SUSAN TAKES A HAND

ANNE HEPPLE

Hutchinson

Title: Susan Takes a Hand
Date of first publication: 1938
Author: Anne Hepple (1877-1959) (pseudonym: Anne Hepple Dickinson)
Date first posted: May 6, 2023
Date last updated: May 6, 2023
Faded Page eBook #20230510

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at https://www.pgdpcanada.net

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JEMIMA RIDES
THE UNTEMPERED WIND
GAY GO UP
THE RUNAWAY FAMILY
THE OLD WOMAN SPEAKS
ASK ME NO MORE
AND THEN CAME SPRING
TOUCH-ME-NOT
RIDERS OF THE SEA

SUSAN TAKES A HAND

ANNE HEPPLE

HUTCHINSON & CO.
(Publishers), Ltd. LONDON

PRINTED IN
GREAT BRITAIN,
AT THE ANCHOR
PRESS, TIPTREE,
:: ESSEX ::

Dedicated to

My dear Cousin

ANNIE MARSHALL DODDS

(Now of New Zealand)

and her five girls

ELIZA, EMILY, MAIMIE, NANCY, and WINIFRED

the spirited originals of most of

the girls in my books.

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Susan Takes a Hand

CHAPTER I

HOW IT BEGAN

"THERE'S one thing about gas-fires," said Aggie, "they do make good toast."

"Yes, if we didn't keep thinking of the shillings," returned Susan with a sigh. "When did you put the last one in, Aggie?"

"This morning before I boiled the kettle—but don't let's think about it, I've another one ready under the ginger-jar. We simply must have a fire on a night like this."

She glanced at the window, a black square down which the rain teemed and in which a bowl of pink hyacinths was reflected, and thought things couldn't be so very bad while they still had a gas-fire, a bowl of pink hyacinths, and two chocolate éclairs for tea.

The éclairs were rather wet with the rain, as Susan had brought them in in a paper bag, but for all that they were a luxury, yes, a decided luxury when you were both out of work and hadn't a ghost of an idea where your next job was coming from—not a ghost!

Susan finished toasting the last slice and started to butter it.

"I know it's extravagance to butter it hot," she announced, "but cold toast is so dull, and I'm really being very careful, Aggie, I'm just putting on a layer of margarine to make it soppy and then just a tiny scrape of butter for flavour and for smell. I do like the smell of hot buttered toast . . ." She suddenly stopped with the knife in her hand and looked at Aggie.

"I thought I heard Bede," she said. "If she comes in don't let her catch us in the dumps, Aggie. She was howling in bed the other night."

"Of course I won't. Besides—look here, Susan, we simply must get something to do. I'm down to thirty-three pounds nine and elevenpence. I thought I had about forty, but I'd forgotten about the six guineas for my Aunt Rosaline's fur coat. In fact, I thought she'd give it to me, but I got a letter today reminding me it was six guineas."

"I do think that's mean."

"Oh, well," sighed Aggie, "the Agnews are all hard up, nowadays, and she did say something about six guineas, and, though it's worn, it's real

mink and must have cost a hundred or two, and I do like it. I wish I hadn't been born with extravagant tastes."

"Well, that comes of belonging to the gentry, as they used to say in our village, and you know it's only in appearance and clothes that it comes out in you."

That was quite true. Aggie's real name was Patricia Agnew and, unlike most unfortunates who are given high-sounding patronymics at their birth, she looked a patrician from the top of her neat little black head to the tips of her long arched feet. She was slender and tall, with straight hair brushed back from a small pale face, with delicate winged nose and haughty eyebrows. There, however, the patrician element stopped, for Aggie had all the bourgeois virtues. She was practical, cooked like a Frenchwoman, enjoyed kippers and tripe and onions, and had chilblains in the winter. That's why everybody called her Aggie—it was short for Agnew, and described the real person under the haughty exterior to a "t".

Needless to say it was Susan's quick wit that had supplied this appropriate cognomen.

Aggie belonged to an old but impoverished family, and, except for a few titled aunts and a small ward called William Shakespeare Delacorne, had no one belonging to her.

Susan was the rather dumpy (when compared with Aggie) daughter of a Highland manse and had no claims whatever to high birth or gentility. She was just plain Susan Tyndal, M.A., of Edinburgh, and looked it, with her cropped fair head and rosy cheeks.

"Well," she said now with a sigh, "we seem to have tried everything."

"I do wish," said Aggie, "we could have done something together, and I might have got the aunts to help, not with money, poor dears, but they know everybody and could have got us clients or customers, whichever we rose to. But there doesn't seem a thing; we are so different, and so differently trained. I know nothing but typing and shorthand and cooking, and you are really trained to be a school-marm. But you don't like it, so it's no use thinking of starting a school together, though the aunts might have got us some of the nobility and gentry as a draw for the pork-butchers' daughters who would really have made it pay. I do wish we'd both been trained as dressmakers or milliners, and then we could have opened a shop in the West End—the aunts would have come in useful there. Or hairdressing—if we'd been trained as hairdressers and so on, we could have opened a beauty parlour."

“Beauty parlour, my hat! Pull yourself together!” exclaimed Susan indignantly. “Do I, I ask you, look like a beauty parlour?”

“Well, no,” admitted Aggie, looking at Susan’s small sturdy frame, her spectacles, which she wore on occasion, though she had only really needed them when studying for her M.A., her straight fair hair and wide disarming smile; “you’ve the whitest teeth I ever saw, but your freckles certainly wouldn’t be good for trade.”

“No,” said Susan; “and nothing takes them out.”

She paused a moment, and it was then that Aggie brought out, quite idly, another idea.

“We might start a boarding-house,” said she.

“How?” Susan opened her eyes; they were real green eyes and gave her face its only touch of the unexpected.

“Don’t ‘how’ me, woman.” Aggie could be very forthright. “Put your thinking-cap on.”

Susan evidently put it on, for there was silence for a few moments.

“Well,” Aggie inquired at last, selecting the wetter of the two éclairs, “don’t you think it’s a good idea?”

“No.”

“Why?”

“First because you’re a journalist, at least you’ve been in a publisher’s office”—Susan was rather vague about these things—“and second because we’ve no money, except my hundred pounds, and thirdly because, hang it all, after all I am an M.A. of Edinburgh and should make some use of it.”

“Well,” said Aggie, who always gripped on to an idea that was being criticized, “for my part I think an M.A. of Edinburgh would be just as suitably employed looking after a boarding-house as selling ribbons for Messrs. Clark & Jones, as you were doing lately to keep the pot boiling. You could keep the books and entertain the guests with that extraordinary tongue of yours, and I’d do the practical part and the cooking. I’d love to be a cook, I really would. In fact, I’m a born cook, and I’ve always longed to run a house and keep a first-class table. I know I could do it.”

“Then you’d better marry Jerry,” said Susan drily.

But Aggie was not going to be drawn about Jerry (who earned about twopence a year) and went on, merely for argument’s sake, and not because she had the faintest notion of starting a boarding-house:

“And the aunts could help us there, they are simply hotchin’ ” (Aggie had picked up a Scottish word or two from Susan, which she sprinkled about

her conversation with more or less accuracy) "with retired colonels and dowagers with little dogs and no home, titled maiden ladies and so on. I do think it's one of my most brilliant suggestions. Oh, goodness, I do wish something would turn up! Don't look so serious, Susannah, you give me the pip. I'm only making wild suggestions."

"Well, it might be an idea," said Susan, coming round. "After all, there's my hundred pounds lying in the bank doing nothing. I believe I'd love it, only——"

"So would I, only it's out of the question. Let's look through the advertisements again, perhaps we've missed something." She reached over for a newspaper and propped it up against the toast-rack.

But she got no time for reading, for at that moment the door of their bed-sitting-room opened and two other girls came in. They were carrying a large bundle between them, which they dumped down on one of the divans.

"Gosh, Bede," said Susan, "you do look a ticket! What have you and Sally been doing?"

Though hot and dishevelled, it was easy to be seen that Bede was Susan's sister, only Bede was entrancingly pretty, with a mop of fair curls that made her young face seem small and her head enormous. Sally, her great friend, was the daughter of the proprietress of No. 33 Beaton Square, Mrs. Knight, a doctor's widow who had come to London from Susan's village to make a living. Besides No. 33 she had a very successful little tea-room called the "Green Lizard", in which Sally and occasionally Bede helped her as waitresses. They all had bed-sitting-rooms at No. 33, into which they ran in and out as the fancy took them.

"Sally and I are swopping clothes," Bede announced now.

"We've just had a brain-wave—haven't we, Sal? You see, we just fit each other's things, and as we're both simply dead sick and tired of every garment we possess, we are going to have a dress parade in each other's things and you and Aggie are to be the judges. It's to be a mannequin parade," and she forthwith started to pull her jumper over her head.

"Here's a letter for you," said Sally, coming over to Aggie and giving her the envelope. "I'm simply dying to see what I look like in Bede's yellow viyella, and you're the only ones who have a full-length mirror." She skipped over to the divan, and before Aggie could pull out her letter was standing in a skimpy petticoat sorting out the various garments tumbled on the bed.

Aggie opened her letter and drew out a sheet of notepaper and a folded page of newspaper.

“Here, Susan,” she said, “you look at that while I read my letter, it’s from Biddy Arkles in Northumberland. She lives near my old home, but I can’t think why she’s sending me half a newspaper—I never read the local rag.”

She opened her letter and Susan spread the paper innocently out among the tea-things, never dreaming of all that crushed bit of newspaper was going to mean to her. There was silence in the room for about two minutes, then:

“Gosh!” said Susan.

Aggie looked up from her letter.

“What are you goshing about?” she asked.

“Gosh!” said Susan again. She was sitting with the paper open, staring at an item below a spot where two large blue crosses had been marked.

Suddenly she raised her head and glanced round the room.

“Listen to this,” she said, and began to read out in a sort of chant:

> “Would any lady with a little capital care to join another in converting her house into a guest house for anglers. A lady with some experience preferred. The house is very suitably situated near two famous trout streams.”

She stopped.

“Is that all?” asked Bede.

“Yes, it stops there. But don’t you see——”

“Gracious,” said Aggie, who had looked up from reading her letter to listen, “is that what Biddy Arkles sent the paper for?”

“Oh no,” said Susan, “she’s marked something else, about a Mrs. Delacorne wanting a secretary, but this is underneath it.”

“Oh, that’s William Shakespeare’s great-aunt—I mean my William Shakespeare. Well, I’ll tell Biddy Arkles I’m not going to be that old dame’s secretary. She’s never as much as asked if my baby was alive.”

Aggie always referred to her small ward as her baby.

“Nobody’s asking you to be her secretary,” grunted Susan impatiently; “it’s the other bit that’s interesting me.”

“Well, what is it? Read it again, I wasn’t listening.”

Susan read it again more slowly this time.

> “Would any lady with a little capital care to join another in converting her house into a guest house for anglers. A lady with some experience preferred. The house is very suitably situated near two famous trout streams.”

"Well?" Aggie raised her eyebrows.

"Well! Isn't that what we've just been talking about? It looks like fate to me. Oh, Aggie, let's answer it, it might just be the very thing. As you were saying, I could keep the books and run the place and you could do the cooking, and your aunt could send along the retired colonels—they always fish. It would just suit us!"

But Aggie was used to Susan's sudden discoveries that the most extraordinary situations could be marvellously adorned by herself and her friend, so all she did was to give a snort and return to her letter.

"Where is it?" Bede's wild head came out of a blue-green jumper with coral buttons, as she asked the question.

"The *Culverston Mercury*."

"Don't be a goose—where's the house, I mean? Is it near London?"

"I don't know, it doesn't say. You just have to write to A. P., care of the *C.M.* I'm going to write."

"But you've no capital and no experience," exclaimed Sally, buttoning up the yellow viyella; "you'll need both."

"A lady with capital!" quoted Aggie, now folding up her letter and laughing a little bitterly. "My holy aunt, we look like ladies with capital, don't we? Mending our own shoes with stickfast, counting up the shillings for the gas-fire!"

"I've my hundred pounds," argued Susan, "that I've never touched since Aunt Maria Selby left a hundred each to Bede and me, and I'm a good housekeeper—didn't I keep the manse for years when Mother was ill? And did everything, except washing the blankets—my legs weren't thick enough."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Aggie, really interested at last. "Did you wash the blankets with your legs in your Highland manse?"

"No, feet. You stamp on them in your bare naked legs among the soap-suds in the tub—don't you, Bede? It's great fun, only you need legs that *are* legs."

"Mercy! What an extraordinary thing to do!" Aggie paused a moment, then went on: "But a hundred pounds wouldn't be any use. She'll need loads of money, tons, a thousand pounds, anyway!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Sally judiciously. The other two girls had subsided on to a divan in their borrowed plumes, always ready for a discussion on ways and means. "A hundred pounds is quite a decent sum."

"Yes," declared Bede, "to *spend*, though it's simply *nothing* if you keep it in a bank and get three measly pounds for it every year. Madness, I call it!"

"So do I," said Susan heartily. "I never could stand the man who put his talents in a napkin and buried them. I'm certain sure the Bible meant banks for napkins."

"That's all very well," Aggie put in, "but the point is that a hundred pounds would never be enough even if you did spend it. Look what they eat!"

"Who eat?" all three chimed in.

"The anglers. All those sporting sort of men eat like crocodiles."

"Yes," broke in Bede, well-meaning if slightly confused, "they simply devour food—sirloins of beef and rounds of pork and game pies and legs of lamb and gigots. What's a gigot?"

"I know," said Sally; "it's a kind of pigeon, like a capon—that sort of thing."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Susan. "It's a sheep, I mean it's sheep, and you say 'jigget'—a gigot of mutton. We used to have it at home, boiled, with caper sauce."

"Well, that's a new one on me," exclaimed Sally. "I always called it a 'gigot' when I came on it in a book, and saw it in my mind's eye running about like a little bantam hen—terribly sweet—but where were we?"

"At my hundred pounds and the advertisement. Don't you think it has possibilities, Aggie?"

"No, I don't. Honestly, Susan, it's only widows with large houses and lots of oak sideboards and mahogany chests of drawers and chiffoniers and brass bedsteads and that sort of thing who go in for boarding-houses. Besides, you know nothing about the financial side, catering and bills I mean, and extras and so on."

"That's nothing," said Susan, "neither do the widows, poor lambs. One just learns, and A. P. sounds as if she had chiffoniers and all that. I do think I'll write to her. Shall I, Aggie?" She paused, looking dreamily at the gas-stove, but did not wait for Aggie's reply, she went on, "Besides, I'm so sick of bed-sitters and gas-fires and Heinz tomato soup, aren't you? I'd just love to be in a real home again with coal-fires that make a blaze and warm you right through to your backbone, not just scorch the front of your legs; and a proper kitchen with a large stove and an oven that's always hot, and a cat on the hearthrug, and going upstairs to a real bed in a real bedroom, not just making up the divan; and hearing the wind in the trees and the birds

scolding and twittering under the eaves. It would be the country, Aggie. You know yourself one pines sometimes for the country."

"No," put in Sally in her confident young voice, "that's just what would be my main objection to it—it's the country—cows, mud, taking the dogs for a walk, red-faced men, thick-soled shoes——"

"Poking the pig with a stick on Sunday afternoons," put in Bede, laughing, "walking a mile in the rain to post a letter and buy two-pennyworth of bull's-eyes, picking slugs off the lettuces, bed at ten o'clock—bulls, ewes, curates, turnips, the sale of work. Don't do it, Susan, you'd die of boredom."

"Well, there will be no harm in writing." She looked across at Aggie.

"My goodness!" exclaimed Aggie. "You're not going to write, are you?"

"I am so. Nothing venture nothing win. Anyhow, it will give me the feeling that I have one iron in the fire. Where's the ink-pot?"

"It's empty, but you can have the loan of my fountain-pen. I filled it at the free library today when I was looking through the advertisements. Ye gods, but I hate that place!"

"What do you bet the A stands for?" asked Bede. "I bet it's Alice."

"Of course it's Alice," said Aggie crossly; "she sounds exactly like an Alice, and bamboo tables and Venetian blinds and a locked bookcase with glass doors. I loathe the woman already."

But behind her crossness Susan heard the note of despair, and calmly went on with her letter. After all, they must try something. There wasn't only themselves, there was Bede. Bede was attending the L.C.C. Art School and doing clever work, and wanted to become an illustrator or a fashion artist. She was spending her hundred pounds on the training, and paying Mrs. Knight for her room by helping at the Green Lizard Café, but she wouldn't really be able to keep herself for some time, and Susan would have to look after her. She, Susan, was the oldest and had all the common sense.

But it was later on that Aggie capitulated a little—when the lights were out and the divans made into beds into which each had crept in shabby pyjamas.

"You see, Aggie"—a whisper came through the dark—"I'm growing a little frightened."

"I know," a voice faltered from the other divan; "so am I, Susan. Do you hear the rain? It sounds so hope—hopeless!"

Their defences were down.

“Creep in beside me,” said Susan. “If we are going to cry we might as well cry together.”

CHAPTER II

THE LETTER

THE answer to Susan's letter, when it came, both amused and puzzled the girls. They were all busy darning stockings when it fell with a flop through the letter-box on the postman's last round. Sally and Bede had been having baths and doing their washing and were in dressing-gowns, both crossed-legged on one of the divans which had been drawn up in front of the fire between the arm-chairs of Aggie and Susan.

"I know what that is," said Susan at once, "it's an answer from Alice." And she jumped up and ran to get it.

She was opening the envelope when she came in, and plumping down on the arm of Aggie's chair she began at once to read it out:

"*Dear Miss Tyndal*,

I am so glad to have heard from someone like yourself. I need an experienced person here with the strength of character which I gather from your letter you possess. I am very much in need of help as I do not understand very well about money as my dear, late father saw to all that. A hundred pounds does not seem very much, but if you will come and see me I shall explain the circumstances more fully and you will be able to judge for yourself. Please come on Wednesday, the 26th of this month, at two-thirty in the afternoon. There is a bus from the station and the conductor will put you off at the corner.

Yours very sincerely,
Alice Primmer."

"Gosh!" said Susan, on finishing this epistle, "she's Alice after all."

"My hat!" said Aggie. "What kind of a letter did you write, Susan?"

"Very sedate," said Susan. " 'Dear Madam, Seeing your advertisement in the current issue of the *Culverston Mercury* it has occurred to me'—and so on. And I signed it 'Yours very truly, Susannah Jane Tyndal'."

"That's what did it," said Aggie at once. "Susannah Jane Tyndal sounds just what she wants, fifty-two and staid enough for anything. Well, my girl,

you'd better write now and tell her the truth—that you're twenty-four and skittish."

Susan flushed up.

"I'm not skittish! I loathe skittishness, and you know it, Aggie."

"Oh, well, I didn't mean skittish. I'm not so quick as you are at finding the right word, but I do mean whatever is the opposite of staid—lighthearted, perhaps."

"Well," put in Sally, "I do think poor Alice needs somebody lighthearted to cheer her up. She does seem depressed and under the weather. If I was Susan I'd get the conductor to put me off at the corner and go and see her."

"I am going to see her," said Susan.

"She'll never take you," said Aggie, "that's one comfort. One look will be sufficient."

"I'll wear my spectacles," said Susan; "they do give me an air."

"Your spectacles are simply false pretences." Aggie was not to be brought round. "You know you don't need them."

"Sometimes I do, for various reasons, and, anyhow, I look at least thirty-nine in them."

"Where does she live?"

Susan glanced at the letter.

"Round-about House, The Moor Road, Bonnyblink. Oh, what a lovely name! I simply must see Round-about House, it sounds like a fairy-tale."

"Fairy-tale nothing," gloomed Aggie. "You'll see, it will be a modern bungalow stuck on the edge of a little Border village with a sundial and a crazy pavement outside and a crazy mistress inside. You mark my words."

After that, of course, they all had to describe their imaginary visions of Round-about House and its mistress, which at length sent them into such gales of laughter that even Aggie had to come round and listen to Susan's plans for her journey into Northumberland.

Then the two younger girls went off to help Mrs. Knight with a late supper-party at the Green Lizard, and Susan and Aggie were left alone.

"Are you really terribly down on my going to see Miss Primmer?" Susan asked at last, breaking the rather long silence that had followed the hilarious departure of Bede and Sally—in their own hats for a change.

"No, not really," said Aggie. "I think it might be lovely if we could get it—I mean if we could go together. I'm sick of London, too. But I think your hopes are too high, honestly I do, and I don't want you to go there all cocked up about it and then get a frightful disappointment. And then—well . . . I

don't want us to separate. If we both have a job in London we can always have a room together, but if you go off to Northumberland and find Miss Primmer likes you, but there's no room for me—well! There's an end to—to ——"

She stopped.

"I know," said Susan. "But you know you said you'd like to run a boarding-house, Aggie, and if I could just get in I'd soon find a place for you—you know I would. In fact, you and your aunts are to be one of my main lines of attack—so to speak. And you know you hate bed-sitters as much as I do and typing in an office all day with no prospects of anything better. We do want something to get our teeth into and make a success of." She sighed.

"Yes, we do—only . . . we've sworn to stick together."

"Well—so we shall. Listen, I won't have anything to do with it if I see no chance for you joining me."

"And what about that little flat we were going to have near Hampstead Heath, where William could play—and having him with us?"

Aggie had kept William up her sleeve as a sort of last trench to fall back on, for Susan adored William, who was about six now. He was an orphan and the son of a distant cousin, a great friend of Aggie's. She had cheerfully consented to look after him, "if anything happened to us both", when her friend Edna Delacorne (whose maiden name had been Shakespeare) had as cheerfully made the request, none of them dreaming that a short time afterwards the young husband and wife would be killed together in a motoring accident.

The old lawyer who was trustee with her had wanted her to take William and his hundred and fifty pounds a year herself and bring him up, and she would have liked to if she could get settled in a post that would allow of a tiny flat near one of the parks. In the meantime, he was in a very high-class home for orphans and for children whose parents were abroad and where, as Aggie said, they had vitamins and calories and ultra-violet rays and study-of-the-child-mind and furniture made to fit them and all sorts of things she never could provide, even with the £150 a year which the home at present absorbed.

She had taken Susan with her sometimes when she went to see him, and Susan had absolutely fallen for William, simply worshipped him, and had been dying for months to take a flat with Aggie where, as she said, they could make a home for William—"A home with a little h, not a Home with a capital H. It makes such an awful difference," said Susan.

She sat now thinking about William for a few minutes before replying, then what she said rather took the wind out of Aggie's sails:

"William's at the bottom of all this."

Aggie started.

"How? What do you mean?"

"We'll have William too—later on—if I bring it off. Children ought to be brought up in the country. I've had William on my mind for a long time."

Aggie laughed.

"Oh, Susan, you're impossible—absolutely impossible—but I suppose you'll have to go. I'd lend you my fur coat only it would come down to your heels, but there's my short kolinsky cape and cap that Aunt Janet gave me; like all my hand-me-downs they are a little worn, but good. They'd make an impression of money in the background, and that's what you need to do."

"If that's what I need to do I'd better take you with me," said Susan, "you always look so terrifyingly elegant; you'd simply carry things off on the spot. What about coming with me? I'd represent hard work and practicability, and you the rich clients in the background."

"No," said Aggie definitely, "we can't spend all that money on train fares for a bird in the bush, and that's what your grand scheme is—simply a bird in the bush."

"Well, that's better than a bird in a cage—like William," said Susan, as usual leaping wide of the mark but landing on the spot.

CHAPTER III

MISS PRIMMER

SUSAN pushed open the gate and surveyed the house through her large, tortoise-shell spectacles. Then she took them off to get a better view.

"Gosh!" she murmured. "What a house!"

The conductor, as Miss Primmer had promised, had put her off at the corner. She had found herself at the end of a little lane with low walls, all one mass of greenery—ivy with little fresh browny-yellow leaves, moss and ferns with silverweed and toadflax and foxgloves in the crannies and along the foot. None of the flowers was out yet, as March was not long in, but the new leaves were there and a few clumps of primroses and dog violets were showing green. Then she had crossed a little humpy bridge over a stream and seen two water-hens in the rushes and a water-vole under a willow, and then a little farther on she had reached the gate—and there was the house!

This was evidently a side gate, for farther off she could see signs of a drive that went up to the other side of the house. The gate was shabby and had once been painted white and there were wooden steps up the bank to it, all mossy and broken, and with primrose rosettes in all the corners and pushing through the broken cracks in the wood.

From the gate one saw only one bit of the house, but it was enough to make Susan draw in her breath quickly with joy. She knew at once why it was called Round-about House. It wasn't exactly round, but the bit she was looking at was round and she could see that beyond it was another round tower, with a low, long, two-storied piece in the middle. It looked as if two squat round towers had been built at a little distance apart and then joined by building across from one to the other. It was whitewashed and had greeny-blue slate roofs—at least, as she explained later to Bede, the whitewash was a very pale yellow, which made it look sunny, and as the day was one of those bitter grey days that keep threatening snow, the sunny effect was delightful.

There were ragged creepers of all kinds on the walls, and though the garden and its paths were absolutely neglected, it was plain to be seen that someone loved it. Everywhere there were daffodils coming up and late snowdrops still rioted. There were even clumps of little scillas and hypaticas

in the paths, and the edges of the borders were a mass of coloured primroses and dusty-millers just coming out.

Trees and bushes were in bud. She saw a syringa, and could imagine the beauty of the lilacs and laburnums later on as she opened the gate and brushed past them.

But as she neared the house she saw that, except for large beds of wallflower plants at each side of the front door, everything was in a state of neglect, everything rioted and weeds were as numerous as the flowers.

The walls of the house, too, were peeling and needed fresh coats of the yellow wash, the windows looked dusty, with lines under the sills down which rain-marks ran. There was moss on the front doorsteps and the paint was blistered and peeling on the door.

She had made her way by twisting paths through escaliered, lichened apple trees to the front door which was in the straight bit of the house between the towers. There was a bell-pull which pulled out a long way and then a bell which gave a sudden loud clanging.

"Gracious," she thought, as it went on mercilessly clashing its tongue, "they'll think I'm the fire brigade or something!"

But the inmates were evidently not alarmed by the swinging bell. She waited a long time and amused herself looking at the lawn, which resembled a small hayfield, with two lovely cedars standing knee-deep in the grass and a garden seat tumbled upside down in the middle.

"My certes!" she thought, relapsing into her native Scots, "it's time somebody took a hand here."

She turned back to the door and was just about to ring again when she saw the handle turn and then the door began very slowly to open, so slowly that Susan had time to remember her spectacles and slip them on again before the crack was wide enough to allow her to see the elderly lady who stood there.

Yes, undoubtedly a lady, there was no mistaking her air, but got up in the queerest outfit Susan had ever seen. She was very tall and thin and had grey hair rather untidily piled on the top of her head, which made her look taller. She wore a rough tweed skirt, which was too short and revealed spindle legs clad in black woollen stockings and muddy leather slippers with straps across like a child's.

At the top of the skirt was a flannel blouse with a lie-over collar turned up and pinned into a clump with a beautiful old brooch. Over this she wore a curious garment, that Susan recognized after a moment as a lumbago belt turned upside down and with tapes over the shoulders to keep it in place.

Over all that she wore a woollen antimacassar in faded greens, reds, and purples, as a shawl.

She was, in brief, what Susan described later on to Aggie as a "mess"—a favourite word of the moment.

Nevertheless she had dignity and that unselfconscious air which cannot be imitated, but which stamps a gentlewoman.

"Oh," she said, and a red spot of colour appeared on each high cheek-bone, then she hesitated, waiting for Susan to speak.

"Good afternoon, Miss Primmer," said Susan, wondering if this possibly could be Miss Primmer. "I am Susan Tyndal."

"Oh, surely not."

Rather daunted, Susan smiled her sweet, indomitable smile.

"Yes, I am—didn't you expect me?"

"Oh yes." She opened the door wider. "Please come in." Then, as they were crossing the hall, she turned and said:

"You see, I expected an elderly lady."

"I hope you are not too disappointed," said Susan. "I'm not really so young as I look, and elderly ladies are so often rather helpless, aren't they? I'm not a bit helpless."

She smiled again to Miss Primmer, her frank eyes gleaming through the large glasses.

By this time they had reached the drawing-room. It was bitterly cold and there was no fire in the grate. A tall jug full of pampas grass stood in front of it. Susan glanced round—a lovely old room with water-colours on the walls and slender, rosewood furniture, but smelling slightly of damp and decay, she had only time to take in the general effect of old-fashioned elegance and refinement when, having motioned her to a chair and sitting down beside her, Miss Primmer spoke.

"I am so grateful to you for coming," she said in her gentle, hesitating voice. "I need someone so very much, but"—she glanced round her uncertainly—"I'm afraid you are too young."

"Thirty-six," said Susan firmly, clasping her hands tightly together and praying to be forgiven for the lie. "I'll tell her the truth later," she thought, "as soon as ever I can."

"Oh no, you don't look thirty-six. I'm afraid it would be very dull here for a young girl."

"Dull!" exclaimed Susan; it was the last objection she had expected. "Oh no, I wouldn't be dull. I'm a country girl—woman I mean. I'd never be dull

in the country. Is this the house you want to turn into a boarding-house for anglers? It's lovely!"

"Do you like it? I'm so glad. Well, yes, I did think so, but I'm afraid it's going to be so very difficult; and then a hundred pounds seems so, so—pardon me—but so inadequate."

"Yes, I know," said Susan, leaning forward eagerly and trying to remember all the speeches she had made up in the train. "But couldn't we just go into things and discuss it? I know it's not much money, but it's all I have and I could make up for that in other ways. May I tell you my side and then you tell me your side? When I have come all this way it seems a pity not to talk it over."

"Oh yes, yes, I should like to do that," murmured Miss Primmer uncertainly.

"I do hope you will try me," went on Susan, leaning towards her and raising her round but assured young face which even the spectacles could not age, nor could they quench the eager courage of its expression; all they could do was to add a touch of incongruousness and humour to Susan's ingenuous aspect. "You see, I know so much about anglers and what they like—the kind of meals and all that. My brothers were all anglers and I fish myself and could even advise about flies once I had tried the streams—wet fishing and dry fishing and worm and so on" (this was all part of the speech she had composed in the train). "I know a hundred pounds is not much, but a hundred pounds backed by a practical woman (woman!) who is an experienced and economical housekeeper would be better, I'm sure you must admit, than, say, five hundred pounds and an impractical handless lady with no experience."

She paused for breath.

Miss Primmer's hands fluttered up to her untidy hair. She looked at Susan; her eager face with the pink cheeks and cropped hair looked extraordinarily dauntless and competent. Miss Primmer could not but sense the confident assurance that seemed to be an integral part of her visitor. For the first time she looked really interested.

"I do wish you wouldn't think an elderly lady was what you needed," went on Susan after taking a breath. "I'm sure it really isn't. Two elderly ladies would be pretty much the same thing—if you know what I mean. Now you could help me and I could help you. I'm a very experienced, practical person because I was brought up in a Highland manse and for years after my mother died I ran the house. I am quite a good, ordinary cook—but I have another idea about that—and know all about keeping books and

working economically. I had a year at a Domestic Training College before I went to the University and took my M.A. I know I could run the house well and I'm very strong and full of energy and I'd just love to make a success of a boarding-house. I can do all sorts of things like paper-hanging and upholstery—and I can manage servants."

Susan's throat was dry and she was hungry and thirsty, having had nothing since breakfast. She glanced at the clock, hoping tea would appear. It was about three, so there were no signs of tea as yet.

"You are an M.A.?" Miss Primmer inquired.

"Yes; Edinburgh."

"But, my dear—shouldn't you be teaching?"

"Not with just an ordinary M.A. I couldn't afford to take Honours, and besides, I don't like it."

At the mention of servants, Miss Primmer's pale face had flushed. She now returned to Susan's remark.

"You could manage servants?"

"Yes, rather."

"And cook?"

"Yes—plain cooking."

There was still no sign of tea, but Susan was so excited at Miss Primmer seeming to be considering her at last that she had revived, and Miss Primmer's next words were so surprising that the thought of tea went clean out of her head.

"Could you stay now?" asked Miss Primmer.

"Now?" exclaimed Susan after her, so completely taken aback that her mouth fell open. "Do you mean—at once? I mean, stay on now—not go back? But we haven't discussed terms or anything. You haven't told me anything about your plans. You haven't asked about my references—or anything."

"Yes . . . Yes . . . of course."

Susan suddenly realized that behind her gentle diffidence there was something desperate about Miss Primmer. That she was so badly in need of help she would accept it from almost anywhere or from anyone. Instead of Susan being desperately in need of Miss Primmer, it began to dawn upon her that Miss Primmer was desperately in need of Susan. Her spirits rose at the thought, and unconsciously she began to take charge of the interview.

"Miss Primmer," she said, "why do you want me to stay now—is there some trouble?"

Miss Primmer hesitated, looking towards the door of the room as if she were listening.

"Well, you see," she said faintly, "I have got two boarders already."

"Oh!" Susan gasped. ("Boarders, already!" ran her thoughts. "And with the place looking like this. Gosh!")

"Have you been advertising? When are they coming?"

"They're here."

"Here—in the house, do you mean?"

"No, they are out fishing."

Susan sat silent, gazing with astonished eyes at Miss Primmer through her round glasses.

"You see," that lady went on in her diffident hesitating way, "they came this morning. They had gone to the inn but there was some disagreeableness and they left, and then someone in the village told them I was going to take anglers to board. The Cobbs must have been talking. Of course I said, 'No, I was not prepared', but he was a very determined old gentleman and it seems the water was just right for the fish. I don't exactly know how it came about, but—his luggage is here and they've ordered dinner for seven-thirty—and Cook is going out and has refused to make it."

"Oh!" Susan was beginning to understand, and her spirits were rising. Here was a situation to be tackled, and she dearly loved tackling a situation and clearing up what, again, Aggie would have called a "mess".

Still, *some* business would have to be discussed and something arranged before she could do anything. She pulled her chair nearer, pulled off her hat and drew off her gloves.

"Miss Primmer," she urged, "do let us be frank with each other. I'll tell you all my side first and then you tell me all yours. I'm out of work and I have a sister to look after, so I need a job badly. I'm living in a bed-sitting-room in London with a friend and she's out of work too, so we're pretty desperate. But I have that hundred pounds and would like to do something with it. I thought if you had the house and furniture and some kind of income we could use my money for extra things you might need. I can work hard, so we could save on the servant side. Honestly, I should like to put my hundred pounds and all my energy into starting a boarding-house, and I would work like a hatter. But we will have to come to some agreement—you see that, don't you?—or I should have no authority. You did mention a sort of partnership. At least, that was what I understood."

"Thank you, my dear," said Miss Primmer gently. "I will try to put my side as clearly. You see, there is this house that my dear father left me and he also left me, as he thought, enough money to live on comfortably—but I find somehow that I have not enough." She paused, wrinkled her forehead and gave a helpless sort of sigh. "You see, servants nowadays have to have such very large wages and they need plenty of good food. They cannot do their work on the simple diet that serves me; and cleaning materials cost so much; and then there's the garden, it does seem to require so much money ——"

"The garden!" exclaimed Susan involuntarily.

"Yes. I know it doesn't look quite what it did in my dear father's time. He loved the garden; I do my best. I was working in the garden when you came, but Cobb seems to need so very much manure and plants, tools, so many things—I am afraid I am not a very good manager. There never seems to be any money, so I thought . . . boarders . . . this big house . . ."

She had a way of pausing between her sentences as though she had to think it all out again as she spoke. "I did not mention you to Mr. and Mrs. Cobb, I thought it would be time enough after we had come to some decision. But this very persistent gentleman turned up and—well, I'm afraid I allowed myself to be over-persuaded, and they are rather put out."

"How many servants have you?"

"Just two—at present. Isabella and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Cobb. I am afraid the work is a little too much for Isabella." She glanced at the clock nervously. "She is a little late with tea, but she prefers to do everything herself, with the assistance of Cobb, to save me further expense. Cobb attends to the garden and does the windows and knives and—and so on."

"And what do you pay them?"

"Four pounds a week."

"What?"

"You see, my dear, that is two pounds a week for Cobb, which I don't think excessive. Of course, it was arranged at a time when he lived out, in their cottage; and as Isabella saves me another maid . . . and, of course, Isabella used to live out too. But somehow I—I haven't liked to mention it or suggest a smaller wage since they came to live in. . . . Perhaps if you come . . ." she paused.

"I could mention it," interjected Susan. "I jolly well think I could."

"But not so as to give them offence, dear, they—I—they have been very kind to me."

("Have they? I wonder," thought Susan to herself, but she said nothing.)

"But I must see about a cup of tea for you—you would like a cup of tea?"

"Oh yes"—there was no mistaking the relief in Susan's voice—"I would love a cup of tea."

"I'll ask Isabella to bring it."

She got up and pulled the long bell-pull and stood waiting. There was no response of any kind, so after a moment she went to the door, saying, "The bell does not always ring."

But Susan was sure she had heard a faint jangling in the lower regions.

"Isabella! Isabella!"

There was no answer to Miss Primmer's call. She left the room and Susan heard her go along the passage, down a few steps, and knock at a door.

It seemed to be opened from within, and her quick ears heard Miss Primmer say:

"Oh, Isabella, please."

"Well, what is it?" a loud, impatient voice answered.

"May we have a cup of tea, please? I have a caller."

"The tea's not ready."

"But if it would not be too much trouble, Isabella, I should like it now."

"The kettle is off the boil," said the impudent voice, "but I suppose I'll have to leave my work and get it. You'd think there was a dozen servants running the house. Well, you'll need to wait a bit. Tea-time's not till five o'clock and I can't make the kettle boil to suit callers when the fire's just been damped down. Who is it, anyway?"

She did not hear the reply, but the door was, if not banged, very firmly shut.

"My holy aunt," said Susan to herself, "what a tartar!"

Miss Primmer came back into the room and sat down.

"It will be here in a minute," she said. She was looking very flushed but went on immediately: "Perhaps we could discuss the preliminaries in the meantime. Would you be able to let me have the hundred pounds at once? You see, on going over my linen and napery and the blankets I find that I have much less than I expected; it all seems to have disappeared." She frowned uncertainly. "I cannot quite understand how it has all got worn out so quickly. . . . However, there is a shortage, a decided shortage—we would

need to buy at once. If you could do that—provide the hundred pounds—and take complete charge—I am afraid I am very useless on practical matters—I think we might arrange to go equal shares, if that would suit you?"

("Suit me!" thought Susan, her heart leaping in her side. "Oh, golly, wouldn't it? But would it be fair to Miss Primmer? She has the house, it's her income that will keep things going till we get a fair start.")

"Do you think that would be fair to you?" she asked.

"Yes," said Miss Primmer, "if you make it a success."

"Oh, I would work hard to make things a success, and I have a friend—I meant to tell you about her, but that will have to wait till later. She is related to several titled families and could help us with clients. Well, shall we say equal shares in the meantime, so that we can get set agoing, and consult a lawyer as soon as it's possible about its being fair? I am willing to consult a lawyer if you are."

"Yes; but I think it will be quite fair. We shall be equal partners, only I am afraid most of the work will fall to you."

"Shake hands on it," said Susan, and held out her hand.

"Wait a minute."

Miss Primmer got up and went to her desk where she took a piece of paper and wrote something on it. She brought it to Susan, who read:

> *Miss Susan Tyndal, M.A., and Miss Alice Lavinia Primmer have agreed this day to become partners and run a boarding-house at Round-about House on equal shares. Miss Susan Tyndal to pay one hundred pounds.*

She had signed it and handed her pen to Susan, who put her signature underneath.

"I have found it best to have things in writing," she said solemnly. No doubt she was thinking she was being very businesslike.

Susan did not know if this paper was of any legal value whatever, but she said, trying to be very businesslike also: "Shouldn't we each have a copy?" So another copy was written and signed, which Susan put into her purse.

Then they shook hands, and sat and looked at each other uncertainly for a moment.

"This is the psychological moment for tea," thought Susan, but there was still no welcome rattle of tea-cups to be heard.

Then Miss Primmer spoke as though continuing a conversation: “You see, I needed you at once because the gentlemen will be coming at seven-thirty for dinner and—the Cobbs are going out. This is their night out, and ____”

“There will be no dinner ready,” said Susan, smiling, “and we would lose our first boarders—that would be unlucky. In fact, it’s not going to happen. I’ll make the dinner.”

“They—the Cobbs—I’m afraid they have given me an ultimatum.”

“Oh, they are going to leave if you take the boarders! Well, all the better, I’ll manage.”

But it appeared that the Cobbs had no intention of giving in their notice. It was the guests who were to be turned out. Knowing that Miss Primmer was helpless without them they had laid down the law (“You see, my dear, I have never been used to doing housework or cooking,” she explained nervously, clasping and unclasping her hands)—the boarders were to go.

“Well,” said Susan, “as we are partners now, it’s time, I think, for me to take a hand in this.”

“But—I thought we might wait till they had gone out, and then tomorrow I could explain that—that you had turned up and helped me.”

Her voice trailed off. Susan saw that for some reason she was terrified of the Cobbs and that it was only sheer desperation that had made her try to take a stand at all.

“No,” said Susan, “you must not be afraid of them. You must ring the bell and, when Mrs. Cobb comes up, introduce me as your partner and say that you have handed over the management of the house to me. Do you understand? It will be quite easy after that. I shall do the rest.”

Miss Primmer looked terrified to death. Susan herself was rather scared, but she realized that the moment had come to show her metal. It was now or never. She went forward herself, and, taking hold of the bell-pull, gave it a firm and mighty tug. The resultant peal rang through the house like a summons to arms.

“Gosh!” thought Susan, “there’s no mistake about that, anyhow.”

Then they both stood and waited for the battle to begin.

CHAPTER IV

ISABELLA

BUT no answer came to the summons of the bell. They waited a few moments and Susan could just imagine that down in the kitchen a sullen voice was saying, "Let them wait."

"I don't think Isabella is going to answer," said Miss Primmer timidly.

"Then we must go down to the kitchen," said Susan firmly. "Come on, all you have to do is to say, 'Isabella, this is Miss Tyndal, who is now my partner. I have handed over the management of the house to her.' Can you manage that? You really must say it, but that is all you need to do, I'll take on then. Are you ready? Will you do it?"

"Yes," whispered Miss Primmer. "I—I must do something or I shall be in the workhouse."

Susan took her hand. The poor lady was so white, and trembling so much, she was afraid she would never get her to the kitchen. However, some spurt of courage seemed to come to her, she lifted up her head and with two bright spots of colour in her cheeks led the way down a passage to the kitchen door. She lifted up her hand to tap, but Susan forestalled her.

"Better start as I mean to go on," she said quickly, and, taking hold of the handle, opened the kitchen door.

A warm draught of air came out as the door swung back. The sight that met her eyes was a picture of cosy cleanliness. The kitchen was a big, light, airy room with whitewashed walls and blue-and-white check curtains at the wide windows. A blue-and-white checked linoleum covered the floor, the table was scrubbed white, the dresser decked with blue-and-white ware. In front of the fire was a huge blue rug on which a large yellow cat stretched itself in luxuriant ease. There was a smell of toasted buns and melted butter that made Susan's mouth water. On an arm-chair beside the hearth sat a large, stout woman with a pale face and big loose pink mouth. She had red hair and a wart on her chin from which a few hairs, also red, stood straight out like a brush.

"She must cut them," thought Susan involuntarily, "to make it look so like a pin-cushion full of pins."

She rose as the two entered together, and a look of amazement crossed her face, followed by a curious expression that Susan thought was very like fear, but it passed too quickly into anger for her to be sure.

"Good afternoon, Isabella," said Miss Primmer at once, evidently determined to get her words out before she was intimidated. "This is Miss Tyndal, with whom I have been in correspondence for some time. We have come to an arrangement by which we have become partners. We are going to run the house together as a boarding-house, and she has taken over the entire management of the house."

Mrs. Cobb, whose face had turned a deep red, and whose eyes darted fury at them both, now broke in:

"Oh, indeed, and where do I come in?"

"It's time for me to butt in now," thought Susan, and spoke as pleasantly as she could.

"I am afraid, Mrs. Cobb, that you do not come in anywhere as far as our partnership is concerned. That is between Miss Primmer and myself. But if you care to stay on under the new arrangement and take orders from me, I think we might settle down quite well together. I see your kitchen is very well kept, though the rest of the house is in such a state of neglect and disorder."

And she glanced coolly round thinking to herself, "Well, that's thrown down the gauntlet, anyhow. . . ."

"And who may you be?" Mrs. Cobb stood back and folded her arms as if prepared to do battle.

"My name is Tyndal—Miss Tyndal—Mrs. Cobb, and I shall expect you to adopt a different tone than that in speaking to me. Of course, I can understand that at the moment you are rather taken aback, but you must try to pull yourself together a little and adapt yourself to the new situation. Miss Primmer has handed over the running of the house to me, the agreement is all signed, sealed, and settled. So, you see, it's no use running your head against a stone wall. You will find it your best plan to accept the situation and adapt yourself to it."

Susan smiled to her. "I know it's rather hard for you, coming suddenly like this, but——"

"You shut up!" said the woman rudely. "I'll have no dealing with a little start-up like you. Miss Primmer engaged me and it's Miss Primmer I'll answer to and nobody else."

"Very well. Miss Primmer has told you that she has handed over the running of the house to me. Do you wish her to repeat it?"

"No, I don't. She can't hand the running of the house over to you, because I run the house."

"Oh no, Isabella," put in Miss Primmer now, evidently heartened a little by Susan's bold stand, "you do not run my house. Until now I have run my own house."

"What—you!" jeered the woman. "Much you've done! Left all the work to me and Cobb and never done a hand's turn, and now after I've slaved after you for years and worked me fingers to the bone, you go behind me back and give me place to a little upstart of a nobody. But I don't believe it! And what's more I'll see what Cobb has to say to this; and what's more, *Miss* Primmer, there's more between you an' me an' him than folks knows of, and the sooner you tell that little impident besom to get out o' my kitchen, the better for yourself—that's what I says—and now!"

She turned to Susan. "Out ye get—out o' my kitchen before I take my foot and I kicks ye out."

Her face was scarlet. She glanced at Susan and Susan turned as white as paper. She was scared, for the woman looked dangerous, and Miss Primmer was about as much use for a stand-by as a hank of cotton. She looked pale, drooping, and timid, and Susan knew that in a moment she would capitulate to this overbearing randy. She took hold of her hand and held it firmly as she spoke.

"Mrs. Cobb, as you know perfectly well, Miss Primmer is not strong and not fit to stand a scene like this, so please leave her alone. It is I with whom you have to deal, and threatening to turn me out of the kitchen—which is now partly my kitchen—is simply silly. I have the law behind me and, let me tell you, the *police*."

At the word police, the woman, who had stepped forward with her fist raised as Susan commenced to speak, paused, but though she did not strike she was evidently too sure of herself and her power over Miss Primmer to be really intimidated. She turned now, however, and spoke directly to Susan.

"Who are you, anyhow? I've never as much as set eyes on ye before. You're no relation of Primmer's, for I know *the only one she has*. Some little sneak-thief I'll be bound that's trying to get at her money—but you'll have me and Cobb to answer to, let me tell you that."

"It's no use being abusive and calling me a thief," began Susan, when she was interrupted by Miss Primmer who said:

"Far from Miss Tyndal being a thief, Isabella, she has just paid me a large sum of money for her share in our partnership."

At that the woman quailed a little and stood looking from one to the other uncertainly. Susan, who was the most sympathetic of creatures, suddenly felt a little sorry for her.

"There is nothing to do but to accept the situation, Mrs. Cobb. Miss Primmer and I came down to inform you of the fact of our partnership and to say that you and your husband can either stay on in the meantime, under the new management, until we see how we get on, or you can, as you are perfectly at liberty to do, refuse to work under me, in which case you can either take your notice or wages in lieu of notice. Now we know this is very sudden news to you and we can hardly expect you to take it all in at once, so we will leave you alone for a little to think it over."

As they turned to go she added:

"Miss Primmer, however, took in two boarders this morning, and they are returning to dinner at seven-thirty. Their rooms will have to be prepared and their dinner made ready. There is, however, plenty of time for you to do that."

"I take my orders from Miss Primmer and not the likes of you," said Isabella to Susan. "You may think you've got over Alice Primmer, but let me tell you, you're not settled here yet—and, what's more, you never will be!—here's Cobb, we'll see what *he* has to say."

"Yes, we'll leave you to tell your husband," said Susan lightly, and she and Miss Primmer turned and left the kitchen, Susan feeling rather triumphant that they left of their own accord and had the last word. For a moment it had looked as if they were going to be turned out.

When they were safely upstairs Susan gave Miss Primmer's arm a squeeze.

"Round the first," she said. "Now cheer up and don't look so downhearted. The only thing that's making me downhearted is that we haven't got any tea. I nearly stole the teapot and the toasted buns—they did smell good. I say, your servants do themselves well, don't they?"

"Oh, tea!" said Miss Primmer, who had evidently completely forgotten tea in her agitation. "I'm so sorry." And she stood there, looking quite helpless.

Susan glanced at the clock and saw that it was just about time for the returning bus that was to meet her and take her to the station.

She was sure now that Miss Primmer had not told her all, that there was some secret reason why the Cobbs were in the house and had such a hold over the poor lady—but, for all that, she was not going back by the bus, not she! Susan had put her hand to the plough and was not going to turn back.

Besides, she was enjoying herself, she really was. She was as full of energy as an egg is full of meat, and here was something real to do—so much more satisfactory than sitting moping in a bed-sitter with daily visits to the horrible reading-room of the free library, where wet puddles lay on the wooden floors and where the very walls in their ugly grey varnish seemed to breathe out discouragement and failure. Of course, she wanted her tea. By this time she was starving of hunger—but she'd see about that later. Now she was going out to tell the man on the bus she was not going back with him and to send a wire to Aggie—a nice long wire even if it cost double the usual price of her wires.

"Where is the post-office?" she asked—"if there *is* a post-office about here!"

"Oh yes," said Miss Primmer. "It's just along the road from the corner. But I wonder, my dear, if—if we should really go on when Isabella is turning so disagreeable about it all. You see, I rather thought she liked the idea of having boarders at first, but ever since Colonel MacCrae turned up she has completely changed about it. . . . I really don't know what to do."

"Don't be so frightened of the Cobbs," said Susan, for she saw that Miss Primmer was flushed and trembling. "After all, they can't do anything. It is just going to be disagreeable at first until we settle down—or get rid of them."

"Oh, we can't do that, dear, we really cannot do that. They have been very kind in some ways—very; I couldn't. No, I couldn't think of dismissing Isabella."

"Well, we'll discuss it when I come back," said Susan. "I must run now to catch the bus. The man said he'd wait for me if I wasn't there, and I don't like to keep him waiting for nothing."

She was putting on her hat and pulling on her thick gloves.

"Now you get a nice hot cup of tea—perhaps Isabella will spare you one when I'm out of the way, but don't tell her anything about our arrangements. Promise you won't."

"All right, dear, no, I won't tell them anything, but do you really think you'd better stay?"

"Yes. I'm going to send a wire to Aggie, it won't take me very long ——"

"But——"

"Well, I'll stay the night anyhow, and we can talk things over and I'll help you with the old Colonel. The poor man will need some kind of supper and a bed."

"Well, if you think . . ."

But Susan had no time for more. She picked up her bag, shouted, "Good-bye, then," as she ran through the passage—for she heard in the distance the long impatient sounding of the motor-bus horn—and sped down the garden path. The bus was waiting at the end of the lane. She explained to the jolly-faced conductor that she wasn't coming on and then stood listening to the grinding of the gears as the bus started and with a prodigious noise, for it was up-hill, swung along the lane and round the corner.

When it was out of sight she turned round to seek the post-office. "I might have asked him how far it was," she said to herself, but there was nothing to be done now but to hunt for it, and she set off in the opposite direction as quickly as she could.

Country people think less of distances than townsfolk. This was borne in on Susan as she sped down the country road hoping to see signs of the village of Bonnyblink round every corner, but she was beginning to feel tired before she saw the first little house peeping out of a whole witch's broom of winter jessamine.

Once there she was lucky, however: the first cottage was the post-office.

There were a few glass bottles of brandy-balls and striped sticks of candy in the little window, and a worn, wooden sign above it said "Bonnyblink Post Office".

She went in, and after knocking a few times on the tiny counter heard a door open. A black spaniel rushed barking out at her but subsided into friendly tail-wagging when his mistress followed, scolding, "Sooty" at the top of a high, squeaky voice.

The postmistress was an elderly, stout body with jet-black hair and a friendly smile. She explained to Susan before commencing business that she had the rheumatics badly in her legs and feet and they were always worse before rain or snow. "It'll be snow this time," she said; "we always get a bit of winter back at this time of the year."

"Well, it's cold enough for anything," said Susan, and asked for a telegraph form.

After a good deal of poking about in a drawer a form was forthcoming, and a rather dry and gluey bottle of ink and a pen. However, she succeeded —the postmistress talking all the time—to get her telegram written.

Please send some clothes. Am staying on in meantime. Think it's all right. Not sure. Writing. Susan.

She stood looking at it a few minutes. She had half a mind to strike out the first sentence and put, “Pack my clothes and bring them.” She did so long to talk things over with Aggie and get the benefit of her ruthless common sense, and Aggie could come for an hour or two at least and catch the bus back, but it might all be a wild-goose chase and a waste of money for nothing. No, she would find out about the Cobbs first.

After a few moments’ conversation, punctuated by the sympathetic sounds she had to make about Miss Buchan’s rheumatism and *angelica*—though what angelica had to do with it she had no idea—she temporized by putting “*pack my clothes or bring them*”. Aggie had wits enough to understand the last part was half a joke and not to be taken too seriously. Then she paid up and turned to go.

“Are you staying in the village?” asked the postmistress.

“No,” said Susan, “not in the village. I’ve not seen the village yet, but I hear it’s very pretty and a great place for the fishing,” and talking volubly about fishing she got herself out of the shop without having to answer any more questions.

She didn’t want to talk about what she was doing in the meantime. It all seemed so much in the air.

When she came out, she found there was a shower of fine dry snow blowing up with the wind, but it only lasted a few minutes and she hurried happily along, enjoying the cold air now she was warmed up with exercise, and feeling somehow elated at the look of the world with a thin white veil across the fields, and the shiny, polished sky with grey gleaming into yellow beyond the whitened hedge where a robin sat telling his beads, “pit, pit, pit”, beside the last crimson haws.

When she arrived at the gate she saw that clouds were gathering above the old cedar trees, which looked black now in the wintry afternoon. She hurried up the path and knocked on the door, as she thought Miss Primmer would hear the knock and she preferred at the moment to meet Miss Primmer quietly rather than to set the noisy bell jangling in the kitchen.

She waited, but there was no response. She knocked again, but no one came. There was nothing for it but to ring the noisy bell.

She pulled the knob gingerly out and must have succeeded, she thought, in bringing off not too alarming a peal. Anyhow, from outside she could hear nothing at all.

Perhaps she had been too gentle. She pulled it again, but still hearing nothing and growing impatient she dragged out the knob as far as it would

come and let it go again with a vigour that should have sent the bell clanging and clashing through the house like a fire alarm.

There was nothing. Not a sound.

"Goodness," thought Susan, "what can be the matter with the old thing?"

She pulled again and let it go.

Silence.

This was getting serious. Again and again she pulled without setting up the faintest murmur inside. She tried the door; it was securely locked.

"Well, I'll try the back," she said to herself.

She made her way round some weedy paths bordered with box and through a silent shrubbery, where a blackbird went scuttering and scolding into the laurel, crossed a big, stone-paved yard with a pump in the middle and empty stables at one side, and found the back door. There was an ancient knocker on it and she gave a resounding thump.

The echo was all she heard.

Again and again she thumped, with no result. All was quiet and still.

She went forward to look through a window and then she made a new discovery.

It was one of those old-fashioned houses with shutters on the ground-floor windows. Every window in the house had its shutters closed. Upstairs the blinds were all drawn down. It looked, standing grey, cold, and lonely in the neglected garden with its veil of ghostly white over the straggling borders and ragged and unkempt bushes and creepers, like a house of the dead, like a place that had not echoed for ages to the sound of a human footstep.

Susan shivered.

What had happened?

Standing there in the deserted garden a feeling of immense loneliness came upon her.

CHAPTER V

GRIFF

WHERE was Miss Primmer? What had the Cobbs done to her? How had they spirited her away?—if she was away. But if not she must have heard Susan's loud and repeated bangings at the door.

She could not solve the mystery, but of one thing she was certain—the Cobbs were at the bottom of it. She felt there was something sinister about the couple in spite of their common-place name and appearance.

Following all these questions another came hard on their heels. What was she to do? She was alone in a strange place with very little money in her purse. Certainly she had her return ticket to London, but the last bus was gone, and even if she could walk to the station she did not know the way back through all those twistings and turnings of the Border lanes.

Besides, did she want to go back defeated? "With," as she said to herself, "her finger in her mouth and her tail between her legs?" How she was to combine these feats, since tails and fingers were not usually found in juxtaposition, she did not know. Neither did she care. She wasn't going to do it, anyhow. Not if she could help it.

But coming to this decision brought her no further forward. Slowly she turned and walked down the garden paths to the little white gate.

"There's nothing for it, I suppose," she said to herself, "but to start and walk either to the station or back to the village, where I might get a bed for the night, and then return in the morning to see what was going on. I could find out, too, something more about Miss Primmer and the Cobbs. I wonder if I have enough money? I'll sit down, anyway, and count what I've got. I may as well take a rest before I begin walking again—Gosh! I wish I'd had my tea."

Taking no heed of the snow, she sat down on the top step, outside the little gate, with her back towards the house, and getting her purse out of her bag emptied its contents into her lap and began to count them.

"One, two, three shillings," she murmured, picking them up, "a half-crown, two sixpences, and one, two, three, four——" but she never got the word "pennies" out, for at that moment there was the sound of something landing heavily on the road just behind her. She turned just in time to see a

young man balancing himself on the slippery surface after a leap over the hedge at the other side of the lane.

She had only time to notice that he was rather attractive-looking when their eyes met.

"Hullo," said he, and lifted a worn tweed hat that had about as much shape as a pudding cloth after the pudding's been taken out of it.

"Hullo, yourself," said Susan, as youth to youth.

"Gee, you gave me a start sitting there like a gnome on a toadstool."

"Like a what?"

"Well, perhaps you call it 'gome', it's all one to me—or have I got the wrong gender?"

"I don't know what you are talking about," said Susan, "and, anyhow, I wish you'd be quiet. I'm counting my money."

Instantly, on sight of this young man, Susan had felt at her ease with him. There was something about him—that's the only way you can put it—something about him.

It wasn't that he was handsome. Far from it. Anything less like the advertisements in the *Tatler* of young men wearing lordly overcoats or smoking sumptuous cigars it would be difficult to imagine. He was dressed in shabby tweeds, with pockets that bulged in a manner that would have made any decent tailor throw a fit. He had a clean, brown face and merry eyes, and that's about all you could say for him, except, perhaps, his mouth—a humorous mouth, but a mouth which belied the otherwise extreme youthfulness of his appearance.

"He's not like me," thought Susan, if the vague passing reflection could be called a thought; "he's older than he looks, he doesn't need spectacles to give him weight—so to speak."

"How much have you got?" he asked now.

"I have three shillings, one half-crown, two sixpences and four pennies—how much is that?"

"Six and tenpence."

"Oh yes, and I have a threepenny bit out of William Shakespeare's birthday cake—that makes seven and a penny, doesn't it?"

"Depends on if it's genuine. Did Shakespeare have a birthday cake, by the way? I wouldn't have thought it of him."

"I don't mean him, I mean my William Shakespeare. Well—I suppose I'd better be getting on." She rose to her feet, and, tucking her bag under her arm, prepared to go. "Good afternoon, Mr.——"

"Thorne is my name—Griffith Thorne."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Thorne. Many thanks for helping me with my arithmetic." And she turned to go down the lane.

"Where are you going—if you don't mind my asking? I'm quite harmless."

"Not a bit. I don't know."

He looked at her quickly and they stood hesitating a moment. She thought he was going to ask if he might accompany her for a bit along the road, and was prepared with a refusal, but instead he asked:

"Do you live there?" nodding at the house across the garden.

"No—at least . . . No, I don't think I do. Why?"

"Because I was wondering if I did."

Light dawned on her.

"Oh, are you the boarder?"

"Well, I thought I was one of them. But it's all shut up."

"Yes, I know. It's very mysterious, isn't it?"

"Very. The old lady took us in this morning and dinner was to be at seven-thirty." He looked at his watch. "Of course it's a long way off seven-thirty, but my uncle will be here by seven, and anyhow—it looks all shuttered and deserted-looking. I can't understand it."

"Neither can I."

They both stood looking at each other and then she said:

"You see I'm—I've just come as a sort of partner and lady help today. I went to the village to send a wire and when I came back it was all locked up. Not a soul about the place—unless Miss Primmer is inside."

"Is she," he hesitated, "a bit peculiar? Please excuse me if she's a relation or anything, but——"

"No, I hardly know her. I met her for the first time this afternoon."

"Oh, you don't know her either."

"No."

He sat down on the top step and beckoned her to a place beside him.

"Well, shall we sit down and talk it over? I must say it looks a bit queer to me. Shall I tell you my story first? My uncle—he's really my employer, but he's my uncle as well. I'm his agent and secretary and man-of-all-work so to speak—hard up and glad of the job. Well, we got here this morning for a few weeks' fishing. We found the village inn an awful place and were told Miss Primmer at the Round-about House—nice name, isn't it?——"

"Rather!" put in Susan. "It got me too."

"—That she was taking anglers and turning her house into a boarding-house for them. Well, we came round here and found a rather nice, frightened-looking lady who had obviously never taken in a boarder before. She said 'No' at first, but we liked the house and it was just perfectly situated for my uncle, so he started in and he'd soon over-ruled her. He's a bit of a martinet, like all these retired colonels. In fact, I think she'd hardly realized she had taken us when we left, but it was all settled and we were to send along our bags from the inn and come back to dinner at seven-thirty. I got a bit tired fishing—I'm not so keen as my uncle—and said I'd come up and see how things were getting along, and found the house all shut up, had a walk round about the place, came back and found you sitting on the doorstep—as it were. Now it's your turn."

"Oh, mine's a much longer story than that. It begins in a bed-sitter just off Brunswick Square"—and Susan plunged in and related all that had happened since she saw the advertisement in the *Culverston Mercury*, ending up with:

"And so I didn't like just to go back without seeing Miss Primmer again, and anyhow, I'd wired for my things, so I was just counting my money to see if I'd enough for supper and a room for the night—I thought Miss Buchan at the post-office might put me up—that's to say if I couldn't get in here later, for I was coming back if I stayed at Bonnyblink."

"I see. Well, Miss——" he paused.

"My name's Tyndal—Susannah Jane Tyndal."

"Gee!—you don't say!"

"Of course I do—what's the matter with it?"

"Oh, nothing, not really, only you don't look like Susannah Jane, if you know what I mean. You haven't exchanged names with Miss Primmer by any chance?"

"No, Mr. Thorne, I have not . . . they call me Susan for short."

"Susan, that's better——"

"And Miss Tyndal to you."

"Of course, of course—I apologize. Well, what's to be done?"

He put his hand in his pocket and brought out a rather crushed-looking packet of cigarettes and passed it to her.

"No, thanks, I don't feel like smoking."

"Good enough." He put them back and brought out a pipe covered with tobacco ash. "Do you mind if I smoke? To tell the truth I'm absolutely

starving of hunger and a pipe will put it off."

"So am I. I didn't get any lunch and no tea either."

"Well, I'd ask you to come and have a bite at the inn—but, well, we left—er—rather under a cloud. My uncle has a peppery temper and there was rather a scene."

He laughed as if in recollection of the scene, struck a match and lit his pipe. He puffed away a minute and then turned to her.

"Look here," he said, "I have an idea—what about burgling the house?"

"Burgling the house!"

"Yes—breaking in to see what's up. I'm not easy in my mind after what you tell me about those Cobbs."

"Oh, but they seemed respectable enough."

"You don't think they've murdered the old lady and put her body down the well?"

"Oh no." Susan's eyes were very round and serious.

"That's right, neither do I. Besides, there isn't any well. But, all the same, there's something up—dirty work at the crossroads."

"Do you think so?"

"Well, on the face of it, what do you think yourself? Frightened old lady with nice house and income engages you, takes us in as boarders; sullen couple in the background not wanting anybody to butt in on their little Tom Tiddler's ground, 'picking up gold and silver'; old lady disappears; house shut up; door-bell tied up——"

"Oh, do you think so? Was that why it wouldn't ring?"

"Shouldn't wonder. Well, what about it?"

"I don't know."

"You see, I've a perfectly good reason for entering the house—my bags are there—not to speak of my uncle's; my coat's there and—yes, by jove, I'm cold, that's it. I'm going to get my coat and see about my bags. The window over the porch is the one in my room. I'll just slip up there and try to get in. I hope the catch is off."

"I bet it isn't; they'll have seen to that."

"Well, I'm going to try. Coming?"

"Yes, of course. What shall we say if they return?"

"I'll say I wanted my coat. You can say you had come back as arranged and found me in the house. Simple, isn't it?"

"I'm not so sure; you haven't found the window unlatched yet." She got up and shook the snow off her dress.

"Well, anyhow, you shouldn't be sitting there on a snowy, worm-eaten step," he said severely. "You'll catch your death."

"I like that! Who asked me to sit down?"

"Did I? What an ass!"

He held out his hand and pulled her up the steps.

"Let's run," he said. "I'm 'chilled to the bone' as my granny used to say."

They raced together up the snowy paths to the door. Susan was surprised at herself. She was used to being rather stand-offish with young men in London, and here she was running hand-in-hand with a young man through twisting paths bordered with gnarled apple trees. What would Aggie say if she could see her?

But this young man was different. There was something so frank and friendly about him. In some ways, he seemed so young—like a boy—and yet, no, that mouth wasn't a boy's mouth—but they had arrived at the door.

"Now you keep *cave*," he said, "while I spiel up the pillar."

She hadn't heard the word "spiel" since she had played with her brothers at the manse. She laughed. Now Susan's laugh was one of the most delightful things about her; it was so gay, so merry, a laugh to lighten all the burdens of the world. From his position half-way up the pillar he looked down at her through the straggling, wintry vines of the wistaria and laughed too.

"What are you laughing at?"

"I don't know. You look so funny—spieling up the pillar."

"Do I? Not half so funny as you look down there with your smart little town hat on the back of your head."

And they went into another peal of laughter, in the midst of which he swung himself up and in another minute Susan heard the window go up.

She stood beside the door, listening and waiting. He seemed a long time in coming, but at last she heard the bolts being pulled back and the door was opened. He was standing in the shadow of the hall, looking rather white.

"Come in," he said, and opened the door wider.

"Well?" she asked.

He pointed mysteriously up the stairs.

"I think there is someone in the house."

"Oh." She stood considering. "Do you think it's Miss Primmer?"

"I don't know, but I heard—well, it sounded like snoring."

"Where?"

"Up there, in the room on the right—but, I say, ladies don't snore, do they?"

Susan felt inclined to laugh, but he looked so serious she refrained.

"Of course they do," she said. "Don't be silly."

"Yes—but not—not loud. Honestly, it was like a man snoring."

"Do you think it could be Cobb?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I'm going up to see."

She left him standing at the bottom of the stairs and ran lightly up the steps. At the top was an open landing with a window and a long corridor to left and right. She turned to a door on the right. Yes, there were unmistakable sounds of snoring—loud snores.

She stood for a moment uncertain what to do. Suppose it were Cobb? Well, in any case he was asleep. She took hold of the handle and, quietly turning it, opened the door.

It opened on to a small sitting-room. The blinds were down and there was a red, glowing fire on the hearth. On a sofa pulled up to the fire Miss Primmer lay sound asleep, tucked up under an eiderdown. At her side was a small table on which stood a tray with an empty glass and a flask of aspirin beside it. The room looked very cosy and comfortable.

Susan stood gazing a few moments and then went and gently shook Miss Primmer. It took some time before she opened her eyes and stared at Susan. She seemed for the moment quite puzzled and bamboozled. Her grey hair was all in disorder, her eyes unnaturally bright, her cheek-bones flushed an ugly red.

"Who is it?" she said at last.

"It's me—Susan Tyndal," said Susan, and she added, unnecessarily, "I've come back."

Miss Primmer slowly struggled up into a sitting position.

"I don't understand," she began. "They told me . . ." She stopped and began brushing the hair out of her eyes and back from her forehead. "They told me . . . you were gone. You had left by the bus."

"Oh, did they, indeed?" said Susan. "Well, I didn't."

Susan looked about her. She was close to the sofa on which Miss Primmer lay and to the little table, drawn up so comfortably near the fire. There was also a bottle of eau-de-Cologne on it, but it was not Cologne she smelt, it was brandy, or, at any rate, either whisky or brandy—Susan could never tell the difference. But of one thing she was sure, Miss Primmer had been well dosed with either the one or the other.

"What else did they tell you?" she asked.

Miss Primmer seemed to be pulling herself together.

"The bus stopped," she said. "They said you had gone with it and that word had come that Colonel MacCrae and his nephew had changed their minds and would not be back." She paused and sat gazing into the fire, then spoke rather crossly:

"I had a severe headache with all this upset, and Isabella tucked me up here with a couple of aspirins and a hot drink, so that I should have a quiet rest while they were out. I did not wish to be disturbed."

"And she put brandy in your hot drink to make you sleep all the heavier. You were snoring dreadfully, I was quite alarmed," said Susan frankly.

Miss Primmer flushed.

"She said she would give me just a teaspoonful to quiet my head. I hope you do not think I am in the habit of taking brandy—it was just a medicinal dose."

Susan did not know anything about that except that she was sure Miss Primmer was speaking the truth as far as she knew it. At the same time, she was perfectly certain that Miss Primmer had been well dosed to make her sleep soundly for a few hours. She still looked rather dazed and so heavy about the eyes it was plain to be seen she would fall asleep again the moment she was left alone. Susan wondered what she should do.

"Miss Primmer," she said as brightly and cheerfully as she could, "we are partners now, you know. You remember you asked me to stay. I just stopped the bus to tell the man I was not returning and then went to send off a telegram to my friend. I've just come back."

She thought it as well to say nothing about the locked door in the meantime.

"Oh yes, my dear, I remember, but I think perhaps we were a little hasty, and now that the boarders are not coming there is no need to do anything in a hurry. In fact, I've been talking it over with Isabella and I don't think anglers would really do. So noisy and messy and requiring such very large meals and so much attention. It would require quite a staff of servants, for Isabella could never manage alone, so that there would really be very little

advantage in the long run. Now Isabella has suggested that they give up their cottage entirely and settle in here. They have always kept on the cottage, you know, and Cobb sleeps there. He only works and has his meals here. Then I could let the cottage—it is mine, you know—and make a little extra money that way. In fact, her married daughter would be glad to pay me a good rent—so I really think, dear, we will call it off."

"Call what off?" said Susan bluntly, her mind working furiously.

"Our little arrangement."

"Are you sure you wish to do that, Miss Primmer? Do you wish to be entirely in the power of the Cobbs?"

Miss Primmer looked a little frightened.

"Listen," said Susan. "It isn't true that Colonel MacCrae sent a message to say he wasn't coming. I have met his nephew, in fact he is here now, and they are coming at seven-thirty as arranged. The Cobbs told you a lie, and then Mrs. Cobb gave you a large dose of aspirins and brandy to make you sleep, and tied up the door-bell and locked up all the place so that you wouldn't hear the bell if Colonel MacCrae got here before they had returned. I expect they intend to be here by seven-thirty with some lies ready for him.

"It's a good thing they thought I had left by the bus because, however you decide to act, at least you know the truth, and it is the truth I am telling you now. When I returned, the doors were locked, all the windows were shuttered, and the bell would not ring—did you know about that?"

Miss Primmer had started up now.

"No, indeed! How dare they?" and then, to Susan's horror, she crumpled up and began to cry, dreadful sobs shaking her in the most heartrending fashion.

"Oh, save me, my dear," she sobbed out, "save me from them. I know the truth, they are robbing me and deceiving me, but I cannot fight against them. Oh, why haven't I someone of my own to help me! Oh, if only my poor girl—my poor niece—could have been like you! Oh, what am I to do?"

And she put her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking with her sobs.

"What is the matter?"

Susan looked up to see young Thorne standing at the door.

"I heard somebody crying," he said, "and thought I'd better come and see if I could help."

Miss Primmer looked up.

"Who's that?" she asked.

“It’s your boarder, Mr. Thorne. He helped me to get in. The Cobbs locked him out too.”

“Oh dear, what am I to do? What am I to do?”

“We must get rid of the Cobbs,” said Susan firmly. “You know we are partners now, we signed our agreement this afternoon, so we must decide together what to do about them.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t, I couldn’t get rid of them.”

“But they are robbing you,” said Susan, “you know they are.”

“Oh yes, yes. I am so distressed about my mother’s sealskin coat. I missed it this morning and Isabella said the moths got into it and she burnt it —but moths don’t attack sealskin.”

She seemed to be going off at a tangent about the sealskin coat when young Thorne interrupted her.

“They are blackmailing you, too—aren’t they?”

“Oh no! I mean, not blackmailing. I only pay Isabella a little—a little to ——”

“To hold her tongue about something. That’s blackmailing. I was in a lawyer’s office, Miss Primmer, and I know a little about that. You could have them punished.”

She blenched.

“Oh no! Oh, I could never do that! And the publicity—oh, if they would just let me alone and not, and not——”

“Not tell your secret, is that it?”

Susan understood now why this young man had that firm mouth. He was quite a different man standing frowning in the firelight to the lighthearted youngster who had climbed through the wistaria to the window.

“You see—you see,” faltered Miss Primmer, “my dear father—we have always held up our heads, we are very much respected.”

“Yes,” said Susan; “and they are frightening you. Do let us help you.”

Quite unconsciously she used the we.

“Yes,” said Thorne. “There are no secrets about us, we are all open and above-board, and you can have your own lawyer in and find out all about us, so don’t be frightened.”

“And we don’t want to know your secret,” said Susan.

“No, you can be protected against blackmailing without telling anything you don’t want known.”

They kept on reassuring her, until she managed to pull herself together, and at last Susan persuaded her to give her a free hand in dealing with the Cobbs. It took some doing, as she was evidently of a very timid nature and quite unable to assert herself, apart from being afraid of some exposure. But Susan was so frank and self-assured and her new boarder evidently so sure of his ground and so disdainful of the Cobbs, that she began to see them from their standpoint as an uneducated, coarse, and ignorant pair of rogues who had no power whatever except what she gave them herself by her timidity and her terror of having her secret exposed.

But finally Susan succeeded in gaining all she had lost and reinstating herself as Miss Primmer's partner who was to manage all the domestic side. She was to deal with the Cobbs alone, and promised Miss Primmer faithfully that she would not bring her into the row that, most assuredly, there would be that evening. She had Miss Primmer's terrified consent to get rid of them, and once having got it she said no more, for she was beginning to understand that the poor lady was apt to change her mind at the first threat of disagreeableness. Besides that, she was terrified for her secret. But young Thorne, from his acquaintance of the law, was able to convince her that he could frighten the Cobbs into holding their tongues. Especially after he and Susan had paid a visit to Isabella's room and found in her locked trunk, for which he discovered a key, not only the sealskin coat but piles of beautiful linen, besides a large parcel of silver in the wardrobe all packed up ready to be taken away.

"Now," said Susan at last, "I'll bring you up a cup of tea, then you can come down and help me, if you like, to prepare for the Colonel. We'll keep a good lookout and at first sight of the Cobbs you'll come up here and lock yourself in. They have a cottage, you say, to which they can go?"

"Oh yes, dear, it's a very nice cottage, in fact quite a little house."

"All right—now where shall we begin?"

Susan was in her element.

CHAPTER VI

THE LEG OF MUTTON

"COME on, Mr. Thorne," said Susan, "I'll give you a cup of tea in the kitchen, and then you can amuse yourself till dinner-time—I'll light the drawing-room fire."

"Not on your life. I'm going to help with the dinner. I'm a first-class cook—in fact I'm a chef. You try me and see. And look here, my name's Griff. What about starting as we mean to go on?"

"But you're a boarder," said Susan. "It would never do for the landlady to call her boarders by their Christian names. And not only are you a boarder, you're *the* boarder. Our first and most important. I've never had a boarder before, and I'm going to practise on you and get perfect before the others arrive—in fact I want a little practice before your uncle arrives."

They had reached the kitchen and the new boarder sat down on the table very firmly while Susan hunted about for a tray-cloth for Miss Primmer's tea.

"Now get up," she said, having found a paper one that would have to do. "I want the table."

"No," said Griff firmly; "I'm on strike. I won't be a boarder; I'm the cook, chef, and butler, and I won't stir till you call me Griff and order me about."

"Butler indeed! Cook! Chef! Where do you think your wages are coming from, young man?"

"We'll see about that. Oh, lor', Susan, do let me help. I'll be a boarder officially and let you practise on me, but I'm in this with you and you've got to let me help. Besides, you could never tackle the Cobbs alone—you need a man behind you for that."

"Yes." Susan paused in the middle of the kitchen with a loaf in her hands. "I'd like you to help me there. Have the Cobbs seen you?"

"No."

"Then you must be a lawyer—of course you are one, but I mean a proper one come down to look into Miss Primmer's affairs. All right, let's be in it together. Get the toasting-fork!"

"Get the toasting-fork, *Griff*. And I'm not a lawyer. I meant to be, but we lost our money, so I went into an estate office, and now look after my uncle's affairs."

"All right. Griff, then. I haven't time to bother on with you. Do you realize there are the rooms to prepare for two boarders and dinner to cook before half past seven, and me fainting on my feet for hunger?"

"And two very particular boarders," said he, jumping up. "The old gentleman's a regular peppery old colonel, and likes everything right—and the young one's very pernickety about his food."

From that moment Griff assumed a dual personality. He was the old gentleman's secretary—and a very high and mighty one—and he was also "Griff", the man-of-all-work.

In two ticks Susan had set a little tray for Miss Primmer while Griff made the toast, and while she went up with it he made tea for themselves and toasted a couple of currant buns which he found in a jar.

Sitting on the table, each with a steaming cup of strong tea and a toasted bun in their hands, they discussed ways and means.

"First," said Susan, "I'll light the drawing-room fire and get Miss Primmer to dust the room. Then I'll see about the dinner. I wonder if your uncle would eat it in here tonight—there's no fire on in the dining-room—and really this is a lovely kitchen. We can keep all the mess in the back kitchen. There's an oil-stove there and it's nearly as big as this room—the back kitchen I mean, not the oil-stove."

"Of course he won't mind," said Griff. "As long as he's comfortable he'll never play cheep. And you can explain that the servants have run off, but that you'll have everything in running order by tomorrow—I'll help you out."

"That's all right, then. I can prepare your rooms while you sit in the drawing-room after dinner. Does he like Bridge? Of course I cannot join in tonight but you three might play other card games."

"Not on your life. My uncle and Miss Primmer will amuse each other. He liked her this morning. In fact they quite took to each other, that's how he got round her to take us. And between you and me, I think that's partly why she's consented to go on with making this a boarding-house for anglers—she took to us!"

"She took to me, too," said Susan, "so you needn't be so conceited about it. Let's make a plan to deal with the Cobbs; they may be here at any minute."

"We'll lock the doors and then when they knock you must answer and tell them where they get off. Oh, by the way, have you any money? I mean you'll need to get some from Miss Primmer and have it ready to pay them off."

In a few minutes Susan was ready for the Cobbs.

Miss Primmer had not quite enough money to pay them in advance, though luckily they had always been paid weekly. But Griff managed to add a pound or two and the money was counted up and laid on the broad window-sill in readiness.

That settled, she lighted the drawing-room fire by the effective, if dangerous, method of taking off a shovelful of glowing embers from the kitchen stove and rushing through the passage with them. Mrs. Cobb evidently believed in comfort and plenty in the kitchen, if nowhere else. Every room in the house was cold, dusty, and neglected, but the kitchen was shining with cleanliness, the fire glowed and heaping scuttles of coal stood ready for use.

Griff followed her to the drawing-room with one of the scuttles and they soon had a fire roaring merrily up the chimney. The lamps were lit and Susan, finding Miss Primmer cheered by her cup of tea, managed to get her into the drawing-room with a dusting-cloth.

"Don't just rub, dust everything hard," Susan told her. "We must have the room shining and bright for our new boarders. I'm going to leave you to entertain them after dinner while I see to their rooms."

"Oh!" Miss Primmer suddenly sat down. "I forgot; Isabella said there was nothing in the house for dinner and this wasn't the butcher's day. What shall we do?"

"Don't worry," said Susan, "I'll manage to scrape something together. Oh my, I wish Aggie were here."

"Who is Aggie?"

"She's my friend and a perfect cook. We were talking of running a boarding-house together when I saw your advertisement. It's she who has all the titled friends. I've thought of her as cook if we get rid of the Cobbs. Nicely, of course, and without any bother," she added as she saw Miss Primmer's eyes turning worried and her brow creasing. "But we won't discuss that till we've settled about the Cobbs. But Aggie and I could run the place and do all the work between us for a bit with perhaps a man for the garden and odd jobs, like floor-scrubbing and knives."

"I could do most of the garden," said Miss Primmer, suddenly brightening up. "I could take that as my province. I love gardening, only you

see I can't do the rough digging, and Cobb never seemed to have time, so it's been very difficult, especially as they didn't like me to work in the garden. Cobb said it reflected on him. Oh, I would enjoy doing the garden again—my dear father and I . . ."

Susan left her happily ruminating over the garden and flew back to the kitchen, where she found Griff with a large mop in his hands washing the tea-cups.

"I say," said he turning round, "do you think Miss Primmer has a brat?"

"A brat?" Susan's small face flushed up to her fair hair with anger.

"Yes—you know what I mean—one of those affairs made of sacking and tied with tapes."

"Oh, you mean an apron!" She rushed up to the dresser and pulled out a drawer, furious with herself for getting so red.

"That's the very thing." He had pulled out a large towel and was shaking it out. "Now for a safety-pin and you can pin it round my waist."

"Your waist!" said Susan, talking hard to cover her confusion and struggling to make the towel meet while he held up his arms. "I like that, you've about as much waist as a hippopotamus."

"Well, surely that's plenty. I say, what about dinner? What are we going to have?"

"Now you're asking! I haven't a notion. Let's go and forage in the larder."

She got a candle, and together they found a large pantry. If there was nothing there for Miss Primmer's boarders it was plain to be seen the Cobbs had laid in ample provisions for themselves. There was a ham and a side of bacon hanging from the ceiling, there were eggs and kippered herrings and a good supply of tinned foods. The remains of a beefsteak pie stood on the shelf beside a leg of mutton, and next that was a piece of cold boiled ham which had only been started. Susan looked at her wrist-watch.

"It's six o'clock," she said. "We've just time to roast the mutton. I don't suppose there's any mint—unless you could find some in the garden. But there are onions. That's roast mutton and onion sauce, preceded by—oh, I wish Aggie were here, she'd whip up a soup and a sweet out of nothing. I hate tinned stuff, but we'll just have to have tinned tomato soup and tinned fruit. It doesn't matter so much when we've a good leg of mutton—and that's straightforward, I can cook that."

"And I'll peel the potatoes."

"But we ought to have another vegetable."

"There are sure to be turnips in the garden—there always are. I think they must come up like weeds. I'll go and forage with the lantern after I've peeled the potatoes. My goodness, I'm hungry again."

"So am I. It's all this fresh air and excitement."

By this time they were so friendly they might have known each other for years. Susan forgot her dignity and answered to Susan, Susannah, Suzette and other variations of her name without a murmur. She was too busy to be dignified and, though she tried for a bit, she found Mr. Thorne or Mr. Griffith so very stiff and Griff so much easier to say that, before she knew it, she was calling him Griff and ordering him about as though he were one of her brothers.

Outside an owl called "Tu-whit-tu-whoo", and thin flakes of snow blew between the world and the moon, but inside the kitchen all was bright and cheerful.

Susan had, after fastening Griff's safety-pin, copied suit and pinned herself into a towel and then tied a white dusting-cloth round her head. So apparelled the two of them chattered and laughed as they got through the work. The mutton frizzled gaily in the oven, the potatoes were peeled and the onions cut up and popped into a little saucepan to stew at the side. It was too stormy to hunt the garden for turnips or mint, but a tin of peas was discovered to do duty as a vegetable, and Miss Primmer, on being consulted, had remembered that there were pots of rowan jelly in the store-cupboard.

Miss Primmer had set to work and dusted the drawing-room in a fashion, and in the lamplight it looked rather charming, especially as the fire, replenished with plenty of logs, was now leaping up the chimney, and the lamp was covered with an old-fashioned but charming rose-coloured shade.

Another surprise was in store for Susan when Miss Primmer had changed her dress. To do honour to the Colonel and the occasion she had put on her best grey silk and rigorously brushed her grey hair into smoothness, and, though she still could not be called anything but a plain woman, the air of breeding, which even the lumbago belt upside down could not destroy, triumphed, and she very decidedly had what Susan called an "air". One saw, too, that she was younger than she had at first appeared.

"It's what I shall never attain," confided Susan to Griff in the kitchen, "even if I live to be a hundred. Too short, that's what I am; and when I'm Miss Primmer's age I'll be a dumpling. Now Aggie's tall and stately enough for a princess. I do wish one could add a few inches to one's stature—though, of course, the Bible says it's impossible."

"You are very nice as you are," said Griff, and began to hum:

"Oh, mein Rose, du bist so kleine."

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's a German love-song."

"Gosh! Do you know German? What's it mean?"

"It doesn't sound the same in English."

"Never mind—let's have it. Is it very sentimental? The Germans are, aren't they?"

"It is rather, it means, 'Oh, my Rose, you are so little'."

Susan considered this for a moment, her fair head on one side, her pink cheeks faintly pinker, but her blue eyes as frank and forthright as ever. Then she said most unexpectedly:

"There's one thing about mutton, it must be well cooked. I hate pale-pink mutton, don't you?"

"I'd say I do. But I'm not the one to consider; it's the Colonel."

"Do you always call him that or do you call him Uncle James or Uncle Peter or something?"

"Not as a rule. You see, he's my employer, and I think it's best to forget the uncle except when he calls it to mind himself."

"Yes, I understand that," she replied sagely. "I intend to treat Miss Primmer with great respect too, in public anyhow. In private I'll pet her up a bit, poor lamb. She needs it—so nervous and fussy and never sure of her own mind. I think her dear father must have been a tartar and kept her well under his thumb, and, of course, when he died and she had no one to tell her what to do she went all to pieces and tried leaning on the Cobbs."

"And they picked up the pieces," said he, "and were sticking them nicely together to suit themselves when Miss Susan Tyndal turned up. It must have been an unpleasant surprise for them, not to say a blow."

"They haven't got the blow yet." Susan carefully sliced up an orange and a banana she had bought at a station kiosk and never eaten, to make her tinned fruit into a "fresh fruit salad". "It's still in the air, so to speak. You'll stand by me, won't you?"

"Rather! I'll tackle them if you like."

"No; you've no official position. You're just the boarder, but I'm the partner. I must stick to that, though I don't feel a bit like a partner, it sounds so important—I feel more like the new kitchen-maid. But I'll have to stand on my dignity and keep my end up and show them! Now, I've ten minutes before I thicken the sauce. I'm going to fly up and see if there are towels in

the bathroom and straighten the Colonel's room. It's a cold night, so I'll take in that oil-stove we saw in Mrs. Cobb's room. We must have everything ready for him. There's one thing that eases my conscience about taking so much on myself as I've done ever since I saw Miss Primmer: she hasn't the remotest idea of how to run a boarding-house, not the faintest. When the Cobbs went on strike she was at their mercy. She will never be any use, personally, except as a figurehead. She'll be a nice imposing figurehead, but I'll have to take everything on my shoulders if this place is going to be a success—and it must be. You will persuade the Colonel to stay, won't you, even if things are a bit at sixes and sevens and dinner in the kitchen and sounds of an undignified row with the servants penetrating to the upper regions tonight?"

"You bet your life I will. We're here for weeks, and I'll help you all I can. As I said, officially I'll be boarder number two, but, behind the scenes, man-of-all-work whenever I'm not busy with the Colonel."

Ten minutes later, as Susan was thickening the sauce, there was a ring at the front-door bell, and Susan pulled off her dusting-cloth and towel and hurried to the door.

"Good evening," said a pleasant if autocratic voice. "You'll have to give me a key. What a very disagreeable night"—and a very tall, very thin, elderly man came in. "Is my nephew here?"

"Yes, he came quite a while ago. Would you like to go straight to your room? The bathroom's just opposite and there's plenty of hot water. Dinner will be ready at seven-thirty—this is the drawing-room door here."

"Thanks, thanks." He was taking off his coat and putting a rod in a corner. "Yes, I'll just go up, and you might send my nephew up to speak to me. I hope you were careful with the typewriter."

"Yes, indeed," said Susan, blushing faintly, as she had never seen the typewriter. She conducted him to his room and then flew to the kitchen.

"The Colonel wants you, you're to go at once. Oh, my, I do wish we could have managed to get the dining-room ready, but it's like an ice-house and inches deep in dust. You'll have to break the news to him that he's dining in the kitchen. Now fly. I'm going to set the table. Oh yes! And see that the typewriter is all right. I've been very careful with it."

CHAPTER VII

BATTLE ROYAL

THE dinner was a great success. Susan had time to clear away most of the signs of cooking into the back kitchen and to set the table with Miss Primmer's best napery and silver while the Colonel was changing out of his rough, wet tweeds into a grey suit. Griff, too, found time to change, but Miss Primmer's grey silk had to do duty for two, as it were, in the way of the ladies dressing, for Susan had nothing but the navy blue skirt and jumper in which she had travelled.

Miss Primmer and Colonel MacCrae discovered that they both liked gardening and had never succeeded with blue poppies.

Miss Primmer was really at her best. She was of no use whatever when it came to practical matters—unless it was gardening—but she had evidently been used to "entertaining the gentlemen" when dear Papa was alive and was an adept at leading the conversation into happy by-paths.

By the time they had reached the fresh fruit salad—which, Susan remembered with a sigh as she was serving it, Aggie would have supplemented with some kind of hot and peppery savoury for the Colonel—the older pair seemed to be enjoying themselves immensely.

Indeed, Miss Primmer seemed, for the moment, to have forgotten about the Cobbs, while the only thing that disturbed Susan's peace of mind, once she had discovered the joint to be properly cooked, was the fear that they would turn up during dinner.

It was with relief, therefore, that she saw the others depart for the drawing-room. Miss Primmer evidently expected Griff to go with them and seemed to have the vaguest ideas about what he meant when that young man informed her he was going to help Miss Tyndal to "do the chores".

"I hope you play or sing, my dear," she remarked to Susan, "and then we can have a little music later. My dear father never liked the wireless."

There was, however, a very good wireless in the kitchen, and as the Colonel had none of the late Major Primmer's—he had been a major, it appeared, in the Militia—objection to it, it was agreed that Griff would transfer it later on to the drawing-room.

"Well, I must say," said Susan, as the drawing-room door closed, "the Colonel swallowed the kitchen like a thoroughbred. What did you tell him?"

"That the servants had decamped on hearing Miss Primmer was going to keep boarders—said they'd never been engaged to work for boarders and so forth. He was rather apologetic as a matter of fact. You see, he did rather force our way in—and I'm glad."

"So am I." They were gathering up the plates as she spoke.

At that moment the kitchen door was tried.

Both the conspirators stood still and stared at each other as if the day of judgment was upon them.

"Is that them?" whispered Susan Tyndal, M.A., every rule of grammar she had ever learned flying to bits at the ominous silence that followed the attempt to open the door.

Griff was the first to recover his composure.

"Now," said he, "keep your head, Susan Tyndal. Shall I open the door?"

"No," said Susan, her heart in her mouth, "this is where I come in—but what shall I do if they push their way in? She's a big, enormous woman."

"Put the chain on," he whispered. There was a chain on the back door, the same as at the front. As he spoke, he slipped it into its socket so that the door could only be opened about a foot.

All this time the latch had been lifting and falling and the door rattled and pushed from outside. Now there came a thunderous battering on the wood.

"I'll keep out of sight in the meantime," said Griff, "but remember I'm a lawyer and have been looking into Miss Primmer's affairs." He stepped back and Susan opened the door.

A little fine snow blew in, but the moon was shining behind it and she could make out perfectly well the big truculent Isabella and her smaller husband behind her.

"Is that you, Mrs. Cobb?" she inquired.

"Who do you think it is? Open that door!"

War had begun.

"The door is open, as far as it is going to be opened. We can discuss the situation perfectly well from here."

"You'll suffer for this, my little madam! Open that door and let me into my rightful place—which is in this 'ouse, let me tell you—and you get away to *your* rightful place, wherever *it* is. Not much from the looks of you. I've let the polis know about your goings on, comin' here and trying to get the

better of a pore innocent lady. I know your kind, and so does John MacAllister the polisman, who's a friend of mine, let me tell you."

"That should be useful for you."

"Are you going to open that door? I'll smash it in if you don't."

"You'd better not do that—for your own sake."

"Are you going to open that door? Where is Miss Primmer?"

"You are not going to see Miss Primmer tonight."

"Ho? Amn't I? We'll see about that." Rage overcame her and she kicked at the door, screaming at the top of her voice.

"You open that door! I'll have the law on you, I will—stealing into a house and shutting out the rightful owner. Don't you think you'll get away with that!"

"Now listen to me, Mrs. Cobb. In the first place you are not the rightful owner. You and your husband have been found out to be robbing Miss Primmer right and left. She has a lawyer here and your thefts have been discovered, so that the best thing you can do is to go home to your own cottage and keep a still tongue in your head."

"Turn us out of the house, would you? Turn us out without notice and in the middle of the night! The polis will have somethink to say about that. Not that I'm going. I'm Miss Primmer's housekeeper and 'as been for the matter of seven years. Do you think an impident upstart like you's goin' to turn me out? It's my right to see Miss Primmer, and I don't move a foot off this here doorstep till I 'ave seen her, and, what's more, I'll batter the door down if I have any more of your impidence. Where's Miss Primmer? I've got to see Miss Primmer."

All this was accompanied by a great deal of unprintable language, so strong that it almost made Susan's straight hair curl. But she was not going to be browbeaten, and she wanted to face the woman out herself. Griffith Thorne was standing inside the doorway. Once or twice he had made a move, but Susan had frowned him back, and he stood watching her slight upright figure with its dauntless set-back of the shoulders with an expression in which amusement and admiration was mixed with anxiety. The language he heard was really not fit for the young ears at the side of that ruthlessly cropped fair head. It was all very well, but . . . anyhow, he was there if the man put his oar in.

But so far the man, Cobb, had not spoken. He had turned his back, hunched his shoulders, and seemed to be observing the sky for signs of better weather. Susan, glancing up, saw a skein of wild-fowl fly between herself and the moon.

“You can’t see Miss Primmer,” she said again. “You gave Miss Primmer enough aspirin and brandy to poison her when you went out after tying up the bell and shutting up the house. She is not at all well. She has asked me, however, to say that she no longer requires your services and”—Susan held out an envelope—“here are your wages, also your husband’s, with an extra week for you both in lieu of notice. You will also be expected to return all that you have taken out of the house. An inventory is going to be made.”

This was a shot in the dark, but it had a different effect from what she expected. The man came forward now and before she could step back had pushed his head close to her face.

“Who are you, anyway?” he demanded. “That’s what I want to know. Miss Primmer never clapped eyes on you till today—you’ve got to show your rights to be in this house.”

“Quite so,” said Susan coolly. “I understand the point. I am Miss Susan Tyndal, Miss Primmer’s partner. We have signed an agreement this afternoon. In the house is also a lawyer—Mr. Thorne. Now your best plan is to go to the post-office and telephone for the police. We will then explain everything to them. And be sure to ask them to bring a warrant to search the locked boxes in your wife’s room, as they are not going out of the house till they have been examined. Whether it is in front of the police or not depends entirely on yourselves. And I have a message to you from Miss Primmer, that at the first indication that comes to her ears, or to her lawyer’s, that you have been talking about her private affairs, she will inform the police of certain things that have taken place here—things well known to yourselves. Here is your money and good night to you.”

“Take it,” said the man to his wife, “and let’s go, but”—he turned and shouted to Susan—“this is not the end of it, not by a long chalk. We’ve been badly treated we ’ave, we’ve been turned out of house and home, we’ve been called thieves and burglars, and somebody ’as to answer for this night’s work.”

“I don’t go without me boxes, I don’t!” shouted his wife—“not if I sits on the doorstep all night. Not if I bangs in every window in the place.”

“All right,” said Susan, “stay there and you’ll get your boxes,” and she shut the door.

“That’s a mistake,” said Griff.

“Oh no, it isn’t. Let’s get rid of them for good.”

“But they can’t take their boxes tonight. What can they do with them?”

“That’s not our affair. Anyhow, their cottage is not far off. Come on and help me to get their things packed in.”

She rushed upstairs, followed by Griff.

In a trice they had opened the woman's box. They had taken out earlier all Miss Primmer's linen and silver. Now Susan opened the chest of drawers and the wardrobe and transferred their contents to the trunk. There was not very much to pack, and Susan surmised that the trunk was really only a blind by which she could transfer things from the house to their own cottage. They fastened it and locked it and carried it downstairs between them. At the foot of the stairs Griff paused.

"We'll put it outside the front door," said he.

Neither Miss Primmer nor Colonel MacCrae seemed to have heard the bumpity-bump of the trunk as they half carried it and half slid it down the stairs.

Now Griff cautiously opened the door and deposited it on the doorstep and closed the door.

"So far, so good," said Susan. "Now I'll go and tell them where it is."

Followed by Griff she made her way to the kitchen and opened the back door. The husband and wife were standing there evidently in deep confabulation as they did not turn when she opened the door.

"Your box is on the doorstep at the front door," she called, "with your umbrella on the top of it. If there is anything more belonging to you you can get it tomorrow—when you bring back Miss Primmer's things!"

It was the man who came forward.

"Look here, miss," he said in a more conciliatory tone, "you don't know what you are doin' buttin' in here. Miss Primmer's under obligations to us, she is, and when she knows what you've done she'll be in a fine stew. Anything we've got from 'er has been for services rendered, and well she knows it. You'd better let me wife in to speak to her, and when I says that I mean it would be a long chalk better for her—Miss Primmer. You go and tell her what I've said, and you'll see."

"I suppose you are blackmailing her," said Susan.

"Blackmailin's a nasty word, miss. We don't want to do her no harm, but right's right and fair's fair."

"Blackmailing is a crime, and the lawyer has just been explaining to Miss Primmer that she can bring you to justice without any of her personal affairs becoming public and, what's more, she is thinking of doing it. Now you can go, but first I'd like to tell you that I think you're a pair of cowards to have taken advantage as you have done of a delicate and nervous lady. Now you can go."

“You’ll eat those words yet, my fine madam,” put in his wife now. “Pushing yourself in where you ain’t wanted. Well, you’ll sing a different tune when you know a little more than you do, you little cantin’ hypocrite. But don’t think you’re here long. You’ll be out again before tomorrow night—you mark my words. We ain’t done with you yet.”

“All right, good night,” said Susan.

“And how d’you think I’m going to move my box in the middle of the night?”—the voice took on a whine now. “Or find a place to lay me ’ead? It’s again’ the law to turn folks out of doors in the snow in the middle of the night.”

“You have your cottage—I know all about you,” said Susan. “You can go there.”

“Oh, we can go there, can we?” put in the man. “Well, you can go to . . .”

But Susan waited to hear no more. She shut the door on the vituperation that was now filling the garden.

“Gosh!” she said, sinking into a chair, “that was awful.”

She was trembling so much she could not keep her knees still for a few minutes.

“I wonder what they know,” said Griff—“what hold they have?”

“Don’t you think it’s just bluff?”

“No—I don’t think so. Did Miss Primmer consent to your dismissing them?”

“No-o-o, not exactly.”

“But she gave you their money.”

“Yes—but, honestly, I think she was rather bamboozled about what I wanted it for. She’s so terribly muddled and unpractical. I wonder what she’ll say?

“Well, it’s done now—and I must get the dishes washed. Let’s leave all that till tomorrow.”

Susan seized a pile of plates, but she did rather wonder if she should have got rid of the Cobbs quite so expeditiously.

CHAPTER VIII

THE COBBS RETURN

BUT the die was cast. Susan had turned off the Cobbs and put her hand to the wheel; there was no turning back now.

She spent a good part of the night worrying over what she had done. Possibly if she had thought it all out beforehand or had had more time for consideration, she would not have done it, nor if she had been older, but one thing had followed so quickly on another she had been swept along almost willy-nilly.

And then, Susan was like that, eager and enthusiastic and ready to take things on. Added to that she had been so sorry for Miss Primmer she simply could not leave her to the mercy of the Cobbs; she saw she needed help, and there Susan was, at a loose end herself and eager to help all the lame dogs she met over their stiles. It was really a foregone conclusion that she would plunge into this sea of troubles and start rescuing the poor lady who didn't seem very sure herself, at odd moments, that she wanted to be rescued.

"However, I'm in for it now," she concluded after a dark hour or two of frightful misgivings and doubts. "Though what Aggie will say I do not know, possibly that I ought to be shut up in a lunatic asylum. Well, anyhow, there's Griff . . ." and on the comforting thought of Griff she fell asleep.

Then the morning broke high and clear and sunny and Susan simply could not be downhearted in the spring sunshine. The black dog which had sat on her pillow all night in the darkness simply took one leap off the bed and out of the window. Susan followed him—as far as the window, there she stopped to gasp with joy.

She hadn't really seen much of the country the day before, and besides, it had been a dull and lowering day till the late blast of March snow had come on as it so often does in the north. Now it all lay spread before her in the brilliant light of the morning. Already the snow was melting. A birch tree beneath her was like a tree in a Persian fairy-tale, covered with glittering gems. The melting snow had run into millions of drops along the boughs and twigs which sparkled every colour of the rainbow as they caught the slanting beams of the sun.

But what enchanted her most was the trout stream straight beneath her window, on whose banks the birch tree stood. She looked straight down into the curling, rushing water as it found its way through rocky boulder and mossy stone to join a second and larger stream which she could just see across a bit of moorland on her right, the angle of the house shutting out the junction of the streams.

As she looked downwards a water-ouzel darted through an overhanging alder and, alighting on a stone, began to sing its clear wintry song which mingled with the chattering of the water in the joyous music of the cold bright spring morning.

"Oh, I'll love being here," she said to herself, "whatever happens. Oh, I wish Aggie could see it, and oh, please"—she shut her eyes—"dear God, do let William Shakespeare come and catch sticklebacks in the pools with a jam-jar with a string round it to put them in."

After which effort she pulled in her head and began to dress as quickly as she could, for the Colonel had ordered breakfast for half past eight sharp, and he looked the sort of man who would be there with his watch out at the moment.

It was lucky she had been trained in a Scots manse with a posse of brothers to look after, for she knew what hard work was and could go at it with a will.

She soon had the fires going in the drawing-room and kitchen. After one glance at the dining-room she decided to leave it for a thorough turn-out after breakfast and have that meal in the sunny front kitchen.

She had swept and dusted the drawing-room and put it in order, with a glowing fire of logs on the hearth, and set the table in the kitchen and started to fry the ham and eggs, when a voice saluted her from the doorway and she turned to see Griff smiling at her with a dusting-cloth tied round his head and a broom in his hand.

"Ready for work!" said he.

"My! You are early," she greeted him sarcastically, his boasts of the night before on what he could do in the way of early rising still lingering in her ears. "What are you this morning, the gentleman boarder or the man-of-all-work?"

"Can't you see? I'm the tweenie," said he. "I say, that ham does smell good."

"Yes, doesn't it? Home-cured. The Cobbs did themselves well. How many eggs can you eat?"

"As many as you'll give me, and turned. The Colonel likes two—poached, and lots of toast."

"Is he up?"

"Rather. If he said eight-thirty he'll be ready at eight-thirty to the minute. I say, he does like Miss Primmer! You, my child, are entirely in the shade."

"Oh, does he? I'm so glad. Golly!—there's the bathroom door. You come and turn your eggs while I poach a couple. I wonder what time Miss Primmer gets up."

At that moment, to her surprise, Miss Primmer entered the kitchen, dressed in the garments of yesterday but lacking the lumbago belt.

"Oh, dear," sighed Susan to herself, "she does look a ticket. I hope she doesn't put the Colonel off. I must get her to let me help her with her dress. If Aggie were here she could run her up one of those pretty cotton morning-gowns that are coming in now, they'd just suit her old-fashioned style."

Miss Primmer looked round the kitchen in a rather frightened way, as if nervous about the Cobbs, but at that moment the Colonel came in and she forbore to ask any questions. As they bid each other polite good mornings Susan dished up the ham and eggs in a silver entrée dish while Griff put the toast and coffee on the table.

The Colonel enjoyed his breakfast and complimented Susan on her cooking. She saw that he was a man who enjoyed his food and was a bit of a gourmet. Again she wished for Aggie. She was all right as far as plain dishes went but knew nothing of the finer arts of *soufflés*, savouries, sauces, and all the proper accompaniments to fish, fowl, and game.

She was glad to hear that he was going off for a day's fishing with sandwiches in his pocket, and would not be home for lunch. She could manage sandwiches, and they could have the scraps of cold mutton for their lunch. Griff and he were both good trenchermen and there wasn't much of the joint left, but where dinner was to come from she did not know. However, she had the whole day before her to arrange the dinner. One thing at a time must be her motto.

She could have done with Griff to help and advise her, particularly as she was afraid of the Cobbs turning up through the day; but he had, of course, to be on attendance with his uncle, who, it was well to be seen, liked to have him at his beck and call.

"Oh, well," she comforted herself, "he might just put off my time with his nonsense, and as for the Cobbs they'll be an ever-present source of danger in the meantime. I'll just have to learn to deal with them alone."

All the same, when she had seen the two men depart across the moorland road with their packages of sandwiches she could not forbear a sigh.

"A man is so comforting to have in the house in times of stress—*sturm und drang* as Griff says the Germans say; that's one thing to be said for husbands, they are more or less fixtures, and useful at quelling members of their own sex. I think I could manage Isabella; it's Cobb who gives me the shivers."

No sooner were they gone than Miss Primmer tackled her about her late servants.

"What exactly happened?" she asked. "I do hope you didn't upset them too much, Miss Tyndal."

"Call me Susan," said Susan—"it sounds so much more friendly. And sit down while I wash up. I'll do it in the front kitchen here and tell you all that happened while I work. I haven't a minute to put off, there is so much to do."

"Could I dry the cups, perhaps?"

"No." She smiled her cheerful smile. "I'm the working partner, you know, and you are the 'lady of the house', and the hostess, and besides, I'll get on more quickly myself. But we must discuss things as there is so much I want to know, and then, I am afraid the Cobbs may turn up again this morning"—and she gave her an expurgated account of what had happened the night before.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Miss Primmer helplessly. "I don't know what to do. It is all so very alarming. They are very determined sort of people."

"Well, leave them to me to deal with and keep out of the way if they come. But there is one thing you must do and only you can do it. Go over all your things and make a note of everything that is missing. Take a notebook and jot them all down. You might start that at once. Do the silver first and then the linen and then your own personal belongings. Did you miss anything else than the fur coat?"

"Oh yes, there was my Aunt Sidonia's gold locket set with seed pearls and amethysts, but I don't think Isabella took that. Perhaps I promised . . . You see . . ." She paused and Susan waited, but she evidently changed her mind about what she had been going to say and went back to the Cobbs.

"You see, my dear, there are things you don't know."

"Yes, I know, and I don't want to be inquisitive. I'm not really, but wouldn't it help you to tell me? You see, I like you very much, Miss Primmer, and you could trust me absolutely not to repeat anything you told me. After all, we belong to the same class. Don't you feel you need someone

of your own class to help you in dealing with people like the Cobbs, who evidently know something you wish kept private? You don't trust them, do you?"

"Well, you see, dear, it isn't a case of trusting them. They know, and so far they have been very faithful, and Isabella helped me in a time of trouble. . . . I feel——"

"And has blackmailed you ever since, I suppose."

"Oh no—not blackmail! That's a dreadful word." There was silence for a moment and then she said tentatively: "Perhaps we might take Isabella back as cook—she's a very good cook; and Cobb might do the garden."

"But you know they have been robbing you right and left."

Miss Primmer sat looking so distressed that Susan was more than ever sorry for her. What secret in her life did the Cobbs know that made her so afraid of them? Susan felt if only she knew she could help her to get out of their clutches, but it was impossible for her to try and force the poor lady's confidences; she flushed at the thought that she might be accused of trying to do so.

"Have you no relatives who could help you?" she asked.

A bright scarlet suddenly tinged Miss Primmer's pale cheeks, and Susan felt she was treading on delicate ground.

"No," she said, after a moment's indecision. "I have no relatives, only my niece, and she—she is not at all strong, in fact she is in a nursing-home at the moment undergoing treatment for weak lungs."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Susan quickly. "I hope she will soon recover her health." She felt she could not push things any further, for Miss Primmer had taken her handkerchief and pressed it to her eyes, and Susan was afraid she had made her cry. "Please forgive me reminding you about it, and shall we leave the Cobbs just now? You see, I don't think you need worry about them because you can threaten them with exposure about their thefts and the police if they talk about your private affairs. They have put themselves in your hands. That's why I want you to make out those lists—apart from trying to get your things back."

"Oh, we mustn't force——" Miss Primmer began, when a sudden noise in the hall made her start and turn deadly pale. Then the sound of loud voices followed, and, too late, Susan remembered that she had not locked the front door after taking out some cushions to beat in the morning.

The Colonel and Griff had left by the back door as it led through the garden to a short cut across the moor to the point on the river they were making for. Griff had warned her to keep the doors locked and on no

account to allow the Cobbs into the house or to see Miss Primmer. How could she have been so stupid! She remembered that she had heard the kettle lid making an awful din as it came to the boil, and she had just shut the door and run and quite forgotten it was not locked. Her heart quailed as she heard from the approaching sounds that both Cobb and his wife were there. There was triumph in their loud remarks as they opened the drawing-room door and, finding it empty, came on to the kitchen.

"Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?" cried Miss Primmer in a sort of hoarse whisper as she started from her chair, and stood twisting her hands and gazing at the door leading to the hall.

Susan looked round, but it was too late to hide Miss Primmer anywhere; the kitchen door opened and Mrs. Cobb advanced followed by——

"Keep us and save us!" exclaimed Susan, horrified, falling into her native Scots at the sight that met her eyes. "They've brought the village with them!"

CHAPTER IX

ANOTHER BOARDER ARRIVES

BUT it was not quite the village that Mrs. Cobb had brought with her to see, as she put it later herself, "fair play". It was merely her daughter and three of her daughter's children who, it appeared, could not be left at home. To Susan's bewildered eyes, however, they looked like an advancing horde.

First came Mrs. Cobb, wearing a beflowered hat and an old golfing cape which made her look enormous; behind her was Mr. Cobb in his Sunday clothes and a bowler hat; the daughter, almost as stout as her mother, followed in shabby black, and behind her the three children came in single file, a little girl and two small boys.

There were, however, no introductions. Mrs. Cobb was on the warpath and started off straight away. It was evident that she had had a little drink and was primed for battle.

"Oh, here you are, Miss Primmer, in the kitchen with the slavey; that's a nice come-down! You never got as low as that with me to look after you; always settin' in your drarin'-room like a lady you was."

"That's right," put in Cobb, who had evidently also been fortified. "Never soiled a finger, she didn't—too much damn' pride."

"Meals in the kitchen, too," shouted Mrs. Cobb. "Oh, I saw you last night. Mark my words, you'll be down on your knees scrubbing the floor next, while Miss High and Mighty lords it upstairs."

"What have you come here for?" demanded Susan with her head up.

"We've come here to have a little talk with Alice Primmer, Miss Impidence, and you can take yourself off—see. Me and her has private business to talk about as we don't want any fly-by-nights to hear; very private business—isn't that so, Miss Alice Primmer?"

She plunged down on to a chair and unfastened the buttons of her golf cape as she spoke. Cobb put his bowler hat on the table and took another seat. The daughter stood looking uncomfortable and the children stared.

"You've brought a good many ears with you to listen to Miss Primmer's private affairs," said Susan.

To her surprise she saw that the shot had gone home. Mrs. Cobb looked taken aback, but recovered herself in a moment.

"I've brought me own lawful daughter as was begotten in lawful marriage," she stated sententiously. "Miss Alice Primmer knows that. *And* her three innocent children, also begotten in lawful marriage, and as what you would turn out of house and home. Yes, my lady, turn out of house and home for the other kind as is no better than they should be."

She turned from Susan to Miss Primmer, after this confused statement:

"Isn't that so, Miss Alice Primmer?"

Susan could make nothing of the rigmarole, but glancing at Miss Primmer she saw that her face had gone absolutely grey and her mouth was working as though she could not keep it still.

"Be quiet!" she said to the woman—"and leave this house immediately. You have no right here."

The woman laughed.

"Here we are and here we stay," said she.

"Oh no, you don't!" said Susan. "You are dismissed from Miss Primmer's service for stealing."

"You'll be made to eat them words, Miss Haughty, before you're much older. Anythink we've got from Miss Primmer was given us for benefits received—ain't that so, Miss Primmer?"

She looked across at that lady, and Susan saw her wink impudently at her late employer, whose face flushed up into a dull unbecoming crimson. But the impudence of the wink had a different effect from what Mrs. Cobb had expected. Indeed, the drink she had taken was making her take false steps that she might have avoided had she been quite sober. Miss Primmer's innate pride came to her assistance and made her put up a little fight.

"There were many things in your room that I did not give you, Isabella," she said.

"Humph!" sneered the woman. "If you didn't, you was going to give them; a lot of old trash, anyhow. It'll take more than old trash to make up for 'ow we was treated last night—that's if we've to keep still tongues in our heads about certain doin's o' yours, Alice Primmer."

"That's blackmail," said Susan quickly, "and I'm a witness to it."

"You shut up," shouted the woman, "and get out of 'ere!" and she pointed to the kitchen door.

"Not on your life," said Susan. "It is you who are going to get out, and I am going to inform the police about you."

"Huh!" The woman laughed. "What police? There's no police in Bonnyblink. But just go and look for one, my lady. And when you're gone,

me and Alice Primmer will have a little talk about—me niece. Eh, Miss Primmer? Me niece and you're——"

"*My* niece has nothing to do with you," said Miss Primmer quickly. "Hold your tongue, Isabella."

As she spoke Miss Primmer sat quickly upright, while Susan stared amazed at both seeming to claim the niece.

"Oh, hasn't she?" The woman, who was evidently getting excited and bursting for a row, turned from attacking Susan to her late mistress. "Hasn't she? Hasn't me niece that was brought up by me something to do with me if she is your——"

"Shut up!" said her husband suddenly, and then, for the first time, the daughter chimed in.

"You hold your tongue, Mother," she said; "you're going too far!"

"Oh, going too far, am I? And who's to blame if the truth comes out at last?"

But Miss Primmer had sprung to her feet.

"That's enough, Isabella!" she said. "I forbid you to say another word."

"You can't forbid me now, Miss Primmer," shouted Mrs. Cobb, who had also jumped to her feet. "I'm not in your service now and talk I can, and talk I will unless I'm took back this minute instant, and given me rightful place back in this house, and well paid for insults received into the bargain. I'll have the whole place pointin' their fingers and sniggering at the respectable old maid's goings on. . . . Old maid, ha! ha! Wait till the village knows——"

But Susan's gorge had risen at these insults to poor Miss Primmer, who was stepping backwards before her tormentor, with blanched face. Her fiery temper rose and took possession of her.

"Stop!" she shouted. "How dare you! How dare you! Go out of this house!"

But the woman knew her advantage.

"And if I goes out the whole place gets to know——"

"And," interrupted Susan, blazing with wrath, "as it seems you've told your husband and your daughter whatever it is that you know about Miss Primmer or her family, who do you think is going to believe that your tongue has not been wagging already about affairs with which you have nothing to do? Tell the village, indeed! I'll wager the village knows all you ever knew and a host of lies into the bargain." She turned suddenly to the silent daughter. "Isn't that so?"

Taken aback, she began to stammer, "I—I——" when her mother interrupted with a high laugh.

"Miss Alice Primmer's *family*. Ha! That's a good one that is! That's a good one, if you like."

"Be quiet!" gasped Miss Primmer.

"Me be quiet? Not me. Either I stays or I talks—now which is it to be? I don't move till I gets me answer; and just you think on all that Isabella Cobb knows." She sat down. "Here I bide till you makes your choice, and fine I know what that'll be when you think on all that I can tell the countryside, *and* your fine friends."

Miss Primmer sank into a chair and put her hands up to her face.

"Don't mind her. Please don't mind her," pleaded Susan, but she felt that the battle was already lost. Mrs. Cobb thought so too, for she now turned on Susan, thinking herself safe.

"And as for you, you little impident bit of trash, the sooner you march back——" She stopped, her eyes fixed on the door behind Susan's back, her mouth half-open.

Susan turned.

Within the doorway a man was standing. A tall man in a rather crushed-looking and old-fashioned navy blue suit, slightly small for his long lean figure. He held his hat in his hand, and at his feet stood a lamentably ancient and battered suit-case covered with torn labels from, it seemed, every country on earth, which had been pasted on and ripped carelessly off to make room for others. "Suez" and a "Morocco" were the only ones she could make out. His lined face was lean, weather-beaten, and tanned to a deep brown, his black hair was straight and showed a few grey hairs where it had been meticulously brushed above the ears. A very slight black moustache outlined the upper lip of a closely shut mouth. In spite of his unexpected appearance and a slight touch of shyness he had an air of complete and authoritative imperturbability.

His dark keen eyes met Susan's frightened blue ones as she stood protectingly over Miss Primmer, her ruffled fair hair and pink cheeks above the absurd green and blue towel pinned round her slight body, giving her the air of a gallant but ruffled little cockatoo.

"Can I be of any assistance?" he asked.

There was complete silence for a moment. Then to Susan's astonishment Miss Primmer spoke.

"It's Simeon Quest, isn't it?"

"Yes, Miss Primmer. They told me in the village you were"—he hesitated—"taking guests for the fishing at Round-about House, and I came to inquire before going to the inn—but I could not make anyone hear. Is there some trouble with these people?" He turned and regarded the man with his eyebrows knitting a little.

"Oh yes, please, there is," said Susan desperately. "Miss Primmer has dismissed Cobb and his wife, but they won't listen. They are blackmailing her and frightening her and I can't make them go away."

He smiled at her slightly, and though there was amusement in it, as he regarded her slight figure pitted against the three stout and enormous Cobbs, there was reassurance too. Then he turned swiftly on Cobb and there was no mistaking the menace and command in his voice and in his lean, whipcord figure.

"Now, my man, you get out and take your family with you. If you want to do any arguing you can do it with the police. My car and man are at the door and can bring Inspector Black here in"—he looked at the battered silver watch strapped to his wrist—"twenty-five minutes."

"Miss Primmer doesn't want us to go," put in Mrs. Cobb. "It's just that little upstart that's come buttin' in." She turned to Miss Primmer. "Don't you not want us to go, Miss Primmer?"

"No. I . . . I . . ." began Miss Primmer in a terrified voice, and stopped.

Mrs. Cobb, looking at her and wanting to make sure of her victory, continued, "She knows what the consequences will be."

"Ah!" said the new-comer. "I see, trying to frighten your late mistress, whom you've been blackmailing, with threats. A clear case for the police." He turned to go. "I'll just send the message," he said, "and be back in a moment."

"Oh," began Miss Primmer, but he was gone.

Cobb gave one glance at his wife and ran after him. "Hey, mister!" Susan heard him call, while Mrs. Cobb with fallen jaw stared at the door. Susan saw that Miss Primmer was going to make some desperate protest. She herself did not want the police brought in, but she felt she could trust this man.

"Hush!" she said. "Hush! It's all right," and stooping she put both arms protectingly round the poor distracted lady, and drew her head against her heart, holding her and preventing her protests from breaking forth.

It was only for a moment. In two ticks Cobb came back into the kitchen.

“Here,” said he, “let’s get out of this.” And he went and flung open the kitchen door, while his silent daughter and the children rushed after him.

Mrs. Cobb stood her ground a minute, but the irate man at the door ordered her, with an oath, to get out. “You’ve made a fine mess of things,” he shouted, and that was the last Susan heard before the kitchen door banged.

By this time Miss Primmer was sobbing openly.

“Oh,” she gasped, “now we’ve made enemies of them, and you don’t know what they know—what they can do to me!”

“I can make a good guess,” said Susan, “and you are going to tell me all I haven’t guessed and we’ll fight them together.”

“You’ve guessed!” She stopped mopping her face to stare at Susan. “What do you mean?”

“I mean the Cobbs told me by their innuendos, just as they will have told all their particular friends long ago. But that doesn’t matter. They are liars and blackmailers and of no account. All you have to do is to hold up your head and say nothing. Now come and lie down and I’ll tuck you up and give you a couple of aspirins, for I’m sure your head is aching. Just remember you haven’t to fight them alone now. You have four staunch friends behind you: the Colonel and Mr. Thorne and me, and your friend—what is his name?”

“Oh, my dear, I hardly know Simeon Quest. He is one of the Quests who used to be at the Hall, a wild youngster who stole my dear father’s best apples——”

“Well,” interrupted Susan—she was getting her partner upstairs by this time—“he’s one of our boarders now, and I’ll have to go and interview him about rooms and get him some lunch—and that’s three men to dinner. It never rains but it pours. What has set them to come all rushing in before we are set going?”

“It’s the trout-fishing,” gasped Miss Primmer, as Susan tucked her up. “You see, the open season started on the fourteenth and . . .”

But Susan fled to catch her new boarder before he disappeared. Already she was the real landlady. Whatever happened, the boarders must be secured and kept, their comfort must come first.

She pattered down the stairs.

CHAPTER X

STILL ANOTHER UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL

SUSAN found the stranger standing among his cases in the hall. He seemed very retiring, very reserved, and spoke but little.

In the fewest words he came to an arrangement for himself and then asked about the man, Hicks. But he found Susan hesitated about taking him.

"You see, there is only the kitchen for him to sit in and I do most of the work myself."

He said at once he'd find a room for him in the village; then he briefly assured her that bread and cheese or cold ham and a glass of beer or milk would be excellent for lunch, and disappeared with Hicks in the direction of the outhouses to see if there were a garage.

"There's one thing about men, they amuse themselves," thought Susan, flying off to turn the dining-room out at last and thanking her lucky stars she had no entertaining to do.

She finished the dining-room and lit a roaring fire, but asked her new boarder when he came in if he would mind taking his lunch at the kitchen table, for the room was like an ice-house.

She managed an omelette to precede the cold ham and, while he ate, took up some lunch to Miss Primmer.

"I'll need to get someone in to help with the rough work," she said to her. "With three men and all the cooking to do, I'll never get through."

But Miss Primmer was about as much use as a figure of straw when it came to practical suggestions. No, there was no one she could think of in the village; the Cobbs had always done everything, perhaps Susan could advertise in the *Culverston Mercury*.

"Advertise! But I need someone at once."

"Yes, dear—I quite understand, but there isn't anyone."

Susan thought of the postmistress. Perhaps Miss Buchan could help her. She'd try and run along there after lunch; and she would be able to tell her where the butcher lived, if there was a butcher!

She ran back to the kitchen to find her silent boarder slicing up bread and making some hefty cheese sandwiches. He had a bottle of beer beside

him, which he had evidently raided from the larder.

"Do you mind if I take Hicks some lunch?" he asked.

"But of course—take him some ham sandwiches as well."

"He likes bread and cheese. By the way, there's a room above the stable with some bits of furniture in it; the stableman used to sleep there, I remember. Do you mind if Hicks puts up there and helps a bit. He's a very handy man."

"Oh, but—his wages."

"He works for me. I'd have to pay him board-wages, anyway. You've had to dismiss the Cobbs. You can't do everything yourself, and Hicks hates doing nothing, he might as well be working."

He walked off with the bread and cheese and beer as if the matter were settled.

"Well!" said Susan to herself. "Well, of all the! . . ." She couldn't find the proper word, and stopped.

By the time lunch was cleared away she was almost distracted. There was so much to do she did not know where to turn. Miss Primmer had come downstairs, but only got in her way. When asked about dinner she suggested chickens.

"When my dear father was alive we always fell back on chickens."

"But where can we get the chickens?"

It appeared that that was easy, but they should have been ordered the night before, and killed, poor lambs, on an empty stomach.

There was a butcher, but he only butchered on certain days and Miss Primmer didn't know what days.

"You see, Isabella . . ." Susan was sick of the name of Isabella. Besides, she was sure they weren't done with Isabella yet, and she didn't want to speak about her till she had had time to reflect a little on all that had been said that morning. She hastily changed the subject.

"I've given Mr. Quest that nice big tower room; he wants a table in it that he can write at, and a fire when he requires it. I said bedroom fires were extras, but that's all right. He and that man of his seem to be very busy over that car. I told him I thought he'd find some place for a garage, and they are in the empty coach-house. And by the way, he asked if Hicks could have the room over it. He is to give us some help in the house in return."

Miss Primmer was a little doubtful, because if they were "obliged to arrange something with Cobb it might be rather complicated, and by the way, my dear," she went on, "you were asking me about linen. As you are

just going up to do out his room, you might look in the chest, but I'm very much afraid we have no more sheets. Indeed, it's empty!"

Susan stared at her in apprehension. In taking on another guest she had quite forgotten the depleted linen-chest, and there were no draper's shops in Bonnyblink.

For the first time she really felt that Aggie had been right: she wasn't experienced enough for this job. She had taken on too much; she hadn't considered enough all that it meant to take in boarders—servants, meals, beds, cooking, accounts, linen. What on earth could one do without sheets? A dinner she could manage somehow, the work she could get through even if she toiled on till the small hours of the morning, but sheets—one simply could not do without sheets. No bed could be camouflaged into a respectable couch without sheets—and there was the room to do and the tea to get ready, and the butcher to be hunted out; and now it had started to rain and the men would be coming with their clothes to dry, needing hot water, and heaven knew what else, but anyhow, needing to be run after.

Then she must set the dinner in the dining-room tonight, and hunt out and polish more silver and cutlery and glass. Despair seized her! She stood looking at Miss Primmer with tears in her eyes. If only Miss Primmer had been able to do something except garden and entertain the gentlemen, if only—perhaps she had been too hasty in getting rid of the Cobbs. Wouldn't they rejoice if they saw her now, distracted, not knowing what way to turn, alone with everything on her shoulders! Well, they wouldn't see her crying! She dashed her hand across her eyes and at that minute the bell rang.

"Another guest!" she said to herself. "Or the Cobbs come back. What shall I do? Oh, what shall I do?"

Hastily pulling off the towel she still wore to protect the only garments she had with her, she went reluctantly to the door, wishing heartily at that moment that she was safely back in her carefree bed-sitter, without a whole world of domestic cares on her shoulders.

On the well-known principle of locking the stable after the horse is stolen, she had securely barred the door after the Cobbs were gone, and now it took her a few moments to slide the bars back.

She had just time to hope that her face wasn't too dirty and her hair too wild as she struggled with the key. "But, anyhow, things couldn't be worse," was her last thought as she despondently and slowly swung back the heavy door. Then she gave a shriek.

Aggie stood on the doorstep with two large suit-cases at her feet.

“Aggie! Aggie! Oh, darling, here you come straight from heaven?” In a rush she swooped upon her and enveloped her in a hug.

“No, you goop,” said Aggie calmly, “from the bus. Weren’t you expecting me?”

“Expecting you? I’ve never had one moment to think of you since I sent that wire. Oh, Aggie, the heavens have opened and rained down troubles upon thy servant Israel—rained down Cobbs and boarders and deserted houses and maiden ladies and dust and ashes and lamps and legs of mutton and sheets. Oh no, that’s part of the tragedy, it didn’t rain sheets. Oh, my sweet darling dear, come in. I’m so glad to see you, I want to make all the bells of heaven go cling-a-ling-ling!”

“Gracious!” said Aggie. “What’s come over you? Could you be less lyrical or tragical, or whatever you’re being, and get me a cup of tea? I’m starving, and I have to catch that bus back in an hour. I intend to eat the whole hour. Not a bite have I had——”

“You shall have lands rolling in milk and honey and the flesh-pots of Egypt and the fatted calf all rolled into one, but don’t talk to me of buses. You’ve got to stay and make a dinner out of nothing and call up sheets from the vasty deep. Oh, Aggie, I’ve met my Waterloo and what do you think it is?”

“The boarding-house, I should fancy—or Miss Primmer.”

“No—sheets!”

So tragic was her voice that Aggie had to laugh. At that moment Miss Primmer, hearing voices, came out of the drawing-room to see what was going on.

“Oh, Miss Primmer,” said Susan, “this is my friend, the one I told you about who is the wonderful cook. She has brought my things herself and says she must go back by the bus. She mustn’t, must she? She must help us out.” She paused and pulled herself together. “Miss Agnew, Miss Primmer.” Adding unnecessarily: “This is Miss Primmer, Aggie.”

“How do you do?” said Miss Primmer. “Of course you must not go back by the bus. It’s pouring, and you are soaked. It is so disagreeable travelling in wet clothes, isn’t it?”

“But——” began Aggie, when Miss Primmer went on:

“Susan and I are quite in a dilemma. I am sure she must be glad to see you with her clothes, it’s so awkward——” and talking on, she was making for the drawing-room when Susan noticed Colonel MacCrae coming up the garden alone.

“There’s the Colonel,” she said. “The rain must have driven him home early. I’ll tell you what I’ll do, Miss Primmer. I’ll set tea for you and he and Mr. Quest on the trolley and bring it along to the drawing-room, and Aggie will come along to the kitchen with me and get dried and fed.”

She was dying to get Aggie alone to herself, and luckily this idea appealed to Miss Primmer.

“Get off your coat, and cut some thin bread-and-butter,” she said to Aggie as soon as the baize door had closed behind them. “I’ll set the trolley and make the tea, and then you and I’ll feed here and I’ll tell you everything.”

In ten minutes the trolley, with afternoon tea, was in the drawing-room, and Aggie and Susan were sitting down to a more substantial meal in the kitchen.

“You’ll have to stay, Aggie,” said Susan. “We’ve three boarders and no cook and no maid and no anything. Oh, bless my soul, I’ve forgotten Hicks! Well, Hicks can wait for his tea till we’ve had ours and I’ve told my tale.”

“Who’s Hicks?”

“I haven’t come to Hicks yet. I’m going to begin at the beginning.”

And while Aggie ate a large and incongruous meal of cold beefsteak pie, bread and jam and tea, Susan recited the whole of what had befallen her since the moment she walked up the garden path the day before.

Aggie sat and listened astounded. It did not seem possible that such a crowd of events could have been jammed into a day and a half.

“I must say you’ve been going your ends,” said she, as Susan arrived at the sheets. “Well, I’ll stay the night. I meant to anyhow, if I were asked, but any other suggestion will have to come from Miss Primmer. We can’t just walk in and take possession of her house without a ‘by your leave’.”

“No, of course not, but I’m going to suggest you as lady-cook——”

“Not on your life,” interrupted Aggie. “Cook or nothing.”

“All right, as cook, with a small wage to begin with until we see how things turn out. But this boarding-house idea seems to be a paying proposition. This is a great angling centre and the inn is hopeless. I think if you and I get down to it we can make a success of it. Miss Primmer is a dear and a lady, but hopelessly impracticable. Now let’s take up the cases and get out overalls and start off. Oh, that reminds me, I meant to rush to the village and try to get a joint for the dinner.” She glanced at the clock. “My goodness, it’s after five, and I promised to have dinner at seven!”

They stood and looked at each other. Susan had forgotten the joint, talking to Aggie. That was like Susan. She was all enthusiasm and eagerness, but she had not Aggie's intensely practical mind or her genius for organization. As she frankly admitted, she had got herself into a muddle.

As they stood and looked at each other, the door opened and Griff walked into the kitchen. He stopped dead when he saw Aggie, and stared. Susan turned round and looked at Aggie too, and realized, not for the first time, how lovely Aggie was. Excitement had put a little colour in her pale cheeks, her tall, slender figure looked charming in a flared, three-quarter-length overall—in which Susan only looked dumpy—her smooth little head and delicate features were unmistakably patrician, she was smiling her mysterious smile.

"This is Miss Agnew, my friend," she said. "You know, I told you about her. This is Mr. Thorne, Aggie, our first boarder."

All Griff's careless nonchalance seemed to have left him. He seemed suddenly shy. Perhaps he was perturbed about the state he was in, soaked with rain and splashed with mud. He came forward almost diffidently, and shook hands with his old hat crushed up into a bunch in the other fist.

"I'm in a frightful mess," he said.

"I should just think you are," said Susan cheerfully. "You're dripping mud all over the place."

He turned round to her, beaming, and seemingly relieved to enter into good-natured hostilities with Susan.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "You shouldn't complain, young Susan. It's for you I've been drowning in rain these last hours."

He loosened the creel from his shoulders, opened it, and dumped on the table first, two couple of rabbits, and then a lovely catch of trout.

"Oh!" exclaimed Susan, her spirits soaring upwards at once. "The dinner!"

"*The dinner*," said Griff.

"The dinner," echoed Aggie.

CHAPTER XI

THE SECRET

THE three had tremendous fun in the kitchen that evening. After a little and when, as head cook, she had taken to ordering him about, Griff overcame his awe of Aggie, and, though he still treated her with a certain amount of deference, his usual laughing equanimity was almost entirely restored.

Hicks, at Aggie's instigation, was called in to help. She didn't see why Hicks should be wasted, as she put it, in the garage, and went off and talked to him herself. Hicks was an Irishman and had been everything, it seemed, from valet and houseman to motor mechanic and sailor. He'd kept a store in Rhodesia, where he'd been picked up by Simeon Quest, and been with him as general factotum ever since, accompanying him in all his travels, for Quest, it seemed, was a born traveller, who loved exploring in the out-of-the-way parts of the world.

Hicks was only too pleased to leave the solitude of his room for the cheerful house. He installed himself in the back kitchen, where he cleaned boots, peeled potatoes, polished silver, skinned rabbits, cleaned trout, and even ironed some table-cloths, without turning a hair.

Aggie, in a hunt for sheets, had found a pile of large, old-fashioned damask table-cloths, rough-dried and rolled in a bundle—no doubt for convenient removal by the Cobbs—and instantly decided that Mr. Quest should sleep in damask table-cloths. And sleep in the table-cloths he did, though Susan was taken with a fit of the giggles every time she thought of it.

Aggie, having decided on grilled trout, roast rabbits, and a cheese savoury for dinner, took charge and made her underlings work like niggers. She was in her element, and Miss Primmer, coming down to the kitchen to see what was going on, seemed to take to her more than she had done to Susan. Perhaps that was because she very quickly discovered that she was one of the Northumberland Agnews, who were distantly connected not only with the Delacornes at the Manor but with the Primmers. Miss Primmer's mother and Aggie's grandmother must have been cousins, she was sure. She had an old sampler in the house worked by a Patricia Agnew, aged seven, and would have gone off to hunt for it at once if not recalled to her duties as hostess in the drawing-room.

Going up to the drawing-room later, on some message, Susan felt rather sorry for Mr. Quest. She saw that he was younger than she had thought at first, and it seemed very dull for him to sit in the drawing-room when they were having such fun making sauces and basting rabbits in the kitchen. Still, one could hardly ask one of the front-room boarders to come and help to chop the onions or beat the eggs. As Griff said, he himself as a back-room boarder was on quite a different footing altogether.

The dinner was a great success, and after it was over Aggie and Susan had a chance to talk together, for Griff was called in to make a fourth at bridge. Susan heard all the news from London, and was able to give Aggie more details about her own doings and the battle with the Cobbs.

"You will have to look out, Susan," said Aggie, when she had finished. "They will have their knives in at you if they can."

In the following days it was plain to be seen that Aggie had won Miss Primmer's heart and was her favourite. Possibly, in her heart, she blamed Susan, however unjustly, for the discomfort she now felt about the Cobbs. Though she had been terrified of them and had known they were robbing her right and left, she still seemed to think that all might have been amicably arranged somehow, and confided to Aggie that she was very much afraid they had been too hasty in turning them out.

When, however, Aggie suggested at once that she and Susan should depart now that the boarding-house was started off and that Miss Primmer should have the Cobbs back again, she turned pale with apprehension and begged Aggie to stay and not say a word to Susan about her doubts.

It seemed, at any rate, that the boarding-house was going to be a success. Two other anglers turned up: a well-known Edinburgh surgeon on holiday—Mr. Carrick-Symthe—and a funny little London barrister called Mr. Albert Ogle, who, to everyone's surprise, was immensely proud of his name. He wanted to engage rooms for a brother and brother-in-law to come on later, as he had just come for a fortnight, but was to return with them for a longer stay later.

Mr. Carrick-Symthe was also only on a fortnight's holiday, but had not been there many days when he announced that he wanted a room kept for him as he intended to run down whenever he could for a day's fishing.

On Miss Primmer's pressing her, Aggie decided to stay, but made one stipulation—that she could have William Shakespeare for a week's holiday at Easter. By this time a lawyer had been consulted and the decision come to that the boarding-house was to be Miss Primmer's and that Susan and Aggie were to have a good salary each and a share in the returns. He had also gone

to the Cobbs' cottage and had frightened them into returning a couple of trunks full of things from Miss Primmer's list, including piles of linen and some silver and furs and jewellery, which they declared to the last Miss Primmer had given them "for services received".

As a matter of fact, both Susan and Aggie were sure they had frightened Miss Primmer into giving them things, and that, from that point of view, they were not actually stolen.

A woman called Christina was engaged to come in daily from a farm cottage near and, with the invaluable Hicks as valet for the men and general factotum, things settled down into a more or less smooth routine.

When the Colonel wasn't fishing he helped Miss Primmer in the garden which, with the aid of Christina's son, was recovering much of its former glory. Miss Primmer and the Colonel were both great gardeners, and when they weren't playing at bridge in the evenings sat immersed in the highly coloured seedsmen's catalogues that seemed to arrive with every post.

Simeon Quest was very busy writing a book about his experiences in some quite unknown regions of Africa, and went on his quiet way without really coming much into touch with the rest of the household. Susan avoided him because he made her feel shy, and besides, she was very much taken up with Griff when she had any leisure.

There were a few weeks of quiet, and everything seemed to be going well, when suddenly things began to happen.

She and Aggie had been very busy preparing a room for William, who was to arrive in a day or two, and as they wanted a few toys to amuse him, Griff and Susan had gone by bus to Culverston to do some shopping.

Susan, who was always ready to welcome an expedition of any kind, had thoroughly enjoyed her outing, but the bus broke down on the return journey, and they were faced with the alternative of sitting waiting till a reserve bus could be sent on, or walking home.

As they were only about a mile from Round-about House, they decided to walk and have the conductor dump the parcels at the end of the lane.

Griff had been very happy and merry all day, and they had thoroughly enjoyed themselves in their usual teasing, happy-go-lucky fashion. Susan had on a new hat, in which, he kept telling her, she resembled the creature he persisted in calling a "gome" because, he said, Susan had corrected his pronunciation of the word the first time he called her a "nome".

"Yes, you do look like a gome," he repeated, as he helped her down the steps of the bus, and certainly there was something rather puck-like about

Susan's small face under the "halo" hat as it was caught in the glow of the bus lights.

"I do not," said she, jumping the last step. "Whoever heard of a *goam*? I'd hate to look like it, whatever it is."

He took her arm and ran her into the blustery darkness of the lane. Easter was very late that year and April was in but it was still cold.

"All the same, darling, you do look like a dear little gome, with your ferny-tickles and your straight, silver-gilt hair."

"What are ferny-tickles?"

"That's the fairy name for freckles—little pale fairy freckles like yours."

"You know, Griffith Selby Thorne, you really must have kissed the blarney stone when you were over in Ireland. Nothing else would account for your honeyed tongue."

"You would account for it, Susan, mavourneen; it wouldn't need anything else."

He pressed the arm he was holding against his side. "I'm so glad Miss Primmer decided to keep a boarding-house. Aren't you?"

"Yes," said Susan frankly. "Aggie and I were at our wits' end for a job."

"That's not what I meant." But before he could tell Susan what he did mean they were met by Aggie, who was running and out of breath.

"Oh," she said, "I'm so glad you are back. Miss Primmer has disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

"Yes. Christina says a note came for her and she went out—that was just after you left—and she hasn't come back. Colonel MacCrae is quite in a state and went out to meet her, at least he said he'd stroll up the lane with his flashlamp as it was so dark. He's just back, and I said I'd go over to the MacIntoshes and see if she were there."

The MacIntoshes had a farm near and reared chickens. Miss Primmer spoke sometimes of strolling over for eggs or fowls, and a chat with the farmer's wife.

"She won't be there," said Susan at once. "She talks of going, but she never goes. We've never known her take a step out of the garden. Who was the note from?"

"Goodness knows."

"I wonder if it was from the Cobbs," said Susan. "I think somebody should go over to their cottage and see if she's there. I'll go if you like."

“Oh no!” said Aggie. “You must be tired. I’ll go. Where is it?”

Griff knew the cottage and offered to take Aggie to it. She had the Colonel’s flashlamp with her, so they set off, and Susan returned home alone. She was sure something must have upset Miss Primmer, who never went beyond the garden. She seemed to be afraid of venturing beyond her own gate, and Susan had always put it down to fear of meeting the Cobbs. It was certainly very strange that she had gone off like that.

CHAPTER XII

THE NOTE

On entering the house, Susan went straight to the drawing-room, expecting to see Colonel MacCrae, but there was no one there but Simeon Quest, who looked up questioningly from his book when she entered.

Susan was always a little afraid of Mr. Quest, whom Hicks always called "the Major". Perhaps it was his military bearing that awed Susan a little or the remembrance of the command in his voice and suggestion of cold steel when he had dealt with the Cobbs, for there was nothing in his treatment of her to make her so nervous and shy of him.

In fact the tall, lean man seemed very shy of women himself, and seldom addressed either Susan or Aggie, contenting himself with a rather diffident smile of greeting when he met them.

"Does that Major of yours never talk at all?" the downright Aggie had asked Hicks one day.

"Never to vimmen," said Hicks, and shut his humorous thin-lipped mouth as much as to say, "That's enough of that subject."

"He's not like you, then," said Aggie. "You're a real ladies' man, Hicks. I hear you dance all the girls off their feet at the village hops."

" 'Tis the Irish blood in me, thin," said Hicks, who was never at a loss for an answer. "Sure, I could dance the 'Kerry Cow' before I was as high as me mother's knee."

"It's not a case of 'like master like man' with you two, then."

"It is not. Begob, if I'd the looks o' the Major, and me own comin'-on disposition, I'd have all the girls of the county at me heels."

"You do very well as it is," said Aggie drily.

Now, as Simeon looked up, Susan with her hand on the door started to withdraw, but, to her surprise, he rose to his feet and spoke.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked.

"Just that Miss Primmer has gone out and not returned."

He looked puzzled.

"But, is that unusual? It's not late."

"No; but she never goes out. I think she is afraid of meeting the Cobbs."

"You are troubled about her."

"Well . . ." She told him about the note.

"I see." He stood looking down at Susan. "Would you like me to go along to their cottage?"

"Oh no! I don't want to trouble you."

"It would not trouble me," he smiled. "You have so much on your shoulders . . ." He paused, and before he could continue she rushed in:

"Oh, but Griff has gone. We met Aggie, and Griff went with her." A sudden doubt of the Cobbs came into her mind. "Do you think they'll be all right—safe, I mean?"

He looked away from her towards the window.

"Oh yes," he said, with a slight smile. "Young Thorne will be all right."

"Oh, I didn't mean——" began Susan; but at that moment there were sounds in the hall and, rushing out, Susan found Griff and Aggie with Miss Primmer between them. She was crying and seemed in a great state of distress.

"You go off," said Aggie to Griff, as she saw Susan. "Susan and I will manage."

Together they got her upstairs and into bed. She was shivering with cold and kept breaking into sobs.

Susan flew to the kitchen to get some hot milk, and when she returned to the room she found Aggie perched on the bed with her arm round Miss Primmer, whom she had propped up with pillows and cushions. Aggie took the milk.

"You go down and look after the men and see to their dinner," she said to Susan. "I'm going to stay here a bit."

Susan was glad to go. She always felt that Miss Primmer blamed her a little for the trouble with the Cobbs. Aggie had arrived after it was all over, and had had nothing to do with them, so was immune. Besides, Miss Primmer had really taken to Aggie and grown very fond of her, and Aggie was not at all shy of the prim, gaunt lady, but teased her and petted her and fussed about her as if she were an old aunty.

"She's never been loved or had her leg affectionately pulled," she said one day, "and she's choked up with repressions. Dear father must have been a martinet, she's terrified of him. Even though he's dead now, she's still terrified of him."

Susan presided over the dinner and then saw that the Colonel was settled to his beloved bridge. She was afraid she would have to play herself in the

absence of Miss Primmer and Aggie, for Simeon Quest was not keen on the game, and usually settled down with a book or played the piano a little. He liked sitting, picking out old-fashioned airs which he hummed or sang softly to himself in a low tenor, taking no notice of the others, who took even less notice of him or his music in the rigours of the game. Only Susan liked to hear him, but she was always too shy of him to let him know, and just listened at the door or pretended to be engrossed in her book or in the woolly mittens she was knitting for William.

But tonight he offered at once to take a hand when he saw her hesitating about asking him, and with a sigh of relief, for she was no expert like Miss Primmer and Aggie, and besides, had plenty of other things to do, she escaped from the room as soon as they were all seated round the card-table.

She went up the stairs with a bowl of soup to ask Aggie to come and have her dinner downstairs, while she sat with Miss Primmer, but at the bedroom door she hesitated, hearing the older lady talking in rather high, excited tones.

She was about to slip away when she heard Aggie say, “That’s Susan. Shall I ask her to come in?”

Miss Primmer must have consented, for Aggie opened the door.

It was plain to be seen Miss Primmer had been crying more than ever; her poor face was quite swollen and she was clutching a wet handkerchief in her hand.

She would not have any soup, but they got her to take a hot drink and some aspirin and go to bed for the night.

When they’d got her tucked in, Aggie went down to the kitchen with Susan to have some dinner. Christina went home at night, so they had the place to themselves.

“Miss Primmer has told me all about it, poor dear!” said Aggie. “She said I could tell you.”

“Did she?” asked Susan, rather surprised. “I thought she sort of felt a grudge against me about the Cobbs.”

“Well, she thinks you were a bit hasty, but beneath that she’s grateful to you, and, anyhow, she realizes that she cannot deal with those people alone —the note was from them.”

“I guessed as much.”

“Yes, I did too. Well, I’d better tell you the whole story, and then you’ll know where we are.”

"Yes, start at the beginning and tell me all the details; the details are often the most important bits."

"Well, when Alice"—they often called Miss Primmer Alice when alone together—"was a girl of seventeen, she fell in love with a ne'er-do-weel who came to the neighbourhood, whom Father hated. They ran away together eventually, and were married, and a few days later Alice found he was a married man and her own marriage a fraud. She was terrified of her father and had gone off on the pretence of staying with an old school friend. Then she had put off writing to tell him she was married, so when she discovered the truth she just packed up and came home again."

"Perhaps the best thing she could do."

"Yes . . ." Aggie hesitated.

"Oh," said Susan, suddenly, "I guessed there was something about her niece. Poor Miss Primmer—poor lamb!"

"Yes, the niece is really her daughter—Dorrie."

"Why doesn't she have her to live with her now the old father is dead?"

"She can't—that's another sad bit, but I haven't got to that yet. Isabella Cobb was a young servant in the house at the time and she helped Alice. Alice says she really was good to her then. Her parents—Isabella's—had a croft in a lonely part of the Highlands and she managed to get Alice there on a long holiday, and after Dorrie was born they brought up the little girl. Alice, of course, wanted to see Dorrie, and so the child used to come and stay in the house, sometimes, as Isabella's niece, and the funny thing was the old gentleman simply adored the little girl. I think if Alice had only had the courage to tell him Dorrie wasn't Isabella's niece, but his own little granddaughter, he might have forgiven her, after the first shock, because he was so fond of the child, and terribly cut up about there being no Primmers to carry on after Alice. Anyhow, he was so fond of her that Alice had the brilliant idea of suggesting that she should adopt the child as her niece. She did, with his consent, and all went well for a while."

"And where is she now? I mean, I know she is ill, but where is the nursing-home?"

"That's part of the tragedy. It isn't a nursing-home."

Susan stared at her.

"That's another secret that the Cobbs know. She is really in a mental home, or, to put it in plain words, an asylum. Miss Primmer couldn't keep on paying the enormous fees of the expensive private place."

"Oh, poor Miss Primmer! What a tragedy!"

"Yes; and she's convinced if only she could have her with her, Dorrie would be all right. You see, she had a fall on her head when she was a baby and always was subject to fits afterwards, and she would be strange for a few days after an attack of these fits. When she was older she got much worse, and once when Miss Primmer was from home and Dorrie was left with the Cobbs, they called a doctor in when she was at her worst and he got her certified as insane and taken to a mental home."

"But they must have got Miss Primmer's consent."

"Yes, they did. Miss Primmer says she did not understand clearly and it seems that when Dorrie was at home she only had attacks every few months, and her queer turns only lasted a day or two after them, but after they took her away she had the fits much oftener—and, of course, the mental periods too."

"But why did the Cobbs want her away?"

"I don't know. Miss Primmer says it was because Dorrie couldn't bear Cobb—hated him—even began to dislike Isabella after she married him, but I expect money came into it too."

"I see; and they've been blackmailing her by threatening to tell all they know."

"Exactly. And, strange to say, she's just as terrified about them telling about the asylum as she is about Dorrie's birth. Of course, she's in a frightful state about the good name of the Primmers and so on, but really it's all as much for Dorrie's sake as her own. She thinks that once it's mooted that Dorrie has been in an asylum she's done for for life, and she declares Dorrie isn't mad, and that if she could just get her home and looked after she would be all right. The main thing, which she declares nobody understands as she does, is to keep her from having a bout of fits, and she knew how to ward them off to a great extent."

"I see. So she's frightened the Cobbs will not only tell the truth about Dorrie's birth, but let it be known she is in an asylum! They have two strings to their bow—the beasts! Do you know, Aggie, it makes me so sorry for Alice. I just *love* her. I can't help it."

"Yes, I feel the same—poor darling, poor, helpless soul. Think of all those years."

"Yes, I want to go and put my arms round her and comfort her, and tell her we'll put it all right."

They sat thinking for a few minutes, their young brows corrugated with the dilemma in front of them.

"What was the note about?" asked Susan at last.

"I have it here. I got her to give it to me." She opened up a crumpled piece of paper and passed it to Susan, who spread it out under the lamp and read it.

Dear Miss Primmer,

Seeing as how you have put us out of your house without a character after all *that were done for you Cobb and me as decided the time as come when the* truth should come out. *He is going tomorrow to see Miss Janet Curle as had the post-office to tell her the facks of the case. As you well know Janet Curle is no friend of the Primmers since your father did her out of her job a decent woman if ever there was one taking the bred out of her mouth. She knows what comes of trying to oblidge the Primmers.*

Yours truly,

Isabella Cobb and James Cobb.

Of course if we was to get our place back and interloppers sent about their business nothink more will be said. Cobb and me would be pleased to do for the gentlemen, you took us up wrong there, all innocent of offence and just going for a night out at the Chapel soiree.

"Well, what's to be done?" said Susan, when she had read it. "I suppose Miss Primmer went off to see them. What happened?"

"A what-do-you-call-it. The 'interloppers' are to be sent about their business and the Cobbs reinstated or this Miss Curle is to KNOW ALL."

"An ultimatum. She couldn't do anything with them?"

"Of course she couldn't. Fancy our poor Alice up against those two creatures. I wonder if it would be any good seeing this Janet Curle."

"Not a bit. Even if we got over her, they'd tell other people," Susan assured her. Then went on hesitatingly:

"Couldn't our Alice be persuaded not to mind—after all——"

"Well, I've spent the better part of two hours trying to persuade her and all she does is to go into hysterics at the idea," said Aggie. "I think we'd better get Griff in and consult him, only she doesn't want us to tell him. I don't think she minds him so much, but she couldn't bear the idea of the Colonel knowing."

After another long silence, Susan spoke.

"Do you know what I think?"

“Of course not, don’t be silly.” Aggie was getting a little ruffled with all the worry.

“I think it might be a good thing to take Mr. Quest into our confidence.”

“What! The Major!”

“Yes.”

“But—he’s so stand-offish. No, Griff is all there and knows something about the law. You’d better tell Griff and ask him not to tell the Colonel.”

“Why me? Why not you tell Griff?”

“Oh, you are much more intimate with Mr. Thorne than I am.”

Suddenly Aggie had grown quite stiff and queer.

“Gosh!” thought Susan, “what’s biting Aggie?” She looked at her and Aggie jumped up and began fussing about, putting the dishes away.

“Griff’s no more friendly with me than he is with you, Aggie.” Susan’s colour had heightened a little.

“Don’t be silly,” said Aggie. “Do you know where Christina put the mop?”

“No, I don’t,” said Susan, and she went out, and as she did so gave the door a good bang.

The next moment she opened it again, and put her head into the kitchen.

“I banged that door on purpose,” she said, and disappeared.

CHAPTER XIII

SUSAN GOES FISHING

SUSAN, who was never one to hide her light under a bushel, had often boasted of her fishing prowess. As a matter of fact most of Susan's fishing had been guddling trout in a burn or angling with a hazel rod and a worm in the drumlie waters after a spate. But she wasn't going to tell everyone that, and as her brothers had all been famous fishermen—using famous in the Scots sense—expert with wet and dry fly, and had taught her to cast, she could make an excellent show of first-hand knowledge and discourse on March browns and May fly as to the manner born.

When, however, Griff one morning invited her to come for an hour or two's sport on the Melk water, which joined the Dunwater just below the house, she instantly began making excuses and would have got out of it with flying colours had not Aggie appeared on the scene and reduced all her excuses to smithereens. It was a fine morning; the water was just right; two boarders had taken sandwiches in their pockets and would not be home to lunch; the Colonel had borrowed Simeon Quest's car and was taking Miss Primmer in to Culverston to look at a new heating arrangement for the hot-house, and Aggie could manage perfectly well by herself to do all there was to do.

In fact, she literally rushed Susan out of the house, willy-nilly. Not that Susan was really reluctant to go off and enjoy an hour's well-earned holiday with basket and rod, though she was sorry she had let her tongue run away with her so much; and she knew she would enjoy being with Griff, only she did wish Aggie hadn't begun to, almost, push her at Griff. It somehow spoiled things, and she couldn't understand why she did it, unless . . .

Was Aggie getting interested in the Major? Was that it? And was she afraid of Susan? Susan laughed to herself at that idea. As far as she knew, the Major hardly knew she was alive. For her part, she was much too frightened of his taciturn personality even to speak to him if she could get someone else to do it for her.

She had sometimes thought it might be terribly interesting and even inspiriting to get really to know him, but she was much too shy of him ever to make the attempt.

She had persuaded Aggie, who, she remembered now, had not taken so very much persuading, to talk to him about the Cobbs, with the result that in the meantime things were pretty normal and Miss Primmer had calmed down. Susan knew that the Major had met Cobb and talked to him, but that was all.

Anyhow, she was sure it wasn't Griff Aggie was interested in. Griff and Aggie didn't seem to be hitting it off; in fact, she often snubbed Griff so thoroughly, poor lamb, that he looked positively subdued, though not for long. Like a cork in the water, he always bobbed up again.

There was nothing subdued about him this morning, anyhow. He teased and flattered Susan by turns all the way down to the stream, and the sunshine and happiness of the spring morning got into Susan's blood too, so that it was a merry pair who went laughing across the heather and racing each other to the Spinney Pool, where all the best trout were supposed to lie.

It was a perfect forenoon for being young and happy, if not for fishing. Larks rose and carolled and dropped to the heather, only to pass on their way other larks carolling yet more jubilantly, rising yet farther into the blue. Plovers cried "pee-weep, pee-weep", turning and somersaulting on the wing; now and then a curlew sailed serenely away, calling his haunting call.

Bees hummed in the yellow blossoms of the tormentil, butterflies spread their wings so wide they covered the flowers they alighted on; whole families of rabbits went scuttling to their holes as the two blithely took their way across their feeding-grounds.

"I do like rabbits," said Susan. "They are such comics. They always sit with their ears so alert and their eyes so wide and full of frightened unbelief, just like old maids listening to some absolutely horrifying scandal about their neighbours."

"Yes," said Griff. "They are saying, 'Would you believe it? There's young Susan out with a young man at ten o'clock in the morning—and the beds not made!' "

"Oh, but they are made," said Susan, shocked at such a reflection on her housekeeping. "Even yours, Griff, and you do make a frightful muddle of your bedclothes. I've often wanted to ask you what you did with them. You'd think you'd made them into ropes every night and climbed down them into the garden."

"That's nightmares," returned Griff at once. Griff was never at a loss for an answer. "I have nightmares every night, thinking I've asked you to marry me and you've said 'No'."

"I should think it would be a worse nightmare if you asked both Aggie and me and we both said 'Yes'," retorted Susan.

"No, I'd like that," said he. "For then I'd know you both liked me, whereas now——"

"You're not sure if Aggie does," put in Susan.

But instead of a flippant answer, his face changed, and he said rather morosely, "On the contrary, I'm sure she doesn't; can't bear the sight of me sometimes."

"She seems a bit nervy just now," said Susan. "She is the same with me sometimes. I think she worries over Miss Primmer's troubles. They have got very friendly, and she is really fond of her."

"Well, we can comfort each other, can't we, young Susan?"

"Yes; and it's too lovely a morning for worries. Let's just enjoy ourselves and catch dozens of trout—two-pounders."

They had come to the pool, a deep, silent one under an out-jutting rock, and at the edge of a ripply stretch where the water was broken with boulders.

Griff and she consulted learnedly about flies and he tied hers on for her, apologizing as he did so, as he expected she was quite an expert at the different knots.

"That's all you know," said Susan, frankly. "It's so many years since I fished, I expect I've forgotten how—anyhow, you know, Griff, I was always best at guddling."

"So was I," said Griff, "till I grew up. You haven't grown up yet, Susan."

They separated and fished and fished. Farther and farther up the stream they went without either of them getting so much as a bite.

"This is terrible," said Susan at last, when they had met to commiserate with each other. "We must have some kind of a basket to show Aggie, or she'll just laugh at me. She never did believe I could fish."

"Let's go back to the Spinney Pool," said Griff. "There's always a nice fat trout to be had thereabouts."

They arrived at the Spinney Pool and then wandered along the stream a bit. At last Susan had an inspiration.

"Griff," she said, "I have a marvellous idea."

"What's that?" He stood looking down at her from the bank, and glancing upwards it struck her, as it had often done before, how very good-looking Griff was. His fishing outfit suited him. He was one of those young men who look best in the country and are absolutely blotted out, as it were,

in townish garb. His outdoor life as estate agent to the Colonel had browned his face and given him an air of hardy, muscular strength. The snouted cap he had on made him look older and became him. "Really," she thought to herself, "Griff *is* good to look at. I mustn't let myself like him too much."

"Bend down," she said, and stood on tiptoe to reach his ear. Then she whispered conspiratorially, "Let's *guddle* some trout!"

Instantly his face lighted up.

"Oh, Susan, you little villain! What a joke!"

Together they went seeking a good place for their nefarious scheme. If guddling trout isn't poaching, it's next door to it, and, in any case, as a means of supplying an empty basket is too despicable to be even mentioned in the presence of devotees of wet and dry fly fishing, such as Griff and Susan were supposed to be. As they went along he pointed out some famous pools for trout, an otter's holt under the willows, the Covenanter's Cave, called Kirk's Hole, across the water, and various other landmarks.

Sad to say, however, their attempts at guddling or tickling the trout were not much more successful than their more legitimate methods.

Susan did succeed in landing one small specimen after a while. She saw him lying nicely within reach of the grassy bank, and lying full length managed to slide her hand gently under him and start tickling him softly from beneath; then a quick jerk of her hand and he was flung wriggling on to the grass, where he would have quickly jerked himself back into the water had not Griff caught and dispatched him.

Her next attempt closed their fishing for that day. It was a much bigger trout, and it was lying at the shallow end of the hole under the ledge of rock at the Spinney Pool. Susan got really excited. Clinging to a bit of heather sticking out from a cranny of the stone, she leaned over the water and once more succeeded in tickling the trout, but as she made the jerk to throw him out the heather gave way. She lost her balance and with a shriek of dismay saved herself from going headlong in by plunging both hands to the bottom of the water.

"Save me!" she shouted in her usual extravagant hyperbole. "I'm drowning!"

Griff, seeing her predicament, for she was unable to pull herself out of her ridiculous position, ran laughing to her, and putting his arms round her waist pulled her upwards. Then, instead of letting her go, he held her fast, smiling down into her flushed face.

"You do exaggerate, Susan."

“Well, so do you. All I needed was a helping hand. You needn’t have seized me as if I was a sack of potatoes. Let me go.”

“A sack of potatoes! I like that!” His brown face was very near to hers. “You’re not a bit like a sack of potatoes, Susan. You’re very nice to hold.” His eyes were full of mischief and also, could Susan have looked deeper, of something else. She saw only the mischief.

“Let me go at once!” She tried to free herself, but he stood like a rock and his arms were too strong for her to make any impression on.

“Don’t struggle like that. I haven’t saved you yet. The water is very deep under this narrow ledge and if you don’t stay quiet for a moment we’ll both go in.”

“No, we won’t!” But she stopped struggling and trying to unloosen his clasped fingers, for she saw that he was right. There was really not room for them both on the ledge; a sudden slip and over they would go. “Do let me go, Griff. I can manage.”

“Just a moment, then.” Lifting her up he stepped across the out-jutting rock to the grassy stretch beside it, and sitting down with her on the warm thyme-scented bank loosened his arms, but as she was struggling upwards he put them loosely round her again and drew her back.

“Don’t go, Susan.”

He spoke very softly and the teasing laughter had all gone out of his voice.

“Yes, I must, Griff. Anyhow, we should go home now.”

She was a little shy and felt unequal to him for the first time. Even his physical strength, which made her feel like a small bird caught in steel bands, gave her a feeling of weakness. She took hold of his fingers again and tried to unclasp them.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m trying to get your hands loose.”

“Silly little Susan—with these small fingers? But you’ve only to ask and they are loose, see!” He loosened them but caught her own hands in his open ones and drew her down so that, sitting on the turf beside him, she was leaning against one arm and still enclosed within them both.

“I want to ask you something, Susan.”

“No, don’t, please.”

“Do you know what it is?”

She shook her head.

“Do you think you could love me, Susan?”

“I don’t know,” she said, flushing up and suddenly very shy.

“Could you try?”

“I don’t know, Griff.”

“If I wanted you to very much, could you?”

She was silent.

“I do want you to, very much.”

“But—we’re just good friends.”

“Are we? Is that all I am to you? You are much more to me than that.”

“I do like you very much.”

“Like a brother.”

“*Oh no!*” It was out in all its emphatic bareness before she realized all that it might mean.

“Darling Susan.” He drew her close, laughing at her a little. “You don’t know what a darling you are.” He paused, looking at her puzzled brows and ruffled hair. “Susan, you *do* look like a little *gome* with that frown on your face. Do you know that ever since that first day we met when I said you looked like a ‘nome’ and you said it was ‘gome’——”

“I didn’t!”

“Be quiet, you are not to interrupt. If you interrupt I’ll kiss you before I’ve proposed, and then I’ll never do it properly—propose, I mean. I shall kiss you properly, all right. Susan, when I saw you sitting on the steps in the snow under the jasmine bush, like a little g-nome, I loved you and wanted to marry you—straight off, just like that! It was a case of love at first sight. But I thought I must give you time to get used to me, otherwise I’d have asked you there and then. Have you got used to me yet, Susan?”

“Oh yes, I’m used to you!”

“Then, will you?”

“Will I what?”

“Marry me, you little goose.”

“Not for a long time. Not till we’ve settled Miss Primmer.”

“That’s a nice way to accept a proposal. To the deuce with Miss Primmer. Say ‘Yes’, Susan.”

“Well, I might, if——”

“If what?”

“You really do.”

“I really what?”

"Like me enough to marry me—but not for a long time."

"Is that all? Then we're engaged, darling, and now I am going to kiss you properly."

But she turned her head as he bent towards her and it was only her cheek he kissed. Her cheek, and her ear, and her neck, at the side of her chin.

"Susan."

"Yes?"

"You've not told me if you 'like me enough to marry me'."

"Well—will you keep it a secret?"

Susan was recovering her confidence a little.

"You bet I will."

"Then—I *think* I do."

"Oh, Susan, when will you be sure? Will you be sure tomorrow?"

"I might."

"But tomorrow is such a long way off. Can't you be sure today? Never put off till tomorrow, darling, what you can do today. Love me today, Susan—there never might be a tomorrow."

That was too much for Susan's sensitive heart.

"I'll love you a little bit today," she said.

Then he kissed her again, but she wouldn't let him kiss her mouth. She didn't know why, so she could not tell him when he asked:

"Is it because you are shy of being loved, Susan? Is it because you really are a little gnome—they always run away when mortals woo them——"

"Oh, Griff, I wish you wouldn't think I'm a gnome, or anything fairy-like. I'm such a solid person, really, and I'll disappoint you if you do."

"All right, disappoint me. I sometimes think I'd like to know you were solid. I never feel sure you won't disappear in the moonlight."

"Not me! But, Griff, it's time we went home now. Aggie will think we are never coming."

"Well, I think Aggie will guess why. Were you crying in bed the other night, Susan?"

"No." She shook her head.

"Yes, you were. Why were you crying?"

"Well, I wasn't—but if I was, I don't know why. One just cries sometimes, and sometimes I get frightened because my brothers are all

overseas and far away and there's just me and my young sister, and I have to look after her."

"I'll help you, Susan. Is she as sweet as you?"

"Oh, much, much prettier and sweeter than I am."

"Then we'll marry her to a fairy prince; only a fairy prince would do for anything sweeter than you, Susan—but I don't believe it's possible for anyone to be that. Must we go?"

Susan was struggling to be free, and after a moment he let her go. And collecting their rods and baskets, with the one trout, they set out for Round-about House.

"Griff," said Susan on the way, "don't let us tell anybody yet, especially not Miss Primmer. I feel as if I'd done wrong, somehow, getting engaged so soon after coming to help her."

"What I want to do," said Griff, "is to shout it from the house-tops. Do let me, darling. I'd love to climb on to the stable roof and cry in loud and ringing tones, 'Listen, all people that on earth do dwell, Susan has accepted me.' "

"Do be sensible," said Susan. "If you don't, I'll ungage myself. We must keep it to ourselves for the present."

"Can't I tell anybody? I'll burst if I can't tell somebody."

"Burst, then—it might do you good," said callous Susan.

"Don't you really want us to tell?"

"No, really and truly, I'd rather not."

"All right. Then promise you'll be all the more engaged to me."

"All right," said Susan.

"And what about your ring?"

"There's to be no ring just now," said Susan firmly.

But in spite of these well-meant efforts, Aggie seemed to guess something the minute she saw them, especially as Griff announced at once: "We're not engaged, it's too soon for Miss Primmer, so don't look so knowing, Aggie."

This made them all laugh, and Aggie seemed so pleased and happy, respecting their wish to say nothing, but giving Susan such heartfelt hugs, that their spirits all soared up and they began laughing and singing and making such a noise that Miss Primmer, returning with the Colonel, said, most inappropriately, that she thought the house was on fire.

She, herself, looked much happier than she had done since Susan and Aggie came to the house, and, discussing it later, they both hoped it was because she had taken the bull by the horns and told the Colonel all about her troubles.

If so she had she said nothing about it to them, but there was not much time for confidences, as Aggie had to fly away and meet William Shakespeare, who was arriving in time for tea, and Susan had a great deal of work to do after her morning's fishing, including cleaning the trout for William.

As Aggie was about to leave, Simeon Quest appeared and offered to take her to the station in the car. He came so well-timed on the scene that Susan could not help wondering if he had arranged it beforehand.

"He's a deep one, that," she said to herself, and when they had driven off, she turned and said to Griff:

"Oh, Griff, wouldn't it be nice if——"

"If what?"

"Oh, dear," sighed Susan. "Men are slow in the uptake. Just if—put that in your pipe and go and smoke it."

"Not I—I've got something else to smoke in my pipe. Susan, do you think you could come fishing again tomorrow?"

"I could not. I've had plenty of fishing to last me for some time."

And Susan flew to put on an overall.

CHAPTER XIV

WILLIAM

William Shakespeare Delacorne simply took the house by storm. He came, he saw, he conquered!

No one could exactly say why. He was certainly no scholar, though he could say one piece of poetry:

> Twinkle, twinkle little star,
> How I wonder what you are.

Neither was he a genius like his famous namesake. At least, there were still no signs of literary ability, for he couldn't even say his "A B C", as the Colonel at once discovered.

Looks might have had something to do with it, for he had fair feathery curls; and there was something very taking indeed about the back of his neck, just above where the strings of his overall were tied.

He was dressed in minute holland knickerbockers, about the size of a mitten, which he called his "trousers" with indubitable justification, since they had buttons under a flap and were held up, as he always pointed out, by braces instead of having elastic round the top like those worn by the inferior creatures he called "gals".

The trousers were, however, his masterpiece. The garment over them was rather a come-down after this masculine effort, being merely a short overall fastened at the back of the neck with tape and linen buttons. It is well authenticated, of course, by those who have made a study of the subject, that men do not tie their clothes on with tapes round their necks. Still, if you have a very manly air, you can carry this off. William carried it off despite the fact that while the overall, sticking out all round him, gave him an air of solidity and plumpness, it was sadly contradicted when you hugged William. There was so very little of William to hug.

To start with, no doubt, he had been quite an ordinary little boy, but if you take an ordinary little boy of two or so away from all he has known and put him in a Home where he cries inconsolably for his mother till all hope departs, you do something to him. Something had been done to William, so that he caught at your heartstrings, and, if you weren't very careful, twisted them into knots.

Miss Primmer, before he came, had been a little dubious about having a rampageous, mischievous little boy let loose among her boarders—or, as she more genteelly put it, "the gentlemen"—and had delicately suggested to Aggie that he be kept in the kitchen and the back premises. Aggie, with a tug at her heart for William, agreed, and told him that as they were there on sufferance, and Miss Primmer was a very kind lady to have him there at all, he must never go through the baize door. He must also be a very good boy.

William never forgot about the baize door. It must be confessed that sometimes he forgot about being good, though not often. He knew too well already that he had no niche in the world of his own, and could only balance himself precariously on the edge of other people's by being "a good little boy".

Nothing would ever induce him to go through that baize door, either fore or aft, and this in itself led to many misunderstandings. If he was sent from the drawing-room to the kitchen, he hid silently behind the large oak chair in the hall till somebody opened the front door, then he shot through it like a scared kitten and flew round the garden to the kitchen. If Griff lifted him to carry him through the baize door he struggled without a sound but like a little maniac to be put down. . . .

If he had but understood, the ban on the baize door was soon lifted. Miss Primmer fell for William before he had been an hour in the house as completely and abjectly as ladies of more tender years fall for their favourite film star. But she was shy of William, and Aggie had quite unconsciously made him afraid of her, so it was some time before they understood each other.

The first round was won by William when Miss Primmer came down to the kitchen where William was being regaled with bread-and-milk.

"I hope you are going to be a good little boy," she said, rather seriously, "while you stay here."

"Yes," said William, and then after a pause continued in his grave little voice: "It is very kind of you, isn't it, to let me stay in your house?"

That was a blow straight on Miss Primmer's really soft heart.

"Oh, but," she said quickly, "I like you to stay with me, William."

But it was the woolly bear that really decided things between William and Miss Primmer.

With the assistance of the Colonel, Miss Primmer bought the woolly bear. The angels are said to take particular care of fools and babes. As far as buying toys was concerned, Miss Primmer and the Colonel were both, so the angels must have taken care of them when, from among a wilderness of

carts, horses, balls, engines, and soldiers, they chose the bear. He was covered with yellow fur; he had boot-button eyes, a nose made of thread, a little red coat—and the secret key to William's heart.

Susan and Aggie had bought him toys, but though he played with them very carefully they roused no great enthusiasm in his heart. He was used to having fine toys, shared with the other children at the Home, and did not seem able to get it out of his head that he must play with them carefully and discreetly for a little while and then return them undamaged for some other little boy to have his turn at playing with them.

The woolly bear was different. The light in his eyes would have told you that, not to speak of the way in which he held on to it as if he could never part with it. He wouldn't put it down even to take his meals. It was a large bear, nearly half as big as himself, but he even got through the process of stripping and getting a bath without really parting from the bear because Susan, who understood all sorts of strange little things, tied a string round the bear's middle and gave it to William to hold while she bathed him.

Then he had to go and say "Good night" to Miss Primmer. "And mind you thank her for the woolly bear," said Aggie.

Immediately he understood that the bear was now to be returned to the donor, so he held back as long as he could, but the inevitable moment came; he was led reluctantly to the drawing-room. Holding out the toy to Miss Primmer, for obedience had been scared into William's little soul, he said gravely:

"Thank you very much for letting me play with your woolly bear."

Miss Primmer laughed—then saw his eyes.

"Oh, but it's your woolly bear, William! Your very own. I gave it to you."

He stood looking at her, still not quite sure.

"You can take him to bed with you."

And with those words Miss Primmer got the surprise of her life, for William ran at her, clambered up to her knees, and, putting his arms so tightly round her neck he nearly choked her, broke into sobs.

Nobody knew why he cried or could make out what was the matter. Perhaps some dim memory had come to him of days when he had taken other woolly toys to bed or had had toys of his own. Anyhow, Miss Primmer had to carry both William and the bear to bed and tuck them in together.

Next morning Aggie discovered them all in Miss Primmer's bed together, Miss Primmer and William on each side and the bear in the middle.

From that day they were very maty indeed. They made seas and islands with their porridge and milk; they stole the raisins.

They also discovered that William was a great gardener and could do marvels with a twopenny spade and a watering-can and, incidentally—but that was quite a mistake—with the Colonel's prize tulip bulbs.

After he had been there a few days there was no thought of his going back at the end of the week. After a week, he was there "for the summer"; by Martinmas—but that's anticipating.

The advent of William took Miss Primmer's mind a little off the Cobbs, who were evidently lying low for the meantime. It also took her mind off Susan and Griff, for she noticed nothing there, but possibly another affair was taking up her attention. Aggie said so, anyway.

Susan was thinking about Aggie and the Major one very wet night, as she stood preparing William's supper of hot milk and bread and honey. William was in the drawing-room with Miss Primmer and the Colonel, and Aggie was out with Simeon Quest and Griff. They had gone to a rehearsal of a play and concert that the village amateur theatrical society was getting up to pay for new lamps in the hall. They were all in the play. Susan had, of course, been asked to take a part as well, but as she and Aggie could not both be spared, and as Aggie was a much better actress, Susan had insisted on her accepting.

Sometimes it was a little lonely when they all went off, but it couldn't be helped; turn and turn about was fair play, and Susan was to be taking part in a Christmas play that the village amateur society was getting up later on.

She was just thinking that William was very late for his supper when she heard a faint little tapping on the back door. She opened it, and there stood William, soaked to the skin and shivering with cold, for, with the rain, the weather had turned very chilly again.

"Oh, William, what have you been doing!" Susan exclaimed as she drew him into the kitchen, but even as she asked the question she suspected that the baize door was at the bottom of it.

She was right. Miss Primmer, it appeared, had gone upstairs a little while before to fetch something from her room. While she was away, the Colonel, who never remembered William's attitude to the baize door, had sent him off to the kitchen to get his supper and go to bed.

William had waited for a bit and then discovered that he could open the front door, whereupon he had started off through the downpour of rain for the kitchen door at the back of the house, but in the torrent of rain and the darkness he had missed the path and found himself at a little tumble-down

summer-house in the shrubbery. That was all plain and straightforward, but when Susan came to ask him how he'd found his way back from the shrubbery he hesitated and, when Susan pressed him, to her astonishment he began to cry.

"But, William darling," she said, lifting him on to her knee and peeling off his soaking clothes, "what is the matter? Did something frighten you?"

William threw his arms round her neck, squeezed her till she nearly choked, and cried the more.

Susan felt sure something had happened to frighten him, but saw she was only distressing him, so stopped asking questions, rubbed him down with a warm towel and got him to drink his hot milk.

"Now," she said, when he was warm and comforted, "tell Susan about it."

But William shook his head and she could get nothing out of him.

It wasn't till he was saying his prayers that Susan got any enlightenment, and then something came out. William always had a long list of blessings to be asked on all his friends. Tonight he reeled them off and ended with "the lady in the summer-house".

"What lady in the summer-house?" asked Susan.

The mystery deepened, for again William shook his head.

"Are you romancing, William? You know there is no lady in the summer-house." Susan spoke severely.

He stood looking at her, his mouth trembling again, his eyes swimming with tears.

"Naughty Susan, to lissen," said he. "I was talking to God." William had a funny way of speaking sometimes that he had picked up from a Highland nurse at the Home.

Thus rebuked, Susan felt she could not press him any more. She tucked him up in bed, but when she was going out of the room he called her back. He was sobbing into his pillow.

She was sure now something had frightened him. She rolled him up in a blanket, carried him downstairs, and going to the drawing-room she told Miss Primmer that he seemed to have got a fright and asked leave to tuck him up on the sofa for a few minutes.

"Tut! tut!" said the Colonel. "Spoiling him."

But Susan took no notice. She knew the Colonel's bark was worse than his bite.

“Children should never be frightened,” she said, and left them. The Colonel and Miss Primmer worked out their game of patience and then put William to bed.

Going down to the kitchen, Susan got the big stable lamp from its peg in the back kitchen, lit it, and went off to investigate matters.

She was glad she had slipped on Griff’s thick old fishing waterproof which hung on a peg in the back entrance, for she found the rain was still coming down in torrents.

“This would happen on a night when all the men are out,” she said to herself, as she made her way down the dark paths. “Of course, there’s the Colonel, but one can’t ask an elderly gentleman to go on a wild-goose chase in the pouring rain.”

Whether the Colonel, who was well-set-up and as hardy as a trooper, would have liked to be described as an elderly gentleman and relegated to an arm-chair in the drawing-room when adventure was afoot, Susan did not pause to consider. She was just wishing that Griff and Simeon had been at home.

If William had talked about a man in the summer-house she would certainly have waited till they came in, but the tramp who had possibly taken shelter there must be a woman—all women were “ladies” to William—and, while not at all disposed to turn her out, Susan felt she must find out what she was doing there and why William, who was usually the frankest and most truthful of mortals, had been so strangely queer and evasive about her. She wasn’t going to have William frightened.

Another explanation had also come into her mind. Could it be Mrs. Cobb? Had she been hanging about to try and see Miss Primmer and frightened William?

It would be just like her, thought Susan angrily, but at the same time it seemed curious for Mrs. Cobb to have chosen such a pouring wet night—unless, of course, she had thought the coast was clear and that Susan was also out at the rehearsal.

She had reached the shrubbery by this time and, as she made her way up the narrow path bordered by syringa and bushes of flowering currant, she felt sure that she had hit on the explanation.

She paused, wondering if, after all, it would be more prudent to wait. Now she was warned she would take care that Isabella got no opportunity of seeing Miss Primmer.

But prudence was never Susan’s long suit.

“I’m dashed if I’m going back without looking in the summer-house, anyhow,” she said to herself, and went on.

She turned the corner and now the little broken-down place was just in front of her. It had no door, but across the opening had been hung at some time or other one of those bamboo curtains that were supposed to come from China. Beads and bits of bamboo were threaded on long strings that hung closely together and completely concealed the inside of the little building.

Going forward, Susan pushed aside the strings of beads and shone her lantern into the interior. The floor and seat were covered with the dried leaves of many autumns and there was an all-pervading smell of rot and decay within. The light of the lantern swung round and then stopped.

Seated in the farthest corner and shrunk as far as possible into the angle of the walls sat a dark figure. Even before the light shone on the white terrified face that suddenly appeared out of the shadows, Susan realized that this was no Mrs. Cobb. Mrs. Cobb was large and stout and truculent; this was the thin, shrinking figure of quite a young woman—the blanched, terrified face with the wild dark eyes was the face of a girl.

CHAPTER XV

THE LADY IN THE SUMMER-HOUSE

"GOODNESS!" gasped Susan, so relieved that it wasn't Mrs. Cobb that her voice came out with quite a jerk. "What a fright you gave me! What are you doing there?"

The pair of dark eyes stared at her a moment, then a strained voice whispered:

"The little boy told you?"

"Oh no!" said Susan, instantly vindicating William. "He wouldn't tell, but I thought something must have frightened him and came out to investigate. What is the matter? What are you doing out here?"

"Who are you?"

"I'm Susan Tyndal," began Susan, and then paused. After all, she was the one who ought to be asking questions.

"Who are you?"

The poor thing was shivering like a leaf, either with cold or terror, and Susan saw now that her thin dress and shabby waterproof were absolutely soaked with water. There was a pool of water at her feet, which ran in a trickle across the floor and was lost among the dead leaves.

Her hat was shapeless and hung like an old mushroom round her face; her shoes were thick with clay and mud. Beside her on the seat was a little basket of white straw embroidered with woollen flowers. They were black with wet, but the glistening straw was stained in red and blue dyes from the wool.

"Who are you?" Susan repeated, as no answer came to her first inquiry.

"I want to see Miss Primmer."

The voice in which she spoke was refined, but hardly above a whisper.

"But why didn't you come to the door? Have you been here long? You are terribly wet."

As she spoke, Susan went right inside and dropped the bead curtain behind her.

"Are you in trouble?" she asked more gently, as the girl remained silent.

“If you would tell me who you are,” the girl half whispered—“there are so many strangers about. Oh, please go and tell Miss Primmer I must see her.”

Susan stared at her, comprehension suddenly dawning as she looked at the terrified and bedraggled figure.

“Dorrie!” she exclaimed, in a voice that surprise made into a hoarse whisper like the girl’s. “Are you Dorrie?”

Suddenly the girl stood up and took hold of Susan’s arm, swaying on her feet.

“No, no, please don’t tell! Please don’t give me away.” She shook Susan’s arm. “You mustn’t—you mustn’t! Go and tell my aunty, but nobody else—promise—promise! You don’t know what it means. They mustn’t get me. I won’t go back. I won’t! I won’t!”

She burst into tears.

Susan put an arm round her and held the poor terrified rain-soaked little creature close to her.

“No, no,” she said. “Don’t be frightened. I won’t tell, but you must come up to the house. If you come now before the others get back, we can slip into the kitchen.”

The girl suddenly pushed her away and stepped back.

“The kitchen! No, no! Never! Not the kitchen! Isabella would see me. Isabella would get me back. No, I’ll go away.” She picked up her little basket and made as if to run past Susan, but at the doorway, just as Susan caught hold of her arm, she tripped and fell forward into the torrential rain; spreading out her arms as she did so, she went full length down into the soft clay and running mud of the path.

Instantly Susan knelt beside her and tried to raise her, but she had either fainted or succumbed from hunger and exhaustion. She lay there with her eyes closed, one side of the white face deep in the mud, the rain pouring down on her.

For a few minutes Susan struggled, trying to raise her, then she jumped up, seized the lantern, and raced towards the house. She must get the Colonel to help her carry the girl indoors. They could think what to do afterwards, but she must be got indoors at once, or she might die on their hands out there in the cold. All the same, as she ran, she wished it hadn’t been the Colonel; he was so slow and precise, he would want explanations; and then he was so much on the side of law and order he would want to send wires to the asylum. If only . . .

She burst into the kitchen and there Simeon Quest was standing, looking so tall and capable and steady, with the rain still wet on his brown face, that Susan, with a cry, almost threw herself at him.

"Oh, Mr. Quest! Please come and help me! Come and help me!" and she caught hold of his arm. "Oh, I'm in such trouble."

"Steady on, steady on!" said Simeon quietly, and immediately put an arm around her. "What is it, Miss Susan?" He always called her miss very punctiliously.

"I must tell you, but we mustn't tell anyone else. . . . Oh, Mr. Quest, Dorrie has run away from the asylum and she's lying outside in the rain. Come and carry her in."

She was dragging him towards the door as she gasped out the words, her voice hardly above a whisper.

"Dorrie?"

"Yes—Miss Primmer's niece. Don't ask questions—I'll tell you about it later—just help me. You see, I couldn't carry her in."

She had caught hold of his hand by this time, pulling him along the path, while she swung the lantern in the other hand.

"There!" she said, as they reached the prone figure lying in the mud. "Lift her gently. She's so little and frail."

Simeon bent down. "Poor little soul," he said softly, his voice unsteady with pity as he saw the little head with the tangled curls lying in the mud. Very gently he put his arms underneath her and raised her.

"Carry on, Miss Susan," he said. "You go first with the lantern."

In the kitchen he stood still with his light burden in his arms.

"Where shall we put her?"

Susan had been considering this coming up the path. She had at once come to the conclusion that they must hide Dorrie. All her sympathies had at once gone out to the poor little frightened creature. She remembered, too, all that Miss Primmer had said about how the Cobbs had got her away. The Cobbs were her enemies; that in itself would have been enough for Susan. She did not know what she was going to do or what her next step would be, but until she did know they must keep her presence in the house a secret.

All the bedrooms, except the room where Aggie and she slept, with the little room off it which had been given up to William, opened off the landing at the top of the stairs. Their room was really the servant's bedroom and was reached by a separate staircase. In the kitchen was a door which looked like an ordinary cupboard door until you opened it, when you discovered a flight

of stairs. When they had been putting the house ready for more boarders Aggie and she had decided to take these unused rooms for themselves, and leave all the other rooms for their visitors.

"I know," she said now to Simeon—"we'll put her in William's bed."

She opened the door and ran up the steep narrow stairs, followed more cautiously by Simeon with his burden.

Luckily the hot-water bottles were in the big bed where she and Aggie slept together. She ran through into the other room, lifted the sleeping William out of his snug rest in the blankets and, depositing him in the other bed, told Simeon to lay Dorrie on William's eiderdown till she got her wet things off.

But by this time Dorrie had come round and was in a state of terror bordering on sheer hysteria. She clung to Quest and would not let him put her down. For some reason she had immediately taken to him; which was rather surprising as people did not as a rule immediately take to the rather stern and silent Major. But as Susan watched him humouring and coaxing the poor, distraught creature, she saw another side of him from the reserved and rather stand-offish man she knew. He was so patient with her and so kind, calling her "Dorrie" and "Little Dorrit", gently loosening her hands from round his neck and holding them in his own, while he persuaded her to get tucked up into bed, telling her all the time that she was safe, that he would not let anyone take her away.

He helped Susan to undress her with such simple unconcern and freedom from any embarrassment that Susan felt an entirely new feeling for Simeon Quest stealing into her heart.

"Oh," she said to herself, "what a gentleman you are! What a perfect gentleman all through and through, and I never realized it," and she felt really friendly and almost intimate with him for the moment as she slipped one of her warm night-dresses over the girl's head, while Quest held her, still comforting her and coaxing her as if she were a child.

Then he lifted her up as though she were a featherweight, and laid her in William's warm place.

"Don't leave me—don't leave me!" she pleaded with him.

"Listen, Dorrie," he said. "I must leave you to have a rest and a sleep, but I promise I won't leave the house and nobody shall see you, or come near you, except Susan and your aunty. Will that do?"

They had given her brandy and hot milk and at last she fell into a doze. Susan had had her ears alert for the last half-hour, as she wanted to make a plan of some kind before Aggie and Griff arrived. Of course, Aggie would

have to be told, but the fewer people who knew she was there the better, if Susan were to carry out the plan she was already forming in her head of hiding Dorrie until the time had passed when she could be taken back to the asylum.

They went into the larger room, where William lay curled up and fast asleep, and there Simeon Quest explained how he had got through his own part and left Griff and Aggie to practise in a musical piece that the vicar was getting up.

"I thought I'd get a few quiet minutes with my papers," he said.

Susan hastily pulled herself together.

"We must tell Miss Primmer at once. I'll do it while you keep the Colonel talking in the drawing-room. Then we must tell Aggie and Griff, but I don't think we should tell anyone else in the meantime. We must keep her hidden up here. The Cobbs and Christina know about this bedroom, but it's out of the way for the boarders."

"Will you tell Miss Primmer tonight?" he asked. "What about waiting till the morning? Dorrie's asleep and will probably sleep all night."

Susan at once saw the common sense of this idea. Miss Primmer would be no help; on the contrary, she would be sure to get into a state and might upset Dorrie if she persisted in seeing her. Hastily they decided to say nothing to anyone but Aggie and Griff till the morning.

While they were talking they heard them come in, and slipped down the stairs.

Aggie stared when she saw the Major follow Susan into the kitchen from what they called their "secret stairs".

"Gracious!" she said. "What is the matter?" And then fright leaped into her eyes. "William—is William all right?"

"As right as rain," said Susan. "But I've something to tell you, Aggie."

Griff and Simeon went off, and, sitting down with a glass of hot milk each, Susan recounted to Aggie all that had taken place.

Aggie quite agreed that it was no use telling Miss Primmer that night.

"Goodness," she said, "do you remember those kids saying nothing ever happened in the country? We seem to be plunged into one thing after another with scarcely time to draw our breaths in between."

"What shall we do if they come for her?" asked Susan.

"They will come for her right enough," Aggie assured her. "When did she run away?"

"I don't know, and she's been in no state to answer questions."

“Well, let’s hope they don’t come tonight.” Aggie glanced at the clock. “My! It’s nearly twelve! I’d no idea it was so late.”

“I expect you were too occupied to notice,” said Susan quickly. “You and Griff were very late.”

But Aggie did not rise to this hint.

“Well, I’m tired,” she said. “Let’s go to bed and leave our troubles for another day.”

CHAPTER XVI

FLIGHT

"THERE'S a telegram for Miss Primmer," said Susan, running upstairs to Aggie the next morning. "It will be from the Home about Dorrie. What shall we do?"

"We'll have to give it to her, of course," said Aggie slowly, "but . . ." She paused, thinking it over.

By this time Aggie had seen Dorrie, and was now also on her side against law and authority.

Neither Aggie nor Susan was very well informed about the subject, but they both had it very clearly fixed in their minds that if Dorrie could be kept out of the Home, as they always called it, for the matter of a few days, she could not be forced to go back. Talking it over, they had decided to try and keep her.

"Of course," Aggie had said, "I do think that if Miss Primmer had any force of mind about her she could get Dorrie free herself, if what she says is correct."

"She never will," said Susan with absolute conviction. "She's too chicken-hearted and spineless; she'd hum and haw and quiver and quake, and make the Board or whatever it is think she wasn't fit to look after a tame rabbit, much less a mental case."

"I wonder if she is," said Aggie.

"I think Dorrie should have a chance," said Susan decidedly. "Even last night, when she'd been through enough to send anybody out of their mind, she was terrified and a bit hysterical, but not in the very least mental. It's only after a bout of those fits that she turns queer for a few days, Miss Primmer said. And if that is so we could help to look after her. We had a boy in our village who was the same and nobody ever thought of putting him in a Home. His people just looked after him."

"But if she takes fits——" said Aggie doubtfully.

"Miss Primmer is used to them," said Susan, "and knows exactly what to do. Honestly, I'd just hate to send her back, poor little soul! We must do something, Aggie. We must give her another chance."

As usual, Susan was all on the side of the lame dog, and eager to help Dorrie over her stile.

"I wonder who you think you are, Susan Tyndal," said Aggie severely, but with a tone in her voice which told Susan she was all on her side, "to set yourself up against law and order."

"But I only do when they're wrong," replied Susan solemnly, and wondered why Aggie laughed.

"Well, you had better take that telegram, and tell Miss Primmer everything."

"Well, you see, I have an idea," said Susan, hesitating with it in her hand.

"I thought as much," said Aggie.

"I thought—how would it do to let Miss Primmer reply to the telegram before we told her about Dorrie?"

Aggie gave Susan a look.

"You little besom!" was all she said.

Susan took in the telegram which, as she had guessed, was to let Miss Primmer know Dorrie was missing and to ask if she had arrived at Round-about House.

Miss Primmer, who was having breakfast in bed, immediately jumped up and pushed aside her tray, then threw the telegram on the floor and began rushing about trying to get post-haste into clothes.

"Dorrie! Dorrie's here! I must go out and seek for her. She would be sure to come home. Oh, Susan, help me into my things. Be quick—be quick!"

Susan put her arms round her. "Don't get so excited, Nanty." (They had all taken to calling her "Nanty" now. William had begun it; it was supposed to be short for Aunty.) "We'll all help you, darling. You'll see, it will be all right. Only you should answer the telegram first, the boy's waiting."

"Where is it? What shall I say?"

"Whatever you like," said Susan, with Machiavellian subtlety.

Miss Primmer picked it up and re-read it. Then she took a pencil and scribbled on the back—*Have not seen or heard of Dorrie. You must find her at once*—and passed it to Susan.

"I wouldn't put that end bit," said she. "Let's try and find her ourselves. If you say that, they'll be down here at once and might frighten her into running off again if she is about the place."

"I don't want them here," said Miss Primmer at once. "If they come here I'll send them off."

Susan ran down with the telegram which now simply said: *Have not seen or heard of Dorrie*.

She watched the boy ride off on his bicycle till he had disappeared. As she turned to run upstairs she saw Aggie and told her what had been said on the wire and suggested that, as Nanty was so fond of Aggie, she should be the one to break the news.

"No," said Aggie; "you found Dorrie, Susan. You ought to tell her about it yourself."

Miss Primmer was dressed and putting on a coat when Susan got back to her room. She went and put an arm round her.

"I've some news for you."

"Dorrie!"

"Yes. She's found."

"Where is she? Where is she?"

Susan told her and then gave her the whole story of the night before. Miss Primmer took it well and thanked Susan over and over again as they made their way downstairs, through the kitchen, and up to William's room, where Susan left her to go in and see Dorrie by herself.

There was never much time in the mornings at Round-about House for talk. A large and solid breakfast had to be cooked for the anglers, and there were always two or three extra ones coming and going beside the Colonel, Simeon, and Griff; men who just took a few days from their profession or business for their beloved hobby. Some, like Mr. Carrick-Symthe, the surgeon, had engaged a room for the season; others just sent a wire and expected everything to be ready for them when they turned up. But the boarding-house was prospering; all the rooms were usually full and sometimes Griff had to occupy a camp-bed in Hicks' room above the garage, and on one or two occasions both he and Hicks had turned out and occupied shake-downs in the cloakroom—a little room that had been "dear Papa's" office, but which Aggie and Susan, with the help of Griff and Hicks, had turned into a room for coats and hats, rods and baskets, and all the paraphernalia of anglers.

When breakfast was over large piles of tasty and satisfying sandwiches had to be made and put up, with chunks of home-made cakes or mince- and apple-pies, into neat packets for the fishermen. But once that was over there came a pause in the rush. There was no lunch to prepare and the day lay before them fairly quiet till the men began to come in, wanting tea and baths and hot water and a dinner that *was* a dinner.

Both Susan and Aggie believed that the secret of success lay in good food, good fires, good lights, plenty of hot water, and good beds. They charged very high terms, but saw that everything was liberal and of the best.

"No petty economies," said Aggie when Miss Primmer sometimes opened her eyes at the price of the hams, the variety of dishes she would offer for breakfast, or the piles of laundry that went to the country woman who washed for them. Not that Aggie was wasteful. Every scrap of food was used up and she and Susan and Christina worked like niggers, but her economies went on where their boarders wouldn't notice them.

Once they were all off for the day, Susan and Aggie had a late and leisurely breakfast and it was then they discussed whatever they wanted to talk over.

No sooner had they sat down that morning than Miss Primmer appeared from upstairs where she had been talking to Dorrie.

"Oh," she explained, "I don't know what to do!"

"Come and sit down and tell us all about it," said Aggie, "and then we can decide what's to be done. When did Dorrie run away?"

Dorrie, it appeared, had run away the day before. It had not been very difficult, as there had been some excitement over a festival of some kind that was being held. She had had enough sense to arrange everything beforehand. One of the doctors' chauffeurs had helped her by running her to a station and pretending that he was the manservant settling his mistress in the railway carriage, carrying a rug and papers and so forth. Her troubles had only begun when she reached Culverston in the pouring rain. From that point she had been terrified of being seen, particularly by the Cobbs, but had managed to get as far as the house, where she almost ran into Hicks. Then she saw the Colonel in the drawing-room, through the window, and was making her way to the summer-house when she and William bumped into each other.

"And now," said Miss Primmer, when she had finished her story, "what are we to do? I'm not going to let Dorrie go back."

"We'll have to hide her for a week then," said Susan, "or is it ten days?"

None of them was very clear on that point, Miss Primmer least of all, and at last they adopted Aggie's suggestion that Miss Primmer should take Dorrie back herself and try to get her released, for it became quite clear, when she really went into details, that she was very much to blame herself for Dorrie's long time in the Home. She had been so afraid of the truth coming out that Dorrie was her daughter that, it seemed, the authorities were under the impression Dorrie was a waif with no one really responsible for

her. Of course, Miss Primmer did not say so in so many words, but she contradicted herself so much that it was plain to be seen that she had misled them. She had never legally adopted Dorrie in any way, and, as far as Aggie and Susan could make out, both she and the Cobbs had denied any knowledge of who Dorrie's parents really were.

Yet she was really fond of her. Miss Primmer was just one of these helpless people who by one false start envelop themselves in a tangled web of deceit and unhappiness.

However, when Aggie suggested going with her, she consented to sending another telegram to say Dorrie was with her and would be brought back.

They rose from the discussion, all rather relieved that something definite had been arrived at, and Miss Primmer went to talk to Dorrie about it.

Susan and Aggie separated to get on with their housework and Susan was making beds when a strange scream sent her headlong down one staircase and up the other to Dorrie's room. Even as she ran she guessed what had happened, and blamed herself that she hadn't foreseen it.

Dorrie had worked herself up into such a state of agitation at the news that she was to go back that she had had one of her attacks. Luckily they knew what to do, and before long Dorrie had returned to consciousness, though she was very weak and exhausted. The main thing now was to keep her quiet and run no danger of another attack, and, first and foremost, they all had to promise that she should stay where she was. Nothing else would calm her, even for a moment, and indeed, by this time, they were all so sorry for poor Dorrie that their promises were readily enough given.

"And now," said Aggie, when at last she and Susan were alone together again, "what's to be done next?"

"Well, I've given her my word and I'm not going back on it," said Susan. "Let's hide her and keep her hidden for a few days; if we can do that the whole official business will have to be gone through before they can confine her again, and it will be much easier to keep her out than to get her out. What do you say?"

Aggie was not so sure, but Susan most unexpectedly obtained a strong and determined ally in the person of Griff. Griff was, like Susan, wholeheartedly on the side of the weak and helpless. Moreover, he was ready with a plan in a twinkling. Dorrie was to be moved over to Hicks' room above the garage. He and Hicks would occupy the rooms above the kitchen, and Susan and Aggie were to take his room. The secret was to be kept by the five already in it—Miss Primmer, Aggie, Susan, Simeon, and

Griff—and Hicks was also to be let into it. Miss Primmer, they agreed, was the weak link in the chain, but love for Dorrie might make her play her part better than they expected if people came to question her from the Home, as in all probability they would.

Once their minds had been made up, Susan was in her glory; she dearly loved a spice of adventure.

It was Christina's afternoon off, and as soon as she was gone they set about making the changes. Hicks, who was another adventurous spirit like Susan, rose to the occasion with all the spirit of his Irish forebears. In an hour or two the necessary changes in the rooms were made.

While they had been busy, Miss Primmer had kept a watch on the road from an upstairs window, but now she had to go and help to get Dorrie moved. Griff was to carry her over to her new quarters, but she was so frightened of any attempt to move her that they thought it better for her aunty, as she called her, to be there, and for Susan to keep watch.

Slipping on a waterproof, for it was still showery, Susan ran up the garden to keep her lookout in the little lane leading to the house. She was terribly excited, for time was getting on, and now their preparations were so nearly complete that a quarter of an hour or less would see Dorrie safely hidden in the room supposed to be occupied by Hicks in the garage. Once there, Susan was sure no one would ever suspect Dorrie was at home. Christina only came through the day and the garage could be reached through the hedged and tangled paths of the garden, without being seen from the house, though they'd have to try to visit it as little as possible while she was about. She was really the only danger, and Susan wished they could find some excuse to give her a few days' holiday, but there didn't seem to be any. Anyhow, in another ten minutes they'd be fairly safe. Drawing her waterproof about her and tying more tightly the scarf she had wrapped about her head, she passed through the gate to wander a little way down the road.

As she went down the steps she heard the short hoot of a motor-car, and stopped dead. Cars always hooted as they took the sharp turn off the main road into the lane leading to Round-about House. As she stood suddenly still, she was filled with apprehension. A car would naturally go through the big open gate to the garage where, at that moment, Griff would be carrying Dorrie across the wide yard from the house. She ran swiftly the few yards to the gate and at that moment a black car came round the corner. She guessed at once that it was from the Home.

For the space of a second absolute dismay and a horrible sense of defeat held her rigid, then her indomitable spirits rose. Susan would never give in

without a fight. She drew the scarf round her face and stood shrinking in the gateway, with her back to the lane. As the car drew up and stopped to avoid her, she glanced round, gave a wild, mad scream and took to her heels across the moor.

In a minute she knew her ruse had succeeded. Glancing round she saw two figures coming in full chase after her. They thought she was Dorrie; it was what she had meant them to think. But now, what was she to do? Her action had been the outcome of a sudden impulse; she had no plan whatever and there did not seem much chance of making one, as she went haring at top speed through the heather and the ling.

CHAPTER XVII

THE COVENANTER'S CAVE

It is not very easy, as Susan swiftly found out, to make a plan as you go scurrying at your highest speed over stretches of heather and peat moss. Her whole mind was taken up in avoiding pitfalls, rounding bogs, leaping burns, and trying to thread a way through stretches of bracken. However, her sense of humour did not desert her.

"I believe," she addressed herself as she ran, "this is a wild-goose chase and, as usual, I'm cast for the part of the goose! What in the world am I to say when they catch me?"

She glanced round and thanked her stars that she could run. She had put quite an appreciable distance between herself and her pursuers, who, she now saw, were a man and a woman.

"The driver of the car," she thought, "whoever he may be, and a nurse—poor lamb. I hope she's not fat!"

Then her mind turned to the problem of what she must do. In taking her hurried flight across the moorland, her one idea had been to give Griff time to get across the yard with Dorrie and have her safely hidden before anyone arrived from the Home. If she had taken to the road they could have swiftly overtaken her in the car, so she had chosen the moor, intending to run a short distance and then allow herself to be caught, and the discovery made that she was not Dorrie. Now she realized in a flash that in doing so she would be giving away the secret that Dorrie was at Round-about House. The two following her would have to be very dense, indeed, if they did not realize on catching her that they had been hoaxed with a purpose, and what conceivable purpose could there be but to draw them off Dorrie?

There was that mad scream, for instance. What reason could she possibly give for shrieking like a banshee and taking to her heels at the sight of an ordinary motor-car? It took more than even Susan's vivid imagination to account for such a very unusual reaction to a black Austin Ten. If it had been a striped tiger now, or a wild elephant, or even Farmer Johnson's tame bull, her task would have been easier. A sane and rational young woman, and Susan hoped, though not too optimistically, that she was both, might be excused for howling like a Dervish and taking the hedge at a leap at the sight of any of these—but a motor-car! Nobody but a lunatic, or somebody

pretending to be a lunatic, would act as she had done. Once she was caught, those two would know at once that she had pretended she was Dorrie because Dorrie was at Round-about House, and she wanted to give her time to hide, unless they were lunatics themselves, and that really did not seem probable. No, she must think of something else, and the only other thing she could think of was not to let herself be caught. As long as she was not caught they would, presumably, continue to suppose that she was Dorrie, and Dorrie would be safe.

She now saw that there was a mist of fine rain sweeping across the moor and coming towards her. For days there had been a great deal of rain, with only brief intervals of fine weather, and though the misty cloud would help her, she realized that unless she found shelter she would soon be wet through, and her mind turned to the problem of a dry hiding-place. It did not take her long to make up her mind. The district round the Melk and Dunn waters was rich in Covenanting memories, for it was here that Selkirk had preached and held his secret meetings. Away towards her left ran the Melk water, and about half a mile farther on was the cave in the steep bank of the river where he had hidden when hunted by the Government troopers.

The cave was on the opposite side of the stream and just under the large mansion house called Corne House. From the grounds of Corne House to the river was a precipice of sheer rock, and in the rock close to the water was the cave called Kirk's Hole. It was well known by repute, but few people had visited it because it was situated between two out-jutting corners of the rock, past which it was only possible to climb when the Melk was exceedingly low in a very dry summer. As a rule the water was quite deep at both the out-jutting points. Susan had never been to Kirk's Hole, but Griff had pointed it out to her from the opposite bank and she knew exactly where it was. She would have to wade through the river to reach it, but, once there, she would be in shelter and quite safe. Anyhow, it was the best she could think of, and she cut across the heather towards the stream.

Just as she reached the waterside the fine misty shower of rain swept across the river and she ran for the shelter of a line of alders that marked that part of the stream. By the time she had reached the place where she must cross the rain-cloud had swept on; but it was now between herself and her pursuers, and for a few moments there would be a curtain of mist and rain between them, of which she must either take immediate advantage or cower among the alders till they had passed.

She decided to cross at once through the water. It was a risky thing to do, for the bed of Melk was dangerous and full of deep holes and there was, besides, a good deal of flood-water in the river, but Susan had fished that

part and knew it. It was close to where she and Griff had guddled the trout and at a spot where the stream broadened out on a pebbly bed. She sat down and quickly took off her shoes and stockings and rolled her pants well up out of the way, then twisting her skirt and coat round her waist, out she slipped into the water. It was cold and muddy and rushed swiftly round her ankles, and the pebbles hurt her feet, but she knew that the only way to get over sharp pebbles was to go swiftly on and try not to think of them, so she struck boldly out. Soon the water was up to her knees and the force of the current made itself felt, but the shower was also passing on; she had no time to lose.

Once or twice she stumbled and nearly fell, but Susan was sturdy on her pins and had spent a childhood wading streams and running barefoot over heather and stony moorland. Where a less hardy girl, or one not country-bred, would have been lost, she struggled on, quickly regaining her foothold when she slipped and setting her teeth when the sharp-edged rock hurt her feet. In a few minutes she was over the worst and making for the narrow shelf of dry rock between the water and the precipitous bank; in another moment she had reached it and climbed on to dry land. A few yards brought her to the entrance of the cave, which was shaped like the letter V, narrow at the bottom and widening towards the top. Inside it sloped upwards to a sort of natural seat, and there she sank down, thankful to be across the water in safety.

She dried her feet as well as she could with her handkerchief, pulled on her stockings and shoes, and, feeling now that she had outwitted the two who were following her, she began to think of what her next step was to be —for, as usual, Susan's policy had been daring but short-sighted. It was Aggie who took the long views, but who was also, like all those who look a long time before they leap, if less liable to get herself into trouble, also less quick to lend a helping hand.

"Well, here I am," said Susan to herself, after finding the most comfortable corner to settle in. "But what I'm going to do next, I'm blessed if I know. I suppose those two, when they realize that I've escaped them, will go back to Round-about House and tell them that Dorrie is lost on the moor. The chances are that Aggie and Griff will rise to the truth at once, and Griff will possibly start off to track me down. Anyhow, I'll wait an hour or two and let things take their course. I've done my best and it's their turn to carry on. Then I'll wade back and make for home as unobtrusively as I can and try to slip into the house without being seen. My goodness! I wish I'd known what I was in for and brought a packet of sandwiches—I'm as hungry as a hunter."

There was nothing to do but to watch the water and the strip of the farther bank within her view, and time hung heavily on her hands. At first she kept continually looking at her watch, though that made the minutes go more slowly still, but at last, glancing towards the walls, she saw that someone—a geologist probably, for the rock formation was very interesting hereabouts—had carved the simple outline of a geologist's hammer on a smooth part of the rock. Immediately the notion of passing the time by also carving something on the rock, seized her versatile mind, and hunting in her pocket she found an old penknife and was ready to start before she had thought of an object to carve.

"It must be simple," thought she, "and it must mean something for me."

In two ticks she had got it. She would carve the outline of an hour-glass—firstly, because time hung heavily on her hands, and secondly, because it was nice and easy, just two circles joined with a cross. She did think of a fish, which was also easy, but really the trout she and Griff had landed by their combined efforts at guddling was such a very insignificant specimen that it hardly seemed a subject for commemoration, besides . . . She began to think again of Simeon's words about Aggie and Griff, and to wish they were better friends and less mysterious. She had always thought that Simeon and Aggie were interested in each other, so her surprise had been very great when Miss Primmer a day or two before had coolly coupled Aggie's name with Griff's. Besides, he had seemed so sure of himself that Susan could not help wondering if there were anything in it. As far as Aggie was concerned, she had always avoided Griff, and was apt to get cross if Susan even suggested that he should take her anywhere or that she should have a turn at going out with him, but her attitude had perhaps been too aggressively determined that Griff was Susan's property, so to speak.

"Oh, dear," she ended up. "I do hope there is nothing in it. It would be so terrible if poor Aggie were to fall in love with Griff and us secretly engaged. Perhaps I was wrong to keep it a secret—still, Aggie does know, and it doesn't matter about anybody else, and I just feel somehow it wouldn't do to announce we are engaged. I'm sure the Colonel wouldn't like it, and it doesn't seem fair to Miss Primmer to get her to take me and Aggie to help her and then for me to get engaged in a few weeks—especially as Griff is so hard up, and we couldn't marry for ages. No, I am sure I was right. It would just complicate things, and we are all so happy. . . ."

She glanced at her watch and saw that time was getting on; she'd better get started on her hour-glass. She took her old penknife, opened it, and started to scratch the outline in the rather soft sandstone that made the walls of the cave. She became so interested that when next she consulted her

watch it was to find she had been a couple of hours in the cave. It was time she was recrossing the river and starting off to try and get secretly into the house. She had not seen a soul by the riverside so far, so evidently no one had guessed at her hiding-place.

She took off her shoes and was about to roll down her stockings when she noticed something different about the floor of the cave; it didn't seem nearly so large. In another moment she realized with dismay what had been happening while she was engrossed with her carving—the flood had increased to an alarming degree. Like all mountain streams the Melk was subject to very sudden rises when there had been a heavy downpour on the hills; all the tiny watercourses then swelled up and discharged their tumbling waters into the main stream, so that the spate would come down at times in a wall of water. It had not been quite as sudden as all that, or she would have noticed it, but the water had gradually risen several feet in the couple of hours she had been sitting there. Could she manage now to get across?

She stuffed her stockings into her shoes, tied the laces together and slung them round her neck to leave her hands free; then she stepped into the water. She was no sooner out of the cave than she saw that she was attempting the impossible, for immediately the water swirled above her knees, and farther out it was rushing past in a muddy torrent that would instantly have swept her off her feet.

She looked up and down, as far as she could see, but not a soul was to be seen on the farther bank. Behind her the rock rose straight up for twenty feet or more without a foothold, as far as she knew.

Susan was trapped.

She went back to the dry ledge, put on her shoes and stockings and began to consider the situation. She didn't think there was any danger of drowning. The cave was high, and there were other ledges to which she could climb with an effort, but it was late afternoon now; night was coming on and no one knew where she was. A night alone in the dark cave with the water rising and rising around her seemed inevitable, and Susan began to feel afraid.

There was the chance that when she was missed they would come up the waterside looking for her, and she might be able to attract their attention, though shouting would be no use, as her voice would never be heard above the roar of the water. Then there was Griff. He had pointed out the cave to her and might remember about it and come to look for her. A man in wading-boots might be able to get across, though she was doubtful of even

that. Still, it would be comforting just to know that they had discovered her whereabouts, and were alive to her danger.

Then she had a bit of luck. In the pocket of the waterproof she found a man's large white handkerchief. She waded back into the water and managed to tie it to the branch of a little rowan tree that was sticking out of a crack in the stone at the side of the cave.

"If they come this way, they will see my flag of distress, anyhow," she said to herself.

After that there was nothing to do but to wait. She was chilled to the bone by this time and very hungry, and as the time went slowly past her usual high spirits deserted her. She sat huddled up in a corner, watching the water rise farther and farther up the floor of the cave, shivering with cold and fear and sobbing a little now and then as she thought of the long night before her.

Already the darkness was beginning to fall, and once night had really set in she had no means of advertising her whereabouts—no flashlight, no box of matches—nothing.

At last she felt that she must wait no longer, but climb up to a higher ledge before it grew really dark. It was more difficult than she thought; several times she fell back into the water now covering the floor, and she broke her nails and injured a finger as she scraped and dug for a hold in the cracks of the stone. At last, by a supreme effort, she drew herself up, but the ledge was so narrow she could only kneel uncomfortably on it, supporting herself with her hands, gripping the edge of the rock. She was past crying now, being too terrified of falling off the ledge to have strength for anything but to hang on. She began to pray for Griff to come. All her thoughts centred upon him and she even tried to reach him in thought as she had heard of people doing. "Oh, Griff," she prayed, "do remember about showing me Kirk's Hole! Do think of Kirk's Hole. Oh, please, please, please, Griff darling, do come and find me, because I think I'm going to die if you don't." Then she tried to reach God—though God always seemed so far away—and even went so far as to promise, in true Susan vein, that if He got her out of this mess she would think twice before lending helping hands again—"or legs", she concluded, for death itself wouldn't quench Susan's inexhaustible humour, "for really it was helping legs I lent this time."

It grew quite dark, and Susan's last hope was gone. She could see nothing but the sheen of the water below her and hear nothing but the roar of the flood. She had managed to ease her cramped position a little and was wondering if she should attempt to stretch herself full-length along the ledge

and spend the night in that position when a faint sound caught her attention, and instantly she was all alert. Griff! Griff had remembered and found her? Again there was a sound of rumbling and she tried to pierce the gloom of the cave and see what had caused it, but all she could make out was the faint outline of the opening and the sheen of the water. The next moment a voice seemed to sound close to her ear: “Susan! Are you there, Susan?”

Griff had come. She felt so sure of it, she gave a glad cry.

“Griff! Griff! Oh, I thought you were never coming!”

“Where are you?” said a voice. But it was not Griff’s voice—it was Simeon Quest’s.

CHAPTER XVIII

SIMEON QUEST

In the midst of her relief disappointment smote Susan's heart. She had been so sure it was Griff. She had been longing so much for Griff to hold her and comfort her as he knew so well how to do. Possibly her chagrin crept into her voice for she had exclaimed, "Oh, I thought it was Griff!" before she could pull herself together, and then, as a tall figure loomed up beside her and two arms came round her, she suddenly began to sob. He lifted her up, then put her in a sitting position on the shelf and with his arms round her held her there, standing knee-deep in the water himself.

"I'm so sorry, Susan," he said, dropping the Miss in his relief at finding her and his dismay that she was crying, as he thought, for another man. "Thorne is out looking for you, but I happened to see the glimmer of your handkerchief as I flashed my torch and climbed down. But I'll take you home—don't cry. I'll take you to him."

"Oh!" gasped Susan. "It's not that—it's just—just——"

"Yes, I know. Poor child, how long have you been here?"

"Ages and ages and ages. I thought Griff would never come. I thought he would remember about Kirk's Hole—and the water kept getting nearer . . ." She ended in more sobs, while he got out a handkerchief and tried to wipe her face.

"You are frozen with cold," he said, feeling her hands. "Wait a moment."

He steadied her with one hand at a time while he took off his coat and wrapped it round her, pushing her hands into the sleeves in the darkness.

"Now," he said, "we must get you home. If I carry you through the water out of the cave, do you think you could manage to climb a little? You see, I'll have to take you up the cliff by the rocks, it would be too dangerous to try and ford the water. There's a tremendous spate coming down."

"Oh!" said Susan in dismay. "I couldn't go by the cliff; it's sheer up the rock. I'd fall."

"Oh no, you won't. I'll get you up all right, if you can just help yourself a little."

"But how?" Susan gasped. "I looked at it; it goes straight up with no foothold."

“Ah, but you don’t know the banks of the Melk as well as I do. I’ve climbed over every inch of them as a boy. You must put your faith in me. Thorne could hardly have got down even if he had seen your signal, you know, because he wouldn’t have known the way. Won’t you trust me?”

Susan was terrified at the thought of the steep cliff, but there seemed nothing else to do. It was either that or stay in the cave all night with the water rising round them.

“I’ll try,” she faltered.

“That’s a good girl. Now first you must sit on my shoulder and I’ll carry you out of the cave. There’s a ledge over the top. You can reach it by standing on my shoulder.”

He lifted her without more ado. He was even taller than Griff, and though not so broad she realized his sinewy strength as he swung her up with ease on to his shoulder.

He stood as steady as a rock in the swirling water while she managed, by gripping the rock in front of her, to stand and steady herself on his shoulder. The shelf was then easily within reach, and as she climbed on to it she realized that her nerve and strength were coming back.

In two minutes he was up beside her and then began a strenuous climb up the steep slope. They could never have done it if he had not known every foot of the way, which followed a series of broken cracks and seams across the face of the rock to where it merged into less precipitous slopes among boulders and heather. For a great part of the way he had first to find a safe footing for Susan, then climb upward and help her to climb or draw her up himself. To add to their difficulties, the rain came on again, which made their footholds slippery. Susan’s spirit, however, once she was started on the climb, rose to meet all demands. There was something about Simeon that gave her absolute confidence. She felt that he knew exactly what he was about and would not ask her to attempt anything that was really beyond her powers, and he was always there, quick with a helping hand if she felt herself slipping or found the upward pull more than she could manage. The last bit was the most difficult of all, for the rock above them sloped outwards a little and he had to leave her a few moments alone in the dark clinging to the gnarled roots of a tree, while he climbed up and then leaned over to grasp her arms and help her up.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “I have my feet fixed round a small tree and am as firm as a rock. Just cling to me and pull yourself up, helping yourself with your feet.” He had shown her how to grasp his wrists above his hands while he held her arms. She was afraid for a moment of swinging outwards

and dragging him down, but once she had felt the firm hold and the strong pull of his sinewy arms she felt renewed confidence in his strength and, leaving her foothold, was drawn upwards till she could help herself with her feet against the rock. Then a final pull and struggle and they were safely up among tree-roots and soaking heather and able to sit down for a moment's respite.

He had taken his coat off her at the start of the climb, as it was so big and it impeded her movements, and worn it himself. Now he drew her inside and wrapped it round her to shelter her from the rain as they rested before finishing the upward climb. She felt terribly shy sitting held up close against this stranger to whom she had spoken so little, who always seemed so dark and taciturn and quiet; especially as he made no effort to speak, to tease her or make love to her as Griff would have done. He simply held her, closely wrapped round in his coat. Above her his lean out-jutting chin was lifted, his inscrutable eyes stared out into the darkness, his lean, bony wrists were crossed in front of her, imprisoning her, and he leaned his body forward to shelter her still more from the pouring rain.

For one moment, she thought about Griff. Of course she loved Griff and had wanted him to come, but she wondered if he could have done that climb, and knew in her heart that he might have done it himself in daylight but could never have heaved her up and swung her across from foothold to foothold as this queer, dark-avised man had done. Yet Griff, for all his couple of inches less in height, looked broader and stronger than Simeon.

"His muscles must be made of steel and whipcord," she said to herself, and suddenly, she didn't know why, her action was quite involuntary, she put her hands over his wrists as they held her. They were cold and wet and as hard as iron. He gave a sudden movement as she did so, and then sat quite still. They remained like that for a few minutes while the rain beat down all around them. Then he unclasped his hands and laid one of them over hers as it lay on his wrist, holding it for a moment before he spoke, then:

"Are you rested?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered back, that unaccountable feeling of shyness making her voice tremulous.

He looked down at her.

"You are not fit for the long road to Round-about House, though. I'm going to take you to my old friend, Mrs. Delacorne. We are quite close to the house."

"I—" said Susan quickly—"I'd rather go home. Griff . . . and Aggie and the others will be wondering where I am."

"I'll go down and tell them," he said.

"But I'm afraid of Mrs. Delacorne. I don't want to go to her house."

"Afraid? Why?"

"Aggie doesn't like her. She is some relation of William's. Besides, everybody is afraid of her. She's supposed to be a terrible old lady."

"Well, we'll go and see." He stood up as if it was all settled, and raised Susan to her feet. She found her legs were still shaking beneath her from the strain of the climb. Without a word he bent and lifted her up.

"Keep your head down against my shoulder," he said. "We are going through trees," and he strode off.

"Oh, but I can walk quite easily," Susan declared, and began to struggle. He put her down and pulled her arm through his.

"Very well," he said. "Lean on me and try it."

She stumbled forward a few steps and then tripped. Susan was done, for once in her life. She had had no food since breakfast; she had run and waded and been through hours of terror, and then she had had to put out every ounce of energy to climb that terrible cliff—not only physical but mental energy, because she had been so terrified in the darkness and the rain.

Suddenly she felt utterly exhausted; her knees shook and bent beneath her; she turned and, clinging to his arm with both hands, burst into tears.

"Oh, I can't!" she cried. "I can't! I'm done!"

"Of course you are done," he said, and his voice sounded cold to her. He lifted her again and almost threw her over his shoulder and strode on a few steps, then he stopped, put her down, took off his coat and wrapped it round her.

"Poor, cold, tired little girl," he said, in a voice so low and gentle it made the warm tears well over her eyelids again. Then he lifted her again and threading his way through the trees and heather came out on to a grassy walk bordered by pines. It wound round to the front of a low stone house with pillars and steps to the front door, where, setting her down, he pulled on an old-fashioned bell-handle and set the echoes ringing through the house.

Shy and miserable, Susan shrank up against him. In a few minutes they heard a chain being slid along a groove, a bolt shot back, and the door was opened by an old manservant who stood peering out of a vast lamp-lit hall, wrinkling grey bushy eyebrows above old rheumy eyes.

"Hullo, Grimsy," said Simeon Quest. "Are you not dead yet?"

"Grimsy" (Susan found out afterwards that his name was Grimes, and he had been butler there for over forty years) stood staring, his thin shoulders

bent forward.

"It's not—" he said—"it's not Master Simeon?"

Simeon stretched out his hand and, taking the old man's, shook it.

"Yes, you're right, Grimes. You're a wonder. Never forgot a face, did you?"

The old man was delighted at this compliment and would have started off on a long talk, but Simeon drew Susan forward.

"I've a lady here, Grimes, who has had an accident. Is Mrs. Delacorne in?"

The old man seemed doubtful about their reception, Susan thought, but at a word from Simeon he led them through the dim hall and opened a door into a brightly lit drawing-room. Hardly had he done so when an old lady appeared behind him, leaning on a stick.

"Who is it?" she said in a peremptory voice, then, seeing Simeon, she gave a start.

"Bless my soul! Is that Simeon Quest? I heard you were here. Why have you never been to see me?"

"Because," said Simeon, "last time I was here you told me never to darken your doors again."

"Toots! You were a young scoundrel. You'd been poaching my waters—I hope you've learned your manners since then."

"I hope so," said Simeon. "I apologize about the salmon, and I certainly was a young scoundrel."

"Who's this?" The old lady's brown gimlet eyes were turned suddenly on to Susan.

"It's Miss Tyndal. She's had an adventure and been nearly drowned in the Melk. The spate came down and she got into Kirk's Hole. Have you any brandy?"

He asked the question quickly because Susan's legs had suddenly begun to give way again, and she would have pitched forward on to the floor if he hadn't caught her.

She came round to find herself on a sofa with brandy stinging down her throat.

"I'm so sorry," she apologized. "I think I must be feeling faint."

The old lady laughed. She was standing at the foot of the sofa looking at Susan, and turned to Simeon:

"What's to be done with her?"

"I think you should give her a good meal—she's had nothing to eat since breakfast—and keep her for the night. I'll go off and let them know at Round-about House where she is. They are all out looking for her."

"Oh no!" said Susan, starting up. "I feel much better. I'm quite able to go home."

"Nonsense," said the old lady in her decisive voice. "You'll stay here for the night and I'll send you down in the car in the morning."

Susan gave in, and in a very short time found herself tucked into a large, old-fashioned bed in what, she was told, was the "Parrot" room, with a tray on her knee containing soup, chicken, and a sweet. There were china parrots on the mantelpiece, another swung inside a hoop, the curtains had parrots in every gay colour imaginable on them, and really, she thought to herself, the old lady sitting by her bed completed the scheme, being not unlike an old parrot herself, with her hooked nose, her thin crooked fingers, and her dress of shot green and blue silk.

"You are one of these young London lasses who are running Alice Primmer, aren't you?" asked her hostess, and then she started to find out all she could about Miss Primmer and the new venture. Susan was tired and would have liked to lie still and quiet, for she had a great deal to think over, but Mrs. Delacorne was evidently a very curious old lady who liked to be at the bottom of everything. She seemed to know a great deal, too, for she knew that Aggie was at Round-about House and asked no end of questions about her and William.

"I suppose you know all about that?" she said, looking sharply at Susan.

"About what?" said Susan.

"William's parents and so on."

"No," Susan answered her. "I just know that William is related to you in some way and that you don't care to acknowledge it, but I don't know any of the whys or wherefores. Aggie isn't a chatterer."

"Well, you can ask her to tell you about it when you get home," said the surprising woman. "But don't think I'm going to have anything to do with them."

"Oh, but you would love William," said Susan instantly. "He's a dear little boy"—and she proceeded to tell her some tales about him. Indeed, Susan got so interested that the sleepiness that had threatened to overtake her when they began to talk quite vanished. She always got excited about William's virtues. Besides, she wanted to keep the inquisitive old dame, as she called her in her own mind, off Dorrie. She had managed so far to keep

her out of the conversation, though she had been hard put to it to account for the "accident" whereby she had been nearly drowned in the Melk.

Mrs. Delacorne had accepted, so far, a hint of Simeon's about fishing and being caught in the spate, possibly because she was much more interested in Miss Primmer, whom she knew well, and Aggie and William, than in Susan herself.

Simeon had gone off at once to let them know at Round-about House where she was, and it had been arranged that Susan would be taken home in the morning.

At last Susan was left alone and she began to go over in her mind all that had passed since she heard her name called and found it was Simeon Quest and not Griff who had come to the rescue.

"Of course, I did want Griff," she said to herself. "But I don't really think dear Griff would have got me up that horrible precipice—still, it wouldn't have been so bad in the cave with Griff, he's so funny and cheerful, and Simeon is so very solemn." Griff—Simeon—Simeon Griff—she began to mix them up, and before she knew any more she was dreaming that Griff, Simeon, and she were all struggling together in the muddy flood-water of the Melk.

She breakfasted with her hostess, who was really very kind and who, to Susan's infinite surprise, invited her to come back again. It was not a casual invitation either; she said that Simeon was to bring her up to Corne to lunch the following Sunday, and would not listen to any excuses about not being able to get away or anything of that kind.

"Just you tell Alice Primmer that I insisted," said she. "Alice knows me of old, and though we quarrelled about those horrible Cobbs, whom she insisted on having in her house, she is very well aware that quarrels don't really sever old friendships."

"Can I bring William, then?" asked Susan daringly.

To her surprise—she really was a most unaccountable person—Mrs. Delacorne laughed.

"Bring him if you like," she said. "But don't think I don't see through you. I'm a lonely old woman with lots of money to leave, and you've got it into your head I may leave some to William."

Susan was so startled at this that she instantly denied it, with such evident honesty that Mrs. Delacorne was bound to believe her.

"I didn't know you had lots of money," Susan assured her. "And if I had I would have thought you had it all settled to leave to your nearest relations.

William is just a distant relative, isn't he? It was *you* I was really thinking of. I thought William would amuse you."

"It takes more than a precocious imp of six to amuse me," said the old lady. Then she added, as an afterthought: "You do it yourself, though."

And then the car came round and Susan was taken back to Round-about House.

CHAPTER XIX

ODDS AND ENDS

SUSAN arrived home in state in Mrs. Delacorne's car to discover that her ruse had, after all, only succeeded to a certain extent. When Simeon got back the previous evening Aggie had been on the lookout for him, and when he had told his story they had decided to tell the couple from the Home that Dorrie was perfectly safe, but that she was so distressed about going back he had had to promise her not to say where she was.

When earlier in the evening the two from the Home had returned to Round-about House with the story that Dorrie was lost on the moor, Aggie had just let them suppose it was Dorrie, as she had been too taken aback to know what to say, though she had very quickly thereafter jumped to the conclusion it was one of Susan's escapades. So the ensuing hunt had ostensibly been for Dorrie, only the inmates of Round-about House knowing it was Susan.

"Well," said Susan, on hearing this, "it was a good thing I stayed all night with Mrs. Delacorne."

"It sure was," said Aggie, dropping most unaccountably into the American language. "For we managed to get them to go away when Simeon assured them she was perfectly safe and tucked up in bed, but wouldn't say where she was."

"Did he absolutely refuse?"

"Oh yes! Said he had given his word and so forth. And it's true that if we can keep her another few days they can't force her to go back without going through all the official routine again. But I had a word with the nurse, who is really a nice soul, and, though she had to be very careful what she said, I saw she thought if Miss Primmer would go up and see them and undertake to look after Dorrie she might get her home."

"Well," said Susan, "the whole thing seems to me to be to keep her quiet and happy and not let her get excited. Did you hear that Carrick-Symthe told Miss Primmer it was probably a little dint in the bone pressing on Dorrie's brain and an operation might cure her, or that if she lived a very calm, healthy, country life she might never take fits? It seems there has been talk of an operation before, but it is difficult because the very mention of it made

her have a bad series of fits. She has a frightful terror of doctors and chloroform and all that sort of thing."

"Well," Aggie concluded, "I don't see why she shouldn't live an absolutely calm and happy life here at home with her 'Aunt'. It's in the middle of the country and there's no excitement from one year's end to the other."

"Oh, isn't there!" said Susan.

"Well, you know what I mean. Nothing to excite Dorrie. She doesn't rush headlong into adventures like you."

When Susan saw Miss Primmer and told her about Mrs. Delacorne she flushed up with pleasure. "We used to be very friendly," she said, "and have such nice bridge parties, till she got a bee in her bonnet about Isabella and Cobb and said she wouldn't come back to the house as long as they were here; so, of course, I wouldn't go to her house when she wouldn't come to mine."

"Well, the Cobbs are gone, so you should make it up," said Susan. "I think she's lonely, too."

"I never feel sure about Isabella and Cobb," said Miss Primmer. "I think they'll *do something*."

"They couldn't do anything if you wouldn't be frightened of them," said Susan. "After all, nobody's interested in that old story."

Miss Primmer flushed up and changed the subject.

Griff came in with the Colonel shortly afterwards and Susan had to tell her story all over again and be teased by Griff, who at once said he was glad Simeon had been there. "I might have managed to swim across to you, Susan darling, but I'd no more have thought of climbing up there than I'd think of climbing a chimney-stack. We'd have had to sit all night in that cold and clammy cave—all right for me, but not for you, Susannah! But Quest is quite a famous climber, you know, and belongs to all the swell Alpine clubs and suchlike. You need to have money to do that sort of thing, though."

"Has he money?" asked Aggie, who was listening.

"Pots," said Griff. "Well, I'm going off to see Dorrie. I promised her a game of table-tennis."

Later on in the evening Susan and Aggie were alone in the kitchen, and Susan asked her what was the real relationship between William and Mrs. Delacorne.

"William's grandfather was her brother," said Aggie at once. "So she is his great-aunt."

"And why won't she acknowledge William?"

"There was a bitter quarrel between Mrs. Delacorne's father and brother, and Mrs. Delacorne took their father's side. There were just the two of them in the family, so the old man disowned his son and left everything to Mrs. Delacorne. She married a cousin of hers, but they had no children and he died about two years after they were married. She's lived alone and nursed her anger against her brother, William's grandfather, ever since. The quarrel was partly about the girl he married. Well, they had a son and he married my friend, Nannie Shakespeare, and William is their little boy. That's why she will have nothing to do with William Shakespeare, poor lamb."

"Well, I'm going to take him to see her," said Susan.

"I don't think you should," said Aggie. "She will just think we're nosing after her money for him."

"Oh yes, she told me that!" said Susan coolly. "But she can't think William is nosing after it, and she can't think you are, and I don't care twopence if she thinks I am."

"Well, have it your own way," said Aggie. "But *I'm* not going near the woman."

That was how it came about that Susan and William were often to be seen thereafter going up to Corne House. Not that Mrs. Delacorne was instantly conquered by William as Susan, of course, expected. The first time she took him was to the Sunday lunch as she had promised.

Simeon Quest was surprised when she appeared in her best dress—it was green with a little white vest, and really Susan looked very nice in it, with her fair hair, pink cheeks, and those surprising blue-green eyes of hers which seemed to reflect the green of her frock and take on the colours of a bit of lapis-lazuli under the shade of her hat—with William in tow.

"Are you taking the boy?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes," said Susan. "I said I would."

"Did she ask him?"

"No, not exactly. But I suggested him. You see, I had my reasons."

Simeon smiled his rare smile.

"What are you smiling at?"

"Well, I was just thinking that the redoubtable Mrs. Delacorne has met her match."

"Oh yes," said Susan confidently, "I'm a match for Mrs. Delacorne! You see, she thinks all her relatives want her money, and she hates the lot. But

I'm not a relative and I don't want her money, so she can't brow-beat me—not that I couldn't do with some of it," she added candidly.

"But William's a relative, so she will be prejudiced from the start."

"Oh yes, it's a pity he's a relative and she hated his grandfather, so he hasn't a chance." She sighed. "But I think she ought to know him."

Mrs. Delacorne said: "How do you do?" to William, and then rang for Grimes, who, she said, would take the child away and amuse him.

"He'll be much happier in the kitchen," she continued decidedly, seeing Susan's disappointment. "Cook has a puppy, and he can have a ride on the Shetland pony. I keep it for the children the Argyle-Smiths and the Delacornes bring here to win me with their charms, but I hate having children used as decoys for my money."

"Oh!" said Susan, getting rather red, and looked to Simeon for sympathy. She got none; there wasn't a ghost of a smile on his face. "I wish Griff had been here," she thought petulantly. "He would have stuck up for me, or helped me out by saying something funny or just even *looking* sympathetic."

The old lady laughed. "Don't look so guilty," she said to Susan. "And don't mind me. I always say what I think and sometimes a little more, and I don't think any the less of you for doing your best for a child who isn't any relation to you. . . . Did his aunt, or whatever he calls her—Miss Agnew—ask you to bring him to see me?"

"She did not," said Susan. "She didn't want him to come. She said you would think she was nosing after your money for him."

If frankness was to be the order of the day, Susan was quite equal to holding her own.

William had stood gazing at them all this time with wide, rather frightened eyes.

"I think, Mrs. Delacorne," said Simeon, "there is rather a sensitive soul listening to all this."

She turned at once and looked at William directly for the first time.

"Do you know who I am?" she asked him abruptly.

"Mrs. Delacorne," he said.

"Anything else?"

He stared at her, uncomprehending for a moment, then evidently thinking she was referring to his manners, said shyly: "Thank you very much."

There was a moment's silence and then Simeon spoke.

"Pity my simplicity," he quoted softly.

Mrs. Delacorne had for an instant looked a little taken aback, and when she spoke again her voice, though by no means gentle, was perhaps a shade less aggressive.

"Would you like to see the puppy and have a ride on the little white pony?" she asked.

He looked at her, puzzled; it was evident he was trying to fit this in with her, to him, angry voice of a moment before.

"You would, wouldn't you, William?" said Susan.

"Yes, please."

"Well, he's not a chatterbox, anyhow," said Mrs. Delacorne, and then to Grimes who had arrived on the scene: "Take the little boy downstairs and take him out on the pony after he's had his lunch," she commanded, then turning to Susan: "Yes, I'm a hard-hearted old woman, there's no getting over it."

In spite of all this, Susan liked her. She liked her even better when she called to take her a book one afternoon. By this time Susan had come to do a number of little jobs for her, one of them being to choose her library books at the library in Culverston. The librarian there, said the old lady in her forthright way, was a fool and always sent her rubbish to read. Susan quickly found out that she liked any book dealing with Victorian times and detested modern sex-ridden novels. She shared with Susan, too, an interest in Royalties, both ancient and modern; so whenever a new book came out on the French Revolution, the fate of the Czar of Russia and his family, the life of Queen Elizabeth, or any Royal memoirs, Susan ordered them at once and they both enjoyed reading and discussing them. She helped her with her correspondence too, and did quite a lot of secretarial work for her, besides matching her silks for her embroidery, helping her with the antique domestic implements she collected, and various other odd jobs.

It was quite evident that she liked Susan, but all that could be said about William, for whose acceptance Susan was much more anxious, was that she put up with him more or less good-naturedly. She always tired very quickly of him, and sent him off to play with the puppy or to ride the pony or amuse himself in the tool-house in the garden.

William adored the pony, whose name was "Shaggy", because he looked shaggy—a very satisfactory reason indeed to William.

As it happened on this particular day Susan was rather pleased with life in general. She had had a letter from Bede who had started working for herself in a sort of haphazard way, but was making quite a small success.

Sally too, her great friend, had got a post, and they had taken the little flat at the top of No. 33. It had only two rooms and a kitchenette, but it was self-contained. A real flat with a door of its own, which you could lock, as Bede said, and be "king of your castle". The two girls still helped Sally's mother by waiting at the "Green Lizard" in the evenings when the little restaurant was busiest, and they had been offered the flat in return if they could manage to furnish it. *So you can come and visit us in our own house*, Bede had ended up grandiloquently. *We can easily put you up!*

Then things were much more satisfactory about Dorrie. She was in splendid health and getting quite plump. They had succeeded in their scheme of hiding her and also in having her at home. Miss Primmer had really done that entirely on her own, and though the scheme was just on trial for a short time, it looked as though poor Dorrie were home for good.

They were glad for Miss Primmer's sake and for Dorrie's own, though she was anything but a help in the establishment. There was a childishness about her that made them all very indulgent to her and even fond of her, and the only rift, if it could be called a rift, was that she had not taken to William, the reason being obvious enough, for Miss Primmer thought the world of William, and Dorrie was jealous. Not that there were any signs of real ill-feeling, just a slight petulance on Dorrie's part sometimes; if William was being taken notice of, she would act like a child herself, pushing herself forward and chattering or asking: "Isn't it time William went to bed, now?" or reminding her "Aunt", "You said, Aunty, William had to go and play in the kitchen."

She never played with William or amused him as the others did, and she did not like Susan always taking him with her when she went to Corne.

"Couldn't I go, Susan?" she would ask. "You always take William, and I'd love to go."

"Well, you see, Mrs. Delacorne hasn't asked you, Dorrie," Susan would reply good-naturedly. "But I'll speak about you again and see if she takes the hint."

"I'm sure she doesn't always ask William," Dorrie said quickly.

"Mrs. Delacorne is William's grand-aunt," said Susan, a little stiffly. "You aren't any relative, you know."

"Still, she might take a fancy to me," said Dorrie, quite seriously, and without a spark of fun or humour. She was quite hurt when Susan laughed. Though Dorrie laughed a lot herself she was sadly deficient in a sense of humour, and could not bear to be laughed at.

The boarding-house was doing well too, and Griff had stopped teasing her to announce their engagement—in fact, she frowned a little bit remembering Griff. Of course, he was a dear to be sweet to them all, but it was a little confusing to have him calling Aggie and Dorrie and herself all "Sweetheart" or "Darling" as the fancy took him. Still, that was just Griff's way. He was a darling and so kind and good to everybody, helping them all —getting William out of scrapes with the Colonel, playing dominoes with Dorrie and teaching her clock-golf and croquet, as she had to play quiet games, and carrying her about since she had hurt her ankle one day when she slipped on the wet grass. It was practically better, but she couldn't go downstairs or up or down any steps yet. . . .

All these thoughts and reflections kept Susan's mind employed as she climbed the lane now bordered by silverweed and the frothing of lady's lace in the hedges. William was with her as usual and near the gates she passed Mrs. Cobb, who never could refrain from a sneer or veiled insult when she met Susan alone.

"Taking your little boy for a walk," she said today, as she passed, and then gave a sneering laugh.

Susan took no notice. If Mrs. Cobb thought William was her little boy she was welcome to. One day she had heard her remark in a loud voice to a woman who was with her when she and William overtook them, "Tries to pass him off as a Delacorne to those as don't know the truth." But Susan wasn't going to bandy words with Mrs. Cobb; she was only too glad to let sleeping dogs lie, and the Cobbs could now, she thought, be described as sleeping dogs, who only opened one eye and gave a snarl when anyone from Round-about House passed them. Miss Primmer was still afraid of them and seemed to think they were biding their time, but really Susan was too busy to consider this very seriously.

When they reached the house William would have liked to go straight off and interview the puppy, who had also now been given the simple but efficient name "Blackie", because he was black, and to try and induce "Tim" at the stables to put Shaggy's saddle on, but Susan always insisted upon him minding his manners and saying "How do you do?" to his hostess before he went off on pleasure bent.

She rang the bell and then, as she had begun to do, walked in and up to the drawing-room, but she paused at the door, surprised to hear voices within.

For a moment she thought of putting down the book and going away, but as she hesitated the door opened and a tall woman dressed in black and with

a large red face, powdered so thickly that it had a purple tinge, came out.

She looked at Susan in surprise and then said rudely: “Oh, are you the young woman who comes to type?”

“I’m Susan Tyndal,” said Susan. “I’ve called with a book for Mrs. Delacorne.”

Mrs. Delacorne heard her voice then, and called:

“Is that you, Susan? Come in. Have you got a book for me?”

Taking William’s hand, Susan entered. There were three other people there. Two girls, in their late twenties, she thought, and a youngish-looking man, whose legs were too thin for the plus-fours he wore, and who had in general a sort of second-rate look about him.

“This is Miss Tyndal,” said Mrs. Delacorne, and all three stared at her. She knew at once these were some of Mrs. Delacorne’s relatives, and that they were up against her. They watched William with sharp eyes as he went forward and said, “How do you do?”, and seemed relieved when he was told as usual to run and play.

“You’ll find some other youngsters to play with,” said Mrs. Delacorne.

Susan would have liked to beat a retreat at once, but Mrs. Delacorne insisted on her staying to tea, which was just being brought in.

Never did she spend a more uncomfortable hour. The four strangers, who had been introduced to her as Gordon-Smiths, all did their best to ignore her and make Mrs. Delacorne do the same. They talked eagerly together about matters of which Susan could know nothing. They helped themselves to everything and purposely forgot to pass the sandwiches or cakes to Susan; and when at last she got up to go they all showed her plainly that they were glad to be quit of her.

“Well, of all the boors,” said Susan to herself, as she went down the steps into the garden. “Of all the boors! My patience, I don’t wonder at Mrs. Delacorne detesting her relatives.”

Behind a tree near the door William was hiding. He ran out when he saw her and took hold of her hand.

“Hullo, William,” she said. “I was coming round to the paddock to look for you. Have you had a ride on Shaggy?”

William shook his head.

“Shaggy is the boys’ pony,” he said. “They wouldn’t let me ride. They said I mustn’t ride him ever again.”

“Never mind, William,” said Susan, as brightly as she could, though her heart was sore for him. “I hope you had a good tea.”

“They chased me away, Aunty Susan. You see it’s really their house, and they said I wasn’t to have any tea.”

“The little blackguards!” said Susan. “How many were there?”

“There were two and there was a gal.”

“Well, I’ll tell you what—we’ll run all the way home and have buttered eggs for tea. I hadn’t any either, and I’m famished”—and taking his hand Susan rushed him laughing down the hill.

William loved buttered eggs.

CHAPTER XX

SUSAN HAS SEVERAL BLOWS IN THE "MIDRIFF"

It was a day or two after that that Susan had what she called a blow in the midriff, not that she knew, any more than you or me, what a midriff was, but that's what she said.

For some time she had thought that Dorrie's ankle was a long time in getting better. She skipped about the house, it is true, but she couldn't go up or downstairs, as, she explained, she had to put all her weight on the bad foot, so she was carried up and down, which was easy enough, she was so little, and it was usually Griff who carried her, though Simeon or the Colonel cheerfully swung her down if they were about.

Susan had come out of her room rather quietly, as Miss Primmer was having her afternoon rest, when she suddenly saw Dorrie leave her aunt's room (they were so used to thinking of Dorrie as Miss Primmer's niece that it would just confuse things to say her mother) and slip quietly and swiftly down the stairs.

"Well," she said to herself, "I'm glad the ankle is all right at last."

She didn't see Dorrie to mention it to her, and had really forgotten about it till later in the evening when she got the blow in her midriff, for she heard Dorrie calling Griff from the top of the stairs to carry her down.

"That ankle of yours is taking a long time to get strong, Dorrie," Griff remarked as he ran up two steps at a time. "Let's try to walk down together. I'll help you."

But Dorrie's ankle gave way and he had to carry her.

Susan observed all this with the greatest surprise. She had never dreamt of Dorrie pretending that her ankle hurt, and the realization took her breath away.

"Now what," she said to herself, "is the meaning of this?"

It didn't need so very much perspicuity to find out what the meaning was. Dorrie must be getting rather too fond of Griff. Perhaps Griff had guessed it himself, for he certainly had done his best to get Dorrie to walk, teasing and encouraging and laughing at her in his usual happy way. Somehow, Susan had never dreamed of anything like that happening—Dorrie, though she was over twenty, being so very young, childish even, for

her years. Well, something had better be done about it. Perhaps she and Griff had better become openly engaged after all. “Though what the use of it is, I don’t know,” she concluded. “Griff has only his salary and that hardly keeps himself. Of course, I suppose he will come in eventually for the Colonel’s money. He has plenty; he might even raise Griff’s salary if he were going to get married, but I don’t like the idea of building on that or expecting it even; and as for waiting for dead men’s shoes, neither Griff nor I could bear the idea and. . .” She tried to analyse her reluctance to getting properly engaged, and after trying several reasons ended up, “Anyhow, I hate long engagements, detest them, hanging on and on and people asking when the wedding is going to be and looking surprised that the date isn’t fixed.”

Still, she felt something must be done and resolved to have a chat with Aggie on the subject.

But that day was to be full of blows in the midriff. So much so that Susan should really have known where it was by bedtime.

Aggie had taken it into her head to spring-clean the attic.

“But it isn’t spring,” Susan reminded her. “You’ve missed the bus. You should have cleaned it before the summer solstice.”

“Summer solstice be hanged!” said Aggie. “Don’t air your M.A. degree on me. I don’t know what the summer solstice is and have no intention of learning. I’m going to turn out that attic. It’s simply rammed full of interesting stuff, inches deep in cobwebs and dust.”

So they dolled themselves up in old frocks and overalls, with blue-and-white checked dusting-cloths tied over their heads, and started in.

Once started they got really interested, for all sorts of old Victorian litter came into view as they turned out boxes and trunks. Hand-embroidered fire-screens and fender-stools and framed samplers, including the one that Miss Primmer had mentioned when first she met Aggie, signed “Patricia Agnew”, which was instantly appropriated by Patricia’s modern namesake and laid aside to be begged for from Nanty. A box of beautifully made patchwork quilts and a roll of Paisley shawls came to view also, besides two boxes of early Victorian dresses and mantles, etc., that they decided at once were the very thing for the Dickens Play they were getting up for Christmas with the village dramatic society.

In fact, there was so much of interest to look over and rave about that very little work was done; but Susan didn’t mind, because in their enthusiasm over their finds Aggie and Susan came much nearer to their old jolly friendship than they had been for months.

Susan didn't know what it was, but Aggie had been "sort of queer", as she put it, since very shortly after settling down at Round-about House. Quite friendly and nice, but . . . well . . . stand-offish and a bit sharp-tongued. Of course, there always had been a sort of refreshing acid to Aggie's tongue, but wholly without any acrid quality, just her funny way of pretending she was much less soft-hearted than she really was; but these last months the acidity had really been more pronounced than usual, so much so that Susan had been at times a little hurt.

Still, they had had pretty hard going and much responsibility running the house, and Susan had generously put it down to worry on Aggie's part. But it was particularly satisfying now to be on the old laughing easy terms, and Susan decided that she had been quite wrong in thinking, as she had sometimes done, that something was the matter.

They were laying out with much laughter and fun an assortment of dresses, nankeen breeches, stocks, and suchlike to try on later in the day, when Griff's head appeared above the railings of the attic steps.

"What ho!" said he. "Nanty's on the warpath downstairs; there's a pair of her great-grandfather's breeks dropped into the hall and she says she will not have you girls destroying the clothes in the boxes—here she comes."

"Oh, but!" exclaimed Aggie, running down to meet Miss Primmer, who was toiling up with the trousers over her arm. "We aren't destroying them, Nanty. We *wouldn't*. They are beautiful things in the boxes and so rare, too. You said we could tidy them and that's what we are doing, but we'd love some of them for the play if you'd allow us to use them."

This mollified Miss Primmer and she sat down on a box to see what they had turned out. Close behind her came Dorrie, who had refused to join them earlier because the dust got in her nose.

"But Griff is here now," thought Susan to herself, and a little worried frown chased the laughter off her face.

"Oh, Susan," said Griff, "you do look nice in a check dusting-cloth and with a smudge on your nose. I'm going to stay and help."

"Well, Aggie looks quite as well as me," said Susan. "Why don't you compliment her? She has smudges all over her."

They both looked at Aggie, whose pale little face, with tightly pinned cloth round it and smudges under her eyes, looked somehow distractingly appealing and lovely, and there was an awkward silence for a moment because Griff's ready tongue seemed to have absolutely deserted him.

"Oh, Aggie——" he said at last, and stopped, and to Susan's amazement, Aggie suddenly turned her back on them and plunged into a

box, without speaking.

"Aggie," repeated Griff, and stopped again.

"I wish you would all clear out," came Aggie's muffled voice from the bottom of the trunk, "and let me get on—you and Susan can go away down to the kitchen and see about some lunch."

"That's queer," thought Susan. "Aggie sounds as if she were—almost—crying."

She stood looking at Griff, who was staring at Aggie's kneeling form by the box, and then turning round found Dorrie's eyes fixed on her with a very strange expression in them of, almost, dislike.

"Gosh!" thought Susan to herself. "I thought we were simply going to clear up this attic and have some fun, but it seems that instead of dust, or with it, we've stirred up all kinds of feelings and emotions. I think I'll decamp."

"No," she said aloud. "You help Aggie, Griff, and Dorrie and I will go and get some lunch ready. Come on, Dorrie."

"I can't," said Dorrie at once. "My ankle is hurting me with walking up."

But Susan thought it was high time the ankle business was finished. She was sorry for Dorrie, but she mustn't be allowed to make a fool of herself. Everybody would be seeing through the ankle ruse if it were allowed to go on.

"Nonsense," she said brusquely. "You are just frightened of your ankle, Dorrie. It's all right when you don't think of it. I saw you coming up the stairs like a lintie. Come on with me. I'll help you down."

"Yes," said Griff immediately, "you could do it if you tried, Dorrie. The ankle's just a little out of practice and needs using. Let Susan help you down, sw——" He stopped. "Like a good little girl."

"Griff sees it, that's evident," thought Susan, and then to her chagrin and to the undoing of both herself and Griff, Dorrie burst into tears.

"Oh," she sobbed, "you are all unkind! I hate you all. My ankle *is* sore. It is—it is!"

Both Griff and Susan were tender-hearted and there was something so childish and helpless in her grief that they both ran to comfort her. Miss Primmer was instantly upset too and turned on Susan.

"Her ankle does hurt her," she said, and putting her arms round Dorrie she drew her close, kissing and comforting her. "Griff will carry you down, my pet," she assured her. "It's nothing for a great, hefty lump like that to

carry my little frail girl down the stairs." Then she turned round to Aggie: "*You* surely don't mind him carrying her down, Aggie," she said.

"Me!" Aggie glared; no other word could describe it. "What have I to do with it? It's Susan's business, not mine!"

"I think it's Griff's," exclaimed Susan.

"Oh, I know nicely who's business——" began Miss Primmer, when Griff as usual came to the rescue.

"Of course it's mine, Nanty Primmer," he said, laughing. "I'm the hefty lump and here goes——" He swung Dorrie up in his arms and began leaping and careering down the stairs till he had her giggling and laughing.

"All safely landed," he called up. "No more bones broken, and the child's laughing again."

"I'm not a child," Susan heard the little petulant voice declaring as he carried her into the drawing-room. In a moment Susan followed down the stairs to see about the lunch. She was taking two steps at a time and a flying leap at the bottom, when she slipped and would have fallen if Simeon Quest, crossing the hall at the moment, hadn't caught her and steadied her.

"Gosh!" she exclaimed, as she found her balance. "I might have broken *my* ankle, and then *you* would have had to carry me up and down the stairs, poor wretch."

"I should not have been displeased," said Simeon gravely, and then walked off.

"Oh, dear," said Susan to herself. "Why couldn't I have held my tongue. Now he will think I was fishing—I'd hate him to think that."

However, there were plenty of other things to think about, and Susan was not given to bothering her head much about what effect she had on people.

It was late in the evening before she got an opportunity for a quiet word with Aggie. They were busy together in the shelved linen-room, going over some of the napery, when Susan spoke.

"I don't know if you've noticed," she said, "but I'm afraid that child Dorrie is getting too fond of Griff."

To her surprise, Aggie's lips seemed to tighten.

"And whose blame is that?" she said, and then to Susan's astonishment she broke out and blamed her for everything. Reproached her with dilly-dallying and keeping Griff hanging on a string; with not being frank and honest, either with herself or anybody else; with playing about with people's feelings; with being vain and self-centred. It all came out in a flood, while

Susan sat and stared, surprised beyond any words at the change in the usual quiet, sardonic, humorous Aggie. Her eyes blazed and she worked herself up until she seemed to be just saying anything that came into her head; anything against Susan that she could think of. At last she began to falter, and to Susan's complete bewilderment ended up by falling into tears and hard hiccuping sobs.

Susan jumped up and ran round the table to her.

"But, Aggie—but, Aggie!" she gasped.

"Oh, go away—go away!" exclaimed Aggie. "Get out—leave me alone!"

"But, Aggie——"

"Leave me alone. Go away! You're only making things worse. For pity's sake, *go* away!"

There was nothing to do but obey her. Aggie quite evidently wanted to be alone to recover herself, so Susan slipped away. She would have liked to be alone herself for a few minutes to recover from the shock of Aggie's sudden accusations and the blow that her sudden anger had been to her; but it was difficult to avoid people at Round-about House between tea and dinner, when they were all over the place. She thought it would be quiet in the dining-room and slipped in there; she could see to the fire and have a few minutes to pull herself together.

The lamps had not been lighted and the fire only showed a deep red glow under the caking of dross, that was waiting for a touch of the poker to spring into flame. Susan crossed the dark room, knelt on the hearthrug and, pushing in the poker, broke up the caked mass. Instantly the room was lit up by the leaping orange and scarlet flames and she saw that the Major was leaning forward in one of the arm-chairs; his dark, lean face suddenly appeared out of the shadows and, before there was time for its expression to change, something struck her with a queer feeling of pain—how intensely sad it was. She had caught him off his guard; evidently he had been sitting there in the darkness alone with his thoughts and they had been very sorrowful ones. There were deep lines drawn from his nose to his mouth, which was set in a sort of sardonic curve as if in derision of his own sorrow, whatever it might be. His eyes looked very deep and dark beneath the brows wrinkled forward and over them.

Instantly, however, the expression she had caught was banished as he smiled and put out a hand to take the poker from her. His cuff shot up and she saw the lean wrist with the whipcord muscles over which she had put

her hands in the rain the night he had dragged her up the river bank. She remembered it with a strange feeling of having missed something.

"Let me do that," he said, and finished poking the fire, while she sat back on the rug and put her hands round her knees. They sat silent for a moment, and then he said:

"You look—worried—or—hurt. Is anything the matter? Have you been crying?"

"Oh no!" said Susan. "Just nearly. Yes, I'm worried, and hurt too, but that doesn't matter so much, only I don't know what to do, or if I'm really to blame, or what."

"Could you tell me about it?"

Susan sat silent for a few minutes, ruminating. There wasn't any reason really why she shouldn't tell him; she was sure he would try and help her and that anything she said would be kept locked away behind that quiet, taciturn manner of his. That was one thing about people who didn't talk so much, they kept secrets. She wished—but here she drew up her straying thoughts and looked at Quest, who was sitting leaning forward in his chair, hands clasped loosely together, waiting patiently till she should speak.

"It's several things," she said slowly at last. "I'm worried about Dorrie. You know, her ankle really is better, poor lamb, but . . ."

"Yes," he said. "Malingering a little, isn't she, poor child. Thorne . . ."

"Yes, I think she is getting too fond of Griff, and you know——" She paused again and again he took up the story where she left off.

"You and he are engaged?"

"Oh no!" she said, surprised at herself for her quick disavowal. "Not really engaged, just——"

"Well, you have an understanding. Yes, I knew about that."

"Did you? How did you know?"

He was a long time in answering. At last:

"One is sometimes sensitive to things like that," he said slowly.

"Oh, but apart from that, of course, anything of that kind is out of the question just now with Dorrie——"

"Of course, poor child."

"But how to stop it without hurting her, that's the *puzzle*."

"Don't you think Thorne could manage that best?"

"Yes—only Griff is so affectionate—" she corrected herself—"friendly with everybody, and so lighthearted and gay, he *makes* people love him

without meaning to."

"I see"—the words were very dry.

"Don't you like Griff?" said Susan quickly.

"Yes, I do, very much," he answered at once; "only men with so much charm are a little dangerous at times."

"Yes, I know. But he is trying to let Dorrie see, gently, that she's—well, barking up the wrong tree," ended Susan in her usual unexpected manner.

He laughed.

"Whereas," said Susan wisely, "a douche of cold water might be better for her, if you see what I mean."

"Quite—not so much gentle hinting, but a little stern truth."

"Yes; and then there's another thing. Aggie thinks it's all my blame for not getting engaged properly to Griff. She is terribly angry with me. I never saw Aggie so angry before; she really *rated* me, and now she is crying and I don't know what to do."

He sat for a long time silent, rubbing his chin with his hand. So long that Susan turned in sudden dismay.

"Do you think it's all my blame, too?"

"No," he said at last. "But—if you and young Thorne love each other, it would clear up things, wouldn't it, if you became engaged—publicly, I mean. Neither Miss Agnew nor Dorrie would be in uncertainty then."

"Oh, Aggie knows," said Susan, with assurance. "It's Dorrie. Only——"

"Yes?"

"Well, you see, I promised to help Nanty—Miss Primmer—to run the boarding-house, and got rid of the Cobbs and upset all her life generally, and she would think it was sort of mean of me to go and get engaged right off, and besides——"

But the door opened and Christina came in to set the table, so Susan's sentence was never finished.

CHAPTER XXI

SURPRISES FOR SUSAN

SUSAN thought a long time over what Aggie and Simeon had said. That same night Aggie had come and asked her to forgive her.

"I think I must be tired," she said, "and overwrought, to go on like that. I didn't mean half the things I said, Susan—in fact, I just made a fool of myself, and you'll have to forgive me because it wasn't me that was speaking, just some evil spirit of tiredness and over-strung nerves that got into me."

Susan hugged her. "It's all right, darling, as long as you didn't mean it. Only I think all the same a great deal that you said was true, but . . ." and she went over again all the reasons why she didn't want her engagement to Griff published abroad.

Aggie was silent for a while and then said:

"But you *are* engaged, aren't you? It doesn't seem to me to matter about people knowing if it's the truth. Of course, anybody can see Griff adores you; he just brims over. But Dorrie won't see anything she doesn't want to." Then she added, tentatively: "She's a little more of a handful than we thought, isn't she?"

"Ye—s," admitted Susan slowly, and then added with more confidence, "But there's no doubt it was the best thing for Dorrie. Look how well she is. She's getting quite plump, and never the shadow of a fit."

"Well . . . perhaps," said Aggie; "but I don't like this business over the ankle. I do think she shouldn't be allowed to get ideas into her head about Griff."

"All right," said Susan. "I'll talk to him."

But that night in bed she had a brain-wave. At least, so she considered it. She would speak to Miss Primmer about Dorrie.

She did not quite understand, herself, her strong reluctance to her engagement being made public, but something that had happened that evening, while it puzzled her, had made her more reluctant than ever to say anything about herself and Griff.

She had met Griff in the garden as she was returning with William from a fishing expedition of their own—for minnows. They had caught three after

an hour's strenuous angling with a bright green net at the end of a yellow bamboo, and the minnows were now in a glass jam-jar, with a string handle —proof positive for everyone to see of William's marvellous prowess at what Susan called, to William's rapture, "wet-fly fishing". "Very wet," she added, *sotto voce*, after these explanatory notes to Griff. "We're both soaked!"

"So I see," said Griff. "I must really make William a rod for dry-fly fishing. Wouldn't you like that, William—a rod and a line with a hook on it?"

"I don't know about hooks," said Susan doubtfully, and then they changed the subject, for William had caught sight of Miss Primmer and was off, helter-skelter, to show her the minnows.

It was then that Susan had taken the opportunity to speak of Dorrie.

Griff reluctantly admitted that he had noticed her playing up about the ankle, but wanted to make light of it, to pooh-pooh her very evident preference for himself as a childish fancy. "She is really just a child," he said. "She's like a little girl home from boarding-school and ready to think she's in love with any man she meets. . . . Don't worry, Susan. The ankle is definitely better now and I'll try and ease her down gently to realities."

"Aggie says we ought to announce our engagement," said Susan. "She was quite cross with me about it—only for a minute of course. Aggie's never cross for more than a minute, but she was very emphatic for the moment and I sort of wondered if we *were* being quite fair to Dorrie."

It was then she got her slight surprise, for Griff, instead of jumping at the opportunity as he would a few weeks ago, said instantly:

"Honestly, Susan, I don't think you need bother in the least about Dorrie. I'll switch very emphatically on to the kindly brother attitude, which, of course, it's always been, poor kid! But I'll, so to speak, dig it in. Of course, if you like——" He paused.

"No, I'd much rather not," said Susan, at once.

"Does Aggie know—really?" asked Griff.

"Oh yes, of course. She always has. Aggie's so clever, it's no use trying to keep anything from her, but I don't think anybody else has a ghost of an idea—certainly not Nanty."

"All right, Susan, just as you like."

There certainly had been nothing to worry about in that, nothing whatever, and yet something nagged a little at the back of Susan's mind. She and Griff had had very little time together recently—but that was not to be

wondered at, rather the reverse, for with the summer there had been an influx of boarders and many of them had brought their wives and daughters and so on, so that Aggie and she had been run off their feet, not to speak of Hicks and Christina; and even Christina's daughter, a sharp girl who had just left school, had been called in to help and was being trained as table- and housemaid by Aggie. Sometimes Susan almost longed for the autumn and winter months, when they expected a very quiet season, for there was really nothing to attract winter visitors.

They both talked of a holiday to London then to see Bede and Sally and visit a theatre once again and look up all their old friends.

No—her mind went back to Griff—there was nothing to worry about, only she had expected to have to bring out all her arguments to persuade him and had felt when they weren't needed rather as one feels on expecting another step on the stairs which isn't there.

However, she was afraid that Griff was really too kind-hearted to deal effectively with Dorrie. Apart from Griff, personally it was just as well that Miss Primmer should realize that Dorrie wasn't the child she always seemed to consider her. After all, though they all accepted the evasion that she was her aunt, she really was her mother, and the proper one to deal with her. And another thing, thought Susan, we all make the same mistake, for none of us really considers Dorrie is grown-up. She's so small and childish, we treat her like a child, and it's a mistake.

Next day, when she knew Miss Primmer was alone in the potting-shed, she went across the garden to her. The garden was now looking very pretty with the lupins and delphiniums and pinks all colouring the borders, and masses of sweet-peas and roses scenting the warm air. Both Miss Primmer and the Colonel loved old-fashioned flowers, and there was mignonette and bee-balm and lad's-love and love-lies-bleeding in out-of-the-way corners, and the evenings were made sweeter by the tobacco flowers, evening primroses, and the great bed of night-scented stocks they had sown and planted.

William, as usual, she discovered busy "helping" Nanty, seated on a log of wood and filling pots with sand and leaf-mould. Susan sent him to pick pansies, a job he loved, and then turned to Miss Primmer. "Little pitchers have long ears," she said, "and I wanted to have a little private talk with you."

"Has Isabella——" began Miss Primmer at once, starting up from her work and looking round.

"No, Isabella and her husband seem to have settled down now. They are taking in boarders too, did you know that?"

"No, but I'm glad they've found something to do; the cottage they have is quite a big one, you know."

"And I suppose they are sitting rent free."

"Oh, well, yes, but I feel I owe them something, so——"

"You provide the nest that they've feathered so well out of your house." Susan laughed. She was too glad the Cobbs were quiescent at the moment to grudge them the cottage, though they could have done with it themselves as an overflow place. "Well, I didn't come to talk about the Cobbs." She added, "It's Dorrie, Nanty."

Rather to her surprise, Nanty agreed with everything she said. Then she discovered the Colonel had been talking to her too, which made Susan's task easier. Miss Primmer said she would talk to Dorrie, and ended up a long and rather rambling account of what she would say by giving Susan another of those blows in the midriff she had been complaining about.

"But," Miss Primmer ended up, "it would all be so much easier if Mr. Thorne would get himself engaged. He's so charming and so nice-looking and kind, any young girl would be attracted, and he *has* made a fuss of Dorrie."

So Miss Primmer had guessed after all; Susan wondered if the Colonel had had a hand in that pie as well.

"We all have," she said quickly, to get Miss Primmer off this tack. "Dorrie's such an attractive little soul herself."

"Still," said Miss Primmer, busily inserting a cutting into a small pot, "I can't see why Aggie and he can't get straightforwardly engaged. Anyone can see they are head over heels in love with each other. I can't stand all this avoidance and pretence, and Aggie looking so miserable—what's the man thinking of?"

Susan's mouth dropped open and she stared. "Aggie!" she exclaimed, before she could stop herself.

Miss Primmer stopped pressing down the soil with her gloved thumbs and stared in her turn.

"Haven't you seen it?" she said.

"No," said Susan. "Oh no! You are quite wrong there."

"Well, you are blinder than I thought, Susan, or more easily taken in. Anyone can see Aggie is in love with the man and terrified of betraying herself, and he is always looking at her with a sort of frightened, hang-dog

look, when he thinks no one is noticing—though why they should hide it from each other when they are both in the same boat is more than I can fathom. Of course he is poor, but she is so clever, and has made such a success of Round-about House, I don't see why they couldn't start something in that line."

All this was too much for poor Susan to grasp at once. Not only was there all this extraordinary nonsense about Aggie, but the unfairness of putting down all the success of the boarding-house to Aggie, without a reference to Susan, fairly winded her; and then the extraordinary suggestion that she should start a place of her own! What did Nanty expect would become of Round-about House without Aggie, if she were its mainstay? And fancy her suggesting so coolly a rival establishment, even if it were some distance away! Well, surprises were evidently the order of the day!

Did Miss Primmer, although she had so pointedly left Susan out as a partner in the success, think that she and Susan were quite capable of running Round-about House themselves, or what?

Really Susan was too bewildered to think clearly, she just stood silent, gazing at Miss Primmer who had returned to her potting.

"But," said Susan, after a while, and then as nothing else seemed to form clearly in her mind, she repeated rather helplessly:

"But——"

"Well," said Miss Primmer, "you do seem taken aback. Hadn't you noticed anything?"

"No . . . You are quite mistaken, really, Nanty——"

"Not I—you keep your eyes open and think things over. You might even have a word with Aggie. Now I must carry these pots along to the greenhouse. Where's William? I must say William is a real help, though the Colonel won't believe it, he is such a careful, obedient little boy if you ask him to do anything . . ." and she trailed away off in her usual meandering style into stories about William and excuses for the times when he *had* made mistakes that roused the Colonel's ire.

Susan, after a few moments trying to think what to say, gave it up.

"I must really have a few minutes' peace and quietness to get my thoughts collected," she said to herself, "and decide what's to be done—this is a pretty kettle of fish!"

Before she went, however, she could not help letting one remark drop, out of her rather sore heart.

"I don't see how you could run the boarding-house without Aggie," she remarked, as she opened the door, expecting some acknowledgment that, after all, she was of some use.

"Oh, I don't expect I'll be carrying on much longer," said Miss Primmer. "There's plenty of time yet, of course, but I meant to be telling you soon that next year——" She stopped and Susan, running out, closed the door between her and the end of Miss Primmer's remarks. It might be a little rude, but really she had had enough for one morning. She felt shattered.

As soon as she could she found Aggie, who was busy stuffing a pair of chickens in the little kitchen, and told her about the latter part of Miss Primmer's remarks, carefully avoiding any allusion to herself and Griff.

"Well," said Aggie coolly, "you know I'm not so very much surprised, Susan. Have you never thought the Colonel has stayed on here a very long time and is taking a very personal interest in the garden? The fishing is practically over now and yet he and Griff stay on and on—don't you think there's something in the wind?"

"You mean—Miss Primmer and the Colonel!" gasped Susan.

"Exactly! Now she has said so much, I'm certain they'll be announcing the engagement one of these days."

"Well," said Susan, "I must be a blithering idiot. It never struck me—and yet, I have wondered vaguely and occasionally about the Colonel. Still, you could knock me down with a feather—and I really thought I was rather clever at knowing what was going on in people's minds and so forth."

"Did you?" said Aggie, so drily that Susan looked at her.

"I *did*," she said. "But now——" she broke off.

"Now what?" asked Aggie.

"I'm going to make the beds," said Susan, and she went.

"I *must* get a quiet time to myself," she thought, stripping Miss Primmer's bed, "and sort all this out."

But Christina arrived to help her with the beds as usual, and then there was lunch to prepare, and Susan's time was so much taken up in the house that she decided she would slip out in the afternoon and walk up to Corne House. She would take William—he had been talking rather wistfully about Shaggy being the other boys' pony, and wondering if, perhaps, they would sometimes allow him to have a ride if he just went a very short way, perhaps once round the paddock. The boys would be away by this time and William should have his ride. William would be too busy collecting flowers and

chasing butterflies to interrupt her thoughts on the way to the house. She'd have, as she put it, "peace and quietness".

True to her word, she did a lot of thinking on the road to Corne.

"If I've made so many mistakes," she ruminated, "where am I really? Is it possible that Aggie does like Griff?" And she went over all that had happened recently. Now and then another thought poked up its head—Griff . . . Had Griff changed? But she really could not bear to face that at the moment. She poked the head of that thought well down again and reconsidered Aggie.

Aggie certainly had been rather unlike herself for weeks and weeks. Indeed she had never really been the same Aggie since she came to Round-about House. But she had always been, except at rare moments, almost snappy about Griff, and Susan was perfectly certain of one thing: if anyone had as much as hinted of any sentiment in regard to him, she (or he) would have had her head immediately snapped off.

"Still," thought Susan, "if she knew about Griff and me, she would naturally——"

Here her thoughts went off on another tack. Why did Aggie sometimes cry in bed at night? Not, of course, so that anybody would know, but once or twice Susan had suspected—yet there had always been something to account for it directly. A letter from Jerry. . . . What about Jerry? Susan had always thought that Aggie and that impecunious artist had an understanding; they all used to tease her about Jerry, who used to haunt "Number 33" on the chance of catching her alone. Aggie had always laughed about Jerry, but that had been taken as a camouflage.

"Perhaps the idea of Jerry has blinded me to lots," thought Susan. "Perhaps—— And if it's true about Griff, what am I to do?"

No answer to this question had arisen by the time she reached the steps of Corne House, and there she found to her surprise that Mrs. Delacorne was in bed ill.

CHAPTER XXII

SUSAN'S EYES ARE OPENED

"We were expecting you up," said Grimes.

"I'd have come at once if I had known," said Susan. She thought he looked rather taken aback, but as the question immediately arose of what to do with William, she thought no more of it.

Mrs. Delacorne, it appeared, wanted to see William, but when they went up to her bedroom she seemed too irritable to take much notice of him.

"Set him up on the window-seat," she said, and Susan lifted him up and told him to sit still.

"Tell him to turn his head," said the peevish voice. "I want to see who he's like."

Susan did as she was bid and poor William had to sit still for a while so that his great-aunt should see his profile.

"Yes, he's a Delacorne!" said the voice from the bed, but in such a tone that Susan thought, "Oh, dear, my poor darling William! Why couldn't you have looked like Shakespeare?"

"Aggie always says he's like the Shakespeares," she said aloud, hopefully.

"Fiddlesticks. . . . She has never come to see me."

"You never asked her."

"No—well, I like her for it. Independent, isn't she?"

"Rather!" Susan returned with conviction.

"Fond of William?"

"Aggie adores William," said Susan. "She has always wanted to have him altogether to live with us, only we lost our jobs and were so poor."

"But he has a hundred and fifty pounds a year, hasn't he?"

"Yes; and Aggie has to think how he'll get the best for the money. It will only last till he's sixteen, you know."

"Well, good enough. My father went to work when he was twelve. Well, I'm glad they are not expecting my money." And then she went on to talk about the people who had been there the last time Susan called, and the way they acted as if the place belonged to them because they had the right to the

estate after her, and how the other families had arrived, how they had all quarrelled and nagged at each other and at her, how she had turned on them, partly because she really felt ill and partly because she was tired of the whole lot of them. “If it wasn’t for my father——” she said, and stopped, and Susan wondered if it hadn’t been for her father and his will she might have left something at least to William. But she had heard too much about greedy relatives to say anything. “No,” she thought, “you are out of it, poor William; but, at least, she can’t say Aggie or you ever even thought about the money.”

They had both forgotten William, who had sat very patiently but now piped up in a pause of the conversation.

“Do you think the boys would let me give my apple to Shaggy, Aunty Susan? I won’t ask for a ride.”

“What’s he say?” asked the old lady.

“He is asking if I think the boys would let him give Shaggy the apple he brought for him. They chased him away last time and he thinks they are still here. They told him the pony was theirs.”

“Off you go and have your ride,” said Mrs. Delacorne. “Nobody will interfere with you. Their pony indeed! He’s going to a Barnardo Children’s Home when I’m done with him.”

Shaggy was sometimes yoked into a sort of wheeled chair in which he drew her about the gardens.

After a while Susan took her leave. She didn’t quite know what was the matter and asked old Grimes as she left if it was just a rest Mrs. Delacorne was taking.

He shook his head.

“She’s failing,” he said. Then he changed the subject. “Did you not get the note Mrs. Delacorne wrote you?” he asked.

“No,” said Susan. “When was it posted?”

It seemed it wasn’t posted but had been sent by one of the garden lads, who had been interviewed since she came and said he’d given it to Cobb who had said he was passing the house and would hand it in.

“Well, I didn’t get it,” said Susan, “or I would have come up at once.”

She wasn’t surprised that Cobb hadn’t delivered it; he had probably put it in the fire, hoping to do her an ill turn with Mrs. Delacorne. However, she did not want to go into that with Grimes so said no more, but collected William and went home, her mind so occupied with Griff and Aggie that she

only realized when he was well behind her that she had met Cobb and that he had snarled something as he went by.

After supper, when they were alone together, Aggie, after sitting silent for a few minutes, said:

"Well, I've been talking to Nanty, or rather she's been talking to me."

"What about?" asked Susan, rather surprised, though she knew that Miss Primmer made more of a confidante of her than she did of herself, always having shown a preference for Aggie.

"Everything," said Aggie. Then after a pause: "She's engaged to the Colonel."

"She might have let us know."

"Well, you've no room to talk, but anyhow it's quite recent." She paused again for a while and then said, as Susan did not make any comment:

"It's the old story, of course."

"You mean——" Susan paused. She didn't know what Aggie did mean.

"The Cobbs. She says they've guessed and are just waiting to be sure and then they will threaten to tell the Colonel unless she promises to have them back when she is married—or make some other arrangement."

"I see. Yes, that's just what they would do."

"And," continued Aggie, "I've been trying to get her to tell him—the Colonel—the whole story."

"That would draw their teeth," commented Susan. "Do you think she will?"

"I don't know. I think she's terrified, but wavering."

"Well, you urge her to do it. That's the only way she will get any peace of mind."

They were busy darning some linen in the little parlour, and for a while there was silence, while Susan, who was always inclined to be forthright, wondered if she could clear things up by the simple method of asking Aggie if there was any truth in Miss Primmer's suppositions.

Susan hated mysteries and she couldn't bear anyone to be unhappy. She always felt she must clear things up, get them straight, and *force* people to be happy again. Yes, so strong was Susan's horror of unhappiness for others that she always felt she could bear anything herself, if they would only be happy again, that she must *make* them be happy. She was always willing to fling herself into the breach and let them climb over and trample her in the dust if need be, and, like many such generous, selfless souls, she gave too

little thought to the delicacies and sensibility of her—*victims*. Though Susan, of course, would never have dreamed that that word could be used.

A whole day of puzzled bewilderment had been enough for Susan. Her warrior soul was on the warpath. Things must be cleared up and, to give her her due, if she had thought for a moment that Aggie really was in love with Griff she would have felt she must either offer him to her like a piece of pie on a plate, or, thinking herself very subtle, try to belittle him and push forward the attractions of some other man. Simeon perhaps! She had always had her eye on Simeon for Aggie.

"Aggie," she said at last, "when I was speaking to Miss Primmer this morning she told me something."

Aggie looked up.

Susan had been going to say, "That you and Griff, she thought, were fond of each other," but found that there was something in Aggie's eyes that made her stammer a little and change it to, "That she was sure that Griff was —very fond of *you*. It's made me think all day, and, Aggie, if—if there is anything in it——"

She stopped.

Aggie sat staring at her. In spite of her anger the other evening Susan was quite unprepared for the effect of her words. She had expected laughter, or ironic sarcasms, but not the naked fury that flashed into Aggie's eyes and poured from her tongue like liquid flame.

"Are you offering him to me, Susan?" she flung at her. "Have you tired of him, or do you think the Major would be a better bargain? Because if that's it—no, thank you! You needn't, with your beastly insulting kindness, offer to lend a helping hand to me."

"Aggie!"

"And if you want to know"—Aggie had jumped to her feet—"I hate and loathe and detest you for your well-meant kindness. I'd like to hit you in the face."

She flung down the piece of linen she was holding and fled from the room so quickly, Susan was staring at the closed door almost before she realized she was gone.

"But," said Susan to herself, staring bewildered at the door—"but—it's true then! Aggie is in love with Griff! That's all three of us—Dorrie and Aggie and me—me and Aggie and Dorrie all in love with Griff. . . . A pretty kettle of fish!"

CHAPTER XXIII

THE SHADOWY THIRD

FROM that moment, it seemed to Susan that things began to happen as quickly as if a great wave that had been gathering force suddenly broke and poured over her head.

Aggie changed her room and took her bed and her belongings into William's little cubby-hole, and would scarcely speak to her; and at the same time it was borne in on her very strongly that Dorrie had taken a dislike to her. Of course she had expected her to be a little pettish and put out for a day or so after her plain words about the ankle, but Dorrie kept it up and did a few childish but spiteful little things that left Susan in no doubt about her feelings.

One night she asked Dorrie to put her bottle in her bed as she was going to be out late at Corne. Mrs. Delacorne was really ill and Susan had promised to go up and stay with her a few hours in a hiatus between nurses, with whom the patient was constantly quarrelling. She returned cold and tired to find the bottle in her bed right enough, but filled with cold water. That was just like Dorrie's childish spites—indeed, since she had fallen in love with Griff she had changed very much for the worse, and Susan sometimes wondered if she had not been really better in the Home. When they had thought she would be so much happier with them and that the quiet, peaceful country life would be good for her, they had never calculated with the possibility of her falling in love. It seemed to have brought out all her bad side. Sometimes the girl had an almost evil, cunning look when Susan caught her watching her, that rather frightened her.

Griff was the only one of the four involved who seemed on the same terms with them all. He was kind and gentle and brotherly with Dorrie; laughed and teased and made lighthearted love to Susan; was shy and awkward with Aggie and seemed afraid of her. But since Miss Primmer had so confidently expressed her views Susan had begun to wonder—had Griff really fallen in love with Aggie; but only—thought Susan in her usual style—as the cat might look at the king. "She is 'O so far above me' and so forth".

And if that was true where did she, Susan, stand?

Of course, she loved Griff dearly, but suppose Griff really and truly loved Aggie and was only being loyal to her . . . because he was like that, loyal and soft-hearted and kind—dear Griff.

"It must be awful for him to have three women in love with him," thought Susan, sympathetically. "Especially if he's in love himself with the one he thinks would never look at him. Oh, Christopher Columbus! I do wish I knew the truth. Why can't people be frank and honest? . . . If we could all get together and discuss it!"

But even Susan's forthright mind baulked at the thought of the devastating earthquake which might ensue were she to suggest such a thing.

But all this lonely thinking brought her to one conclusion: She must speak to somebody about it. Somehow since the night in the cave Susan's mind always turned to Simeon in trouble. It turned to him now. She would talk to Simeon.

Simeon, like the Colonel, seemed more or less of a fixture at Round-about House. Though he spoke sometimes of being eager to get back to his explorations in Africa, he just stayed on. He spent a lot of his time writing in his room, and Susan, after trying various other devices for seeing him alone, decided to "beard him in his den"—so she put it.

Though he smiled his slow smile when he opened his door to her knock, he suddenly turned quite grave when she suggested that she should come in. "I want to talk to you," she added, "and I never can find an opportunity."

"I wish I had known," he said, but did not invite her in. Although there was a desk and arm-chairs, there was no doubt about it, it was his bedroom, and Simeon looked disturbed. His tall figure blocked the door and his lean face took on a puzzled frown, then suddenly cleared.

"Run and put on your hat," he said, "and I'll take you for a walk. You see——" he glanced round the room, but evidently could find no way of delicately suggesting that a girl oughtn't to be shut up with a man in his bedroom, even his very innocent sitting-cum-bedroom. "You see, I'd like some fresh air," he added, rather lamely, as he had just come in from a day's outing on the moors. ("The dear!" said Susan to herself. "He is such an old-fashioned, soldierly Victorian! I do like men that are thoughtful and shyly but iron-handedly considerate of, as Hicks says, '*vimmen*'. We have to be looked after and guarded whether we like it or not.")

"All right," she said aloud. "If——" She had been going to say, "You are not tired", but looking at his taut and hardened figure it seemed absurd, so she left her sentence unfinished and flew off to get her hat.

It was a lovely evening with just that faint hint of autumn in the air that comes occasionally with the shortening of the days before a leaf has turned. Simeon took her down to the riverside and along the nut alley where the hazelnuts were already formed and where the dipper sang in the stream. They watched one for a few moments as he dived underwater, ran about, and then climbed on to a stone with a watersnail in his beak, whose shell he broke by banging it on the stone, exactly as a thrush would have done.

"I do like watching creatures," said Susan—"birds and animals; every little thing they do when they think they are unobserved is so interesting."

"Yes," he said, and began to tell her about some of his experiences trekking alone in unknown parts of the world.

"Oh, I'd love that," said Susan with a sigh. "You know, I've never got enough of real life and adventure. I'd like to live on the edge of safety, not always wrapped up in eiderdowns."

He smiled. "Yes," he said. "I know that about you—and you do contrive, don't you, to live pretty near the edge of safety in most things?"

"I do," said Susan, with a sigh. "That's really what I want to talk to you about."

"Yes," he said quietly.

"You see—" Susan plunged in at once—"I've just discovered that there are three of us women in love with Griff and I don't know who he really is in love with himself, and I think something ought to be done, because of Dorrie partly, and because it's all such a mix-up and I do like things to be straight. If they aren't I just seem as if I couldn't help interfering and making everything come right—though, sometimes, they come wrong—and I thought if I could tell the whole story to an *outsider*, who is quite *uninterested*, he could see it more clearly and perhaps find a way out. I'm just like a mouse with so many holes he doesn't know which to go out by."

"And I am the 'uninterested outsider'?"

"No, not *outsider*, because you are one of us and you rescued me before—but, yes, *uninterested*."

"Um-m——"

"I mean in a—well—sentimental way—love—you know."

"Yes, I know. Well, tell me the trouble, Susan. I thought that Thorne and you loved each other and were engaged and everything settled. It surely cannot really affect you two if Dorrie, poor child, and Miss Agnew . . . like him too. Dorrie will soon get over it, and Miss Agnew doesn't strike me as a

person who would allow herself to be conquered by an unhappy love. She has so much pride, she will mount above it at all costs."

"Oh yes, Aggie is terribly proud, and if it was just that it wouldn't be so —so puzzling. But there's Griff."

"But he and you love each other."

"Yes." She paused, deep in thought, trying to find the proper words to express her misgivings. "Yes, we do, but—lightheartedly, somehow, not all passion and tragedy and 'the world well lost' and dark secret forces, like in books and—you know, Mr. Quest——"

"Simeon."

"Yes, I mean Simeon, though you always seem like Mr. Quest to me ——"

"That hurts rather, Susan."

"Oh, but I don't mean like that!" She paused. "I mean you're so—dignified and reserved, you make me think of Victorian gentlemen, and you know their *wives* called them 'Mister'."

There was a dead silence and suddenly Susan realized where her unruly tongue had carried her. She blushed scarlet and proceeded to make things worse.

"Oh, I don't mean——" She stopped.

"I take everything back. You can call me 'Mister' if you like, Susan," said Simeon, very gravely, but with a smile in his eyes.

"You know, some people might take that as a proposal," said Susan, sternly, recovering her poise on seeing that he needed protection, which she was, as usual, prepared to give forthrightly. "It's all right with me, but you ought to be more careful."

"I'm not so sure that I'm as glad as you seem to expect that it's all right with you, Susan."

She looked at him, standing upright and lithe as a wand, her straight fair hair pushed under her hat, her clear sea-green eyes gazing upwards into his brown ones. "Are you laughing at me?" she asked. "Have I been making a silly of myself?"

Instantly he picked up her hands.

"No, I'm not laughing at you, Susan. I apologize that ever such a thought should have crossed your mind; but perhaps I am laughing a little at myself and making a fool of myself, too. Now, let us go back. You love Griff, lightheartedly and with none of the deep, dark, secret passion in books—sometimes not only in books, you know." He paused, looking at her for a

moment, still holding her hands, and then went on, “And Thorne, don’t you think he——”

“Oh no!” said Susan, before he could finish.

“Griff isn’t like that either. It’s sort of half fun, you know—and that’s what made me wonder. Suppose Griff and Aggie *do*—I mean love in that tragic sort of way. Well, you see, what am I to do?”

He dropped her fingers and turning away looked across the Melk water to where the hill was growing dark purple in the evening light.

“It is more difficult than you know for me to advise you,” he said at last. “But suppose—suppose your supposition were right, what about you—you do love him, don’t you?”

“Oh yes, I do. I do love Griff.”

“And could not give him up?”

She drew in her breath quickly, with a sort of little sob.

“Oh yes, I think so—if, if he loved Aggie better than me.”

There was another long silence, and then she said almost in a whisper:

“What do you think? I feel”—she turned round, moving her shoulders, drooping a little—“I feel as if I’d been blind; everyone seeing things and knowing things better than I. Do you think Griff and Aggie——”

Suddenly she knew that she hated linking their names together, and her voice ended in a little catch at the throat, but she swallowed it down and went on: “Tell me the truth, please, if you can. Do tell me the truth.”

It was a moment or so before he spoke.

“You are asking of me more than I can do,” he said, and at the same moment, as if to reassure her that he did not mean to be harsh, for his voice sounded a little rough and abrupt, he took hold of her hand as it hung at her side and held it in his own. “I think you ought to talk to Thorne and tell him your doubts.”

“But he might not tell me the truth.”

“I think you should talk to him, Susan.”

“Yes——” she faltered, then added more in her usual style, “Anyhow, I must get to the bottom of things. I must get them *clear*.”

He laughed, a little, short laugh.

“Be careful, Susan. You might break something if you get things too clear—clear things are sometimes brittle.”

“You mean——”

“I mean your own heart,” he said, letting go her hand and speaking quickly and roughly, “or—some other heart. Now I’m going to take you home.”

He put his arm through hers and guided her through the darkening hazel boughs that were now outlined with leaf and nut-clusters against the crimsoning west.

They said little more on their way home, each being deep in their own secret thoughts, but it was comforting, Susan felt, to have her arm held so firmly against his side, as if he were reassuring her, telling her he was her friend.

At the house Susan left him, ran upstairs to take off her hat and change her frock for the evening. She was standing, brushing her hair, when Miss Primmer came in.

“Have you heard the news?” she asked.

Susan turned round.

“No,” she said. “What news?”

“Mrs. Delacorne died this afternoon.”

“Oh,” said Susan quickly. “Oh, I am sorry. Oh, I do wish I had seen her again. She was so lonely. Surely it was very sudden.”

“Yes, a heart attack. The vultures will be gathering now.”

“Yes,” said Susan, knowing instantly what she meant. “All the Argyle-Smiths and the Selby-Potts—they do run to double names in that family—and the Delacornes. All except our poor William.”

“I suppose William has no chance among those greedy grabbers.”

“Not a hope. She never really took to William. I think she disliked his father—I mean his grandfather—too much. I wonder why she hated him so.”

“He came between her and the man she loved—a woman never forgives that,” said Miss Primmer.

“No, one never forgives that,” said Susan drearily, and found Miss Primmer’s eyes upon her.

“Who told you?” asked Susan, to change the subject.

“James—the Colonel,” said Miss Primmer, and blushed. “I wanted to tell you,” she went on, “though this is hardly the moment to do it, that Colonel MacCrae and I are engaged to be married.”

Susan dropped her hairbrush and put her arms around her.

“Oh, I am glad,” she said. “I do congratulate you both. He is such a dear, and you are too. I know you will be happy.”

A shadow crossed Miss Primmer’s face.

“I hope so,” she said.

“Yes; you will,” said Susan. “Now don’t you go worrying about the Cobbs. You have the Colonel to deal with them now.”

Miss Primmer did not speak for a moment, then:

“I had a letter from Isabella this afternoon,” she said. “She wants to see me.”

“Well, she isn’t going to.” Susan was very decisive. “And if she comes up here, *I’ll* see her.”

“I knew she was waiting for this.”

“To hear about your engagement?”

“Yes; they know everything. Now she’ll strike. I sometimes think, Susan ____”

But Susan knew too well what was coming and changed the subject by reminding her that if the Cobbs had stayed and Susan had gone she would never have seen the Colonel, to which Miss Primmer good-naturedly agreed, with a laugh at Susan.

Susan waited for an opportunity to talk to Griff. All these worries were having an effect on her and she was beginning to look peaked, and when he told her so the next day she said:

“I’m worried, Griff. I want to talk to you.”

“Well, darling,” he answered—“talk.”

They were standing in the hall and Susan looked round. There was no one in the cloakroom, so she pushed open the door and they went in and Susan closed the door.

Griff was going to put his arms round her, but she stood back.

“Don’t, Griff,” she said. “Not just now. I want to speak seriously.”

“You do look a little conspirator,” he said, laughing at her. “Shutting us in, all among the coats and fishing-baskets.”

But Susan didn’t smile in return.

“I’m terribly serious, Griff—don’t laugh at me.”

“All right, sweetheart, out with it—is it Dorrie?”

Susan shook her head. “It’s Aggie.”

A queer expression crossed Griff’s face and he stood staring at her, immediately serious. “Aggie?”

"Yes—and you."

He stood looking at her, silent, astonished.

After a few moments he asked: "What is all this, Susan?"

"Griff," she said, speaking quickly, determined to get it all out now she had got her courage up, "I know it is strange to pull you in here and spring this on you all at once, but I'm so worried I just can't stand it any more. Griff, have we made a mistake? Is it Aggie that you really love? Please don't mind telling me. I do love you, Griff, but—but I couldn't bear for us to be engaged or—or married, if you felt that"—it was very difficult with Griff looking at her with that extraordinary look of dismay and astonishment on his face, but she had to get on with it—"that you—you had been hasty, that you might—might have made Aggie love you if you had had a chance."

She paused. There was no mistaking Griff's seriousness now. He had gone very white and a little nerve had begun ticking at the side of his face; she could see it just above the grim line of his jaw, which had tightened as she spoke.

"I don't understand, Susan," he said. "What is making you speak like this—what have I done?"

She noticed he did not answer her question, or quickly reassure her. She mustn't give Aggie away or reveal what she knew, but she wondered if it would be disloyal to hint that she guessed . . .

"What makes you speak like this to me?"

It was no use beating about the bush, she had begun and she must go on. Besides, Susan always was one not only to take the bull by the horns but to hang on once she'd got a hold.

"Because I think if *I* don't speak we may all end in unhappiness. Griff, I've got it into my head, and I cannot get it out, that it ought to be you and Aggie, that in your secret heart you love her. I think you—like—me too. I don't mean you've done anything, you are always so good to me—that's partly, too, why I'm speaking, because I feel you are so loyal and you would try to go on with it and never let me know. But, you see, I do know—at least, I—I—suspect. Griff, do tell me the truth. Let there be absolute truth between us—as far as we can. . . . Do you love Aggie? Even if you think it's hopeless, please tell me, Griff."

He was silent, looking at her.

"I have a right to know, haven't I?"

He took his hands from his pockets, into which he had plunged them, and took hold of hers.

"You know that I'm very fond of you, my darling?"

"Yes, I know that, Griff. We sort of fell for each other, didn't we?"

She managed to keep her voice from choking.

"Yes, that was it—and then Aggie came."

"Yes, Aggie came and——"

"I couldn't help it, Susan. There was something about her. I'm sorry, darling, but I will tell you the truth. She sort of drew me in spite of myself—not meaning to. She's never looked at me." He smiled. "Never given me a kind look, and I know it's quite hopeless, and—I'm getting over it, Susan, truly I am. I think you haven't anything to fear. You are so dear to me. You see, when—when a thing is absolutely hopeless it doesn't take a grip. I've never thought of marrying anybody but you, Susan."

She smiled at him.

"Yes, I know. But, Griff——"

"Yes?"

"I want to break everything off. I want to tell Aggie that it's all over, that we've found we don't—don't *suit* each other."

"No."

"Yes, listen. I couldn't go on with any doubt at all. Perhaps, Aggie . . . You see, she has thought you belonged to me ever since she came, so of course she wouldn't look at you. Aggie is as loyal as an oak tree—I think I mean an oak tree." There were tears on her lashes and she had to blink them off. "As loyal as can be. So you see she's never had a chance, and I want her to have it. Let's break it off, Griff—in fact, it is broken off. I've done it. But if, a year after this, or sometime when you and Aggie have really had a chance and found it wasn't each other you wanted, then perhaps——"

"No," he said at once. "That's not fair to you, Susan. If you break it off, then let's make it a clean break, and leave the future to take care of itself, but . . . Are you determined, Susan? I would never, never let you down. You are so sweet and so dear to me. We'd forget all this and be happy—or—don't you really care for me, sweetheart?"

"Yes, but not, not—I can get over it. I'd rather get over it than have doubts, or anything half and half—'the shadowy third' "—and she smiled.

He let her hands go and stood looking out of the window, and she felt sure in her hurt and secret heart that he was looking relieved, trying to hide it, but it was breaking through.

That settled it absolutely for Susan. She put both her hands up and took hold of his coat.

“Let’s kiss and be friends,” she said bravely and brightly. “It’s over. We are both absolutely free—but good friends, aren’t we, Griff?”

He put both arms round her, drew her to him and kissed her mouth.

“ ‘But friends the merest’,” he quoted softly. “ ‘Keep much that I resign’. You’ll always be something of a little sweetheart to me, Susan—for ever and ever.”

“And I’ll always love you a little bit, Griff. We’ve had a good time, haven’t we?” And then she added in her inimitable solemn way, making him laugh till the last, “ ‘Let brotherly love continue’.”

“Oh, Susan.” He shook her and let her go. “You are the one and only Susan.”

“Well, two would have been a catastrophe. I couldn’t have managed two of me. . . . Off you go, Griff, and comb your hair, it’s all ruffled.” She pushed him towards the looking-glass and ran off.

CHAPTER XXIV

SUSAN HAS A NEW IDEA

To Susan's surprise, she received an invitation to Mrs. Delacorne's funeral, which was to be the following day. She decided to go and to take William with her. "It's the last time he'll see the place that ought to have been his, if his grandfather hadn't been a noodle," she said to Miss Primmer. "And, anyhow, he *is* her grand-nephew, and has as much right to be there as those beastly little boys who chased him off. . . . I do hope Mrs. Delacorne kept her word and left Shaggy to the Barnardo Homes. I'd hate those selfish little pigs to get him."

"I sometimes think," said Miss Primmer, "you should cultivate a more Christian attitude of mind, Susan. You are so very downright in your dislikes."

"I think I should," agreed Susan. "Only when people like the Cobbs and Argyle-Smiths butt at me I can't help butting back. . . . Have you heard any more from Isabella?"

"No, not yet."

"You know, Nanty," said Susan, "if I were you I'd tell the Colonel all about Dorrie. If you don't, those Cobbs will always have a hold over you, and if you do, you draw their teeth once for all."

They were alone together in the drawing-room and Miss Primmer, to Susan's surprise, did not answer at once. She was more surprised when the answer did come.

"I should like Colonel MacCrae to be informed," said Miss Primmer, primly, "because I feel that, as my future husband, it is right that he should know, only it is so very difficult to mention such a subject to a gentleman. But I have made up my mind to go from home and write to him."

"Won't that be just as difficult?" asked Susan. Miss Primmer was silent for a few minutes and then said, hesitatingly:

"I've sometimes wondered if . . . if you . . . I asked Aggie, but she did not care to undertake it."

"Do you mean you asked Aggie to tell him?" said Susan, amazed.

"Yes. You modern young girls seem so frank and unembarrassed with the gentlemen on these subjects, and I have no relative—my dear father

would, no doubt, have been the right person, only, of course, he didn't know and——"

Susan knew she would go on "havering", as she called it, for the next hour if allowed to, so she interrupted her and, being Susan, flung herself wholeheartedly into the breach.

"I'll tell him if you like," she said.

And tell him she did.

He was busy making flies when she came upon him, seated under the cedar tree with a little table in front of him. She sat down beside him and began to help him, having often enough helped her father and brothers to make flies for their lines, and they were soon deep in a discussion of trout and salmon fishing. Gradually Susan introduced Miss Primmer and Dorrie into the conversation, and then as he spoke of how much better Dorrie was looking she plunged, and knowing these things were best gone at straightforwardly, she was straightforward. Not that Susan could ever be anything else.

"Miss Primmer would like me to tell you something about Dorrie," she said. "But perhaps you've guessed it for yourself. You know how frightened she is of the Cobbs and how they've blackmailed her?"

He blinked at her under his bushy eyebrows.

"Yes—damn them!" he said.

"Well, you know, it's because they know her secret about Dorrie. She wants you to know, but—well, you know how shy and terrified she is about things—and she thinks it would be easier for you if someone else told you, but she has no relative——"

Susan hesitated.

"Are you trying to tell me, my dear girl," barked the Colonel—only it was quite an unalarming bark—"that Dorrie is her daughter? I know that."

"Oh," said Susan, with tremendous relief. "I'm so glad."

"Bless my soul!" said the amazing man. "You've only to look at them to see that! Told you to tell me, did she? I'll have to go and see her. I've nearly blurted it out once or twice, but—well——"

"She's so *innocent*, isn't she!" said Susan, looking herself about as knowing as a gosling.

"You women," said the Colonel, "are all innocent geese to an old chap who's knocked about the world. . . . Poor Alice, I wonder what kind of unblemished knight she takes me for? Well, thank ye, my dear. We'll leave these flies in the meantime."

But whether he was thanking her for telling him or for her assistance with the flies, she had no idea.

But that was how it was that Susan, when later in the day she saw the Cobbs coming up the avenue in their Sunday best, advanced to the fray with a satisfaction and verve that betokened ill for that couple.

She allowed them to ring at the front door and then went and opened it herself.

"We have come to see Miss Primmer on business," said Isabella, who was evidently going to be spokesman, as usual.

"Certainly," said Susan, with ferocious politeness. "Come in."

They looked surprised, as Susan had meant them to do.

"Lovely weather," said she, as she led them across the hall to the drawing-room, where she knew Miss Primmer was alone. "Though we could do with a little rain."

"We could do with less gab," said Isabella surlily. She didn't like Susan's air of ease and was beginning already to wonder what it betokened.

"Mr. and Mrs. Cobb," announced Susan, at the door, then she followed them in and closed it behind her. Isabella turned.

"We're going to see Miss Primmer alone," said she.

"Oh no, you're not," said Susan. "You are going to see me too, and possibly Colonel MacCrae as well."

"Look here," said Cobb, advancing with his head thrust out towards Susan. "We've had enough of you, see? You get out!"

"It's you that will get put out if you don't behave yourself. You aren't dealing with a lonely woman now, Mr. Cobb," retorted Susan.

"Look here," said Isabella, addressing Miss Primmer, who, dressed in a grey silk gown and looking quite stately, was sitting very upright in a high-backed chair, "we've come to see you and talk about private affairs—your private affairs—do you want that bit of impidence here? It'll be the worse for you if she is."

"Now, Isabella," said Miss Primmer, and Susan saw that, in spite of the dignified way in which she was holding herself up, she was trembling, "I don't wish you to make a scene."

"Scene!" exclaimed the woman. "I'll make a scene all right, not here only but in the whole village. I'll have your name bandied about as a——"

"Stop that!" said Susan. "Leave Miss Primmer alone, but make as much of a scene as you like with me. I'm not frightened of your scenes."

"I'll give you a fright yet, my lady, before I'm done with you."

"All right, but before you go any farther now, listen to me. It will save your time, because Miss Primmer and I have something to say to you. That's why you are in this room, not because we want to listen to your impertinent remarks."

"You shut up!"

"Oh no, not till I've told you one or two things. In the first place, you've come here to threaten to disclose to the Colonel the truth about Dorrie, haven't you? Well, he knows all about Dorrie. Miss Primmer told him herself, and he's in the house now, so you can see him for yourself before you go. In the second place, you are going to threaten to tell all the village the same thing. Well, you are welcome to do it. The village knew all about it long ago, and nobody is going to get excited over that old story. In the third place, you think Miss Primmer is still anxious that it should be a secret that Dorrie is her daughter. On the contrary, both Colonel MacCrae and Miss Primmer, who is now engaged to be married to him, are anxious that everyone should know that Dorrie is the Colonel's adopted daughter. She is adopted already, so I advise you to walk quietly out of the house and amuse yourselves by telling everybody you meet. It will be doing Miss Primmer—as I'm sure you are anxious to do after all her kindness to you—a good turn.

"In the third, or is it the fourth place? Colonel MacCrae has asked me to let you know that he will be requiring the cottage for his gardener and wife, as he is coming here to live after his marriage, so you are given a month's notice to leave."

To say that the Cobbs were taken aback would be about as near the truth as to say a wild bull was tickled because you pulled his tail. They were so amazed that Susan had got to the end of her more or less rigidly accurate declaration without a word from them. They had thought they knew the timid, modest spinster too well. They never dreamt that she had told the highly respectable Colonel, who went to church every Sunday and occasionally read the lessons, of that shameful secret of her past. Susan's shot about the village knowing was made entirely in the dark, but had gone straight home. It had been too good a story not to have leaked out; but they had thought that after all these years had passed without any of the gossip reaching Miss Primmer's maidenly ears, so to speak, they were safe. They thought, as Susan meant them to, that the Colonel had legally adopted Dorrie (which he had offered to do).

Cobb, himself, was completely knocked off his perch and could do nothing but shake his fist and swear at Susan, but Isabella, in about two minutes, found her tongue.

Not without reason, she put everything down to Susan, and the fury and hate which came tumbling out of her mouth might have alarmed anyone less dauntless than the girl who stood facing her with white cheeks but fearless eyes.

"You'll pay for this!" she screamed. "I'll make you eat your words, or my name's not Isabella Cobb. Send us out of the only home we've got, would you, after losing us a place as what we'd kept for twenty year an' more. . . . You . . . you . . . you——"

But her voice had got so loud it rang through the house. The door opened and the Colonel entered followed by Simeon, and in two minutes the Cobbs were outside the front door.

Once they were gone Susan was rather sorry for them and made up her mind that she would help Miss Primmer to do something for them. The Colonel needed their cottage, it was near the grounds, but another might be substituted in the village. "Never hit a man when he's down" was part of Susan's large-hearted creed, and the Cobbs were down and she couldn't help pitying them. In fact, she very nearly called them "poor lambs".

As they tramped off down the garden, Aggie came to hear the news. Susan had told her the night before that her engagement, such as it was, was off. The following conversation had taken place.

"Why?" Aggie had briefly inquired.

"It's been petering out for a bit," said Susan, "on both sides. Now it's come to a head."

"Of course," said Aggie cruelly. "Now that the Colonel is marrying, Griff can have no expectations."

"Yes—that's why," said Susan, really stabbed, and turned away.

"You know I didn't mean that," Aggie had assured her quickly.

"I'm not so sure," said Susan.

"No, I just said it to give you a bat in the eye—you think you can take me in, don't you? But I know quite well you're in love with Griff and acting the little saint and giving him up so that I can have my chance. You might save yourself the trouble, I'm going off!"

"You're what?"

"I've given Nanty a month's notice, but it doesn't matter. She's giving up the boarding-house when she marries, of course, so we're both out of a job. You'll be getting married, so you'd better just stop throwing dust in my eyes. William must go back to the Home and I'm advertising for a job—as cake-maker. Cake-makers are very much in demand at the moment." And

she had gone off, leaving Susan with the rather belated conviction that Aggie was too clever for her.

Now Aggie listened to the tale of the Cobbs in quite an interested, friendly way, warning Susan so anxiously to be careful of them and keep a lookout for mischief, that anyone hearing her might have thought they were back on the old happy terms, but Susan knew better and her heart ached. For all her good intentions, she had lost Aggie. Lost Aggie and lost Griff, even lost poor Dorrie—who had again been studiously rude to her at lunch—and gained what? As far as she could see, nothing but a sore heart.

"The road to hell is paved with good resolutions," she quoted to herself, wryly, and with a half-smile for the exaggeration.

After tea she felt very lonely. Aggie had gone off to hunt a strayed duck up the burn and taken William with her, and shortly afterwards Susan had seen Griff going off in a great hurry in another direction—over the bridge and up the other side of the Melk. He could wade across, reflected Susan, farther up and come quite innocently and unexpectedly on Aggie and William. She was really surprised that her heart didn't ache more at the thought. "But it's not as if I'd quarrelled with Griff," she concluded innocently. "I've still got him and we're still friends and I do believe could be happy if Aggie and he would get engaged and be happy too. . . . Oh, dear, why are people so difficult? Aggie will never believe I'm not sacrificing myself for her sake—unless——" She stood still. "Unless I fall in love with somebody else myself! Only there isn't anybody—except, of course——"

At that moment her eyes had fallen on Simeon, who was crossing the grass towards the seat under the cedar tree, and a daring scheme entered her fertile brain. Aggie had suggested that she, Susan, might have found she preferred Simeon Quest. It was only her bitter joke, of course, but—could she pretend that she had fallen in love with the Major?

She quailed at the idea. If it had been Griff, now, how easy it would have been, but how could she pretend to be in love with anyone so taciturn and reserved as Mr. Quest? Break her ankle and pretend she had to be carried like Dorrie? He'd probably tell Hicks to do it. Haunt his room? He might think she'd gone mad. Gaze at him with love-lorn eyes? But she hadn't those kind of eyes, they had to be long and dark and mysterious—like Greta Garbo's—not round gobbles of eyes like hers.

However, Susan was nothing if not brave. She decided she could at least try to get friendly with him and then make Aggie think they had a secret understanding.

With Susan there was never any time like the present. With quaking heart but bold mien she went over the grass and sat down beside Simeon Quest, who had opened a book to read. He put it away at once.

"I'd like to go a walk," said Susan, to whom subtility was not possible, though she would have been vastly surprised if told so.

"Certainly," he said, and stood up, looking a little surprised, and then, swiftly coming to the conclusion that she was in trouble again and wanted to talk about it, he put an arm on her elbow and guided her towards the little bridge and down the dene which it crossed.

"Did you wish to tell me something?" he asked at last, as Susan hadn't said a word.

"Oh no," she exclaimed, stopped, then, "I mean—yes," she said, and stopped again.

They had reached a little stile between the dene and the meadows, and he swept some leaves off the top with his arm.

"Won't you sit down and tell me what it is?"

And before she knew where she was, Susan was sitting telling him the whole trouble, finishing it up with, "So Griff and I aren't engaged any more, and now, after all my trouble, Aggie won't look at him."

She was so serious and indignant that Simeon smiled a little beneath his small, dark moustache, but said nothing.

"And then there's Dorrie," she added. "Something should be settled to bring her to her senses; poor Dorrie is still being so silly about Griff. So there seems nothing for it but for me to pretend there's somebody else." She paused and waited for him to speak. When he did, she got a surprise.

"Are you by any chance going to pretend to be in love with me?" he asked.

"Well . . ."

"Was that why you offered to take a walk with me?"

"Oh, dear," thought Susan, "I do wish people wouldn't be so clever." But she had nothing to add, so she said: "Well . . ." again.

"It was?" His eyebrows were drawn down rather alarmingly.

"You see—you're handy," she admitted, glancing at him and prepared to smile, but she got no smile in return.

"Well"—after a pause—"I'm prepared to aid and abet you, Miss Susan"—he still occasionally used the "Miss"—"on one condition."

"That I don't make a nuisance of myself," said Susan quickly.

“No, I think I can look after myself as far as that is concerned. On the condition you assure me that everything is absolutely finished between you and Thorne.”

“Oh, but really, we are just friends now.” She knew instantly that he meant the engagement and love-making.

He was silent a moment or two and then said slowly:

“You know, you puzzle me. I thought you and he . . .” He paused. “You seem, as a matter of fact, to have so quickly changed your minds. Are you really serious about this broken engagement?”

“I think,” said Susan, “it was all just lightheartedness. We liked each other and got on well and had adventures together and helped each other through, and thought we must be in love. We were always laughing and merry—but I see now love is serious. It’s changed Aggie completely. It’s made her almost hate me; and when I remember Griff’s face when he spoke of her—so stricken somehow—well, I don’t think he ever was in love with me or I with him—not like that, anyhow, tragically, sadly, somehow. We were always so gay.”

Her voice had saddened and slowed down as she spoke, partly because she did suddenly feel sad about it all and partly because she was surprised at herself confiding these things to a man who was so much a stranger to her, and an incalculable one at that.

“Yes,” he said slowly, “I can understand that.” He spoke sadly himself. Then his voice changed and he said, almost abruptly: “So you want to help them to an understanding and intend to use me in your schemes.”

“Oh no!” Susan felt ashamed. “I’m afraid I was silly. It was a silly idea. Please, Mr. Quest, don’t think any more about it. You see”—she added frankly—“I didn’t mean you to know about it.”

“You haven’t answered my question, however. Do you assure me it’s absolutely all over between you and Thorne?”

“Oh yes.” Susan was surprised and looked it.

“Very well. It’s not such a bad scheme and it’s a pity the misunderstanding should continue. I’ll aid and abet your but—beware!”

“Beware of what?” Susan stared.

“I think, Susan,” he said cryptically, “you are badly in need of somebody to look after you.”

He allowed this to sink in a moment, and then said briskly:

“Now I’m going to take you home.”

As they were parting, Susan, who had been ruminating over his words, said solemnly: “You know, I do seem to have behaved in a very silly, irresponsible way—like a flibberty-jibbet—over Mr. Thorne and everybody; but really I am quite a staid, sensible person, and very responsible.”

“Yes,” he said, and there was no vestige of a smile to be seen on his face. “As I said, you need looking after.”

And he left her at the door.

CHAPTER XXV

SUSAN IS ELOQUENT

THE next day was Mrs. Delacorne's funeral. Aggie did not want Susan to take William, but Susan was determined, and it was easier for her to get her way with Aggie now that she was so anxious to avoid any intimacy with her. Dorrie had noticed Aggie's unfriendly attitude to Susan—she was very sharp in some ways—and it had given her more confidence to be rude to her. She made a mistake, however, when she took advantage of the situation to show more plainly her hatred of William's position in the house as general favourite. Griff had taken to having William a great deal with him as a protection against Dorrie's insistent demands on his time and company. She found that whenever she went anywhere with Griff, William was there, and that, in fact, she could hardly ever see Griff alone for the ubiquitous William. This she blamed on William, and many were the secret slaps and little nips she gave him.

Emboldened, she gave William a slap when Aggie was there, but brought down such wrath on her head that she thought better of it, and was more careful in future.

Indeed, if Aggie and Susan had not been estranged at the moment, they would have confided in each other that Dorrie was not improving. Her health seemed good, but her character seemed to be deteriorating, or perhaps her childish charm and her sorrowful little face had hidden the real Dorrie from them, or perhaps it was her health that made her appear in such a bad light. It was impossible to say.

For some reason she was jealous of William going to the funeral and wanted Susan to take her instead.

"Mrs. Delacorne used to like me," she said pettishly. "William's nothing to her, just a little boy, and she never liked boys, but she liked me and perhaps she's left me something."

"Well, if she has, you'll get it," said Susan. "But I can't take you when you weren't invited."

"William wasn't invited."

"He's not grown-up. He is, as you say, just a little boy—I'll hide him under my petticoats." And she tried to laugh Dorrie out of her ill-humour—

with little success.

She didn't quite know herself why she was so determined to take William. Partly she felt that he had a right to be there, and she had perhaps carefully hidden from herself and everyone else a forlorn hope his great-aunt might have left him, not Shaggy, that was hopeless, but the puppy perhaps, or some small token of remembrance. There was a musical-box with little dancing figures of which he was inordinately fond. . . . Then she was rather frightened of all the overbearing Delacornes and Argyle-Smiths whom she had met at intervals, and who were sure to be there in force, and William would be company and a sort of protection.

She found, as she had anticipated, the relatives there in force. They were all distant connections and therefore jealous and at daggers drawn with each other; for, although they all persuaded themselves they had prior claims, none of them had any rights whatever.

They all drew together, however, like sheep at the sight of a fox, when Susan and William appeared.

Grimes had taken her to the drawing-room, where they were all collected in deep mourning, like a flock of rooks.

Mrs. Argyle-Smith was the first to recover herself.

"I didn't know you had been asked," she said to Susan. "The typist, aren't you?"

"Mrs. Delacorne left instructions that Miss Tyndal was to be invited," said a tall, thin man, who, Susan learned later, was the lawyer.

"Was there any necessity to bring the boy?" asked one of the Delacorne women. "A relative of your own, isn't he?"

"He is Mrs. Delacorne's nearest relation," said Susan, whose fighting spirit was rising. "She was his grand-aunt."

"Children are out of place at funerals," said another voice.

Susan had caught a friendly and sympathetic look from the lawyer, who now said, just to "give them one in the eye", Susan was certain:

"The boy has quite a right to be here. Indeed, Mrs. Delacorne said to me that Miss Tyndal would be sure to bring him."

"She seems to have taken you very much into her confidence," said Mr. Delacorne, a stout man with a red nose, who looked like a publican, only his name seemed wrong for a publican. He looked round the company and laughed. "If you ask me," he said, "the late Mrs. Delacorne wasn't given to taking anybody into her confidence, but some folks have imaginations—that's what they have, imaginations."

There was no reply to this, and a thin, sour-looking woman turned and spoke to a rather spotty youth seated next to her.

"As the nearest relative, I think you should have been consulted, Henry."

Henry drew himself up. "We'll soon get rid of that tribe," he said. Susan felt that he was referring to her and William, but said nothing.

It was a most uncomfortable day for Susan, and many times she wished that she had never come.

Mrs. Argyle-Smith, a big, domineering woman, had taken her place as mistress of the house. Grimes, who hated her, told Susan she had arrived immediately on the death of Mrs. Delacorne, with her husband and family, and taken possession of the place, telling Grimes that he was now to take orders from her, as they were the next of kin and Corne would now belong to her husband, and hinting that there would be many changes, including, no doubt, the end of things for Grimes and other old servants.

"Yes, Miss Susan, we'll all have to go," he said. "She has even chosen her bedroom already and those for the boys, and she altered the cook's menus for the lunch and dinner as if the place was hers already."

"But there are the other Delacornes," said Susan. "Are they taking it lying down?"

"They are not, as you may hear for yourself. But you see, Miss Susan, they aren't the real Delacornes. They are related, though more distant than the Argyle-Smiths; but they changed their name by deed poll to Delacorne, and hope they'll be taken for the real thing. The Argyle-Smiths aren't much better—Smith is their real name, but they are the next of kin right enough—saving your little Willum, of course, poor crittur, and the old gentleman barred him out of everything—or his father—no, t'would be his grandfather before him. Ay, it'll be them that's heirs right enough. Mrs. Delacorne aye said she couldn't give the estate to charity. That Delacorne lot don't really expect it, but they are keeping their end up to the last, and are hoping to get the money."

"She told me it was all going to charities," said Susan.

"Ay, she was aye changin' her mind," said the old man.

"Well, I hope she's looked after you and the other old servants," said Susan, but he shook his head. Poor old Grimes was very much under the weather. He had been harried all day by the warring relatives and was growing old.

The luncheon after the funeral was a miserable affair. William had been sent to eat in the kitchen, though the Argyle-Smith boys gobbled and boasted of all they were going to do in the dining-room. The Delacornes and Argyle-

Smiths joined forces in banishing William. They seemed glad to have some scapegoat they could attack mutually, and snubbed Susan and William at every turn. If it had not been for Mr. Selby, the friendly lawyer, Susan would have gone straight home after the funeral, but he roused her fighting spirit.

"Stick it out," said he. "You might as well hear the will and get what entertainment you can."

"If I thought William——" suggested Susan, but he shook his head.

"I can't give you any hope there," he said.

Susan gave in about the luncheon the more readily as she knew William would enjoy his meal much better in the kitchen. She went to find him afterwards, but was told he had gone to see Shaggy and have a ride, so she went up to the library where the family had gathered to hear the will read.

"I thought only the family was to be here," Mrs. Delacorne said sourly to the lawyer, when she saw Susan.

"Quite in order, quite in order," said Mr. Selby, getting out his eye-glasses and fixing them on his nose. So they drew up their chairs, shutting Susan out, so that she had to sit with the servants near the door. They had been called in by Mr. Selby, so Susan felt sure that they had been remembered.

Mr. Selby unfolded the will and began to read. There were various bequests to charities—"No mention of Shaggy," thought Susan, "I suppose he'll come in at the end."

Then bequests came to the relatives. Susan listened, growing puzzled, while the Delacornes and Argyle-Smiths sat forward in their chairs, so intent on every word that they looked frozen where they sat.

The legal language puzzled Susan, but she gathered there were various bequests of money, of pieces of furniture, of jewellery, to Delacornes and Argyle-Smiths. She kept her ears open, but there was nothing for William, and in spite of herself she was disappointed. She had hoped to the last for Shaggy.

Then to her amazement Susan heard her own name. She had been left all Mrs. Delacorne's jewellery except the pieces mentioned; her furs and such of her wearing apparel as she cared to have, the rest to be sent to the Society for Indigent Ladies; her Crown Derby tea-set, her canteen of Georgian silver, and all her other Georgian silver. There were a few other items, but Susan, sitting open-mouthed, could not remember them all. The tears were in her eyes because they were left to her "in recognition of her kindness to an old lady and her amusing and disinterested efforts on behalf of a small

boy who was no connection of hers, efforts that she would like Miss Susan Tyndal to know she had seen through from the first!"

"Well!" thought Susan, divided between pleasure at being so kindly and richly endowed herself, and resentment on behalf of poor William. "Well—of all the wicked old ladies!"

The darted looks of fury from the relatives wavered a little into triumph at this smack at Susan and final disposal of William's claims, and they rustled back to hear the most important news, the disposal of the property and main portion of the money.

The lawyer paused, and Susan wondered if he had reached the end. She was very ignorant about wills.

"That is the finish, I suppose," she thought, her heart very sore for William, and then she saw that, although the lawyer had paused, it was not the end. Every head had turned to the tall man at the end of the room who was turning a page of the document.

"And the residue?" Susan heard a strained voice exclaim hoarsely in front of her.

The lawyer seemed to be enjoying the moment of suspense. A touch of power is always sweet. He prolonged the pause for a moment, looking round on the strained, eager, and greedy faces. Then he continued: "To my great-nephew, William Shakespeare Delacorne, I give and bequeath . . ." Susan stared as the legal words fell into the electrified silence of the room, and then the whole meaning of the rigmarole swept like a wave through her heart—William was the heir! "His rightful heritage," she heard. "All the estate, together with the house of Corne and all its contents"—the farms were mentioned, the stables, the appurtenances (whatever they were)—Susan only caught words here and there, most of the legal terms were meaningless to her—and then the voice stopped. Susan turned to Grimes.

"Does it mean . . . ? Does it mean . . . ?" she whispered, not able to believe her own ears.

"Master William is the heir," said Grimes.

"Master William!" That brought it home to Susan better than any legal term. "Your little Willum", the "poor crittur", had come into his own; already he was "Master William" and "the heir".

Then the storm broke; a perfect babel of voices arose—indignation, fury, disappointed greed found voice. Mrs. Argyle-Smith started screaming at the lawyer about her rights. The fat and red-nosed Mr. Delacorne was shouting about contesting the will.

“The will is perfectly in order.” Susan heard Mr. Selby’s calm voice above the tumult.

“But it’s impossible, illegal!” screamed Mrs. Argyle-Smith. “That branch of the family was entirely banned for ever from any share in the estate.”

“Not the branch, madam, only the grandfather of the present heir.”

“But that is the same thing.”

“Not at all. Everything was left unconditionally to Mrs. Delacorne. She could dispose of it as she willed after the death of her brother.”

“She must have been out of her mind!”

“She was got at!”

“Undue influence!”

Susan caught sentences here and there—but she knew it was all right. Mr. Selby was saying so. He had come over to her and was asking for William. “Is he not here?”

“No,” said Susan. “I never dreamt . . . you said . . .” She paused.

“Mrs. Delacorne asked me to keep the secret till the will was read. . . . I couldn’t tell you.”

“Oh no, of course not,” agreed Susan. “But is it really true? Can they not take it away from him?”

“They can not! We saw to that—there’s not a loophole.”

“Oh, I must find William,” said Susan, and rushed off.

But William was nowhere to be found. Susan and one of the menservants rushed to the paddock and learned that William had been chased away by the Argyle-Smith boys, who, with two of the Delacornes, were tearing round the paddock, one of them on Shaggy, beating him with a whip, and all of them yelling like young savages.

“You shut up!” said the oldest boy, when Johnson, the groom, who had been in the library, went forward and spoke to him. “He belongs to us now and you’ll be sent about your business if you touch me,” for the man was trying to get the whip from him.

“Where is William?” shouted Susan.

“We sent him home; we sent him pelting down the avenue,” and they all began to laugh.

Susan took to her heels down the avenue. Just outside the gates she found William, sitting like a little outcast on a stone, waiting for her.

“The boys wouldn’t let me stay,” he said. His face was very white and dirty, and his jersey torn. “I kicked one of them,” he said. “He was hitting Shaggy with a whip.”

“Never mind,” said Susan, hugging the thin little shrimp in the torn and muddy jersey. “Shaggy is yours now. Come on and we’ll rescue him”—and she took his hand and began hurrying through the gates. But they did not need to rescue Shaggy. Round the first bend came Johnson leading the little pony.

“I brought Master William his pony,” he said, “so that he could ride back.”

And William in the torn jersey, with no hat, with his face “as black as a crow’s”, as Susan told him, and his hair on end, rode up to the house, Johnson carefully leading the pony as befitted the little heir.

But it was Susan who felt triumphant. William had no idea of the change in his fortunes. He was content to be allowed to have a ride on Shaggy. But, Susan! Never had she felt so elated.

“I walked up that avenue on wings,” she announced later on in the drawing-room, beside herself with joy, her cheeks scarlet with excitement. “I ordered the sun to stand still. I advanced like the Hosts of Israel. I trumpeted like an elephant!”

Which was quite one of Susan’s best efforts in eloquence.

CHAPTER XXVI

WILLIAM GOES TO LOOK FOR A DUCK

AFTER that things quietened down for a little. In her excitement Susan had missed the fact that Aggie, together with Mr. Selby, was appointed William's ward, and that an income was provided for her during his minority, after which it was left to William to make further arrangements.

In the ensuing congratulations and joy, Aggie took back all that she had ever said about Susan, hugged her and kissed her and broke down and wept so that Susan had to comfort her, when she took the opportunity to assure her that she had been telling the truth when she said it was all over between herself and Griff. "I found I had made a mistake," she said. "When I told him, Griff admitted that he had made a mistake, too." And then she managed to convey, by delicate hints, that there were other fish in the sea, and that Griff wasn't the only pebble on the beach, and by other assorted metaphors indicated that her thoughts were turning elsewhere.

Aggie was so happy about William that she took it all meekly, only remarking: "You see, I never know what you are up to, Susan, with your flair for lending a hand and landing yourself and everybody else into muddles."

"Well, I've landed William very nicely," said Susan, who, as has already been remarked, had no predilection for hiding her light under a bushel, and Aggie hugged her again and told her she really was an angel and a genius rolled into one, to which Susan heartily agreed.

"I really do feel like an angel," she said, "flying through the air, blowing a trumpet, with my cheeks all puffed out, like this"—and she proceeded to give a demonstration with the poker, her cheeks blown out like round red apples.

Simeon Quest coming in on them stood and looked at her, smiling to himself with a look in his eyes that, if Susan had seen it, would certainly have given her a blow in the midriff. It was Aggie who got it!

And that was how Aggie and Griff began to be very friendly. The blow in the midriff, though Aggie was even more ignorant than Susan as to what or where a midriff was, had done more than all Susan's protestations.

It was agreed that, in the meantime, and until things were settled, William should stay where he was, but Shaggy was brought down and stabled in an outhouse and grew rounder and fatter than ever on a diet of apples and lumps of sugar.

Everybody at Round-about House was very gay and happy, except Dorrie. Dorrie took it all very badly and really acted as if William had in some way done her out of her inheritance and spoiled her life.

She really had got it into her head that if Susan had taken her up to Corne instead of William, Mrs. Delacorne would have "taken a fancy to her" instead of him and left her, if not the estate, a good part of her fortune. Mrs. Delacorne really had taken some notice of her when, as a little girl, she had stayed at Round-about House, and on this she built up her absurd notions, so absurd that perhaps no one gave enough attention to them, only Susan saw how strong her antipathy was towards William and how ugly her jealousy, and sometimes felt alarmed. She spoke to Aggie about it and they kept him away from her as much as possible, which was easy, as William himself, no doubt in return for many secret little nips and slaps, had turned afraid of her and would not be left alone with her.

In pursuance of her plan to throw dust in Aggie's eyes, Susan showed as public a preference for Simeon as she could. She found it easy in public with other people there to protect her, though why she needed protection she couldn't have said; but alone with him she found herself so unaccountably shy and awkward that if it hadn't been for Aggie's eagle eyes—she still felt them watching her—she would have avoided him.

Not that that would have been easy, for the reticent and determined Major, with his soldierly competence, was always managing to get her to himself.

Evidently, having promised to aid and abet her in her nefarious schemes, he meant to keep his word and do it properly. The inmates of Round-about House began to think he was in love with her and to tease her about him, which so alarmed and disconcerted Susan that at last she tackled him about his behaviour.

It took a terrible and strenuous summing-up of courage to do so, but when the Colonel had made some heavy and jovial remark *in front of Simeon*, so very jovial indeed that Susan, to her indignation, had blushed scarlet to the ears, she felt that this must be put a stop to, and really it was all Simeon Quest's fault. She was annoyed with him, terrified of him, and immensely indignant, all at the same time. She was also nettled, piqued, puzzled, and fractious, all of which she covered with the word "cross". "I

feel really cross," she assured herself, again and again, while working up her courage.

There was no difficulty about finding an opportunity to talk to him nowadays. Simeon seemed, in his calm, unobtrusive way, to be always there, at her beck and call, so that all that she had to do was to agree when he made one of his everlasting (Susan's word) proposals to take her for a walk or "do whatever she would like".

He had taken her fishing, and they really caught fish, to Susan's surprise —her fish-catching being more honoured, as we have seen, in the breach than the observance. They had also caught them with fly, let it be noted, not by guddling—that is to say, definitely Susan had caught a fair share of the basket herself, under Simeon's tutelage. "Whatever that man sets out to do, he does," had been Susan's comment on this.

They had climbed all the hills that Susan had wanted to climb since she first looked out of the window on that March morning. They had been "to the pictures", though Simeon had smiled in his knowledgeable way when Susan had chosen the picture with the most cowboys, wild mustangs, "lonely gorges, far from human ken", and hairbreadth escapes that the local cinema could supply. They had also on numerous occasions taken William riding, one on each side of the pony in case he performed the impossible feat of running away. And they had revisited the cave and looked at the hour-glass—rather askew—that Susan had drawn. They had started barefoot and ended by Simeon carrying her across.

And in all this Simeon had preserved his air of quiet authority, his reticence, his lean and competent appearance of knowing perfectly well what he wanted and what he was aiming at, while Susan grew more and more—cross.

It was quite easy then to find the opportunity to "have it out with him about the wrong impression he was giving people".

Of course, she had meant to give Aggie a wrong impression, but the whole house was a different thing. "And him doing nothing to counteract it!" grumbled Susan. That was really going too far. "Ridiculous!" said she.

There was a Michaelmas goose to be ordered at the farm, and she thought of taking William with them, as he loved a visit to the farm and could ride the pony across the fields, but William wasn't to be found. Aggie thought he was trotting round after Hicks, so they set off without him.

Susan tried several times to introduce the subject uppermost in her mind, but it was not until they were well on their homeward way and back at the stile that she got up her courage.

By this time the "Mr." had been almost completely dropped, but Susan still kept it up her sleeve as a sort of shield and buckler in case—well, just in case he . . . which he never did!

Still, she always had a queer feeling that she was walking along the edge of a precipice with Simeon Quest, or sitting on a barrel of gunpowder. She used both similes and occasionally mixed them.

"I wanted to tell you," she said at last, "that I was very much annoyed with the Colonel yesterday."

"That's bad," said he. "What has the Colonel been doing?" (As if he didn't know!)

"You know quite well. *Saying things!*"

"About us?"

"Yes. I consider his remarks quite uncalled for." Susan considered this quotation, from the latest novel she had been reading, very apt.

"It was all right, Susan," said he, "if you hadn't blushed."

"I didn't blush!"

"Well, somebody blushed, and I'm sure I didn't."

"Mr. Quest, I really do wish you would be serious; this is very important."

"I agree, it is—very important. Why did you blush—Miss Tyndal?"

"You know"—Susan left this point and tried another opening—"they are beginning to think there really is something in it."

"In what?"

"Well . . . in you and me—being interested in each other."

"Yes, quite right."

Now what was Susan to say to that? "That," she assured herself, "was just the sort of thing she complained of." (See reference to precipices, etc.)

"I really don't know what you mean."

"No? Then suppose you sit down on this stile and I'll tell you."

Immediately the stile became not a stile but a barrel of gunpowder. Nothing would have induced Susan to sit down upon it.

"Oh no! I think we ought to get home."

"Frightened?"

"What should I be frightened of?"

"Well, you look so frightened, I'm going to let you off."

"Let me off what?"

“Being told the truth for one thing and—being——”

“There’s a wild duck!” exclaimed Susan, and she really looked alarmed because of the wild duck, which was calmly paddling among the rushes.

“Yes, he came in very useful,” said Simeon calmly. There was silence for a few moments. Silence never seemed to perturb Simeon Quest. However, it was he who broke it.

“I saw you were out with Thorne last night,” he said.

“Oh yes, we came home from the rehearsal together.” She paused and then added: “You know Griff and I are still great friends.”

“So I’ve noticed,” he said rather stiffly. “Is Miss Agnew quite pleased about that?”

“Yes, she knows it’s just friendship. We are what you call—‘maty’.”

“Never,” said he.

“I don’t mean you—people.”

“We’ll waive that point and stick to the other. You’re quite sure it’s just being—maty?” He spoke the word as if it were a rat he had picked up by the tail.

“Yes, I am.” Susan was cross, or, as she spelt it when she used it in her letters, X.

They had reached the garden gate by this time and Aggie was to be seen coming quickly towards them. He put his arm suddenly through Susan’s, held it tight against his side and said, very firmly:

“I don’t like that word, Susan—maty, or its meaning. I think you should drop it.”

But whether he meant drop the word or being “maty” with Griff, Susan was never to know, for at that moment Aggie reached them and blew all Susan’s reflections and every thought but one out of her head.

“William’s lost!” she cried.

Hardly were the words out of her mouth when Miss Primmer, with an antimacassar round her head, came darting through the trees followed by Christina, while from another part of the garden the Colonel came panting with his usually meticulously tidy hair all on end.

“Oh, is William not with you?” gasped Miss Primmer. “Aggie said he wasn’t, but we thought he might have run after you. . . . Oh, where can he be?”

Susan stood for a moment, looking absolutely bewildered.

“But he’s with Hicks!” she gasped.

“No, he isn’t. Hicks hasn’t seen him all afternoon. He says he left him with Dorrie just after lunch, when he—Hicks—had to do a job for the Major, and we’ve hunted everywhere. We’ve been looking ever since you went away, because Aggie thought, after you’d asked about him, that she would make sure he was with Hicks—and he wasn’t, he was nowhere to be found.”

“The moor!” exclaimed Simeon. “Would he have wandered on the moor?”

“No——” said Aggie, and then stopped. “The duckling!” she said. “He’s always talking about the duckling being lost and not able to get home.”

The duckling, which Aggie and William had gone in search of, had never been found and William had been terribly grieved about it.

Immediately they all came to the conclusion that William had gone off to hunt for the strayed bird, and parties went off, up and down the stream and along the banks of the Melk water, to seek for him.

Susan, remembering his love for visiting the farm, and thinking he might have followed herself and Simeon and missed the path that led to the stile and the fields, went off alone down the dene. His sturdy little feet might have carried him far enough along the side of the trickling burn, if he missed the stile.

She returned, hot, tired, and distraught, for there was thunder in the air, hoping to find he was home. But William had not been found and night was coming on.

Dorrie had seen him last, but Dorrie knew nothing. As a matter of fact, they did not want to worry Dorrie too much, because a few days before she had flown into a terrible temper when reproached by Susan for teasing William by pretending she was going to hit Shaggy with a sjambok of the Major’s, which she had found stuck in the bag among his golf-clubs in the cloakroom. Griff had come out on hearing her screaming at Susan, and seeing her waving the whip about had taken it from her. This had so incensed her that, to their horror, she had fallen in a fit, and had one or two slight ones later on.

Susan, in particular, was afraid to press her about William as all her resentment had centred on him and on Susan who, she had screamed, had put Griff against her so that she could get him for herself. Sharp though she was where Griff was concerned, she had never realized that it was Aggie and not Susan he was really in love with. Like all slightly mental people, she was a slave to the fixed idea.

But Miss Primmer had very gently questioned her and was sure that Dorrie knew nothing about William. He had been playing beside her, but wandered off by himself when Hicks had left them.

Susan was not so sure that Dorrie knew nothing, but she daren't press her in the state she was in. Whatever happened, Dorrie must be kept quiet, and not allowed to get excited.

A hurried meal was eaten, standing in the kitchen, and then everybody went off again with lanterns and flashlights, to continue the search.

Susan waited till they were all gone, wondering if it would be possible to coax Dorrie into saying more without rousing her anger.

She was lying on the drawing-room sofa, reading, when Susan went in to make her attempt, ready to soothe her and withdraw at the least sign of excitement.

"Dorrie darling," she said, very gently and sympathetically, "did William do anything to vex you today? We would all be so sorry if he did when you were feeling so tired, poor little Dorrie."

Dorrie could always swallow any amount of petting and sympathy.

"I hate William," she said pettishly. "I hope he *is* lost. I hope the Cobbs have got him. He went to look for the duck. Go away."

"All right, Dorrie," said Susan, hastily changing the subject, for Dorrie was evidently not to be placated and might fly into a rage at any moment. "Shall I make up the fire for you, and would you like a glass of Horlick's milk?"

Dorrie loved Horlick's milk and graciously consented to take a glass, which Susan hurried to the kitchen to make, taking time, in spite of her rage of impatience to be off hunting for William, to make it strong as she liked it and to put it daintily on a fresh and gay little tray-cloth with a few crisp biscuits. As Susan gave it to her, she asked: "Where is Griff?"

"He is seeking William," said Susan, "and I'm going out, too. You'll be all right, won't you? Christina will be here soon."

Then she left the drawing-room and stood for a moment in the hall, recalling Dorrie's words. "The Cobbs!"

Suddenly a conviction seized her that the Cobbs were at the bottom of this. They hated her and had vowed revenge, and they had always seen William with her, never with Aggie. She knew from their passing remarks that they thought he was her little boy, or, if not, then related to her, and knew that she adored him.

“Nevvies don’t get so much mammy-love,” had been one of Isabella’s sneering remarks.

But what could the Cobbs have done with him? Was he at their house? Were they frightening him? What could their intentions be, seeing they could hardly go to the lengths of making away with him. Sell him to gipsies! Even Susan’s imaginative mind baulked at that. The days of children stolen by the gipsies were well past. Neither did she give more than two minutes to the supposition that he had been kidnapped, to be held at ransom for a fortune. After all, the Borders were not America. Perhaps they just wanted to give Susan a good fright. But to use William for that! To terrify William! Susan felt like a roused lioness at the thought. But what could she do? How could she find out? They would deny any knowledge of him, that was certain.

She stood very still, her quick, active brain tearing at one idea after another and casting it aside. At last she made up her mind.

“I’ll go to their house,” she said to herself, determined, “and try to find out something there.”

She picked up her flashlight, and leaving Dorrie alone in the house—Christina had promised to come back and would soon be there—closed the front door and ran swiftly down the dark avenue.

CHAPTER XXVII

A STORM ROLLS UP

As she sped along the road she wished she could have asked more of Dorrie. What she meant by her reference, for instance, to the Cobbs? Was it just a passing thought because she hated the Cobbs herself and had a way of teasing William by saying, “The Cobbs will get you”, though William did not know them?

Or did she know something?

It was no use trying to riddle it out, and it had been impossible to risk exciting Dorrie by asking her.

The Cobbs’ cottage lay in a side road not far from the house if she took a short cut, which she did, although it was now very dark and she could not keep to the paths.

It stood with its back to a little spinney which they had spoiled by using it as a run for their hens. She wondered if the hens would cackle as she prepared to cross it to look through a back window whose light she could see from the hedge at the far side.

The hens, fortunately, were less easily alarmed than the plovers, who had earned the hatred of the covenanters by giving away their hiding-places and still had a bad name on the Borders for that reason. Not a hen, as Susan remarked later, gave tongue. She crept across the spinney and reached the window, but when she came to look through she discovered it was merely a pantry. Someone had evidently been in there and been suddenly called away, for there was a lighted candle on a shelf beside a jam-jar with a spoon across it and a half-filled jam-dish.

The window was slightly open, and from the direction of what she guessed was the kitchen she heard loud voices raised in argument.

She put her ear to the slit of the open window but could only make out a word now and then. She was certain, however, that she heard the word “boy”, and that decided her to push the window up, if she could only manage it quietly.

The window made a little noise, and though there was no pause in the talk they may have heard some slight sound because the voices became quieter. Susan was never one to be baulked for lack of courage; she decided

to climb through the window and get close enough to hear what all the talk was about.

The window was not very broad, but neither was Susan. Though by no means possessed of Aggie's long, willowy figure, her small sturdy frame was slight and supple. She wriggled herself through like a little cat. Luckily there was a shelf just underneath her; she got on to it and reached the floor without making any noise, then she tiptoed across the pantry, pushed the door wider open and looked about her.

There was a little square lobby with the outer door in front of her, doors at each side, and a stairway on her left. From the door beside the stairs the voices were coming.

After a moment she tiptoed out, but first she turned and blew out the candle. She hoped, if disturbed, to have time to slip back and out of the window without being seen.

The kitchen door, as it proved to be, was pulled close but not quite shut, and after she had put out the candle she could see a slit of light coming through. She stole softly up to it and listened. At once she recognized Isabella's voice.

"Well, you can keep him for a day or so, can't you?"

"I don't like it, Mother," whined another voice in reply. "Why couldn't you keep him yourself, if you want to give her a fright? It wasn't fair bringing me into it."

"How could I keep him here? They'll never guess he's up at Langhope. You could keep him out-by there for a month o' Sundays and nobody any the wiser."

"You're a fool, Belle," said Cobb's voice. "They'll have the polis out and the whole place turned ower. What set ye to take the laddie onyhow?"

"Well, it was just a sudden idea. There he was all alone up the burn, and it was that easy to tell him his duck he was lookin' for was up at Lizzie's. We could see Langhope frae there and I knew she was all alone. I wanted to give that whey-faced huzzy a fright; and then I thought there's lots o' folks would give something to hear that little bag-o'-bones was out o' the way."

"Be quiet, woman," said Cobb. "You're no talking o' doin' away with the crittur, are ye?"

"No—but you'd think it would be easy enough to take him to Glesca or somewhere and lose him. That Mistress Argyle-Smith, as she calls herself, is at the 'Red Lion' in Culverston keepin' an eye on things, and she'd gi'e a pot o' money to have him lost. I thought I might go and see her—what did ye do with him, Lizzie, when ye come oot?"

"What could I do with him and me alone in the hoose? I shut him up in the attic; he can yell his head off there without being heard—though he's not a yeller, I'll say that for him. I gave him the kitten to keep him quiet, till I got away. But mind you, for two pins I'd have brought him back to ye, for I want nothing to do with it, but they were all out on the moor and I'd as like as not have been caught with him. I wish, Mother, you'd do your own dirty work."

They began to shout and argue with each other, but Susan had heard enough. She crept back through the pantry window and took a bee-line for Langhope, never noticing a shadowy figure who had been hiding in the spinney and followed on her heels.

She never thought of going for any of the others to come with her. Anyhow, she did not know where the men or Aggie were. Miss Primmer had gone with a lantern to examine every corner of the out-buildings, but she was no use. William was alone and terrified in that lonely cottage, shut up in a dark attic; she must get to him at once. Langhope was a little lonely shepherd's cottage, perched, miles from anywhere, on the side of one of the hills that rose from the great moorlands lying all around. She went by the burn up which William had strayed, looking for his duck, as it flowed close past the cottage and was her only guide in the dark night. It was very dark and still, with rumbles of distant thunder that seemed to be coming nearer. If the storm broke William might be scared out of his wits, alone in the attic. He was not, as the woman had said, a "yeller", he never shouted and screamed, but he was nervous and highly strung. She saw him, white-faced, shaking, giving those little whimpers of suffering children, choking with terror.

She struggled on, slipping on stones, plunging through bogs of peaty moss, getting scratched and torn as she pushed through furze and old heather, but at last she came to the little bridge that crossed the burn beside the house.

From there a path led to the door, which she found with her flashlight.

The door was locked, but she was country-bred and knew the big key would be hidden near. In a few seconds she came on it, in the rone under the thatch, and opened the door.

Now to find the attic. She looked round the entry and the rooms but could find no staircase anywhere. In the kitchen there was a lamp, turned down, but giving a low glimmer of light; she stood thinking and listening. Not a sound was to be heard. Then she remembered that in some of the cottages in the district an attic room was reached by an outside stone stair.

She left the kitchen and went all round the outside of the house with the flashlamp, but found no steps. Then in a flash she recalled the back stair at Round-about House up which Simeon had carried Dorrie; it led straight up from a door in the kitchen.

She flew back and opened the doors in the kitchen; two were cupboards, the third opened into a milk-house, the last was the right one. Before her a flight of wooden steps led upwards. She started up and was just going to shout, "William! William!" when, to her horror and amazement, something gripped her ankles and jerked her down. She gave a scream of terror as she went hurtling backwards on to the kitchen floor.

For a minute she lay stunned, her head had struck the stone floor and a sharp pain cut through it. She could not move or open her eyes for a few seconds, and as she lay an explanation crossed her mind—Cobb must have followed her—or Isabella. What was she to do?

At last a sound startled her back into full consciousness and she opened her eyes. But for a moment she could hardly believe them as she stared at the figure that had now darted across the kitchen and was standing at the table, opening the drawer. It was Dorrie!

For one moment she felt relief, and then sheer horror took its place, for Dorrie had picked up a short carving-knife out of the drawer and now came brandishing it towards Susan, her face livid with fury, her eyes quite mad.

"The fits! The fits!" thought Susan, as she sprang to her feet, fear swiftly pulling her to her senses.

They had been warned to watch Dorrie after a bout of fits, but never from any danger of her turning maniacal. Up till now she had only lost her memory, become dazed and talked about people having faces like birds and so on; but now something had turned her into a mad woman. In a moment Susan knew what it was. It was her brooding over Griff and William that had unhinged her mental balance.

"So you stole here to meet Griff," Dorrie hissed. "You thought you would blind me by talking about William. You thought I didn't know you were meeting him on the sly, but I followed you, and now you're going to pay for taking him away from me."

"But, Dorrie, it was William——" Susan began, and then saw her mistake.

"William! William! I'm going to get William after you. He comes next!" And the demented girl began to shriek horribly about William and what she would do to him.

Susan saw that she must try to get her mind off both Griff and William, if that were possible—her madness was centred on them. She was getting more excited as she screamed that William had taken her Aunty from her and now had taken her money as well.

Susan's terror turned to desperate concern for William. Suppose he came down the stairs and Dorrie made a rush at him with the knife. Could she protect him? Susan was stronger normally than Dorrie, but she knew only too well about the abnormal strength of people seized with a fit of maniacal fury. The sight of William would be enough to send Dorrie flying at him with the knife. If she could just shut the door to the stairs that would keep him out of the kitchen, if he found his way down the stairs.

Turning sideways and keeping her eye on Dorrie, who was watching, ready to spring at her, she reached backwards and was closing the door when Dorrie saw the movement and made a rush, but instead of attacking Susan she took her unawares by dashing the door out of her hand and springing up the stairs.

"He's up there!" she screamed. "But it's me he wants, not you. Me! Me! Me!"

But Susan, almost mad herself now with terror for William, leaped after her, caught her round the knees, dragging her backwards and downwards, but in doing so she lost her own balance and they both came crashing to the floor. This time it was Dorrie who got the full force of the blow. Her head struck the floor, the knife flew from her hand and she lay still.

Instantly Susan sprang to her feet, shut the door to the stairs, and looked for something to tie Dorrie's arms with. She saw the knife and, picking it up, ran to the open door and flung it outside. Then her eye caught sight of the roller-towel behind the door, and pulling it down she got a knife from the drawer and hacked it into one long straight piece; then she knelt down beside Dorrie. As she did so the girl's eyes opened and she struggled to sit up; but the terrible mad glitter had left her eyes, she looked dazed as she stared at Susan, but fairly normal. "Let me up," she said.

Susan was puzzled. Had she come to her senses or was this the cunning of the maniac of which she had heard? Then she saw her eyes searching the floor. Was she looking for the knife? She seemed puzzled. Perhaps she did not remember what had happened.

Anyhow she must get Dorrie out of the cottage without her knowing William was there. She must make her think it was Griff who was hiding up there. Susan's brain was working at lightning speed. William was so small and helpless. Griff and she could look after themselves, but she must keep

William hidden from Dorrie till she was quite better or something had been arranged about him going to Corne. She had, so far, no idea where he was—that he was here, up in the attic. If only Susan could get Dorrie away she would take William across to Corne and keep him safely there, or have him sent away. With maniacs you never knew, they were so cunning. She must hide William, get him away somewhere, and let Dorrie think he had never been found. Once a maniacal fit had seized her, it might return at any time. She prayed that William would make no sound as she desperately tried to think of some way of getting Dorrie out of the house without her guessing where he was. With desperate haste she made a plan.

She would pretend it was Griff she had come to meet, but that he had gone back to Round-about House, and try to get Dorrie to follow him.

Now that Dorrie was conscious she must not try to bind her arms, anything might bring back the fit of fury. Susan, herself, must be as cunning as though she were also mad, indeed she felt almost mad with terror for the small boy who had wound himself so closely round her heart.

She helped Dorrie up and led her to an arm-chair that stood by the fire, watching her every movement. As she did so, her eyes caught sight of a shawl hanging at the back of the chair. At the least sign of violence she would throw it over her head and blind her in its folds.

But Dorrie lay quietly back and closed her eyes for a few moments as if exhausted; when she opened them they seemed sane enough as she said:

"Griff is up there."

Susan hesitated, but only for a moment.

"He was, Dorrie, but he's gone now. I'll take you to him. He's left the cottage."

"No, you are trying to get me away. He's up there and I'm going to see him"—and she tried to rise.

Susan was desperate.

"No, Dorrie, he was there, but he's gone. He slipped out when you were unconscious. Come now, I promise faithfully to take you to him."

"You were meeting Griff here, I know it."

"Yes—I was meeting Griff, but he's gone, truly——"

A sound made them both start and turn round.

Simeon Quest was standing in the open doorway, his face blank with incredulity.

He must have heard their last words, but in Susan's great rush of relief there was no room for considerations of that kind. But before he could speak

Dorrie had shouted out:

"Now you can't hide Griff any more. Simeon will make you let me see him."

Susan turned.

"Dorrie isn't very well," she said quietly. "Would you please try to get her home?"

Instantly he came forward, his face clearing.

"Not very well," he said. "Poor child. How did she get up here?"

"She followed me here," said Susan.

"You—but you were going to the village."

Susan had said she was going to the village, to ask there if William had been seen. Griff had arranged to come up the burn. Instantly, Susan remembered that Dorrie had heard all these arrangements being made.

"Yes," said the latter, triumphantly. "I did. I followed her. She went after Griff. She thinks I don't know about her meeting Griff, but I knew she would follow him. She's always sneaking away to meet him to keep him from me."

"Well, we will take you home now, Dorrie."

"Yes, I'll come home with you," she said instantly. "But Susan won't, because Griff is hiding here. I know where he is."

"Oh yes," Simeon said, "Susan will—won't you, Susan? We shall both take you home."

"No," said Susan desperately, "I can't come."

He looked at her, puzzled, and Dorrie laughed. To all seeming, she was her usual self, spiteful and childish, but either the fit of madness had passed or she was acting with maniacal cunning, waiting for her chance. Susan did not know which.

Just then she heard a sound from behind the closed door of the stairway. She instantly surmised that William was crawling down the stairs in the darkness. He must have found his way out of the pitchy blackness of the attic. She became absolutely desperate to get Dorrie away. Not only was she afraid that the sight of him might again send her into a fit of maniacal fury, but she felt that it would be better in every way to keep her mind off him. She and Griff could cope with Dorrie, if necessary, so it would be best to keep her mind on them, and safest for William to be removed from her sight and never to let her see him again. She seemed to have quite forgotten him for the moment.

"I can't come," she repeated. "But Dorrie ought to get home. Take her home, please."

Simeon turned to her.

"Why can't you come? I can't leave you here, alone."

"I'm not alone."

He stared at her.

Dorrie laughed. "Griff's here," she said.

"Oh," he said stiffly, as Susan did not speak. "In that case . . ." He paused, then bent and took Dorrie's hands. "Come along, Dorrie," he said in his quiet, resolute voice. "I'm going to take you home."

Dorrie liked Simeon, and besides there was something in his voice that mastered her. She rose, saying pettishly, "Yes, I'll go with you."

And now another fear struck Susan. She must warn Simeon and the others of what had happened, it wasn't safe not to do so, and yet it was difficult with Dorrie there listening, but she daren't leave her in the kitchen and try to see Simeon alone. She must say something and yet not rouse Dorrie's anger—but what?

She risked treating her like a naughty girl.

"Dorrie's been very naughty," she said, as lightly as she could, but looking straight at Simeon. "She tried to attack me with a knife."

"I didn't," said Dorrie, at once.

"No, you didn't know what you were doing, Dorrie," she said soothingly. "You didn't mean it, did you?"

Simeon was looking at Susan, a deep frown across his brows.

Susan nodded to him, frowning back, catching the moment when Dorrie's sharp eyes were turned away. Then she spoke to Dorrie again. "So Simeon must take great care of you, mustn't he, Dorrie, because you are not very well just now—and not leave you for a minute."

But Dorrie's thoughts had gone back to her grievance.

"I'll go if you come too," she said—"or if Griff comes. I'm tired. Griff could carry me." And she tried to sit down again.

"I think you should come with her, Susan," said Simeon, in a low voice. "There is no one in the house but Miss Primmer to get her to bed and care for her."

But Susan was growing desperate. With a terrible effort she had been holding in her impatience to have them gone. The faint sounds she had heard had ceased. Had it been William? Where was he? What was he doing?

“I can’t come,” she said sharply.

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Is Thorne here?”

“Oh,” said Susan, “please go. Please take Dorrie away. It’s essential she should go.”

“I see,” he said slowly. He looked at Dorrie.

“Griffith Thorne is not here,” he said, and Susan knew he was telling her what to him was a lie, because he thought it the only way to get Dorrie to go quickly. “I saw him before I came in. Come along, we’ll go and find him”—and leaning down, he gently raised her up again and led her to the door. Just then a roll of thunder broke over the house and he paused, evidently completely puzzled about it all, and loath to leave Susan, and said gently:

“Are you sure you won’t come, Susan? I don’t like leaving you alone.”

“Oh, go away, go away!” snapped Susan, at breaking-point. “I won’t be alone, if that’s what you want to know.”

“I only wanted to know if you’d been lying to me all this time about Thorne,” he fired back, his face white with sudden anger. “I see you have.”

And going quickly out he shut the door.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"FRIENDS THE MEREST"

For one revealing moment Susan stood staring blankly at the door. "But, Simeon," she wanted to cry out, "Griff isn't here! I don't care for him now!"

She even took a step forward, when another rattle of thunder made her turn again—William!

She picked up her flashlight, and rushing across the kitchen flashed it up the dark stairs. There was no one there.

"William!" she shouted, and ran up the steps. At the top was a closed door, with the key in the lock. "William! William!" she called again, and pushing open the door, flashed her light round the walls of the pitch-black room. At first she thought he was not there, and then, hearing a sound at her side, she looked down and saw him huddled close to the door. In a moment she was on her knees beside him. He was lying completely wound round the kitten, quiet, but hiccuping with the exhausted shaking sobs a frightened child will give when he has cried till he can cry no more.

In a moment her arms were round him and she had lifted him up, kitten and all. In her heart she blessed the woman who had given him the kitten, thinking what a strange mixture human nature was, never all black. The woman had shut him alone in that dark attic and left him—but she had given him the kitten!

"It's all right now, Susan's here," she assured him, kissing his wet, burning face and hugging the thin, dishevelled shrimp close in her arms. "Susan's going to take you home."

"Take the k—k—k——" hiccupped William.

"Take the kitten! Of course we'll take the kitten."

"His name is B—B—B——"

"Blackie," guessed Susan, seeing the kitten was black. William had no use for originality or self-conscious humour in the naming of his pets. He liked the good and old-fashioned obvious.

She asked him no questions. Children's minds do not dwell consciously on the past; they are immediately taken up with the present. William didn't sob out about how frightened he had been or sound any pathetic note, but he clamped his arms round her neck and held it in a vice-like grip. When he did

speak, it was to inform her, lisping through the gap where he'd lost two tiny white teeth, the tears still on his lashes, that he wanted to carry the "faushy"—in imitation of Christina who called all flashlamps "flaushies".

So the handle of the flashlight was squeezed between his tight fingers and Susan's neck and they set off, not for "home", but for Corne.

By this time the thunderstorm was on. The thunder, Susan surmised, had kept Lizzie from returning home; her husband was probably away with sheep to one of the more distant markets and there would be no hurry, but Susan's heart was wrung when she thought of the long hours that William might have been left alone.

The rain came on and fell in drenching sheets. William, though so small and thin, soon became a heavy burden in her arms, and she prayed that she might meet some of those who were out seeking for William. She remembered now that she ought somehow to have let Simeon know he was found, but she had been too distraught to think of that. Once she was at Corne she would find some means of letting them know. Of one thing she was determined: William was not going back to Round-about House while Dorrie was there; nor was Dorrie to know in the meantime that he had been found. Better let her think he was lost, or she might guess, with that strange, cunning cleverness she showed in some things, that he was in the house that was now his own.

She wondered, too, if Simeon might come back once he had got Dorrie home, then she remembered that he thought Griff was with her, unless he jumped to the truth that she had been humouring Dorrie, as he had a queer way of doing.

It was very dark between the vivid flashes of lightning, and she often stumbled, and once when she fell to her knees the flashlamp was jerked from William's fingers and lost. Not that it mattered very much, for in its position the jogging light had fallen behind her, but it had comforted William and taken his mind off the lightning flashes that lit up moor and sky.

Then she had to find her way across the moor to the Melk water and thence across the bridge to Corne.

She had reached a point on the burn where she felt she ought to leave it and start across the trackless waste to the Melk, which flowed here more or less parallel with the little burn, but close to Corne. She stood hesitating, drenched with rain and tired out for a moment, and then decided to put William down, take a few minutes' rest, and then mount him pick-a-back, and struggle on in that way.

The kitten, which had had to come with them, was another addition to her troubles. She had turned up her skirt before starting, pinned it firmly round her waist, and put the tiny creature in the "poke" thus made, but it kept jogging against her legs and mewing in discomfort. She had, of course, no qualms whatever about stealing the kitten. Susan would have stolen an elephant if it had comforted William at the moment, but she did wish it could have been a teddy-bear or something more easily transported.

Instead of resting, she tried walking with William for a little way—but his small feet, in strapped slippers, were not of much use in the tall heather and boggy peat mires—and had just left the side of the burn when she saw farther back on the way they had come a light twinkling out now and then.

With a sigh of relief she stopped, and sent out a ringing "Coo-ee". At the same moment a flash of light revealed a dark figure up the burn and a reassuring voice answered her hail. It was Griff.

Never had she been so glad to see him. In two ticks William was transferred to his shoulder and he had taken Susan's arm and was listening to her breathless tale as she poured it out.

He, himself, had been far up the burn, having heard that a small boy had been seen trotting that way early in the afternoon, and was slowly returning, examining every nook and cranny, when he heard Susan's shout.

He assured her that the best way was to keep to the burn till they came to the path leading to the Melk water bridge, and accordingly they kept to the burnside while she told him all her adventures, only keeping back the parts about himself and Dorrie and Simeon.

He quite agreed that William should be taken to Corne, and it was at once arranged that as soon as he had seen Susan and William safely housed, he would return to Round-about House and let them know that William was found.

As it happened, however, this was not necessary, for long before they reached the bridge another figure appeared, coming up the other side of the burn. It was Simeon on his way back to make sure that Susan was all right.

He did not join them, however, but on hearing of William's safety said he would find Aggie, who was distractedly hunting the little spinneys near the house, and went off with a stiff "Good night" after he heard they were making for Corne, because Susan felt it was safer, considering Dorrie's state of mind, and her evident hatred of William.

Dorrie, he told them, was safely in bed and the doctor sent for, and Christina was staying all night to be at hand if she were needed.

“Good night, Simeon,” Susan called with rather a sinking heart as he strode away.

After seeing her with Griff, he had confined all his remarks to him and to William.

“Good night,” he said, and went.

“Oh dear,” thought Susan, “shall I ever be able to explain all this muddle?” And she became rather absent-minded with Griff as she went over in her mind all the story she had to tell to Simeon on the morrow, when she saw him again, wishing, as she tramped along, that she could have run after him and explained at least that Griff had not been at Langhope as he would be convinced, now he had seen them returning together. For, somehow, her heart had turned terribly heavy as she realized how deep was Simeon’s resentment and how angry he was with her.

“But,” she tried to comfort herself, “when he knows the truth and that I just couldn’t help lying a little bit, perhaps—perhaps we’ll be friends again.

“Of course, we were just friends,” she assured herself. “But somehow I can’t bear him to be angry with me, and if he wasn’t friends with me . . .”

Griff’s quotation came back to her about “Friends the merest”.

“Don’t be silly,” she admonished herself. “That doesn’t fit at all,” and she turned to listen to Griff, who had begun talking about Aggie.

CHAPTER XXIX

"THE WIND BLOWS COLD"

It was too late for Aggie to come up to Corne that night, but she was up shortly after breakfast next morning.

Old Grimes and the cook had been delighted to see William, as he had always been a favourite of theirs, and, of course, now that he was the young heir, nothing was too good for him.

He was regaled on hot bread-and-milk and two pink-sugar biscuits miraculously produced by Cook and shaped like mice, while Blackie blew himself out like a little balloon on a saucer of cream beside him.

When he had been put to bed Susan told the story of the Cobbs to an interested group of men and maids, for she had no intention of hiding their evil deeds. She wanted William well-protected. Grimes' opinion was, however, that William would be perfectly safe now. He had no great opinion of Isabella, either as a criminal or anything else. She was just a daft body, he said, who needed a "weiss-like husband" to look after her and not the silly, swearing Cobb, whom she led by the nose and who was afraid of her tantrums. It calmed Susan considerably to have this sane view of the Cobbs, who had become, to her, villains of the deepest dye, and on Grimes' advice she gave up the idea of calling in the police and having them punished.

To spread the story round the countryside would be sufficient to safeguard William and make them draw in their horns for a long time. Anyhow, Grimes had heard talk of them going out to "Australy" to join forces with a brother of Cobb's on a small ranch, and this would probably give them the final impetus to set off.

She told Grimes and Cook alone the true reason why she had brought William to Corne, as she did not want Dorrie talked about if it could be prevented. The others were just told of his wandering off after the duck and getting lost and being found near the house and brought in.

When Aggie arrived the next morning, she was told the whole story, but it appeared that Dorrie was being kept perfectly quiet in bed and had shown no symptoms of madness, and it had been decided to try and persuade her to have the operation later on, as Carrick-Symthe had advised. Simeon had said she must go back to the Home, but that would be a terrible business, and

Miss Primmer was all against it and wanted to see Susan, as she thought she would be on her side. Aggie was deputed to bring her back to Round-about House to a consultation, so they started off, leaving William in the care of Grimes and the rest of the household, but particularly of the stalwart young groom, Johnson, who promised never to let him out of his sight.

They had hardly reached the gates when they met Cobb and Isabella. It appeared that news had reached them that William was at Corne and that the police were on their way to apprehend Isabella, and, terror-stricken, they had come up to see Susan and explain, the explanation being that Isabella had found the little boy wandering up the burn and had taken him to her daughter's house for safety until he could be sent for, and that her daughter had had to leave the house, but being afraid he would "catch his death of cold" in the storm that was brewing had left him in the upstairs room, where he would be safe, away from fires or lamps or candles, and given him the kitten to play with; and what was her surprise on going back to find him gone—and so forth, and so on.

"Now listen to me, Mrs. Cobb," said Susan, when she could get a word in. "I might have believed a part of that tale, but for one thing. I climbed through your pantry window last night and heard all about the plot to take him to Glasgow and lose him and get money from the Argyle-Smiths for doing it, so I know that every word you are saying is a lie."

Mrs. Cobb for once lost her high colour, she turned a sickly yellow, and was so dumbfounded she had, for a moment, not a word to say. It was Cobb who broke in.

"Sure, Miss Tyndal, that was all a lot of Isabella's tomfoolery, and if ye heard that much ye must have heard me and Lizzie calling her a damn' fool for her pains. Isabella is aye full of daft notions, and that was the daftest o' the lot."

"I didn't mean it, Miss Susan," put in Mrs. Cobb, regaining her wind, which had been knocked out of her. "I wouldn't have harmed the bairn; it was just wild talk, for I wanted to give ye a fright, but that was all. When Lizzie went away she was going to get the laddie and take him straight back the minute the storm was over."

"You didn't think of relieving our anxiety, though," said Susan, "by letting us know where he was."

There was some difficulty in finding an answer to that, but no doubt Mrs. Cobb would have found it had Susan not stopped her by saying:

"You see, Mrs. Cobb, I know all about it and I'm in two minds about letting the police know. However, I am writing out the whole of the facts

together with every word that I heard in your house and sending them in a sealed letter to William's lawyer. If ever anything in the least suspicious happens to William, that letter goes straight to police headquarters—and you understand what that means. Immediate arrest, probably for attempted murder, for among other words I heard were these, 'There's lots of folks would give something to hear that that little bag o' bones was out of the way.' "

That shot went home. In two seconds they were both pleading with Susan to do nothing more in the matter, and promising with vows and protestations that they would trouble Round-about House and Corne no more.

Susan said they must sign a letter to that effect, which she would get Mr. Selby, William's lawyer, to write and send for their signatures, and having thus settled, she hoped for good, the Cobbs, she and Aggie set off again for home.

In spite of leaving William and still being anxious about him, not on the Cobbs' account but Dorrie's—she had become much more afraid of Dorrie than the Cobbs—Susan was glad to be going back to Round-about House. Though she did not quite admit it to herself, she knew in her secret heart it was because she would see Simeon again, and now she could tell him the whole story and explain that it was William she had meant when she said she would not be alone, and that Griff had never been there at all, nor had she followed him nor been meeting him secretly, that she just had let Dorrie think that to keep her mind off William, who was hiding, as she thought, behind the door to the stairs.

Once she had told him all about Dorrie's fit of maniacal fury and the knife, he, she was sure, would understand.

It had become most important to her that Simeon should understand, that he should forgive her and think well of her and that they should be friends again.

"I suppose I do like him," she said to herself. "At least, I have a grudging admiration for the man"—she stopped herself. Was it grudging? No, to be quite honest, she supposed she did admire him, he was so unassuming and quiet and competent, and you felt he was so strong in every way, not only physically but in character, and—and so upright and plain and fine and modest—only modest wasn't quite the word, either, for he wasn't at all modest when he was being dominant and despotic, which he certainly was at times—she supposed he had had to be despotic often in his wanderings among queer tribes and savages and had got used to it. . . .

"Well," Susan concluded this summing-up—"whatever he is, the mixture is rather frightening and, at the same time, exciting and overpowering and—and—yes, attractive." He did attract her, she admitted, though, of course, only in a friendly way, but so much so that she simply could not bear him to think badly of her or to be angry with her.

And he had been very angry. Yet although he was angry, he had been going back through the storm to see that she was all right. That was just what he would do, and she liked a man like that, who would look after you even if he were furious with you. What a pity Griff had been there when they met last night! She felt again the decided resentment she had felt against poor Griff when they had met Simeon going back. Simeon would have helped her even more with William, for he would have given her advice, and Griff rather depended on her for knowing best what to do, which was nice of him but made her so responsible. Simeon always seemed to take the responsibility off her shoulders.

Yes, and she could have told him then all about it, and they would have made it up and been friends again then and there.

Well—her heart lightened—she was going home now and would see him and would manage somehow to get him alone, even if she had to frighten him into concern for her by going to his room—she smiled to herself, such a gentle and reminiscent smile that Aggie, wondering at her long silence and turning to look at her, was surprised.

"You do look happy, Susan. You're not engaged or anything, are you?"

"Oh no!" Susan was much more emphatic than there was any need to be at Aggie's light and laughing inquiry. "Of course I'm not. Who would I be engaged to?"

"Oh, there are possibilities at Round-about House," said Aggie demurely.

"Fiddlesticks!" said Susan, quoting Mrs. Delacorne's favourite remark in her rather overdone eagerness to deny any such possibilities. At the same time her mind flew back to Simeon.

Who would he marry? Some beautiful, aristocratic girl in all probability.

"I'll see their pictures in the *Tatler*," thought Susan with dismal brightness, "and point him out to Bede and Sally at the flat." For it seemed there would be nothing for it now but to return to London and seek a job, since Miss Primmer would be giving up the boarding-house and Aggie otherwise engaged.

Very much otherwise, as her next words proved!

"I've never got my news told you," said she, after a few minutes' silence. "I meant to, first thing, but I've never found an opportune moment to bring it in."

"You do look so happy." Susan turned the tables on her: "You are not engaged or anything, are you?"

Aggie nodded her head. "You'll never guess to whom."

"Hicks!" said Susan teasingly. Then she turned and hugged Aggie heartily.

"Oh, darling, I'm so glad. Was it in the thunderstorm? I'd love to get engaged in a thunderstorm."

"Well—there were distant rumbles. I thought it might be you chuckling."

"I never rumble, Patricia Agnew. I'm not aristocratic enough. Congratulations, all the same. Griff, though I says it as shouldn't, is a darling. In fact, I'm jealous. If you like to offer him to me now, I'll take him."

"I dare say you would, Susan Tyndal, you two-faced besom, but you've missed the bus." And Aggie hugged her in return and then began talking nineteen to the dozen as they went down the hill, telling Susan all about it, or at least a great deal, and explaining about the letter that had come the evening before, offering Griff the post of estate agent at Corne, because old Mr. Deans, the present agent, had only kept on because Mrs. Delacorne wouldn't let him retire, but he was tired and wanted to give it up. So Griff, as soon as he had a job—and suspecting the Colonel had had a hand in the pie, for he and Mr. Selby were old friends—a job and therefore something to offer Aggie—had taken the first opportunity to ask her, because, he said, he couldn't ask her before when she had an income and he had none—and so on, Aggie getting it all out without any pauses at all, which makes it a little difficult to punctuate, but suited Susan very well, for somehow she didn't feel like talking because getting nearer to Round-about House they were, presumably, getting nearer to Simeon Quest, and Susan was turning quite shaky about meeting him and wondering what she would say—if . . . And what she would do—suppose . . .

In the garden Miss Primmer was walking with the Colonel but immediately came up to her, and then Susan realized that no one but herself knew that for a short while Dorrie had been really mad—dangerous—or that she, herself, and William had had their lives threatened by a raving maniac. Before she knew where she was she was in the middle of a terrible scene.

She tried to explain what had happened, but they were unconvinced and vigorously resented her proposal that Dorrie should be sent back to the

Home. In two minutes she was in the centre of a storm. They were all indignant. Miss Primmer was so furious she ordered Susan out of the house.

"You have taken a dislike to Dorrie," she said, in a voice shaking with anger, when Susan, driven desperate, said she would call in a doctor and get her certified, because it wasn't safe for William. "Dorrie has shown a little childish jealousy, but that is all. William in danger from Dorrie! I think *you* are mad and had better go away yourself. Indeed, I think, as you are so afraid for your safety, that would be the best plan. I couldn't bear you in the house knowing you were afraid of poor Dorrie."

Desperately Susan turned to Aggie.

"Aggie—surely you agree with me? And Griff—what does Griff think?"

"We think Dorrie was playing up," said Aggie. "You know what she is, Susan. She loves making scenes. I do think it's cruel to suggest she should go back to the Home."

"It's abominable!" said Miss Primmer. "It's more than I can stand. Please go and leave us if you are afraid, but don't dare to suggest again that Dorrie should be sent away—why, it would kill her!"

"Very well," said Susan. "I'll go. I'll go at once, but I warn you to take care. Dorrie was dangerous and might turn dangerous at any time. I am so desperate about it I feel like letting them know at the Home."

"Go away!" shouted Miss Primmer, beside herself at this. She turned to Aggie, who was trying to calm Susan, "Take her away, she is making me ill."

Susan turned and ran out of the room and up the stairs, followed by Aggie. In her own bedroom she flung open the wardrobe and began to put on her suit and pack a few things.

"Susan, be reasonable," Aggie implored. "Nanty doesn't mean you to go. She's just beside herself and furious with you because you keep on insisting about the Home. That would be too cruel, Susan; but we'll get a nurse to be with Dorrie till William goes to Corne for good."

"I'm going," exclaimed Susan. "And what's more——" She stopped. She had been going to say she was not coming back, but it was no use having arguments about what she meant to do. "What's more, I'm going to see Simeon Quest before I go, and tell him everything about Dorrie. I never got a chance to do so at the cottage with her there, but he is the only person in this house with any sense." In her misery at being, as she felt, cast out of the house, with no one taking her side, she gave a sob. Surely Simeon at least would forgive her and listen to her story.

"Simeon!" exclaimed Aggie. "But I thought you knew. Simeon is gone."

"Gone!"

"Yes, packed up and went off this morning, leaving no address or anything. He and Hicks just piled everything into the car and drove off after telling Miss Primmer he had had a sudden call. We thought you knew."

"What made you think that?" Susan's voice was cold and frozen.

"Well—he'd just left you, and, to be quite frank, we all thought he had proposed to you last night and you had turned him down. So, of course, I didn't like to mention him. But when I saw you looking so happy and smiling to yourself coming down the road I wondered if I had been mistaken; if you had accepted him and he had just rushed off in a hurry to get a special licence and arrange a hurried wedding. You know he did speak once of going away by the *Warwick Castle*, and she sails on Friday."

"I suppose he must just have had a sudden call then," said Susan. "I don't see any mystery about it. He works for the Government. They must have sent for him."

"Whatever happens," she prayed inwardly—"oh, God, don't let me give myself away. Don't let Aggie guess I've had—I've had a—a bit of a blow. . . ."

And she steeled herself to keep her voice steady as she asked, for she must make sure:

"He isn't coming back at all?"

"Oh no," said Aggie. "He said 'Good-bye' to us all quite definitely—but he never mentioned you."

"I expect he was too harassed," said Susan lightly. At least she prayed that her voice sounded light—indifferent.

Aggie said nothing for a moment, then changed the subject.

"Perhaps you had better go up to Corne for a day or two, till this blows over; and it will be nicer for William. I think I should stay and see to things here."

"Yes," said Susan, in her frozen voice—"yes, that will be best."

Across her heart the wind blew cold.

CHAPTER XXX

BACK AT NUMBER 33

BUT SUSAN had no intention of staying at Corne. She was too deeply wounded; they had all hurt her too much by not believing her about the danger to William and herself they incurred by keeping Dorrie at Round-about House. She could hear them saying, "Poor Susan's got the wind-up. She will be all right if she has a day or two's rest at Corne. Susan does exaggerate"—and so on. She even heard them laughing at her chagrin at not being taken seriously. Aggie had even hinted that she was upset about Simeon's departure, and not quite herself; even Miss Primmer's accusation of jealousy of Dorrie infuriated her less than that. How dared Aggie!

She would stay the night at Corne. Yes, but she was catching the first train to London next morning and going to the flat. Sally and Bede would be glad to see her, and what was more—*she was taking William with her!*

She was not going to leave William within a few minutes' walk of Dorrie and no one understanding the danger. Aggie and the lawyer could say what they liked, she was going to look after William herself.

The worst of it was they would never know the truth. With William and herself out of the way and nothing to rouse her fury, Dorrie might never have another attack, but she herself would never feel safe now about William and Dorrie. Well, she must leave the future for consideration when it came and do what she could in the present.

She cried miserably in bed for a long time that night. Cried for William and cried for Dorrie. Poor Dorrie, it was terrible to think of her going back to the Home. But even more terrible to know what Susan knew, that she really wasn't safe if her hatred was roused. She cried because she had been turned out of Round-about House and no one had protested. She thought they all liked her, even if they laughed at her—but they had let her go. Aggie, her own particular friend, had advised it for the best. But most of all, she cried for Simeon; that he had gone off like that without a word and she had thought they were such friends. No, at last she admitted the truth—that down in the most secret place in her heart she had thought Simeon was beginning to like her very much indeed, just as she was beginning to like Simeon. Not that she had ever really thought . . . it was too heartshaking, too enkindling, like allowing a smothered fire to shoot up into flame, to really

have *thought* there might be anything more than friendship between her and Simeon. But as she wept desolately in the cold and rainy dawn, she felt as if her tears were falling forlornly on the ashes of a fire that had shown a few sparks of glowing heat beneath the surface, but now was dead for ever, cold and black—and soaked with tears.

She didn't really want to go to London; she didn't want to do anything; there was no zest in life—but she must go on and she must look after William.

In the pouring rain they set off.

It was one of those hopeless wet days of early autumn, when the skies seemed to have gone grey and dull for ever, without a chink where the sun could get through. Cold water and mud sluiced the roads, the piles of leaves looked sodden and old, the black haystacks looked huddled together like old, cloaked women, and no birds sang.

In the environs of the city it was even worse; rain streamed off the roofs into the dreary backyards and sooty gardens. There was a sulphury fog that even the lights spotted about could not cheer, and it was cold with that deadly damp coldness that seems to chill not only one's bones but one's very soul.

Even William added to the cheerlessness, for William had not wanted to leave Corne or Round-about House and had got it into his head that he was being taken back to his Home with the capital letter—that admirable Home for Orphans, run on the latest and most modern lines, but terrible and fearful to William's sensitive little soul.

No assurances from Susan could wipe out the dread in his eyes or bring a smile to his solemn, hopeless little face. He had been taken to the Home before, with valiant attempts to cheer him up. He knew Susan was doing her best, but he thought things—the powers that be, the fate against which it was no use crying out—were too strong for Susan or Aggie, as they had been too strong before.

Susan took the tram out their way, as being cheaper than a taxi, because she had lost her job and must begin to count the pennies again. She even wished Mrs. Delacorne had left her some money instead of "gear", as she called it in her Scottish way. Money would have been so much more useful.

The tram clanked and stopped, and clanked on again through the black, muddy streets and sooty rain; the dirty wooden floor was wet and strewn with soaked tram-tickets; wet people, smelling of damp clothes, pushed out and in and allowed their dripping umbrellas to dribble cold streams of water down Susan's stockings and into her shoes.

She was not going straight to the flat because she knew they would all be out and the place locked up. She intended going first to the "Green Lizard", which was some distance away. Sally's mother, who ran the block of flats, would be there, and she and William would get some lunch and the key, if there happened, which wasn't always the case, to be a spare one, or she would hear where Bede or Sally was and get into touch with them.

She wished she had sent a wire the night before, but they were a long way from the village, and there was no telephone at Corne, and besides she had not thought of it, being too miserable for such details.

They arrived at the café to find it had changed hands and that Mrs. Knight had opened a bigger and better "Green Lizard" nearer the West End. Susan remembered Bede mentioning the change was to come, but she hadn't realized it was actually accomplished.

The place had fallen off sadly and was serving rather dreary one-and-sixpenny lunches of slightly warm "brown" soup of no particular origin or flavour, except of salt, a tough piece of meat with sodden potatoes and very wet Brussels sprouts, and a "trifle" of dry sponge-cake, sparse jam, and a thick layer of bright yellow custard made with cheap custard powder.

It was not a sustaining meal, but Susan hadn't the heart to go tramping off looking for another place in the rain, and William was hungry, so they stayed, and Susan lingered on a little over a cup of coffee and a cigarette, wondering if she should go to No. 33 or make for the "Green Lizard" and Mrs. Knight.

She had decided on the latter course when the proprietress of the café came in and recognized Susan. She was an elderly woman who had had a room at No. 33, and was "looking about" for something when Susan was there.

They sat talking for a while, Susan listening to a sad tale of failure, and then she heard that Mrs. Knight, on the contrary, was doing very well and, in pursuance of an idea of a chain of "Green Lizards"—which catered particularly for students—was very busy opening a second café near the British Museum and might be there. After that, Susan tried to get away, but had, out of politeness, to listen to a long story of how Miss Fairweather had asked Mrs. Knight to put her in charge of Number Two, but had been refused through the instigation of enemies who had put Mrs. Knight against her, and so on and so forth, and perhaps Susan, when she knew the truth—she and Miss Fairweather had always been friends, hadn't they?—would intervene on her behalf and try and get her the job, for really . . .

Susan promised to do what she could—thinking inwardly if the lunch was a sample of Miss Fairweather's cookery or ideas, no wonder she was a failure—and prepared to go. But by this time, bored and weary, William had fallen asleep on her knee, so she accepted the offer of a cup of tea and to wait by the fire till four o'clock when, by the time she reached No. 33, one of the girls might be in.

It was nearer five when she got away at last; it had poured in one incessant downpour all the afternoon and she had not really had the spirit to face the hunt from café to café for Mrs. Knight, especially as William slept on.

Miss Fairweather had rung up for her and found that one of the flat owners was in by this time, and would open the outer door if Susan came along.

So Susan and William set out once more to trudge through the rain to the square, which was off the bus routes, and really just far enough for William's small legs to tramp.

Tired and wet through, they reached the house at last, and were let in by a new girl student who lived in a bed-sitter on the ground floor and thought the other occupants of the rooms would be in soon.

Susan and William sat down on two wooden chairs in the hall and waited while the door opened and shut to innumerable figures, but never to Bede or Sally.

At last a girl came in whom Susan knew, and when interrogated explained profusely that Sally had got a part in a play and was touring, and that Bede had gone off to see her. But she had a key that opened their flat, and so Susan and William climbed the innumerable stairs and found themselves at last in Bede's rooms.

She put the few pennies she had in the penny-in-the-slot gas-fire and boiled the kettle, but discovered that save for a bottle of milk standing outside the door and a half-loaf of stale bread, the cupboard was bare.

They always did live from hand to mouth in their bed-sitters or so-called flats, having no room for storage, so she was not surprised, only disheartened and utterly downed.

She made bread-and-milk for William, but did not want to take him out shopping in the rain. She would wait till he was tucked up in bed and then slip out for supplies.

So she sat telling him stories till his half past six bedtime, and then tucked him into bed in the bedroom with a hot-water bottle and saw him off to sleep.

By this time the gas had gone out with a flop and she had no more pennies and it was still raining.

The failure of the gas was the last straw, for the unused room up under the roof was cold and felt damp, yet she did not like to leave William, as he had a way of wakening up until he got really into his night's sleep, and liked a reassuring call to his sleepy croak or his demand for a drink of "vatter". Once he was well over she would risk slipping out for a few minutes, but now she sat down in the worn arm-chair by the cold stove, and a picture of the jolly kitchen and the warm cheery drawing-room of Round-about House rose to her mind's eye. She didn't want to go back, as things were, but everything was spoiled and, realizing it, the accumulation of the day's miseries quite overcame her. She curled herself round in the dismal arm-chair and began to cry; her feet were damp and cold as ice; she felt cold all over.

Usually Susan's spirit would have set her on to master all this, to turn the room into a pleasant place with bright lights and flowers and glowing fire, but Susan was not herself. Susan was in the depths.

Forlornly she wept. She had kicked off her shoes and curled her stockinged feet beneath her to try and warm them, but she didn't really care; her misery of soul was what was really the matter, she felt hopeless and dejected, and no fire and icy feet seemed neither here nor there.

"At least I can cry in peace," she thought. "For nobody knows where I am and nobody cares——"

And at that moment, as if to contradict her and deprive her of even this cold comfort, a tap came at the door.

Susan knew who it would be. Miss Fairweather still had her room at No. 33 and doubtless she had stolen up to try some more persuasive arguments why Mrs. Knight should engage her.

There was nothing to do but open the door and make some excuse for her tears. She might at least borrow some coppers for the gas. The tap came again and she went and opened the door. But it wasn't Miss Fairweather who stood there—it was Simeon Quest.

Susan was not at that moment looking her best.

Her usually happy face was a blue tinge with the cold. Her eyes were swollen. Her nose was quite pink at the end. Her fair hair had escaped from its tight little bun at the back—for, though she was letting it grow, it wasn't very long—and a strand hung loose over her ear. There were smudges of tears on her cheeks and her eyelashes were wet with them. Her dress was

crumpled and shapeless and her feet looked just like the stuffed stockings that cheap dolls have for feet, narrow and stiff and too long.

She just looked at Simeon, who seemed taller and stiffer than ever as he stood in the small doorway.

"Well, Susan," he said.

"I thought you were away," she said.

"No, I'm not away. May I come in?"

She stepped back and he came in, then stood looking round the cold and cheerless room without a word.

"The gas-fire went out and I hadn't any more pennies," said Susan.

"Is this where you lived?"

"Yes. I'm back again. I only had a bed-sitter before."

"What is a bed-sitter?"

"Aggie says it's a place where you sit on the bed—a bedroom and sitting-room combined."

"I see."

He stood looking rather helpless; it was quite evident that the amenities of a bed-sitter puzzled him. He gave it up. He looked at Susan, shivering a little with cold, at the line of small damp footsteps across the green oilcloth, at the chair she had just left, sagging in the middle but bravely covered by cretonne patterned with tulips, at the rather dim electric globe suspended by a cord from the ceiling, then again at Susan.

Then he took off his mackintosh and put it with his hat on the table.

"How do you light that affair?"

"I'll show you."

Susan knelt down on the hearthrug and held out her hand.

"Will you give me a penny, please?"

He took a handful of coins out of his pocket and turned them over, there were no pennies among them; then he plunged his hands into both pockets, looked ruefully at the result and shook his head.

"I don't seem to have any coppers—will half-a-crown do?"

"Oh no." Susan shook her head, turning her back to him. At another time she might have laughed at this misfortune, but now she felt ashamed—ashamed of the mean, poverty-stricken aspect of the whole affair, of the dusty room she hadn't had the heart to clean, of the horrible, cold gas-stove with its rows of grinning white teeth, and most of all, perhaps, ashamed of

her stockinged feet sticking out so ridiculously behind her with a large hole in the heel.

Staring at the sullen stove, the tears welled up into her eyes and ran down her face. She felt him standing there watching her, looking so terribly self-possessed himself, so straight and soldierly and trim, his face grim and unsmiling.

He made her feel so small and dismal and helpless. If only she had had her shoes on, she felt she could have faced him better. She looked at them, standing damp and muddy beside the chair, but didn't like to start putting them on. If only he would go away—and come back when she had the fire on and everything tidied up and her face washed and her hair done. She kept her back turned and tried to stop crying, licking in the tears at the corners of her mouth.

"I wish you'd go away," she managed to get out in a fairly steady voice. "I'm not quite myself. I've got a headache."

"No food, I suppose, and tramping all day in wet feet." There was no sympathy whatever in his voice. It sounded rough.

She answered as roughly.

"Why did you come here? I don't want to see anybody!"

"I went back to Round-about House. They said you had run away with William. Aggie told me about your finding him, and her engagement to Thorne. I got your address from her and came straight off."

She said nothing. She was trying to pull herself together, to get her feet under her skirt, to stop crying.

"You needn't turn your back to me," he said—"I can see you are crying; and you needn't try to hide your feet—I've seen the hole in your stocking; and you needn't think you are going to escape from me this time, for you're not."

He suddenly sat down on the chair behind her, leaned forward and put his arms lightly round her, taking hold of her hands.

"What am I to do about you, Susan?"

She shook her head slowly and sadly, twisting her mouth as she licked in the tears that still ran down the side of her nose and into the corners of her mouth.

"Are you crying for Thorne? Tell me the truth."

His voice was quite gentle as he asked, and that made Susan worse than ever. She gave a little stutter, then shook her head, drawing her lips tightly in

over her teeth; he saw her throat working with the effort to keep from crying.

"Susan—tell me, are you a little bit glad to see me—or shall I go away for good? But just a little bit will do, Susan; nod your head if you don't want to tell me."

He couldn't be said to be smiling, but his firm, straight mouth under the dark, thin line of moustache was—knowledgeable!

For a moment Susan almost said, "Go away", and then found she couldn't. There was a brief pause, then Susan's head gave a tiny nod. Nobody else could really have seen it, but it seemed to be enough for Simeon.

"That's all right for the present then. Shall we be friends in the meantime and leave—all the rest—till later?"

At last Susan found her voice. "I don't know how to be friends with you," she said, between the sobs that broke through. "You are such a stranger and so grim and stiff and far away, you—you *frighten* me, and—and—I don't know whether you like me or hate me!"

"Don't you? Well, you see, I don't know whether you like me or hate me either, so we'll have to find out all that about each other, shan't we?"

He leaned his face nearer. "I'll soon let you know all about that, Susan, but shall we try being friends just for an hour or so first till I get you warmed and dried and fed? You're shivering with cold and white with hunger and you'll be catching your death if I don't get you into dry stockings. Or shall I——"

But Susan was struggling up, leaning backwards on his arms to do so, but suddenly terribly shy and bashful, though she would have hated the latter word.

He lifted her to her feet and at once became his competent self.

"Hasn't your sister or somebody some dry stockings and—and—*panties*—whatever you call them? Go and get into them while I get the fire lighted. How many pennies does the thing hold?"

"Two or three will last a long time," said Susan, still shy.

"Then we'll go out and have a meal."

"Oh no!" she said, quickly and more naturally. "I couldn't leave William."

"Oh, by Jove, I'd forgotten William! Where is he?"

"In there. He's asleep."

"Then get dressed and get a basket or fish mat or whatever you carry things in and we'll run out and bring food in. You could leave him for a few minutes? I'm not much good at shopping and don't know where the shops are."

In a few minutes Susan had changed into dry things of Bede's, asked the girl who'd opened the door to keep an ear open for William, and found a large basket and two string bags.

Simeon buttoned her into her coat, took the basket, and off they went. Soho was quite near; the rain had stopped and the lighted streets looked suddenly gay and jolly. Perhaps that was what made Susan also feel suddenly happier; and Simeon came out in a new light too. He seemed to enjoy buying tinned soup and cold chicken and *pâté de foie gras* and mysterious salads and tempting-looking rissoles and whatnot.

Indeed he wanted to buy everything he saw, and Susan had difficulty in restraining him from sampling the whole *delicatessen* shop.

Already in one hand his basket was full and brimming over, while he had in the other about half a dozen cardboard boxes tied together, and under his arm a bottle of wine; while Susan's string bags, one in each hand, dangled to the ground with the more sensible articles of diet—a huge loaf and eggs and cheese, and salad oil and vinegar and coffee and cream.

"What on earth are you doing with all that stuff?" she asked. "And Wiltshire ham and kidneys! You'd think we were having a party."

"We are having a party—you and me celebrating—and I'm as hungry as a hunter. All these kickshaws are nothing to a hungry man. I'm one of these lean kine that eat everything up. And I'm coming back for breakfast—hence the kidneys and bacon. Have you a frying-pan?"

"Oh yes," Susan assured him. "We have a frying-pan and two pans and a kettle."

Then the rain came on and they had to run home, to find William wide awake and as hungry as a hawk. So a thoroughly spoiled William joined the revels in his pyjamas and, beginning modestly on a boiled egg, was sampling *pâté de foie gras* and *mushrooms farcie* and stuffed red peppers before you could say Jock Robinson.

"He'll have a pain," sighed Susan. "Aggie would take a fit if she saw him. But bless his heart, it's only once in a way—but lobster mayonnaise!" She grabbed the spoon wavering towards the mayonnaise. "I do think we'll have to draw the line at lobster mayonnaise."

"Yes," said Simeon. "No lobster mayonnaise, William. Your tummy will be sticking out like a baby kaffir's and you'll be howling with the jim-jams

before you're an hour older."

But William came to no harm. He fell asleep as Simeon was holding up his glass to a toast.

"To our better acquaintance, Susan."

There was nothing in that to bring the colour into Susan's pale cheeks, but it did.

"I'm not used to wine," she said hurriedly. "It's making me get all flushed up."

They put William to bed and washed up and then Simeon lit his pipe and drew his chair up beside Susan's and told her all about going to Round-about House. Everybody had been in a panic there because Dorrie had been found walking about through the night, evidently seeking for something or somebody, and behaving very strangely; so she was going away, not to the Home but a sanatorium, where she was going to have an operation on her head, Carrick-Symthe having turned up and managed to get her confidence.

They were all in a terrible way about Susan, and he had promised to take her back, and they all sent messages and Nanty begged to be forgiven.

Then he told her something of his life on his explorations, going on safari and camping out and photographing wild animals, till Susan was so thrilled she forgot all her shyness and burst out:

"Oh, I should simply love to do that."

"And why not?" said Simeon at once.

There was a long silence after that, and Susan felt embarrassed again and wished she hadn't spoken.

She looked at him. He was bending forward in his chair, his elbows on his knees, his lean, inscrutable face reddened by the glow from the gas-fire. He laid his pipe very deliberately down beside the stove, then turned and looked at Susan with again that compression of the lips that could hardly be called a smile—it was as if the smile in his eyes hadn't quite reached his mouth, or that it was so stern as a rule it took longer to relax.

"The time has come," he quoted, "to talk——"

"Of ships and things," put in Susan quickly. "But we're doing that."

"Of getting married," said he. "Will you marry me, Susan?"

"Oh, but——"

"I'm grim and stern and you don't know whether I like you or hate you . . . well, that's soon remedied."

He pushed the pipe aside with his foot and stood slowly up. Susan jumped up too. And, turning, he quickly put his arms round her, lifted her

off her feet before she knew where she was, and held her fast.

"Now you can't get away till you know whether I like you or not," he told her. "So don't struggle. Or struggle if you like, because the more you struggle the tighter I'll hold you.

"Susan"—he was looking down into her face, really smiling, though slightly, at last—"I've wanted to do this ever since I first saw you, standing in the kitchen at Round-about House like a little ruffled cockatoo with your hair all up in an outraged crest—I wanted to lift you up and run away with you then. I'd have done it, too, for two ticks, but I was terrified of you. Yes, *terrified*. You looked such a fiery little warrior."

Now her worst fears—as she would undoubtedly have put it herself—had been realized, some of Susan's apprehensive alarms had gone. His arms were gentle if strong, and there was something very reassuring in his eyes as he looked down at her.

"Terrified!" she said reproachfully. "You never even looked frightened."

"Didn't I? That's long practice. In my job you never have to look frightened."

"But I was *really* terrified of you. You're so mystifying and . . . I never know what you are going to do next——"

"But you know now," and slowly he bent and kissed her. And his kiss, like everything about him, was deliberate and competent, and left Susan in no doubt whatever whether he loved her or not.

"And now," he said, "I'm going to leave you, for it's time you were in bed after this exciting day . . . running away and getting engaged to me and finding out it was me you loved—for you did, didn't you, Susan, when I kissed you?"

"Yes—I knew it was you."

"And not lightly—laughingly—only?"

"No." She shook her head. "That was why I was frightened of you and frightened to let myself know."

"Or let me know either. I had to go every inch of the way myself, like the prince through the dark forest, and then waken the little sleeper at the end. Yes, every inch of the road myself. Is that to be the way of it always?"

"Well, you're quite capable——"

"Of marrying you without any help? Well, listen to me. I'll be here to breakfast tomorrow morning with the special licence, and a week tomorrow you'll be sailing on the *Dumbarton Castle* for Africa, 'wooed and married

and all'. Well, no—married, but not entirely wooed. I'll still have a lot of that to do. . . . So you'd better begin packing as soon as you waken."

"Oh, but I couldn't——"

"Then you'll find I'm quite capable of making you. . . . Now take a share in kissing me good night. You'll find it's much nicer, you little tyro, if you kiss me too. Come, try it. . . ."

His face was very near to hers. Susan tried it, and found . . . Ah, but you know all about that as well as I do! So let the curtain fall.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Susan Takes a Hand* by Anne Hepple Dickinson (as Anne Hepple)]