

NURSE HEATHERDALE'S

STORY by Mrs Moleworth



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NURSE·HEATHER·
DALE'S·STORY·BY
MRS·MOLESWORTH



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NURSE HEATHERDALE'S STORY

BY MRS MOLESWORTH

ILLUSTRATED BY
L LESLIE BROOKE

MACMILLAN & CO
LONDON MDCCCXCI

TO
MY FAR-AWAY
BUT FAITHFUL FRIEND
GISÉLA

LINDFIELD,
August 22, 1891.



She was sitting in the dame's old-fashioned armchair, in the window of the little room; the bright summer sunshine streaming in behind her.—P. 31.

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NURSE HEATHERDALE'S STORY

CHAPTER I

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

I could fancy it was only yesterday! That first time I saw them. And to think how many years ago it is really! And how many times I have told the story—or, perhaps, I should say the *stories*, for after all it is only a string of simple day-by-day events I have to tell, though to me and to the children about me they seem so interesting and, in some ways, I think I may say, rather out of the common. So that now that I am getting old, or 'beginning to think just a tiny bit about some day getting old,' which is the only way Miss Erica will let me say it, and knowing that nobody else *can* know all the ins and outs which make the whole just as I do, and having a nice quiet time to myself most days (specially since dear tiresome little Master Ramsey is off to school with his brothers), I am going to try to put it down as well as I can. My 'as well as I can' won't be anything very scholarly or fine, I know well; but if one knows what one wants to say it seems to me the words will come. And the story will be there for the dear children, who are never sharp judging of old Heather—and for their children after them, maybe.

I was standing at our cottage door that afternoon—a beautiful summer afternoon it was, early in June. I was looking idly enough across the common, for our cottage stood—stands still, perhaps—I have not been there for many a year—just at the edge of Brayling Common, where it skirts the pine-woods, when I saw them pass. Quite a little troop they looked, though they were scarcely near enough for me to see them plainly. There was the donkey, old Larkins's donkey, which they had hired for the time, with a tot of a girl riding on it, the page-boy leading it, and a nursemaid walking on one side, and on the other an older little lady—somewhere about ten years old she looked, though she was really only eight. What an air she had, to be sure! What a grand way of holding herself and stepping along like a little princess, for all that she and her sisters were dressed as simple as simple. Pink cotton frocks, if I remember right, a bit longer in the skirts than our young ladies wear them now, and nice white cotton stockings,—it was long before black silk ones were the fashion for children,—and ankle-strap shoes, and white sun-bonnets, made with casers and cords, nice and shady for the complexions, though you really had to be close to before you could see a child's face inside of them. And some way behind, another little lady, a good bit shorter than Miss Bess—I meant to give all their names in order later on, but it seems strange-like not to say it—and looking quite three years younger, though there was really not two between them. And alongside of her a boy, thin and pale and darkish-haired—that, I could see, as he had no sun-bonnet of course, only a cap of some kind. He too was a good bit taller than Miss ———, the middle young lady I mean, though short for his age, which was eleven past. They were walking together, these two—they were mostly always together, and I saw that the boy was a little lame, just a touch, but enough to take the spring out of his step that one likes to see in a young thing. And though I couldn't see her face, only some long fair curls, long enough to come below the cape of her bonnet, a feeling came over me that the child beside him was walking slow, keeping back as it were, on purpose to bear him company. There was something gentle and pitying-like in her little figure, in the way she went closer to the boy and took his hand when the nurse turned round and called back something—I couldn't hear the words but I fancied the tone was sharp—to the two children behind, which made them press forward a little. The other young lady turned as they came nearer and said something with a sort of toss-up of her proud little head to the nurse. And then I saw that she held out her hand to her younger sister, who kept hold all the same of the boy's hand on the other side. And that was how they were walking when they went in among the trees and were lost to my sight.

But I still stood looking after them, even when there was nothing more of them to be seen. Not even the dog—oh, I forgot about him—he was the very last of the party—a brisk, shortish haired, wiry-looking rough terrier, who, just as he got to the entrance of the wood, turned round and stood for a moment barking, for all the world as if he might be saying, 'My young ladies have gone a-walking in the wood now, and nobody's to come a-troubling of them. So I give you fair notice.' He did think, did Fusser, that was *his* name, that he managed all the affairs of the family. Many a time we've laughed at him for it.

'Dear me,' thought I to myself, 'I could almost make a story out of those young ladies and gentleman, though I've only seen them for a minute, or two at the most.'

For I was very fond of children even then, and knew a good deal about their ways, though not so much—no, nor nothing like—what I do now! But I was in rather a dreamy sort of humour. I had just left my first place,—that of nursery-maid with the family where my mother had been before me, and where I had stayed on older than I should have done by rights, because of thinking I was going to be married. And six months before, my poor Charles had died suddenly, or so at least

it had seemed to us all. For he caught cold, and it went to his chest, and he was gone in a fortnight. The doctor said for all he looked strong, he was really sadly delicate, and it was bound to be sooner or later. It may have been true, leastways the doctor meant to comfort me by saying so, though I don't know that I found much comfort in the thought. Not so much anyhow as in mother's simple words that it was God's will, and so it must be right. And in thinking how happy we had been. Never a word or a coldness all the four years we were plighted. But it was hard to bear, and it changed all my life for me. I never could bring myself to think of another.

Still I was only twenty-one, and after I'd been at home a bit, the young ladies would have me back to cheer me up, they said. I travelled with them that spring; but when they all went up to London, and Miss Marian was to be married, and the two little ones were all day with the governess, I really couldn't for shame stay on when there was no need of me. So, though with many tears, I came home, and was casting about in my mind what I had best do—mother being hale and hearty, and no call for dress-making of a plain kind in our village—that afternoon, when I stood watching the stranger little gentry and old Larkins's donkey and the dog, as they crossed the common into the firwood.

It was mother's voice that woke me up, so to say.

'Martha,' she called out in her cheery way, 'what's thee doing, child? I'm about tidied up; come and get thy work, and let's sit down a bit comfortable. I don't like to see thee so down-like, and such bright summer weather, though mayhap the very sunshine makes it harder for thee, poor dear.'

And she gave a little sigh, which was a good deal for her, for she was not one as made much talk of feelings and sorrows. It seemed to spirit me up somehow.

'I wasn't like that just now, mother,' I said cheerfully. 'I've been watching some children—gentry—going over the common—three little young ladies and a boy, and Larkins's donkey. They made me think of Miss Charlotte and Miss Marian when first I went there, though plainer dressed a good deal than our young ladies were. But real gentry, I should say.'

'And you'd say right,' mother answered. 'They are lodging at Widow Nutfold's, quite a party of them. Their father's Sir——; dear, dear, I've forgot the name, but he's a barrowknight, and the family's name is Penrose. They come from somewhere far off, near by the sea—quite furrin parts, I take it.'

'Not out of England, you don't mean, do you?' I asked. For mother, of course, kept all her old country talk, while I, with having been so many years with Miss Marian and her sisters, and treated more like a friend than a servant, and great pains taken with my reading and writing, had come to speak less old-fashioned, so to say, and to give the proper meaning to my words. 'Foreign parts really means out of this country, where they talk French or Italian, you know, mother.'

But mother only shook her head.

'Nay,' she said, 'I mean what I say. Furrin parts is furrin parts. I wouldn't say as they come from where the folks is nigger blacks, or from old Boney's country neither, as they used to frighten us about when I was a child. But these gentry come from furrin parts. Why, I had it from Sarah Nutfold's own lips, last Saturday as never was, at Brayling market, and old neighbours of forty years; it's not sense to think she'd go for to deceive me.'

Mother was just a little offended, I could see, and I thought to myself I must take care of seeming to set her right.

'Of course not,' I said. 'You couldn't have it surer than from Mrs. Nutfold. I daresay she's pleased to have them to cheer her up a bit. They seem nice little ladies to look at, though they're on the outside of plain as to their dress.'

'And more sense, too,' said mother. 'I always thought our young ladies too expensive, though where money's no consideration, 'tis a temptation to a lady to dress up her children, I suppose.'

'But they were never *over*-dressed,' I said, in my turn, a little ruffled. 'Nothing could be simpler than their white frocks to look at.'

'Ay, to look at, I'll allow,' said mother. 'But when you come to look *into* them, Martha, it was another story. Embroidery and tucks and real Walansian!' and she held up her hands. 'Still they've got it, and they've a right to spend it, seein' too as they're generous to those who need. But these little ladies at Sarah's are not rich, I take it. There was a deal of settlin' about the prices when my lady came to take the rooms. She and the gentleman's up in London, but one or two of the

children got ill and needed country air. It's a heavy charge on Sarah Nutfold, for the nurse is not one of the old sort, and my lady asked Sarah, private-like, to have an eye on her.'

'There now,' I cried, 'I could have said as much! The way she turned just now so sharp on the poor boy and the middle little lady. I could see she wasn't one of the right kind, though I didn't hear what she said. No one should be a nurse, or have to do with children, mother, who doesn't right down love them in her heart.'

'You're about right there, Martha,' mother agreed.

Just then father came in, and we sat round, the three of us, to our tea.

'It's a pleasure to have thee at home again, my girl, for a bit,' he said. And the kind look in his eyes made me feel both cheered and sad together. It was the first day I had been with them at tea-time, for I had got home pretty late the night before. 'And I hope it'll be a longish bit this time,' he went on.

I gave a little sigh.

'I'd like to stay a while; but I don't know that it would be good for me to stay very long, father, thank you,' I said. 'I'm young and strong and fit for work, and I'd like to feel I was able to help you and mother if ever the time comes that you're laid by.'

'Please God we'll never need help of that kind, my girl,' said father. 'But it's best to be at work, I know, when one's had a trouble. The day'll maybe come, Martha, when you'll be glad to have saved a little more for a home of your own, after all. So I'd not be the one to stand in your way, a few months hence—nor mother neither—if a good place offers.'

'Thank you, father,' I said again; 'but the only home of my own I'll ever care for will be here—by mother and you.'

And so it proved.

I little thought how soon father's words about not standing in my way if a nice place offered would be put to the test.

I saw the children who were lodging at Mrs. Nutfold's several times in the course of the next week or two. They seemed to have a great fancy for the pine-woods, and from where they lived they could not, to get to them, but pass across the common within sight of our cottage. And once or twice I met them in the village street. Not all of them together—once it was only the two youngest with the nurse; they were waiting at the door of the post-office, which was also the grocer's and the baker's, while she was inside chattering and laughing a deal more than she'd any call to, it seemed to me. (I'm afraid I took a real right-down dislike to that nurse, which isn't a proper thing to do before one has any certain reason for it.) And dear little ladies they looked, though the elder one—that was the middle one of the three—had rather an anxious expression in her face, that struck me. The baby—she was nearly three, but I heard them call her baby—was a little fat bundle of smiles and dimples. I don't think even a cross nurse would have had power to trouble *her* much.

Another time it was the two elder girls and the lame boy I met. It was a windy day, and the eldest Missy's big flapping bonnet had blown back, so I had a good look at her. She was a beautiful child—blue eyes, very dark blue, or seeming so from the clear black eyebrows and thick long eyelashes, and dark almost black hair, with just a little wave in it; not so long or curling as her sister's, which was out-of-the-way beautiful hair, but seeming somehow just to suit her, as everything about her did. She came walking along with the proud springing step I had noticed that first day, and she was talking away to the others as if to cheer and encourage them, even though the boy was full three years older than she, and supposed to be taking charge of her and her sister, I fancy.

'Nonsense, Franz,' she was saying in her decided spoken way, 'nonsense. I won't have you and Lally treated like that. And I don't care—I mean I can't help if it does trouble mamma. Mammams must be troubled about their children sometimes; that's what being a mamma means.'

I managed to keep near them for a bit. I hope it was not a mean taking-advantage. I have often told them of it since—it was really that I did feel such an interest in the dear children, and my mind misgave me from the first about that nurse—it did so indeed.

'If only——' said the boy with a tiny sigh. But again came that clear-spoken little voice, 'Nonsense, Franz.'

I never did hear a child of her age speak so well as Miss Bess. It's pretty to hear broken talking in a child sometimes,

lisp, and some of the funny turns they'll give their words; but it's even prettier to hear clear complete talk like hers in a young child.

Then came a gentle, pitiful little voice.

'It isn't nonsense, Queen, darling. It's *howid* for Franz, but it wasn't nonsense he was going to say. I know what it was,' and she gave the boy's hand a little squeeze.

'It was only—if *aunty was* my mamma, Bess, but you know she isn't. And *aunts* aren't forced to be troubled about not their own children.'

'Yes they are,' the elder girl replied. 'At least when they're instead of own mammas. And then, you know, Franz, it's not only you, it's Lally too, and——'

That was all I heard. I couldn't pretend to be obliged to walk slowly just behind them, for in reality I was rather in a hurry, so I hastened past; but just as I did so, their little dog, who was with them, looked up at me with a friendly half-bark, half-growl. That made the children smile at me too, and for the life of me, even if 'twas not good manners, I couldn't help smiling in return.

'Hasn't her a nice face?' I heard the second little young lady say, and it sent me home with quite a warm feeling in my heart.



'Hasn't her a nice face?'

It was about a week after that, when one evening as we were sitting together—father, mother, and I—and father was just saying there'd be daylight enough to need no candles that night—we heard the click of the little garden gate, and a voice at the door that mother knew in a moment was Widow Nutfold's.

'Good evening to you, Mrs. Heatherdale,' she said, 'and many excuses for disturbing of you so late, but I'm that put about. Is your Martha at home?—thank goodness, my dear,' as I came forward out of the dusk to speak to her. 'It's more you nor your good mother I've come after; you'll be thinking I'm joking when you hear what it is. Can you slip on your bonnet and come off with me now this very minute to help with my little ladies? Would you believe it—that their good-for-nothing girl is off—gone—packed up this very evening—and left me with 'em all on my hands, and Miss Baby beginning with a cold on her chest, and Master Francis all but crying with the rheumatics in his poor leg. And even the page-boy, as was here at first, was took back to London last week.'

The good woman held up her hands in despair, and then by degrees we got the whole story—how the nurse had not been meaning to stay longer than suited her own convenience, but had concealed this from her lady; and having heard by a letter that afternoon of another situation which she could have if she went at once, off she had gone, in spite of all poor Widow Nutfold could say or do.

'She took a dislike to me seein' as I tried to look after her a bit and to stop her nasty cross ways, and she told me that impertinent, as I wanted to be nurse, I might be it now. She has a week or two's money owing her, but she was that scornful she said she'd let it go; she had been a great silly for taking the place.'

'But she might be had up and made to give back some of her wages,' said father.

'Sir Hulbert and my lady are not that sort, and she knows it,' said Mrs. Nutfold. 'The wages was pretty fair—it was the dulness of the life down in Cornwall the girl objected to most, I fancy.'

'Cornwall,' repeated mother. 'There now, Martha, if that isn't furrin parts, I don't know what is.'

But I hadn't time to say any more. I hurried on my shawl and bonnet, and rolled up an apron or two, and slipped a cap into a bandbox, and there I was.

'Good-night, mother,' I said. 'I'll look round in the morning—and I don't suppose I'll be wanted to stay more than a day or two. My lady's sure to find some one at once, being in London too.'

'I should think so,' said old Sarah, but there was something in her tone I did not quite understand.

CHAPTER II

AN UNEXPECTED PROPOSAL

We hurried across the common—it was still daylight though the sun had set some little time. The red and gold were still lingering in the sky and casting a beautiful glow on the heather and the gorse bushes. For Brayling Common is not like what the word makes most people think of—there's no grass at all—it's all heather and gorse, and here and there clumps of brambles, and low down on the sandy soil all sorts of hardy, running, clinging little plants that ask for nothing but sunshine and air. For of moisture there's but scanty supply; it no sooner rains than it dries up again. But oh it is beautiful—the colours of it I've never seen equalled—not even in Italy or Switzerland, where I went with my first ladies, as I said before. The heather seems to change its shade a dozen times a day, as well as with every season—according as the sky is cloudy or bright, or the sun overhead or on his way up or down. I cannot say it the right way, but I know that many far cleverer than me would feel the same; you may travel far before you'd see a sweeter piece of nature than our common, with its wonderful changefulness and yet always beautiful.

There's little footpaths in all directions, as well as a few wider tracks. It takes strangers some time to learn their way, I can tell you. The footpaths are seldom wide enough for two, so it's a queer sort of backwards and forwards talking one has to be content with. And we walked too fast to have breath for much, only Widow Nutfold would now and then throw back to me, so to say, some odds and ends of explaining about the children that she thought I'd best know.

'They're dear young ladies,' she said, 'though Miss Elisabeth is a bit masterful and Miss Baby—Augusta's her proper name—a bit spoilt. Take them all together, I think Miss Lally's my favourite, or would be if she was a little happier, poor child! I can't stand whiney children.'

I smiled to myself—I knew that the good woman's experience of children was not great—she had married late and never had one of her own. It was real goodness that made her take such an interest in the little Penroses.

'Poor child,' I said, 'perhaps the cross nurse has made her so,' at which Sarah gave a sort of grunt. 'What is her real name—the middle young lady's, I mean?'

'Oh, bless you, I couldn't take upon me to say it—it's too outlandish. Miss Lally we call her—' and I could hear that Mrs. Nutfold's breath was getting short—she was stout in her later years—and that she was a little cross. 'You must ask for yourself, Martha.'

So I said no more, though I had wanted to hear about the boy, who had spoken of their mother as his aunty, and how he had come to be so delicate and lame. And in a few minutes more we found ourselves at the door of Clover Cottage; that was Mrs. Nutfold's house, though 'Bramble Cottage' would have suited it better, standing where it did.

She took the key out of her pocket.

'I locked them in,' she said, nodding her head, 'though they didn't know it.'

'Gracious,' says I, 'you don't mean as the children are all alone?'

'To be sure—who'd be with them? I wasn't going to make a chatter all over the place about that impudent woman a-goin' off. And Bella, my girl, goes home at five. 'Twas after she left there was all the upset.'

I felt rather startled at hearing this. Suppose they had set themselves on fire! But old Sarah seemed quite easy in her mind, as she opened the door and went in, me following.

'Twas a nice roomy cottage, and so clean. Besides the large kitchen at one side, with a good back-kitchen behind it, and a tidy bedroom for Mrs. Nutfold, there was a fair-sized parlour, with casement windows and deep window-seats—all old-fashioned, but roomy and airy. And upstairs two nice bed-rooms and a small one. I knew it well, having been there off and on to help Mrs. Nutfold with her lodgers at the busy season before I went away to a regular place. So I was a little surprised when she turned to the kitchen, instead of opening the parlour door. And at first, what with coming out of the half-light and the red glow still in my eyes, and what with that there Fusser setting upon me with such a barking and jumping—all meant for a welcome, I soon found—as never was, I scarce could see or hear. But I soon got myself together again.

'Down Fusser, naughty Fuss,' said the children, and, 'he won't bite, it's only meant for "How do you do?"' said the eldest girl. And then she turned to me as pretty as might be. 'Is this Martha?' says she, holding out her little hand. 'I *am* pleased to see you. It's very good of you, and oh, Mrs. Nutfold, I'm so glad you've come back. Baby is getting so sleepy.'

Poor little soul—so she was. They had set her up on Sarah's old rocking-chair near the fire as well as they could, to keep her warm because of her cold, and it was a chilly evening rather. But it was past her bed-time, and she was fractious with all the upset. I just was stooping down to look at her when she gave a little cry and held out her arms to me. 'Baby so tired,' she said, 'want to go to bed.'

'And so you shall, my love,' I said. 'I'll have off my bonnet in a moment, and then Martha will put Miss Baby to bed all nice and snug.'

'Marfa,' said a little voice beside me. It was the middle young lady. 'I like that name, don't you, Francie?'

That was the boy—they were all there, poor dears. Old Sarah had thought they'd be cosier in the kitchen while she was out. I smiled back at Miss Lally, as they called her. She was standing by Master Francis; both looking up at me, with a kind of mixture of hope and fear, a sort of asking, 'Will she be good to us?' in their faces, which touched me very much. Master Francis was not a pretty child like the others. He was pale and thin, and his eyes looked too dark for his face. He was small too, no taller than Miss Bess, and with none of her upright hearty look. But when he smiled his expression was very sweet. He smiled now, with a sort of relief and pleasure, and I saw that he gave a little squeeze to Miss Lally's hand, which he was holding.

'Yes,' he said, 'it's a nice name. The other nurse was called "Sharp;" it suited her too,' with a twinkle in his eyes I was pleased to see. 'Lally can't say her "th's" properly,' he went on, as if he was excusing her a little, 'nor her "r's" sometimes, though Bess and I are trying to teach her.'

'It's so babyish at *her* age, nearly six, not to speak properly,' said Miss Bess, with her little toss of the head, at which Miss Lally's face puckered up, and the corners of her mouth went down, and I saw what Sarah Nutfold meant by saying she was rather a 'whiney' child. I didn't give her time for more just then. I had got Miss Baby up in my arms, where she was leaning her sleepy head on my shoulder in her pretty baby way. I felt quite in my right place again.

'Come along, Miss Lally, dear,' I said. 'It must be your bed-time too, and if you'll come upstairs with Miss Baby and me, you'll be able to show me all the things—the baths, and the sponges, and everything—won't that be nice?'

She brightened up in a moment—dear child, it's always been like that with her. Give her a hint of anything she could do for others, and she'd forget her own troubles—fancy or real ones—that minute.

'The hot water's all ready,' said Mrs. Nutfold. 'I kep' the fire up, so as you shouldn't have no trouble I could help, Martha, my dear.'

And then the three of us went upstairs to the big room at the back, where I was to sleep with Miss Baby in her cot, and which we called the night nursery. Miss Lally was as bright as a child could be, and that handy and helpful. But more than once I heard a sigh come from the very depths of her little heart, it seemed.

'Sharp never lettened me help wif Baby going to bed, this nice way,' she said, and sighed again.

'Never mind about Sharp, my dear,' I said. 'She had her ways, and Martha has hers. What are you sighing about?'

'I'm so fwightened her'll come back and you go, Marfa,' she said, nestling up to me. Baby was safe in bed by now, prayers said and all. 'And—I'm sleepy, but I don't like going to bed till Queen comes.'

'Who may she be, my dear?' I asked, and then I remembered their talking that day in the street. 'Oh, it's Miss Bess, you mean.'

'Yes—it's in the English *history*,' said the child, making a great effort over the 'r.' 'There was a queen they called "Good Queen Bess," so I made that my name for Bess. But mamma laughed one day and said that queen wasn't "good." I was so sorry. So I just call Bess "Queen" for short. And I say "good" to myself, for my Bess *is* good; only I wish she wouldn't be vexed when I don't speak words right,' and again the little creature sighed as if all the burdens of this weary world were on her shoulders.

'It's that Miss Bess wants you to speak as cleverly as she does, I suppose. It'll come in time, no fear. When I was a little girl I couldn't say the letter "l," try as I might. I used to leave it out altogether—I remember one day telling mother I had seen such a sweet "ittie 'amb"—I meant "little lamb."

'Oh, how funny,' said Miss Lally laughing. She was always ready to laugh. 'It's a good thing I can say "l's," isn't it? My name wouldn't be—nothing—would it?—without the "l's."

'But it's only a short, isn't it, Missy?' I said.

'Yes, my *weal* name is "Lalage." Do you fink it's a pretty name?' she said. She was getting sleepy, and it was too much trouble to worry about her speaking.

'Yes, indeed, I think it's a sweet name. So soft and gentle like,' I said, which pleased her, I could see.

'Papa says so too—but mamma doesn't like it so much. It was Francie's mamma's name, but she's dead. And poor Francie's papa's dead too. He was papa's brother,' said Miss Lally, in her old-fashioned way. There was a funny mixture of old-fashionedness and simple, almost baby ways about all those children. I've never known any quite like them. No doubt it came in part from their being brought up so much by themselves, and having no other companions than each other. But from the first I always felt they were dear children, and more than common interesting.

A few days passed—very quiet and peaceful, and yet full of life too they seemed to me. I felt more like myself again, as folks say, than since my great trouble. It *was* sweet to have real little ones to see to again—if Miss Baby had only known it, that first evening's bathing her and tucking her up in bed brought tears of pleasure to my eyes.

'Come now,' I said, to myself, 'this'll never do. You mustn't let yourself go for to get so fond of these young ladies and gentleman that you're only with for a day or two at most,' but I knew all the same I couldn't help it, and I settled in my own mind that as soon as I could I would look out for a place again. I wasn't afraid of what some would count a hardish place—indeed, I rather liked it. I've always been that fond of children that whatever I have to do for them comes right—what does try my temper is to see things half done, or left undone by silly upsetting girls who haven't a grain of the real nurse's spirit in them.

My lady wrote at once on hearing from Mrs. Nutfold. She was very angry indeed about Sharp's behaviour, and at first was by way of coming down immediately to see to things. But by the next day, when she had got a second letter saying how old Sarah had fetched me, and that I was willing to stay for the time, she wrote again, putting off for a few days, and glad to do so, seeing how cleverly her good Mrs. Nutfold had managed. That was how she put it—my lady always had a gracious way with her, I will say—and I was to be thanked for my obligingness; she was sure her little dears would be happy with any one so well thought of by the dame. They were very busy indeed just then, she and Sir Hulbert, she said, and very gay. But when I came to know her better I did her justice, and saw she was not the butterfly I was inclined to think her. She was just frantic to get her husband forward, so to speak, and far more ambitious for him than caring about anything for herself. He had had a trying and disappointing life of it in some ways, had Sir Hulbert, and it had not soured him. He was a right-down high-minded gentleman, though not so clever as my lady, perhaps. And she adored him. They adored each other—seldom have I heard of a happier couple: only on one point was there ever disunion between them, as I shall explain, all in good time.

A week therefore—fully a week—had gone by before my little ladies' mother came to see them. And when she did come it was at short notice enough—a letter by the post—and Mayne, the postman, never passed our way much before ten in the morning. So the dame told as how she'd be down by the first train, and get to Clover Cottage by eleven, or soon after. We were just setting off on our morning walk when Sarah came calling after us to tell. She was for us not going, and stopping in till her ladyship arrived; but when I put it to her that the children would get so excited, hanging about and nothing to do, she gave in.

'I'll bring them back before eleven,' I said. 'They'll be looking fresh and rosy, and with us out of the way you and the girl can get the rooms all tidied up as you'd like for my lady to find them.'

And Sarah allowed it was a good thought.

'You've a head on your shoulders, my girl,' was how she put it.

So off we set—our usual way, over the common to the firwoods. There's many a pretty walk about Brayling, and a great

variety; but none took the young ladies' and Master Francie's fancy like the firwoods. They had never seen anything of the kind before, their home being by the seashore was maybe the reason—or one reason. For I feel much the same myself about loving firwoods, though, so to say, I was born and bred among them. There's a charm one can't quite explain about them—the sameness and the stillness and the great tops so high up, and yet the bareness and openness down below, though always in the shade. And the scent, and the feel of the crisp crunching soil one treads on, soil made of the millions of the fir needles, with here and there the cones as they have fallen.

'It's like fairy stories,' Miss Lally used to say, with her funny little sigh.

But we couldn't linger long in the woods that morning, though a beautiful morning it was. Miss Bess and Miss Baby were in the greatest delight about 'mamma' coming, and always asking me if I didn't think it must be eleven o'clock. Miss Lally was pleased too, in her quiet way, only I noticed that she was a good deal taken up with Master Francie, who seemed to have something on his mind, and at last they both called to Miss Bess, and said something to her which I didn't hear, evidently asking her opinion.

'Nonsense,' said Miss Bess, in her quick decided way; 'I have no patience with you being so silly. As if mamma would be so unjust.'

'But,' said Master Francis hesitatingly, 'you know, Bess—sometimes——'

'Yes,' put in Miss Lally, 'she might think it had been partly Francie's fault.'

'Nonsense,' said Miss Bess again; 'mamma knows well enough that Sharp was horrid. I am sure Francie has been as good as good for ever so long, and old Mrs. Nutfold will tell mamma so, even if possibly she did not understand.'

Their faces grew a little lighter after this, and by the time we had got home and I had tidied them all up, I really felt that my lady would be difficult to please if she didn't think all four looking as bright and well as she could wish.

I kept myself out of the way when I heard the carriage driving up, though the children would have dragged me forward. But I was a complete stranger to Lady Penrose, and things having happened as they had, I felt that she might like to be alone with the children, at first, and that no doubt Sarah Nutfold would be eager to have a talk with her. I sat down to my sewing quietly—there was plenty of mending on hand, Sharp's service having been but eye-service in every way—and I won't deny but that my heart was a little heavy thinking how soon, how very soon, most likely, I should have to leave these children, whom already, in these few days, I had grown to love so dearly.

I was not left very long to my meditations, however; before an hour had passed there came a clear voice up the old staircase, 'Martha, Martha, come quick, mamma wants you,' and hastening out I met Miss Bess at the door. She turned and ran down again, I following her more slowly.

How well I remember the group I saw as I opened the parlour door! It was like a picture. Lady Penrose herself was more than pretty—beautiful, I have heard her called, and I think it was no exaggeration. She was sitting in the dame's old-fashioned armchair, in the window of the little room; the bright summer sunshine streaming in behind her and lighting up her fair hair—hair for all the world like Miss Lally's, though perhaps a thought darker. Miss Baby was on her knee and Miss Bess on a stool at her feet, holding one of her hands. Miss Lally and Master Francie were a little bit apart, close together as usual.

'Come in,' said my lady. 'Come in, Martha,' as I hesitated a little in the doorway. 'I am very pleased to see you and to thank you for all your kindness to these little people.'

She half rose from her chair as I drew near, and shook hands with me in the pretty gracious way she had.

'I am sure it has been a pleasure to me, my lady,' I said. 'I've been used to children for so long that I was feeling quite lost at home doing nothing.'

'And you are very fond of children, truly fond of them,' my lady went on, glancing up at me with a quick observant look, that somehow reminded me of Miss Bess; 'so at least Mrs. Nutfold tells me, and I think I should have known it for myself even if she had not said so. I have to go back to town this afternoon—supposing you all run out into the garden for a few minutes, children; I want to talk to Martha a little, and it will soon be your dinner time.'

She got up as she spoke, putting Miss Baby down gently; the child began grumbling a little—but, 'No, no, Baby, you must do as I tell you,' checked her in a moment.

'Take her out with you, Bess,' she added. I could see that my lady was not one to be trifled with.

When they had all left the room she turned to me again. 'Sit down, Martha, for a minute or two. One can always talk so much more comfortably sitting,' she said pleasantly. 'And I have no doubt the children have given you plenty of exercise lately, though you don't look delicate,' she added, with again the little look of inquiry.

'Thank you, my lady; no, I am not delicate; as a rule I am strong and well, though this last year has brought me troubles and upsets, and I haven't felt quite myself.'

'Naturally,' she said. 'Mrs. Nutfold has told me about you. I was talking to her just now when I first arrived.' Truly my lady was not one to let the grass grow under the feet. 'She says you will be looking for a situation again before long. Is there any chance of your being able to take one at once, that is to say if mine seems likely to suit you.'

She spoke so quick and it was so unexpected that I felt for a moment half stupid and dazed-like.

'Are you sure, my lady, that I should suit you?' I managed to say at last. 'I have only been in one place in my life, and you might want more experience.'

'You were with Mrs. Wyngate, in ——shire, I believe? I know her sister and can easily hear any particulars I want, but I feel sure you would suit me.'

She went on to give me a good many particulars, all in the same clear decided way. 'The Wyngates are very rich,' she said, as she ended. 'You must have seen a great deal of luxury there. Now we are not rich—not at all rich—though we have a large country place that has belonged to the family for many hundreds of years; but we are obliged to live plainly and the place is rather lonely. I don't want you to decide all at once. Think it all over, and consult your parents, and let me have your answer when I come down again.'

'That will be the difficulty,' I replied; 'my parents wanted me to stay on some time with them. There is nothing about the work or the wages I should object to, and though Mrs. Wyngate was very kind, I have never cared for much luxury in the nursery—indeed, I should have liked plainer ways; and I love the country, and as for the young ladies and gentleman, my lady, if it isn't taking a liberty to say so, I love them dearly already. But it is father and mother——'

'Well, well,' said my lady, 'we must see. The children are very happy with you, and I hope it may be arranged, but of course you must consult your parents.'

She went back to London that same afternoon, and that very evening, when they were all in bed, I slipped on my bonnet and ran home to talk it over with father and mother.

CHAPTER III

TRELUAN

There were fors and againsts, as there are with most things in this world. Father was sorry for me to leave so soon and go so far, and he scarce thought the wages what I might now look for. Mother felt with him about the parting, but mother was a far-seeing woman. She thought the change would be the best thing for me after my trouble, and she thought a deal of my being with real gentry. Not but that Mrs. Wyngate's family was all one could think highly of, but Mr. Wyngate's great fortune had been made in trade, and there was a little more talk and thought of riches and display among them than quite suited mother's ideas, and she had sometimes feared it spoiling me.

'The wages I wouldn't put first,' she said. 'A good home and simple ways among real gentlefolk—that's what I'd choose for thee, my girl. And the children are good children and not silly spoilt things, and straightforward and well-bred, I take it?'

'All that and more,' I answered. 'If anything, they've been a bit too strict brought up, I'd say. If I go to them I shall try to make Miss Lally brighten up—not that she's a dull child, but she has the look of taking things to heart more than one likes to see at her age. And poor Master Francis—I'm sure he'd be none the worse of a little petting—so delicate as he is and his lameness.'

'You'll find your work to do, if you go—no fear,' said mother. 'Maybe it's a call.'

I got to think so myself—and when my lady wrote that all she heard from Mrs. Wyngate was most satisfactory, I made up my mind to accept her offer, and told her so when she came down again for a few hours the end of the week.

We stayed but a fortnight longer at Brayling—and a busy fortnight it was. I had my own things to see to a little, and would fain have finished the set of shirts I had begun for father. The days seemed to fly. I scarce could believe it was not a dream when I found myself with all the family in a second-class railway carriage, starting from Paddington on our long journey.

It was a long journey, especially as, to save expense, we had come up from Brayling that same morning. We were not to reach the little town where we left the railway till nearly midnight, to sleep there, I was glad for the poor children's sake to hear, and start again the next morning on a nineteen miles' journey by coach.

'And then,' said Miss Lally, with one of her deep sighs, 'we shall be at home.'

I thought there was some content in her sigh this time.

'Shall you be glad, dearie, to be at home again?' I said.

'I fink so,' she answered. 'And oh, I am glad you've comed wif us, 'stead of Sharp. And Francie's almost more gladder still, aren't you, dear old Francie?'

'I should just think I was,' said the boy.

'Sharp,'—and the little girl lowered her voice and glanced round; we were, so to speak, alone at one end of the carriage,—Miss Lally, her cousin and I, for Miss Baby was already asleep in my arms and Miss Bess talking, like a grown-up young lady, at the other end, with her papa and mamma—'Sharp,' said Miss Lally, 'really *hated* poor Francie, because she thought he told mamma about her tempers. And she made mamma think he was naughty when he wasn't. Francie and I were frightened when Sharp went away that mamma would think it was his fault. But she didn't. Queen spoke to her, and Mrs. Dame' (that was her name for old Sarah) 'did too. And you didn't get scolded, did you, Francie?'

'No,' said Master Francie quietly, 'I didn't.'

He looked as if he were going to say more, but just then Miss Bess, who had had enough for the time, of being grown up—and indeed she was but a complete child at heart—got up from her seat and came to our end of the carriage. Sir Hulbert was reading his newspaper, and my lady was making notes in a little memorandum book.

'What are you talking about?' said the eldest little sister, sitting down beside me. 'You all look very comfortable, Baby

especially.'

'We are talking about Sharp going away,' replied Miss Lally, 'and Francie thinking he'd be scolded for it.'

'Oh! do leave off about that and talk of something nicer. Franz is really silly. If you'd only speak right out to mamma,' she went on, 'things would be ever so much better.'

The boy shook his head rather sadly.

'Now you know,' said Miss Bess, 'they would be. Mamma is never unjust.'

She was speaking in her clear decided way, and feeling a little afraid lest their voices should reach to the other end—I wouldn't have liked my lady to think I encouraged the children in talking her over—I tried to change the conversation.

'Won't you tell me a little about your home?' I said. 'You know it'll all be quite new to me; I've only seen the sea once or twice in my life, and never lived by it.'

'Treluan isn't quite close to the sea,' said Master Francis, evidently taking up my feeling. 'We can see it from some of the top rooms, and from one end of the west terrace at high tides, and we can hear it too when it's stormy. But it's really two miles to the coast.'

'There are such dear little bays, lots of them,' said Miss Bess. 'We can play Robinson Crusoe and smugglers and all sorts of things, for the bays are quite separated from each other by the rocks.'

'There's caves in some,' said Miss Lally, 'rather frightening caves, they're so dark;' but her eyes sparkled as if she were quite able to enjoy some adventures.

'We shall be at no loss for nice walks, I see; but how do you amuse yourselves on wet days?'

'Oh! we've always plenty to do,' said Miss Bess. 'Miss Kirstin comes from the Vicarage every morning for our lessons, and twice a week papa teaches Franz and me Latin in the afternoon, and the house is very big, you know. When we can't go out, we may race about in the attics over the nurseries. There's a stair goes up to the tower, just by the nursery door, and you pass the attics on the way. They're called the tower attics, because there are lots more over the other end of the house. Francie's room is in the tower.'

It was easy to see by this talk that Treluan was a large and important place.

'I suppose the house is very, very old?' I said.

'Oh yes! thousands—I mean hundreds—of years old. Centuries mean hundreds, don't they, Franz?' said she, turning to her cousin.

'Yes, dear,' he answered gently, though I could see he was inclined to smile a little. 'If you know English history,' he went on to me, 'I could tell you exactly how old, Treluan is. The first bit of it was built in the reign of King Henry the Third, though it's been changed ever so often since then. About a hundred years ago the Penroses were very rich, very rich indeed. But when one of them died—our great, great grand-uncle, I think it was—and his nephew took possession, it was found the old man had sold a lot of the land secretly—it wasn't to be told till his death—and no one has ever been able to find out what he did with the money. It was the best of the land too.'

'And they were so surprised,' said Miss Bess, 'for he'd been a very saving old man, and they thought there'd be lots of money over, any way. Wasn't it too bad of him—horrid old thing?'

'Queen,' said Miss Lally gravely. 'You know we fixed never to call him that, 'cos he's dead. He was a—oh, what's that word?—something like those things in the hall at home—helmet—was it that? No—do tell me, Queen.'

'You're muddling it up with crusaders, you silly little thing,' said Miss Bess. 'How could he have been a crusader only a hundred years ago?'

'No, no, it isn't that—I said it was *like* it,' said Miss Lally, ready to cry. 'What's the other word for helmet?'

'I know,' said Master Francis, '*vizor*—and——'

'Yes, yes—and the old man was a *miser*, that's it,' said the child. 'Papa said so, and he said it's like a' illness, once people get it they can't leave off.'

Miss Bess and Master Francis could not help laughing at the funny way the child said it, nor could I myself, for that matter. And then they went on to tell me more of the strange old story—how their great grandfather and their grandfather after him had always gone on hoping the missing money would sooner or later turn up, though it never did, till—putting what the children told me together with my lady's own words—it became clear that poor Sir Hulbert had come into a sadly impoverished state of things.

'Perhaps the late baronet and his father were not of the "saving" sort,' I said to myself, and from what I came to hear afterwards, I fancy I was about right.

After a while my lady came to our end of the carriage. She was afraid, she said, I'd find Miss Baby too heavy—wouldn't I lay her comfortably on the seat, there was plenty of room?—my lady was always thoughtful for others—and then when we had got the child settled, she sat down and joined in our talk a little.

'We've been telling Martha about Treluan and about the old uncle that did something with the money,' said Miss Bess.

My lady did not seem to mind.

'It is a queer story, isn't it?' she said. 'Worse than queer, indeed——' and she sighed. 'Though even with it, things would not be as they are, if other people had not added their part to them.'

She glanced round in a half impatient way, and somehow her glance fell on Master Francis, and I almost started as I caught sight of the expression that had come over her face—it was a look of real dislike.

'Sit up, Francis—do, for goodness' sake,' she said sharply; 'you make yourself into a regular humpback.'

The boy's pale, almost sallow face reddened all over. He had been listening with interest to the talking, and taking his part in it. Now he straightened himself nervously, murmuring something that sounded like, 'I beg your pardon, Aunt Helen,' and sat gazing out of the window beside him as if lost in his own thoughts. I busied myself with pulling the rugs better over Miss Baby, so that my lady should not see my face just then. But I think she felt sorry for her sharp tone, for when she spoke again it was even more pleasantly than usual.

'Have you told nurse other things about Treluan, children?' she said. 'It is really a dear old place,' she went on to me; 'it might be made *quite* delightful if Sir Hulbert could spend a little more upon it. I had set my heart on new furnishing your room this year, Bess darling, but I'm afraid it will have to wait.'

'Never mind, dear,' said Miss Bess comfortingly, in her old-fashioned way, 'there's no hurry. If I could have fresh covers to the chairs, the furniture itself—I mean the *wood* part—is quite good.'

'I did get some nice chintz in London,' said her mamma; 'there was some selling off rather cheap. But it's the getting things made—everything down with us is so difficult and expensive,' and my lady sighed. Her mind seemed full of the one idea, and I began to think she should try to take a cheerier view of things.

'If you'll excuse me mentioning it,' I said, 'I have had some experience in the cutting out of chair-covers and such things. It would be a great pleasure to me to help to make the young ladies' rooms nice.'

'That would be very nice indeed,' said my lady; 'I really should like to do what we can to brighten up the old house. I expect it will look very gloomy to you, nurse, till you get used to it. I do want Bess's room to look better. Of course Lally is in the nursery still, and won't need a room of her own for a long time yet.'

Miss Lally was sitting beside me, and as her mamma spoke, I heard a very tiny little sigh.

'Never mind, Miss Lally dear,' I whispered. 'We'll brighten up the nurseries too, nicely.'

These little scraps of talk come back to my mind now, when I think of that first journey down to Treluan so many years ago. I put them down such as they are, as they may help better than words of my own to give an idea of the dear children and all about them, as they then were.

We reached Treluan the afternoon of the next day. It was a dull day unfortunately, though the very middle of summer—rainy and gray. Of course every one knows that there's much weather of that kind in the west country, but no doubt it added to the impression of gloom with which the first sight of the old house struck me, I must confess. Gloom, perhaps, is hardly the word to use; it was more a feeling of desertedness, almost of decayed grandeur, quite unlike anything I had ever seen before. For in my former place everything had been bright and new, fresh and perfect of its kind. Afterwards, when I came to see into things better, I found there was no neglect or mismanagement; everything that *could* be done was done by Sir Hulbert outside, and my lady in her own department—uphill and trying work though it must often have been for them.

But that first evening, when I looked round the great lofty hall into which my lady had led the way, dusky and dim already with the rain pattering against the high arched windows and a chilly feeling in the air, the half dozen servants or so, who had come out to meet us—evidently the whole establishment—standing round, I must own that in spite of the children's eager excitement and delight at finding themselves at home again, my heart went down. I did feel so very far away from home and father and mother, and everything I had ever known. The first thing to cheer me was when the old housekeeper—cook-housekeeper she really was—Mrs. Brent, came forward after speaking to my lady, and shook me kindly by the hand.

'Welcome to Treluan, Nurse Heatherdale,' she said. And here I should explain that as there was already a Martha in the house, my lady had expressed her wish that I should be called 'nurse,' or 'Heatherdale,' from which came my name of 'Heather,' that I have always been called by. 'Welcome to Treluan, and don't go for to think that it's always as dull as you see it just now, as like as not to-morrow will be bright and sunny.'

She was a homely-looking body with a very kind face, not Cornish bred I found afterwards, though she had lived there many years. Something about her made me think of mother, and I felt the tears rise to my eyes, though no one saw.

'Shall I show nurse the way upstairs, my lady?' she said. For Mrs. Brent was like her looks, simple and friendly like. She had never known Treluan in its grand days of course, though she had known it when things were a good deal easier than at present; and that evening, when the children were asleep, she came up to sit with me a bit, and, though with perfect respect to her master and mistress and no love of gossip in her talk (for of that she was quite free), she explained to me a few things which already had puzzled me a little. No praise was too high for Sir Hulbert with her, and my lady was a really good, high-minded woman. 'But she takes her troubles too heavy,' said Mrs. Brent; 'she's like to break her heart at having no son of her own, and that and other things make her not show her best self to poor little Master Francis, though, considering he's been here since he was four, 'tis a wonder he doesn't seem to her like a child of her own. And Sir Hulbert feels it; it's a real grief to him, for he loved Master Francis's father dearly through all the troubles he caused them, and anyway 'tis not fair to visit the father's sin on the innocent child.'

Then she told me how Master Francis's father had made things worse by his extravagance, half-breaking his young wife's heart and leaving debts behind him, when he was killed by an accident; and that Sir Hulbert, for the honour of the family, had taken these debts upon himself.

'His wife was a pretty young creature, half a foreigner. Sir Hulbert had her brought here with the boy, and here she died, not long before Miss Lalage was born, and so, failing a son, Master Francis is the heir, and a sweet, good young gentleman he is, though nothing as to looks. 'Tis a pity he's so shy and timid in his ways; it gives my lady the idea he's not straightforward, though that I'm very sure he is, and most affectionate at heart, though he hasn't the knack of showing it.'

'Except to Miss Lally, I should say,' I put in; 'how those two do cling together, to be sure.'

'He loves them all dearly, my lady too, though he's frightened of her. Miss Lally's the one he's most at home with, because she's so little, and none of Miss Bess's masterful ways about her. Poor dear Miss Lally, many's the trouble she's got into for Master Francis's sake.'

All this was very interesting to me, and helped to clear my mind in some ways from the first, which was, I take it, a good thing. Mrs. Brent said little about Sharp, but I could see she had not approved of her; and she was so kind as to add some words about myself, and feeling sure I would make the children happy, especially the two whom it was easy to see were her own favourites, Miss Lally and her cousin. This made me feel the more earnest to do my very best in every way for the young creatures under my care.

CHAPTER IV

A NURSERY TEA

Writing down that talk with good Mrs. Brent made me put aside the account of our arrival at Treluan, clearly though I remember it. Even to this day I never go up the great staircase—of course it is not often that I pass that way—without recalling the feelings with which I stepped up it for the first time—Mrs. Brent in front, carrying a small hand-lamp, the passages being so dark, though it was still early in the evening; the children running on before me, except Miss Baby, who was rather sleepy and very cross, poor dear, so that half way up I had to lift her in my arms. All up the dark wainscoted walls, dead and gone Penroses looked down upon us, in every sort of ancient costume. They used to give me a half eerie feeling till I got to know them better and to take a certain pride in them, feeling myself, as I came to do, almost like one of the family, though in a humble way.

At the top of the great staircase we passed along the gallery, which runs right across one side of the hall below; then through a door on the right and down a long passage ending in a small landing, from which a back staircase ran down again to the ground floor. The nurseries in those days were the two large rooms beyond, now turned into a billiard-room, my present lady thinking them scarcely warm enough for the winter. It is handy too to have the billiard-room near the tower, where the smoking-room now is, and the spare rooms for gentlemen-visitors. A door close beside the nurseries opened on to the tower stair; some little way up this stair another door leads into the two or three big attics over the nurseries, which the children used as playrooms in the wet weather. Master Francis's room was the lowest door on the tower staircase, half way as it were, as to level, between the nurseries and the attics. The ground-floor rooms of the tower were entered from below, as the separate staircase only began from the nursery floor. All these particulars, of course, I learnt by degrees, having but a very general idea of things that first night; but plans of houses and buildings have always had an interest for me, and as a girl I think I had a quick eye for sizes and proportions. I do remember the first time I saw the ground-floor room of the tower, under Master Francis's, so to say, wondering to myself how it came to be so low in the ceiling, seeing that the floor of his room was several feet higher than that of the nurseries. No doubt others would have been struck by this also, had the lowest room in the tower been one in regular use, but as long as any one could remember it had only been a sort of lumber-room. It was only by accident that I went into it one day, months after I had come to Treluan.

The nurseries were nice airy rooms; the schoolroom was underneath the day nursery, down on the ground floor; and Miss Bess's room was off the little landing I spoke of before you came to the nursery passage. But all seemed dim and dusky in the half light, that first evening. It was long before the days of gas, of course, except in towns, though that, I am told, is now thought nothing of compared to this new electric light, which Sir Bevil is thinking of establishing here, to be made on the premises in some wonderful way. And even lamps at that time were very different from what they are now, when every time my lady goes up to town she brings back some beautiful new invention for turning night into day.

I was glad, I remember, June though it was, to see a bright fire in the nursery grate—Mrs. Brent was always thoughtful—and the tea laid out nice and tidy on the table. Miss Baby brightened up at sight of it, and the others gathered round to see what good things the housekeeper had provided for them by way of welcome home.

'I hope there's some clotted cream,' said Miss Bess; 'yes, that's right! Nurse has never seen it before, I'm sure. Fancy, Mrs. Brent, mamma says the silly people in London call it Devonshire cream, and I'm sure it's far more Cornish. And honey and some of your own little scones and saffron cakes, that is nice! Mayn't we have tea immediately?'

'I must wash my hands,' said Master Francis, 'they did get so black in the carriage.'

'And mine too,' said Miss Lally. 'Oh, nurse, mayn't Francis wash his for once in the night nursery, to be quick?'

'Why didn't you both keep your gloves on, you dirty children?' said Miss Bess in her masterful way. 'My hands are as clean as clean, and of course Francis mustn't begin muddling in the nursery. You'd never have asked Sharp that, Lally. It's just the sort of thing mamma doesn't like. I shall take my things off in my own room at once.' And she marched to the door as she spoke, stopping for a moment on the way to say to me—'Heatherdale, you'll come into my room, won't you, as soon as ever you can, to talk about the new chair-covers?'

'I won't forget about them, Miss Bess,' I said quietly; 'but for a few days I am sure to be busy, unpacking and looking over

the things that were left here.'

The child said nothing more, but I saw by the lift of her head that she was not altogether pleased.

'Now Master Francis,' I went on, 'perhaps you had better run off to your own room to wash your hands. It's always best to keep to regular ways.'

The boy obeyed at once. I had, to tell the truth, been on the point of letting him do as Miss Lally had wanted, but Miss Bess's speech had given me a hint, though I was not sorry for her not to have seen it. I should be showing Master Francis no true kindness to begin by any look of spoiling him, and I saw by a little smile on Mrs. Brent's face that she thought me wise, even though it was not till later in the evening that I had the long talk with her that I have already mentioned.

Our tea was bright and cheery, Miss Baby's spirits returned, and she kept us all laughing by her funny little speeches. My lady came in when we had nearly finished, just to see how all the children were—perhaps too, for she was full of kind thoughtfulness, to make me feel myself more at home. She sat down in the chair by the fire, with a little sigh, and I was sorry to see the anxious, harassed look on her beautiful face.

'You all look very comfortable,' she said; 'please give me a cup of tea, nurse. I found such a lot of things to do immediately, that I've not had time to think of tea yet, and poor Sir Hulbert is off in the rain to see about some broken fences. Oh dear! what a contrary world it seems,' she added half laughingly.

'How did the fences get broken, mamma?' said Miss Bess; 'and why didn't Garth get them mended at once without waiting to tease papa the moment he got home?'

'Some cattle got wild and broke them, and if they are not put right at once, more damage may be done. But all these repairs are expensive. It only happened two days ago; poor Garth was obliged to tell papa before doing it. Dear me,' she said again, 'it really does seem sometimes as if money would put everything in life right.'

'Oh! my lady,' I exclaimed hastily, and then I got red with shame at my forwardness and stopped short. I felt very sorry for her; the one thought seemed never out of her mind, and bid fair to poison her happy home. I felt too that it was scarcely the sort of talk for the children to hear, Miss Bess being already in some ways so old for her years, and the two others scarce as light-hearted as they should have been.

My lady smiled at me.

'Say on, Heatherdale; I'd like to hear what you think about it.'

I felt my face getting still redder, but I had brought it on myself.

'It was only, my lady,' I began, 'that it seems to me that there are so many troubles worse than want of money. There's my last lady's sister, for instance, Mrs. Vernon,—everything in the world has she that money can give, but she's lost all her babies, one after the other, and she's just heart-broken. Then there's young Lady Mildred Parry, whose parents own the finest place near my home, and she's their only child; but she had a fall from her horse two years ago and her back is injured for life; she often drives past our cottage, lying all stretched-out-like, in a carriage made on purpose.'

My lady was silent. Suddenly, to my surprise, Master Francis looked up quickly.

'I don't think I'd mind that so very much,' he said, 'not if my back didn't hurt badly. I think it would be better than walking with your leg always aching, and I daresay everybody loves that girl dreadfully.'

He stopped as suddenly as he had begun, giving a quick frightened glance round, and growing not red but still paler than usual, as was his way.

'Poor little Francie,' said Miss Lally, stretching her little hand out to him and looking half ready to cry.

'Don't be silly, Lally; if Francis's leg hurts him he has only to say so, and it will be attended to as it has always been. If everybody loves that young Lady Mildred, no doubt it is because she is sweet and loving *to* everybody.'

Then she grew silent again and seemed to be thinking.

'You are right, nurse,' she said. 'I am very grateful when I see my dear children all well and happy.'

'And *good*,' added Miss Bess with her little toss of the head.

'Well, yes, of course,' said her mother smiling. It was seldom, if ever, Miss Bess was pulled up for anything she took it into her head to say, whether called for or not.

'But,' my lady went on in a lower voice, turning to me, as if she hardly wished the children to hear, 'want of money isn't my only, nor indeed my worst trouble.—I must go,' and she got up as she spoke; 'there are twenty things waiting for me to attend to downstairs. Good-night, children dear; I'll come up and peep at you in bed if I possibly can, but I'm not sure if I shall be able. If not, nurse must do instead of me for to-night,' and she turned towards the door, moving in the quick graceful way she always did.

'Franz!' said Miss Bess reprovingly; the poor boy was already getting off his chair, but he was too late to open the door. I doubt if his aunt noticed his moving at all.

'You're always so slow and clumsy,' said his eldest cousin. The words sounded unkind, but it was greatly that Miss Bess wanted him to please her mamma, for the child had an excellent heart.

There was plenty to do after that first evening for all of us. I got sleepy Miss Baby to bed as soon as might be. The poor dear, she *was* sleepy! I remember how, when she knelt down in her little white nightgown to say her prayers, she could only just get out, 'T'ank God for b'inging us safe home;' as she had evidently been taught to say after a journey.

'Baby thinks that's enough, when she's been ter-a-velling,' explained Miss Lally.

Then I set to work to unpack, and it was quite surprising how handy the two elder girls—and not they only, but Master Francis too—were in helping me, and explaining where their things were kept and all the nursery ways. Then I had to be shown Miss Bess's room, and nearly offended her little ladyship by saying I hadn't time just then to settle about the new covers. For I was determined to give some attention to Master Francis also.

His room was very plain, not to say bare; not that I hold with pampering boys, but he being delicate, it did seem to me he might have had a couch or easy-chair to rest his poor leg. He was very eager to make the best of things, telling me I had no idea what a beautiful view there was from his windows, of which there were three.

'I love the tower,' he said. 'I wouldn't change my room here for any other in the house.'

And I must say I thought it was very nice of him to put things in that way, considering too the sharp tone in which I had heard his aunt speak to him that very evening.

When I woke the next morning I found that Mrs. Brent's words had come true, for the sun was pouring in at the window, and when I drew up the blind and looked out I would scarce have known the place to be the same. The outlook was bare, to be sure, compared with the well-wooded country about my home; but the grounds just around the house were carefully kept, though in a plain way, no bedding-out plants or rare foreign shrubs, such as I had been used to see at Mr. Wyngate's country place. But all about Treluan there was the charm which no money will buy—the charm of age, very difficult to put into words, though I felt it strongly.

A little voice just then came across the room.

'Nurse, dear.' It was Miss Lalage. 'It's a very fine day, isn't it? I have been watching the sun getting up ever so long. When I first wokened, it was nearly quite dark.'

I looked at the child. She was sitting up in her cot; her face looked tired, and her large gray eyes had dark lines beneath them, as if she had not slept well. Miss Baby was still slumbering away in happy content—she was a child to sleep, to be sure! A round of the clock was nothing for her.

'My dear Miss Lally,' I said, 'you have never been awake since dawn, surely. Is your head aching, or is something the matter?'

She gave a little sigh.

'No, fank you, it's nothing but finking, I mean th-inking. Oh! I wish I could speak quite right, Bess says it's so babyish.'

'Thinking! and what have you been thinking about, dearie? You should have none but happy thoughts. Isn't it nice to be at home again? and this beautiful summer weather! We can go such nice walks. You've got to show me all the pretty places about.'

'Yes,' said Miss Lally. 'I'd like that, but we'll be having lessons next week,—not all day long, we can go beautiful walks in the afternoons.'

'Was it about lessons you were troubling your little head?'

'No,' she said, though not very heartily. 'I don't like them much, at least not those *very* high up sums—up you know to the *very* top of the slate—that won't never come right. But I wasn't finking of them; it was about poor mamma, having such ter-oubles. Francie and I do fink such a lot about it. Bess does too, but she's so clever, she's sure she'll do something when she's big to get a lot of money for papa and mamma. But I'm not clever, and Francie has got his sore leg; we can't fink of anything we could do, unless we could find some fairies; but Francie's sure there aren't any, and he's past ten, so he must know.'

'You can do a great deal, dear Miss Lally,' I said. 'Don't get it into your head you can't. Rich or poor, there's nothing helps papas and mammas so much as their children being good, and loving, and obedient; and who knows but what Master Francis may be a very clever man some day, whether his poor leg gets better or not.'

The little girl seemed pleased. It needed but a kind word or two to cheer her up at any time.

'Oh! I am so glad Sharp has gone away and you comed,' she said.

She was rather silent while I was dressing her, but when she had had her bath, and I was putting on her shoes and stockings, she began again.

'Nurse,' she asked, 'do stockings cost a lot of money to buy?'

'Pretty well,' I said. 'At my home, mother always taught us to knit our own. I could show you a pair I knitted before I was much bigger than you.'

How the child's face did light up!

'I've seen a little girl knitting who's not much bigger than me. Couldn't you show me how to make some stockings, and then mamma wouldn't have to buy so many?'

'Certainly I could; I have plenty of needles with me, and I daresay we could get some wool,' I replied. 'I'll tell you what, Miss Lally; you might knit some for Master Francis; that would be pleasing him as well as your mamma. There's a village not far off, I suppose—you can generally buy wool at a village shop.'

'There's our village across the park, and there's two shops. I'll ask Bess; she'll know if we could get wool. Oh! nurse, how pleased I am; I wonder if we could go to-day. I've got some pennies and a shilling. I do like to have nice things to think of. I wish Francie would be quick, I do so want to tell him, or do you think I should keep it a surprise for him?'

And she danced about in her eager delight, which at last woke Miss Baby, who opened her eyes and stared about her, with a sleepy smile of content on her plump rosy face. She was a picture of a child, and so easy minded. It is wonderful, to be sure, how children brought up like little birds in one nest yet differ from each other. I began to feel very satisfied that I should never regret having come to Treluan.

CHAPTER V

THE SHOP IN THE VILLAGE

Before many days had passed I felt quite settled down. The weather was most lovely for some time just then, and this I think always helps to make one feel more at home in a strange place. That first day, and for two or three following, we could not go long walks, as I had really so much to see to indoors. Miss Bess had to make up her mind to wait as patiently as she could, till other things were attended to, for the doing up of her room, and, what I was more sorry for, poor Miss Lally had also to wait about beginning the knitting she had so set her heart on.

I think it was the fourth day after our arrival that I began at last to feel pretty clear. All the nursery drawers and cupboards tidied up and neatly arranged; the children's clothes looked over and planned about for the rest of the summer. My lady went over them with me, and I could see that it was a comfort to her to feel assured that I understood the need for economy, and prided myself, thanks to my good old mother, on neat patches and darns quite as much as on skill on making new things. My poor lady—it went to my heart to see how often she would have liked to get fresh and pretty frocks and hats for the young ladies, for she had good taste and great love of order. But after all there is often a good deal of pleasure in contriving and making the best of what one has.

'You must take nurse a good walk to-day, children,' said my lady as she left the room. 'I shall be busy with your papa, but you might get as far as the sea, I think, if you took old Jacob and the little cart for Baby if she gets tired, and for Francis if his leg hurts him. How has it been, by the by, for the last day or two, Francis?'

Her tone was rather cold, but still I could see a little flush of pleasure come over the boy's face.

'Oh! much better, thank you, auntie,' he said eagerly. 'It's only just after the day in the railway that it seems to hurt more.'

'Then try to be bright and cheerful,' she said. 'Remember you are not the only one in the world that has troubles to bear.'

The boy didn't answer, but I could see his thin little face grow pale again, and I just wished that my lady had stopped at her first kindly inquiry. A deal of mischief is done, it seems to me, by people not knowing when it is best to stop.

Jacob, the donkey, was old and no mistake. Larkins's 'Peter' was young compared to him, and the cart was nothing but a cart such as light luggage might be carried in. It had no seats, but we took a couple of footstools with us, which served the purpose, and many a pleasant ramble we had with the shabby little old cart and poor Jacob.

'Which way shall we go?' said Miss Bess, as we started down the drive. 'You know, nurse, there's ever so many ways to the sea here. It's all divided into separate little bays. You can't get from one to the other except at low tide, and with a lot of scrambling over the rocks, so we generally fix before we start which bay we'll go to.'

'Oh! do let's go to Polwithan Bay!' said Miss Lally.

'It's not nearly so pretty as Trewan,' said Miss Bess, 'and there are the smugglers' caves at Trewan. We often call it the Smugglers' Bay because of that. We've got names of our own for the bays as well as the proper ones.'

'There's one we call Picnic Bay,' said Master Francis, 'because there are such beautiful big flat stones for picnic tables. But I think the Smugglers' Bay is the most curious of all. I'm sure nurse would like to see it. Why do you want to go to Polwithan, Lally? It is rather a stupid little bay.'

'Can we go to the Smugglers' Bay by the village?' asked Miss Lally, and then I understood her, though I did not know that tightly clutched in her hot little hand were the shilling and the three or four pennies she had taken out of her money box on the chance of buying the wool for her stockings.

'It would be ever such a round,' said Miss Bess; but then she added politely—she was very particular about politeness, when she wasn't put out—'but of course if nurse wants to see the village that wouldn't matter. We've plenty of time. Would you like to see it, nurse?'

A glance at Miss Lally's anxious little face decided me.

'Well, I won't say but what it would interest me to see the village,' I replied. 'Of course it's just as well and might be

handy for me to know my way about, so as to be able to find the post-office or fetch any little thing from the shop if it were wanted.'

This was quite true, though I won't deny but that another reason was strongest and Miss Lally knew it, for she crept up to me and slid her little hand into mine gratefully.

'Very well, then,' said Miss Bess, 'we'll go round by the village. But remember if you're tired, Lally, you mustn't grumble, for it was you that first spoke of going that way.'

'There's the cart if Miss Lally's tired,' I said. 'Three could easily get into it, and Jacob can't be knocked up if only Miss Baby goes in it all the way there.'

'Nurse,' said Miss Lally suddenly—I don't think she had heard what we were saying—'there's two shops in the village.'

'Are there, my dear,' I said; 'and is one the post-office? And what do they sell?'

'Yes, one is the post-office, but they sell other things 'aside stamps,' Miss Lally replied. 'They are both *everything* shops.'

'But the *not* the post-office one is much the nicest,' said Master Francis. 'It's kept by old Prideaux—he's an old sailor and ——' Here the boy looked round, but there was no one in sight. Still he lowered his voice. 'People do say that after he left off being a proper sailor he was a smuggler. It runs in the family, Mrs. Brent says,' he went on in the old-fashioned way I noticed in all the children. 'His father was a regular smuggler. Brent says she's seen some queer transactions when she was a girl in the kitchen behind the shop.'

'I thought Mrs. Brent was a stranger in these parts by her birth and upbringing,' I said.

'So she is,' said Master Francis, 'but she came here on a visit when she was a girl to her uncle at the High Meadows Farm, and that's how she came first to Treluan. Grandfather was alive then, and papa and Uncle Hulbert were boys. Even then Prideaux was an old man. Uncle Hulbert says he knows lots of queer stories—he does tell them sometimes, but not as if they had happened here, and you have to pretend to think he and his father had nothing to do with them themselves.'

'It was he that told us first about the smugglers' caves, wasn't it?' said Miss Bess. 'Fancy, nurse, some treasures were found in one of the caves, not so very long ago, hid away in a dark corner far in. There was lace and some beautiful fine silk stockings and some bottles of brandy——'

'And a lot of cigars and tobacco, but they had gone all bad, and some of the brandy hadn't any taste in it, though some was quite good. But grandpapa was a dreadfully honest man; he would send all the things up to London, just as they were found, for he said they belonged to the Queen.'

'I wonder if the Queen wored the silk stockings her own self?' said Miss Lally.

'If *we* found some treasures,' said Miss Bess, 'do you think we'd have to send them to the Queen too? It would be very greedy of her to keep them, when she has such lots and lots of everything.'

'That's just because she's queen; she can't help it. It's part of being a queen, and I daresay she gives away lots too. Besides, you wouldn't care for brandy or cigars, Bess?' said Master Francis.

'We could sell them,' answered Miss Bess, 'if they were good.'

'P'raps the Queen would send us a nice present back,' said Miss Lally. 'Fancy, if she sent us a whole pound, what beautiful things we could buy.'

'It would be great fun to find treasures, whatever they were,' said Miss Bess. 'If we see old Prideaux to-day, I'll ask him if he thinks possibly there's still some in the caves. Only it wouldn't do to go into his shop on purpose to ask him—he'd think it funny.'

'And you'll have to be very careful how you ask him,' said Master Francis. 'Besides, I'm quite sure if there were any to be found, he'd have found them before this.'

'Does he sell wool in his shop, do you think, Miss Bess?' I inquired, and I felt Miss Lally's hand squeeze mine. 'Wool, or

worsted for knitting stockings, I mean. I want to get some, and that would be a reason for speaking to him.'

'I daresay he does; at least his daughter's always knitting, and she must get wool somewhere. Anyway we can ask,' answered Miss Bess, quite pleased with the idea.

'Now, nurse,' said Master Francis suddenly, 'keep your eyes open. When we turn into the field at the end of this little lane—we've come by a short-cut to the village, for the cart can go through the field quite well—you'll have your first good view of the sea. We can see it from some of the windows at Treluan and from the end of the terrace, but nothing like as well.'



Then there burst upon the view a wonderful surprise.

I was glad he had prepared me, for we had been interested in our talking, and I hadn't paid much attention to the way we were going. Now I did keep my eyes open, and I was well rewarded. The field was a sloping one—sloping upwards, I mean, as we entered it—and till we got to the top of the rising ground we saw nothing but the clear sky above the grass, but then there burst upon the view a wonderful surprise. The coast-line lay before us for a considerable distance at each side. Just below us were the rocky bays or creeks the children had told me of, the sand gleaming yellow and white in the sunshine, for the tide was half way out, though near enough still for us to see the glisten of the foam and the edge of the little waves, as they rippled in sleepily. And farther out the deep purple-blue of the ocean, softening into a misty gray, there, where the sky and the water met or melted into each other. A little to the right rose the smoke of several houses—lazily, for it was a very still day. These houses lay nestled in together, on the way to the shore, and seemed scarcely enough to be called a village; but as we left the field again to rejoin the road, I saw that these few houses were only the centre of it, so to speak, as others straggled along the road in both directions for some way, the church being one of the buildings the nearest to Treluan house.

'It is a beautiful view,' said I, after a moment's silence, as we all stood still at the top of the slope, the children glancing at me, as if to see what I thought of it. 'I've never seen anything approaching to it before, and yet it's a bare sort of country

—many wouldn't believe it could be so beautiful with so few trees, but I suppose the sea makes up for a good deal.'

'And it's such a lovely day,' said Master Francis. 'I should say the sun makes up for a good deal. We've lots of days here when it's so gray and dull that the sea and the sky seem all muddled up together. I'm not so very fond of the sea myself. People say it's so beautiful in a storm, and I suppose it is, but I don't care for that kind of beauty, there's something so furious and wild about it. I don't think raging should be counted beautiful. Shouldn't we only call good things beautiful?'

He looked up with a puzzle in his eyes. Master Francis always had thoughts beyond his age and far beyond me to answer.

'I can't say, I'm sure,' I replied. 'It would take very clever people indeed to explain things like that, though there's verses in the Bible that do seem to bear upon it, especially in the Psalms.'

'I know there are, but when it tells of Heaven, it says "there shall be no more sea,"' said Master Francis very gravely. 'And I think I like that best.'

'Dear Francie,' said Miss Lally, taking his hand, as she always did when she saw him looking extra grave, though of course she could not understand what he had been saying.

We were out of the field by this time, and Miss Bess caught hold of Jacob's reins, for up till now the old fellow had been droning along at his own pace.

'Come along, Jacob, waken up,' she said, as she tugged at him, 'or we'll not get to Polwithan Bay to-day, specially if we're going to gossip with old Prideaux on the way.'

We passed the church in a moment, and close beside it the Vicarage.

'That's where Miss Kirstin lives,' said Miss Bess. 'Come along quick, I don't want her to see us.'

'Don't you like her, my dear?' I said, a little surprised.

'Oh yes! we like her very well, but she makes us think of lessons, and while it is holidays we may as well forget them,' and by the way in which Master Francis and Miss Lally joined her in hurrying past Mr. Kirstin's house, I could see they were of the same mind.

Miss Kirstin, when I came to know her, I found to be a good well-meaning young lady, but she hadn't the knack of making lessons very interesting. It wasn't perhaps altogether her fault; in those days books for young people, both for lessons and amusement, were very different from what they are now. School-books were certainly very dry and dull, and there was a sort of feeling that making lessons pleasant or taking to children would have been weak indulgence.

The church was a beautiful old building. I am not learned enough to describe it, and perhaps after all it was more beautiful from age than from anything remarkable in itself. I came to love it well; it was a real grief to me and to others besides me when it had to be partly pulled down a few years ago, and all the wonderful growth of ivy spoilt. Though I won't say but what our new vicar—the third from Mr. Kirstin our present one is—is well fitted for his work, both with rich and poor, and one whom it is impossible not to respect as well as love, though Mr. Kirstin was a worthy and kind old man in his way.

A bit farther along the road we passed the post-office, which the children pointed out to me. The mistress came to the door when she saw us, and curtsied to the little ladies, with a smile and a word of 'Welcome home again, Miss Penrose!' She took a good look at me out of the corner of her eye, I could see. For having lived so much in small country places, I knew how even a fresh servant at the big house will set all the village talking.

Miss Lally glanced in at the shop window as we passed. There was indeed, as she had said, a mixture of 'everything,' from tin pails and mother-of-pearl buttons to red herrings and tallow-candles.

'Nurse,' she whispered, '*in case* we can't get the wool at Prideaux', we might come back here, but I'm afraid Bess wouldn't like to turn back. Oh! I do hope'—with one of her little sighs—'they'll have it at the other shop.'

And so they had, though when we got there a little difficulty arose. The two elder children both wanted to come in, having got their heads full of asking the old man about the smugglers' caves, and thinking it was for myself I wanted the

wool. Never a word said poor Miss Lally, when her sister told her to stay outside with Miss Baby and the cart; but I was getting to know the look of her little face too well by this time not to understand the puckers about her eyes, and the droop at the corners of her mouth.

'We may as well all go in,' I said, lifting Miss Baby out of the cart. 'There's no one else in the shop, and I want Miss Lally's opinion about the wool.'

'*Lally's!*' said Miss Bess rather scornfully; 'she doesn't know anything about wool, or knitting stockings, nurse.'

'Ah! well, but perhaps she's going to know something about it,' I said. 'It's a little secret we've got, Miss Bess; you shall hear about it all in good time.'

'Oh, well, if it's a secret,' said Miss Bess good-naturedly—she was a nice-minded child, as they all were—'Franz and I will keep out of the way while you and Lally get your wool. We'll talk to old Prideaux.'

He was in the shop, as well as his daughter, who was knitting away as the children had described her, and the old wife came hurrying out of the kitchen, when she heard it was the little gentry from Treluan that were in the shop. They did make a fuss over the children, to be sure; it wasn't easy for Miss Lally and me to get our bit of business done. But Sally Prideaux found us just what we wanted—the same wool that she was knitting stockings of herself, only she had not much of it in stock, and might be some little time before she could get more. But I told Miss Lally there'd be enough for a short pair of socks for her cousin—boys didn't wear knickerbockers and long stockings in those days—adding that it was best not to undertake too big a piece of work for the first.

The wool cost one-and-sixpence. It was touching to see the little creature counting over the money she had been holding tightly in her hand all the way, and her look of distress when she found it only came up to one and fourpence halfpenny.

'Don't you trouble, my dear,' I said, 'I have some coppers in my pocket.'

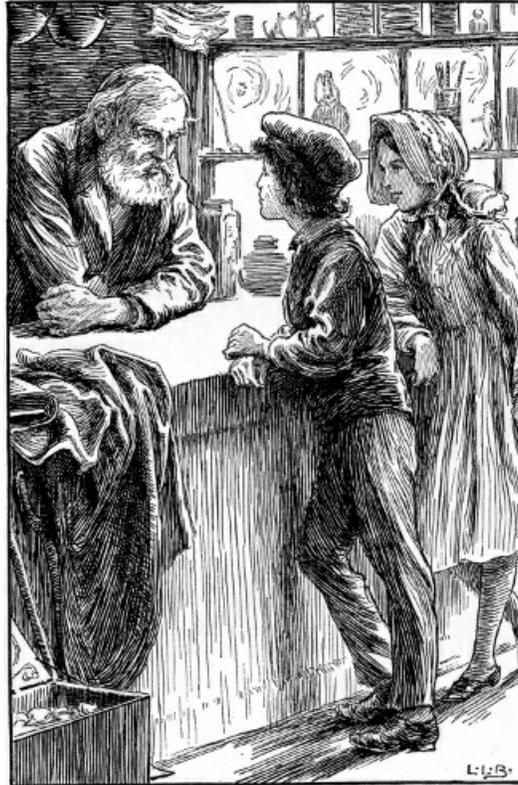
She thanked me as if I had given her three pounds instead of three halfpence, saying in a whisper—'I'll pay you back, nursie, when I get my twopence next Saturday;' and then as happy as a little queen she clambered down off the high stool, her precious parcel in her hand.

'Won't Francie be pleased?' she said. 'They must be ready for his birthday, nurse. And won't mamma be pleased when she finds I can knit stockings, and that she won't have to buy any more?'

CHAPTER VI

THE SMUGGLERS' CAVES

The others seemed to have been very well entertained while Miss Lally and I were busy. Mrs. Prideaux had set Miss Baby on the counter, where she was admiring her to her heart's content—Miss Baby smiling and chattering, apparently very well pleased. Miss Bess and Master Francis were talking eagerly with old Prideaux; they turned to us as we came near.



Miss Bess and Master Francis were talking eagerly with old Prideaux.

'Oh, nurse!' said Miss Bess, 'Mr. Prideaux says that he shouldn't wonder if there were treasures hidden away in the smugglers' caves, though it wouldn't be safe for us to look for them. He says they'd be so very far in, where it's quite, quite dark.'

'And one or two of the caves really go a tremendous way underground. Didn't you say there's one they've never got to the end of?' asked Master Francis.

'So they say,' replied the old man, with his queer Cornish accent. It did sound strange to me then, their talk—though I've got so used to it now that I scarce notice it at all. 'But I wouldn't advise you to begin searching for treasures, Master Francis. If there's any there, you'd have to dig to get at them. I remember when I was a boy a deal of talk about the caves, and some of us wasted our time seeking and digging. But the only one that could have told for sure where to look was gone. He met his death some distance from here, one terrible stormy winter, and took his secret with him. I have heard tell as he "walks" in one of the caves, when the weather's quite beyond the common stormy. But it's not much use, for at such times folk are fain to stay at home, so there's not much chance of any one ever meeting him.'

'Then how has he ever been seen?' asked Miss Bess in her quick way; 'and who was he, Mr. Prideaux? do tell us.'

But the old man didn't seem inclined to say much more. Perhaps indeed Miss Bess was too sharp for him, and he did not know how to answer her first question.

'Such things is best not said much about,' he replied mysteriously; 'and talking of treasures, by all accounts you'd have a better chance of finding some nearer home.'

He smiled, as if he could have said more had he chosen to do so. The children opened their eyes in bewilderment.

'What do you mean?' exclaimed the two elder ones. Miss Lally's mind was running too much on her stockings for her to pay much attention. Prideaux did not seem at all embarrassed.

'Well, sir, it's no secret hereabouts,' he said, addressing Master Francis in particular, 'that the old, old Squire, Sir David, the last of that name—there were several David Penroses before him, but never one since—it's no secret, as I was saying, that a deal of money or property of some kind disappeared in his last years, and it stands to reason that, being as great a miser as was ever heard tell of, he couldn't have spent it. Why, more than half of the lands changed hands in his time, and what did he do with what he got for them?'

'That was our great, great grand-uncle,' said Master Francis to me; 'you remember I told you about him, but I never thought——' he stopped short. 'It *is* very queer,' he went on again, as if speaking to himself.

But just then, Miss Baby having had enough of Mrs. Prideaux' pettings, set up a shout.

'Nurse, nurse,' she said, 'Baby wants to go back to Jacob. Poor Jacob so tired waiting. Dood-bye, Mrs. Pideaux,' and she began wriggling to get off the counter, so that I had to hurry forward to lift her down.

'We'd best be going on,' I said, 'or we'll be losing the finest part of the afternoon.'

I didn't feel quite sure that Prideaux' talk was quite what my lady would approve of for the children. They had a way of taking things up more seriously than is common with such young creatures, and certainly they had got in the way—and I couldn't but feel but what my lady was to blame for this—of thinking too much of the family troubles, especially the want of wealth, which seemed to them a greater misfortune than it need have done. Still, being quite a stranger, and them seeming at liberty to talk to the people about as they did, I didn't feel that it would have been my place to begin making new rules or putting a stop to things, as likely as not quite harmless. I resolved, however, to find out my lady's wishes in such matters at the first opportunity.

Another half hour brought us close to the shore; the road was a good one, being used for carting gravel and sea-weed in large quantities to the village and round about from the little bay—Treluan Bay, that is to say—it led directly to. But as we were bound for Polwithan Bay, where the smugglers' caves were, and had made a round for the sake of coming through the village, we had to cross several fields and follow a rough track instead of going straight down to the sands. Jacob didn't seem to mind, I must say, nor Miss Baby neither, though she must have been pretty well jolted, but it was worth the trouble.

'Isn't it lovely, nurse?' said Miss Bess, when at last we found ourselves in the bay on the smooth firm sand, the sea in front of us, and so encircled on three sides by the rocks that even the path by which we had come was hidden.

'This bay is so beautifully shut in,' said Master Francis. 'You could really fancy that there was no one in the world but us ourselves. I think it's such a nice feeling.'

'It's nice when we're all together,' said Miss Lally; 'it would be rather frightening if anybody was alone.'

'Alone or not,' said Miss Bess, 'it wouldn't be at all nice when tea-time came if we had nothing to eat. And fancy, what *should* we do at night—we couldn't sleep out on the sand?'

'We'd have to go into the caves,' said Master Francis. 'It would be rather fun, with a good fire and with lots of blankets.'

'And where would you get blankets from, or wood for a fire, you silly boy?' said Miss Bess.

'Can we see the caves?' I asked, for having heard so much talk about them, I felt curious to see them.

'Of course,' said Master Francis. 'We always explore them every time we come to this bay. Do you see those two or three dark holes over there among the rocks, nurse? Those are the caves; come along and I'll show them to you.'

I was a little disappointed. I had never seen a cave in my life, but I had a confused remembrance of pictures in an old book at home of some caves—'The Mammoth Caves of Kentucky,' I afterwards found they were—which looked very large and wonderful, and somehow I suppose I had all the time been picturing to myself that these ones were something of the same kind. I didn't say anything to the children though, as they took great pride in showing me all the sights. And after all, when we got to the caves, they turned out much more curious and interesting than I expected from the outside. The largest one, though its entrance was so small, was really as big as a fair-sized church, and narrowing again far back into a dark mysterious-looking passage, from which Master Francis told me two or three smaller chambers opened out.

'And then,' he said, 'after that the passage goes on again—ever so far. In the old days the smugglers blocked it up with pieces of rock, and it isn't so very long ago that this was found out. It was somewhere down along that passage that they found the things I told you of.'

We went a few yards along the passage, but it soon grew almost quite dark, and we turned back again.

'I can quite see it wouldn't be safe to try exploring down there,' I said.

'Yes, I suppose so,' said Master Francis, with a sigh. 'I wish I could find some treasure, all the same. I wonder——' he went on, then stopped short. 'Nurse,' he began again, 'did you hear what old Prideaux said of our great grand-uncle the miser? Could it really be true, do you think, that he hid away money or treasures of some kind?' and he lowered his voice mysteriously.

'I shouldn't think it was likely,' I replied. For I had a feeling that it would not be well for the children to get any such ideas into their heads. It sounded to me like a sort of fairy tale. I had never come across anything so romantic and strange in real life. Though for that matter, Treluan itself, and the kind of old-world feeling about the place, was quite unlike anything I had ever known before.

We were outside the cave again by this time; the sunshine seemed deliciously warm and bright after the chill and gloom inside. Miss Bess had been listening eagerly to what Master Francis was saying.

'I can't see but what old Sir David *might* have hidden treasures away, as he was a real miser,' she said.

'And you know that misers are so suspicious, that even when they're dying they won't trust anybody. I know I've read a story like that,' said the boy. 'Oh! Bess, just fancy if we could find a lot of money or diamonds! Wouldn't uncle and aunt be pleased?'

His whole face lighted up at the very idea.

'I daresay he hid it all away in a stocking,' put in Miss Lally, whose head was still full of her knitting. 'I've heard a story of an old woman miser that did that.'

'And where would the stocking be hid?' said Miss Bess. 'Besides, if a stocking was ever so full, it couldn't hold enough money to be a real treasure.'

'It might be stuffed with bank notes,' said Master Francis. 'There's banknotes worth ever so much; aren't there, nurse?'

'I remember once seeing one of a thousand pounds,' I said. 'That was at my last place. Mr. Wyngate had to do with business in the city, and he once brought one home to show the young ladies.'

'Well, then, you see, Queen,' said Miss Lally, 'there might be a stocking with enough money to make papa and mamma as rich as rich.'

'I'm quite sure Sir David's money wasn't put in a stocking,' said Miss Bess decidedly. 'You've got rather silly ideas, Lally, considering you're getting on for six.'

Miss Lally began to look rather doleful. She had been so bright and cheerful all day that I didn't like to see her little face overcast. We had left Jacob outside the cave, of course; there was one satisfaction with him—he was not likely to run away.

'Miss Baby, dear,' I said, 'aren't you getting hungry? Where's the basket you were holding in the cart?'

'Nice cakes in basket,' said the little girl. 'Baby looked, but Baby didn't eaten them.'

The basket was still in the cart, and I think they were all very pleased when they saw what I had brought for them. Some of Mrs. Brent's nice little saffron buns and a bottle of milk. I remember that I didn't like the taste of the saffron buns at first, and now I might be Cornish born and bred, I think it such an improvement to cakes!

'Another time,' I said, 'we might bring our tea with us. I daresay my lady wouldn't object.'

'I'm sure she wouldn't mind,' said Miss Bess. 'We used to have picnic teas sometimes, when our *quite*, quite old nurse was with us—the one that's married over to St. Iwalds.'

'Bess,' said Master Francis, 'you should say "over at," not "over to."'

'Thank you,' said Miss Bess, 'I don't want you to teach me grammar. *That* isn't parson's business.'

Master Francis grew very red.

'Did you know, nurse,' said Miss Lally, 'Francie's going to be a clergy-gentleman?'

They couldn't help laughing at her, and the laugh brought back good humour.

'I want to be one,' said Master Francis, 'but I'm afraid it costs a great lot to go to college.'

Poor children, through all their talk and plans the one trouble seemed always to keep coming up.

'I fancy that's according a good deal to how young gentlemen take it. There's some that spend a fortune at college, I've heard, but some that are very careful; and I expect you'd be that kind, Master Francis.'

'Yes,' he said, in his grave way. 'I wouldn't want to cost Uncle Hulbert more than I can help. I wish one could be a clergyman without going to college though.'

'You've got to go to school first,' said Miss Bess. 'You needn't bother about college for a long time yet.'

Miss Lally sighed.

'I don't like Francie having to go to school,' she said. 'And the boys are so rough there; I hope they won't hurt your poor leg, Francie.'

'It isn't *that* I mind,' said Master Francie—the boy had a fine spirit of his own though he was so delicate—'what I mind is the going alone and being so far away from everybody.'

'It's a pity,' I said without thinking, 'but what one of you young ladies had been a young gentleman, to have been a companion for Master Francis, and to have gone to school together, maybe.'

'Oh!' said Miss Bess quickly, 'you must never say that to mamma, nurse. You don't know what a trouble it is to her not to have a boy. She'd have liked Lally to be a boy most of all. She wanted her to be a boy; she always says so.'

Here Master Francis gave a deep sigh in his turn.

'Oh! how I wish,' he said, 'that I could turn myself into a girl and Lally into a boy. I wouldn't *like* to be a girl at all, and I daresay Lally wouldn't like to be a boy. But to please Aunt Helen I'd do it.'

'No,' said Miss Lally, 'I don't think I would—not even to please mamma. I couldn't bear to be a boy.'

I was rather sorry I had led to this talk.

'Isn't it best,' I said, 'to take things as they are? Master Francis is just like your brother—the same name and everything.'

'I'd like it that way,' said Master Francis, with a pleased look in his eyes. But I heard Miss Bess, who was walking close beside me, say in a low voice, 'Mamma will never think of it that way!'

This talk made some things clearer to me than before, and that evening, after the children were in bed, I went down to the housekeeper's room and eased my mind by telling her about it, I felt so afraid of having said anything uncalled for. But Mrs. Brent comforted me.

'It's best for you to know,' she said, 'that my lady does make a great trouble, too great a trouble, to my thinking, of not having a son. And no doubt it has to do with her coldness to Master Francis, though I doubt if she really knows this herself, for she's a lady that means to do right and justly to all about her; I will say that for her.'

It was really something to be thankful for to have such a good and sensible woman to ask advice from, for a stranger, as I still was. The more I knew her, the more she reminded me of my good mother. Plain and homely in her ways, with no love of gossip about her, yet not afraid to speak out her mind when she saw it right to do so. Many things would have been harder at Treluan, the poor dear children would have had less pleasure in their lives, but for Mrs. Brent's kind thought for them. That very evening I had had a reason, so to say, for paying a special visit to the housekeeper's room; for when we had got in from our long walk, rather tired and certainly very hungry, a nice surprise was waiting for us in the nursery. The tea-table was already set out most carefully. There was a pile of Mrs. Brent's hot scones and a beautiful dish of strawberries.

'Oh, nurse!' cried Miss Bess, who had run on first, 'quick, quick, look what a nice tea. I'm sure it's Mrs. Brent! Isn't it good of her?'

'It's like a birthday,' said Miss Lally.

And Miss Baby, who had been grumbling a good deal and crying, 'I want my tea,' nearly jumped out of my arms—I had had to carry her upstairs—at the sight of it.

For I'm afraid there's no denying that in those days breakfast, dinner, and tea filled a large place in Miss Augusta's thoughts. I hope she'll forgive me for saying so, if she ever sees this.

CHAPTER VII

A RAINY DAY

That lovely weather lasted on for about a fortnight without a break, and many a pleasant ramble we had, for though lessons began again, Miss Kirstin always left immediately after luncheon, which was the children's dinner, for the three elder ones always joined Sir Hulbert and my lady in the dining-room.

Two afternoons in the week, as I think I have said, Master Francis and Miss Bess had Latin lessons from Sir Hulbert. Miss Bess, by all accounts, did not take very kindly to the Latin grammar, and but for Master Francis helping her—many a time indeed sitting up after his own lessons were done to set hers right—she would often have got into trouble with her papa. For indulgent as he was, Sir Hulbert could be strict when strictness was called for.

Miss Bess was a curious mixture; to see her and hear her talk you'd have thought her twice as clever as Miss Lally, and so in some ways she was. But when it came to book learning, it was a different story. Teaching Miss Lally—and I had something to do with her in this way, for I used to hear over the lessons she was getting ready for Miss Kirstin—was really like running along a smooth road, the child was so eager and attentive, never losing a word of what was said to her. Miss Bess used to say that her sister had a splendid memory by nature. But in my long life I've watched and thought about some things a great deal, and it seems to me that a good memory has to do with our own trying, more than some people would say,—above all, with the habit of really giving attention to whatever you're doing. And this habit Miss Bess had not been taught to train herself to; and being a lively impulsive child, no doubt it came a little harder to her.

A dear child she was, all the same. Looking back upon those days, I would find it hard to say which of them all seemed nearest my heart.

The days of the Latin lessons we generally had a short walk in the morning, as well as one after tea, so as to suit Sir Hulbert's time in the afternoon; and those afternoons were Miss Lally's great time for her knitting, which she was determined to keep a secret till she had made some progress in it and finished her first pair of socks. How she did work at it, poor dear! Her little face all puckered up with earnestness, her little hot hands grasping the needles, as if she would never let them go. And she mastered it really wonderfully, considering she was not yet six years old!

She had more time for it after a bit, for the beautiful hot summer weather changed, as it often does, about the middle of July, and we had two or three weeks of almost constant rain. Thanks to her knitting, Miss Lally took this quite cheerfully, and if poor Master Francis had been left in peace, we should have had no grumbling from him either. A book and a quiet corner was all he asked, and though he said nothing about it, I think he was glad now and then of a rest from the long walks which my lady thought the right thing, whenever the weather was at all fit for going out. But dear, dear! how Miss Bess did tease and worry sometimes! She was a strong child, and needed plenty of exercise to keep her content.

I remember one day, when things really came to a point with her, and, strangely enough,—it is curious on looking back to see the thread, like a road winding along a hill, sometimes lost to view and sometimes clear again, unbroken through all, leading from little things to big, in a way one could never have pictured,—strangely enough, as I was saying, the trifling events of that very afternoon were the beginning of much that changed the whole life at Treluan.

It was raining that afternoon, not so very heavily, but in a steady hopeless way, rather depressing to the spirits, I must allow. It was not a Latin day—I think some of us wished it had been!

'Now, Bess!' said Master Francis, when the three children came up from their dinner, 'before we do anything else'—there had been a talk of a game of 'hide-and-peek,' or 'I spy,' to cheer them up a bit—'before we do anything else, let's get our Latin done, or part of it, any way, as long as we remember what uncle corrected yesterday, and then we'll feel comfortable for the afternoon.'

'Very well,' said Miss Bess, though her voice was not very encouraging.

She was standing by the window, staring out at the close-falling rain, and as she spoke she moved slowly towards the table, where Master Francis was already spreading out the books.

'I don't think it's a good plan to begin lessons the very moment we've finished our dinner,' she added.

'It isn't the very minute after,' put in Miss Lally, not very wisely. 'You forget, Queen, we went into the 'servatory with mamma, while she cut some flowers, for ever so long.'

Being put in the wrong didn't sweeten Miss Bess's temper.

"Servatory—you baby!" said she. 'Nurse, can't you teach Lally to spell "Constantinople"?'

Miss Lally's face puckered up, and she came close to me.

'Nursie,' she whispered, 'may I go into the other room with my knitting; I'm sure Queen is going to tease me.'

I nodded my head. I used to give her leave sometimes to go into the night nursery by herself, when she was likely to be disturbed at her work, and that generally by Miss Bess. For though Master Francis couldn't have but seen she had some secret from him, he was far too kind and sensible to seem to notice it. Whereas Miss Bess, who had been taken into her confidence, never got into a contrary humour without teasing the poor child by hints about stockings, or wool, or something. And the contrary humour was on her this afternoon, I saw well.

'Now, Bess, begin, do!' said Master Francis. 'These are the words we have to copy out and learn. I'll read them over, and then we can write them out and hear each other.'

He did as he said, but it was precious little attention he got from his cousin, though it was some time before he found it out. Looking up, he saw that she had dressed up one hand in her handkerchief, like an old man in a nightcap, and at every word poor Master Francis said, made him gravely bow. It was all I could do to keep from laughing, though I pretended not to see.

'O Bess!' said the boy reproachfully, 'I don't believe you've been listening a bit.'

'Well, never mind if I haven't. I'd forget it all by to-morrow morning anyway. Show me the words, and I'll write them out.'

She leant across him to get the book, and in so doing upset the ink. The bottle was not very full, so not much damage would have been done if Master Francis's exercise-book had not been lying open just in the way.

'Oh! Bess,' he cried in great distress. 'Just look. It was such a long exercise and I had copied it out so neatly, and you know uncle hates blots and untidiness.'

Miss Bess looked very sorry.

'I'll tell papa it was my fault,' she said. But Master Francis shook his head.

'I must copy it out again,' I heard him say in a low voice, with a sigh, as he pushed it away and gave his attention to his cousin and the words she had to learn.

She was quieter after that, for a while, and in half an hour or so Master Francis let her go. He set to work at his unlucky exercise again, and seeing this, should really have sobered Miss Bess. But she was in a queer humour that afternoon, it only seemed to make her more fidgety.

'You really needn't do it,' she said to Master Francis crossly. 'I told you I'd explain it to papa.' But the boy shook his head. He'd have taken any amount of trouble rather than risk vexing his uncle.

'It was partly my own fault for leaving it about,' he said gently, which only seemed to provoke Miss Bess more.

'You do so like to make yourself a martyr. It's quite true what mamma says,' she added in a lower voice, which I did think unkind.

But in some humours children are best left alone for the time, so I took no notice.

Miss Bess returned to her former place in the window. Miss Baby was contentedly setting out her doll's tea-things on the rug in front of the fire,—at Treluan even in the summer one needs a little fire when there comes a spell of rainy weather. Miss Bess glanced at her, but didn't seem to think she'd find any amusement there. Miss Baby was too young to be fair game for teasing.

'What's Lally doing?' she said suddenly, turning to me. 'Has she hidden herself as usual? I hate secrets. They make people so tiresome. I'll just go and tell her she'd better come in here.'

She turned, as she spoke, to the night nursery.

'Now, Miss Bess, my dear,' I couldn't help saying, 'do not tease the poor child. I'll tell you what you might do. Get one of your pretty books and read aloud a nice story to Miss Lally in the other room, till Master Francis is ready for a game.'

'I've read all our books hundreds of times. I'll tell her a story instead!' she replied.

'That would be very nice,' I could not but say, though something in her way of speaking made me feel a little doubtful, as Miss Bess opened the night nursery door and closed it behind her carefully.

For a few minutes we were at peace. No sound to be heard, except the scratching of Master Francis's busy pen and Miss Augusta's pressing invitations to the dollies to have—'thome more tea'—or—'a bit of this bootiful cake,' and I began to hope that in her quiet way Miss Lally had smoothed down her elder sister, when suddenly—dear, dear! my heart did leap into my mouth—there came from the next room the most terrible screams and roars that ever I have heard all the long years I have been in the nursery!

'Goodness gracious!' I cried, 'what can be the matter. There's no fire in there!' and I rushed towards the door.

To my surprise Master Francis and Miss Baby remained quite composed.

'It's only Lally,' said the boy. 'She does scream like that sometimes, though she hasn't done it for a good while now. I daresay it's only Bess pulling her hair a little.'

It was not even that. When I opened the door, Miss Bess, who was standing by her sister—Miss Lally still roaring, though not quite so loudly—looked up quietly.

'I've been telling her stories, nurse,' she said. 'But she doesn't like them at all.'

Miss Lally ran to me sobbing. I couldn't but feel sorry for her, as she clung to me, and yet I was provoked, thinking it really too bad to have had such a fright for nothing at all.

'Queen has been telling me such *howid* things,' she said among her tears, as she calmed down a little. 'She said it was going to be such a pretty story and it was all about a little girl, who wasn't a little girl, weally. They tied her sleeves with green ribbons, afore she was christened, and so the naughty fairies stealed her away and left a howid squealing pertence little girl instead. And it was just, *just* like me, and, Queen says, they *did* tie me in green ribbons. She knows they did, she can 'amember;' and here her cries began again. 'And Queen says 'praps I'll never come right again, and I can't bear to be a pertence little girl. Queen told it me once before, but I'd forgot, and now it's all come back.'

She buried her face on my shoulder. I had sat down and taken her on my knees, and I could feel her all shaking and quivering, though through it all she still clutched her knitting and the four needles.

'Miss Bess,' I said, in a voice I don't think I had yet used since I had been with them, 'I *am* surprised at you! Come away with me, my dear,' I said to Miss Lally. 'Come into the other room. Miss Bess will stay here till such time as she can promise to behave better, both to you and Master Francis.'

Miss Bess had turned away when I began to speak, and I think she had felt ashamed. But my word about Master Francis had been a mistake.

'You needn't scold me about spilling the ink on Francis's book!' she said angrily. 'You know that was an accident.'

'There's accidents and accidents,' I replied, which I know wasn't wise; but the child had tried my temper too, I won't deny.

I took Miss Lally into a corner of the day nursery and talked to her in a low voice, not to disturb Master Francis, who was still busy writing.

'My dear,' I said, 'so far as I can put a stop to it, I won't have Miss Bess teasing you, but all the same I can't have you screaming in that terrible way for really nothing at all. Your own sense might tell you that there's no such things as fairies

changing babies in that way. Miss Bess only said it to tease.'

She was still sobbing, but all the same she had not forgotten to wrap up her precious knitting in her little apron, so that her cousin shouldn't catch sight of it, and her heart was already softening to her sister.

'Queen didn't mean to make me cry,' she said. 'But I can't bear that story; nobody would love me if I was only a pertence little girl.'

'But you're not that, my dear; you're a very real little girl,' I said. 'You're your papa's and mamma's dear little daughter and God's own child. That's what your christening meant.'

Miss Lally's sobs stopped.

'I forgot about that,' she said very gravely, seeming to find great comfort in the thought. 'If I had been a pertence little girl, I couldn't have been took to church like Baby was. Could I? And I know I was, for I have got godfather and godmother and a silver mug wif my name on.'

'And better things than that, thank God, as you'll soon begin to understand, my dear Miss Lally,' I answered, as she held up her little face to be kissed.

'May I go back to Queen now?' she asked, but I don't think she was altogether sorry when I shook my head.

'Not just yet, my dear, I think,' I replied.

'Only where am I to do my knitting?' she whispered. 'I can't do it here; Francie would be sure to see,' and the corners of her mouth began to go down again. 'Oh! I know,' she went on in another moment, brightening up. 'I could work so nicely in the attic, there's a little seat in the corner, by the window, where Francie and I used to go sometimes when Sharp told us to get out of the way.'

'Wouldn't you be cold, my dear,' I said doubtfully. But I was anxious to please her, so I fetched a little shawl for her and we went up together to the attic.

It did not feel chilly, and the corner by the window—the kind they call a 'storm window,' with a sort of little separate roof of its own—was very cosy. You have a peep of the sea from that window too.

'Isn't it a good plan?' said Miss Lally joyfully. 'I can knit here *so* nicely, and I have been getting on so well this afternoon. There's no stitches dropped, not one, nursie. Mightn't I come here every day?'

'We'll see, my dear,' I said, thinking to myself that it might really be good for her—being a nervous child, and excitable too, for all she seemed so quiet—to be at peace and undisturbed now and then by herself. 'We'll see, only you must come downstairs at once if you feel cold or chilly.'

I looked round me as I was leaving the attic. There was a big cupboard, or closet rather, at the end near the door. Miss Lally's window was at this end too. The closet door stood half open, but it seemed empty.

'That's where we wait when we're playing "I spy" up here,' said Miss Lally. 'Mouses live in that cupboard. We've seen them running out of their holes; but I like mouses, they've such dear bright eyes and long tails.'

I can't say that I agreed with Miss Lally's tastes. Mice are creatures I've never been able to take to, still they'd do her no harm, that was certain, so seeing her quite happy at her work I went down to the nursery again.

CHAPTER VIII

THE OLD LATIN GRAMMAR

Master Francis was still writing busily when I went back to the nursery. He looked pale and tired, and once or twice I heard him sigh. I knew it was not good for him to be stooping so long over his lessons, especially as the children had not been out all that day.

'Really,' I said, half to myself, but his ears were quick and he heard me, 'Miss Bess has done nothing but mischief this afternoon. I feel sometimes as if I couldn't manage her.'

The boy looked up quickly.

'O nurse!' he said, 'please don't speak like that. I mean I wouldn't for anything have uncle or auntie think I had put her out, or that there had been any trouble. It just comes over her sometimes like that, and she's very sorry afterwards. I suppose Lally and I haven't spirits enough for her, she is so clever and bright, and it must be dull for her, now and then.'

'I'm sure, Master Francis, my dear,' I said, 'no one could be kinder and nicer with Miss Bess than you; and as for cleverness, she may be quick and bright, but I'd like to know where she'd be for her lessons but for you helping her many a time.'

I was still feeling a bit provoked with Miss Bess, I must allow.

'I'm nearly three years older, you know,' replied Master Francis, though all the same I could see a pleased look on his face. It wasn't that he cared for praise—boy or man, I have never in my life known any human being so out and out humble as Mr. Francis; it's that that gives him his wonderful power over others, I've often thought,—but he did love to think he was of the least use to any of those he was so devoted to.

'I'm so glad to help her,' he said softly. 'Nurse,' he added after a little silence, 'I do feel so sad about things sometimes. If I had been big and strong, I might have looked forward to doing all sorts of things for them all, but now I often feel I can never be anything but a trouble, and such an expense to uncle and aunt. You really don't know what my leg costs,' he added in a way that made me inclined both to laugh and cry at once.

'Dear Master Francis,' I said, 'you shouldn't take it so.' I should have liked to say more, but I felt I could scarcely do so without hinting at blame where I had no right to do so.

He didn't seem to notice me.

'If it had to be,' he went on in the same voice, 'why couldn't I have been a girl, or why couldn't one of them have been a boy? That would have stopped it being quite so bad for poor auntie.'

'Whys and wherefores are not for us to answer, my dear, though things often clear themselves up when least expected,' I said. 'And now I must see what Miss Bess is after, that's to say if you've got your writing finished.'

'It's just about done,' he said, 'and I'm sure Bess won't tease any more. Do fetch her in, nurse. Why, baby! what is it, my pet?' he added, for there was Miss Augusta standing beside him, having deserted her toys on the hearthrug. For, though without understanding anything we had been saying, she had noticed the melancholy tone of her cousin's voice.

'Poor F'ancie,' she said pitifully. 'So tired, Baby wants to kiss thoo.'



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The boy picked her up in his arms, and I saw the fair shaggy head and fat dimpled cheeks clasped close and near to his thin white face, and if there were tears in Master Francis's eyes I am sure it wasn't anything to be ashamed of. Never was a braver spirit, and no one that knows him now could think him less a hero could they look back over the whole of his life.

I found Miss Bess sitting quietly with the pincushion on her lap, by the window, making patterns with the pins, apparently quite content. She had not been crying, indeed it took a great deal to get a tear from that child, she had such a spirit of her own. Still she was sorry for what she had done, and she bore no malice, that I could see by the clear look in her pretty eyes as she glanced up at me.

'Nurse,' she said, though more with the air of a little queen granting a favour than a tiresome child asking to be forgiven, 'I'm not going to tease any more. It's gone now, and I'm going to be good. I'm very sorry for making Lally cry, though she is a little silly—of course I wouldn't care to do it if she wasn't,—and I'm *dreadfully* sorry for poor old Franz's exercise. Look what I have been doing to make me remember,' and I saw that she had marked the words 'Bess sorry' with the pins. 'If you leave it there for a few days, and just say "pincushion" if you see me beginning again, it'll remind me.'

It wasn't very easy for me to keep as grave as I wished, but I answered quietly—

'Very well, Miss Bess, I hope you'll keep to what you say,' and we went back, quite friendly again, to the other room.

Master Francis and she began settling what games they would play, and I took the opportunity of slipping upstairs to the attic to call Miss Lally down. She came running out, as bright as could be, and gave me her knitting to hide away for her.

'Nursie,' she said, 'I really think there's good fairies in the attic. I've got on so well. Four whole rows all round and none stitches dropped.'

So that rainy day ended more cheerfully than it had begun.

Unluckily, however, the worst of the mischief caused by Miss Bess's heedlessness didn't show for some little time to

come. The next Latin lesson passed off by all accounts very well, especially for Miss Bess. For, thanks to her new resolutions, she was in a most biddable mood, and quite ready to take her cousin's advice as to learning her list of words again, giving up half an hour of her playtime on purpose.

She came dancing upstairs in the highest spirits.

'Nursie,' she said,—and when she called me so I knew I was in high favour,—'I'm getting so good, I'm quite frightened at myself. Papa said I had never known my lessons so well.'

'I am very glad, I am sure, my love; and I hope,' I couldn't help adding, 'that Master Francis got some of the praise of it.'

For Master Francis was following her into the room, looking not quite so joyful. Miss Bess seemed a little taken aback.

'Do you know,' she said, 'I never thought of it. I was so pleased at being praised.' And as the child was honesty itself, I was certain it was just as she said.

'I'll run down now,' she went on, 'and tell papa that it was Franz who helped me.'

'No, please don't,' said the boy, catching hold of her. 'I am as pleased as I can be, Bess, that you got praised, and it's harder for you than for me, or even for Lally, to try hard at lessons, for you've always got such a lot of other things taking you up; and I wouldn't like,' he added slowly, 'for uncle to think I wanted to be praised. You see I'm older than you.'

'I'm sure you don't get too much praise ever, poor Franz!' said Miss Bess. 'Your exercise was as neat as neat, and yet papa wasn't pleased with it.'

Then I understood better why Master Francis looked a little sad.

'It was the one I had to copy over,' he said.

All the same he wouldn't let Miss Bess go down to her papa. Sir Hulbert was busy, he knew; he had several letters to write, he had heard him say, so Miss Bess had to give in.

'I'll tell you what it is,' she said. 'People who are generally rather naughty, like me,'—Miss Bess was in a humble mood!—'get made a great fuss about when they're good. But people who are always good, like Franz, never get any praise for it, and if ever they do the least bit wrong, they are far worse scolded.'

This made Master Francis laugh. It was something, as Miss Bess said, among the children themselves. Miss Lally, who was always loving and gentle to her cousin, he just counted upon in a quiet steady sort of way. But a word of approval from flighty Miss Bess would set him up as if she'd been the Queen herself.

That was a Friday. The next Latin day was Tuesday. Of course I don't know much about such things myself, but the lessons were taken in turns. One day they'd words and writing exercises out of a book on purpose, and another day they'd have regular Latin grammar, out of a thick old book, which had been Sir Hulbert's own when he was a boy, and which he thought a great deal of. Lesson-books were still expensive too, and even in small things money was considered at Treluan. It was on that Tuesday then that, to my distress, I saw that Master Francis had been crying when he came back to the nursery. It was the first time I had seen his eyes red, and he had been trying to make them right again, I'm sure, for he hadn't come straight up from the library. Miss Bess was not with him; it was a fine day and she had gone out driving with her mamma, having been dressed all ready and her lesson shortened for once on purpose.

I didn't seem to notice Master Francis, sorry though I felt, but Miss Lally burst out at once.

'Francie, darling,' she said, running up to him and throwing her arms round him. 'What's the matter? It isn't your leg, is it?'

'I wouldn't mind that, you know, Lally,' he said.

'But sometimes, when the pain's been dreadful bad, it squeezes the tears out, and you can't help it,' she said.

'No,' he answered, 'it isn't my leg. I think I'd better not tell you, Lally, for you might tell it to Bess, and I just won't have her know. Everything's been so nice with her lately, and it just would seem as if I'd got her into trouble.'

'Was papa vexed with you for something?' the child went on. 'You'd better tell me, Francie, I really won't tell Bess if you

don't want me, and I'm sure nursie won't. I'm becustomed to keeping secrets now. Sometimes secrets are quite right, nursie says.'

I could scarcely help smiling at her funny little air.

'It wasn't anything *very* much, after all,' said Master Francis. 'It was only that uncle said——,' and here his voice quivered and he stopped short.

'Tell it from the beginning,' said Miss Lally in her motherly way, 'and then when you get up to the bad part it won't seem so hard to tell.'

It was a relief to him to have her sympathy, I could see, and I think he cared a little for mine too.

'Well,' he began, 'it's all about that Latin grammar—no, not the lesson,' seeing that Miss Lally was going to interrupt him, 'but the book. Uncle's fat old Latin grammar, you know, Lally. We didn't use it last Friday, it wasn't the day, and we hadn't needed to look at it ourselves since last Wednesday—that was the ink-spilling day. So it was not found out till to-day; and—and uncle was—so—so vexed when he saw how spoilt it was, and the worst of it was I began something about it having been Bess, and that she hadn't told me, and that made uncle much worse——.' Here Master Francis stopped, he seemed on the point of crying again, and he was a boy to feel very ashamed of tears, as I have said.

'I don't think Miss Bess could have known the book had got inked,' I said. 'And I scarce see how it happened, unless the ink got spilt on the table, and it may have been lying open—I've seen Miss Bess fling her books down open on their faces, so to speak, many a time,—and it may have dried in and been shut up when all the books were cleared away, and no one noticed.'

'Yes,' said Master Francis eagerly, 'that's how it must have been. I never meant that Bess had done it and hidden it. I said it in a hurry because I was so sorry for uncle to think I hadn't taken care of his book, and I was very sorry about the book too. But I made it far worse. Uncle said it was mean of me to try to put my carelessness upon another, a younger child, and a girl; O Lally! you never heard him speak like that; it was *dreadful*.'

'Was it worse than that time when big Jem put the blame on little Pat about the dogs not being fed?' asked Miss Lally very solemnly.

Master Francis flushed all over.

'You needn't have said that, Lally,' he said turning away. 'I'm not so bad as that, any way.'

It was very seldom he spoke in that voice to Miss Lally, and she hadn't meant to vex him, poor child, though her speech had been a mistake.

'Come, come, Master Francis,' I said, 'you're taking the whole thing too much to heart, I think. Perhaps Sir Hulbert was worried this morning.'

'No, no,' said Master Francis, 'he spoke quite quietly. A sort of cold, kind way, that's much worse than scolding. He said whatever Bess's faults were, she was quite, quite open and honest, and of course I know she is; but he said that this sort of thing made him a little afraid that my being delicate and not—not like other boys, was spoiling me, and that I must never try to make up for not being strong and manly by getting into mean and cunning ways to defend myself.'

Young as she was, Miss Lally quite understood; she quite forgot all about his having been vexed with her a moment before.

'O Francie!' she cried, running to him and flinging her arms round him, in a way she sometimes did, as if he needed her protection; 'how could papa say so to you? Nobody could think you mean or cunning. It's only that you're too good. I'll tell Bess as soon as she comes in, and she'll tell papa all about it, then he'll see.'

'No, dear,' said Master Francis, 'that's just what you mustn't do. Don't you remember you promised?'

Miss Lally's face fell.

'Don't you see,' Master Francis went on, 'that *would* look mean? As if I had made Bess tell on herself to put the blame off

me. And I do want everything to be happy with Bess and me ourselves as long as I am here. It won't be for so very long,' he added. 'Uncle says it will be a very good thing indeed for me to go to school.'

This was too much for Miss Lally, she burst out crying, and hugged Master Francis tighter than before. I had got to understand more of her ways by now, and I knew that once she was started on a regular sobbing fit, it soon got beyond her own power to stop. So I whispered to Master Francis that he must help to cheer her up, and between us we managed to calm her down. That was just one of the things so nice about the dear boy, he was always ready to forget about himself if there was anything to do for another.

Miss Bess came back from her drive brimming over with spirits, and though it would have been wrong to bear her any grudge, it vexed me rather to see the other two so pale and extra quiet, though Master Francis did his best, I will say, to seem as cheerful as usual.

Miss Bess's quick eyes soon saw there had been something amiss. But I passed it off by saying Miss Lally had been troubled about something, but we weren't going to think about it any more.

Think about it I did, however, so far as it concerned Master Francis, especially. Till now I had been always pleased to see that his uncle was really much attached to the boy, and ready to do him justice. But this notion, which seemed to have begun in Sir Hulbert's mind, that just because the poor child was delicate and in a sense infirm, he must be mean spirited and unmanly in mind, seemed to me a very sad one, and likely to bring much unhappiness. Nor could I feel sure that my lady was not to blame for it. She was frank and generous herself, but inclined to take up prejudices, and not always careful enough in her way of speaking of those she had any feeling against.

I did what I could, whenever I had any opportunity, to stand up for the boy in a quiet way, and with all respect to those who were his natural guardians. But, on the whole, much as I knew we should miss him in the nursery, I was scarcely sorry to hear not many weeks after the little events I have been telling about, that Master Francis's going to school was decided upon. It was to be immediately after the Christmas holidays, and we were now in the month of October.

CHAPTER IX

UPSET PLANS

But, as everybody knows, things in this world seldom turn out as they are planned.

There was a great deal of writing and considering about Master Francis's school, and I could see that both Sir Hulbert and my lady had it much on their minds. They would never have thought of sending him anywhere but of the best, but in those days schools, even for little boys, cost, I fancy, quite as much or more than now. And I can't say but what I think that the worry and the difficulty about it rather added to his aunt's prejudice against the boy.

However, before long, all was settled, the school was chosen and the very day fixed, and in our different ways we began to get accustomed to the idea. Master Francis, I could see, had two quite opposite ways of looking at it: he was bitterly sorry to go, to leave the home and those in it whom he loved so dearly, more dearly, I think, than any one understood. And he took much to heart also the fresh expenses for his uncle. But, on the other hand, he was eager to get on with his learning; he liked it for its own sake, and, as he used to say to me sometimes when we were talking alone—

'It's only by my mind, you know, nurse, that I can hope to be good for anything. If I had been strong and my leg all right, I'd have been a soldier like papa, I suppose.'

'There's soldiers and soldiers, you must remember, Master Francis,' I would reply. 'There's victories to be won far greater than those on the battlefield. And many a one who's done the best work in this world has been but feeble and weakly in health.'

His eyes used to brighten up when I spoke like that. Sometimes, too, I would try to cheer him by reminding him there was no saying but what he might turn out a fairly strong man yet. Many a delicate boy got improved at school, I had heard.

But alas!—or 'alas' at least it seemed at the time—everything was changed by what happened that winter.

It was cold, colder than is usual in this part of the world, and I think Master Francis had got it in his head to try and harden himself by way of preparing for school life. My lady used to say little things sometimes, with a good motive, I daresay, about not minding the cold and plucking up a spirit, and what her brothers used to do when they were young, all of which Master Francis took to heart in a way she would not then have believed if she had been told it. Dear me! it is strange to think of it, when I remember how perfectly in later years those two came to understand each other, and how nobody—after she lost her good husband—was such a staff and support to her, such a counsellor and comfort, as the nephew she had so little known—her 'more than son,' as I had often heard her call him.

But I am wandering away from my story. I was just getting to Master Francis's illness. How it came about no one could really tell. It is not often one can trace back illnesses to their cause. Most often I fancy there are more than one. But just after Christmas Master Francis began with rheumatic fever. We couldn't at first believe it was going to be anything so bad. For my lady's sake, and indeed for everybody's, I tried to cheer up and be hopeful, in spite of the doctor's gloomy looks. It was a real disappointment to myself and took down my pride a bit, for I had done my best by the child, hoping to start him for school as strong and well as was possible for him. And any one less just and fair than my lady might have had back thoughts, such as damp feet, or sheets not aired enough, or chills of some kind, that a little care might have avoided.

It was my belief that he had been feeling worse than usual for some time, but never a complaint had he made, perhaps he wouldn't own it to himself.

It wasn't till two nights after Christmas that, sitting by the nursery fire, just after Miss Augusta had been put to bed, he said to me—

'Nurse, I can't help it, my leg is so dreadfully bad, and not my leg only, the pain of it seems all over. I'm *all* bad legs to-night,' and he tried to smile. 'May I go to bed now, and perhaps it will be all right in the morning?'

I *was* frightened! Sir Hulbert and my lady were dining out that evening, which but seldom happened, and when I got over my start a little I wasn't sorry for it, hoping that a good night might show it was nothing serious.

We got him to bed as fast as we could. There was no going down to dessert that evening, so Miss Bess and Miss Lalage set to work to help me, like the womanly little ladies they were; one of them running downstairs to see about plenty of hot water for a good bath and hot bottles, and the other fetching the under housemaid to see to a fire in his room. I doubt if he had ever had one before. Bedroom fires were not in my lady's rule, and I don't hold with them myself, except in illness or extra cold weather.

He cheered up a little, and even laughed at the fuss we made. And before his uncle and aunt returned he was sound asleep, looking quiet and comfortable, so that I didn't think it needful to say anything to them that night. But long before morning, for I crept upstairs to his room every hour or two, I saw that it was not going off as I had hoped. He started and moaned in his sleep, and once or twice when I found him awake, he seemed almost lightheaded, and as if he hardly knew me. Once I heard him whisper: 'Oh! it hurts so,' as if he could scarcely bear it.

About five o'clock I dressed myself and took up my watch beside him. My lady was an early riser; by eight o'clock, in answer to a message from me, she was with us herself in her dressing-gown. Master Francis was awake.

'O my lady!' I said, 'I'd no thought of bringing you up so early, and you were late last night too.' For they had had a long drive. 'It was only that I durstn't take upon me to send for the doctor without asking.'

'No, no, of course not,' she said. And indeed that was a liberty my lady would not have been pleased with any one's taking. 'Do you really think it necessary?'

The poor child was looking a little better just then, the pain was not so bad. He seemed quiet and dreamy-like, though his face was flushed and his eyes very bright.

'Auntie!' he said, smiling a very little; 'how pretty you look!'



'Auntie!' he said, smiling a very little; 'how pretty you look!'

And so she did in her long white dressing-gown, with her lovely fair hair hanging about, for all the world like Miss Lally's.

I think myself the fever was on his brain a little already, else he would scarce have dared speak so to his aunt.

She took no notice, but drew me out of the room.

'What in the world's the matter with him?' she said, anxious and yet irritated at the same time. 'Has he been doing anything foolish that can have made him ill?'

I shook my head.

'It's seldom one can tell how illness comes, but I feel sure the doctor should see him,' I replied.

So he was sent for, and before the day was many hours older, there was little doubt left—though, as I said before, I tried for a bit to hope it was only a bad cold—that Master Francis was in for something very serious.

Almost from the first the doctor spoke of rheumatic fever. There was a sort of comfort in this, bad as it was—the comfort of knowing there was no infection to fear. It was a great comfort to Master Francis himself, whenever he felt the least bit easier, now and then to see his cousins for a minute or two at a time, without any risk to them. For one of his first questions to the doctor was whether his illness was anything the others could catch.

After that for a few days he was so bad that he could really think of nothing but how to bear the pain patiently. Then when he grew a shade better, he began thinking about going to school.

'What was the day of the month? Would he be well, *quite* well, by the 20th, or whatever day school began? Uncle would be *so* disappointed if it had to be put off—and so on, over and over again, till at last I had to speak, not only to the doctor, but to Sir Hulbert himself, about the way the boy was worrying in his mind.

The doctor tried to put him off by saying he was getting on famously, and such-like speeches. A few quiet words from Sir Hulbert had far more effect.

'My dear boy,' he said gravely, 'what you have to do is to try to get well and not fret yourself. If it is God's will that your going to school should be put off, you must not take it to heart. You're not in such a hurry to leave us as all that, are you?'

The last few words were spoken very kindly and he smiled as he said them. I was glad of it, for I had not thought his uncle quite as tender of the boy as he had used to be. They pleased Master Francis, I could see, and another thought came into his mind which helped to quiet him.

'Anyway, nurse,' he said to me one day, 'there'll be a good deal of expense saved if I don't go to school till Easter.'

It never struck him that there are few things more expensive than illness, and as I had no idea till my lady told me that the term had to be paid for, whether he went to school or not, I was able to agree with him.

I was deeply sorry for my lady in those days. Some might be hard upon her, for not forgetting all else in thankfulness that the child's life was spared, and I know she tried to do so, but it was difficult. And when she spoke out to me one day, and told me about the schooling having to be paid all the same, I really did feel for her; knowing through Mrs. Brent, as I have mentioned, all the past history of the troubles brought about by poor Master Francis's father.

'I hope he'll live to be a comfort to you yet, if I may say so, my lady, and I've a strong feeling that he will,' I said (she reminded me of those words long after), 'and in the meantime you may trust to Mrs. Brent and me to keep all expense down as much as possible, while seeing that Master Francis has all he needs. I'm sure we can manage without a sick-nurse now.'

For there had been some talk of having one sent for from London, though in those days it was less done than seems the case now.

And after a while things began to mend. It was not a *very* bad attack, less so than we had feared at first. In about ten days' time Mrs. Brent and Susan the housemaid and I, who had taken it in turns to sit up all night, were able to go to bed as usual, only seeing to it that the fire was made up once in the night, so as to last on till morning, and the day's work grew

steadily lighter.

Once they had finished their lessons, the little girls were always eager to keep their cousin company. He was only allowed to have them one at a time. Miss Bess used to take the first turn, but it was hard work for her, poor child, to keep still, though it grew easier for her when it got the length of his being able for reading aloud. But Miss Lally from the first was a perfect model of a little sick-nurse. Mouse was no word for her, so still and noiseless and yet so watchful was she, and if ever she was left in charge of giving him his medicine at a certain time, I could feel as sure as sure that it wouldn't be forgotten. When he was inclined to talk a little, she knew just how to manage him—how to amuse him without exciting him at all, and always to cheer him up.

The weather was unusually bad just then, though we did our best to prevent Master Francis feeling it, by keeping his room always at an even heat, but there were many days on which the young ladies couldn't get out. Altogether it was a trying time, and for no one more than for my lady.

I couldn't help thinking sometimes how different it would have been if Master Francis had been her own child, when the joy of his recovering would have made all other troubles seem nothing. I felt it both for her and for him, though I don't think he noticed it himself; and after all, now that I can look back on things having come so perfectly right, perhaps it is foolish to recall those shadows. Only it makes the picture of their lives more true.

Through it all I could see my lady was trying her best to have none but kind and nice feelings.

'The doctor says that though Francis will really be almost as well as usual in three or four weeks from now, there can be no question of his going to school for ever so long—perhaps not at all this year.'

'Dear, dear,' I said. 'But you won't have to go on paying for it all the same, my lady?'

She smiled at this.

'No, no, not quite so bad as that, only this one term, which is paid already. Sir Hulbert might have got off paying it if he had really explained how difficult it was. But that's just the sort of thing it would really be lowering for him to do,' and she sighed. 'The doctor says too,' she went on again, 'that by rights the boy should have a course of German baths, that might do him good for all his life; but how we *could* manage that I can't see, though Sir Hulbert is actually thinking of it. I doubt if he would think of it as much if it were for one of our own children,' she added rather bitterly.

'He feels Master Francis a sort of charge, I suppose,' I said, meaning to show my sympathy.

'He is a charge indeed,' said his aunt. 'And to think that all this time he might have been really improving at school.'

I could say nothing more, but I did grieve that she couldn't take things in a different spirit.

'It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good.' Miss Lally had a fine time for her knitting just then, with Master Francis out of the way. Of course if he had been at school there would have been no difficulty, and she had planned to have his socks ready to send him on his birthday, the end of March. Now she had got on so fast—one sock finished and the heel of the other turned, though not without many sighs and even a few tears—that she hoped to have them as a surprise the first day he came down to the nursery.

'I'll have to begin working in the attic again, after that,' she said to me, 'for I'm going to make a pair for baby.'

'That's to say if the weather gets warmer,' I said to her. 'You certainly couldn't have sat up in the attic these last few weeks, Miss Lally.'

CHAPTER X

THE NEW BABY

The weather did improve. The winter having been so unusually severe was made up for, as I think often happens, by a bright and early spring. By the beginning of April Master Francis was able to be out again, though of course only for a little in the middle of the day, and we had to be very careful lest he should catch the least cold. I was exceedingly glad, really more glad than I can say, that his getting well went through without any backcasts. For himself he was really better than the doctor had dared to hope, but as he began to move about more freely I was grieved to see that the stiffness of his leg seemed worse than before his illness. I don't think it pained him much, at least he didn't complain.

In the meantime I thought it would be best to say nothing about it, half hoping that he didn't notice it himself, but I heard no talk of his going to school.

I shall never forget one morning in April—it was towards the end of the month, a most lovely sunny morning it was, as I went up the winding staircase leading to Master Francis's room in the tower. The sunshine came pouring in through the narrow windows as brilliant as if it had been midsummer, and the songs of the birds outside seemed to tell how they were enjoying it, yet it was only half-past six! The little ladies below were all sleeping soundly, but Master Francis, I knew, always woke very early, and somehow I had a feeling that he must be the first to hear the good news.

As I knocked at the door I heard him moving inside. He had got up to open the window; the room seemed flooded with light as I went in. Master Francis was sitting up in bed reading, or learning some of his lessons more likely, for he was well enough now to have gone back to regular ways. He looked up very brightly.

'Isn't it a most beautiful morning, nurse?' he said. 'The sunshine woke me even earlier than usual, so I'm looking over my Latin. Auntie doesn't mind my reading in bed in the morning. It isn't like at night with candles.'

'No, of course not,' I said. 'But, Master Francis, I want you to leave off thinking about your lessons for a minute. I rather fancy you'll have a holiday to-day. I've got a piece of news for you! I wonder if you can guess what has happened?'

He opened his eyes wide in surprise.

'It must be something good,' he said, 'or you wouldn't look so pleased. What *can* it be? It can't be that Uncle Hulbert's got a lot of money.'

'There are some things better than money,' I said. 'What would you think if a dear little baby boy had come in the night?'

His whole face flushed pink with pleasure.

'Nurse!' he said. 'Is it really true? Oh! how pleased I am. Just the very thing auntie has wanted so—a little boy of her own. I may count him like a brother, mayn't I? Won't Bess and Lally be pleased! Do they know? Mayn't I get up at once, and when do you think I may see him?'

'Some time to-day, I hope,' I answered. 'No, the young ladies don't know yet. They're fast asleep. But I thought you'd like to know.'

'How good of you!' he said. 'I'm just *so* pleased that I don't know what to do.'

What a morning of excitement it was, to be sure! The children were all half off their heads with delight. All, that is to say, except Miss Baby, who burst out crying in the middle of her breakfast, sobbing that she 'wouldn't have no—something——' We couldn't make out what for ever so long, till we found it was her name she was crying about, as of course we were all talking of the new little brother as 'the baby.' We comforted her by saying that anyway he would not be 'Miss Baby'; and perhaps from that it came about that her old name clung to her till she was quite a big girl, and almost from the first Master Bevil got his real name.

He was a great darling—so strong and hearty too—and so handsome even as an infant. Everything seemed to go right with him from the very beginning.

'Surely,' I often said to myself, 'he will bring a blessing with him. And now that my lady's great wish has been granted, I

do hope she will feel more trustful and less anxious.'

I hoped too that she would now have happier feelings to poor Master Francis, especially when she saw his devotion to the baby boy. For of all the children I must say he was the one who loved the little creature the most.

And for a while all seemed tending in the right way, but when the baby was a few weeks old, I began to fear that something of the old trouble was in the air again. Fresh money difficulties happened about that time, though of course I didn't know exactly what they were. But it was easy to see that my lady was fretted, she was not one to hide anything she was feeling.

One day, it was in June, as far as I remember, my lady was in the nursery with Miss Lally and Miss Baby and the real baby. The two elder children were downstairs at their lessons with Sir Hulbert. Master Bevil was looking beautiful that afternoon. We had laid him down on a rug on the floor, and he was kicking and crowing as if he had been six months old, his little sisters chattering and laughing to him, while my lady sat by in the rocking-chair, looking for once as if she had thrown all her cares aside.

'He really is getting on beautifully,' she said to me. 'Doesn't he look a great big boy?'

I was rather glad of the remark, for it gave me a chance to say something that had been on my mind.

'We'll have to be thinking of short-coating him, before we know where we are, my lady,' I said with a smile. 'And there's another thing I've been thinking of. He's such a heavy boy to carry already, and as time gets on it would be a pity for our walks to be shortened in the fine weather. We had a beautiful basket for the donkey at Mrs. Wyngate's, it was made so that even a little baby could lie quite comfortably in it.'

'That would be very nice,' my lady answered. 'I'll speak to Sir Hulbert about it. Only——,' and again a rather worried look came into her face. I could see that she had got back to the old thought, 'everything costs money.' 'We must do something about it before long,' she added.

Just then Miss Bess ran into the room, followed more slowly by her cousin.

'What are you talking about?' she said.

'About how dear fat baby is to go walks with us when he gets still fatter and heavier,' said Miss Lally. 'Poor nurse couldn't carry him so very far, you know, and mamma says perhaps——'

'Oh! nonsense,' interrupted Miss Bess; 'we'd carry him in turns, the darling.'

My lady looked up quickly at this.

'Don't talk so foolishly, child,' she said sharply. For, fond as she was of Miss Bess, she could put her down sometimes, and just now the little girl scarcely deserved it, it seemed to me. 'I won't allow anything of that kind,' she went on. 'You are far too young, all of you—Francis especially, must never attempt to carry baby. Do you hear, children? Nurse, you must be strict about this.'

'Certainly, my lady,' I replied. 'Master Francis and the young ladies have never done more than just hold Master Bevil in their arms for a moment, me standing close by.'

Then they went on to talk about getting a basket for the donkey, which they were very much taken up about. I didn't notice at the time that Master Francis had only looked in for an instant and gone off again; but that evening at tea time, when Miss Bess and Miss Lally said something about old Jacob, Master Francis asked what they meant, which I remembered afterwards as showing that he had not heard his aunt's strict orders.

It was a week or two after that, that one lovely afternoon we all set out on a walk together. We had planned to go rather farther than we had yet been with the baby, resting here and there on the way, it was so warm and sunny and he was not *yet* so very heavy, of course.

All went well, and we found ourselves close to home again in nice time. For of course I knew that if we stayed out too long it would be only natural for my lady to be anxious.

'It's rather too soon to go in and it's such a beautiful afternoon,' said Miss Bess as we were coming up the drive. 'Do let us go into the little wood, for half an hour or so, nurse, and you might tell us a story.'

The little wood skirts the drive at one side. It is a sweet place, in the early summer especially, so many wild flowers and ferns, and lots of squirrels overhead among the branches, and little rabbits scudding about down below.

We found a cosy nook, where we settled ourselves. The little brother was fast asleep, the three elder ones sat round me, while Miss Baby toddled off a little way, busy about some of her own funny little plays by herself, though well within sight.

I was in the middle of a long story of having been lost in the firwoods at home as a child, when a loud scream made us all start, and looking up I saw to my alarm that Miss Baby was no longer to be seen.

'Dear, dear,' I cried, jumping up in a fright. 'She must have hurt herself. Here, Master Francis, hold the baby for a moment, don't get up;' and I put his little cousin down safely in his arms.

I meant him not to stir till I came back, but he didn't understand this. Miss Bess was already off after her little sister, and after a minute or two we found her, not hurt at all, but crying loudly at having fallen down and dirtied her frock in running away from what *she* called a 'bear,' coming out of the wood—most likely only a branch of a tree swaying about.

It took a little time to quiet her and to set her to rights again, and when we got back to the other children I was surprised to see that the baby was now in Miss Lally's arms, Master Francis kneeling beside them wiping something with his handkerchief.

'There's nothing wrong, I hope,' I said, rather startled again.

'Oh no!' said Miss Lally. 'It's only that little brother cried and Francie walked him up and down and somefing caught Francie's foot and he felled, but baby didn't fall. Francie held him tight, only a twig scratched baby's nose a tiny little bit. But he doesn't mind, he's laughing.'

So he was, though sure enough there was a thin red line right across his plump little nose, and the least little mark of blood on the handkerchief with which his cousin had been tenderly dabbing it. Master Francis himself was so pale that I hadn't the heart to say more to him than just a word.

'I had meant you to sit still with him, my dear.'

'But he cried so,' said the boy.

However, there was no harm done, though I thought to myself I'd be more careful than ever, but unluckily just as we were within a few steps of the house whom should we see but my lady coming to meet us. I'm never one for hiding things, but I did wish she had not happened to come just then.

She noticed the scratch in a moment, as she stooped to kiss the baby, though really there was nothing to mind, seeing the dear child so rosy and happy looking.

'What's the matter with his nose?' she said quickly. 'You haven't any pins about you, nurse, surely?'

Pins were not in my way, certainly, but I could have found it in my heart to wish I could own to one just then, for Master Francis started forward.

'Oh no! Aunt Helen,' he said, 'it was my fault. I was walking him about for a minute or two, while nurse went after Baby, and my foot slipt, but I only came down on my knees and *he* didn't fall. It was only a twig scratched his nose, a tiny bit.'

My lady grew first red then white.

'He might have been killed,' she said; and she caught the baby from me and kissed him over and over again. Then she turned to Master Francis, and I could see that she was doing her best to keep in her anger.

'Francis, how dared you, after what I said the other day so very strongly about your *never* carrying the baby? Your own sense might have told you you are not able to carry him, but besides that, what I said makes it distinct disobedience. Nurse, did you *know* of it?'

'It was I myself gave Master Bevil to Master Francis to hold,' I said, flurried like at my lady's displeasure. 'I hadn't meant him to walk about with him.'

'Of course not,' said my lady. 'There now, you see, Francis, double disobedience! I must speak to your uncle. Take back baby, nurse, he must have some *pomade divine* on his nose when he gets in,' and before any of us had time to speak again she had turned and hurried back to the house. My lady had always a quick way with her, pleased or displeased.

'She's gone to tell papa,' said the young ladies, looking very distressed.

Master Francis was quite white and shaking like.

'Nurse,' he said at last, when he had got voice enough to speak, 'I really don't know what auntie meant about something she said the other day.'

'O Franz! you can't have forgotten,' said Miss Bess, who often spoke sharply when she was really very sorry. 'Mamma did say most plainly that none of us were to carry baby about.'

But the boy still looked quite puzzled, and when we talked it over, we were all satisfied that he hadn't been in the room at the time.

'I must try to put it right with my lady,' I said, feeling that if any one had been to blame in the matter it was certainly me much more than Master Francis, for not having kept my eye better on Miss Baby in the wood.

But we were a very silent and rather sad party as we made our way back slowly to the house.

I couldn't see my lady till late that evening, and then, though I did my best, I didn't altogether succeed. She had already spoken to Sir Hulbert, and nothing would convince her that Master Francis had not heard at least some part of what she said.

Sir Hulbert was always calm and just; he sent for the boy the next morning, and had a long talk with him. Master Francis came back to the nursery looking pale and grave, but more thoughtful than unhappy.

'Uncle has been very good and kind,' was all he said. 'And I will try never to vex him and auntie again.'

Later that evening, when he happened to be alone with me, after the young ladies had gone to bed, he said a little more. I was sitting by the fire with Master Bevil on my knee. Master Francis knelt down beside me and kissed the little creature tenderly. Then he stroked his tiny nose—the mark of the scratch had almost gone already.

'You darling!' he said. 'Oh! how glad I am you weren't really hurt. Nurse,' he went on, 'I'd do anything for this baby, I do *love* him so. I only wish I could say it to auntie the way I can to you. If only I were big and strong, or very clever, and could work for him, to get him everything he should have, and then it would make up a little for all the trouble I've been always to them.'

He spoke quite simply. There wasn't a thought of himself—as if he had anything to complain of, or put up with, I mean—in what he said. But all the more it touched me very much, and I felt the tears come into my eye, but I wouldn't have Master Francis see it, and I began laughing and playing with the baby.

'See his dear little feet,' I said. 'They're almost the prettiest part of him. He kicks so, he wears out his little boots in no time. It would be nice if Miss Lally could knit some for him.'

Master Francis looked surprised.

'Why,' he said, 'do you call those little white things boots? And are they made the same way as my socks? I've got them on now; aren't they splendid? I really think it was very clever of Lally.'

CHAPTER XI

IN DISGRACE AGAIN

He held out one foot to be admired.

'Yes,' I said, 'they are very nice indeed, and Miss Lally was so patient about them. I'll have to think of some other knitting for her.'

'O nurse!' said Master Francis quickly, then he stopped. 'I must ask Lally first,' he went on; and I heard him say, as if speaking to himself—'it would be nice to please auntie.'

For a day or two after that I saw there was some mystery going on. Master Francis and Miss Lally were whispering together and looking very important, and one fine afternoon the secret was confided to me.

Miss Bess was out with her mamma, and Master Francis had disappeared when we came in from our walk, a rather short one that day. Suddenly, just as we were sitting down to tea, and I was wondering what had become of him, he hurried in, and threw a small soft white packet on to Miss Lally's lap.

'O Francie!' she said, 'have you really got it?'

Then she undid the parcel and showed it to me; it was white wool.

'Francie has bought it with his own money,' she said, 'for me to knit a pair of boots for baby, and oh! nursie, will you show me how? They're to be a present from Francie and me; me the knitting and Francie the wool, and we want it to be quite a secret till they're ready. It's so warm now I can knit up in the attic. Won't mamma be pleased?'

'Certainly, my dear,' I said. 'I'll do my best to teach you. They'll be rather difficult, for we'll have to put in some fancy stitches, but I think you can manage it now.'

Master Francis stood by, looking as interested and pleased as Miss Lally herself.

'That was all the wool Prideaux' daughter had,' he said. 'Do you think there'll be enough, nurse? She'll have some more in a few days.'

'I doubt if there'll be enough,' I said, 'but I can tell better when we've got them begun.'

Begun they were, that very evening. Miss Lally and Master Francis set to work to wind the wool, having first spent some time at an extra washing of their hands, for fear of soiling it in the very least.

'It's so beautifully white,' said Miss Lally, 'like it says in the Bible, isn't it, nursie? It would be a pity to dirty it.'

Dear me! how happy those two were over their innocent secret, and how little I thought what would come of Master Bevil's white wool bootikins!

The knitting got on nicely, though there were some difficulties in the way. The weather was getting warmer, and it is not easy for even little ladies to keep their hands quite spotlessly clean. The ball of wool had to be tied up in a little bag, as it would keep falling on the floor, and besides this, Miss Lally spread out a clean towel in the corner where she sat to work in the attic.

I gave Miss Bess a hint that there was a new secret and got her to promise not to tease the children, and she was really good about it, as was her way if she felt she was trusted. Altogether, for some little time things seemed to be going smoothly. Master Francis was most particular to do nothing that could in the least annoy his uncle and aunt, or could seem like disobedience to them.

After the long spell of fine weather, July set in with heavy rain. I had now been a whole year with the dear children. I remember saying so to them one morning when we were all at breakfast.

It was about a week since the baby's boots had been in hand. One was already finished, in great part by Miss Lally herself, though I had had to do a little to it in the evenings after they were all in bed, setting it right for her to go on with

the next day.

With the wet weather there was less walking out, of course, and all the more time for the knitting. On the day I am speaking of the children came down from the attic in the afternoon with rather doleful faces.

'Nursie,' said Miss Lally, 'I have been getting on so nicely,' and indeed I had not required to do more than glance at her work for two or three days. 'I thought I would have had it ready for you to begin the lace part round the top, only, just fancy the wool's done!'

'They'll have more at the shop by now,' said Master Francis. 'If only it would clear up I could go to the village for it.'

'It may be finer to-morrow,' I said, 'but there's no chance of you going out to-day; even if it left off raining, the ground's far too wet for you with your rheumatism. Now, Miss Lally, my dear, don't you begin looking so doleful about it; you've got on far quicker than you could have expected.'

She did look rather doleful all the same, and the worst of it was that though Master Francis would have given up anything for himself, he never could bear Miss Lally to be disappointed.

'I'm so much better now, nurse,' he said. 'I don't believe even going out in the rain would hurt me.'

'It's *possible* it mightn't hurt you, but——' I was beginning, when I heard Master Bevil crying out in the other room. Miss Lally had now a little room of her own on the other side of the nursery, and we had saved enough of Miss Bess's chintz to smarten it up. This had been done some months ago. I hadn't too much time now, and the young girl who helped me was no hand at sewing at all. Off I hurried to the baby without finishing what I was saying to Master Francis, and indeed I never gave another thought to what he'd said about fetching the wool till tea-time came, and he didn't answer when we called him, thinking he was in his own room.

Just then, unluckily, my lady came up to the nursery to say good-bye to the children, or good-night rather, for she and Sir Hulbert were going to dine at Carris Court, which is a long drive from Treluan, and the roads were just then very heavy with the rain. She came in looking quite bright and cheery. I can see her now in her black lace dress—it was far from new—it was seldom my lady spent anything on herself—but it suited her beautifully, showing off her lovely hair and fair complexion. One little diamond star was her only ornament. I forget if I mentioned that as well as the strange disappearance of money at the death of old Sir David, a great many valuable family jewels, worth thousands of pounds, were also missing, so it was but little that Sir Hulbert had been able to give his wife, and what money she had of her own she wouldn't have spent in such ways, knowing from the first how things were with him.

She came in, as I said, looking so beautiful and bright that I felt grieved when almost in a moment her look changed.

'Where is Francis?' she asked quickly.

'He must be somewhere downstairs, my lady,' I said. 'He's not in his room, but no doubt he'll be coming directly.'

Esther, the nursery-maid, was just then coming in with some tea-cakes Mrs. Brent had sent us up.

'Go and look for Master Francis, and tell him to come at once,' said my lady. 'Surely he can't have gone out anywhere,' she added to me; 'it's pouring, besides he isn't allowed to go out without leave.'

'He'd never think of such a thing,' I said quickly, 'after being so ill too.' But even as I spoke the words, there came into my mind what the boy had said that afternoon, and I began to feel a little anxious, though of course I didn't let my lady see it, and I did my best to smooth things when Esther came back to say that he was nowhere to be found. It was little use, however, my lady began to be thoroughly put out.

She hurried off to Sir Hulbert, feeling both anxious and angry, and a good half-hour was spent in looking for the boy before Sir Hulbert could persuade her to start. He was vexed too, and no wonder, just when my lady had been looking so happy.

'Really,' I thought to myself, 'Master Francis is tiresome after all.' And I was thankful when they at last drove off, there being no real cause for anxiety.

No sooner had the sound of the carriage-wheels died away than the nursery door opened and Master Francis burst in,

looking for once like a regular pickle of a boy. His eyes bright and his cheeks rosy, though he was covered with mud from head to foot, his boots really not to be thought of as fit to come up a tidy staircase.

'Hurrah!' he cried, shaking a little parcel over his head. 'I've got it, Lally. And I'm not a bit wet after all, nurse!'

'Oh no!' said Miss Bess, who did love to put in her word, 'not at all. Quite nice and dry and tidy and fit to sit down to tea, after worrying mamma out of her wits and nearly stopping papa and her going to Carris.'

Master Francis's face fell at once. I was sorry for him and yet that provoked I couldn't but join in with Miss Bess.

'Go upstairs to your room at once, Master Francis, and undress and get straight into your bed. I'll come up in a few minutes with some hot tea for you. How you could do such a thing close upon getting better of rheumatic fever, and the trouble and worry it gave, passes me! And considering, too, what I said to you this very afternoon.'

'You didn't actually say I wasn't to go,' he said quickly. 'You know quite well why I went, and I'm not a *bit* wet really. I'm all muffled up in things to keep me dry. I'm nearly suffocating.'

'All the worse,' I said. 'If you're overheated all the more certain you'll get a chill. Don't stand talking, go at once.'

He went off, and I was beginning to pour out the tea, which had been kept back all this time, when, as I lifted the teapot in my hand I almost dropped it, nearly scalding Miss Baby who was sitting close by me, so startled was I by a sudden terrible scream from Miss Lally; and, as I have said before, anything like Miss Lally's screams I never did hear in any nursery. Besides which, once she was started, there was never any saying when she'd leave off.

'Now, whatever's the matter with you, my dear?' I said, but it was little use talking quietly to her. She only sobbed something about 'poor Francie and nursie scolding him,' and then went on with her screaming till I was obliged to put her in the other room by herself to get quiet.

Of all the party Miss Bess and Miss Baby were the only ones who did justice to Mrs. Brent's tea-cakes that evening. They did take Miss Lally's screaming fits quietly, I must say, which was a good thing, and even Master Bevil had strong nerves, I suppose, for he slept on sweetly through it all, poor dear. For myself, I was out and out upset for once, provoked and yet sorry too.

I went up to Master Francis and did the best I could for him to prevent his taking cold. He was as sorry as could be by this time, and he had really not meant to be disobedient, but though I was ready to believe him, I felt much afraid that this new scrape wouldn't be passed over very lightly by his uncle and aunt. After a while Miss Lally quieted down, partly, I think, because I promised her she might go up to her cousin if she would leave off crying, and the two passed the evening together very soberly and sadly, winding the fresh skein of white wool which had been the cause of all the trouble.

After all Master Francis did not take cold. He came down to breakfast the next morning looking pretty much as usual, though I could see he was uneasy in his mind. Miss Lally too was feeling rather ashamed of her screaming fit the night before, for she was growing a big girl now, old enough to understand that she should have more self-command. Altogether it was a rather silent nursery that morning, for Miss Bess was concerned for her cousin too.

I had quite meant to try to see my lady before anything was said to Master Francis. But she was tired and later of getting up than usual, and I didn't like to disturb her. Sir Hulbert, I found, had gone out early and would not be in till luncheon-time, so I hoped I would still have my chance.

I hardly saw the elder children till their dinner time. It was an extra long morning of lessons with Miss Kirstin, for it was still raining, and on wet days she sometimes helped them with what they had to learn by themselves.

The three hurried up together to make themselves tidy before going down to the dining-room, and I just saw them for a moment. Master Bevil was rather fractious, and I was feeling a little worried about him, so that what had happened the night before was not quite so fresh in my mind as it had been; but I did ask Miss Lally, who came to me to have her hair brushed, if she had seen her mamma, and if my lady was feeling rested.

'She's getting up for luncheon,' was the child's answer, 'but I haven't seen her. Mrs. Brent told us she was very tired last night. Mrs. Brent waited up to tell mamma Francie had come in.'

After luncheon the two young ladies came up together. I looked past them anxiously for Master Francis.

'No,' said Miss Lally, understanding my look, 'he's not coming. He's gone to papa's room, and papa and mamma are both there.'

My heart sank at the words.

'Mamma's coming up to see baby in a little while,' said Miss Bess. 'She was so tired, poor little mamma, she only woke in time to dress for luncheon, and papa said he was very glad.'

Miss Lally came round and whispered to me.

'Nurse,' she said, 'may I go up to the attic? I want to knit a great lot to-day, and if I stayed down here mamma would see.'

'Very well, my dear,' I said. 'Only be sure to come downstairs if you feel chilly.'

There was really no reason, now that she had a room of her own, for her ever to sit in the attic, but she had taken a fancy to it, I suppose, and off she went.

Miss Bess stood looking out of the window, in a rather idle way she had.

'Oh dear!' she said impatiently; 'is it *never* going to leave off raining? I am so tired of not getting out.'

'Get something to do, my dear,' I said. 'Then the time will pass more quickly. It won't stop raining for you watching it, you know. Weren't you saying something about the schoolroom books needing arranging, and that you hadn't had time to do them?'

Miss Bess was in a very giving-in mood.

'Very well,' she said, moving off slowly. 'I suppose I may as well do them. But I need somebody to help me; where's Lally?'

'Don't disturb her yet awhile, poor dear,' I said. 'She does so want to get on with the work I've told you about.'

Miss Bess stood looking uncertain. Suddenly an idea struck her.

'May I have Baby then?' she asked. 'She could hold up the books to me, and that's about all the help I need, really.'

I saw no objection, and Miss Baby trotted off very proud, Miss Bess leading her by the hand.

The nursery seemed very quiet the next half-hour or so, or maybe longer. I was beginning to wonder when my lady would be coming, and feeling glad that Master Bevil, who had just wakened up from a nice sleep, was looking quite like himself again before she saw him, when suddenly the door burst open and Master Francis looked in. He was not crying, but his face had the strained white look I could not bear to see on it.

'Is there no one here?' he said.

Somehow I didn't like to question him, grieved though I felt at things going wrong again.

'No,' I replied. 'Miss Bess is in the schoolroom with——,' then it suddenly struck me that my lady might be coming in at any moment, and that it might be better for Master Francis not to be there. 'Miss Lally,' I went on quickly, 'is at her knitting in the attic, if you like to go to her there.'

He turned and went. Afterwards he told me that he caught sight of my lady coming along the passage as he left the room, and that he hurried upstairs to avoid her. He didn't find Miss Lally in the attic as he expected, but her knitting was there lying on the floor, thrown down hurriedly, and though she had not forgotten to spread out the clean towel as usual, in her haste she hadn't noticed that the newly-wound ball of white wool had rolled some distance away from the half-finished boot and the pins.

Afterwards I will tell what happened to Master Francis, up there by himself in the attic.

To make all clear, I may here explain why he had not found Miss Lally in her nook. The book-tidying in the schoolroom had gone on pretty well, but after a bit, though Miss Baby did her best, Miss Bess found the want of some one who could read the titles, and she ran upstairs to beg Miss Lally to come for a few minutes. The few minutes turned into an hour or

more, for the young ladies, just like children as they were, came across some old favourites in their tidying, and began reading out bits here and there to each other. And then to please Miss Baby they made houses and castles of the books on the floor, which she thought a beautiful new game, so that Miss Lally forgot about her knitting, while feeling, so to say, at the back of her mind quite easy about it, thinking she had left it safely lying on the clean cloth.

They were both so much taken up with what they were about, that it never struck them to wonder what Master Francis was doing with himself all the afternoon.

My lady and I meanwhile were having a long talk in the nursery. It had been as I feared, Sir Hulbert having spoken most severely to the boy, and my lady having said some bitter things, which already she was repenting, more especially when I was able to explain that Master Francis had really not been so distinctly disobedient as had seemed the case.

'We must try and put it right again, I suppose,' she said rather sadly, as she was leaving the room. 'I wish I didn't take up things so hotly at the time, but I was really frightened as well as angry. Still Sir Hulbert would not have spoken so strongly if it hadn't been for me.'

This was a great deal for my lady to say, and I felt honoured by her confidence. I began to be more hopeful again, and tried to set out the tea rather nicer than usual to cheer them up a little.

CHAPTER XII

LOST

The three young ladies came in together, Miss Baby looking very important, but calling out for her tea.

'It's quite ready, my dear,' I said. 'But where's Master Francis?'

'I don't know,' said Miss Bess. 'I haven't seen him all the afternoon.'

I turned to Miss Lally.

'He went up to sit with you, my dear, in the attic,' I said.

'I didn't see him,' said Miss Lally, and then she explained how Miss Bess had fetched her down ever so long ago. 'I daresay Francie's in his own room,' she went on. 'I'll run up and see, and I'll look in the attic too, for I left my work lying about.'

She ran off.

'Nurse,' said Miss Bess, 'do you think Francis got a very bad scolding? You saw him, didn't you? Did he seem very unhappy?'

'I'm afraid so, my dear, but I think it will come all right again. I've seen your mamma since, and she quite sees now that he didn't really mean to be disobedient.'

'I wish you had told mamma that before they spoke to Francis,' said Miss Bess, who I must say was rather a Job's comforter sometimes.

We waited anxiously till we heard Miss Lally's footsteps returning. She ran in alone, looking rather troubled.

'He's not there, not in his own room, or the attic, or nowhere, but he must have been in the attic, for my work's gone.'

A great fear came over me. Could the poor boy have run away in his misery at having again angered his uncle and aunt? for the look on his face had been strange, when he glanced in at the nursery door, asking for Miss Lally. Was he meaning perhaps to bid her good-bye before setting off in some wild way? And what she said of the knitting having gone made me still more uneasy. Had he perhaps taken it with him as a remembrance? for of all the queer mixtures of old-fashionedness and childishness that ever I came across, Master Francis was the strangest, though, as I have said, there was a good deal of this in all the children.

I got up at Miss Lally's words. Master Bevil was asleep, luckily.

'You go on with your tea, my dears, there's good children,' I said. 'I must see about Master Francis, he must be somewhere about the house. He'd never have thought of going out again in such weather,' for it was pouring in torrents.

I went downstairs, asking everybody I met if they had seen him, but they all shook their heads, and at last, after searching through the library and the big drawing-rooms, and even more unlikely places, I got so frightened that I made bold to knock at Sir Hulbert's study door, where he was busy writing, my lady working beside him.

They had been talking of Master Francis just before I went in, and they were far more distressed than annoyed at my news, my lady growing quite pale.

'O Hulbert!' she exclaimed, 'if he has run away it is my fault.'

'Nonsense, Helen,' he said, meaning to cheer her. 'The boy has got sense and good feeling, he'd never risk making himself ill again. And where would he run away to? He couldn't go to sea. But certainly the sooner we find him the better.'

He went off to speak to some of the men, while my lady and I, Mrs. Brent and some of the others, started again to search through the house. We did search, looking in really impossible corners, where he couldn't have squeezed himself in. Then the baby awoke, and I had to go to him, and Miss Bess and Miss Lally took their turn at this melancholy game of

hide-and-seek, but it was all no use. The dull gray afternoon darkened into night, the rain still pouring down, and nothing was heard of the missing boy. Sir Hulbert at last left off pretending not to be anxious. He had his strongest horse put into the dog-cart, and drove away to the town to give notice to the police, stopping on the way at every place where it was the least likely the boy could have been seen.

He didn't get back till eleven o'clock. My lady and Mrs. Brent and me were waiting up for him, for Master Bevil was sleeping sweetly, and I had put the nursery-maid to watch beside him. The young ladies, poor dears, were in bed too, and, as is happily the way with children, had fallen asleep in spite of their tears and sad distress.

We knew the moment we saw Sir Hulbert that he had no good tidings to give us. His sunburnt face looked almost white, as he came into the hall soaking wet and shook his head.

'I have done everything, Nelly,' he said, 'everything that can be done, and now we must try to be patient till some news comes. It is impossible, everybody says, that a boy like him, so well known in the neighbourhood too, could disappear without some one seeing him, or that he could remain in hiding for long. It is perfectly extraordinary that we have not found him already, and somehow I can scarcely believe he is doing it on purpose. He has such good feeling, and must know how anxious we should be.'

Sir Hulbert was standing by the fire, which my lady had had lighted in the hall, as he spoke. He seemed almost thinking aloud. My lady crept up to him with a look on her face I could not bear to see.

'Hulbert,' she said in a low voice, 'I said things to him enough to make him doubt our caring at all.' And then she broke down into bitter though silent weeping.

We got her to bed with difficulty. There was really no use whatever in sitting up, and who knew what need for strength the next day might bring? Then there were the other poor children to think of. So by midnight the house was all quiet as usual. I was thankful that the wind had fallen, for all through the evening there had been sounds of wailing and sobbing, such as stormy weather always brings at Treluan, enough to make you miserable if there was nothing the matter—the rain pattering against the window like cold tiny hands, tapping and praying to be let in.

Sad as I was, and though I could scarcely have believed it of myself, I had scarcely laid my head down before I too, like the children, fell fast asleep. I was dreaming, a strange confused dream, which I never was able to remember clearly; but it was something about searching in the smugglers' caves for Master Francis, followed by an old man, who I somehow fancied was the miser baronet, Sir David. His hair was snow white, and there was a confusion in my mind of thinking it like Miss Lally's wool. Anyhow, I had got the idea of whiteness in my head, so that, when something woke me—afterwards I knew it was the sound of my own name—and I opened my eyes to see by the glimmer of the night-light what seemed at first a shining figure by my bed-side, I did not feel surprised. And the first words I said were 'white as wool.'

'No, no,' said Miss Lally, for it was she, in her little night-dress, her fair hair all tumbling over her shoulders, 'it isn't about my wool, nurse, please wake up quite. It's something so strange—such a queer noise. Please get up and come to my room to see what it is.'

Miss Lally's room was a tiny place at the side of the nursery nearest the tower, though not opening on to the tower stair.

I got up at once and crossed the day nursery with her, lighting a candle on the way. But when we got into her room all was perfectly silent.

'What was it you heard, my dear?' I asked.

'A sort of knocking,' she said, 'and a queer kind of little cry, like a rabbit caught in a trap when you hear it a long way off.'

'It must have been the wind and rain again,' I was beginning to say, but she stopped me.

'Hush, listen!' she said, holding up her little hand, 'there it is again.'

It was just as she had said, and it seemed to come from the direction of the tower.

'Isn't it like as if it was from Francie's room?' said Miss Lally, shivering a little; 'and yet we know he's not there, nursie.'

But something was there, or close by, and something *living*, I seemed to feel.

'Put on your dressing-gown,' I said to the little girl, 'and your slippers, and we'll go up and see. You're not frightened, dear?'

'Oh no!' she said. 'If only it was Francie!'

But she clung to my hand as we went up the stair, leaving the nursery door wide open, so as to hear Master Bevil if he woke up.

Master Francis's room was all dark, of course, and it struck very chill as we went in, the candle flickering as we pushed the door open. It seemed so strange to see the empty bed, and everything unused about the room, just as if he was really quite away. We stood perfectly still. All was silent. We were just about leaving the room to go to the attic when the faintest breath of a sound seemed to come again, I couldn't tell from where. It was more like a sigh in the air.

'Stop,' said Miss Lally, squeezing my hand, and then again we heard the muffled taps, much more clearly than downstairs. Miss Lally's ears were very sharp.

'I hear talking,' she whispered, and before I knew what she was about she had laid herself down on the floor and put her ear to the ground, at a part where there was no carpet. 'Nursie,' she went on, looking up with a very white face and shining eyes, 'it is Francie. He must have felled through the floor. I can hear him saying, "O Lally! O Bess! Oh, somebody come."'

I stooped down as she had done. It was silent again; but after a moment began the knocking and a sort of sobbing cry; my ears weren't sharp enough to make it into words, but I seized the first thing that came to hand, I think it was the candlestick, and thumped it on the floor as hard as ever I could, calling out, close down through the boarding, 'Master Francie, we hear you.'

But there was nothing we could do by ourselves, and we were losing precious time.

'Miss Lally,' I said, 'you won't be frightened to stay here alone; I'll leave you the candle. Go on knocking and calling to him, to keep up his heart, in case he can hear, while I go for your papa.'

In less time than it takes to tell it, I had roused Sir Hulbert and brought him back with me, my lady following after. Nothing would have kept her behind. We were met by eager words from Miss Lally.

'Papa, nursie,' she cried, 'I've made him hear, and I can make out that he says something about the window.'

Without speaking Sir Hulbert strode across the room and flung it open. Oh, how thankful we were that the wind had fallen and all was still.

'Francis, my boy,' we heard Sir Hulbert shout—he was leaning out as far as ever he could—'Francis, my boy, can you hear me?'

Something answered, but we inside the room couldn't distinguish what it said, but in another moment Sir Hulbert turned towards us.

'He says something about the cupboard in the attic,' he said. 'What can he mean? But come at once.'

He caught up my lady's little hand-lamp and led the way, we three following. When we reached the attic he went straight to the big cupboard I have spoken of. The doors were standing wide open. Sir Hulbert went in, but came out again, looking rather blank.

'I can see nothing,' he said. 'I fancied he said the word "mouse," but his voice had got so faint.'

'If you knock on the floor,' I began, but Miss Lally stopped me by darting into the closet.

'Papa,' she said, 'hold the light here. I know where the mouse-hole is.'

What they had thought a mouse-hole was really a hole with jagged edges cut out in one of the boards, which you could thrust your hand into. Sir Hulbert did so, beginning to see what it was meant for, and pulled. A trap-door, cleverly made,

for all that it looked so roughly done, gave way, and by the light of the lamp we saw a kind of ladder leading downwards into the dark. Sir Hulbert stooped down and leaned over the edge.

'Francis,' he called, and a very faint voice—we couldn't have heard it till the door was opened—answered—

'Yes, I'm here. Take care, the ladder's broken.'

Luckily there was another ladder in the attic. Sir Hulbert and I dragged it out, and managed to slip it down the hole, in the same direction as the other. We were so afraid it would be too short, but it wasn't. My lady and I held it steady at the top, while Sir Hulbert went down with the lamp, Miss Lally holding a candle beside us.

Sir Hulbert went down very slowly, not knowing how or in what state Master Francis might be lying at the foot. Our hearts were beating like hammers, for all we were so quiet.

First we heard an exclamation of surprise. I rather think it was 'by Jove!' though Sir Hulbert was a most particular gentleman in his way of speaking—then came a hearty shout—

'All right, he's here, no bones broken.'

'Shall I come down?' cried my lady.

'I think you may,' Sir Hulbert answered, 'if you're very careful. I'll bring the light to the foot of the ladder again.'

When my lady got down, Miss Lally and I strained our ears to hear. I knew the child was quivering to go down herself, and it was like her to be so patient.

Strange were the words that first reached us.

'Auntie, auntie!' we heard Master Francis say, in his poor weak voice. 'It's old Sir David's treasure! You won't be poor any more. Oh! I'm so glad now I fell down the hole, but I thought I'd die before I could tell any one.'

Miss Lally and I stared at each other. Could it be true? or was Master Francis off his head? We had not long to wait.

They managed to get him up—after all it was not so very far to climb,—my lady coming first with the lamp, and Sir Hulbert, holding Master Francis with one arm and the side of the ladder with the other, followed, for the boy had revived wonderfully, once he knew he was safe.



Sir Hulbert, holding Master Francis with one arm and the side of the ladder with the other, followed.

My lady was crying, I saw it the moment the light fell on her face, and as soon as Master Francis was up beside us, she threw her arms round him and kissed him as never before.

'Oh! my poor dear boy,' she said, 'I am so thankful, but do tell us how it all happened.'

She must have heard, and indeed seen something of the strange discovery that had been made, but for the moment I don't think there was a thought in her heart except thankfulness that he was safe.

Before Master Francis could answer, Sir Hulbert interrupted.

'Better not ask him anything for a minute or two,' he said. 'Nurse, you will find my brandy-flask downstairs in the study. He'd better have a little mixed with water; and ring the bell as you pass to waken Crooks, and some one must light the fire in Francis's room.'

I was back in five minutes with what was wanted; and then I found Miss Lally having her turn at petting her cousin. As soon as he had had a little brandy and water we took him down to the nursery, where the fire was still smouldering, Sir Hulbert carefully closing the trap-door as it had been before, and then following us downstairs.

Once in the nursery, anxious though we were to get him to bed, it was impossible not to let him tell something of what had happened. It began by a cry from Miss Lally.

'Why, Francie, you've got my knitting sticking out of your pocket. But two of the needles have dropped out,' she went on rather dolefully.

'They'll be lying down in that room,' said Master Francis. 'I was carrying it in my hand when I went down the ladder after the ball of wool, and when I fell I dropped it, and I found it afterwards. It was the ball of wool that did it all,' and then he went on to explain.

He had not found Miss Lally in the attic, for Miss Bess had already called her down, but seeing her knitting lying on the

floor, he had sat down to wait for her, thinking she'd be sure to come back. Then he noticed that the ball of wool must have rolled away as she threw her work down, and disappeared into the cupboard. The door was wide open, and he traced it by the thread in his hand to the 'mouse-hole' in the corner, down which it had dropped, and putting his hand through to see if he could feel it, to his surprise the board yielded. Pulling a little more, the trap-door opened, and he saw the steps leading downwards.

It was not dark in the secret room in the day-time, for it had two narrow slits of windows hardly to be noticed from the outside, so, with a boy's natural curiosity, he determined to go down. He hadn't strength to lift the trap-door fully back, but he managed to stick it open enough to let him pass through; he had not got down many steps, however, before he heard it bang to above him. The shock may have jarred the ladder, which was a roughly-made rotten old thing. Anyway, the next moment Master Francis felt it give way, and he fell several feet on to the floor below. He was bruised, and a little stunned for a few minutes, but he soon came quite to himself, and, still full of curiosity, began to look about him. The place where he was was only a sort of entrance to a larger room, which was really under his own bedroom, and lighted, as I have said, by narrow deep windows, without glass. And though there was no door between the two, the large room was on a much lower level, and another ladder led down to it. This time he was very careful, and got to the bottom without any accident.

Looking about him, he saw standing along one side of the room a collection of the queerest-shaped objects of all sizes that could be imagined, all wrapped up in some kind of linen or canvas, grown gray with age and dust.

CHAPTER XIII

'OLD SIR DAVID'S' SECRET

At first he thought the queer-looking things he saw must be odd-shaped pieces of stone, or petrifications, such as you see in old-fashioned rockeries in gardens sometimes. But when he went close up to them and touched one, he found that the covering was soft, though whatever was inside it was hard. He pulled the cloth off it, and saw to his surprise that it was a heavy silver tea-urn, though so black and discoloured that it looked more like copper or iron. He examined two or three other things, standing by near it; they also proved to be large pieces of plate—great heavy dinner-table centres, candelabra, and such things,—and, child though he was, Master Francis could see they must be of considerable value. But this was not what struck him the most. Like a flash of lightning it darted into his mind that there must be still more valuable things in this queer store-room.

'I do believe,' he said to himself, 'that this is old Sir David's treasure!'

He was right. It would take too long to describe how he went on examining into all these strange objects. Several, that looked like well-stuffed sacks, were tied up so tightly that he couldn't undo the cord. He made a little hole in one of them with his pocket-knife, and out rolled, to his delight, ever so many gold pieces!

'Then,' said Master Francis to us, 'I really felt as if I could have jumped with joy; but I thought I'd better fetch Uncle Hulbert before I poked about any more, and I went up the short ladder again, meaning to go back the way I'd come. I had never thought till that minute that I couldn't manage it, but the long ladder was broken away so high above my head that I couldn't possibly reach up to it, and the bits of it that had fallen on to the floor were quite rotten. And the trap-door seemed so close shut, that I was afraid no one would hear me however I shouted.'

He did shout though, poor boy; it was the only thing he could do. The short ladder was a fixture and he couldn't move it from its place, even if it had been long enough to be of any use. After a while he got so tired of calling out, that he seemed to have no voice left, and I think he must have fallen into a sort of doze, for the next thing he remembered was waking up to find that it was quite dark. Then he began to feel terribly frightened, and to think that perhaps he would be left there to die of hunger.

'And the worst of it was,' he said in his simple way, 'that nobody would ever have known of the treasure.'

He called out again from time to time, and then a new idea struck him. He felt about for a bit of wood on the floor and set to work, knocking as hard as he could. Most likely he fell asleep by fits and starts, waking up every now and then to knock and call out again, and when the house was all shut up and silent for the night, of course the sound he made seemed much louder, only unluckily we were all asleep and might never have heard it except for dear little Miss Lally.

It was not till after Master Francis caught the sound of our knocking back in reply that it came into his head to make his way close up to the windows—luckily it was not a very dark night—and call through them, for there was no glass in them, as I have said. If he had done that before it is just possible we might have heard him sooner, as in our searching we had been in and out of his room, above where he was, several times.

There is not much more for me to tell. Master Francis was ill enough to have to stay in bed for a day or two, and at first we were a little afraid that the cold and the terror, and the strange excitement altogether, might bring on another illness. But it was not so. I think he was really too happy to fall ill again!

In a day or two Sir Hulbert was able to tell him all about the discovery. It was kept quite secret till the family lawyer could be sent for, and then he and my lady and Sir Hulbert all went down through the trap-door again with Mr. Crooks, the butler, to help them, and everything was opened out and examined. It was a real miser's hoard.

Besides the plate, which was really the least valuable, for it was so clumsy and heavy that a good deal of it was only fit to be melted down, there were five or six sacks filled with gold and some with silver coin. Of course something was lost upon it with its being so old, but taking it all in all, a very large sum was realised, for a great many of the Penrose diamonds had been hidden away also, *some* of which—the most valuable, though not the most beautiful—were sold.

Altogether, though it didn't make Sir Hulbert into a millionaire, it made him a rich man, as rich, I think, as he cared to be.

And, strangely enough, as the old proverb has it, 'it never rains but it pours,' only two or three years after, money came to my lady which she had never expected. So that to any one visiting Treluan, as it now is, and seeing all that has been done by the family, not only for themselves, but for those about them,—the church, the schools, the cottages on the estate being perfect models of their kind—it would be difficult to believe there had ever been want of money to be wisely and generously spent.

Dear, dear, how many years ago it all is now! There's not many living, if any, to remember the ins and outs as I do, which is indeed my excuse for having put it down in my own way.

Miss Bess,—Miss Penrose, as I should say,—Miss Lalage, and even Miss Augusta have been married this many a day; and Lady Helen, Miss Bess's eldest daughter, is sixteen past, and it is she that has promised to look over my writing and correct it.

Master Bevil, Sir Bevil now, for Sir Hulbert did not live to be an old man, has two fine boys of his own, whom I took care of from their babyhood, as I did their father, and I'm feeling quite lost since Master Ramsey has gone to school.

And of dear Master Francis. What words can I say that would be enough? He is the only one of the flock that has not married, and yet who could be happier than he is? He never thinks of himself, his whole life has been given to the noblest work. His writings, I am told, though they're too learned for my old head, have made him a name far and wide. And all this he has done in spite of delicate health and frequent suffering. He seems older than his years, and Sir Bevil is in hopes that before long he may persuade his cousin to give up his hard London parish and make his regular home where he is so longed for, in Treluan itself, as our vicar, and indeed I pray that it may be so while I am still here to see it.

Above all, for my dear lady's sake, I scarcely like to own to myself that she is beginning to fail, for though I speak of myself as an old woman and feel it is true, yet I can't bear to think that her years are running near to the appointed threescore and ten, for she is nine years older than I. She has certainly never been the same, and no wonder, since Sir Hulbert's death, but she has had many comforts, and almost the greatest of them has been, as I think I have said before, Master Francis.

Mother and my aunts want me to add on a few words of my own to dear old nurse's story. She gave it me to read and correct here and there, more than a year ago, and I meant to have done so at once. But for some months past I hardly felt as if I had the heart to undertake it, especially as I didn't like bringing back the remembrance of their old childish days to mother and my aunts, or to Uncle Bevil and Uncle Francis, as we always call him, just in the first freshness of their grief at dear grandmamma's death. And I needed to ask them a few things to make the narrative quite clear for any who may ever care to read it.

But now that the spring has come back again, making us all feel bright and hopeful (we have all been at Treluan together for Uncle Bevil's birthday), I have enjoyed doing it, and they all tell me that they have enjoyed hearing about the story and answering my questions.

Dear grandmamma loved the spring so! She was so gentle and sweet, though she never lost her quick eager way either. And though she died last year, just before the daffodils and primroses were coming out, somehow this spring the sight of them again has not made us feel sad about her, but *happy* in the best way of all.

Perhaps I should have said before that I am 'Nelly,' 'Miss Bess's' eldest daughter. Aunt Lalage has only one daughter, who is named after mother, and *I* think very like what mother must have been at her age.

There are five of *us*, and Aunt Augusta has two boys, like Uncle Bevil.

What used to be 'the secret room,' where our miser ancestor kept the hoard so strangely discovered, has been joined, by taking down the ceiling, to what in the old days was Uncle Francis's room, and enters from a door lower down the tower stair, and Uncle Bevil's boys have made it into what they call their 'Museum.' We are all very fond of showing it to visitors, and explaining how it used to be, and telling the whole story. Uncle Francis always maintains that Aunt Lally saved his life, and though she gets very red when he says so, I do think it is true. She really was very brave for such a little girl. If I heard knockings in the night, I am afraid I should hide my head under the clothes, and put my fingers in my

ears.

Uncle Francis and Aunt Lally always do seem almost more brother and sister to each other than any of the rest; and her husband, Uncle Geoffrey, whom next to Uncle Francis I think I like best of all my uncles, was one of *his*—I mean Uncle Francis's; what a confusion I'm getting into—best friends at college.

When I began this, after correcting nurse's manuscript, I thought nothing would be easier than to write a story in the most beautiful language, but I find it so much harder than I expected that I am not sorry to think that there is really nothing more of importance to tell. And I must say my admiration for the way in which nurse has performed *her* task has increased exceedingly!

THE END

[The end of *Nurse Heatherdale's Story* by Mary Louisa Molesworth]