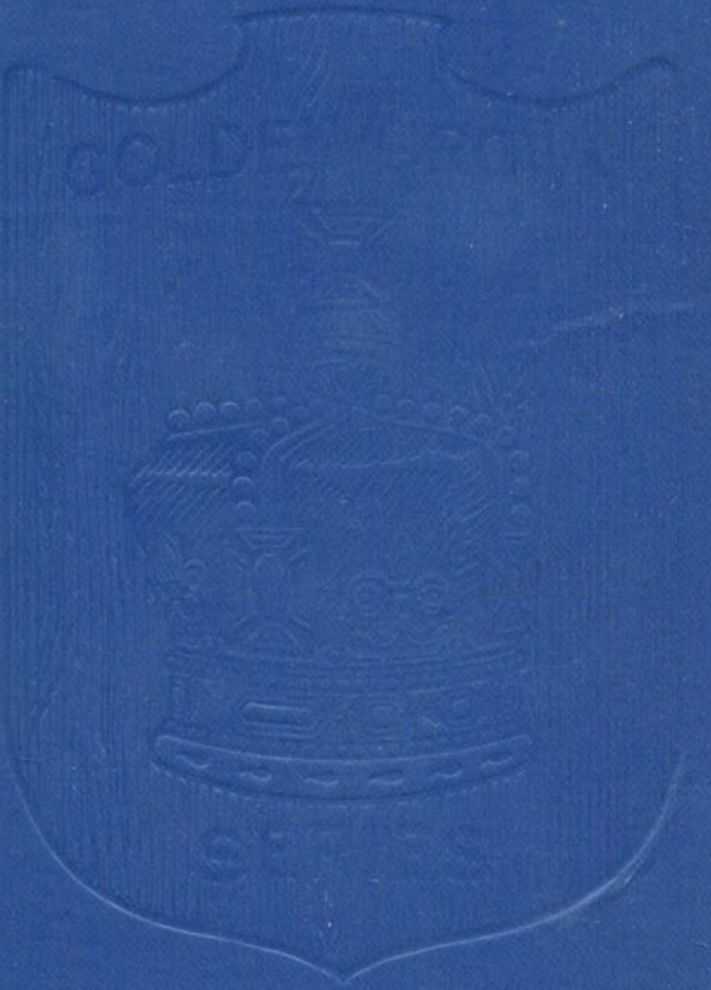
SOME BUILDERS



Title: Some Builders, Or, A Sure Foundation
Date of first publication: 1931
Author: Amy Le Feuvre (1861-1929)
Date first posted: Oct. 19, 2023
Date last updated: Oct. 19, 2023
Faded Page eBook #20231029

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

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SOME BUILDERS

Or, A SURE FOUNDATION

BY

AMY LE FEUVRE

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LONDON:

PICKERING & INGLIS LTD.

14 PATERNOSTER ROW, E.C.4

and at Glasgow, Edinburgh, Manchester, Liverpool

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CHAPTER I

SIDNEY

"Oh, God, teach me to forget! Teach me to forget!"

The cry was passionate and tense, as the girl clenched the newspaper in her slender hands.

The man overheard the cry by pure accident. He was lying lazily in a punt moored at the bottom of his hostess's garden, and the girl was leaning over a broad low wall, screened from view by a thick bush of syringa. She had come down to the river to be alone with her grief. He lay motionless, afraid to betray his presence; but she voiced the dreary bitterness in his own heart. He had come down from town to try to forget too. He had only arrived about an hour or two before, and was told that his cousin, Lady Fielding, had gone out for the afternoon. As he lay in his boat and heard the crackle of the newspaper in the girl's hand, he wondered dully why she, as well as he, had received a blow through the Press on the same day.

He saw the announcement in his mind's eye which had staggered him that morning, when he opened the *Times* at his club.

> "Hughes—Keith. On July 29, in Bombay, by the Rev. Owen Keith, M.A., cousin of the bride, Archibald Thomas Hughes, only son of the late General Thomas Hughes, to Eva Mary, youngest daughter of Colonel William Keith, C.B., of Omeraymore, N.B."

Eva had been his betrothed for over two years, and had written to him only three weeks previously, mentioning her probable return to England in the autumn. He had already been house-hunting within an easy reach of town, and was making preparations for his marriage. And he had been very deeply in love with the pretty girl who had dealt him such a bitter blow.

Manlike, he had taken it silently, and was now making an effort to bear it philosophically; but the wound was too recent to be healed in such a way.

"Teach me to forget," he murmured. "Only time does that, and time is a laggard when one wants him to hurry."

And then he began to wonder who the girl was that was so close to him, and whether she was one of his cousin's guests.

After a time she moved away, and he caught glimpses of her white gown through the shrubbery path as she wended her way back to the house.

He lay on in the boat. He was tired of the strenuous life he had lived in town, and the afternoon was one that invited sleep.

An hour later he woke up with a start. Lady Fielding's merry laugh as she discovered his whereabouts, and the chaff of two of her young sisters, made him leap up in a moment, and for the time forget his trouble. When dinner-time came he wondered if he would see the owner of that passionate voice. He asked his cousin if any of her guests had been left at home that afternoon.

"Yes," she answered promptly, "Sidney Urquhart. She left by the five o'clock train. Have you never met her? She's a dear girl, the life of any house-party; but she was summoned home unexpectedly. Her uncle was ill. She would have gone with us otherwise. Did you see anything of her?"

"No. I went straight down to the boat when I was told you were out."

Lady Fielding was alone with him in the drawing-room as they talked; the other guests were still in their rooms. Her face grew grave as she said almost in a whisper:

"Oh, Randolph, I am so horrified! What an awful blow for you!"

He winced as if he had been struck.

"Yes; it has hit me hard; but spare me any words of sympathy, or I shall flee back to town."

"Well, I always think that when a girl behaves like that it is a merciful escape. I will not speak of it again. You can trust me."

By neither word nor look did Randolph Neville show to the world at large what he felt at this juncture of his life. But cynicism and bitterness tinged his speech; he had been an easy-tempered, optimistic man; now he began to develop critical faculties, and certain hard lines imprinted themselves about his lips. A week of boating with his cousin's guests was enough for him.

"I am going away," he informed her one morning when she was walking round her well-ordered garden with him and asking his advice about certain alterations she wished to make in the autumn.

"Not back to town? It is August; not a soul will be there."

"If I thought that, I would return to-morrow. I want more solitude——"

"Than I can give you here? Oh, I quite understand, but I don't believe it will be good for you. What wilds will hold you?"

"I'm going to look up Monica Pembroke."

"Randolph! You will rusticate with a vengeance! I hear that she's never out of an apron and nailed boots. But she makes her farm prosper, which is something in these days. Monnie is a good woman spoiled. Has she that imp of a nephew with her still?"

"I believe so, and Aunt Dannie."

Lady Fielding shrugged her shoulders.

"If you prefer their company to mine, I have nothing more to say."

"Don't be cross, Molly. I must get away from conventionality for a bit, and try the simple life. Your French chef is spoiling my digestion and laying the foundation for gout. May I catch the three o'clock train this afternoon?"

"Yes. I will order the car. I'm not cross with you, Randolph; but you have sealed my lips, so you can expect no sympathy. I understand, and that is all I can say."

About six o'clock that evening Randolph Neville alighted from the train at a quiet little sleepy station bright with roses, carnations and stocks. It had been a hot afternoon. Heat still simmered in the air, and no cloud softened the brilliant blue sky above. The old stationmaster was struggling into his official coat as the train steamed up. He came forward, mopping his brow with a red-and-white handkerchief.

"Any luggage, sir? Miss Pembroke be awaitin' outside. Her mare won't be handled by none but herself."

Randolph pointed to his bags, then went through the tiny booking-office to the white dusty road. There, in a high dogcart, was seated his cousin Monica. She was clad in brown holland coat and skirt and a large shady hat. She looked cool and fresh, and every inch a lady. When she turned her face to him and smiled her welcome, her skin might be tanned by outdoor life, but her bright blue eyes and wealth of soft golden hair rolled back from a broad, intellectual forehead, and her frank smile proclaimed her a good-looking attractive woman.

"It's delightful to see you, Randolph."

"Ah!" he said, climbing up to the seat beside her, "I was sure of a welcome, and so I came. *You* won't expect me to go out to tea-parties and

picnics and the like, I know."

She glanced at him with twinkling eyes.

"I hope I shan't. This is a busy time with me; so if you can entertain yourself, and be content with our simple ménage, your visit will be a success. Aunt Dannie was horrified when I told her you were coming. 'My dear, I do hope he will not be disgusted by our very poor quarters. Randolph is accustomed to the best. These London men must be humoured. I hope you will dine at the usual hour, not put him down to a square meal at half-past twelve or one o'clock.' Then she worried herself to fiddlestrings with training our village girl to valet you. I can see poor Polly doing it!"

She laughed, and Randolph joined her.

"I've always wanted to see how you run your place," he said. "Are you coining money over it?"

"No; but I'm not losing it, which is something."

They were driving up a steep hill now, edged with shady trees. In the distance lay the blue ocean, and a winding tidal river curved in and out at the bottom of wooded heights.

Suddenly a yell close to them made the chestnut mare throw back her ears and begin to dance.

A small figure in a stained holland overall and a large straw hat darted down a bank.

"I've been waiting for you for simply years," the little creature cried. "Take me up, Aunt Monnie, take me up!"

"No, that I shall not do," was the calm reply, "because I have told you many times that you are not to spring out and frighten Sunbeam."

Disappointment and dismay was in the pair of brown eyes raised so beseechingly.

"Oh, Auntie Monnie, do forgive me, do! Sunbeam isn't frightened of me. She's quite grave now."

But Monica drove steadily on, leaving the little boy in a tempest of tears upon the road.

"May I not intercede for the small culprit?" Randolph said. "It seems rather——"

“Heartless and hard-hearted, eh? But a little discipline is good for Chuckles. He never gets it from Aunt Dannie, so I must make up her deficiencies. And it is no hardship for the imp to run home. We shall be there in five minutes.”

They were turning up a drive now, and soon arrived at a red-bricked gable house. The sun-blinds were down at every window; a lawn in front was gay with flower-beds, and Randolph could not help exclaiming:

“This is not my idea of a genuine farmhouse.”

“No? You must wait till you see my dairies and all my live stock. Here is Aunt Dannie.”

A frail little white-haired lady stood at the door.

Randolph stooped down and kissed her. She was his mother’s sister, and he was her favourite nephew.

She led him into a long low room, dark and cool after the glare of the sunshine outside. The table was laid for supper. There was a sense of peace and restfulness in the house that charmed Randolph. He cut short his aunt’s profuse apologies.

“My dear boy, we wait on ourselves; there seems so much to do, and so few to do it. But you will not expect a well-ordered country mansion. Not that Monica is a bad housekeeper. She is here, there, and everywhere—in the dairy, in the kitchen, in the fields; but she has method, and everything goes by clockwork. I will take you to your room. It is our only spare room, and the roof slopes and the floor is uneven, but——”

“Now, look here, Aunt Dannie, I’ve come down here for quiet and peace of mind. I have begun to feel the atmosphere already, so don’t you point me out the drawbacks. I call this the picture of a prosperous homestead.”

Left alone in his room, Randolph leant out of the low window taking in the extensive view beyond the garden.

“What a mercy!” he ejaculated to himself, “there will be no Society girls to entertain. I’m sick of them all!”

When he came downstairs he found a clean, demure-faced Chuckles waiting for him.

“We’re having a chicken for supper,” Chuckles whispered to him; “the poor fing was made to die yesterday. And I put pins in your pincushion for you. Did you see them?”

“How did you get home so quickly?” Randolph asked, hoisting him on his shoulder, to his delight, and carrying him into the dining-room. He was very light and small, with a shock of flaxen curls which consorted strangely with his blazing brown eyes and dark curling lashes.

“Oh, I stopped crying and ran for my life,” he retorted. “I knewed I must wash before I came to supper; and will you ask for the wishbone and then pull it with me? And be sure to leave just a bite of the chicken on it for me.”

Randolph shook his head as he deposited him on a chair.

“How can you eat a person you have known in life?” he asked.

Chuckles heaved a sigh.

“I can pretend I never knowed her, like I does Johnny Barton, who frew my ball down the well.”

Monica sat at the head of the table behind an old-fashioned silver urn. She and her little nephew seemed to be on the best of terms with each other, but more than once she checked the child’s tongue. Miss Darlington—who was called “Aunt Dannie” by all who knew her—had a ready flow of conversation, and was amusing in her description of the country round them and their neighbours. Randolph and she kept the ball of conversation rolling. Monica herself was singularly silent.

When the meal was over, Randolph sauntered out of doors to look around, and presently Monica joined him and took him over the premises. He could not but admire the order and prosperity of it all.

“What makes you such a good farmer, I wonder?” he said presently. “None of your forbears went in for it.”

“Ah,” she said, “I have lighted on a good man to superintend it. John Bayley is a farmer born, only he had the misfortune to own an unhealthy farm. He gave it up when he had four children taken from him by diphtheria, and having lost heavily in three or four bad years, was willing to come to me. He has taught me all I know. My time at an agricultural college has been of benefit to me; and I love outdoor life, as you know. I think I should have sickened and died in a town. I loathe it so!”

Randolph was silent for a few minutes, then he said:

“Well, I’m going to laze for a bit in your country air. What are your plans for to-morrow? Not harvesting yet, are you?”

“Not till next week, unless we have a break in this weather. I shall leave you to amuse yourself, for I’m rarely indoors till five o’clock. But——”

Here she hesitated and looked at him doubtfully.

“Would you mind very much dining out with me to-morrow night? I’m afraid I have let you in for it. It is old Admiral Urquhart who wants to see you. He knew your father. He and his brother live about a mile from here. He has a very pretty house stretching down to the river.”

“I was told you had banned Society. Why, Monnie, I believe you are a fraud, after all!”

“I like my fellow-creatures,” said Monica firmly. “I am not a recluse, and country neighbours are not to be despised. As a matter of fact, I have not worn my best dinner-gown for over a year. But it will be only a family party. You will not mind, will you?”

“I’ll try not to. He was a contemporary of my father’s, was he not? And isn’t there something queer about his brother?”

“No. He hurt his leg in the Boer War, that was all. He goes in for carpentering—a most useful hobby. He has made a lot of things for me, and we are great pals.”

“No ladies, I hope?”

“Only the Admiral’s daughter. You have met her, have you not? She was staying with your cousin, Lady Fielding, the other day.”

“Molly is always running girls by the dozens. That is why I fled down here; they were too many for me.”

Randolph relapsed into gloom, and Monica wisely left him and went into the house. She knew why he disliked all girls at this juncture, but made no comment upon his speech.

He was pacing the gravel path, enjoying the cool, still evening air, when suddenly a small head shot out of an open window overhead.

“Cousin Ran, I’m going to be a poacher when I grows up!”

The head was as quickly withdrawn. Aunt Dannie could be heard expostulating with the small boy.

And Randolph smiled.

“The love of intrigue and sport begins early,” he muttered. “I meant to be a poacher once.”

His thoughts went back to a lonely boyhood, then swiftly turned to his more recent experiences of life, and as he remembered his wrongs, the peacefulness of his surroundings did not bring peace to his soul.

The next evening found him walking down the road, a light overcoat covering his dress-suit, and Monica by his side.

"You don't mind walking?" she was saying. "My mare is dead tired. I had to send her on an errand of five-and-twenty miles to-day. And, selfishly, I enjoy a tramp at this hour of the day."

"I mind nothing except the anticipation of our evening," he said somewhat grimly.

"I know you are a martyr; but it's good to do some things we don't like, Ran, especially if it gives pleasure to others."

They walked through a shady lane, then turned down a road flanked by beech woods, and went steadily downhill for half a mile. Then they saw the river. It was high tide, and some fishing smacks, with their red-brown sails, were floating slowly down to the sea. They came to a high, tarred wooden fence, and Monica stopped at a small gate in it.

"We'll go in this way. It is a short cut. I am allowed a key."

A short walk through a dense shrubbery brought them out under a group of trees to the side of the house. The garden stretched away in terraces down to the river. On the lower lawn were a row of ship's guns mounted, and trees and flowering shrubs stretched down to the water's edge. They turned a corner sharply, and the long low, white house lay before them. It was a pretty spot; but Randolph's gaze was not on the house or the grounds.

A girl stood outside the open hall door, leaning against a stone pillar. She was dressed in a clinging black gown, her neck and arms were bare, and she was standing with her arms up and head resting on her clasped hands behind it. Very soft dusky dark hair surrounded a delicately pale oval face. Her eyes were grey, with black curling lashes and eyebrows. Her skin was as white as alabaster. It was a proud, high-bred little face, with determination stamped upon the round, prominent chin and sensitiveness about the curved lips and straight, Grecian nose. But her expression now, as she gazed up into the evening sky, was one of abject misery and helpless appeal.

Monica gave a loud cough. It seemed as if they were intruding upon sacred ground.

In a moment the girl dropped her arms and came forward. Her face was alight with pleasure and interest.

"Monica, is it you? Oh, my dear! Uncle Ted has insisted upon going down to Yalstone for fish. He went off in his boat at two o'clock and hasn't yet returned. Cook is tearing her hair, and father is annoyed and growling away to himself. But we can exist without a fish course, can't we? Is that Mr. Neville? I have heard of you often, but we have never met, I think."

She held out her hand to Randolph in a friendly fashion, and as he encountered her mirthful glance he began to think that his first impression of her had been an optical delusion. Her voice had a peculiarly sweet lilt in it. He saw now that she was not a very young girl. There was the grace and ease of a woman in her manner. She led them into a low wide hall, scented with roses and heliotrope, which filled great china bowls. Monica, in a businesslike fashion, slipped off goloshes and cloak and stood upright in a dark green silk gown with some priceless lace upon neck and sleeves. Then they entered the drawing-room. It was quaint and dainty with its chintz hangings. A rounded bay window looked over the river, and beyond was a glimpse of the sea. Sitting in the twilight was the Admiral. He rose and welcomed Randolph heartily.

"Now, father, we will not wait for the dilatory culprit. He and his fish may arrive as we are having our coffee. I have explained to our guests, and they are quite resigned to their fate."

She rang the bell, told the maid that dinner was wanted at once, and a few minutes after they were seated in the dining-room. The soup was hardly finished before there was a bustle in the hall and the tapping of a stick along the beeswaxed floor. Major Urquhart put a rather dishevelled head inside the door.

"That confounded boat sprung a leak; and the young fool—Harding's eldest—brought me a conger eel; said there was nothing else. Don't wait for me. I shan't be a second."

The Admiral muttered something under his breath. He was a hale hearty-looking man, clean-shaven, and with the same well cut features as his daughter, only more pronounced. Randolph found him a keen politician, and interested in every subject that was touched upon.

"I get most of my information from printers' ink," he said with a short laugh. "I haven't been to town for five years, and it's precious few of my

own sex that come down my way; but Sidney and I are book-lovers, and there's not much that we don't thrash out together."

He glanced across the table at his daughter with a certain amount of quiet pride in his eyes. When Major Urquhart appeared, his niece chaffed him unmercifully. Her spirits never flagged, and the dinner, in spite of the absent fish, was a great success.

When Randolph eventually joined the ladies, he found them pacing up and down the terrace outside the house.

Sidney turned to him at once.

"Well, Mr. Neville, how long will our quiet country satisfy you? Are you a fisherman? Do you like sailing? Because there is nothing else for your entertainment. I have seen a few men—very few—endure a fortnight in this part, but never longer."

"You want to drive me away," Randolph said lightly; "but I assure you I have learnt to be independent of my environment."

"Now, that's a nasty one, isn't it, Monnie? He is all in all to himself, and we count for nothing. Like old Bob the shepherd in our village. He has got pensioned off and been given an almshouse. I went to see him the other day, and pitied him for the loss of his occupation. 'Bless 'ee, miss, 'tis no' to be pitied I am. All my life I have had to think an' mix wi' crowds o' creeturs, an' now I can do very well to myself. No such good company as oneself arter all, but one hasn't a chance commonly o' finding it out.' "

Monica laughed, but Randolph took the bantering speech quite gravely.

"I don't think I bore myself quite as much as other people bore me," he said.

"No," said Sidney quickly; "but there's one disadvantage one has to reckon with, and that is, that we can run away from other people, but never from ourselves."

"And self is a big tyrant sometimes," said Monica gravely.

"Now we're moralising," cried Sidney gaily; "let us come down to the lower lawn, it is so lovely close to the water."

"Bring your guitar down and sing to us," suggested Monica; "I hear so little music, and you know how much I love your singing."

Without any demur, Sidney slipped into the house for that instrument.

Randolph could not but enjoy the scene before him. It was a still soft moonlight night; the river rippled below, only making a slight lapping sound at the stone terrace wall. Roses climbed over a rustic fence—and flowering trees and shrubs seemed to scent the air around them. The old ship's guns looked strangely out of keeping on the soft turf, but chairs were drawn up round them, and Monica and Randolph took possession of them. Sidney sat on the broad low terrace wall. Without any hesitation or apology, she broke into song, and her voice, though not a powerful one, was wonderfully sweet and thrilling. She gave them a gay little troubadour song and an evening lullaby, then with her face towards the river and her back to them, she seemed to forget their presence, and sang her soul out in the following words:[1]

"This is the way of it, wide world over:
One is beloved, and one is the lover,
One gives and the other receives,
One lavishes all in a wild emotion,
One offers a smile for a life's devotion,
One hopes and the other believes,
One lies awake in the night to weep,
And the other drifts off in a sweet, sound sleep.

"One soul is aflame with a god-like passion,
One plays with love in an idler's fashion,
One speaks and the other hears,
One sobs 'I love you,' and wet eyes show it,
And one laughs lightly and says 'I know it,'
With smiles for the other's tears.
One lives for the other, and nothing beside,
And the other remembers the world is wide.

"This is the way of it, sad earth over:
The heart that breaks is the heart of the lover,
And the other learns to forget.
For what is the use of endless sorrow?
Though the sun goes down, it will rise to-morrow,
And life is not over yet.
Oh! I know this truth, if I know no other:
That passionate Love is Pain's own Mother!"

Sidney's voice was a naturally sad one, and though she recovered herself in the last verse, and her notes rang out in gay defiance, Randolph felt he had received a distinct shock. It flashed across him as she was singing why he had instinctively been feeling that he recognised her voice and must have heard her speak somewhere before. Now he knew that she had been his unseen neighbour down by the river in his cousin's grounds.

"Teach me to forget" rang through his ears as clearly as her words were doing now. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he made no comment when the song was finished.

Monica wiped her wet eyes.

"My dear Sidney, you make me feel a perfect fool. Why do you revel so in sadness? Sing us one of your 'coon' songs."

But Sidney would sing no more; she turned to greet her father and uncle, who had sauntered down to join them; and talk was of the lightest description for the rest of the evening.

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[1] From "Poems of Pleasure." Ella Wheeler Wilcox. (Gay & Hancock, Ltd.)

CHAPTER II

A CRONY AND A CLIMB

"WELL, what do you think of Sidney?" asked Monica as they were walking home together.

"A very self-controlled young woman," replied Randolph promptly.

Monica eyed him sharply.

"You are more observant than most men," she said. "Sidney is very good company at all times; but she is not phlegmatic by nature, and is thinner skinned than most people, so is apt to be misunderstood. She is of the make of French aristocrats in the Revolution, who went to the guillotine with a jest upon their lips."

"You speak as if a tragedy is hers."

"Oh, no; we have no tragedies in this village."

"Nor suitors to carry off your heroines?"

Again Monica glanced at him, but she said nothing.

It was the next day that he was enlightened, and it was Aunt Dannie who did it.

She came out into the garden with him and paced up and down by his side.

"Tell me about your dinner party. Such a little amuses us in this quiet neighbourhood. I suppose you fell in love with Sidney Urquhart on the spot. Most people do, I believe. She might have married over and over again had she been so minded. But I always said that her cousin, Archie Hughes, was the favoured man."

"You're a veritable gossip," said Randolph, looking at the old lady with twinkling eyes.

Aunt Dannie nodded her head, well pleased with the accusation.

"Of course I am. Country people must be gossips, unless they're recluses. You see, Archie lived all his life close here. His father was one of the Admiral's cronies. He died two years ago. Archie and Sidney grew up

together, and there was a kind of boy and girl engagement between them. We all expected a marriage, but I fancy Sidney could not make up her mind to leave her father. She was content to drift along. Then General Hughes died, and Archie grew restless, and the next thing we heard was that he was going out to India as secretary to a distant relative of his out there, who was Governor in some outlandish province. And then the other day, to our great surprise, we heard of his marriage. So I suppose, after all, there was nothing but cousinly feeling between him and Sidney. He was a second cousin of hers. She and Monica are great friends, but it is a pity she does not marry. She is not like Monica; she has not half such a self-reliant nature."

Randolph did not speak. He was wondering at the coincidence of his coming down to this place to hear of the man who had stolen his fiancée from him. And he alone—unless Monica knew her friend's secret—had by mere accident discovered that Sidney had suffered as well as himself in that transaction.

Aunt Dannie continued:

"I am interested in Sidney; she is a little different from most girls; it comes of being chiefly associated with men. Her mother died when she was five. She had a brother two years younger than herself. He was in the Navy, and a rollicking sailor he was, but he died of fever a few years ago. It was a great grief to the Admiral. She is straight and blunt at times, and has no airs or graces, but she is not quite so masculine as Monica."

Then the old lady rambled on about some of Monica's misdemeanours, and Randolph hardly heeded her.

The sudden appearance of Chuckles, demanding his presence at the sheep-shearing, made him change his company, and for a time his thoughts.

Sidney, if he had only known it, was at the same time discussing him with her father. Admiral Urquhart spent most of his afternoons on the lower lawn by the river. Sidney established him there, with his morning newspaper, with clockwork regularity directly luncheon was over. He had his own chair, and Major Urquhart had his, but the Major was not a slave to his afternoon nap as was the Admiral. He was a restless man by nature, and generally had more on hand than he could possibly get through. He seldom sat down till tea-time. It was half-past three now, and in her white linen dress and cool shady hat, Sidney approached her father with her work-basket under her arm.

"Now, dad, I'm ready if you are. The leading article first of all, please, and then details after."

Admiral Urquhart turned over the sheet of the *Times* with alacrity. There was nothing he enjoyed more than reading the paper to his daughter and discussing the degeneracy of old England. But he paused for a moment, paper in hand.

"A nice fellow, Neville is; very like his father, who was the most ultra-conscientious beggar that I ever came across. But it was his own undoing. He never did much in politics."

"I don't know anything about the Nevilles. Tell me about them."

Sidney settled herself with her work under the shady beech that grew down so close to the river. Her father responded:

"Charles Neville was a school chum of mine. He came into a nice little property in Hampshire, and was member in the House for a good number of years. He had talent and interest, and we expected him to do great things; but he was one of those independent thinkers, and though he made good speeches, he never secured a good office for himself under his Government. This son of his is going the same way, I fear. He was in the Army, and, I expect, might have got on; but on his father's death the constituents insisted that he should take his father's seat, and Randolph chucked the Service. He was telling me about it last night, and, upon my soul, I don't blame him. He was returned all right, and was in Parliament for five years, but at the last election he retired. He was dead sick of the party discussions, and tricks, and subterfuges. Told me a clean pair of hands was impossible if you climbed the ladder. I don't agree with him, but, of course, things are different from what they were. The class of member is different, to begin with, and now this payment system has been started, the old patriotic spirit will die out."

"What is he doing now? He looks too keen to be an idler."

"He is waiting for a job; has been promised a post of some importance in India or the Colonies. I hope he'll get it. He's a strong man; too conscientious for the present time."

"Oh, dad, don't! I hate to hear you talk so."

Sidney's grey eyes flashed fire.

"Do you think we're to follow the multitude, and to abjure all the traditions of our race?"

“Why cast pearls to swine?” said the Admiral, “or take up pebbles with a silver spoon? There are only two professions, my dear, where dirty tricks don’t prosper, and those are soldiering and sailoring.”

“I’m sure every profession wants good clean-handed men in it,” retorted Sidney.

Then she laughed.

“It is too warm to argue, or I would suggest that the War Office and the Admiralty have diplomatic ways sometimes. Mr. Neville looks more of a soldier than anything else. But he’s not so keen as he has been. He speaks so indifferently of people and things in general.”

“He classes himself amongst the failures in life,” said the Admiral. “That’s what he said to me; but he’s not the fellow to sit down under it.”

“I should hope not.”

Sidney’s lips curled a little, then mischief stole into her eyes.

“Let us hope Monnie will take him in hand, dad. I long that some inferior man should come along and capture her proud heart. It would be glorious to see her knuckle under and have to defer to her lord and master. And he looks as if he would manage the woman he cared for.”

“He has more grit than his father,” said Admiral Urquhart, after a few moments’ silence, in which he had thought the matter over.

“I’m waiting for your news,” said Sidney. “We won’t dissect Mr. Neville too thoroughly.”

So her father turned to his *Times*; but he was very comfortable, and the atmosphere was a sleepy one. His voice began to waver, the paper slipped from his fingers, and a gentle snore told Sidney that further reading was over for the present. She dropped her work in her lap and gazed dreamily over the water; shadows gathered and deepened in her eyes. Then she sprang up and slipped quietly down some broad steps close by. There was a light boat moored to the stone wall. With deft fingers she loosened the rope, stepped in, and taking up the light pair of oars, rowed gently away from the garden and down the river towards the sea.

Then, alone at last, she raised her head with a passionate gesture.

“Oh, I can’t bear it! I can’t bear it! What is life to me now? It’s finished —absolutely done! There is nothing to hope for, nothing to wait for! Nothing will ever come to me now!”

She went back in thought to the years that stretched behind her. One figure, one personality, was prominent in them all. Archie Hughes had been a playmate first, then a friend, then a lover. She and he latterly had been separated by distance, but it had only made the future brighter to her, for would it not bring them together? In all she planned, Archie took a prominent part. She did not now seem able to adjust her life without him. Never had she looked forward to the years stretching away in front of her without a happy thrill, the certain hope that she would have Archie to advise her, comfort her, and be her stand-by.

Sidney was no modern young woman with an assurance and independence of thought which made a single life appear so attractive. She had grown up amongst men who still held chivalrous ideas of women. She was accustomed to little attentions from them, and perhaps queened it over them rather more than was good for her.

"Oh," she moaned, as she pulled in her oars and let herself drift for a little with the tide, bowing her head in her hands in abject misery, "if it had been anyone but Archie! He must have tired of me. Perhaps I showed him too much how I cared. And yet when he wished me good-bye he whispered, 'Good-bye, little wifie!' What can have happened to make him change so?" She recalled his letters; but a pang went through her as she remembered how few and far between they had been of late.

It was bitter to her to feel that he had flung her aside without a word, without giving her any reason for doing so. "Perhaps," she soliloquised, "he was tired of waiting for me. Men are not like women. I tried his patience. But how secure I felt! how implicitly I trusted him!"

Then she sat up and pushed her hair off her forehead, and the proud little poise of her head told that there was still some spirit left in her.

"I must have pluck and courage. Others have gone through as bad a time as I am having now. Some women seem to be happy without husbands or lovers. Monica is. She never seems to have a thought about them, except to like a friendly chat with them occasionally. I *must* rise above my trouble. I will not brood over it. I shall never be tempted to leave dad now. I must learn to look at life differently. God will help me. My life belongs to Him, and He has arranged it so. I will try not to pity myself any more. If only I could forget!"

She caught up her oars again and swung the boat round. Rowing back against the tide was hard work, but the exercise to muscle did her good, and the desire to battle with difficulty was realised.

When she brought the boat back to its mooring-place she saw that visitors were with her father. A young fellow, seeing her, sprang towards her.

He was a curly-haired merry-faced boy of twenty-two, a special crony of hers.

"It isn't often the mother and I drive out paying calls," he said, as he assisted in mooring the boat to her anchor, "but I was as dull as ditch-water. When I'm like that my mind always veers to you! Buck me up. I'm as flabby as a codfish. This heat, and life as it is seen from our house, is pretty deadly, I can tell you."

"You're too idle," Sidney said, looking at him with laughing eyes. "Hot weather and idleness naturally sap all your energy and spirit out of you. But if you had come down early this morning and told me you would take me for a day's sail in your new boat, we should both be returning now, enormously hungry, and ready for anything."

"Oh, why didn't I! But this scandalous little agent keeps me pottering over fusty musty documents on purpose to annoy. And the governor had a bad night, and so, of course, he insisted upon an extra lot of business being done; and first I had to be shut up with Dobbs, and then I had to be shut up with him, telling him every item of our conversation. The doctor is an old fool; he won't let Dobbs come near the governor; as if my bungling recital isn't fifty times worse than the genuine article! I assure you I wasn't done till one o'clock, and then I don't know who was exhausted most, the governor or myself."

Sidney went up the garden and greeted a tall, handsome woman who was talking to her father.

It was said in the neighbourhood that the de Cressiers were the proudest people in the county. They had lived at Thanning Towers since the Norman Conquest, and had refused several peerages, for their menkind had been of great service to their country and king. The present Henry de Cressiers had been stricken down a year ago in the hunting field, and he lay a helpless paralysed invalid; but his voice was left him, and his brain, though the latter was enfeebled. The eldest son and heir had been drowned out in America in that same year, and Austin, the second one, had been summoned home from the university to manage his father's estate and try to keep an eye upon a very unsatisfactory agent, whom Mr. de Cressiers would not discharge. Nearly all the de Cressiers were good-looking, dark men, with strong wills and stern self-repressed natures. Austin often declared he must be a changeling, for his pride was nil, and he was one of the sunniest and most

warm-hearted of mortals. As a small boy he had been devoted to Sidney, who was a distant cousin, her mother having been a de Cressiers, and his devotion was still as great.

Mrs. de Cressiers kissed Sidney affectionately. There were few people round who did not like the girl. Perhaps her attraction was chiefly in her intense interest in everyone and their affairs. Her nature was essentially a sympathetic one.

"My dear Sidney, I want to borrow you for a couple of nights. We have two big dinners on, and I want your help at them."

Sidney made a little grimace.

"Eating is such a farce in this hot weather. Why don't you turn them into moonlight suppers up the river?"

Austin chuckled. His mother looked scandalised. And then Sidney laid her hand caressingly on her arm.

"Of course I will come, if dad thinks he can spare me. Is he to be asked?"

"I have asked him already. He won't come. We must have your uncle."

"You won't get him, I am afraid. He is going up the river for a week's fishing to-morrow."

"I want another man badly."

"Monnie has a cousin staying with her. Ask him."

"But then I should have to include her, and I don't want another woman."

"I'll stay at home. Why did you ask me?"

"Sidney, don't be silly. I really need you."

A little pucker of Mrs. de Cressiers' eyebrows made Sidney drop her bantering tone.

"Monnie won't dine with you. She hates a lot of people, and she'll be very glad to get rid of her visitor. Just explain it to her; she will understand."

"But what is her cousin like?"

"Is he county or cockney?" interrupted Austin. "Has he a long enough pedigree to eat salt with us, and has he an immaculate dress-suit?"

“He is one of the Nevilles,” said Sidney, shaking her head reprovingly at him, for one of his mother’s failings was a lack of humour. “Dad will tell you his pedigree. He’s an ex-M.P. and a failure.”

“That he’s not!” contradicted the Admiral with warmth. “He is too good for his party, that’s what he is. Take him and be thankful, Clarice. But I doubt if he’ll go to you; he told me he wanted to rusticate.”

“I’ll drop in on Monica on my way home,” said Mrs. de Cressiers.

“And I’m going to plant myself firmly here till bedtime,” said Austin.

His mother looked at him reproachfully, and he added heartily: “I really ought to be canonised, mother, so don’t overdo it. Think of my busy day, and let me have a little recreation now. I really will come home before the small hours of the morning.”

Mrs. de Cressiers rose to go. Her son accompanied her to the gate, where the carriage was waiting; then he came back joyously to Sidney.

“Now, Sid, what shall we do?”

“Go and tell them to bring down tea to us here,” said Sidney, sitting down by her father’s side and taking up her work again.

He made a grimace, but obeyed. Admiral Urquhart looked after his retreating figure with twinkling eyes.

“If he were a few years older I should take myself off, my dear. As it is, I don’t intend to move. He’ll never make a good landlord, and his mother knows it. When he comes into the property he’ll spend all his father has saved.”

“Now, dad, you shall not abuse him. He is a dear boy, and will be more popular than any former de Cressiers. They are so alarming as a rule.”

Austin returned and flung himself into a hammock under the trees.

“The mother is as keen as mustard on these dinners. They are to introduce Sir Walter Rame as possible member.”

“I thought he refused to be canvassed,” Sidney said.

“He is in doubtful mind. Our first dinner is for the cream of Thanning Dale, our second for the ordinary. Now, which is this new arrival? The mother will sort him with her eye in a twinkling.”

“I don’t think he is ordinary,” said Sidney slowly.

"I wish you would enlighten me as to this Monica Pembroke. She has only appeared since I left home. Everyone seems to know her, but I don't."

"I suppose not; but she used to live at Crawford Manor, only after her parents' death she lost all her money and left the neighbourhood. She had one brother abroad in New Zealand. He wrote to her, telling her his wife was dead, and he wanted to come home. He said he would take a farm in England if she would join him. And she worked hard at an agricultural college and was full of it, and then on his way home her brother died, and a small imp of a boy arrived alone. Monnie has, of course, adopted him, has put her brother's money into a farm, as he wished, and means to bring up the imp to work it. Meanwhile, she's master, and is making a huge success of it. She's a dear. She succeeds in everything she puts her hand to. I wish I had half her energy and capability."

"What would you do with it?"

Sidney's eyes grew wistful.

"I should like to be of use to my generation," she said.

"Be content with being useful to your old father and uncle," said the Admiral. "I hate these rampaging public women, and pray you may never be one of them."

"I don't care a button for my generation," said Austin—"wish I did. I loathed all the mangy chaps at Oxford. There were a few who were rather decent chaps, but I would always rather people were useful to me than the other way about. I say, Sid, will you come up Rock Beacon with me after tea? It will be cool enough for a climb. You see how your society is beginning to invigorate me!"

"Yes; I am longing for bracing air. We'll go."

They started when tea was over. It was not the first time they had climbed the Beacon together. It lay about a mile from them, and as they went, Austin plunged into confidences about his home and the work that was so distasteful to him.

"*You* understand," he said; "I've no one else to grouse to. If I was given a free hand I would work from morning to night and be as happy as a sand-boy, but I have to see all kinds of inane things being done. I know Dobbs is a rogue, and is an adept at cunning and lining his own nest, but the mother implores me to keep worries from the governor, and he, poor chap, thinks that Dobbs is an angel of goodness, and tells me that I'm not to do a thing

unless he agrees. I'd chuck it all to-morrow except for the mother. I'm wasting my days, and doing no good."

"What good would you be doing if you weren't at home!"

Austin looked at Sidney's grave face and laughed.

"I'd be storing honey like the busy bees: imbibing knowledge and having a good time generally. No, I wouldn't! It was a mistake going to Oxford. I'm not a scholar. I want to travel. The de Cressiers are as narrow as —as—give me an apt simile!—a thread of silk! I want my mind broadened."

"You ought to have had a profession."

"It's the eldest son's rôle to be in the Service—a very stupid arrangement, for he never stays there long."

"I don't think it is wise to grumble at what you're doing now, for it is work. You must be a check on Dobbs, and you can't deny that you're a pleasure and comfort to your parents."

"Oh, Sid, don't be a stuffy prig!"

"Well, don't ask for my opinion then."

"Did I?"

"You invited it! Of course, you're very young, and you think that life ought to be your servant. You will discover that it may be your master."

"A de Cressiers is never mastered by fate!" His merry eyes flashed fire; then he gave a little chuckle. "Didn't I say that like my mother! I believe, after all, I've got the same pride of race at the bottom of my heart."

There was a little silence between them; then he said:

"Sid, you are changed. What has happened? Has life mastered you?"

Sidney laughed, but her laugh had lost its merry ring.

"I am climbing," she said, "and we won't philosophise any more. You know what I think about idle men. And I want you to have high ideals, Austin, not low selfish ones."

Heather and bracken were now under their feet; the wind came over from the ocean and fanned their faces. Soon they left the heather below them, and short turf with grey blocks of stone lay before them. Sidney presently spied a man's figure in front of them. He was just gaining the summit.

“Who is that? Some tourist? He is not a shepherd or anyone of our parts.”

“What dogged shoulders! And what a pace! Come, Sid, buck up! We’re awfully slack.”

“We aren’t climbing for a wager. Let us look back. I don’t know why I feel inclined to moralise to-day, but I do.”

“Oh, let me do it for you! I know the style. As we look back on the path of our feet, dear friend, we see here a picture of our life’s journey. When we come to the top of the hill of life we shall see how small the things now look that once seemed so great—our all in all. As we——”

“Be quiet, Austin. I want to enjoy the view.”

Sidney was gazing out towards the ocean which lay before them in the distance. The land below them, with its shining valleys and winding river, its wooded hills, and the cluster of cottages dotted here and there round a turreted church tower, or spire, presented a fair picture of English country.

Austin threw himself upon the ground to rest. His eyes were fixed on Sidney’s slim upright young figure.

“I wonder some fellow has not stepped in and laid siege to your heart,” he remarked meditatively. “I always thought that Hughes would be the lucky chap. You don’t mind my mentioning it. He has got tied up now, hasn’t he?”

“I believe he has,” Sidney answered quietly. “Now let us finish our climb.”

They started again, and in another ten minutes were at the top of the Beacon. There, leaning against a pile of rocks, the foundation for many a bonfire, was Randolph Neville.

CHAPTER III

MONICA'S REQUEST

He looked as surprised as they when they met each other. Sidney introduced Austin at once.

"I came up here for a blow," said Randolph.

"And perhaps to get away from people," said Sidney with quick intuition. "We had no idea we were pursuing you, though we admired the purpose and energy of your long strides."

Randolph smiled.

"I was pursued by visions of dinners and crowded drawing-rooms. I have come from town to escape them."

"Then my mother wasn't successful in capturing you," said Austin; "she had a hard try, didn't she?"

"She was very kind. I am afraid I vexed her; but I should be no addition at present to any company."

Sidney looked at him with a mixture of amusement and interest.

"There are very few of us who refuse Mrs. de Cressiers anything," she said. "I don't think it was very kind of you. And these are very special occasions, aren't they, Austin? It is a political opportunity."

"So Mrs. de Cressiers said; but that is just one of the reasons why I fight shy of it."

Sidney, who knew his history, was silent.

"Shake hands!" cried Austin delightedly. "I loathe politics. My mother is too strong on them for my taste."

"I am ashamed of you both," said Sidney hotly, a warm colour creeping up into her cheeks. "If you love your country you must be interested in them. It is sheer laziness with you, Austin, and you know it."

Randolph turned to her.

"What part are you going to take in these political dinners, Miss Urquhart?"

“Oh, I shall be a listener, and perhaps try a little persuasion with one or two stiff-necked old squires, for I want Sir Walter Rame to succeed. He isn’t of this county, but he rents a big place here, and is honest and upright, I am sure.”

Randolph was silent again. He doubted the sincerity of a would-be member.

Sidney looked at him a little deprecatingly.

“Forgive me, Mr. Neville; I don’t know you well enough to scold you, do I? But I can’t bear to think that there are some Englishmen who wash their hands of politics because they cannot purge them of all self-seeking and knavery. There is always good leaven in them, and we want to increase that, not decrease it. A good captain never deserts an old ship.”

“It’s only the rats,” said Randolph, meeting her earnest gaze with twinkling eyes. “I’m a bad rat and a sad rat, and I shan’t be missed.”

“Look here,” broke in Austin; “I didn’t bring you up here, Sid, to talk politics. Let us try another subject. Look at the ocean. Are you keen on fishing? I’m going out to-night with an old salt—a great pal of mine. Will you make a third?”

Randolph and Austin plunged into an animated talk of fish in general. Sidney moved away. She loved the wide expanse of earth and sky, and the fresh keen air invigorated and refreshed her. Sitting down and leaning her back against a rock she wondered why, at a high altitude, the troubles and worries of daily life seemed so small and insignificant.

“I suppose,” she mused, “it is because I feel so near Heaven, and deep down in my heart I know that my deepest love and interests are there.”

When, a little later, Randolph and Austin joined her they were both conscious of an increased radiance and softness in her face. And Austin, who never could keep his thoughts to himself, said:

“Communion of the saints again, Sid? I’d like to know your thoughts when you get alone, but you never will tell me.”

She roused herself with a light laugh.

“It is time we were going home. We will leave you to your solitude, Mr. Neville. I would love to spend a night up here by myself.”

Randolph did not offer to accompany them down, and Austin took care to engage Sidney’s attention for the rest of the way.

“The mother will be furious at Neville’s refusal to come to her. A very decent chap, I should say, but quite equal to holding his own with anyone.”

“He looks unhappy,” Sidney remarked.

“Oh, you sentimental women! If a man has got a fit of indigestion, or the gout in his big toe, it is heartache with you. He is posing as a country-lover, and he’s already bored to death. He jumped at the idea of an all night fishing. I’ll tell you if he has had a disappointing love affair after our expedition is over. But I doubt it. He’s bored to tears with the quiet here, and won’t own up to it.”

“We won’t criticise him, Austin. He is a stranger and deserves our consideration.”

When Sidney chose, a certain aloof inflection of tone had the effect of a severe snub upon Austin. He instantly demanded very weakly:

“Please tell me what to talk about now,” and then with laughter, they resumed their usual happy intercourse together.

The day after, Monica called for Sidney to drive into the nearest market town with her. Admiral Urquhart had a small trap, and a very fat lazy pony. Monica’s cob was a fast one, and Sidney was always glad to go with her rather than drive herself. Friday was market day in Pegborough, and both of them liked to go there every week.

“Randolph has taken Chuckles off my hands for the day,” Monica said. “I shall be glad when his holidays are over. He is rather a handful for poor Aunt Dannie, and I can’t have him always with me.”

“I wish you would send him up to me oftener. I adore him.”

“Sidney, I’m going to ask a favour of you.” Monica spoke abruptly, and a certain little frown appeared between her level eyebrows.

“Ask away; you know you will get it.”

“Don’t be rash. It’s this. I want to know if you’ll give Chuckles a little Sunday tuition on Sunday afternoons?”

If Sidney was surprised she did not show it.

Monica flicked her cob a little nervously as she continued:

“I can’t do it, as you know. It isn’t in my line at all, and poor old Aunt Dannie tries and fails. Last Sunday the little imp chased her round the room with sofa cushions. I know you have a class in the morning, and it seems

nasty of me to wish to spoil your quiet Sunday afternoons, but the fact is I feel he wants something that I can't give him. He is growing up a godless little heathen, and seems lacking in moral principles. I don't know why I can't give them to him, but I can't. They're instinctive with me, but he seems morally deficient. And I'm anxious, awfully anxious, that he should grow up to be an upright honourable man. I know what you believe in, Sidney, and I want you to impart your faith to him."

Sidney was silent. Sudden tears sprang into her eyes.

"I would love to have him, Monica dear, but you ought to teach him, not I."

Monica looked before her with set lips.

"You know what my religion is. I never want to appear other than I am. I go to church once on Sunday. I practise honesty and live straight. I have a strong belief in leaving the world better than I find it. I believe in our Creator. That is the sum and substance of my faith. I get along very well. I have been successful in all that I have put my hand to, and I want no more. But I have failed so far in building up Chuckles' character. I can build my own; I can't build his."

"He wants a foundation-stone, and so do you." Sidney's tone was soft and reflective.

"He may do so. I give you leave to do what you can in that direction. But I differ from you entirely about myself. I consider I have shaped my own life since I left school. I have firm ground under my feet—duty is my foundation; a good straight life springs up from it. This sounds conceited. It is only what I aim at. I sometimes fail in the practice, and I seem to fail with Chuckles. Duty is always shirked by him, and oh, Sidney! my hopes are centred in him. I want him to grow up a success, not a failure. I hope to hand him over a thriving, prosperous farm—his heritage; I only regard it as a trust for him at present. They say single women make a mess of a boy's training, but I am determined that I shall not. No one can say I spoil him, and I think I have his love."

"Chuckles is very lucky," said Sidney warmly.

"I think he is," responded Monica with a little laugh; "not in his aunt, but in his surroundings. But I honestly would like him to have a little more religion. He hates church. When Aunt Dannie discourses to him on the love of God for good little boys, and how he ought to love back, he says he can't love a Person he never sees, and he doesn't want to be a good little boy.

Then she shakes her head over him, and he laughs at her. I feel that his only hope in that direction is being taught by you."

Sidney did not answer for a moment; then she said slowly:

"You know, Monnie, I was of the same mind as you till I met that earnest-minded German woman abroad four years ago. I hope I inherited principles of duty and honour from dad, but I do assure you that there is something more in life than that; and she showed it to me. Duty is a good foundation, but it isn't the right one."

"It's good enough for me," said Monica dryly.

"But you are willing that Chuckles should have a better one?"

"No, I want him to have that, but I can't arrive at it."

"Oh, what a drab world for children and for all of us if duty filled our hearts to the exclusion of love!"

"Don't let us moralise; but I hand over Chuckles' spiritual education to you with pleasure."

Then they began to talk over Randolph Neville.

"It is strange," Monica said, "that he is content with my quiet life. He seems in no hurry to leave me. To-day he has taken Chuckles up the river, fishing. I expect he will be bored with the small imp before long. I was vexed that he refused Mrs. de Cressiers' invitation to dinner. She was astonished and annoyed. She is not accustomed to be denied anything."

"No," Sidney said, laughing. "We spoil her, don't we? And she was quite aware of her condescension in asking him at all, as she knew nothing of him. I like him, Monnie; I admire strong silent men, and I am sure he is one of them, but something has embittered and soured him."

"Yes, and I heard this morning what it is. His cousin mentioned it in a letter to me. The girl he was going to marry threw him over and married someone else."

"Oh!" said Sidney with a long-drawn breath. "If a man is real in his feelings he takes that very badly."

"Yes, but it ought not to spoil his life."

"It won't spoil Mr. Neville's."

"I hope not. He ranks himself as a failure, but that's mere surface talk. He is keen now on getting a Government appointment abroad. I hope he

will. He is too good to be an idler, and he unfortunately has enough money to be that."

They accomplished their marketing and returned home. Sidney had a busy afternoon. Her uncle carried her off to his workshop directly lunch was over. He was erecting a small teahouse in the garden, and wanted her advice about the dimensions and shape of it. Then her father told her he wanted to drive over to inquire for an old friend of his, a Sir Peter Wood, who lived six miles off, and he would like her to accompany him. When they came home a woman from the village was waiting for her. One of her little Sunday scholars was very ill and wanted to see his teacher. Sidney went off promptly, and returned only just in time for dinner. And after dinner she played chess with her uncle, sang to her father, and got no time to herself till bedtime arrived.

When she was at last alone her thoughts turned to Chuckles. She was a true child-lover, and had often longed to have a bigger bit of his company than was possible. Here was an opportunity. And the thought of all that might result from it made her open her Bible and pray earnestly for guidance.

"It is a bit of building," she thought as she read to herself. " 'Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Christ Jesus.' God's building, and if Jesus and His Life and Love are left out in a child's training, how can he be expected to thrive on stern duty and self-repression? Love makes it all so easy."

And as her mind dwelt on the theme of the New Testament her heart glowed within her.

"What does it matter about my broken prospects when I serve One Who never disappoints, Who never fails? He is a rock under my feet, and that gives me an idea for to-morrow. I will tell Chuckles the story of the builders on the rocks and the sand."

She went to sleep that night with a happier heart than she had had for a long time, and with a little shamed feeling that she had not realised more of the wealth she possessed in the unseen things.

Precisely at three o'clock the next afternoon Chuckles appeared. He was in his Sunday garb—an immaculately clean white sailor suit; but he looked at Sidney rather suspiciously.

"I don't know what I've comed for. Aunt Monnie said I was to listen to you, Miss Sid. What are you going to say?"

“We’re going to enjoy ourselves,” said Sidney, producing a box of chocolates. “Help yourself, Chuckles, and you shall choose where we shall sit, under a tree or in a tree. But I vote for the garden and not the house.”

Chuckles gave a swift glance round; then his eyes rested on the river in the distance, and he promptly said:

“I chooses to sit in the boat.”

For an instant Sidney hesitated; then she gave consent, and they marched down to the bottom of the garden.

“We won’t unmoor her as it is Sunday, and I never use her on Sunday.”

Chuckles looked a little dissatisfied, but clambered in, and Sidney followed him, thinking to herself that the boat had one distinct advantage, for that Chuckles could not so easily run away from her.

“What am I to listen to you about?” the small boy demanded, folding his arms and looking up at her with a glint of defiance in his brown eyes.

“Oh, just talk,” said Sidney happily. “Why weren’t you at church this morning?”

“I don’t like it. I—I washed the yabbits’ house.” Chuckles’ “r’s” had a way of escaping him sometimes. “And then I wented down and built sand castles on the sand, but the sea comed in, and I had to come home. Aunt Dannie says I’ll never go to heaven.”

He said this quite cheerfully.

“I’m going to tell you a story,” said Sidney promptly. “One fine day two men walked along by the seashore, and they suddenly said to each other: ‘We’ll build a house to live in by the sea; it’s so beautiful here.’ So they began to build, and first they walked about to choose the place. And one was quicker than the other, and he started the very next day. He chose a nice flat place on the sand, a good way from the sea, and he got some men to help him, and every day his house grew bigger and higher. When his doors and windows were in, he looked at his friend’s house, and he could see no sign of it. At last he went over and called his friend.

“ ‘What are you doing? Just look at my house. You’ve done nothing but dig, dig, dig. Every day you dig, and I have had no digging at all.’

“ ‘Yes,’ his friend said, ‘I’ve been watching you, and I’ll allow your house is getting built very quickly, but, you see, I want a good strong foundation, for this is a stormy part, so I am digging into the rock.’

" 'Oh, that's waste of time; there's nothing to show for your labour.'

" 'We'll wait and see,' the slow builder said. And so days passed; his house grew very slowly, but it was firm.

"The house on the sand was finished very soon, and the man furnished it, and took his family to live in it, and everybody said what an industrious worker he had been, and how quick and how clever he was. And they laughed at the rock builder; they said he would be an old man before his house would be finished. But he did not care; he went slowly and steadily on. At last his house, too, was complete, and he went into it to live with his family.

"Now, Chuckles, which house would you have lived in?"

Chuckles had been following this story with open mouth and eyes.

"I like sand better than rock," he remarked reflectively; and Sidney was glad his aunt was not there to hear him say it.

"Well, you would have chosen a house on sand. What happens to your sand castles?"

"Oh!" said Chuckles, with a beaming face. "You're going to make a storm knock it down. I should like to have been there to see it."

Sidney went on hurriedly.

"Yes; one day the clouds rolled up, and the sky got black, and the wind rolled the waves in with a boom and a crash, and the two men got inside their houses and hoped they would be safe. But, alas! the house on the sand soon began to rock and sway, and the sea rushed in at the bottom, and then suddenly it all crumpled up and fell down with an awful crash, and the man and his family were crushed to death."

"And the other house?"

Chuckles' eyes were nearly starting out of his head.

"Well, the slow man looked out of his window, and saw his neighbour's house destroyed, and his wife began to cry and say: 'It will be our turn next.' And then he said, with a proud smile: 'No; we are built upon the rock, and the ocean itself and all the storms in the world won't wash us away.'

"He was right. The waves dashed against his house, and the wind beat it, and the rain poured down; but when the storm was over and the sun shone out there was his house safe and sound, and the other was in ruins. Now, which do you think was best?"

“The rock,” said Chuckles with conviction. “I’ll build a castle on the rocks next time.”

There was a pause. It was one thing to tell the story, another to apply it; and Sidney began to feel that her subject was above a child’s comprehension.

“That’s a story from the Bible, Chuckles. Jesus told that one, and He said that people who tried to live without Him were like the man who wouldn’t build on the rock. He is the Rock of Ages, you know. And God wants us all to be builders; only we must take care we build properly.”

Chuckles leant over the side of the boat, and began to splash the water with his hands.

“I don’t know nothing about God,” he remarked carelessly, “and I can’t live with Jesus. He is up above the stars, millions of miles away. Aunt Dannie told me so.”

“He is here now, Chuckles—close to us. He sees you, and He hears what you say.”

Chuckles looked fearfully round; then he shook his curly head.

“I would rather He didn’t.”

“That is because you don’t know Him, Chuckles. I want you to get to know Jesus Christ. I want Him to be your best friend.”

“The las’ friend I made was our washwoman’s husban’. He mends umbrellas and china, and he sharpened my knife for nuffin. He lived in London once, but the fog got on his chest. I’ve got an awful lot of friends.”

“But I don’t think you have one friend who died to save you. And Jesus loved you so much that He did this for you. If He was on earth He would draw you gently to Himself, and put His arm round you. He would tell you He had died so as to let you go to Heaven, for He had been punished instead of you. He would tell you He wanted to live in your little heart, and make you happy and take care of you; and if you only saw His kind, loving face, if you only heard His voice, you would look up and say: ‘I will follow You all my life. I will try to please You every day.’ ”

“Would I, do you think?” said Chuckles thoughtfully. “If I could really see Him, p’raps I would. Only Aunt Dannie always says He wants me to be puffickly good, and have no fun at all.”

“I am sure the Lord Jesus Christ loves to see you have fun—fun that makes you and everybody else happy is quite right. It is only fun that hurts or destroys anything and anybody that is wrong. Now, Chuckles, will you have the Lord Jesus for your best friend?”

Chuckles gave a little wriggle.

“I don’t know Him.”

“No, you don’t; but I’m going to try to get you to know Him. I shall talk to you about Him, and tell you stories about Him, and read you messages from Him, until you won’t be able to keep from loving Him. He is my best friend, and I want Him to be yours. And when you come to see me on Sunday afternoons, you are coming to meet Him and make His acquaintance. He is so close to us now that I am going to speak to Him, and you can listen to what I am saying, if you like.”

Sidney bent her head. Chuckles watched her with keen interest.

“O Lord Jesus, will You be Chuckles’ Friend? Will You speak to him Yourself, and make him love You and know You. For Thy Name’s Sake. Amen.”

“Why, that’s praying!” said Chuckles. “You said Amen.”

“Praying is only speaking,” said Sidney. “Now I have talked to you enough. You talk to me.”

“There’s a man on the other side of the garden wall,” said Chuckles, springing up in the boat. “Why, it’s Cousin Ran!”

And Randolph it proved to be. He had walked down to fetch the small boy home to tea, but how long he had listened to the Sunday lesson on the other side of the wall he did not say. Sidney wondered. And she wondered if she had made any impression upon Chuckles. As she stooped to kiss him and wish him good-bye she said:

“Have you liked our talk?”

He nodded.

“I liked about the storm and houses. I shall play at that.”

“And remember, darling, that you’re a little building belonging to God, and unless you are a part of Jesus Christ, Who is the Rock, you’ll never stand the storm that will come to you.”

“That’s too differcult,” said Chuckles, and then he turned to Randolph.

“She’s going to make me have a New Friend,” he said with a little nod of his head at Sidney. “But I haven’t said ‘Yes’ yet.”

Randolph’s eyes met Sidney’s.

“Ah!” he said. “You have made me wish myself a boy again, Miss Urquhart. I used to have Sunday lessons in a garden once upon a time.”

Then, without another word, he marched Chuckles off, and Sidney went to her father wondering again if she had done any good or not by her first effort towards Chuckles’ spiritual education.

Up the road the man and boy walked together.

“I love Miss Sid,” Chuckles asserted. “I ate twenty chocolates, and she never said ‘Stop.’ ”

“Mind you remember what she tells you,” said Randolph, somewhat severely.

“Did you listen to her behind the wall?”

Randolph scorned embarrassment.

“If I did, it was for my own profit.”

“Tell me honest now,” said Chuckles gravely, “do you know this Friend? You don’t think she’s taking me in. I don’t like church and catechism, you know, but she made it out quite different, and she says Jesus will like me to have fun. Do you know Him like she does?”

“That I don’t.”

“Not at all?”

“Well, perhaps a little.”

“Is it proper for men and boys to know Him?”

“Quite proper,” said Randolph, with a smile, and as he spoke the words from some distant cell in his memory came almost to his lips: “ ‘Neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him that glorieth, glory within, that he understandeth and knoweth *Me*.’ ”

“I’ll think about it,” said Chuckles in a lofty manner, “and tell her next Sunday whether I’m going to do what she wants or not. But I shall cut the rope when she isn’t looking, and then we shall drift out to sea and be shipwrecked.”

As Chuckles' intentions that were told never came off, Randolph made no remark. His thoughts persistently followed Sidney, and at times he was perplexed and annoyed by the vagaries of his brain.

When Monica met them coming in at the garden gate she looked a trifle anxiously at Chuckles.

"I hope you have been good," she said.

"Me and Miss Sid don't want to be good," said Chuckles with his chin in the air. "We don't talk about such stupid things as that."

Monica wisely forebore to question him further. It was enough for her that he had been and was willing to go again.

CHAPTER IV

ON A SANDBANK

Mrs. de Cressiers' political dinners were a great success. When Sidney was returning home again, that lady said to her:

"I wish you were my daughter. You are such a help to me when I am entertaining."

"Or daughter-in-law, mother," put in Austin. He was driving Sidney back in his high dogcart, and could not resist adding to his mother's words.

Sidney laughed.

"I will come whenever you want me, Cousin Clarice."

Then, as they drove away, she reproved Austin for his levity:

"Your mother looked quite shocked."

"Oh, no," Austin said calmly. "I often tell her if I had come into the world a little sooner I might have had a chance with you. As it is, you scorn me and call me a mere boy."

"And so you are, and ever will be in my eyes; so don't you try to be different."

"As long as we're chums I don't much care. When is that man going away?"

"Which man?"

"Oh, there aren't so many about here—Neville. I took him fishing, and didn't cotton to him."

"For any reason?"

"Now, don't speak with that distant air. He wouldn't unbend. I chaffed him about his politics. Hate a fellow who won't stand chaff! He treated me like a fly upon the wall."

"You're very young," said Sidney; then, meeting a glare from the corner of Austin's eye, she added quietly: "and impudent."

“A de Cressiers is never snubbed in these parts,” said Austin laughing. “That’s my mother’s creed, you know, and Neville gave her the biggest snub she has received for a long while, so she and I both bear him a grudge. Why is he so superior?”

“He never strikes me to be anything different from ourselves,” said Sidney. “He is a reserved man, and not a very happy one. He is a disappointed man, I should say. Life has treated him hardly.”

“You seem to know a lot about him. I’m a disappointed man, and life is treating me hardly, but I don’t talk to people as if I am in the sky and they in the gutter.”

Austin finished with a little chuckle. His naturally sunny temper overcame his sudden prejudice.

“We’ll let him go hang!” he said. “Will you come out sand-eeling with me to-morrow?”

And in the interest of this new topic Randolph sank into the background.

About a week later, Randolph went to dine with the Admiral. He arrival punctually at eight o’clock, but found the house in a commotion. The Major met him at the door.

“Have you seen my niece? We thought she might be at the Farm.”

“Is she lost?” Randolph asked lightly.

“By George!” said the Major, bringing his fist down with force upon the hall table. “Do you think we’re going to allow that for a moment? She went out after lunch, and said she would be back to tea. It’s close on eight now, and no one seems to have seen anything of her.”

“She has not been near the Farm,” said Randolph, sobering at once. “Did she go on the river?”

“She never said she was going,” said the Major.

“Is the boat missing?”

No one seemed to have thought of looking.

The Admiral came forward:

“It was only ten minutes ago that we discovered that she was not in the house. I have been out riding all the afternoon, and have not been in long. Wherever she is, she must have been delayed by some grave cause, for she is never late for dinner.”

Randolph almost smiled as he recalled Monica's remark to him about the clockwork regularity of the Admiral's household, and then he was surprised at the anxiety tugging at his heart. Why should Sidney's unpunctuality be of such moment to him? He almost ran down to the boathouse. There was no boat in it, nor was it moored to its anchorage. The tide was out, and the low sandbanks across the river were plainly discernible.

"She's stuck on the mud somewhere," was his thought, and he shouted it out to the Major, who was following him down the garden.

He shook his head.

"Don't believe it! She has more gumption than that. She knows the river better than we do."

Randolph lost no time. He pulled out another boat close by—a boat built for the sea, and not for the river. He threw off his overcoat and dress-coat; turning up his white shirt sleeves, he shoved off and cautiously rowed in the shallow current down towards the sea.

The Major shouted after him: "I'll go down to the village and make inquiries there. Don't get on the mud yourself."

Randolph rowed off, and as he looked back, saw the old Admiral fussing round his horse, and evidently preparing to ride off again in search of his daughter.

"Three of us," he said, bending to his oars with a will. "I mean to come in winner."

It was getting dark, and the navigation of his boat was difficult. Progress was necessarily slow. He wondered now if he had better have ridden along the banks and trusted to his sharp eyes to discover her whereabouts. To add to his discomfort, black clouds rolled up, and soon torrents of rain poured down almost perpendicularly.

"I'm rather a fool if she has landed safely hours ago and is making her way home," he muttered, but he knew that nothing would make him go back. Three miles down was the sea and the fishing village of Yalstone. This was his goal. He knew she invariably rowed seawards.

Suddenly he slipped in his oars and listened. Was it fancy that the following words were wafted over the water towards him?

"For what is the use of endless sorrow?
Though the sun goes down, it will rise to-morrow."

Was it a trick of imagination? The rain was lessening. He struck a match or two as a signal light whilst he listened; and then very distinctly came a "Hallo!" across the river. He shouted back, and Sidney's voice came like a bell in response:

"I'm on a sandbank. Don't come too close."

"Why," he muttered to himself, "I was within an ace of passing her!" Deftly and cautiously he worked the boat towards the centre of the river.

"Go on singing," he shouted. "I can't see, but I can hear."

"I've sung myself hoarse!" came the cry.

Then came a rift in the rolling clouds, and a watery moon showed itself for a moment or two. Randolph saw his goal, and in a few minutes had pulled up by the side of a low sandbank.

Sidney was there in her boat, stuck hard and fast.

"Take care!" she cried. "You will stick too!"

Randolph was reckless.

"I've come down all right; I can go back. Now step in."

Sidney extended two very cold hands with her gay laugh.

"I really never expected that *you* would be my rescuer. I pictured you in the midst of the pudding course."

"Did you imagine that we should dine without you?"

He was wrapping her in his overcoat. Sidney protested.

"My dear man, I am soaked through. What I want is exercise, not wrappings. I really think our best plan will be to land and walk home. We shall only get stuck on another sandbank. I know them better than you. It's just a fluke that you rowed safely down. It's too dark to see anything."

"Can we land?" Randolph said, peering through the darkness.

"I'm afraid it must be on the wrong side—this side; there's a bit of beach close to us. I was making for it when I got stuck."

"Let's chance rowing back."

"We shan't do it. Father won't sleep if I'm out all night."

"Will you steer, then, as you know where you are? Confound the boat; I believe it has stuck."

He backed with all his might and just saved it. Sidney steered still downstream.

“We shall get to the end of this bank and then slip across. Now, then, row for your life. Give me an oar.”

It was a breathless moment, but they did it, and drove the boat fast and firm on a stony beach.

In another moment both were out on dry ground.

“There!” said Sidney, “now we’ll say good-bye to our boats and make the best of our way home. It’s a good six miles round by the bridge, but there are no obstacles to prevent speed.”

They scrambled up a steep bank, after making the boat fast to a post close by, and found themselves on a good high road.

Sidney slipped out of Randolph’s overcoat and held it out to him.

“I really couldn’t walk in it,” she said apologetically; “but it has sent a little circulation through me.”

“You are wet through,” he said, just for one moment letting his hand rest on her shoulder.

“Yes; but I’m hardy, and am going to enjoy my walk. I honestly am very grateful to you. I was preparing to make myself comfortable for the night when I heard the splash of oars, so then, Lorelei-like, I began to sing, knowing that I might be luring you to a similar fate.”

“Who did you think it was?” demanded Randolph.

“Not you.”

“Why not? You knew I was coming to dine.”

“But you don’t know the tricks of our river, and Uncle Ted does. I’m disappointed in him.”

“I got to the boat first,” explained Randolph. “He didn’t give you credit for sticking in the mud; said you had too much gumption.”

Sidney laughed out.

“I’ve never done such a thing in my life before; and now he’ll never let me forget it. I was a fool, I own I was, but—I was thinking too much.”

She hesitated, and Randolph, not liking the drop in her voice, said cheerfully:

“How long shall we give ourselves for getting round?”

“Four miles an hour. In an hour and a half we shall be walking up the drive. Oh, yes, I feel you have no faith in my walking powers, but when I wind myself up I’m equal to any man—and the difficulty is to stop. When I’m thoroughly in it I feel I could walk on for ever.”

She walked as if she liked it; her feet hardly seemed to touch the ground, her tread was so light and springy.

“I’m told that you don’t smoke!” Randolph said. “So many women do so nowadays.”

“Of course not. Dad is old-fashioned; I think I am too. I never could take to it. I assure you I’m a century behind most contemporaries of mine.”

Randolph did not respond.

She went on:

“It’s an advantage in one way. I don’t get sick longings for an active independent life. I’m too pleased with myself and my surroundings. Don’t you think I’m a very self-satisfied creature? Aunt Dannie says I am.”

“I think you would be contented with very little,” said Randolph gravely. “I wish I could be. Hand your secret on to me. I can’t be content with my circumstances.”

“Ah,” said Sidney, drawing a long breath, “content or discontent is a matter of long or short sight, isn’t it? I have learnt that it is.”

Randolph began to think it out.

“How?” he questioned. “Even a sandbank in a deluge doesn’t affect your spirits.”

“Well, it might be worse,” said Sidney; “and I’m not going to have you think me other than I am. A fit of discontent took me out this afternoon and abstracted me from the present. When I stuck, I readjusted my focus, and then felt better.”

“Still I don’t understand.”

“ ‘For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.’ ”

The words came softly but very firmly from Sidney’s lips.

“But you don’t apply that to the sandbank?”

Sidney's laugh rippled out.

"I was going to the cause that made me drift to the sandbank. We were talking of general content and discontent, weren't we? That quotation gives present and future; if we see as far as the end of it, there's not much to grumble at, is there?"

"You're very religious," Randolph said vaguely.

"Oh, I'm not. I wish I were; but I stake my all on the Book from which that saying comes. I believe it through and through. And it's such a cheerful creed."

Randolph walked along silently for a few minutes. He thought over his disappointments and disillusions in life, and he wondered if he had taken the Bible as his guide whether it would have brought him cheer and comfort.

"I wish you would tell me more," he said. "If you bring disaster wilfully upon yourself, can you still look ahead and forget the present? It sounds ghostly and unreal. What is our future? Who can tell? It is the present that matters."

"Well," said Sidney gaily, "our present is rather a nasty one. I'm treading water in my shoes, and haven't a dry inch on me, but we're not taking it to heart much; we're getting home—on our way there—and the thought of the fires and food and comforts that will be ours makes us think lightly of the present, does it not?"

"*You're* going home," said Randolph with emphasis.

"We've all got the same home at the end of life—at least, we can have it if we want to—and we're *getting* home, that's what I keep saying to myself."

Strange memories crowded into Randolph's heart. He had had a good mother, and he knew that she had reached home and expected to see him there. In a vague fashion he expected to meet her again; but he had never troubled his head about the way to do it. He felt as if he would like to walk on for ever, listening to Sidney's soft bright voice as she spoke so naturally of the things that were usually locked away from ordinary conversation. They tramped along; from grave subjects they turned to gay; once Sidney spoke regretfully of her father and his anxiety.

"I wouldn't make him uneasy for worlds. I do hope he hasn't sallied out anywhere after me. He has had a cold, and his throat is always delicate.

What a dinner party for you! I really think you most long-suffering not to be enraged with me!"

"I haven't missed my dinner," said Randolph quietly; "but this will be my last visit to you. I am off to-morrow."

"Are you, really? We—my father will miss you."

"Why did you correct yourself?" Randolph asked with a short laugh. "I should like to think you missed me. I haven't too many friends; perhaps it's as well. The fewer you have, the fewer you lose. They want me in town about a billet abroad."

"Why do you leave poor old England? I heard you were a good speaker. We have not many at present in Parliament."

Then Randolph spoke with passion underlying his tone:

"They are offering me a frontier post. I shall have things my own way there; but it's a disgrace to the Empire at present. I shall get a chance of a good sweep out, and a general clean up. If I can clean one corner for the country and keep it clean, it's better work than fighting for party, and swallowing one's convictions and conscience with one gulp."

"Yes," said Sidney slowly; "perhaps. And we want strong men for those isolated frontiers. You are going to accept it?"

"Most certainly. I am a single man and have no ties; there isn't a soul who will miss me. I have nothing and nobody to keep me at home."

Bitterness was in his tone.

"Oh, don't say that."

"It's true. You were good enough to hint you might miss me down here. But for how long? A month hence your remembrance of me will be vague. A few years hence you may take up a paper and read of the death by fever or some such epidemic of a certain Randolph Neville. And you will say to your father, 'Wasn't that the man who visited Monnie once? I seem to remember the name.' "

Very lightly Sidney laid her hand on his arm, and the touch thrilled Randolph, though he was furious to have to acknowledge it to himself.

"Have I deserved such a speech?"

"I don't know why I'm talking of myself at all," said Randolph gruffly; "it isn't my way."

“Life will be better to you than you think. It’s a good world to live in. Don’t doubt everything and everybody.”

“Ah, you have as yet had no disillusions!”

Then, aghast, he recollected; and her tense cry once more came to his ears: “Teach me to forget! Teach me to forget!”

“I have had a few,” said Sidney very quietly; “but the world is big, and we are not meant to grow bitter in it.”

Randolph caught his breath.

Then through the darkness came a shout, and the next moment the Admiral’s groom reined up his horse by them.

“Oh, Baker, is that you? I am all right, and we’re coming home as fast as we can.”

Sidney’s voice was brisk and cheerful.

“Ride back and tell the Admiral I’m coming. I got stranded on a sandbank.”

The groom galloped off.

All serious talk was over, and very soon they were in the hall, with the Admiral and the Major fussing round them. The Major had just got in, very tired and rather cross now that the excitement was over.

“We thought your boat had got upset,” he said testily. “We never expected you would stick in the mud.”

“I’m so sorry I have disappointed you,” said Sidney; then she put her arms up round her father’s neck, and gave him a hug. “You are not sorry to see me back again, are you, dad?”

Her father laid his hand caressingly on her head.

“I shall say my prayers to-night with a grateful heart,” he said; then he looked towards Randolph. “Thanks much to you for bringing me back my little girl. I could not live without her.”

Then Sidney slipped away to change her wet clothes. Half-way up the low broad staircase, she stopped and looked down at the little group in the hall.

“Make Mr. Neville change his wet things, dad. Uncle Ted’s clothes will fit him. And we shall be ready for dinner in twenty minutes.”

The belated dinner was served at half-past ten, and it was a cheerful meal. Afterwards, in the drawing-room, Randolph bade Sidney good-bye.

"Shall we *never* meet again?" she exclaimed, as she laid her hand in his, and felt the emphasis of his words. "I don't like to make friends and lose them so quickly. Won't you be in these parts again before you sail?"

He shook his head.

"If I go, I go next week. Miss Urquhart, I shall be a lonely man out there. Will you write me a line occasionally? May I write to you? Just to keep up our friendship, which I trust we have started."

"I shall like to hear from you how you are getting on, and will certainly answer your letters," responded Sidney gravely.

Randolph's eyes for one moment rested upon her slim graceful figure as she stood before him. Surely, he thought, those fringed grey eyes that looked with a sunny calm into his could be trusted! And then he saw them droop before his gaze, and was not sure whether it was only his imagination that made him think he saw a glistening drop hanging on the tip of those dark curled lashes.

He went, and Sidney watched him go with a strange sinking of heart.

"I feel so sorry for him," she said, turning to her father; "he is conscious of his integrity and clean hands; but has always been abused and misunderstood and deceived by those whom he trusted most."

"Well, you seem to know a lot about him," said her father; "but Neville will make his way. He is a rising man, and if he gets this billet he'll be the right man in the right corner."

"Monnie has told me a good deal about him," said Sidney, with a wistful look in her eyes. "He is not a happy man, I am afraid; and yet he deserves to be. I wish he were not going out to such desolation."

"It's time some right-minded man tackled that job," the Admiral said. "I happen to know a good bit about that place. We coasted round it once. There is only a handful of Europeans, and they say English lads sent out there either die in five years' time, or come back hopeless drunkards. They go to pieces; climate, isolation, and drink are too much for them. But they've had bad administrators; it's a blot on our Empire. Neville will remedy that."

"I wish he had never left the House," said Sidney warmly. "He will be wasted out there. We want strong men at home in the present state of affairs."

“We want them in all quarters of the globe,” said the Admiral. And his daughter said no more.

Randolph did not go to bed very early that night; when he got back he sat up with Monica over a little log fire, the first she had had; but the rain was heavy. And though she had no idea how much he had been exposed to it, she expected that he would have a wet walk home. She and he were very good friends, and she was genuinely sorry that he was leaving her the following day.

“You have done me a lot of good,” she said to him. “I get into a rut of my own, and want to be shaken out of it. But dear though Aunt Dannie is, she is not a conversationalist, and we think so very differently that we agree to go our own ways. You make me see that my ways are not infallible; and your presence here has been good for Chuckles. Oh, Randolph, do you think I shall make a good man of him? I get so anxious. Sometimes I think I am too severe; sometimes over indulgent. And it is such a loss for a boy to have no father!”

“I don’t know,” said Randolph; “it rather depends on the father. I believe a woman is better at training than a man—up to a certain age. I know all the good that ever came to me was through my mother. I remember her teaching; it has stuck to me through life—at least, some of it has; I don’t remember anything learnt from my father. He was indifferent to me, and died when I was ten. A woman lays a better foundation than a man.”

Monica sighed. Sidney’s words came to her: “Duty is a good foundation; but it is not the right one.”

“I shall get Sidney to help me with him,” she said. “She happens to have that happy knack of teaching without any effort. I get ponderous when I talk to him for his good. And he and I are both relieved when it is over. I wonder when you will come down here again?”

“Not for some years, I should say.”

“Oh, don’t bury yourself out there. You must have a home of your own one day, Randolph. I know you don’t feel like it now; but time brings changes to our feelings, as well as to everything else. And do choose an English girl for a wife!”

“Are you afraid I shall choose a dark-skinned one?” Randolph said, with a little laugh.

“I know you will be lonely out there,” said Monica gravely.

“I don’t know the meaning of that word,” said Randolph, squaring his shoulders and compressing his lips, quite forgetting his parting words to Sidney. “I have always lived alone and thought alone; but that is second nature to me. The difficulty to me is to include my fellow-creatures in my calculations.”

“Now, that is nonsense! No one has worked harder for his fellow-beings than you have.”

“Yes, and have received kicks and abuse for it accordingly. Never mind! I suppose I must have one more try, and then, if I come back a failure, I’ll struggle no more against the stream.”

“You will never become a drifter,” said Monica with conviction.

The next morning, at breakfast, Chuckles was told of Randolph’s coming departure.

“Why are you going away, Cousin Ran? I’m very fond of you. I was hoping you would take me with you to London.”

“I’m going a little farther than London,” said Randolph. “No, you’ll have to do your growing without me for a bit now, Chuckles. When I come back, I’ll find you a first-class farmer, I hope.”

“I’d rather be a builder,” said Chuckles, looking across at his aunt with his mouth full of bread and butter. “I’m specially intellested in building just now. Miss Sid is talking a lot to me about it.”

“What does she say?” asked Randolph, laughing at the child’s solemn eyes.

“We’ve all got to build,” Chuckles said. “I’m practisin’ on the sand, but I always put a big stone first at the bottom of my castles. That’s the funation, you know. It must be a stone—rock, the Bible says. The funation is awfully differcult. Miss Sid says we’re all builders. Fancy! God put us in the world to build! Did you know that?”

“Well, I’m going to do a bit of Empire building, I trust,” said Randolph, looking across at Monica with a queer smile, “so I shall be fulfilling my destiny.”

“Yes,” she answered gravely, “and I, in my corner, building up a prosperous heritage, I trust, for a certain small boy, who may defeat and disappoint my hopes.”

“Not if Miss Urquhart is as successful a builder in her corner as you are,” returned Randolph.

“Yes, I’m a better builder at farms than characters,” said Monica with a little sigh.

“So we’re all building something, Chuckles,” said Randolph, looking at the small boy with a twinkle in his eyes. “I’ve been an unsuccessful builder so far; two of my cherished castles have toppled over.”

Chuckles clapped his hands exultantly.

“That’s acause you didn’t have a stone funation, like the man on the sand. The winds blew, and the flood came, and the big sea washed it over.”

“Yes,” said Randolph, the twinkle dying away; “the winds blew, and the flood came, and the big sea washed them quite away. I’m having another try now. Wish me success, little man.”

Chuckles looked at him with big eyes.

“How high will you build? Up to heaven?”

“Go on with your breakfast,” said Monica quickly.

Chuckles said no more until his good-bye came, and then he looked with awe at the small gold piece pressed into his chubby palm.

“Why, that will buy me a pony, won’t it?” he questioned, beginning to caper up and down. “Oh, Cousin Ran, thank you truly! And may I come out to see you building in India one day? Me and Miss Sid will come out togever.”

“And what will become of Aunt Monnie?”

“She’ll come, too. We’ll all come, and we’ll all build togever!”

“A happy family!” laughed Randolph, as he waved his adieux.

He had much food for thought during his journey up to town, and somehow or other Sidney’s slim gracefulness, her sweet vibrating voice, her eager shining eyes, haunted him. He carried away the impress of her personality with him, and also the lisping words of the child: “How high will you build? Up to heaven?”

CHAPTER V

THE WIDOW

LIFE went on very quietly for Monica and Sidney after Randolph left them.

But one afternoon, as Sidney and her father were sitting together in the garden, Major Urquhart came limping out to them in some excitement.

"It's what I always say," he declared, sitting down heavily in a garden chair; "brain and knack are better servants than strength. Six men—brawny fellows, too—all perspiring and cursing and shouting, and with no more notion than a child how to get a bit of furniture in at a door!"

"And then you walked by with your brain and knack, and the thing was done," said Sidney laughing. "At which village move have you been assisting? I know there are one or two flittings on hand."

"Lovelace's Cottage—bottom of the hill."

Sidney sat up and looked interested.

"I heard a lady had taken that. Did you see her?"

"Yes, I did. An uncommonly sensible little woman; but her workmen were bunglers. I passed by and lent a hand."

"I can see you do it!"

"She's got some very good bits of furniture," the Major pursued, "and this gigantic bureau, of course, came to pieces. They only wanted a screwdriver, but none of them had thought of it. She's come from Norfolk, she told me, and is a widow."

"Does she know anybody here?"

"Yes. She's a connection of Mrs. de Cressiers."

"Oh, she'll be all right, then. I wonder Austin did not tell us about her. He was here yesterday. Is she all alone, poor thing?"

"My dear Sidney, a 'poor thing' doesn't apply to her. Wait till you make her acquaintance."

"I don't know that I'm fond of widows," Sidney said meditatively. "Is she old or young?"

“Young—quite young; a very sensible young woman! So natural. I’ve promised to put her up a shelf or two to-morrow. She has some good books, but no place to put them.”

“Well,” said Sidney admiringly, “you have got on!”

The Admiral chuckled.

“You’ll be kept busy, Ted,” he said. “Mark my words, if she has her wits about her, she’ll make use of you. I should, if I were in her shoes. You’re a first-rate carpenter.”

“She gave me a first-rate cup of tea,” said Major Urquhart; “boiled some water up in a spirit lamp in a jiffy. She’s good for emergencies, I can tell you! Wasn’t flustered or fussed, but sat down and told me a rattling good story of an experience she had in Ireland with the Paddies. Her husband was a soldier. She seems to have been in all quarters of the globe.”

“She sounds interesting,” said Sidney; “I’ll call on her as soon as ever I can.”

“I told her you’d be down first thing to-morrow morning, and she’s coming to lunch. Her maid doesn’t come to her till to-morrow evening.”

The Admiral laughed out.

“I wonder you didn’t offer her a bed, and bring her back to dinner,” he said.

“I offered it,” said the Major, quite unabashed. “I knew Sidney would be delighted, but she declined.”

“But why hasn’t Mrs. de Cressiers befriended her, if she is a connection?” asked Sidney.

“I didn’t ask. Shouldn’t think she’s a little woman to hang on to her connections; too independent for that.”

“But,” began Sidney; and then she stopped herself. She was about to say that surely connections should be asked for hospitality before strangers; but she knew how impulsive her uncle was, and did not want to hurt his feelings.

“You have rather rushed me into a call,” she said.

“It’s only neighbourly to show her the ropes in a strange place,” said her uncle. And Sidney assented, wondering if she could see Mrs. de Cressiers before she went.

Fortunately, after dinner Austin walked in.

"Came down to be livened up!" he confided to Sidney. "The governor is extra grumpy; the mother on her high horse, so I cut."

"Now you can tell us about the new arrival at Lovelace's Cottage," Sidney said eagerly. "She's a connection of yours?"

"Never heard of her. Who do you mean?"

"She's a Mrs. Norman; her husband was a captain in the 12th Lancers."

"Never heard of her," repeated Austin. "But now I come to think of it, the parents were saying something to each other about Lovelace's. I didn't take much notice. Is she a good sort?"

The Major gave an emphatic nod.

Sidney began to laugh.

"Uncle Ted is bowled over. I'm to go down in the early hours of to-morrow, and she's to feed here till she gets in comfortably. It's all arranged."

"I think I'll stroll round and have a look at her," said Austin. "If I'm a connection, I ought to have first innings."

"Ask your mother about her first," said Sidney.

"Oh, you suspicious, conventional brutes!"

The Major shot this out with vehemence; then walked out of the room, and banged the door behind him.

Sidney could not treat it gravely.

"Dad," she said, "this is worse than we have had hitherto. Uncle Ted is always susceptible, but he never has capitulated quite so rapidly."

"Don't chaff him. You'll make his kind-heartedness into something more if you don't look out!"

Sidney took her father's rebuke at once, and said no more; but the next morning a groom rode down before breakfast with a note from Mrs. de Cressiers:

> "My dear Sidney,—Mrs. Norman married the son of the second cousin of my brother-in-law, Colonel St. Orr, who married my youngest sister. Can this be called a connection? Certainly nothing more. I have neither heard nor seen anything of the lady herself, except that my sister mentioned her name in a letter. Why

are you so precipitately making her acquaintance? Surely you can wait till I have called upon her? And I certainly am not going to do that till I return from town. I am going up for a fortnight next Tuesday.—Yours in haste, with love,

"Clarice de Cressiers."

Sidney read the first part of this note aloud at the breakfast table. The latter bit she kept to herself, for she knew she would have no peace from her uncle until she had been down to the cottage; and though Mrs. de Cressiers always tried to rule her life, Sidney had never allowed her to do so. Her father was quite aware of Mrs. de Cressiers' failing and always backed his daughter up to resist her sway.

"No woman shall rule my ship," he would say genially; "and these old families are not living in the feudal days; neither are we their serfs. Oh, I know, my dear, your mother was a de Cressier, but the Urquhart blood is quite as good, and a little more vigorous than theirs; and you are your father's daughter, remember, and not Mrs. de Cressiers'!"

So after breakfast Sidney accompanied her uncle down to Lovelace's Cottage.

The front garden was still strewn with empty packing cases and paper and litter of all kinds. As they unlatched the gate, Mrs. Norman came out of the front door. She was a pretty woman; her complexion was good, her eyes rather a vivid blue. She showed a good many teeth when she smiled and talked, and her hair was bright golden. She was dressed in a very short and shabby tweed skirt, a man's bright yellow cardigan jacket was over it, and a soft grey felt hat, with a jay's feather and a bit of staghorn moss in it, gave her a distinctly sporty appearance.

"How awfully kind and friendly of you!" she said, holding out her hand to Sidney. "Your uncle told me what a friend you were to any forlorn strangers. Do come in, if you don't mind the chaos. I'm in the state of the Irishman who said: 'Sure I'm in sech a botheration and commiseration, that I don't know whether me toes come out of me head or me legs!' "

She led the way into the tiny house, found some chairs, and Sidney sat down and looked about her.

"You ought to have had a woman in to clean," she said. "Are you quite by yourself?"

"Absolutely. I quaked in the night when I remembered half of my china was lying in the packing cases in the garden; but then I remembered that the country was not crammed with thieves, and I slept like a dog till nine this morning. I've only just finished my breakfast."

Major Urquhart was already examining the walls of the tiny sitting-room.

"Look here," he said, "this is the place! I'll rig you up some shelves in this recess in no time. And how would a locker at the bottom work, with a lid? It's a tidy contrivance of my own, for women always have a lot of rubbish about—sewing, you call it, don't you? And you can shoot the whole lot in, when you want a tidy room, see? My man will be here directly with some wood."

"Oh, how awfully kind of you! That's what I always say—men are so delightfully prompt. If they promise a thing, they go straight away and do it."

She sprang up, and for the next twenty minutes she and the Major were deep in calculations and measurements. Sidney looked on, half amused, half interested. Then Mrs. Norman turned to her with a laughing apology:

"You will think me most dreadfully rude, but it really is a chance for me, when I have such a kind offer made me. I can't afford to have half I should like in this house. I'm afraid you'll go back, and think me a calculating selfish creature; but I've learnt a good many things in life, and one is how to take from people. There was a time when I preferred to give; but then, of course, I had the means to do it. After all, the world is divided between givers and takers, and if you can't be one, you can be the other."

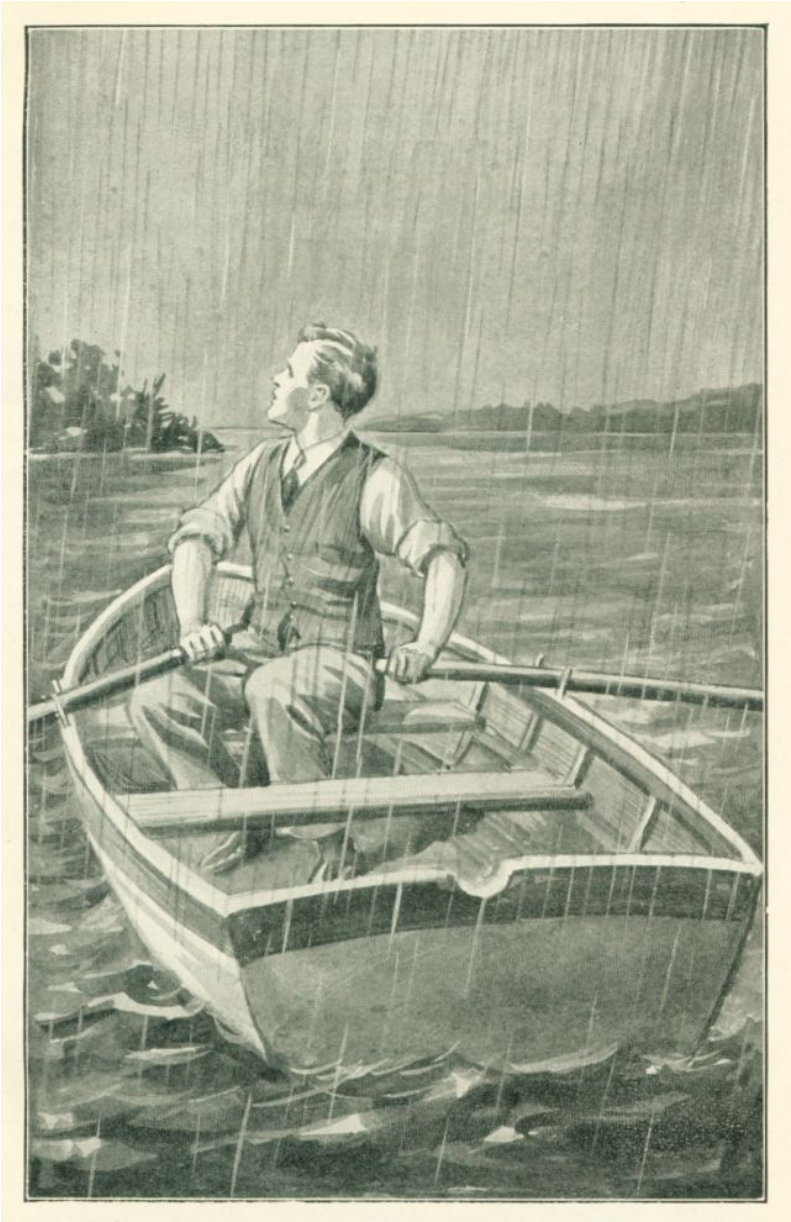
She laughed as she spoke, and Sidney felt the magnetism of her frank cheerfulness.

"I'm sure you'll be doing Uncle Ted a kindness if you give him work. He has filled our house to overflowing with his handiwork, and now has no scope for half his designs. I don't think I will take up your time any longer; but do come up to lunch, if it will be of any help to you."

"Oh, how kind! But perhaps I had better not. I only want a snack of bread and cheese, and I don't want to encroach upon your kindness!"

"Come up, of course," Sidney said. "But tell me before I go if I can help you in any way."

Mrs. Norman laughed.



TO ADD TO RANDOLPH'S DISCOMFORT, BLACK CLOUDS ROLLED UP, AND SOON TORRENTS OF RAIN POURED DOWN ALMOST PERPENDICULARLY (Page 64)

"I know I want all sorts of counsel about supplies, but at this moment my bookshelves have ousted everything else. May I pick your brains at luncheon? As you are so very kind as to press me, I will come with pleasure."

Sidney saw nothing for it but to go; she felt instinctively that she was not wanted; she refused to let herself criticise her new neighbour, and went home occupying herself with many household duties for the rest of the morning. Once her father came across her, and asked about the new arrival.

"She is a pleasant little body. You will see her at lunch."

And no more would she say.

Major Urquhart arrived punctually for a wonder, but Mrs. Norman accompanied him. And when Sidney laughingly remarked that her uncle was always late for meals, she said:

"Ah, but, you see, I insisted upon punctuality, for I was an invited guest, and could not take such liberties!"

"Unpunctuality is impossible to me," said the Admiral. "We let Ted go his own way, but my daughter and I never keep each other waiting."

It was a cheery table. Mrs. Norman was very good company, and could talk on a variety of subjects. She discoursed on books and politics to the Admiral, on fishing and carpentering to the Major, on servants and village tradesmen to Sidney. When they rose from the table she gave a little sigh:

"I shall return to my work a Hercules. But, oh, what a problem it is to fit big furniture into a cottage! I should like to tip some of my effects into the river, which flows in such an accommodating way past my back garden. What a temptation to fling all my tiresome burdens into it as well, and let it carry them away for ever!"

"How would you begin?" said Sidney merrily.

"My duties and responsibilities would go first—don't be shocked, Admiral!—they weigh heavily on us all at times, especially if you're a lonely unit, and have none to share them with you! My memories would follow. They are so worrying and depressing. And my bills would complete the list. What a happy creature I should be!"

She laughed, and her laugh was so infectious that even the Admiral joined in it, though he hardly approved of such audacious sentiments being aired.

Major Urquhart insisted upon going back with her to complete his work.

"He's quite infatuated," the Admiral said, turning to his daughter.

"Yes," said Sidney, "aren't we all? She is charmingly natural and original. Don't you think so?"

"No," said the Admiral gruffly. "I've seen a good many of that stamp in my time."

Sidney shook her head at him.

"We shall see a good deal of her, I prophesy; so we will be prepared to like her."

"*We* shan't see much of her. Ted will."

Sidney said no more. She was strangely anxious to like this new arrival; but as time went on her views changed, and one afternoon she arrived at Monica's farm with a depressed little furrow on her usually smooth forehead.

She found Monica in her store room, packing up some honeycomb from her bees to go to London. Sidney swung herself up on an empty shelf, and began:

"Be rude to me, Monnie! I'm longing for a short abrupt brusque remark from someone. Honey is delicious, but you can get a surfeit of it, can't you? And somehow or other I've been having honey with some sting in it. Do bees ever leave their stings in their honey?"

"I haven't time to talk in parables," said Monica, in her downright way. "What is the matter with you?"

She did not look up from her work. Sidney watched her quick deft movements, as she slipped her cases of honey into the light packing cases on the floor, and said somewhat wistfully:

"I've come over for a talk. Can't you be idle for half an hour?"

"Yes, if you wait ten minutes. These must go to the station this afternoon."

"I sometimes wish I had an entrancingly busy life like yours," Sidney said; "and yet I have my days filled up, only they don't seem as profitable as yours."

Monica did not reply. She worked on until the cases were full; then she called one of her men to nail them down, gave him directions for taking them to the station, and, slipping off her apron, turned to Sidney with a smile.

"Come into the sitting-room, and we will have tea. Aunt Dannie and Chuckles are spending a day at the rectory, so we shall be undisturbed."

The sitting-room looked cheerful with its blazing fire. Outside, a grey mist was coming up from the sea; the leaves on the trees seemed to be shivering under its touch, and many were silently dropping to their death.

Sidney seated herself with a sigh of content in an arm-chair by the fire. Then she looked up into Monica's face affectionately.

"Be a safety valve to me! Oh, Monnie, what should I do without you! You are so safe, so silent, so busy in your world of work, that all my confidences will be safe. I have come over with the overwhelming desire in my heart to pick our new neighbour to pieces. Isn't it truly dreadful of me? Have you seen her yet?"

"Her name is Mrs. Norman, is it not? She is taking milk from us. No, I have not met her."

"You would like her at first sight, as I did. She's a jolly cheery-looking little woman; but, oh, Monnie, I wish with all my heart she had never come near us."

Monica sat down.

"Tell me all about her. Get it off your chest, and you will feel better."

"It's ridiculous of me, but I have an instinctive feeling that she is going to bring havoc into our quiet life. I suppose she is what you call a man's woman; but she is awfully sweet—too sweet to me—only, as a rule, her conversation is directed wholly to Uncle Ted and father. And she makes me feel out of it. I can't explain. I'm not jealous, and I've never been made to feel so in my own home before. She's a great talker, and an amusing one; and she's the kind of person that absorbs all the conversation, and centres it round herself. I've tried awfully hard to like her, but I haven't succeeded; and there are things I have hated in connection with her. She has always given us to understand that she was a lonely widow, with no one belonging to her. Yesterday, quite accidentally, I found out that she has a grown-up daughter who lives with her father's relations. She seems quite indifferent in her feelings towards her. Then she posed to father as a great reader, and Uncle Ted was full of her wonderful library. Now we find out the books were her husband's, and she keeps them with the intention of selling them when she has a good offer for them. She hasn't read one of them; she confessed as much to me in an unguarded moment. She orders Uncle Ted about as if he were a boy; he is doing all kinds of things for her in her cottage, and he spends his days down there. Of course, I am delighted that he should have the interest and occupation of it; but one day when I was out,

she left him down there and marched up to spend the afternoon with dad. She was full of garden questions. When I came back, she was pouring out tea for dad, as if she had known him all her life. Dad was bored to death with her—only he's too polite to say so. He doesn't like her, I can see. Then Uncle Ted came to dinner in the sulkiest of tempers; he had been furious at her leaving him and attaching herself to father. It sounds very silly and foolish, doesn't it? I wish Mrs. de Cressiers were back."

"It sounds as if she were of the adventuress style," said Monica laughing.

"Doesn't it? And yet she isn't; for everything is quite straight and above board, except perhaps about her daughter. Mrs. de Cressiers knows her history. Well, let me continue. Two days ago Austin called on her, and now she has him completely in tow. He is superintending her garden; Uncle Ted is making shelves, and dressers, and tables for her. Isn't she clever? And am I not a back-biter?"

"I should like to see her," said Monica thoughtfully; "but I'm not one to make calls, as you know. I'm not a society person."

"My dear Monnie, if Mrs. Norman wants to know you she'll do it, whether you want it or not. She amuses me awfully. She has such a good opinion of herself that it never enters her head that other people may set a different value on her from what she does herself. There, I'm becoming bitter, and I will not be that, if I can help it. She told us the other day that she had left a 'weeping world' behind her in Norfolk. 'And I know,' she added, 'that new friends are more difficult to make as one grows older. My dear old ones have such a big place in my heart.' "

"That's nice," said Monica shortly. Then she looked out of the window. "And here she is coming up the drive. At least, it is a stranger. Peep and tell me if it is she, Sidney."

"Yes. I'm off. Don't let me meet her."

"But why not? Do stay."

"She'll—you'll get on better without me," said Sidney. "I'll creep out the back way."

But it was too late. Mrs. Norman's voice was heard in the hall, and the next moment she was in the room.

CHAPTER VI

LETTERS

"Ah, this is delightful!" were her first words. "Miss Urquhart, you will be my friend, and introduce me? I have really only come up on a little matter of business, Miss Pembroke. It is so kind of you to let me have your dairy produce. I am wanting to start a small poultry yard. Quite a few hens, you know, as I'm rather an ignoramus; but Major Urquhart has been advising me strongly to go in for eggs and chickens. I think he is wise, don't you? And I wondered if you could sell me a few good pullets. I want them to begin laying in the winter. Can you manage that for me? Ah, Miss Urquhart, I see you are laughing at me; but you know what I mean! I don't want to keep fowls all the winter and never get an egg. And I have heard of Miss Pembroke's fame. Everything she puts her hand to prospers, I was told. What a charming old house you have!"

She turned to Monica. Poultry and poultry-keeping was the subject of conversation, but it was one to which Monica always rose with alacrity; and again Sidney marvelled at Mrs. Norman's talent for interesting people at once.

When business was satisfactorily settled, Mrs. Norman turned to Sidney.

"I've left that dear boy, Austin, planting roses round my porch. Doesn't that sound ideal! I told him I would be back to tea, so must not stay. If you have time, Miss Pembroke, do come down and see me. I know you're a busy woman, but I shall be so grateful for any more hints about my poultry."

"I'm afraid I'm a bad hand at visiting," said Monica bluntly.

"Oh, I don't mean a state call," said Mrs. Norman, laughing. "You know I'm renowned for my unconventionality. I would not have dared to come to you this afternoon, unless I had known you were too sensible to mind; and, after all, it was business."

She got up to go; then laid her hand affectionately on Sidney's arm.

"Has Miss Urquhart told you how kind she has been to me, and how hospitable? Why, I feel now as if I am welcome at any meal, and can run in and out with all my troubles. A lone woman is at such a disadvantage when she comes to a fresh place."

Then Sidney spoke:

"I can't help wondering why your daughter did not come with you. She would have been a great help, would she not?"

"Poor Gavine! I would not spoil her good time by the drudgery of a move. When I am really established, and everything is pretty and comfortable, then I shall introduce my little daughter to you. And you will love her, as everyone does who sees her."

She shook hands and left. Sidney gazed at Monica with a sparkle in her eyes.

"Well? Your verdict?"

"It's too soon to give it. I shouldn't say there was any harm in her."

"No, of course there is none. But she doesn't like me. I know she doesn't!"

"She realises you haven't taken to her."

"I did at first, but she simply overlooks me if there are men in the room, and I honestly hate that style of woman. But, oh, I have to be so careful, Monnie, in guarding my tongue from criticism when Uncle Ted is near. And now Austin is getting nearly as bad. What will his mother say, I wonder, when she comes back? I shall be curious to see how she and Mrs. Norman take to each other. Now I must be off home. I feel I have relieved my mind by my outpouring. I am so thankful we haven't sweet purring things to say to each other when we meet, Monnie."

Monica laughed.

"Ah, well, I should be the better for some of her sweetness, I know. And, after all, Sidney, she is wise to make friends. And it is hard to start in a fresh place alone."

Sidney walked home through the dusky mist feeling strangely depressed. But when she got in, her father claimed her attention, and she was her bright happy self again.

"There is one heart she can never touch, and that is dad's," she told herself. "His heart is divided between my mother and myself."

And then the next day her thoughts were turned from Mrs. Norman to Randolph Neville, for she got a letter from him.

"Dear Miss Urquhart,

"I have written letters to you by the score, and torn them all up. One does foolish things on board ship to while away the time, but now I am going to write sense, if I can. I wonder if you have given me a thought since I left you? Thanning Dale seems a far-away country to me now, and yet if I shut my eyes I can see it all before me—your garden sloping down to the river, the Admiral reading in his chair under the old trees on the lawn, and you flitting about in your white gown with flecks of sunshine on your hair and a vast wealth of it in your eyes. Please forgive my personal remarks. That is why I have torn up so many of my effusions. I feared that you might consider them impertinent. Well, I got my billet, and I am on the way out, and on the same boat is a brown-faced wiry little doctor who is bound for the same spot. He is returning there after a furlough. I asked him if he was kept busy; but he tells me he has a tremendous round, and only stays there for three months in the year. 'A loathsome hole,' he terms it. There is not a single European woman in the station, and the few men are a motley crew with a great propensity for hard drinking. He looked me up and down this morning, and remarked as he walked away: 'The body and soul of a man goes to pieces there in a twelvemonth, and it's a race between them. I give you an extra six months, for you're extra fit.' This is a cheerful outlook. Do you think I'll fulfil his prediction? I am selfishly telling you this, for I don't want you to snap our chain of friendship. It is a slight one, I own, but if it is only a silken thread and you hold fast, I'll have grit and hope to pull along and fight my environment. It won't be severed at my end, I promise you. Tell me of your doings. Do you still instruct Chuckles on Sunday afternoons in the art of building? I should like to be instructed too. Give me a tip on the subject, if you will. We are all building something, are we not? And my buildings, as I told Chuckles before I left, have collapsed so disastrously that I am the more wary in the beginning of another.

"Well, what else can I tell you? The gossip of board ship will not interest you. Our outlook is sea and sky at present. The feeling of infinite space on all sides is a depressing one to me—I don't know why. Write to me soon. You promised to answer me; and I look and wait anxiously for the letter that is not yet begun.

"Yours most sincerely,
"Randolph Neville."

Sidney read this in the privacy of her bedroom. She sat for a long while with it on her knee, for the personality of the writer possessed her; and then she wrote a reply:

"Dear Mr. Neville,

"Thank you for your letter. I have not forgotten you, and have often wondered how you are getting on. I shall not let my end of the chain slip, I assure you, for friends like yourself are few and far between. You seemed, when amongst us, to find a niche for yourself, and fit into it so comfortably that now the emptiness of that niche is ever before us. My father says no one here understands the political world as you do, and he misses your company.

"Well, I do congratulate you on your plot of building land; and the tougher the job, and the harder the ground, and the rougher the atmosphere, the more complete and astonishing and praise-worthy will be your success—for you will succeed, I do not doubt that. You have the elements of a superior force and conquering power within you, and a clean upright honest life will do much in degrading surroundings. Don't despise unseen strength from our unseen God. He is the Master Builder; we only work under Him. And in the dark places of the earth, where heathen teaching and devil worship preponderate, you cannot afford to fight single-handed against the principalities and powers of darkness. This is presumption on my part to offer you such advice, but I cannot help doing it.

"I have not been out in my boat since that disastrous day. It lives in my memory as an experience of contrasts. The utter misery with which I drifted on to the sandbank, the long waiting—learning lessons that I ought to have learnt before—and the steady downpour of rain, and then the sound of splashing oars and your cheerful shout. I could have hugged you from sheer gratitude, only naturally—I didn't! What a different world it was when I walked home by your side, feeling the blessing of a man's protection!

"Now my boat has been tucked away in the boathouse for the winter. The sea mists have begun, the leaves are dropping off the trees, and the gulls fly across our lawn, loving its shelter. The wind and waves keep up a duet of bluster and roar. Father piles up the logs on his study fire and says to me: 'Now for a feast of our

favourite authors. Bring your work, and we will share them together.' It never strikes a man that a woman does not want to be ceaselessly sewing. He considers that a woman's needlework is the equivalent of his pipe. And perhaps it is, for it always soothes me when I have my knitting in hand; but there are times when I enjoy absolute idleness. My pen is running on. I must close.

"This will find you at the end of your journey. Do give me some details of your life. I want to see a wild frontier setting, and you the central figure in it. I shall often try to picture you building for the Empire in your lonely station, making a clean sweep of all the evil you can lay your hands upon, and lifting up and encouraging those who have tumbled and who want to rise again.

"I still teach Chuckles. Last Sunday he wished me to tell him whether it mattered whether a dog was good or wicked. 'Because,' he insisted, 'nothing will ever make it go to Heaven, John Endcott says, so why should it be good? I should be as wicked as I could be if I knew I couldn't go to Heaven.' We had a long talk about the instinct of animals, but I felt helpless in discussing their future state, as I always have a sneaking feeling that I may meet my dead favourites again. What do you think? Now, this is really good-bye.

"Your very sincere friend,
"Sidney Urquhart."

When her letter had gone, Sidney began to wish it back; there was so much she wished to alter in it; and then she laughed at the importance it was assuming in her eyes.

"What does it matter? Why should I think so much about it? I wish he were here. I loved talking to him. And yet I am glad he is away, for he would follow the others down to Mrs. Norman's cottage and give her the benefit of all his ideas. What a jealous creature I am getting! Mrs. Norman seems to creep into all my thoughts."

But Mrs. Norman did figure in Sidney's life a good deal, and she could not get away from her. The day after Mrs. de Cressiers' return from town, Austin appeared. It was after dinner, and Sidney and her father had retired to the study to have a cosy time together. The Major had strolled down to Mrs. Norman's with a magazine he had promised her.

Austin came in rather breathlessly.

"I want to speak to you," he said, addressing Sidney.

“Am I in the way?” asked the Admiral.

Austin looked a little embarrassed; so, without a word, Sidney took him into the drawing-room.

“Have you been getting into any scrape?” she asked him.

"WILL IT BORE YOU?" SAID MRS. NORMAN. "ANYTHING THAT INTERESTS YOU, INTERESTS ME," RESPONDED THE MAJOR GALLANTLY (Page 130)

"No; it's only—— Dash it all! I won't beat about the bush. I want you to persuade the mother to call upon Mrs. Norman soon—to-morrow. She's so on her high horse with me. It's ridiculous! You can influence her; she is fond of you. It's a shame! The poor little woman is connected with us. Why

should she be snubbed because she is poor and unknown? It's rank snobbery. You know what mother is like: 'I may call on her when I have time. There is no hurry. She is a complete stranger to me,' etc. etc. Do go up to-morrow and make her see reason."

Sidney smiled at his eagerness.

"My dear boy, your mother won't be driven. Does it make a vast difference to Mrs. Norman whether your mother calls at once or a little later? She means to do it, which is something."

"I should rather think she did," said Austin hotly. "She ought to have done it before she went away. Now, be a brick, and tell the mother what a good sort Mrs. Norman is. Women are always so queer when a man praises one of their own sex. But you're different; you're generous, and she'll listen to you and take your word for it."

Sidney was touched by his faith in her.

"I will do my very best," she said, "but don't blame me if I fail."

Austin looked relieved. He sat back in a chair and commenced to talk. He had not been to the house for a long time, and Sidney was glad to have him back on the old lines. But his talk was chiefly of Mrs. Norman, and Sidney listened and tried to give him her sympathy.

"Can't think why your uncle is always poking about down there. He's making her a fence now, but I told her it wasn't necessary; she has a nice iron railing. What else could she want? And he strikes me as getting quite doddery—makes eyes at her. Don't laugh! She finds him rather a bore, between ourselves; but he turns up nearly every day, she tells me."

"Poor Uncle Ted! Why shouldn't he like to talk to her as much as you do?"

Sidney's eyes were mischievous, but for once Austin did not join in her humour.

"I hope I shan't be so garrulous when I get to his age," he muttered.

In accordance with her promise, Sidney went up to Thanning Towers the next morning, but though Mrs. de Cressiers was unfeignedly glad to see her, nothing would induce her to call upon Mrs. Norman that same day.

"It's perfectly ridiculous, Sidney. Of course, I know that Austin has sent you to me. He seems quite infatuated with her. And it is a thousand pities. I have heard all about her in town. She married her husband for the sake of a

home, neglected him whilst alive, and now poses as a broken-hearted widow. She couldn't be bothered to bring up her own child; found her an encumbrance when travelling about, and she has been brought up entirely by her father's family. Why she has come down here I cannot fathom. She has five hundred a year of her own, but has very extravagant tastes. Now, is she a suitable wife for Austin?"

"I should see her and judge for myself," said Sidney craftily. Then she added quietly:

"I think if you oppose Austin in the matter you will perhaps hurry him into an engagement with her, when otherwise the acquaintance may die a natural death."

Mrs. de Cressiers sighed.

"I wish you and Austin would make a match of it. He is really fond of you, Sidney."

Sidney laughed gaily.

"As a sister, nothing more. I am much too old for him. He is a mere boy. I *couldn't* marry anyone younger than myself."

"Isn't this woman older than you?"

"I don't think it will come to anything. Uncle Ted is as often there as Austin. It's most amusing. But I'm afraid they're beginning to dislike each other heartily."

"Oh, I know her kind."

Mrs. de Cressiers' tone was contemptuous. Then she said with deliberation:

"I shall call on her to-morrow afternoon, and you must come with me."

"Oh, please not! I can't help thinking that she doesn't like me."

"Her likes or her dislikes cannot affect you. I will call for you in the carriage at three o'clock, and I shall stay ten minutes with her, not a moment more; and then you must come back to tea with me."

"You are so masterful," murmured Sidney.

She told Austin later of the result of her visit. He was satisfied.

"I said to her the mother was generally rather done up by her visits to town, so if she goes to-morrow it will be all right. And I'm glad you're

going too, for you will prevent mother from being ‘ ’igh and ’aughty,’ as our old nurse used to say.”

Sidney did not relish what was before her, but she made the best of it, and the next afternoon joined Mrs. de Cressiers at the time appointed.

“Oh, dear!” she said with her bright laugh, as she looked at Mrs. de Cressiers in her most imposing attire, “I am glad I am not the poor victim of your visitation.”

Mrs. de Cressiers smiled very slightly. Sidney was a favoured person, and perhaps the very fact that she had never been afraid of Mrs. de Cressiers was a point in her favour, for it was the fearful and timid who suffered most from that lady’s masterful spirit.

“I am visiting her as a neighbour,” she said.

“And as a friend,” Sidney put in.

“That remains to be seen.”

Lovelace’s Cottage was fast assuming a neat and pretty aspect. A respectable-looking maidservant opened the door and ushered them into the tiny drawing-room, where they found Mrs. Norman sitting by a bright fire with needlework in her hand. She had discarded her loud-coloured cardigans and short skirts, and was in a dark green cloth gown which fitted her to perfection. The room was dainty and fresh. Yellow chrysanthemums were in bowls on the table. Her greeting to Mrs. de Cressiers was quiet and simple.

“It is very kind of you to come to see me. I did not expect it. I think I have made acquaintance with your son. Major Urquhart brought him in one day. What a nice fresh boy he is! He told me he felt quite lost when you were away. I don’t expect to see him now you are back; but he seemed so lonely that I quite pitied him.”

“Then I am afraid you wasted your pity,” said Mrs. de Cressiers in her most frosty tone, “for Austin and I have our interests entirely apart, and we are hardly ever together.”

Sidney’s cheeks got quite hot, but Mrs. Norman was quite serene. She turned towards Sidney with a smile.

“I can’t tell you, Mrs. de Cressiers, how very good and kind Miss Urquhart and her people have been to me. I came as a stranger to a strange land, and they befriended me from the very first day. I have always heard that country neighbours are real friends, and now I have proved it. Major Urquhart is my great stand-by. I think hardly a day passes without his

coming down to give me some bit of advice or counsel. And one really feels that a man of that age can help one tremendously without any unseemly gossip following his kindness."

"I don't think we gossip in these parts," said Sidney. "Do we, Mrs. de Cressiers? There are so few to be interested in the doings of their neighbours. The rector is an old bachelor, and the doctor has a family of ten children, who keep their mother more than busy, and our other neighbours live too far away to know anything about our daily life."

"Are you making a home here for your daughter?" asked Mrs. de Cressiers abruptly.

Just a glint of light seemed to pass over Mrs. Norman's eyes as she replied with a little laugh.

"I wish I could say 'Yes,' but she finds it dull to be with me. She is one of these modern girls who must have their hockey and golf and young companionship. And she gets it all at her aunt's house. But I mean to have her down as soon as she will come. And I will bring her to see you, if I may. She is considered a very handsome girl. Let me show you her photo."

She rose and went to a side table, producing a cabinet photo of a singularly interesting-looking girl, with broad intellectual brow and earnest wistful eyes. Sidney gazed at it with pleasure.

"She has a beautiful face," she said warmly.

"So people say," said Mrs. Norman. Then she turned to Mrs. de Cressiers: "I have heard so much of your goodness to the village people that I fancy there is not a small corner which I could occupy, is there? I do so want to do something to help my poorer neighbours. You see, I am an idle woman, and after a busy life the days will seem rather empty here unless I fill them with work and local interests. I used to help the secretary of the G.F.S. in Norfolk. I have always been interested in that society. I wonder if a branch has been started here?"

Sidney almost smiled as the big fish at last rose to the bait. Mrs. de Cressiers had been keenly anxious for a long while to have a branch of the G.F.S. in the villages surrounding her property. It had been tried, but for lack of proper organisation it had failed, and she could persuade no lady to take it. Sidney had enough already on her hands, and her father did not want her to take up anything more. She had her Sunday scholars, and a weekly working party amongst the fisherwomen, and was a district visitor as well. In fact, she was the rector's right hand in most of his parish work.

Now Mrs. de Cressiers began to thaw. In a few minutes she and Mrs. Norman were having an animated discussion upon the merits and advantages of the G.F.S., and the visit of ten minutes lengthened into nearly half an hour. Tea appeared, but that Mrs. de Cressiers would not stay for. When she and Sidney at last drove away, she said thoughtfully:

"Perhaps I was prejudiced. She is a lady, and evidently sees more of your uncle than of Austin. He is a mere boy, of course. I must have some girls down to stay in the house; they will employ his spare time. And I really shall be very thankful if Mrs. Norman will work up the G.F.S. in this part."

Sidney wisely said nothing, but she confided in her father that evening that Mrs. Norman was the cleverest woman she had ever met.

CHAPTER VII

THE SHADOW OF A CLOUD

It was a wild wet November afternoon. Rain and wind were making havoc of the few late flowers in Sidney's sheltered garden. Petals of dahlias, chrysanthemums, and even late roses were flying through the air; the trees and shrubs were swaying and bending under the gale, and every window and chimney in the house creaked and whistled in company with the wind outside.

The Admiral sat with his head in his hands over the study fire. He had caught a slight chill, and a bout of toothache completed his discomfort and depression. He had had words with his brother at luncheon, a most unusual occurrence, and Major Urquhart had sworn and flung out of the room, leaving his food unfinished upon his plate. It was over a trifle: the Admiral did not want some trees cut down in the garden, the Major did, and the altercation was sharp and bitter. Sidney was astonished at the Major's virulence, and when he got up from the table, he shouted:

"By ——, we'll see who's master here!"

She puzzled over his words. Major Urquhart had been proverbial for his good nature and easy temper. He had never, since Sidney could remember, asserted his wishes above those of his brother's, but lately he had become irritable and restless, and much more argumentative than of old. They had always been a very peaceful household, so that it was bewildering to Sidney now. She had gone after her uncle to try to make peace, but he shut himself up in his workshop, and told her he did not wish to be disturbed. Then she came into her father's study and softly touched him on the shoulder.

"Dad dear!"

The Admiral looked up. It was not only pain that had brought such a shadow across his face, but he tried to smile.

"I shan't be good company this afternoon," he said, with an effort to speak cheerfully.

"I don't know what possesses Uncle Ted! He is quite unlike himself." Sidney spoke resentfully.

“I think there’s something going on down at the Cottage,” said the Admiral a little wearily.

“But it would be too ridiculous if he were in love with Mrs. Norman,” said Sidney; “and I think she aspires higher than poor Uncle Ted. She is making a fool of him, and he knows it, and that makes him angry. Why, Austin would be a much better match for her, for he will come into a big property!”

“If she wants a comfortable home, Ted could give it to her.”

“By bringing her here? Oh, don’t suggest such a thing! It would be too awful! I am sure she would not agree to it. She must be mistress wherever she is.”

“But she would be!” said the Admiral. “Do you think this house belongs to me?”

Sidney stared at him. She thought for a minute that her father had taken leave of his senses.

And then the Admiral put his arm round her.

“Come and sit down. I have never told you, for there seemed no need; but when my father died, he left this house and property to Ted. He gave me extra money in lieu of it. He fancied that as a sea-faring man I would never settle down. You know your uncle and I are twins, but he is my senior by a few minutes. Well, at the time of my father’s death Ted was abroad, and much in need of money. He wrote to me saying that he did not care for this part of the world, and that he would never elect to live here. If I liked to have the house, and send him some of the extra money that had been left me, we would be quits. I agreed, sent him a big cheque in a very unbusinesslike fashion, and took up my abode here. Then he got wounded and left the Army. He travelled abroad for a short time, but drifted back here and settled down. We mutually agreed to live together, but I was to run the house, and he to pay me so much yearly towards the household expenses. There has never been a hitch till the other night. He came back late from the Cottage. You had gone to bed. He told me he much regretted giving over this house to me, and added, ‘Of course, it is still legally mine.’ I asked him why he should talk so, and he muttered something about a man wishing to settle down, and it was a mistake to have a divided household.”

Sidney’s face blanched.

“Why, dad, this is dreadful! He can turn us out! If she means to marry him—and I believe she does—she will make him do it! Our sweet pretty

home! I can't believe it!"

Quick tears sprang to her eyes.

"It's awful! I never imagined the house was not yours. It is, it must be. He gave it to you. He could not be so despicable as to say he did not."

"I'm afraid it's a question of pride with me," said her father, holding up his head sternly. "If he wishes to dispute the fact of ownership, you and I must make our best bow and walk out!"

Sidney's face was full of horror at the thought.

"It will never come to that, it cannot! We have been such a happy family, and I'm really fond of Uncle Ted, and he likes me. He couldn't be such a brute! Oh, dad, dear, you don't feel well, and facts have become distorted in your mind. It is only the merest, most shadowy possibility! It will not come to pass!"

"We will hope for the best."

But there was no hope in the Admiral's voice, only tired depression.

Sidney looked at him with affectionate anxiety; then she persuaded him to move to his couch, which she drew up near the fire.

"You said you had a sleepless night, so do try and have a nap now. I will cover you up warmly. There's nothing so depressing as toothache. You will feel quite differently about everything when you wake. You and I will have a cosy tea together. Oh, dad, dear, nothing on earth matters if you and I have each other."

Sidney bent down and kissed her father passionately as she spoke, then she slipped out of the room, and for a moment her cheerfulness deserted her. Then she pulled herself together.

"I shall go out and battle with the elements. I feel I must fight someone! And Uncle Ted is keeping out of my way."

She ran upstairs to equip herself for her walk, and in a few minutes was walking briskly out of the house. She had no umbrella, only a walking-stick; indeed, she could not have kept an umbrella open, the wind was so violent. But her waterproof tweed coat and cap were impervious to the wet, and she liked to feel the rain sting her cheeks. For one wild moment she meditated climbing the Beacon, and then she realised that she would have no chance of keeping her footing in the gale, so she tramped along the country roads. They were bordered by woods for a couple of miles, and the smell of the wet

leaves underfoot and the moist earth gave her a sensation of pleasure. She had plenty to think about. The prospect hinted at by her father hung like a heavy black cloud in front of her; but she resolutely tried to push it out of her thoughts. Her uncle's present state of irritability more concerned her.

"I wonder if I have been neglectful of him," she mused. "He always has lived his life pretty much to himself. Perhaps he has felt lonely, and Mrs. Norman's eager sympathy has made him feel the want of it at home. Father and I are always together; but he has had his carpentering and fishing, and we have generally been together in the evenings. I will try in future to be more with him, to interest myself in what he is doing."

Then her thoughts, in an inexplicable fashion, flew to Randolph; she began to picture him in his lonely life, to wonder if he ever longed for a woman to speak to, for she remembered the statement that the doctor made to him on board ship: "Not a single European woman in the station."

"He is too good to go to pieces," she said to herself. "I don't know how it is, but I always felt that he was a tower of strength to lean against. I wish he were here now. I believe he would be able to manage Uncle Ted."

She had come to a turn in the road, and suddenly met Monica walking briskly towards her. The young women stared at each other. Monica was also in suitable country garb; she scorned umbrellas at all times, but it was not her usual custom to take walks by herself, and Sidney knew that this particular road led to no place or house to which business might call her.

"How nice to meet you!" Sidney cried. "Where have you been?"

"I've been tramping off my temper," Monica replied stolidly.

Sidney's merry laugh rippled out.

"How delicious! I've come out on pretty much the same errand, only it is a fit of the blues, not temper, which I wish to get rid of. You're not going back yet!"

"I'll turn and walk a bit farther with you. I've had a rasping day, and that imp Chuckles is at the bottom of it. You know I'm having some new pig-sties built; well, one was finished this morning, or pretty nearly—the masons had done their part and gone. What did that child do but deliberately slip out in the driving storm and demolish the whole building. How he did it I don't know; he kicked and beat and tore the bricks off one after the other. I caught him standing in the ruins. He seemed beside himself with exultation. He yelled when he saw me:

“ ‘It hadn’t a funation, Aunt Monnie; Higgs wouldn’t build it on a piece of rock, and so, of course, it has all come down with a crash. The wind and storm and me didded it altogether! I telled Higgs he would find it all gone away! He’ll have to build another on a rock!’

“I was so exasperated that I did not argue the point with him, but gave him bread and water for his dinner for that piece of deliberate mischief. I left him to Aunt Dannie for the afternoon, and then, as I discovered the sheep had escaped out of their proper field, I thought to myself that he might like to help me drive them back. He never bears malice—that’s one of his good points—and I hate being out of friends with him. So I went indoors and called him. He was in an arm-chair by the dining-room fire, drawing with pencil and paper. Aunt Dannie was opposite, nodding off to sleep. When he heard why I wanted him, he looked up calmly:

“ ‘No, fanks; I’m more comfable here.’

“Then my anger rose, for I am determined to bring him up hardily.

“ ‘You’ll come out at once,’ I said, ‘or go straight to bed. I’m not going to have you turn into a little mollycoddle, sitting by the fire and letting your aunt go out in the rain. A man would be ashamed to do such a thing.’

“That touched him, but unfortunately Aunt Dannie woke and gave a shiver.

“ ‘Ugh!’ she said, ‘it’s not fit for a dog to be out in such weather!’

“And then the imp pursed up his mouth and defied me.

“ ‘I won’t come, fanks,’ he said.

“So I carried him, kicking and screaming, upstairs, undressed him, and put him into bed; and then, as I shut the door and came downstairs, he burst it open and shouted after me:

“ ‘I hates you, Aunt Monnie, I hates you!’

“I heard the thud of his bare feet as he scampered back into bed. It may seem ridiculous, but I was in such a tumult that I came straight out of the house, drove the sheep back, and then tramped the roads to bring myself into order. For, Sidney, I cannot show it, but I dote on that child! He is all I live for, work for! Do you think he will learn to hate me? I do want to bring him up a self-disciplined industrious man; but am I making him my enemy by so doing?”

“Poor baby!” said Sidney, the soft tender look stealing into her eyes, the look that all mothers have, and that some single women have, too. “His heart is yours, you need not trouble, but your methods are drastic with him. I own he is a pickle, but I’m afraid I’m to blame for his demolishing your pig-sty. I have filled his mind with the necessity of a foundation, and he applies it at once in a practical fashion to the first fresh-made building he sees!”

“Oh, I don’t mind that so much, but I will not have him choose ease rather than duty.”

Sidney laughed.

“You do amuse me, Monnie, though I own your principles are right; but you make duty a terrible bugbear!”

“It’s a stern reality with me.”

“You have the spirit of the old Puritans. You’re quite a generation or two behind your time.”

“I may be behind most of you, but I’m not a Puritan. I wish sometimes I had a little of their faith. I live in a material world, and I’m of a material nature.”

“And you build on the sand,” said Sidney softly; “but, of course, your building is only for this life, so you do not expect it to last.”

“I expect it to last over my time, and for Chuckles, too. I’m building for him and no other.”

“And if at any time anything happened to him? Suppose he did not live to grow up?”

Monica gripped her arm fiercely.

“Don’t say such horrible things! His life and mine are bound up in each other. Let us talk of other matters.”

“No,” said Sidney, “this is so interesting; but we won’t suppose anything dreadful will happen to Chuckles. You don’t really mean, Monnie, that your whole life will be given to providing a prosperous farm for Chuckles? Do you see no other goal ahead?”

“None. I want to be a success in the line I have mapped out for myself. I care for nothing else. My epitaph can be:

‘She made earth give her its best,
And earth demanded her best in return.’ ”

“No, that’s heathenish. It isn’t worthy of you. Earth is our servant, not our master.”

“Look at the churchyards.”

“I see nothing there but worn-out caskets, waiting till their owners come back. Oh, Monnie, look up and believe!”

“It’s too much trouble.”

Monica seldom spoke so unreservedly, but Sidney was not shocked. She remembered her daily in her prayers, and believed that she would see differently one day. Then Monica gave herself a little shake.

“We have talked enough of my concerns. Tell me yours. Something is troubling you. What is it?”

“It seems such a mare’s nest,” said Sidney. “It’s undefined trouble in the future, and, yet I don’t know, I have something definite to worry me. You are so safe that I will tell you.”

And Sidney told her friend of what her father had said to her that afternoon.

Monica’s face grew grave as she listened.

“I don’t quite share your fears. I think Mrs. Norman is one of those women who must be friendly with all men. Look at young Austin de Cressiers! They rode up to me yesterday; he had mounted her! She strikes me as being interested in everybody and everything. She talks most sensibly about poultry and farming, and really enjoys the subject. I heard them talking a good deal of the hunting-field. She is a first-rate horsewoman, and if that engrosses her, your uncle won’t see much of her, poor man!”

“No,” said Sidney reflectively, “I suppose not; and if she wants another husband, there are plenty of men about who would suit her better than Uncle Ted. She will meet them if she hunts. But I am sorry for Mrs. de Cressiers. She won’t see much of Austin now; she told me she hoped he would not hunt so much this winter as he did last, for the estate business wanted his attention. Of course, I think this weather and father’s little chill has made both him and Uncle Ted a little teasy. I am sure Mrs. Norman will not be mistress of our home at present! It’s quite ridiculous to imagine it. Oh, how good the wind and wet air is! I feel a different creature, don’t you?”

“Yes,” assented Monica. “We get apt to exaggerate trifles when we shut ourselves up within four walls. I’m going back to my imp now, and I don’t feel that his fit of temper is likely to bring dire consequences upon us. Now

we part ways. My advice is to you, treat your uncle's infatuation lightly, and be just and generous to Mrs. Norman. You are such a sympathetic little soul that you ought to see her side and make allowances for her accordingly. I'm not one to take to strangers, but I must say I like what I have seen of her."

Sidney walked back feeling that there must be something very wrong with her not to have the same regard for the young widow as had everyone else. "Even Mrs. de Cressiers is beginning to sing her praises, only I doubt if she will like Austin providing her with a hunter."

When she reached home she went straight to her uncle's workshop, and this time she was successful in gaining admission. He was not working, but sitting over his fire studying a rough plan. Sidney came in like a fresh genial breeze.

"Well, Uncle Ted, have you been in all this afternoon? It's really delicious out, if you don't mind a wind. I wish you'd been with me to enjoy it."

"I've been busy," her uncle said curtly. "Only just finished my job. How do you like it?"

He pointed to a wooden bench daintily turned and panelled.

"I think it's charming," said Sidney, stooping down to examine it. "It's for Mrs. Norman, I suppose?"

"Yes."

There was a hint of defiance in the Major's tone.

Then Sidney took the bull by the horns.

"Dear Uncle Ted, I want to talk to you. We have been so happy together, that a breeze between you and dad is dreadful to me! Why were you so cross at luncheon? Now, tell me why."

She was down on her knees by his side, her hand affectionately on his shoulder. Few could resist Sidney when she exercised her charms.

The Major looked into her sweet pleading face and melted.

"It was my wounded leg again!" he said contritely. "This weather plays 'Old Harry' with it, and I've had red-hot wires pulling at my nerves! And your father is so awfully conservative that he won't uproot a tree, even if it's blocking out an exquisite view. It's the one corner in the garden that would give us the mouth of the river and the sea. Mrs. Norman called my attention to it."

"Yes, we'll see what we can do. I think dad fancied you wanted more timber for your work, and you've had several trees this year, haven't you?"

"Well, and if I'd had fifty, is there any reason why I shouldn't have fifty-one?" demanded the Major, getting choleric again. "Whose are the trees, I'd like to know?"

"I always thought they were father's till to-day," said Sidney quietly. "You've given us quite a shock. I never knew properly how things stood between us. Of course, legally you can turn us out."

"Is it likely I'm going to do that?" said the Major, calming down. "I had no intention of saying what I did. Vernon is a fool to take notice of it. He had no right to repeat it to you."

"But it places us in a very awkward position, Uncle Ted, dear. Father is proud, and so am I. If you say you have the right to the house, and want to live alone, we shall walk out of it—to-morrow, if necessary."

The Major shot an almost frightened look at his niece; then he said humbly:

"We won't quarrel, Sid. We've lived fair and square together, only sometimes I feel I'd like to have a wife and a home of my own. It's not likely to happen. No one would put up with a lame, maimed creature like me, but I own I did have a bout of temper this morning."

"Then we won't say any more about it; but come into father's study with me, and we'll have a cosy tea together."

"I can't do that. I saw the hounds come back half an hour ago. That puppy is out with her, and she asked me to come down and hear about her first day out. It's lonely for a woman to turn into an empty house after a hard run and have no one to speak to. I wish that young de Cressiers had never lent her a mount! She'll break her neck with some of his half-trained hunters, but she told me her doctor strongly recommended her to ride for the sake of her health. It makes one feel the loss of one's legs when one remembers bygone days and what hard hunting one had."

Sidney gave a little caressing pat to his shoulder.

"We'll let bygones be bygones," she said half pityingly, half cheerily. "And when you meet father again, do be nice to him. He isn't at all well to-day."

"Nice," muttered the Major. "Wonder how often women make mention of that feminine adjective! I always loathed 'nice' behaviour!"

But his growl was no longer surly, and Sidney knew that peace had been restored.

CHAPTER VIII

RIVALS

MAJOR URQUHART went off to Lovelace's Cottage.

Yes, Mrs. Norman was in, the maid told him. Would he come in and wait? She was upstairs, but would be down directly.

So in he came, and scowled when he saw upon the mantelpiece a cabinet photo of Austin, in his pink coat, on his favourite hunter.

"Insolent puppy!" was his muttered imprecation.

In about ten minutes' time Mrs. Norman appeared. She was clad in a russet-brown velvet tea gown; a cluster of tea roses was fastened in some old point lace at her breast. Her face was flushed with her riding, the little curls about her forehead still damp with the rain. The Major had never seen her look more beautiful.

"How kind of you, Major!" she said, extending one white hand, and looking up at him with pleased eyes. "You see, I have not come to grief, as you prophesied, but I did wish you had been with us. We had such a splendid run. May I tell you about it, or would you rather not? Will it bore you?"

"Anything that interests you interests me," responded the Major gallantly.

"Ah, that is your unselfishness! When I think of what it must be to you to be deprived of the sport you once loved so much, it makes me marvel at your cheeriness. And instead of sitting still and developing into an irritable whining gouty invalid, you choose a hobby which not only employs your odd time, but is of such inestimable benefit to your fellow-creatures. And you're always busy, always contented. I often think you are not half appreciated by your relatives, but, as we were saying the other day, three in family is rather an awkward number—one invariably goes to the wall. And, of course, Miss Urquhart is wrapped up in her father, and he in her. It is only natural! Well, I am digressing. Now I will describe our run."

Mrs. Norman was a good *raconteuse*. Nothing escaped her quick observation; she had humour, and knew how to seize the humorous points of

the hunting-field. The Major listened and chuckled and laughed till the tears came into his eyes. Then he broke in with some of his hunting reminiscences, and Mrs. Norman was a woman who could take interruption with equanimity, and be as interested in his stories as in her own.

The time flew, and when seven o'clock struck by the little silver chiming clock on Mrs. Norman's writing table the Major got reluctantly upon his feet.

"Oh, must you be going? Now, won't you take pity on me and stay to my frugal little supper? It will be such a treat to have company. I am sure the Admiral will spare you to-night. Just to celebrate my first day with the Thanning hounds. And that dear boy Austin sent me in a brace of partridges, so there will be just a picking for each of us. You don't know what distaste I have for my food when I invariably sit down to eat it alone. I picture your cheerful dinner going on, and the amicable and interesting conversation upon the sayings and doings of each one of you during the day, and then I sigh and try to be content with my lonely lot."

"We hadn't a very amicable luncheon to-day," said the Major with a short laugh.

He looked round the cosy firelit room, and at the pretty bewitching little woman before him, and he contrasted it with the big dining-room at home, and the Admiral's politics. He saw Sidney linking her arm in her father's, and going off to the study with him after dinner and throwing a laughing word at him over her shoulder:

"Now, Uncle Ted, don't shut yourself up the whole evening in your workshop. And don't burn it to the ground, for I know you have a nap and the fire is none too safe."

The words of Mrs. Norman rang in his ears: 'Three in family is rather an awkward number—one invariably goes to the wall.' Why should he trudge home to make the outside third, when here was one who wanted, who appreciated, him?

Mrs. Norman saw his hesitation.

"Now you're going to say 'Yes.' I won't be refused."

She pulled her bell. The maid appeared.

"Major Urquhart is staying to supper," she said. And the Major sat down again, with a smile and a shake of his head, but relief plainly discernible in his face.

“They won’t miss me,” he said. “They never wait, for they say I’m always late.”

“Do tell me what happened at lunch. That is, if it is not very inquisitive,” Mrs. Norman said, re-seating herself in an easy chair opposite to him and stretching out her slender satin-slippered foot upon the fender.

“Oh, it was a tirade of my brother’s against timber cutting. He refused to have that old elm touched!”

“The one that blocks that exquisite view? Oh, what an old duffer he is! Why don’t you insist a little more upon your rights, Major? You are too good-natured, too easygoing. You have allowed your brother for so long to think of the house as his that he is an absolute tyrant regarding it.”

“Well, you know,” the Major said, uneasily twisting himself in his chair, “it is his virtually—he paid me a big sum, as I told you.”

“Don’t tell me any more,” said Mrs. Norman impatiently, tapping her foot on the ground. “It is Jacob and Esau over again; making you sell your birthright! I don’t mean to liken you to Esau, but I think the Admiral intensely mean in taking advantage of a young soldier’s difficulties! Could he not have helped you out of those difficulties without making such a bargain? It would have been only brotherly to do it.”

“I must say that I proposed it,” said Major Urquhart. “You see, I was a gay young dog, had run through a lot—ah, well, best not talk about it.”

“No, we won’t. And, of course, as we said the other day, an estate, however small, cannot be handed over from one brother to another in such an easy illegal fashion. I am quite sure the Admiral in his heart realises that the house is yours, though you were ready to make such an amicable arrangement with him. Virtually, it does not matter much, as long as you are content to sink your own individuality and live together as you have been doing. But I must say I cannot bear to see you put aside as you are. You ought to have a voice in the management of your own place, and if a time ever came when you wanted to be master of it, you ought to have the pluck and stand up and tell them so. There! I have relieved my feelings, and I know it is most impertinent of me to give my opinion on such a private family matter. You must forgive me. But you are so kind and unselfish that you do not seem able to stand up for yourself, and it makes me angry. Now, shall we go in and have supper? I hear the bell, and we will talk of lighter subjects.”

She chatted with great ease and graciousness; her supper table was dainty with flowers and well kept silver; the soup, partridges, and sweet omelette that followed were well cooked, and the Major found himself wondering what he would feel like if he could sit down to dinner every day with this pretty vivacious little woman, who seemed to understand and feel for him in a way that no one else had ever done.

After dinner they went into the drawing-room, and still they talked; they seemed to have so much to say to each other. Once the Major pointed to the photo on the mantelpiece.

"Did he give you that?"

She smiled.

"Yes; he is such a boy, isn't he? So proud of himself when he is in his pink. I sent him home to his mother to-day; he does rather bore me, *entre nous*, with his youthful aggressiveness and self-assertion. But he's a nice boy for all that. I wish my girl was home; they would be great chums, I know. I feel so very old when I am talking to him. I'm afraid his mother is not very sympathetic, is she? The young want an interest shown in them, and a patient tolerance for their youthful failings. I am glad to mother him a little, for I never forget my own youth—and I had a baby son once. He died when he was two; I always feel tenderly towards boys. He would have been such a big son by now if he had lived."

She sighed heavily, and a wistful look came into her eyes. The Major's spirits rose. How foolish he had been to think that Austin de Cressiers could stand in his way! What was he but a bumptious boy, who bored this kind little soul to distraction! He looked almost kindly at the photo at which a short time ago he had gnashed his teeth.

It was past ten o'clock when he let himself in with his latchkey. Sidney, candle in hand, was just going up the wide staircase. She turned at his entrance.

"Oh, you truant! Why didn't you tell us you were dining out? But we guessed. Go in and see dad, won't you? Good-night!"

He nodded a good-night to her, and marched off rather surlily to the smoking-room.

Admiral Urquhart greeted him pleasantly:

"What kind of night? Rain before long, eh?"

"Begun already," the Major said shortly.

“Look here!” the Admiral said; “I was a bit hot tempered at lunch, old fellow. Chop down your elm, if you like. Don’t let us cut up rough with each other over such a trifle!”

“Oh, it’s all right,” said the Major, appeased at once. “We’ll have a walk round to-morrow and discuss it.”

He dropped into a chair, started to talk, and peace was restored. For the time, even Mrs. Norman’s gentle insinuations had faded from his mind. His evening had been a delightful one. Austin was relegated to the background; the Major and the lady moved alone through a succession of dreams. Her personality possessed him, and he was content.

There was another household in which peace had been made that night.

Monica went back to her farm refreshed in soul and spirit. Yet a lurking fear was in her heart that she might find Chuckles still harbouring resentment against her for such summary chastisement. She found Aunt Dannie still dozing over the fire.

“Have you heard or seen anything of the child?” Monica asked a little anxiously.

“Eh, my dear? No. Why, you sent him to bed, did you not? I always think you are a little too hard upon him. But he is very obedient; he has not made a sound.”

Monica went upstairs. It was dark, and there was a great stillness in Chuckles’ small room. A sudden fear seized her. Had he defied her after all, and made his escape downstairs, perhaps into the kitchen, knowing she had left the house? She hoped there would be no need for further scolding. Under her reserved, rather stern manner there beat a very soft heart where her small nephew was concerned. She stood on the threshold of the door, listening. It was an intense relief to hear a whispered, lisping voice proceeding from the bed.

“And so you see, God, I’ll just step up as quick as anyfing the minute you call. I’d like to. I know all about it. And Jesus is my very special Friend. Why, I know Him almost as well as Miss Sid, and when Aunt Monnie comes she’ll look and look, and will never find me nevermore, and she’ll say to herself: ‘Why, I spec’ he’s just been taken to heaven becorse I was cross!’ ”

The little chuckle that gave Chuckles his name came at the close of his speech. He was evidently gloating over his aunt’s supposed remorse when she found him gone.

Monica suppressed a smile, and called out:

"Chuckles, are you awake?"

There was no answer. The whispering was over. She advanced into the room, and lighted a candle. Matches were not allowed in the child's room, but she carried a silver fusee case in her pocket. Then she saw that the bedclothes were pulled tightly over the small boy's head, and the little figure was rigidly still.

"Chuckles, it's nearly supper time. Would you like to come down?"

No answer or movement.

"I believe there's a hot baked apple for a little boy who is going to be good."

Then the bedclothes were thrown back, and Chuckles' curly head was thrust upwards. Not yet would he entirely capitulate.

"I'm very busy saying my p'ayers. God and me don't want to be asturbed!"

"I'm sorry," said Monica meekly. "I'll wait."

She sat down on a chair near the window and there was silence.

Chuckles regarded her reflectively; then he lifted up his voice:

"And, please God, perhaps we'd better wait till nex' time, becorse supper is ready. Amen."

Then he sat up and began eagerly to put on his socks. Monica came to assist him.

"God and me have been talking," he assured her with a grave nod. "God has quite forgiven me for not going with you. He's purfeckly pleased with me now."

Then Monica lowered her head and pressed her lips on the curly head.

"And so have I forgiven the little boy who told his aunt he hated her."

"That was Satan," said Chuckles in the same solemn voice. "He tolded me to say that, and he hurried me to say it, so I did it quick as anyfing."

"But you are sorry now?"

He looked at her with a little twinkle in his eyes.

"Could I have two baked apples, do you fink?"

"No, only one. Are you sorry, Chuckles?"

He threw his arms round her neck and hugged her.

"I loves you! Let's hurry downstairs!"

They walked downstairs hand in hand, and Monica's soul was at peace.

But there was trouble at Thanning Towers that night. Mother and son were talking late into the night. Mrs. de Cressiers first scolded, then threatened, then expostulated with Austin for neglected estate business and being out with the hounds day after day.

"I understand you've told the grooms you mean to hunt four days a week; who is going to do the work which you came home from college to do?"

"If I hunt four days that leaves me two for business, and I should be a rotten slacker if I couldn't tackle all that there is to do in that time."

"You know your father likes to see you at a certain hour every morning and talk over things with you. If he does not do it, he worries the whole day. How can he do this when you leave the house every morning before he's out of bed?"

"He worries anyhow. There is no necessity for him to be like clockwork. I can talk over things with him in the evening."

"You come home dead tired and very cross, and your father's patience has given out, waiting all day for you. If he discusses business late at night he sleeps badly in consequence. You know this as well as I do, Austin."

Austin began to get heated.

"I always have hunted, mother. I'm not going to give up every healthy exercise and be a household drudge and slave. I'll throw the whole thing up and go abroad; you expect too much from me."

"You promised me a month ago you would only have an occasional day out. What has made you so keen about it? I understand you are mounting Mrs. Norman. Is she the attraction?"

"If she is, it's no one's business but my own. You all seem determined to run her down."

"You cannot accuse me of that. I have had her to luncheon several times. I admit she is a bright sensible little woman—too fond of affecting to be

young, for she's old enough to be your mother; but she ought not to come in the way of your duties. Your father ought to come first with you."

"He doesn't, then," muttered Austin rebelliously.

"I don't want to make mischief," pursued Mrs. de Cressiers relentlessly; "but if you will neglect the estate and pay no regard to our wishes, I shall go down to Mrs. Norman and tell her the harm she is doing you."

Austin laughed.

"I am not a baby to be coerced by such threats. You will do yourself more harm than you will do her or me if you venture to mix her up with it."

So it went on. Mrs. de Cressiers had an iron will, but so had her boy when roused, and she soon saw that opposition was making him like adamant. She adopted a milder tone; she reminded him how all their hopes were centred in him, how he was their only son, and the only one who could take his father's place.

Austin listened and tried to carry it off with a high hand, but he grew uncomfortable, and finally departed to bed without wishing his mother good-night.

He rode off obstinately the next morning, and found Mrs. Norman waiting for him at the four cross-roads. The meet was not a great distance off, so they jogged slowly along the roads together. He confided to her that he had had a row with his mother the previous night.

"She always has kept a tight hand on the reins in our household. My father is absolutely under her thumb, so she cannot understand my independence."

"Mothers never can," said Mrs. Norman softly. "I sometimes wonder, if my boy had lived to grow up, whether I should have tried to manage him. I don't think I should. I have a great belief in men being placed in a right position. Young men *must* have freedom of thought and action; they can't be tied to their mothers' apron strings if they're to be men at all. But we poor women can't understand it. Now let us enjoy our day. We won't think of disagreeable things."

"Were you awfully tired yesterday?"

"No; I had that poor old Major down to inquire after me. Don't glare so, you silly boy! He bored me to death. I couldn't get rid of him; he was so garrulous. But I do feel so intensely sorry for him. He is old and crippled, and seems to have so few pleasures."

“He can’t keep away from you, it seems,” said Austin a trifle curtly.

“I always notice that old men must have some woman as a recipient for all their egotistical reminiscences. You need not be jealous. I look upon him as a father—a grandfather, if you like. There’s the horn! We must hurry up.”

At four o’clock that afternoon Sidney met Austin riding home. He stopped when he saw her, and dismounted.

“Sid, do come up to dinner to-night. I tell you I can’t stand any more of the mother’s jaw. She was at it all last night, and now I’m going back to begin it again. I mean to hunt, so she must make up her mind to it. It’s absurd to attempt to tie me down to an old woman’s life and make me into a sick-nurse to my father. I won’t do it. I have told her so. I very nearly accepted Mrs. Norman’s invitation to dinner, but I won’t be a funk, and I know I must see the governor about some letters. Can’t you come back now, just as you are?”

Sidney shook her head.

“I never accept invitations to dine from the men of a household. Your mother would not be pleased.”

“Rot! You know she would be delighted. Well, come back to tea. I’ll manage the rest.”

Sidney wavered, then said she would.

“Only I must run in and tell them I shall be out to tea. Don’t wait for me. I shall come later.”

She was as good as her word. Mrs. de Cressiers was delighted to see her, and kept her to dinner. Afterwards she sang to Mr. de Cressiers, and kept them all in a good humour. She put a word in for Austin when she was alone with Mrs. de Cressiers.

“Don’t go against him, and give him credit for some feeling for you and his father. You’ll find he will buckle to work the two days he is home, and I don’t believe he will continue his four days’ hunting for very long. Mrs. Norman is not very strong, and she won’t keep it up. When she gives it up, he will.”

Austin walked back with her at ten o’clock, but his talk was chiefly of Mrs. Norman and of her horsemanship, which was astonishing the field. Sidney listened and tried to sympathise, and Austin did not notice any want of enthusiasm in his subject. When they parted he wrung her hand gratefully.

“You’re a trump, Sid. I’m eternally grateful to you. But, I say, do keep the old Major from trotting down all hours and boring Mrs. Norman to death. She can’t stand him.”

Sidney nodded and laughed, but as she turned into the house she again murmured to herself reflectively:

“She is very clever; most appallingly so, and no one seems to see it but me.”

CHAPTER IX

JOCKIE'S ARRIVAL

SIDNEY's next letter from Randolph Neville was as follows:

"DEAR MISS URQUHART,

"The mail is just in, and yours with it. Ever so many thanks. You have inspired and braced me, for I can tell you one wants bracing in this awful hole, and I don't wonder at so many giving up. But I'm starting a few innovations, and am turning teetotaller, at small cost to myself, for I've never been inclined in the opposite direction, and it's digging your grave to drink in this climate. I'm rather keen on giving a hand up to a young chap out here. For six months after he came out, he went straight as a die, and then he began to go down; the forces against him were too strong. I met him when out riding about four days after my arrival. I had lost my bearings, and he put me straight, going out of his way considerably to do so. When I asked him to come back to dine with me, he first refused, then I pressed him, and he said with a little gulp:

" 'I haven't dined in decent society for two years; no one will have me now.'

" 'Well,' I said, 'I give you fair warning. I'm not going to have whiskies and sodas *ad lib.* I don't take anything myself, and only have a little light claret for my guests.'

"He wrung my hand.

" 'For God's sake keep it up,' he cried, 'for it is my curse, and we're all tarred with the same brush in this hole.'

"He came, and I liked the boy, and I've taken him in hand. If you'll remember him in your prayers, I believe we'll set him on his feet again. He has grit, and purpose, and principles, but his will power has been weakened and deadened by alcohol and this climate. How I smelt the salt sea breezes and saw the leaves fly from off your high trees as I read your letter! I have some nice

pictures stored in my memory of the time I was at Thanning Dale. Yes, I suppose I'm a builder of a sort, but just as some erections have to be overthrown to be rebuilt, so I realise that my work at present is to overturn rather than continue to build. And one gets no thanks for it: only abuse and ill-will.

"I have been wondering as I think over the problem of building whether I had better not take myself in hand as well as my small kingdom here. I expect you would tell me that there needs to be an overthrow in many an individual, for they have been piling bricks upon straw and stubble and sand, and until what Chuckles calls a satisfactory 'funation' be established, the building won't stand the stress of life.

"You see what a moral philosopher I am becoming. But I and my thoughts have some long hours together when work is done, and if the heat is too great for much physical effort I don't mean to let my mental capacities rust for lack of using. I work out many a problem, I assure you, and my last one is how far does the Almighty go in working miracles nowadays? I seem to remember a saying: 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' Can you tell me whence it comes? I am glad you have put your boat by. I should not like to think of you stranded again, as I found you that wet dark night; but we did have a very snug walk home, did we not? And you don't know how your words then have rung on, and are ringing still with an undying echo in my soul. 'We are getting Home, and the thought of all that will be ours when we get there makes us think lightly of the present.'

"So be it with me, I pray. Remember me to your father. I see you ask me to give you my setting. How can I do it? I am neither poet nor painter. I see hard brilliant skies of blue, mountains clad with thorns and cactuses, and evil beasts crouching in the thick jungles that are below them, some quaint relics of ancient heathen temples, and there are rather squalid settlements dumped down behind a stone fortress, with the inevitable bazaar and the noisy native quarters, and the European club, which is nothing more nor less than a very unsavoury drinking saloon. There are five miles of straight hard road, with parched turf by the side, and this is where I ride for my morning and evening exercise. We are too lethargic to play polo, or even tennis; there are not enough of us with healthy British blood in our veins to do so. Cards and billiards

seem the only recreations that are popular. But I mean to start cricket or tennis if I can, more for the sake of young George Lockhart than myself.

"May I call myself your fellow-builder,

"RANDOLPH NEVILLE."

"He's a good man," murmured Sidney as she folded her letter up. "I don't believe he would ever fail his friends. And I do like his remarks about building."

She thought over one of her buildings which had been overthrown, the one which had occupied the citadel of her heart, and though the smart and anguish of it had not yet left her, she dimly began to see the why and wherefore of its overthrow.

The foundations were not worthy.

She was thinking this out when a little later she walked over to the Rectory about some parish matters which she wished to lay before the Rector.

He was an old man, but hale and hearty for his years, and lived with his housekeeper. Mrs. Lunn had been with him over twenty years, and was of the old-fashioned school. Sidney and she were great friends, and would have long talks together, comparing the past generation with the present. Mrs. Lunn considered that nothing ever came up to the "good old times that were gone."

The Rector was in the hall, preparing to go out. He took Sidney's hand with fervour.

"I believe you have been sent to me," he said. "I am in great trouble. I was just coming out to find either you or Miss Pembroke. Come into my study. No, not into the drawing-room."

Then turning to his parlourmaid, who stood by, he said with some agitation:

"Will you tell Miss Borlace that I am engaged for the present and cannot be disturbed."

"Who is Miss Borlace?" asked Sidney, with interest, as she followed him into his study. "Is it some relative of yours?"

Mr. Borlace sat down heavily in his big arm-chair, and shook his head in rather a helpless fashion.

"My dear Sidney, I'm sadly afraid she is—sadly afraid."

Sidney could not help smiling.

"You seem quite bowled over. What has she done?"

"I am shaken, and for once in my life I don't know how to act. I want a woman to advise me. Mrs. Lunn refuses to do it. She says it is not her place, but she will be the most affected by it—she and I together."

"It is quite mysterious. Do begin at the beginning."

"It began yesterday, but upon my word it seems like a year ago. I was nailing up my William Allen Richardson—the wind of these last few days has played havoc with it—and suddenly I heard a voice behind me: 'I believe I am speaking to my cousin.' I turned and there she was! Her bicycle was leaning against the gate, and she told me she was taking a cycle tour through these parts, and thought she would look me up. I couldn't remember who she was at first, but she soon enlightened me. I asked her to stay to lunch, and then she stayed to tea, and she talked hard the whole afternoon, and in the end I offered her a bed for the night, and this morning we have had tears, and a burst of confidence, and she wants me to keep her here altogether, and, of course, it is very upsetting, for I have been a bachelor for so long that I prefer my own ways, and yet she seems to have some claim upon me. I don't know what to do. I wish you would go into the drawing-room and have a talk with her, and come back and tell me what you think of her."

"She might resent my interference," said Sidney.

"Oh, she isn't that sort. She is too anxious to be helped."

So Sidney left the room. She expected to see some hysterical woman of middle age, so that it was rather a surprise to confront a radiant specimen of girlhood. She was sitting on the arm of a chair, whistling; her hands were in the pockets of a short tweed coat; her hair was done up rather untidily, with a broad plait encircling her head, but her face was bewitching in its fresh beauty and sparkling animation, and her eyes seemed alive with mischief.

She jumped off the chair and looked up at Sidney with a mixture of bashfulness and assurance.

Sidney held out her hand at once.

“We have been left to introduce ourselves. I am Sidney Urquhart, a close neighbour of your—your cousin’s. And he has asked me to come and have a chat with you.”

“And to find out what kind of species I am,” said the girl, with a laugh. “I’m Jockie—that’s who I am—Jockie Borlace. And I’ve cycled forty miles to see if he can do anything for me.”

“Tell me all about it,” said Sidney, smiling into Jockie’s eyes with instant friendliness.

“You will help me, won’t you? I remember mother saying before she died that there was only one member of father’s family whom she believed in, and that was Cousin John Borlace, and he was a clergyman. And she told me if I got into any difficulty to go to him or to write, and he might help me to earn my living. And now I’ve come, and he seems frightened to death at the sight of me. I only came home from school a year ago. I wish I could go back, but they won’t have me. They say I upset the earnest atmosphere of the house. I can’t be earnest, can you? But I’ve had an awful year. Father knows people whom mother would have never let inside the door. And last week he married a music-hall girl, and they’re coming home the end of this week. I won’t eat a meal in the house with her. I told father I wouldn’t. And I’ve come straight off, and I told our housemaid to send my luggage after me when I wired her my address. Now, ought not parsonages to be places of refuge? I don’t see how Cousin John can turn me out, especially as he has a nice spare bedroom ready for use. I slept in it last night. And I shall be awfully useful to him if he will let me stay. I can do anything from cooking to typewriting, and I’ll run the whole parish for him, too.”

“There’s nothing like self-advertisement,” said Sidney, laughing.

Jockie joined her in the laugh.

“Well, I could help him to do it, then. I want to be useful, Miss Urquhart—I really do. And I love children. Do go back and tell him that you like the looks of me extremely, and that you think he’d better take me on a month’s trial. After that, we’ll make other plans if necessary, but a month will give me time to look round. Perhaps you know someone who wants their library books sorted out and mended up and re-bound. I know a girl who got a job like that, and it lasted her three years, with board and lodging and seventy pounds a year. Not bad, was it? And I’ve learnt bookbinding, and love reading, so I would have the time of my life if you knew of such a billet.”

“You’re a thoroughly modern young woman,” said Sidney, looking at her with twinkling eyes. Then she put her hand caressingly on her arm.

“If I promise to plead for you, will you promise to be very good to Mr. Borlace, and not upset his methodical, orderly household? I am very fond of him, and shouldn’t like him to be worried at his time of life.”

Jockie gave Sidney an impulsive hug.

“I know you’ll be an angel to me! You show it in your face. I’ll do anything and everything that Cousin John tells me, if he’ll only give me a home *pro tem*.”

So Sidney left her and joined Mr. Borlace in his study. He was pacing up and down the room in great perplexity of spirit; but Sidney’s persuasion was always successful. She soothed and comforted him, and finally told him that if Jockie proved a trial to him he could send her to the Admiral’s.

“We will take her in for a time, for she wants befriending, poor child!”

“Her father is a ne’er-do-well,” said Mr. Borlace, with a sigh. “Charlie was never anything but a trouble to his family, and broke his wife’s heart. She was too good for him. I only saw her once, but this girl is not a bit like her. She takes after her father in her audacious spirits. I suppose I must keep her for the time, but, of course, her father’s house is the proper place for her.”

“I don’t think his marriage can be a good thing for her,” Sidney said. “But I will tell her you will have her on a visit, or come and tell her yourself. That will be the best way.”

She led him into the drawing-room.

Jockie almost flew into his arms directly she saw him.

“You’re going to keep me! I see it in your face. I promise I’ll be a very angel of goodness. And now, dear Cousin John, tell me where I can wire home for my luggage. Do they send off wires in the village post office?”

Sidney slipped away; she thought they would settle down together best if left to themselves.

But she was to see a great deal of Jockie Borlace.

Early the next morning she arrived and marched in upon Sidney before the Admiral had finished his breakfast. Sidney was discussing the morning’s post with him. Jockie was not in the least abashed at the early hour she had disturbed them.

“We had our breakfast at the unearthly hour of eight,” she said; “and I haven’t known what to do with myself since. Cousin John wouldn’t let me order the dinner, or do a bit of gardening, and now he has got an old women’s club up at the house, and says he prefers to do it alone. And he looked so worried that I promised to make myself scarce till luncheon, and so I’ve come off to you.”

The Admiral eyed her critically.

“I am sorry for your poor cousin,” he remarked.

“Are you? For having me, I suppose you mean? But I’m not a worry—really I am not. I can amuse myself in heaps of ways, and if only he would let me into his study I would be as happy as a king. I love reading, and he has his walls lined with books.”

“I can lend you books,” said Sidney, getting up from the table. “Come with me, and when I have done my housekeeping we will go out for a walk together.”

She took the girl into the morning-room, which was her special domain. To her surprise, she found it already tenanted. Austin de Cressiers was seated calmly at the table writing a note.

He looked up and laughed, then, when he saw Jockie, rose to his feet.

Sidney introduced them.

“How cheeky of you!” she said. “My note-paper, too! What are you doing?”

“I came in through the French window; knew you were at breakfast. And I wanted to leave a note, and hadn’t any paper in my pocket. I’ve had to stay at home to-day, but meant to have hunted. The governor is in one of his ramps! I’m an ill-used, cock-and-henpecked son!”

His eyes sought Jockie’s. They both laughed.

“So you’re a fresh importation?” Austin said. “I hope you’ll like us.”

“I like Miss Urquhart already,” said Jockie promptly and emphatically. “I adore her! She’s—she’s so fascinating!”

“Yes,” Austin said, cocking his head on one side and regarding Sidney through half-shut eyes; “she is that, and when she sings she’s a siren—and when she comforts you she’s an angel—and when she scolds you she’s a duck!”

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Sidney put in. “Have you finished with my pen and paper?”

Austin turned back to his seat, signed his name with a flourish, sealed his envelope, and stuck it in his breast-pocket, which he then patted affectionately.

“Now I’m off to Lovelace’s Cottage.”

“To leave your note? I saw Mrs. Norman ride by an hour ago.”

“I was to have met her at Three Crows Inn. Isn’t it scandalous of the parents? Well, what I want you to do is to come up to lunch. I’m to be up to my eyes in business till one. Then it’s the workman’s dinner hour, and I want you, Sid, to act as a buffer between me and the mother. For she won’t remember that a man’s digestion plays the dickens with him if he’s harried between every mouthful. And bring up Miss—Miss——”

“Jockie,” said that young lady, with sparkling eyes. “Oh, I shall be delighted to come, and Cousin John will be more delighted still, for he told me he has always been accustomed to have a luncheon tray brought to him in his study. He doesn’t like sitting down to the table with me, and yet he won’t dispense with ceremony. I should love to picnic on his study floor with him, and told him so, but he didn’t see it.”

“Then you come up, and I’ll turn you on to mother, whilst Sid and I enjoy ourselves.”

He caught up his cap, waved it at them, and dashed out of the window like a schoolboy.

Jockie laughed delightedly.

“What a nice boy! Tell me who he is?”

So Sidney told her, and then left her, whilst she went to her cook, and Jockie amused herself by drawing caricatures of people on a sheet of note-paper. On one she made a solemn-looking dog regarding a chicken emerging from an egg, and the words underneath were: “Will it bite me?” The dog had a great look of her uncle, and the pert chicken a slight resemblance to herself.

When Sidney returned to her, she wore her hat and coat.

“Now I have done all my duties, and I’ll take you out; we’ll go and see Monica. If you want to garden or to farm she’s the one who will teach you.

And then we'll lunch with the de Cressiers. I'm sorry for Austin, for he is being pulled two different ways every day of his life."

"Pleasure versus duty," said Jockie knowingly. "It's the way with me. My chief chum is a girl—oh, she is grand! I would like you to know her. We did everything together at school, and she inspired me. She's chock full of enthusiasm and earnestness, and life is all nobility and grandeur, and work is our vocation, and we tread in the air, with our souls in heaven when we're together, and then when we part, I tumble down to earth, and have been grovelling on it ever since I last heard her speak. But she's trained me to have an uncomfortable feeling when idle the whole day through, so I know what it is to be tugged two different ways."

Jockie knew how to talk; her tongue was at it hard till the farm was reached. They came upon Chuckles swinging upon the gate.

"Can't come in!" he cried. "This is my castle, and everybodies outside is enemies!"

Jockie caught him up in her strong young arms, then seated herself upon the gate and began to swing herself and him together.

"Now this is *our* castle," she said, "and two are better than one to keep the gate!"

Chuckles was enchanted. It was some minutes before Sidney could persuade them to get down and walk on quietly with her to the house.

"We're ploughing the five-acre field to-day," said Chuckles importantly. "Aunt Monica will be back soon. We must see the men works, you know. And then we're going to see the frashing!"

"You are a jolly little farmer," said Jockie admiringly. "Isn't he a duck, Miss Urquhart? Isn't it a pity that they grow up?"

Chuckles frowned upon her.

"It's a pity you growed up. If you were a nice little girl you and me would play marbles at once. I got twopence of them yesterday."

"Why aren't you at school, Chuckles?" asked Sidney.

He twinkled all over.

"They has the mumps."

"Happy boy!" said Jockie. "I can play marbles. Let's have a game now."

Chuckles seized hold of her, and they ran off together. Sidney caught sight of Monica coming across the yard, and went to meet her. They always had a good deal to say to each other, and Monica was interested to hear of the new arrival.

"I don't understand girls, nor care for them," she said; "but if she likes to come over here sometimes I can always give her a job. She will be very dull at the Rectory, I should think."

"You must see her. I like her. She is frank and natural. We are going to lunch with the de Cressiers. Austin is not getting on well, Monica. He ought to be more at home, and this hunting has bewitched him."

"Or Diana!" said Monica, laughing.

"Well," said Sidney, with a little sigh, "I am pulled two different ways. When she is not with him she is with Uncle Ted. I don't know which I dislike most."

"You are hard upon her."

"I suppose I am, but she will make no man happy, Monnie. She demands too much and gives too little."

"That will make a man unselfish," said Monica thoughtfully. "People say men are selfish, but it is the women who make them so, and a selfish woman is a boon to the race of men."

"Oh, Monnie!" remonstrated Sidney, laughing.

"I mean it. If I am not very careful I shall rear Chuckles into a selfish man. Let me tell you our fracas at breakfast. I told him I wanted him to come and watch the ploughing.

" 'I don't want to,' he said promptly.

"Then Aunt Dannie said in shocked tones:

" 'Little boys must never say that. If we only do what we want to do, that is selfish.'

"Chuckles gazed at her with his big eyes.

" 'And I want you to come with me, so you're coming,' I said quickly and decidedly.

" 'Then you're selfish, Aunt Monnie,' the imp said. 'If you weren't, you'd let me do what I like.'

“So then I had to read him a long lecture, and finally took him off with me. But isn’t the training of a man fatiguing?”

Sidney and Jockie stayed at the farm for a good hour, then walked on to Thanning Towers.

“I shall have Chuckles to spend the day with me,” announced Jockie. “He is quite charming!”

“He is a dear little boy,” said Sidney, rather absently.

Her thoughts were straying to Austin and to Mrs. Norman. She honestly did not want him to become engaged to her, and yet it seemed to her that if that happened, she would have no longer any anxiety about her uncle. She was, as she said, torn two ways. And then she impulsively turned to Jockie.

“I wish you were a man, Jockie—a good-looking, wealthy man on the look out for a wife, a man who would be quick and successful in his wooing, and who would insist upon a speedy marriage!”

Jockie stared at her.

“You don’t want him for yourself, do you?”

“Rather not; but I know of someone who would make him a very sweet bride.”

Then she laughed.

“I am talking nonsense, Jockie. You must forget it.”

“I’ll try,” said Jockie; but she knew she would not, and she made a mental note of Sidney’s strange speech, and determined to keep her eyes open for the possible “sweet bride.”

They reached Thanning Towers. Mrs. de Cressiers welcomed them cordially, but she looked careworn and anxious. Mr. de Cressiers was not at all well, and in an irritable frame of mind. Austin and he had been having a difference of opinion, and Mrs. de Cressiers had been called in to intervene. Austin came to lunch gloomy and self-absorbed, but in Jockie’s vicinity it was impossible to remain grave for long. She soon had him laughing, and before the meal was over a happy easy camaraderie had been established between them. He insisted upon taking her out into the grounds, and Mrs. de Cressiers, with relief in her face, swept off Sidney into the drawing-room.

“Oh, my dear, I am so troubled! George is getting quite unfit to discuss business affairs, and he will insist upon doing it! I don’t know what we shall do. Austin has neither patience nor tact. He expects his father to understand

what he cannot. He does not realise his brain power is failing. We have had dreadful scenes this morning. And, of course, Austin has been careless and negligent lately. I can hardly ever get hold of him to have a quiet talk. He shuns being with me. He is wrapped up in his hunting."

Mrs. de Cressiers had seldom spoken so freely to Sidney as she did now. Her reserve and pride seemed to have been crushed in her real anxiety about her husband and son.

Sidney's face was grave and sympathetic as she listened.

Mrs. de Cressiers continued:

"I had got it into my head that Mrs. Norman was the attraction in the hunting-field, but she happened to call late yesterday afternoon, and from what she said I see my fears were quite unfounded. In fact, she assured me that Austin was quite offended with her because she talked to him for his good, and told him his duty was to stay at home and help his father and me. You used to have influence with him, Sidney dear; can't you exert it now? It's a bitter confession for a mother to make, but it is true. My words make no impression upon him. He will listen to a stranger rather than to me."

"I think if Mrs. Norman cannot influence him in the right direction, I cannot," said Sidney slowly.

"Well, something will have to be done. I cannot go through such scenes as we had this morning. They are bad for all of us, especially for my poor husband. I believe this will be his last winter with us. Is it too much to ask of his son that he should give up his hunting and help and comfort us?"

"No," said Sidney firmly; "I think Austin ought to do it. I will talk to him again if I get a chance. But you must forgive me for saying it—if you were to meet him half-way and show him as much affection as you really feel for him, Austin would respond at once."

Mrs. de Cressiers' head was instantly raised haughtily and stiffly.

"I think, my dear Sidney, I do not require you to teach me my duty as a mother."

"I am sorry."

Sidney spoke penitently, and then Mrs. de Cressiers said in a different tone:

"That is a nice little girl you brought with you. Shall we walk out into the garden and join them?"

They did so, but Sidney got no chance of a word alone with Austin. He avoided her, and as soon as they had left the house he went to the stables and ordered his horse. His mother did not see him again till dinner-time.

CHAPTER X

JOCKIE'S FRIEND

JOCKIE settled down at the Rectory in a surprisingly quick time. She took a Sunday class of boys, and helped as much as she was allowed in the parish. The Rector before long began to trust her, and discovered that she was not the flighty damsel that her words had led him to expect. She was devoted to Sidney, and gave her a young girl's worship, but she was of too energetic a nature to be satisfied with her quiet life at the Rectory.

She marched up to Monica one day.

"I want work, Miss Pembroke. Miss Urquhart says you can give me some. I can't fill my days. Cousin John has too many servants. There is nothing to do. The gardener won't let me touch the garden; the housekeeper orders the house; when I'm not running about the village, I read; but I know that my friend Gavine would say that if I take in, I must give out. She is great on work. I had a letter from her the other day. She implores me to make myself of use to my fellow-creatures. What can I do?"

Monica looked at her thoughtfully.

"I believe you can help me," she said; "not by outdoor work—I could give you a lot of that—but by taking Chuckles in hand."

"Oh, how heavenly!" gasped Jockie; "tell me quickly!"

"Could you give him steady teaching from nine to twelve every morning, and then take him for an hour's walk. I am not at all satisfied with his school. It is a small private one in Pegborough, and the few boys who go to it are tradesmen's sons. I don't mind that, but the teaching is indifferent, and he is not improving in manners or principles. I want to send him to a good boarding-school next year, and I want him coached in Latin, as well as French and English. Of course, if you take him, we must do it on business terms. I should regard you as his governess."

Jockie's face was radiant.

"Miss Pembroke, you are a witch! Who told you of my secret longings to earn something? You know, I arrived with two shillings and twopence in my pocket. My father has not sent me a penny as yet, and I can't go to

Cousin John. I was wondering what I should do. And then you offer me the job that I should like above all others. I'm sure I know enough Latin to satisfy you, and I assure you I'll be as stern as you are in school-time. When can I start?"

"I think at once. This is the second time this term I have had to have him home. They seem to have perpetual epidemics at the school. Of course, I trust you to teach him thoroughly, and have no games in school-hours. He is not very strong, and he will be out of doors with me in the afternoons."

Jockie could hardly express her gratitude. Terms were arranged, and lessons were started in earnest the very next day. Jockie was a clever girl and had a knack of teaching; Chuckles was as good as gold, and everything went smoothly.

One fine frosty afternoon Jockie came in upon Sidney with her usual flow of spirits.

"I've been enjoying myself so much," she said. "I met Mr. Austin, and we've actually climbed the Beacon together. He was very grumpy at first, but he couldn't keep it up. How hunting people hate frost. I'm rather glad I don't ride. If I did, I think I should neglect everything else for it, like Mr. Austin. He's great fun when you get him alone, isn't he? And then, on the way home, we met his ladylove—Mrs. Norman. I know all about it. He was singing her praises most of the way. Well, she stopped and asked to be introduced to me, and, Miss Urquhart, we only chatted together for about ten minutes, but it's going to be war to the knife between us!"

"My dear Jockie, don't say such things!"

"But I must. I tell you everything. And I made a most astonishing discovery; that's why I have come to tell it to you. But I'll give you our conversation first. She began by commiserating Austin—I can't help calling him by his Christian name to you—upon the frost, and then I spoke up.

" 'It will keep him more at home, Mrs. Norman, and that will be a good thing,' for Austin had been telling me a little of his home affairs. She gave me a nasty gleam out of her eye, and then, ignoring me, went on to talk about people in the hunting-field, whom, of course, I didn't know; and then, looking at her, it suddenly flashed across me, and I said: 'I've seen you before, Mrs. Norman, and I know someone whom you know.'

"She gave a little start, but smiled and said:

" 'I'm afraid I don't remember you.'

“ ‘But your daughter is my greatest friend,’ I said, ‘and I saw you once when we travelled to town together, and you told her that you could not have her with you for the Christmas holidays. It was a blow to her, poor girl, for her aunts were abroad, and you sent her to an old nurse who kept lodgings in some fusty London square. Poor Gavine had an awful Christmas; she wrote and told me all about it.’

“ ‘Oh,’ she said, ‘do you really know my dear Gavine? Yes, I remember, poor child. I don’t know who felt it most, she or I. That was a dreadful Christmas. And so you are one of her school-fellows! How delightful! You must come and see me, and we will have great talks together.’

“ ‘I’m going to get Cousin John to invite Gavine down here,’ I went on. ‘She never has any pleasures with her invalid aunts.’

“ ‘I think when her aunts can spare her she will come to me,’ she said, and she tried to speak very haughtily. So I laughed and said:

“ ‘But you never want her, do you? There’s always some reason why you can’t have her.’

“And then she glared at me and went on talking very fast to Austin, and presently I said good-bye and left them. Now, isn’t it funny that I did not connect her with Gavine before, as, of course, it is the same name? And do you know, Miss Urquhart, that her daughter doesn’t know where she is? She hardly ever writes to her, and Gavine thought she was abroad.”

Jockie paused for breath, and Sidney looked quite mystified.

“How very strange! Then is the girl you talk so much about Mrs. Norman’s daughter?”

“Yes; and she has treated her abominably. She hardly ever sends her any money, and always writes as if she is at her last penny. Fancy! since Gavine left school she has only been allowed twelve pounds a year! It’s a kitchenmaid’s wages when she first goes out. Gavine has two aunts who are not at all well off, and one of them is paralysed; but they have given her a home until her mother can settle down and have her. She has always said she would do it, and now she has taken a cottage here, there’s no reason why Gavine should not come to her. Only if she lives with her, I know she’ll be perfectly miserable. I’ll get her to come to me; that will make her mother feel ashamed of herself.”

“Oh, Jockie, dear, you must not talk so. She is her mother. If your friend is a nice girl, she must feel attached to her own mother.”

"So she does. Gavine is an angel. But I know what her life has been—continual disappointments. She's always hoped and longed to live with her mother, and Mrs. Norman won't have her. She likes to pose as a young woman; and Gavine is much handsomer than she is, and wants to do good, and Mrs. Norman hates good people. She hates you, Miss Urquhart. She mentioned your name to Austin. I'll tell you what she said. 'Do come and deliver me from that poor old Major. He has come down every day for the last week. I feel so sorry for him. It is a great pity he has such an unhappy home. I cannot understand Miss Urquhart; but then I don't know her. She seems to me such a pleasant girl to outsiders, but she does not show much affection to her poor old uncle.' I flared up, of course. 'Miss Urquhart adores him, and he adores her,' I said. And then Austin laughed. 'You have got hold of the pig by the wrong ear, Mrs. Norman,' he said. 'The old Major is a confounded bore, but his niece has always been most awfully good to him. I've had the run of the house since I was quite a small boy, so I know.' Now, don't you think that ought to have squashed her? Not a bit. She looked quite perturbed and sorry. 'Oh, dear! What a dreadful old humbug the Major is!' she said. 'He gave me to understand quite the contrary. I suppose he was wanting to get my pity. Old men love to have a grievance, don't they?' It was then I said good-bye to them and walked on. Yes, it is war to the knife between us, Miss Urquhart. I feel it in my bones. And, of course, I understand why you want another man to come upon the scene and carry her off. I wish he would."

"You take my breath away, Jockie!" Sidney said with a distressed look in her eyes. Jockie's recital had cut her to the quick, and the girl perceived it. She flung her arms round her and kissed her.

"Don't look like that! My tongue runs away with me. We won't think any more about her. She isn't worth it. But I shall write and tell Gavine where her mother is."

Jockie was as good as her word, and came to tell Sidney the result.

"Gavine says she has just heard from her mother, and she wants her down here at once. Isn't it exciting? I shall love to have her. I want her to see you, and you are sure to like her—everyone does—but keep a little bit of your heart for me."

Sidney laughed at her.

"You won't want me when your friend comes."

“I’ve just met Mr. Austin,” Jockie continued; “so I told him the news. He didn’t look best pleased. I think this frost is making him very cross. When I told him that Gavine ought to live with her mother always, he said curtly, ‘I don’t see why she should.’ So then I said an awful thing! I can’t help my tongue, Miss Urquhart. I wish I could. It is past my control entirely. I said: ‘I suppose you wouldn’t care to have so old a stepdaughter?’ He looked as if he could bite my head off, and turned bang round and walked off without saying good-bye, or even raising his cap. He can be very rude when he likes. So then my temper was up, and I called after him: ‘You had much better let the Major have his innings. His age is much more suitable.’ And, of course, you’ll say I was rude and vulgar. I thought I was myself when he had gone.”

“I don’t see why you should try to quarrel with Austin,” said Sidney very quietly.

“He annoys me. He is so idiotically infatuated with Mrs. Norman. And she is Gavine’s mother, I never can forget that.”

Gavine Norman soon arrived, and Sidney went down to Lovelace’s Cottage with some curiosity, to see Jockie’s bosom friend. The frost still held. Sidney herself was grateful to it. Austin was much more at home, and his mother rejoiced accordingly. Mrs. Norman took long walks; she did not hide her disappointment at the hunting ending so soon. Major Urquhart wandered down to her cottage about every other day. Sidney wondered as she walked if her uncle were down there now. But she was overtaken by Austin, whose steps were bound the same way.

They were both shown into the tiny drawing-room, where mother and daughter were sitting. Mrs. Norman was writing at her davenport; Gavine was sitting by the fire reading. She looked up as they entered, and Sidney was struck at once by her face. She was dressed in a dark red gown. The colour suited her. She had a very white skin; her soft, dusky black hair was parted in the middle, it fell away in ripples over her ears, and a thick plait encircled her head. Her eyes were dark blue, and a steady, rather sombre light seemed to glow in their depths, whilst thick eyebrows and very long curved lashes lent a touch of heaviness to her otherwise fragile and delicate oval face. Her nose was straight and sensitive, her lips had a wistful droop at the corners, but her square, determined chin, and broad intellectual brow showed that she had mental force and ability.

Mrs. Norman was her usual gay charming self. She greeted Sidney warmly, her eyes welcomed Austin.

“How kind of you, Miss Urquhart! Let me introduce my big daughter. She quite frightens me by her size, but time flies, and she has grown much since I last saw her. I must get accustomed to take the back place when I have her with me.”

Gavine made no reply. She dropped her book, and sat silently listening to the chatter around her. When talk got on the frost, and the signs of it yielding, Sidney left Austin to Mrs. Norman, and turned to the girl.

“I have heard so much about you from Jockie, that I have longed to meet you,” she said.

Gavine smiled, and when she smiled, her face was beautiful.

“Jockie is a dear; she sees no fault in her friends.”

“Have you seen her yet?”

“Yes; she came over yesterday. We are going to take a long walk together to-morrow if fine.”

“Do you hunt?”

“I have never been on horseback in my life.”

“I was wondering if you would find it dull here. But I expect you have resources.”

“I never want to kill time,” said Gavine, looking at Sidney with glowing eyes; “it is too precious for that.”

“I hear you are a great reader.”

“I love it—as a relaxation.”

Sidney began to wonder if she were priggish or in deadly earnest.

Her mother turned round at that moment.

“Mr. de Cressiers is asking whether you skate, Gavine. He says the ice is bearing.”

“Yes,” she said a little indifferently. “I have skated up in the north.”

Austin looked across at her with some eagerness.

“We are going to open our grounds to-morrow, for we have some big fish-ponds which are in first-rate condition. You will come, won’t you? We’ll adjourn to the house for lunch.”

“I don’t think she has any skates with her,” said Mrs. Norman slowly.

“That doesn’t matter, we will turn out ours. I know we have a lot of odd pairs. And you’ll come too, and if you don’t know how to skate, I will teach you.”

He turned an adoring eye upon the young widow. Gavine regarded him gravely for a minute, then she said to Sidney:

“Will you be there, Miss Urquhart?”

“I—I hope so, and Jockie must come too.”

“I thought Jockie taught in the morning.”

“Oh, I dare say Miss Pembroke will give Chuckles a holiday.”

“I should hope she won’t, for Jockie’s sake,” Gavine said earnestly. “When she does undertake a thing, she ought to stick to it. That was her great fault at school, she was brilliantly clever, but would never persevere.”

“And perseverance comes easily to you?” Sidney asked with a smile.

“Yes, I lack in initiative. I can’t start things, but when once started I’m all right. Jockie is a very good starter.”

Sidney was interested in the girl; not so much in what she said, but in the smouldering fires which shone in her deep blue eyes, and in the changing expression of her face. She said to her:

“You take life earnestly, Miss Norman.”

“Who wouldn’t? Oh, Miss Urquhart, it is a tremendous thing, isn’t it? There is so much to gain, and so much to lose.”

Her lips quivered. She touched the volume she had been reading.

“These are some essays by Carlyle, and Macaulay, and Emerson. I am only dipping into them, but they make you think, don’t they? And they make me long to work. I have had so much time to think and to read. I am simply yearning to do——”

“You must come and see me, and we will have a good talk together,” said Sidney, being almost startled by the vehemence in the girl’s tone. Mrs. Norman had caught a bit of the conversation.

“Ah, Miss Urquhart,” she said, laughing. “It is the young people who teach us in the present day. They are so wise, so full of enthusiasm, so intense in what they feel and hope for. When I listen to my girl it reminds me of my hot-headed youth, and I pray she may not be awakened so quickly as I was.”

Gavine looked at her mother.

"How were you awakened?" she asked gravely.

"My dear child. You will know how later on. Life has hardly touched you yet. You are only on the threshold."

"You talk as if you were Methuselah!" said Austin. "How can you be so absurd?"

"Am I absurd!"

Mrs. Norman lowered her voice and turned her head away from Sidney and her daughter. "My dear boy, Gavine makes me feel a frivolous doll; she is the essence of lead. Her heaviness and stolid matter-of-fact sense have a most depressing effect upon me. I feel bound with chains when she is in the room. And when we go about together I have the awful desire to shock her. Isn't it dreadful of me? For she's such a good earnest girl, and her good worthy aunts are so much more to her than her own mother is. She is never happy till she gets away from me. And I assure you she would be scandalised if she saw me tumbling about on the ice to-morrow. She thinks I ought to be dressed up in a lace cap and spectacles and sit over the fire knitting shawls for the poor. That is her ideal mother!"

Austin laughed. He could not help it; but he felt a little uncomfortable. Gavine's good looks impressed him. He was inclined to talk to her, and when presently her laugh rang out at one of Sidney's speeches, he moved across the room and joined them.

"What is the joke?"

"I was only describing some of our characters here," said Sidney, and then she rose to go. Austin stayed behind. He did not offer to accompany her, but she was accustomed to that now. She went home wondering what kind of intercourse there was between mother and daughter.

"I don't know which I pity most," she said to herself. "The girl wants more gaiety in her, the mother less. But I like the looks of Gavine, and hope I shall see something of her."

There was no skating the next day. A sudden thaw set in. Sidney did not see either of the girls for some time, as her father was in bed with a slight attack of bronchitis, and she hardly left the house. The Major was in very low spirits as he watched Mrs. Norman riding off to the meets with Austin. He shut himself up in his workshop, and growled at everyone who came near him.

Gavine and Jockie took long walks together every afternoon. One day Gavine's face was unusually grave.

"Jockie, dear, I must go back to the aunts. I can't stay here."

"Why?" Jockie's horrified face made Gavine smile.

"I don't think mother wants me."

"She never has," said Jockie indignantly; "but *I* want you. Have you had a row? You needn't mind telling me."

"Oh, it never comes to that. Mother never loses her temper, you know. I sometimes wish she did. But I annoy her. I blurt out truths which are best not expressed, and I can't understand what I'm expected to say, and what I am not. Major Urquhart came yesterday, and mother asked him to tea to-day, as there was no meet anywhere. Mr. de Cressiers happened to come in this morning, and wanted us to go motoring with him this afternoon. Mother accepted, and, thinking she had forgotten, I said quickly: 'Oh, we can't do that, can we, mother? You asked Major Urquhart to tea to-day, and you asked him to come early, for you had not seen him for such a long time.' Now why should that speech of mine be such a crime? Mother carried it off all right at the time, but she was most annoyed with me afterwards. She told me I was like an awkward child, had no manners, and she really thought I was better in my 'northern wilds' than in decent society. I honestly think I am. I hate the chitter-chatter of society. It leads to nothing, and I am living a lazy idle life here. It doesn't suit me. I have been accustomed to attend to my two aunts, and do some sick-nursing. There is nothing to do here, and Jockie, dear—it is not her fault. We have lived our lives apart since I was four years old, but mother has no more affection or feeling for me than that stone."

She struck a wayside stone with her stick as she spoke, but there were tears rising in her blue eyes. Jockie linked her arm in hers.

"No, dear, you two will never hit it off together, never! Has your mother disappointed the old Major again?"

"I took up a note to him, asking him to dinner instead. She is out now motoring, but I did not want to go. It is no fun to me."

"No. You're a gooseberry!" said Jockie.

Gavine stared at her.

"I sometimes think I am very dense. What do you mean? You don't know mother as I do, Jockie. She is friends with *every*body. She always has

been, but never anything more."

There was an anxious look in Gavine's eyes, and Jockie did not enlighten her further. They began to talk of "work," which was Gavine's favourite topic.

"I want to work somewhere in London, Jockie. If only mother would give me a little more money I could do it. I should like to go to one of those settlements, where everybody is doing something for others. There is so much to be done, so few to do it. I don't want to hide my talents in a napkin. It is the next life that matters, not this. We are in a school of discipline here. We must make efforts towards heaven, and I do not want to fail in getting there, do you?"

"I don't know," said Jockie soberly. "I don't incline towards the strenuous disciplined life. I have often told you so. I want to enjoy everything as it comes. It always seems to me that in preference you cross the street to the shady side. Now I like to walk in the sun."

"I want to keep my body in subjection," said Gavine, with earnest shining eyes, "so that it will not be a hindrance to me when I am working. I sometimes think I should like to join a sisterhood. I was very nearly doing it a year ago, and then I promised someone I would not."

"Who?" Jockie asked bluntly.

A soft pink colour stole into Gavine's cheeks.

"Oh, it's only someone who has gone abroad."

Jockie's eyes twinkled.

"I'm waiting to be told his name."

But Gavine kept her own counsel and would say no more.

CHAPTER XI

AUSTIN'S ENLIGHTENMENT

CHRISTMAS came with its festivities; and though Thanning Dale was not a very gay neighbourhood, there was enough going on to keep everyone occupied. Sidney was freer now that her father was convalescent, and she and Jockie pressed Gavine into their service, for there were parish teas and entertainments and a Christmas tree for the children. And somehow or other, Austin was always with them. Sidney noticed that he did not mention Mrs. Norman's name, and there was something in his feverish gaiety and forced ring of cheerfulness, that made her wonder if anything had gone wrong in their friendship. She was too busy to seek for his confidence; and, indeed, there was little opportunity for quiet talk between them. Gavine and he were good friends, but nothing more. Jockie made fun of him, laughed at him, and contradicted him whenever she got a chance, but Austin held his ground with her, and Sidney listened to their gay talk and laughter with relief of mind. This was Austin in his wholesome boyish state again. What had occasioned the change?

She was enlightened at last. Austin was seeing her home after the village children's prize-giving and treat. It was a windy night.

"Take my arm," he insisted; "you are tired out with the romping. Are you my friend still, Sid?"

"Is it my way to change?" Sidney said quietly.

"Oh, no, but women are beyond me. And it's my fate to have my ideals shattered."

"You'd better tell me," Sidney suggested.

"I want to. But you're the only one on earth I'll speak to about it; for I know you won't crow, and say 'I told you so.' It's only—only I've had a nasty shock about that little woman. I really can't bring myself to tell you, but it's all up between us, and I'm going to clear out for a bit. The mother condescended to say that I could have a holiday, and I'm off to Cairo next week. I know a fellow going out, and I've fixed it up with him."

"That is very wise of you," said Sidney, hardly knowing what to say.

“You don’t ask questions? But I’ll try to tell you. She sent me a letter intended for your uncle. ’Pon my honour, I feel sorry for her, but she began, ‘My dearest,’ and dashed if I didn’t read it right through before I twigged she had put it in the wrong envelope. And she told him not to be angry with her, for the ‘poor boy’ would not keep away, and she could not make him see how he bored her. Then she went on to hint that if this poor infatuated youth still frequented her cottage, the Major must take into consideration that there was her girl ready to amuse him, and young people liked each other’s company. Now what do you think of that? After assuring me that the Major was a daily purgatory to her. It bowled me over, I can tell you.”

“I am sorry for you,” Sidney said, “but you would take no warnings. She has wanted to keep you both as friends.”

“Oh!” cried Austin with a little groan. “I tell you it has been a pretty stiff eye-opener to me! I sent the letter back to her, and told her she need not trouble to send the letter she originally meant for me, and, of course, I haven’t been near her since. She wrote an abject apology, saying she could explain if I called, but mum’s the word! And I shall be out of it soon. And I’m jolly well cured of a leaning towards your sex, Sid. If it were not for you, I’d never believe in a single woman again. By George! How she’s taken me in, and befooled me. Do you think the Major got my letter?”

“No, I don’t think he did,” said Sidney, stifling a sigh. “I almost wish he had. I don’t think his eyes will ever be opened.”

“I shouldn’t like to tell you of the jeers and jibes she has flung at his courting. But she may pull it off with him. And I say, do befriend that poor girl; she does have a time of it.”

“Do you mean Gavine?”

“Yes, I put my foot in it several times trying to stand up for her. Don’t think I’m a broken-hearted youth, Sid. I tell you, I rode by the cottage on purpose to-day, and whistled merrily. But all the same, I shall be glad to turn my back on this place for a time.”

When they parted, Sidney looked at him gravely.

“Austin, you ought to be thankful to have had your eyes opened. She never would have made you happy.”

But when she got indoors she said to herself:

“And now I feel that Uncle Ted is doomed. She will not let him escape her.”

And that feeling hovered about her like an angry looming cloud. The more cheerful her uncle became, the more anxious she was. The uncertain future seemed to menace her. It needed all her faith and fortitude to go about with a bright and smiling face.

About the same time Monica had a visit from Mrs. Norman. She was the first to inform her that Austin was leaving home for a time.

"It is an immense relief to me. In fact, I may tell you in confidence that it is chiefly through my instrumentality that he is going. It was bad enough to have him in and out of my house all hours of the day, before Gavine came to me. I was sorry for the boy. He seemed so lonely and miserable, so misunderstood at home. But you know a woman's pity is sometimes mistaken for something else, and I found he was presuming too much, so I had to stop it. You see, I do not mind what people say of myself. I am quite impervious to idle gossip. I think if one has a clear conscience one is perfectly indifferent to the wagging of tongues. But I have my daughter to think of now, and I was afraid if he was never out of our house that her name might be a subject of gossip. A woman is always supposed to have matrimonial plans if she has a pretty daughter. So I wrote him a letter which has effectually quenched him. I have acted rightly, have I not? I believe you would have done the same, had you been in my place."

Monica could not but agree. She did not know how much went on at Lovelace's Cottage; she was too busy a woman to meddle much in her neighbours' affairs; but when Sidney came next to see her, she told her what she considered were "the rights of the story." Sidney listened, and felt hopeless and helpless to put the matter straight, so did not try to do so.

"We had better take Mrs. Norman at her own valuation, Monnie. It will be only a fret and annoyance to ourselves if we don't. How do you like her daughter?"

"I have hardly seen her, but she happens to be coming to tea this afternoon. Will you stay to meet her? Jockie is going to bring her in here after their walk."

"Yes, I shall like to stay. Father and Uncle Ted have actually gone out driving together. It is some business they want to do with their lawyer in Pegborough."

Something in Sidney's tone made Monica look at her sharply.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?"

"Nothing, I believe; but I am full of fears, Monnie."

"And I am afraid Austin's absence will not mend matters."

"We shall see. How is Chuckles? Do you think his Sunday lessons are impressing him?"

"He is still mad on building. Some of his remarks are very funny. He asked Aunt Dannie if God had not nearly finished building her yet; and when she said she did not know, he informed her that when the top stone was put on, God would take her to heaven. I really enjoy listening to him. I will bring up the subject at tea-time, and you will see for yourself if he does his teacher credit."

Sidney gave a little sigh.

"It is so easy to talk, so difficult to live. Life is very perplexing, Monnie."

"But *you* don't find it perplexing," said Monica with a dry little smile. "You tell me that your foundation is so sure that you are never affected or moved by difficulties and troubles. Isn't there a verse in the Psalms, 'I shall never be moved'? That is your position, is it not?"

Sidney looked wistfully out of the window.

"It ought to be my realisation." Then a light came into her eyes. "But it doesn't say 'I shall never be shaken'; only 'never be moved.' It's the buffeting I find so trying. It isn't the building's fault when the wind and storm attack it."

She visibly brightened up.

"I like to tease you sometimes," said Monica, smiling at her.

"Yes, you brace me up, Monnie. I feel very slack at present. I have all kinds of presentiments, and I honestly don't like living near anyone who is not friendly to me. I see the girls are coming in. They are a handsome couple, are they not?"

Chuckles was dancing up the garden after them. He was in a very dirty overall, and brandished a trowel in one hand.

Monica carried him off to make him tidy for tea; the girls joined Sidney in the cosy sitting-room. Both were genuinely glad to see her there.

"We've been up the Beacon," said Jockie. "It's our favourite walk. Oh, dear! I shall be glad of some tea. Talking and climbing are rather exhausting, and our tongues have been hard at it. Gavine says she's going away soon; isn't it a shame of her, when I want her so much?"

“Does your mother want you to leave her so soon?” Sidney asked, turning to Gavine.

“Yes,” the girl answered simply; then she added, with a little effort: “We have been talking together, and mother is quite willing that I shall go and do something. You see, my aunts do not really need me. They told me so when I came away; they thought my duty was to stay with my mother.”

“And is it not?” asked Sidney.

“Not when it is her wish that I should leave her,” said Gavine quietly. “I am going up to London to stay with a clergyman and his wife; he has a curacy in the slums somewhere, and they say they can give me plenty of work. She was at school with me. Jockie knows her.”

“Yes; she’s not a bit like a clergyman’s wife; much too fond of dress and society,” said the outspoken Jockie; and then she laughed.

“I expect people say much the same of me—not a bit like a clergyman’s cousin; much too fond of fun. I tell Gavine we can give her plenty of parish work, can’t me, Miss Urquhart? But I know what she wants—a more rigorous, self-denying life; she wants to live in a kind of cell and be short of food and fires, and go out to early services at six o’clock in the morning, and make herself very ill and bad-tempered.”

Monica came back at this juncture, leading a very clean Chuckles by the hand. Then she asked them to come to a sit-down tea in the dining-room.

When they were at the table, Sidney asked the small boy what he had been doing with himself all the afternoon. His eyes gleamed.

“I’ve been building a real house, me and Mr. Rudge togever.”

“It’s a labourer’s cottage being erected,” said Monica. “You can fancy that he discovered it very quickly.”

“Yes,” said Chuckles, with a self-satisfied nod. “Mr. Rudge holded my hand and showed me how to put the mortar atween the bwicks. He was very like God this morning. I tolded him so.”

Gavine stared at the child with her grave eyes.

Jockie giggled.

“How was he, Chuckles?” she asked. “Tell us.”

“He helped me to build,” said Chuckles with great gravity. “That’s what God does to me every day, doesn’t He, Miss Sid?”

Monica looked across at Sidney with a smile. Chuckles was never better pleased than when he had got an audience. He lifted up his voice and continued:

"I'm just about middle built now."

"What do you mean?" asked Jockie.

"Well, fust, you see, God builded me a baby; that's when I couldn't do nuffin myself, and God builded me all by Hisself. Then He went on building me taller, a little bit at a time, until I was builded into a boy; now I've got to build a little myself, and build all kinds of bwicks on me; and God just hold His hand over mine so I don't make no mistakes. He's building me up gooder every day."

"Oh," said Monica, "I hope I see the goodness coming, Chuckles; but you don't grow in that direction very fast."

Chuckles cocked his head on one side like some saucy sparrow.

"The bwicks don't stick always," he asserted; "sometimes they tummles off; 'specially the bwick this week—it's to do what you're told quick, and it *won't* stick."

"Did you teach him all this, Miss Urquhart?" asked Gavine, a light leaping into her eyes.

"Yes," said Sidney; "we're doing a course of building every Sunday, and we find out a lot about it, don't we, Chuckles? We're all builders—of a sort."

"Of a sort," repeated Monica slowly.

"When I'm builded into a man I shall begin to build other people," asserted Chuckles.

And the important tone with which he said it made the girls laugh.

They had a merry tea. Jockie was overflowing with fun and spirits, but when the time came for them to go, she said to Sidney:

"Will you let Gavine walk a part of the way with you. I have promised to be home in time for the choir practice; and she's dying to talk to you."

Sidney was only too delighted. She had wanted to see more of Gavine, but seemed to have had no opportunities with her.

When they were left alone together Gavine said:

"What a quaint child that boy is. He seems such a mixture. Jockie says he is a regular pickle, and yet he talks like a little saint."

"He is far from a saint," said Sidney; "but real religion is as natural to children as their daily food. They only want teaching, and Chuckles has a bright intelligence and a vivid imagination. I love having him on Sunday."

"I want to be a builder," said Gavine earnestly. "I really think I'm going to get my wish. But I wish I could think with Chuckles that God would put His hand over mine to prevent mistakes."

"He will if you ask Him," said Sidney earnestly. "Only, if you want to be a successful builder, be sure about your foundation."

"How do you mean?"

"Chuckles and I began with the stories of the houses on the rock and sand. Don't build on sand; it will only court disaster. It says in the Bible: 'Other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.' "

"Oh, do talk to me, Miss Urquhart," said Gavine in a voice which vibrated with earnest longing. "Jockie said you would. I want to know so much. I want to get satisfied."

Sidney gave a little happy laugh as she tucked Gavine's arm within hers.

"You poor child! Talking is easy, but the right talk is what we want. And I don't quite know where you are."

"I don't know where I am myself," said Gavine, "except that long ago I felt that life would not bring me sunshine, so I determined that it should bring me work. But I seem thwarted on all sides. Now, it is true, I feel light is coming, but it has been obtained at tremendous cost. My mother has been long in coming round to my point of view, and she has told me definitely that, as I wish to take up work, I must look upon it as my profession or vocation in life, and never count again upon her house as my home. It makes me feel bitter, but it is happier to have a complete understanding between us. We haven't an idea in common. She says I am my father's daughter, and she never cared about him; it is no good to pretend she did. All my life I have been hoping she would have me with her, and let me take care of her and work for her. It has been one series of hopes and disappointments. Now it has come to a crisis, and it is better so. I can learn to stand alone. Many girls would glory in such freedom. I have £80 a year of my own now, for I was twenty-one last week. But though work is coming to me, it has not as yet made me really happy, and I am wondering if it will. I suppose it doesn't matter about being happy, does it? But you carry it about in your face. I was

watching you to-day. I know you feel sad sometimes. I—don't laugh—but Jockie and I love looking at your face. It is so beautiful, and has so many changes in it. Before Chuckles began to talk, conversation was a little effort to you, and your thoughts were far away; then, when he began to talk about building, light and gladness crept into your eyes and the merry ring into your voice. You looked as if you were brimming over with happiness, and I felt as if I was outside a house in the cold and rain, looking into a cosy firelit room. Do help me."

Quick tears had sprung into Sidney's eyes. She exclaimed impulsively:

"You shall not go to London till you know how you can be happy, dear. You will want the deep fountains of content inside you to tide you over all the sin and misery that you will see in London's slums. I wish you could come back to dinner with me this evening. Do you think you could? We will send you home."

Gavine's eyes looked very wistful.

"I wish I could. But I don't know whether mother would like it."

"Oh, yes, she will. I will send a note down and say I have kept you; that is the best way. Now let us go on talking. I wonder what foundation you have under your feet? I mean what do you rely on when things go wrong? What is your aim, your hope, your inspiration?"

Gavine's young pulses throbbed, yet her eyes were troubled.

"I think I'm like a watch without a mainspring. I have great ideas of what can be done, what ought to be done, and of what I mean to do, but I don't seem to get the power to do it. I'll confess to you, Miss Urquhart. Jockie has been giving me sick poor to go and see in the village. I've all my life wanted to visit the poor. I've had to content myself with waiting on a sick aunt, and I've felt all my talents were hidden and wasted. Well, I've visited the poor; but, do you know, my tongue has been dumb. What can I say to help or comfort a mother who is doing her share of wage-earning by days out at farms, a mother who gets from her husband thirteen shillings a week, and has eleven children to bring up and fit out in life upon it? What can I say to a partially paralysed old woman who lies in bed day after day alone with her thoughts, and only a dirty cracked ceiling and a dingy coloured wall to feast her eyes upon? It makes me wonder, now I have got the desire of my heart, whether that will turn to dust and ashes when I touch it."

"Why do you want to work so much?" said Sidney softly.

“Why? I don’t know, except that I’ve always had a contempt for wastelings, for idlers, for cumberers of the ground. We’re put into the world to make it better, aren’t we? We have to work our way to heaven. That is my goal. I do think it is. I want to be inside its gates one day. And a lifetime here is only a fragment of eternity, is it not?”

Gavine’s eyes were glowing, her heart was in her words.

“Yes,” said Sidney, “You want to be a builder with the rest of us.”

“I do, I do. I have all the longings for it in the abstract, but I am beginning to doubt myself, to wonder what practical value I am going to be in the world.”

“Oh, Gavine dear, you will be all right if you build on the right foundation. But a creed of good works erected on the sand will topple over before they reach heaven. And it is such dreary work wondering if one has done enough, or will do enough to pay for what has already been paid for. Don’t you know from your Bible that eternal life can never be bought—that it is a gift?”

“We must work out our own salvation,” murmured Gavine.

“Yes, work it out, but it must be given us first. That is such a misunderstood verse. We work, for love compels more forcefully than the desire to escape death. Do you remember St. Paul’s words?—‘And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity,’ or *Love*. Christianity is the gospel of Love. Christ earned heaven for you, He showed His love by dying, and by bearing your sins. He could do no more. When God Himself said, ‘It is finished,’ do you think it needs our puny attempts, even of a lifetime, to add to His scheme of salvation? We can show our gratitude and love to Him by a good life and good work; that is our absolute duty, but when every act pleases the One you love, it is such happy work.”

There was a little silence. Then Gavine squeezed Sidney’s arm, and there was a sound of tears in her voice.

“Oh, Miss Urquhart; I have never had anyone to talk so to me before. Show me how to love Him.”

CHAPTER XII

FRONTIER NEWS

GAVINE stayed to dinner, and afterwards Sidney retired with her over the drawing-room fire, where they had the talk that remained with Gavine for the rest of her life.

Major Urquhart was, of course, only too delighted to take her home, and Mrs. Norman welcomed him in so warmly that Gavine escaped to bed unnoticed. Sleep did not come very soon to her. She had always been a deeply religious girl, but there was now a quickening thrill and fire in her soul that had never been there before, for she had been shown the foundation stone, and simply as a little child she had planted herself upon it.

She opened her window and gazed up into the still blue heavens above her.

"What does anything matter?" she exclaimed in the rapture of her heart's adoration for the One who had become the centre of her life. "If I never get any slum work at all, I can find work to do at home. Wherever I am I can be working, for it is just doing His will and following Him. That is what makes Miss Urquhart so contented and happy in her life. I wondered at it before. Now I understand."

To Sidney, that evening talk had been a tremendous lift and cheer. She had kept a bright face, but her heart had been saddened and fearful over her future. She was not a perfect woman by any means, and in pointing the way to another wayfarer, she had taken a firmer foothold herself.

So the next day dawned for these two with a brighter outlook, and the little frets and chafings of life hardly touched them.

That afternoon the Admiral called Sidney to him.

"I've been reading about Neville's doings. Have you seen the paper? He is making things hum out there. I knew he would."

Sidney sat down at once by her father's side.

"Do read it to me," she cried. "I have neither heard nor seen anything."

"You had better read it yourself. He has been turning out a native collector or commissioner, and the place is up in arms. He found him out in

‘bribery and corruption,’ the usual thing with a native official. But this particular man was the son of a big gun out there, and I’m afraid he has raised a hornet’s nest about his ears. What with the depredations of native robbers, and the corruption of many of the officials, those small outposts are not a treat, I can tell you. I know a little about them. And these Radicals in Parliament are, of course, thrusting their noses into the pie, and calling out that colour and the rights of the native are not being respected.”

Sidney took the paper in her hand with beating heart. Why she was so agitated she could hardly explain to herself. She had written to her “fellow-builder” only a week previously, one of her gay, sweet letters, ending with some earnest bracing words of cheer and stimulation. As she saw his name in print, and his actions criticised and questioned in the House, the warm colour crept into her cheeks. She read an extract from a letter of his which was quoted: “I will sooner resign my post than wink at a system of job and corruption.” And she looked up at her father with glowing eyes.

“What a pity we have not a few more men like him, dad.”

“I’ll write him a line of congratulation,” the Admiral said, turning to his writing-table. “He is standing alone at present; but the Viceroy will back him up. People at home are so terribly afraid of the natives rising that they think nothing of recalling a man who is doing his simple duty. I know all about it. Those who have travelled round the world as I have, see a little farther than these country bumpkins who push themselves into Parliament, and think that any trouble with natives means unjust oppression on our part.”

“I hope they will give him a free hand,” Sidney said. “He told me he had been born under an unlucky star. It would be rather hard to recall him. They couldn’t do it, could they?”

The Admiral shook his head.

“He’ll win his way sooner or later. I always said so, and why not now?”

In a few days’ time they saw from the papers that troops had been called out, and a horde of fanatics had swept down from the hills to join in the mêlée. Sidney watched for the news breathlessly. She was astonished when Gavine appeared one morning and begged to know if the daily paper had come.

“We don’t get ours so soon as the Admiral, and I want to see something in it.”

“It has not come yet. Sit down and wait. It won’t be long now. What is it you want to see, Gavine?”

"Oh, only the account of this row on one of the Indian frontiers."

"Are you interested in it?"

"Very. I know someone out there."

Gavine was blushing. Sidney looked at her in amazement.

"Do confide in me. Father and I are interested too, in someone out there. Do you know Mr. Neville?"

"No, but I've heard of him."

The girl hesitated a little, then, meeting Sidney's affectionate and sympathetic gaze, she faltered.

"It's a young fellow who used to live close to my aunts in the north. We grew up together. We aren't engaged. I did not want to be, but I promised if he still wanted me in three years' time from the day he went out, I would think about it. I wanted him to make his way first. He has been out there two years now, and he writes to me constantly. I feel I could go down on my knees before Mr. Neville, if I were ever to see him, and thank him for all he has done. Because George could not keep straight, and I have suffered tortures as I gathered it in his letters. He is not a weak character, I should not care for him if he were; but he is one of those happy generous natures who love their fellow-creatures, and are too simple to suspect guile in anyone. He was essentially a home boy. His mother was a widow, and died just before he went abroad, so he has no home or home ties to keep him straight—only me. And he did struggle and try so hard when he went out there, but, as far as I can make out, there wasn't a single soul who gave him a helping hand. Everyone dragged him down. And I felt a month or two ago as if I had completely lost him. He had left off writing for five months. Then he wrote again. Such a letter, and such a confession of the past! But he had been taken hold of by Mr. Neville, and he said he felt he could die for him. I little thought how those words would nearly come true. I heard from him two days ago, and he was full of all this that is coming out in the papers, only, of course, he tells me much more. Do you really know Mr. Neville well? How awfully strange. I think he must be a splendid man—a regular hero."

"He was staying down here before he went out," Sidney said, trying to speak calmly. "He is a cousin of Miss Pembroke's. Do tell what you have heard. We are so—so interested in him, and all that is going on out there."

"Oh, George has been full of it. He has told me of all the improvements Mr. Neville has made, and how he has absolutely alone and unaided attacked all the abuses in the place, and pulled things together, and made a clean

sweep of the scoundrels and rogues. But, of course, there has been a section dead against him, and furious with him for stopping so much of the drinking and gambling, so they have made mischief and stirred up the natives; and then he was the cause of the native collector at the neighbouring station being removed, and that was the last straw, and one night—the night before George wrote; he was dining with him fortunately—a crowd of natives surrounded his bungalow. His servants ran away, and the ringleader called out for Mr. Neville to show himself. He didn't want any calling, for he was out on the steps in a moment, and one man with a revolver dashed forward and fired full in his face. George was quicker still, and sprang forward and struck up his hand as he fired, so the shot went clear over the bungalow. He stood there before them bare-headed, with his hands in his pockets, and smiled at them, George said. 'Next man!' he cried. 'I have no firearms about me, and am a good target.' And not a man moved. Then he spoke to them, and George said his speech was simply wonderful. He talked to them like a father might to his children. He told them they had only one life to live down here, and it ought to be a clean life. He was going to help them up, and not down. And then he reasoned with them and pleaded with them, and he reduced some to tears, and some pressed forward and prostrated themselves before him, and the scoundrels slunk away. George said it was like listening to a second Gordon, and Mr. Neville wound up by talking of the Indian and British Empires, which would rise or fall together, and he impressed them with the righteous power of a just nation. Oh, I am not telling it well, but I cried over the letter. It was all so splendid, so inspiring."

Sidney's eyes were moist too, and her heart beating strangely. Why should she be so moved? she asked herself. But, womanlike, she evaded—even to herself—the answer.

"Did he say anything about the troops coming down?"

"Yes; he said that was a very big blunder. Some well-meaning but mistaken fool had written off for them. Mr. Neville told George there would have been no more trouble if the troops had not arrived. As George was writing, he heard that the natives had risen in the hills. And that is why I'm so anxious to get news. I know George will be in the thick of it, for he refuses to leave Mr. Neville's side, and he is not the man to stay inactive."

"Here is the boy with the paper," said Sidney, and she darted out into the hall to get it. Together they bent their heads over it, but there were only two lines, saying that there had been sharp fighting, but the natives had been repulsed, with a few British losses. "Particulars would follow."

“They would have said if any officers or Commissioners had been wounded,” said Sidney. “Now come and tell my father your news, Gavine. He will be so interested. It is such an extraordinary coincidence that you should know someone out there too. How quiet you have kept it.”

“Well, he is only a friend,” said Gavine shyly. “Nothing more at present. You can’t wonder I like Mr. Neville, after all he has done for George.”

She accompanied Sidney to the Admiral’s study, and there told her story again. The Admiral was delighted.

“He’ll do. I always said he’d do. And this fighting is nothing at all. It will clear the air and show that we are in earnest over our out-stations.”

When Gavine had gone Sidney went straight to her writing-desk and wrote:

“My dear Mr. Neville,

“You don’t know what a state of excitement we have been in over your small corner. Father and I have watched for the daily papers eagerly; but how much they omit and how much they misrepresent! Do sit down when you have time and give us a detailed account of all your doings. I have been hearing a lot about you through a girl who has come here lately and is a great friend of young George Lockhart’s. You can understand what we have heard and how it has stirred us. How I wish I could peep through a telescope at you. I should like you to know Gavine Norman. She is such a fine splendid girl. And what you have done for George Lockhart, you have done for her. She was so miserable about him before you went out. Oh, how often I wish I were a man to go out into the world to do and dare! But it is good to be friends with the one who does it. And you must never forget that any detail from your seat of war is welcome. Father is stroking himself down with great complacency, saying he knew, and he foretold, and his intuitions were correct that you would do as you have done.

“Things have not gone on exactly the same since you have left us. Fresh personalities have come upon the scene, and have brought with them much interest, some conjecture and alarm, and a good deal of unrest. I feel as if I am on the brink of an earthquake, an upheaval that will lift father and myself right out of our old home and plant us down in some strange soil and surroundings. It may be a false alarm. If it is not, I will tell you

where we are taken. Monnie tells me that my creed is, 'I shall never be moved.' Have you got your foundation so firm underfoot that you can give your assent to that? My earthquake is a very earthly one. I think—in fact, I know—that my foundation is immovable, so if one's inner man is anchored 'sure and steadfast' to it, it does not matter about the outer man, does it?

"I think you are going ahead with your building faster than I am. But Empire building is a big thing. I do congratulate you with all my heart upon your success. You see, we have heard more of your doings through George Lockhart than through yourself.

"This is not a very interesting letter, but it will at least let you know that we think of you and talk of you, and look forward to your letters. I am always going to sign myself,

"Your fellow-builder,
"SIDNEY URQUHART."

Sidney put her pen down when she had signed her name with a little sigh.

"Oh, how tied a woman is!" she exclaimed; "how she has to keep back all natural expressions of pleasure in what a friend does and says. My heart is too full of his heroism to trust my pen. It would run away with me. I feel I would like to see him. Letters are so stiff, so unsatisfying."

Then she relapsed into dreams—dreams which she had long thought dead, but which kept her wrapped in sweet oblivion of time and surroundings and brought a light to her eyes and a flush upon her cheeks. When she roused herself at last she laughed at herself.

"I ought to know better than to waste my time in such silliness."

And she went downstairs and occupied herself with so many household duties that further dreams were impossible.

The papers for the next few days brought no fresh news except that the British had a complete victory over the rebels, with fifteen dead and thirty wounded. Then one day the names of the wounded were given, and amongst them was Randolph Neville, "slightly wounded in the shoulder." A letter arrived from him later. It was as follows:

"DEAR MISS URQUHART,

"I am enjoying a lull after a storm. I don't know how much you may have seen in the papers from the telegrams sent, but we've been having rather a busy time here. I know I am an unknown quantity, but I suppose I have a better opinion of my powers in dealing with these natives than have my superiors, and I honestly think you would have heard nothing about us if I had been left alone. However, there was a slight disturbance over the ejection of a scamp, and troops came rushing down; and then we had a bit of a shindy, as one of the hill tribes joined in. Now we are quiet again, and I have to nurse my right shoulder, which received a bullet at rather too close quarters to be pleasant. Young Lockhart quite distinguished himself. He will get promotion soon, if I have any influence at headquarters. Well, how are things going down your way? Your letters do more to keep me going, and keep me going cheerily, than any other mortal thing. How do you manage to instil such a breath of sweetness and vigour between such thin sheets of paper? Last night I dreamed that you were sitting in the shadows here singing to me. It was a hot, breathless night, but I could smell the syringa bushes in your garden shrubbery, and I seemed as if I were enveloped in your atmosphere. Some time ago I was cursing the gift of memory; now I am blessing it, for it brings me you. Am I receding farther and farther in the cells of your memory? But no; you are more than good in corresponding with me, and I will not think so meanly of your friendship, which you gave so frankly and warm-heartedly. Excuse this scrawl; my right arm is in a sling. Remember me to the Admiral. I would like a chat with him out here. I enjoyed the society of the soldiers whilst we had them. I put up the colonel and major in my quarters, and discovered that the major had been in my old regiment years ago. We had quite a gossip over old times. I always feel a pang when I think of my exit from the Service. Fighting in politics is such a different thing from real warfare.

"Now they have gone, and I am left undisputed king of my domain, with piles of correspondence to wade through, and reports to write to about twenty different departments. I am neither fish nor fowl, civilian nor soldier, and, *ergo*, I have a variety of masters to serve and can manage to please none. The chances are that I may come back like a bad half-penny to old England. What would your welcome be like, I wonder? It opens a vista of conjecture and possibility to me. Well, I shall for the present go on with my

building, and if I can get this spot wholesomely sweet before I leave it, I shall have done as much as I expected to do.

"Your rather weary fellow-builder,
"RANDOLPH NEVILLE."

Sidney read the greater part of this aloud to her father.

"Men always take things so lightly," she complained. "Now, if that had been a woman who had written, we should have had the fighting in all its awful reality. She would have drawn a vivid picture of the whole; but Mr. Neville dismisses it in a few words."

As she was speaking, Gavine was ushered into the room. She brought up a letter from George Lockhart which she had received by the same mail, so Sidney had her desire given her, for George gave many details about his chief, and told exactly how he was shot in carrying a wounded soldier to safety.

"All has quieted down," he wrote, "and the colonel saw that no more troops would be needed. Mr. Neville holds the whole place in the hollow of his hand. The natives were rather shy and uncertain of him before; now they look upon him as a god. He has gradually and quietly got them in hand, and this upset has brought matters to a crisis and shown them that he will be master. But I believe he has had some bad moments himself, when he was expecting a recall. In fact, all one day wires were hard at work undoing slanderous reports. He never says much, but he let out to me when we were having a chat together that if he was not allowed a free hand, and if they were suspicious of his motives at home, he would clear out at twenty-four hours' notice. And he would, too. And the Government would lose one of the best men out."

"I thought you would like to hear this," said Gavine simply. "George is very enthusiastic over Mr. Neville, but he knows him better than anyone else."

Sidney thanked her warmly for her news, and for some time the Admiral and the two girls discussed the situation. Then Sidney asked Gavine about herself. There had been delay about her going up to town, and she had not yet left her mother, but she was hoping to leave the very next day.

"I never thought I should be so sorry to go," she confided to Sidney as she stood on the terrace outside the house wishing her friend good-bye. "I felt I should miss Jockie, but I shall miss *you* a thousand times more."

Sidney did not laugh at her girlish infatuation, she kissed her tenderly.

“We will write to each other, and you must come and stop with us next time you visit this part.”

For an instant Gavine looked as if she were about to say something; then she checked herself, and it remained unsaid.

Yet, as she went down the drive a few minutes later, she murmured to herself:

“I wonder if she guesses. I could not tell her my fears, for, after all, I may be mistaken, and I am not the one to talk of my own mother.”

CHAPTER XIII

THE MAJOR'S NEWS

THE very next day Jockie burst in upon Sidney like a whirlwind.

"Oh, Miss Urquhart, haven't you a contempt for women who scratch each other? Mrs. Norman and I have been doing it with smiling faces, and I feel disgusted with myself, and yet I would do it again gladly if she were here to provoke me. Do let me confess to you. First of all, of course, you know that the Major and she are on the eve of making their engagement known?"

"Oh, Jockie!"

"Yes; and I ought to cut off my right hand, for I, and no other, have brought it all to pass. If I once begin confessing, there will be no end to it. You remember that Austin got the wrong letter sent to him, and it had the effect of choking him off? Well, one afternoon I was cycling down to see if I could get hold of Gavine, when I saw Mrs. Norman flying up the road without a hat on, and looking perfectly distracted. 'What is the matter?' I said. 'Oh,' she gasped, 'I want to catch the postman. I have enclosed a letter in a wrong envelope.'

" 'I'm afraid you're too late,' I said. 'I passed the postman ages ago.' 'Oh,' she cried, 'it is so important; I must try to get it back from the post office. Could you—would you help me. You could cycle in a few minutes to the office. A mile would be nothing to you.'

" 'All right, I'll go,' I said, and I cycled off. Neither she nor I thought of mentioning the address or the letter, so when I got to the post office I was quite in ignorance. But the postman was very obliging. I caught him up before he got to the post office, and he opened his bag and took out two letters addressed in Mrs. Norman's writing. One was to Austin, the other to Whiteley's, in London. For one moment I hesitated, and then I knew that she would not be in such a ferment over a tradesman, and I felt that if Austin got the letter it might possibly show him what a fool he was, and so I deliberately took Whiteley's, and slowly made my way back to the cottage. Now don't be disgusted with me! I thought the end would justify the means. I really almost felt sorry for her when I saw her face. But she couldn't say much, except that I had brought the wrong letter, and that in her agitation

she omitted to tell me which one it was. Now I see what I have done, and I have brought trouble on the one I love best. But I didn't realise that if it was not Austin it would be the Major. Of course, since Austin has gone off the Major has been down there every day, and Gavine has tried her utmost to keep out of their way, but was unfortunate yesterday, as she surprised them in the midst of an embrace. Oh, perhaps I had better not go on. I am paining you."

Jockie's blunt speech was like salt on a raw wound to Sidney's soul. She could not bear hearing of her uncle's infatuation for the widow; though she was conscious of the truth of it. But she said very quietly:

"I should like to hear all you have to tell me."

"Well," said Jockie, "I come back to where I started. I had to take a message about some committee meeting to Mrs. de Cressiers this afternoon. Uncle John sent me. I found Mrs. Norman there before me. She had evidently been telling Mrs. de Cressiers how she had refused Austin, for as I came in she was saying:

" 'I will not say that I did not think of you in it, dear Mrs. de Cressiers, for I knew that his continued absence from home must be most trying to his father. And I thought the sooner it was stopped the better. The whole thing was foolishness. I regarded him, and shall always regard him, as I should if I had a son of my own. But young men are so rash and headstrong that they cannot, and will not, see themselves as others see them.'

"Then I came in and gave my message. Mrs. de Cressiers is always nice to me. I like her. Then Mrs. Norman asked me if I had been with Gavine.

" 'I see so little of her that I am afraid I shall not miss her so much as I ought when she leaves me. It is quite a characteristic of the young people nowadays, is it not, Mrs. de Cressiers, to be happiest away from home with strangers? If girls have parents, they will not be content to live with them.'

"I knew she was hitting at me, as well as at Gavine, so I said:

" 'It depends on the parents, Mrs. Norman. Parents nowadays are always on the lookout for a second marriage, and find their daughters in the way. Gavine and I have had pretty much the same experience.'

"Mrs. de Cressiers was quite shocked at my rudeness.

" 'Respect to parents is dying out,' she said with a little sigh. 'I am afraid Austin does not care for his home.'

“ ‘He will be different now when he comes home,’ I said consolingly. ‘He told me he was thankful he had had his eyes opened, for he had been the biggest fool out. And he means to be a model son, Mrs. de Cressiers. We had a lot of talk together at Christmas time. It will do him good going abroad.’

“Then Mrs. Norman began to talk about the parish, and how unfortunate it was that Uncle John had no woman to advise him, and how many mistakes there seem to have been made this Christmas, and then I said——”

“My dear Jockie, please spare me any more. It is not interesting or edifying, and if you are going to indulge in such petty, spiteful retaliation with people whom you do not like, you will do yourself more harm than you will do them.”

Sidney spoke severely. Jockie kissed her impulsively.

“Don’t be angry with me. She brings out all the evil in me. You always make me feel ashamed of myself. And I honestly own that it was a beastly trick to play her when I took back the wrong letter, but I went down under the temptation.”

“I could not have believed you would do such a thing,” said Sidney, still unappeased.

“No; scold me well! I’m awfully repentant. But if I went and confessed it to her she would be still more furious, would she not? For, of course, she does not know I saw the other letter. I could tell her I knew all about it. Shall I?”

“Jockie, are you an imp in disguise? Do you think you are fitted to teach Chuckles?”

“No, that I’m not.”

And this time Jockie spoke quite humbly.

“But, oh, Miss Urquhart, I have done you an awful lot of mischief. Gavine says her mother told her that she was thinking of marrying again, and she said that the Major was an honourable kind-hearted man. I should hate to have Mrs. Norman enter my family, and if I had left well alone, she would have become Mrs. Austin de Cressiers, and you would have been well rid of her. I never, never shall forgive myself!”

“Now, look here, Jockie, I am going to speak seriously to you. You must not talk so wildly. Sometimes it is best not to put our feelings into words, and you are old enough to understand this. If Mrs. Norman becomes engaged to my uncle, you and I will be told in due time. It is mere

conjecture now. And if the engagement is announced, I shall trust to your discretion not to go stamping all over the village saying you are so sorry for me. If my uncle is happy, I shall be glad for his sake; and you may be sure that neither now, nor at any other time, would I wish to say anything that might hurt his feelings or estrange him from us. You see, I am talking to you quite confidentially. If this thing happens, for my sake keep quiet, and don't make a moan about it. And if"—here Sidney spoke with some hesitation —"if it may not turn out as happily as we could wish, it is perhaps better that an old life should suffer than a young one. So do not reproach yourself too much. Do you understand?"

"I understand that I'm a beast, and you're an angel!" exclaimed Jockie fervently. "And I'll shut my lips and never say a word more on the subject."

Sidney smiled, but her heart failed her at the prospect that lay before her. She chatted to Jockie on different village matters, and sent her home to the Rectory quite happy. Then she went to her father.

She found her uncle having a talk with him in the study, and such an occurrence in the afternoon meant that something of importance was under consideration.

Her father looked up at her with a little relief in his eyes.

"Come along, little woman," he said cheerfully. "Give your Uncle Ted your good wishes. You can guess the news."

Sidney's face blanched. It had come quicker than she expected.

Then she pulled herself together with an effort.

"Are you really going to marry Mrs. Norman?" she said with a smile, turning to her uncle.

Major Urquhart looked her steadily in the eyes.

"Yes," he said, with a mixture of shyness and defiance in his tone. "Don't you think she's very good to take such an old crock as I am?"

Sidney bent and kissed his forehead.

"I think she is fortunate in getting such an awfully nice man to take care of her."

The Admiral laughed.

"Women congratulate women, Ted. Men congratulate men."

“Ah, well,” said the Major, “I must admit my limitations. I know I’m not a catch in any way. I’m not one of those fools that don’t know their own value. I must thank you both for taking my news so well. We’ve lived together these many years very happily, and I shan’t wish for any changes. There’s room enough for us all in the old house, eh?”

Just for a second Sidney’s eyes sought her father’s anxiously, then she said gently:

“I don’t expect we shall wish for any change, Uncle Ted.”

“Will you write her a little friendly note, Sid? I am dining with her this evening. I thought perhaps you’d ask her up to dinner to-morrow night?”

“Yes; most certainly,” said the Admiral, and Sidney added her assent.

A little silence fell on them. Sidney stood on the hearthrug, looking into the blazing fire in front of her. Then her uncle got up.

“Have my chair,” he said. “I’m off to the workshop for half an hour.”

He left the room. Sidney dropped into the big leather chair he had vacated, and drew a long sigh:

“Well, dad dear?”

The Admiral looked at her with a little whimsical smile.

“Our fears have turned into certainty. Now we must buck up, and take it as happily as we can.”

“Does he expect to bring her here, and make us into one happy family?”

“We can but give it a trial.”

“Oh, we can’t—we can’t!”

Sidney’s forced composure gave way. She almost wrung her hands.

“Oh, dad dear, how shall we stand her? It’s impossible! She must not be brought here. It’s bad enough to have to ask her to dinner, but to live in the house with us is awful! Never to be able to get away from her! And it will mean misery to Uncle Ted. She does not really care for him; it must be to get a comfortable home and a position. Think how she has been going on with Austin! She was determined to get one of them, and she really cares for neither of them, or she could not have acted so! What can we do?”

The Admiral leant back in his chair and half shut his eyes.

“If it is not pleasant, we can go away and leave her in possession.”

“But, dad dear, will it come to that? Is the house really not yours? Oh, why won’t Uncle Ted go, and start a house of his own somewhere?”

“He is quite willing to do so, but she is not. I have gathered that from his talk this afternoon. She will be the ruling spirit, I expect.”

The tears came to Sidney’s eyes. She had been expecting—dreading this blow, yet now it had fallen she felt quite stunned and unprepared for it.

“I know she has determined to turn us out.”

Then she stiffened in her chair.

“Dad, you and I must not wait to give her a chance of doing it. We must go at once, before the wedding.”

Her father shook his head at her, with a sad little smile.

“That would be unfair to Ted. He doesn’t want us to go. I somehow think that even now there are times when his heart fails him, when he questions the wisdom of taking such a momentous step at his age. He begged me to stay, and let things be as they are.”

“But if Uncle Ted considers this his house, how can things remain the same? Don’t you see that she will be mistress?”

The Admiral looked quite startled.

“I never thought of that. Well, Sidney, my child, we have each other, and I think we could find a snug little home somewhere else. Wouldn’t you be content to live alone with your old father?”

Sidney left her chair and went over to the Admiral. Getting down on the hearthrug by his side, she rested her head against his knee. It had been her favourite position as a little child, when she had felt a craving for companionship and solace.

“You and I would be happy in a walnut shell,” she said, laughing, and wiping her tear-stained cheeks with her handkerchief. “I think you would feel leaving this house more than I.”

“I dare say I should,” said the Admiral; “but my training in the Service has taught me to view change as promotion, and if it be to an unpopular station now, our Great Commander makes no mistakes.”

He laid his hand caressingly on Sidney’s soft hair as he spoke.

And then Sidney’s eyes glowed with understanding and appreciation, but she could not trust herself to speak. At length she broke the silence.

"I will be thankful for our mercies," she said in her bright natural voice. "Why, there was an awful time soon after she made her first appearance, when I thought she was setting her cap at you. And imagine—don't laugh—let us imagine my feelings when you told me you were giving me such a stepmother. Oh, dad dear, a house—even a dear old house like this—is nothing to give up—nothing! But don't let us wait for her to humble us. My pride is up in arms. I don't think we are called upon to make ourselves into doormats for her feet! Don't say that will be necessary!"

"I think we must wait and see," said the Admiral very firmly. And Sidney dropped her head upon his knee again and was very silent.

They did not talk much more about it. Both their hearts were full of the impending change in their lives, and each was trying to discover bits of cheer which might be passed on to the other.

At last Sidney moved.

"I must go, dad. I suppose I had better write a note for Uncle Ted to give her. Will you write, too?"

"Just a line, perhaps. I have been thinking, dear, that she may prefer a house in town. I am sure she will find this very dull."

"Yes," said Sidney bravely, "perhaps she will. In any case, they are not married yet, and 'there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip.' "

She left the room, and did not take long to write her note:

"Dear Mrs. Norman,

"Uncle Ted has just told me the news. I hope you and he will be very happy together. He has been a most kind uncle to me ever since I can remember him, and I am glad for his sake if he has got someone besides us to love and care for him now. Will you come up to dine with us to-morrow night?

"Yours very sincerely,
"Sidney Urquhart."

She went to the workshop and gave this into her uncle's hand. He looked a little wistfully at her.

"I hope my news has not annoyed you—worried you?"

"Oh, Uncle Ted, why should it? I don't grudge you your happiness. If I was sure, quite sure, that it would be for your lasting happiness, I would be

delighted."

"You have my word that it will. And if Ethel comes to-morrow you will be nice to her, will you not? She has an idea you don't like her, and no one has ever disliked her before, she says."

"Is Gavine going to-morrow?"

"Yes, I—I think so. I heard her mother say something about it, but I did not take much notice."

"If she does not go, will you ask her to come with her mother? She is a dear girl. I am very fond of her."

He shook his head.

"Rather too headstrong for me. She has not the sweet clinging nature of her mother."

Sidney turned away.

"Thank God, no!" she murmured to herself.

The next morning, as soon as she was set free from her housekeeping duties, she tramped off to see Monica. She had a great difficulty in finding her, but eventually came upon her looking after some ewes with their tiny lambs. It was a cold day, and she was superintending a rough shelter being put up for them in a field.

"Poor mites!" said Monica, looking at the tiny bleating creatures ambling round their mothers, who did not seem to know how to protect them properly from the wind. "What an unfriendly world they have come into! How they must long to go out of it again."

"Yes," said Sidney gravely. "But if we were all granted our wishes, what a lot of hurried exits there would be from this world."

"What has happened?" Monica asked, pulling on her leather gloves and taking Sidney's arm. "Let us get out of this field and tramp the high road for a bit, shall we? I have nothing particular to do at this present moment."

"I want you to come to dinner to-night. You must not fail me. I never shall be able to get through alone. It is to welcome the future Mrs. Edward Urquhart into our family."

"Really? Oh, Sidney dear, I am sorry."

"You must not express regrets. We must carry it off happily and cheerily."

“Then I think you had better have Jockie, not me.”

“It is you I want. Jockie is the last person who will be asked to meet her. She is very naughty about her.”

“She does not hide her dislike to her, I own. Well, Sidney, our fears have come true. You see, there was never anything between her and Austin. I always felt that she was much more attracted to your uncle. Don’t you think they will make their home somewhere else? If so, it will not affect you much.”

Sidney shook her head.

“It will be us who will have to make our home elsewhere. I am perfectly certain she covets the old house and grounds. I don’t say so to father. I think it will break his heart if he has to go. He loves his grandfather’s guns on the terrace.”

“I have never heard the history of them.”

“Oh, they were the guns of his ship that he commanded under Nelson. And when the ship was broken up, and the guns became obsolete, he got possession of them. I see father stroking them down sometimes, as if they were live creatures. One thing is certain—that we shall never be able to live all together in one house. I know you think me prejudiced, Monnie, but Mrs. Norman has disliked me from the very first moment she saw me. There is some instinctive antipathy between us. I felt it, too.”

Monica looked very grave.

“Jockie has been saying something of the same sort. She is like a little tiger where you are concerned.”

“You see,” Sidney went on, feeling it a relief to unburden her mind to someone; “it is not only from a selfish point of view that I dislike the thought of the marriage, but she is not true or sincere, and does not really care for Uncle Ted. She only cares for the home and the position that he can give her. She has laughed at him, and made fun of his failings to Austin in a most heartless way. She has called him an old bore. What chance is there of her making him a good wife? And Uncle Ted is too nice a man to be so deceived. It is such a miserable outlook for us all. I know you rather like her, and so does Mrs. de Cressiers. She has made you both believe that she refused Austin and sent him away. Now I know for a fact that he gave her up because he found her out. That makes a lot of difference.”

“Yes, it does,” said Monica slowly. “Well, I will come if my presence helps you, Sidney dear. It seems rather a disaster; it certainly will be a terrible one if you leave your home. Is it quite an established fact that the house is your uncle’s, and not your father’s?”

“They both went into Pegborough the other day to see their lawyer about it. Legally it is Uncle Ted’s; morally, I say, it belongs to dad. But in any case, father would not turn Uncle Ted out, and it will be quite an impossibility to live together when once they are married. How is the boy?”

“He is pegging away at his lessons. He told me yesterday that he won’t be a farmer.”

“Oh, Monnie, don’t look so tragical!”

Sidney began to laugh. For a moment she forgot her own troubles.

“Why do you pay so much attention to a baby’s words?”

“Because I’m so dreadfully in earnest, I suppose. If he grows up with a dislike to farming, what am I to do?”

“I think it will be a good thing when you send him to school. You will find that when he comes back in the holidays he will love every stick and stone in the place.”

Monica smiled a little.

“Aunt Dannie has been depressing me to-day. She says Chuckles hates coming the round of the farm with me. I always like him to be with me in the afternoon.”

“I think,” said Sidney slowly, “I should let him consider that a treat, not an obligation. Send him to the Rectory some afternoons for a change.”

“I will,” said Monica firmly. “I am coming to the conclusion that I am too old a woman to have the care of a little child. He wants someone brighter and younger.”

“He is a very fortunate little boy, Monnie, and he has a young bright governess. What else does he want? Good-bye. Don’t torture your old head with your delinquencies as an aunt. You are all that you ought to be. Good-bye till to-night.”

She waved her hand as she parted from her friend, and went her way, softly singing to herself Longfellow’s lines:

“Ah! what would the world be to us
If the children were no more?
We should dread the desert behind us
Worse than the dark before.

“What the leaves are to the forest,
With light and air for food,
Ere their sweet and tender juices
Have been hardened into wood.

“That to the world are children,
Through them it feels the glow
Of a brighter and sunnier climate
Than reaches the trunks below.”

CHAPTER XIV

A DIFFICULT TIME

MONICA, in a grey silk gown, and Sidney, in a russet-brown velvet with old point lace, stood in the drawing-room, warming their feet on the fender and waiting for Mrs. Norman's arrival. The Admiral met her in a friendly fashion in the hall, and brought her in. Her gown was of a heliotrope satin; it fitted her like a sheath; her dark hair was bound with silver braid and an aigrette; her complexion was, to even Monica's eyes, slightly made up with rouge and powder. But her manner was sweet and gracious, and had a touch of deference in it to the Admiral.

She took hold of both Sidney's hands, but did not offer to kiss her.

"You are a dear girl to send me such a sweet note! It took away all hesitation on my part about coming to-night. How nice to see you, Miss Pembroke! This is quite an unexpected pleasure."

"I hope you don't consider I shall be in the way," said Monica, with her grave smile. "I told Sidney that I had qualms about inserting myself into such a family party. But she and I are almost like sisters, so you will understand that I am glad to have an opportunity of offering you my congratulations."

"Thank you very much. I have really known you as long as I have Sidney, have I not?"

The easy way in which she uttered Sidney's name made the girl start, but she said nothing. The ice was broken, and, sitting down, conversation became general. Major Urquhart was the only one who was rather silent, but his eyes followed every gesture of the widow's, and his ears were only open to her words. When the ladies were in the drawing-room after dinner Mrs. Norman seated herself on the sofa by Monica.

"I can't tell you how this has upset my quiet monotonous life! I had so little idea when I came here what would happen. And my heart is still in my little cottage, which I have made so pretty. It will be a great blow to leave it."

Sidney got up and moved about the room rather restlessly, putting things straight. Why was it, she wondered, that Mrs. Norman always tried to ignore

her in conversation?

“But why should you leave it?” asked Monica in her quiet decided tones. “I should have thought it was an ideal home for two people.”

Mrs. Norman heaved a slight sigh.

CHUCKLES WAS DANCING UP THE GARDEN AFTER JOCKIE AND GAVINE BRANDISHING A TROWEL IN HIS HAND (Page 188)

“Men require more room than women, do they not? The Major will not hear of it. And his impatience almost irritates me, if it were not so touching. He wants our marriage to be at once. I believe he thinks a week or so is quite long enough to wait. We mean to go up to town very quietly, and walk into

one of the City churches one day, without any following at all, except the necessary witnesses."

Sidney came across the room and re-seated herself.

"I am sure you are wise in coming to that decision. Poor Uncle Ted has hated crowds all his life. Have you fixed the day yet?"

"Not at present. You may be sure I will tell you when we have."

Sidney gave a little laugh. She could not help it. Then Mrs. Norman addressed herself to her:

"Can you spare time to-morrow to show me over the house, Sidney dear? Your uncle is very anxious that I should have the choice of rooms. He wants me to have a little boudoir of my own upstairs, but you are not cramped for room at all, are you? So there will be no difficulty about that. He wanted me to come over yesterday, but I said 'No, I will speak to Sidney first.' "

"I will take you over the house whenever you like," said Sidney.

"Thank you. It is a dear old rambling place, is it not? And your old-fashioned bits of furniture seem to suit it. Don't be afraid that I shall make any changes. I am not fond of these comfortless modern rooms. As long as my own room is according to my taste, I shall leave the rest of the house as it is, and I hope, my dear Sidney, we shall be very happy together. I do not see any reason why we should not be. You will have your father to look after, and to be with; I shall have my dear Ted, and if I relieve you of the housekeeping you will have the more time for your outdoor pursuits. Perhaps we shall be able to induce Gavine to spend more of her time at home; a house with young people in it is always cheerful, and I know you like her and she likes you."

Just for a moment Monica's eyes met Sidney's, and she had a glimpse of the misery that was in them. Her friends always said that Sidney's eyes betrayed her.

Sidney was almost breathless with the assurance and sweet determination of the widow, but she held her head high, and smiled as she responded:

"It is early days to talk of our combined households yet, Mrs. Norman. Perhaps it may never come to pass."

"Has Gavine gone away?" Monica called hastily, feeling that the atmosphere might get electric. And in talking of that young lady they veered

away from the subject of the house and housekeeping.

Major Urquhart was the first to return from the dining-room, and he proposed some music.

Sidney sat down and sang with such warmth and sweetness that Monica marvelled at her. But she and the Admiral were the chief audience, for the Major and his ladylove retired to the farther end of the room, where they conversed in low tones until the party broke up.

It was not a comfortable evening, but as Sidney whispered to Monica in the hall as she was helping her into her cloak, "We have got through it amicably, and that was the most that I hoped."

In a few days the neighbourhood received the news, and Mrs. Norman was recognised as the Major's fiancée. Mrs. de Cressiers could not conceal from Sidney the relief which this turn of affairs had brought to her.

"So much more suitable than my poor dear Austin! She was quite true in all she told me. She never had cared for my boy. It was a very one-sided attachment."

And Sidney and her father just waited on, saying very little to outsiders, but feeling all the more. It was a difficult time to them, and Sidney's spirits, though generally good, fluctuated occasionally.

After her inspection of the house Mrs. Norman did not trouble them much with her company, but the Major talked of nothing but her wishes and her views and her likings, until even the Admiral began to lose his equanimity of temper. One day there was a question raised about the guns on the Terrace.

"Ethel wants to know if you would mind very much if they were moved. She says they spoil that bit of lawn. I told her you were attached to them, but they wouldn't look bad in the field on the edge of the cliff. She says they would show a more imposing front there to the public up and down the river."

Then the Admiral turned upon his brother.

"Look here, Ted, if those guns go, I go too. You know they've been part of the soil for a couple of generations. For goodness' sake, man, let your future wife keep to her own province, and not meddle with our family trophies. And let her have a right to our name before she begins to turn our household topsy-turvy."

Major Urquhart said a bad word and flung himself out of the room. From being good-tempered and in high spirits he relapsed into sullenness and gloom, and spent all his days down at the cottage. Sidney guessed that Mrs. Norman was quietly and steadily exerting all her powers to estrange him from her and her father. But her heart ached for him, as she knew he was being used as the widow's mouth-piece, and did not like the business.

The wedding-day was fixed, and Sidney packed her uncle's portmanteaux and thought of everything for him. By Mrs. Norman's wish none of the family were to come up to it. They were going to Paris for a fortnight, and then coming straight to The Anchorage.

Just before the Major left the house he found Sidney tidying in his dressing-room. She put her hands affectionately on his shoulders.

"Oh, dear Uncle Ted, I do wish you happiness."

He looked at her wistfully.

"I do believe you do," he said. "I'm—I'm rather too old for this kind of thing. It makes me feel nervous. But I wish you felt nicer in your heart towards Ethel. It always gives me an uncomfortable feeling when you are talking together."

He shook his head as he spoke.

"Now, look here," said Sidney with earnestness, "if we aren't a happy family when we all settle in together, you must let father and me slip away from you, and then there will be no friction. We mustn't live at warfare with one another. We will see how things work. You have told father you don't want him to go, but I won't have him stay here if he is miserable."

"No, no," the Major said hastily. "We will see, as you say. Why shouldn't we go on as we have done all these years? And I won't have those guns moved. I have told her so. We've been very good friends, little Sid, have we not? We shall pull together all right." But when he had gone Sidney went away to her room and had a good cry.

She knew that the old days were gone, and would never come back again; that nothing would ever be the same when Mrs. Norman came to live in their midst.

And then she poured out her soul in prayer, and rose from her knees with a bright and steadfast spirit.

"I will make father happy anywhere. I must. If it were not for his feelings I would set to work at once to find a fresh home. But he will break

his heart if he has to leave this. God knows about it, and He loves dad better than I do. I will trust Him to do what He sees best. And meanwhile we shall have a very happy fortnight together."

Jockie kept Sidney bright at this juncture. She was always popping in at unexpected times and giving her news of Chuckles, or of the village, and no one could be in her presence long without being infected by her spirit of mirth. She learnt to be very silent on the subject of the absent bride and bridegroom, for she saw her outspoken remarks were neither palatable to Sidney nor her father, and, as she wisely remarked to Monica:

"Now the thing is done it's no good to sit down and moan about it. We must all grin and bear it."

Gavine had said very little in her letters about her mother. She wrote to Sidney long details of her work, and said she was very happy.

"Yet the work would not have made me happy," she wrote; "there is so much that is depressing and disheartening. But after that wonderful talk I had with you I see things so differently. And I really do feel now that one's Foundation is the only comfort in life. When I visit the sick, and realise how little I can relieve their pain, I know I can tell them of the certain cure for their weary, sin-stained souls. And hope, glad hope, of our good time by and by, is better than any doctor's tonic."

Sidney kept up a brisk correspondence with her, for she felt that she had been brought into touch with her to help her. And Gavine wrote to Jockie that "Miss Urquhart's letters were like 'angels' messages.' "

The fortnight flew by, and then came the arrival of the bride and bridegroom.

Major Urquhart looked bright, but there were times when a nervous flicker of his eyelids and an anxious look in his eyes betrayed a want of ease in his wife's society. She was, as usual, sweetness itself, and expressed herself delighted with her rooms and all the preparations made for their arrival. Only Sidney noticed that a certain sharp inflection of tone had crept into her conversations with her husband. Major Urquhart had never taken the initiative in household matters, and was with the greatest difficulty prevailed upon to do so now. He could not understand his wife's continual hints and suggestions, and would say bluntly:

"Well, ask Vernon; he'll see to it, or else Sidney will."

The situation was a tense and difficult one to all. One thing Major Urquhart utterly refused to do, and that was to sit at the head of the table.

Sidney relinquished her seat at once, and Mrs. Urquhart promptly took it, but the Admiral faced her.

Before very long Sidney came to her father:

"We cannot continue to live here, dad dear. It will be a ceaseless fret to all of us. I have given over the housekeeping to her, and she is altering all the hours of everything, just for the mere sake of changing our ordinary routine. There is no reason in it. I asked for the pony carriage yesterday, and could not have it. To-day I have asked again, but she has again ordered it for her own use. She is pulling down the outside greenhouse, and a conservatory is going to be built on to the hall. I don't know where the money is coming from. And she has just told me that some friends of hers are coming down for the week-end, and she is afraid she will have to ask me to give up my room and move up to the top floor whilst they are here. I never make a single objection to anything she says, but the more I acquiesce the more she demands. What are we to do?"

The Admiral looked at his daughter with troubled eyes.

"I am afraid she resents our presence here. Well, little girl, if we have to go, we must. Would you like to come up to town for a month or two before we settle down again?"

Sidney's face flushed and sparkled with pleasure. She had never been able to induce her father to stay long in London at any time. She had often longed to see a little more life, and renew her friendship with old school friends and distant relations, but would not leave her father. Such a prospect before her seemed to take all the sting out of her present circumstances.

"Why, dad, that will be delightful! Let us go at once! We can say it is for a visit, and it will be better for them to settle down alone together."

They planned it all out, and at dinner that evening, after the servants left the room, Mrs. Urquhart again mentioned her coming visitors.

"They are such charming people. Surely you have met them? She is a niece of Lord Berrydown's, and her sister, who lives with her, is quite one of Society's beauties. I met them abroad a few years ago, and we were the greatest friends. They have just let their flat in town. He is ordered into the country for a rest. He has had a kind of nervous breakdown—so sad for a man! But he is a scholar, and has been working too hard at deciphering some old Persian books. I thought you would let him have the run of your study, Vernon. He will enjoy your library, and he will be able to lie on your couch

by the window, and read and smoke by the hour together, looking out on that lovely peep of the river."

The Admiral smiled; he could not help it. It was his turn now, he felt, to be ousted from his quiet retreat, which had hitherto been monopolised solely by himself and his daughter.

Sidney never betrayed a sign of vexation. Her father marvelled at her perfect self-control.

"That will be very pleasant for him," she said, meeting Mrs. Urquhart's eyes with serene equanimity. "I hope the change down here will do him good, poor man! It will fit in very well, for father and I are going up to town the end of this week."

"To town!" the Major blurted out. "Why, Vernon, you hate it! You never told me you meant to go. I—I don't see how we're to get on without you here to entertain these people."

He looked helplessly at his wife. If Sidney's statement was news to her, she never showed her surprise, but went on peeling her walnuts with an unconcerned air.

"My dear Ted," she said, "I would not think of troubling Vernon to entertain my friends. That is the last thing I should wish or expect. If Sidney wants her father to go to town with her, I should not dream of raising any objections to it."

"The fact is," the Admiral said pleasantly, "we have come to the conclusion that we would like a little change. Sidney has been such a thorough housekeeper that she was always chary of leaving her duties up to now, but she is free from that, and Ethel and you, Ted, will be quite equal to run the house in our absence. It is good for me to be routed out of my quiet groove. And I think Sidney and I will get much enjoyment out of our little jaunt together."

"I should think we would!" murmured Sidney, smiling contentedly to herself.

It was arranged very easily. Sidney went over to see Monica before she went, and her news was received with much approbation.

"It's the best thing that you can do," said Monica heartily. "I think you are all in very difficult circumstances at present. Things will shake down, and you will be able to see much more clearly when you return how to act for the best."

“Yes,” Sidney replied. “But, oh, Monica, I never quite imagined it would be as bad as it is. You see, Ethel never loses her temper, and I think I keep mine in pretty tight control; but my feelings and my bottled-up anger inside are terrible! She knows how to cut, and she seems to delight in picking out the weak points in one’s armour. Dad and I have not a corner in the house now where we can retire and be undisturbed. Her energy is ceaseless; so is her passion for altering furniture and every habit of our quiet household.”

Monica looked distressed.

“I am afraid you will not be able to live together.”

“I am certain we shall not. Well, as you say, we shall see, and meanwhile dad and I are going to town, and it will be enchanting! One gets the sun with the clouds, doesn’t one? They come after each other in pretty quick succession. I don’t think you’re looking very well, Monnie. Tell me how things are going with you.”

“I’m having an anxious time. My right hand, as I call him, is leaving me. He is going to set up for himself in Canada.”

“Not John Bayley?”

“Yes. Of course, I can get another man to take his place, and I know enough myself to see that he does all that is required, but I shall be busier than ever. John has saved me so much.”

“I think that is quite a disaster,” said Sidney.

Monica laughed.

“No, it’s a set-back. I’m going through all the accounts with John. This last year has not been a prosperous one, but the previous ones have, and it will only mean harder work for me till the new man has learnt my ways. There is nothing to be anxious about, only sometimes a wave of doubt seems to sweep over me; and when I doubt myself and my powers, the outlook seems very black.”

“I did not know that you *could* doubt your powers,” said Sidney, laughing.

Monica smiled, too.

“You always have thought me too self-sufficient, haven’t you? But I don’t often get a fit of blues. I have quite decided to send Chuckles to boarding-school after Easter.”

“I believe that is at the bottom of your depression. You don’t like losing him. I’m sure I shall miss him on Sundays dreadfully. And just while I am away, will you let Jockie teach him on Sunday afternoons? It will do her good as well as him.”

“If she is willing to be saddled with him, I shall be very glad.”

After a little more talk, Sidney said good-bye and left. She paid one more visit, and that was to Mrs. de Cressiers, but she did not confide in her. She simply stated the fact that she and her father were going up to town.

Mrs. de Cressiers thought it a very good plan.

“Your dear father moves about so seldom that the change will do him good. And now, Sidney, what is this about your handing over the reins of government to your uncle’s wife? Is that wise of you? You are not a very young girl, and are undoubtedly the proper mistress there. I cannot imagine why your uncle does not get a house for himself and his wife. He must do so before long. A joint household is always a failure.”

“If it is,” Sidney said quietly, “father and I mean to go and leave them in possession.”

“My dear girl, what do you mean?”

“It is something we have discovered lately—the house is legally my uncle’s. I cannot go into details. We have lived together many years without any necessity for making this known; in fact, we were not aware of it ourselves till lately.”

“But I happen to remember and to know more than you do, Sidney,” said Mrs. de Cressiers gravely. “I remember when your grandfather died, and when your uncle was ‘sowing his wild oats,’ as people say. He sent word he did not want to take the house and would not settle down, and then sold it to your father.”

“I did not know you remembered it all,” faltered Sidney. “Well, there was no legal transaction between them, it seems, and——”

“But your uncle is an honourable man.”

“Oh, yes—yes; but please don’t talk of the past or refer to it. Mrs. Urquhart does not see it as we do; she worries him till he begins to look at things in a different light; and we have decided that we had better go—at least, I think we shall do so. Nothing is absolutely settled yet.”

Mrs. de Cressiers looked almost dazed.

“I shall begin to think as hardly of her as Jockie does. That girl is a strange mixture. Do you know she has been coming up and playing draughts with my poor husband, and chatting away to him so entertainingly that he quite enjoys her visits. But, my dear Sidney, you and your father must not leave this neighbourhood. You really must not. Why, it will break your father’s heart. He is bound up with that house and those old guns. I shall have to go down and have a talk with your uncle, I think.”

The colour mounted in Sidney’s cheeks. She raised her head proudly.

“I hope you will do nothing of the sort. If we go, it will be because we prefer to do it. There is no question of expulsion.”

Mrs. de Cressiers smiled, and patted Sidney on the shoulder.

“I always like to see your de Cressiers blood come to the fore. Go to London, my dear, and things will be different when you return.”

So Sidney and her father departed, having the sanction of their dearest friends; and Mrs. Ted Urquhart watched them go with a triumphant heart, for she meant to reign supreme, and she knew that this step would further her resolve.

CHAPTER XV

THE GUNS

A FORTNIGHT in town soon slipped away; and then the fortnight lengthened into a month. The Admiral and his daughter found many old friends, and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. They stayed at a quiet private hotel, and took life more easily than did most of those around them. Sidney saw a great deal of Gavine, who spent all the time she could spare away from her work with them. She did not talk much of her mother; it had never been her way to do so; but one day, when she was wishing Sidney good night, she clung to her for a minute and whispered:

"Oh, do tell me—is it because of *her* that you have come away? I can't tell you what torture it is to me to think that we have brought trouble into your family."

"My dear Gavine, nothing has happened except that which God has overruled. I am quite positive of this, and you have nothing in the world to do with it. I am only too delighted to have a holiday from housekeeping, and my father is thoroughly enjoying himself."

AS AUSTIN CAME IN JOCKIE LOOKED UP AT HIM WITH HER MISCHIEVOUS SMILE
(Page 316)

“But you will never be able to stand it when you go back. I have been through a little of it, so I know.”

Sidney smiled bravely as she kissed her.

“I feel I can stand anything as long as dad and I are together. A house, after all, is not the chief happiness in one’s life. And if we were to move into another place, it would still be home to me.”

Gavine said no more, and never referred to the subject again.

Spring was already showing its hand in the London squares and parks when Sidney and her father turned their steps homewards. As they sped through the fresh green meadows, and noted the budding copses and woods by the side of the railway line, the Admiral said:

“It is good to be going home, little girl. I have already my old craving for the salt sea breeze and the sweet smell of the country.”

Sidney nodded, but could not trust herself to speak. Her heart felt as heavy as lead. She gazed out of the carriage window with misty eyes, and longed that the end of their journey should come, so that her fears might either be certainties or be proved groundless.

The hired cab was at the station to meet them, and the stationmaster, as usual, had a little pleasant chat with the Admiral.

“Saw the Major down here yesterday, sir. A deal of company since you’ve been away.”

“I wonder if the company has departed,” Sidney said to her father, as they were driving up together.

“I should hope so,” her father said; then he turned to her with his cheeriest smile. “Remember, little woman, we have quite made up our minds that we are going home to pack up our things and flit. We’ll be a happy party till then, I hope.”

“We will try to be,” said Sidney valiantly.

Mrs. Urquhart met them in the hall, and welcomed them back in her sweet gracious way. But when the Admiral went into his study, which—manlike—was the first room he entered, he drew in a long breath of surprise and consternation. It was almost entirely transformed. A whole row of some of his choicest books had disappeared, some old oil paintings—family portraits—had been taken away and cheap prints hung in their places on the wall. Two big lounge chairs and an old curiosity cabinet had gone, and only his writing-table had remained as he had left it. There was no fire in the room, and it looked cold and dreary. Hearing her father exclaim, Sidney stepped in after him, and her eyes flashed with indignation.

“How dare she interfere with your room!”

"Won't you come to tea?" said Mrs. Urquhart, following them in. "I know you won't mind, Vernon, but I took the opportunity when you were away to make a few alterations in your room. You see, when we have visitors it is so very awkward to have no sitting-room apart from using your study, so with some manipulation I have made a very cosy sitting-room out of the lumber-room at the end of the passage. I wanted to leave you undisturbed in your own room, but as the Major seemed to dislike the idea of buying new furniture for my venture I have had to collect a few odd bits from different rooms. I don't think I have taken anything that you will really miss."

"My books," said the Admiral.

"I thought I had been most careful in what I chose. I have not taken a single one with your name in it—only your grandfather's and a few of your father's. Of course, those are really the Major's, are they not? They went with the house. I am longing to show you the sitting-room. It looks so cosy! But come and have some tea first. You must be tired with your journey."

"Come along, dad; we will soon get things to rights," said Sidney brightly, linking her arm into her father's and drawing him after her into the cheerful, firelit drawing-room. Then, turning to the parlourmaid, she said quietly: "Light the fire in the Admiral's study at once, Jane. It is too cold for him to be without it."

Jane glanced at Mrs. Urquhart, and then left the room.

"I told her not to light it, Sidney, for we have one in the new sitting-room, and I thought your father would like a chat with the Major there to-night. Ted is devoted to the new room."

"Uncle Ted can come into the study and sit," said Sidney a little shortly. "My father must always have his room and his fire."

"Where is Ted?" asked the Admiral, sitting down by the fire and speaking in his usual pleasant tone.

"He is in the grounds somewhere, directing the gardeners. We are having a good many alterations, which I hope you will consider improvements."

A little later the Major came in. He seemed nervous and ill at ease, and made conversation in jerky tones. Sidney saw that he was manifestly afraid of his wife, for when she left the room for a few moments his whole manner changed. He leant forward eagerly to Sidney:

“I hope you don’t mind the changes, Sid? She’s a wonderful woman! Such energy and enterprise. But I sometimes wish I could pull her in a bit. But you and she together will put things straight. I don’t want anything altered myself. I hope you believe me?”

There was a little wistfulness in his tone.

Sidney reassured him. She was her gay bright self that evening, resolutely suppressing all the tide of anger that rose within her, and trying with all her might to keep her father cheerful. She did not like the look of patient endurance upon his face, the weary dejection in his eyes. She sang some of her old songs to him after dinner, she related their town experiences with great animation, and never let the conversation flag for a moment. Then, when her father went back to his study, she went with him, and sat down on the hearthrug, leaning her head on his knee.

“I did not think it would be so difficult,” said her father slowly.

“To leave this, dad? It won’t be. We must find a nice little house somewhere in the neighbourhood.”

“They say a woman is wrapped up in her possessions,” said her father in the same slow, grave way, “but I begin to feel I must be getting like her. If we go, Sidney, all of it will be new. I don’t know why my heart fails me. I had hoped to carry away my books and some of our family heirlooms—my mother’s picture amongst them, and my wife’s miniature. She evidently does not know who it is. But she is quite right—the house, with its contents, was left to Ted. If he has it, he has it all.”

“You have me,” said Sidney, trying to laugh, but a lump rose in her throat, and a choke was in her voice.

Her father caressed her hair gently with his hand.

“Yes, my little Sid. You will never fail me. What is that verse? ‘A man’s life consisteth not in what he hath.’ Is that how it goes?”

“ ‘A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth,’ ” quoted Sidney. “But, father dear, there are quantities of things in the house which are really yours, and which we can take. We won’t worry about it to-night. You are looking so tired. Don’t sit up late, will you? And if you would rather stay on here, don’t think of me. I will willingly do it.”

“No; it is only that I feel my age to-night. I have not the buoyancy I had. The thought of a move into a strange house is not a cheerful one. But I dare

say I am tired with the journey. I shall be more myself to-morrow, and we can discuss the question then."

Sidney kissed her father passionately when she wished him good-night. She was very near tears herself. She could bear slights to herself, but not to her father, and when she met Mrs. Urquhart in the hall her head was high and her voice remote and distant in its tone.

"I shall be glad if you will return my mother's picture. It was over the mantelpiece in the study. That does not belong to Uncle Ted."

"Oh, I am so sorry. The picture of a young girl in white? I thought Ted told me it was a sister who died. She is rather like your father in face, don't you think so? You mustn't be vexed with me, my dear Sidney, for trying to improve this old house. It really was sadly in want of a little renovation and change. I know old people don't like change as a rule, but I have always found men better than women in that respect, and I think that if you show a little of your good sense, you will soon persuade your father to welcome my improvements."

"I don't think that will be necessary," said Sidney, looking at her with quiet dignity, "for we shall not be here much longer. My father and I are going to make ourselves another home."

"That is very sensible of you. It is a mistake to have amalgamated households, and quite as difficult for me as for you. I am sure Ted will be pleased to hear of that arrangement. Are you going to bed? Good-night."

And as she swept off to join her husband in the sitting-room triumph was in her eyes.

Sidney went upstairs and cried bitterly.

The next morning, when she came down to breakfast, she heard that her father had gone out into the garden. For a moment she thought of joining him, but did not do so, as she knew he sometimes liked a quiet time before breakfast, and the morning was a lovely one.

Major Urquhart came to the table more like his old self.

"We have missed you, Sid—haven't we, Ethel? And I always feel a lost dog without your father. He must help me in these new garden plans of ours. I'm always a duffer about flower-beds and vegetables."

Sidney made some vague response. As she glanced out of the window opposite her, she saw a flock of finches and thrushes breakfasting off the green lawn. The lilac and laburnums were coming into full flower, a cherry

tree was white with blossom, and the beds round the house were full of narcissus and daffodils. Beyond the sloping lawns was the river, edged with young larches and copper beech. What a sweet house to leave, she thought; and then she rose from her seat, feeling as if her food would choke her.

"Excuse me," she said to Mrs. Urquhart; "I must go and bring father in. He is forgetting the time."

"I don't think he slept too well," the Major said. "He was pacing his room half the night. My room is just below his, so I heard him."

Sidney stepped out of the French window.

"Oh," she said to herself, "how could he sleep? I believe he will be pretty nearly broken-hearted when it comes to leaving his old home."

She wandered round the garden walks, but nowhere could she see her father. At length she went down to the lower lawn, and there she stood aghast. The turf had been cut and taken up, and the guns which had stood there for so many years were gone! Two or three men were at work. The old gardener was not there. Sidney knew the men—they were labourers in the village.

"Have you seen my father?" she asked.

One of them rubbed his head rather ruefully.

"Yes, miss. The Admiral, he come down an hour ago, and he were proper upset at this job, so he were!"

"Where is he? Where did he go?" Sidney asked impatiently. Oh, why had she not been at hand to comfort him! she thought.

"He went towards the shrubberies, miss, but I reckon he's back at the house long ago."

Sidney turned off at once, and as she walked she mechanically repeated to herself:

" 'I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord is my helper. I will not fear what man shall do unto me.' "

The verses had formed part of her morning reading. She wondered afterwards why they had recurred to her mind at that juncture, as she was not conscious of actual fear, only a longing desire to be with her father and comfort him. The shrubberies were gloomy even on this bright morning. She called her father by name, but there was no response. She was on the point of turning back when she heard the whining of the Admiral's little terrier,

and, coming out at the end of the shrubberies, she saw the dog. There was a rubbish heap against an old wall; half in and half out of a ditch were the guns, and leaning against one of them, with his arms tightly clasped round it, and his head bowed down upon his arms, was her father. For a moment Sidney hesitated to disturb him. This private grief was sacred; she felt she ought not to intrude. And then a well of seething hot anger rose within her. How dared they go to such lengths with these family treasures! She felt as if she could never forgive Mrs. Urquhart for such a wanton proceeding.

"Dad dear!"

Lightly she placed her hand on her father's arm.

"Oh, dad dear, never mind; we can take them away with us, and you will not be separated from them."

There was no movement, no response, and a sudden ghastly fear clutched at Sidney's heart—a fear which was realised a moment later, when she bent over her father and took his hand in hers. The Admiral's body was guarding his beloved guns, but his soul was beyond all earthly treasures. At first she could not believe it. She rushed back to the house and summoned her uncle and the servants.

"Father has fainted; he is ill! Come quick—quick!"

The Major was on the spot first, in spite of his lame leg. He groaned when he saw his brother, and exclaimed:

"These confounded guns! I wish I'd told him last night. I knew it would upset him!"

Carefully and tenderly the Admiral was carried into the house and laid upon his bed. The doctor was not long in coming, but he could do nothing—only testified that it was sudden failure of the heart. He asked if he had been agitated in any way. Sidney was too dazed and stunned to reply, but Mrs. Urquhart was voluble with explanations:

"He has been a month in London, and it evidently has been quite too much for him. He has always led such a very quiet life that the rush and excitement and fatigue of it up there has told upon him. I noticed how grey and drawn his face was when he returned yesterday. I said to my husband that it was a pity his daughter had not brought him home before. Of course, she would have done so, poor girl, if she had known the harm town life was doing him, but he doted on her, and you know how thoughtless young people are when they are enjoying themselves; they don't realise that the old cannot keep pace with them."

Sidney heard all this as in a dream. She did not take it in. Dr. Lanyard, an old friend of the family, raised his eyebrows, but the Major burst forth excitedly, and it was the only time he ever let his feelings get the better of him:

"It's all our doing! Oh, why was I such a fool as to give way about it! His guns were cleared away. It was the last straw! I found him clinging to one. I told Ethel it was a cruel thing to do. I'll never lift up my head again!"

A choke came into his voice, and he hurried out of the room. The doctor turned and followed him. Sidney crept back to her father's room. She would not leave it. The blow had been so sudden, so unexpected, that she could not realise it was true. She knew that her father had not been strong, but he had seemed so much brighter and more active in town that she had had no anxieties about his health, and had never known that his heart was at all weak.

The news spread fast. That afternoon Monica came to the house. One of the old servants begged her to go upstairs to Sidney.

"She's just breaking her heart, ma'am. You may be able to get her to have some food. We've got her out of the room at last, but she's in her own room, and won't come out of it."

Monica went up with a heavy heart. She realised that no earthly comfort could ease Sidney's pain, and in a strange way the words of the parable which Chuckles was so fond of repeating to her came into her mind:

> "The rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house."

" 'Twill be a terrible loss to Miss Urquhart," the old servant said, as she followed her along the corridor to Sidney's bedroom. "Things have all been turned upside down lately, and I for one don't wish our dear master back. The new mistress has served him shamefully—and I gave her notice this morning."

Monica hardly heard the muttered words; her thoughts were with the storm-tossed one.

"I wonder," she murmured to herself, as she tapped gently at Sidney's door; "I wonder if the house still stands?"

Monica gained an entrance. Sidney was sitting by the window, which was open, her Bible was upon the broad ledge before her, and she was

gazing out, the tears fast dropping down her cheeks as she did so. She clung to Monica when she kissed her.

"Oh, Monica, what a wonderful day this is to him! It has seemed a year to me, but think of what he must be seeing and hearing! Come and sit down. I don't mind you, but I cannot go downstairs and eat food. Could you?"

Monica was tongue-tied. There was a radiance in Sidney's face which was like a rainbow shining through rain.

"I came up here stunned," she went on softly, "and then I took my Bible. Do you know the forty-sixth Psalm, Monnie? 'God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.' That seemed to steady me. And when I came to the verse; 'God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early,' I took the words and applied them to myself. You can do that with the Bible. Words seem to give messages in so many different ways. And as I prayed about it I got my answer. God has been raising my heart up above the world altogether to where dad is. What does it matter about me? He is with mother. I found his 'Daily Light' open on his dressing-table. He always read it, and the first verses he read this morning were these:

" 'His left hand is under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me;
Underneath are the everlasting arms.'

And the last verse:

" 'They shall never perish.'

He went out straight into the garden after reading those verses, and was gathered into God's arms to be comforted. He wanted it, poor dad! It was a difficult homecoming last night. Let me talk, Monnie; it eases me. I had a miserable hour to-day, thinking of dad's great sadness. Uncle Ted said he was pacing his room half the night. If only I had known! If only I had been with him! He was perplexed and troubled about the future. People think that it is only women who cling to old associations, but men do—even more. Father did! He could not make up his mind to leave his books, his pictures, the old bits of furniture that his father and mother had used. It was torture to him, and I suppose when he found his guns torn up, rooted out of their place and thrown in a ditch, that was the finishing stroke. I won't be bitter; I won't think of the door through which he escaped. It does not matter about the door, does it? It may be a narrow one, and an unpleasant one to enter, but it is so quickly passed, and the other side is so glorious!"

She paused, and again her eyes sought the blue sky outside her window.

Monica was silent. What could she say? She put her hand out and took Sidney's in it. They sat for some minutes in silence. Then Sidney turned to her, and the light still shone in her eyes.

"Oh, Monnie, it is at times like this that you learn the value of your faith."

When, half an hour later, Monica left the house, she repeated the verse again that was still sounding in her ears, but she was able to add the conclusion, for Sidney had not disappointed her:

> " 'The rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not; for it was founded upon a rock.' "

CHAPTER XVI

LEAVING THE OLD HOME

"It is never you!"

"Why shouldn't it be? How's the world wagging down here?"

Jockie had been taking a walk, and had suddenly come face to face with Austin, who, with an overcoat slung over his shoulder, and a cap pushed back from his forehead, was pelting along the road at a rapid rate.

"Things are awful for most of us," Jockie said, looking at him gloomily, "but your people are all right. Do they know you're coming? They hadn't an idea of it yesterday."

"My boat arrived a day earlier than expected, so I thought I'd walk up and take them unawares. Left my baggage at the station. I've had a stunning time. Now, just turn back with me, and tell me the 'awful things,' as you call them."

"I don't know where to begin. How much do you know?"

"I heard of the wedding," said Austin, taking off his cap and letting the spring breeze fan his heated brow.

"I do wish with all my heart that it had been your wedding," said Jockie viciously. "I wish with all my heart I had never tried to do you a good turn. I don't know what possessed me to do it. It was only to spite her. I have brought disaster to everyone."

"What the d—dickens have you to do with it?" asked Austin.

Jockie told him of the episode outside the post office.

"She came back from her honeymoon determined to slight and insult the Admiral and Sidney all she could. Oh, I can't tell it all to you; it would take too long. She began to be mistress before she married, so you can imagine what it was like afterwards. She has always hated Sidney, and she couldn't forgive the Admiral for not being smitten by her charms, and falling down and worshipping her, as all the rest of you did."

"But," interrupted Austin, "the Admiral isn't a fool. Surely he can be master in his own house?"

"No, the Admiral isn't a fool," said Jockie solemnly, "he is now a saint in heaven."

Austin stopped still in the middle of the road.

"You don't mean to tell me that the dear old chap is dead?"

"She killed him—murdered him—just as surely as if she had shot him. Do let me tell the story in my own way. I hardly know the ins and outs of it, but it seems that the house really belongs to Major Urquhart—at least, she gives out that it does, and your mother told me that the Admiral would not fight his brother about it, but that it was morally, if not legally, his. Mrs. Ted has turned Sidney out of her place at the head of the table. She took the reins of the whole house in her own hands; she moved and changed everything in it on purpose to annoy them. She took the Admiral's books and pictures away from his study, and said they belonged to the Major, and she furnished a new sitting-room with all his treasured things. The Admiral and Sidney at last, in despair, went up to London. They were driven out of the house by her. When they came back she was worse than ever. She had cut down all the Admiral's favourite trees, and in spite of the Major's protests got some labourers to come up and clear away the guns from the lawn. That was the last straw! The poor old Admiral went out the morning after he came home, and found them half buried in an old rubbish ditch. It broke his heart, and he was found dead, clasping his arms round one of them. Now, what do you call that but murder?"

Austin drew in a long breath of dismay.

"Gracious, child, go more slowly! I can't quite believe that Mrs. Norman would act so."

"Mrs. Edward Urquhart, please. And you need not address me as 'child.' I shall shut up if you do."

"Beg pardon. Go ahead."

"Well, of course, dear Sidney has behaved like an angel. We wanted her to leave the house at once, but she would stay on until the lawyer and she had sorted out all her father's papers and put the business straight. What she's gone through no one knows! She's a marvel to all of us. I have heard Mrs. Ted stinging at her like a gnat, and Sidney speaks to her in the most gracious and sweet way, but in a lovely remote tone, as if she hardly knows who she is, and she lives in another world just now. She looks lovelier than ever in her black, but so frail and delicate. And then sometimes she puts her hand on my arm and laughs in her old fascinating way, and then the dreamy

sad veil falls over her eyes again. Miss Pembroke wants to have her, and your mother wants to have her, but neither has got her yet. Sometimes I think she stays on for the Major's sake. He's awfully unhappy—I can see it in his eyes; he's a broken-down old man since the Admiral's death, and his wife does nothing but whip him on, as if he were a tired old horse. Oh, she's an awful woman! If only you had married her!"

"Thank you," said Austin stiffly; then he added: "How women hate one another! I can hardly recognise Mrs. Norman under your description. I never heard her say an unkind word to anyone."

"Oh, if you're going to believe in her still, I'll stop. There's such a thing as poison coated with sugar. But you'll never see her in her true colours. Men are as blind as bats where women are concerned."

Jockie gave her head a little toss and walked on.

Austin looked at her. If he had not been so perturbed he would have laughed, as Jockie on her dignity was like some saucy sparrow aping a swan.

"Poor dear old Sid!" he murmured. "I didn't think she was having such a bad time! She was quite swallowed up in her father. I can't believe I shall never see him again."

"No," said Jockie in a grandmotherly tone, "we never know how soon old people will be taken from us. I hope you're going to be very good to your father now you have come back. He has missed you frightfully. If I had been a man I should have had enough grit to stop at home where I was wanted, instead of running away from my trouble."

"You seem to have a remarkable knowledge of our private affairs," said Austin witheringly.

"Yes; I know them all," said Jockie cheerfully. "I have been trying to be your substitute, since you have been away. Your father and I talk over lots of things together, and I went round with your horrid agent the other day to see a farmhouse which wants repairing. I reported it to your father the next day, and I told him what a sneak and bully the agent was. I've heard some stories about him in the village, and Cousin John and I can prove the truth of them. Mr. de Cressiers is almost willing to dismiss him now he takes in what kind of a man he is."

"I think it is high time I was back," said Austin loftily.

"It is," assented Jockie.

The two young people walked on for a minute in silence, then Jockie burst forth again:

"It's no good for you to defend her! She's a clever unscrupulous woman, and Sidney can't cope with her. What do you think she is saying to everyone now? She pulls down her mouth and drops her eyes and sighs forth: 'Yes, most sad; but the Admiral's sudden death must wholly be attributed to that London trip. His daughter did not realise that he was not strong enough to drag about after her. She, like most girls, wanted to have a good time, and her poor old father could not keep pace with her. He returned home a perfect wreck, and the very next day he collapsed.' Now, what do you think of that?"

"I suppose she thinks it true," said Austin loyally.

"Does she? Now, I'll tell you something else, for you deserve to know it. Do you know what she told everybody when you went away? That you had proposed to her, and that she had refused you, for the very idea was preposterous. She had only taken pity on you and talked to you like a mother for your good, and you had simply made a fool of yourself."

"I think I'll be walking on," said Austin, in dangerously quiet tones. He was white with rage, and Jockie's audacity for once deserted her.

"Oh, forgive me! What would Sidney say? I promised her I would try to control my tongue."

Then, as Austin's long legs outwalked her, she called out:

"All right, then. You need not think I am going to run by your side. You're much more disagreeable than when you went away."

Austin looked back, and raised his cap.

"I prefer sugar to vinegar. You won't keep any friends with that tongue of yours."

And Jockie walked home humbly, for she felt the truth of his words.

Austin had a warm welcome from his parents. His mother corroborated much of what Jockie had told him, but her plain dignified statements had more effect upon him than Jockie's bitterness. Early the next morning he went down to The Anchorage to see Sidney. It cost him some effort, but he knew that he must meet Mrs. Urquhart soon, and wanted the first plunge to be over.

He came across her in the garden giving directions to the gardeners. She was looking as sweet as ever, and greeted him with perfect ease.

"So glad to see you back. Your father has been wanting you badly. What do you think of the sunny East?"

"Oh, tolerable! Is Sidney in? I'm awfully upset over the Admiral's death, and came down to see her."

"Poor girl! She is wonderful. It has been so sad, for they both intended this London visit to be one of keen enjoyment. We little thought——"

"I have heard about it," said Austin abruptly. "Excuse me going in. This place has always been like a second home to me, and I'm bewildered at all these changes."

He heaved a sigh of relief as he got past her.

"Thank goodness that's over! Jockie was quite right. I did make a fool of myself."

He noticed at once the changes in the house; but when he was shown into the morning-room, and Sidney held out both hands with a bright smile of welcome, he almost broke down.

"Oh, Sid! My little chum! What can I say? How we shall miss him!"

Sidney's eyes filled with sudden tears.

"That's good to hear, Austin! He was very fond of you."

"Can you speak about it? Would you rather not?"

"I should love to tell you all about him, but I expect you have heard."

"Not details. I want them."

So, in a soft steady voice Sidney went over those last precious days, which would always be beloved in her memory.

Austin had been so truly fond of her father, that his sympathy was more to her than that shown by others. And then he drew her on to talk of herself and her own plans. He was aghast when she told him of her altered circumstances.

"I shall have enough to live on," she told him; "but, of course, father's pension is gone, and the house with all its contents seems to belong to Uncle Ted. He has promised to furnish a small cottage for me from any bits that I like to pick out. Ethel suggests my going to Lovelace's Cottage, which is

still unlet; but I can't bring myself to do that. It is a matter of pride, I am afraid."

"But you don't mean that they're going to turn you out?"

"No, I am choosing to go myself. I have been too long my own mistress to be happy here now. Uncle Ted has besought me to stay; but it is neither good for him nor her that I should do so. Your mother has very kindly asked me to stay with her till I can find a house. I don't want to leave the neighbourhood."

"And you're coming to us? That's the first bit of good news I've heard since I came back! It has been blow upon blow! That imp of a girl met me yesterday on the way from the station and poured a black recital into my ears."

"Do you mean Jockie? I thought you were good friends."

"So we were. She's a pretty little thing, too, but she piled it on too strong, and did not spare me, I can tell you! How on earth has she got hold of my father? She manages him like no one else, my mother tells me. And he is actually going to get rid of Dobbs!"

"Jockie has great tenderness under that careless exterior; and patience, too. I have seen her with sick people, and she is a different being at once. Poor Jockie! She espouses my cause with too much zeal. She will learn wisdom later on. And now tell me all about yourself. We have talked enough of me and my troubles!"

So Austin leant back in a lounge chair, crossed his legs, and for an hour discoursed to Sidney about all he had seen and heard. When he at last rose to go, he said:

"Come to us as soon as you can, won't you, Sid?"

Sidney nodded cheerfully.

They had not discussed Mrs. Urquhart at all; but Austin encountered her again in the hall on his way out.

"I want to speak to you for a minute," she said, turning wistful eyes upon him.

Austin followed her like a lamb into the drawing-room, with an uneasy sense of walking into a snare.

"I want you to forgive me," she said, laying her hand gently on his arm. "You went off so suddenly; you would listen to no explanations. I was

forced to act so. Your mother implored me. And you know how often I reminded you of the difference in our ages. It is a great mistake for a middle-aged woman to tie a young fellow to herself. It would have ruined your life. If I had consulted my own feelings——"

She paused, and her eyes finished her sentence.

"Oh, that's all right," said Austin awkwardly; "that chapter is closed. Don't for goodness' sake try to open it again."

"Ah, you are hard and unforgiving! Let us close it, by all means, but let us be friends. We live in the same neighbourhood; don't let there be ill-feeling between us. You say you have looked upon this house as a second home. I want you to look upon it in that light still. Come in when you want cheer, or comfort, or advice; let me feel that I can still be a friend to you. I will not speak of myself. I have many lonely hours, and the Major, as you know, does not shine in conversation. But I cannot bear to live amongst you if you are going to give me the cold shoulder. It is my misfortune to be over-sensitive, and I feel things so much and so deeply!"

What could Austin say? He could never be anything but courteous to a woman; so he murmured something about the past being the past, and having no cause for resentment, and then he slipped away.

" 'Pon my soul," he muttered, "she's one too much for me. I don't know where I am, but I'll keep clear of her for all I'm worth; for I'll play the game with the old Major! And I'm honestly sorry for the poor beggar!"

After Austin had left her, Sidney sat with her head in her hands. In spite of her bright brave spirit, she had times of real darkness and depression, and no one but herself knew what an effort it was to live through her days.

She now was doing what she seldom allowed herself to do—looking back into the past. It was hardly a year ago that she had lost the one who was her all in all: not by death—she could have borne that better—but by his own treachery. Her soul writhed at the very thought of the valley of humiliation into which he had cast her, and through which she had struggled with soreness and anguish of heart. Now she had lost both her father and home. Like Job, she felt inclined to say: "My days are past, my purposes are broken off, even the thoughts of my heart."

Her future seemed to stretch away from her in one dreary monotonous line. The purpose in her life had been snapped. The care of her father had been her absorbing thought since the end had come between herself and

Archie Hughes. Now that was gone! How could she gather up the broken fragments of her life to the best advantage?

She lifted up her heart in earnest prayer:

"Thou will teach me how to glory in tribulation. Thou will not quench the smoking flax! It is Thine hand upon me. Show me what Thou wouldest have me to do."

This was the gist of her prayer. And when Sidney went to her knees she always rose with serene and steadfast eyes.

"As long as I am left in the world, I am wanted there," she said to herself. "If my own personal life is not all that I desire, there are other people's lives around me to be thought of. And I am absolutely free to help wherever my help is needed most."

It seemed at present to be needed at Thanning Towers. Mrs. de Cressiers, with tears in her eyes, had begged her to come to her.

"I have never urged you before, Sidney, because of your dear father; but now your way seems clear. After all, I am your nearest relation in this county. I may be able to help you about getting a small house if you are still determined to live alone; you certainly will help me. As one gets older one feels less equal to bearing the strain and anxiety alone. You are the only one I can talk to about my husband and boy, and you don't know what your sympathy and companionship will be to me."

Sidney arranged to go. The evening before she went she spent in tidying the Admiral's desk. Her uncle crept into the room almost stealthily.

"Sid," he said dejectedly, "is it too late now to beg you to change your mind? Our happy old days have slipped away, but I would do all I could to make you comfortable if you stayed with us. You don't know what this house is without you! You used to be fond of your old uncle. Are you going to cast him off altogether?"

There was something so pathetic in his eyes that Sidney almost cried. She put her hand on his shoulder caressingly.

"Dear Uncle Ted, you know I am fond of you still, but I am quite sure I do not add to your happiness by staying here. I shall be in the neighbourhood, and will often pop in and see you."

He gave almost a groan.

“I am being justly punished, but I was a blind fool! I never meant to oust you and poor Vernon. I’ll never hold up my head again, Sid. But one thing I’ve done: I’ve ordered those guns back to where they were taken from, and there they shall stay till my time comes to quit! I can assert myself sometimes, but it’s confoundedly hard!”

Sidney kissed him. Her heart ached for him as she saw what a cipher he was in his own house. And though she could not tell him so, she knew that his wife resented her talking much with him alone. Mrs. Urquhart showed the only impatience she ever showed anyone towards her husband. Sidney saw that there was no love to help her to endure his bachelor ways; she had no real interest in his workshop. Her one idea was to fill the house with company; and company of any sort the Major thoroughly disliked. They had hardly any tastes in common. The Major spent half his days wandering through the house looking for Sidney, and this was why Sidney was anxious to leave. She knew the only chance for the ill-matched couple to draw closer to one another was to leave them alone. As long as there was a third person, the breach would widen between them; for the Major was perplexed and frightened by his wife’s masterful methods, and avoided being with her. Her manner was now coldly civil to him; her sweet graciousness was only for outsiders. If she by chance said a kind word, the poor old Major would become almost hilarious with joy; then a little curl of his wife’s upper lip would send him shrinking into his shell again. And he could not understand why he should not seek Sidney’s society in preference to his wife’s. When the time came for her to leave for Thanning Towers, he accompanied her to the gate.

“You’ll remember that anything out of the house can be moved to your new home,” he said, waxing bold as soon as he got out of earshot of his wife. “You have only to tell me, and I’ll see that they’re sent off. And, Sid, my dear child, just assure me the past is forgiven. You don’t bear me malice for the—the step I took? And will you come to me if I’m taken ill; one can’t have good health for ever; and I sometimes think that I’m beginning to break up. You won’t cut us, will you?”

“Why, Uncle Ted, you are quite morbid! Of course I won’t! And if you’re ill, send for me at once. I will run over and tell you directly I have made my plans. I am not going very far away, you know. Good-bye, dear.”

She gave him one of her old hugs, then turned quickly away, for there were actually tears in the Major’s eyes. He coughed them down, and as Sidney watched his retreating figure out of the carriage window she noted that his shoulders seemed extra bent and his limping gait more discernible.

“He is getting an old man,” she said to herself. “Oh, I hope she will be kind to him.”

To Thanning Towers she went, and took with her there an atmosphere of sunny content which was felt by all who came near her. Mrs. de Cressiers’ troubled brow relaxed; she could speak to Sidney, and to Sidney alone, of her fears about her husband’s state of mind and body. And the very speaking of it seemed to lift a weight off her spirit. Mr. de Cressiers liked to hear her sing. It was the keenest delight left to him to listen to any music, and Sidney’s wonderfully sweet and thrilling voice brought messages of peace and comfort to his soul. Austin shouldered his burden in gay spirits when Sidney was near at hand. She was the recipient of confidences from father, mother and son, and her presence in the house was joy to all. Jockie still came and went. At first she said she would be wanted no longer, but Mr. de Cressiers was always ready to listen to her lively chatter, and Sidney told Mrs. de Cressiers that her gay spirits were better than any amount of doctor’s visits for the invalid. Mrs. de Cressiers assented. She had no objection to the pleasant intercourse that existed between her husband and Jockie, but when it came to that between her son and the girl, she became alarmed.

Sidney laughed at her.

“You must expect young people to be friendly; Jockie is the last girl in the world to mean anything serious by it. And if it did come to anything, you would gain a dear little daughter-in-law!”

“She is a perfect hoyden, and not at all the style I approve of. I want Austin to marry in his own class, not beneath him.”

“But,” expostulated Sidney, “Jockie is a little lady. Her father is Mr. Borlace’s cousin, and you have always said that it was an advantage to us to have a rector who was really well born.”

“Oh yes; the rector is a gentleman, but the Borlaces are not county; and I don’t know who the girl’s mother was. Austin must marry well.”

“There is no one about here who is good enough for him,” said Sidney with a mischievous smile. “You despise titles, so you would not care for a titled daughter-in-law. I think Jockie would suit him very well.”

“She would not suit *me*. I do not want to be connected with our rector. If I thought that there was anything between them, I should stop her coming to the house altogether.”

“Well,” said Sidney, “the surest way to make them care for each other is to keep them apart now. Don’t try it, dear Mrs. Cressiers.”

Mrs. de Cressiers looked unconvinced; but she kept her own counsel after that, and never mentioned the subject again. And Jockie and Austin continued to chaff each other, and were a great deal more together than either Mrs. de Cressiers or Sidney imagined.

CHAPTER XVII

STRUCK DOWN

"AUNT MONNIE, do take me with you."

Monica was driving off in her high dogcart one afternoon in May. She was going over to see a neighbouring farmer, who lived nine miles off, about some business matter. Chuckles, in his holland overall, came tearing across the garden.

For a moment Monica hesitated. In after years she often wondered if it had been her good angel who tried to intervene. Then, seeing the eager expectancy in the child's eyes, she told him to climb up. For a moment she thought of telling him to put on an overcoat, but the sun was bright, and she had a warm plaid over her knees, so she drove off with him, saying dryly:

"I hope we shall not meet anyone, for a more smutty nephew I think no one could possess!"

"It's the waterbutt; I'm sailing my walnuts in it. They're the Channel fleet on an island of water."

"There's no such thing as an island of water."

"Isn't there? What is it when the land comes round the water?"

"The water is then a lake."

Chuckles tipped his hat back on his head and thought hard. Then his mind took another turn.

"Aunt Monnie, I feel I was born a sailor."

"You were born to be a farmer," said Monica firmly. "You were born on a farm abroad. Your father brought you home and meant to farm himself, and bring you up to it. He was taken from you, and I am bringing you up in the way he wished."

"I think father is very happy to be an angel instead. I'd rather be an angel than a farmer."

"Why don't you like farming? You never used to talk like this?"

Chuckles considered.

“I always did like water better than earth,” he said solemnly. “I remembers when I was a baby I liked it. And everybody ought to fight for their country—Miss Jockie says so—and farmers don’t fight. Aunt Monnie, if you promise you’ll change me from a farmer into a sailor, I’ll bring you back a red and green parrot the first day I come back from sea!”

“No,” said Monica, trying to speak lightly; “I can’t be bribed, Chuckles. You must grow up a good man, and carry out your father’s wishes.”

Chuckles said no more. His aunt drove on through the sunshiny green lanes feeling a heavy weight on her heart. Her farm had not been prospering lately; her new man was careless and untrustworthy. She feared she would not be able to keep him, but she dreaded another change. Chuckles always depressed her when he talked of his dislike to farming. She wondered as he grew older if he would take his own way instead of hers. He had a stubborn will and much tenacity of purpose; but she told herself that she had not toiled all these years to give up the fruits of her labour at a child’s bidding. And then, dismissing the subject from her mind, she talked quite happily to the small boy till she reached her destination. Her business did not take her very long. She left Chuckles the proud possessor of the reins outside the house, and when she joined him again he relinquished them very reluctantly.

“I can drive Nellie. She turned her head to look at me, for she meant to bolt, but I showed her the whip and she was afraid of me!”

Monica drove home a different way. She was not quite certain of the road, and missed her bearings; but when the river came in sight she was reassured, for she knew she had only to follow it. Some tall yellow flags attracted Chuckles’ attention. He begged to be allowed to get down and gather them.

“You must be quick, then,” his aunt said to him, “or we shall be very late home.”

He scrambled down. Monica dreamily gazed before her, enjoying the beauty of the scene. The river banks were shrouded with scenery: wild roses, honeysuckle, and the white meadow-sweet climbed in riotous profusion over the bushes. Here and there clumps of blue forget-me-nots brightened the edge of the water. On the farther side of the river was a wooded hill, and in a dip at one side was a glimpse of the distant sea. Clouds were rolling in from it, and Monica began to fear that a storm was on its way. She was about to call to Chuckles, when a sharp scream and a heavy splash broke the silence reigning. In an instant Monica sprang down and dashed to the bank. She saw Chuckles struggling in the water. There was a rapid current, and he was

being carried down the river. In one second she plunged in just as she was. She could swim, but her clothes were heavy, and in one agonising moment, when the little figure sank, she feared she had lost him. Then he rose, she was able to get hold of him, and in another moment she struggled to the bank with him and landed herself and him safely on shore. Chuckles was frightened and exhausted, but quite conscious. She rapidly wrung his clothes as dry as she could, and then wrapped him tightly round in the warm plaid and laid him in the bottom of the trap.

"There!" she exclaimed, "that is a cold pack! Lie still, and I will drive to the nearest house and get you dried and warm."

Then she wrung her wet garments, got into the trap, and drove as fast as she could homewards. It was a lonely bit of country, and after satisfying herself that Chuckles was well and warm, she did not go out of her way to look for any houses. Her nerves were strong, but the realisation how near the child had been to death that afternoon set her face in tense lines, and made her strong capable hands tremble. More than once she bent over the child to listen to his breathing. She caught herself picturing her return home with a little drowned body at her feet, and she shuddered at the vista it opened out before her of a purposeless future and a wasted past.

A strong keen wind blew in from the sea; the clouds rolled up and obscured the sun, and Monica shivered with cold. She found driving in drenched garments a very miserable experience. She had not even a rug over her knees, nothing to protect her from the rising storm. And about two miles from home the storm broke full upon her. She drove into her own gates with a blue face and chattering teeth, but in spite of all Aunt Dannie's expostulations, she would not change her wet garments till she had put Chuckles to bed with her own hands, given him something hot to drink, and seen him drop off into a quiet sleep. Then she thought of herself, and went off to her own room to get into dry clothes.

The next morning she was too racked with pain to get out of bed, and before another day dawned she was in the throes of rheumatic fever. Sidney did not hear of it till the evening, and then she left Thanning Towers and went over to help nurse her friend. Jockie carried off Chuckles to the Rectory, and Aunt Dannie and Sidney, with the doctor's help, fought hard to keep death at bay. Monica was a strong woman, but for once she had presumed too much upon her hardy constitution, and Nature asserted itself with a vengeance. She was wrapped in cotton-wool from head to foot, and fever ran high. It was pitiful to hear her repeating over and over again:

“Save the child! It does not matter about me. He *must* live. Oh, leave me, and help him! Don’t you hear his cries for help?”

Dr. Lanyard was indefatigable in his care and attention.

“We can’t spare her yet, Miss Urquhart,” he would say to Sidney; “hers is a valuable life. We must not let her slip!”

And Sidney prayed earnestly for her recovery, and nursed her with fervent devotion. The doctor at last insisted upon a nurse, for he saw that Sidney was wearing herself out.

Aunt Dannie was not of much use in the sick-room, and when Monica was conscious, the poor old lady’s nervous fussy movements seemed to irritate her. So Sidney persuaded her to remain downstairs and try to superintend the many daily duties of the servants and farm hands.

Three weeks, four weeks passed, and only then did Monica slowly creep back to convalescence. This was the most trying part of her illness, for she began to fret and worry over her farm. Sidney tried to keep things from her, for matters had not improved during her illness. Her head man was more unsatisfactory than ever; he absented himself for days together from the farm without any ostensible reason, except that he was doing business in the neighbouring town, and the labourers were becoming slack. They could not work without a head. The hay was left uncut too long, and a wet month ensued, ruining some most promising crops of rich meadow-grass.

One morning Sidney stood looking out of the sitting-room window in deep dejection of mind.

The doctor had paid his usual daily visit, and had shaken his head when he had come out of the sick-room. He had followed Sidney downstairs, and had blurted out:

“Cheer her up, Miss Urquhart! She is a strong woman. She ought not to lie worrying there over inevitable circumstances. She must use her strength of will now to some purpose, to help her to endure what is before her, for her farming days are over. I fear she will not walk round her fields for many months to come—perhaps never!”

Sidney stared at him with pallid cheeks.

“Oh, don’t say that! Give her hope, or she will die. She has been so strong, she has had such an outdoor life! Surely her iron constitution will save her from chronic rheumatism!”

“I have seen too many like her. She will be crippled for the rest of her life, I fear. This rheumatism has seized hold of her like a vice, and attacked every joint. When she gets stronger she might try some baths, or the electrical treatment, but her age is against her.”

“She is in the prime of life.”

“If she were ten years younger she would have a better chance,” said the doctor grimly.

Sidney could not speak. Her heart ached for her friend. She shook hands with the doctor in silence as he went away, and now stood at the window and watched a grey mist roll in like smoke from the sea.

The trees and grass were sodden with wet, but the dreariness outside did not equal the dreariness within. Aunt Dannie wandered up and down the house with tear-stained cheeks, murmuring weakly to herself:

“What shall we all do! Everything is going to pieces for want of a head!”

The three young maids quarrelled with each other, and, realising that their mistress’s tight hand was for the time withdrawn, spent most of their time in gossip and surmises about the future. Chuckles’ absence brought an unusual quiet and stillness into the atmosphere, and Sidney, standing in her deep mourning by the window, began to feel that deeper trouble than her own seemed to be brewing in the farm.

She thought of Monica, who had boasted that she could never remember a day’s illness in her life; Monica, strong and active, whose greatest joy was striding over her fields in all weathers; whose greatest penance was to sit still for any given time indoors; and who was now condemned by the doctor to be a cripple for life and never walk again.

“Oh!” cried Sidney, raising her sweet face to the sky, “I wish it had been me. I wish I could bear it for her. I have no ties now, nothing to demand my health and strength, and I should be able to draw comfort from the One Monica does not know. I don’t see how she will be able to endure. It’s a terrible verdict.”

“Sidney, my dear, she is asking for you.”

Aunt Dannie broke in upon her musings, and as Sidney went upstairs in obedience to the summons, her heart was saying:

“Oh, God, help me to help her. Do Thou help her Thyself.”

Monica lay on her bed, a wreck of her former self. She could not move without pain, but she tried to smile when she saw Sidney.

"How soon shall I be about again?" she said. "The doctor looks so mysterious when I question him. Did he say anything to you this morning?"

"It will be a long business, dear, we are afraid."

Sidney spoke cheerfully, but her eyes could not meet Monica's.

"Does he not think I am going to recover?"

The words came like a pistol shot, so sharp and incisive they were.

"Oh, yes—yes—you are getting on splendidly, but you have had a very severe attack, and it will take time."

There was silence for a few minutes, then Monica said:

"Chuckles must go to school as soon as possible. I meant him to go after Easter."

"After the midsummer holidays will be time enough, dear. Jockie is teaching him and looking after him. He is very happy and good."

"How long have I been ill?"

"Six weeks."

"And the hay. Has it all been saved?"

"Not all," said Sidney evasively. "You really must not worry over anything just now, Monnie, or you will never get well."

"But I can't continue to lie here," said Monica in feverish excitement. "I must be getting about to look after things."

She tried to rise, but the excruciating pains in her limbs made her sink back amongst her pillows with a groan.

Sidney tried to soothe and comfort her, but it was hard work. Monica made an exceedingly bad patient. And as her mind grew clearer and stronger, her irritability and impatience seemed to increase. Even Sidney felt a desire at times to go away and leave her to herself. No one had the courage to tell her of the doctor's gloomy fears. But as time went on, and she found that strength did not come to her crippled limbs, Monica began to have her dark hours of doubt. When she was well enough to be put into a wheeled chair, she was brought downstairs.

Sidney had arranged that a friendly farmer near should take over the bulk of the crops and superintend all necessary farming operations for the time. This was highly resented by Frank Edge, the head man, but he had been absent so much from his work that he had little cause for complaint. Austin de Cressiers had helped Sidney a great deal when appeal to Monica had been impossible, but his advice was not always followed.

"Chuck Edge if he doesn't do his work! Chuck them all; it's the only way! I'd chuck anyone who didn't serve me faithfully, in the twinkling of an eye!"

But Sidney did not feel she had the authority to "chuck" any of Monica's people, and Aunt Dannie was hopeless and helpless about any practical issue.

When Monica was downstairs it was impossible to keep things from her. She insisted on interviewing her man, and the interview was a trying one to both of them. She dismissed him at once.

Sidney went back to Thanning Towers for a week or two, as Mrs. de Cressiers was not very well. Once away, she found it very difficult to get back to the farm, and Monica was forced to meet and fight her battles alone. Chuckles was packed off to a private boarding-school, and he departed in high spirits. Childlike, he had little notion of his aunt's self-sacrificing devotion to him, and did not seem to take in that her illness was due to her care and love of him.

Sidney had a very long Sunday talk with him before he went.

"I won't forget I'm a building," said Chuckles, looking into her face with great earnestness. "And I've got to build and God has to build, and we're going to do it wiv each other."

"No, Chuckles; God must put His Hand over yours and teach you how to lay every brick."

"Should I put them on crooked?"

"Very crooked; so crooked that they would never hold together, and only come to the ground with a crash!"

"But that's only when a storm comes, and I'm not on the rocks. I mean to be quite, quite steady, I 'sure you, for I aren't on the sand. What do you think my school bwicks will be?"

"The same as at home. Truth is one, obedience another. Industry——"

Chuckles jumped up and put his small hand over her lips.

"Don't say them all. They're so dis—disinterwesting."

Yet his last words to her were:

"I shall have gwown into a strong tower when you see me nex'. A very high one indeed."

And Sidney kissed him with laughing eyes. "You dear little man! I shall expect to see and hear great things now you are a genuine schoolboy."

It was a lovely autumnal morning. Sidney was walking along a terrace of roses at Thanning Towers, reading a letter from Randolph Neville. It was the first one she had received since she had left her old home, and her eyes devoured each line with an eagerness which surprised herself.

"Dear Fellow-Builder,

"Not one word will I tell you of my surroundings or work till I have talked of your heavy trouble. Blow upon blow seems to have fallen upon you. I have written before of my deep sympathy for you in the loss of your dear father; but why need there have followed such an uprooting? Surely your uncle's house is yours? You say little about his bride, and I have to read between the lines. I feel a tremendous longing surge up within me to come straight home and learn how it is with you. When I return, shall I find that Thanning Dale knows you no more? I cannot see it without your light active figure flitting along the roads, climbing the beacon, gathering flowers in your quaint old garden by the sea. Will you write me a letter in answer to this and tell me all about yourself, and your feelings and outlook, and about no one else at all? I am greedy for news of you. I cannot see you at Thanning Towers. You ought to be in a setting of your own. Don't, I beseech you, go away and try to forget your troubles in the seething turmoil of city life. I have been too long without a real home of my own to wish you a similar fate. You write so calmly about being a single woman with no ties, but you are not a woman to be without a home; you are essentially the ideal home-maker. I cannot separate you from all that brings peace and rest and cheer to any toil-worn, weary traveller. Who is looking after you, guarding and advising you? Have you anyone who notes whether you are weary or tired, anyone whose joy it is to watch every passing emotion on your face, to awake smiles, and still tears? Oh, I expect you will say I

am writing like some sentimental boy; but I do not feel like one. I have been hardened and roughened in the school of life, but I am like a traveller who has trodden tracts of desolation and dreariness and has suddenly found an oasis in the desert, with such a cluster of pure and sweet-scented blossoms growing there that long after he has left it the scent and refreshment and delight of that moment remains with him still. Would the traveller hear unmoved that the sweet centre of that spot had been ruthlessly torn from its setting, and the oasis would know it no more? Write to me, I plead again, of yourself, for it is you who pass and repass in my thoughts night and day.

"Your far-away friend,
"Randolph Neville."

Sidney's face was flushed as she folded up the letter and slipped it into her pocket. She stood leaning against the low terrace wall, a picture of dainty grace and sweetness, and in her eyes was a dreamy glow of expectation.

"Oh," she said half aloud, "if I could only see him walking up this path I should never feel lonely again. He has never written me such a letter before. What does he mean by it, I wonder?"

Her answer was not long in the sending.

"Dear Mr. Neville,

"Your letter has already comforted me. It is such a wonderful thing that my troubles and concerns are of more interest to you, so many thousand miles away, than to any of my friends here with whom I talk and live every day. I don't know that it is a good thing to write about oneself. I have never been in the habit of doing so; nor do I wish to spend much of my time in self-pity and self-introspection. Life has changed to me, of course. But it had changed before my father died. The glamour and joy of it had steadied down to quiet content. And so long as I had him to live for, I wanted nothing else. Yet there were reasons that made me thankful for his absence later on. And now I try not to think whether I am happy or not. What does it matter? There are others who have as deep sorrows as I have had, and are taking life as I am taking it—just a day at a time, to be lived, not so much for oneself now, as for those who need our care and pity. Mrs. de

Cressiers will not let me leave her. I must do so before long. But I do not think I will take refuge in towns. I love every inch of these sweet country lanes, every ripple of the river that laps under its green banks, always calling one down to the sea. My uncle asked me wistfully yesterday, when I happened to meet him trudging down to the river, where I was going to settle. He told me there was a small house empty upon the cliffs at Yalstone. 'I could often turn in when I'm fishing, and we'd have yarns together,' he said. But I had to shake my head. Much as I love the sea, I could not live so close to it. I told you in my last letter about Monica. Oh, isn't life perplexing and sad? And she has not the key of Faith to unravel it. It is all dark to her. I am going to see her this afternoon.

"Do, please, tell me a little of your doings when next you write. I hear scraps about you from Gavine, who, of course, hears them from George Lockhart. She says you have had an attack of fever. Are you over it yet? Have you anyone—you see I am taking a leaf out of your book—who looks after you and nurses you when ill?

"And now I'll answer some of your questions. I have Someone Who watches over me and notes if I am weary or tired; Someone Who guards and advises me; Someone Who brings smiles to my lips and stills the tears that rise, and understands the very thoughts of my heart; Someone Who daily makes that promise good: 'Lo! I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world.'

"And isn't it good to think that He is guarding and guiding us both at the same time—though the ocean may be between us—and shepherding us through the wilderness that leads to our Home?

"Your fellow pilgrim,
"SIDNEY."

CHAPTER XVIII

AUSTIN SPEAKS

"WELL, MONICA, dear, how are you?"

Sidney was bending over her friend, but the face that was raised to hers hardly seemed like Monica's. It was sharpened and lined with pain, and the misery and bitterness that flashed from her eyes struck Sidney with a fresh realisation of what she was enduring.

"I know the worst at last," Monica said in cold, biting tones. "That fool of a doctor could buoy me up with false hopes no longer. I made him tell me the truth."

"He wants you to try electrical treatment," faltered Sidney.

"Oh, don't tell me what he wants me to try! He knows, and you know, that if ever I walk again it will be with crutches. He told me, in any case, my farming days were over."

Sidney could not speak.

"I wondered he dared say such a thing to me. I felt in such impotent fury. To tell me—I, who have never had a day's illness, who have been out of doors in all weathers, who cannot breathe with comfort indoors, who, a couple of months ago, was the strongest straightest hardiest woman in the county—that I am to spend the rest of my life on a couch by the fire, or, at the best, hobble out for an hour or two in the sun upon crutches! Why, Sidney, it is enough to turn my brain!"

Sidney's eyes filled with tears.

"I wish I could bear it for you."

"I made up my mind directly his back was turned to go straight up to London to get special advice, but the post came in and brought me this letter. You will laugh at me when I tell you that it is the last bitter drop to my cup of misery, and the climax of it all. I shall struggle no longer. The farm is going rapidly to pieces. My house, Sidney, has been destroyed. The storms have come and beat upon it, and great is the fall!"

Sidney took the letter offered to her. It was in Chuckles' best copper-plate handwriting.

"My deare Ant,

"We allways rites home on Sondays. I like my skool first rat. There is forteen boys, witch is all older than me. I have now quite sertenly made up my mind I will never—no, never—be a farmer. Willie Green seys no gentleman is a farmer, and we wud kick a farmer's sun out of our skule. I am going to be a saylor on the sea. Willie is a nice boy; he says you can allways run away and be a saylor; he thinks Nelson did; so please rite and tell me I can be like him. I hope you are kite well. With my best love,

"Your loving
"Chuckles."

Sidney had no heart to smile, for Monica's restless unhappy eyes never left her face.

"My dear Monica, such a baby's letter cannot really affect you. Next week you may hear he means to be a soldier. You don't really mean to tell me that this ridiculous letter has any weight with you?"

"Yes, it has. The child is growing rebellious already over my future for him. I know what boys are. I know what my brother was, and Chuckles is just like him. He has never hidden his dislike to farming. I don't know why. And now, as I lie here, I see things differently. It is not a promising profession in England. The least slacking off, the absence of superintendence, and a few mistakes, and the whole thing begins to slip downhill. My farming days are over. I keep repeating it to myself. All my efforts, my successes, have been fruitless. My time, my life, has been wasted, and I am doomed to a sofa and crutches for the rest of my days. Don't express any sympathy or talk religion to me. If you think that disaster and trouble will make me turn to religion, you are mistaken. It never suited me, and it never will. Your nature and mine are utterly different. You are fatherless and homeless; I acknowledge the storm has beaten and buffeted you, and you still go about serenely, with a smile in your eyes and on your lips. We illustrate the two builders about whom Chuckles is so fond of talking. You have built on the rock, you say, and your life is still steady, your spirit unbroken, your trust unshaken. I am lying amongst the ruins of mine. I ought to rise up and start building again, this time on the rock, but I won't do it. If I pray at all, it will be to death to come and finish off a useless, broken life. I am vanquished now, with a vengeance. Oh, how horribly cruel life is!"

Sidney listened in pained silence.

Then she put her hand gently on Monica's arm, and said with intense feeling:

"You can prevent my talking to you about the only One Who can comfort you, but you cannot prevent my praying for you. Your illness only makes me love you all the more and long to help you; and if I feel thus, what must God do, to Whom you naturally belong?"

"No more, please," said Monica, with furrowed brow. "Now let us put me and my misery aside for a time, and talk about the advisability of letting this farm while it is still worth its purchase."

Sidney humoured her, but before she left her she persuaded her to try some baths that the doctor had recommended, and offered to go with her.

In the end Monica accepted the offer. Aunt Dannie was left behind to take care of the house, and for two months Thanning Dale was without Sidney's bright personality.

And whilst she was away Jockie was more than ever up at Thanning Towers. Mrs. de Cressiers had tried to snub her, but it was of no use. Jockie was impervious to snubs.

"Don't you really want me to-day, Mrs. de Cressiers? Then I'll come to-morrow, instead. I want to tell Mr. de Cressiers a very good story I heard in the village to-day. It will make him laugh, and that always does him good, does it not? But if you're very busy, you had better let me stay a few hours, because I shall be able to take Mr. de Cressiers off your hands."

Then Austin would appear and carry her off in triumph to his father's study, whence Mrs. de Cressiers would hear gay laughter and chatter. If she went in, she would generally find Austin there, sometimes astride on the low window-sill that opened upon the terrace, sometimes pretending to sort over papers at his father's desk, but in reality listening to the gay young voice and having wordy skirmishes with audacious Jockie, when he could get a chance. Mr. de Cressiers would lie back amongst his cushions, well pleased, and would always say to his wife:

"We must keep Miss Jockie to lunch. I want her to read to me afterwards."

And Mrs. de Cressiers soon gave up trying to keep Jockie and Austin apart. The girl's bright natural ways and frank affection began to have effect upon her. She comforted herself with the thought that Austin was too perfectly at ease in Jockie's presence to have any warmer feeling for her than that of a comrade and friend. He teased her unmercifully, and

sometimes she would lose her temper and take her departure with stiff dignity; but the next time they met, the past would be forgotten, and they would be greater friends than ever.

One lovely evening in September, Austin and Jockie were boating on the river together. Austin had been rather grave and silent, and Jockie was fond of relapsing into dreams when she was upon the water. She looked up at him presently, and her eyes began to twinkle.

"A penny for your thoughts, old sobersides."

"We'll exchange them; give me yours."

"I was thinking of dear Sidney. I do wish someone would come along and marry her, so as to prevent her shutting herself up in some poky little house. But there isn't anyone near here good enough for her. Of course, women don't marry nowadays as they used to do; but Sidney is so enchanting that she ought not to be wasted."

"It's rather rum that both our minds should be running on matrimony. I was trying to make up my mind to 'come along,' as you term it, and 'marry somebody.' I think it is time I settled down."

Jockie looked at him with round eyes.

"You're too young," she said, with her head in the air; "boys like you couldn't be trusted with wives. You would not know how to take care of them."

"Girls don't want to be taken care of nowadays," he retorted; "more's the pity. They're too independent to suit me. And you talk as if I'm intending to have a batch of wives. One would be quite enough for me."

Jockie's laugh rippled out. She leant over the side of the boat and let her hand trail in the water. She looked at him through half-shut eyes.

"Go on," she said. "Tell me about your future wife. What is she going to be like?"

But Austin was silent. He compressed his lips. Then he blurted out suddenly:

"If you don't think I would make a good husband, we'll change the subject."

"Oh, don't be sniffy. I think you have, as dear Cousin John would say, some valuable qualities. You are a gentleman, and have a gentleman's ideas of truth and honour. You wouldn't do a dirty trick to save your life; and

you're quite intelligent. Your father says you are no fool; and you buck up when obstacles crop up and bar your path. You learn how to jump awkward banks in the hunting-field, don't you? And you're not one of those who are always looking for the gates. I admire the way you have dismissed the agent and are doing his work yourself till you can find someone else."

Austin grinned at her.

" 'This is very pleasant,' as my mother says. I don't often hear my praises sung. Please proceed."

"I always spread the butter fairly thick," said Jockie gravely, "but your faults must be told."

"No, thanks, not to-day. I'm going to have my say now. This honourable, high-minded gentleman with intelligence and grit now proceeds to offer his hand and heart to the one who appreciates his noble qualities. Miss Jockie Borlace, will you do me the honour of accepting them?"

Jockie gave such a start that she nearly upset the boat. Then she said, a little reproachfully:

"What a humbug you are!"

Austin slipped in his oars, and, folding his arms, gazed at her with steady eyes.

"I'm in dead earnest."

Jockie went red and white with emotion which she could not conceal.

"But—but," she said, "we may like each other very much, but that's not enough to marry upon."

"It depends on the measure of the liking," said Austin.

Then he stretched out his hands and took hold of both hers.

"Sit still and listen to me. I've had this in my mind for a long while. I'd rather live with you, Jockie, than with anyone else on the face of the earth. We won't discuss each other's virtues and vices. You're no more perfect than I am; but I loathe perfection. I like you just as you are. Now, do you feel like that about me?"

Jockie's slim sunburnt hands trembled in his grasp. He was glad to see that she was perturbed; he dreaded lest she might show flippancy.

"Do you care for me a little bit? Now, on your honour! For this is no game; it means either that we're going to be all in all to each other, or

nothing at all."

"I think you'll have to give me time," she said irresolutely. "There's a lot to be considered, and I'm sure Mrs. de Cressiers won't approve."

"No; I won't give you time. Hang consideration! You know your own mind as well as I do. Leave everyone else out of the question. Here are we alone—just we two. If there was no one else in the world but you and me, what would you feel like?"

Then Jockie looked up. Her mischievous eyes showed a deep clear light in them as she met his ardent penetrating gaze. She drew in a long breath.

"Gloriously happy," was her answer.

And he was more than satisfied.

An hour later they were walking up to the Rectory together, when two people stopped to speak to them. These were Major and Mrs. Urquhart.

"Is that Jockie?" said Mrs. Urquhart sweetly. "My dear girl, we have just been talking with the Rector. He was quite anxious about you. It is getting dark. Have you been on the river?"

"She has been with *me*," said Austin, with pride in his tone.

"So I gather. Well, we must not keep you. I suppose you have heard that Sidney returns to-morrow with poor Miss Pembroke? It is such a sad blow—that the baths have done her no good. I expect Sidney will make her home with her now. It will be very nice for her if she does so, as she will be able to help her a good deal."

"Sidney helps everyone," said Jockie with sudden heat. "The house is happy that has her, and those are fools who oust her from their lives."

"Hear, hear!" muttered the Major.

His wife responded with dangerous sweetness:

"You are a warm-hearted champion, Jockie. I wish, for your own sake, that Sidney could be more with you. You certainly want someone to look after you. Good-night. The sooner you get home the better. Your poor cousin is much harassed by these late expeditions."

Austin was about to speak, but Jockie slipped her arm into his and dragged him on.

"Don't explain or protest. It will only be wasted on her. We won't spoil our evening by a wordy combat. Oh, Austin, do you think we shall look

back to this lovely evening for the rest of our lives as a red letter day? I shall never forget it, will you?"

Austin insisted upon going into Mr. Borlace's study and informing the Rector of what had taken place. His distress and agitation was quite alarming, but Jockie laughed and soothed him into a peaceful state of mind.

"Don't you be afraid of Mrs. de Cressiers. Austin and I will manage her all right; and I'm not a child, Cousin John. And you can pretend you know nothing about it, if you would rather not. It has nothing to do with you, has it? And we have settled it up on the river, not even in this house, so you can't be in any way responsible."

She talked to him in the way that a modern girl would; as if she, and she alone, were the only one responsible for her future. And Mr. Borlace, who did not understand girls, and had come to look upon Jockie as a very original specimen of her race, at last sat back in his chair with a resigned sigh.

"Well, you must 'gang your own gait'; only don't ask me to express my opinion upon such an altogether unexpected and unsuitable union."

And then Austin laughed, shook him warmly by the hand, and departed, wondering how he would get through the coming interview with his mother. Manlike, he hated scenes, and he knew that his mother's hopes did not rest upon Jockie as a daughter-in-law. He went straight to her boudoir, and found her writing letters at her davenport.

"Now, mother," he said gaily, "when do you intend to get old, and sit in an arm-chair before the fire knitting for the poor? Isn't that the rôle of all good old ladies?"

"Not when the thermometer stands at seventy-eight," said his mother dryly.

But she left her writing and sat down in her easy chair. Austin stood on the hearthrug warming his back at an imaginary fire.

"Are you only just back?" she asked him. "I hope you have not been out with Jockie at this late hour?"

Austin did not answer; then he launched his bolt.

"I have asked her to marry me, mother. You do like her, don't you? The governor does. He was only saying to-day how good she was to him. I could not bring you a daughter-in-law whom you did not know. Jockie is like a daughter of the house already."

Mrs. de Cressiers visibly stiffened in her chair.

"You might at least have given me some idea of your intentions, Austin. It will be a bitter disappointment to your father. He never anticipated this. Jockie is a good-tempered amusing schoolgirl, no more fitted to be a member of our family than any well-behaved village girl. I can hardly believe that you are in earnest. It was only a year ago that you were infatuated with Mrs. Urquhart."

Austin nodded in a shamefaced manner.

"Yes. Would you have preferred her as a daughter-in-law? I don't think you would. I own I was a fool. But fools can learn wisdom by experience, and Jockie and Mrs. Urquhart are as different as chalk and cheese. You'll find that Jockie will, under your tuition, grow into a de Cressiers under your very eyes. It only wants a great self-assurance, and a firm belief in one's own superiority to the rest of the human race, to stamp the de Cressiers look and tone upon one's face and tongue. I bet you that Jockie will do it easy."

"You have always been different from any of your race," said his mother bitterly. "It is only what I might have expected. She is your sort. I ought not to have hoped for anything different."

Austin, generally so easy going, said a bad word now, and flung himself out of the room. He could not go to his father, for he had retired to his room for the night, so he stamped off to the sitting-room, where he brooded over the unreasonableness and silly pride of some women, and the sweet audacity and warmheartedness and lovableness of one in particular.

"Ah," he said to himself, "Sid will be home to-morrow; she will pour oil on the troubled waters."

But it was not Sidney who brought the first signs of relenting to Mrs. de Cressiers' proud heart. Jockie met Austin the next morning riding off to one of the distant farms on a matter of business. They had a short confabulation together, and arranged to walk up the Beacon in the afternoon.

"How is your mother?" asked Jockie.

Austin tightened his lips.

"I'm dead certain I'm a changeling," he said; "was changed in my cradle by the nurse. Isn't that how it is done generally? Otherwise, shouldn't I have a little comprehension of my own mother's spirit? She's an enigma to me, and I ditto to her."

“I suppose you’ve had an awful row about me?” said Jockie, looking a little disconsolate.

“I didn’t think my mother would take it lying down. But she’ll be all right in a day or two. Don’t you fret!”

“I never fret!” said Jockie scornfully. Then the light sparkled in her eyes. “You’re rather an old blunderbuss with your mother. Go on like a good boy, and do your business, and don’t come home before you can help it. You’ll find a slight change in her, I venture to prophesy, before the day is over.”

He shook his head, and after a few more words went his way. Jockie stood and watched him out of sight, then pelted away as fast as she could towards Thanning Towers. She was rather breathless when she arrived at the front door, but was shown at once into the morning-room where Mrs. de Cressiers was sitting.

Her face when she saw the girl was a study. But Jockie came forward with both hands out-stretched, and such a radiant sunshiny face, that Mrs. de Cressiers could not maintain her icy remoteness. She never knew how she did it, or why she did it, but she had kissed the girl before she realised what she was doing.

“I know it’s all wrong my coming to you like this,” said Jockie humbly; “but I couldn’t keep away, for you have been so awfully kind and good to me that I wanted to know how you were feeling; and, dear Mrs. de Cressiers, I’m so honestly fond of you and Mr. de Cressiers, that I promise you I won’t bring discord in your family. I know I’m not what you would like as a daughter-in-law, and if you’re dead against me, and are quite convinced that Austin will be happier with some other kind of girl, I shall just go away somewhere and hide myself till Austin forgets me. He is so self-willed and obstinate that it would be no good my remaining in the neighbourhood, for he would insist upon meeting me and worrying my life out. I can’t help being fond of him, you know; he is such a dear. But I’m fond of you, too, and I do honestly believe I could make Austin a little bit more of a de Cressiers than he is. He doesn’t think half enough of himself, does he? But since your last agent has gone, he has done a lot more in the way of business, hasn’t he? I’m always talking to him about it. It’s a funny thing to say, but if you could bring your mind to it, how do you think it would be to give me a month’s trial as your daughter-in-law! Then, if we’re miserable all round and you feel ashamed of me, I could break off the engagement. Now I promise on my honour to do it, but give me a month’s trial first. You see, I’ve had no mother to look after me and tell me things.

Comparing myself with Sidney, I see how rough and clumsy and slangy I am. But if you'll have patience and just mother me yourself for a bit, you don't know the good it will do me. And I'll try to my utmost limit to live up to your ideal of a daughter-in-law."

Jockie paused for breath. She was so much in earnest, and so full of her subject, that she did not notice a slight relaxation in Mrs. de Cressiers' stern set face.

"I don't think we shall gain anything by discussing the situation together," Mrs. de Cressiers said loftily.

"Oh, I think we shall, if we go on long enough," said Jockie cheerfully. "If you will tell me a few of your objections, I will try to meet them; and I'll do anything to please you. Of course, I don't mean in the cringing way. I could never cringe to anyone; but I'll try to cure my most glaring faults and curb my tongue."

Mr. de Cressiers' bell rang at this juncture.

"Oh, let me go to him!" Jockie exclaimed as Mrs. de Cressiers made a move. "Do think over what I have been saying. It would be so heavenly if Austin came home and found that you and I were the greatest friends."

She slipped away, and was soon making Mr. de Cressiers laugh at her confidences. Mrs. de Cressiers left them alone, but later on joined them. As she more than half expected, her husband turned to her at once:

"My dear, I think we must accept this little girl as a daughter. She is young, but time will mend that, and if she makes Austin a good wife, and reminds him of his duties towards us and the estate, she will be a help and not a hindrance in our home."

Jockie looked appealingly into Mrs. de Cressiers' face.

"I wish you liked me as much as I like you," she said.

The frank sincerity of her tone, and a little wistfulness in her eyes won the day.

Mrs. de Cressiers put her hand gently on her shoulder.

"We old people must learn to stand aside when young people come together," she said. "I cannot prevent your becoming my son's wife, but I will try to become accustomed to the prospect. It remains with you as to whether you will bring peace or discord amongst us."

Jockie seized her hand, and pressed it fervently.

“You must turn me out if I bring discord,” she said. “Thank you, dear Mrs. de Cressiers, for withdrawing your objections to me. You will make Austin a happy boy to-day.”

And when Austin returned home with a slight shrinking in his heart from another encounter with his mother, he found Jockie and her holding an animated conversation as they sat at luncheon together.

As he came in, Jockie looked up at him with her mischievous smile.

“I am quite one of the family now,” she said; “and though your mother does think me not half good enough for you, she is going to train me herself to carry on and maintain the tradition of your race.”

Austin was too dumbfounded to reply. He said to his father afterwards:

“Jockie beats anyone I know for walking into a heavy squall, and coming out of it triumphant. She not only knows what she wants, but she gets it done before I’ve half finished surveying the situation.”

CHAPTER XIX

RANDOLPH'S RETURN

"He will come home."

"Do you think he will?"

"Sure to. It's a most splendid appointment."

It was a year later. Monica and Sidney were sitting in the garden. Sidney was working, whilst Monica was reading the newspaper; and it was Randolph Neville whom they were discussing. There was a short paragraph in the paper, mentioning the good work he had done on the frontier, and the appointment that was offered to him of an important Government post in Central India.

Monica had had a terrible year of suffering and struggling against her fate. She had been through many treatments, but with very little result as regards improvement to her health. She could walk a little with the help of a stick, and use her hands; but she would never be a strong active woman again; and she had at last grasped this fact and accepted it. Sidney had never left her. Monica had told her that if she did, she would not endure her life a day longer; and though her rash words were unconvincing, Sidney had not the heart to leave her alone. The months had been testing times for all, for Monica's courage deserted her, and she was a captious irritable impatient invalid. Aunt Dannie worried her so much, and realised that she did, that she finally left her and went to make a home with an old friend of hers in London. Sidney took the household into her care, a good working bailiff was found for the farm, and the routine of life went on pretty much as before.

Chuckles came home for his holidays, and gladdened the place with his presence. But his aunt never spoke to him about being a farmer now. She had decided to sell the place as soon as she got a good offer for it and retire into a town, where Chuckles could attend a good day school. Her hair was grey, and her face lined like an old woman; for this upheaval in her life had met and conquered all her fighting strength, and her agonising and futile efforts to get the better of it had left scars behind which would not ever be effaced.

Sidney's sweetness and patience with her, her unfailing cheerfulness, and unswerving trust in One Who is Lord of circumstances, did much to soften her lot; but though Monica had accepted her fate, she was not resigned to it. She had been very slowly, from constant intercourse with Sidney, learning a few lessons that were not of her own materialistic school; but though she was seeing through a glass darkly, she was still outside that circle of rest and assurance in which, though "the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines, the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls," yet the bereaved one is able to "rejoice in the Lord," and "joy in the God of his salvation." She was still her determined practical self; very quiet about her deep feelings, coldly undemonstrative to everyone but Sidney. But she was beginning to take more interest in the outside world, and to bear the visits of her friends without the resentment she had showed at first.

Sidney's heart beat quickly at the thought that she might possibly see Randolph soon.

Their letters had insensibly altered in character from the time when they had first started their correspondence. She felt she could not greet him now as a mere acquaintance. He was a good deal more to her than that. And as she mused upon the probability of an early meeting the flush deepened in her cheeks, and the light came to her eyes.

About four days afterwards, Monica received a wire.

> "Can you put me up? Landed in London last night.—RANDOLPH."

And Sidney felt as if she were walking on air after it came.

It was a most exquisite evening in August when he arrived. The dogcart had been sent to the station for him, and Monica and Sidney greeted him from their seat on the lawn. He strode towards them, looking thin and sunburnt; but his eyes were on Sidney's face and no other.

"How good to see you here," he said, as he took her hand in his. "I hardly dared to hope it."

Monica smiled at his outspokenness.

"She is where she always is," she said,—"where her help is needed. Since I have become such a crock, she has supplied all my deficiencies."

And then Randolph turned to her.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am," he murmured.

"Well, if you are, you mustn't say so. Because I am not yet able to endure pity. Here is Chuckles coming to greet you. He was hoping to drive you back from the station, but arrived home too late from the Rectory."

Chuckles had flung himself delightedly on Randolph. His school had not as yet robbed him of his impulsive affectionate ways.

"I'm simply longing to hear about India, Cousin Ran."

"Well, give me breathing space, old chap. I'll do my best later on. Now I want to hear all the news round here; my news can wait."

Sidney had slipped into the house. It was more than she could bear to stay quietly there. The touch of his hand, the look in his eyes, the tone of his voice, were all too much for her. She felt like breaking down. She would have given worlds to have had her first meeting with him alone, but Monica hardly realised how things were between them. And Sidney had hardly realised it herself until she was brought face to face with him.

Randolph's eyes followed her to the house. And then Monica, looking up, caught the hungry unsatisfied look in his eyes, and understood. She promptly resolved to give him his opportunity later on.

Meanwhile, with Chuckles on his knee, he sat and asked after Major Urquhart.

"Oh, he is pretty well; but he is not a happy man, and is in complete subjection to his wife. She fills the house with visitors whenever she gets a chance; but I have nothing to say against her. She is sweetness itself to all outsiders, and is always doing little kindnesses to her neighbours. Her rôle is to be popular. As a matter of fact, people round here take her existence very quietly, and do not have much to do with her. They can't get over Sidney's dethronement."

His lips met together in a stern line.

"And has she no home but this?"

"Not at present. I assure you it's not a bad one, taking everything into consideration. She has had bad times with me, but we're really fond of each other, and she says she is happy and content."

"And what about young Austin? Is he married yet? I haven't seen the young lady, have I?"

"No; she arrived in this part after you left. Well, of course, people shook their heads at first; but, really, it seems turning out remarkably well. They were married last May, and Jockie is perfectly happy living under the wings of her mother-in-law. She has a most astonishing capacity of adapting herself to her surroundings, and from a rather noisy hoyden, she is shaking down into a very fascinating and sweet little daughter of the house. Old Mr. de Cressiers is pretty much the same. He is devoted to Jockie; and Austin has settled down in great content."

Chuckles had kept silent as long as he could. Now he burst forth:

"And I go to school, Cousin Ran, and I'm in the eleven, and I gets more runs than any other chap."

"Wonderful!" said Randolph absently; then he turned to Monica. "She's looking so frail. Has she been ill?"

There was no need to ask who "she" was.

"I think I have worn her out a good deal," said Monica gravely. "But, of course, she's been through a lot since you saw her last. And though her spirit is not broken, nor her bright hopefulness taken from her, yet the loss of her father and home has told upon her physically."

Randolph was silent for a moment or two. Then he rose from his seat, and stood looking down upon his cousin with pity in his eyes. Chuckles dashed away into the house. He could never be still for very long.

"You won't let me say how sorry I am for what has befallen you," he said.

"No. Please don't try to. It is just what I cannot stand. Talk to me as you would in the old days. Try to feel that my individuality is as strong and unimpaired as ever. It is only my outer shell that is the crock."

"It is strange that such trouble should come upon you both in the same year," said Randolph musingly.

"Yes," said Monica, with a little dry smile. "I tell Sidney we are the two builders who built their houses side by side, one on the rock, the other on the sand. The storms have come and beaten upon us; hers still stands firm, but mine has gone under. And I tell you honestly that I would give anything sometimes to have Sidney's faith. Something to which I could cling, some light beyond the present. I'm sitting amongst the ruins of my plans and hopes, and though I've given up the struggle at last of trying to erect my

building again, I'm not what you call resigned or happy. It's a cruel fate to overtake me, is it not?"

"I should start building again," said Randolph, looking at her meditatively. "It may have to be a different style of building, and upon a different foundation, but you can still be a builder of sorts."

Monica made no reply. Then she made a move towards the house, and quiet talk was for the time postponed. Sidney appeared when the evening meal was ready. She wore a simple white gown. She might be thin, and her face somewhat transparent, but the flush on her cheeks and light in her eyes made her look very radiant.

Randolph could hardly keep his eyes off her, but he was led to talk of his experiences, and he had a good deal of interesting news to give, so that Sidney lost her momentary fit of self-consciousness and was an eager listener. Young George Lockhart had got promotion besides himself, and had already written to Gavine to ask her to come out and share his life.

"He's as steady as a rock now," said Randolph, "and has a good future in front of him. I hope she is the kind of girl to be a help to him."

"She will be a tremendous help to him if she goes," said Sidney warmly.

And then, with a little hesitation, Randolph said:

"I came down here with a Major Hughes and his wife. He used to live in this neighbourhood, did he not? They're visiting the Woods. We got into conversation. I knew her before she married."

His eyes never left his plate as he spoke. He felt, much as he longed to meet Sidney's eyes as he hurled this bolt upon her, that it would be more honourable on his part not to do so.

Sidney's tone was easy and assured.

"Yes; Archie Hughes is an old friend. I thought he was still in India."

"His wife was ordered home by doctors, so he has come with her to spend his long leave."

"You never told me that you knew his wife," said Monica, eyeing him anxiously.

"Did I not? I used to be often at her father's house in town."

Sidney was slightly distrait for the rest of the meal. But when it was over, Monica asked her to show Randolph some new farm buildings which

had been erected since he had been there.

"They were a good investment," said Monica quietly, "though I shan't have the use of them much longer. I am putting up the place for sale shortly."

Randolph walked out into the sweet evening air, feeling that his opportunity was close at hand. What were farm buildings to him when Sidney was by his side? How hungrily he had longed for the sound of her voice, the sight of her smile, in those distant lands which had held him!

Sidney trod lightly by his side.

"What is Mrs. Hughes like?" she asked.

"She looks ill and worn now, but she used to be a pretty girl when I knew her." Then, in rather a stern tone, he added: "She was engaged to be married to me before she went out to India."

Sidney drew her breath in sharply.

"And I was engaged to him," she said simply, "or thought I was."

They were crossing the old orchard. He turned round quickly, and, before Sidney realised it, both her hands were imprisoned in his.

"Isn't it a remarkable thing that the two who wrought havoc in our lives should be brought before us, to-night of all nights?"

"Why?" asked Sidney gently.

"Because I am hoping that we have both learnt not to regret the past. I know I have. Have you?"

Sidney raised her eyes to his, the eyes that Randolph loved so to meet, so clear and deep and sweet were they under their long curled lashes.

"Yes," she said. "I have no regrets."

Then he spoke, and strong man as he was, his voice was a little husky, and he paled under his emotion.

"I wonder if you guess why I have come home? By night and day your presence has been with me. I have closed my eyes and pictured you before me; I have dreamed so often that a rustle of your gown in passing, a whispered call, told me that you were with me. I got heart-sick for a sight of you, the sound of your voice. Oh, Sidney, sweetest, will you let me tell you how I long to take care of you for the rest of your life? You have been spending your life in looking after others, will you let me look after you? I

want to love you, to guard you, to make it my one business in life to make you happy. Do you think I shall be able to do it? Will you trust yourself entirely to me?"

Sidney's hands trembled in his. Her lips quivered. Though this was an exquisite moment in her life, her eyes were blinded by a mist of tears. She allowed his strong arm to come round her, and with a little happy sigh leant her head against his shoulder.

"Oh!" she said softly; "if you have wanted me, I have wanted you. I believe I have missed you every day since you went."

"And I you. Do you remember, darling, the first night we came to dine at The Anchorage—Monica and I? You were standing outside the door, looking like some ethereal being who had come to earth, met with bitter disappointment and disillusion, and was already poised for flight. Your soul seemed reaching out to heaven. That picture of you has never left my heart. And now I will confess to you that same evening I discovered your trouble. Do you remember coming down to the river just before you left Lady Fielding's, and calling out in the anguish of your heart: 'Oh, God! teach me to forget!' I was an unwilling listener, for I had just arrived, thought nobody was in, and was lying under the wall in a boat. And you uttered the words that were hammering away in my own brain. I had that morning received the same shock as you had, and was in great bitterness of soul. When I heard you sing, it flashed across me that I had heard your voice before, and then I remembered."

Sidney lowered her head a little.

"That dreadful day! I hardly know what I did, and how I got home to father. Oh, it was dreadful! But it is past. Don't let us think of it. How wonderful it was that we were brought together! How strange that we each should have been dealt the same blow!"

"Yes, Fate plays many tricks, does she not? Oh, Sidney! Sweetheart, I can hardly believe I have won you! How often when I was here before, I longed to chase the sadness out of your eyes! How I have prayed for this moment to hold you in my arms, and tell you how I loved you! The time has been sweetened out abroad by your letters; I have carried them about; I have slept with them under my pillow. I have learnt them by heart, and kissed the writing night and morning, but they're a poor exchange after all for you, yourself. I got foolishly jealous at one time of young Austin. I was glad when you told me that he had gone abroad. It was torture to me when you left your home, and I knew that you had no longer any man to care for you

or protect you. I know I'm out of date; but, thank God, you are! You don't want to go through life alone and independent, do you? You will be content to come to me, and let me have the joy of caring for you?"

Sidney's murmured assent was hardly needed. She felt the exquisite rest of soul that a good and strong man's love brings to one. She believed in him and she loved him. He would never disappoint her.

Presently she released herself, but the farm buildings were forgotten. They wandered round in the twilight talking over their letters, their experiences, their need of each other; and when they at last returned to the house, Monica received them in her matter-of-fact fashion.

"I am sure you have never been near my buildings. Well, it served its purpose, and now accept my congratulations. You are a very lucky man, Randolph, to have won her heart. But I don't like the idea of you carrying her off from us all. How shall we get on without her?"

"You can get on better without her than I can," said Randolph, with erect head and triumphantly happy eyes. "And I think it is her turn to be taken care of. You people down here seem to regard her as a general help, one whom you can send for at moment's notice if you get into any sort of trouble. I am going to stop all that, for she is worn out in working for others."

"Never!" said Sidney, looking up at him with kindling eyes. "Don't you know that is a woman's highest ideal, to be wanted?"

"Then that ideal will be realised, for I have only half lived since I met you first, and then had to part from you."

"It's just another form of selfishness," said Monica dryly. "She will have to centre herself round one individual, instead of round many."

Randolph laughed lightheartedly.

"You have me there," he said; "but I'm not going to take her to a desert island. She is going to help me at Empire building."

A sharp line showed itself between Monica's brows.

"Oh, this building!" she exclaimed; "it is getting on my nerves."

Sidney bent over her and kissed her.

"We won't talk about it any more, Monnie, and you are not going to lose me yet, not for a long time."

CHAPTER XX

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER

"Is Uncle Ted in?"

Sidney wanted to tell her uncle herself of her engagement. Randolph and she had come down to The Anchorage together, and Mrs. Urquhart had received them rather ceremoniously in the drawing-room. Randolph was a stranger to her; and she had no idea of what had taken place. Sidney felt unable to break the news to her, and wanted to get away to her uncle, and Mrs. Urquhart was only too pleased to entertain any visitor.

"You will find him in his workshop. He doesn't do much but read and sleep there. I'm afraid his working days are over."

Sidney sped away. She did not find her uncle asleep. He was surrounded by papers, and was writing rather laboriously when she entered, but made an attempt to hide his handiwork.

When he saw she was alone he stood up, received her greeting, then turned and locked the door behind her.

"I will have you to myself," he said, rather desperately. "I want to show you something."

Sidney smiled into his anxious-looking face.

"Ethel is entertaining a visitor—Randolph Neville. Do you remember him? He has come home, and is staying with Monnie."

"He was rather a nice chap. Oh, well, she won't miss you if he is with her. Sit down. I want to tell you something."

Sidney quietly obeyed him. Her own news could keep. She saw that her uncle was full of his own affairs.

Major Urquhart leant back in his chair. Looking at him Sidney saw that his hair was rapidly getting white; he had become a careworn old man, and her heart ached for him, for she knew that the atmosphere of love was wanting in his home, and there was but little comfort for him.

"I've been making my will," her uncle said solemnly; "one can't tell at my time of life how soon it might be wanted. I've had it drawn up and

legally witnessed, and it is here." He patted a businesslike envelope on his table. "I've been writing a letter to my wife explaining the contents of it. The letter I am going to lock up in dear Vernon's writing bureau. She'll soon find that after—after I'm taken. But I want you to know, and only you, where I am going to put my will. I'm not going to have any risk of it being lost; and she's rather thick with that lawyer chap. Upon my word, I'm beginning to suspect everybody nowadays. Look here!"

He went up to the fireplace, and, stooping down, took up a bit of the flooring in a recess by the side of it. Sidney followed him, and saw a tin box reposing underneath.

"That's where my will is going to be!" he said impressively.

"All right, uncle. May it remain there for many a long year."

He shook his head.

"We are not a long-lived family. Look at poor Vernon! Well, I've relieved my mind. And you'll be able to have it produced when necessary. You see, the best of women are curious, and I shouldn't like her to get an inkling of its contents, so I have put it where she will never be able to find it. And I would like you to know, Sid, that the old house and its contents will just come back to you. She would never live here. She has no love for the place. I couldn't rest in my grave, unless I felt that I had made my wrongdoing right as far as possible. I shall like to feel that in days to come you, and perhaps children who may come after you, will still be here."

Tears were in Sidney's eyes.

"You are a dear, Uncle Ted! I don't want to thank you now. I don't know how you have done it; but, of course, you will remember that your wife has the first claim upon you. If she doesn't care for the house——"

"Oh, yes, yes; we won't discuss the money part of it."

"I want to tell you," Sidney went on quietly, "that Randolph Neville wants me to go back to India with him. You see, I shall be provided for. Will this make any difference?"

"None whatever," said the Major stoutly, "except to ease my mind at present about you. So that is the way the land lies, is it? I'm glad he's had the sense to come home. Well, well! You can't live in India for the rest of your days. You'll be glad enough to retire after a bit, and then you will find this place useful. But what does he say to finding you turned out of your home? I never shall hold up my head again."

It was the usual strain when Sidney visited her uncle. He always began lamenting over the past.

Sidney stopped him rather sharply.

"Now, Uncle Ted, if you begin talking like that I shall run away. Don't you see how everything has turned out for the best? If you and I had been living on here together, how could I have left you? I shouldn't have had the heart to do it. I should have told Randolph that he must wait, and he would have had to sail back to India alone. As it is, I know you are being taken care of in your own home, and so I shall go out happily with him."

The Major cheered up at once.

"Yes, yes, I see. Well, that gives me a gleam of light. Is Neville here? I should like to see him. He is a lucky dog, that he is!"

They both returned to the drawing-room. Randolph had evidently enlightened Mrs. Urquhart. She came up to Sidney and kissed her.

"So glad, my dear Sidney, to hear the news. It was a pleasant surprise. And isn't it strange that by yesterday's post I got a letter from Gavine, telling me she was engaged to young George Lockhart. I understand Mr. Neville and he are great cronies. It gave me quite a shock when I had the letter. These modern daughters settle up their own affairs quite independently. I shall have to congratulate her and provide her trousseau. That is all my part of it."

"Dear Gavine!" said Sidney warmly. "She deserves to be happy, for she is spending her life in trying to make others so."

They did not stay much longer. Randolph was impatient to get Sidney to himself. They were walking home to the farm, talking as only lovers can, when suddenly, in a turn of the road, they came face to face with a little group of people. Jockie and Austin were escorting some friends down to the riverside. They were in boating attire. It was a trying moment for all, for Sidney and Randolph instantly recognised the couple who had wrought tragedy in their lives—Archibald Hughes and his wife. Introductions followed, of course. Mrs. Hughes had a washed-out appearance, and rather a spiritless laugh, but light came into her eyes as she turned to Randolph. She could not forget the past; few women can.

"I was wondering when we should meet you again," she said. "We came over to Thanning Towers last night to dine and sleep, and now we have been persuaded to stay to a water picnic. But you know Sir Peter, of course. Do come over and see us."

“I’m afraid I shall not be able to, thanks,” said Randolph briefly.

Archie Hughes was the most awkward one of the party. He was trying to be unconscious of Sidney’s presence; and yet she had never looked more charming than she did now, and he found his eyes wandering towards her in spite of himself.

In the first shock of the meeting Sidney had paled even to her very lips, but her greeting was perfectly assured and gracious.

“When are you going back to India?” she asked him.

“Er—when?—er—I think in about a month’s time. We’re visiting round in this neighbourhood for a week or so. A lot of changes. Sorry to hear about your father. Never knew it till we got here. Is your uncle here still?”

“Yes. He has married since you were in this part. He would be very glad to see you.”

As she talked to him calm conviction came to her that the love she had had for this man once was absolutely dead. She contrasted his loose and somewhat stout exterior with the wiry-knit frame of Randolph. Archie did not seem to have improved with time, and his marriage was not one which would lead him to take serious views of life.

Jockie, of course, was most eager that Sidney and Randolph should join them in their expedition. She could not understand her husband’s want of enthusiasm in the proposal; but she was the only one of the party who was ignorant of the past.

When at last the boating party went on their way, Jockie exclaimed:

“And that is the frontier hero whom Gavine has talked so much about. Well, they will make a splendid couple. Now I know where Sidney’s heart has been all this time. I always felt she would never remain an unappropriated blessing for long.”

“She’s rather good-looking,” said Mrs. Hughes.

“Oh, she’s perfectly beautiful,” said warm-hearted Jockie; “but it is herself we love her for, isn’t it, Austin?”

“I hope he’ll be good enough for her,” said Austin. “I thought it would have come off when he was here before.”

Archie was silent. What could he say?

It had been a remarkable meeting, and Sidney and Randolph were the only ones involved who could view the past without regret.

"I am glad our meeting is over," said Sidney, slipping her arm in that of Randolph's. "I was foolishly dreading it, but I only feel thankful now."

Randolph bent down over her.

"We have both suffered," he said; "but now let us bury the past. The future is ours, and my own aim in life now will be to make you and keep you happy."

"It won't be difficult to do that."

Sidney had for so long lived in the shade that this sudden spell of sunshine almost overwhelmed her. Tears came into her eyes. Then she met Randolph's gaze and smiled.

"Don't make too much of me, will you? Oh, Randolph, I do believe that God meant us for each other, and so in love He prevented us from making the mistake of our lives."

Later on Monica was told about it. Randolph was lured away by Chuckles to inspect his rabbits, and Sidney sat and talked with her friend.

"What I like about Ran," said Monica in her matter-of-fact way, "is that his love is unselfish. It will wear well, Sidney. His first thought is of what he can be to you. Most men think of what you can be to them. I am glad you two have come together. I remember the time when I thought you and Archie Hughes would make a match of it. But he was never good enough for you. You would have had to be always pulling him uphill after you."

"The only regret I shall have is leaving you," said Sidney slowly and thoughtfully.

"You have pulled me through my worst time," said Monica. "I have always been accustomed to stand on my own. I'm not one of the world's leaners."

"But I wish I could leave you happier."

"You want me to think as you do, don't you? I may come at it some day, but not yet. You have made me realise what faith can do. Whether I shall ever arrive at it is a different matter."

"If you could only see how lost one is without a centre," cried Sidney, "and how much we owe to the One Who made us."

Monica looked thoughtfully at her, but made no reply.

"Oh," Sidney went on earnestly, "it is just being illustrated over again with you and Chuckles. How you have toiled and slaved for that child! How anxiously you have worked and saved to bequeath to him a good inheritance. How you even were ready to sacrifice your life for his, and have, in saving him, condemned yourself to a crippled life. He realises it all so little; he does not understand. He takes it all as a matter of course, and seems to have no sense of gratitude or wish to please the one who has loved him so. Isn't that how we treat our Father?"

The words sank into Monica's heart. She began to see dimly a little of what she had missed in her life; but she said nothing, only turned the conversation into another channel.

And presently Randolph returned with the chattering boy.

"We've been having a lovely time. Cousin Ran has been telling me about snakes. Aunt Monnie, I'd like to go out to India one day and do what Cousin Ran is doing. Miss Sid says he's an Empire builder. I should like to build an Empire. It's such a big thing to do."

"You won't be ready for that just yet," said Monica.

"And you have to take care of your aunt, Chuckles," said Sidney. "She will want someone to love her and care for her when we have gone."

"Is Cousin Ran going to take you away from us? That's horribly nasty of him."

"I can't build without her," said Randolph.

"She does know how to build wonderful," said the child with a wise nod. "She taught me all about it; she said God taught her, so, of course, she couldn't build wrong."

"Of course she couldn't," said Randolph gravely, as his eyes met Sidney's. "We can all learn from the Master Builder, and then there will be no mistakes."

"But you will be done building before me," pursued Chuckles, who, once on his favourite topic, was not easily quenched; "because the older people are, the higher their house is, and when it's very high and close to heaven, God takes them in. I made that up myself."

Sidney smiled, but Monica's brows were furrowed.

“Of course,” Chuckles continued in his most dreamy voice, as he gazed up into the summer sky, “some people get their houses knocked down, and then, I suppose, they begin again. Miss Sid says they can. That’s because they didn’t build tight on the rock. I do hope my building won’t slip off the rock.”

“Run off to bed,” said his aunt shortly.

She felt she could bear no more.

Chuckles obediently wished them all good-night; then, as a parting shot, he called out to Randolph:

“I see you out of my window when you take Miss Sid through the garden. You stick so close you only make one shadow!”

“That is what we will do through life,” murmured Randolph in Sidney’s ear, not at all embarrassed by the child’s remark. “Our shadows will be merged into one.”

Later on, when they were taking their evening stroll together, Sidney looked up at Chuckles’ window.

“I hope he will grow up a comfort to Monnie,” she said. “She has spoiled her life in saving him; and yet I do think no life can be spoiled down here. She will come through it yet, a nobler and finer character.”

“She will learn to rebuild, eh?” said Randolph, divining Sidney’s thoughts.

And then, as if Chuckles had heard them, he raised his window and shot his head out.

“I see you! Miss Sid, do you know why I’m going to be like a limpet? Because I’m going to build tight and stick to the rock for ever and ever. I’ve just said it in my prayers.”

And Randolph raised his hat and looked upwards. “Amen,” he said.

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 *Some Builders, Or, A Sure Foundation* by Amy Le Feuvre]