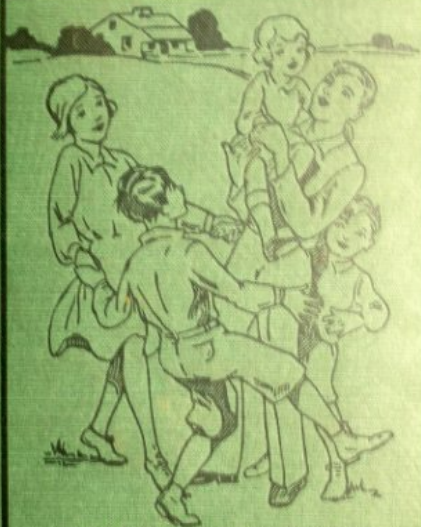


FIVE LITTLE PEPPERS

BEN PEPPER



MARGARET SIDNEY

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by Margaret Sidney

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Title: Ben Pepper

Author: Margaret Sidney

Illustrator: Eugenie Wireman

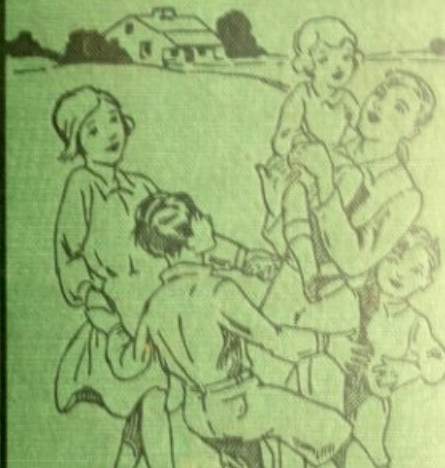
Release Date: February 5, 2011 [EBook
#35178]

Language: English

*** START OF THIS PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK
BEN PEPPER ***

Produced by Heather Clark, Mary Meehan and
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FIVE LITTLE PEPPER BEN PEPPER





BEN PEPPER

**BY MARGARET
SIDNEY**

**AUTHOR OF "FIVE LITTLE
PEPPERS AND THEIR
FRIENDS," "A LITTLE MAID
OF CONCORD TOWN," "OLD
CONCORD," "HESTER, AND
OTHER NEW ENGLAND
STORIES," ETC.**

***ILLUSTRATED BY
EUGENIE M. WIREMAN***

**BOSTON:
LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD
CO.**

PEPPER

TRADE MARK
Registered in U. S. Patent Office.

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BY Harriett M. Lothrop.**

Published, August, 1905.

Twentieth Thousand

**Norwood Press:
Berwick & Smith Co., Norwood,
Mass., U.S.A.**





Then she hopped away from Polly

**and made a little cheese right on
the sidewalk.**



PREFACE

It was quite impossible that the detailed records presented through the later Pepper books, of the doings and sayings of the "Little Brown House" family, should omit Ben. He, the eldest-born of Mother Pepper's brood, and her mainstay after the father died, the quiet, "steady-as-a-rock boy," as the Badgertown people all called him, with lots of fun in him too, because he could not help it, being a Pepper, was worthy of a book to himself.

So the hosts of readers of the Pepper Series decided, and many of them accordingly be-sought the author to give Ben a chance to be better known. He was always so ready to efface himself, that it was Margaret Sidney's responsibility, after all, to bring him more to the front, to be understood by all who loved his life in the earlier records.

So Margaret Sidney, despite Ben's wishes, has written this latest volume. To do it, Polly and Joel

and David and Phronsie have told her most lovingly the facts with which it is strewn. Most of all, Mother Pepper-Fisher contributed to the new book, out of a heart full of gratitude and love for her Ben.

MARGARET SIDNEY.

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By MARGARET SIDNEY

By EDITH DUNHAM

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Then she hopped away from Polly and made a little cheese right on the sidewalk

"O dear me," wailed Polly, burrowing deeper within the folds of the black alpaca apron

And the first person he ran up against was a small boy, his hands full of little wads of paper bundles

"See what you've done; that's castor oil"

There was an awful pause, every one staring at the smooth layer of brown paper

"Did you ever see such sweet little fingers?" said Polly



Ben Pepper

I

THE CHRISTMAS SHOPPING EXPEDITION

"Oh, yes, the children can go as long as Ben and Polly are with them," said Mother Fisher, with pride. "I'll trust them anywhere," her face said as plainly as if she had put it all into words.

"I wish I could go with them." Mrs. Whitney took her gaze from the busy fingers sorting the pile of small stockings Jane had brought up from the laundry, and went abruptly over to the window with a troubled face.

"But you can't," said Mrs. Fisher, cheerfully, nowise dismayed at the number of holes staring up at her, "so don't let us think any more of it. And Ben's big enough to take them anywhere, I'm sure. And Polly can look after their manners," she thought, but didn't finish aloud.

"You see father didn't know about this picture exhibit till Mr. Cabot's note came a half hour ago, begging him not to miss it. And if I told him of the children's plans, he'd give the whole thing up and stay at home rather than have them disappointed. He mustn't do that."

"Indeed he mustn't!" echoed Mrs. Fisher, in her most decided fashion, and putting the last stocking into place on top of the big pile on the table. "Hush! Here comes Polly!"

"Oh, Mamsie!" Polly rushed up to the work-table. "Just think what splendid fun!" She threw her arms around Mrs. Fisher's neck and gave her a big hug. "Isn't Aunty Whitney too lovely for anything to take us out to buy our Christmas presents? Dear me! What richness!"

"Polly, see here, child," Mother Fisher brought her face around to look into the rosy one; "Mrs. Whitney cannot—"

Polly tore herself away with a gasp, and stood quite still, her brown eyes fixed on Mother Fisher's face, and the color dying out of her

cheek. "Do you mean we are not to go, Mamsie?" she cried, her hands working nervously; "we must!" she brought up passionately.

"You see, Polly," Mrs. Whitney came quickly away from the window. Polly at that turned and stared in dismay. O dear! To think Aunt Whitney was there, and now she would be so distressed. "It is just this way," Mrs. Whitney was hurrying on in quite as unhappy a state as Polly had feared: "Father has received word that there is a picture exhibit this afternoon, and I must go with him. I'm sorry, dear, but it can't be helped." She bent to kiss Polly's cheek where the color had rushed this time up to the brown hair.

"I'm so sorry, too," Polly burst out, clinging to Mrs. Whitney's hand. Oh, why had she given way to her passion? The tears were running down her cheeks now, "I didn't mean—" she murmured.

"Why, you are going, Polly," said Mrs. Whitney, comfortingly, and patting the brown hair.

"What?" exclaimed Polly, bringing up her head suddenly to stare into the kind face.

"Yes," laughed Mrs. Whitney, "the Christmas shopping isn't to be given up. Mrs. Fisher is going to let you and Ben take the children. Just think, Polly, that's much better than to go with me," she finished gayly.

All this time Mother Fisher had sat quite still, her black eyes fastened on Polly's face. "I don't know," she said slowly, "about their going now."

"Oh, Mrs. Fisher," cried Mrs. Whitney, in dismay, "you can't think of—" but she didn't finish, on seeing Mrs. Fisher's face. Instead, she went softly out and closed the door.

"I didn't mean—" mumbled Polly again, and then she tumbled down on her knees and hid her face on Mamsie's lap, and sobbed as hard as she could.

"Yes, that's the trouble, Polly," Mother Fisher's hands were busy smoothing the brown hair; "you didn't mean to, but you said it just the same; and that's the mischief of it, not to mean to say a thing, and yet say it."

"O dear me!" wailed Polly, burrowing deeper within the folds of the black alpaca apron. "Why did I? O dear!"





**"O dear me," wailed Polly,
burrowing deeper within the folds
of the black alpaca apron.**

Mother Fisher's hands kept on at their task, but she said nothing, and at last Polly's sobs grew quieter. "Mamsie," she said faintly.

"Yes, dear."

"I'm so sorry."

"I know you are, child; but, Polly, there is no 'must' unless mother says so. And to fly into a passion—why, then you ought not to go at all."

"Oh, I don't want to go now, Mamsie," cried Polly, flying up to sit straight on the floor, and brushing away the tears with a hasty hand, "I really don't, Mamsie."

"Well, then you see you'll just keep the children at home," said Mrs. Fisher; "for I can't let Ben have all the care alone, and they'll be so disappointed."

Polly gave a groan and wriggled on the carpet in distress.

"You see, Polly, that's the trouble when we give way to our passion; it hurts more than ourselves," said Mother Fisher, "so I can't see but that you have got to go."

"Oh, I don't want to, Mamsie; don't make me," cried Polly, squeezing her mother's hands tightly in both of her own. "I can't go now!"

"Tut, tut, Polly," said Mrs. Fisher, reprovingly; "'can't' isn't the thing to say any more than 'must.'"

And her black eyes had such a look in them that Polly ducked her head, taking refuge in the lap again.

"And now you must get up," said Mother Fisher, "and get ready, for I am going to let you and Ben take the children; that's decided."

"Oh, Mamsie!" Polly found her feet somehow, and flung her arms again around her mother's neck; "you won't trust me ever again. O dear me!"

"Yes, I will," said Mrs. Fisher, quickly, and, seizing Polly's hands, she made the brown eyes look at her; "why, Polly child, did you suppose Mother would let you go and help Ben take care of the children if she didn't know you would do everything just right? Never say such a word as that again, Polly!" and the black eyes shone with love and pride. "And now hurry, child, for here's Ben coming," as steps sounded in the hall, and then his voice asking, "Where's Mamsie?"

Polly flew up to her feet and stumbled over to the washstand. "O dear me!" she gasped, catching sight of her face in the long mirror on the way, "I

can't—oh, I mean my eyes are so red, and my nose, Mamsie! Just look at it!"

"That's the trouble of crying and giving way to fits of passion," observed Mrs. Fisher, quietly; "it makes a good deal of trouble, first and last," as Ben came hurrying in.

Polly splashed the water all over her hot face with such a hasty hand that a little stream ran down the pretty brown waist, which only served to increase her dismay.

"Oh, Mamsie!" Ben was saying, "we're not to go, after all. What a pity! Polly'll be so sorry." His blue eyes looked very much troubled. To have anything make Polly sorry hurt him dreadfully.

"Oh, yes, you are going, Ben," Mrs. Fisher made haste to say.

"Why, Auntie Whitney can't go," said Ben, in surprise. "Grandpapa just said she is going out with him."

"You didn't say anything of the shopping plan, Ben?" ejaculated Mrs. Fisher, involuntarily, yet

she knew she didn't need to ask the question.

"Why, no," said Ben, in amazement; "of course not, Mamsie."

"Of course not, too," said his mother, with a little laugh; "and why I asked such a stupid question, I'm sure I don't know, Ben."

All this gave Polly time to sop her face quite cool, and she had buried her red cheeks in the towel to dry them off, when Mother Fisher, having made Ben acquainted with the joyful news, called, "Come, Polly, it's time to get on your hat and coat."

"Halloo, Polly, you there?" cried Ben, whirling round, as Polly hurried into the little room next to get her out-of-door things.

"Yes," called back Polly, on her way, "I'll be ready in a minute, Ben."

"Isn't it no end jolly that we're going, Polly?" he cried, deserting his mother to hurry over to the doorway where he could stand and see Polly get ready. His blue eyes shone and his head was held

very high. To think that Polly and he were to be allowed to take the children out shopping amid all the excitement of Christmas week! It was almost too good to be true! "Say, Polly, did you ever know anything like it?" He came in and pressed close to the bureau where Polly was putting on her hat.

"Yes, yes, I know. Ugh!" Polly, with all her eyes on the red-rimmed ones looking out at her from the mirror, beside what she saw of the poor swollen nose, jammed on the hat over her face and jumped away from the bureau.

"You needn't hurry so," said Ben, "'t isn't any matter if we don't start right away. Besides, I don't suppose Jane has Phronsie ready yet. But isn't it perfectly splendid that we can go alone, you and I, and, just think, Polly Pepper, can take the children?" He was quite overcome again at the idea and leaned against the bureau to think it all out.

"Yes," said Polly, in a muffled voice. But she was in the closet now, getting into her coat, because if she stayed out in the room Ben would help her

into it, and then he would be sure to see her face! So Ben, although he thought it funny that Polly, who was generally bubbling over with joy at the prospect of any pleasant expedition, should be very quiet and dull in the light of such an extraordinary one, set it down to the hurry she was in getting ready.

"Oh, Polly, don't hurry so!" he cried, going over to the closet. "Here, come out here, and let me help you with that."

"Ugh, no, go right away, Ben," cried Polly, wriggling off frantically, and only succeeding in flopping up one sleeve to knock her hat farther down over her nose. "O dear me! where *is* the other armhole?"

"Do come out," cried Ben; "whoever heard of trying to put on a coat in a closet? Whatever makes you, Polly?"

"And I do wish you'd go away," cried Polly, quite exasperated, and setting her hat straight, forgetting all about her face.

But instead, Ben, after a good look, took hold of her two shoulders and marched her out into the room. And before Polly knew it, her other arm was in its sleeve, and he was trying to button up her coat.

"Oh, Bensie," she mumbled; "I'm so sorry I was cross."

"Never mind," said Ben, giving her a comforting pat. "Well, come on, now you're ready, Polly."

And Joel and David plunging in tumultuously into Mamsie's room, followed by Jane ushering in Phronsie all attired for the trip, the whole bunch gathered around Mother Fisher's chair for final instructions.

"See, Mamsie," piped Phronsie, crowding up closely, to hold up the little money-bag dangling by its chain from her arm; "my own purse, and I'm going to buy things."

"Don't, Phron," said Joel, "push so," and he tried to get past her to stand nearest to Mother Fisher.

"What are you doing yourself," said Ben, "I sh'd

like to know, Joel Pepper?"

"Well, that was my place," said Joel, loudly, and not yielding an inch.

"Joel!" said Mrs. Fisher.

"It was my place," he grumbled. But he hung his head and wouldn't look up into Mamsie's face.

"It's my very own purse," cried Phronsie, in a joyful little key, "and I'm going to buy things, I am. See, Mamsie!" She held it up before Mrs. Fisher, and patted it lovingly, while she crowded in worse than ever.

"Yes, I see," said Mrs. Fisher, smiling down into her face, but there was no smile for Joel, and looking up he caught her black eyes resting on him in a way he didn't like.

"You may have it, Phron!" he exclaimed, tumbling back against David suddenly, who was nearly knocked over by his sudden rebound. "I'd just as lief you would. Here, get in next to Mamsie."

"And I'm going to buy you something, Mamsie,"

said Phronsie, standing on her tiptoes to whisper confidentially into Mother Fisher's ear.

"You are, dear?" Mrs. Fisher leaned over to catch the whisper, but not before she sent a smile over to Joel that seemed to drop right down into the farthest corner of his heart. "Now Mother'll like that very much indeed."

"And you must be s'prised," said Phronsie, bobbing her head in its big, fur-trimmed bonnet, and fastening a grave look of great importance on Mrs. Fisher's face.

"Hoh—hoh!" began Joel, who had recovered his composure. Then he thought, and stopped. And again Mother Fisher smiled at him.

"Now, children, you understand this is the first time you have ever been out shopping without Mr. King or Mrs. Whitney or me," began Mrs. Fisher, looking around on them all. "Well, it's quite time that you should make the trial, for I can trust you all." She lifted her head proudly and her black eyes shone. "I'm sure you'll all be good."

"Oh, we will, we will, Mamsie," declared all the little Peppers together. And their heads went up, too, in pride.

"So I am going to let Ben and Polly take you about in the shops. And whatever they tell you, you are to do. And remember one thing, you are not to crowd and push."

"We can't see if the big people all get in front," said Joel, grumblingly.

"Then you must go without seeing," said Mrs. Fisher, decidedly. "At any rate, you are not to crowd and push. Remember, Joel, and all of you."

"I won't," said Joel, "crowd and push. Now may we go, Mamsie?" and he began to prance to the door impatiently.

"One thing more. Come back, Joel." Mrs. Fisher waited until the group was once more quiet around her chair. "And you are none of you to handle things."

"Not when we are going to buy them?" cried Joel, in an injured tone. "Oh, Mamsie, I sh'd think we

might when we are out shopping. And I've got such lots of money in my pocket-book." He swung it high, clenched in his hot little fist.

"Take care or you'll lose it if you show it like that, Joe," said Ben.

"How am I going to lose it?" demanded Joel, squaring around at Ben.

"Somebody'll pick it out of your hand if you don't look out," warned Ben.

"I guess there won't anybody pick my pocket-book. I'm going to get a pin," and he raced off to the big mahogany bureau in the corner.

"What for?" asked David, who always followed Joel's movements with attention; "what are you going to do with a pin, Joel?"

"I'm going to pin up my pocket so no old picker can get my purse," declared Joel, with energy, and running back with the biggest pin he could find on the cushion, the one Mrs. Fisher fastened her shawl with.

"Yes, and likely enough you'll forget all about it and stick your own hand in," said Ben, "then, says I, what'll you do, Joel?"

"Humph—I won't forget," snorted Joel, puckering up the pocket edge and jamming the pin through the folds; "there, I guess the pickers will let my pocket alone. Yes-sir-ee," he cried triumphantly.

"Now you remember you are not to touch things on the counters," Mrs. Fisher was saying. "I don't want my children to be picking and handling at such a time. You can look all you want to; but when you see what you would really like to buy, why, Polly and Ben must ask the saleswoman to show it to you."

"I've got my money-purse," said Phronsie, exactly as if the fact had not been announced before; "see, Mamsie," and she held it up with an important air.

"I see," said Mother Fisher, "it's the one Grandpapa gave you last birthday, isn't it, Phronsie?"

"Yes," she said, patting it lovingly. "My dear Grandpapa gave it to me, and it's my very own, and I'm going to buy things, I am."

"So you shall," said Mrs. Fisher, approvingly. All the while Joel was screaming, "Come on, Phron, we'll be late," as he pranced out into the hall and down the stairs.

"Oh, Mamsie," Polly flung her arms around Mrs. Fisher's neck, "I wish you were going too."

"Well, Mother can't go," said Mrs. Fisher, patting Polly's shoulder; "and take care, Phronsie will hear you."

"And I want to kiss my Mamsie good-by, too," said Phronsie, clambering up into Mrs. Fisher's lap, as well as she could for the fur-trimmed coat. So Mother Fisher took her up, and Phronsie cooed and hummed her satisfaction, and was kissed and set down again. And then David had to say good-by too, and Ben as well; and then Polly made up her mind she would have the last kiss, so it was some minutes before the four children got out of Mamsie's room and ran down

the stairs. And there they found Joel hanging on to the newel post and howling: "You've been an awful long time. Come on!"

"We wanted to bid Mamsie good-by," said Polly, twitching Phronsie's coat straight. "Well, we're all ready now; come on, children."

Joel had thrown the big front door open with a flourish and was rushing out. When Polly said that about Mamsie, he stopped suddenly, then plunged back, nearly upsetting Phronsie, and ran over the steps as fast as he could. "Oh, Mamsie," he cried, flying up to her. Mrs. Fisher had gotten out of her chair, and was now over by the window to see her little brood go off so happy and important. "Why, Joel!" she exclaimed, "what's the matter?" as he precipitated himself into her arms.

"I want to kiss you good-by, too," howled Joel, burrowing within them; "good-by, Mamsie!"

"So you shall, Mother's boy," said Mrs. Fisher, cuddling him. "Well now, Joel, you remember all I said."

"I'll remember," said Joel, lifting a radiant face; "I'll be good all the time."

"Yes, you must, else Mother'll feel badly. Well, good-by."

Joel's good-by floated back as he raced down the stairs and overtook the group waiting for him out on the big stone steps.

"Who's keeping us waiting now, I wonder?" said Ben, as he came up panting.

"Well, I guess I'm going to bid my Mamsie good-by, too," said Joel, importantly. "Come on, Dave, let's race to the big gate!"

II

BEN'S PLAN

When Phronsie saw the two boys racing away, she wanted to run too, and started to patter off after them.

"No, no, Phronsie," said Polly, calling her back. "She'll get all tired out to begin with," she said to Ben, "then what should we do?"

"Oh, I want to race to the big gate with Joel and David," said Phronsie, coming back slowly. "Can't I, Polly? Do let me," she begged.

"No," said Polly, decidedly, "you'll get all tired out, Phronsie."

"I won't be tired," said Phronsie, drawing herself up very straight; "I won't be, Polly."

"You will be if you run and race to begin with," declared Polly, very much wishing she could join

the boys herself. But she was holding Phronsie's hand by this time, and it never would do to leave her. "So we must walk till we reach the car."

Phronsie heaved a sigh, but she kept tight hold of Polly's hand, and walked obediently on.

"You see," said Polly, who never could bear to hear Phronsie sigh, "we're going shopping, Phronsie, and there's a good deal of walking we have before us, and——"

"And I have my money-bag," cried Phronsie, breaking in jubilantly, and not waiting for Polly to finish, and lifting it high as it dangled from her arm. "See, Polly, and dear Grandpapa gave it to me, he did."

"I know, pet," said Polly; "take care, now, or you'll tumble on your nose."

"And I'm going to buy my dear Grandpapa something," declared Phronsie, with a bob of her fur-trimmed bonnet; "I am, Polly."

"So you shall," cried Polly, radiantly; "now that'll be fine."

"Polly," said Ben, on her other side, "I've been thinking of something that perhaps it would be good to do."

"Oh, Ben, what is it?" she cried, all in a twitter to know, for Ben's plans, if sometimes slow, were always so good to follow.

"Why, let's us all put our money together instead of buying little things for Grandpapa, for of course we are all going to give him something, and buy one good present." It was a long speech for Ben, and he was quite glad when it was all out.

"Let's," said Polly, quite enchanted. "Oh, Ben, you do think of just the right things."

"No," said Ben, "I don't think up such nice things as you do, Polly," and he looked at her admiringly; "I can't."

"Well, your things are always best in the end, anyway," said Polly, unwilling to take so much praise, and preferring that Ben should have it.

"O dear me!" Joel, with David at his heels, came tumbling up. "You are so slow, just like snails," he

grumbled.

"Just like snails," echoed Phronsie, with very pink cheeks, stepping very high, all her attention on the money-bag dangling from her wrist.

"Well, we can't go any faster, Joe," said Ben, "so you must make up your mind to be satisfied."

"Well, I'm not satisfied," declared Joel, in a dudgeon.

"So it seems," said Ben, with a little laugh.

"And it isn't the way, when people are going shopping, to run through the street," said Polly, "so when you get outside the gateway, you've got to walk, Joel. It isn't elegant to race along."

When Polly said "elegant" with such an air, the children always felt very much impressed, and little David now hung his head quite ashamed.

"I'm sorry I ran, Polly," he said.

"Oh, it's no matter in here," said Polly, "but when we get outside, then you must walk in a nice way. Mamsie'd want you to. Oh, now, Ben, go on with

your plan and tell the rest."

"Oh, now you've been talking up things, you and Ben; you're always doing that, Polly Pepper," cried Joel, loudly. And he tried to crowd in between Polly and Phronsie.

"See here, you get back!" cried Ben, seizing his jacket collar; "you're not to crowd so, Joe."

"Well, you and Polly are always talking secrets," said Joel, but he fell back with Ben nevertheless, "and keeping them from Dave and me."

"Then you should have stayed with us," said Ben, calmly.

"We didn't know you were going to talk secrets," grumbled Joel.

"Oh, we've only just begun," said Polly, brightly, looking over past Phronsie, "so you'll hear it all, Joey; and Davie, too," she added, looking off to little David on the farther end of the line.

"I'm not going to stir a step away ever again," declared Joel, squirming up as close to Ben as he

possibly could, "then you can't talk things without I hear them."

"You've got to give me a little more of the walk, Joe," said Ben, striding on and thrusting out his elbow on Joel's side, "else you'll go behind."

"O dear! I want to hear what you're going to say," whined Joel. But he gave way, moving up against David, who was the last in the row. "Well, do begin," he begged.

"Yes, do tell them, Ben," said Polly.

"Well, you see," said Ben, as they turned out of the big stone gateway, "we are all to give Grandpapa a present, each one, I mean."

"I am," shouted Joel, jumping up and down, "Whoopity la, whickets, I am!"

"Oh, Joel Pepper!" exclaimed Polly, looking down the row at him. Whenever Polly said "Joel Pepper," everybody felt that the case was very serious. So Joel hung his head and looked quite sheepish.

"Mamsie would be so sorry to hear you say that," went on Polly.

"Well, he isn't going to say it again," said Ben, "I don't believe."

"No, I'm not," declared Joel, his black head going up again, "never again, Polly."

"That's right," and she smiled approvingly. "Oh, now, do go on again, Ben," she said, "with your plan."

"Yes, we're all going to give Grandpapa presents," cried Joel, before Ben had time to put in a word. "I am, and I won't tell what I'm going to buy, either. You can't make me, Dave." He slapped the pocket containing his purse, but encountering the big pin, drew off his fingers. "Ow!"

"There, who's hurt now?" cried Ben, with a laugh as he looked down at the rueful face.

"Pooh—it didn't hurt any," said Joel, pulling off his glove to suck the drop of blood that came up to meet him.

David, who never could bear to see Joel hurt, pressed up to see the extent of his injury, and turned pale. Perhaps it went clear through his finger, for it was Mamsie's big shawl-pin!

"Oh, don't, Joel," cried Polly, with a grimace; "take your handkerchief, do!"

"No, I'm not going to," said Joel, squirming away, and repeating the process as another little drop appeared; "I can spit it out, and my handkerchief'll stay bad."

"Joel," said Polly, sternly, "you must not do that. Do you hear me?"

"Well, that's the last drop, anyway," declared Joel, "so I haven't got to do anything."

"Let me see," said Polly, feeling quite motherly with all her brood to look after. So the whole row stopped and Joel leaned over and thrust out his finger for Polly to examine it.

"Yes, that's all right," she said with a sigh of relief. "Well, now, we must hurry, for we have so much to do. And, Ben, do go on."

"Well, you see Grandpapa has so many things that it'll be hard to pick out five that he'd like," said Ben, "so I thought—"

"He'll like mine," interrupted Joel.

"Hold on, Joe, and wait till I get through," commanded Ben, turning on him.

"And if you interrupt again, you must walk behind, Joel," said Polly, severely.

"I don't want to walk behind," said Joel, ducking as he caught her glance.

"Well, then, you mustn't interrupt Ben again," declared Polly, in her most decided fashion.

"Oh, I won't, I won't!" he promised, much alarmed as he saw her face.

"See that you don't, then," said Ben. "Well, so it seems as if perhaps it would be a good plan to all put our money together and get Grandpapa one good thing."

"I think it would be a perfectly elegant plan," declared Polly, radiantly.

Joel stood stock-still twitching the end of Ben's coat, so that he was pulled up short. "I'm not going to put any money in," he cried in a loud tone.

"Hey? Oh, then, you don't like the plan, Joe?" said Ben, getting his coat free and whirling around on him.

"I'm not going to put any money in," repeated Joel, in the same high key.

"Well, then, you needn't," said Ben, nowise disturbed.

"Oh, Ben, then we can't any of us do it," said Polly, quite dismayed, "and it would have been so perfectly splendid." She stopped short, and Phronsie, looking up in surprise, pulled her hand gently. "Oh, Polly," she exclaimed, "are you sick?"

"Oh, the rest of us will do it," said Ben, coolly, "and Joel can stay outside."

"Oh, I'm not going to stay outside," howled Joel, throwing his arms around Ben and clinging to him in his distress. "I'm not. I'm not, Ben, don't make

me."

"I don't make you," said Ben, getting himself free from Joel's frantic little hands; "if you don't want to join us, why, you'll just have to stay by yourself."

"I'm not going to stay by myself," cried Joel, in the greatest distress, "need I, Polly?" and he flew over to her. "I don't want to stay by myself, I don't."

But Ben answered instead of Polly.

"Hush now, Joel, we're to walk along quietly, else you'll have to go home. And we'll vote now, and all who don't want to get Grandpapa one big, nice present, can just stay out of the plan. Polly and I are going together in it, anyway."

Which was just the same as saying the plan would be carried out. If Polly and Ben were to join in it, all the remainder of the "Five Little Peppers" would consider it the greatest calamity to be left out, so Joel pushed as near to Ben as he could get as the whole group drew off to the curbstone to vote on the question.

"I'm in it,—I'm in it," screamed Joel, making more than one passer-by turn the head to look back at the busy little group. "Come on, Dave," twitching that individual's jacket to get him into the centre of things. "He's in it, too, Ben," he added, anxious to have that settled beyond a doubt. "David is."

"Everybody is looking at us," said Polly, whose greatest pride was to have the children appear well, and she looked quite mortified. "O dear me!" and this was only the beginning of the Christmas shopping!

"Now you must just understand, Joe," Ben laid hold of him; "we aren't going to have such carryings on. Look at Polly, how you're making her feel."

All the children now regarded Polly anxiously, Phronsie standing on tiptoe to achieve the best result. "Oh, I won't make her feel," cried Joel, much alarmed, "I won't. Please don't, Polly; I'll be good," he promised. His face worked, and he had hard work not to burst out crying.

"All right, Joey," said Polly, trying to smile, and

the little pucker between her eyebrows straightened itself out at once. And she leaned over and set a kiss on the chubby cheek.

"You kissed me on the street!" said Joel, quite astounded. "Why, Polly Pepper, and you said the other——"

"Never mind," broke in Ben, hastily.

"And I couldn't help it," said Polly, happily, yet with a backward glance to see if any one saw it, for Polly deeply loved to be fine on all occasions.

"And if we are going shopping for Christmas presents," said Ben, "we must hurry up. Hush, Joe, don't say a word. Now how many want to put in their money to buy one big, nice present for Grandpapa instead of little bits of ones? Put up your hands."

Joel's hand shot up as high as he could raise it, while he stood on tiptoe, and of course Polly's went up, and so did David's. But Phronsie stood looking down at her money-bag dangling from her arm, while she patted it lovingly and crooned

softly to herself.

"She doesn't understand," said Polly, so she got down until she could look into the face within the fur-trimmed bonnet. "Look up, pet; now don't you want to buy Grandpapa a big, big present with all of us?"

"I'm going to buy my dear Grandpapa a present," cried Phronsie, in a happy little voice, and, taking her gaze from the money-bag, "I am, Polly," she declared, dreadfully excited. Then she put her mouth close to Polly's rosy cheek; "I'm going to buy him a cat," she whispered.

"O dear me!" exclaimed Polly, nearly tumbling over backward.

"Yes, I am," said Phronsie, decidedly, "a dear sweet little cat, and Grandpapa will like it, he will."

"Well, now," said Polly, recovering herself, "don't you want to put the rest of your money you were going to spend for Grandpapa's present into something big? We're all going to do that,

Phronsie, and give him a nice Christmas present."

"My present will be nice," said Phronsie, gravely.

"Yes, yes, I know," said Polly, quickly, and giving the boys a look that told them to keep away from this conference; "but don't you want to help to buy this big present, too? I would, Phronsie pet, if I were you!"

"I shall give him the cat," said Phronsie, decidedly and bobbing her head.

"Yes, of course. But you can help to buy the other, too," said Polly.

"I'll help to buy the other," hummed Phronsie. Then she hopped away from Polly and made a little cheese right on the sidewalk. The fur-trimmed coat flew out as well as it could, and the money-bag also.

"Oh, Phronsie!" exclaimed Polly, in dismay, getting her up as quickly as possible.

"I'm going to buy a cat and a big thing, too, for my dear Grandpapa," announced Phronsie to all the

bunch, as Polly got her straight and smoothed down her coat and settled her bonnet.

All this proceeding took so much time that Ben now hurried them off, and they walked briskly along till presently they turned into the main street where the most of the holiday shoppers were out in full force. And as Joel wanted to stop at each window that presented a smart display, and that was furnished at nearly every step of the way, they didn't make so very much progress after all.

"We shan't get anywhere at this rate," said Ben, at last, in despair, and, hauling Joel away from a fascinating window against which he had set his chubby face, quite lost to the delightful show within, he struck off at a smart pace, threading his way quickly in and out of the crowd of shoppers, so that Polly and Phronsie, clinging to her hand, had great difficulty to keep track of him at all. David was pattering along in front as close to Ben as he could get.

At last they stopped before a big toy-shop, and Ben drew breath.

"O dear me!" cried Polly, hurrying up. Phronsie's bonnet was pushed awry where an excited shopper had knocked a big bundle against it, so she couldn't see anything till Polly had set it straight.

All this took a little time; meanwhile the bunch of shoppers was stopping the crowd.

"Get out of the way," roared an expressman at them. He was so crowded up with bundles that only his head was to be seen above the pile; there was another heap on the pavement and a man loading up, as fast as he could, the already well-filled wagon, and he gave Joel a punch with something, not his hand, for that was full.

"Stop that!" Joel squared up at him and doubled up his little fist.

"Joe, Joe!" cried Ben, suddenly.

"That man pushed me with an old bundle," said Joel, his eyes flashing.

"Well, come on," said Ben, picking his sleeve. Polly, busy with Phronsie, had heard nothing of it.

"O dear, dear!" David was wailing.

"And I'll give you something more'n a push if you don't get out of the way," declared the expressman, trying to look over his shoulder as he edged his way to the wagon, "you saucy cub, you!"

"And he's calling me names," cried Joel, wildly; "let me go back and make him stop," and he shook his small fists in the air. "He's a bad old man and he hasn't any right. Let me go, Ben."

But Ben by this time had Joel well within the shop, and, the others following, they were soon lost in the important business of choosing Christmas presents.

"Let Phronsie buy hers first," said Polly. And the others, even Joel, saying, "Yes, let Phronsie buy hers first," they edged their way along, Phronsie proclaiming in a high key, as they threaded their course down a long aisle, that she was going to buy Grandpapa a cat, so that everybody turned and smiled, until at last they found a saleswoman, who seemed to be willing and able to wait on

them.

"So you want a cat?" she said to Phronsie, who could just manage to see over the counter by standing on her tiptoes.

"Yes," said Phronsie, "I do, a really and truly cat for my dear Grandpapa."

"Oh, we haven't any real cats," said the woman, turning back from the shelf she was looking over with a pair of sharp eyes. "We don't keep live cats in a shop. Nobody does," she added.

"She means that it must have fur on," explained Polly, while the younger boys never took their eyes from the transaction. This was quite one of the most important events of the afternoon for Phronsie to choose her own present. Just at this juncture a stout old lady, with a stiff black silk coat that made her bigger than ever, as it had a trick of flying open, and the sides blowing off seemed ready to engulf all unfortunate passers-by, swept past Phronsie, and she disappeared from view for a moment.

"Stop that!" roared Joel, looking up into the soft white puffs above the woman's nose; "you 'most knocked my sister over."

The stately old woman looked down into the chubby face. "You impertinent boy!" she exclaimed, then set her profile disdainfully in the opposite direction and sailed on.

"Oh, Ben!" cried Polly, in consternation, all the color gone out of her face; "what shall we do?"

"Here, pet," and Ben swung Phronsie up to his shoulder. "Now, that's the best place for you in such a crowd."

"I want a truly cat," Phronsie kept saying from her perch, and, swinging her feet delightedly, she grasped Ben's neck so tightly it seemed as if he could hardly breathe; and his face got very red.

"I tell you we haven't got any live cats," declared the saleswoman, impatiently, and slamming the glass door beneath. "Here's a china one," and she set it on the counter.

"Oh, no!" Phronsie shook her head. Polly

meanwhile had been looking after the stately old woman, and claspings and unclaspings her hands nervously. It wouldn't take but a minute to go after her, for the big figure had paused in front of the doll counter, and say how sorry she was, for he was her brother, and would she please to excuse it? And without stopping to think, Polly dashed off through the crowd, no one of the little bunch of Peppers seeing her go, as they were lost in the transaction that was to get Phronsie her cat.

She plunged up suddenly to the side of the stiff black silk coat, now wedged in against the overcrowded counter, its owner by no means in the best temper at her failure to attract any saleswoman to wait on her.

"Oh, ma'am," Polly looked up into the impatient face, and everything she had intended to say flew right out of her mind, for the white puffs seemed to stand right out like mountains, and the Roman nose was so very dreadful. "My brother," was all she could manage to say.

"Hey?" The stately old woman laid down a doll and glared at her. "My brother," began Polly,

wishing that she was back with the others. If only she could catch a glimpse of Ben, but the intervening crowd surged in waves between her and the spot where she had left them, so that they were swallowed up. Meantime there was that dreadful old woman, with her cold, sharp eyes just like gimlets boring her through and through, and waiting for her to finish what she had to say.

"My brother," began Polly, faintly, and her head dropped, "said something naughty to you."

"Well?" said the old lady, and she turned her back on the doll counter as far as she was able for being wedged in so, and this time Polly felt that she must make herself understood. Besides, the people on either side were beginning to be interested, and were nudging each other not to miss this funny thing.

So she began quite decidedly, determined to be brave and say it all through. "My brother—" But the stately old lady broke in, "I don't know anything about your brother, nor you, girl, and if you speak to me again, I shall call the proprietor," and she shook with indignation till all the jingling

jet things, and there seemed to be a great many under her silk coat, made a great commotion.

"I came to ask you to forgive my brother who spoke to you because you brushed against my little sister." Polly was speaking so fast now, a little red spot on either cheek, that the stately old woman had to hear. "It was naughty of him, and Mamsie would be sorry."

"Naughty?" The old lady gasped for breath; it was such a new idea to ask her to forgive a saucy boy; still, she couldn't make any other reply than "It was scandalous, and you are nearly as bad, interrupting me in the midst of my Christmas shopping." Then she turned to the dolls again, leaving Polly to stumble back as best she might to the place where she had left Ben and the children. But they were not there.

III

HAPS AND MISHAPS

"I want Polly," Phronsie was saying, wholly lost now to the fact that the "really truly cat" for Grandpapa had not been found. "Bensie, I do!"

"Yes, Phronsie," Ben made out to say, holding her hand fast; "we'll see her pretty soon."

"She's lost!" cried Joel, wildly, who up to this time had been so diverted by the bewildering array of tin soldiers, drums, and express wagons displayed on all sides as they threaded their way in among the crowds that surrounded the counters and shelves, that he hadn't given his mind to anything else. "She's lost, Polly is!" he ended with a howl.

At this direful announcement Phronsie gave one cry, then she sat right down on the floor and lifted up her voice, "I want Polly!"

It was impossible to quiet her, and everybody in

the immediate vicinity turned and stared. A small girl, trying to decide between a woolly dog and a pig, both of whose charms had held her for the past ten minutes, laid them down on the counter and ran over to the place where the cry came from. When she saw the little group she pushed in between them. "O dear me!" she cried to Phronsie, sitting there in a small heap and sobbing pitifully, "how'd she get hurt?"

Little David made way for her instantly, but Joel, who had stopped his wails in surprise at her appearance, stood his ground. "Go away," he said, his black eyes shining through his tears.

The small girl paid no attention to him. "How'd she get hurt?" she kept on asking.

"She isn't hurt," said Ben, not looking up as he knelt on the floor and wiped Phronsie's streaming tears with his handkerchief. "There, there, Phronsie, stop crying."

"O dear me!" exclaimed the girl; "what a little goose to cry!" and she laughed derisively.

"She isn't a goose," cried Joel, in a loud, injured tone; "my sister isn't a goose; so now you just take that back, you girl, you!"

"Joel," commanded Ben, sternly, "stop this moment," just as a floor-walker stalked up. "You're blocking the way," he said with a great deal of official manner, "and you must just take yourselves off out of this aisle."

Little David, who up to this time, clasping and unclasping his hands nervously, had said nothing, now looked up into the cross face. "We've lost Polly," he exclaimed.

The floor-walker, not understanding, repeated to Ben, "You've just got to get out of this aisle."

But the small girl had heard. "O dear me!" she exclaimed again; "now that's perfectly dreadful," and she sat right down by Phronsie's side. "I'll go and find her for you," she said, putting her hands on Phronsie's two small ones, doubled up in the folds of the fur-trimmed coat. "And I'm sorry I called you a goose. Don't cry, I'll bring her back."

Phronsie, astonished out of her grief, and hearing the welcome words, "I'll bring her back," looked up radiantly, the tears trailing off down the round cheeks, while Joel, whose face had become a lively red, blurted out, "And I'm sorry I was bad to you," staring at the girl.

"Oh, I didn't mind you," said the girl, carelessly. "Now, who is Polly?" She looked at Ben as she spoke. Meanwhile, she was helping Phronsie to her feet. "Here she is now, I guess." She gave a sharp, birdlike glance between the crowd, then started off like a flash, winding herself in and out of the throng, and up to a girl a little bigger than herself. "Are you Polly?" she demanded breathlessly.

Polly, rushing along, searching one side and the other frantically for a glimpse of Ben's blue cap and sturdy shoulders (she hadn't much hope of seeing the children, for the crowd was very thick just here), hurried on, scarcely hearing the words.

"Because if you are, she wants you, the little girl does. And I guess they all do," said the girl, rushing after.

"Where are they?" cried Polly, turning on her, "please be quick and tell me."

"Come on, I'll take you." The girl made her way through the crowd, edging along, and Polly, with the color coming back to her cheeks that had gone quite white, followed as nimbly as she could, till, "Here she is; here's Polly!" She heard Joel's voice. And in a minute Polly was in their midst, her arms around Phronsie, and cuddling her to her heart's content.

And after this episode they all settled down to the business of shopping at once; all except Ben, who looked here and there for the small girl who had found Polly. She had slipped away in the crowd.

"And we didn't even thank her," said Ben, sorrowfully.

"Well, we must go to some other store and get Phronsie's cat," said Polly, "as long as we can't find her," with a sigh, so they all followed Ben as he made a way for them through the crowd, Phronsie clinging to Polly's hand as if she never meant to let her go again. All at once Ben darted

aside, then turned back to Polly. "There she is," he pointed over to the counter where the small girl had her pig and woolly dog once more, taking each up affectionately, then laying it down.

"Well, you can't do that all day," observed the saleswoman, crossly. "Take one, or leave it, or I'll put 'em both up again."

"He'd like 'em both," said the small girl, "my brother would, an' I don't know which."

The saleswoman snatched up the pig and reached out an impatient hand for the woolly dog.

"Oh, Polly, just hear that!" whispered Ben; "she wants them for her brother, and she was so good to us."

"I know it," said Polly. "O dear me, I wish she could get them both."

Ben fumbled in his pocket and brought out his brown leather pocket-book. "You give it to her," he said, putting a silver half-dollar into Polly's hand.

"Oh, whick—!" began Joel, with his big eyes at the half-dollar.

"Don't say anything, Joel," said Ben, hurriedly, and dragging him off; "here, just look at that steam-engine, will you?"

Polly shut her fingers over the half-dollar, and still holding Phronsie's hand, she leaned over the small shoulder, which now she saw was thin, and touched the rusty black coat sleeve. "That's for the woolly dog," she said softly, so nobody heard, and slipping the half-dollar into the red hand without any glove on.

"Oh, my!" cried the girl, staring first at her hand with the silver half-dollar shining up at her from the middle of it, and then into Polly's face, "what's that for?"

"You were so good to us," said Polly, simply, and before the girl could say a word, she had slipped back to Ben, and this time they were soon lost in the crowd down the aisle, on their way to another shop.

"You've given away a whole half-dollar," gasped Joel, staring up into Ben's face.

"Hush!" said Ben, hauling him on, as Polly flew back; "well, now, then, we must hurry, else we never will get through."

"Yes, we must get Phronsie's cat," said Polly, with a happy little thrill. "Oh, Ben, just think," she whispered, for Ben never could bear to be thanked, "she's bought that woolly dog by this time, I 'most know."

"Do hush!" begged Ben.

"Oh, now, I know you are whispering secrets," declared Joel, trying to crowd in between them.

"No, we are not," said Polly, "really and truly we are not; are we, Ben?"

"Then what are you whispering for?" demanded Joel, before Ben could answer, as they all hurried out, Phronsie announcing gleefully that she was going to buy Grandpapa's cat, and pulling Ben along, whose hand she held, so that there was no time to peer into the shop windows.

Polly and the boys brought up the rear of the little procession. And there, sure enough, up on the top shelf of the animal department of the next toy-shop, was a little yellow cat with very green eyes, and a pink ribbon around her neck, looking down on the "Five Little Peppers" as if she had expected them all the while, as they hurried up to anxiously scan the assortment. And oh, she had really-and-truly fur on! When she saw that, Phronsie screamed right out: "She's there. Oh, I want her!" and stretched out her arms, the money-bag dangling merrily, as if its services would be wanted presently. "Oh, Polly, I want her, I do!"

And before any one would believe it, it was all done so quickly, the little yellow cat was taken down and paid for, and Phronsie had it in her hand, and was stroking its back lovingly, and telling it about dear Grandpapa, and that it was going to him on Christmas Day, and ever so much more.

"Ain't you going to have it wrapped up?" asked the saleswoman. "Here, give it to me, and the

boy'll put a paper on it for you."

"Oh, no, no," said Phronsie, edging away in alarm, and cuddling the little yellow cat up in her neck, "she doesn't want to be wrapped up. Don't, Bensie," as he tried to take it out of her arms.

"All right," said Ben, with a laugh.

"Oh, Ben, she can't carry it all the afternoon in that way," said Polly, disapprovingly.

"It won't do any harm if she does," said Ben, with a glance at her, "and I don't believe, Polly, she'll put that cat down till we get home," he added.

So out they went, Joel and David having to be dragged away from the alluring toys of every description on all sides, fairly clamoring to be purchased.

"Oh, I want that steam-engine," howled Joel. "See, Dave, see!"

"I'd rather have the express-wagon," said David, who hadn't been able to take his eyes from it, the second he spied it.

"Huh, old wagon!" Joel exclaimed in contempt; "a steam-engine'll go, like this!" He shot out his arm, regardless where it went.

"Take care!" a voice sang out, but it was too late. Over went a pile of toys, just purchased, from the arms of a cash-girl on its way to be wrapped up. Smash went something—a big doll with pink cheeks and very blue eyes; and, with an awful feeling at his heart, Joel, with everybody else who saw the accident, bent over the heap of little pieces on the floor—all that remained of the pretty face.

"You broke it!" declared the cash-girl, aghast at the mischief, and her teeth fairly chattering with fright, as she whirled around to Joel.

"I didn't mean—" he began stoutly; David looked wildly around for Ben and Polly. They were ahead with Phronsie, so he ran after them on unsteady feet.

"I didn't mean—" Joel was saying again, as they hurried up in great distress.

"Oh, Ben, don't let Phronsie see!" cried Polly, as soon as she caught sight of the broken doll, for Phronsie never could bear to think of one being hurt, and she tried to draw her away. Too late! Phronsie rushed into the very middle of the group, just as the floor-walker was protesting, "Of course you didn't do it," to Joel, for it never would do to charge the trouble to rich Mr. King's household. He knew all the children well, as they had been many times at the shop with the old gentleman, who was one of its best customers.

"Oh, let me take her," begged Phronsie, eagerly. "Polly, can't I? Oh, please give her to me!"

"And it was all your own carelessness," went on the floor-walker, sternly, fastening his gaze on the cash-girl and quite delighted to blame somebody. "And I shall report you to the office. Now go ahead with those other things, and then come here and pick up these pieces, and take the doll back." With that he turned off from everybody who had stopped to look at the accident, and marched off with his best manner on, and his head well in the air.

"O dear me!" the cash-girl took two or three steps off toward the wrapping counter, and began to cry all over the rest of the purchases piled in her arms, as she staggered on.

Meantime Phronsie had sat right down on the floor, and was cuddling up the doll without any face, against the little yellow cat.

Joel stumbled off after the girl. "Don't cry," and he twitched her arm.

"You be still, and go right away," cried the girl, turning on him as well as she could for the pile of bundles, and she stamped her foot in rage; "you've made me smash that doll, and they'll take it out of my pay, and now I can't get my mother any Christmas present at all." The tears were rolling down her cheeks, and her face worked dreadfully.

"They shan't!" declared Joel, his black eyes flashing.

"An' now you'll make me smash these, I s'pose," said the cash-girl. "You go right away, you bad

boy, you. Boo-hoo-hoo!"

"I'll tell 'em I did it," said Joel, bounding off to overtake the floor-walker. "Say, oh, do stop!" for he had almost reached the office door. "Mister, *please*," and he seized the end of the departing coat, Polly and Ben both calling, astonished as they saw him fly past, to stop.

"Hey? Oh, is that you?" The floor-walker smoothed out his face when he saw who it was.

"Yes," said Joel, "it is, and you mustn't make that girl pay for that doll."

"Oh, don't you worry about that," said the floor-walker, easily, with a smile, "she's a careless thing and I must make an example of her, or she'll break something else. It's all right, my boy," and he put his hand, where the big diamond ring shone up from the little finger, familiarly on the sturdy shoulder.

"It isn't all right," declared Joel, hotly, "and she didn't do it. I knocked her with my arm and that old doll fell off;" he swallowed hard. What an

awful hole that would make in his pocket-book! Perhaps he wouldn't be able to buy only half as many things for his Christmas presents as he had scrawled on the list within it, and the blood surged all over his round cheeks to his stubby black hair. "How much did it cost?" he asked faintly.

"Oh, you won't have to pay for it," said the floor-walker, smiling pleasantly, till he showed his white teeth. "Mr. Persons wouldn't ever charge you a cent for it."

"Thank you!" bobbed Joel, in intense relief, "that's awfully good!" and he laughed, too, and gleefully slapped his pocket till, encountering the big pin again, he thought better of that, and said once more, "Thank you, mister," in the exuberance of his delight, and was moving off.

"Oh, no, indeed," repeated the floor-walker, decidedly, "he wouldn't ever think of it; the girl's got to pay," and he turned off, too.

"Hey!" cried Joel, whirling around. Then he ran back to the tall man's side. "Has that girl got to pay?" he demanded, his black eyes flashing and

his eyes working dreadfully; "say, tell me, has she?"

"Why, of course," said the man, "don't you worry, he won't touch a cent of your money; and you keep still, I shan't tell him, so he won't know, anyway."

"Well, I shall tell him myself," said Joel, in a burst, and dashing up to the first door he saw, he opened it and plunged in before the floor-walker could stop him.

So Ben and Polly, staring in the direction he had run, of course lost track of him and had nothing to do but to wait there till he came back.

Joel pranced up to the first desk he saw, of which the room appeared to be full, and found himself by the side of a young man, with a very large head of tow-colored hair, who was doing his best to find the bottom of a long column of figures. As he paid no attention to Joel's sudden appearance, the floor-walker had time to add himself to their company. At this the young man deserted his figures, thrust his pencil in the thicket of tow hair,

and said, "Hey, that you, McKenzie?"

But Mr. McKenzie paid small heed. "Here, you don't want to come in here," he said to Joel, "I'll fix that up for you." But Joel, not caring to wait for attentions that didn't appear to be forthcoming, dashed off to the next door. "Where's the big man?" he demanded.

"Hey?" The busy worker raised his head in astonishment to stare into the chubby face thrust into his own.

"The big man, the one who's ahead of you all?" said Joel, impatiently, waving his arms around comprehensively to take in the whole counting room.

"Oh, Mr. Persons, I guess he means," contributed the man at the neighboring desk. By this time everybody in the department had become interested, and pens were laid down and heads were bobbed up.

"Yes, yes," cried Joel, quite delighted to recognize the name that in his excitement had slipped away.

"Where is he?" drumming on the desk impatiently.

"In there, kid," the bookkeeper stuck his penholder over his shoulder, and following its lead, Joel was soon within a little office, that, if he had taken time to notice, would have showed him "Private" in big letters across the door.

But Joel hadn't time to waste on anything but the matter in hand, and he plunged up to the desk and burst out: "It was my fault, and I want to pay for it. Don't let him make the little girl pay, please don't." He laid hold of the gray-haired man's arm at this last, and held on with a grip, for Mr. McKenzie hurried up.

Mr. Persons dropped his pen in astonishment. His mouth flew open, but he said not a word.

"I'll explain it, sir," began the floor-walker, with deference, but he had a withering look for Joel. "You see, one of the——"

"Oh, don't let him tell it," burst in Joel, in terror, and gripping the arm on the desk worse than ever; "he wants that poor little girl to pay." He brought

his black eyes so close to the gray-bearded face that the countenance holding them obscured everything else.

"I'll tell you how it is, sir," said McKenzie, hastily.

"On the contrary, I'll let the boy tell his story," said Mr. Persons, dryly. "Now, then, what is it, my lad?" and he brought his eyes, just as sharp in their way, although the palest of blue ones, to bear on Joel's face.

So Joel, perfectly happy now that he had the telling of the story in his own way, began with great satisfaction, and never stopped to draw breath until he turned to pull out his pocket-book. Then he tugged at Mamsie's big shawl-pin till he grew quite red in the face. At last it was out, and so was the money. "How much is it?" he cried.

"Oh, you want to pay for it?" asked Mr. Persons, with a keen look into his flushed face.

"Yes, sir," Joel bobbed his black head. "How much is it?" he demanded again, this time impatiently. Since it was all settled, he began

wildly to think of Ben and Polly and the others.

"Mr. Persons," this time the floor-walker got back of the big office chair, and whispered the information as to who the boy was, without Joel's hearing a word.

Mr. Persons nodded. "Well," he said to Joel, his face not moving a muscle, "you may give me a dollar, my lad, and we'll consider that everything is all squared up in regard to the injury to that doll."

So Joel counted out a dollar from his hoarded silver pieces and put them into Mr. Persons's hand, the floor-walker staring in amazement at his employer. Then he fastened up his pocket again, sticking Mamsie's big shawl-pin in tighter than ever.

"All right, thank you, sir," and he marched out through the rows of men at their desks in the big counting room, all curiously staring at him as he passed.

Outside he found Ben and Polly making anxious inquiries of every one; David following closely, beyond saying a word, and Phronsie, who didn't

know that he was lost, only that the poor sick doll had to be left to get a new head on.

"What *have* you been about, Joe?" cried Ben, for even David was not quite clear how it all had happened.

"Oh, something—" said Joel, carelessly craning his neck to look about on all sides. "Oh, whickets! There she is." And he was gone again, this time in chase of a small cash-girl.

When everything was finally all explained, and the cash-girl had stepped off with a radiant face, Ben drew his charges off into a quiet corner, and said quite decidedly, "See here, now, we'll buy Grandpapa's present first, and make sure of it."

"Yes, do," said Polly, "for we never will get through in all this world. Well, what shall we choose, Ben?"

"What do you choose?" asked Ben, looking only at her.

"Oh, I know, I know," said Joel, eagerly.

"Hush, Joe, let Polly say."

"I don't know," said Polly.

"Polly doesn't know," broke in Joel, "let me tell; I know something splendid, Ben."

"You be still, Joe," said Ben, "and let Polly think."

"Why, I thought perhaps he'd like books," said Polly, slowly, wrinkling up her brows in little puckers.

"Hoh!" exclaimed Joel, in great disgust, "books aren't any good. I know—"

"Books will be fine, Polly," said Ben, smiling approval. "Anything else for second choice?"

"No," said Polly, "I can't think of another thing. Grandpapa has got just every single thing in the world, I do believe," she brought up with a sigh.

"I heard him say he'd broken his gold pen," said Ben, "the other day."

"Oh, Bensie!" cried Polly, with sparkling eyes, and seizing his arm, "how perfectly splendid you

are to always think up the right things."

"No, I don't, Polly." Ben was guilty of contradiction, but his cheek glowed. "You always get ahead of me with twenty plans while I'm thinking up one."

"But your one is the best," laughed Polly, squeezing his arm affectionately. "Oh, now let's hurry and buy the gold pen."

"Well, do you children want it?" asked Ben, looking around at them, "because it must be something that we all like, else Grandpapa won't care anything for it."

"Phoo!" cried Joel, horribly disappointed at such a quiet present. "What's an old pen, anyway? Can't write with it, without a handle."

"Well, we are going to give the handle, of course," said Ben, "only it must be a black one, for we haven't money enough for a solid gold one."

"And did you suppose we'd give Grandpapa a pen without a handle, Joey?" said Polly, quite horror-stricken at the very idea.

"Well, you said pen," persisted Joel.

"And so it is pen," said Ben, gayly, his spirits rising fast, "and handle, too. Well, now, do you vote for it, Joe?" and he slapped his back.

"Yes," said Joel, "if you'll give the handle, too."

And David saying "yes," then Polly had to explain it all to Phronsie. "And just think, pet, you can sit by him at his table, and watch him write with it," she finished.

"Oh, I want to buy my dear Grandpapa a pen," cried Phronsie, dreadfully excited and hopping up and down; "do, Bensie, please get it now, this very one minute!"

IV

"IT'S JOEL'S OLD LADY"

So a pen was bought, and a lovely gold-mounted black handle, all the children hanging over the purchase in rapt attention. And it was left to be marked with Grandpapa's initials and to be sent to Ben in two days, in order to be actually sure to be on hand in time for Christmas, which now was only a week away. "For suppose it shouldn't be there in time!" breathed Polly. At which the rest of the Pepper children took alarm. "Oh, won't it?" gasped Joel, in distress, trying to fly back to the counter, as the whole bunch moved away in great delight at this momentous undertaking accomplished.

"Here, you!" Ben seized his jacket and pulled him back, then he slipped away himself, while Polly reassured Joel that she was only supposing that if they hadn't bought Grandpapa's present this very day what might have happened, so that she didn't

see Ben go, until, as he hurried back, "Why, where—" she began, looking around.

"Nothing," said Ben, answering her question, and his face grew red, "only I thought you'd better have the parcel sent to you," for he remembered just in time how dearly Polly loved to receive bundles addressed to her own self.

"Oh, Ben!" exclaimed Polly, in dismay, "you shouldn't have done so. I'm going back to tell them to change it."

"Indeed you won't," declared Ben, bursting into a laugh, "I guess changing it once is enough. Come on, Polly."

But once outside they couldn't get along for the throng.

"What is it?" cried David, who happened to be first, Joel hanging back to look at the things on the last counter. "A fire. Oh, Polly, it must be!"

"A fire!" Joel caught the last word. "Oh, good, that's prime!" He cleared the steps with a bound. But Ben was after him and had him fast.

It was impossible to see what the commotion was about, the people pressing up to the curbstone in such a throng.

"It isn't any fire at all," declared Joel, with a sniff, quite willing to be led back by Ben. "There aren't any fire-engines or anything! Come on, let's go to Gallagher's."

"Gallagher's" was the best all-round shop in town, and it was the children's perfect delight whenever allowed to go there.

"But something has happened," said Polly, standing on her tiptoes, and craning her neck to look up the street where the group was the thickest. "O dear me! It's a woman, and she's hurt!"

"Tried to go across the street and got knocked down," volunteered a man, who, having seen all he wanted to, kindly made way for Polly to take his place.

"O dear me!" she began, then she caught sight of the face. "Ben," she clutched his sleeve, "it's Joel's

old lady!"

Sure enough, the face, now as white as the big puffs of hair above it, came into view as two men lifted the owner, a big, stately woman, to the sidewalk. They came close to the little Peppers, so that the stiff black silk coat, now plentifully besprinkled with mud, brushed them as it passed. Joel gave a howl as she was carried by. "It's that cross old woman!" he exclaimed.

"Hush, Joel!" Polly pulled his arm.

"Get out of the way!" said the men, pushing with their burden into the drug store, two doors off.

The bystanders, having seen all that satisfied their curiosity, rushed off to the delayed Christmas shopping. Only the Pepper children were left.

"Polly," said Ben, hoarsely, and his blue eyes shone, "just think, supposing she belonged to us."

"She couldn't," said Joel, decidedly, "she's awful cross."

"For shame, Joel," said Ben, sternly. "I'm going in

to see." He hurried after just as the men laid down the old woman on the marble floor.

"Blest if I know who she is!" said one of them, wiping his forehead as the perspiration rushed off.

"She run right in front of the wagon, I seen her myself," said the other.

"Well, I guess she's dead," said the first man. Ben pushed up nearer, motioning for the rest of the children who had followed to keep back. Meantime the proprietor ran to the telephone. "I would thank you to call my carriage," said the old lady, the eyes in the white face flying open. The two men who had brought her in, and the little fringe of spectators, principally composed of the druggist's clerks and the little group of Peppers, tumbled back suddenly.

"She's out of her head," said one of the men behind his hand. "She didn't have no carriage." Ben pushed by him, the old woman's eyes closing again, when Polly knelt down by her side, and forgetting how scared she had been by that face the last time she saw it, she seized the poor stiff

hand in its black glove. "Oh, ma'am," she cried, "can't you tell me who you are, and we will get you home?"

The eyes flew wide open again, and the face was quite as terrible, where she lay on the floor of the druggist's shop; the Roman nose and the big white puffs stood up in such a formidable way.

"Oh!" the keen black eyes bored into Polly's face; but "lift me up, and call my carriage," was all she said.

Ben heard, as did the others, and he rushed up to the proprietor just as the doctor, a dapper little man with a very big instrument case, came importantly in.

"I don't want anything done to me," said the old lady, viewing the new arrival from head to foot. She was now sitting up, having made Polly help her to that position. "And see here, boy," she glanced around for Ben, "I'd thank you to give me a hand," and disdaining the proffered assistance of the young medical man, she was on her feet, and proceeding, though somewhat unsteadily, toward

the door.

"There he is," she raised one of her black gloves, "there's Carson," pointing to a coachman driving a spirited pair of bays down the street, anxiety written all over his florid face, as he looked to right and to left. "Here, stop him."

Which was easy to do, as Ben rushed tumultuously out, for the coachman turned when down at the corner, driving slowly back to scan once more every shop door, and the passers-by on either side.

"I thought I'd walk over to Summer Street," said the old lady, "and I told Carson to wait there, when the wagon knocked me down." Meanwhile she clung to Polly's hand.

"Are you sure, madam, that you are not hurt?" the young physician pushed up. "Such an accident as yours should be attended to."

"When I require your services I can inform you," said the old lady, turning on him with so much vigor that he fell back involuntarily. "I shall call my

own physician when I reach home. That's right, girl, help me to my carriage," and clinging to Polly's hand she went down the drug-shop steps, Carson ejaculating "O Lord!" in great relief at seeing her, and nervously slapping his knee, though it had been all her own fault that she was in such a plight.

"Um!" She wouldn't groan, but it was perilously near it as she got into the carriage with Polly's and Ben's help and settled back on the cushions with a grimace.

"Oh, you *are* hurt!" cried Polly, the color dying from her cheek, and looking in the window in great concern.

"Nonsense!" said the old woman, in her sharpest tone. Then she drew her breath hard. "Your name, girl, and your brother?" She looked inquiringly at Ben.

"Yes," said Polly, with a glad little smile up at him; "he's Ben."

"What's the last name?"

"Pepper." Ben and Polly said it together, and the three others crowded up to the carriage door, crying out, "We're all Peppers."

"Um!" said the old woman, looking them all over, but her gaze rested the longest on Joel.

"I'm sorry you got hurt," he blurted out with a very red face, and wishing he had remained in the background.

"And where do you live?" asked the old woman, without the slightest attention to his remark.

"At Mr. King's," said Ben. "He's my own dear Grandpapa," announced Phronsie, pressing up closely, "and I've bought him a dear little cat," holding it as high as she could.

"Drive home, Carson," was all the old woman said. So Carson, almost beside himself with delight that she was safely inside, went off at his best pace, and the carriage was soon lost to view around the corner.

"Well," said Ben, "she'll soon be home now," with a sigh of relief. "We must make haste and get to

Gallagher's."

When they came out of Gallagher's an hour later, they were so laden down with bundles, little and big, for the children insisted on carrying everything home, that Polly and Ben had all they could do, what with their own parcels, to pilot the three younger ones along.

Everything had gone off splendidly, just the right presents had been found and bought, and, bubbling over with joy, the little group hurried along to get home to Mamsie, knocking into everybody and being knocked about in return by big and crisscrossed bundles of every description, as their owners endeavored to wind their way along the crowded streets.

"O dear, where is Papa Doctor?" cried Polly, for the third time, when the coffee was brought in at dinner, and the children, who couldn't take any, were busy over the nuts and raisins. The shopping expedition had been hilariously told by the whole bunch, all except Phronsie, who had been too sleepy to more than mumble to Mamsie her purchase of the little cat, before she hid it in the

under drawer of the big mahogany bureau. She wanted dreadfully to take it to bed with her, but that would never do, as it was to be a Christmas gift. So she patted it lovingly good-by, and, after her nursery tea, was popped into bed herself.

"O dear me!" Polly ended with a sigh, for she never felt just comfortable unless she could tell Doctor Fisher everything, so half the pleasure of the recital was lost to her.

"He is busy with a case, I suppose," said Mother Fisher, yet she looked worried and cast an anxious glance at the door.

"Working himself to death," observed old Mr. King, from the head of the table, yet his eyes gleamed with delight. "Just what I said," he was revolving in his own mind; "if he would come to the city, he could lead the profession."

Polly gave a little start and grew pale.

"Grandpapa doesn't mean that," whispered Ben; "don't, Polly," when the door opened and the little doctor marched in, head erect and his eyes

shining behind their big spectacles.

"Well, well," he declared breezily, "I thought you'd be through dinner," and without a bit of warning he went up to Polly's and Ben's chairs. "I don't know which of you children I'm proudest of," he began.

Everybody stared and laid down knives and forks, while the little doctor, as if he had the happiest sort of a tale to unfold when the proper time came, nodded over to his wife. "I've been attending Mrs. Van Ruypen," this time he bobbed his head over toward Mr. King.

"What, is Mrs. Van Ruypen sick?" asked the old gentleman, quickly.

"Got knocked down in the street," the little doctor brought it out jerkily.

When the little Peppers heard that they all started, and Joel exclaimed, "Oh!" and slunk down in his chair, wishing he could go under the table, while old Mr. King started a rapid fire of questions. Little Doctor Fisher, skipping into his seat, replied

as fast as he could, till the accident and its result was pretty generally known around the table.

"But what have the children to do with it?" at last demanded Mr. King, in a puzzled way, as he was never able to take his mind off very long from the Peppers and their affairs.

The little doctor burst into a happy laugh, he was so pleased, and it was so very contagious that before long everybody at the table had joined, until any one looking in would have said, "Well, well, it's no use to wait for Christmas to be jolly, for here we are merry as a grig now!"

"I don't know in the least what I'm laughing at," said old Mr. King, at last, "but you are enough, Fisher, to start us off always. Now be so good as to tell me what it is all about," and he wiped his eyes.

"Why, the old lady, Mrs. Van Ruypen, whatever her name is, wasn't so very much hurt," said Ben, his blue eyes shining.

"And it's so very lovely, Grandpapa," cried Polly,

her cheeks very red, and clapping her hands, even if she were at the table.

"It's prime!" shouted Joel, coming up straight in his chair, his black eyes shining. But at the next remark, down he slid again, wishing he hadn't said anything.

"Oh, it isn't that!" said Doctor Fisher, quickly, "I'm glad enough I can fix the old lady up; but it's my children." Then he set his glasses straight, which had slipped down his nose, and beamed affectionately on the four faces.

Mrs. Fisher slipped her hand on his tired one, as it rested on his lap. "What is it, Adoniram?" she asked.

"Why, that old—I mean Mrs. Van Ruypen,—I should just as soon think of a stone gate-post breaking out—says our children helped her, and she's overcome with gratitude. Think of it, Mary, that old stone post!"

"Oh!" cried Joel, burrowing deeply, till his face was almost obscured.

"And she can't say enough about them. Wants them to come over to-morrow."

"Ugh!" with that Joel wholly disappeared, sliding down under the table.

"Where are you going, Joe?" Ben exclaimed, and the butler hurrying over, Joel was soon drawn out and installed once more on his chair. This time he was the centre for all eyes.

"Oh, Joel!" Mother Fisher's delight which had spread over her face died out so suddenly, that Joel blurted out, dreadfully distressed, "I didn't mean to, Mamsie," and he choked back the tears, not to add to his disgrace.

"Brighten up, Joel," said little Doctor Fisher, cheerily. "We'll forgive him this time, Mary, for Mrs. Van Ruypen sent her love to him, and particularly wants him to come to-morrow, and —"

"No, no," howled Joel, this time all lost to control, "I was bad to her," and every bit of blood rushed up to his round face.

"Why, she says she was bad to you," observed the little doctor, demurely; "anyway you are to go with the others to-morrow, Joe, so it's all right, my boy."

V

"THE PRESENTS ALL GO FROM SANTA CLAUS"

Joel protested up to the very last that he couldn't go to see the big lady in the black silk coat.

"But maybe she won't have it on," said David, who had been anxiously hanging on Joel's every word, and surveying his round countenance in fear. Supposing Joel shouldn't really go! This would be worse than all, and David clasped and unclasped his hands nervously.

"Of course she won't have it on!" exclaimed Polly, briskly. "Why, the very idea, she wouldn't wear that in the house!"

"Now you see, Joel," cried David, much relieved, and his face brightening, "she won't, really, for Polly says so."

"Well, you've got to go anyway," declared Ben, in

a downright way there was no mistaking. "So say no more, Joe, but get your cap."

The other Pepper children were all in a bunch in the wide hall revolving around Joel, who felt, as long as he postponed getting his coat and cap, he was surely safe from making the awful expedition. But now, seeing Ben's blue eyes upon him, he set out for the closet in the back hall where the boys' outer garments were kept, grumbling at every step.

"O dear me! This is too dreadful for anything," sighed Polly, sinking down on the last step of the stairs. When Phronsie saw her do this, she hurried over, and snuggled up in her fur-trimmed coat as close as she could get to her side.

"I wish Jasper was home," said Ben, with a long breath, and going across to stand in front of the two.

"So we wish all the time," said Polly, "but then, he can't come till Friday, and that's just forever."

Little David, left alone, thought the best thing he

could do would be to run after Joel. So he precipitated himself upon that individual, who, just knocking down his cap from its hook, was beginning to prow around the floor in the corner of the closet.

"Can't find it," growled Joel, knocking off more things in his irritation.

"Oh, let me!" cried David, delighted to help. "Let me, Joel; I'll get it!"

"You keep off," cried Joel, lifting a hot, red face; "I'll get it myself. And I won't go to see that old woman!" he declared savagely.

"Oh, yes, you must, Joe!" cried David, in alarm.

"I won't, I won't, I won't!" declared Joel, feeling with each repetition of the word a happy independence.

"Yes, indeed, the children have gone," a voice suddenly proclaimed above the stairs, as somebody opened the door and came out into the upper hall. "Yes, Mrs. Whitney, they have gone to Mrs. Van Ruypen's."

"It's Mamsie," gasped David, clutching Joel's shoulders, who ducked back into his corner so suddenly that they both went down in a little heap.

"Did she hear?" gasped Joel, holding his breath for the answer.

"I don't believe so," said David, when he could extricate himself from Joel sufficiently, who now grasped him by both hands in a way very uncomfortable for conversation. "No, I don't really believe she did, Joel, 'cause she said we'd gone."

"She'll hear us now, anyway," said Joel, thrust into the depths of gloom, his independence completely deserting him; "what'll we do?"

Little David found his feet and tiptoed out to listen under the stairs. "She's going into her room," he announced in a whisper, coming back to the closet. "Come, Joey, do hurry."

So Joel picked up his cap and crammed it on his head, and stepped out of the closet, but he had a very gloomy air when the two boys presented

themselves in the front hall.

"O there! now you see," said Polly to Ben, quite in despair, "just how very dreadful it's all going to be, when Joel goes with such a face."

"Well, come on," said Ben, setting his lips tightly together. So Polly and Phronsie got off from the stair, and if the expedition was not begun in hilarity, it was at least started.

But when they reached the big house of Mrs. Van Ruypen, that loomed up across the square like a heavy, dark brown fortress, the situation was much worse.

"I'm not going in," declared Joel, all his terrors returning, and he planted his feet firmly on the pavement, determined not to go up the first step. How it was done, he never knew, but the next moment he was at the top of the flight under Ben's hands, who released him enough to ring the bell, and the butler answering the summons, Joel was really the first person to enter, which he did with a bound, as if extremely eager to get in.

And then, it was all like a dream! They were ushered into a reception room, high and dark and gloomy, and told to take off their things, for madam would receive them upstairs. In the excitement of it all, Polly, while undoing Phronsie's coat and taking off her bonnet, forgot all about Joel, and it wasn't really until after they had mounted the long stairs that she had the first thought about him. And then, O dear me! there stood Madam Van Ruypen, with a long white hand, fairly blazing with rings, outstretched to welcome them.

"Where's the other boy?" she demanded, looking over the group.

"He came," said Polly, faintly, growing quite scarlet at such dreadful manners in one of her family, for which she felt responsible. "He really did, ma'am."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Madam Van Ruypen; "you can see for yourself he's not here," and her face fell.

Ben said never a word, but dashed down the long

flight. There was Joel, the picture of gloom, on one of the big chairs in the reception room. He had run back, after Ben supposed that he was at his heels, and found the only refuge he could think of.

"You're a nice boy," said Ben, picking him off from his chair. "Now march, Joe," and he kept him well in front of him; and at last, there he was, and Madam Van Ruypen had taken his hand. But he didn't look at her.

"Well, at last you are all here," she was saying; "now I'm going to tell you what I wanted you for."

No one of the five little Peppers appeared to breathe, except Phronsie, who chirped out, "Oh, we've come all this way to see you!"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Madam Van Ruypen, who was vastly pleased at that, and she nodded her head, that had a ponderous affair of lace and jet upon it, down toward Phronsie; "but there was something I especially wanted of you, and I'll tell it in one word. You must choose the toys I'm going to send to some poor children." Without another

word, she turned and swung the door wide to another room, and there, before their entranced eyes, was toyland!

Joel took one look, and howled out, "Oh, I will; let me; let me!" bounding in.

"So you shall," said Madam Van Ruypen, laughing heartily. "There, get in there, all of you, and set to work."

There was no need to tell them this, and they were soon running about, not pausing long in any spot, for the attractions overflowed on tables and chairs, and even the carpet appeared to be covered with the best specimens of toys from all the shops in town. But Phronsie went directly over and sat down in front of a big doll, and gazed at her without a word.

"Oh, it's just like Gallagher's," cried Polly, flying about with sparkling eyes, and she clasped her hands. "Oh, what richness!"

"Hoh, it's better than Gallagher's," retorted Joel, in scorn, who had always thought that shop was the

very finest place imaginable. "Dave, here's the steam-engine, the very one!" he cried, spying it in a corner.

Madam Van Ruypen laughed again, and this time it seemed as if she were not going to stop. And pretty soon the whole room looked as if Santa Claus himself had been there with his load, while as for the babel of voices,—well, it was exactly like a flock of blackbirds all chattering together.

"You said they were going to poor children," said Polly, at last, flying up to the tall figure that now it seemed as if they had known all their lives. "Oh, do tell us about it."

"So I will." Madam Van Ruypen swept off the articles from a big easy-chair, preparatory to sitting down.

"Let me!" said Ben, coming up in his slow way. But the toys were half off, and Polly had gathered up the rest, and the big figure was already in the chair.

"You see," she began—

"Oh, would you please wait?" begged Polly, in great distress, looking over across the room where Joel and David were deep in the charms of some mechanical toy.

"Yes, to be sure," said Madam Van Ruypen, good naturedly, while Polly ran over to them. "Boys, come!" she cried hurriedly.

"Something's the matter with this pig," said Joel, not looking at her, and fussing with the animal in question.

"Well, put it down," said Polly, impatiently. "She's going to tell us what she wants us to do."

"Then Dave'll get my pig," said Joel, with one eye askance at that individual.

"Oh, no, he won't touch it; will you, Davie?" said Polly. "Do put it down, Joe, and come along."

"No, I won't," said David, "touch it a single bit." So Joel laid the pig carefully down, and the two boys hurried after Polly.

Madam Van Ruypen now began again.

"Phronsie ought to hear," said Joel, as he crowded up.

"Hush," said Ben, looking over at her where she still sat absorbed in the big doll; "you let her be, Joel, and keep still."

"I have had so much trouble over every Christmas," said Madam Van Ruypen, proceeding briskly, "selecting presents for some children I happen to know about, who ought to have them, that really I sometimes wish there wasn't any Christmas."

Wish there wasn't any Christmas! Every one of the Peppers who heard those direful words tumbled back in dismay and gazed at her in amazement.

"I really did, but I don't now!" Madam Van Ruypen drew a long breath, then she laughed again. "Well, here we are, and this Christmas I mean to have an easy time, for I'm not to select a single thing myself, but put all the responsibility on you young people."

"Do you really mean," cried Polly Pepper, crowding up quite closely, with flushed cheeks, "that we can pick out the toys and things for you to give to your poor children? Oh, do you mean it?"

"To be sure, bless you, yes; why, that is just why I got you over here, and what I've had this room turned into a toy-shop for." She waved her long, white hands over at the array.

"Oh, oh, Joel," Polly seized the arm next to her and gave it a little tweak, "do begin, for she wants us to pick out the things she is to send to the poor children. I'm going to choose that work-box, and that backgammon board, and—" and Polly ran off and was deep in a dozen things at once.

"Hoh, I'm not," said Joel, who couldn't bear backgammon; "I'm going to choose my pig, when I fix him so he'll squeak, and my steam-engine. Yes, sir! that's the best of all."

And immediately the entire room was in a bustle.

Ben turned off with the others, but presently came

slowly back to stand a minute at Madam Van Ruypen's chair, where she sat with folded hands.

"Well, what is it?" she asked, looking up into his face.

"Were you picking out toys for the poor children when we saw you yesterday?" asked Ben, looking at her steadily.

"Dear me, yes; what do you suppose could have induced me to go into such a mob?" cried Madam Van Ruypen.

"Oh!" said Ben, then he turned back and set to work on doing what he could to pick out the things he should want if he were really a poor boy, not likely to get presents in any other way.

But the nicest of all things, so he thought,—thick boots, mittens, and fur tippets to keep out the cold,—were not there, and he stifled a sigh, and gave his mind to do the best he could under the circumstances.

"Something is the matter, I see." He didn't know it, but there the old lady was, close by his side,

and the next words showed clearly that she had discovered what was on his mind.

"Out with it, Ben,—for that's your name, I believe."

"Yes," said Ben, "it is."

"Well, you might as well tell me, for I see very plainly that you don't think I've had the right things sent up from the stores. What would you send to poor children for their Christmas?"

"I think a boy would like a pair of boots," said Ben, slowly; then he came to the conclusion that he might as well tell the whole, "or a thick coat, or some mittens, and a tippet."

"But those wouldn't be Christmas presents; those are everyday things," said the old lady, sharply.

"They wouldn't be his everyday things," said Ben, sturdily.

"Oh, perhaps that is so," said Madam Van Ruypen, thoughtfully. "Well, let us see." She took up some books, whirled the pages a minute, to

give herself time to think, then she pushed them all away impatiently. "You go on, and choose what you think some boys would like out of the things that are here, as we haven't any clothes among them," then she turned away, and swept back into her seat. And Ben, feeling very sure that the wrong thing had been said by him, set to work, as best he might, to do as she wanted.

When the task was over, it seemed as if all the toys and gay articles had been chosen, every one!

"They are all perfectly beautiful," sighed Polly, "and we can't leave any out."

"So I am to send them all," said Madam Van Ruypen, much pleased to think that her experiment in having the things sent up was so approved, and looking around at them all.

"Oh, yes, yes!" they cried, Joel especially vociferating that not a single one was to be omitted. Now that he had discovered the weak part in the pig's voice, and had fixed it to his satisfaction, everything was all right.

"Please give her to the poor child," begged Phronsie, who had the whole thing explained to her by Polly, and coming up with very pink cheeks to hold as high as she could the big doll. "Oh, do, please do, and give it right away."

"Oh, I shall not give it," said Madam Van Ruypen, decidedly.

A quiver came into Phronsie's voice and her lip drooped, and she looked as if she were going to cry. "Please," she began.

"Santa Claus is going to take it to her," said the old lady, making haste to explain when she saw Phronsie's face. "Don't you be afraid, child; the poor little girl will get her doll."

"Oh, then I'm glad," said Phronsie, beginning to smile. And two little tears that were just starting out determined to go back again. Then she laughed gleefully. "Polly, Polly," she cried in great excitement, "the big lady is going to take it to the poor little girl; she is, Polly, she said so."

"I shan't take it," said Madam Van Ruypen,

nodding over to Polly; "the little girl won't know it's from me, but she will have it all the same."

"Shan't you tell her you sent it?" demanded Joel, who had caught the words, and whirling around suddenly; "shan't you tell her about any of the things?" waving his hands in all directions.

"Of course not," declared Madam Van Ruypen. "Dear me, not for the world, Joel, would I have them know where the things come from. The presents all go from Santa Claus."

"Oh!" said Joel.

"And now you don't know—you can't even guess," said Madam Van Ruypen, "what a load you have taken off my mind by coming here to help me."

"Have we?" cried Polly, with glistening eyes.

"Oh, so much!" declared the old lady.

"I haven't," said Joel; "I've only had a good time," and patting his steam-engine lovingly. Then he set it off once more. "Whee,—whiz,—see her go!" he

cried.

"Stop, Joey, we're all through," said Polly.

"And it's time to go," said Ben.

"And send 'em to-night, do," said Joel, deserting his engine abruptly to march up to the old lady.

"Oh, Joel!" cried Polly, much ashamed.

"And tell the boy who gets the pig to turn him upside down when the squeak won't come," said Joel, nowise abashed.

"Come on, Joe," said Ben, picking his sleeve.

"Oh, wait a moment, Ben," said Madam Van Ruypen, laying a detaining hand on his arm, as the others said good-by and filed downstairs to get coats and hats on. "I think, myself, it might be advisable to add a few things to wear to these presents, and I want you to go to-morrow afternoon with me to choose them. Will you?"

And Ben said "Yes," quite overwhelmed with the thought. He was actually going shopping with Madam Van Ruypen!

VI

BEN GOES SHOPPING WITH MADAM VAN RUYPEN

All the rest of the Peppers crowded up to the windows to watch Ben go off in state in the Van Ruypen carriage, Phronsie climbing up on a chair to see him the better. As for Ben himself, he was so amazed at the whole thing, to think that he was by Madam Van Ruypen's side, and expected to give his opinion as to matters and things, that for some minutes he had all he could do to keep his attention on what she was saying.

"You see, Ben," at last he made out, "I don't know in the least what to get for a boy, and if it were not for you, I shouldn't think of such a thing as to pick out clothes for one. Well, here we are," as Carson drew up to a large tailoring establishment. "We'll go in and do our best, but it must be you who does the selecting."

Ben, with an awful feeling at his heart at all this responsibility, stumbled after her as she marched down the long store, the salesmen all vying with each other to attract her attention and wait upon her. She didn't notice any of them, but kept on her way, her Roman nose and white puffs of hair held well up, until at the end of the aisle a little dapper man stepped up, rubbing his hands obsequiously together, and stopped her progress.

"Anything I can show you, madam?" he said with a bow and a flourish.

Madam Van Ruypen looked him all over carelessly. "Oh, well, I suppose you can; this boy here," she turned to Ben, "understands what I want. Now then, Ben, speak up and tell the man, for I know nothing about it." With that she looked around for a chair, which the little dapper man, hurrying off, soon brought, and, sitting down, she drew up her stately figure to its full height, and left Ben to his own devices.

"I suppose it must be a coat," began Ben. Oh, if Mamsie were only there! Instead, was the big figure in the black silk coat, whose eyes had such

a way of boring right through one that it seemed to take the breath away of the one being inspected.

"I suppose so," said the old lady, "as we have come for clothes; why, a coat appears to be essential, and if I were to express an opinion, I should consider that the rest of the suit would be a good investment, too."

"Quite right," assented the shopman. "Now I will show you some. This way, madam; here, stay, and I will move your chair."

"You will do nothing of the sort," said Madam Van Ruypen, shortly; "this is not to be of my purchasing; this boy will attend to it for me. Ben, you go along with the man and select the articles."

"Do you mean I'm to go without you, ma'am?" asked Ben, quite aghast at the very idea, his blue eyes very wide.

"Of course," said the old lady, having hard work not to laugh; "I said so, I believe."

"But, but—I may not pick out the right things,"

stammered Ben.

"I'll trust you," said Madam Van Ruypen, waving him off summarily. So as there was nothing else to do, Ben followed the little man down what seemed an interminable number of aisles, at last pausing before a set of drawers, on either hand of which was a cabinet with doors.

"Now, here," said the salesman, swinging wide one of the doors, "is just the thing. It's for yourself, I suppose," and he took down with a deft hand a jacket and a pair of trousers.

"Oh, no, it isn't," Ben made haste to say, answering the question.

"Hey—oh!" the little man whirled around to stare at him—"your brother then?"

"No," said Ben, growing hot and red in the face. "It isn't for any of us,—no one I know; she's going to give them away to some boy who—" he was going to say "needs them," but the salesman shut off the words from his mouth, and, clapping to the door, led the way off down another aisle to a

counter where the suits were piled high; "I've got just the very thing for you here," he announced, twitching one out; "there, now, see that."

"But that is much too nice," said Ben, putting his finger on the fine goods, and wishing he were anywhere else in the world but in that store, and the perspiration began to trickle in little drops down his face.

"So?" the salesman leaned his hands meditatively on the counter, and surveyed him. "Well, I'll show you some other goods. Come this way," and again they traversed some more aisles, took an elevator, and went up what seemed to Ben a great many floors, at last coming out to a department which, as far as the eye could see, was stacked with thick, ready-made goods of serviceable materials.

"There," said the little man, giving quick, birdlike glances on either side, and, at last pausing, he slapped his hand smartly down on a small pile of suits, "is just the ticket for you."

"Yes," said Ben, and he ran his hand approvingly

over the thick surface, "I guess it is; it looks good."

"And it is good," said the salesman, emphatically; "it'll outwear three of those other ones downstairs. We haven't but a few of these left. Now, how big is the boy you want it for?"

"I don't know," said Ben, helplessly.

"Well, we've got to have something to go by," said the salesman; "of course you can't buy at random and haphazard."

"She didn't say," said Ben, with a nod over in the direction supposed to be where Madam Van Ruypen was waiting several floors below for the transaction to be completed. "But she's going to give them to a boy," he added desperately, "and so I guess I'll pick out the very best you have for the money, and it'll be right. They'll fit some boy."

"Right you are," declared the salesman, delighted to have the matter satisfactorily arranged, and, pulling out a coat and jacket, he held them up before Ben's eyes. "Now that is the best money

value we've got in the store. Fact. We're closing them out. Couldn't afford to give 'em at this low figure, but there's only these few left, and we don't allow remnants to bother us long, no, sir." He rattled on so fast that Ben, who was slowly going over the coat, which he had by this time gotten into his own hands, in a close examination as to buttons and buttonholes, only half heard him. Indeed, it wasn't in the least necessary, for he hadn't held the garment for a moment before he knew quite well that here was a good bargain, and one well fitted to warm some poor boy, and to wear well.

"You can't find fault," said the little man, in great satisfaction, when the whole suit had been gone over in this slow way, "cause there ain't any. Fact! Well, do you want it?"

"How much is it?" asked Ben.

"Nine-fifty. It's worth three dollars more, but we're closing them out, as I told you, and we don't give room to remnants. It's a bargain if ever there was one. Fact! Do you want it?"

"Yes, if she says so," said Ben. And now his spirits quite rose, for it was a good thing, and he was not ashamed to show it to Madam Van Ruypen, or to any one else, as his selection. So the salesman flung the suit over his arm, and skipped off, followed by Ben. And they shot down the elevator and went back down all the aisles. There she sat, stiff and immovable, in her chair.

"Oh, only one?" she asked, as the salesman held up the bargain.

"I didn't know you wanted two," gasped Ben; "you didn't say so."

"Oh, I suppose I did not mention it. But have you been all this time picking out a paltry one?" She didn't even offer to touch the suit, and scarcely glanced at it.

"Do you like it?" asked Ben. "See, it's thick and warm, isn't it?" lifting the sleeve for her to see it the better.

"Oh, I suppose it will serve its purpose, and be

warm enough," she said carelessly. "Well, now," to the salesman, "will you go back and bring another one, a smaller size, and stay, still another, for there must be some more boys in the family? There ought to be. No, you don't need to go, Ben; he can pick them out. Just the same quality, mind," and she dismissed the little man.

When he had disappeared, she cast an approving glance at the suit thrown across the counter. "Very well chosen," she said. "And now, see here, run down to the neckwear counter—or stay," and she raised her black glove.

A small army of salesmen seemed to rush to the scene, so many appeared. "What is it, madam?" for all knew, at least by sight, the wealthy old lady, who, try as hard as she might, never seemed to be able to make much impression on the Van Ruypen money-bags. "Take this boy to the different departments that he selects, and let him buy what pleases him," she said to the first salesman that reached her.

"Yes, madam," he said, well pleased, and leading off with Ben. But just then a floor-walker touched

him on the shoulder, "Mr. Moses wants you," he said, "about those vests."

"Oh, all right," said the salesman; "here, Perkins," and beckoning to a tall young man, who appeared to Ben very much dressed up, he turned the boy over to him, and went off.

"Well, what do you want?" asked Mr. Perkins, leisurely surveying Ben's sturdy figure from his greater height.

"A red woollen tippet, I think," said Ben.

"A red woollen tippet!" repeated the salesman, nearly falling backward. "Oh, we haven't got one in the store!"

"Haven't you?" asked Ben, very much disappointed, for he had set his heart on seeing that the boy who was to have those good warm clothes should have a red woollen tippet to tie around his throat, and perhaps go over his cap, and down around his ears, if it was very cold. Anyway, the ends were to tuck in the jacket. Ben knew just exactly how that tippet was to look

when it was all fixed, ready for a sharp, cold, snowy day.

"Well, I can suit you," said the salesman, noting the disappointed tone; "we've got silk scarfs, nice ones, all—"

"Oh, I don't want a silk scarf," said Ben, quickly.

"Some of them are plaid; you don't know how fine they are. This way," and he stepped off.

But as Ben stood quite still, there was nothing for the salesman to do but to come back, which he did, quite discomfited.

"Have you got any caps?" asked Ben, leaving the red tippet out of the question as an impossibility in this shop.

"Caps? Oh, yes, this way," and away they went, down aisles, up in elevators, and into the department where nothing but headgear showed itself.

This time, knowing there were to be three boys provided for with suits, Ben picked out the same

number of good, strong caps, the salesman all through the process plainly showing his disgust and disappointment at what he thought was to be a fine purchase, turning out to be such a poor trade. But Ben knew nothing of what was going on in the other one's mind, and would have cared still less, had he known, all his attention being absorbed in the bargain he was making for Madam Van Ruypen. At last the business was concluded.

"Do you keep gloves?" he asked, as they turned away.

"Yes," said the salesman, sullenly, and slapping the three cloth caps together disdainfully.

"Mittens?" asked Ben.

"No, indeed," said Mr. Perkins, emphatically.

"Mittens, the very idea!" then he winked at a young man, who looked as if a wrinkle, by any chance, never existed in his clothes, and whose hair was evidently just fresh from the barber's.

"We don't keep anything but first-class goods."

The other young man made no attempt to conceal his broad smile. And by this time Ben had considerable attention down the long store. He couldn't help but see it, and he held his head high, and his blue eyes flashed.

"Well, give me the money—" Mr. Perkins held out his hand, the one with the big ring on.

"I don't pay for them," said Ben.

"Well, I guess you do, young man," declared Mr. Perkins, in a high key, designed to impress the onlookers. "You've bought these caps," and he gave them another disdainful slap together, "and you'll pay for them, and now, right sharp off!" he added in a very unpleasant way.

"But I haven't bought them for myself," said Ben.

"Hey? Oh! What are you talking about?" Mr. Perkins whirled around at him. "Who sent you here, anyway?" glaring down at him.

"I haven't been sent," said Ben; "I came with the one who is going to buy them."

"Well, who is he? Take me to him." Mr. Perkins craned his neck this way and that, trying to see the friend of his customer.

"If you will follow me, you will see for yourself," said Ben, stepping off. When he paused by Madam Van Ruypen's chair, Mr. Perkins was in a bad state. His long limbs seemed wobbling under him, and his usually glib tongue appeared to be fastened to the roof of his mouth. He delivered up the caps with a limp and feeble hand, then cast an appealing eye down at Ben.

"Very good," said the old lady, without a glance at them. "Put them with these other articles," pointing to the suit left on the counter. "Now, then, Ben, are these all the things you can find here, pray tell?"

"Yes," said Ben, "they don't seem to keep what I want in this shop."

"Let me look again," cried Mr. Perkins, in great distress, "I think maybe I can find something to suit you. Don't go yet, I almost know we can find something," he kept on in such misery, saying the

same thing over and over, that Madam Van Ruypen stared at him in amazement.

Meanwhile, the other young man, who had followed Ben and Mr. Perkins with his eye till they arrived at Madam Van Ruypen's chair, soon spread the astounding news that the boy who wanted mittens had good reason to hold his own against everybody, and was by no means a person to be safely laughed at. "And Perkins is having a fit," he wound up, to the group of salesmen unencumbered by customers.

"I don't think you can," said Ben, quickly; "I must try some other shop."

"But just come and let me show you some things," begged Mr. Perkins, in a frenzy.

"Oh, go along, Ben," said Madam Van Ruypen; "you might as well, for I must wait here until the other man brings down those extra suits."

So Ben had nothing to do but to move off with Mr. Perkins. When they had turned into a convenient corner, "See here," said the salesman,

and his face paled, "you won't tell on me, will you?" His mouth twitched, and anxious wrinkles seemed to run all over his face, making him suddenly quite old and worn.

"What do you think?" said Ben, indignantly, and he turned on his heel in contempt.

"You see," Mr. Perkins hurried after him, and spoke as if his throat were parched, the words came out so jerkily, "I couldn't stay here a minute, you know, if the old man knew I'd treated any one belonging to her badly."

"I don't belong to her," said Ben.

"Well, you came with her," said Mr. Perkins, quite willing now to believe Ben much higher up yet, if that were possible, in the social scale. "And I've got a mother," he swallowed hard with a kind of choke, "and three sisters, and—"

"You needn't be afraid," Ben stopped the rest; "I give you my word I'll not speak of it."

"Honest Injun, now?" said Mr. Perkins, anxiously.

"I've given you my word," said Ben; "that's all I'll say," looking at him squarely.

Mr. Perkins drew a long breath, and the wrinkles seemed to drop right out of his face. "Thank you," he said. "Now, if you'll come this way, I'll show you some things that you want."

When the two joined the old lady there was quite a little array of articles in Mr. Perkins's hands, which he did not slap disdainfully together. To be sure there were no mittens; but there were some thick cloth gloves, and a stout, large handkerchief, and some heavy stockings. And as the other two suits had been brought down from the top floor, there was quite a respectable pile of purchases to be done up and put in the handsome brougham waiting at the door.

And Mr. Perkins insisted, also, on seeing them out, although the first salesman, by his manner, proclaimed it quite unnecessary, and the tall young man's "Thank you" was said last of all, and he appeared to look only at Ben.

"Quite a gentle-mannered young man," observed

Madam Van Ruypen, as the carriage door was closed; "such a contrast to the ordinary, pert creature. I shall make an excuse to shop there again, and I shall insist upon having him wait upon me. Well, now, Ben, while we are driving to Birdsall's, where you can, maybe, get the articles you couldn't find here, let us think up some boys to give these things to." She pointed to the big bundle on the opposite seat, which, more for the pleasure of actually carrying it home, than because of the Christmas rush, she had decided to take with her.

"Don't you know the boys you are going to give the clothes to?" exclaimed Ben, turning in great astonishment to gaze at her.

"Dear me, no," said Madam Van Ruypen, with a laugh, "but that doesn't make any matter. There are boys enough who will like those things, I haven't any doubt. I only thought, seeing you've been such a help to me in buying them, that perhaps you'd think of the boys to fit them to. Well, there's the City Missionary Society; they'll tell me, probably."

Ben removed his gaze from the white puffs and Roman nose, and looked steadily out of the window. Gone seemed the city buildings and streets to give place to country lanes, with here and there a farm-house to break the stretch of long, snow-covered roads. If only he dared to say his thought!

"And as long as you can't help me," Madam Van Ruypen's voice had a little break in it, as if she were not, somehow, finding quite as much satisfaction in the expedition as she had hitherto enjoyed, "why, I suppose——"

"Why don't you send them to a country boy?" cried Ben, whirling suddenly around on the green leather seat, his blue eyes shining.

"Hey, what—why——" began the old lady. Then there was an awful pause. And just as Ben had made up his mind that the whole morning expedition had been made a failure, and by him, she broke out, "I have the very thing, and, Ben, there are three boys in that family. Only think, I've forgotten them all this time, since I saw them up in the mountains last summer."

Ben drew a long breath, and his face said, "Do tell me about them," though he couldn't say a word.

"There isn't much to tell," said the old lady in a shamefaced way, "for, being boys, I didn't somehow get interested in them. Their mother did my washing when I was at the hotel. Their father had died, you see."

"Oh," said Ben.

"And now it comes to me, though I didn't think much of it at the time, that the people at the hotel said the boys, that is the two older ones, had to walk three miles to school every day. It was only a little settlement, you see." Madam Van Ruypen didn't add that she had sent some money to the mother, on hearing this story, and then straightway forgot all about the matter.

"So now, oh, Ben, just think what you've made me remember! And we'll make the box just as big as we can. What do you want to buy now?" She turned on him eagerly.

"Mittens," said Ben, promptly, "and a red woollen

tippet."

VII

"WHERE'S PIP?" AND JASPER TURNED BACK

"Something is the matter!" cried Polly, hoarsely. "Oh, Ben, I know there is!" She rushed up to him in the hall and seized his arm.

"Nonsense!" said Ben, but his cheek paled, and his blue eyes, usually so steady, didn't look at her. If Polly were frightened, something dreadful must have happened.

"There is, there is," repeated Polly, quite wildly, "for Aunt Whitney has gone to Grandpapa. And there's a telegram come,—and, oh, Ben, can it be Jasper?" With that Polly held so tightly to the sturdy arm she had grasped that at another time Ben would have cried, "Hands off, Polly!" This time he didn't even feel it.

"Oh, no, Polly," was all he could say reassuringly,

yet his knees knocked together and everything for a moment seemed to swim before his eyes.

"I saw it myself. It was a telegram that Jane had," Polly was saying, between little sobs that cut Ben through and through like a knife. "And Christmas—" and she could get no farther.

"See here, Polly," Ben came to his senses enough to shake himself free, then he threw his arms around her and held her fast, "don't let us act like this until we know for sure. I'm going to find out" With that he rushed off, and Polly, too wild with distress to be left alone, stumbled after him down the hall, as he hurried to find Jane.

That individual was huddled down in a corner of the back hall which she fondly supposed cleverly concealed her, her apron up to her eyes, and mumbling something behind it to herself. Ben precipitated himself so suddenly upon her that there was no time for recovery of her composure. She dashed down the apron to look up at him and also see Polly at his heels.

"O my!" she began, dreadfully frightened at the

sight of the two she most dreaded to meet at this moment.

"You might as well tell us, Jane," said Ben, swallowing very hard, and he reached out and seized Polly's hand, "because we know some bad news came. Now, what is it?" If Polly had pinched his arm in her fright, it was nothing to the grip he now gave her fingers, without his knowing it, while she threw her arm around his neck and held on.

"O my gracious!" Jane shook with fright, but she saw no way out of it but to tell, so she added, twisting her apron-end into a ball, "Yes, it did come, O me, O my!"

"It is about Jasper," said Ben, quietly.

"How'd you know, Master Ben?" cried Jane, in astonishment, remembering how she had become possessed of the news which yet couldn't have travelled through the house.

"Never mind, what is it?" demanded Ben, sharply. "Be quick now, Jane; you might as well tell us first

as last."

"O me!" cried Jane, deserting the apron-end to wring her hands desperately, "I wish I hadn't listened. Oh, I can't tell you, don't make me!"

"Jane," Ben leaned over her as well as he could for Polly hanging to him, "you've just *got* to tell us, so you might as well be quick about it. Don't you see you're only making us feel worse?"

As Ben wasn't given to long speeches, Jane had time to look up in surprise at his face, and then she made up her mind to tell the whole story.

"If you must know—but don't let 'em blame me 'cause I told you," she burst out.

"You shan't be blamed," promised Ben. "Go on."

"Well, there's been a fire at the school, and Master Jasper's hurt, burned, I guess, and—"

"Ben!" a voice rang through the hall.

"O mercy me!" Jane bounded to her feet, seized her feather duster, which implement she had been wielding when the fatal telegram had been handed

in, and scuttled down the back hall.

"Ben, Ben! Does any one know where he is?" It was Aunt Whitney, whose gentle voice was never heard on such a key, and she was actually running down the hall, her pretty face all streaked with tears. "Oh, Ben, there isn't a moment to lose. Father wants you to go with him to Jasper. I can't tell you what for."

"I know," said Ben, quietly, while Polly stuffed her fingers into her mouth to keep from screaming.

Mrs. Whitney didn't stop to express any surprise, but her face looked relieved that he had heard the news.

"And you must catch the next train," she hurried on, her voice breaking; "oh, Ben, you must."

"I'm ready," cried Ben. He gave Polly one kiss, then pulled her arms away from his neck.

"Your mother says you can go, and she is getting your things together."

"I'll—I'll help put them up," said Polly, blindly

staggering off after him as he rushed down the hall.

"No, no, Polly," cried Mrs. Whitney, "your mother said you must stay with me,—and Polly, I need you so badly." She opened her arms and Polly ran into them, and though there wasn't very much comforting done, it was good to be together.

And Thomas whirled up to the door, and Mr. King and Ben and Mr. King's valet got into the carriage, into which portmanteaus were thrown, and away the horses sprang in a mad rush to make the train. And it was all done in such bewildering haste that the group in the hall scarcely knew or understood anything until the big front door shut with a clang, and they were alone. And nothing to tell of it all but that dreadful yellow telegram lying on Mr. King's writing-table just where it had been thrown.

"Fire at school dormitory early this morning.
Your son Jasper hurt. Come at once.

"Jacob A. Presbrey."

Polly never knew for long weeks afterward just how she got through that dreadful day, except that Joel and David had to be soothed, no one being able so well as herself to stop the howls of the former, who, on hearing the news, threw himself flat on the floor in a corner of Grandpapa's writing room, refusing all comfort. Little David crouched closely to him, and with never a word laid his head on his shoulder.

And afterward Polly found herself installed as Mrs. Whitney's little nurse, sitting upon the bed most of the time, and smoothing the soft, fair hair, as it lay on the pillow, with a trembling hand.

"You can't know what a comfort you are to me, Polly," every once in a while Mrs. Whitney would say, and reaching up a hand to feel for Polly's fingers.

"Am I?" said Polly, careful not to let the tears drop where they could be seen.

"Yes, indeed! And oh, Polly, I don't really believe that we ought to think the worst. God wouldn't let anything happen to our Jasper. He wouldn't,

Polly." But Mrs. Whitney clutched the pillow, and turned her face into it and sobbed. And Polly smoothed her hair, and said not a word.

And all those terrible hours passed away—how, no one could tell. Outside they could hear Phronsie, who, of course, knew nothing of the blow that had fallen upon the household, gayly laughing and chattering away. She had been told that Grandpapa had gone away and that she must not go into his room; so she hadn't seen Joel and David. But Mother Fisher had hard work to keep the incessant calls for Polly from being sounded over the halls and stairs, and at last she took Phronsie into her room and closed the door.

"Now, Mother's baby," said Mrs. Fisher, seating herself on the wide haircloth sofa, and drawing Phronsie into her lap. How often had Jasper sat on this old sofa and told her his boyish confidences the same as her own children! She gave a groan at the thought of what might be happening now at that distant school.

"What is it, Mamsie?" asked Phronsie, in gentle surprise, and lifting a soft little hand to her

mother's cheek.

"Oh, my pet," Mrs. Fisher drew Phronsie quickly to her breast, "you mustn't mind Mamsie."

"But you made a funny noise here, Mamsie," and Phronsie touched her mother's throat.

"Did I? Well, never mind, dear. Now I must tell you, you cannot have Polly to-day, Phronsie."

"But I want Polly," said Phronsie, regarding her mother with grave displeasure.

"Yes, I know, dear. But you cannot have her just to-day. Mother does not think it is best."

Phronsie's lip quivered and her brown eyes closed to squeeze the tears back. But despite all her efforts they would come, and two big ones rolled down her cheeks.

"And Mamsie will be very much disappointed in her little girl if she cries," went on Mrs. Fisher, "for Aunt Whitney needs Polly to-day. So Phronsie must be brave and let Polly stay with her."

"Is Aunt Whitney sick?" asked Phronsie, with

sudden interest, her eyes flying open at once. For any one to be sick was to enlist her sympathy, and she at once gave up all thoughts of having Polly to herself.

"Yes, that is, she will be, I am afraid, if Polly does not stay with her," said Mother Fisher; "so you must be a good child, and not call for Polly."

"I will be good," said Phronsie, sliding down from her mother's lap, and folding her hands. "I will be good." She bobbed her yellow head. "And Auntie Whitney will get all well, because Polly is there."

Meanwhile the train bearing Mr. King and Ben was speeding swiftly on its way. For the first hour the old gentleman sat erect on his chair, gazing straight before him at the flying landscape, and with never a word for his companion. Then he suddenly turned with a little groan, and laid his hand on Ben's shoulder. "You are such a comfort to me," he said brokenly.

"Am I?" said Ben, all the color rushing to his face. He a comfort to Grandpapa! He hadn't gotten over wondering what had given him this honor of

being allowed to go with him,—and now, to think of being a comfort!

"What I should have done without you, Ben, I cannot tell," Grandpapa was saying, his hand slipping down until it rested on Ben's woollen glove, "but, oh, my boy, I am so glad I have you."

Ben said never a word; he couldn't have spoken, it seemed to him, to save his life, but he lifted his blue eyes to the white, drawn face, and old Mr. King did not seem to feel anything lacking. And so, on and on; the revolutions of the wheels, the flashing in and out of strange cities, the long, steady, tireless plunge of the heavily laden express, by river and lake, hill-top and plain, only rang one refrain through every heart-throb, over and over, loud and clear above the reverberation of the train,—"What shall we find at our journey's end?"

And when it was reached at nightfall, Grandpapa still had Ben's fingers in his grasp; the valet rushed into the Pullman from another car, gathered up the luggage, and out all the passengers poured from the train. There on the platform was Dr. Presbrey

himself.

"It is not so bad as we feared," were his first words, as he reached Mr. King's side; and, without waiting for a word, for he saw the old gentleman was beyond it, he led the way to his carriage.

"Stop a bit," Grandpapa made out to say through white lips, "a telegram—tell them at home." He looked at Ben, but Dr. Presbrey sprang back into the station, wrote it, sent it off, and was with them once more; and then it was only a matter of moments and Jasper was reached, at the master's house, where he had been carried after the fire.

"Don't go in," said one of a crowd of boys, who surrounded Ben on the steps, old Mr. King being in advance, a medical man and one or two teachers coming out of the house to meet the party. "Don't go in," he repeated, laying detaining hands on him; "it's perfectly awful in there; everybody's crying."

"He may want me," said Ben, hoarsely, nodding toward the white-haired old gentleman ahead, and

trying to free himself. The other boys closed in around him.

"Oh, Dr. Smith won't let you get near him," volunteered one boy; "catch him!"—which proved to be true. Old Mr. King was just at the moment being ushered into the front parlor, and the medical man followed and closed the door with such a snap that it was impossible for any one else to even dream of entering.

"Now, what did I tell you?" said the boy, triumphantly.

"You're Ben, aren't you?" asked the first boy, who hadn't relinquished his hold, the other boys drawing up.

"Yes," said Ben.

"Well, we've heard all about you, and the rest of you. King talked just whole packs about you all."

"Don't," said Ben, and he put up his hand; everything seemed to turn suddenly dark.

"Hush up, Grayson, can't you have some sense?"

said a tall, dark-haired boy, angrily, and by a speedy movement he had rescued Ben from the first grasp. "Now, then, come over to my room," he pointed to a long building on the west, "and I'll tell you all about it."

But Grayson had no mind to be so easily pushed off. "That's no fair," he cried; "I had him first."

"No, sir, take your hands off, I'm—" and he clutched Ben again, determined to fight to the end for possession.

"That's right. Get out, Tim," a dozen voices took it up in a subdued tone, it is true, but equally determined to see fair play.

And the tall, dark-haired boy, being shouldered off the steps, Ben soon found himself sitting down in the midst of Jasper's school companions, Grayson still hanging like a leech to him.

"You see we can't do anything but hang around here," one of the boys was saying, "and when anybody comes out, why, we hear a bit how he is."

"And to think it needn't have happened only for Pip,—O dear!" said a stout, chubby-cheeked boy, who didn't look as if he ever did anything but laugh and eat.

"Pip! He wasn't worth saving, little rat," exploded

Tim, who, being on the outskirts of the crowd, had to vent his vexation over somebody.

"You'd better let King hear you say that," cried a boy, with a belligerent glance over at Tim. Then, as he remembered how little prospect there might be of Jasper's ever being troubled by the remark, he ground his teeth together to keep from saying more before Ben.

"See here, fellows." Grayson, having made first capture, deemed it his further duty to do the right thing by Ben. "We ought to tell him all about it. And I'll begin," and without more ado, he started off.

Ben clasped his woollen gloves tightly together, and looked over the heads of the boys up to the sky. Was it possible that the stars had ever twinkled in friendly fashion at them, as Polly and the other children had run out of the little brown house with him at such fortunate times when their mother had let them sit up; and the moon had beamed down on them too, so sociably that Polly made up little stories about their shining light, so that they had all grown to love them very dearly.

Now, it seemed as if great tears were dropping out of the sky, and Ben shivered and listened, and gripped his hands tighter together than ever.

"You see, it began—well, no one knows how it did begin," Grayson was rushing on; "I think Beggins was drunk."

"What stuff!" ejaculated another boy, contemptuously. "Beggins never got off the handle; the Doctor would have fired him long ago."

"There must always be a first time," said Grayson, nowise discomfited. "Beggins is the night watchman," he explained to Ben. "Well, anyway, —hush up, fellows,—the fire broke out, we don't any of us know how. It doesn't signify. What we do know is that in about five minutes from the first alarm it got too hot for us in there." He hopped to his feet and pointed to the broken outline of a long building. Even in the dim light, Ben, dropping his gaze from the sky, could see the ruined chimney, the ragged side wall, and the blackened, crushed windows.

"And it was every one to save his skin. Great Scott! I'll never forget that yell that Toddy sent up. He's the teacher on our hall, Todd is," Grayson explained again, as he dropped into his seat beside Ben.

"Nor the bell clanging," put in another boy; "Christopher Columbus, I thought it was all day with us then!"

"And I couldn't find my clothes!"

"Well, 'twas no worse for you than for any of us," retorted the boy the other side of Grayson. "There wasn't a rag for any of us to get into but blankets, and sheets, and——"

"You see we were waked up out of a sound sleep; it was about three o'clock this morning," Grayson took the words out of any mouth that might be intending to explain, "so we just vamosed the ranch. I tell you, there was some tall sprinting. And King was with us; I remember seeing him. But he was last, and he looked back; then somebody sang out, 'Where's Pip?'"

"Pip?" Ben found his tongue, that had seemed to be glued to the roof of his mouth, enough for that one syllable.

"Oh, it isn't his real name," said Grayson, in a hurry to explain again before any one else could put in a word; "his own was so ridiculously long,—Cornelius Leffingwell,—only think, for such a mite of a chap,—so we had to call him Pip, you see. Well, somebody was fool enough to scream out, 'Where's Pip?' and Jasper turned back."

Ben clenched both hands tightly together in a grip that would have hurt but for the woollen gloves.

"And I roared out, 'Come along, King—'"

"And so did I."

"And I." The voices took it up, one after another.

"For it wasn't the time to look out for any skin but your own; it was as much as your life was worth to turn back," cried Grayson, bearing down on the other voices.

"Boys!" The big door back of them burst open

suddenly, and a teacher's head appeared, making them all jump as if shot. "Go right away from these steps!"

"How is he?" Nothing seemed to dash Grayson, and he took time to ask this quite comfortably, still holding to Ben, while the other boys moved off the steps and around the corner of the master's house.

"Somewhat better. Be off with you!" The teacher waved his hand, and closed the door.

"That old Sterrett,—well, he's a dragon," declared Grayson, between his teeth, and, dragging Ben to a convenient angle, where the other boys soon gathered, the narrative was taken up where it had been dropped.

"I grabbed King, but you might as soon try to hold an eel. He *would* go."

Ben groaned, and this time so heavily that Grayson pulled himself up short. "See here, I won't tell any more; you're going to keel over."

For answer he was in an instant whirled

completely around on his two feet, and instead of his having any sort of a grasp on Ben, it was the visitor who held his coat collar in a woollen-gloved hand in such a way that it didn't seem as if Grayson were ever to be free again.

"Now tell everything you know! I can't wait! Be quick about it!"

It was the same face he had shown to Jane, and, just as she had done, Grayson made all possible haste to answer, "Oh, I will, I will!" the other boys in their astonishment staring silently at the two.

"Pip couldn't be found. He slept in the north wing, but he'd run into another boy's room, so King lost time, and if he hadn't screeched,—Pip, I mean,—why, he never would have got out. And there King—oh, well, he crawled under the bed,—Pip, I mean, nasty little beggar,—and there King found him, and dragged him out. He told us all about it,—Pip, I mean,—and King slung him on his back, and by that time it was no use to try for the stairs; the flames were roaring up like mad, so King tried for the roof of the 'Lab.' Had to go through Toddy's room, and jumped out of one of the

windows. And he made it.—Oh, don't hang on to a fellow so!—And there we saw him, and the firemen got a ladder up, and, oh—" Here Grayson gave out and actually blubbered.

Ben looked around for some one to take up the tale. And the tall, dark-haired boy they had called "Tim," now seeing his opportunity, pushed up.

"It's better you should have the whole," he said; "without a bit of warning we saw the roof overhanging the 'Lab'—laboratory, of course, I mean—waver, and then fall, and we screamed to King to look out; it wouldn't have done any good if he had heard, for the chimney toppled, and some bricks knocked him over, and then he saw it coming and kept Pip underneath."

Ben's hand had fallen from the jacket collar to his side, and he didn't seem to breathe.

"You are to come. Mr. King wants you." Somebody reached through the crowd of boys, and drew him off and away.

VIII

**"ANY ONE WHO WANTS TO
PLEASE JASPER," SAID BEN,
"HAD BETTER TAKE UP THIS
CHAP"**

And the first thing Ben knew, he was being hurried over the stairs and into Master Presbrey's big library. There stood Grandpapa, and, wonder of wonders, with a smile on his face!

"You are to see Jasper," said the old gentleman, briefly.

Ben staggered back, it was all so sudden, and stared up at the one the boys had called "Dr. Smith" standing near.

"Yes," said the gentleman, "he has asked for you." And without further ado Ben was piloted into the back room, and there, looking eagerly toward the door, was Jasper in the big bed and propped up

with pillows.

"Halloo!" It was all either of them said at first; then Ben, with a lump in his throat, leaned over and grasped the fingers on the coverlet.

"You see I'm all right," said Jasper, his eyes roving affectionately all over Ben's square figure.

"Yes," nodded Ben.

"But it was good, though, to see Father and you." And Jasper's dark eyes beamed; then a wave of pain swept its trail over his face. And the doctor, seeing that, unceremoniously bundled Ben out of the room, and back to old Mr. King again.

But the next day, oh, that was joy! for Ben was not only let in again, but allowed to stay a good half-hour. And this time he found his tongue, for Dr. Smith said a little cheery talking was just the thing. So the budget of home news was undone, and Ben regaled Jasper, who hungrily took in every word.

"It's a shame I spoiled all the Christmas," murmured Jasper, his face in the pillow, his

thoughts flying back to Polly and the others, busy with the preparations for that gay festival.

"Oh, that's no matter," said Ben, cheerily, "and perhaps you'll be able to come home soon, and we'll have it then."

"But it won't be Christmas," said Jasper, dejectedly.

"Well, but we can call it Christmas," said Ben, "so that'll be just as good." Then, for want of something else to say, he began on Mrs. Van Ruypen buying all sorts of things for poor people, of course with never a word of himself mixed up in it.

"Now isn't that fine?" cried Jasper, taken for the moment off from the loss of Christmas to the family, and bringing his face into view again.

"Yes," said Ben, "it is," and he went on so fast that Polly herself couldn't have told it better, Dr. Smith smiling to himself in satisfaction at the experiment of letting Ben in.

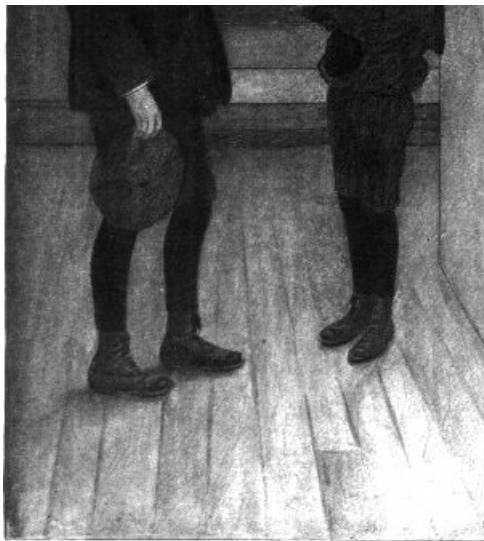
"Well, now, boys," he said at last, coming up to

the bed, "time is up. But you can come in, maybe, this afternoon," to Ben.

"Oh, let him stay now!" begged Jasper.

"Can't," said the doctor, laconically. And off Ben went again. And this time he, too, smiled. And the first person he ran up against was a small boy, his hands full of little wads of paper bundles, crammed tightly together in his nervous fists.





**And the first person he ran up
against was a small boy, his hands
full of little wads of paper bundles.**

"They're for him," said the small boy, emptying the fistful into Ben's hands, who involuntarily thrust his out, as it seemed to be expected of him.

"For whom?" asked Ben, in astonishment.

"Why, for him," said the boy, pointing with a set of sticky fingers he first put into his mouth, off toward Jasper's room. "Of course; hurry and give 'em to him before the doctor sees. It's candy." He couldn't repress his longing as his eyes now fell on the wads in Ben's hands. "I got 'em down town. Hurry up!" and his little face, pasty-colored and sharp, scowled at the delay.

"If you mean I'm to give these to Jasper," said Ben, holding the little packets toward the small figure, "I can't do any such thing; the doctor wouldn't like it."

"You are a 'fraid cat," said the boy, contemptuously; "but he won't hurt you, 'cause you're a stranger, so hurry up!" and he laid his sticky fingers on Ben's arm.

"But don't you understand that these things will

hurt Jasper?" said Ben, kindly, into the scowling little face.

"Hoh! I guess not," said the boy, with another longing look at the little packets; "they'll make him well, do take 'em to him. O dear!" and his thin lips trembled, his sticky little fingers flew up to his eyes, and he turned his face to the wall.

"Now, I guess you're Pip," said Ben, hustling the little wads all into one hand, and putting the other on the small shoulder.

"Yes, I am," snivelled Pip, flattening his face against the wall, "and all the boys hate me, and say I've killed King, and—O dear!" he whined.

"Well, now, you just see here," Ben turned the little figure swiftly around; "no more of that."

It was so sudden that Pip released one pale eye from his sticky fingers to peer up at the big boy, and he stopped snivelling in amazement.

"The worst thing you can do for Jasper King is to carry on like this," said Ben, firmly. "Come, now, wipe your eyes," which Pip at once proceeded to

do on his jacket sleeve, "and take your candy," and Ben dropped the little packets of sweets back into their owner's hands. "I'll tell Jasper all you wanted to do for him; it was nice of you." Ben was astounded to find how fast he was getting on in conversation. Really he hadn't supposed he could talk so much till he got this Pip on his hands. Meantime, his grasp still on the small shoulder, he was marching him off, and downstairs, and across the school yard, not exactly knowing what in the world to do with him after all.

"Great Scott! If that Pepper boy hasn't got Pip!" A dozen heads, their owners just released from recitation, were thrust up to the windows of a class room. Meantime Pip, in the familiar borders of the school yard, and remembering everything again with a rush, began to snivel once more, so that Ben was at his wits' end, and seeing a boy a good deal bigger than his companion coming down the long path, he hailed him unceremoniously.

"See here, can't you do something for him?" Ben

bobbed his head down at the cowering shoulders. "Can't you play ball with him?" He said the first thing that came into his head.

"You must excuse me," said the boy, with an aristocratic air, and, not knowing Ben in the least, he looked him all over contemptuously. "King was my great friend. I don't know this little cad at all, nor you either," and he walked on.

Pip's head slunk down deeper yet between his shoulders at that, and he snivelled worse than ever.

"Come along, I'll play with you myself," said Ben. "Got a ball, Pip?"

"Ye-es," said Pip, between a snivel and a gasp, "but the fellows wo-on't let you play with me. O dear, boo-hoo-hoo!"

"Oh, yes, they will," said Ben. "Come, let's get your ball. Where's your room?"

So Pip, seeing that he was to have company all the way, led off somehow to his room, and the little wads of candy were placed in the bureau

drawer. Once the ball was in Ben's hands he managed to follow him to a corner of the playground where, without any more words, Ben soon had him throwing and catching in such a rapid fashion there was no time for tears or anything else but the business in hand.

Meantime the boy they had met on the long path had marched off, very angry at having been spoken to by such a common-looking person in company with Pip, whom nobody had liked from the first, certainly not after the injury to their favorite, King. And nursing his wrath he projected himself into the class room where the heads of the boys were still at the windows.

"Something must be done with that Pip!" he fumed, throwing down his book on the first desk.

"What's the poor chap done now?" cried Tim, turning off from his window quite readily, as there was nothing more to be seen. "Can't you let up on him, Bony?"

"No," said Bony, called short for Bonaparte, much to his distress, for the great air which he

assumed he fondly hoped was to bring him distinction, "and none of us ought to."

"It wasn't the poor little beggar's fault that King got hurt," said Tim, thrusting his hands in his pockets and lounging over toward Bony, "and we ought to remember that."

"Don't preach," cried Bony, derisively. "Well, he is such an insufferable little cad!" he brought up in disgust. "And that country lout—Great guns! how did that fellow dare to address me?" With that he began to fume up and down the room, puffing out his chest at every step.

"Has any one dared to speak to our Bony?" cried Tim, throwing his head back and blowing out his cheeks, in step and manner imitating as much as his long figure could, as he followed the other one down between the rows of desks.

"See here, now, Tim," Bony turned suddenly amid the roars of the delighted boys, "you quit that now," and he doubled up his fists in a rage.

"Excuse me, your high mightiness, if I object to

being crushed," said Tim, coolly, and folding his fists, which were long and muscular like the rest of his body. "Now, then, Bony, if you like."

But Bony didn't like, taking refuge in, "You're no gentleman," and turning his back.

"I suppose not," said Tim, coolly, and regarding his fists affectionately, "but I don't see why these wouldn't do. I really can't see, Bony, why you object to them; they're a good pair."

"What's the row, anyway?" The boys, not to be balked out of all the fun, seeing that Bony would not fight, crowded around him. "What's upset you, Bony?"

"Enough to disturb any one," he cried, glad to vent injured feelings on something. "A common country fellow just now spoke to me on the long path; fancy that, will you? I never saw him in my life, and he took it upon himself to give me advice about Pip."

"What?" cried ever so many of the boys.

"Yes, just fancy. And there I had just come from

seeing Mr. King," here Bony threw out his chest again and looked big. "I'd had a long talk with him; his father knew my father very well, *very* well indeed, and he wants me to meet Ben Pepper that he brought here yesterday," and Bony paused to see the effect on his auditors.

"Well, you've met him," said one boy. Some of the others gave a long whistle.

"No such thing," retorted Bony. "I wasn't with your crowd when he got here last night," he added superciliously. "This is quite different,—quite in the social way,—and his grandfather is going to introduce us."

"You won't need any introduction," said Tim, with a chuckle. "Hush up, boys," for the room was in an uproar of cat-calls and peals of laughter.

"Yes, I will, too," said Bony, in a superior way, "for I never speak unless properly introduced. My set never does."

"Well, you've broken your rule for once then," said Tim, in a hush now, every boy holding himself

in check to lose no word, "for that country lout with Pip was Ben Pepper."

Bony sat down on the nearest desk, his chest sank in, and he groped feebly with his hands, mumbling something—what, the boys couldn't have told, even if the babel that now set up around him had been less. And Mr. Sterrett coming in, and the other boys rushing out, he was presently asked if he were ill.

"No, sir," said Bony, getting up from the desk; "oh, no, sir, I—I only sat down a minute," and he slipped out, leaving his Bonaparte air behind him.

But if the boys didn't have any more fun with Bony, they did with the ball game going on between the two over in the playground corner, which they soon spied, and off they rushed there.

"Let us in, Pepper, will you?" cried Tim, his long legs getting there first.

"Sure," said Ben, his round cheeks all aglow with the exercise. "Now then, Pip, wait a bit," the ball just then getting ready to fly from the thin little

hand.

Pip paused, his small pasty-colored face, that without having gained any color had quieted down from its nervousness, now took on a fresh alarm, and he looked ready to run.

"They're all going to play with us," said Ben, looking around brightly on the group as the other boys rushed up. "Now, then, Pip, we'll have a splendid game!"

"Yes, we'll play," cried the boys, in different keys. And before long the whole playground resounded with shouts of enjoyment. Ben couldn't play the most scientific game according to their rules, but he was a capital pitcher, and he took all errors in a sturdy good humor that kept things jolly. Altogether, by the time the game was over, everybody in it had voted that Pepper was worthy to be King's friend.

"You'll have that little chap at your heels every minute, after this," Tim nodded over toward Pip, who was running after, having lingered behind a bit to get his ball, as Ben struck off on the path

leading to Master Presbrey's house.

"All right, let him come," said Ben.

"He'll be an awful nuisance," said Tim; "take my advice, Pepper, and drop him now."

"Can't," said Ben, "can't oblige," and his fingers closed on the thin little ones crowding into them, as Pip ran up to his other side.

"And I think any one who wants to please Jasper," said Ben,—he hated to preach, but it must be done,—"had better take up this chap."

Tim coughed and stuck his hands deeply in his pockets.

"I'm going down this way," said Ben, striking off on a side path, and he marched off with pip.

"I never knew such a chap," Tim waited for a crowd of the boys who had joined in the game to come up; "he's been here a little more than one day, and he leads us all by the nose. Boys, we've just got to take up that Pip, and we might as well do it handsomely as not."

IX

WHAT A HOME-COMING

Van sprang off the car steps and rushed up tumultuously to Polly in the midst of the group come down to the railroad station to meet the boys.

"O dear," he grumbled in a loud voice, "now we can't have any Christmas at all."

"Hulloa, Van—Hulloa, Percy." Pickering Dodge tried his best to cover this remark by an extra amount of hilarity, as he clapped each of the boys smartly on the back. "Well, you're an awful long time in getting here—I should say half an hour late."

"For shame, Van!" cried Percy at his heels, and edging off toward Polly.

"For shame?" repeated Van, hotly; "well, that's no more than you've been saying on the train,—'we

can't have any Christmas,'—and you know it, Percy Whitney."

"Stop that, you little beggar." Pickering's long arm got possession of Van, who, instead of occupying the vantage-ground of first arrival, had now the vexation of seeing Percy in that coveted position.

"Why did you pull me back?" he cried in a small fury at hearing the bustle and excitement of the group he had just left so summarily.

"Because you were making yourself a nuisance. Fancy such a way to come home for the holidays, Van."

"There aren't to be any holidays," howled Van, his face very red. "Let me go, Pick," struggling violently to free himself from Pickering's long fingers.

"No, indeed." Pickering wound his fingers into a still tighter hold. "Not much, sir, until you stop those whines. How you can go on so, I don't see!"

By this time, Pickering, over his shoulder, had the

ill luck to see Clare take the first place in marshalling off the party, a position he had fully expected to occupy himself whenever Jasper and Ben were away. All this didn't in the least add to his satisfaction. "Well, I wish you'd stayed back in your school," he declared in extreme irritation. And Alexia, running up, only made matters worse by crying out: "Come on, Van, I'm sure it's bad enough to bear all these dreadful things without coming clear down here for a boy like you. Do come on, we're all waiting for you." So it was a very gloomy party that finally became settled in the two carriages.

"I'm not going to sit with him," declared Van, having freed himself from Pickering, and bolting for the second carriage.

"No, you're coming with me," said Alexia, hurrying after him. "Come, Polly, here's a seat. Here," and she waved frantically.

But Polly was already in the other carriage. And seeing this, Alexia was about to desert her charge, when Thomas, on the box of the forward conveyance, whipped up and off it went.

"O dear me!" cried Alexia; "somebody stop it. Why, Polly Pepper was going with me," and she was just about to jump out.

"No use, Alexia," said Pickering, who at the last moment had found himself crowded out of carriage number one, and putting her to one side as he helped Cathie in, and then David, at last he got in himself. "Don't you see they're a good bit on the way home already?"

"Yes, and here I am shut up in here with all of you, whom I don't want in the least to go with," cried Alexia, in the greatest dismay, sitting down in her corner too suddenly for comfort, as the horses started up, and waving her hands frantically.

"Thank you," said Pickering, with a low bow, "I'm sure we all feel much obliged to you."

"Well, I don't," said Cathie, in a dudgeon, "feel obliged a single bit, and I'm sure I didn't want to come with you, Alexia, only there wasn't room in the other carriage, so I had to."

"And I thought Polly Pepper was surely coming in this carriage," ran on Alexia, too vexed to stop herself, and turning anything but a sweet countenance upon the rest of the carriage-load. "She started for it."

"Don't look so at me, Alexia," said Pickering. "I'm not to blame; Clare took her off."

"It's just like Clare—always meddling," said Alexia, thoroughly out of temper. "Van Whitney, you're sitting all over my coat, and it's my best one, too," and she turned and twitched it away with an angry hand.

"I didn't sit all over it," retorted Van, "and I didn't want to come with you, but you made me."

"Well, because you and Pickering were having such a fight. O me, I wish I'd let you alone," she added, sinking back into her corner.

But Van, much preferring Alexia to Pickering, couldn't say the same, so the carriage rolled on to a gloomy silence within.

"Oh, I say," began Pickering, after this had gone

on for some minutes, "this is a sweet way to go to Mr. King's, isn't it?"

"Well, we can't help it," cried Alexia, flying up from her corner; "I'm sure, Pickering, you can't blame any of us. And I haven't got Polly Pepper; you know she was coming in here with me, and everything is just as bad as it can be."

"You're always tagging on to Polly Pepper; I'm glad you haven't got her this time," declared Cathie, in venom from her corner.

"Of course I'm always after Polly," said Alexia, decidedly, "when she's my very dearest friend. O my, don't I wish I could get out!"

"Well, you will pretty soon," said Pickering, coolly; "we'll all get out, for we'll be there in a minute. And then how we'll look, for we're supposed to be helping Mr. King's family, and they're in such trouble."

"O dear me!" exclaimed Alexia, in great distress, whirling around suddenly to look out of the window, her long, tight braids flying over her

shoulder. "Pickering Dodge, we aren't near Mr. King's yet," she declared, peering out; "we haven't got to—oh, yes we have—O dear me, what shall we do?" and she flew back again into her corner.

"We've just got to do something," said Pickering, in a determined voice. Little David had been past speaking for some time, and, wedged in between Cathie and Pickering, had been chiefly occupied in twisting his hands, and trying not to think how very dreadful it all was, and how Mamsie would feel to see them all come in.

"We can't do anything," said Alexia, despairingly; "it's all as dreadful as it can be, and we can't help it," and she ran her long arms as far as she could into her muff, and hugged it up tightly.

"Well, we've got to help it," said Pickering. "There's Jasper," he broke off suddenly, for it was as much as he could do to think about the accident that had summoned Mr. King and Ben away from home, let alone trying to talk about it, and he swallowed hard and looked out of his window.

"O dear me!" exclaimed Alexia, faintly from her corner.

Then she sat up straight. "Oh, I know, let's look pleasant, that's what the man says when he takes my photograph, and he won't throw back his old woollen cover from the machine till I smile, so I'm going to now,"—which she did with such surprising effect, that Pickering, turning around, couldn't help but join all the others in the general laugh that set up; even little David forgot everything else for that moment.

The consequence was that when the carriage drew up to the door of the big stone house, the occupants tumbled out and ran up the steps in quite good humor, to join the other half of the party, in the centre of which were Mother Fisher and Mrs. Whitney.

"Now that's very nice and cheerful," said Mother Fisher, beaming on them all. Mrs. Whitney, her arms around her two boys, was beyond speaking. "You must all stay and have luncheon with Percy and Van; they'll enjoy it so much more," and she led the way to the dining room.

"Ugh, O dear me!" Alexia ran after her. "Oh, don't ask me; I can't stay, Mrs. Fisher, truly I can't."

"Why, Alexia,"—Mother Fisher turned on her in great surprise,—"it will help to make things pleasanter," she said slowly.

"Oh, I can't; don't ask me," mumbled Alexia, wildly, and twisting her hands together. One thing only she now really longed for, and that was to stay for the dear little luncheon party she knew Polly's mother had made ready. But she had lost it all; and she darted back and, clutching Polly's arm a moment in passing, "I'm going home," she said.

"What?" cried Polly, flying around to seize her. "Oh, no, indeed, you are not, Alexia. Why, you are all to stay; didn't you hear Mamsie say so?"

"Well, I can't," said Alexia. "O dear me, I'm going to cry, and I can't get my handkerchief. Polly Pepper, do let me go!"

But instead, Polly held very fast indeed to her, and the next moment Alexia found herself in the

big dining room, in the midst of the delightful luncheon party made for the two schoolboys' home-coming.

"Well, I shan't sit down, anyway," declared Alexia, desperately, "and I'm going to tell Mrs. Fisher." With that she darted away from Polly and ran over to her mother. "I haven't been cheerful, and I was just as bad as I could be coming up in the carriage," she said as fast as the words would come, "so you see I can't stay."

"This is your seat, Alexia," said Mother Fisher, just as if she hadn't heard a single word, and laying her hand on a chair, she pulled it out from the table; "hurry and sit down, dear, for those two boys must be very hungry after their journey," and Alexia obeyed and slipped into her chair, for once in her life not waiting to get Polly Pepper next to her.

And after the little luncheon was over,—and it didn't seem to have made a bit of difference that every one besides the two hungry boys had already had a midday meal, for it all tasted so good,—why, things began to get a bit more

cheery. And Mother Fisher and Mrs. Whitney even smiled over to each other. But Van, his hunger appeased, slipped out after his mother when at last the feast was over.

"Oh, Vanny, my boy, it is so good to get you home," she cried, affectionately throwing her arm around him, as they went down the hall.

"I'm going to your room," announced Van, without any preamble.

"How good that is," she declared as he hugged up close to her. "You don't know, Van, how I have wanted to see you and Percy."

"O dear," said Van, but he crowded closer than ever.

"And—well, here we are," and Mrs. Whitney hurried into her pretty room with the haste of a girl, and turned her face with its little pink glow of happiness on him. "Oh, Van!"

"I've been bad," said Van, not looking at her, but dropping his eyes to the floor.

"Oh, Van!" Mrs. Whitney laid her hand on her heart, and all the pretty flush died from her cheek. "What—" but she couldn't get any farther, for somebody fumbled at the door, and, without any further announcement, walked in.

"O dear me!" exclaimed Percy, withdrawing when he saw Van.

"Come in, Percy," called his mother, before he could beat a retreat. It would be some relief to have both of her boys, but what could have happened!

So Percy walked in, and he stood just like Van, only worse, for he didn't seem to know what to do with his hands.

"Why, what is it? What can it be?" cried their mother. "Oh, do tell me, boys; don't be afraid."

Van turned off on his heel till he got his back to Percy. Then he found his tongue. But it was only to say again, "I was bad."

"Well, so was I," Percy got the words out with great difficulty, staring gloomily at the carpet, and

thrusting his hands in his pockets to pull them out as suddenly.

"You must just tell me what you have done," said Mrs. Whitney, looking desperately first at one and then at the other, "or I shall go for Mrs. Fisher," and she started for the door.

"Oh, no, no, Mamma!" they cried together, and Van whirled around and held her gown.

"I certainly shall," declared their mother, firmly, "unless you tell me at once what is the matter," and she took another step toward the hall.

"I fretted about—" began Van.

"Not having any Christmas," said Percy, coming in as a finish. "O dear!"

"Oh, boys!"

"Don't look so, Mamma, don't!" implored Van, clutching her gown with desperate fingers.

"And I did, too," said Percy. His hands now seemed to have no comfort in his pockets, so he twisted them miserably together.

"You mean when you were coming home in the carriage?" asked Mrs. Whitney, a sorrowful little droop coming in her pretty mouth.

"Yes," said Van, his head hanging. "O dear me,"—he had hard work not to cry, but he wagged his head from side to side, and somehow kept the tears back,—"I did, anyway."

"Well, I did, too," said Percy, hastily; "that is, on the train. O dear!"

"Well, this is very bad," said their mother. But her voice was quite gentle, and she put her arm around each of them. "When we know how happy we ought to be that Jasper is really better, although he can't come home until after Christmas, how can we think of a holiday, and fret because we lose it?"

"We won't fret," said Percy, eagerly. "Oh, we won't, Mamma, ever again."

"No," said Van, "we won't, truly, Mamma."

While this was going on in Mrs. Whitney's room, there was a small clamor raised downstairs.

Where in the world were the two boys just come home from school?

"I know," declared Alexia, who had recovered her spirits. "Polly," and she drew her off into the library, "they went upstairs with Mrs. Whitney," she said with a loud whisper in her ear.

"I heard you," cried little Dick, creeping in back of the two girls, "and I shall just go up to Mamma's room," and he began to skip off joyously.

"Oh, no, you mustn't," cried Alexia, deserting Polly to race after him and seize his blouse. "The very idea—Polly, come and help me hold this dreadful boy."

"I shall go up and see my Mamma," said Dick, in a small fury, and pulling and kicking violently. "She is my very own Mamma, and I *shall* see her."

"But you mustn't," said Alexia, very red in the face. "O dear me, why did I speak! Polly, do help me," for just then Phronsie had run in between the two girls, and before any one had a chance to

hardly breathe, a dreadful sound struck their ears.

"There, see what you have done!" exclaimed little Dick, in a wrathful key. Alexia's fingers fell away, and he held up a dangling end of lace, all frayed and ragged. "You've torn my blouse, and I *shall* see my Mamma." With that he set out on a run for the stairs.

X

"I'LL LOVE HER JUST FOREVER!"

"I'm going home," cried Alexia, hoarsely, and rushing blindly down the hall.

"Alexia!" Polly deserted Phronsie and raced after her. "You can't mean it; do come back. It isn't any matter that lace was torn," she added breathlessly, as she gained her side.

"Polly Pepper," gasped Alexia, "how can you say so? It's the most dreadful thing!" and she turned wide eyes of amazement at her.

"I mean it isn't near as bad as for you to run home," said Polly, hastily; "that would make Mrs. Whitney feel ever so much worse."

At the mention of Mrs. Whitney's name, Alexia's long figure shook all over. "Horrors! I can't ever see her again!" and she buried her face in her

hands.

"Now, Alexia, aren't you ashamed to act so?" said Polly. "Dear me, over a bit of lace that can be mended, I most know; and we've had so much trouble," and she sighed.

"And I've made a mess of it ever since those boys came home, and now I've gone and torn that lace," mumbled Alexia, between her fingers, the sigh making her nearly frantic. "Polly Pepper, I *shall* go home,"—with that she sprang away from Polly, and ran upstairs to Polly's room to get her things.

Polly, with only one thought to get Mamsie, who alone seemed to be the person to manage this new trouble, hurried off to find her. But Mrs. Fisher, happy in the success of the little luncheon party, had disappeared to some unknown house duty, and couldn't at this very moment be found. So Polly had the distress to hear, before she could run over the stairs herself, the big front door bang, and, hurrying to the window, she saw Alexia running down the driveway and pulling her coat around her as she ran.

For the first moment Polly had wild thoughts of flying off after her. Then, remembering what Mamsie had once said, "If you want to help, Polly, take time to think what would be the best way," and that Mamsie would say now, in this trouble, "Don't go, for the boys are just home,"—"O dear me!" she cried as Joel rushed in and up to the window, and without a bit of warning seized her about the waist and spun her into the middle of the floor.

"Oh, Joey, what is it?" she gasped when she could get her breath.

"He's going to bring Pip," cried Joel, bobbing his black head at her. "Come on, Polly, whoopity la!" and he held out his hands for another war dance.

"Oh, Joel,"—Polly seized his hands and stood quite still,—"you don't mean Jasper is coming soon?" The color flew into her cheeks till they were rosy red.

"Yes, I do, too," said Joel, prancing off by himself, since Polly wouldn't dance; "he's coming to-morrow; no, I guess next week—anyway, he's

coming." With that he executed some remarkable steps as only Joel could.

"How did you know, Joel? Stop and tell me." Polly flew after him around and around the room.

"A letter," said Joel; "whoopity la! and he's going to bring Pip."

"A letter?" Now she must find Mamsie or Auntie Whitney, and Polly left Joel dancing away and got over the stairs with her best speed to find Mrs. Whitney just coming to call her. She held in her hand an open letter, scraps of which she was reading aloud to the two boys hanging on either arm, little Dick, unable to attract attention to his torn lace, pulling at her gown impatiently.

"Is it true—is Jasper coming home?" cried Polly, breathlessly rushing up.

"Yes, dear," Mrs. Whitney tore off her gaze from the letter, and turned shining eyes on her. "Oh, Polly, this has just come and I was going to find you. Yes, yes, Dick, Mamma will attend to you presently; he is really coming home."

"When is he coming?" asked Polly, clasping her hands impatiently.

"Oh, not until next week, but it is, oh, so much, to have the doctor set a time. Just think, Polly," and she turned her face, now almost as rosy as Polly's own, upon her affectionately.

"She tore my lace," said little Dick, thinking it a good time to begin again on the announcement he had been trying to make ever since he had arrived, and he held up the frayed end.

"Yes, yes, dear," said Mrs. Whitney, indifferently without even a glance at it; "and he is to bring Pip, and he wants us all to make him have the best time in the world. Oh, won't we, children! for it will please Jasper." Her eyes glowed as she looked around at them all. At this little Dick deserted his lace. "Oh, I will, Mamma," he promised, "and he shall have my rocking-horse, and that'll please Jasper, I guess," and he began to march up and down the hall in great importance.

"And now, Polly," said Mrs. Whitney, "and, boys, we must think up what we are to do for the real

Christmas, when Jasper and father and Ben get home; oh, and Pip—we mustn't forget Pip."

"Oh, no, we won't forget Pip," they cried, as they all hurried downstairs to bring the good news to Mother Fisher and the others.

And so, although Polly did not forget about Alexia, it was some time before she could get Mrs. Whitney's ear to tell her about it.

"Now I'll tell you what we'll do, Polly," said Mrs. Whitney, when she had heard it all; "I'll have the carriage right away, and you and I will drive over and get Alexia to come back to dinner."

"Oh, and can't she stay over night, Aunty?" cried Polly, hopping up and down in great excitement.

"Yes, indeed, if her Aunt will let her," said Mrs. Whitney, delighted to have everything coming out so nicely; "so now run off and get on your things, child."

No need to tell Polly that. She was soon ready, and before long there they were, Aunty Whitney and she, driving off to bring Alexia home and

comfort her up.

"She isn't home," said the maid, who answered the door-bell of Mrs. Cummings's aristocratic boarding-house on the Avenue.

"Isn't home?" repeated Polly, faintly.

"No'm."

"What is it, Polly?" asked Mrs. Whitney, from the carriage.

"Alexia isn't home," said Polly, disconsolately, and feeling as if the whole world were out of joint.

"Miss Rhys took her away," said the maid, who, beginning to be communicative, saw no reason why she shouldn't tell the whole, "and she didn't want to go, either."

"O dear me!" exclaimed Polly.

"No, she didn't; but Miss Rhys wouldn't leave her alone 'cause she was crying so, and she was going to Miss Barnard's to tea, and so she made her go, too."

"Aunty,"—Polly flew down the steps,— "oh, can't we," she cried desperately, "go over and get Alexia; can't we, Aunty?"

"At Miss Barnard's, is she?" asked Mrs. Whitney, who had heard only part of the maid's information.

"Yes, and Alexia does hate to go there," said Polly, in a burst, "and she was crying. Oh, Aunty!"

That "Oh, Aunty!" settled it. "Yes, child, tell Thomas to drive to Miss Barnard's, and get in."

So Polly, seeing a little light on what had been so dark and miserable, hopped into the carriage, and off they went to Miss Barnard's.

Miss Hetty Barnard was a maiden lady upon whose company Miss Rhys placed herself whenever the dull routine of boarding-house life, or a new stitch in knitting or crochet, gave her a desire for the society of her friend. All such visits Alexia carefully avoided if a possible thing. And Polly, knowing full well the details of those enforced upon her by her aunt, as Alexia, the day

after, poured the miseries of each in her ear, sat forward on the green leather seat and clasped her hands, impatient to get there.

"Oh, if they only haven't gone in to tea," she breathed.

"It's early yet, child," said Mrs. Whitney, reassuringly, "scarcely half after five o'clock," glancing at the little silver watch in the carriage pocket before her; "so don't worry, Polly."

"But Miss Barnard has tea so very early," said Polly, in a small panic. "Oh, here we are!" she brought up gleefully, as the carriage rolled up to the Barnard door and stopped.

"Yes, here we are," laughed Mrs. Whitney, just as well pleased, as Polly jumped out and ran up the steps.

Polly hadn't half finished, "Is Alexia Rhys here, and can I see her?" before a rustle began in the stuffy little parlor, and out rushed the object of her search.

"Oh, Polly, Polly!" exclaimed Alexia, seizing her

with both hands to draw her down the hall; her head sank on Polly's shoulder and she began to cry as hard as she could.

"Ow!" said Polly, as the tears ran down her neck; "O dear me, Alexia, do stop!"

"Oh, I can't," said Alexia, "and do take me away, Polly, for it's too dreadful here, and we're just going out to tea, and I never can live through it. O dear!"

"Well, I'm going to," said Polly, as soon as she could be heard.

"What!" exclaimed Alexia, bounding away to look at her.

"Yes, if your Aunt will let you come," said Polly, with happy little thrills.

"Oh, Aunt will let me quick enough," said Alexia; "but do you really mean it? O dear, it'll be 'most as bad at your house, for there's Mrs. Whitney, and I tore that lace,—oh, I can't go!"

"You must come; Aunty Whitney is out in the

carriage, and we've come for you, and you are to stay all night," explained Polly; "don't you see, Alexia, she wants you?"

"Does she? Oh, goody," and, "O dear, how can she?" was jumbled all up by Alexia, who was now hugging and kissing Polly at a great rate.

"Tea is ready." A thin little woman, who was alternately feeling of her brooch and smoothing down her plaid silk gown as she came along the hall, announced it so suddenly that both girls jumped.

"Oh, I can't stay, Miss Barnard," said Alexia, recovering herself; "I'm going home with Polly Pepper," and without another word she ran back into the stuffy little parlor to announce that fact to her Aunt.

"And whom have we here?" demanded little Miss Barnard, who hadn't half heard Alexia, and peering out of small, near-sighted eyes into the corner where Polly stood.

"It's Polly Pepper," said Polly, coming out into the

light, "and I've come for Alexia; that is—"

"To be sure, to be sure, now I know you," Miss Barnard raised her hands, "and how you grow, Polly,"—a remark the little maiden lady never failed to make when seeing any of the young folks at close enough range to speak to. "Well, and do you want to take Alexia away? Why can't you stay to tea with her? I wish you would; my maid has quite enough prepared. Quite enough, indeed," and Miss Barnard waved her hands to indicate the extent of her larder.

"Oh, I can't, indeed, Miss Barnard," cried Polly, hastily. "And Auntie Whitney is waiting out in the carriage. Would you please tell Alexia to hurry?"

"Is Mrs. Whitney out in the carriage?" cried Miss Barnard, catching at this desirable information and letting everything else slip. "Oh, then, I must speak to her; surely I must, for I wouldn't be so rude as to let her be at my door without a word from me. Elvira," she thrust her head into the small parlor to throw a word over to Miss Rhys, who was just saying "Yes" to Alexia, "I'll be with you in a bit; I must first speak to my dear friend, Mrs. Whitney."

"It's very cold," said Polly, as the little maiden lady laid her hand on the knob of the front door. Alexia was frantically throwing on her hat and coat in the dim recesses of the back hall.

"That may be, but I wouldn't neglect my duty," said Miss Barnard, with the air of knowing what was required of her; "but perhaps I had best be careful," pausing with her hand on the knob, "so would you mind, my dear, handing my shawl; you will find it on the hat-rack at the end of the hall."

So Polly had nothing to do but to go down after it.

"The very idea," exclaimed Alexia, in smothered wrath, "to ask you to get her old shawl!"

"Hush!" begged Polly, with a warning pinch.

"And just think of her going out to see Mrs. Whitney! Come on, Polly, I know the way to the back door," and she seized Polly's arm.

But Polly got away, and carried the shawl down to Miss Barnard and laid it over the wiry little shoulders; and at last the front door was opened.

"My dear Mrs. Whitney," exclaimed the little maiden lady, skipping out to the carriage step, and holding out both hands, "you don't know how very glad I am to see you here; now do get out and have tea with Miss Rhys and me."

"Oh, it is quite impossible, Miss Barnard," said Mrs. Whitney, "thank you. Now, girls," with a smile over the little maiden lady's head to Polly and Alexia, "step in, both of you, for we must hurry home."

"O dear, I am so sorry," cried Miss Barnard, as the girls rushed to obey; then she gave a little cackle, intended to be very winning, "perhaps some time you will come, my dear Mrs. Whitney, I should *so* admire to have you—hee-hee."

"How Aunt can—" began Alexia, as the good-bys were said and the carriage door slammed and away they went. "Polly Pepper, I've just killed your foot, I know, but I couldn't help stepping all over you, for that dreadful woman fluttered me so. O dear, and I haven't said anything to Mrs. Whitney," and Alexia could feel her sallow cheek grow hot and red.

"I'll forgive you," said Mrs. Whitney, with a little laugh.

"And how Aunt can take up with her," finished Alexia in vexation, "O dear me, I can't see."

"She has some good qualities," said Mrs. Whitney, kindly; "we must remember that."

"Well, I don't know where they are," fumed Alexia. "She's quite the most odious person I ever saw, and I'm so tired of her everlastingly coming to see Aunt. Oh, Polly!" She gave such a cry of distress that both Polly and Mrs. Whitney turned in dismay. "I can't go, I can't go; I forgot my nose and eyes. I cried so, see how they look!" She leaned forward in the carriage to display them the better.

"Is that all?" exclaimed Mrs. Whitney, with a sigh of relief; while Polly cried, "Oh, Alexia, that's no matter," comfortingly, "and they don't show so very much; really they don't."

"And then that lace." Alexia, now that she was really on the way to be comforted, began to feel

all the first distress of the accident over-whelming her again. "O dear, I am so sorry, Mrs. Whitney!" she mumbled shamefacedly.

"Now, Alexia," and Mrs. Whitney leaned over and put both hands on the anxious face, then she drew it down and set a kiss where a stream of tears had run, "do you know, dear, you will make me feel badly if you ever speak of that lace again, or worry about it, child." She turned the other cheek, and dropped a soft kiss on it. "Promise now, say you will not."

"I won't," mumbled Alexia, looking up into the blue eyes, and she didn't speak another word till safe up in Polly's room.

Then she shut the door and marched up to her.

"She kissed me, she really did, and twice, and just as if she really wanted to! And no one has ever done that but you, Polly Pepper, and I'll love her just forever!"

XI

AN AFTERNOON CALL

And so the real Christmas rang its joy-bells, passing over the King household as if such a thing as a holiday was never thought of.

Polly gave her presents to the girls of her set, and in every way she and the other members of the household kept up all the delights of the season, so far as it concerned people outside of their family. But when all the little and big white-papered gifts for her began to pour into the care of the butler who attended the door, they were carefully deposited in a little room off from the main hall, set apart for the purpose, there to lie untouched until "we have *our* real Christmas," she said.

And as it was arranged with Polly's gifts, so it was to be the order of proceedings in regard to the presents of every other member of the family; till

the little room seemed fit to burst with richness, and even Hobson despaired of getting much more in.

"We'll have to get some other place, and that's true enough," he said to himself, with a sigh, and dumping down a huge box just left at the door.

Joel, racing along the hall at the sound of the arrival, panted, "What is it? Oh, Hobson, who is it for?" all in the same breath.

"Hold on, Master Joel!" cried Hobson, and feeling of his arm gingerly, after the eager pinch from Joel's fingers. "Well, it was for you, if you must know," he said irritably. "But you can't go in," twitching the door in alarm, and trying to turn the key.

"Oh! I will too; it was mine!" cried Joel, very hot and red faced, and struggling to squeeze by the portly figure of the butler. "You've no right to put me out," he fumed.

"Mrs. Whitney gave me this key," said the butler, puffing from his exertions to keep Joel off with

one hand, and to adjust the implement in its lock with the other. "And I, O bless me," as it slipped from his fingers and jingled to the floor.

"There,—goody,—O jumbo!" exclaimed Joel, pouncing on it where it fell on the edge of the rug, then he slipped away from the big hand, and, prancing off, shook the key high in the air in derision. "Now I can go in whenever I like. Whoop it up! Yes-sir-ee!"

Hobson, beyond answering, made a dive in his direction, which Joel quickly eluded, and, the bell ringing again, there could be no further attempt to rescue the key, and Joel danced off, chuckling triumphantly. And hopping through the back drawing-room on a short cut across to the side hall, he rushed up almost into the face of a big figure sitting up in state on one of the high-backed carved chairs.

"O dear me!" exclaimed Joel, backing out summarily.

"I am very glad to see you, Joel," said Madam Van Ruypen, with her best smile on, "for I'm

going to wait until Mrs. Whitney gets home," and extending her hand.

Joel, forgetting his key, put hand and all into her black glove.

"Dear me," she said, looking at her palm, "what have we here, Joel?"

"It's a key," blurted Joel, recovering it quickly, "and I can't stay," feeling questions in the air, and he was for bolting out again.

"Indeed, you will stay," declared Madam Van Ruypen, coolly; "a talk with you is the very thing I want! Sit down," and she pointed a black-gloved finger over to an opposite ottoman. And Joel sat down.

"Now, my dear boy," she said as sweetly as if she had come expressly to see him, and was quite sure of her welcome, "before your aunt comes home, I want to talk with you."

"Oh, I'll go and put it back," said Joel, supposing it was all about the key, and beginning to slide off from his ottoman.

"Put what back?" demanded the old lady with sharp eyes full on him.

"The key," said Joel, fumbling it first in one set of fingers, then in the other. "I'll—" and he was on his feet.

"Sit down," said Madam Van Ruypen, pointing to the ottoman, and again Joel sat down with a decided conviction that he didn't like afternoon calls; and he gazed anxiously at the door to see if by any chance Aunt Whitney would appear.

"You see, Joel, I depend on you," Madam Van Ruypen was saying.

Joel, all his thoughts on the little room off from the hall, and the desire which now possessed him to get back the key into the butler's hands before he could go with his story to Mother Fisher, sat and swung his feet in dismal silence, every word of the old lady's falling on heedless ears.

At last she stopped short and surveyed him with smart displeasure.

"You haven't heard a word I've said," she

declared sharply.

"No'm," said Joel, promptly; and, coming to himself with an awful consciousness that here was something dreadful to add to the matter of the key that now began to quite weigh him down, he stopped swinging his feet and sat stiffly on the chair.

"Well, do you come straight here," she demanded; and somehow Joel found himself off from his chair, and over by the old lady's side.

"No, not there; I want you in front where I can look at you," and she summarily arranged him to her liking. "There you are! Now, Joel,"—she surveyed him as long as it suited her, Joel not taking his black eyes from her face,—"*do you know what I want this talk with you for?*"

"No'm," said Joel.

"Well, I'll tell you; listen, now."

"Yes'm," said Joel, gripping his key tighter than ever.

"You'd much better give me that key," said Madam Van Ruypen, with a sudden sharp look down at his clenched hand; "you are not attending at all to what I am saying, Joel."

"Oh, no, no," cried Joel, quite alarmed, and thrusting his fistful back of him. "O dear! Let me go, ma'am, *please do!*"

Instead of this request being complied with, Madam Van Ruypen leaned over and calmly laid a black glove on his hot little fist. "Give it to me at once," she commanded; "I'll keep it for you until I've said my say."

"I can't," screamed Joel; "'tisn't mine. O dear me, I can't." Clapping his other hand on his fist to hold it tighter yet, he wriggled away in distress to stand in the middle of the floor, the old lady viewing him with fast-rising choler; at last she arrived at the height of her displeasure.

"Go away at once," she said coldly, "and send your brother David here. He's a boy of sense, and the best one, after all, to deal with, seeing Ben isn't home."

Joel, nearly blinded by the tears that now ran freely down his cheeks, stumbled out to do as he was bidden, forgetting in his misery the key still doubled up in his fist. But search high and low as he might, David could not be found. And at last Joel, quite gone in distress, rushed into Mother Fisher's room. There was no one in it, and Joel flung himself down on the wide old sofa, and cried as if his heart would break.

Meantime Madam Van Ruypen, despairing of Mrs. Whitney's return, and despite her summons to servants, unable to find a trace of Joel or David, swept out of the back drawing-room, got into her carriage, and was driven off home in a very bad frame of mind.

And Joel sobbed on until he could scarcely see out of his eyes, and still Mother Fisher didn't come. And the butler crossly set the other Christmas gifts that kept arriving, in a closet under the hall stairs, much too small a place for them, and everything was about as bad as it could be.

A smart clap on the back brought Joel up, but he hid his face behind his hands.

"Phoh! What are you crying for?" It was Van; and he was so delighted to catch Joel in this plight that he chortled over and over, "Joe Pepper's been crying!" and he began to dance around the room.

"I haven't," cried Joel, too wild to think of anything but Van's taunts, and dashing his hands aside.

"Oh, what an *awful* whopper!" exclaimed Van, coming quite close to peer up into Joel's face, "and you don't know how you look,—just like that baboon at the Zoo, with the little squinched-up eyes!" he added pleasantly.

"I don't care—go 'way!" said Joel, crossly, and flapping out his hands, regardless of anything but the wild desire to keep Van from a close inspection. Something jingled as it fell to the floor.

"What's that?" cried Van, dancing away from Joel, and peering with bright eyes on the carpet.

"It's nothing," screamed Joel, flying down in front of the sofa, and pawing wildly along the carpet. "I tell you 'tisn't," he kept on screaming. "Go 'way

this minute."

"Oh, now I know you've got something that doesn't belong to you, and you're keeping it secret from the rest of us." Van threw himself flat on the floor and tried to crowd in between Joel and the old sofa.

"I haven't; it's mine, it's—it's—Go right away!"

But struggle and push as he might, Van somehow seemed to wedge himself in; and Joel's poor eyes not allowing him to see much, it was just one minute, when—"O goody!" The key was in Van's hand, and he was dancing again in the middle of the room.

Joel sprang to his feet and tossed his stubby black hair off from his forehead, "You give that right straight back here, Van Whitney!" he shouted.

"Catch me!" cried Van. Then he swung the key tauntingly over toward Joel. "Hoh, don't you wish you may get it, Joe Pepper, don't you, now?"

For answer Joel made a blind rush at him, and there they were, flying around and around in

Mother Fisher's room, Van now having all he could do to look out for himself and keep away from Joel's sturdy fists, without the care of keys. So he flung his captured prize as far as he could over into the opposite corner. And hearing it land somewhere, Joel released him, and ran blindly over where it appeared to strike. And as Van followed quickly, there really didn't seem to be any chance of recovering it, at least in peace, with another on its trail who had a sharp pair of eyes in his head.

Joel turned suddenly, and before Van had the least idea what he was about, he was seized and hustled off to Mother Fisher's closet, bundled in, the door slammed to, the key turned in the lock, and there he was.

"Now," said Joel, drawing the first long breath, "I'll get that key easy enough," and he rushed over to begin operations.

"Let me out!" screamed Van, in muffled accents, and banging on the closet door.

"Don't you wish you may?" Joel, pawing and

prowling frantically along the floor, found time to hurl him this over his shoulder. Then he rubbed his smarting eyes and set to work with fresh vigor, not paying any further attention to Van's entreaties. At last, when it really seemed as if that key had been possessed of little fairy legs and run off, Joel pushed aside Mother Fisher's big workstand, a thing he had done at least three times before, and there it was shining up at him where it had hidden behind one of the legs!

"I've got you now," cried Joel, jubilantly pouncing on it. And this time, not daring to trust it in his hands, he thrust it deep within his pocket, and with never a thought of Van, who had stopped his cries to listen to Joel, he tore out of the room, and down the stairs, three at a time.

"Has any one seen Mamsie?" he cried of the first person he met, one of the under servants passing through the back hall.

"Why, she's gone out with Mrs. Whitney," said the maid.

"Bother!" exploded Joel, dancing impatiently from

one foot to the other.

"Yes, they've gone out making calls, I s'pose," said the maid, delighted to think she had any news to impart.

Joel made a grimace at that, not having at any time a reason for liking calls, and this afternoon with a positive aversion to them. And that brought back Madam Van Ruypen unpleasantly to his mind.

"Has she gone?" he asked in a dreadful whisper; and clutching the maid's arm, "has she, Hannah?"

"Ow!" exclaimed Hannah, edging off quickly. "Yes, I told you she had; she and Mrs. Whitney, too. You don't need to pinch me to death, Master Joel, to find out."

"Oh, I don't mean Mamsie," cried Joel, impatiently. "I mean *she*,—has *she* gone?" and pointing off toward the back drawing-room, "Say, Hannah, has she?"

"Whoever do you mean?" demanded Hannah, glancing over her shoulder in the direction

indicated.

"Why, *she*," repeated Joel, stamping impatiently to enforce his words, "Madam Van Ruypen, of course."

"I didn't know she was there," said Hannah, "I'll go and see," and she started for the back drawing-room door.

"Oh, no, no," cried Joel, in a lively terror, and running after her, he laid hold of her apron string; "I don't want to know, Hannah; I don't, really."

"Why, you asked me," snapped Hannah, twitching away the apron string; "there, now, you've mussed it all up," she added in vexation, and now quite determined, if for no other reason than to spite Joel, to explore the back drawing-room, she opened the door and went in.

Joel, seeing she had escaped him, fled precipitately and, not waiting to restore the key to Hobson, a thing he had intended to do if he couldn't find Mamsie, now considered out of doors to be the only safe place for him. For of

course Hannah would come for him to go back to Madam Van Ruypen sitting in dreadful state to receive him. It sent cold chills down his spine just to think of it! And he rushed madly along down by a cross cut to the green wicket gate on his way over to Larry Keep's.

"Hullo! Well, you needn't knock a chap down," as some one bumped into him.

"I didn't. 'Twas you knocked me."

"No such thing," said Larry, recovering himself, "and I was going for you; and Van, too."

At mention of Van, Joel's face dropped, and all the color rushed out of it. "O dear me, I forgot; he's in the closet."

"*In the closet?*" repeated Larry, his blue eyes opening their widest.

"Yes, I shut him up. Oh, come with me." In his distress he seized Larry's arm, and together they raced, Joel far in advance, up to the big house.

XII

VAN

Larry, keeping after Joel as well as he could, found him at the head of the back stairs, and gesticulating wildly to "Hurry, you're slow as a snail. Hush, she'll hear you!"

"Who?" cried Larry, breathlessly, as he gained his side.

"Never mind, come along." He hauled him on and into Mother Fisher's room, dashing up to the closet, turned the key with a click, and flung wide the door, "Why, he isn't here!"

"Who?" cried Larry, forgetting all about Van, and not knowing whom he was expected to see.

Joel's teeth were chattering so that he couldn't answer. "He's got out," he managed to say.

"Who?" Larry crowded up closer and peered

fearfully into the closet depths.

"Why, Van," cried Joel, impatiently; "oh, well, he's got out some way. Come on," and he turned to go.

"Van!" exclaimed Larry, faintly.

"Yes, I told you so. I shut him up."

"Oh, I thought you meant in your closet," said Larry, the mad race remaining uppermost in his mind to the effect of crowding out other things that now began to assert themselves. "Well, then, he's here now."

"Phoo, no, he isn't," declared Joel, waving his fingers convincingly; "you can see for yourself. Somebody's let him out, and he's locked the door to cheat me."

But Larry was not to be convinced. "He is, I know he is," leaning forward the better to peer around within the closet.

"Take care," warned Joel, who had good reason to know Van's capabilities along that line, "maybe

he's hiding in the corner, and he'll tweak you."

At this Larry, who also had occasion to know Van quite well, bounded back quite suddenly, saying, "I see a shoe sticking out," and pointing to it.

"Oh, that's Mamsie's," said Joel, determined not to believe. Then the moment he had said it he remembered that Mother Fisher's shoes were always kept in the shoe-box over in the corner. "We'll give it a pull," he said, doing his best to speak carelessly, which Larry proceeding to do, out came the leg attached which clearly belonged to Van. But it was limp, and lay just where it was dropped with a thud on the closet floor.

Joel, with his heart thumping so he could hardly breathe, sprang into the closet, twitched away Mother Fisher's long black silk gown, seized Van where he lay under its folds, and got him outside to lay him flat on the carpet.

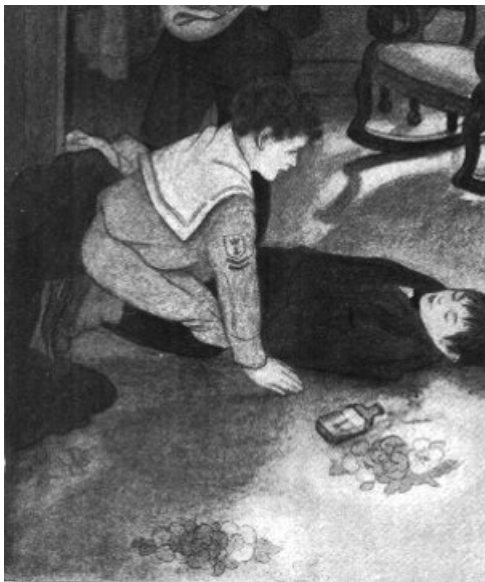
"He's dead, I guess," said Larry, cheerfully.

"Get some water," screamed Joel, "and open the

window;" meantime he slapped Van's hands smartly together and called him to open his eyes, and this not succeeding, he ran over to Mother Fisher's medicine closet, rushed back, and in his trepidation emptied a whole bottle of something all over the white face.

"That's no good," said Larry. The window now being open, he advanced with a water pitcher whose contents he promptly distributed in the same way. "See what you've done; that's castor oil."





**"See what you've done; that's
castor oil."**

It was no time to cast criticisms upon each other, and Joel soon had a cologne bottle, and Larry the ammonia, and in two minutes their united efforts had Van sitting up in the middle of the floor with anything but a pleased expression on his face, into which his usual color was slowly creeping.

And just then in rushed Polly.

"Whatever in the world—" she began, stopping in sheer amazement.

"See what they've done," cried Van, in a towering passion, shaking his head like a half-drowned rat, and he pointed to his clothes, from which little streams of water were running off to join the pools on the carpet. "*Tchee! Tchee!* Get away," and he knocked the ammonia bottle out of Larry's hand.

"O dear me!" cried Polly, "pick it up, do; don't let it get spilled," as it spun off.

"Now I should just like to know what all this is about," she demanded indignantly, as she joined the group.

"Well, I guess he'd have been in a tight fix if we hadn't—" began Larry, recovering the ammonia bottle. Then he stopped short.

"Hadn't what? Go on," said Polly.

"Hadn't—hadn't—" Larry, not looking at Joel, floundered miserably.

"I'll tell you," said Van, wishing so much of the ammonia hadn't gone into his mouth, and up his nose, and stopping to cough and splutter. "O dear, wait a minute, Polly, I'll tell you!"

But Polly was fixing her brown eyes sternly on Larry and Joel, who stood with his head cast down, and wringing his hands together miserably.

"Now, you two boys must just stay in this room," at last she said decidedly, feeling quite sure there was nothing more to be gotten out of them, "and sit there," pointing to the wide sofa, "till Mamsie comes home, and—"

"No, no," howled Joel; "I'll tell, I'll tell, Polly. Don't make us sit there."

"Yes, you must," said Polly, firmly, feeling that the responsibility that had fallen upon her in Mother Fisher's absence quite weighed her down, "and when Mamsie comes, she will have to know it all," and her mouth drooped sorrowfully.

"Tisn't any matter," said Van, getting up to his feet and giving a final shake, so that the little drops flew far and wide, "I don't mind it,—I'm all dry now."

"No, you are not," said Polly, guilty of contradicting, "Vannie, you're just as wet as you can be," feeling of his jacket; "run off and get into dry things as soon as you can. Yes, you two boys must sit there; at least Joel, you must," pointing to the sofa again.

"I'm going to stay if Joel has to," declared Larry, after an awful pause in which he had fully decided to cut and run. And down he sat by Joel, who had flung himself in great distress on Mamsie's sofa.

Van started toward the door, took two steps, turned and rushed back to lean over Joel, "I won't ever tell," he whispered, and ran out as fast as he

could go.

And Polly wiped up the carpet and put back the bottles and the water pitcher, and tidied things up, the boys watching her out of miserable eyes.

"Polly," came pealing over the stairs.

"Yes," called Polly, back again, pausing in her work long enough to add, "don't come up, Alexia, I'll be right down;" but Alexia, following the sound of her own voice, was already rushing into the room.

"Well, if I ever," she began, pausing by Polly's side. "What *are* you doing, Polly Pepper?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Polly, running off into the bath room with the wet cloth; "I'll be through in a minute, Alexia."

"Oh, you two boys have been up to mischief," said Alexia, running her pale eyes over the two culprits, "and now you've bothered Polly, and we shan't have time to go down-town at all, and here we all are working ourselves almost to death for our Christmas when Jasper and Ben get home."

It was a long speech, and it had its effect, for the boys wilted perceptibly. That is, Larry did; Joel already being in that state where a greater degree of misery would not easily be noticed.

"It just passes me," said Alexia, provoked not to rouse them to reply, "how you can act so. But then, you are boys. I suppose that's the reason."

"I didn't act so," cried Larry, "and you've no right, Alexia, to scold us. 'Tisn't your house, anyway," he took refuge lamely in that fact, and he swung his feet in defiance.

"Well, somebody must scold you," said Alexia, "and no one else will, unless I come over. Well, anyway,—Polly, where are you?"

"Here," said Polly, hurrying in,—"oh, don't, Alexia, say anything,—they feel badly about it, whatever it is."

"Don't you know what they've been doing?" asked Alexia, with wide eyes, and whirling around to stare at the boys.

"No," said Polly, "I don't, Alexia, but Mamsie'll

make it right, for they're going to tell her," and again she cast a sorrowful glance at them.

"Well, come on," said Alexia, turning her back on the sofa and its occupants; "I don't care in the least what they've done, so long as I have you, Polly. Hurry up, Polly, and get on your hat."

"I can't go," said Polly, standing quite still, and not looking at the boys this time.

"Can't go? why, Polly Pepper, you know you said the red-and-green holly ribbon had all given out, and you must get some more so we could tie up the rest of the presents this evening."

"Well, I can't go," said Polly, with a sigh. Then she folded her hands and shook her head.

When Polly looked like that, Alexia always knew it was no use to beg and plead, so now she turned on the boys.

"Now see what you've gone and done," she cried in a passion. "Polly won't go down-town because you're keeping her home. And there we've all had our Christmas put off (Alexia wouldn't hear to

celebrating the holiday until the Peppers could have theirs), and you two boys have just gone and spoiled it all."

"Alexia—Alexia!" implored Polly.

"I will say so," cried Alexia, perversely, "they've upset all our nice Christmas; and just think, Jasper almost killed, and—"

"Ow!" howled Joel, springing from the old sofa. He wavered a moment on unsteady feet, then dashed out of the room.

Larry, left without any support whatever, concluded to sink down against the sofa-pillow and bury his face in its soft depths.

"Oh, Alexia!" mourned Polly, but that one word was quite enough.

"O dear, dear!" gasped Alexia, wringing her long fingers together, "I didn't mean—oh, what have I done?"

"I must go after him," said Polly, hoarsely, and springing past her to the door.

"Let me, oh, let me," mumbled Alexia, plunging after her. "I'll go, Polly."

"No, you stay here." Polly was off halfway down the stairs. Alexia turned back to the sofa.

"I don't see why you boys always make such a fuss," she began, too nervous to keep still, and twisting her fingers together.

Larry, having the sofa-pillow stuffed up all around his ears, could not be expected to hear conversation. So Alexia, finding it all one sided, began to rage up and down the room, alternately whimpering that she didn't mean to say it, and blaming the boys for the whole thing. At last, Larry, finding it necessary to get a wholesome breath of fresh air, sat up straight and tossed aside the pillow.

"Oh, now you can hear me," cried Alexia, turning on him with sparkling eyes; "you must confess, Larry, that you've been perfectly awful, both of you boys, and made it just as bad as can be for everybody."

"I haven't been bad," retorted Larry, glaring at her, and pushing off the hair from his hot face, "so there, now; I didn't do a single thing."

"Well, what's it all about, anyway?" cried Alexia, running over to him to sit down by his side.

"What whole thing?" said Larry, edging off. "Go away, Alexia," and he scrambled off to the sofa end, where he planted himself at a safe distance.

"Why, you know just as well as I do," said Alexia, and hurrying to place herself next to him as quickly as if he had invited her there.

"No, I don't," said Larry, with anything but a sweet countenance. "Do go away, Alexia."

"Why, Larry Keep!" exclaimed Alexia, and her pale eyes were very wide, "you must know; and now tell me all about it."

Larry, for answer, hopped nimbly over the sofa arm. "No, I won't. I haven't anything to tell. Go away, Alexia."

"Oh, what an *awful* boy," exclaimed Alexia,

raising her long hands in horror, "to get off this sofa, when Polly Pepper told you to sit here."

"She didn't either; she said Joel must," corrected Larry, defiantly. "So there, now, Alexia Rhys!"

"Well, you know she meant you," said Alexia, "only she didn't exactly like to make you, 'cause you don't live here."

"Well, Joel's gone, and I'm not going back," declared Larry, flatly, and regarding the sofa with anything but pleasure.

"Well, that's dreadfully mean," said Alexia, leaning back composedly to look him all over, "to run away, now Joel's gone. He'd expect you to stay here, of course."

To do anything that Joel would not expect not fitting into Larry's ideas, he slipped back into his place again, crowding up against the sofa arm as closely as possible.

"Now tell me all about it," said Alexia, happily, and leaning forward to catch every word.

"All about what?" said Larry, sourly.

"Why, all about just everything, you stupid boy; what you and Joel have been up to, and the whole thing," said Alexia, hungrily.

"There hasn't been any whole thing," said Larry, gloomily, and very much wishing he had "been up to something" that had yielded at least a little bit of fun.

"O dear me, how tiresome you are!" exclaimed Alexia, quite exasperated, and picking up the big sofa-pillow to bestow impatient dabs upon it. "O my goodness me!"

For in walked Mrs. Fisher, and Alexia, feeling that in the interview to come she should certainly not be in the right place, skipped to her feet and out of the room, leaving Larry in a miserable state enough to face Joel's mother.

XIII

THE BIG BOX

The little widow ran down the road, not much more than a good-sized trail cut between two hard, frozen banks of snow. Her shoes flapped miserably, and with one hand she held the remnant of a bonnet on her head, the other clutched the old plaid shawl together across her thin chest.

Toiling slowly round the curve came a white horse, very tired and old, dragging a wagon that alternately had the wheels on one side or the other tilted up on either bank, making very difficult progress.

"Hullo! Where be ye goin'?" the occupant of the wagon yelled out, as the little woman ran suddenly almost into the face of the old white horse, who, recognizing an obstacle, gladly stood still in his tracks without the sharp twitch on the reins to pull

him up.

"Now how yer goin' ter git by, an' what be yer runnin' so fur anyway, Mis' Hansell?" exclaimed the old man, all in one impatient breath.

The little widow drew a long sigh and glanced about her on either side. The hard, frozen wall seemed to oppress her, and she set her gaze on the old face under the fur cap, but pressed her thin lips together without a word.

"Well, ye're there an' ye can't git back," said the old man, twitching one rein violently in an effort to turn the wagon out an inch or two. "Shin up the bank, Mis' Hansell, shin up the bank, and then gimme yer hand, an' you can hop in here,"—he jerked his sharp chin over his shoulder,—"an' set on them bags, bein's th' seat's full." As indeed it was, a collection of various articles, going to the farmers' wives, occupying all the leather cushion not filled with the driver. "Ye've got to; I can't move a mite further," as the little woman hung back.

Her thin lips fell apart. "Are you going anywhere

near Harrison road, Mr. Bramble?"

"Hey—Harrison road? Eh, yes, after a spell. I'm goin' first to the Potterses, an' th' Timmenses, an'—Land o' Goshen, I clean forgot,—I'm goin' to your house, Mis' Hansell, I clar to gracious, I am!" He clapped his knee with his big woollen mitten. "There, you hop in an' set on them bags, an' I'll take you home."

"But I'm not going home," said little Mrs. Hansell, creeping as closely to the wall of frozen snow as possible, in her endeavor to get by the team. "And if you've got to go to the Potterses and the Timmenses, I won't ride. Thank you kindly, Mr. Bramble."

She made another attempt to crowd by over the rough, jagged edges of the ice, lost her footing, and fell with her face against the wheel.

"Sho!" ejaculated Mr. Bramble, in great distress, "now ye've hurt ye! Couldn't ye have done as I said? But women have no sense no more'n hens; they must bunt up ag'in' sunthin', blind-headed. Get in, can't ye? Ye'll have to ride a piece

anyway, till I get where I can turn round."

"It's no matter," said the little widow, wiping off a few drops of blood that trickled down her cheek, as she got in, being pulled up over the step by the firm grip of the knotted fingers in the woollen mitten, and sat down on the bags of grain, as bidden.

"That 'ere is your box," said Mr. Bramble, when he had seen her comfortably adjusted, and pointing with one mitten over his shoulder.

"Hey?" said little Mrs. Hansell, lost in thought that seemed to be very mournful, for she sighed deeply, and picked at the edge of her shawl where the fringe had been.

"Yes, 'tis yours, I say, your box." Mr. Bramble kept reiterating it, each time giving a fierce nod to the old fur cap that finally settled it well over his eyes. "It come yesterday over to the deepo at Purdy's, but I couldn't get here, th' goin's so bad."

The little widow said nothing. Having never received a box, conversation in regard to one

couldn't possibly interest her, so she had failed to hear any reference to herself. And at last old Mr. Bramble, having got the white horse safely past the narrowest part of the road, whirled around on his seat and stared at her.

"Sakes alive, Mis' Hansell, are you deaf?" he roared. "*You've got a box.*"

"I?" said the little widow, turning a bewildered gaze up at him. "I—what *do* you mean, Mr. Bramble?"

"You've got a box; *box*, I said." The expressman roared it at her so that the old white horse jerked up his tired head and took two rapid steps forward, positively by his own accord.

This wholly unsettling the dilapidated bonnet on the little widow's head so that it slid down her neck, with difficulty being recovered from flying out of the wagon altogether, and the shock of the announcement of the box occurring at the same moment, she was speechless again.

"Well, if I ever!" ejaculated Mr. Bramble, when

he recovered from the astonishment into which his steed's burst of energy had plunged him. And giving his travelling companion up as a bad job so far as conversation was concerned, he relapsed into a sullen silence, neither of them speaking till a good half mile was slowly traversed.

And then he felt a timid twitch at the end of the old woollen scarf hanging over his back.

"Mr. Bramble, is that true?" and he glanced over his shoulder to see the thin face of the little widow working convulsively, while her faded eyes gleamed with excitement.

"Oh, ye've waked up, hev ye?" cried Mr. Bramble. "Yes, 'tis true, true as gospel writ, Mis' Hansell," he averred solemnly.

"True?" She had only breath to repeat the one word, and she hung on the answer.

"Sure as shootin'," declared the express driver. He clapped his knee smartly to enforce his words. "There 'tis now," he added suddenly, and pointing with his thumb over his shoulder; "you're a-settin'

ag'inst it this blessed minute, Mis' Hansell."

Little Mrs. Hansell turned convulsively, gave one look at the big box looming up behind her, then covered her face with her thin hands, and rocked back and forth on the grain bags.

"Oh, I don't believe it; I can't. I hain't never had a box. 'Tain't mine."

"Well, I'm a-goin' to dump it at your house, anyway," declared Mr. Bramble, "for it's got your name on it."

"'Tain't mine, an' I must git out an' go to Harrison road an' tell Mr. Shuggs that he can come and take us all to the poorhouse, for—"

"Land!" exclaimed Mr. Bramble, in a mighty shout that puffed out his red cheeks like small bellows, "'tain't so bad as that, is it? Thunder an' lightnin', an' that was where ye were goin'?" He was taken with a sudden fit of coughing and he blew his nose violently, wiped his eyes with the back of his mitten, and glanced off at the towering mountains as if he had never seen them before.

"O dear, dear, dear!" The little woman huddled on the grain bags was now in such a bad state at having told her secret that he whirled around to look after her.

"I must whip up Billy an' git there quick, or she'll be out over the wheel with her didoes, like enough," and he slapped the back of the old white horse with the doubled-up end of the reins so effectively that in due time the wagon jounced over the icy ruts of the winding road, and drew up in front of the little cabin nestling at the foot of the hill, the express driver mumbling within his straggly beard: "Well, I am busted, who'd 'a' thought she an' them children was struck so hard!"

Instantly the door burst open and a brood of children, six in number, the baby being left to sprawl on the kitchen floor, plunged out, trooping over the frozen ground, some of them running on the crust of the polished snow lying high in banks—any way to get there the quicker.

To see their mother riding in state in Mr. Bramble's express wagon was a supreme event, and they clambered over the wheels and fairly

swarmed around her, as she tremblingly tried to get down.

"Easy, easy there; sho now, can't you let her get down?" Mr. Bramble roared at them, pretending to be very much put out. But they paid not the slightest attention to him.

"Oh, Mammy!" they cried, surrounding her tumultuously.

"You've got hurt," exclaimed one of the big boys, seeing her cheek, and, "Oh, I'm so hungry," said Jane, the youngest, who, since her mother had really returned, thought it just as well to mention a fact she had been steadily reiterating all the morning.

"Hush up!" shouted Mr. Bramble, "and look here, Mat, an' you too, Mark and Luke, tumble out that box. Step lively now." Again his thumb came into service over his shoulder.

"Oh, bless my buttons, I never see such a dull lot," as the whole collection of children, big boys and all, stared open-mouthed at him, without offering

to stir from their tracks. "I'll pitch it out myself." And with many grunts, for his legs were rheumatic, he slowly hitched himself off his seat, and laid hold of the box.

"Give us a grip, Mat," he sang out to the oldest boy. "This box has got to go into your house, an' I know *I* ain't a-goin' to carry it. Come on!"

And instantly the whole swarm of children, wild with excitement, deserted their mother to crowd around Mr. Bramble and the boys.

"The baby's comin' out," screamed Elvira, with one hasty glance back at the cabin door, as she ran to the centre of attraction with the others.

The little widow turned where she had been left alone and sped frantically up to the broken steps, where little Susan, spitting her fat hands on the floor as she crawled along to see what the noise was all about, had just decided to tumble down. But instead of landing on the hard, frozen ruts, she was gathered up to her mother's thin breast and hugged and coddled.

"Oh, baby, baby." She sank down on the steps and rocked back and forth, Susan now spitting her thin cheeks and struggling to get away to where all that delightful noise was coming from. "Oh, good Lord, I can't believe it. We've got a box, Susan; we have, Susan, he says so, but I know he's made a mistake. And p'raps there's somethin' to eat in it, and I won't have to go to the selectmen an' tell 'em we'll go to the poorhouse. But 'tain't ours, I know 'tain't. *O Lord, they're bringin' it in!*"

And in another minute the little widow, hanging to Susan, was off the steps, the box was dragged over them by the united efforts of the three boys, their progress very much impeded by the crowding up of the girls, who were afraid they would miss something of the progress, Mr. Bramble looking on in great satisfaction. Then he climbed into his wagon, stared at the little cabin for another minute, where they had all disappeared, and drove off, blowing his nose violently, his eyes seeming to need a great deal of attention from the back of his gray woollen mitten.

Down went the big box with a thud in the very middle of the kitchen floor.

"Get the hammer," screamed Elvira, capering wildly, her black braids, tied with bits of string, flying out from either side of her head. "I'm goin' to get it myself," with a leap toward the corner.

"No such thing," Matthew roared at her. "I'll get it. Come back, Viry."

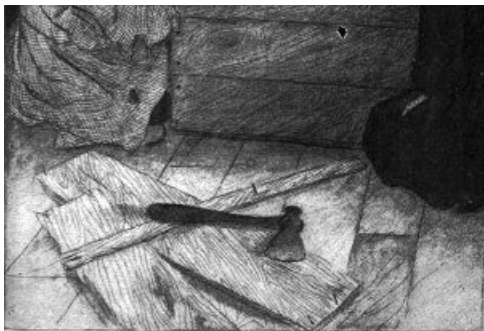
"The axe,"—Mark shouted it high above the din, as he rushed to get that necessary implement,—"*that's better'n the hammer.*"

"Oo—Oo—Scree!" Susan, in dreadful distress at being bound in mother's arms, let her feelings have free vent in a wail that soared high above the crackling of the box cover as it splintered under the effort of both hammer and axe.

"And we can keep warm now." The little widow's eyes glistened at the pile of splintered boards tumbling down on the kitchen floor. "Oh, Susan," and she drew near, the whole cover being off now.

There was an awful pause, every one staring at the smooth layer of brown paper. The supreme importance of the event swept them all into silence.





There was an awful pause, every one staring at the smooth layer of brown paper.

"I'm goin' to peek first," announced Elvira, finding her tongue.

This unloosed all the others. "She shan't; Elviry's always a-pushin' first."

"Mammy, mayn't I?"

"No, let me." It was a babel in a minute.

"You be still." It was Matthew who commanded silence. "Mother's goin' to look first; it's *her* box," he added convincingly.

The little widow would much rather have allowed this privilege to one of her brood, but it was difficult to choose between the five; so she put out her hand tremblingly, then drew it back.

"We'll let Susan do it," she said; "she couldn't go out to the wagon with the rest of you."

"Oh, yes, let baby do it," cried the others, easily pleased, and in a dreadful twitter to begin operations. "Yes, let baby," echoed Elvira, dashing away from the box to hug Susan, who, delighted at the opportunity, seized one of the black braids in her fat little hands, with a crow that disclosed the few teeth she possessed.

"Ow! Let me go!" screamed Elvira, very red in the face and twisting violently. "Mother, Susan's got my *hair*! Slap her."

"Oh, no, no," said the little widow, getting the

small, triumphant hands within her thin ones; "we wouldn't slap baby for anything. There, there, Susan mustn't. Naughty—naughty!"

Susan looked up in her mother's face to see if she really meant it, and concluding that she did, the black braid slid out of her hands, the string flying off to the floor.

"There, see what she's done! My hair's all untied," cried Elvira, in great vexation, and picking up the old white string; "she ought to be slapped," she added, bobbing her head decidedly, her black eyes flashing.

"Oh, no, no," said her mother again; "why, we couldn't slap our baby, Elvira, ever in all this world," and she pressed her closely to her breast. "Well, come, children, now Susan's going to pull up the paper."

"Wait!" screamed Elvira, the string between her teeth, and doubling over in great distress, "till I tie my braid. Oh, wait, Mammy."

"Oh, never mind! Viry, hurry up!" cried all the

boys together. And the other children, capering around the big box, with many dashes and pickings from impatient fingers, made Mrs. Hansell say, "Stop, children; there now, hurry, Elviry. Yes, yes, Susan, you're going to do it," until at last the great moment had arrived, and the whole family was drawn up around the centre of operations, each one scarcely daring to breathe.

"Now, baby," said the little widow, grasping Susan's fat hand in one of her thin ones, "you must take hold of one end of the paper; there, see," and she folded the little one's fingers over it. But Susan preferred to spat the smooth surface, and to crow loudly. So it was really Mother Hansell after all that lifted the veil and opened up fairyland to view.

XIV

THE CHILDREN IN THE MOUNTAIN CABIN

"Heaven bless me!" exclaimed the little widow. Then she put Susan on the floor, and fell on her knees.

"Mammy, Mammy, look!" the children were hopping wildly around the big box, clutching the sides, each attempting to get hold of their mother's head as it sank between her trembling hands, while she rocked herself to and fro. At last Elvira, unable to keep her hold of the box-edge, the others were crowding her so, and at the same time to attract her mother's attention, stamped her foot violently and howled, "*Look!*" way up above all the rest of the voices.

"Oh, 'tisin't for us; 'tisin't for us. It's got to go back," moaned Mrs. Hansell, shivering down further between her hands.

At the mention of the box going back, dire alarm struck all the group into sudden silence, and they stared into each other's faces in the greatest distress.

"It shan't," screamed Elvira; "it's ours," and she plunged into the box with both hands, pulling out bundles, which she dropped to the floor, in order to dive for more.

"You hold on," cried Matthew and Mark, seizing her little brown hands.

"You lemme be!" cried Elvira, in a fury.

"No, we ain't a-goin' to let you be," cried Jane. The other girl, who had picked up Susan, who was sprawling in everybody's way, and run over to a corner to barricade her with a big chair turned upside down, now came hurrying back, determination in every line of her thin little face.

"An' I say you ain't a-goin' to either, Elviry Hansell," she declared; "that box ain't yours."

Elvira had no time to retort, "An' 'tain't yours either, Matilda," for she was struggling so with the

boys that she had too scant breath to waste in replies. But she whirled a red face over to her sister for a second, while she twisted her wiry little arms in frantic endeavors to get free from the stronger grips upon them.

"Come on," said Matilda, coolly, to Jane, and to Luke, who never would take part in any family quarrel against Elvira, "and we'll pull her petticoat and tickle her legs. Then she'll let go."

"That's not fair," said Luke, glowering at her.

"Huh, I don't care."

"An' 'tis, too," cried Matilda, gleefully. "Come on, Jane, you tickle one leg, and I'll tickle the other, and then she's got to let go."

"Ow," cried Elvira, who knew quite well what to expect from the tickling process, and tucking up first one leg, then the other. "Go 'way, I'll kick dreadful!"

"She will," said Jane, fearfully, who also knew what to expect, as she and Matilda crouched on the floor, with fingers all ready for the attack.

"Huh! S'posin' she does? 'Fraid-cat," said Matilda, scornfully, "can't you scrouge back?"

"No, I can't," said Jane, truthfully, "not in time."

"Then, I tell you." Matilda slid off on the old floor, holding Jane's calico apron-end. "I'll tell you; you tickle first, an' when she's kicking you, I'll tickle the other leg, and she can't—"

"You tickle first," said Jane, interrupting.

"All right, I will," promised Matilda; "only you're so afraid, you won't tickle in time."

"Yes, I will," said Jane; "as long as she ain't kickin' me, I don't care."

"Well, come on," and Matilda slid cautiously up behind the ragged little shoes that ended Elvira's legs, and, understanding through long experience how to bide her time, she bestowed such stinging little nips on the nearest red woollen stocking, that Elvira sent it out with a spiteful kick, just too short to reach the attacking party, who took a long slide back on the floor. And having the same attention now being paid to her other woollen leg, and her

two hands full with the boys, it was easy to see that Elvira would soon be pushed quite away from her vantage ground by the big box.

Meantime Susan had crawled over her barricade, with mind intent on joining the family party again around the big box, but, meeting a large wad of paper, she changed her plan, and sat placidly still, chewing it into bits, which she spit out of her mouth with happy little crows.

And now, with four good pairs of hands busy at unpacking, why, it is needless to say that the big box was soon to be quite empty. Elvira ran around and around the sides, trying to crowd herself in somewhere. But they wouldn't let her in, nor Luke either, who they quite well knew would give her up his place as soon as he got it.

"I don't care a single bit," at last cried Elvira, finding all her efforts useless; "I'll take the bundles an' open 'em, so there!" with a dash at the nearest one on the floor.

"No—sir—ee!" exclaimed Matthew, flying away from the big box to pursue her; "we're goin' to

open 'em all together. Drop that, now, Viry Hansell!"

But easier said than done. Elvira, clutching the big bundle, raced around and around the kitchen, Matthew after her, till, in an unwary moment, she turned too suddenly; over she went, coming flat down on Susan, with her big wad of paper in her mouth.

"Now, then," cried Matthew, angrily, "see what you've done!" And stopping first to pick up the baby, it gave Elvira just the time she wanted. But where should she fly?

Just then a gust of wind answered her. It blew the crazy old door, always loose on its hinges, free, and with a whoop she pushed it wide, and flew out with her prize.

"All right. Now you won't come in again," declared Matthew, decidedly, who had set Susan in her mother's lap, and slamming the door, he pushed an old nail into the hole over the latch. "That fixes you, Miss Elviry Hansell," and back he went to the interrupted scene of his operations.

"Where's Elviry?" asked Luke, anxiously, as the bustle went on.

"Outdoors," said Matthew, concisely.

"Outdoors?" repeated Luke. "It's cold there."

"Well, she can run and keep warm. I'm goin' to let her in, in a minute. Now, then, we've everythin' out," peering into the box-depth.

"Let's get into a ring round Mammy an' open 'em one at a time," said Mark.

"All right," said Matthew, approvingly. "Come on, move the bundles. All hands now. Take hold, Luke."

But Luke stood quite still. "She can't keep warm a-runnin'," he said.

"Yes, she can; and besides, she's a naughty girl. She's always a naughty girl," said Matthew. "Come ahead, Luke, I'll take care of Elviry, an' let her in, in a minute, I tell you."

But Luke preferred to see to the matter himself. So, in the midst of the bustle attendant upon

getting ready to open the bundles, he slid out, with Mrs. Hansell's old black shawl, and scampered around the corner of the house.

"Where be you, Elviry?" he cried, under his breath, and wishing he could put the old shawl around himself.

"Here," said a voice, and looking off, he jumped, for there on a high snowbank, back of the old pump, was a boy in a big overcoat with a red woollen tippet tied around his head.

Luke took one good look, then sprang for the house.

"Oh, you silly thing," cried Elvira's voice, "it's me! Come here, Luke!"

It was so unmistakably Elvira's voice that Luke stared again, and, rubbing his eyes at every step, he stumbled up, putting the old shawl under his arm.

"What you got on?" he gasped, staring wildly at her.

"Hee-hee-hee!" giggled Elvira, drumming her old shoes against the ratty snowbank. "Come up here, an' I'll tell you."

As Luke wouldn't be told until he got up there, he lost no time in doing so, and was soon beside her, with the whites of his eyes showing generously in a prolonged stare at the overcoat and red woollen tippet.

"What *you* got?" demanded Elvira, feeling quite elegant and sociable, and smoothing down the overcoat front with contented fingers.

"Mammy's shawl—for you," said Luke.

"I don't want it," said Elvira, picking at the end of the woollen tippet with her little finger quirked up elegantly. "Put it on yourself," which Luke was only too glad to do.

"Where'd you get 'em?" gasped Luke, forgetting in his worry over Elvira's being out in the cold, any big bundle she might have had in possession at the time of her departure and laying fearful fingers on the magnificent coat-sleeve.

"O dear, hee-hee-hee!" Elvira went off into a giggle again. And she swung her feet smartly back and forth. "Why, see there, Luke Hansell!" She flapped the coat collar back suddenly. "See there!" she repeated.

"Where?" said Luke, stupidly.

"Why, there, you silly thing, see that paper! 'For Biggest Boy.' I know. I've spelled it all out."

"Well, I don't see," began Luke, blankly, huddling up in the old shawl and wishing it was bigger.

"Oh, you, I'd like to shake you, Luke!" cried Elvira, twisting her hands together nervously; "it's just as bad as it can be to be so stupid. I *ought* to shake you."

"You may," said Luke, humbly, who had given that answer many times to Elvira, but had never yet received the shaking.

"Twouldn't be any use, you'd be just as stupid," she said with a sigh. "Well, Matthew's our biggest boy, ain't he?"

"Yes," said Luke, "he is."

"Well, an' so this coat an' tippet's meant for him," said Elvira, composedly, and drawing her cold fingers well up within the thick sleeves.

"That coat for Matthew!" cried Luke, slipping off from his snowy perch; *"an' that tippet, too!"* With that he lost his head completely, and, getting entangled in the ragged fringe of the shawl, over he went, rolling down against the frozen pump.

Meantime the heads of all the children remaining in the old kitchen, except that of Susan, who had squirmed out of her mother's lap to the delight of her paper-chewing again, were pushed tight up over Matthew's shoulder, as he laboriously spelled out a letter found in the midst of the bundle-opening.

"Mrs. Hansell—that's Mother," explained Matthew.

"Yes, yes, we know," said Matilda, scornfully; "go on."

"Well, stop pinching me," demanded Matthew,

dropping his hand with the letter in his lap to turn a pair of indignant black eyes upon her.

"I didn't," said Matilda, but she ducked nevertheless; "it was Jane."

"Oh, what a story; I didn't neither," said Jane, with round eyes at her.

"Well, do you get right straight down, Matilda Hansell. You ain't goin' to look over, now."

"I won't get down. And I will look too," declared Matilda, savagely.

"Let's see you." With that Matthew shifted his seat on the floor; seeing which, Jane nimbly slipped into Matilda's place.

"Oh, now, that's my place, Jane Hansell," cried Matilda, with a very red face and blazing eyes.

"No, 'tain't," said Matthew, "that's Jane's. Now you keep still, or I'll put you out along with Elviry."

"I'll tell Mother you put Elviry out," said Matilda, with venom.

"Well, you needn't," said Matthew, composedly; 'an' she ain't cold, 'cause Luke's took her out Mammy's big shawl. I seen him."

"Mrs. Hansell," and he fell to reading the letter again. "I re-mem, m-e-m,—yes, that's it,—'ber, b-e-r—remember you did my wash—washing last summer. You a-p-p-e-a-r-e-d—" Matthew scratched his head, looked sideways at the word, then full in front, with great determination, then gave it up as a bad job, and slid over it, hoping the children wouldn't notice it.

"Elviry'd read that," said Matilda, "as quick's anythin'."

"To have a g-r-e-a-t great many c-h-i-l-d-r-e-n, so I t-h-o-u-g-h-t,"—again Matthew scratched his head and gave great diligence to the word, but was forced to relinquish it also, plunging on,—"I would send you a box." That was plain enough, especially as the box was there before them. "Some of the a-r-t-i-c-l-e-s—" What in the world is that?" cried Matthew, in despair.

"Go on," cried Matilda; "p'raps the rest will tell."

So Matthew hastened on, "are s-e-l-e-c-t-e-d —" Here Matthew felt obliged to omit two lines. "The o-v-e-r-c-o-a-t,"—somehow Matthew knew by intuition what that spelt,—"and the red t-i-p-p-e-t are for your biggest boy—" Down went the letter to the floor, to be pounced on by Matilda's greedy fingers. Matthew, regardless of this, swept Jane aside, and pawing each bundle this way and that, twitched the strings off, making havoc generally in the piles of presents.

"Tain't here; she's forgotten to send it," he howled, and, "biggest boy" though he was, he threw himself flat on the floor and cried as hard as he could. Everybody stopped in dismay to hear him.

"Hee-hee-hee!" giggled a voice close to the broken window-pane. Elvira flapped up both arms in the overcoat sleeves, and bobbed her head, tied up in the red tippet.

"Oh!" screamed all the children in such a voice that Matthew raised his head a minute. The next he was flinging wide the crazy old door.

"Don't you wish you may get 'em?" screamed Elvira, making quick time off up the bank, and flapping the coat sleeves derisively.

"That's mine, that coat and tippet!" screamed Matthew, flying after her; "mine—*mine!*"

XV

THE MINISTER LOOKS AFTER HIS PARISHIONERS

Matilda, clutching the precious letter in her greedy fingers, said quite importantly, "Now, children, you can come and look over me while I read it."

"Children!" snorted Mark, in a fury. "I'm twice as big as you. Give that letter here, Tilly Hansell," making a dash for it.

"I ain't a-goin' to, ain't, ain't," screamed Matilda, in a fright, and commencing a mad rush around the kitchen. Then, seeing Mark gaining on her, and Jane running to head her off and deliver her up to him, she turned suddenly and flung the letter into the little widow's lap, where she still crouched on the floor.

"It's Mammy's letter, anyway; 'tain't yours," she cried triumphantly.

"Mammy, can't I read it?" cried Mark, throwing himself down by her side, and spreading his red, chapped hand over the letter.

"Read what?" said Mrs. Hansell, lifting her dazed face.

"Your letter. 'Twas in the box," said Mark, clapping his other hand on it, too, and keeping a sharp lookout for Matilda's next move.

"Mayn't I? I had it before he did, Mammy." Matilda flung herself down by the little woman's side. "Mark's awful mean—he's always pickin' and grabbin'."

"I don't know what you mean, children," said the little widow, turning perplexed eyes from one to the other.

"Well, I'll tell you," cried Mark. "Now keep still, Matilda. You've got a letter, Mammy, in the box, and mayn't I read it?"

"I've got a letter?" repeated little Mrs. Hansell, in a bewildered way.

"Yes, yes," cried Matilda, impatiently. "Now, Mark Hansell, it's mine; I had it first." With that she slapped his red hands with her two little fists. "Anyhow, I'll keep mine on top of yours," suiting the action to the words.

"You won't get the letter," said Mark, with a grin, flattening his hands tightly over it. "Mammy, mayn't I read it? Do hurry an' say yes. Tilly's actin' just awful."

"I've got a letter?" repeated Mrs. Hansell, looking around the old kitchen. When her glance reached the big box, and pile of bundles scattered about, she clasped her hands and burst into tears. "It's too good to be true," she cried; "I can't believe it."

"Why, the box is there. See it," and Mark unguardedly hopped to his feet, ran up to it, and slapped it triumphantly with a resounding thwack.

"There—Mark Hansell, I've got it!" He turned to see Matilda, too excited to keep still, waving the letter, and hopping from one foot to the other. When she saw Mark coming, she wisely took refuge under her mother's arm, within which she

tucked the letter, gripped fast in her hand.

Mrs. Hansell sat up suddenly. "Did you say there was a letter come in that box?" she demanded, unwonted energy coming into her pale, tired eyes.

"Yes, I've been a-tellin' you so for ever so long," said Mark, in great chagrin, "an' now Tilly's grabbed it away from me."

"I didn't; I had it before," said Matilda, squirming up tightly to her mother.

"Give me that letter," said her mother.

Matilda, with anxious eyes on Mark, set the letter, now much wrinkled, in her mother's thin hand, and held her breath in suspense.

"Well, as Matthew ain't here," casting a glance around the kitchen, "you're the next biggest, Mark, so you may read it," at last said Mrs. Hansell.

"Ow!" grumbled Matilda, very much discomfited.

Mark, too jubilant to get the letter, wasted no time in his triumph, but, sitting down on the floor

in front of his mother, spread it out, and began his attempt to find out what it said. Jane came up and planted herself by his side.

"Mrs. Hansell," read Mark, quite fluently.

"Matthew read that," said Matilda, sourly.

"You stop," said Mark, without looking at her; "I'm reading this to Mammy. 'Mrs. Hansell, I remember you did my washing last summer.'"

"Hoh! He ain't readin'; he's only sayin' what Matthew read, Mammy. Mammy, Matthew's read all that." Matilda got up to her knees and hugged her mother around the throat.

"Sit down," said Mrs. Hansell. The conviction that she really had a box had been slow in growing, but now that she was sure of it, it was quite time to set up authority equal to such magnificence.

Matilda slid down meekly, her arms falling away in amazement to her lap.

"You a-p-p-e-a-r-e-d—" Mark stuck fast on the word that had floored Matthew, and helplessly

shook his head.

"What is it?" demanded his mother. Since she really had a letter, she was going to have every word of it.

So Mark began again, but it was no use. Flounder and guess as he might, it was impossible to say what that dreadful assortment of letters might mean.

"Oh, well, if you can't read it, Mark," said Mrs. Hansell, coolly, "I must get some one who can."

"Let me try, Mammy, let me," begged Matilda, with two eager little hands thrust out.

"I can read the next words," declared Mark, hanging on to the letter like grim death.

"No, the next ones won't do. I must have the whole of the letter," said Mrs. Hansell, with great dignity. "Yes, you can try now, Matilda," and she picked the sheet from Mark's hand, to be hungrily seized by Matilda.

"She can't read any better'n a pig," said Mark in

great scorn. "Now, what is it, Matilda Hansell?"

Matilda turned her shoulders on him, and spelled backward and forward, up and down, with the greatest vigor, but all to no purpose. Her face was red as fire, and she had all she could do to keep from crying, but still she struggled on.

"No, that won't do. You can't read it either," said Mrs. Hansell at length, in the midst of Mark's "What did I tell you, Mammy? Ho! Ho!"

"Now, children, it's just this way," she continued, "some one has got to read that letter, 'cause it explains th' whole thing,—th' box an' all,—so one of you may take it down to the minister an' ask him to please read it for me."

"Oh, let me, Mammy, let me," cried Matilda, seizing her mother's arm.

"No, me; I'm goin'; I'm the biggest," said Mark, having no relish that Matilda should see the inside of the parson's house before he did. Besides, on that important errand!

"Yes, I'm not sure but you ought to go, seem'

Matthew ain't here," said Mrs. Hansell.

"O dear!" Matilda flung herself flat on the floor with such wails that Susan crept up, her mouth full of chewed paper, to see what it was all about.

"Hush making such a noise! Well, you may go, too," said their mother. "Oh, mercy me, what you been a-eatin', Susan? Spit it right out this minute," as she gathered her up in her arms.

"An' I'm a-goin' to carry th' letter," declared Matilda, racing up with her tattered old hood and the remnant of a black cloak, "so there!" bobbing her head at Mark.

"No such thing. I shall carry it; I'm the biggest," said Mark, decidedly.

"So you always say," cried Matilda, fretfully, and taking out a pin from her mouth, she brought the two sides of the hood together in a fashion that kept it on at least.

"Well, an' I am," said Mark, "so I always shall say it."

"Mammy, can't I carry the letter part way to the minister's?" begged Matilda, running over to her mother.

"You're not goin' to," declared Mark, stiffly, and marching off to the door.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Hansell, poking out with her finger the chewed wads of paper that appeared to be the last packed away in Susan's mouth. "Dear me, it's a wonder you ain't choked to death. What'd you say? Oh, yes, you may carry it part way. There, there!" as she set the squirming baby straight on her lap.

"There, Mammy says I can," Matilda shouted triumphantly, and spinning around on one set of toes, till the old hood slipped away from the pin and fell to the floor.

"Did you, Mammy?" cried Mark, running back to Mrs. Hansell.

"Did I what?" asked his mother. "Dear me, I wonder how much this child has swallowed."

"Say Matilda could carry the letter part way?"

"Yes, I did. Now hurry along an' behave, both of you. An' be quick, or I'll send Jane after all, and keep you to home."

This would be so much worse than giving up the letter for half the distance, that Mark took himself off without delay. Matilda scuttled after and slammed the old door as tight as it would shut.

It was certainly an hour by the old clock that wheezed crazily in the corner, and struck whatever time it chose, when steps were heard coming up the frozen path. The door burst open, and in rushed Matilda and Mark, and after them, at a slower pace, as befitted his calling, Mr. St. John, the minister of the mountain parish. The rest of the family sat in gloomy or impatient silence around the big box. All but Matthew; he was radiant in an overcoat, that, had anybody attempted to fit to him, certainly couldn't have been more of a success. And all around his neck was tied a thick, red woollen tippet that seemed to possess no end, so much was left that was wound generously around his head. He was strutting up and down the old kitchen floor,

patting his shaggy sleeves, and feeling the thickness of the overcoat skirts, and saying "Ah!" in a tone of the greatest satisfaction.

Luke, unable to take his eyes from him, followed every movement silently, while Elvira, nearly bursting with impatience, sat on the floor, alternately drumming on the side of the big box and bullying Jane, when unfortunate enough to get in her way.

"There! Now let's open the bundles," screamed Elvira, hopping to her feet. "Mark and Tilly have come!"

"For shame, Elviry," reproved her mother, sharply, who now came in from the bedroom, after seeing that Susan was really asleep, and not in convulsions over a diet of paper wads. "Can't you see the minister comin'? Oh, good day, sir!" She dropped him what was meant for a courtesy, and, wiping off a chair with her blue checked apron, she looked around on all her little group for their best behavior.

"I thought it better to come myself, my good

woman," said the minister. He was quite young, this being his first parish, and only regarded as a sort of missionary effort to get his hand in after the theological seminary. "Ah—I quite forget your name, madam, as you are so seldom at church."

"Hansell, sir," said the little widow, with another effort at a courtesy. "An' I live so far, sir, from the church, it's not easy gettin' there, if you please." She did not add, "And how can I, without anything to wear?"

"Ah, yes, no doubt," answered the Rev. Mr. St. John, reassuringly. "Well, I considered it best to come and read the letter to you myself, as it contains important directions. I will do so now," and he spread it open on one hand, all the family coming up, even Matthew, losing sight for a moment of his new splendor.

"Mrs. Hansell," read the minister, clearing his throat, "I remember you did my washing last summer. You appeared to have a great many children, so I thought I would send you a box. Some of the articles are selected with reference to the ages of the members of your family. For

instance, the overcoat and the red tippet are for your biggest boy."

"I know it," cried Matthew, unable to keep still, and beginning to strut again. "I've got it on."

The minister looked and nodded at him. This unloosed Matthew's tongue, who, before that, had been afraid of him. "I tell you what, it's bully!" he declared, peering out from the folds of the red tippet; "an' this, too," patting his head.

"So 'tis," said the Rev. Mr. St. John, with a little laugh.

"There are some jackets and trousers for the other boys."

"*Ow!*" Mark and Luke both gave a howl together and darted off toward the pile of bundles.

"Come back this minute," demanded the little widow, sharply. "And, oh, sir, would you mind reading real smart like," she said to the minister, "'cause we can't wait much longer to see what's in them bundles." She was twisting her apron-end now with nervous fingers, and a red spot mounted

to either thin cheek.

"Indeed, I will," said the young man, obligingly. "Well, let me see, where was I? Oh,—" "The other things you will know quite well how to dispose of."

"Now I wish you to allow me to have three of your children—your two oldest boys and one girl—to stay a few weeks at my house. This will help you, and I do not doubt that I shall get some amusement out of it. The girl will make the boys behave, I feel quite sure. You may choose which daughter; it makes no difference to me. Ask Mr. St. John, the minister, you know, to put them on the train under the care of the conductor, and then to telegraph me. I enclose a check for all expenses. And I wish you all a Merry Christmas."

"Henrietta van Ruypen,"

"Well, well, well." The Rev. Mr. St. John spread the letter on his knee, then fell to stroking his chin, where he was fondly expecting a beard some fine day. "To think of that old money bags," he was going to say, but pulled himself up in time.

"I did do her washing," the little widow was standing in front of him, still twitching her apron-end, "and she was awful cross, and——"

"Well, something has happened to change her," said the minister, "there's no denying. As I remember last summer, she was not a pleasant person to talk to."

"An' that she wasn't," said Mrs. Hansell. "She was that partik'ler 'bout a cent in change. But that box——" she stopped and turned her eyes over toward it.

"Yes, the box, and the invitation for the children to visit her," said the minister. "You can't get around these facts without believing she's entirely changed."

"The what?" said the little widow.

"Why, the invitation for the children, at least three of them, to visit her," said the young man.

"An' where'd she say that, if you please?"

"Why, I just read it to you," he said, a trifle impatiently.

"Oh, no, excuse me, sir." The poor woman's head was now turning from side to side in bewilderment; the children, who had understood as little, beginning to clamor lustily for the bundles to be opened.

Upon this the Rev. Mr. St. John said, "Stop, this moment!" bringing down his foot, "Just as he slaps the Bible," whispered Elvira, who had been to church one eventful Sunday. "I will read it to you again," which he did.

"And now, what have you done with the check?"

"Check? I don't know what you mean," said the little widow, utterly incapable of understanding anything more after that invitation!

"Why, the check,—dear me,—the money she sent."

"She hasn't sent me no money. She paid me for the washing when she was here," said Mrs. Hansell.

"I mean the money she sent in the letter," he shook it at her; "the paper check to pay for the children's railroad fare. Where is it?"

"I hain't seen no money," said Mrs. Hansell, putting up her hand uncertainly to her poor bewildered head.

Thereupon the minister decided to take matters into his own hands. So getting off from his chair, "Children," he said, "not one of these bundles can be opened until we find something that has been dropped out of this letter. A little strip of paper."

"I guess Susan's et it," said Elvira, cheerfully.

"Oh, no, that cannot be."

"Yes, 'tis," she defied him, "she's been eatin' paper just awful."

"Well, look for it as hard as you can. I'll help you." The minister dropped to all fours, and together they all looked over the papers and bundles strewn in confusion around the big box. No strip of paper was to be seen.

"This is very dreadful," said the Rev. Mr. St. John, at last, getting up to his feet, and snapping off the wisps of straw from his clothes, which he was glad to reflect were not his best ones.

"Now can't we open the bundles?" screamed Matilda.

"Yes, can't we? can't we?" begged the others, except Matthew, who was wholly concerned in himself and his new attire.

"Everythin's out of the old box," said Mark, giving it a kick.

"Yes, everythin'," said Elvira, taking a flying leap past it, and peering in once more, "cept an old scrap o' paper." She dived into its depths and brought up a long, thin strip, which she waved disdainfully before casting it off. At sight of which,

the minister sprang and twisted it out of her hands. "Oh, the check! Well, I *am* thankful that's found!"

But this fell on careless ears after all. For was not the opening of the wonderful bundles at last to be allowed! And for the next half hour nothing was heard but the tearing of paper, the bursting of string, and the howls of delight from the young brood and the half-frightened, tearful ejaculations from the little mother. No one stopped in the process of unfolding the treasures, except to dig the teeth into a cracker or a bun, too hungry to wait.

"Tea, Mammy!" Mark bundled a package that spilt half its contents into his mother's lap, then rushed back for more treasures.

"Thank the Lord!" she cried, involuntarily, and hungrily gathering up each morsel.

The minister turned aside his face to look out of the window, pretending to see something very attractive in the drear winter landscape, and so the babel went on.

At last all the unfolding was done. "Now then," said the Rev. Mr. St. John, "you understand, don't you, that Matthew and Mark are to go, and one of the girls, to visit Mrs. Van Ruypen?"

"See my new dress," interrupted Matilda, prancing up with a red merino gown, resplendent in gilt buttons all down the back.

"That's mine," said Elvira, dropping the blue one, which she had selected, now that she saw how pretty the red one looked.

"Tain't either. This is too big for you. Anyway, it's mine," said Matilda, folding it within her arms, and getting off the kitchen-length from her sister.

"Children, children, stop quarrelling," commanded the minister.

"Huh, I ain't afraid o' him," said Elvira to Luke, and pointing to the minister, who since he had been down on the floor with them, hunting for the check, had seemed quite one of the family.

"Now which one of the girls shall you allow to go to Madam Van Ruypen's?" asked the minister.

"She has left it to you, Mrs. Hansell."

"Oh, I don't know, I'm sure," she said helplessly.

"You can send which one you like," he said kindly, and smiling down at her encouragingly.

"Well, Elviry ain't goin', anyway," said Matthew, with great decision.

"Where?" Elvira dropped her blue gown in a heap, and ran up to her mother's chair. "Where ain't I goin', Mammy?" but she looked up into the minister's face for the reply.

"Oh, visiting with Matthew and Mark," he said laughingly at her.

"What's visiting?"

"Oh, a little journey. But be quiet now, and give your mother time to think."

"What's a journey?" demanded Elvira, without the least hesitation.

"Oh, going away on the cars."

"Are Matthew and Mark goin'?" asked Elvira, with a long breath, and very big eyes.

"Yes. Well, Mrs. Hansell, what do you say?"

"I don't know."

"I'm goin'; I'm goin'," announced Elvira, capering away.

"Be quiet, child, your mother hasn't decided," said the minister.

"I'm goin'; I'm goin'," Elvira kept on, shouting and dancing away as hard as she could, which presently brought the other two girls up to their mother's chair with a clamor to know what it was all about.

When it was explained, the trouble was so great the minister had more than two minds to flee the scene and let the little widow get out of it as best she might. At last a happy thought struck him.

"Mrs. Hansell, you might let them draw," he said; "strips of paper, you know. Now that's the very idea!" He clapped his hands like a boy. "Now,

Matthew, get the pieces."

"It's the littlest, ain't it?" said Matthew, hurrying, as fast as the dignity of the great coat and tippet would allow, to obey the minister.

"No, no, the longest," said the minister, laughing. "Now, girls, you must stand in a row—there—and toe that crack. That's it," as they scuttled into place on the old kitchen floor. "Now then, my boy, hurry up." He was as excited as the children themselves, and found it as difficult to wait.

"Now shut your eyes," and he turned his eyes on the line of girls, while Matthew handed him the little strips.

"Tilly's peekin'," announced Luke.

"I ain't," said Matilda, twisting her eyelids tightly together; "not a single squint, so there, Luke Hansell."

"Well, all ready!" The minister whirled around, the little strips neatly placed, and all presenting the same appearance, between his two hands. "Matilda, you're the oldest; you may draw first."

"O dear! I don't know which one," said Matilda, putting out her brown hand, then drawing it back with a jerk.

"Of course not," said Matthew, bursting into a laugh; "if you did that would be peekin'."

"Well, you must hurry, and give your sisters a chance," said the minister.

"I don't want to; I want to go myself," said Matilda, hanging back.

"Then you don't want to draw," said the young man, severely. "Very well, you give up your chance. Elvira, it's your turn."

"Oh, I will, I will," cried Matilda, terribly alarmed, and, making a lunge, she twitched out the middle piece, so very tiny it was scarcely worth being there at all.

"Hoh, hoh!" snickered Mark. And Luke gave a little crow. Badly as he should miss Elvira, he wouldn't for the world want her to lose the chance of going.

"Now, Elvira."

"Oh, I'm goin'," she said, confidently, laying hold of the outside piece.

Luke trembled; that couldn't be the one. Out it came,—there was a second's lull,—and a strip so long it had to be doubled up in the middle was flying from her hand.

"I told you I was goin'," she said.

XVI

WHO WILL HELP?

The Van Ruypen butler came down the rose-tinted room, known as madam's boudoir, with his usual soft, catlike tread, and stood by her very chair for a moment without being seen. She appeared lost in thought, her head bent on her hand, and her right foot tapping impatiently on the carpet.

"If you please, madam," said the serving-man, with a little apologetic cough to announce his presence, "I—"

"Well," interrupted his mistress, sharply, and lifting her head with an impatient gesture, "what is it, Hooper?" Then, without waiting for an answer, she got out of her chair, and went quickly across the apartment to her writing-desk. "I want you to take a note to Mr. King's, to little Miss Pepper," and she began to write hastily, and as if no very

good humor inspired her thought.

"If you please, madam," said Hooper, obsequiously, "little Master Pepper is downstairs now."

"Hey? What is that you are saying?" demanded the old lady, throwing down her pen to turn away from the writing-table.

"He's downstairs," repeated Hooper, "the little Pepper lad."

"Which one?" cried madam, quickly.

"*The* one, madam," said the butler; "I don't know his name."

"Then it must be Joel," said the old lady, and a smile of great satisfaction began to run over her strongly marked face. "Show him up at once, Hooper; at once," she added, with an imperious wave of her hand that set all the heirlooms of rings to shining at a great rate.

"Yes, madam," said Hooper, getting out on his errand as expeditiously as possible.

"To think that Joel has really come!" she exclaimed to herself joyfully. She deserted her writing-table now and began to walk up and down the apartment, her long fingers nervously playing with the silken cord of her elaborate morning gown. "Oh, Joel," as her restless feet brought her near the door, "there you are, my boy."

"Yes'm," said Joel, wholly miserable, and leaning against the casing, with his black eyes fastened on the staircase, as if the way to Paradise lay there.

"Well, come in. Don't stand there any longer. Pray come in." She waved her hand authoritatively toward the centre of the apartment, then followed him, as he crept dismally in. "Now sit down," she said, in her most sociable way.

So Joel sat down and fastened his eyes on the beautiful red velvet carpet.

"So you've come to see me this time, instead of my going to call on you," said Madam Van Ruypen, to set him at his ease.

"Yes'm," said Joel, "Mamsie made me come."

"That's not very polite," observed the old lady, dryly. Which so added to Joel's confusion, that he folded his small brown hands together tightly, with a wild idea of springing off down the long stairs and out of the big house—but Mamsie. Oh, he couldn't do it! So he sat still, hardly daring to breathe.

"However, it doesn't signify, since you are here," Madam Van Ruypen went on, her eyes twinkling, which, of course, Joel couldn't see, as he didn't dare to look up. Then she burst out suddenly into a laugh, long and loud, from which it seemed so difficult for her to get free, that at last Joel tore his gaze off from the carpet and stared at her in terror.

"Oh, I'm through," said the old lady, wiping her eyes; "dear me, and I haven't laughed so for many a day. No, no, Lizette," to the French maid, who popped in her white-capped head at the unwonted noise, "I'm not going to have a fit. Go back to your work. Now then, Joel, do you know what I wanted to see you for, and the errand that

made me take all the trouble to call on you the other day?"

"No'm," said Joel, all his misery returning, and hanging his head again.

"Well, you see, I was in great trouble."

Joel looked up quickly. Then his head fell again, to think how he had acted—and she, the rich old Madam Van Ruypen, in trouble! In the first place he couldn't believe his ears; but worse than ever it was for him that he had been bad at such a time.

"The *greatest* trouble," said the old lady, whereat Joel's chin went lower yet, and his hands twisted together miserably.

"You see Ben, who is the really sensible one among you Peppers," said Madam Van Ruypen, bluntly, "and the one I rely on, wasn't at home. And to think I had gotten myself into such a scrape. Joel, you can't think, I was just about frantic!" She leaned forward, resting both hands on her knees.

"Oh, what was it? What was it?" cried Joel,

forgetting all else except this dreadful thing that had happened to her, and, hopping off from his chair, he ran over to her, clutching her morning gown with excited fingers.

Madam Van Ruypen put both strong hands on his shoulders. "I'd gone and written to that washerwoman up in the country to send down some of her children for a visit here. Think of that, Joel Pepper; I must have been crazy!"

Joel drew a long breath, his black eyes fastened on her face.

"And I don't know any more what to do with children, nor what to say to them, for that matter," declared the old lady, dropping her hands in her lap, "than—" she cast her eyes about the apartment, "that table there," bringing them up to the nearest article.

"So I went for you in my trouble," she continued—Joel, not thinking of anything to say, wisely keeping still. "You understand, Joel," with a keen glance at him, "you aren't anyway to be compared with Ben, but seeing I couldn't get him, and two of

the three children that are coming are boys, why, I had to make you do to help me out."

"Are some boys coming?" asked Joel, finding his tongue.

"Yes," said the old lady. "Oh, didn't I tell you? I wrote to the mother to send the two biggest boys and one girl—I couldn't take any more than one girl, but she'll be a quiet, gentle little thing, of course, and keep the boys civilized. That's what I wanted her for."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Joel in great disgust, and digging the toes of one foot well into the thick carpet.

"Oh, she won't trouble you, Joel," said the old lady, confidently; "she'll want to play with dolls all the time. I will keep her supplied. And if she should get discontented, why I'll ask Polly what to do. But what I want to know from you, Joel, is, will you help me out with those boys?"

Madam Van Ruypen grasped him again by the shoulders to look him squarely in the face. "Will you, Joel?"

"Pip is coming home with Ben and Jasper," said Joel, irrelevantly.

"What? Not that boy who almost killed Jasper King?" cried Madam Van Ruypen, and letting her hands again fall, this time in sheer astonishment.

"He didn't," contradicted Joel, bluntly.

"Well, he was the cause of it, anyway," said the old lady, inconsequently, "so never mind, we won't waste words about him. I wouldn't have believed that Mr. King would do such a thing. Dear me, I shouldn't want ever to see the boy again."

"Well, Grandpapa does," said Joel, bobbing his black head, "cause he's going to bring him; an' I'm glad of it."

"Well, supposing this boy, this Pip, does come," said Madam Van Ruypen, much discomfited, "what of it? That won't make any difference about helping me out with these two dreadful ones I've gone and fastened myself up with. Now will you do it, Joel? You must."

"I've got to help about Pip," said Joel, reluctantly.

"Pip! Well, who cares about your Pip?" began the old lady in an autocratic way.

"I've got to help about Pip," said Joel again, and beginning to back slowly away from her.

"See here, Joel!" she exclaimed in alarm, and seizing the end of his blouse, "you won't refuse to help me? Just think of it, I don't in the least know what to say to boys, let alone entertaining them—and they're coming, Joel Pepper, they actually are!"

She dropped the blouse-end and wrung her hands together. "And that minister is going to send them along. Like enough they'll get here to-day, although he hasn't telegraphed yet. And what shall I do, in Heaven's name!" She was so nervous by this time that it was impossible for her to sit still, so she got off from her chair and began to pace up and down the room, with long, excited steps.

"I've got to help about Pip," said Joel again, and standing quite still by her deserted chair.

"Well, don't you say that again," commanded the old lady in an angry tone, and not pausing in her walk. "Help about your Pip if you want to, Joel Pepper. I'm sure I don't care if your Grandfather is foolish enough to burden himself with that dreadful boy. And I guess I'll telegraph to Mr. what's-his-name—the minister—oh, St. John, to keep those children back. They can stay in their poor old cabin for all me. I can't have them here," and she turned off to the writing-table.

"Oh, no, don't, don't," screamed Joel, flying after her. "I'll help you. Let 'em come—I will!"

"No, you don't want to," said the old lady, perversely. "I see it in your face, Joel." She turned and looked at him keenly. "It's no use, those children can't get this chance. They must stay at home."

"Let them come," howled Joel. Then he laid hold of her gown and blubbered into it. "O dear! *Please* let 'em come!"

Just then in came Hooper, who appeared not to notice the astonishing state of things as he held out

to his mistress a yellow envelope, and then discreetly retired.

"It's well you promised, Joel," said Madam Van Ruypen, grimly, throwing down the yellow sheet, which she tore out of the envelope, "and it was just in the nick of time. Those children are on the way, and will be here this afternoon."

Meantime an express train from another direction was rapidly bearing the party from the Presbrey School. And at this identical minute Pip was pressing his thin little face against the window-pane, as he had slipped from his parlor chair to rest his tired legs. "What would it be like to go to Ben's house and be with him all the time?" For Pip never for a moment lost sight of the fact that it was Ben, and Ben alone, who was all the world to him.

He stood so for some minutes, his gaze idly resting on the flying landscape, of which he could not have told a single feature. Then he gave a long

sigh and glanced longingly across the aisle at Ben, comfortable in his chair over a book, for Jasper was asleep in the chair ahead. Besides, he wasn't to be talked to, so the doctor had given orders, on the home journey.

"Hey—what is it?" Ben in turning a page happened to glance up and catch a glimpse of the earnest little eyes.

"Nothing," Pip tried to say, but he made no success of it.

"Oh, come over here," said Ben, in a low voice, because of Jasper. And tossing aside the book, he crowded Pip in next to his window. "Now then, sir, what is it?"

"Nothing," said Pip, in a joyful little way. He could say it now, as he had what he wanted—Ben to himself.

Ben leaned over and picked up his book. "You can have a nice time looking out of the window, eh, Pip?"

"Yes," said Pip, but his thin little face fell, and he

turned it away to cast a dismal glance on what he didn't care in the least to see.

Ben found his place in the book and plunged in. Was Bob really to be pursued by the shark, or would the good sailor who had befriended him before, save him now? He read on—whirled a page—what was that, a sigh? He glanced quickly around his book, and took one look at Pip. "Oh, say," he broke out, and down the book went to the floor, "what shall we do now, I wonder?"

"Do you mean it; are we going to do anything, Ben?" cried Pip, in a joyful voice, and whirling around in great excitement.

"Yes—hush, we might wake Jasper," warned Ben, but he smiled into the happy little face. "It must be something quiet, you know." He threw his arm around the small figure and drew it down beside him on the parlor chair. "There's room enough for us both, isn't there?" he said pleasantly.

"You're so awful big," said Pip, squirming in, and snuggling up to Ben as tightly as he could in quite

an ecstatic frame of mind. "Oh, I wish you'd draw something, Ben, I really do."

"Well, so I will," said Ben, after a bit of consideration. "Now then, you sit still and I'll get my bag," which he soon did, from the rack overhead. And extracting the drawing materials, every movement being superintended by Pip in the greatest satisfaction, he soon had them all laid out, ready to begin operations.

"Well, sir, and now what shall we draw?" he asked, balancing his pencil thoughtfully on his fingers.

Pip turned around, his pale eyes searching the parlor car in all directions. "Draw that old woman," he said at last, pointing to the subject of his choice; "she's awful funny."

"Hush!" said Ben, pulling down his finger.

"Oh, no, I couldn't draw the people in the car; they wouldn't like it. Choose something else, Pip."

"There isn't anything else," said Pip, in a disconsolate voice. "Everything outside is running

so fast."

"I tell you, I'll draw something from memory," said Ben, quickly. "I'll show you the little brown house where I used to live—that'll be nice. You'd like that, Pip."

"Yes," said Pip, "I should."

If Ben said so, that was quite enough, so he crowded as closely to the scene of operations as he could get.

"See here," said Ben, twisting off, "you don't leave me room enough. You mustn't crowd so, Pip."

"I can't see, then," said Pip, dreadfully disappointed.

"Well, I tell you, get on my other side, then,—there, that's fine," as Pip hopped over. "Now my right hand is free. Well, here goes!" And in two minutes the little brown house began to stare right up at them from the paper, and Ben was drawing furiously away, until it seemed as if every revolution of the car wheels was whirling them to Badgertown.

"Oh, do teach me to draw houses, Ben," cried Pip, as the little lane down to Grandma Bascom's began to come in sight. "Do, Ben, please," he begged.

"So I will," promised Ben, kindly. "Now you can take the pencil when I've finished this, Pip, and I'll give you your first lesson."

"May I? May I?" and Pip ended up with a glad little crow.

"Hush! You'll wake Jasper," warned Ben. "Yes, and I'll sharpen you up a nice new point on my best pencil, and you shall make a try. There, this is almost done." He put in a few more strokes, and held it off to examine with a critical eye, "All except a bit of shading in those trees,—there, now it's all right," and he laid the sketch in Pip's hands.

"I'm going to draw just like that," declared Pip, with the utmost confidence, devouring the picture with his eyes.

"Oh, you'll draw one better than that, sometime,"

said Ben, laughing, as he whittled away on his best pencil. "Now then, that *is* a point for you," and he held it up in satisfaction.

Pip seized the pencil, and made some quick, jerky strokes that snapped the beautiful point quite off.

"O dear, dear!" he exclaimed, ready to cry.

"Never mind, we'll soon have another point on, just as good," said Ben, reassuringly, opening his knife. "Now then, Pip, I'll begin your lesson," holding up the pencil; "here you are, all ready."

"I want to draw a picture first, just as you did," said Pip, with an eager hand for the pencil.

"You can't," said Ben, sturdily, "not the first go. You must learn how, Pip."

"Let me try, do," begged Pip, earnestly, and his thin little face twitched.

"Oh, well, you may if you want to," said Ben, laughing; "but you mustn't be discouraged if you don't succeed. Now then, go at it if you wish."

For the next few moments nothing was to be

heard but Pip's hard breathing and the scratching of his fine pencil over the paper. Ben yawned and looked longingly at the book on the floor. And there was Bob, and the shark in full pursuit, with the prospect of the sailor putting in an appearance at the last moment. No, it wouldn't do to desert Pip—and—why, really there was something worth while coming on the big piece of white paper. Ben leaned over the thin little figure. "Why, Pip!"

Pip said nothing, but drew his breath harder yet, with every effort on his work. He gripped the pencil as if it were to run away from him, and bent lower yet to his task.

"Don't clutch it so; hold it easier," said Ben, laying his hand on the little thin one, guiding the pencil.

Pip released his grasp for just one moment, then tightened it up again. Seeing which, Ben wisely let him alone. "It'll make him nervous," he said to himself, and turned his attention to watching the sketch grow. "My goodness, to think he can draw like that!"

For there unmistakably was an old man, very withered and bent, holding out his hand, and by his side a little girl in a tattered shawl. Anybody with half an eye could see that the old beggar was blind, and that the girl had been crying.

"Pip! why, where,"—Ben was beaming at him now, as Pip lifted his face,—"*how did you learn to draw like that?*" and he seized the sketch. It was very rough and uneven, but there they were, sure enough, the two figures.

"I used to see them," said Pip, explaining. "They stood on the corner, don't you know, when the master let us go up to town from school."

"Well, I guess you don't want any lessons from me," declared Ben, not able to take his eyes from the picture.

"Oh, yes, I do, I do," cried Pip, in mortal terror that he was going to lose the very thing above all others that he prized. "I'll tear it up," he cried, with a savage lunge at the picture, and venom written all over his little pale face.

"No, you don't, sir," declared Ben, with a laugh, and holding the sketch off at arm's length; "this picture is mine in return for the one I gave you. And I'll teach you all I know, Pip, I really will. So now we will set to work."

And the first thing that either of them knew, Grandpapa was leaning over them and smiling, to say, "The next station, and we are home!"

XVII

"NOW WE CAN HAVE OUR CHRISTMAS!"

And so it turned out that Joel, who had to go down in the big brougham with Madam Van Ruypen to meet the mountain children, only just got home from that expedition in time to be whisked off to the other railroad station with the welcoming party to meet Grandpapa, Jasper, and Ben—oh, yes, and Pip!

"Whatever you do," Ben had taken special pains to write Joel long before, "be glad to see Pip."

And then, nobody knew exactly how they got home. But they did all right, and, of course, with a procession of friends to follow. There was Alexia—why, it goes without saying that she was there—and Pickering Dodge; Jasper wouldn't believe he was at home, really he wouldn't, without seeing Pick's face, while Pick's voice cried out, "Hello,

old chap!" as no one else but Pickering could say it.

Well, and there was Pip's white little face with the scared eyes, for somehow the turmoil made him dreadfully afraid he was going to lose sight of Ben. So he clutched him with a desperate grip, getting in and out between all the welcoming groups with marvellous dexterity.

"Hulloa there, you little beggar!" It was Pickering Dodge who seized him. "Let Ben alone, can't you, a minute, till we've seen him." But the small figure struggled, his little wiry legs becoming so nimble around Pickering's longer ones, that the tall boy fell back. "Whew! Well, I must say I wouldn't be in your shoes, Ben!"

Ben laughed, then put out his hand and gathered up the thin nervous fingers.

"You can grin," said Pickering, as he moved off, "but I tell you it's no laughing matter, Ben Pepper. You'd much better shake off that leech while you can."

Meantime Joel had been making little runs around the group of which Ben was the centre; each step that he took nearer Pip he would dart off again in the opposite direction, only to think better of it and plunge up once more. On one such occasion he caught Ben's blue eyes fixed upon him reproachfully.

"Oh, I say, Pip," screamed Joel, prancing up, "come with me, I've lots to show you."

For answer he got a grimace done in Pip's best style, who crowded closer to Ben than before.

"You needn't then," said Joel, in a small passion. "Hoh! I don't really want you, only—"

"Joel!" said Ben.

"Well, he's a—a—"

"Joel!" Ben said it again. "Come, Pip, with me," and the two turned off.

"Ben," screamed Joel, in a dreadful voice, and dashing after him to seize his jacket-end. "Oh, I won't—I will, Ben, I'll be good."

"See that you are, then," said Ben, good-naturedly turning around. When he saw the others were not looking, "Now then, and you too, Pip, for I'm talking to you as much as to Joel, I expect you chaps to act like sensible beings, and be good friends. Shake hands now, and say you will."

Out flew Joel's sturdy brown paw. Pip drew his back, and glanced up at Ben to see if he really meant it.

"Any boy who isn't willing to do what I asked, can't be my friend," said Ben, coolly, and Pip felt his fingers shaken off from the big warm hand.

"Oh, Ben, I will be good, I will, Ben," cried the little fellow, in great distress. He threw up both his hands and flung himself against Ben.

"No, sir," said Ben, sturdily, "unless you shake hands with Joel, and promise to be a good friend to him, you can't stay with me."

"Come on," said Joel, a light dancing in his black eyes, and he stuck his little brown hand out more sociably yet. So Pip put his thin one within it, and

then he drew a long breath, as if a terrible ordeal had just been passed.

"Well, he didn't bite you," said Ben, with a laugh, and taking possession of the thin little fingers once more, "eh, Pip?"

"No, I didn't bite you, did I, Pip?" chuckled Joel, dancing on Ben's other side. "Oh, Ben, now we can have our Christmas!"

"Yes, now we can have our Christmas!" The others racing after them took up the cry.

"And we're going to have it to-morrow," piped Phronsie, standing on her tiptoes. "Because Jasper will be rested then, Grandpapa says."

"Oh, no, Phronsie," corrected Polly, dancing up, "not till day after to-morrow. Jasper has to rest to-morrow, you know, after the journey." Then she ran off to see if there was really nothing she could do to make him comfortable. But little Doctor Fisher, who had come up in the carriage with Jasper from the station, already had whisked him off to his room, with injunctions for no one to

see him again that day. So Polly flew back again to hang over Ben and try to get acquainted with Pip.

"He can draw. Oh, you just ought to see him, Polly," confided Ben over Pip's tow-colored head.

"Really, Ben?" said Polly.

"Really?—well, I should say!" Then Ben laughed. "I wish I could do half as well."

"Oh, Ben!" exclaimed Polly, incredulously. "Perhaps he can do something, but he couldn't draw like you. He couldn't."

"Well," said Ben, with a long breath, "I only wish I could make my things seem as if they moved, Polly. Now his do, and mine look stiff as sticks."

"They don't either," contradicted Polly, with an uncomfortable little twist. And she looked down at Pip not quite so pleasantly.

"What are you two chaffing about?" cried Alexia, rushing up with her "whirlwind air" on, as

Pickering always called it.

"Oh, something," said Ben, with twinkling eyes.

"Now tell me," said Alexia, greedily. "What was it, Ben?"

"Something," said Ben.

"You said that before," retorted Alexia.

"Well, and so I say it again," said Ben, coolly.

"What was it, Polly?" begged Alexia, seizing Polly's arm. "You've some piece of news, I just know; do tell me what it is!"

"Oh, ask Ben," said Polly, catching his spirit of mischief.

"Oh, I never saw such perfectly dreadful creatures," cried Alexia, tossing back her long light braids impatiently. "Nip—Flip—whatever your name is,"—glancing down at Pip, "you tell me, that's a good boy. What is it?"

"I shan't," said Pip, with a snap that brought his white teeth together smartly.

"Well, you needn't take my head off," said Alexia, tumbling back.

"Pip, now you must beg her pardon," said Ben, coming out of his laugh.

"She told me to tell on you, and I'm not going to," said Pip, his pale eyes flashing.

"Well, you needn't have refused in just such a way; so beg her pardon at once, like a man," said Ben, decidedly.

"And I'm sure I didn't suppose that Mr. King had brought home a snapping turtle," said Alexia, airily.

"There now, you see, Pip," said Ben, gravely, "how you will make trouble for all of us unless you behave."

Thereupon, Pip's thin lip trembling, he put out his hand to Alexia. "I'm sorry, and I never will tell you in all this world, never, never, never!"

"And I'm sure I don't care whether you do or not," said Alexia, as they all laughed, "only I'm not

going to have my head eaten off, I can tell you that."

"Well, come on," said Polly, briskly, "and let's talk over Christmas. Oh, you can't think, Ben, what elegant things we are going to do!"

"Let's call all the others and get down on the library rug," proposed Ben.

"O dear me!" Polly's face fell. "Without Jasper?" she said.

"Now see here, Polly," said Ben, whirling around to get a good look at her face, "I promised Jasper I'd do my best to go on with everything the minute we got home, the same as if he were able to be in it all. I thought you'd help me, Polly, for I can't do anything without you." He looked so disapprovingly at her that she made haste to say, "Oh, I will, I will, Ben."

"Then run and get the others," said Ben, with a little pat on her back. "And you go, too, Alexia, that's a good girl."

"Of course, I will," said Alexia, "if Polly is going."

And almost as soon as one could write it, there they all were in a group on the big rug before the library fire, and Grandpapa in his easy-chair, smiling down at his family.

And little Doctor Fisher looked in to say that Jasper had stood the journey re-*mark*ably well, that he was now fast asleep, and that to-morrow he would be down among them all.

"Oh, goody! goody!" cried Polly, clapping her hands.

At this Phronsie slipped out from her nest where she had been sitting, her head in Polly's lap so that she could smooth the yellow waves away from the hot little cheeks, and, picking up her skirts, she began to dance, finishing up with a little cheese in the middle of the library floor.

"I don't mean you can have your Christmas to-morrow," the little doctor made haste to explain. "Jasper must have some hours of rest. But the day after—then says I." He took off his big spectacles, wiped them carefully, stuck them on his nose again, laughed gleefully at the babel of

rejoicing he had set up, and was off.

"Well now, Phronsie," said Grandpapa, "you would better come and sit with me. I really need you, child."

"Do you, Grandpapa?" asked Phronsie, and coming up to his big chair, exceedingly pleased.

"Very much indeed," said the old gentleman, decidedly. "There, that's right," as she climbed up into his lap, and laid her head on his breast. "Now then, you and I can hear all these wonderful plans finely."

"We're going to have a Christmas," said Phronsie, putting up a soft little hand to pull his face down.

"No, really?"

"Yes, we are," said Phronsie, in grave delight. Then she bobbed up her head to look at him the closer. "We surely are, Grandpapa; and Polly is going to tell about it, she is."

"Well, then we must listen, you and I," said old Mr. King. "So we'll be still as mice, Phronsie," he

whispered.

"Well, now," Polly was saying, drawing a long breath and smoothing down her gown; "O dear me! How shall we begin, we've so very much to tell? Ben—"

"Why, just begin," said Joel, impatiently, burrowing deeper in the rug, where he lay nearest to the fire.

"Do be still, Joe," said Alexia, with a little pinch.

"Ow!" said Joel. Then he reached out and took up one of her long braids.

"Whee!" exclaimed Alexia, flying around at him. "Oh, you bad boy, you pulled my hair awfully."

"Well, you pinched me," snorted Joel.

"Such a little nip," said Alexia, pulling both of her braids in front of her; "nothing at all like what you did to me. And you've mussed up my bow," she added, twitching it off to tie it again.

"Come, you two, stop your sparring," said Ben, with a laugh. "Goodness me, have you kept that

up all the while I've been gone?"

"Every single day," said Alexia, tying the ribbon fast, and proceeding to pick out the bow-ends with critical fingers. "Joel's bad, always, you know."

"I suppose you are not, Alexia," said Ben, with another laugh.

"Well, come on, Polly, do begin," said Alexia, ignoring the question; and her bow being tied to her satisfaction, "although 't isn't as good as it was before," she grumbled, "do hurry up."

"Well," said Polly, pushing back the little rings of brown hair from her forehead, "where shall I begin? Oh, I know,—we are going to—"

"She says there's a reply expected." The butler came up to the group and thrust out a big white note.

"You take it, Polly," said Ben.

"It's for Master Joel," said Hobson. And there it was in big, slanting letters clear across the

envelope.

"Here's your missive, Joe," said Ben, catching it to toss it over to him. "Hurry up and read it so that Polly can go on."

"O dear me! Must we wait for this tiresome boy?" cried Alexia. "Can't you read your letter and let Polly tell just the same? You know all she is going to say, Joe."

"No, you are going to wait," said Joel, with a grimace at her.

"Hurry up, Joe, or we will go on," warned Ben.

So Joel tore open his letter and plunged into it. The next moment he stood outside the circle and stamped up and down the library floor like a wild beast. "I'm not going; I won't, I won't,—I—"

"Joey, what *is* the matter?" cried Polly, in great alarm, and springing out from the group, she ran up to seize his arm. But he slipped away from her.

"She wants me to go and play with those boys," cried Joel, in a towering passion, and plunging up

and down. "I won't! So there! Let me alone, Polly," for she ran after him; this time she was more successful.

"Now see here," Ben jumped to his feet, "stop acting like a goose, Joel."

"He's more like a wild-cat," said Alexia, stretching herself comfortably in the space he had vacated.

"Joel, stop this moment," commanded Grandpapa. Joel's head dropped at the tone, but he ran over to the big easy-chair. Phronsie popped up her yellow head in dismay from its nest in the old gentleman's arms.

"Now don't you see how you are frightening this child to death?" said old Mr. King. "What is the matter, my boy?" for Joel's face was working dreadfully.

"She wants me—that old woman," began Joel, swallowing hard, and grasping the chair-arm for dear life.

"Who?"

"Madam—Madam—"

"Madam Van Ruypen?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, what does she want? Out with it. You're not to do it if you don't wish to, of course, so what's the use in feeling so? What does she want you to do, Joe?"

"She wants me to go over to see those—those boys," said Joel, in a burst.

"What boys, pray tell?" demanded Grandpapa, a trifle impatiently.

"Those boys who've just come," said Joel, "the washerwoman's boys. O dear!" He had great difficulty now in keeping the tears back; still, he managed it after a fashion.

"Whatever in the world are you talking of?" cried the old gentleman, helplessly. "Polly, come here, my child, and see if you can make any sense of what this boy is saying. I'm sure it is beyond me."

"Now, Joel," Polly was saying, and she had her

hands on the ones hanging to the chair-arm, "you must just tell the whole thing so that we can understand what it is about, for you are making Grandpapa sick, and he has just come home," she added, reproachfully.

Joel gave one look into the face under the white hair, then he blurted out, "She sent for 'em, and they've come to-day—the washerwoman's boys. And we went to the station, and they came from the mountains. And I promised to go and help her take care of 'em, and,—and I won't, so there!" and he glanced at the whole group, as if they were all against him.

"Joel, did you promise to go and help Madam Van Ruypen?" asked Grandpapa, quietly, with a keen glance into the flushed face.

"Yes, sir. But she said she only wanted me 'cause Ben wasn't here."

"Did you promise her?" asked old Mr. King, just as quietly, and not taking his eyes away.

"Yes, sir; and there's a girl come too. And she

said she guessed Polly would help take care of her." Joel began to snivel now.

"Never mind what Mrs. Van Ruypen said about anybody else," said Grandpapa, firmly. "You must go anyway, Joe, my boy, and keep that promise."

"O dear, dear, dear!" wailed Joel, now clear gone in distress.

"See here," Ben had with the greatest difficulty all this while kept from crying out. "Is it? Can it be? Has Madam Van Ruypen really sent for those poor children up in the mountains?" At last he broke out, "Oh, Grandpapa, may we all go? Come, Polly, you'll come, won't you?" He threw his arm around her.

"Where are you going?" cried Alexia, raising her head, where she had been luxuriously awaiting their return to the rug. "Polly Pepper, where *are* you going?"

"To Madam Van Ruypen's," said Polly, dancing off, her cheeks as red as two roses. "Come on, Alexia."

"Come on, yes. You lead the way and we'll follow," said Ben, bundling out of the room, Pip at his heels, followed closely by Pickering Dodge.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Alexia, getting up to her feet. "Percy—Van—what is it, do you know?" as they hopped up, and raced after the others.

"Come on," howled Joel, every tear gone, and smiles all over his round face. And looking back at her, for he wouldn't for the world have Alexia left behind. "It's a party over at that old woman's, Mad—" the rest was lost in his rush.

"Party?" repeated Alexia; "O dear me! Wait!" and she was off after them.

"She said there was an answer," repeated the butler, who hadn't stirred from his tracks.

"Er—oh," exclaimed the old gentleman. "Well, the answer will get there before a note could. That's all, Hobson. Now then, Phronsie, you and I will have a cosey time all to ourselves, child."

XVIII

TELLING ALL THE NEWS

"Here, Polly and Ben," little Doctor Fisher met them racing along the hall the next morning, "I want you both," and he led them into his office and closed the door. "Now then, I have some good news for you. You are to go up to see Jasper!"

"Oh, Papa Fisher!" cried Polly, in a tremor of delight. She seized his hand and began to dance up and down, while Ben said, "Whew!" and stood quite still. But the color flew all over his round cheeks.

"I thought Jasper would have to rest all day," said Polly, still hopping about and clinging to the long fingers.

"So I thought," said Doctor Fisher, with a wise little nod. Then he set his big spectacles straighter

on his nose, and took a sharp look first at one flushed face and then the other. "I can trust you both," he said. "The truth is, Jasper wants you, and I don't believe it will hurt him."

"Can we go now?" cried Polly, impatiently. "Can we, Papa Fisher?"

"There, there," said the little doctor, "not so fast, Polly, my child. You see, Jasper isn't really sick now, only I didn't want him to get about too fast after his journey. But it's dull for him alone, that's a fact, and he's been asking for you both. The fact is, he teased," and Doctor Fisher burst out laughing at the recollection of Jasper's face. "So you can go up, but don't for goodness' sake let the children know. If Joel were—" and he broke off, quite alarmed, and mopped his face with his big silk handkerchief.

"We'll creep up the back stairs," said Polly, tiptoeing to the door. "Come, Ben. Oh, do hurry!"

"That isn't saying you are safe from Joel," said Doctor Fisher, grimly, "by any means. Well, go along and be careful."

So Polly and Ben, peering on either hand, hurried up the back stairs, softly. "There isn't so very much danger," said Ben, under his breath, "that Joel will hear us, because he's got Pip somewhere."

"We better be careful, though," whispered Polly, who knew by experience Joel's capacity for finding out things.

"Yes, that's so," said Ben, "you never can tell where Joe will pop up. Well, here we are," as they hurried into Jasper's room.

"Well, I thought you never would come," cried Jasper, popping up his head from the pillows at the back of the big easy-chair, and beaming at them affectionately. "Oh, now it's good to be home, and have you, Polly. Isn't it, Ben?"

"I should say so," said Ben, in huge satisfaction, dragging up a chair for Polly.

"Oh, I'm going to sit down here," said Polly, running after a hassock, to pull it up in front of Jasper's big chair.

"So will I get another," said Ben, discarding the chair.

"That's good," said Jasper, rubbing his hands together in delight. "O dear me! I wish I could get out of this old chair. I'm going to," and he threw back the sofa-blanket from his knees.

"Oh, don't, Jasper, you mustn't," cried Polly and Ben, deserting their hassocks to run either side of the easy-chair, and lay a restraining hand on him. "You'll hurt yourself."

"And then Doctor Fisher will blame us," finished Ben.

"That's so," said Jasper, twitching the sofa-blanket up. "O dear me!" and he leaned back against the pillow. "Well, do go on and tell me something. I suppose I've just got to stay here like an old log."

"Yes, you must stay here," said Polly, tucking the blanket in with deft little pats; "but you are not an old log, Jasper."

"Yes, I am," said Jasper, guilty of contradicting, and making a very wry face, "a stiff horrible old

log," and he gave a little kick that sent one end of the sofa-blanket flying out again.

"I should call you a slippery eel," said Ben, while Polly ran around to the other side to tuck the blanket-end in again.

"Oh, beg your pardon," said Jasper, while the color went flying over his pale face. "I didn't mean to make you so much trouble, Polly, I really didn't."

"It isn't any trouble, Jasper," said Polly, with a final little pat, "only you mustn't get cold, for then I'm sure I don't know what we should do."

"Oh, I couldn't get cold," said Jasper, with a glance over at the bright hickory fire on the hearth, "I couldn't possibly, Polly."

"Well, you aren't going to kick off the blanket like that again," said Ben, with a bob of his head, "or we'll go straight off like a shot, Polly and I will, so there, sir!"

"Oh, I won't, I won't," cried Jasper, bursting into a laugh, "so do sit down, both of you. I'll be just

as good as—what is it Candace always says—pie!"

"See that you are then," said Ben, with another laugh.

"Well, now Polly, you begin," said Jasper, hungry for news, as the two were seated on their hassocks, "and tell everything straight through, what you've all been doing since Ben was away."

"O dear me!" cried Polly, drawing a long breath, "I couldn't tell everything, Jasper."

"You must," said Jasper, decidedly. "I want to hear every single thing; so begin, Polly."

"Well," said Polly, folding her hands in her lap, and plunging in at once on the most interesting part of the story, "in the first place, you know Ben went out shopping with Madam Van Ruypen."

"Ugh!" exclaimed Ben, "don't tell about that, Polly; that's no good."

"What is it, Polly?" cried Jasper, eagerly. "Oh, do go on. You be still, Ben," shaking his finger at him;

"now go on, Polly; don't mind him, he's no good."

"Polly," cried Ben, "tell about how we did our Christmas shopping, that's better. Do, Polly."

"Polly, don't you mind this chap at all," said Jasper, turning a cold shoulder to Ben; "go on with what you were saying; now then."

"The Christmas shopping is enough sight better," said Ben, in another desperate attempt to get Polly's attention.

"Oh, never you mind about the Christmas shopping," said Jasper, coolly, "I'll get that all in good time. Now then, Polly, you said Ben went out shopping with Madam Van Ruypen. Well, what else?"

"Yes, he did," said Polly, keeping her eyes away from Ben, so that all his frantic efforts to attract her attention went for nothing. "You see she took a great fancy to him, and——"

"Oh, now, Polly," began Ben, with a very red face. "Don't you believe her, Jasper; it's just because she didn't have any one else to ask."

"Who, Polly?" cried Jasper, turning back to him.

"No, no, the old lady, Madam Van Ruypen."

"Oh, well, let Polly tell that," said Jasper, turning away again. "Well, go on, Polly, she took a great fancy to him—and what then?"

"And so she invited him to go out with her in her great big carriage to help her get her Christmas things."

"Well, well!" exclaimed Jasper. "I say, Ben Pepper, of all things!"

"I wish you would stop, Polly," said Ben, in a tone of great vexation, and twisting uncomfortably on his hassock.

"Oh, I wouldn't stop her for all the world," cried Jasper, in high delight. "Well, what did they buy, Polly? Fancy Ben out shopping with a lady!"

"Well, you see, Jasper, Madam Van Ruypen goes up in the summer to the mountains, and a poor woman does her washing," said Polly, hurrying along, and not daring to look at Ben. "And she

wanted to do something for her. She has ever so many children, you know."

"Who? Madam Van Ruypen?" asked Jasper, wrinkling his brows.

"No, the poor woman, the washerwoman," said Polly.

"There, Polly, you're getting all mixed up," said Ben, quite pleased. "You better stop."

"You be still," said Jasper, with a nudge. "Polly will tell it all right if you will only let her alone."

"She doesn't seem to be getting on very well," grumbled Ben.

"Well, and then, Polly, what next?" Jasper leaned forward to catch every word.

"Why, there were boys in the mountains, you know, the poor washerwoman's home, so Madam Van Ruypen wanted Ben to pick out some things for them."

"What things?" demanded Jasper, intensely interested.

"Oh, overcoats and tippets and gloves and jackets and—"

"Oh, hurrah!" exclaimed Jasper, breaking into the list. Then he whirled around and bestowed a resounding rap on Ben's back.

"Whew!" exclaimed Ben. "Well, you don't need to get your strength back," he added ruefully.

"Don't I though?" said Jasper, with shining eyes, and lifting up his hand. "Now, here's another—to think she chose you to do that, Ben!"

"No, you don't," said Ben, moving back so hastily that he rolled off his hassock in a heap on the floor.

"See what you got by deserting your best friend," said Jasper, coolly. "Well, go on, Polly; and so Ben bought things?"

"Yes, she let him pick them out all by himself," said Polly, with great pride.

"Polly!" cried Ben, with flaming cheeks.

"She did; she told me so herself," Polly bobbed

her head to emphasize every word, "and she said
—"

"Polly, I can't think Papa Fisher would like to have us stay any longer," burst in Ben, desperately, coming up to lay a hand on Polly's shoulder.

"Hoh! Hoh!" cried Jasper, "now go on, Polly, tell the whole—mind I must have every word."

"I shall tell," said Polly, twitching away her shoulder from Ben's hand, "and you mustn't think to stop me, Ben, 'cause Jasper shall know. She said that Ben had more sense than anybody she knew," ran on Polly, while Ben stuffed his fingers in his ears and marched to the other side of the large room, "and she did everything he said."

"What, *everything*?" asked Jasper, eagerly.

"Yes, every single thing," said Polly. "She didn't choose a thing; all she did was to pay the bill."

"Whew!" whistled Jasper. "Good for Ben!"

"And then she sent all the things in a big box to the

poor washerwoman in the mountains," said Polly.

"Polly," said Jasper, and his dark eyes shone, "I think Ben can do just anything, don't you, if he tries?"

"Yes," said Polly, very much pleased, "I know he can; he always could."

"Well, so he did at the school," said Jasper; "all the boys were talking about it."

"Oh, Jasper," cried Polly, very much excited, "tell me all about it. Do." Her cheeks were very rosy now, and she beat her foot impatiently on the floor.

"Some other time," said Jasper, nodding over at Ben, "when he's not by. Well, old fellow, you must open your ears, we're through with that old story," he cried, addressing Ben.

"Are you sure you are through?" cried Ben, pulling the finger out of one ear, and glancing at them in suspicion.

"Quite," said Jasper, coolly. "Come on, Ben, and

sit down and behave yourself, there's a good chap. Now we're going to talk about something else."

"In that case, I'll come back," said Ben, sitting down on the hassock again.

"Well now, Polly, tell some other things," said Jasper, when they were all settled quietly once more.

"Oh," said Polly, finding it hard work to pull her mind off from the unknown but splendid things that the boys at Jasper's school had said about Ben, "let me see," and she wrinkled up her brows, "where shall I begin?"

"I should think the most natural thing would be to tell about what we did last night," said Ben, composedly.

"Oh, what did you do last night?" cried Jasper. "I suppose you had a lovely time telling all about your plans for Christmas, and there was I, put to bed like a great baby."

"No, we didn't," said Ben, "not by a long shot; we

went over to Madam Van Ruypen's."

"You went over to Madam Van Ruypen's!" repeated Jasper in astonishment. "Not the first evening you were at home?"

"Yes, we did," said Ben; "just as I said, we went over there."

"What for? Oh, Polly, what for?" Jasper flew around, appealing to her. "What did you go over to Madam Van Ruypen's for? Tell me, Polly," as she sat lost in thought.

"Oh, why because," said Polly, coming out of her abstraction, "she has got some of the poor mountain children down there, and she didn't know what to do with them."

Jasper turned a bewildered face over to Ben.

"You see," said Ben, "she had written up when the box went, you know, to have the mother let some of the children come, so as to have a good time. And they got here yesterday, so she had to have us," and he gave a sigh.

"O dear me!" said Jasper, finding no more words for the occasion.

"And she wants us to spend our Christmas over there," said Polly, with a dismal face. "But we are not going to; oh, no, the very idea, Jasper King!" and she brightened up. "Why, Grandpapa wouldn't allow it."

"No, indeed," said Jasper, in his most decided fashion, "but we might have them here," he added.

"If you are strong enough," said Ben. "Papa Fisher said it all depended on you."

"If that is so," said Jasper, with a long breath, and stretching out his hands, "why, we'll have the whole lot of them. See, I'm as strong as an ox!"

"And oh, Jasper, you can't think," cried Polly, plunging into all the delights of the coming celebration, "we are going to have the choir boys of St. Stephen's to sing the carol."

"Not the St. Stephen's boys!" cried Jasper, in great excitement.

"Yes," said Polly, with dancing eyes, "we surely are, Jasper; Grandpapa engaged them. He wrote from the school."

"Isn't Father just too splendid for anything!" cried Jasper, with shining eyes.

"Isn't he!" echoed Polly and Ben together.

"And oh—" here Polly broke off with a happy little laugh, and clapped her hands together.

"What is it, Polly? Oh, do tell me," begged Jasper, in a fever for the secret.

But Polly laughed on. "Oh, you'll know to-morrow," she said gleefully.

"Oh, no, tell me now, Polly," begged Jasper. "If you don't I'll be sick again, I'm afraid. Tell me, Polly, what is it?"

"Yes, Polly," said Ben, "you ought to tell him now; and if you don't, why I will."

"Oh, I'll tell," said Polly, much alarmed at the news coming from any one but herself. "Oh, Jasper," she cried, "Mr. Cabot gave us a present."

"Mr. Cabot gave us a present?" repeated Jasper.

"Yes, to all of us; wasn't he dear?"

"I don't know until you tell me what it is," said Jasper, much mystified.

"The sweetest thing," said Polly. "Oh, you'll love it, Jasper."

"But what is it?" demanded Jasper.

"And he sent 'way to India for it."

"To India!" Jasper didn't seem to be able to say anything but the echo of Polly's words.

"Yes," said Polly, nodding to Ben to keep still; "and it's just too beautiful for anything."

"Oh, now I know; it's a vase," said Jasper, "one of those brass things—that's what it is."

"A vase!" cried Ben, with a laugh, and slapping his knee. "Well, I guess you won't say this is much like a vase when you see it, Jasper King."

"Oh, no, it isn't a vase," said Polly, shaking her

brown head. "Guess again, Jasper."

"Well, then, it's a curtain—a portière, one of those embroidered things."

"No, no," said Polly and Ben together.

"Well, a table cover," said Jasper.

"No, guess again."

"How can I tell?" cried Jasper, wildly. "It might be anything."

"But it isn't anything—I mean it is something," said Polly, in her most decided fashion.

Jasper leaned his head back on a pile of pillows, and gave himself up to thinking.

"Polly," said Ben, "you'd better tell; see, he's getting tired."

Seeing which, Polly gave a little start of dismay. "I'll tell; don't get tired. Oh, Jasper, it's a monkey."

"A monkey!" repeated Jasper, faintly.

XIX

JOCKO

"Yes," said Polly, gleefully, "you can't think, Jasper; it's such a beautiful monkey."

"That's a fact," declared Ben, "or rather, I should say, the very ugliest beast you can think of, Jasper."

"Ben!" exclaimed Polly, reproachfully.

"When did it come? Did Mr. Cabot really give it to you?" cried Jasper, all in one breath, and deserting his pillows at once.

"Oh, he didn't give it to me," said Polly. "It's a present to all of us; it's yours, Jasper, just as much as any one's."

"Dear me!" cried Jasper, quite overwhelmed at being part owner in the Christmas gift of a monkey. "Well, when did it come, Polly?"

"Just two days ago," said Polly, trying to remember all the fun they had enjoyed with their new acquisition, "though it seems—oh, ages; and he's been so cunning."

"How I do want to see him!" cried Jasper, eagerly. "Where is he? I should think Joel would worry the life out of him."

"Well, for once I guess Joe has got his match," said Ben, bursting into a laugh. "I asked him to come along with us and show Jocko off this morning, and he said, 'No,' and showed a lively pair of heels."

"Jocko? Is that his name?" asked Jasper, with the liveliest interest.

"Yes," said Polly.

"That's what the sailors named him, Mr. Cabot said," added Ben,— "so you told me, Polly," turning to her.

"Yes, I did," said Polly. "You see, Jasper, Mr. Cabot was having some things brought out from India, and he thought he'd send for a monkey for

a surprise to us. And the sailors petted him all the way over, and——"

"Who, Mr. Cabot?" interrupted Ben, mischievously.

"No; aren't you ashamed of yourself," cried Jasper, in a pretended rage. "Go on, Polly. If I weren't tied to this old chair I'd pommel this chap for you. Well, where is the monkey now?"

"Oh, Thomas has him in a little room in the stable," said Polly. "He's chained up, you know. But by and by we're going to have him in the house, when he's tame and nice."

"O dear me! How I should like to see him," said Jasper, with a long breath, and sinking back against the pillows.

"Dear me! Well, I wish you could," breathed Polly, wistfully, and a regretful look swept over her face. Why had she told Jasper about the monkey? Better to have waited for the surprise to come out to-morrow. And her head drooped sorrowfully.

"Never mind, Polly," said Ben, who never could bear to have Polly look sorry over anything. "Jasper would rather have the fun of hearing about the monkey to-day than to wait to see him."

"But why should I wait before I see him?" said Jasper. "There's no reason he can't come up here to see me." He looked first at Polly, then at Ben.

"What?" cried Polly, coming out of her sorry little fit to stare at him.

"Whew!" whistled Ben, and he stuck his hands in his pockets and stared too.

"Yes, there isn't any earthly reason why the monkey couldn't come up here," said Jasper, persistently, "and I really need him. He'd cheer me up," he added.

"Yes, there's no doubt of that," said Ben, with a chuckle.

"Well, then bring him. Do, there's a good chap," said Jasper, leaning forward to bestow a resounding clap on Ben's shoulder.

"Goodness me," said Ben, backing away, "if Doctor Fisher could only feel you he'd let you downstairs fast enough. There'd be no need of bringing monkeys or anything else up to you."

"Well, Doctor Fisher isn't here," said Jasper, laughing, "and I am made to stay up here. And just think how dull it is," he added artfully.

"That's a compliment, now," said Ben, "when we've tried to entertain you as hard as we can."

"Well, I didn't mean that; you know I didn't," said Jasper, coming out of his laugh to look very much distressed. "You know I didn't, Polly, don't you?" he begged, appealing to her.

"Yes, I do," said Polly, "know you didn't mean it at all, Jasper."

"All right, now tease away," said Ben.

"But I do want to see that monkey dreadfully," said Jasper, returning to the charge with renewed effort when he saw that his last unfortunate remark was perfectly understood; "it would be just the way to make me entirely well."

"I do believe it would, Ben," said Polly, whirling around to him, "be the very best thing, as Jasper says. Oh, do let's bring him up." She flew off from her hassock to rush to the door.

"Well, I can fetch him, as far as that goes," said Ben, getting up slowly from his hassock. "If that monkey has got to come, why, I'll bring him."

"Good for you!" shouted Jasper, in huge delight, and clapping his hands together.

"But I warn you, he's a perfect—tempest," said Ben, moving off to join Polly. "You don't need to go, Polly," he said; "I'll bring him."

"But I can do it much better," said Polly, "because he knows me, Ben, and you've only seen him once."

"And that was quite enough for both the monkey and me," said Ben, with a little laugh. "Well, prepare yourself to receive Jocko," he tossed back over his shoulder to Jasper; "and don't blame me if he's too much for you."

"I won't blame you," promised Jasper, in huge

delight; then he doubled up one of his pillows and tossed it across the room, to give vent to his feelings, as Polly and Ben ran off downstairs to do his bidding.

It was all he could do to wait with even a show of patience, yet they did it very quickly, considering the distance that had to be run over, and the little formality to be gone through with of detaching Jocko from a plate of cake bits that one of the maids had just left with him.

"Oh, he oughtn't to have that anyway," said Polly, twitching his chain. "Come away from it, Jocko, it's bad for you to have so many sweets."

But Jocko, not thinking so, chattered and scolded, wrinkling up his eyelids and showing all his teeth at her.

"Polly, the beggar will bite you," said Ben, laying a hand on the chain.

"Oh, no, he won't," said Polly. "Now, Jocko, you are *not* going to have all that plate of cake. Come away," for Jocko had scrabbled all he possibly

could of the sweet bits into both cheeks, spreading his paws over the remainder in the dish to protect it. And Polly gave such a jerk that Jocko was twitched clear away from the tempting morsels.

"Polly, Polly," remonstrated Ben in alarm, "he surely will bite you; give me the chain."

"Oh, no, he can't," said Polly. "See, his mouth is full," which was quite true, Jocko's cheeks being puffed out to that degree that he couldn't very well use his teeth to attack with.

"Well, he will as soon as he has swallowed that mouthful, the greedy thing," said Ben. "Here, you," and Ben picked up a stick from the corner. Jocko viewed it with the air of acquaintance, as if Thomas had showed it to him before, and immediately spit out all the cake, rolled up his eyes beseechingly, and folded his paws.

"Oh, you cunning thing!" exclaimed Polly, throwing her arms around him, while Jocko seized her gown and huddled and snivelled into it, getting away from Ben as far as possible.

"Polly, how can you?" cried Ben, in disgust.

"Well, he's just as sweet as can be," said Polly.

"O dear, do put down that stick, he's so afraid of it."

"Indeed, I shan't," declared Ben, brandishing it wildly, whereat Jocko danced a perfect waltz around Polly, clinging to her brown gown and gibbering at every step.

"I do hope Thomas doesn't whip him with it," said Polly, whirling around uncertainly with the monkey's antics. "Oh, you don't suppose he does, Ben, do you?"

"Nonsense; you know Thomas wouldn't hurt a fly," said Ben. "But Jocko has probably tasted a stick on board ship, Polly, or a rope-end, or something worse. And it's just as well to show him something now that he will respect." It was a long speech for Ben.

"Well, we ought to hurry," said Polly, "for it's so hard for Jasper to wait." So away they ran, Jocko getting between their feet at every chance he

could find. And then, "Well, here we are!" announced Ben, as they all three dashed, or rather tumbled, into Jasper's room together. For Jocko, seeing here a grand opportunity, plunged in suddenly, dragging the chain before them so that Polly promptly fell over it. And in trying to save her, Ben lost his balance.

"Well, I should think so!" exclaimed Jasper, starting forward. "My goodness! What an entrée."

"Well, you ought to be thankful that we've got here at all," retorted Ben, extricating himself and helping Polly up; "and if you don't get enough of this beast, I miss my guess."

"Oh, isn't he perfectly lovely!" cried Polly, racing up and pulling Jocko along to Jasper's chair. "Did you ever see—" she couldn't finish, for Jocko, not considering it necessary to wait for any further introduction, leaped up to Jasper's shoulder and laid his little black, cold, slippery nose against the nearest cheek.

"I told you you'd get enough of him," cried Ben, bursting into a laugh. "Oh, your face, Jasper!" as

Polly twitched the chain so that the monkey sprawled at once on the floor.

"Oh, well, that's all right," said Jasper, recovering himself and wiping his face dry with his handkerchief.

"Is it?" laughed Ben. "I'm glad you like it."

"There, Polly, bring him a little nearer. I don't want him on my shoulder, you know," Jasper was saying.

"Oh, don't you?" said Ben. "I thought he was all right up there."

"Let me take the chain," said Jasper, paying no attention to Ben.

"Oh, Jasper, I'm afraid you're not strong enough," said Polly, fearfully. "Hadn't I better hold it?"

"Oh, I'm strong enough," said Jasper.

So Polly, although with many misgivings, handed the chain to Jasper, who pretty soon had the monkey on his knee, examining all his fine points, and becoming acquainted with his exceedingly

expressive countenance.

"Now, isn't he a dear?" cried Polly, dancing in front of Jasper's chair, and regarding the new pet with affection.

"He certainly is," said Jasper, making Jocko give him his paw, then teaching him to feel in his pockets.

"Oh, Polly, get me a lump of sugar, do; there on the tray." So Polly ran to the little silver bowl and came back with two sweet blocks in her hand.

At sight of them Jocko gave a greedy little cry and tried to spring off from Jasper's lap.

"Oh, no you don't, sir," said Jasper, holding him fast by the collar; "you must hunt for them. Give them to me, Polly."

So Polly put the sugar lumps into Jasper's hands, and he dropped one into each pocket. "There now, hunt, sir," which Jocko, wrinkling up his flat nose, was glad to do.

"Did you ever see such sweet little fingers?" said

Polly, dropping to her knees by the side of the big chair, as Jocko, finding one sweet lump, dragged it forth triumphantly, to set sharp little teeth in it.





"Did you ever see such sweet little fingers?" said Polly.

"Fingers! Oh, Polly!" exclaimed Ben, coming up, stick in hand.

Jocko grunted and chattered, one eye on the stick, while he nibbled away.

"Oh, Ben, do put it down," begged Polly.

"All right," said Ben, depositing the stick on the table. "Lie there, but see that you behave, Mr. Jocko."

"He says he will," said Polly, with a laugh, as Jocko gave a little scream, his sugar being all gone. Then he began to hunt for more, puckering up his forehead in the search. He was quite sure there were two pieces, and he must hurry and get the last one. So he pulled and pawed and scratched and scrabbled over Jasper in his efforts to reach all his pockets that might be possible, Ben laughing as much as the other two in the process.

At last Polly looked up, "Oh, you are getting tired, Jasper," she exclaimed in dismay.

"I believe I am," confessed Jasper; "my sides fairly ache with the laughing. But don't take Jocko away," he said, clinging to him.

"Well, we ought to," said Ben, "for you are tired, and my sides ache, too."

"We might tie Jocko up for a while," suggested

Polly, who hadn't the heart to go against Jasper's wish.

"That's it, tie him up till I'm a bit rested," said Jasper, eagerly. "Here, Jocko, go with your mistress," and he put the chain in Polly's hand.

"Well, where is a good place?" asked Polly, twitching Jocko off from Jasper's knee. "Come on, Ben, where shall we tie him?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Ben, looking about him doubtfully. "Why, to the door-knob, perhaps."

"Wouldn't the bureau handle be better?" asked Polly.

"The table leg, Polly," suggested Jasper.

"The table leg, oh, yes," cried Polly. "Now then, Jocko, you must be very good," and she knelt down by the table, dragging the monkey up to her.

"Let me fasten it for you," said Ben, coming up.

"Oh, I can do it," said Polly, pulling the chain around the table leg and taking a little loop in it.

"There, sir! Now you're fast!" as she jumped up and brushed her brown gown with both hands.

"He's mussed you all up," cried Ben; "and see, his hair's all over your dress."

"Never mind," said Polly, who always liked everything very nice, "they'll come off," and she brushed away smartly. "There, that's all right now, Bensie. Oh, let's talk over what we are going to do to-morrow, our real Christmas," and she flew back to Jasper's chair.

"Yes, do," said Jasper. "Come on, Ben."

"You know, of course, there's the tree," began Polly, as the two pulled their hassocks and sat down again, on either side of Jasper's chair.

"Yes, of course," said Jasper. "Christmas wouldn't be Christmas, would it, Polly, without our tree."

"No, I should think not," laughed Polly. And Ben saying the same thing they immediately launched into an animated recital of all the plans for this particular tree, and the comparison with all the other trees of the past Christmases, till they forgot

Jocko and everything else in the charms of this belated holiday.

"What's that funny noise?" at last asked Ben in a lull, when all three had paused to rest.

"What? I don't hear anything," said Jasper, pricking up his ears.

"Nor I," said Polly. "Oh, yes, I do." She sprang off from her hassock and ran around to the table.

"Why, Jocko, where—" she cried.

Ben got off from his hassock. "Well, that explains the noise fast enough," he said grimly. "Why, where is the whip?" going over to the table.

"Dear me, I don't know," said Polly. "I haven't touched it," and she began to fly all about the room. "Jocko, Jocko dear," she cried coaxingly.

"The little scamp has taken the whip," said Ben, too vexed to smile. "How you can laugh, Jasper, I don't see. Now then, we must find that beast. My goodness me!" He dashed off. As Ben seldom took any but deliberate steps, Jasper stopped

laughing to see him go. The next instant, "Come, Polly!" called Ben.

"Where?" She was over by one of the long windows, shaking the curtain, fully expecting to see the runaway hiding within its folds.

"In the bath-room," shouted Ben. So down the little passageway, tiled and wainscoted, clattered Polly on hasty feet, to find Ben holding Jocko by the collar, and the bath-tub running over with water, both faucets being turned on, and several articles, the broken whip among the rest, floating on the top.

Jocko was grinning and cringing, with sharp, sudden squeals for pity when he saw Polly.

"Take care, you'll wet your feet," warned Ben. "The water's all over the floor." Which Polly soon found out the moment she stepped on the tiled surface.

"O dear me!" she gasped, stepping gingerly in.

Squeal! Squeal! Jocko set up more elaborate attempts to attract her attention.

"Do turn off the faucets, Ben," said Polly, hurrying over to peer into the tub.

"Oh, I have, long ago," said Ben, "but I can't let the water out."

"Why, Ben Pepper, there is Jasper's 'As You Like It,'" said Polly, in anguish, hanging over the bath-tub.

"I know it," said Ben. "Hush, Polly, Jasper'll hear you."

"O dear! And I 'most know there are his sleeve buttons."

"Yes, and lots of things more," said Ben, grimly, "so I can't let the water off, for they'd all run down."

"And, and,—why, Ben Pepper!" Polly forgot the wet floor and she splashed up and down in great distress. "Oh, I must bale it out," she cried. "I see Jasper's watch and chain down at the bottom."

"Stop, Polly, you're getting as wet as anything and splashing all over me," said Ben. "Now then, you

little scoundrel," to Jocko, "I'll tie you up so that you won't get loose again in a hurry," and he fastened the chain, in a way that no one but Ben could do, to the door-knob, then he came back and rolled up his sleeves, Jocko beginning to sob and whimper, since Polly wouldn't look at him.

"Do you run out in the hall and call down the tube for Jane," said Ben. "Jasper can't hear, for his door is shut."

"But I must tell him what is the matter," said Polly, in great distress. "Listen, he's calling."

"Pol-ly." Evidently Jasper *was* calling. "Ben, what in the world is the matter?" came from Jasper's room.

"I'll tell Jasper," said Ben. "You get Jane up here to clear this water out; do, Polly."

"Well, don't tell Jasper about his Shakespeare," said Polly, hurrying off on her wet feet, "nor the watch."

"No, I won't," promised Ben.

"Oh, nothing much, old chap." He went down the passage, and put his head in at Jasper's door, "It's Jocko, you know; we've found him."

"Oh, that's good," cried Jasper; "and nothing has happened to him, I hope?"

"No," said Ben, "there hasn't."

"That's good," said Jasper again.

So Ben went back and Jane came up with her pail and mop and cloths, and presently a fine array of articles was brought to view on the bottom of the bath-tub, to add to those floating on top.

"Oh, Ben, did you ever in all the world!" said Polly, aghast, as they fished for the things. "I don't see how he had time to do it."

"Well, he used it pretty well," said Ben. "See there, Polly Pepper," holding up what had once been a necktie.

"And it's quite, quite ruined," said Polly, choking off a little sob. Then she deserted the bath-tub, to fly over to the monkey. "Oh, you naughty, naughty

—Oh, Ben, what has Jocko got in his mouth? He's choking!"

"Nonsense, he wouldn't choke," said Ben; yet he left fishing in the bath-tub for more articles of Jocko's depositing and went over to investigate.

Jocko, when he saw Ben coming, spit out a mouthful which proved to be pins, while he tucked with one paw a small article underneath him, and blinked up in Ben's face.

"Spit out the rest," commanded Ben, "or I'll get another switch. Do you hear?"

"Oh, he'll choke, he'll choke," cried Polly, in great alarm. "What shall we do? He has ever so many more in his cheeks. Oh, you bad Jocko!"

Jocko spit out a few more pins, then wrinkled up his eyebrows and grinned and chattered.

"Get the rest out, sir," said Ben, "or the switch, you know."

Fretting dismally, Jocko stuck his paw clear into his cheeks, and poked the pins out until none

seemed to remain. Then he sat up quite straight, scolding frightfully.

"Where did he get the pins?" exclaimed Polly, wonderingly.

"Where did he get anything," said Ben, "you might as well ask."

"But he didn't have them when we found him," she went on.

"Oh, yes, he did; he must have," said Ben; "and he's hidden more somewhere about him now, you may depend. Get up there, Jocko!"

But Jocko, seeing no fun ahead of him if he lost that little cushion, sat still and glared, showing all his teeth at Ben.

"O mercy me!" exclaimed Jane, with her gown tucked up, busy with her mop and pail over the tub, "he'll bite you, Master Ben."

"Yes, he will," said Polly, in a terror. "Oh, Ben, do let him alone."

"I'll let him alone for a minute," said Ben, hurrying

off. Presently back he appeared, flourishing Jasper's riding crop. At sight of this Jocko drew his teeth in, and slunk down into a little heap of abject misery.

"Get up," said Ben, flourishing the whip threateningly.

"Oh, Ben, don't strike him," pleaded Polly.

"And if you do, he'll jump at me, most likely," said Jane, with only a thought for her unprotected ankles. "Please don't, Master Ben."

"I'm not going to," said Ben, "only he must get up. He's sitting on something he's hiding. Now, then, will you get up?" he cried, swinging the whip in the air.

Jocko, who saw the riding crop going up, supposed naturally it was coming down. Not desiring to receive it on his body, he made a quick movement and leaped. Jane, who had followed all proceedings with extreme anxiety, saw no reason why he shouldn't come her way. And to leave the space she had been occupying she decided

without delay. But forgetting the pail, half full of water she had mopped up from the tub, she promptly fell over it, into the pool on the floor.

"What is it?" cried Polly, picking up a small object where Jocko had been sitting. "Why, Ben Pepper, it's Jasper's little pincushion, the one I made for him last Christmas!"

XX

REPAIRING DAMAGES

And that afternoon Jasper was sleeping (nobody had told him, of course, of the result of Jocko's pranks), so Polly and Ben could steal off for a bit of Christmas shopping on their own account.

"I shall pay for the Shakespeare, for it's all my fault that Jocko did those bad things," said Polly, as they hurried along.

"No, it isn't, any more than mine," said Ben. "I oughtn't to have let him up there."

"But you said we better not, all the time," said Polly, truthfully.

"Well, and then I let him up," said Ben, "so I'm just as bad as you, Polly."

"Well, you did it because Jasper wanted Jocko so much," persisted Polly. "That's the only reason,

Ben."

"Yes," said Ben, "but never mind what the reason is; I let him up all the same, so I'm going to pay for 'As You Like It.' You've got to buy a new pincushion, Polly."

"I know it," said Polly. "O dear me! How I wish there was time to make another one before Christmas."

"Well, there isn't. The very idea!" exclaimed Ben; "why, that is to-morrow. Besides, Jasper will want a new pincushion right away."

"I know," cried Polly, with a little sigh. "Well, let's buy that first. Candace has some little cushions, so I'll get one of her," and they turned into Temple Place and ran into the small shop.

There was a bell over the door that jingled smartly whenever a customer stepped in. This had the effect now to bring Candace waddling in from the little room beyond, which was bedroom, kitchen, and all. She had been dressing a rag doll, and her blue checked apron still had some wisps of wool

sticking to it, while she raised her black hands, one of the fingers still retaining its big horn thimble. "Fer de lan's sakes, Miss Polly—an' Mas'r Ben—I'm glad youse home again."

"Oh, Candace," cried Polly, beginning to unburden her woes, when the two were seated on some stools before the counter that ran along one side of the room, "you can't think what trouble we're in."

Candace, just reaching down from a shelf above a jar of peppermint and cinnamon sticks, with which she meant to regale her visitors and celebrate Ben's return, started so she nearly let the big glass jar fall.

"Fer de lan's sakes!" She could get no further as she turned to them a frightened face that seemed to suddenly grow gray.

"Don't scare her, Polly," whispered Ben. "Tell her at once what has happened."

"You know Jocko—"

"Hey?" said Candace, setting the jar down with a

thump to rest both shaking hands on the counter.

"Jocko, our monkey. Oh, I forgot, Candace, you don't know about our present that Mr. Cabot gave to us all. Well, it's a monkey—the dearest, yes, he *is* the dearest thing, even if he has been bad," said Polly, decidedly.

"A monkey!" screamed Candace, lifting both black hands. "An' Mr. Cabot gib you dat did he, fer a present?"

"Yes," said Polly. "Wasn't he kind, Candace?"

"Well, I dunno," said Candace, slowly. "Mr. Cabot's a bery nice gemman—a bery nice *gemman indeed*. He comes in here an' buys tings offen an' offen. But I should a-thought he'd gib ye a leetle purtier ting dan a monkey. Jus' a grain purtier," she added, unwilling to criticise any more sharply.

"Well, he couldn't have given us anything that was nicer," said Polly, loyal to both Mr. Cabot and to the monkey, "only you see, Jocko didn't know quite how to behave."

"I shouldn't think he did," observed Ben.

"He's only just come from India," said Polly, feeling that a little more explanation was necessary before stating just how bad the monkey had been.

"Whar's dat?" asked Candace, in wonder.

"Oh, the other side of the world," said Polly, hastily; "and so you see—"

"De oder side ob de worl'," cried Candace. "My lan' o' Goshen, how you know dat? Who brung him?"

"Oh, the sailors; he came in a ship, and so you see, perhaps he learned some naughty tricks," said Polly, hoping that now the recital of the bad deeds would be softened enough to state her errand at the shop. "And so he didn't know any better, maybe, than to chew up Jasper's little cushion."

"He ain't gone an' chewed up dat ar pincushion you made Mas'r Jasper?" cried the old woman.

"Yes, he has," said Polly, sorrowfully, her brown

head drooping; "that is, he's bitten a hole in one corner, and got it all soiled and wet."

"An' you worked an' worked on dat ar pincushion," cried Candace, in a loud, wrathful tone. "I can see you now, honey. Don' you 'member how you brung it down here for Candace to match you some pink cord to go right round de aidge?"

"Yes," said Polly, "I remember, Candace."

"An' don' you 'member how I matched dat pink ribbin? Laws, you'd 'a' thought it was jus' made for it, wouldn't you now, Miss Polly?"

"Yes," said Polly, drawing a long sigh, "I should, Candace."

"An' dat orful ole brack monkey has done gone an' chewed up dat nice little pincushion you made all alone by yourself, 'xcept such as I helped you." Candace drew herself up to her full height. "Well, he ought to hab eb'ry single one ob his teef pulled out," she declared, with a bob of her head that nearly unsettled her turban.

"Oh, no, Candace," protested Polly, in a tone of horror.

"Yes, he had, honey," declared Candace, decidedly, "'cause don' you see, he'll be a-chewin' up oder tings, like enough some o' Miss Phronsie's dolls." With that the same scared look swept over her fat face, till it looked quite gray again.

"Oh, Candace, we wouldn't ever let him do *that*!" cried Polly. And Ben hastened to say, "See here, Candace, don't you be afraid; we'll look out for those dolls."

"Will you for shore, Mas'r Ben?" cried Candace, grasping his arm with both sets of black fingers, which sent the big horn thimble flying off under the counter. "It would be mos' drefful if anyting should eber happen to dem, 'specially to der ones I made fer de little miss. Why, dey've got har jus' like my bery own." And she lifted one hand to point to her gay turban with pride, then clutched his arm again, "An' I made eb'ry stitch ob der cloes."

"You needn't worry, Candace," said Ben, quietly,

"for I'll look out that Jocko doesn't disturb those dolls."

"Shore?" cried Candace, surveying him with anxious eyes.

"Sure," said Ben, not taking off the gaze of his blue ones.

Candace's arms fell away to her sides. "Well, if yer promises me, Mas'r Ben, I know it's all right. Now you mus' hab some candy sticks," and she lifted off the cover of the big glass jar.

"I'll find your thimble first," said Ben, getting down on his knees to lift the gay flowered calico curtain that hung from the counter-edge.

This was easier said than done, for the big horn thimble, now that it had gotten away from Candace's black finger, decided to take a holiday. So although Ben prowled and peered around amid the boxes and bundles beneath the counter, he couldn't lay his hand on the runaway. Seeing which, Polly decided to begin the trade by which she could be the possessor of another little

pincushion to take the place of the one just spoiled by Jocko. So Candace handed down the box containing them, and together they searched through it for something that would fit the need.

"I'm going to make Jasper another one, you know," said Polly, "but I must buy him something to use right away."

"Well, I got some perfec' beauties," said Candace, lifting out a flaming yellow one with great delight. "See dar now, Miss Polly, did you eber know I had dat in my shop?"

"No," said Polly. Then she searched the corner of the box and pulled out another, but it was a faded green one, very dismal, and quite tired looking.

"Now dat was made out o' one ob my ole missus's bunnet strings," said Candace, raising it with a quick hand. "It's a bery special ribbin. Ain' dat fine, dough?" She balanced it on her black hand, lost in admiration.

"I don't believe I want a green one," said Polly.

"Don' you?" said Candace. "Well, now let's see,

honey," but she was very much disappointed, and set down the little green pincushion slowly by the side of her yellow treasure.

Polly glanced up at her over the box-edge. "Candace," she said, "I thought you had some *little* cushions. You showed them to Phronsie once for her dolls, don't you remember?"

"Oh, dem?" said Candace, wrinkling up her black face. "Why, they were teeny little bits o' tings."

"Well, I've just thought I could sew two or three of them together," cried Polly, the color flying up into her cheeks, "and don't you see, they'd be just as cunning. Oh, do look and see if you have any pink ones."

So Candace, delighted to see that Polly could look so, waddled off to a farther corner, and presently came back with another box, which when opened showed three or four little cushions racing along at play inside.

"Dey ain' pink," said Candace; "I 'member I sold all o' dem."

"O dear me!" exclaimed Polly, dreadfully disappointed, and seizing one end of the box. "Let me look," and suiting the action to the word. "Oh, yes, they are, as sure as anything, Candace; you have some pink ones."

"Shore, I hab," said Candace, quite as delighted.

"At least you have one, anyway," said Polly, her tone dropping some of her elation. "Oh, how I do wish—why, there's another—pick it out, Candace," she concluded in great excitement.

So the second little pink cushion was brought out and set on the counter alongside of the first.

"Well now, how I do wish there was just *one more*, Candace," said Polly, pushing up the damp rings of hair from her forehead, for it was pretty anxious work, "for I can get along with three so nicely. But you haven't another single one," she mourned.

"No, I hain'," said Candace, "an' dat am a fac'. But why couldn' you take a white one, honey? Dat would look real nice," she added, holding one

up persuasively.

"Oh, I want a pink one," said Polly, not looking at the little white one. "I did want three pink ones fastened together, Candace, they would be so pretty."

"But if you hain' got 'em, why you hain'," said Candace, with decision; "so what's de nex' bes' ting to do?"

"Oh, I suppose to take the white one," said Polly, turning away from the box with a sigh. "But the pink one would be *so* nice."

"An' you better not tink about de pink ones," said Candace, opening a drawer to get out some soft paper, "but be glad you could get a white one to mix in. S'posin' I hadn't had nothin' but green ones."

"Dear me!" exclaimed Polly. "Yes, I know, that would have been dreadful, wouldn't it, Candace?"

"Dat's so," said Candace, smoothing out a wad of paper, "as long as you don' like de green ones. But I tink dat one I made out o' ole missus's

bunnet strings is a perfec' beauty. Ole missus al'ays had de bery bes' o' ribbin."

"Oh, I want some pink ribbon to tie the little cushions together with," said Polly, at the mention of ribbon. "And I must have some narrow white, too, Candace, please."

"Well, I'm glad I found that thimble," said Ben, lifting a very red face to the counter-edge, and presently getting up to his feet. "Here, Candace, now don't let that run away from you again, that's my advice."

"Oh, Ben, how hot you are!" exclaimed Polly, as Candace received her horn thimble, which she put on her black finger with great delight.

"I sh'd think I was. Never felt so hot in my life," said Ben, in such a tone that Candace, who was rummaging for the narrow ribbon, could not hear. "Whew!" and he began to walk up and down the small shop, stretching his legs in great satisfaction. "Dear me, that feels good."

"An' now you mus' hab de candy sticks," said

Candace, setting down the little rolls of ribbon before Polly, then uncovering the glass jar again.

"That's fine," said Ben, taking a cinnamon stick and crunching it in a way to make Candace's round face beam with satisfaction. "You do have such nice candy sticks, Candace."

"Don' I?" she said, wriggling in delight. "Well, now, take another, Mas'r Ben."

"No, no," said Ben, "I've this big one," holding it up.

"Yes, you mus' take another," she urged, handing out the biggest stick the jar contained.

"No," said Ben, much distressed, "not unless you'll let me pay you for it, Candace."

But her black eyes fell so at the very thought of this, that he hastened to add, "Oh, well, then I will take it and thank you, Candace," meantime running his eyes over the little show case to see if there was anything he wanted to buy.

"An' you must take a piece to Miss Phronsie, dat

bressed chile," said Candace, doing up another stick with Polly's, which there was no time to eat in the shop, with such important business going on. And presently Polly and Ben hurried out, Polly carrying her little cushions and the ribbon, while a big bundle of a ball of twine and some pencils stuck out of Ben's pocket.

"Well now, Polly Pepper, you and I must just hurry," said Ben, striding off. "There's that Shakespeare book to get, and that red necktie."

"I know it," said Polly, setting quick little steps beside his long ones, "and we mustn't be out late, because Jasper will wake up and might want us."

"I don't believe Papa Doctor will let us up there to see Jasper again to-day," said Ben, grimly, as he strode on.

"Why, we didn't hurt Jasper, being up there this morning," said Polly, in a surprised tone; "Papa Fisher said so; you know he did, Ben."

"That may be," said Ben, "but all the same I don't believe we'll be allowed up there again this

afternoon."

"You know Papa Fisher said we had done Jasper good," persisted Polly, trotting along briskly by Ben's side, "so there, Ben Pepper."

"I know that," said Ben, with a nod. "But Papa Fisher always lets well enough alone. And you and I won't be invited up there again this afternoon, I tell you that, Polly Pepper. All the same, we must hurry, because Mamsie wants us home early."

"So she does," said Polly, almost breaking into a run.

"Hold on," said Ben, catching her sleeve, "don't race like that through the streets; it isn't proper."

"I do so wish," said Polly, flourishing her little bundles, "that it was ever proper to run in the street."

"Well, it isn't," said Ben, with a sharp eye for the bookstore they wanted. "Well, here we are, Polly. Now for that Shakespeare book!"

When they marched home an hour later, Joel ran out of the big stone gateway with Pip at his heels. The two Whitney boys and Davie were making good time down the winding driveway.

"Whoop!" screamed Joel, "where've you been?" and beginning to swarm all over them and seize their bundles, while Pip ran up to Ben and slipped his thin little hand into the firm, big one.

"Hands off," cried Ben, "from those bundles, Joe!"

"Where've you been, and what've you got?" demanded Joel. Then, without waiting for an answer, as the other boys were hurrying up and would let out the news, he screamed, "All those mountain children are coming to supper!"

"What?" cried Polly, standing quite still.

"Yes, and the old lady," cried Joel. "Every single one of them. You needn't try to tell anything," to Percy and Van and David, as they plunged up, all out of breath. "I told it all long ago."

XXI

THE POSTPONED CHRISTMAS MORNING

Well, the next day, what a Christmas it was to be sure! Jasper was to come down in the morning to see all the fun of the last preparations, go upstairs after luncheon to be a prisoner in his room and rest for the grand dinner and tree in the evening!

All the boys in his set crowded in, pretty soon after breakfast, to the big library.

"O me!" cried Alexia, running in and raising her long hands, "what *did* make you come so early—the very idea!"

"Well, it seems you are here, Alexia," said Pickering, coolly, lounging in one of the big easy-chairs.

"Oh, that's quite different," said Alexia, nowise abashed, "and you know it, Pickering. Why, Polly

needs me!"

"Does she?" said Pickering.

"Yes, of course; so I had to come."

Whereat Clare laughed, and one or two of the other boys joining in, Alexia turned on them. "You've no idea how much work girls have to do. Now, you boys don't lift a finger at any such a time as this."

"Don't we?" exclaimed Pickering. "Well, that's a fine thing to say."

"When we've been over here, at least Pick has, every day for a week, and the rest of us ever so many times, helping Polly," cried Clare, in a dudgeon.

"Oh, well, that was such a tiny little bit you could do, anyway," said Alexia, airily, and tossing her long light braids. "The important parts all have to be done by us girls. Boys are in the way!"

"Indeed! Well, why don't you go back and help Polly," retorted Clare, "instead of staying here

with us."

"Oh, I'm going," said Alexia. "I only came in to see what did make you all come so early. Why, it's hardly after breakfast."

"Pick—oh, you here," Ben hurried in, and gave the long figure sprawling in the easy-chair a clap on the back. "You're the very one Polly and I want; and come on, you chaps," addressing the other boys, "there's a job waiting for you all."

Pickering got out of his chair with a little laugh, while the other boys roared.

"What's the matter?" asked Ben, in a puzzle.

"Oh, nothing," said Pickering, as he went out, "only Alexia is glad to see us set to work."

"Yes, I am," said Alexia. Then she laughed, and ran ahead to get first to Polly.

"There is always one good thing about her," said Clare, as the whole group of boys tumbled promiscuously after, "she never minds when the joke is against her."

"That's so," they nodded.

There, sure enough, was quite sufficient to do for all the hands that appeared, as they soon found when they reached the busy playroom, where the tree, all shrouded in white, was awaiting them. And pretty soon the happy babel of voices kept time to the swift fingers as each boy took up the piece of work that Ben or Polly gave to him.

Alexia seemed to be quite busy flying here and there, doing a little of everything. "I'm glad you did come so early, Clare, after all," she condescended to say, coming up to him in one of those flights, as he was tying an extra rope of laurel.

"Thanks," said Clare. "Well, now, don't you suppose, seeing that you are here, that you can hold that other end for me? 'Twould be a sight easier to tie the thing."

"The very idea!" exclaimed Alexia, backing off. "Now that's just like a boy. Why don't I ask you to come and help me tie laurel strips?"

"Because you never tie them, I've observed," said

Clare, composedly.

"Well, it's because I have so many more important things to do," said Alexia. "Anybody can tie a laurel string."

"Can they?" said Clare, laboring away slowly.

"Yes, indeed," and Alexia skipped off, turned, and flew back. "O dear, do give me that old rope," seized the end, and flounced down on the window-seat beside Clare.

"You needn't if you don't want to, Alexia," yet his face brightened. If there was anything Clare hated to do it was to tie festoons.

"Oh, yes, I will," said Alexia. "You boys do anything without asking the girls to help. Here, let me tie for a while, and you hold."

"Oh, you don't want to do that," said Clare, in amazement.

"Yes, I do; it's stupid to hang on to an old rope and sit still. Besides, I can tie ever so much better than you," said Alexia, possessing herself of

Clare's handful.

"I don't doubt it," said Clare, bursting into a laugh, "though I never saw you tie one in my life."

"Oh, that's because we have to leave something for you boys to do," said Alexia, nowise put out, but tying away at a great rate. "Polly and I have much more important things to do, as I've always told you. Here, why don't you bunch for me?"

"But I've seen Polly tie wreaths and ropes ever so many times—oh, a hundred, I guess," said Clare, beginning to bunch for the long fingers.

"Oh, well, Polly does everything," said Alexia, easily. "O dear me! Here's Cathie—and—all the other girls!" With that down went the green festoon to the floor, while she rushed to the door.

Clare picked up the dangling thing, made a grimace, and set to work again, while the bustle and happy hum of voices became quite a babel.

"Now isn't that fine that you have come!" cried Polly, affectionately, and flying around the bevy of girls. "You see we've got to hurry so much

because we want to get the new wreaths and festoons up before Jasper comes down."

"So we'd better set about it," said Ben, in his practical fashion. "Now then, Cathie, suppose you help Polly, she's—"

"Oh, no, I'm going to help Polly," cried Alexia, edging up between the two girls.

"Why, I thought you were helping Clare a minute ago, and he hasn't finished," said Ben, in surprise.

"Oh, that stupid boy," cried Alexia, running her arm through Polly's, "he never will be done."

"Well, that's all the more reason why you should help him out then," said Ben, with a laugh. "Now, Cathie, you're to help Polly," he finished, just as if the most agreeable thing were being said for all hands.

Alexia gave him a long look, then drew her arm slowly away from Polly's and went back to Clare.

"I don't see how Ben Pepper always makes us do what he wants us to," she grumbled, throwing

herself into a seat beside Clare. "Do give me that horrid old thing and let's get through with it."

"Oh, are you back again?" said Clare.

"Yes, but I shouldn't be," declared Alexia, positively, and beginning to bunch furiously, "if Ben hadn't made me. You are so stupid and slow, Clare."

"Thanks," said Clare, tying slowly. "Well, don't throw the bunches at me, they get all mixed up that way."

"And you are so cross," said Alexia, breaking off little twigs of the laurel with nervous fingers, "that I can't suit you any way, and here I am working my fingers to the bone for you."

"Would you rather tie?" asked Clare, trying not to laugh at her face.

Alexia eyed the long festoon with a dubious gaze. "No, I shouldn't. Oh, I'll keep on at this if it kills me."

"Oh, Jasper!" It was Ben who shouted it, and

sprang to welcome him. And then, for the space of a minute, there was no more work done, while everybody crowded around to see Jasper fixed in a big easy-chair at the side of the long room, where he could get the best view of everything. Suddenly a small figure emerged from a heap of greens in the corner, where some thin little fingers had been picking out sprigs for the busy hands to weave into wreaths.

"Hullo, Pip!" cried Jasper, putting out a warm hand, as Pip sidled up, "now that's good to see you," throwing his arm around the thin shoulders. "Having a good time, Pip?" and he bent his head for the reply.

"Yes," said Pip, "I am."

"Now that's fine," declared Jasper, again. "Well, fly back to work," and he gave him a pat on the back.

Pip sidled off again and lost himself in the pile of greens.

"Miss Polly, they've come," announced Jane,

opening the playroom door, and advancing to Polly.

"Who?" asked Polly, holding a wreath for Ben to nail up over the little window—"not that way, a little more this other side," she said, as Ben placed the nail in. "Who, Jane?"

"Why, those poor children at Mrs. Van Ruypen's," said Jane.

"What? Oh, you don't mean they've come this morning!" exclaimed Polly, quite aghast, and dropping the wreath.

"Now something has happened," cried Alexia, dropping the little bunch of laurel. "I must see what it is," and she sprang off.

"Polly, don't look so," she begged. "What is it?"

Ben sat down on the step-ladder, having heard Polly's exclamation, but missing Jane's words. "What is it?" he asked.

"Oh, Ben, those dreadful children have come over this morning," cried Polly, aghast and quite swept

along, "to spoil all our fun."

Ben stepped down quickly. "Is that so, Jane?" he asked.

"They shan't come in," cried Alexia, vindictively, and running over to slam the playroom door.

"Alexia," called Ben, "come right straight back here."

"Well, Polly doesn't want them," grumbled Alexia, yet she came back.

"Never mind if they do come in," said Ben, laying a soothing hand on Polly's shoulder. "What harm will they do, Polly?"

"They'll spoil every bit of our fun," said Polly, with flashing brown eyes—"every single bit; you know they will, Ben, and that Elvira—oh, they *can't* come in!"

"There, you see," said Alexia, beginning to wring her hands. "You'd much better let me shut the door and keep them out, Ben Pepper."

"Polly," said Ben, and he turned her off to a quiet

corner, "perhaps they have never seen a Christmas tree. Why, what am I talking about?— we *know* they haven't."

"Well, they are coming to it to-night," said Polly, the flash dying down a bit, "and that's enough, I'm sure," she added obstinately.

"But the fun of getting ready! Oh, Polly, supposing—supposing somebody had come into the little brown house and asked us to come to help get a tree ready. Just think, Polly!"

Polly dug the toe of her shoe into a heap of greens, then she suddenly threw her arms around Ben's neck. "Oh, I'm a selfish pig, Ben," she cried. "Do let them come in."

Ben gave her an approving pat. "Now you're fine!" he said. "Come on, we'll call them in," taking her hand.

"Oh, now you've gone and made Polly let those dreadful children in," cried Alexia, nervously, envious that she was not to go too, as they ran by her.

"Jasper," said Ben, as they passed his chair, "it's the mountain children; they're waiting outside now. We're going to have them in to help us."

"Whew!" whistled Jasper. Then he added in delight, "The very thing I wanted most of all was to see those mountain children. Do hurry and fetch them."

Which urging was not in the least necessary as soon appeared—Elvira, in her smart blue gown, clear in advance of either Polly or Ben. She pushed her straight locks out of her eyes and gazed around, wholly unabashed.

"Hulloa, Viry!" called Joel, in delight, from the other end of the room. But she paid no attention to him, as she had not completed her gaze to suit her.

"I'm awful glad you've come," said Joel, springing off the chair on which he was standing, holding a festoon for Pickering to nail in place.

"Here, come back, you beggar," cried Pickering.

"We're having awful fun," announced Joel, coming

up to her and sticking out a grimy little paw, all resin and pitch from the branches of pine he had been breaking. His face was smeared as well.

"You're awful dirty," said Elvira, picking the blue gown away as if she feared contamination.

"Well, it's fun, I tell you," said Joel, not a whit nonplussed. "Come on with me," attempting to draw her off to Pickering and the deserted chair.

"I ain't a-goin'," said Elvira, twitching off. "An' I'll slap you if you don't go 'way."

Meantime Ben had charge of the two boys. Matthew wore his overcoat and beloved red tippet (which Madam Van Ruypen had hard work to make him discard in the house) wound around his head and ears. "Now, Jasper," and Ben led them up to the big easy-chair, "this is Matthew and this is Mark Hansell."

"Oh, how do you do?" said Jasper, sociably. "I'm glad to see you."

Matthew bobbed his head, bound up in the red tippet, solemnly, but Mark was too far gone in

amazement at the scene before him to do anything but stare.

"Now, Elvira," said Polly, going up to her, where she stood glaring at Joel, who still persisted in his sociable advances, "you come with me," and she put out her hand.

"I ain't a-goin' to," declared Elvira, stubbornly, and putting her hands back of her.

"Oh, you bad, wicked, awful girl!" cried Alexia, hovering near.

"Elvira," said Polly, and there was a little white line coming around her mouth, "you will come with me, or else you must go home."

"Not to stay with that great big lady," said Elvira, in dismay, her hands falling to her side and her face filling with terror.

"Yes, you surely must," said Polly, decidedly, "go right back and stay with Madam Van Ruypen, unless you do as I say."

"Oh, then I'll go with you." Elvira slipped her hand

into Polly's, made a final grimace at Joel, who, dreadfully disappointed, went back alone to Pickering.

"So this is Elvira," said Jasper, looking at her kindly. She didn't seem to see the hand he put forth.

"What you sittin' there for?" she demanded abruptly.

"Oh—well—they make me," said Jasper, with a little laugh.

"He's been sick, Elvira," Polly made haste to say. "Now come, child, you can help me."

"I don't want to. I'm goin' to stay here," said Elvira, laying a hand on Jasper's chair.

"Elvira!" Polly got no further, but it really wasn't necessary, for she went without further words.

"Polly, make her come over and help me," called Joel, from his chair.

"No, she is going to stay with me," said Polly, but she gave a sigh.

Pip, who had raised his head at entrance of the visitors, ducked it behind the pile of greens at sight of Elvira. And now he shivered as her thin, high voice piped out, "Where's that other boy?"

"The boys are all here," said Polly, absently, as indeed they were, even little Dick, who was happy with Phronsie in a quiet corner, tying little wreaths for one of her doll houses.

"Oh, I don't mean these boys," said Elvira, waving her thin arms scornfully around the roomful. "They're no good. Where's that other boy that was at supper last night?" she craned her neck to catch the sight she desired.

"She means Pip," said Alexia. Pip, at hearing his name, unguardedly raised his head.

"There he is! There he is!" exclaimed Elvira, joyfully. And, deserting Polly, she rushed over to the pile of greens. "I'm goin' to play with you," she said.

But Pip slipped nimbly out and was over by the step-ladder and scrambling up.

"Take her away," he howled, burrowing up to Ben. "Ow! Take her away!"

Polly rushed over to the pile of greens.

"He ran away," cried Elvira, with flashing eyes, "an' I had come to play with him."

"Elvira," said Polly, getting down on her knees to look into the angry eyes, "what did I tell you? Either you will mind what I say or Ben will take you right over to Madam Van Ruypen's. Which shall it be?"

For answer Elvira seized Polly's brown gown with both hands and sniffled into it, "Oh, don't send me to that big old woman. Don't, don't, don't!"

"Then will you let Pip alone?" said Polly, sternly.

"Yes, yes," mumbled Elvira.

"Very well, then come back with me," and Polly led her over to the work with Ben.

But as Pip would not come down from the step-ladder unless Ben brought him, and even then he had eyes of terror for Elvira, there was some

delay before the wreath over the lattice window could be hung up. Meantime, Jasper was getting on famously with Matthew and Mark, who were soon tying wreaths, one on either side of him.

"You'd better take off your tippet, Matthew," said Jasper at length, seeing the drops of perspiration roll down the red cheeks.

"Oh, I ain't hot," said Matthew, pulling the green string tight with strong fingers.

"Dear me," said a voice, strong-lunged and hearty, "this looks very comfortable."

"Oh, she's come!" Elvira dropped a green sprig she was holding for Polly and seized her gown. There stood Madam Van Ruypen surveying the roomful with an air of the greatest satisfaction on her face.

"Get her a chair, Ben," cried Polly. "Elvira," shaking herself free, "if you don't behave, you remember," and she hurried off to greet the visitor.

"Well, this is quite comfortable," repeated the old

lady, first going up to speak to Jasper, and then sitting down in the chair that Ben brought, wiping it off carefully on the way.

"She looks like a big polar bear," said Alexia, in a whisper to Clare, to whom she had flown up again, and was now bunching rapidly. "Dear me, I don't see how she can stand so many furs and things."

"Well, she's taking them off, now," said Clare. "See, Ben's helping her."

"She thinks there's nobody like Ben," said Alexia, diving on the floor for a specially nice green bit.

"Well, there isn't," said Clare, holding up his festoon to squint along its outline. "I do believe this is almost done, Alexia."

"Well, I should think it was quite time," said Alexia, stretching her long arms restfully back of her head. "You've been so awfully slow over it, Clare."

"Yes, I do believe it is," repeated Clare, in a joyous tone.

"And if that old woman is going to stay here all the morning," said Alexia, "I shall just die. 'Twould be too awful for anything, Clare."

"She wouldn't hurt you," said Clare, tying away with redoubled vigor at the delightful prospect of soon having it through; "and if Polly and Ben can stand it, I guess you and I can."

"Well, I'm going to turn my back on her," said Alexia, whirling around so that her light braids flew out, "then I shan't have to see her every minute."

"Yes," Madam Van Ruypen was saying, "I thought I'd bring over a few things that were forgotten for the tree, you know," pointing to its white shrouded outline with her long black glove. "They're out in the carriage, Ben. Will you tell Carson to bring them in?"

"What's she saying? Oh, what's she saying?" cried Alexia, wildly, and whirling about again till her braids flew out the other way like pump handles.

"I thought you didn't want to see her," Clare burst

out into a laugh.

"Oh, this is different; she's telling something, and she doesn't sit up like a great, stiff I-don't-know-what," said Alexia. Then she hopped up from her seat and ran over to the old lady's chair.

"Yes, and I have something I'm going to bring over to-night," Madam Van Ruypen was announcing, as Ben and Carson, the coachman, came in, their arms laden with bundles of all shapes and sizes, all carefully wrapped from curious eyes.

"Ow!" howled Joel, taking a flying leap from his chair. "Come on, Pip, she's got things!"

"I sent for that minister, Mr. What's-his-name—oh, St. John," the old lady was saying. "It will be a good thing for him to have a bit of city life, and he can help to manage these children," she waved her black gloves over to the two boys, but gave the most attention to Elvira after all, "till I get a little accustomed to them. And he's to get here this afternoon; so I'll bring him over to the tree to-night, Ben."

XXII

AROUND THE CHRISTMAS TREE

And the young minister came hurrying down on the mountain express train, reaching there in the "very nick of time," as Madam Van Ruypen observed. She was thus able to appear with him at the grand dinner at the King household, where she was to preside at one of the small round tables, for the big state dining table was to be discarded for this Christmas night, and the assembled company were to meet around little tables; this had been decided upon after an important conference held by Grandpapa, Aunty Whitney, and Polly.

So now, much to her great satisfaction, Madam Van Ruypen looked around, as she sat up, resplendent in black velvet, lace, and gems, in her little company. There was the young minister—of

course he had the seat on her right hand. Ben, equally of course, had the other side, and, as long as Ben was there, why, Polly must be; and then there was Jasper. Well, everybody wanted him, but he said, "Oh, I'll sit with Polly and Ben;" so he had a particularly soft and easy seat, with sofa cushions piled back of him, for it would be truly dreadful if he should get too tired! And then Alexia sat down before anybody asked her, and she looked so horror-stricken at the idea of being at any other table than the one where Polly Pepper sat, that Madam Van Ruypen laughed and said indulgently, "Oh, let her stay," for which Alexia loved her ever after.

And then Pickering Dodge was discovered in a corner, with such a longing eye that Polly cried out in the kindness of her heart,—

"Oh, do let Pick come to this table," so there he was, and that made seven.

"A very comfortable number," observed Madam Van Ruypen, shaking out her napkin with a happy hand, so that all the jewels on her fingers fell to trembling and shining at a great rate. Just then Pip

rushed up and flung himself against Ben's chair, holding on with excited fingers.

"Let me, Ben," he cried, "sit with you!" his little pale face all aglow.

"Oh, we can't have that boy," said Madam Van Ruypen, decidedly.

Ben's ruddy face went quite pale. "I wish we might," he said, fixing his blue eyes on the Roman nose and white puffs.

"Oh, no, indeed," said Madam Van Ruypen, shaking the big white puffs more decidedly yet. "You see for yourself there are seven seats. Any more would be quite uncomfortable."

"I don't need so much room," said Ben, shoving his chair.

"Nor I," said Jasper. "Dear me, it isn't necessary that I have this great big thing. It's that which takes up so much room."

"Oh, yes, you do, Jasper," said Polly, quite alarmed at his efforts to move; "you must keep

that chair, at any rate."

Ben looked over at Pickering in great trouble. Meantime he held Pip's nervous fingers fast.

"I don't see," said Pickering, swallowing something that seemed to choke in his throat, "why we can't all move up, just a bit, you know," beginning on his own chair—"or else, why, I'll quit and go to another table."

"Oh, no, you shan't, Pick," declared Jasper, "not a bit of it;" he looked so distressed at the mere thought that Polly beseechingly raised her eyes to the stately, forbidding old face.

"Oh, if you all like to be crowded," said the old lady, meeting Polly's brown eyes, "why, I am sure I don't care." So, the butler bringing a small chair, Pip crowded in next to Ben, and everything was merry once more.

And the young minister proved to be quite nice, and Madam Van Ruypen fairly beamed at him as the feast went on. And Pickering Dodge and he struck up quite a friendship across the table, and

even made plans for a skating match on the morrow.

"Now tell me," at last said the old lady, when the talk ran a bit low, "what can I do with the boys? And that girl—" she glanced to the end of the room, where Elvira, despite her disappointment at not being at Joel's table, was comforting herself as best she might by giving undivided attention to a chicken wing, which she held in both fingers.

"You better send them to school," said Mr. St. John, quickly. "And just as soon as you can get them there."

"Will the mother allow it?" asked the old lady, brightening up.

"Will she allow it? My dear madam," the minister straightened up and forgot how afraid of her he was, when she sat, a formidable figure in the little mountain church of a summer Sunday, and how very much he had disliked her, albeit her generous contributions whenever the plate went around—and now he smiled broadly, "if you could only have seen her when that box—"

"Never mind that," said Madam Van Ruypen, abruptly, and waving her hand with authority. "The question is, Will she allow me to send these children to school?"

"I think there's no doubt about it," said Mr. St. John, determined to find his own way to tell the story as he wanted it to appear. "Well, as I was saying, that cabin—why, we didn't any of us know what that poor woman was suffering. I blame myself," his head dropped and he drummed on the table with his fingers.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed the old lady, "you're not to blame." Then she added, with a remembrance of the summers spent in the mountain nook, "I'm sure I should have known."

"My dear madam," exclaimed the young minister, very much shocked to think that in the face of all her generosity he should have thrust a question for reproach, "you have been so very good, and have saved them all."

"Perhaps so," said the old lady, grimly. "But it wouldn't have been a bad idea if it had happened

earlier, I'm thinking."

"But just think, if it hadn't gone to them just when it did," continued the young minister, determined to have the benefaction receive its full measure of appreciation. "Why, that poor mother was hurrying down to tell the selectman she could do nothing more,—the children were starving, and he must take them to the poorhouse,—when she met John Bramble, the expressman, you know, with the box in his cart."

Madam Van Ruypen laid down her fork and made a violent effort to get her handkerchief out of the velvet and jet bag that dangled from her waist. As for Polly and the others, they never thought of eating, but listened, with their eyes fastened on the young minister's face.

"I never supposed it was as bad as that," said the old lady, brokenly; at last, with her fingers on her handkerchief, beginning to feel a little bit better.

"Nor did any of us," said Mr. St. John. "Why, John Bramble hasn't got over it yet. And I don't know that he ever will. Well, the misery is over

now, thanks to you."

"All the thanks necessary to be expressed," said Madam Van Ruypen, quite recovering herself and laying a hand on Ben's arm, to pull him forward into notice, "are due to this lad here."

Ben slunk back covered with confusion, and wished for nothing quite so much as to roll under the table quite out of sight. Seeing which Jasper spoke up: "Oh, it would be fine to have them go to school, wouldn't it?" and diverted attention so that it gave Ben time to breathe freely once more.

"Yes, indeed," said the minister; "it would be the making of them. And then that would give you a chance to have Luke and Matilda and Jane come down for a visit, maybe," and he laughed—he couldn't help it—at the face before him.

"I think not," said the old lady, dryly. "At least for a spell, until I get a little rested from Elvira," and then they all laughed. But the main thing was settled: the mountain children were to go to school.

Ben could hardly believe his ears; and he forgot to eat his dinner, while he gazed across the room where Matthew and Mark were placidly engaged at that pleasing occupation at a table with Joel and a whole company of other boys. Matthew had finally been induced to have his red tippet taken off, but insisted on keeping it across the back of his chair, where in the intervals of the dinner he could now and then feel of it. "Oh!" Ben gave a long sigh of satisfaction.

"What's the matter?" cried Madam Van Ruypen, turning off from the young minister; then she glanced at Ben's full plate. "This lad would rather look out for those boys than to eat his dinner," she said, which made Ben feel so ashamed again that he picked up his knife and fork and, with a very red face, plied them briskly.

Well, at last, as everything must have an ending sometime, that delightful dinner drew to a close. And then Grandpapa, who sat at the table of honor in the centre of the spacious apartment, with Phronsie at his side, rose and made them all a little speech, and said that although the

Christmas this year came a little late, it found them all very happy, as, please God, the sick one was well, and they had so many new friends to make good cheer with them. And he wished every one the very merriest of all Merry Christmases!

And then there was a great burst of music out in the hall, and a big orchestra, cleverly concealed in a thicket of palms and ferns, struck up their liveliest march. And all the company, Grandpapa and Phronsie, of course, leading the way, set forth in a procession that finally wound up in the big playroom to circle around the Christmas tree, still under its white cloud.

And then, in the beautiful rose-colored light streaming from the long lines of candles in their red shades, the choir boys from St. Stephen's marched in and around the white-enfolded tree, singing their beautiful carol.

Pip, clinging to Ben's hand, started forward, entranced, his little pasty-colored face looking keen and alight. And as the choir boys sang on and on, Madam Van Ruypen found herself strangely drawn to it. "I must ask Mr. King who

that boy is," she said to herself.

But she didn't have a chance to hear any recital that evening. Dear me, who could expect it, with a Christmas-tree party in full blast! And then the tree was unveiled, to stand forth in all its glory. Oh, such a brilliant sight! And they all took hold of hands, forming in a big, big circle, and marched around it a couple of times.

And then, a smart jingling of sleigh bells was heard.

"Oh, he's coming! he's coming!" screamed Phronsie, clapping her hands and dancing, little Dick doing the same.

"Who?" It was Elvira who picked Phronsie's little muslin sleeve.

"Santa Claus," said Phronsie, turning a happy face with dewy eyes. "He is! He is coming!" and she danced harder than ever.

"Who's Santa Claus?" demanded Elvira, but nobody heard her, for the jingling sleigh bells suddenly paused, and in he popped, the old saint

himself, right through the window!

Now, although Miss Mary Taylor was there, nobody thought to ask her where Mr. Hamilton Dyce was, except when Phronsie piped out, "I want him," and ran up to Miss Taylor, who blushed and looked prettier than ever. But after the presents had all been given out and Santa Claus had bowed and disappeared to get into his sleigh and drive off with his reindeer, Mr. Hamilton Dyce made his appearance in the midst of the festivities, wiping his forehead and looking very hot, but smiling all over his face.

At sight of him Phronsie dropped Grandpapa's hand, and ran up to him. "I wanted you," she said, "and you didn't come."

"But I'm here now, Phronsie," said Mr. Dyce, swinging her to his shoulder.

"Yes, you are here now," repeated Phronsie, folding her hands in great satisfaction, and surveying the company from her high perch. "But you didn't see Santa Claus," and she gave a little sigh.

"Oh, well, I saw him out there," Mr. Dyce bobbed his head toward the hall.

"Did you?" cried Phronsie, in great delight; "and wasn't he a nice Santa Claus?" She bent down to gaze into the face beneath her, whose cheek she patted.

"I'm glad you liked him," said Mr. Dyce, laughing.

"And did he get into his sleigh?" cried Phronsie, in great excitement. "I heard the bells. Oh, I should so very much like to see him once drive off."

"Oh, I didn't see him get into his sleigh, Phronsie," said Mr. Dyce.

"Didn't you?" said Phronsie, much disappointed.

"Well, now we ought to go over and see what Grandpapa wants," said Mr. Dyce, catching sight of the old gentleman's face.

"And there are such a many presents for you," said Phronsie, in a happy little tone, and patting the broad back.

"You don't say so!" cried Mr. Dyce.

"Yes, oh, such a many; do hurry and get them," gurgled Phronsie, as off he pranced with her on his shoulder.

Presents? Well, if Mr. Hamilton Dyce had many, what can be said of the gifts that had been rained down on all sides for every one else in the big room! And the best of it all was that each one seemed to think that nothing ever could be happier, as a selection of gifts, and that no Santa Claus who would understand them better, could by any means have visited them.

"But I like this best," said Matthew, and he laid his hand on the red woollen tippet.

Ben and he happened to be alone in a corner. "Do you, though?" said Ben, his eyes lighting.

"Yes, I've always wanted one," said Matthew.

XXIII

THE SLEIGHING PARTY

"Oh, yes, Pip," said Ben, "you must go."

"Oh, I don't want to," cried Pip, in great alarm, and, clinging to Ben's hand, he huddled up closer than ever. "Don't make me go to that old woman's; don't," he pleaded.

"Why not?" asked Ben, whirling him around to let his blue eyes search keenly the distressed little face.

"She looks at me so," said Pip, squirming uncomfortably; "she's always looking at me."

"Well, supposing she does, she won't bite you," said Ben, with a little laugh. Then he stopped suddenly. "Now then, Pip," and he put his hand on the small shoulder, "it's best for you to go; there's to be a jolly good time. Just think, Madam Van Ruypen is to give you all a sleigh-ride! And

off you'll go into the country and have a supper and come home by moonlight. Why, everybody's going!"

"Are you going?" asked Pip, suddenly, his face emerging a little from its wrinkles.

"Well, no, I'm not," said Ben, "but everybody else is; I'm going to stay with Jasper."

"Oh, I won't go! I won't go!" screamed Pip, wholly beside himself with distress. "I'm going to stay with you, I am." With that he wound his wiry little arms around one of Ben's, and beat his feet nervously on the floor.

"See here now, Pip," Ben lifted him clear from the floor, and set him down on the window-seat, then he stood in front of him, "now just look at me," which Pip did, swinging miserable little feet and twisting his hands.

"It is best for you to go on this party, and so you must go. Why, you'd have to stay with Jocko if you didn't," added Ben, "or else amuse yourself."

"Oh, I don't want to stay with Jocko," replied Pip,

who had good reasons, after his introduction to the monkey by Joel, for this decision.

"Well, you needn't," said Ben, bursting into a laugh, "but you must go on the sleighing party, and without me. Do you understand, Pip?"

Pip did, after he had carefully scanned Ben's face. At first he snivelled softly, but at last even that died away.

"Very well," said Ben. "Now then, you are to go with Joel. He'll see that you have a good time, for he said so. Here he comes now," as hasty feet scampering down the back stairs proclaimed Joel's approach.

"Where's Pip? I can't find him," cried Joel, rushing up with a very red face. "Oh, here he is! Well, come on, Pip," and he plunged toward the door.

"Hold on!" roared Ben. "Pip has got to go up to Mamsie; she's going to put some extra things on him so he won't get cold."

"Oh, bother!" said Joel, beating his feet impatiently on the floor.

"Why, there isn't any need for such a tremendous hurry, Joe," said Ben. "Now then, Pip, step lively upstairs to Mamsie's room; she wants to fix you up herself."

So Pip slowly got off from the window-seat, and, with many a backward glance at Ben, he crept upstairs.

"Go ahead, old snail," sang out Joel beneath. "O dear me! He'll never be ready, Ben," and now he beat his woollen mittens together as he pranced up and down the hall.

"Oh, yes, he will," said Ben, soothingly. "Don't rage so, Joel."

"And he's such a muff," said Joel, but he said it under his breath and with one eye on Ben.

"Hush up, Joe," said Ben, "there's no use in talking that way. And what are you in such a hurry to get to Madam Van Ruypen's for? Why, she doesn't expect you till three o'clock, and its only"—Ben pulled out his silver watch—"twenty-five minutes past two. What a silly thing you are, Joe!"

Joel dug the toes of his shoes into the rug. "Larry'll get there first if I don't," he whined; "you know he will."

"Nonsense! And what if he does; you aren't invited till three o'clock. Wait and go with Polly."

"Oh, I'm not going with a lot of girls," cried Joel, in a dudgeon, and extricating his toes from the rug. "You know they're always coming for her, Ben Pepper."

"Well, go with Percy and Van," said Ben. "Don't fly off in such a tangent."

But this suggestion only added fresh fuel to Joel's fire to be off.

"Oh, do make Pip hurry." He fairly howled it now. "Percy and Van have started already, I most know. They said they'd get ahead of me." And he rushed up and nipped Ben's arm.

"Goodness me! What a crab you are, Joe!" cried Ben, shaking him off, and then feeling of his arm.

"Well, do make him hurry," begged Joel. "O dear

me, all the boys will get ahead of me!"

"Well, let them for once," said Ben, coolly. "And Aunty Whitney won't allow the boys to go now, you may be sure. So rest easy, Joe. And one thing more, you are not to race Pip over there at lightning speed. Do you understand, Joe?"

"O dear!" said Joel, wrinkling his round cheek in great disdain, "he's such a——"

"Yes, yes, I know," said Ben, hastily. "Well, now, I'm off to Jasper."

"Oh, Ben," Joel flew after him, "I wish you were going, I do."

"Well, I'm not," said Ben, "so good-by." He pulled his jacket away from Joel's detaining hand, got around the corner of the hall, and hurried up the front stairs.

Meantime, Polly was having a perfectly dreadful time in little Doctor Fisher's office. There he sat behind his big table, rolling up some powders in tiny papers, and looking at her over his spectacles.

"Oh, please, papa Doctor," begged Polly, clasping her hands, "do let me stay at home."

"That wouldn't ever do in all this world." Doctor Fisher shook his head gravely, and the big spectacles seemed to blink so much displeasure at her, that Polly felt very wicked indeed. "It would stop the party at once, Polly."

"Well, it's no fun at all," said Polly, mournfully, "without Jasper and Ben." She could hardly keep the tears from streaming down her cheeks.

"I don't suppose there'll be so much fun in it as if Jasper and Ben could go," said the little Doctor, quietly, "but that isn't the question just at present. It seems to be the best thing that this sleighing party should be carried out. Think of those poor children, Polly."

Polly twisted uneasily on her feet.

"And how they've never in all their lives had any pleasure like this," the little doctor proceeded artfully.

"O dear me!" said Polly.

"And what such a thing in Badgertown would have meant to you children, Polly," said the little man, softly. He laid down his powder papers and looked at her.

"Oh, I'll go, I'll go!" exclaimed Polly, perfectly overwhelmed, and running around the big table to throw both arms around his neck.

"I knew you would, Polly my girl. There—there." Doctor Fisher patted her gently. "Now that's right, and your mother will be so pleased. She told Madam Van Ruypen she was sure you would help the thing along. So bundle up and start—that's right!" He set his spectacles straight and fairly beamed at her, as she ran out of the room.

"Dear me, you were so long in coming, Ben," Jasper was exclaiming from his big easy-chair. "I've been watching that door as a cat does a mouse for the last hour."

"Hulloa!" said Ben, advancing to the chair. "And

nonsense! You've only just about finished your luncheon, I'll be bound."

"Well, it seems ages ago," said Jasper, with a little laugh. "I tell you, Ben, it's awfully dull to be kept in bed all the morning," and he made a grimace at his canopied resting-place.

"Well, you sat up so late last night; and just think of all that fun!" said Ben.

"Oh, I know I'm an ungrateful wretch," said Jasper, bursting into a laugh. "Well, I don't care now, as long as Doctor Fisher allows me to have you. Where are all the others, Ben?" he asked suddenly, as Ben hurried to draw up a chair.

"Oh, they are going to be with Madam Van Ruypen," said Ben, carelessly, making a great deal of unnecessary noise over getting the chair in place.

"Oh!" said Jasper.

"You know those mountain children," said Ben, feeling something else was expected.

"Yes," said Jasper, "I know. Is Polly going?"

"Oh, yes, of course," said Ben, with wide eyes.

"Why, they couldn't do without Polly, you know."

"Of course not," said Jasper, then he twisted uneasily in his big chair. "It's an awful nuisance to Polly," he broke out.

Ben said nothing, not thinking of anything that seemed just the right thing to say.

"And that girl—that Elvira. O dear me!" Jasper pulled himself up quickly.

"So you'll just have to put up with this person this afternoon," said Ben.

"And I'm sure I'll be glad to," cried Jasper, affectionately. "Oh, Ben!" He leaned over so that both of his pillows immediately tumbled out. "And I was going to give you a regular bear hug," he said ruefully, as Ben hopped up to put them in place again.

"I'll be willing to put it off till you get well," said Ben, laughing. "Now, then, see that you don't

knock those out again," and he drew a long breath. "Well, what do you want to do now?"

"Oh, I tell you," said Jasper, and his dark eyes sparkled, "let us play chess. And do get the new ones that Father gave me last night at our Christmas. We'll christen the set this afternoon."

"We shall go twisted all the year, shan't we," said Ben, as he hurried over to the table for a box of chessmen, in the midst of the overflow of gifts, "because we had such a belated Christmas? Aren't these just fine?" coming back with it in his hand.

"Aren't they so?" cried Jasper, seizing the box eagerly. "And isn't Father good to give me a new set? And such beauties!" He emptied the box on the sofa blanket across his knees, while Ben went to draw up a small table to set them on.

"Oh, not that one," cried Jasper, looking up from his delighted examination of his new treasure. "Do you suppose for an instant that I'm going to play on that old table when I have a brand-new one that Sister Marian gave me last night? Why, Ben

Pepper, what are you thinking of? No-sir-ee! Not by a long shot!"

"Excuse me, your high mightiness," said Ben, pushing back the old table and hurrying over to get the new gift. "Will that suit your Majesty?" he asked, setting it down in front of Jasper's chair.

"Perfectly," said Jasper, setting a good handful of the chessmen on the table, and Ben, bunching the others up from the little hollow in the sofa blanket, they were soon all there in a heap.

"Now which do you choose?" asked Jasper, putting a red and a white piece in either hand, and thrusting them behind him.

"O dear me!" said Ben. "It won't make any difference, for you'll beat me all to death, just as usual."

"Nonsense," laughed Jasper, "you know as much about the game as I do, Ben Pepper!"

"Indeed I don't," said Ben, stoutly contradicting. "Why, you knock the life out of me every time we play. Just think of that last score, Jasper King!"

"Oh, well, a beat doesn't always signify who's the cleverest," said Jasper, quickly.

"Doesn't it?" said Ben, with a little laugh. "Well, I always thought it did."

"Well, which do you choose?" said Jasper, impatiently. "We never shall get to playing if you don't make haste."

"Oh, the right hand," said Ben.

So the red queen was placed in Ben's hand, and the two boys fell to work to set the pieces. And the game began.

"The same old story," said Ben, at its close. "There you go checkmating me, and I haven't even begun to move half my men."

"Oh, well, you'll have better luck next time," said Jasper, beginning to set his men again.

"I'm going to get a paper and pencil for the score," said Ben, hurrying over to the desk in the corner. "There now, game number one, 'J' beats. I might as well mark ditto down for game number

two and all the rest."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Jasper, who was now setting Ben's men. "You'll probably beat me out of sight next time."

"Probably," said Ben, sarcastically. And they fell to work again. And it was ditto, and number three also. But on game number four the luck turned, and Jasper's men, after a long fight, were routed.

"What did I tell you?" cried Jasper, who, although he had put up as good a game as he could, was greatly pleased at Ben's success.

"Oh, well, once," said Ben, leaning back in his chair. His round face was very red and he mopped it with his handkerchief. "I worked harder than I used to chopping wood," he said.

"Well, we won't play any more," said Jasper, yet he looked longingly at the men he was setting.

"Oh, yes, we will; that is, when I've rested a minute," said Ben, getting out of his chair to walk up and down the big room and swing his arms. "You set my men, and I'll be ready then."

"Oh, walk away and swing all you want to," said Jasper, "I'll set your men. Oh, I say, Ben!"

"What?" answered Ben, from the other end of the room.

"Wouldn't it be good fun to go up to the mountains, where those poor children came from, next summer?" said Jasper. "That minister says there is a capital camp up there."

"Wouldn't it!" cried Ben, flying around. Then he came up to Jasper's chair, "And he's an awfully good sort of man," he declared, bringing his hand down on the chess-table so that all the red and white men danced.

"Take care," warned Jasper, putting up both hands to the table-edge, "you'll have them all off. Yes, he is a splendid chap."

"And the camp is a big one," Ben went on, his blue eyes alight, and raising his hand again.

"Ow! Look out!" cried Jasper. But too late; down came Ben's hand, and away flew half the chessmen, running off to all quarters.

"O dear me!" exclaimed Ben, ruefully. "Now I have done it! Whatever did you speak of that mountain camp for now, Jasper King?"

"Well, I didn't suppose you'd think it necessary to knock over the whole thing into flinders," said Jasper, and lying back against the pillows. "You'll have a perfectly sweet time, now, Ben Pepper, picking all those up."

"I rather guess I shall," said Ben, getting down on his hands and knees. When at last he placed the last one on the table he was quite ready to sit down and rest by beginning a new game.

"And Father and Sister Marian could stay at the hotel, if they couldn't stand camp life," Jasper was saying, as he set his men. "And—"

"But I don't believe Grandpapa will want to," Ben was guilty of interrupting. "Mr. St. John says its splendid up at that camp. Oh, Jasper, don't you suppose we can go?" Ben was quite carried away now, and he got the king and queen all mixed up, while his knight and bishop had concluded to change places.

"Oh, what a chap you are!" chaffed Jasper, pointing to them. "See what a mess you've made!"

"Well, I tell you, you mustn't talk about that camp, if you want me to play," said Ben, desperately.

"Oh, well, let's drop the camp," said Jasper, turning his dark eyes on the chess-table, and revolving his plan, for it was his move.

"But I can't. I've just got to talk camp," said Ben, stubbornly.

"Well, you can't. We mustn't either of us talk," said Jasper, "when we are playing. Dear me, what a game that would be!"

"Well, I've got to think camp, then," said Ben.

"All right," said Jasper, "go ahead and think camp, if you must. Then I will beat you all around Robin Hood's barn."

Which he did. And then, as so many things occurred to both of them that had to be uttered about that mountain camp, the chessmen were shut up in their box, the new Christmas game

table set back carefully in the corner, and the two boys gave themselves up without reserve to the grand plan for next summer.



XXIV

JASPER AND BEN

"Oh," cried Jasper, "what fun! Polly could have all the fishing she wanted. Mr. St. John says the mountain brooks are just full of trout."

Ben's eyes glistened. To go fishing had always been one of the longings of his heart that the busy Badgertown days had given little chance to enjoy, when every minute that could earn a few pennies had to be devoted to helping Mamsie keep the wolf from the door of the little brown house.

"You and I would have some sport, eh, Ben?" Jasper leaned over to bring his dark eyes nearer.

"Yes," said Ben. He couldn't for his life get out another word.

"We *must* go," said Jasper to himself, "after that look. Father will say 'yes,' I almost know. And just think of Joel let loose in those woods," he

said aloud.

This brought Ben to. "Yes, I know," he said, "Joe would run wild."

"Wouldn't he?" laughed Jasper. "Well, it would be the best thing for Percy and Van and all the rest of us," he added. "Oh, Ben, we *must* go!" He brought his right hand down on Ben's with a slap.

"Yes," said Ben, "but perhaps we better not think too much about it, 'cause if we couldn't, you know," he turned his face away to look out of the window.

"Well, we must," persisted Jasper. "And then, you know, just think of the tramps you and I would have over the mountains."

"And Polly, too," said Ben, "she can walk as good as we can, you know, Jasper."

"Oh, yes, of course," assented Jasper. "Why, Polly would go on everything the same as we did. Did you think I meant to leave Polly out?" he asked in distress at the very idea.

"No," said Ben, "I didn't think so, Jasper."

"And Doctor Fisher would go; you know he's crazy to walk. If he had time, he wouldn't ever ride to see his sick people. Oh, wouldn't it be perfectly splendid, Jasper King! But we mustn't talk about it," and he pulled himself up quickly.

"Oh, let's talk," said Jasper, "it's half the fun of making plans beforehand. Oh, I wish Polly was here," and he gave a long sigh.

"No," said Ben, "it isn't best to talk about it any more, for if we can't go, we'd have an awful tumble from the clouds, and I can tell you that would hurt."

"Well, what shall we do?" said Jasper, with a long face. "It will have to be something pretty absorbing to keep my mind off that camp, and our tongues as well."

Ben rubbed his forehead and thought a bit. "I can't think of anything more absorbing than Jocko," he said at last.

"Well, Jocko it is," said Jasper, laughing. "Oh, I

wish we had some peanuts to give him," he said suddenly.

"I'll run down town and get some," said Ben.

"Don't be gone long," begged Jasper.

"No, sir," said Ben, and he was off.

Polly and all the others must be just about midway to the country town where they were to stop for supper—Ben couldn't help but think of it as he dashed down the frozen driveway that gave out such a delightful "scrunch, scrunch" to his hurrying feet. He drew his breath hard, thrust his hands in his pockets, and whistled. Oh, how gloriously the winter sunshine glistened across the snow on the lawn, and how the gay equipages with their merry loads swept by him, as he turned into the thoroughfare! He whistled harder than ever until he remembered that Mamsie didn't like him to do such things on the street; then he stopped and set out on a run, that presently brought him up to the little store where Polly always bought her bird-seed. Hurrying in he bought a bagful of peanuts; then out again and home—unchained Jocko in the

small room over the stable, and dashed upstairs.

Jocko, who seemed to know at once there were peanuts in the bag dangling from Ben's other hand, got between Ben's legs at every possible chance, thus impeding the progress seriously.

"Oh, you rascal!" exclaimed Ben, shaking the bag at him, "you shan't have one if you don't behave," and he shortened his grip on the chain to keep Jocko on one side if possible.

Jocko wrinkled up his eyelids and teased and whined, sending out a brisk paw to snatch the bag if possible.

"Be still," said Ben, giving him a cuff with the bag, "and come on and don't dance all over those stairs. Oh, such a piece of work!" he declared, at last going into Jasper's room.

"Have you come at last!" said Jasper, turning an eager face to him.

"Have I?" said Ben, the monkey and he coming in together with a rush up to Jasper's chair, Jocko making a last dash at the paper bag; "well, yes, I

should say I had. There are your peanuts," throwing them into Jasper's lap. "Look out, or he'll have them," as Jocko immediately leaped into the centre of the sofa blanket.

"Not much he won't," declared Jasper, setting the bag back of him with a quick hand. "Hulloa, Jocko!" as the monkey gave a squeal of disappointment. "Oh, you shall have some peanuts all in good time. There, don't cry. Hold your paws."

Jocko, hearing this, stopped his lament and extended both paws, his little eyes shining eagerly.

"Oh, you greedy little thing," said Jasper, laughing, and emptying a handful into them, when Jocko squatted contentedly on the sofa blanket, cracked some nuts as fast as he could, spitting out the shells to right and to left.

"Here, look out, you mustn't do so," said Jasper. "I'll take the peanuts away if you do."

At the mention of this, Jocko stuffed his nuts with both paws into his cheeks, reserving one to crack

and eat as he blinked first at Jasper and then at Ben.

"He's making a lot of dirt," said Ben, beginning to pick up the shells.

"I know it," said Jasper, "but he's such fun."

"They stick awfully, those little red skins," said Ben, picking away at the little pieces, as slap went another shot, this time in his face.

"Well, Jane can shake the blanket," said Jasper. "Stop that, you beggar!" to Jocko. "And they don't leave any spot," as another shell and the shower of little red skins came flying out. "Here, I'll take those away, I say." But easier said than done.

"You can't get those out of his cheeks," said Ben, with a laugh, and giving up the sofa blanket as a bad job. "Well, we'll just let him finish them, and then I'll shake the skins out of the bath-room window."

"And you won't have any more," said Jasper, with a bob at Jocko, as he squatted on his knee.

"Those peanuts are gone, sir."

Jocko, who cared very little what was said about peanuts, as long as he had his cheeks full, picked the nuts out one by one, cracked and threw away the shells, with the same impartial attention to Jasper and Ben, and leisurely ate them.

"Here's the bag, Ben," said Jasper, tossing it to him, when the monkey's cheeks began to flatten out. "Put it up on the shelf, do, for I don't want him nosing all over me for it."

So Ben caught the bag and set it up high in the place designated, Jocko's sharp little eyes following every movement.

"Oh, you needn't stare that way, you greedy little thing," said Jasper, "for you can't get that bag, I'd have you to know. Oh, you are almost through, are you?" Which was presently without doubt the case, proclaimed as it was by a loud shout for more peanuts, and the quick extension of Jocko's long arms.

"No, sir!" said Jasper, shaking his dark hair

vehemently; "see what a muss you've made," pointing to the sofa blanket and to the floor and to his jacket, and Ben's as well.

Jocko, who didn't care to waste time regarding these trivial things, redoubled his cries, till the room seemed full of monkeys.

"Goodness me, what a bedlam!" cried Ben. "You can't stand this."

"Well, do put the bag somewhere else than on that shelf," said Jasper. "If he doesn't see it, he'll stop."

But Jocko, seeing no good reason why he should stop till he had his peanuts, gave vent to howls in another key, much worse than the first.

"Ow!" said Jasper, with a grimace, "that sets my teeth on edge. Here, Ben, you may have your monkey," pushing Jocko off from his lap.

"*My* monkey?" said Ben, running around with the peanut bag, looking for a place to hide it. "Well, I think that's nice, when you made me bring him up here."

"Oh, well, he's yours now, as long as he's in your care," said Jasper, coolly. "That's right, Jocko, run after Master Ben," and he dropped the chain.

There was no need to tell Jocko that, as long as Ben had the peanut bag. So he leaped to the broad back and ran down the arm, at the end of which was the coveted prize.

"No, you don't," said Ben, transferring the bag to the other hand, when Jocko like lightning ran over the broad back again, and down the other arm; this pretty game being played with no gain to either party, until Jasper begged for a pause.

"I should think you'd laugh," said Ben, turning round with a hot, red face, Jocko sticking to one shoulder, rage in his eye.

"O dear me!" said Jasper, faintly, and wiping his eyes. "Ha! Ha! Ha!" and he burrowed in the chair-depths, holding his sides.

"To get me into this scrape," exclaimed Ben, flying around with a wild step. "Stop that," for Jocko in this little diversion nearly gripped the prize. "There

now!" He rushed to the closet, threw the bag in, and slammed the door. "Now, sir! who's got those peanuts?" and he gazed into the monkey's little wrinkled face.

Defrauded of his prize and, what was worse, with no hopes of getting it, for Jocko could see that the closet door was shut, he now set up a piteous sobbing, putting his paws up to his poor little eyes. And there he clung on Ben's shoulder, crying like a child.

"Oh, I say!" exclaimed Jasper, coming out of his laugh, "I can't stand this. Do stuff something into his mouth, Ben," and Jasper thrust his fingers into his ears.

"He shan't have peanuts," declared Ben, firmly, yet having no heart now to set the monkey on the floor. "There, there, Jocko, be still," and he patted him kindly.

"Of course not," said Jasper, taking the finger from one ear long enough to hear Ben's reply; "but get him something else—anything—"

So Ben set up a hunt for something to appease Jocko, and at last lifted the lid of the cracker-jar.

When Jocko heard the click of china, he dropped one paw enough to peer around. Yes, he was going to have something to eat. So down went the other paw, which shot out to receive the tidbit. When on being conveyed to his mouth he found that it was nothing but cracker, a thing that Thomas and Jane and the other maids, who were always running out to pet him, gave him ever so many times a day, he spit it out disdainfully, clapped his paws to his eyes, and cried harder than ever.

"For goodness' sake!" cried Jasper, "can't you find some candy? There is plenty there in that box. I'll come and get it myself." And in another minute he would have been out of the big chair.

"You stay still," said Ben. "Hush, you beast!" to Jocko. And at last, after knocking down more things than he supposed was possible in that short time, the box of candy was found on the table, and a big piece crammed into Jocko's mouth.

"O dear me! How perfectly lovely not to hear his voice," exclaimed Jasper, dropping his fingers and sinking back against his pillows.

"Um!" said Ben; then he set Jocko down in the corner, took a big piece of chocolate, and smeared the wrinkled face from top to bottom, then set the remainder in one paw. "When you've got through licking your face and rubbing it clean, why then you'll go downstairs, sir," he declared grimly. "My goodness me, I *am* tired," and he threw himself into a chair.

"Oh, what a scheme," cried Jasper. "O dear me!" and he began to laugh again, for Jocko, having swallowed as one morsel the big chocolate piece, was now endeavoring to lick his cheeks clean by running his tongue as far out as he could. To do this, as he always fancied after each fresh effort that there was much more up beyond his eyebrows, which was quite true, as Ben had been very generous in the application, he turned his back on himself, so to speak, many a time, to achieve the success he longed for—till he got out of breath, and had to squat and rest, only to up

and at it again.

Just here in came Jane with a small tray, followed by Hobson, the butler, with a large one.

"You are to have your supper up here, too, Master Ben," said Jane.

"Oh, am I?" cried Ben, in a pleased tone.

"Yes, Mrs. Fisher said so," said Jane, depositing her tray on the table. "Oh, that nasty monkey!" she squealed, catching sight of Jocko, who was just beginning on a fresh attempt to get the sweet stuff off from his face. "Oh, me!"

"He won't hurt you, Jane," said Ben; "he's too much occupied. And Hobson, after you have set the table, you can take him downstairs."

"All right, Master Ben," said Hobson, pulling out the tea-table from the wall, and opening its leaves to deftly lay the cloth, Jane going gingerly about to help as far as she could, seeing that she must keep a sharp eye on Jocko.

"It seems so funny to have supper instead of

dinner," said Jasper. "I haven't gotten used to it after all these weeks. And to think of its being time. Haven't you made a mistake and brought it too early, Hobson? Do look at your watch, Ben."

"It is a bit early, sir," said Hobson, "but Doctor Fisher ordered it now."

"It's half-past five o'clock," said Ben, "but it hasn't grown dark hardly any. Well, we must have the light turned on now," springing off to do it.

"I know why I'm to have my supper a half-hour sooner," said Jasper; "it's because I'm to be tucked into bed earlier to-night. Well, I suppose I must," he added resignedly, as a bright light filled the room.

"Yes, indeed, we had such a good time last night," said Ben, flying back. "Now this is jolly, isn't it?" his face lighting up.

"Yes," said Jasper, "it's no end jolly!" looking across the tea-table, as Jane lighted the candles under the red shades, pulled the curtains together, and Hobson adjusted the tea-things. "Is there

anything else you want, Master Jasper?" he asked.

"No," said Jasper, with a quick eye for details, "thank you, Hobson; everything is very nice. Now if you will just take Jocko."

"Yes, I will, Master Jasper," said Hobson, going over to Jocko, who was still working away on his face, supposing he had plenty of time to attack the tea-table later. Jane gave a wide range to the two on her way out.

When they were fairly started Jocko gave a loud cry of disappointment, turning a baffled face to the two boys and the lovely table between them.

"Oh, do toss the poor beggar a piece of cake, Ben," said Jasper.

Which Ben did, and Jocko, wisely considering it better to take it than to get nothing, was borne off; the cake having been swallowed before he reached the bottom of the stairs, his cries pealed up till at last Hobson had him well out of hearing.

Jane set the little silver bell on the tea-table, and

withdrew to the sitting room as usual, when the two sat a long time over the supper enjoying it hugely. At last it was time for her to summon Hobson, and the two trays were carried off.

"And now what?" asked Ben. "Shall I read to you, Jasper?"

"Oh, if you don't mind—are you tired of chess?" Jasper leaned forward to search the round face.

"No, not a bit; only it can't be any pleasure to you, I'm so stupid," said Ben.

"I tell you what it is, Ben Pepper, you are *not* stupid," declared Jasper, warmly; "now don't say so again," he begged.

"Oh, I won't if it makes you feel badly," said Ben, laughing, "only I shall think so."

"You mustn't think so," declared Jasper, decidedly; "and do hurry and get the table and the men."

So the little game-table, inlaid and beautiful, was carefully brought out and set in place by Ben, the

box of chessmen put in Jasper's hands, and then Ben sat down to the table.

"You choose this time," said Ben, picking up a red and also a white piece, to hold back of him, "only, as I said—"

"Ugh!" interrupted Jasper, "you weren't to say that again. You promised, Ben," he added reproachfully.

"So I did," said Ben. "Well, I won't again."

"See that you don't," said Jasper, laughing. "Well—I choose the left hand. Oh! You have the first move," as a white pawn came to view.

And after that there was nothing heard in the big room but the ticking of the French clock, and the crackling of the hickory logs, if we except Ben's hard breathing when his men were pushed pretty hard.

And the first thing any one knew there was little Doctor Fisher looking at them through his big spectacles and beaming all over his face.

"Well—well—well!" he could hardly stop himself. "And so you are having a good time," he said to Jasper.

"I should rather think so," said Jasper, lifting a bright face.

"I suppose now you don't know what time it is," said the little Doctor.

"Oh, it's early, I know," said Jasper, easily; "why, we have hardly got through supper, it seems to me."

"Then you must have been a good while at supper," said Doctor Fisher, composedly, and pulling out his big silver watch, "for it's nine o'clock."

"Nine o'clock!" exclaimed Jasper and Ben together.

"Fact." Doctor Fisher nodded so briskly that his spectacles slipped down to the end of his nose, "And so it's time for you to hop into bed, Jasper."

"O dear!" said Jasper, with a glance at the silken

canopy and covers, and trying not to show a wry face.

"In with you! I give you ten minutes." The little Doctor laughed and went off, and immediately the room was in a bustle, Ben helping along the operation of getting Jasper to bed. And presently the light was out and Jasper was saying, "Oh, thank you, Ben, ever so much. Good night."

"Good night," said Ben, and he shut the door softly and went downstairs.

It was so still all through the big mansion—little Dick and Phronsie of course being abed and asleep hours ago, and all the other children away. Ben opened the big front door and stepped out on the stone porch. Oh, how good the crisp air was! He sniffed it in, and threw back his broad shoulders for another and another breath; then he hurried into the house to get his coat and cap,—and, jamming this last on his head, he thrust his hands in his pockets, and set off for a walk. Yes, they must—the merry sleighs full—be well on their way home by this time, because Grandpapa, who, of course, was going with them, had told

Mother Fisher he should bring them home early.

Oh, how good the air was! Ben thought he hadn't tasted any quite so sweet since he left Badgertown—and he deserted the sidewalk now, having reached the thoroughfare, and struck out in the middle of the road, where it was more fun crunching down the snow. How long he walked he didn't know. Suddenly sleigh-bells jingled,—and merry voices,—and, yes, there was Polly's laugh,—and, why, of course, there was Grandpapa's voice,—and then,—

"Oh, there he is!" screamed Polly. *"Oh, Ben!"* stretching out her arms.

And "Hop up here," called Grandpapa, his cheeks rosy under the white hair. And up Ben went like a flash! One word to the driver of the four horses and off they went, turning first in the direction from which they had just come—the other big sleigh following fast.

"Oh, Grandpapa, we are going to give Ben a sleigh-ride," cried Polly, in a glad little voice, and clapping her brown gloves together.

"Of course," said Grandpapa; "we are going to give him a little one this time, and a big one, all made up on purpose for him, some other night."

XXV

IT WAS POLLY WHO HEARD IT FIRST

"Yes," said Madam Van Ruypen, folding her long hands in her lap. She sat at one corner of her library fire, in a carved high-backed chair, and the young minister at the other end. Both were regarding the leaping flames.

"It will be best for you to return home to-morrow; tell the mother all my plans for the children, and ask her permission for me to put them into school," went on the old lady, not raising her gaze from the crackling hickory logs.

"Yes, Madam Van Ruypen," said the minister.

"And then write me at once what she says. Meantime, I shall be consulting Mr. King as to the school. It has to be a peculiar kind, of course, none of the high-fangled ones, but a good,

substantial, ordinary sort of one, dominated by a man with a conscience. And where shall we find such an one—goodness knows, I'm sure I don't," she lifted her hands in dismay.

Mr. St. John, seeing that something was expected of him, volunteered the remark, "Oh, there must be such institutions; they are so much needed."

"Just like a minister," retorted the old lady, who was nothing if not blunt, especially if it fell out that she took a liking to a body; so now she added, "Oh, you'll do to preach from a desk; but as to practical things, such as the selection of a school, why, what can you, in the name of sense, be expected to know, either about them or the masters who run them?"

A little spot of red began to show itself on the fair cheek, and twice the young minister opened his mouth. But he thought better of it. Then he laughed. "Perhaps so," he said, with a nod, and stretched his hands to the blaze.

Madam Van Ruypen laughed too. Having never meant to give offence, that danger had not

occurred to her. But she had been suddenly overcome, as it were, with a mortal terror, and all on account of those mountain children. What to do with them now she had sent for them she had found herself unable to answer. She couldn't send them back home, that would be cruelty indeed; and until the plan for the school popped up she was in a miserable state enough. So it was quite cheery to hear the bright little laugh bubble out from the other end of the fireplace, and she laughed so heartily in echo, that Mr. St. John tried it again.

"Well, now I feel better," she said, wiping her eyes with her lace-trimmed handkerchief. "You can't know, Mr. St. John, how very much I have been tried in this matter."

"I suppose so," he said, the laugh dropping away. Really, when he came to think of it again, the wonder grew how she came to do this thing at all, and then, how she dared to keep on so bravely. And that recalled "old money-bags"; how he blamed himself now for calling her so in his thoughts on those Sundays in the little mountain

parish church! Could she be the same person as this woman, wiping her eyes, so touched by the little cheer he had given to her perplexity? He cleared his throat. "It was noble of you," he said, his own eyes glistening.

"Oh, now," she turned on him a formidable face; the white puffs and Roman nose seemed to grow bigger. "You would do better to stop right there," she said, raising her forefinger, "else I shall wish you had gone home to-day," all of which made him feel decidedly like a schoolboy about to be whipped. And he sat back in his chair, quite depressed.

"Let us put our minds on those children, Richard," she said at last, breaking the silence that seemed to weigh on one of them like lead. "I don't like your name, St. John; it's well enough for a grand person, but you're a minister, and probably always will be a plain man, so I am going to call you Richard."

"If you only would!" he cried, the brightness coming back to eye and cheek, not caring in the least for the rest of her words.

"So you like it,—eh?"

"Very much. I am, as you say, a plain man."

"Besides being something of a boy," she added, with a twinkle in her sharp eyes.

"Besides being something of a boy," he repeated, laughing again.

"Well, then, Richard it is," she declared, with great satisfaction. "Now then, the first thing is to settle those children in some good school, or rather in two good schools, as soon as can be done. It isn't good for them to be here, I see that. I don't know in the smallest degree what to do with them, at least as far as the girl is concerned, and it is bad for them to be entertained all the while." Not a word about the demoralization of her houseful of servants, whose ill-concealed wrath and dismay were smouldering over the infliction of Elvira. "And they ought to be getting some education. Well, to-morrow you must go back and straighten it all out with the mother. That's settled." Then she sat quite erect to draw a long breath of enjoyment. "Now I'll tell you a piece of news,"

she said; "it's a secret as yet."

Richard leaned forward with great interest. He certainly was boy enough to enjoy a secret, and his eyes sparkled.

"I've engaged the whole front of the mountain hotel, the floor above the office, for next summer," she said. Then she waited to see the effect of her announcement.

"You're coming up?" cried Richard, in a glad voice.

"It looks like it," said the old lady, grimly, but vastly pleased at his tone, "and I want you to engage the Potter Camp for me."

"And you'll bring—oh, now I know what you are going to do!" exclaimed the young minister, with great delight.

"No, you don't know in the least what I am going to do, young man," she retorted. "Oh, go along with you, Richard," and she laughed again, this time as light-heartedly as if her years matched his own. "Yes, I wrote yesterday to the manager to

secure the rooms. You must get the camp for me."

"I surely will," promised Richard with huge satisfaction.

"And tell John Bramble if he doesn't bring my boxes and express matter up to the hotel quicker this summer than he did last year, I'll—I'll—report him to the government. Dear me, I want to scold somebody. Oh, and be sure, Richard, whatever you forget,—and I suppose you'll leave out the most important things,—don't forget to tell—what's that man Handy's name?"

"Shin?"

"Shin! Oh, what a name!"

"Well, we always call him that up in the mountains, because he can shin up the trees quicker than anybody else," said the young minister, laughing, "but his real name is—"

"Oh, well, if he's been called Shin so long, why Shin let it be," said Madam Van Ruypen, composedly; "I'm sure I don't care. Well, be sure

and tell him he's engaged for the summer. There will be plenty he can do when we aren't at camp."

"That's fine," cried Richard, clapping his hands together smartly, "because you see Shin has so much time when he isn't hired for camping and guiding."

"And don't let those other children expect to come down. Whatever you do, don't raise any such hopes." The old lady here turned such a distressed face on him that the best he could do was to laugh again. "I'll remember," he said brightly.

And Madam Van Ruypen slept through the whole night, having the first good sound repose she had enjoyed since the visitors had arrived.

But up at the King household—O dear me! It was Polly who heard it first.

She was dreaming of the difficulty of making a little pink silk cushion out of a mussy end of flaming yellow ribbon that Candace seemed to have insisted on her using; and as she worked

away, wishing it was pink, and trying to make herself believe it was pink, she saw it grow yellower and yellower, till finally she threw it down. And that twitched the needle and knotted up the silk thread, and then off her thimble flew with a little click—snip, and "O dear me!" exclaimed Polly, and opened her eyes.

She was just going to say, "Oh, I'm so glad I was only dreaming, and 'tisn't that hateful yellow cushion in reality," when another little click—snip, just like the one when her thimble dropped off in her dream, struck her ear. This time it was a "really truly" noise, and no dream, and Polly flew up in her pretty bed and leaned on her elbow.

Yes, and not only a click—snip, but a *sh—flop!* or something that sounded as much like that as anything that could be put into words.

Polly flew out of bed, tossed on her pink wrapper, and only stopping to think, "I mustn't go into Mamsie's room, for that will wake King Fisher,"—Papa Doctor was away with a sick patient out of town,—she crept softly off to Ben's room, just around the angle of the hall, and, flying

up to the bed, she gave him a little nip on the shoulder.

"Polly!" exclaimed Ben, sitting bolt upright, and, dashing his hands across his eyes, he was wide awake in an instant. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Polly, huddling up to the side of the bed, "only hush, do, the door's shut, but don't speak loud. There's such a funny noise; it sounds downstairs, Ben," she said, with a little shiver.

"Funny noise!" said Ben. "Well, now, you creep back to your room and lock the door, and stay in there, Polly."

"Oh, Ben, don't go down," she cried, seizing his arm.

"Do as I say." He never spoke in such a tone before, and Polly, who had no thought of disobeying, found herself soon in her own room, wishing that she hadn't called Ben, and longing to run out and help, and a thousand things besides.

Ben meantime was out in the hall, a stout walking-

stick in his hand, hanging over the banister. Yes, Polly was right, there certainly was a funny noise, and it appeared to come from downstairs, too. It wasn't just what he supposed would be raised by anybody getting in to rob the house; it was more like something dropping; and then another sound, like a flap, flap of the window shade. But it was just as well to act speedily, and yet it must be done with caution; so he crept off to the back hall, where he could press the button that gave the signal to the men in the stable.

And he presently saw the lights flashing as they turned their dark lanterns a second toward the big stone mansion. Well, whatever the trouble was, they would soon find out, for Thomas had a key for just such possible emergencies, and the search would—

Ben never finished it in his mind, for a sharp noise, so near him that it seemed as if the person making it must be close to his heels, sent every bit of blood away from his cheeks. He couldn't turn, for what might be back of him in the darkness? It wasn't the click of a pistol exactly,—Ben, in all his

cold terror felt struck with the little resemblance to any such noise,—still, as there was nothing else so likely to be that very thing, why, it must be, he concluded.

Downstairs he could hear, with senses sharpened, that Thomas had entered the house and that the search had begun in earnest. Well, somebody, whoever it was with that pistol, would probably do something more than click it before long, when another noise, this time a little farther off, a soft, pat—pat, sent his mind in another direction. Either there were two burglars who had worked their way upstairs, or the one with the pistol had heard the noise downstairs, and concluded to try for an escape.

And now Ben's blood was up, and he softly followed in the direction of the sound, grasping his stick hard and setting his teeth. "It'll be easier for me than for the other fellow, as I know the way," flashed through his mind.

But he didn't seem to get much nearer. Of course he would stop when there was no noise, then the soft pat—pat would begin at a further remove,

and on Ben would creep after it.

He must at least keep the trail till Thomas and the other serving-man could put in an appearance on that third floor. What,—ah, there he is! Again the click! And the portière twitched out by the sudden movement of a hand. Ben swung his stout stick above his head, and brought it down to hear a squeal of fright and pain, and Jocko, whose tail only had suffered, leaped into his face.

Over went Ben, the stick, and monkey together, just escaping the long stairs, as Thomas and his men rushed up, turning the lanterns on every side to find the cause. Doors were thrown open and frightened faces appeared, while Polly was already down on her knees by his side. "Oh, Ben," then her fingers felt Jocko's hairy coat.

"That beast!" It was all Ben could get out. Then he lay back on the floor and laughed till he was so weak he could hardly breathe. "He's a—sweet—dear—little thing—" at last he made out to say, "isn't—he—Polly?" he ended gustily.

XXVI

"COULD YOU TAKE HIM, BEN?"

"Of course," said Grandpapa, "after this, Jocko must go."

And "Of course," echoed every one else. "But where?"

"Oh, do send him to the Zoo," begged Polly, "do, Grandpapa dear, and then we can go and see him sometimes and take him nice things to eat."

"I don't believe Ben will want to go very often," said Jasper, with a little laugh, "will you, old fellow?"

"Yes," said Ben, with another laugh, "as long as I don't meet him in the dark, when he jumps at me from a curtain, I'd just as soon see him as not."

"Oh, I'm so very glad he is going to the Zoo," said

Polly, with a long breath of relief, "he'll be real happy there with such lots of other monkeys."

But Jocko didn't go to the Zoo after all with "such lots of other monkeys," for Candace, hearing the news of the disturbance by supposed burglars at Mr. King's big mansion, and the consequent plan to send Jocko away, came waddling up the driveway as fast as she could.

"Here's Candace!" shouted Joel, who spied her first. "Come on, Pip, I guess she's got some candy sticks."

But Candace was so out of breath when she reached the big stone steps that she sank down to rest. If she had any candy sticks in the big black woollen pocket she always wore at her side, it couldn't have been announced at present. The truth was, however, that in the hurry and excitement of leaving the little shop, she had forgotten them. Whereat Joel was wofully disappointed, but he covered it up as best he might, seeing her chagrin when she pulled out all her things and shook the empty pocket.

"Oh, me, I've clar forgot 'em," she mourned, holding up her black hands in dismay, as the boys hung over her, still hoping that the candy sticks might be hiding in a corner of the big pocket.

"Shake it again, Candace! Shake it again!" cried Joel. "Here, let me," he begged.

"No, no, Mas'r Joel," protested Candace, in alarm, and putting both hands over the generous black woollen pocket, "you'll done shake it to def, you will. Dey ain' dah, I tell you. Oh, me, to tink I sh'd a-gone an' forget dem. An' it's all about dat ar monkey. Oh, whee! I ain' no bref lef'," and she rocked back and forth on the step, fanning herself with her black alpaca apron, without which she was never attired for a visit up at the King mansion.

"Well, Jocko isn't going to stay here any longer," announced Joel, briskly. "He's going up to the Zoo."

"Oh, no, he ain', Mas'r Joel," contradicted Candace, stopping her fanning to seize his arm.

"Yes, he is, Candace," declared Joel, bringing his black eyes on her in surprise; "he's got to go, he's been so naughty. Grandpapa says it isn't safe to keep him here any longer."

"Well, he ain' goin' to dat ar Zoo," protested Candace, bobbing her black bonnet, from which depended a big figured lace veil. "No, no, Mas'r Joel! Oh, your Grandpa won't neber send him dar," and she clasped her hands, while the tears came into her eyes.

"Yes, he will," stoutly repeated Joel, twisting away to stand still and regard her in intense astonishment, "cause he said so, and my Grandpapa always does just what he says he will, Candace King."

Whenever the children wished to be very impressive with her they called her "Candace King." This usually overcame her with delight. But on this occasion she didn't notice it at all, but, beginning to blubber, she rocked back and forth on the step, saying between the gusts of her distress, "Oh, no, he won't, neber in all dis worl'."

"I'm going for Polly," said Joel, at his wits' end, and springing past her on the steps. Pip, not to be left alone with that singular old black woman, who now terrified him greatly, pattering after, the two raced into the house.

"Polly!" called Joel. "O dear! Where is she?"

"Here!" cried Polly, bobbing out of the music room, her practice hour being just over. "What is the matter, Joe?"

"Oh, Candace is out on the steps," said Joel, "and I guess she's got a fit."

"Candace out on the steps," cried Polly, "and in a fit! O dear me!" and she rushed out.

To be sure, there sat Candace, rocking back and forth, her face covered with her big hands, and wailing miserably.

"Oh, Candace!" and Polly sank down on the step beside her and throwing her arm around the big black figure, she put her cheek up against one of the black hands, "do tell me what is the matter." Joel and Pip, who had both followed, ranged

themselves on either side.

"He won' send him away to de Zoo, will he, honey?" gasped Candace.

"What?" cried Polly, for the words were so muffled back of Candace's big hands, it was impossible to hear a word. "What do you say, Candace?"

So Candace went all over it again; but it wasn't much better so far as Polly's hearing it was concerned, and at last Polly gave it up in despair and started to her feet.

"I don't know what you are talking of, Candace," she declared, "so I'm going to get Grandpapa to come out and see what is the matter with you."

"Oh, no, honey, don'!" and Candace grasped Polly's gown. "You arsk him, dat's a good chile. Arsk him for pore ol' Candace," and she lifted her streaming eyes piteously.

"Ask him what?" cried Polly. "I don't know what you want, Candace. I haven't heard a word that you've been saying."

"She's awful funny," observed Joel; "I told you she was going to have a fit." With that Pip retreated suddenly and ran over to Polly's side, around whose gown he stared with very wide eyes at the big figure on the steps.

"She said something about the monkey," continued Joel, "and——"

"Yes, dat's it," cried Candace, delighted to be understood by somebody. "Oh, he won' send him to de Zoo, will he, Miss Polly?" she begged.

"Indeed he will," declared Polly, positively. "And you ought not to want Grandpapa not to send him," she said, much displeased, "for Jocko's been very naughty; very naughty indeed, Candace."

"Den he won' gib him to me," wailed Candace, releasing Polly's gown, and dropping her head so that the big figured lace veil trailed on the step. "O me—O my!"

"What's that you say, Candace?" cried Polly, dropping down on her knees again. "Do you want

Jocko?" feeling as if she couldn't believe her ears.

"Ob course; dat's what I've been tellin' you and Mas'r Joel all de bressed time," said Candace, raising her head to survey them both with extreme dignity.

"Oh, she hasn't said a single word," began Joel.

"Hush, Joel," said Polly. "Candace, do you really want Jocko; really and truly?" and her eyes shone.

"Ob course I does;" Candace's head bobbed so decidedly that Polly had no reason to doubt her. "I'm dre'ful lonesome and he'd be comp'ny," as she swept the tears away with both hands.

"Oh, I'm so very, very glad you want Jocko!" cried Polly, hugging the big figure. While Joel cried "Hooray!" And Pip, when he saw all things turning out so well, emerged from the shelter of Polly's gown and piped out "Hooray," because Joel did.

"But Jocko will work mischief, I'm afraid," and Polly's face fell suddenly, "and just think, Candace, of all the nice things in your shop."

But Candace was not to be balked. Having once set her heart on having Jocko as a companion, she was now prepared to show how she had counted the cost. So she drew herself up to her utmost height.

"Phoo!" she declared, snapping her stubby black fingers, "dat ar monkey ain' a-goin' to hurt none ob my t'ings, Miss Polly. You know my ole safe?"

"Yes," Polly did, a certain hanging wire arrangement where various eatables were kept, to be free from the inspection of mice that were rampant in the room behind the small shop.

"Well, I done clared dat ole safe all out dis berry mornin', soon's eber I heard ob de trouble. Dat'll be a fine t'ing for Jocko to swing in," cried Candace, triumphantly.

"But where will you keep all your eatables?" said Polly, in amazement.

"Oh, honey," exclaimed Candace, impatiently, "I keeps 'em outside, ob course."

"But the mice," suggested Polly, fearfully.

"Dar ain' goin' t' be no mice," declared Candace, decidedly, and clapping her big hands together smartly. "Do you t'ink any mouse is a-goin' to touch my t'ings when he can hear dat ar monkey a-singin' an' carryin' on? No, sir, he ain'!"

"Well then," cried Polly, springing up, "I do so want you to have Jocko. Oh, I do, Candace," and she clasped her hands. "If you are sure he won't hurt your things and you really want him."

"I'm shore," declared Candace, solemnly. At this Joel bounded off, but Pip decided to stay with Polly to see the matter through.

"How lovely!" and Polly's eyes sparkled, "that you want Jocko, and then, just think, we can see him whenever we go to your shop, Candace." She bestowed another hug on the broad shoulders, or so much of them as she could compass.

"I know it, honey." Candace showed two rows of shining white teeth in a broad smile. "An' den, w'en you ain' dar, w'y him an' me can talk, an' it'll be real sosh'ble like."

"Yes," said Polly, quite as happy as Candace herself.

"He'll be sech comp'ny ebenin's," said Candace, folding her arms in great satisfaction; "you see I gotter set up fer a spell, 'cause some one might come in an' buy somethin'. Only las' week an' Mis' Hardin's girl come in fer a spool o' tred. It's been mighty lonesome, Miss Polly."

"So it must have been," said Polly, sympathetically, with a little twinge of remorse that she hadn't thought of it before; "but then, you've had your cat, Candace."

"Yes, I know," Candace gave a truthful nod, "but w'en you says cat, you says all dar is. Now dat ar cat kain't talk none. An' no matter how I stuffs her, she only licks her paws, an' looks fer more. And she ain't no good as fer's comp'ny—real sosh'ble comp'ny whar dar is talkin' goin' on, I mean. An' den jus' t'ink wat a beau'ful voice Jocko's got!" At that Candace fairly beamed.

"Oh, I'll ask Grandpapa not to send Jocko to the Zoo, but to give him to you," said Polly, preparing

to spring off. "And I 'most know he will, Candace."

But it was really unnecessary for her to do that, for Joel at this moment dashed in, screaming out, "Grandpapa says yes, he does; Candace can have Jocko!"

And presently Candace, chuckling in delight, was drawn within the big mansion, Joel and Polly on either side, and Pip racing along in the rear. And quicker than it takes to write it, the whole houseful knew where Jocko's new home was to be, and everybody thronged around the happy old black woman.

"Only don't blame me, my good Candace," said Grandpapa, laughing, whom the uproar had drawn out of his writing room, "if that monkey eats up all your shopful."

"He ain' a-goin' t' eat up my t'ings," declared Candace, dropping him so many courtesies it was with extra difficulty she got the words out at all.

"Look out that he doesn't," warned Grandpapa,

and he laughed again. "Well now, the next thing, I presume, in the order of arrangements, is to see that Master Jocko gets down to your shop, for that he spends another night here is not my plan for him."

"Oh, I'm going to take him down," announced Joel, easily.

"You!" exclaimed Grandpapa, and he laughed harder than ever.

"Yes, sir!" answered Joel, promptly, "and Candace is going too."

"Well, I guess Candace wouldn't want Jocko by the time they got to the shop," said Jasper, *sotto voce*.

"I guess not too," said Ben, with a laugh.

"And I'm going too," declared Percy, pushing to the centre of the circle.

"And so am I," said Van, "if Joel's going. Can't I, Grandpapa?" he begged.

"Goodness, what a procession!" exclaimed

Grandpapa; "and of course David wants to go—eh, Davie, my lad?"

"Yes, I do," said David, "very much indeed, Grandpapa," and his blue eyes shone.

"I thought so; and I see no reason why you shouldn't be in the party, if all the other boys go. But, dear me, I couldn't allow it. Why, it would be, for all the world, like a circus. And, besides, the monkey would get away from you; he'd be sure to."

"Oh, no, Grandpapa, he wouldn't," howled Joel, quite beside himself with disappointment, and the tears began to come. "I'd hold on to his chain just as tight," and he doubled up his brown fists to show his capacity for keeping things. "Please let me take him."

"No, no;" Grandpapa shook his white head. And he didn't look at Joe nor at one of the other boys, either, for their eyes seemed to be giving them so much trouble. "But I tell you what I will let you do; you can all go down this afternoon and see Jocko in his new home. That is, if Candace will

allow it?" and he bowed his white head as courteously toward her as if she had been a great lady.

"Fo' shore, Mas'r King," said Candace, showing all her teeth, her smile was so expansive. "Jocko an' me'll be ter home, an' den I'll gib you de candy sticks," she said, turning to Joel.

"Oh, goody!" exclaimed Joel. Then his face fell. "Oh, you can't, 'twould take such a lot, Candace; we're all coming."

"Oh, yer go long," said Candace, poking him with her big black finger, "ye're goin' to hab dem candy sticks. Yer Gran'pa's done gib me dat ar monkey, an' don' yo' suppose I'm goin' ter gib nuffin'? Oh, yer go long, Mas'r Joel."

Meantime Jasper was asking, "Well, Father, how are you going to get Jocko down to Candace's?"

"It is something of a problem," said the old gentleman, stroking his white head thoughtfully, "but the best way that suggests itself is," and he hesitated and looked anxiously at Ben,— "it's too

bad to ask it, but could you take him, Ben, in the depot carriage? Thomas will drive you down."

"Oh, I'll be company for Jocko," said Ben, laughing, "we'll have a fine ride together."

"How I wish I could go with you," cried Jasper. "O dear me! I'm well enough. Let me, Father, do!"

"The idea!" exclaimed the old gentleman, in horror, "and you've been so sick, Jasper King!"

"O dear me! 'Twould be such fun," mourned Jasper.

"Well, Polly, you come," said Ben, persuasively.

"Yes," said Polly, "I will;" but her face drooped, and she couldn't look at Jasper in his disappointment.

"And see here," old Mr. King cried suddenly, "Candace can drive down too. So go get your monkey, and be off, Ben and Polly! And, Candace, remember what I said, and don't blame me for whatever Jocko does in that shop of

yours," and Grandpapa went back to his writing room. But they could hear him laughing even after he had closed the door.

It was one thing to plan this fine drive in such pleasant company to introduce Jocko to his new home, and quite another to carry it out. In the first place, the monkey couldn't be found in his accustomed little room up next to that of Thomas over the stable. And Polly turned so pale that Ben hastened to say, "Oh, nothing has happened to him; don't be afraid, Polly. Nothing could happen to that monkey."

"Oh, there has; I know there has, Ben," she declared, clasping her hands in dismay, while the rest of the children, all except Jasper, who, of course, was shut up in the library watching proceedings as best he could from one of the long windows, ran this way and that, calling frantically on Jocko to come, with every imaginable blandishment they could think of as inducement, and Candace sat down on the stable steps and wrung her hands, and lifted up her voice in dismal cries.

This was as much worse as it was possible to be, than if Jocko had gone to the Zoo, for now he had run away, of course, and probably never would be found. "He's done gone to—whar's dat place he come from, Miss Polly?" wailed Candace.

"India," cried Polly, hearing Candace's question, and running up in the interval of exploring several places where Jocko might be expected to hide. "Oh, he couldn't go there, Candace."

"Oh, yes, he could," contradicted Candace, obstinately; "he come from dar, and he could go back dar;" and she redoubled her sobs.

"But he came in a big ship," cried Polly, laying her hand soothingly on the fat shoulder. "Do stop crying, Candace, we'll find him soon, I guess;" but she looked very much worried. "Have you found him, Ben?" she asked in a low voice, as he suddenly appeared.

"No." Ben didn't really say the word, on account of Candace, but he shook his head, and Polly running over to him, he drew her off into a quiet

corner. "I really believe the little scamp has run off."

"Oh, Ben, how very dreadful!" exclaimed Polly, turning quite white. "Whatever shall we do with Candace, and what *will* happen to Jocko? O dear me!" and she wrung her hands.

"Well now, see here, Polly," said Ben, turning her around and gathering up her hands in his bigger ones to hold them fast, "we have just got to make the best of this, and——"

"Yes," Thomas was saying, and the rattling of a chain, together with the sound of his foot-steps, struck upon their ears. "I thought I'd just take the monkey out for a bit of an airing;" and in they both came to the stable, he and Jocko together.

It was impossible to describe the delight of the whole company at the restoration of the lost one. Jocko, who had felt his loss of caste considerably since his escapade of the previous night, put on at once his old airy demeanor, and capered and blinked and wrinkled up his face, and wheedled and begged, and altogether quite outdid any of his

former attempts in that line, until the children hung over him and protested that he must not leave them. Oh, no, he mustn't!

At that, Candace, who had found her feet in a surprisingly quick manner at the monkey's entrance, began to take alarm at once, and her black face fell.

"But he has just got to go," said Polly; "you know, boys, Grandpapa has said so." And Ben reiterating the same thing, the children declared, "Yes, he's going to Candace's."

"And you are going down to see him," cried Polly. "Do hurry, Ben, we must take him right straight off, 'cause they want to go to Candace's shop just as soon as ever they can."

So pretty soon the depot carriage, so called because it was one of the vehicles for common use in the establishment, being all ready, with Thomas, whip in hand, quite equipped for the start, Polly and Ben helped Candace in, or rather Polly did, Ben having quite as much as he could do to take care of Jocko; then Polly hopped in,

and then Ben, with Jocko crowding in between his legs, got in with some difficulty.

"Oh, wait, do wait," begged Davie, before the door was shut. "I want to bid him good-by."

"Oh, Dave, you are going to see him in a little while," cried Joel, trying to pull him back, "just as soon as we get down to Candace's shop."

But David persisted. "He's going away," he said, "and I shall bid him good-by from here."

"Yes," said Polly, "I think he ought to, Ben, because Jocko is going away from this home."

So David climbed up on the carriage steps and shook Jocko's paw, and said "Good-by" two or three times, because from the monkey's face he didn't seem to realize the parting at all.

And then, as David had done it, why, Joel concluded that after all he wanted to. So up he climbed on the carriage step, and went through the same performance. Only he shook both of Jocko's paws. And then, of course, Percy and Van had to do the same thing, each being a little

longer than the other about it.

And then little Dick piped up, standing on his tiptoes, "It's my turn; I'm going to bid my Jocko good-by, I am."

"Yes, do lift him up, Joe," said Ben.

So Joel gave little Dick a good fine lift, Dickie protesting so violently that he was going to get up on the carriage step himself, and trying to kick off any assistance, that he was precipitated to the floor of the carriage in a small heap.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Ben, huddling up Jocko, who pretended to be very much frightened, "this is a circus, I'm sure."

"Well now, Dick, hurry and say good-by," said Polly, "for Grandpapa expects us to start right off. And now, Phronsie. Come, pet!" as little Dick shook Jocko's paws briskly and tumbled out.

Phronsie, who had waited patiently till her turn came to say good-by, now put out her arms. "Take me, Polly," she said.

"Yes, I will," said Polly, flying out of the carriage. So Phronsie was lifted in, when she laid her soft little cheek on Jocko's wrinkled face. "I love you," she said, "and you are going to Candace's house."

"Oh, Phronsie," exclaimed Ben, with a grimace, trying to draw Jocko off.

But Phronsie was not quite through, so she held fast.

"And I'm coming to see you," she finished. Then she held up her arms for Polly to lift her out.

And then Polly hopped in again, Thomas cracked the whip, and off they went, Jocko showing a grinning face at the window, as long as the children were in sight. Then he sat up straight and looked the stout black figure on the opposite seat all over with extreme condescension.

XXVII

"MR. KING, WHO IS THAT PIP YOU HAVE HERE?"

"Well, you are all settled, old chap," said Ben, affectionately, with a pat on Jasper's shoulder, "for a spell at least."

"That's so," said Jasper, in huge satisfaction, and running over to set some books on his shelves; "good for Doctor Fisher that he won't let me go back till the middle of the term! But I have to dig at these, though, else I'll flunk when I do get there," as he crammed the last book into place.

"But you're not to go at them before next week, Jasper," remonstrated Ben, in alarm, and hurrying over to him, "you know Papa Doctor said so; you know he did!"

"Oh, I won't have a bout with them until then," promised Jasper. "But after that—then says I,

why, I've simply *got* to. Well now, Ben, there's Pip!" He whirled around to regard Ben anxiously.

"I know it," said Ben, with a long face.

"I suppose the little chap has got to go back and face those boys," said Jasper, ruefully.

Ben swung off on his heel and walked up and down the long apartment. "You know just as well as you want to, Jasper King," he said, coming up to stand squarely in front of the tall boy, "how it will be when Pip gets back there."

"Yes, I know; but perhaps the boys will treat him better now," said Jasper, yet he looked uneasy.

"Yes, for a while," said Ben, "I think they will;" then he burst out with honest indignation, "but there are enough boys there who'll be at their mean tricks soon enough, as long as you won't be on hand to make them stand round,—you know that, Jasper, as well as you want to."

"Well, Pip is different now," said Jasper, determined to find all the bright aspect possible to the case.

"I know he is," assented Ben, pounding his hand on the table, "ever so much more like a boy, but that will soon be taken out of him, get him back there without you, or any one who really cares a row of pins about him."

"They shan't take it out of him. Oh, no, no!" cried Jasper, in great distress. He really couldn't stop saying it.

"Yes," said Ben, obstinately, "they will."

"Well, what can be done about it?" demanded Jasper tossing his dark hair away from his brow. And he put a hand on either sturdy shoulder; "Speak out, now, old fellow, if you've a plan in your head, and I'm with you to the last gasp," he added, in suppressed excitement.

"There isn't anything to be done," said Ben, slowly, his blue eyes raised to the earnest ones looking him through and through, "except for Pip to keep away from that school till you go back."

"For Pip to keep away from that school," echoed Jasper, faintly; "why, he belongs there."

Ben Pepper, what *are* you saying?"

"I can't help it if he does belong there," said Ben. "The thing is to get him away for a spell."

"How?" demanded Jasper, with a small shake of the broad shoulders.

"Your father can do it," said Ben, for answer.

"My father!" cried Jasper, in surprise. Then his hands fell away from Ben's shoulders, and he backed slowly off.

"Yes, your father," reiterated Ben. "He can do anything, and you know it."

"But Ben Pepper—you—you don't understand," said Jasper, very much puzzled to think how Ben, usually so level-headed, could fall into such a stupid misapprehension at this time. "Pip belongs to Doctor Presbrey; that is,—why, you know the story. His father and mother are dead, and he's in the care of the Doctor. Put there by a sort of a guardian down in South America, where the forlorn little chap came from, and—"

"Oh, I know that whole story," said Ben, guilty of interrupting.

"Well, then, how can you go on so?" exclaimed Jasper, more than ever bewildered that Ben should propose such a useless plan.

"Yes, but all that makes no difference," said Ben, snapping his fingers. "Your father can make Doctor Presbrey let Pip off to stay here until you go back." Ben set up his square shoulders and stood as tall as he could, looking up obstinately at Jasper's face.

"Whew!" whistled Jasper. Then he thrust his hands into his pockets and marched up and down the apartment, the same as Ben had done.

"You see, Doctor Presbrey is a sensible man," said Ben, firing one of his reserve shots after the tall boy, "and when he knows how Pip has changed since he's been here,—why, Joel has done wonders with him,—now that man is going to let him stay on a bit."

"Joel hasn't done everything," observed Jasper,

wheeling in his corner.

"And your father can make anybody do anything," broke in Ben, hurriedly.

"Father never likes to interfere with people," said Jasper, running nervous fingers through his dark hair, and wrinkling it up into waves. Then he tossed it back in irritation. "He'll never do it in all this world, Ben Pepper!" and he strode off down the room again.

"Yes, he will," declared Ben, standing still in his tracks. Then he fired another shot. "But of course he won't if you and I don't believe in it."

"What do you mean?" cried Jasper, wheeling to run up and seize Ben's jacket-button. "Why, I'm in favor of it, this plan of yours, Ben, only it's perfectly useless to begin with;" his gray eyes turned dark with feeling as he fixed them on Ben's face.

"That's no way to favor a thing," said Ben, quite unmoved, "not to believe in it."

"But—but I can't say I believe in it, because I

don't," declared Jasper, quite as obstinately in his way.

"But you can go at it as if you wanted to believe in it," said Ben, sturdily.

"Well, I will; I'll promise you that," said Jasper, "for I want it as much as you do."

"I know it," said Ben, bobbing his head.

"All right; now we'll shove ahead on it," said Jasper, with a laugh. "But Father—" and his face fell.

"If we want it," said Ben, "we've got to make him want it, too."

"Of course. Well, we'll try for it," said Jasper, swallowing hard. "But there's the school; you see it interrupts all Dr. Presbrey's work over Pip."

"I know it," said Ben, and his face fell. "But you know everybody said Pip was so dull at school."

"Well, that's because he was such a forlorn little chap," said Jasper; "poor mite, anybody would be dull where he wasn't wanted."

"That's just it," cried Ben, eagerly. "Well now, he'll study and take hold of things with Joel and David, and Dr. Presbrey will be glad enough to let him stay if it will only wake him up." Ben gave a gasp when he had gotten through, for he wasn't much used to long sentences.

"Well, come on," Jasper picked him by the sleeve, "if we have it to do, to ask Father, we best have it over with;" and he hauled Ben off, never letting go till the two paused to knock on Mr. King's writing-room door.

Then just a breathing space, when it seemed to Jasper that he must make a bolt and give up the whole thing.

"Come in!" called his father's voice; and the two boys found themselves before the big writing-table, and looking down into his face. It wasn't an auspicious moment, for a letter lay open that had evidently caused the reader a bad quarter of an hour.

"What is it?" Old Mr. King looked sharply up from his fit of musing.

Jasper felt cold chills run all over him. As for Ben, he set his teeth, and his right hand doubled up in his pocket.

"Never mind, Father," said Jasper, beginning to back toward the door, "and beg pardon, Ben and I can come in another time if you will allow us."

"You will be good enough to stay now, Jasper, that you and Ben are here," said his father, decidedly, the irritation still remaining on cheek and brow; and he set his keen eyes to work on both boys. "Now then, what is it? Speak quickly, for I haven't much time to give you."

"Father," said Jasper, and he drew a long breath, "it's about Pip."

Old Mr. King took up the subject abruptly. "Well, what has he been doing?" he demanded.

"He hasn't been doing anything," said Jasper, "that is, nothing bad. It's about something we want you to do for him, Father."

"What?" It was only one word and it came out like a cannon-ball. Ben's hand clenched together

tighter yet, especially as he saw Jasper's cheek turn white. "O dear," groaned Ben, "I ought not to have spoken to-day when he's been so sick."

"Father," Jasper drew another long breath, then he looked steadily into the sharp eyes, "if that poor little chap only needn't go back to school yet. Dr. Presbrey will let him stay here until I go, if you only ask him."

"*What?*" roared the old gentleman, amazed beyond his control.

"You know something of the hard time Pip has at the school," Jasper said persuasively, and though his cheek was white, he still looked steadily into the sharp eyes that now were blazing. "Oh, if you only would, Father, get Dr. Pres—"

"And do you mean to say, Jasper, that you would wish me to prefer such a request to Dr. Presbrey, that stern disciplinarian, that he should let a boy off, especially one who is under his care in such a way as Pip is? Preposterous!" Old Mr. King whirled around in his chair, then back again, to bring his right hand emphatically on the table, till

the disturbing letter and all the nearest papers fluttered in the wind of his indignation.

"Father," said Jasper; then he stopped a second for the right word. But that wasn't allowed him.

"And that you should ask such a thing amazes me, Jasper. When did you ever know your father to interfere in other people's affairs?—When, indeed!" He was now so angry that he didn't seem able to contain himself except by pushing about the things nearest to him; and, as his eye fell again on the unlucky cause, he blazed forth, "Never ask me such a thing again."

"It was my fault," blurted Ben.

"Then you are also to blame," curtly replied Mr. King.

"Father," began Jasper again, brokenly; then, without another word, he turned and went out of the room. And Ben, getting out, he didn't know how, followed him to the other end of the hall.

"Don't feel so," cried Ben, in a mortal terror for Jasper, Pip's cause now being so much less, and

laying his hand on the shaking shoulder. "Oh, Jasper, don't."

"We've hurt Pip," said Jasper, his head on his arms, as he leaned on the window-seat. "That's the worst of it. O dear me, Ben!"

"Perhaps not," said Ben, with a desperate attempt to be cheerful.

"Yes, we have," declared Jasper, gloomily. "Now we never shall get the poor chap the least help; not in all this world, Ben Pepper!"

"Well, we've done our best," said Ben, yet his heart fell.

"And, oh, don't blame Father," said Jasper, quickly, and raising his head a moment to look at Ben. "Don't, there's a good chap. He isn't himself to-day,—he's had bad news. Can't you see for yourself, Ben?" Jasper searched the round face eagerly.

"Of course I know it. Grandpapa wouldn't ever in all this world have gone against it if I hadn't made you go in there to-day." Ben, in his remorse,

seized Jasper's shoulder and held on to it, saying it all over again, to wind up with, "It's all my fault, and I've ruined Pip's chance for sure now and made you sick on top of it all." Ben groaned, this time quite aloud, and, despite his efforts, he broke down and threw himself into the nearest chair, to bury his face in his hands.

"Oh, don't, don't!" begged Jasper, quite gone in distress to see, for the first time in his life, Ben give way, and he stumbled over to him.

A door off in the distance opened, but the sound fell unheeded.

"Boys!" Up flew their heads, for there was old Mr. King beckoning with an imperative hand. "Come to my room." And, not daring to look in each other's face, they found themselves once more behind the dreadful door, which was closed after them.

"Now, then, Jasper, my boy," and old Mr. King put a hand on his shoulder, "you sit there," pointing to a chair on one side of the writing-table, "and you, Ben, pull up another, there—that's right

—get on my left hand. Now we are quite comfortable,"—and he sat down in his own big chair,—“where we can see each other and talk things over.”

The old gentleman didn't look at them, but played with various trifles scattered over the table, the unlucky letter not being in sight, until such time as it might be supposed that everybody would be ready for conversation. Then he broke out quite easily, as if the most matter-of-fact thing were being said, “Well, now, that little matter of Pip you were going to tell me of. What is it, Jasper,—eh?”

“I didn't mean to ask you to do anything out of the way, Father,” said Jasper, and his voice shook.

“Of course not, of course not,” said his father, with a wave of the hand. “Well, I was a bit unstrung, my boy,”—he ran his fingers through his white hair,—“you must forgive your old dad.” He coughed, twitched out his handkerchief, blew his nose violently, but didn't seem to get the better of it, especially as Jasper deserted his chair. “Oh, Father!” he cried, falling on his neck.

Ben slipped off his leather chair and crept to the door.

"Hold on!" thundered old Mr. King at him.
"Where are you going, sir?"

"I thought—perhaps—you'd—" stammered Ben.

"You're not to think. Come back and sit down." Old Mr. King pointed to the chair, and Ben found himself on it again.

"And I've a word to say to you, Ben," said the old gentleman, "for you're mixed up in this business."

"I know," said Ben, hanging his head.

"So you needn't think to elude me,—oh, no!" and Mr. King gave a short laugh. "Now, then, Jasper," bestowing a pat on his dark hair, "you get into your chair and we'll see this thing through. Well, about Pip now," and both boys being settled, "you want me to ask Doctor Presbrey to let him stay here till you go back. Is that the idea?" the old gentleman glanced first at one and then at the other of the faces, now very much flushed.

"Yes, sir," said Jasper and Ben together.

"I know the poor little beggar has a hard enough time at that school, from what I saw myself," said Mr. King, "and I suppose I don't know half how bad it is."

"No, you don't, Father," broke in Jasper, quickly, and tossing the dark hair off from his hot forehead. It was easy enough now to find his tongue, seeing they were safely launched on Pip,—"for Doctor Presbrey even doesn't know it."

"A precious set of scamps they are," declared the old gentleman, wrathfully,— "gentlemen's sons! Pretty poor stuff they show for it, to hound a poor, insignificant little specimen like that lad. They ought to be ducked in the nearest pond."

"And it isn't always because they mean to be cruel," said Jasper, loyally, and slipping to the edge of his chair in his earnestness.

"But they are all the same," said old Mr. King, stoutly.

"O dear me! I know it, Father," said Jasper, quite

distressed; "that is, some of them are—"

"Don't tell any theories of 'didn't think,' and 'didn't mean to,' and all that stuff," said the old gentleman, dryly; "it's plain to see that the Presbrey boys didn't regard Pip in the light of a desirable acquaintance."

"No, they didn't," said Jasper, honestly.

"I don't blame them for not being especially drawn to him," said his Father; "he's not to my taste exactly as a boy. But for schoolfellows to act so like the Dickens,—well there, that's my opinion of the whole matter." He brought his good right hand down again on the table, till several articles jumped, and the penholder fell off the silver rack and rolled to the floor.

"I'm altogether too obstreperous one way or the other this morning," said the old gentleman, with a laugh, as Jasper jumped and recovered it. Then the boys laughing, the air seemed to be cleared. So Mr. King settled back in his big chair and folded his hands in real enjoyment.

"Now I don't know but that it would be a good plan," he said, nodding his head, "for me to request Doctor Presbrey to allow the little lad to stay and return with you, Jasper. Understand that I don't say that I believe it will strike the Doctor so; but I can broach it, and if I put it rightly, and ____"

"And you can, Father," Jasper in his eagerness was guilty of interrupting; "he will do it for you."

"I don't know about that, Jasper," said his Father, grimly, but he was vastly pleased nevertheless at the words; "what I know about Doctor Presbrey gives me reason to believe that no one ever makes him do a thing."

"Well, he will do it for you, I know," declared Jasper, shaking his dark head confidently.

"But it may strike the Doctor favorably; there's hope in that," proceeded Mr. King, briskly, "so I'll write to him and put the case as strongly as I know how. I promise you that, boys."

"Oh, thank you, Father," and "Oh, thank you, sir,"

from Jasper and Ben in the same breath.

"Well, now be off with you!"—the old gentleman dismissed them peremptorily,—“for if I have this letter to write I'd best have it off my mind at once," and off they flew on happy heels.

"Dear me! Here's Madam Van Ruypen," exclaimed Jasper, too elated to choose his words. "Now, what shall we do, Ben Pepper? Dodge this way," and they scuttled down the back hall, as Hobson flung wide the big oaken front door.

They needn't have troubled themselves, however, to get out of the way, as the farthest from the stately old lady's mind was the desire to meet any of the children on this especial morning, her mind being weighted with other matters. When she was told that Mr. King was busy in his writing room, she waved one of her long black gloves at the butler, and said nonchalantly, "Oh, well, then I will see him there," and, to his great dismay, she sailed, with her Roman nose and big white puffs well in the air, down the hall to his door.

"Madam," essayed Hobson, starting after her,—

but she was just going into the room.

As there was never any lack of directness in any of Madam Van Ruypen's purposes, or her statements, so now she said, scarcely pausing for a casual nod of recognition, "I want you to do me a favor, my good sir."

"Eh—er—" cried Mr. King, who had supposed it was Mrs. Whitney's rap that had called forth his "Come in." "My dear Madam," he rose, and with his courtliest air extended his hand, "you do me great honor," and he drew up a chair for her.

"Well, if I do you the honor, you must do me the favor," said Madam Van Ruypen, with a little laugh, and settling her stately figure on the chair.

"I shall be charmed to," said old Mr. King, "I promise you that, Madam."

"That's good," the old lady nodded with great satisfaction. "Well, now, you know, sir," then she paused, strangely at a loss how to begin, "that I am very much disturbed;" the face under the big white puffs fell into long lines that added at once

ever so many years to her age.

"Oh, I am sorry to hear it," said old Mr. King, in great concern.

"I am, indeed. In fact, I have seldom been so upset. Perhaps I have no cause to be; it may turn out well for me." She gave vent to an uneasy little laugh, made an aimless sort of attempt to reach a fan that dangled by a jet chain from her wrist, gave it up, and settled back rigidly in her chair.

Mr. King, having nothing to say, picked up a paper-cutter on his writing-table and played with it, not looking at her.

"I'll tell you the whole story, then you'll see how I've got the notion in my head," she said explosively at last. "A notion that has turned to absolute truth, as I hope and pray!" Her thin face was white and drawn.

"I shall be very glad to hear whatever you may choose to tell me," said the old gentleman, turning courteously to her, "and then if I can be of any service, Madam Van Ruypen, you may command

me."

She nodded her stately head. "You knew Emily?" she asked abruptly, her sharp eyes full on his face.

"Emily?" He searched his mind diligently, but no Emily, who naturally connected herself with the lady before him, appeared. "I am afraid not," he reluctantly admitted.

"You cannot have forgotten my daughter," cried Madam Van Ruypen, "though to be sure she was quite a child when we took her abroad to live."

"Oh, your daughter!" cried Mr. King; "indeed, I remember her quite well, though, as you say, she was a mere child when you deserted your own country to educate her abroad. But she was not Emily in those days," he rubbed his forehead in a puzzled way; "unless my memory plays me a trick, she was Helena."

"Helena she was," assented the old lady, undisturbed. "I remember now, it was afterward we began to call her Emily,—quite for a family reason. Well, that is neither here nor there. Now I

won't go into details; enough to say that Emily, despite all her advantages, disappointed us utterly. Perhaps you remember hearing about that. Echoes, if no more, and plenty of them, reached my old home here," she added bitterly.

Mr. King bowed silently.

"You don't know that Emily married against her father's and my will; that she refused our help, and went off with her husband to share his lot. Oh, she was a proud one!" Madam Van Ruypen crushed her gloves together so tightly that the long hands within must have suffered. There was a pause, and Mr. King turned off to play with the paper-cutter again.

"And despite all our efforts, and, after Mr. Van Ruypen died, my individual attempts, we never could get any communication with her or her husband. Mr. King, I never blamed her; it was the influence of the man she married." She faced him now with blazing eyes and head erect.

Mr. King laid down the paper-cutter and turned back sympathetically; albeit several friends in the

old town had kept alive for Emily Hastings's memory much commendation that she did not yield to her parents' choice of the superannuated wealthy foreigner they had selected as a husband for her.

"And he never let me know when the end was coming," her voice did not break—she was to keep herself in hand until through. "Word was sent only after she had gone from this earth. Mr. King, who is that Pip you have with you?"

The transition was so sudden that the old gentleman started nearly out of his chair, stared at her, and gasped, "Pip—my dear Madam—"

"Tell me." He could see she was suffering now. The little beads of moisture ran down below the white puffs, and her eyes were fairly hungry for the reply.

"Pip—why, Pip—" stammered Mr. King.

"Tell me," she commanded peremptorily, "his name."

"It's—let me see, we have called him Pip

constantly—" he groped for the rest of the recital Jasper had given him one day concerning the lad so thrown upon their sympathy. "I shall think of it presently,—or I can ask Jasper, or Ben," starting out of his chair.

"Stay," she laid a detaining hand upon his arm; "where did he live?"

"I recall that—South America," replied the old gentleman, promptly.

A spasm passed over her face.

"His—his father is dead?" It was almost a whisper in which these words came.

"Yes," said Mr. King, decidedly, "that is the reason that the poor little lad is under Dr. Presbrey's care."

The first gleam of comfort swept over the long, white face. "But the name,—you cannot think of it?" she begged piteously.

"Let me see,"—the old gentleman drummed on the writing-table, rubbing his white hair with an

absorbed hand,—“Lef—Lef? Yes, I am quite sure, Leffingwell is Pip's name. Why, my dear Madam!”—he started and put out a strong hand to catch her as she swayed in her chair,—“what is it? What can be the matter?”

She recovered herself immediately and sat erect. “I am convinced that he is Emily's child.”

“Impossible!” Old Mr. King started back and held up both hands incredulously.

She twitched her black bonnet strings apart with a hasty hand, as if finding it difficult to breathe.

“So I thought at first, and I have battled the idea as absurd. But it has conquered me to-day to come here and ask you about his history. And now I *know* he is Emily's child.”

“I did not hear that she had a son,” said old Mr. King, as something seemed to be required of him.

“I did not know it until after his mother died,” said Madam Van Ruypen, her voice breaking, “then chance report brought me the news. But I could never get in touch with his father, though I tried

many a time. Cornelius Leffingwell was—"

"Cornelius?" broke in Mr. King.

"The name of Emily's husband," said the old lady.

"That is Pip's name, too," said the old gentleman.

XXVIII

BEN DECIDES THE MATTER FOR HIMSELF

Ben walked back and forth, his hands thrust deeply in his pockets. "It's no use, Mamsie," he came now and stood straight before her, his blue eyes fastened steadily upon her face; "I've just *got* to do it."

"There is no need for you to say that, Ben." Mrs. Fisher's tone was quiet, but the blood was leaping in her veins. "You're my oldest child," then her voice broke.

"And that's the reason." Ben threw his head back and took his hands out of his pockets to clench them together hard. "It would be mean as—mean as anything to let Grandpapa do anything more for me, and—"

"There's where you are wrong, Ben," cried his

mother, eagerly, and guilty of interrupting, "it is Mr. King's dearest wish to provide an education for you children; you can pay him back afterward. I have accepted for the others; why not for you?"

"Because,—look at Polly. Oh, mother, think what Polly can do with her music!" His whole face was working now, and his eyes shone.

"I know it," cried Mrs. Fisher, proudly. "Polly will be able to pay him back, there is no doubt about that."

"But I'm different," added Ben, quickly, "such a dull, plodding fellow. Oh, Mamsie, what would a college education amount to for me? I'm best to buckle right down to business."

"Ben, Ben!" Mother Fisher's tone was quite reproachful now, and she seized his hand and covered it with her two strong ones. "Any one can accomplish what he sets out to. You can amount to whatever you put your mind on; and you deserve a college education if ever a boy did." She broke down now and was sobbing on his shoulder.

Ben didn't say anything, this being quite beyond him, to see his mother cry. But he patted the smooth black hair with an unsteady hand.

"To think of your giving up your chance," at last Mrs. Fisher said brokenly; "it isn't right, Ben. Can't you see you ought not to do it?"

"But *it is* right," said Ben, sturdily recovering himself when he saw that his mother could really talk about it. "I'm to be a business man, and I'm going to begin at the very bottom, as an errand boy, or an office boy, and work up." Here he straightened his square shoulders as if already pretty near the top of things.

"Ah, Ben, my boy," Mrs. Fisher raised her head to look at him, "all you can get in the way of education helps you on just so much."

"And I can have all these years I'd be spending at college in learning the business," Ben hurried on, feeling if he didn't say something, he should surely break down; for there was such a world of pleading in the black eyes that he didn't dare to trust himself to look into them. "Don't you see,

Mother? Besides,—well, I just *can't* do it."

When Ben called her "Mother," it always meant something requiring grave attention. So Mrs. Fisher knew as well then as afterward that it was a decided thing that Ben was to leave school and go into a business life. All she said now was, "Come," leading the way to the roomy old sofa, where the children used often to tell their troubles or joys to her as they sat side by side.

When Ben emerged from his mother's room, he held his head high, but his breath came hard, and one fist deep in his pocket was clenched tightly.

"Halloo!"—Joel plunged into him; "where've you been?" And, not waiting for a reply, "Grandpapa says I'm to go if you'll go with me,"—he swarmed all over him in his eagerness.

"Get off, Joe!" cried Ben, roughly. It seemed as if he couldn't bear any more just then, and he gave him, without stopping to think, a little shove.

Joel looked at him with very wide eyes.

"You're always hanging on to me," went on Ben,

crossly, not realizing a word he was saying. "Goodness me, a chap can't stir but you must pop up."

Joel stood perfectly still, plastered against the wall, his mouth open, but not equal to uttering a word, as Ben stalked on down the hall.

"Oh, you think you're smart, I s'pose," at last it came in a burst behind him. "Well, I don't want you to go with me, Mr. Ben Pepper—Mr. Ebenezer Pepper." Joel could hardly get the long name out, being so wholly unaccustomed to its use. "And I will tell Grandpapa I wouldn't have you go with me for anything."

"Joel!" Ben called hoarsely after him, whirling in his tracks to see Joel fly down the hall. "Oh, come back."

"You aren't going," declared Joel, savagely, and stopping long enough to snap his fingers at Ben, "no-sir-ee, not a single step!" And despite all Ben's efforts he pranced off with a final jump that defied pursuit.

Ben stood perfectly still for a moment, then strode off up to his room, where he locked the door fast, went over and sat on the side of the bed, and buried his face in his hands.

How long he sat there he never knew. The first thing that brought him to himself was Polly's voice, and her fingers drumming on the door.

"Bensie, are you here? O dear me! *Do* open the door."

Ben took up his head at first with the wild thought that he wouldn't answer. But then, it was Polly calling, and such a thing as a locked door between them would never do. So he staggered off as best he might, not seeing his pale face in the mirror as he went by, and slowly turned the key.

"Oh, Ben! O dear me! What is it?" Polly cried, quite aghast at his face. She huddled up to him and grasped his arm. "Tell me, Ben," and the fright at seeing him thus drove every bit of color from her face.

"Nothing," said Ben, shortly, "that is—"

"Oh, now you are sick," cried Polly, quite wildly, and with another look into his face, usually so ruddy, she tore off her hands and raced toward the stairs. "I shall call Mamsie."

"Polly, Polly!" cried Ben, rushing out after her, "you must not call Mamsie. I'll tell you all about it, Polly. Polly, do come back."

But she didn't hear anything but the first words, that Mamsie must not be called, and feeling more sure than ever by this that Ben was really sick, she redoubled her speed and rushed into Mother Fisher's room, crying, "Oh, Mamsie, do come quickly; something is the matter with Ben."

Mrs. Fisher had sat down resolutely to her sewing after the decision had been made by Ben that put aside all her hopes for his future education. She now sprang to her feet, upsetting the big work-basket, and forgetting Polly, said, "It's been too much for him."

"What's been too much?" cried Polly, hanging to Mother Fisher's hand, her heart going like a trip-hammer. "Oh, Mamsie, what *is* the matter with

Ben?" The room seemed to go round with her and everything to turn black.

"Polly," said Mrs. Fisher, firmly, "I cannot tell you anything now. You must stay here. I am going to see Ben." And Polly, left alone, had nothing to do but throw herself on the big, old sofa, where she crouched in her distress till Mamsie should come back and tell her all about the dreadful mystery.

For that something awful had happened to Ben, Polly was now quite sure, as she lay there, her head burrowed in the big pillow, the wildest thoughts running through her brain. The first thing she knew, a hard little hand was tucked into her neck. She knew Joel's tickles, that he loved to give her, long before he sang out, "Polly Pepper, lying down in the daytime! Aren't you ashamed?"

"Oh, Joel," cried Polly, in a smothered voice; "do go away," she begged.

For answer Joel slid to his knees and crowded his chubby face into the pillow. "Are you sick, Polly?" he cried, in an awe-struck voice.

"No," said Polly, wriggling hard to keep him from seeing her face; "do, please, go away, Joey."

"I know you're sick," contradicted Joel, stubbornly; and bounding to his feet, "Where's Mamsie?" peering all around the room.

Polly didn't answer, being unwilling to tell about Ben.

"Well, I shall go and find her," declared Joel, decidedly, preparing to rush off.

"You must not," cried Polly, bounding up to sit straight. "You mustn't and you can't, because—"

"Because what?" demanded Joel, coming back to the sofa to fasten his black eyes on her face.

"Oh, because—" began Polly, again casting frantically about in her mind what to say and twisting her handkerchief with nervous fingers.

"Now I know that my Mamsie is sick and you're keeping it from me," cried Joel, in a loud, insistent voice, "and I shall go and find her; so there, Polly Pepper."

"Joel, if you do," began Polly, desperately, seizing his jacket-end; then she knew he would have to be told when she saw his face, for nothing could be worse than to let him think anything had happened to Mamsie. "I'll tell you all about it," she promised; "do sit down," and she pulled him into the corner of the big sofa by her side; "you see it's about Ben."

Joel whirled around and fixed wide eyes of astonishment upon her.

"And I don't know in the least," said Polly, brokenly, "what's the matter with him. He acts so funny, Joel, you can't think," she brought up, mournfully, while she twisted her poor handkerchief worse than ever.

Joel pushed his face up to scan her thoughtfully to see if there were anything more forthcoming.

"And to think of it—Ben—" went on Polly in a fresh gust, "he's never acted so. O dear me! What can it be, Joel?"

In her distress she forgot that she was to comfort

him, and she seized his arm and clung to it.

"It's me," blurted Joel, forgetting grammar and everything else, and pulling away from her, he slipped off the sofa and began a quick pace to the door.

"Where are you going?" Polly flew after him, and although he ran smartly, she had hold of his jacket-end. "Joel Pepper, you must *not* go up to Ben's room. Mamsie wouldn't let me."

"But I made him bad," said Joel, his face dreadfully red and twitching violently to get free.

"*You made him bad*," repeated Polly, faintly, and, tumbling backward in surprise, she let the jacket-end go. "O dear me!"

"And I'm going to make him well," screamed Joel, plunging off. She could hear him clambering up over the stairs two at a time.

"If I could only go too," mourned Polly, having nothing to do but go slowly back and shut herself into Mamsie's room, as bidden.

She threw herself down again on the old sofa, and buried her face in the pillows. It was Joel who bounded in and up to her side, calling, "Oh, Polly!" that sent her flying up to sit straight. "Ben wants you," he cried excitedly.

"Oh, Joel, what is it?" she exclaimed, flying off from the sofa; "what is the matter with Ben?"

"Nothing," said Joel, in high glee. As long as Ben wasn't sick, and he had made matters right with him, the rest could wait. So downstairs Joel ran to Grandpapa, to tell him that he had made a grand mistake; that he did want Ben to go on the expedition, no more nor less than a visit to the Museum.

"I thought so, my boy," said old Mr. King, patting him on the shoulder. "Now, if I were you, I wouldn't go off half-cocked again, especially with Ben. No doubt he was in the wrong, too. There are always two sides to a thing."

"Oh, no, he wasn't," protested Joel, terribly alarmed lest Ben should be blamed. "I was cross, Grandpapa. 'Twas all my fault." He was so

distressed that the old gentleman hastened to add, "Yes, yes; well, there now, that's quite enough. As I've never seen Ben treat you one-half as badly as you deserve, sir, I'll believe you. Now be off with you, Joel!" and with a little laugh and another last pat he dismissed him.

Meantime Polly was having a perfectly dreadful time up in Ben's room. It took Mrs. Fisher as well as Ben to comfort her in the least for her dreadful disappointment that Ben was not going to accept a long and thorough education at Mr. King's hands.

But all this was as nothing to Grandpapa's dismay when the truth came out. And it took more than the combined efforts of the whole household to restore him to equanimity when he saw that Ben was actually not to be moved from his resolution. It was little Doctor Fisher who finally achieved the first bit of resignation reached.

"Now, my good sir;" the little man put himself, unasked, beside the stately figure pacing with ill-concealed irritation down the "long path." It was several days since Ben had made his

announcement, and Grandpapa had been hoping against all obstacles that the boy would give in at the last. But to-day even that hope slipped away.

"Let me speak a word for Ben," the little Doctor went on, raising his big spectacles just as cheerfully to the clouded face as if a warm invitation had been extended him.

"Ben needs no words from you, Doctor Fisher," said Mr. King, icily; "I really consider the least said on this subject the better, perhaps."

"Perhaps—and perhaps not," said the little man, just as cheerily. It was impossible to quarrel with him or to shake him off, and Mr. King, realizing this, kept on his walk with long strides, Doctor Fisher skipping by his side, telling off the points of what he had come to say, on his nervous fingers.

"Do you realize," he said at length, "that you would break down all Ben's best powers if you had your way with him?"

"Hold on there, man," roared the old gentleman, coming to an abrupt pause in his walk, "do you

mean to say, and do you take me for an idiot, which I should be if I believed it, that the more education a boy gets, the more he injures his chances for life?"

The little man squinted at the tips of the trees waving their skeleton branches in the crisp air, then brought a calm gaze to the excited old face: "Not exactly; but I do say when you make a boy like Ben turn from the path he has marked out for himself, all the education that culture would crowd on him is just so much to break down the boy. Ben wouldn't be Ben after you got through with him. Now be sensible." He got up on his tiptoes and actually bestowed a pat on the stately shoulder. "Ben wants to go to work. Give him his head,—you can trust him; and let's you and I keep our hands off from him."

And the little Doctor, having said his say, got down on his feet again and trotted off.

All the remainder of that day Grandpapa went around very much subdued. He even smiled at Ben, a thing he hadn't done ever since the dreadful announcement that gave a blow to all his

plans for the boy. And at last it began to be understood that the skies were clear again, and that things after all were turning out for the best.

"But only to think of it," Grandpapa would go on to himself in the privacy of his own room, "mountain children can be brought down and set into schools, and the Van Ruypen money do the old lady some good,—and there is Pip,—see what she has got there,—and nobody to interfere with what she'll spend on him. And I—I am balked the very first thing. And I did so mean to do well by Ben; dear, dear!"

But as the matter was now decided and out of his hands, the next thing to do was to get Ben a good place where he could begin on his business career, sure of good training. So the following day old Mr. King dropped into the office of Cabot and Van Meter, for a little private conversation.

They welcomed him heartily, as usual, dismissing other applicants for the time, and shut the door to the private office, drawing up their chairs to listen attentively.

"No business to-day," was Mr. King's announcement, "that is, in the regular way. This that I have come to see you about is quite out of the ordinary. I want a place in your establishment for a young friend of mine."

The two gentlemen looked up in amazement. It wasn't in the least like Mr. King to ask such a thing, knowing quite well that to secure such a place required much waiting for the required vacancy. It was Mr. Cabot who spoke first.

"I suppose he is experienced," he began slowly.

"Not in the least," replied old Mr. King, shortly.

"Well, er—on what do you recommend him?" ventured Mr. Van Meter.

"I don't recommend him," the old gentleman answered in his crispest manner. "Bless you, I don't go about recommending people; you know that." He looked into each face so fiercely that they both exclaimed together, "No, of course not. We quite understand."

"Well, what do you want your young friend to

have with us—what kind of a position?" asked Mr. Cabot, patting one knee in perplexity.

"Anything," said Mr. King. "Give him anything to do; only get him in here. I tell you he must come, and you've got to take him." He leaned forward in his chair and struck his walking-stick smartly on the floor.

"Who is he?" demanded Mr. Van Meter, feeling that the exigency of the case demanded few words.

"Ben Pepper."

"*Ben Pepper!*" ejaculated Mr. Cabot. "Why, I thought he was in school."

"He was," said old Mr. King, turning on him with considerable venom, as if he were quite to blame for the whole thing, "but he has made up his mind to go into business. A very poor thing in my opinion; but since he's decided it that way, there's no more to be said," and he waved it off with a nonchalant hand.

"Not so very poor a thing to do after all." Mr.

Van Meter got off from his chair, stalked up and down the office floor, bringing his hands every now and then smartly together, to emphasize his periods: "I was but a slip of a lad when I got into the business groove, and I've never been sorry I drudged it early. Now, Mr. King, it wouldn't be well to give Ben any better chance than I had. He must begin at the bottom to amount to anything."

"He wouldn't take the chance if you gave it to him," said Mr. King, dryly. "Why, there's where Ben says he belongs—at the bottom."

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