

The Iron Woman

Margaret Deland

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THE IRON WOMAN

BY

MARGARET DELAND

"_This was the iniquity ... fulness of bread, and abundance of idleness...._"--EZEKIEL, xvi., 49

TO MY

PATIENT, RUTHLESS, INSPIRING CRITIC LORIN DELAND

August 12, 1911

ILLUSTRATIONS

"LOOK!"

"BLAIR IS IN LOVE WITH ME!"

"I THINK YOU ARE REASONABLE ENOUGH FOR BOTH OF US"

"ELIZABETH, MARRY ME!"

"OF COURSE YOU KNOW MY OPINION OF YOU"

SHE WHEELED ABOUT, AND STOOD, SWAYING WITH FRIGHT

"WILL YOU LIVE? WILL YOU GIVE ME LIFE?"

CLUTCHING HER SHOULDER, SHE LOOKED HARD INTO THE YOUNGER
WOMAN'S FACE

THE IRON WOMAN

CHAPTER I

"Climb up in this tree, and play house!" Elizabeth Ferguson commanded. She herself had climbed to the lowest branch of an apple-tree in the Maitland orchard, and sat there, swinging her white-stockinged legs so recklessly that the three children whom she had summoned to her side, backed away for safety. "If you don't," she said, looking down at them, "I'm afraid, perhaps, maybe, I'll get mad."

Her foreboding was tempered by a giggle and by the deepening dimple in her cheek, but all the same she sighed with a sort of impersonal regret at the prospect of any unpleasantness. "It would be too bad if I got mad, wouldn't it?" she said thoughtfully. The others looked at one another in consternation. They knew so well what it meant to have Elizabeth "mad," that Nannie Maitland, the oldest of the little group, said at once, helplessly, "Well."

Nannie was always helpless with Elizabeth, just as she was

helpless with her half-brother, Blair, though she was ten and Elizabeth and Blair were only eight; but how could a little girl like Nannie be anything but helpless before a brother whom she adored, and a wonderful being like Elizabeth?--Elizabeth! who always knew exactly what she wanted to do, and who instantly "got mad," if you wouldn't say you'd do it, too; got mad, and then repented, and hugged you and kissed you, and actually cried (or got mad again), if you refused to accept as a sign of your forgiveness her new slate-pencil, decorated with strips of red-and-white paper just like a little barber's pole! No wonder Nannie, timid and good-natured, was helpless before such a sweet, furious little creature! Blair had more backbone than his sister, but even he felt Elizabeth's heel upon his neck. David Richie, a silent, candid, very stubborn small boy, was, after a momentary struggle, as meek as the rest of them. Now, when she commanded them all to climb, it was David who demurred, because, he said, he spoke first for Indians tomahawking you in the back parlor.

"Very well!" said the despot; "play your old Indians! I'll never speak to any of you again as long as I live!"

"I've got on my new pants," David objected.

"Take 'em off!" said Elizabeth. And there is no knowing what might have happened if the decorous Nannie had not come to the rescue.

"That's not proper to do out-of-doors; and Miss White says not to say 'pants.'"

Elizabeth looked thoughtful. "Maybe it isn't proper," she admitted; "but David, honest, I took a hate to being tommy-hocked the last time we played it; so please, _dear_ David! If you'll play house in the tree, I'll give you a piece of my taffy." She took a little sticky package out of her pocket and licked her lips to indicate its contents;--David yielded, shinning up the trunk of the tree, indifferent to the trousers, which had been on his mind ever since he had put them on his legs.

Blair followed him, but Nannie squatted on the ground content to merely look at the courageous three.

"Come on up," said Elizabeth. Nannie shook her little blond head. At which the others burst into a shrill chorus: "'Fraid-cat! 'fraid-cat! 'fraid-cat!" Nannie smiled placidly; it never occurred to her to deny such an obviously truthful title. "Blair," she said, continuing a conversation interrupted by Elizabeth's determination to climb, "Blair, _why_ do you say things that make Mamma mad? What's the sense? If it makes her mad for you to say things are ugly, why do you?"

"'Cause," Blair said briefly. Even at eight Blair disliked both explanations and decisions, and his slave and half-sister rarely pressed for either. With the exception of his mother, whose absorption in business had never given her time to get acquainted with him, most of the people about Blair were his slaves. Elizabeth's governess, Miss White--called by Elizabeth, for reasons of her own, "Cherry-pie"--had completely surrendered to

his brown eyes; the men in the Maitland Works toadied to him; David Richie blustered, perhaps, but always gave in to him; in his own home, Harris, who was a cross between a butler and a maid-of-all-work, adored him to the point of letting him make candy on the kitchen stove--probably the greatest expression of affection possible to the kitchen; in fact, little Elizabeth Ferguson was the only person in his world who did not knuckle down to this pleasant and lovable child. But then, Elizabeth never knuckled down to anybody! Certainly not to kind old Cherry-pie, whose timid upper lip quivered like a rabbit's when she was obliged to repeat to her darling some new rule of Robert Ferguson's for his niece's upbringing; nor did she knuckle down to her uncle;--she even declared she was not at all afraid of him! This was almost unbelievable to the others, who scattered like robins if they heard his step. And she had greater courage than this; she had, in fact, audacity! for she said she was willing--this the others told each other in awed tones--she said she had "just as lieves" walk right up and speak to Mrs. Maitland herself, and ask her for twenty cents so she could treat the whole crowd to ice-cream! That is, she would just as lieves, _if she should happen to want to_. Now, as she sat in the apple-tree swinging her legs and sharing her taffy, it occurred to her to mention, apropos of nothing, her opinion of Mrs. Maitland's looks:

"I like Blair's mother best; but David's mother is prettier than Blair's mother."

"It isn't polite to brag on mothers," said David, surveying his new trousers complacently, "but I know what I think."

Blair, jouncing up and down on his branch, agreed with unoffended candor. "'Course she's prettier. Anybody is. Mother's ugly."

"It isn't right to say things like that out of the family," Nannie observed.

"This _is_ the family. You're going to marry David, and I'm going to marry Elizabeth. And I'm going to be awfully rich; and I'll give all you children a lot of money. Jimmy Sullivan--he's a friend of mine; I got acquainted with him yesterday, and he's the biggest puddler in our Works. Jimmie said, 'You're the only son,' he said, 'you'll get it all.' 'Course I told him I'd give him some," said Blair.

At this moment Elizabeth was moved to catch David round the neck, and give him a loud kiss on his left ear. David sighed. "You may kiss me," he said patiently; "but I'd rather you'd tell me when you want to. You knocked off my cap."

"Say, David," Nannie said, flinging his cap up to him, "Blair can stand on his head and count five. You can't."

At this David's usual admiration for Blair suffered an eclipse; he grew very red, then exploded: "I--I--I've had mumps, and I have two warts, and Blair hasn't. And I have a real dining-room at my house, and Blair hasn't!"

Nannie flew to the rescue: "You haven't got a real mother. You

are only an adopted."

"Well, what are you?" David said, angrily; "you're nothing but a Step."

"I haven't got any kind of a mother," Elizabeth said, with complacent melancholy.

"Stop fighting," Blair commanded amiably; "David is right; we have a pigsty of a dining-room at our house." He paused to bend over and touch with an ecstatic finger a flake of lichen covering with its serpent green the damp, black bark in the crotch of the old tree. "Isn't that pretty?" he said.

"You ought not to say things about our house," Nannie reproved him. As Blair used to say when he grew up, "Nannie was born proper."

"Why not?" said Blair. "They know everything is ugly at our house. They've got real dining-rooms at their houses; they don't have old desks round, the way we do."

It was in the late sixties that these children played in the apple-tree and arranged their conjugal future; at that time the Maitland house was indeed, as poor little Blair said, "ugly." Twenty years before, its gardens and meadows had stretched over to the river; but the estate had long ago come down in size and gone up in dollars. Now, there was scarcely an acre of sooty green left, and it was pressed upon by the yards of the Maitland Works, and almost islanded by railroad tracks. Grading had left the stately and dilapidated old house somewhat above the level of a street noisy with incessant teaming, and generally fetlock-deep in black mud. The house stood a little back from the badly paved sidewalk; its meager dooryard was inclosed by an iron fence--a row of black and rusted spears, spotted under their tines with innumerable gray cocoons. (Blair and David made constant and furtive attempts to lift these spears, socketed in crumbling lead in the granite base, for of course there could be nothing better for fighting Indians than a real iron spear.) The orchard behind the house had been cut in two by a spur track, which brought jolting gondola cars piled with red ore down to the furnace. The half dozen apple-trees that were left stretched gaunt arms over sour, grassless earth; they put out faint flakes of blossoms in the early spring, and then a fleeting show of greenness, which in a fortnight shriveled and blackened out of all semblance of foliage. But all the same the children found it a delightful place to play, although Blair sometimes said sullenly that it was "ugly." Blair hated ugly things, and, poor child! he was assailed by ugliness on every side. The queer, disorderly dining-room, in which for reasons of her own Mrs. Maitland transacted so much of her business that it had become for all practical purposes an office of her Works, was perhaps the "ugliest" thing in the world to the little boy.

"Why don't we have a real dining-room?" he said once; "why do we have to eat in an office?"

"We'll eat in the kitchen, if I find it convenient," his mother told him, looking at him over her newspaper, which was propped

against a silver coffee-urn that had found a clear space on a breakfast table cluttered with papers and ledgers.

"They have a bunch of flowers on the table up at David's house," the little boy complained; "I don't see why we can't."

"I don't eat flowers," Mrs. Maitland said grimly.

"I don't eat papers," Blair said, under his breath; and his mother looked at him helplessly. How is one to reply to a child of eight who makes remarks of this kind? Mrs. Maitland did not know; it was one of the many things she did not know in relation to her son; for at that time she loved him with her mind rather than her body, so she had none of those soft intuitions and persuasions of the flesh which instruct most mothers. In her perplexity she expressed the sarcastic anger one might vent upon an equal under the same circumstances:

"You'd eat nothing at all, young man, let me tell you, if it wasn't for the 'papers,' as you call 'em, in this house!" But it was no wonder that Blair called it ugly--the house, the orchard, the Works--even his mother, in her rusty black alpaca dress, sitting at her desk in the big, dingy dining-room, driving her body and soul, and the bodies and souls of her workmen--all for the sake of the little, shrinking boy, who wanted a bunch of flowers on the table. Poor mother! Poor son! And poor little proper, perplexed half-sister, looking on, and trying to make peace. Nannie's perplexities had begun very far back. Of course she was too young when her father married his second wife to puzzle over that; but if she did not, other people did. Why a mild, vague young widower who painted pictures nobody bought, and was as unpractical as a man could be whose partnership in an iron-works was a matter of inheritance--why such a man wanted to marry Miss Sarah Blair was beyond anybody's wisdom. It is conceivable, indeed, that he did not want to.

There were rumors that after the death of Nannie's mother, Herbert Maitland had been inclined to look for consolation to a certain Miss Molly Wharton (she that afterward married another widower, Henry Knight); and everybody thought Miss Molly was willing to smile upon him. Be that as it may, he suddenly found himself the husband of his late partner's daughter, a woman eight years older than he, and at least four inches taller; a silent, plain woman, of devastating common sense, who contradicted all those femininities and soft lovelinesses so characteristic, not only of his first wife but of pretty Molly Wharton also.

John Blair, the father of the second Mrs. Maitland, an uneducated, extremely intelligent man, had risen from puddling to partnership in the Maitland Works. There had been no social relations between Mr. Maitland, Sr., and this new member of the firm, but the older man had a very intimate respect, and even admiration for John Blair. When he came to die he confided his son's interests to his partner with absolute confidence that they would be safe. "Herbert has no gumption, John," he said; "he wants to be an 'artist.' You've got to look after him." "I will, Mr. Maitland, I will," said John Blair, snuffling and blowing his nose on a big red pocket-handkerchief. He did look after him. He put Herbert's affairs ahead of his own, and he made it clear to

his daughter, who in business matters was, curiously enough, his right-hand man, that "Maitland's boy" was always, as he expressed it, "to have the inside track."

"I ain't bothering about you, Sally; I'll leave you enough. And if I didn't, you could scratch gravel for yourself. But Maitland's boy ain't our kind. He must be taken care of."

When John Blair died, perhaps a sort of faithfulness to his wishes made his Sally "take care" of Herbert Maitland by marrying him. "His child certainly does need a mother," she thought;--"an intelligent mother, not a goose." By and by she told Herbert of his child's need; or at any rate helped him to infer it. And somehow, before he knew it, he married her. By inheritance they owned the Works between them; so really their marriage was, as the bride expressed it, "a very sensible arrangement"; and any sensible arrangement appealed to John Blair's daughter. But after a breathless six months of partnership--in business if in nothing else--Herbert Maitland, leaving behind him his little two-year-old Nannie, and an unborn boy of whose approaching advent he was ignorant, got out of the world as expeditiously as consumption could take him. Indeed, his wife had so jostled him and deafened him and dazed him that there was nothing for him to do but die--so that there might be room for her expanding energy. Yet she loved him; nobody who saw her in those first silent, agonized months could doubt that she loved him. Her pain expressed itself, not in moans or tears or physical prostration, but in work. Work, which had been an interest, became a refuge. Under like circumstances some people take to religion and some to drink; as Mrs. Maitland's religion had never been more than church-going and contributions to foreign missions, it was, of course, no help under the strain of grief; and as her temperament did not dictate the other means of consolation, she turned to work. She worked herself numb; very likely she had hours when she did not feel her loss. But she did not feel anything else. Not even her baby's little clinging hands, or his milky lips at her breast. She did her duty by him; she hired a reliable woman to take charge of him, and she was careful to appear at regular hours to nurse him. She ordered toys for him, and as she shared the naive conviction of her day that church-going and religion were synonymous, she began, when he was four years old, to take him to church. In her shiny, shabby black silk, which had been her Sunday costume ever since it had been purchased as part of her curiously limited trousseau she sat in a front pew, between the two children, and felt that she was doing her duty to both of them. A sense of duty without maternal instinct is not, perhaps, as baleful a thing as maternal instinct without a sense of duty, but it is sterile; and in the first few years of her bereavement, the big, suffering woman seemed to have nothing but duty to offer to her child. Nannie's puzzles began then. "Why don't Mamma hug my baby brother?" she used to ask the nurse, who had no explanation to offer. The baby brother was ready enough to hug Nannie, and his eager, wet little kisses on her rosy cheeks sealed her to his service while he was still in petticoats. Blair was three years old before, under the long atrophy of grief, Sarah Maitland's maternal instinct began to stir. When it did, she was chilled by the boy's shrinking from her as if from a stranger; she was chilled, too, by another sort of repulsion, which with the

hideous candor of childhood he made no effort to conceal. One of his first expressions of opinion had been contained in the single word "uggy," accompanied by a finger pointed at his mother. Whenever she sneezed--and she was one of those people who cannot, or do not, moderate a sneeze--Blair had a nervous paroxysm. He would jump at the unexpected sound, then burst into furious tears. When she tried to draw his head down upon her scratchy black alpaca breast, he would say violently, "No, no! No, no!" at which she would push him roughly from her knee, and fall into hurt silence. Once, when he was five years old, she came in to dinner hot from a morning in the Works, her moist forehead grimy with dust, and bent over to kiss him; at which the little boy wrinkled up his nose and turned his face aside.

"What's the matter?" his mother said; and called sharply to the nurse: "I won't have any highfalutin' business in this boy! Get it out of him." Then resolutely she took Blair's little chin in her hand--a big, beautiful, powerful hand, with broken and blackened nails--and turning his wincing face up, rubbed her cheek roughly against his. "Get over your airs!" she said, and sat down and ate her dinner without another word to Blair or any one else. But the next day, as if to purchase the kiss he would not give, she told him he was to have an "allowance." The word had no meaning to the little fellow, until she showed him two bright new dollars and said he could buy candy with them; then his brown eyes smiled, and he held up his lips to her. It was at that moment that money began to mean something to him. He bought the candy, which he divided with Nannie, and he bought also a present for his mother,--a bottle of cologne, with a tiny calendar tied around its neck by a red ribbon. "The ribbon is pretty," he explained shyly. She was so pleased that she instantly gave him another dollar, and then put the long green bottle on her painted pine bureau, between two of his photographs.

In the days when the four children played in the orchard, and had lessons with Miss White, in the school-room in Mr. Ferguson's garret, and were "treated" by Blair to candy or pink ice-cream--even in those days Mercer was showing signs of what it was ultimately to become: the apotheosis of materialism and vulgarity. Iron was entering into its soul. It thought extremely well of itself; when a new mill was built, or a new furnace blown in, it thought still better of itself. It prided itself upon its growth; in fact, its complacency, its ugliness and its size kept pace with one another.

"Look at our output," Sarah Maitland used to brag to her general manager, Mr. Robert Ferguson; "and look at our churches! We have more churches for our size than any town west of the Alleghanies."

"We need more jails than any town, east or west," Mr. Ferguson retorted, grimly.

Mrs. Maitland avoided the deduction. Her face was full of pride. "You just wait! We'll be the most important city in this country yet, because we will hold the commerce of the world right here in our mills!" She put out her great open palm, and slowly closed the strong, beautiful fingers into a gripping fist. "The commerce

of the world, right _here!" she said, thrusting the clenched hand, that quivered a little, almost into his face.

Robert Ferguson snorted. He was a melancholy man, with thin, bitterly sensitive lips, and kind eyes that were curiously magnified by gold-rimmed eyeglasses, which he had a way of knocking off with disconcerting suddenness. He did not, he declared, trust anybody. "What's the use?" he said; "you only get your face slapped!" For his part, he believed the Eleventh Commandment was, "Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, because he'll get it."

"Read your Bible!" Mrs. Maitland retorted; "then you'll know enough to call it a Beatitude, not a Commandment."

Mr. Ferguson snorted again. "Bible? It's all I can do to get time to read my paper. I'm worked to death," he reproached her. But in spite of being worked to death he always found time on summer evenings to weed the garden in his back yard, or on winter mornings to feed a flock of Mercer's sooty pigeons; and he had been known to walk all over town to find a particular remedy for a sick child of one of his molders. To be sure he alleged, when Mrs. Maitland accused him of kindness, that, as far as the child was concerned, he was a fool for his pains, because human critters ("I'm one of 'em myself,") were a bad lot and it would be a good thing if they all died young!

"Oh, you have a fine bark, friend Ferguson," she said, "but when it comes to a bite, I guess most folks get a kiss from you."

"Kiss?" said Robert Ferguson, horrified; "not much!"

They were very good friends, these two, each growling at, disapproving of, and completely trusting the other. Mrs. Maitland's chief disapproval of her superintendent--for her reproaches about his bark were really expressions of admiration--her serious disapproval was based on the fact that, when the season permitted, he broke the Sabbath by grubbing in his garden, instead of going to church. A grape-arbor ran the length of this garden, and in August the Isabellas, filmed with soot, had a flavor, Robert Ferguson thought, finer than could be found in any of the vineyards lying in the hot sunshine on the banks of the river, far out of reach of Mercer's smoke. There was a flagstone path around the arbor, and then borders of perennials against brick walls thick with ivy or hidden by trellised peach-trees. All summer long bees came to murmur among the flowers, and every breeze that blew over them carried some sweetness to the hot and tired streets outside. It was a spot of perfume and peace, and it was no wonder that the hard-working, sad-eyed man liked to spend his Sundays in it. But "remembering the Sabbath" was his employer's strong point. Mrs. Maitland kept the Fourth Commandment with passion. Her Sundays, dividing each six days of extraordinary activity, were arid stretches of the unspeakable dullness of idleness. When Blair grew up he used to look back at those Sundays and shudder. There was church and Sunday-school in the morning, then a cold dinner, for cold roast beef was Mrs. Maitland's symbol of Sabbatical holiness. Then an endless, vacant afternoon, spent always indoors. Certain small, pious books were permitted the two children--_Little Henry and His Bearer, The

Ministering Children_, and like moral food; but no games, no walks, no playing in the orchard. Silence and weary idleness and Little Henry's holy arrogances. Though the day must have been as dreary to Mrs. Maitland as it was to her son and daughter, she never winced. She sat in the parlor, dressed in black silk, and read _The Presbyterian_ and the Bible. She never allowed herself to look at her desk in the dining-room, or even at her knitting, which on week-days when she had no work to do was a great resource; she looked at the clock a good deal, and sometimes she sighed, then applied herself to _The Presbyterian_. She went to bed at half-past seven as against eleven or twelve on other nights, first reading, with extraordinary rapidity, her "Chapter." Mrs. Maitland had a "system" by which she was able to read the Bible through once a year. She frequently recommended it to her superintendent; to her way of thinking such reading was accounted to her as righteousness.

Refreshed by a somnolent Sunday, she would rush furiously into business on Monday morning, and Mr. Robert Ferguson, who never went to church, followed in her wake, doing her bidding with grim and admiring thoroughness. If not "worked to death," he was, at any rate, absorbed in her affairs. Even when he went home at night, and, on summer evenings, fell to grubbing in his narrow back yard, where his niece "helped" him by pushing a little wheelbarrow over the mossy flagstones,--even then he did not dismiss Mrs. Maitland's business from his mind. He was scrupulous to say, as he picked up the weeds scattered from the wheelbarrow, "Have you been a good little girl to-day, Elizabeth?" but all the while, in his own thoughts he was going over matters at the Works. On Sundays he managed to get far enough away from business to interrogate Miss White about his niece:

"I hope Elizabeth is behaving herself, Miss White?"

"Oh yes; she is a dear, good child."

"Well, you never can tell about children,--or anybody else. Keep a sharp eye on her, Miss White. And be careful, please, about vanity. I thought I saw her looking in the mirror in the hall this morning. Please discourage any signs of vanity."

"She hasn't a particle of vanity!" Miss White said warmly.

But in spite of such assurances, Mr. Ferguson was always falling into bleakly apprehensive thoughts of his little girl, obstinately denying his pride in her, and allowing himself only the meager hope that she would "turn out fairly decently." Vanity was his especial concern, and he was more than once afraid he had discovered it: Elizabeth was not allowed to go to dancing-school--dancing and vanity were somehow related in her uncle's mind; so the vital, vivid little creature expressed the rhythm that was in her by dancing without instruction, keeping time with loud, elemental cadences of her own composing, not always melodious, but always in time. Sometimes she danced thus in the school-room; sometimes in Mrs. Todd's "ice-cream parlor" at the farther end of Mercer's old wooden bridge; once--and this was one of the occasions when Mr. Ferguson thought he had detected the vice he dreaded--once she danced in his very own library! Up and down she

went, back and forth, before a long mirror that stood between the windows. She had put a daffodowndilly behind each ear, and twisted a dandelion chain around her neck. She looked, as she came and went, smiling and dimpling at herself in the shadowy depths of the mirror, like a flower--a flower in the wind!--bending and turning and swaying, and singing as she danced: "Oh, isn't it joyful--joyful--joyful!"

It was then that her uncle came upon her; for just a moment he stood still in involuntary delight, then remembered his theories; there was certainly vanity in her primitive adornment! He knocked his glasses off with a fierce gesture, and did his duty by barking at her,--as Mrs. Maitland would have expressed it. He told her in an angry voice that she must go to bed for the rest of the day! at least, if she ever did it again, she must go to bed for the rest of the day.

Another time he felt even surer of the feminine failing: Elizabeth said, in his presence, that she wished she had some rings like those of a certain Mrs. Richie, who had lately come to live next door; at which Mr. Ferguson barked at Miss White, barked so harshly that Elizabeth flew at him like a little enraged cat. "Stop scolding Cherry-pie! You hurt her feelings; you are a wicked man!" she screamed, and beating him with her right hand, she fastened her small, sharp teeth into her left arm just above the wrist--then screamed again with self-inflicted pain. But when Miss White, dismayed at such a loss of self-control, apologized for her, Mr. Ferguson shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't mind temper," he said; "I used to have a temper myself; but I will not have her vain! Better put some plaster on her arm. Elizabeth, you must not call Miss White by that ridiculous name."

The remark about Mrs. Richie's rings really disturbed him; it made him deplore to himself the advent as a neighbor of a foolish woman. "She'll put ideas into Elizabeth's head," he told himself. In regard to the rings, he had not needed Elizabeth to instruct him. He had noticed them himself, and they had convinced him that this Mrs. Richie, who at first sight seemed a shy, sad woman with no nonsense about her, was really no exception to her sex. "Vain and lazy, like the rest of them," he said cynically. Having passed the age when he cared to sport with Amaryllis, he did not, he said, like women. When he was quite a young man, he had added, "except Mrs. Maitland." Which remark, being repeated to Molly Wharton, had moved that young lady to retort that the reason that Sarah Maitland was the only woman he liked, was that Sarah Maitland was not a woman! "The only feminine thing about her is her petticoats," said Miss Wharton, daintily. For which mot, Robert Ferguson never forgave her. He certainly did not expect to like this new-comer in Mercer, this Mrs. Richie, but he had gone to see her. He had been obliged to, because she wished to rent a house he owned next door to the one in which he lived. So, being her landlord, he had to see her, if for nothing else, to discourage requests for inside repairs. He saw her, and promised to put up a little glass house at the end of the back parlor for a plant-room. "If she'd asked me for a 'conservatory,'" he said to himself, "I wouldn't have considered it for a moment; but just a few sashes--I suppose I might as well

give in on that? Besides, if she likes flowers, there must be something to her." All the same, he was conscious of having given in, and to a woman who wore rings; so he was quite gruff with Mrs. Richie's little boy, whom he found listening to an harangue from Elizabeth. The two children had scraped acquaintance through the iron fence that separated the piazzas of the two houses. "I," Elizabeth had announced, "have a mosquito-bite on my leg; I'll show it to you," she said, generously; and when the bite on her little thigh was displayed, she tried to think of other personal matters. "My mother's dead. And my father's dead."

"So's mine," David matched her, proudly. "I'm an adopted child."

"I have a pair of red shoes with white buttons," she said. David, unable to think of any possession of his own to cap either bite or boots, was smitten into gloomy silence.

In spite of the landlord's disapproval of his tenant's rings, the acquaintance of the two families grew. Mr. Ferguson had to see Mrs. Richie again about those "sashes," or what not. His calls were always on business--but though he talked of greenhouses, and she talked of knocking out an extra window in the nursery so that her little boy could have more sunshine, they slipped after a while into personalities: Mrs. Richie had no immediate family; her--her husband had died nearly three years before. Since then she had been living in St. Louis. She had come now to Mercer because she wanted to be nearer to a friend, an old clergyman, who lived in a place called Old Chester.

"I think it's about twenty miles up the river," she said. "That's where I found David. I--I had lost a little boy, and David had lost his mother, so we belonged together. It doesn't make any difference to us, that he isn't my own, does it, David?"

"Yes'm," said David,

"David! Why won't you ever say what is expected of you? We don't know anybody in Mercer," she went on, with a shy, melancholy smile, "except Elizabeth." And at her kind look the little girl, who had tagged along behind her uncle, snuggled up to the maternal presence, and rubbed her cheek against the white hand which had the pretty rings on it. "I am so glad to have somebody for David to play with," Mrs. Richie said, looking down at the little nestling thing, who at that moment stopped nestling, and dropping down on toes and finger-tips, loped up--on very long hind-legs, to the confusion of her elders, who endeavored not to see her peculiar attitude--and, putting a paw into David's pocket, abstracted a marble. There was an instant explosion, in which David, after securing his property through violent exertions, sought, as a matter of pure justice, to pull the bear's hair. But when Mrs. Richie interfered, separating the combatants with horrified apologies for her young man's conduct, Elizabeth's squeals stopped abruptly. She stood panting, her eyes still watering with David's tug at her hair; the dimple in her right cheek began to lengthen into a hard line.

"You are very naughty, David," said Mrs. Richie, sternly; "you must beg Elizabeth's pardon at once!" At which Elizabeth burst out:

"Stop! Don't scold him. It was my fault. I did it--taking his marble. I'll--I'll bite my arm if you scold David!"

"Elizabeth!" protested her uncle; "I'm ashamed of you!"

But Elizabeth was indifferent to his shame; she was hugging David frantically. "I hate, I hate, I _hate_ your mother--if she does have rings!" Her face was so convulsed with rage that Mrs. Richie actually recoiled before it; Elizabeth, still clamoring, saw that involuntary start of horror. Instantly she was calm; but she shrank away almost out of the room. It seemed as if at that moment some veil, cold and impenetrable, fell between the gentle woman and the fierce, pathetic child--a veil that was not to be lifted until, in some mysterious way, life should make them change places.

The two elders looked at each other, Robert Ferguson with meager amusement; Mrs. Richie still grave at the remembrance of that furious little face. "What did she mean about 'biting her arm'?" she asked, after Elizabeth had been sent home, the bewildered David being told to accompany her to the door.

"I believe she bites herself when she gets angry," Elizabeth's uncle said; "Miss White said she had quite a sore place on her arm last winter, because she bit it so often. It's of no consequence," he added, knocking his glasses off fiercely. Again Mrs. Richie looked shocked. "She is my brother's child," he said, briefly; "he died some years ago. He left her to me." And Mrs. Richie knew instinctively that the bequest had not been welcome. "Miss White looks after her," he said, putting his glasses on again, carefully, with both hands; "she calls her her 'Lamb,' though a more unlamblike person than Elizabeth I never met. She has a little school for her and the two Maitland youngsters in the top of my house. Miss White is otherwise known as Cherry-pie. Elizabeth, I am informed, loves cherry-pie; also, she loves Miss White: ergo!" he ended, with his snort of a laugh. Then he had a sudden thought: "Why don't you let David come to Miss White for lessons? I've no doubt she could look after another pupil."

"I'd be delighted to," Mrs. Richie said, gratefully. So, through the good offices of Mr. Ferguson, the arrangement was made. Mr. Ferguson did not approve of Mrs. Richie's rings, but he had no objection to helping her about David.

And that was how it happened that these four little lives were thrown together--four threads that were to be woven into the great fabric of Life.

CHAPTER II

On the other side of the street, opposite the Maitland house, was a huddle of wooden tenements. Some of them were built on piles, and seemed to stand on stilts, holding their draggled skirts out of the mud of their untidy yards: some sagged on rotting sills, leaning shoulder to shoulder as if to prop one another up. From

each front door a shaky flight of steps ran down to the unpaved sidewalk, where pigs and children and hens, and the daily tramp of feet to and from the Maitland Works, had beaten the earth into a hard, black surface--or a soft, black surface, when it rained. These little huddling houses called themselves Maitland's Shantytown, and they looked up at the Big House, standing in melancholy isolation behind its fence of iron spears, with the pride that is common to us all when we find ourselves in the company of our betters. Back of the little houses was a strip of waste land, used for a dump; and beyond it, bristling against the sky, the long line of Mercer's stacks and chimneys.

In spite of such surroundings, the Big House, even as late as the early seventies, was impressive. It was square, with four great chimneys, and long windows that ran from floor to ceiling. Its stately entrance and its two curving flights of steps were of white marble, and so were the lintels of the windows; but the stone was so stained and darkened with smoky years of rains and river fogs, that its only beauty lay in the noble lines that grime and time had not been able to destroy. A gnarled and twisted old wistaria roped the doorway, and, crawling almost to the roof, looped along the eaves, in May it broke into a froth of exquisite purple and faint green, and for a week the garland of blossoms, murmurous with bees, lay clean and lovely against the narrow, old bricks which had once been painted yellow. Outside, the house had a distinction which no superficial dilapidation could mar; but inside distinction was almost lost in the commonplace, if not in actual ugliness. The double parlors on the right of the wide hall had been furnished in the complete vulgarity of the sixties; on the left was the library, which had long ago been taken by Mrs. Maitland as a bedroom, for the practical reason that it opened into the dining-room, so her desk was easily accessible at any time of night, should her passion for toil seize her after working-hours were over. The walls of this room were still covered with books, that no one ever read. Mrs. Maitland had no time to waste on reading; "I _live_," she used to say; "I don't read about living!" Except the imprisoned books, the only interesting things in the room were some _cartes-de-visite_ of Blair, which stood in a dusty row on the bureau, one of them propped against her son's first present to her--the unopened bottle of Johann Maria Farina. When Blair was a man, that bottle still stood there, the kid cap over the cork split and yellow, the ribbons of the little calendar hanging from its green neck, faded to streaky white.

The office dining-room, about which Blair had begun to be impertinent when he was eight years old, was of noble proportions and in its day must have had great dignity; but in Blair's childhood its day was over. Above the dingy white wainscoting the landscape paper his grandfather had brought from France in the thirties had faded into a blur of blues and buffs. The floor was uncarpeted save for a Persian rug, whose colors had long since dulled to an even grime. At one end of the room was Mrs. Maitland's desk; at the other, filing cases, and two smaller desks where clerks worked at ledgers or drafting. The four French windows were uncurtained, and the inside shutters folded back, so that the silent clerks might have the benefit of every ray of daylight filtering wanly through Mercer's murky air. A long table stood in the middle of the room; generally it was covered with

blue-prints, or the usual impedimenta of an office. But it was not an office table; it was of mahogany, scratched and dim to be sure, but matching the ancient claw-footed sideboard whose top was littered with letter files, silver teapots and sugar-bowls, and stacks of newspapers. Three times a day one end of this table was cleared, and the early breakfast, or the noon dinner, or the rather heavy supper eaten rapidly and for the most part in silence. Mrs. Maitland was silent because she was absorbed in thought; Nannie and Blair were silent because they were afraid to talk. But the two children gave a touch of humanness to the ruthless room, which, indeed, poor little Blair had some excuse for calling a "pigsty."

"When I'm big," Blair announced one afternoon after school, "I'll have a bunch of flowers on the table, like your mother does; you see if I don't! I like your mother, David."

"_I_ don't; _very_ much," Elizabeth volunteered. "She looks out of her eyes at me when I get mad."

"I don't like to live at my house," Blair said, sighing.

"Why don't you run away?" demanded Elizabeth; "I'm going to some day when I get time."

"Where would you run to?" David said, practically. David was always disconcertingly practical.

But Elizabeth would not be pinned down to details. "I will decide that when I get started."

"I believe," Blair meditated, "I will run away."

"I'll tell you what let's do," Elizabeth said, and paused to pick up her right ankle and hop an ecstatic yard or two on one foot; "I tell you what let's do: let's all run away, _and get married!_"

The other three stared at her dumfounded. Elizabeth, whirling about on her toes, dropped down on all--fours to turn a somersault of joy; when she was on her feet she said, "Oh, _let's_ get married!" But it took Blair, who always found it difficult to make up his mind, a few moments to accept the project.

They had planned to devote that afternoon to playing bury-you-alive under the yellow sofa in Mrs. Richie's parlor, but this idea of Elizabeth's made it necessary to hide in the "cave"--a shadowy spot behind the palmtub in the greenhouse--for reflection. Once settled there, jostling one another like young pigeons, it was David who, as usual, made the practical objections:

"We haven't any money."

"I suppose we could get all the money we want out of my mother's cash-box," Blair admitted, wavering.

"That's stealing," Elizabeth said.

"You can't steal from your mother," Nannie defended her brother.

"I'll marry you, Elizabeth," Blair said, with sudden enthusiastic decision.

But David demurred: "I think _I'd_ like Elizabeth. I'm not sure I want to marry Nannie."

"You said Nannie's hair was the longest, only yesterday!" Blair said, angrily.

"But I like Elizabeth's color of hair. Nannie, do you think I'd like you to marry best, or Elizabeth?"

"I don't believe the color of hair makes any difference in being married," Nannie said, kindly. "And anyway, you'll have to marry me, David, 'cause Blair can't. He's my brother."

"He's only your half-brother," David pointed out.

"You can have Nannie," said Blair, "or you can stay out of the play."

"Well, I'll marry Nannie," David said, sadly; and Blair proceeded to elaborate the scheme. It was very simple: the money in Mrs. Maitland's cash-box would pay their fare to--"Oh, anywhere," Blair said, then hesitated: "The only thing is, how'll we get it?"

"I'll get it for you," Nannie said, shuddering.

"Wouldn't you be scared?" Blair asked doubtfully. Everybody knew poor Nannie was a 'fraid-cat.

"Little people," somebody called from the parlor, "what are you chattering about?"

The children looked at one another in a panic, but Blair called back courageously, "Oh, nothing."

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Richie, smiling at Mr. Robert Ferguson, who had dropped in to find Elizabeth--"perhaps you didn't know that my conservatory was a Pirates' Cave?"

There was a sort of hesitant intimacy now between these two people, but it had never got so far as friendship. Mrs. Richie's retreating shyness was courteous, but never cordial; Robert Ferguson's somber egotism was kind, but never generous. Yet, owing no doubt to their two children, and to the fact that Mr. Ferguson was continually bringing things over from his garden borders, to transplant into hers--it improves the property, he told her briefly--owing to the children and the flowers, the landlord and the tenant saw each other rather frequently. On this especial afternoon, though Mr. Ferguson had found Elizabeth, he still lingered, perhaps to tell the story of some extraordinary thing Mrs. Maitland had done that day at the Works. "She's been the only man in the family since old John died," he ended; "and, judging from Blair, I guess she'll continue to be."

"She is wonderful!" Mrs. Richie agreed; "but she's lovable, too, which is more important."

"I should as soon say a locomotive was lovable," he said; "not that that's against her. Quite the contrary."

The pretty woman on the yellow damask sofa by the fireside flushed with offense. The fact was, this dry, dogmatic man, old at thirty-six, lean, and in a time of beards clean-shaven, with gray hair that stood fiercely up from a deeply furrowed brow, and kind, unhappy eyes blinking behind the magnifying lenses of his gold-rimmed glasses, this really friendly neighbor, was always offending her--though he was rather nice about inside repairs. "Why do I endure him?" Mrs. Richie said to herself sometimes. Perhaps it was because, in spite of his manners, and his sneer that the world was a mighty mean place to live in, and his joyless way of doing his duty to his little niece, he certainly did see how good and sweet her David was. She reminded herself of this to check her offense at his snub about Mrs. Maitland; and all the while the good, sweet David was plotting behind the green tub of the palm-tree in the conservatory. But when Mr. Ferguson called to Elizabeth to come home with him, and then bent over and fussed about the buttons on her jacket, and said, anxiously, "Are you warm enough, Pussy?" Mrs. Richie said to herself: "He is good! It's only his manners that are bad."

Robert Ferguson went out into the brown November dusk with his little girl clinging to his hand, for so he understood his duty to his niece; and on their own doorstep Elizabeth asked a question:

"Uncle, if you get married, do you have to stay married?"

He looked down at her with a start. "What?" he said.

"If you don't like being married, do you have to stay?"

"Don't ask foolish questions!" he said; "of course you have to."

Elizabeth sighed. As for her uncle, he was disturbed to the point of irritation. He dropped her hand with a gesture almost of disgust, and the lines in his forehead deepened into painful folds. After supper he called Elizabeth's governess into the library, and shut the door.

"Miss White," he said, knocking his glasses off, "Elizabeth is getting to be a big girl; will you kindly make a point of teaching her--things?"

"I will do so immejetly, sir," said Miss White. "What things?"

"Why," said Robert Ferguson, helplessly, "why--general morals." He put his glasses on carefully, with both hands. "Elizabeth asked me a very improper question; she asked me about divorce, and--"

"Divorce!" exclaimed Miss White, astounded; "I have been at my post for eight years, sir, and I am positive that that word

has never been used in Elizabeth's presence!"

He did not explain. "Teach her," he said, harshly, "that a woman has got to behave herself."

Blair having once decided upon it, clung to his purpose of running away, with a persistency which was his mother's large determination in little; but the double elopement was delayed for two days because of the difficulty of securing the necessary funds. The dining-room, where Mrs. Maitland "kept all her money," was rarely entirely deserted. In those brief intervals when the two clerks were not on hand, Harris seemed to be possessed of a clean devil, and spent an unusual amount of time "redding up"; or when Harris was in the kitchen, and Blair, dragging the reluctant Nannie, had peered into the room, he had been confronted by his mother. She never saw him--sometimes she was writing; sometimes talking to a foreman; sometimes knitting, for when Sarah Maitland had nothing else to do, she made baby socks for the missionary barrel; once when Blair came to the door, she was walking up and down knitting rapidly, thinking out some project; her ball of zephyr had fallen on the floor, and dragging along behind her, unwinding and unwinding, had involved her hurrying tramp in a grimy, pink tangle.

Each time Blair had looked into the room it was policed by this absorbed presence. "We'll _never_ get married!" he said in despair. The delay had a disastrous effect upon romance, for David, with the melancholy candor of a reasoning temperament, was continually saying that he doubted the desirability of Nannie as a wife; and Elizabeth was just as hesitant about Blair.

"Suppose I took a hate to you for a husband? Uncle Robert says if you don't like being married, you can't stop."

"You won't want to stop. Married people don't have to go to school!"

Elizabeth sighed. "But I don't know but what maybe I'd like David for a husband?"

"He doesn't have but ten cents a week allowance, and I have a dollar," Blair reminded her.

"Well, I don't believe I like being married, anyway," she fretted; "I like going out to the toll-house for ice-cream better."

Her uncertainty made Blair still more impatient to finance his journey; and that day, just after dinner, he and Nannie stood quaking at the dining-room door. "I-I-I'll do it," Blair gasped, with trembling valor. He was very little, and his eyes were dilating with fright. "I'll do it," he said, chattering. Nannie rushed into the breach; Nannie never pretended to be anything but a 'fraid-cat except in things that concerned Blair; she said now, boldly:

"I'm the oldest, so I ought to."

She crept across the floor, stopping at every step to listen

breathlessly; nothing stirred, except her own little shadow crouching at her heels.

"Grab in the top drawer," Blair hissed after her; and she put a shrinking hand into the japanned box, and "grabbed" all the bills she could hold; then, not waiting to close the drawer, she fled back to Blair. Up-stairs in her room, they counted the money.

"We can travel all round the world!" Blair whispered, thrilled at the amount of their loot. But at the last moment there was a defection--Elizabeth backed out. "I'd rather go out to the toll-house for ice-cream," she said; "ice-cream at Mrs. Todd's is nicer than being married. David, don't you go, either. Let Blair and Nannie go. You stay with me."

But David was not to be moved. "I like traveling; I've traveled a good deal all my life; and I want to go round the world with Blair."

Elizabeth gave him a black look. "You like Blair better 'an me," she said, the tears hot in her amber eyes. A minute later she slipped away to hide under the bed in her own room, peering out from under a lifted valance for a hoped-for pursuer. But no one came; the other three were so excited that her absence was hardly noticed.

How they started, the adventurous ones, late that afternoon--later, in fact, than they planned, because Blair insisted upon running back to give Harris a parting gift of a dollar; "'Cause, poor Harris! _he_ can't go traveling"--how they waited in the big, barn-like, foggy station for what Blair called the "next train," how they boarded it for "any place"--all seemed very funny when they were old enough to look back upon it. It even seemed funny, a day or two afterward, to their alarmed elders. But at the time it was not amusing to anybody. David was gloomy at being obliged to marry Nannie; "I pretty near wish I'd stayed with Elizabeth," he said, crossly. Nannie was frightened, because, she declared, "Mamma'll be mad;--now I tell you, Blair, she'll be mad!" And Blair was sulky because he had no wife. Yet, in spite of these varying emotions, pushed by Blair's resolution, they really did venture forth to "travel all around the world!"

As for the grown people's feelings about the elopement, they ran the gamut from panic to amusement.... At a little after five o'clock, Miss White heard sobbing in Elizabeth's room, and going in, found the little girl blacking her boots and crying furiously. "Elizabeth! my lamb! What is the matter?"

"I have a great many sorrows," said Elizabeth, with a hiccup of despair.

"But what _are_ you doing?"

"I am blacking my red shoes," Elizabeth wailed; and so she was, the blacking-sponge on its shaky wire dripping all over the carpet. "My beautiful red shoes; I am blacking them; and now they are spoiled forever."

"But why do you want to spoil them?" gasped Miss White,

struggling to take the blacking-bottle away from her. "Elizabeth, tell me immediately! What has happened?"

"I didn't go on the journey," said Elizabeth; "and David wouldn't stay at home with me; he liked Blair and Nannie better 'an me. He hurt my feelings; so pretty soon right away I got mad--mad--mad--to think he wouldn't stay with me. I always get mad if my feelings are hurt, and David Richie is always hurting 'em. I despise him for making me mad! I despise him for treating me so--_hideous_! And so I took a hate to my shoes." The ensuing explanation sent Miss White, breathless, to tell Mrs. Richie; but Mrs. Richie was not at home.

When David did not appear that afternoon after school, Mrs. Richie was disturbed. By three o'clock she was uneasy; but it was nearly five before the quiver of apprehension grew into positive fright; then she put on her things and walked down to the Maitland house.

"Is David here?" she demanded when Harris answered her ring; "please go up-stairs and look, Harris; they may be playing in the nursery. I am worried."

Harris shuffled off, and Mrs. Richie, following him to the foot of the stairs, stood there gripping the newel-post.

"They ain't here," Harris announced from the top landing.

Mrs. Richie sank down on the lowest step.

"Harris!" some one called peremptorily, and she turned to see Robert Ferguson coming out of the dining-room: "Oh, you're here, Mrs. Richie? I suppose you are on David's track. I thought Harris might have some clue. I came down to tell Mrs. Maitland all we could wring from Elizabeth."

Before she could ask what he meant, Blair's mother joined them. "I haven't a doubt they are playing in the orchard," she said.

"No, they're not," her superintendent contradicted; "Elizabeth says they were going to 'travel'; but that's all we could get out of her."

"Travel! Oh, what does she mean?" Mrs. Richie said; "I'm so frightened!"

"What's the use of being frightened?" Mrs. Maitland asked, curiously; "it won't bring them back if they are lost, will it?"

Robert Ferguson knocked his glasses off fiercely. "They couldn't be lost in Mercer," he reassured David's mother.

"Well, whether they've run away or not, come into my room and talk about it like a sensible woman," said Mrs. Maitland; "what's the use of sitting on the stairs? Women have such a way of sitting on stairs when things go wrong! Suppose they are lost. What harm's done? They'll turn up. Come!" Mrs. Richie came. Everybody "came" or went, or stood still, when Mrs. Maitland said the word! And though not commanded, Mr. Ferguson came too.

In the dining-room Mrs. Maitland took no part in the perplexed discussion that followed. At her desk, in her revolving chair, she had instinctively taken up her pen; there was a perceptible instant in which she got her mind off her own affairs and put it on this matter of the children. Then she laid the pen down, and turned around to face the other two; but idleness irritated her, and she reached for a ball of pink worsted skewered by bone needles. She asked no questions and made no comments, but knitting rapidly, listened, until apparently her patience came to an end; then with a grunt she whirled round to her desk and again picked up her pen. But as she did so she paused, pen in air; threw it down, and pounding the flat of her hand on her desk, laughed loudly:

"I know! I know!" And revolving back again in leisurely relief to face them, she said, with open amusement: "When I came home this afternoon, I found this drawer half open and the bills in my cash-box disturbed. They've"--her voice was suddenly drowned in the rumble of a train on the spur track; the house shook slightly, and a gust of black smoke was vomited against the windows;--"they've helped themselves and gone off to enjoy it! We'll get on their trail at the railroad station. That's what Elizabeth meant by "traveling."

Mrs. Richie turned terrified eyes toward Mr. Ferguson.

"Why, of course!" he said, "the monkeys!"

But Mrs. Richie seemed more frightened than ever. "The railroad!--
Oh--"

"Nonsense," said Mrs. Maitland; "they're all right. The ticket-agent will remember them. Mr. Ferguson, telegraph to their destination, wherever it is, and have them shipped back. No police help at this end yet, if you please."

Robert Ferguson nodded. "Of course everything is all right," he said. "I'll let you know the minute I find traces of them, Mrs. Richie." When he reached the door, he came back. "Now don't you worry; I could thrash those boys for bothering you!" At which she tried to smile, but there was a quiver in her chin.

"Harris!" Mrs. Maitland broke in, "supper! Mrs. Richie, you are going to have something to eat."

"Oh, I can't--"

"What? You are not saying _can't?_ 'Can't' is a 'bad word,' you know." She got up--a big, heavy woman, in a gray bag of a dress that only reached to the top of her boots--and stood with her hands on her hips; her gray hair was twisted into a small, tight knot at the back of her head, and her face looked like iron that had once been molten and had cooled into roughened immobility. It was not an unamiable face; as she stood there looking down at Mrs. Richie she even smiled the half-amused smile one might bestow on a puppy, and she put a kindly hand on the other mother's shoulder. "Don't be so scared, woman! They'll be found."

"You don't think anything could have happened to him?" Mrs. Richie said, trembling; "you don't think he could have been run over, or--or anything?" She clutched at the big hand and clung to it.

"No," Mrs. Maitland said, dryly; "I don't think anything has happened to him."

Mrs. Richie had the grace to blush. "Of course I meant Blair and Nannie, too," she murmured.

"You never thought of 'em!" Mrs. Maitland said, chuckling; "now you must have some supper."

They were in the midst of it when a note came from Mr. Ferguson to say that he was on the track of the runaways. He had sent a despatch that would insure their being returned by the next train, and he was himself going half-way up the road to meet them. Then a postscript: "Tell Mrs. Richie not to worry."

"Doesn't seem much disturbed about my worry," said Mrs. Maitland, jocosely significant; then with loud cheerfulness she tried to rally her guest: "It's all right; what did I tell you? Where's my knitting? Come; I'll go over to the parlor with you; we'll sit there."

Mrs. Maitland's parlor was not calculated to cheer a panic-stricken mother. It was a vast room, rather chilly on this foggy November evening, and smelling of soot. On its remote ceiling was a design in delicate relief of garlands and wreaths, which the dingy years had not been able to rob of its austere beauty. Two veined black-marble columns supported an arch that divided the desert of the large room into two smaller rooms, each of which had the center-table of the period, its bleak white-marble top covered with elaborately gilded books that no one ever opened. Each room had, too, a great cut-glass chandelier, swathed in brown paper-muslin and looking like a gigantic withered pear. Each had its fireplace, with a mantelpiece of funereal marble to match the pillars. Mrs. Maitland had refurnished this parlor when she came to the old house as a bride; she banished to the lumber-room, or even to the auctioneer's stand, the heavy, stately mahogany of the early part of the century, and purchased according to the fashion of the day, glittering rosewood, carved and gilded and as costly as could be found. Between the windows at each end of the long room were mirrors in enormous gilt frames; the windows themselves, topped with cornices and heavy lambrequins, were hung with crimson brocade; a grand piano, very bare and shining, sprawled sidewise between the black columns of the arch, and on the wall opposite the fireplaces were four large landscapes in oil, of exactly the same size. "Herbert likes pictures," the bride said to herself when she purchased them. "That goose Molly Wharton wouldn't have been able to buy 'em for him!" The only pleasant thing in the meaningless room was Nannie's drawing-board, which displayed the little girl's painstaking and surprisingly exact copy in lead-pencil, of some chromo--"Evangeline" perhaps, or some popular sentimentality of the sixties. In the ten years which had elapsed since Mrs. Maitland had plunged into her debauch of furnishing--her one

extravagance!--of course the parlors had softened; the enormous roses of the carpets had faded, the glitter of varnish had dimmed; but the change was not sufficient to blur in Mrs. Maitland's eyes, all the costly and ugly glory of the room. She cast a complacent glance about her as she motioned her nervous and preoccupied guest to a chair. "How do you like Mercer?" she said, beginning to knit rapidly.

"Oh, very well; it is a little--smoky," Mrs. Richie said, glancing at the clock.

Mrs. Maitland grunted. "Mercer would be in a bad way without its smoke. You ought to learn to like it, as I do! I like the smell of it, I like the taste of it, I like the feel of it!"

"Really?" Mrs. Richie murmured; she was watching the clock.

"That smoke, let me tell you Mrs. Richie is the pillar of cloud, to this country! (If you read your Bible, you'll know what that means.) I think of it whenever I look at my stacks."

Mrs. Maitland's resentment at her guest's mild criticism was obvious; but Mrs. Richie did not notice it. "I think I'll go down to the station and meet the children," she said, rising.

"I'm afraid you are a very foolish woman," Sarah Maitland said;-- and Mrs. Richie sat down. "Mr. Ferguson will bring 'em here. Anyway, this clock is half an hour slow. They'll be here before you could get to the station." She chuckled, slyly. Her sense of humor was entirely rudimentary, and never got beyond the practical joke. "I've been watching you look at that clock," she said; then she looked at it herself and frowned. She was wasting a good deal of time over this business of the children. But in spite of herself, glancing at the graceful figure sitting in tense waiting at the fireside, she smiled. "You are a pretty creature," she said; and Mrs. Richie started and blushed like a girl. "If Robert Ferguson had any sense!" she went on, and paused to pick up a dropped stitch. "Queer fellow, isn't he?" Mrs. Richie had nothing to say. "Something went wrong with him when he was young, just after he left college. Some kind of a crash. Woman scrape, I suppose. Have you ever noticed that women make all the trouble in the world? Well, he never got over it. He told me once that Life wouldn't play but one trick on him. 'We're always going to sit down on a chair--and Life pulls it from under us,' he said. 'It won't do that to me twice.' He's not given to being confidential, but that put me on the track. And now he's got Elizabeth on his hands."

"She's a dear little thing," Mrs. Richie said, smiling; "though I confess she always fights shy of me; she doesn't like me, I'm afraid."

Mrs. Maitland lifted an eyebrow. "She's a corked-up volcano. Robert Ferguson ought to get married, and give her an aunt to look after her." She glanced at Mrs. Richie again, with appraising eyes; "pity he hasn't more sense."

"I think I hear a carriage," Mrs. Richie said, coldly. Then she forgot Mrs. Maitland, and stood waiting and trembling. A minute

later Mr. Ferguson ushered the three sleepy, whimpering children into the room, and Mrs. Richie caught her grimy, crying little boy in her arms and cried with him. "Oh, David, oh, David--my darling! How could you frighten mother so!"

She was on her knees before him, and while her tears and kisses fell on his tousled thatch of yellow hair, he burrowed his dirty little face among the laces around her white throat and bawled louder than ever. Mrs. Maitland, her back to the fireplace, her hands on her hips, stood looking on; she was very much interested. Blair, hungry and sleepy and evidently frightened, was nuzzling up against Mrs. Richie, catching at her hand and trying to hide behind her skirts; he looked furtively at his mother, but he would not meet her eye.

"Blair," she said, "go to bed."

"Nannie and me want some supper," said Blair in a whisper.

"You won't get any. Boys that go traveling at supper-time can get their own suppers or go hungry."

"It's my fault, Mamma," Nannie panted.

"No, it ain't!" Blair said quickly, emerging from behind Mrs. Richie; "it was me made her do it."

"Well, clear out, clear out! Go to bed, both of you," Mrs. Maitland said. But when the two children had scuttled out of the room she struck her knee with her fist and laughed immoderately.

The next morning, when the two children skulked palely into the dining-room, they were still frightened. Mrs. Maitland, however, did not notice them. She was absorbed in trying in the murky light to read the morning paper, propped against the silver urn in front of her.

"Sit down," she said; "I don't like children who are late for breakfast. Bless, O Lord, we beseech Thee, these things to our use, and us to Thy service and glory. Amen!--Harris! Light the gas."

Mercer's daylight was always more or less wan; but in the autumn the yellow fogs seemed to press the low-hanging smoke down into the great bowl of the hills at the bottom of which the town lay, and the wanness scarcely lightened, even at high noon. On such days the gas in the dining-room--or office, if one prefers to call it so--flared from breakfast until dinner time. It flared now on two scared little faces. Once Blair lifted questioning eyebrows at Harris, and managed when the man brought his plate of porridge to whisper, "mad?" At which the sympathetic Harris rolled his eyes speechlessly, and the two children grew perceptibly paler. But when, abruptly, Mrs. Maitland crumpled her newspaper together and threw it on the floor, her absorbed face showed no displeasure. The fact was, she had forgotten the affair of the night before; it was the children's obvious alarm which reminded her that the business of scolding and punishing must be attended to. She got up from the table and stood behind them, with her back to the fire; she began to nibble the upper joint of

her forefinger, wondering just how to begin. This silent inspection of their shoulders made the little creatures quiver. Nannie crumbled her bread into a heap, and Blair carried an empty spoon to his mouth with automatic regularity; Harris, in the pantry, in a paroxysm of sympathy, stretched his lean neck to the crack of the half-open door.

"Children!"

"Yes, ma'am," Nannie quavered.

"Turn round."

They turned. Nannie began to cry. Blair twisted a button on his coat with a grip that made his fingers white.

"Come into my room."

The children gasped with dismay. Mrs. Maitland's bedroom was a nightmare of a place to them both. It was generally dark, for the lower halves of the inside shutters were apt to be closed; but, worse than that, the glimmering glass doors of the bookcases that lined the walls held a suggestion of mystery that was curiously terrifying. Whenever they entered the room, the brother and sister always kept a frightened eye on those doors. This dull winter morning, when they came quaking along behind their mother into this grim place, it was still in the squalor of morning confusion. Later, Harris would open the shutters and tidy things up; he would dust the painted pine bureau and Blair's photographs and the slender green bottle of German cologne on which the red ribbons of the calendar were beginning to fade; now everything was dark and bleak and covered with dust. Mrs. Maitland sat down; the culprits stood hand in hand in front of her.

"Blair, don't you know it's wrong to take what doesn't belong to you?"

"I took it," said the 'fraid-cat, faintly; she moved in front of her brother as though to protect him.

"Blair told you to," his mother said.

"Yes," Blair blurted out, "it was me told her to."

"People that take things that don't belong to them go to hell," Mrs. Maitland said; "haven't you learned that in Sunday-school?"

Silence.

"You ought to be punished very severely, Blair--and Nannie, too. But I am very busy this morning, so I shall only say"--she hesitated; what on earth should she say! "that--that you shall lose your allowance for this week, both of you."

One of them muttered, "Yes'm."

Mrs. Maitland looked as uncomfortable as they did. She wondered what to do next. How much simpler a furnace was than a child! "Well," she said, "that's all--at present"; it had suddenly

occurred to her that apprehension was a good thing; "_at present_" she repeated darkly; "and Blair, remember; thieves go to hell." She watched them with perplexed eyes as they hurried out of the room; just as they reached the door she called: "Blair!"

The child stopped short in his tracks and quivered.

"Come here." He came, slowly, his very feet showing his reluctance. "Blair," she said--in her effort to speak gently her voice grated; she put out her hand as if to draw him to her, but the child shivered and moved aside. Mrs. Maitland looked at him dumbly; then bent toward him, and her hands, hanging between her knees, opened and closed, and even half stretched out as if in inarticulate entreaty. Nannie, in the doorway, sobbing under her breath, watched with frightened, uncomprehending eyes. "My son," Sarah Maitland said, with as much mildness as her loud voice could express, "what did you mean to do when you ran away?" She smiled, but he would not meet her eyes. "Tell me, my boy, why did you run away?"

Blair tried to speak, cleared his throat, and blurted out four husky words: "Don't like it here."

"Don't like what? Your home?"

Blair nodded.

"Why not?" she asked, astonished.

"Ugly," Blair said, faintly.

"Ugly! What is ugly?"

Blair, without looking up, made a little, swift gesture with his hand. "This," he said; then suddenly he lifted his head, gave her a sidewise, shrinking look, and dropped his eyes. The color flew into Mrs. Maitland's face; with an ejaculation of anger, she got on her feet. "You are a very foolish and very bad little boy," she said; "you don't know what you are talking about. I had meant to increase your allowance, but now I won't do it. Listen to me; it is no matter whether a house, or a--a person, is what you call 'ugly.' What matters is whether they are useful. Everything in the world ought to be useful--like our Works. If I ever hear you saying you don't like a thing because it's ugly, I shall--I shall not give you any money at all. Money!" she burst out, suddenly fluent, "money isn't _pretty_! Dirty scraps of paper, bits of silver that look like lead--perhaps you call money 'ugly,' too?"

Her vehemence was a sort of self-defense; it was a subtle confession that she felt in this little repelling personality the challenge of an equal; but Blair only gaped at her in childish confusion; and instantly his mother was herself again. "Clear out, now; and be a good boy." When she was alone, she sat at her desk in the dining-room for several minutes without taking up her pen. Her face burned from the slap of the child's words; but below the scorch of anger and mortification her heart was bruised. He did not like her to put her arm about him! She drew a

long breath and began to read her letters; but all the while she was thinking of that scene in the parlor the night before: Blair crouching against Mrs. Richie, clinging to her white hand;-- voluntarily Sarah Maitland looked at her own hand; "I suppose," she said to herself, "he thinks hers is 'pretty'! Where does he get such notions? I wonder what kind of a woman she is, anyway; she never says anything about her husband."

CHAPTER III

There came a day when Miss White's little school in the garret was broken up. Mr. Ferguson declared that David and Blair needed a boot instead of a petticoat to teach them their Latin--and a few other things, too! He had found Mrs. Richie in tears because, under the big hawthorn in her own back yard, David had blacked Blair's eye, and had himself achieved a bloody nose. Mrs. Richie was for putting on her things to go and apologize to Mrs. Maitland, and was hardly restrained by her landlord's snort of laughter.

"Next time I hope he'll give him two black eyes, and Blair will loosen one of his front teeth!" said Mr. Ferguson.

David's mother was speechless with horror.

"That's the worst of trusting a boy to a good woman," he barked, knocking off his glasses angrily; "but I'll do what I can to thwart you! I'll make sure there isn't any young-eyed cherubin business about David. He has got to go to boarding-school, and learn something besides his prayers. If somebody doesn't rescue him from apron-strings, he'll be a 'very, very good young man'--and then may the Lord have mercy on his soul!"

"I didn't know anybody could be too good," Mrs. Richie ventured.

"A woman can't be too good, but a man oughtn't to be," her landlord instructed her.

David's mother was too bewildered by such sentiments to protest--although, indeed, Mr. Ferguson need not have been quite so concerned about David's "goodness." This freckled, clear-eyed youngster, with straight yellow hair and good red cheeks, was just an honest, growly boy, who dropped his clothes about on the floor of his room, and whined over his lessons, and blustered largely when out of his mother's hearing; furthermore, he had already experienced his first stogie--with a consequent pallor about the gills that scared Mrs. Richie nearly to death. But Robert Ferguson's jeering reference to apron-strings resulted in his being sent to boarding school. Blair went with him, "rescued" from the goodwoman regime of Cherry-pie's instruction by Mr. Ferguson's advice to Mrs. Maitland; "although," Robert Ferguson admitted, candidly, "he doesn't need it as poor David does; his mother wouldn't know how to make a Miss Nancy of him, even if she wanted to!" Then, with a sardonic guess at Mrs. Richie's unspoken thought, he added that Mrs. Maitland would not dream of going to live in the town where her son was at school. "She has sense

enough to know that Blair, or any other boy worth his salt, would hate his mother if she tagged on behind," said Mr. Ferguson; "of course you would never think of doing such a thing, either," he ended, ironically.

"Of course not," said Mrs. Richie, faintly. So it was that, assisted by her landlord, David's mother thrust her one chicken out into the world unprotected by her hovering wing. About the time Miss White lost her two masculine pupils, the girls began to go to a day-school in Mercer, Cherry-pie's entire deposition as a teacher being brought about because, poor lady! she fumbled badly when it came to a critical moment with Elizabeth. It all grew out of one of the child's innumerable squabbles with David--she got along fairly peaceably with Blair. She and Nannie had been comparing pigtaileds, and David had asserted that Elizabeth's hair was "the nicest"; which so gratified her that she first hugged him violently, and then invited him to take her out rowing.

"I'll pay for the boat!" she said, and pirouetted around the room, keeping time with:

"Oh, that will be joyful, joyful, joyful!
Oh, that will be--"

"Uncle gave me a dollar yesterday," she interrupted herself, breathlessly.

To this David, patiently straightening his collar after that ecstatic embrace, objected; but his magnanimity was lessened by his explanation that he wasn't going to have any girl pay for him! This ruffled Elizabeth's pride for a moment; however, she was not averse to saving her dollar, so everything was arranged. David was to row her to Willis's, a country tavern two miles down the river, where, as all middle-aged Mercer will remember, the best jumbles in the world could be purchased at the agreeable price of two for a cent. Elizabeth, who was still congratulating herself on having "nicer hair than Nannie," and who loved the river (and the jumbles), was as punctual as a clock in arriving at the covered bridge where at the toll-house wharf they were to meet and embark. She had even been so forehanded as to bargain with Mrs. Todd for the hire of the skiff, in which she immediately seated herself, the tiller-ropes in her hands, all ready for David to take the oars. "And I've waited, and waited, and waited!" she told herself angrily, as she sat there in the faintly rocking skiff. And after an hour of waiting, what should she see but David Richie racing on the bridge with Blair Maitland! He had just simply forgotten his engagement! (Elizabeth was so nearly a young lady that she said "engagement.")

"I'll never forgive him," she said, and the dimple hardened in her cheek. Sitting in the boat, she looked up at the two boys, David in advance, a young, lithe figure, in cotton small-clothes and jersey, leaping in great, beautiful strides, on and on and on, his face glowing, his eyes like stars; then, alas, he gave a downward glance and there was Elizabeth, waiting fiercely in the skiff! His "engagement" came back to him; there was just one astonished, faltering instant; and in it, of course, Blair shot ahead! It must be confessed that in his rage at being beaten David promptly forgot Elizabeth again, for though she waited

still a little longer for him and his apology, no David appeared, he and Blair being occupied in wrangling over their race. She went home in a slowly gathering passion. _David had forgotten her!_ "He likes Blair better than me; he'd rather race with another boy than go out in a boat with me; and I said I'd pay for it--and I've only got one dollar in the whole world!" At that stab of self-pity a tear ran down the side of her nose (and she was still a whole block away from home!); when it reached her lip, she was obliged to put her tongue out furtively and lick it away. But repression made the outbreak, when it came, doubly furious. She burst in upon Miss White, her dry eyes blazing with rage.

"He made me wait; he didn't come; I hate him. I'll never speak to him again. He hurt my feelings. He is a beast."

"Elizabeth! You mustn't use such unladylike words! When I was a young lady I never even heard such words. Oh, my lamb, if you don't control your temper, something dreadful will happen to you some day!"

"I hope something dreadful will happen to him some day," said Elizabeth. And with that came the tears--a torrential rain, through which the lightning played and the thunder crashed. Miss White in real terror, left her, to get some smelling-salts, and the instant she was alone Elizabeth ran across the room and stood before her mirror; then she took a pair of scissors in her shaking hand and hacked off lock after lock, strand after strand, of her shining hair. When it was done, she looked at the russet stubble that was left with triumphant rage. "There, now! I guess he won't think my hair is nicer than Nannie's any more. I _hate_ him!" she said, and laughed out loud, her vivid face wet and quivering.

Miss White, hurrying in, heard the laugh, and stood transfixed: "Elizabeth!" The poor, ugly, shorn head, the pile of gleaming hair on the bureau, the wicked, tear-stained, laughing face brought the poor lady's heart into her throat. "Elizabeth!" she faltered again; and Elizabeth ran and flung her arms about her neck.

"David forgot all about me," she sobbed. "He is always hurting my feelings! And I can't _bear_ to have my feelings hurt. Oh, Cherry-pie, kiss me! Kiss me!"

That was the end of the outburst; the ensuing penitence was unbridled and temporary. The next morning she waylaid David to offer him some candy, which he took with serene unconsciousness of any bad behavior on his part.

"Awfully sorry I forgot about Willis's," he said casually; and took a hearty handful of candy.

Elizabeth, looking into the nearly empty box, winced; then said, bravely, "Take some more." He took a good deal more.

"David, I--I'm sorry I cut my hair."

"Why, I didn't notice," David said, wrinkling up his freckled

nose and glancing at her with some interest. "It looks awfully, doesn't it?"

"David, don't tell your mother, will you? She looks so sort of horrified when I've been provoked. It almost makes me mad again," Elizabeth said, candidly.

"Materna thinks it's dreadful in you."

"Do you mind about my hair?" Elizabeth asked.

David laughed uproariously. "Why on earth should I mind? If I were a girl, you bet I'd keep my hair cut."

"Do you forgive me?" she said, in a whisper; "if you don't forgive me, I shall die."

"Forgive you?" said David, astonished, his mouth full of candy; "why, it's nothing to me if you cut off your hair. Only I shouldn't think you'd want to look so like 'Sam Hill.' But I tell you what, Elizabeth; you're too thin-skinned. What's the use of getting mad over every little thing?"

"It wasn't so very little, to be forgotten."

"Well, yes; I suppose you were disappointed, but--"

Elizabeth's color began to rise. "Oh, I wasn't so terribly disappointed. You needn't flatter yourself. I simply don't like to be insulted."

"Ah, now, Elizabeth," he coaxed, "there you go again!"

"No, I don't. I'm not angry. Only--you went with Blair; you didn't want--" she choked, and flew back into the house, deaf to his clumsy and troubled explanations.

In Miss White's room, Elizabeth announced her intention of entering a convent, and it was then that Cherry-pie fumbled: she took the convent seriously! The next morning she broke the awful news to Elizabeth's uncle. It was before breakfast, and Mr. Ferguson--who had not time to read his Bible for pressure of business--had gone out into the grape-arbor in his narrow garden to feed the pigeons. There was a crowd of them about his feet, their rippling, iridescent necks and soft gray bosoms pushing and jostling against one another, and their pink feet actually touching his boots. When Miss White burst out at him, the pigeons rose in startled flight, and Mr. Ferguson frowned.

"And she says," Miss White ended, almost in tears--"she says she is going to enter a convent immejetly!"

"My dear Miss White," said Elizabeth's uncle, grimly, "there's no such luck."

Miss White positively reeled. Then he explained, and Cherry-pie came nearer to her employer in those ten minutes than in the ten years in which she had looked after his niece. "I don't care about Elizabeth's temper; she'll get over that. And I don't care

a continental about her hair or her religion; she can wear a wig or be a Mohammedan if it keeps her straight. She has a bad inheritance, Miss White; I would be only too pleased to know that she was shut up in a convent, safe and sound. But this whim isn't worth talking about."

Miss White retired, nibbling with horror, and that night Robert Ferguson went in to tell his neighbor his worries.

"What _am_ I to do with her?" he groaned. "She cut off her hair?" Mrs. Richie repeated, astounded; "but why? How perfectly irrational!"

"Don't say 'how irrational'; say 'how Elizabeth.'"

"I wish she would try to control her temper," Mrs. Richie said, anxiously.

But Mr. Ferguson was not troubled about that. "She's vain; that's what worries me. She cried all afternoon about her hair."

"She needs a stronger hand than kind Miss White's," Mrs. Richie said; "why not send her to school?" And the harassed uncle sighed with relief at the idea, which was put into immediate execution.

With growing hair and the wholesome companionship of other girls, of course the ascetic impulse died a natural death; but the temper did not die. It only hid itself under that sense of propriety which is responsible for so much of our good behavior. When it did break loose, the child suffered afterward from the consciousness of having made a fool of herself--which is a wholesome consciousness so far as it goes--but it did not go very far with Elizabeth; she never suffered in any deeper way. She took her temper for granted; she was not complacent about it; she did not credit it to "temperament," she was merely matter of fact; she said she "couldn't help it." "I don't want to get mad," she used to say to Nannie; "and of course I never mean any of the horrid things I say. I'd like to be good, like you; but I can't help being wicked." Between those dark moments of being "wicked" she was a joyous, unself-conscious girl of generous loves, which she expressed as primitively as she did her angers; indeed, in the expression of affection Elizabeth had the exquisite and sometimes embarrassing innocence of a child who has been brought up by a sad old bachelor and a timid old maid. As for her angers, they were followed by irrational efforts to "make up" with any one she felt she had wronged. She spent her little pocket-money in buying presents for her maleficiaries, she invented punishments for herself; and generally she confessed her sin with humiliating fullness. Once she confessed to her uncle, thereby greatly embarrassing him:

"Uncle, I want you to know I am a great sinner; probably the chief of sinners," she said, breathing hard. She had come into his library after supper, and was standing with a hand on the back of his chair; her eyes were bright with unshed tears.

"Good gracious!" said Robert Ferguson, looking at her blankly over his glasses, "what on earth have you been doing now?"

"I got mad, and I chopped up the feather in Cherry-pie's new bonnet, and I told her she was a hideous, monstrous old donkey-hag."

"Elizabeth!"

"I did."

"Have you apologized?"

"Yes," said Elizabeth; "but what's the good of 'pologizing? _ I said it._ 'Course I 'pologized; and I kissed her muddy rubbers when she wasn't looking; and I gave her all my money for a new feather"--she stopped, and sighed deeply; "and here is the money you gave me to go to the theater. So now I haven't any money at all, in the world."

Poor Robert Ferguson, with a despairing jerk at the black ribbon of his glasses, leaned back in his chair, helpless with perplexity. Why on earth did she give him back his money? He could not follow her mental processes. He said as much to Mrs. Richie the next time he went to see her. He went to see her quite often in those days. For the convenience of David and Elizabeth, a doorway had been cut in the brick wall between the two gardens, and Mr. Ferguson used it frequently. In their five or six years of living next door to each other the acquaintance of these two neighbors had deepened into a sort of tentative intimacy, which they never quite thought of as friendship, but which permitted many confidences about their two children.

And when they talked about their children, they spoke, of course, of the other two, for one could not think of David without remembering Blair, or talk of Elizabeth without contrasting her with Nannie. Nannie had none of that caroling vitality which made the younger girl an acute anxiety and a perpetual delight. She was like a little plant growing in the shade--a gently good child, who never gave anybody any trouble; she continued to be a 'fraid-cat, and looked under the bed every night for a burglar. With Blair at boarding-school her life was very solitary, for of course there was no intimacy between her and her stepmother. Mrs. Maitland was invariably kind to her, and astonishingly patient with the rather dull little mind--one of those minds that are like softly tangled skeins of single zephyr; if you try to unwind the mild, elusive thoughts, they only knot tightly upon themselves, and the result is a half-frightened and very obstinate silence. But Mrs. Maitland never tried to unwind Nannie's thoughts; she used to look at her sometimes in kindly amusement, as one might look at a kitten or a canary; and sometimes she said to Robert Ferguson that Nannie was like her own mother;--"but Blair has brains!" she would say, complacently. School did not give the girl the usual intense friendships, and except for Elizabeth, she had no companions; her one interest was Blair, and her only occupation out of school hours was her drawing--which was nothing more than endless, meaningless copying. It was Nannie's essential child-likeness that kept her elders, and indeed David and Blair too, from understanding that she and Elizabeth were no longer little girls. Perhaps the boys first realized Elizabeth's age when they simultaneously discovered that she was pretty....

Elizabeth's long braids had been always attractive to the masculine eye; they had suggested jokes about pigtaileds, and much of that peculiar humor so pleasing to the young male; but the summer that she "put up her hair," the puppies, so to speak, got their eyes open. When the boys saw those soft plaits, no longer hanging within easy reach of a rude and teasing hand, but folded around her head behind her little ears; when they saw the small curls breaking over and through the brown braids that were flecked with gilt, and the stray locks, like feathers of spun silk, clustering in the nape of her neck; when David and Blair saw these things--it was about the time their voices were showing amazing and ludicrous register--something below the artless brutalities of the boys' sense of humor was touched. They took abruptly their first perilous step out of boyhood. Of course they did not know it.... The significant moment came one afternoon when they all went out to the toll-house for ice-cream. There was a little delay at the gate, while the boys wrangled as to who should stand treat. "I'll pull straws with you," said Blair; Blair's pleasant, indolent mind found the appeal to chance the easiest way to settle things, but he was always good-natured when, as now, the verdict was against him. "Come on," he commanded, gayly, "I'll shell out!" Mrs. Todd, who had begun to dispense pink and brown ice-cream, for them when they were very little children, winked and nodded as they all came in together, and made a jocose remark about "handsome couples"; then she trundled off to get the ice-cream, leaving them in the saloon. This "saloon" was an ell of the toll-house; it opened on a little garden, from which a flight of rickety steps led down to a float where half a dozen skiffs were tied up, waiting to be hired. In warm weather, when the garden was blazing with fragrant color, Mrs. Todd would permit favored patrons to put their small tables out among the marigolds and zinnias and sit and eat and talk. The saloon itself had Nottingham-lace window-curtains, and crewel texts enjoining remembrance of the Creator, and calling upon Him to "bless our home." The tables, with marble tops translucent from years of spilled ice cream, had each a worsted mat, on which was a glass vase full of blue paper roses; on the ceiling there was a wonderful star of scalloped blue tissue-paper--ostensibly to allure flies, but hanging there winter and summer, year in and year out. Between the windows that looked out on the river stood a piano, draped with a festooning scarf of bandanna handkerchiefs. These things seemed to Blair, at this stage of his esthetic development, very satisfying, and part of his pleasure in "treating" came from his surroundings; he used to look about him enviously, thinking of the terrible dining-room at home; and on sunny days he used to look, with even keener pleasure, at the reflected ripple of light, striking up from the river below, and moving endlessly across the fly-specked ceiling. Watching the play of moving light, he would put his tin spoon into his tumbler of ice-cream and taste the snowy mixture with a slow prolongation of pleasure, while the two girls chattered like sparrows, and David listened, saying very little and always ready to let Elizabeth finish his ice-cream after she had devoured her own.

It was on one of these occasions that Blair, watching that long ripple on the ceiling, suddenly saw the sunshine sparkle on Elizabeth's hair, and his spoon paused midway to his lips. "Oh, say, isn't Elizabeth's hair nice?" he said.

David turned and looked at it. "I've seen lots of girls with hair like that," he said; but he sighed, and scratched his left ankle with his right foot. Blair, smiling to himself, put out a hesitating finger and touched a shimmering curl; upon which Elizabeth ducked and laughed, and dancing over to the old tin pan of a piano pounded out "Shoo Fly" with one finger. Blair, watching the lovely color in her cheek, said in honest delight: "When your face gets red like that, you are awfully good-looking, Elizabeth."

"Good-looking"; that was a new idea to the four friends. Nannie gaped; Elizabeth giggled; David "got red" on his own account, and muttered under his breath, "Tell that to the marines!" But into Blair's face had come, suddenly, a new expression; his eyes smiled vaguely; he came sidling over to Elizabeth and stood beside her, sighing deeply: "Elizabeth, you are an awful nice girl."

Elizabeth shrieked with laughter. "Listen to Blair--he's spoony!"

Instantly Blair was angry; "spooniness" vanished in a flash; he did not speak for fully five minutes. Just as they started home, however, he came out of his glumness to remember Miss White. "I'm going to take Cherry-pie some ice-cream," he said; and all the way back he was so absorbed in trying--unsuccessfully--to keep the pallid pink contents of the mussy paper box from dripping on his clothes that he was able to forget Elizabeth's rudeness. But childhood, for all four of them, ended that afternoon.

When vacation was over, and they were back in the harness again, both boys forgot that first tremulous clutch at the garments of life; in fact, like all wholesome boys of fifteen or sixteen, they thought "girls" a bore. It was not until the next long vacation that the old, happy, squabbling relationship began to be tinged with a new consciousness. It was the elemental instinct, the everlasting human impulse. The boys, hobbledehoys, both of them, grew shy and turned red at unexpected moments. The girls developed a certain condescension of manner, which was very confusing and irritating to the boys. Elizabeth, as unaware of herself as the bud that has not opened to the bee, sighed a good deal, and repeated poetry to any one who would listen to her. She said boys were awfully rough, and their boots had a disagreeable smell, "I shall never get married," said Elizabeth; "I hate boys." Nannie did not hate anybody, but she thought she would rather be a missionary than marry;--"though I'm afraid I'd be afraid of the savages," she confessed, timorously.

David and Blair were confidential to each other about girls in general, and Elizabeth in particular; they said she was terribly stand-offish. "Oh, well, she's a girl," said David; "what can you expect?"

"She's darned good-looking," Blair blurted out. And David said, with some annoyance, "What's that amount to?" He said that, for his part, he didn't mean to fool around after girls. "But I'm older than you, Blair; you'll feel that way when you get to be my age; it's only when a man is very young that he bothers with 'em."

"That's so," said Blair, gloomily. "Well, I never expect to marry." Blair was very gloomy just then; he had come home from school the embodiment of discontent. He was old enough now to suffer agonies of mortification because of his mother's occupation. "The idea of a lady running an Iron Works!" he said to David, who tried rather half-heartedly to comfort him; David was complacently sure that his mother wouldn't run an Iron Works! "I hate the whole caboodle," Blair said, angrily. It was his old shrinking from "ugliness." And everything at home was ugly;--the great old house in the midst of Maitland's Shantytown; the darkness and grime of it; the smell of soot in the halls; Harris's slatternly ways; his mother's big, beautiful, dirty fingers. "When she sneezes," Blair said, grinding his teeth, "I could--swear! She takes the roof off." He grew hot with shame when Mrs. Richie, whom he admired profoundly, came to take supper with his mother at the office table with its odds and ends of china. (As the old Canton dinner service had broken and fire-cracked, Harris had replenished the shelves of the china-closet according to his own taste limited by Mrs. Maitland's economic orders.) Blair found everything hideous, or vulgar, or uncomfortable, and he said so to Nannie with a violence that betrayed real suffering. For it is suffering when the young creature finds itself ashamed of father or mother. Instinctively the child is proud of the parent, and if youth is wounded in its tenderest point, its sense of conventionality--for nothing is as conventional as adolescence--that natural instinct is headed off, and of course there is suffering. Mrs. Maitland, living in her mixture of squalor and dignity, had no time to consider such abstractions. As for there being anything unwomanly in her occupation, such an idea never entered her head. To Sarah Maitland, no work which it was a woman's duty to do could be unwomanly; she was incapable of consciously aping masculinity, but to earn her living and heap up a fortune for her son, was, to her way of thinking, just the plain common sense of duty. But more than that, the heart in her bosom would have proved her sex to her; how she loved to knit the pink socks for dimpled little feet! how she winced when her son seemed to shrink from her; how jealous she was still of that goose Molly,--who had been another man's wife for as many years as Herbert Maitland had been in his grave. But Blair saw none of these things that might have told him that his mother was a very woman. Instead, his conventionality was insulted at every turn; his love of beauty was outraged. As a result a wall was slowly built between the mother and son, a wall whose foundations had been laid when the little boy had pointed his finger at her and said "uggy."

Mrs. Maitland was, of course, perfectly unconscious of her son's hot misery; she was so happy at having him at home again that she could not see that he was unhappy at being at home. She was pathetically

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