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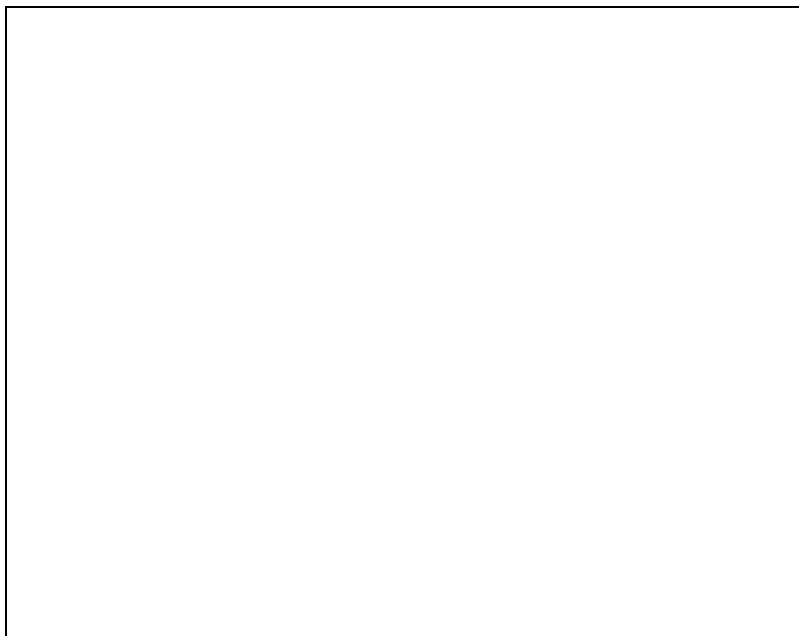
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“I’m Ladybird, and I’ve come to stay”



The Staying Guest

By

Carolyn Wells

Author of "The Story of Betty," "Eight Girls and a Dog" etc.

With Illustrations by
W. Granville Smith



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TO
DEAR DOROTHY ESTERBROOK

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THE STAYING GUEST

CHAPTER I PRIMROSE HALL

Over the hills and far away there was once a quaint little old town which was safely beyond the reach of the long, grasping arms of any of the great cities.

The little town nestled up against the side of a big, kind hill, at the top of which was a beautiful old country-place, called Primrose Hall.

The house was a great white colonial affair that had belonged to the Flint family for generations; and at present was occupied only by two elderly maiden ladies who admirably fitted their names of Priscilla and Dorinda.

Now of course you know, without being told, what a lady named Priscilla Flint would look like. Tall, straight, thin, stiff, formal, prim, smug, demure, with a stately, old-fashioned dignity and refinement. And Miss Dorinda Flint was like unto her, except that she was a little taller, straighter, thinner, stiffer, and a trifle more stately and old-fashioned. And these ladies, whene'er they took their walks abroad, or drives either, for that matter, wore stiff, prim black silk dresses, and black lace mitts, and little point-lace collars pinned with big gold brooches; and they always carried tiny, black, ruffled parasols that tipped on their handles to any desired angle.

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With such mistresses as these, it is easy to see why Primrose Hall was the stiffest, primmest place in the whole world.

Never a chair dared to move from its exact place against the wall; never a curtain dared to flutter with joy if a morning breeze came in to tell it the news. Even the clock ticked softly and very regularly; the well-bred fire never crackled or sputtered, but let its flame glide decorously up the chimney; and the cat looked as if she had never been a kitten.

Out of doors it was just the same. The carefully trimmed hedges wouldn't think of poking out a stray leaf or twig, and every blade of grass on the lawn measured itself against its neighbor that it might be exactly the same length and breadth.

[5]

One bright May morning the sun was shining all over the place, and, out of sheer curiosity, I suppose, was doing his best to poke himself into the house. But it was all shut up tighter than a drum, and he could get in only at one little window, and even

that was a mistake, and ought not to have been left open, for it was the next window but one to where the ice-box stood. But the sun was in a mischievous mood, and he aimed his beams again and again at the parlor windows in hopes that he could squeeze himself in and fade a sofa or a bit of carpet. And finally he did get in through a tiny space at the side of a shade which was pulled down crooked, when, to his great disgust, he found newspapers spread all over that very blue satin sofa he was after. Miss Priscilla had looked out for just such a trick, and the sun concluded he would have to get up very early in the morning to get ahead of Miss Priscilla Flint.

Always during the summer months Primrose Hall had its doors and windows thrown open soon after daybreak, to “air” the house, and at eight o’clock precisely they were all closed again, and the shades drawn to preserve the carpets and furniture from any possible contamination of sun and dust. This caused a sort of artificial night during the middle of the day, but the Primrose ladies were used to it, and went about the darkened house like cats or bats or owls or moles, or any other creatures who can see in the dark.

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Miss Priscilla Flint was the older of the sisters, and therefore was nominally mistress of Primrose Hall. But it was her habit in every household matter to express her opinion at length, and then to ask Miss Dorinda what she thought about it. And as Miss Dorinda’s opinion always coincided with Miss Priscilla’s it would be impossible to say what would have happened if it hadn’t.

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On this particular morning, then, when the sun was baffled in his attempt to fade even a streak on the blue satin sofa, and was so provoked about it that he went behind a cloud to sulk, and stayed there quite a little while, Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda sat in the morning-room holding their after-breakfast conference.

“It seems to me,” Miss Priscilla was saying, “that spring has really come at last. I saw a fly in the library yesterday morning. I didn’t speak of it to you, for I thought I might have been mistaken, as I had on my near-glasses, but Martha says she saw it too, so there can be no doubt about it. And I think, Dorinda, that as we go to the sewing-society to-morrow, and it may rain the next day, I think that to-day we will clean the attic.”

“Yes, sister,” said Miss Dorinda, “it is quite time, and we will set about it at once.”

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Cleaning the attic was a mere figure of speech, for how can any one clean what is already spick and span, and speckless?

But although frequent periodical sweepings and dustings kept every nook and cranny of Primrose Hall as bright as a new penny, yet a semi-annual housecleaning occurred as regularly as the spring and fall came; and, indeed, I daresay the Misses

Flint thought that spring and fall were invented as comfortable seasons for the performance.

The morning-room at Primrose Hall had a wide bay-window in which were two great arm-chairs facing each other, and in these chairs the two ladies sat every morning while they systematically planned the day's occupations.

Near Miss Priscilla's hand was a bell, and after she had pressed it, Bridget, the cook, appeared—automatically, it seemed—in the doorway, which, by the way, she nearly filled.

Miss Priscilla gave her the kitchen orders for the day, then dismissed her and rang for Martha, the waitress.

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Then Martha came and stood in the doorway. She was a pretty young German girl, and seemed to be attired principally in starched pieces.

“Martha,” said Miss Priscilla, pleasantly, “to-day we will clean the attic. Send Matthew after Mrs. Dolan and her granddaughter to assist us, and we will start at ten o'clock.”

Martha disappeared with a starchy rustle, and Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda went to make their toilettes for the great event.

Their housecleaning costumes had been renewed, but never varied, during many springs and falls; and when attired for the fray, each good lady wore a black stuff skirt, short and scant, a white muslin sacque with a bit of neat embroidery at throat and wrists, and a huge checked gingham apron. As Miss Priscilla observed, “No one can work if she is conscious of her clothes,” and this garb had been chosen as the best possible compromise between usefulness and comeliness. On their dignified heads the sisters wore ruffled sweeping-caps made of shiny muslin, and in the way of accoutrements, each carried a pair of scissors, a ball of string, a paper of pins, some sheets of paper, and a pencil.

[10]



“Precisely at ten o’clock the procession formed”

Precisely at ten o’clock the procession formed and solemnly ascended the attic stairs. Miss Priscilla went first, then Miss Dorinda, then Martha, with dusters, hammer and tacks, camphor-balls and moth-powders. Then Mrs. Dolan, with big broom, little broom, and dust-pans. Then Mrs. Dolan’s granddaughter, with soap, pail, scrub-brush, and floor-cloths, and sedately following all walked Tabby, the cat.

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Having arrived at the scene of action, Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda set themselves to work, and at the same time gave orders to their assistants, which were vigorously carried out, and soon the attic seemed to be in the path of a well-trained cyclone. Quilts and feather beds were shaken and beaten; trunks and chests were emptied of contents which were unrolled, inspected, rolled up again, patted and punched, and returned to their places. Discarded garments were critically examined to see what should be given away and what should be packed in tar-balls for the summer.

“This gray barege always makes me think of chicken-pie,” said Miss Dorinda, unfolding an old-fashioned skirt.

“Why?” said Miss Priscilla, in muffled tones, by reason of her head and shoulders being deep in a huge trunk.

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“Because I wore it the day Ann Haskell came to see us. Do you remember? She came in the morning to spend the day, and she stayed a full-fledged week. I thought she never would clear herself off. And she wanted chicken-pie made for her.”

“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla; “and then when she got it she wouldn’t eat it.”

“No; and we couldn’t eat it, because she *would* have onions in it. And the cats wouldn’t eat it: nothing would eat it, and at last we had to throw it away.”

“I suppose we’re not very hospitable,” said Miss Priscilla; “but I just hate to have company, they upset things so.”

“But sometimes it seems a duty,” said her sister.

“Not at all; that’s where you’re silly, Dorinda. I believe in charity, and giving of our worldly goods to help our less fortunate neighbors; but that doesn’t mean we’re to open our doors and let them all come in and make themselves at home. Do you remember when Ann Haskell came again, and rode up in a hack from the station, bringing a big bag with her?”

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“Yes; and you told the driver to come for her again directly after dinner.”

“I did, or she would have stayed another week. My, but she was surprised!”

“I know it; *I* couldn’t do anything like that!”

“Then you’re a coward, Dorinda. It is certainly cowardly to have company because you’re afraid to tell them they can’t stay. Now here’s another matter. The Dorcas Circle wants to make up a box of clothing for those fire-sufferers; so what do you think of giving them some of Lavinia’s things?”

“Oh!” gasped Miss Dorinda, in a startled tone.

“I think we may as well,” went on Miss Priscilla. “It’s fourteen years now since Lavinia died. They say, keep a thing seven years, and you’ll have use for it again; but we’ve kept these things twice over seven years, and I don’t see how they can ever be of use to us, except to give away.”

[14]

“Well,” said Miss Dorinda, still dazed, “perhaps you are right.”

Lavinia Flint, the younger, very much younger sister of these two ladies, had run away from her home fifteen years ago to marry a dashing young soldier named Jack Lovell, and had sailed with him to India. A year or so later the Flint ladies heard from Mr. Lovell that his wife had died, leaving a tiny baby named Lavinia. He sent them no address, so they could not have answered his letter if they had wanted to. And they had no desire to answer it, for they looked upon their sister as lost to them from the day of her elopement, and they had no wish to see her husband or child.

The Flints were a hard-hearted, stiff-necked race, and if one of the family did wrong, the others felt no relenting mercy because of ties of blood.

And so when Lavinia went away, her pretty dresses and other girlish finery were packed away in the attic, and had lain there ever since.

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She was so much younger than her sisters that they had petted her as a child, and had taken great pleasure in her girlish enjoyments. But when she left them, with only a note to say she had eloped with Jack Lovell, their hearts hardened, and they now rarely mentioned her, even to each other.

And so year after year the trunks of Lavinia’s clothing had been looked over and put in order, with no reference to their future disposition, until now Miss Priscilla concluded the time had come.

But when they shook out the old-fashioned gowns, the lovely taffetas and organdies and embroidered muslins did seem inappropriate to send to people who were suffering for plain, substantial clothing.

“Oh, my!” said Mrs. Dolan’s granddaughter, her eyes as big as saucers, as she looked at the beautiful show, “ain’t them just

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elegant! I wisht I was a fire-sufferer, or a freshet victim.”

“How well I remember Vinnie in that flowery frock,” said Miss Dorinda; “she looked like a spring blossom herself, she was so pretty and fresh.”

Miss Dorinda sighed; but Miss Priscilla shut her teeth together with a snap, and returned the dresses to their trunks and shut down the trunk-lids with a snap, and the cleaning of the attic went on again.

Except during an interval for luncheon, the workers worked all day, and at five o’clock the attic was cleaned, and the procession filed down-stairs again.

“Deary me,” said Miss Dorinda, as she reached her own room, “how tired I am! I believe I grow older every year. Are you tired, sister?”

“Yes; but I’m so thankful that the attic is done. When that’s over I always feel like singing the long-meter doxology.”

“Well, I’m too tired to sing; I’ll rest a bit before dinner.”

CHAPTER II

LADYBIRD

Dinner at Primrose Hall was rather an elaborate meal, and was always served promptly at six o'clock. Old Josiah Flint had been very particular about his household appointments and habits, and since his death his daughters had made no changes.

After dinner the ladies always went to the library and read the village newspaper, or dozed over their knitting-work until bedtime.

But one evening in early June this routine was interfered with, by the arrival of a letter bearing a foreign postmark. It was addressed in what was evidently a man's hand, and the two good ladies were greatly excited. Miss Dorinda felt a pleasant flutter of anticipation, but Miss Priscilla felt a foreboding that something disagreeable was in the letter, and she hesitated before she opened it.

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“It's postmarked 'London'”

“It's postmarked 'London,'” she said. “Do we know any one in London? Maria Peters went there once, but she came back, and anyway, she's dead.”

“Open it, sister,” implored Miss Dorinda. And after scrutinizing it thoroughly once more, Miss Priscilla did open it.

“It is signed ‘Thomas J. Bond,’” she exclaimed, looking at the signature. “Now, can it be Tom Bond who was old Jonathan Bond’s son? His mother was a Coriell.”

“Read it, sister,” said Miss Dorinda.

So Miss Priscilla read the letter aloud, and this is what it said:

MISS PRISCILLA FLINT,
DEAR MADAM:

During a recent visit to India I learned that a friend of mine, Jack Lovell, was living at Bombay, and I went there to see him. But it was my sad experience to reach his home the day after he had died from a sudden attack of fever. He left a little child, who told me that her mother had been dead many years, and, indeed, the poor child seemed utterly alone in the world. I tried to find out from Lovell’s papers something about his effects, but as he was of a roving and careless disposition, everything was left at sixes and sevens, and I am afraid there is no provision for the child. Therefore, since Jack’s wife was your sister, I think the right thing to do is to send the little girl to you at once. And if I can find any money or property belonging to her I will advise you later.

My wife and I brought her from India to London with us, and I will send her to you on the next steamer.

Trusting that this letter will insure her a kindly reception, I am

Yours very respectfully,

THOMAS J. BOND.

To say that after reading this remarkable letter Miss Priscilla appeared surprised, amazed, astounded, excited, irritated, angry, umbrageous, furious, or even to say that she was in a state of high dudgeon, would give but an inadequate idea of the indignation shown in her face and manner.

But she only said, “She cannot come!” and snapped her teeth shut in the way she always did when very decided.

“But she’ll have to come, sister,” said Miss Dorinda; “how will you prevent her?”

“Well, then, she cannot stay,” said Miss Priscilla, with another snap; “I will send her back just as I did Ann Haskell. Why, think of it, Dorinda! Think of a child living in this house! She’d very likely leave doors open, and she’d be sure to chatter when

we wished to be quiet, and she'd fairly worry us into our graves."

"Yes," said Miss Dorinda, "I suppose she would. But I don't see how you *can* send her away."

"I don't care whether I can or not, I'm going to do it. This Lawrence J. Bond, or whoever he is, discovered her without our consent; now he can attend to the rest; I shall simply get her a ticket back to his address in London and pack her off."

"Of course that is the only thing to do—we *can't* have her here. And yet—Priscilla—she is Lavinia's daughter."

"What of it? Lavinia didn't consider our feelings when she deserted and disgraced us, so why should we concern ourselves about her child?"

"True enough; and yet I shall be glad to see the little girl. How old is she, Priscilla?"

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"I suppose she must be about fourteen. Yes; it was fourteen years ago that Jack Lovell wrote, saying his wife had died, leaving a tiny baby. He said the little one had blue eyes and golden curls, so I daresay she has grown up to look like her mother. Lavinia *was* pretty."

"Oh, she was. And how sweet she used to look dancing round the house in her bright, pretty frocks."

"Well, what if she did? Lavinia's daughter is not Lavinia, and I wash my hands of the little nuisance. If you choose to—"

"Oh, no, no! I wouldn't do anything that you would disapprove of. But I only thought—perhaps—if she is a sweet, docile child she might be a comfort to us."

"Are you losing your mind, Dorinda? What comfort could come of a responsibility like that? Think of the worrying over her clothes and education and accomplishments. And then, after a while, probably she would treat us as her mother did, and run away with a good-for-nothing scamp."

[23]

"Yes, yes, sister, you are quite right. What is the child's name, do you know?"

"Lavinia; don't you remember her father said so in that letter—the only letter he ever wrote us? If he had acted more kindly toward us, I might feel different toward the child; but as it is, I've no use for her."

"Do you remember sister Lavinia at fourteen? She was a lovely child, chubby and rosy-cheeked, with eyes like the sky, and beautiful, soft golden curls. She didn't look much like us, Priscilla."

“No,” admitted the older sister; “but beauty is a doubtful good. I’d rather be plain and do my duty, than to be handsome and break the hearts of those who love me.”

“Well,” said Miss Dorinda, placidly, “we’d better not talk any more about it, or we’ll get so excited we won’t be able to sleep. Let’s go to bed, sister, and to-morrow morning, after breakfast, we’ll read the letter again and decide what we can do.”

[24]

So, taking their bedroom candles, the two old ladies went upstairs. But as Miss Dorinda had feared, they could not get to sleep, and they lay awake thinking about their sister and their sister’s child.

And so it happened that they were both awake when at about eleven o’clock the great brass knocker on the front door sent clattering clangs all through the house. Such a thing had never before been known at Primrose Hall, and the sisters, terror-stricken, jumped from their beds and met at the door of their connecting rooms, where they faced each other with pale, startled faces.

“What can it be?” whispered Miss Dorinda.

“The house must be on fire,” said Miss Priscilla, decidedly; “let us get our fire-gowns.”

These were commodious robes of thick, dark flannel which hung on the sisters’ bed-posts, to be hurried on in case of fire. For years they had been hung there every night and put away every morning, but it seemed that at last their time had come.

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While the sisters were tremblingly trying to get into them, Martha appeared in her fire-gown and asked what she should do.

“Answer the door,” said Miss Priscilla. “But stay: it may not be the firemen; I don’t smell any smoke. In that case it must be burglars. Let us call Matthew.”

By this time the great knocker sounded again, and Bridget and Matthew both appeared in the hall. Each wore a fire-gown, and as all of the party had on night-caps, they were an imposing-looking crowd. The Flint ladies wore great be-ruffled caps, tied with wide white strings, suspiciously fresh and smooth; and, indeed, these caps had been for years awaiting this very occasion; for if the Misses Flint were to be heroically rescued from fiery flames, they wanted to look decent at the time.

Bridget and Martha wore neat, narrow-ruffled caps, as befitted their station; and Matthew was crowned with a queer-looking thing of knitted yarn with a long tassel hanging down behind.

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With an old musket in his hands, Matthew led the procession to the front door.

Bridget and Martha followed, holding candles, and Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda, arm in arm, encouraged each other, and nerved themselves for whatever might be about to happen.

Then Matthew flung the great front door wide open, and there was no fire-engine outside, no burglars—only a tiny mite of a girl who fairly jumped into the hall as the door opened, and stood looking at the strange beings who surrounded her. Her face was small and very white, with large, dark eyes that seemed to be dancing with mirth. Her straight black hair hung round her ears like elf-locks, and she wore a long red cloak and a wide-brimmed red hat.

She looked inquiringly from one to the other, as if uncertain which to address, and then, with a smiling glance that seemed to include them all, she flung off her hat and cloak, and said, in a sweet, childish voice, “I’m Ladybird, and I’ve come to stay.”

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CHAPTER III

A GUEST FOR THE NIGHT

As no one else seemed able to make any reply to this astounding announcement, old Matthew said:

“Well, if so be ’s you’ve come to stay, I might as well lock the door behind you.”

And he proceeded to do so, while the small visitor followed his movements with her laughing eyes.

Then she turned, still smiling, to the four women who stood watching her with various expressions of surprise, consternation, admiration, and dismay.

The mite gave a quick, comprehensive look at each one, and then, intuitively judging by the superior cap-ruffles rather than by any appearance of friendly welcome, she pointed a tiny forefinger at the two Flint ladies in turn, and said:

“I think you’re my aunts, and I hope you’re glad to see me.”

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Then Miss Priscilla found her voice.

“Your aunts!” she almost screamed. “Who are you, child, and what are you doing here?”

“I’m Ladybird,” answered the mite—“Ladybird Lovell. My father is dead, and you’re my aunts, you know, so I’ve come to live with you. Mr. Bond says my mother used to be your sister,” she went on in an explanatory tone; “but she’s dead too: she died long ago, so I’m all alone, except Cloppy.”

In the hollow of her little bent arm was what seemed to be a gray muff with a blue bow on it, but as she shook it out and held it up it proved to be a dog.

“This is Cloppy,” she said; “he’s my dog, and he’s such a dear, though he’s a lot of trouble. Do you like dogs?”

Now Miss Priscilla Flint did *not* like dogs, but that was a matter of small importance compared with the dire calamity which threatened her quiet household. Her very cap-bows shook with the vehement decision of her tone as she answered:

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“No, I do *not* like dogs, and still less do I like visitors. I cannot turn you from my door in the middle of the night, but nevertheless you must go away as soon as I can arrange it, for you cannot live here.”

Then Ladybird laughed again—such a gay, merry, mirthsome laugh.

“Why, aunty,” she said, “I’m not company; I’m one of the family. And I’m not visiting you; I’ve come to live here forever and ever. This is my home, and I haven’t any other. And you’ll learn to love Cloppy, too, he’s so soft and cuddly. Just hold him once.”

She put the blinking Skye terrier into Miss Priscilla’s arms, which promptly unfolded and let the dog drop to the floor.

Then Ladybird laughed again.

“Oh, you funny aunty,” she cried, and turning to Miss Dorinda said brightly, “Don’t you like dogs, either?”

“Not very much,” said Miss Dorinda, looking at her new-found relative with a sort of fascination.

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“Well, never mind,” said Ladybird, cheerfully, as she took Cloppy up and threw him over her arm like a folded shawl, “I won’t let him bother you any. And now shall we go to bed?”

This suggestion, though timely, gave Miss Priscilla another shock. No preparations had been made for such hospitality, and at Primrose Hall nothing was ever done without preparation.

“Come on, then,” said the guest, interpreting the silence to mean consent; and taking the candle that Martha had set down, she darted up the wide, old-fashioned staircase. At the first turn she paused.

“Where is my room, aunty?” she inquired, looking back at her hostess.

As she stood there on the great square landing, with one foot on the stair above, and the candle held high above her head, she looked so white and eerie, so like a small wraith, that Miss Priscilla could scarcely believe she was real, and indulged in a vague hope that the vision would disappear as suddenly as it had come.

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But Martha felt that it was her turn now, and she said:

“Shall I make up the spare-chamber bed, ma’am?”

“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla, catching gladly at a temporary solution of the problem; “take her there, and put her to bed. I’ll make no plans until morning.” And shutting her teeth together with a snap, Miss Priscilla went to her room and was seen no more that night.

Miss Dorinda did likewise, and Martha said:

“Now, if you’ll come with me, little miss, I’ll try to make you comfortable.”

Ladybird, still holding her dog, followed Martha to the great

spare bed-chamber.

“Is this my room?” she said wonderingly, looking at the massive mahogany furniture and old-fashioned decorations.

“It is for to-night, miss, whatever happens to-morrow.”

“Oh, I like it,” said the child, contentedly; “only, it seems so big. But it’s very pleasant, and when my things come, I can stack them all away in these big bureaus and chests of drawers. But what a funny bed! It’s like a queen’s bed. I’ll play I’m a queen, and you be my lady in waiting, will you, Martha?”

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“Yes, miss,” said the good-natured Martha, smiling at the strange little girl, who had already won her heart. “And where’s your bag, miss, with your night-clothes?”

“Why, do you know, I forgot it and left it on the train. I came alone from Boston, and when the man said ‘All out for Plainville,’ I just jumped out and forgot everything. But you can lend me a nightie, can’t you? and to-morrow I think my boxes will come.”

So Martha provided her new charge from her own wardrobe; and the child laughed gleefully when, in a night-dress far too long for her, and a ruffled night-cap tied under her chin, she found herself ready to climb into the four-poster bed.

There was a wide dimity ruffle all around the top, and a dimity valance below, and long dimity curtains all around. These were looped back at one side with huge rosettes, and with Martha’s assistance the little girl stepped on a chair, and so up on the high feather bed. As she sank down into it, and it nearly closed over her, she laughed merrily.

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“It is like drowning in the sea,” she said; “the billows are high on both sides of me. Where’s Cloppy, Martha?”

“Here he is, miss. Shall I put him in the cellar?”

“Cellar? No, indeed; put him at the foot of the bed, please; and I hope he won’t smother. Oh, how good these sheets smell! Why do they?”

“That’s lavender, miss; we always keep it between the fresh linen.”

“Well, it’s just lovely. Good night, Martha.”

“Good night, miss,” and Martha took the candle and went away, and Ladybird was asleep in ten seconds.

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CHAPTER IV

A FEW QUESTIONS

The next morning Ladybird woke early, with a strange feeling of suffocation. The day was warm, and the dimity curtains, the feather bed, and the night-cap all combined to stifle a little girl who was fond of fresh air.

She hopped out of bed and ran to the window, the extra length of Martha's long night-dress tripping her feet and flapping against her hands.

Throwing open the blinds, she saw that the window opened on a veranda roof, and swinging herself over the sill, she stood delightedly gazing at the spring beauty of Primrose Farm.

She was soon joined by Cloppy, who had scrambled out of the feather nest and followed in his young mistress's steps.

"Hello, Cloppy-Dog," she cried as she picked him up, "how do you like our new home? I think it is lovely. Let's look in at these windows."

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There were several along the veranda, each with closed blinds. Ladybird tried them all, but could not open any until she reached the last one. There the blinds flew open at her touch and disclosed an open window with a pair of the ever-recurring dimity curtains tied back with blue ribbons.

Ladybird perched herself on the window-sill and surveyed the room.

Opposite the window was a curtained bed like the one she had slept in, and as she looked, a night-capped face appeared at the opening and stared at the intruder.

Except that the face between the window-curtains was young, and the face between the bed-curtains was old, it was almost like a reflection in a mirror.

Ladybird smiled most engagingly and chanted:

"Good morning, Aunt Dorinda; I'm sitting in your window."

And then, with the little dog still in her arms, she jumped down into the room.

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"I'll just hop in beside you for a minute," said she, approaching the bed, "'cause my feet are cold—though it's a lovely warm morning. What time do you have breakfast?"

As she spoke she snuggled herself, dog and all, into her aunt's bed, and softly patted the old lady's cheek.

Miss Dorinda knew she ought to be stern, but it was impossible, with the little childish face framed in its big cap-ruffle looking up into her own, and she said:

“About eight o’clock, dearie; are you hungry?”

“Yes, ’m; I’m ’most starved. The train was late last night, and I didn’t get any supper.”

“Why, you poor child! There, that’s the rising-bell. Run right back to your room and dress; the breakfast-bell will ring in just thirty minutes. Can you be ready?”

“In thirty minutes? I should hope so!” said Ladybird, laughing.

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Gathering up her dog, she stepped through the window and ran along the veranda roof to her own room.

Peeping in, she saw Martha staring in dismay at the empty bed.

“Hello, Martha,” she cried gaily, “did you think I was lost? I’ve been calling on my aunt; it’s such a lovely morning for visiting, you know. But I’m as hungry as a bear, and now I think I’ll get dressed and go to breakfast.”

She jumped into the room, and with Martha’s assistance her toilette was soon made; then she seized her dog and went dancing down-stairs.

After wandering through several of the large rooms she came to the dining-room, where the breakfast-table was laid; seeing nothing to eat, she went on to the kitchen.

Bridget looked at her with no kindly eye, for she resented any intrusion on the quiet of Primrose Hall as much as Miss Priscilla did.

But when Ladybird said wistfully, “I’m very hungry,” the good-hearted old cook fell a victim at once to the irresistible charm of the strange child.

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“Are ye that, miss? And what would ye like now?”

“Oh, anything!—I don’t care what; and if I go and sit at the table will you bring me something?”

“I will indeed, miss. Run along, thin, and set at the place forninst the side-board.”

And so that’s how it happened that when, a few minutes later, Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda came into the dining-room they found their guest ensconced at their table and apparently enjoying herself very much.

“Good morning, aunties,” she said smilingly. “I ought to have waited for you, I know, but truly, I was so hungry I just

couldn't. And Bridget brought me such lovely things! I never had strawberries and cream before. Do you always use these beautiful blue-and-white dishes? For if you don't, you needn't get them out just because I've come."

"We always use them," said Miss Priscilla; "we have used them for forty years, and not a piece has ever been broken."

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"Is that so?" said Ladybird, with great interest, quite unconscious that the remark was intended for a warning to herself, as her quick motions and unexpected gestures seemed to threaten the safety of anything in her vicinity.

Having finished her strawberries, she sat back, and throwing her little thin arms above her head, grasped the carved knobs of the high, old-fashioned chair.

"Why, you're just like me, aunty," she said; "I think that's the right way to do—to use your best things every day. It's such a comfort to see them around; and you needn't break china or glass just because you use it. Why, I'll show you what can be done with them, and there's not the slightest danger if you're careful."

As the child spoke, she pushed away her plate, and ranged her cup, saucer, and glass in a row in front of her, and seized a spoon in one hand and a fork in the other. Then in a sweet, crooning voice she began to sing:

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"Should *auld* acquaintance *be* forgot,
And *never* brought to *mind*?"

striking her glass lightly with her spoon at the accented notes, and beating an accompaniment alternately on her cup and saucer.

Miss Priscilla's eyes grew almost as big as her precious and endangered saucers, but the dear old tune, sung in the pretty, childish voice, with its tinkling accompaniment, held her spellbound, and she said not a word.

As Ladybird finished the refrain she said eagerly:

"Now we'll do it again, and you both tap your glasses and sing with me."

And would you believe it? Those two old ladies were so interested that they tapped on their glasses with their thin old silver spoons, and sang with their thin old voices for all they were worth.

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"That was very pretty," observed Ladybird, approvingly, when at last they all laid down their spoons. "And now if you've finished your breakfast, Aunt Priscilla, will you take me out and show me round the garden?"

But Miss Priscilla Flint had by no means lost her mind entirely, and she said:

“You have no time to go round the garden,—you are to start back to Boston this morning, and from there to London as soon as possible.”

“Oh, am I?” said Ladybird, with a wise smile, and an air as of one humoring a wayward child.

“You are indeed,” said her aunt, severely; “and now, if you will come into the morning-room with us, we will ask you a few questions before you go.”

“All right, come on,” said Ladybird; and she grasped Miss Priscilla’s hand in both her own, and danced along at the old lady’s side.

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“Should *auld* acquaintance *be* forgot?””

Miss Dorinda followed, and she and her sister took their accustomed seats in the bay-window.

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Then Ladybird placed a low ottoman at Miss Priscilla's side and sat down upon it, and laid her head against her aunt's knee.

Although Miss Dorinda might seem to a casual observer to be a softer, kinder nature than her elder sister, yet for some unaccountable reason Ladybird felt more attracted toward Miss Priscilla; and, too, the child could already see that Miss Priscilla's word was law at Primrose Hall, and that Miss Dorinda merely acquiesced in her sister's decisions.

But it was no spirit of diplomacy that actuated Ladybird, and she caressed Miss Priscilla's hand for the simple reason that she was beginning to love the stern old lady.

"Now," said Miss Priscilla, glaring at her niece, "will you tell me what your name is?"

"Ladybird Lovell," said the little girl, with a bewitching smile.

"I mean your real name, not that absurd nickname."

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"It *is* my real name. I never had any other."

"Nonsense! Your real name is Lavinia Lovell."

"It is? All right—Lavinia Lovell, then. I don't mind."

"And how old are you?"

"Twelve years old."

"You are not! You are fourteen."

"Yes, 'm. Fourteen."

Ladybird began to treat her aunt as one would treat a harmless lunatic who must be humored, whatever she might say.

"And why have you black eyes and straight black hair? Your father wrote, when you were a baby, that you had blue eyes and golden curls."

"Did he write that? Why, how I have changed, haven't I? Did you ever know a baby to change as much as that before?"

"No, I never did. And I don't say that I would have kept you here if you had had blue eyes and golden hair; but it might have influenced me if you had looked more like your mother,—and your father said you did. As it is, I cannot think of allowing you to stay here, and so when your trunks come this morning—and I suppose Mr. Marks will bring them pretty soon—I shall send them back, and you with them, to Boston. There my lawyer will meet you and start you back to London. Mr. Thomas J. Bond

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had no right to send you here uninvited, and he may burden some one else with you. I positively decline the honor.”

Ladybird had paid polite attention at first, but toward the end of her aunt’s speech her mind began to wander, and as Miss Priscilla finished the child said:

“Aunty, I can make poetry, can you?”

Now the one ambition of Priscilla Flint’s early life had been to become a poetess.

Her favorite day-dream was of a beautiful volume, bound in blue and gold, that should contain poems like those of Mrs. Hemans. But though she had written many, many verses,—and indeed, had a little hair-trunk in the attic packed quite full of them,—yet she had never been able to summon sufficient courage to offer them to any publisher; and lately she had begun to think she never would, for poetry had changed since Mrs. Hemans’s day, and she doubted if her efforts would stand the tests of modern editors or publishers.

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But she said: “Yes, child, I have written poetry. It is a talent that runs in our family. Have you written any?”

“Oh, no, I don’t write it. I just say it. Like this, you know:

“I have a dear aunt named Priscilla,
Who lives in a beautiful villa;
She has lovely old cups,
But she can’t abide pups,
And she flavors her cake with vanilla.

“That’s the kind I make. Of course you have to use words that rhyme, whether the sense is very good or not. I made this one too:

“There once was a lady named Biddy,
Who cried because she was a widdy;
When her husband fell dead,
She thoughtfully said,
‘He didn’t live very long, did he?’

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“Now tell me some of your poetry, aunty.”

“You wouldn’t appreciate mine, child,—you couldn’t understand it.”

“No, ’m; I s’pose not. But I’d love to hear it.”

“Tell her ‘The Sunset Star,’ sister,” said Miss Dorinda.

Miss Priscilla simpered a little; then, folding her hands, she recited:

“The sunset star is shining

Across the meadow green;
The woodbine vines are twining
The trellises between;

“And every pleasant evening
I watch it from afar,
Romantic fancies weaving
About that evening star.”

“Why, aunty, that’s lovely,” exclaimed Ladybird: “and I *do* understand it. I know the sunset star that comes out in the sky just as the sun goes down. Yours is more poetry than mine, but mine are funnier. Don’t you think so?”

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“Yes, child; but as you grow older you’ll see that poetry is more important than fun.”

“Yes; and then I’ll learn to make verses like yours. Can you make poetry too, Aunt Dorinda?”

“No,” said Miss Dorinda, simply; “my talent is for painting.”

“Oh, is it? And do you paint pictures? And will you teach me how? I’ve always wanted to learn to paint, and I’m very industrious. I can play on the piano like a house afire.”

“Sister Lavinia used to play the piano very prettily,” said Miss Dorinda; “doubtless you have inherited her talent.”

“Yes, I think I have. Shall I play for you now?”

“No!” said Miss Priscilla, decidedly; “the piano has never been touched since your mother left us, and it never shall be opened again with my consent.”

“Aunty, did my mamma look like you? It seems funny, doesn’t it? but I’ve never seen a picture of my mamma, and papa never told me anything about her. I didn’t know papa very well, either,—he was always going off on long journeys, and I stayed with nurse. What was my mamma like, aunty?”

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“She was a beautiful blonde, with rosy, plump cheeks. You are not a bit like her.”

“No, I should say not,”—and Ladybird laughed merrily, —“with my straight black hair and thin white face. Papa used to call me a black-and-white ghost. But after I live here awhile, I expect I’ll get plump and rosy; though I don’t suppose anything will ever make my hair curl.”

“But you’re *not* going to live here; you’re going away this morning.”

“Now, Aunt Priscilla,” said Ladybird, with an air of being kind but firm, “this joke has gone far enough. I’m going to stay here because it’s my home, and I have no other. I belong to you and

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Aunt Dorinda, because I have no other relatives. I hope you'll learn to like me; but if not, I have to stay here, all the same. People have to live where their homes are, and so we'll consider the matter settled."

"Indeed, miss, we'll consider no such thing! What do you mean by defying me in my own house? I say you are to go, and go you shall. Here comes Mr. Marks up the road now, in his wagon. Get that worthless dog of yours, and prepare to go at once."

Miss Priscilla looked at the little girl with flashing eyes, and Ladybird, who had risen from her stool, looked back at her aunt, smiling and unalarmed.

Then the child gave a quick glance round the room. The windows were high from the ground, and there was but one door, which led to the hall.

Like a flash, Ladybird flew out through the door, shut it behind her, and turned the key in the lock, making the Misses Flint her prisoners.

She went out on the front veranda just as Mr. Marks drove up with her trunks in his wagon.

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"Good morning!" she said brightly. "Will you please set the boxes out on the porch? Oh, here is Matthew; he will help you. Now, if you please, will you carry them up-stairs? I'll show you where to put them."

She ran up the broad staircase; the men followed; and finally her three trunks were safely lodged in the room she had occupied the night before, and which she looked upon as her own.

"How much is it, Mr. Marks?" she said; and when he told she paid him from her little purse, and bade him good morning.

She watched until he was well out of sight, and then she went to unlock the door of the morning-room.

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CHAPTER V

ANOTHER ATTEMPT

When the Misses Flint saw the door shut behind Ladybird, and heard the key click in the lock, they could believe neither their eyes nor their ears.

Miss Priscilla rose and walked majestically to the door and turned the knob, fully expecting the door would open. But it would not open, of course, being locked, and the good lady, almost stupefied with anger and amazement, uttered an explosive and exasperated “Well!” and dropped into the nearest chair.

Miss Dorinda responded with a terrified and apprehensive “Well!” and then the two sisters sat and stared blankly at each other.

Miss Dorinda spoke first, timidly.

“Priscilla, don’t you think perhaps it is our duty to give a home to Lavinia’s child?”

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“Duty!” exclaimed the elder sister, in a tense, restrained voice. “Duty! To keep such a vixen as that in our house? No! I confess I had some such thought during the night; but now I have only one desire, and that is, to get rid of her.”

“Yes,” said Miss Dorinda, sighing; “of course she can’t stay after this; but she seems very affectionate and loving.”

“Affectionate! Loving! Dorinda Flint, what are you talking about? Do you call it affectionate to lock us helplessly in this room?”

“No; but that was impulsive, and because she wants to stay here. I don’t think she is really a vicious child.”

“Well, I don’t want to think anything about her!”

Miss Priscilla took up a newspaper and pretended to read, so desirous was she of not appearing defeated; and, indeed, she would have stayed quietly in that room all day rather than call for assistance, or in any way show that she was at the mercy of her erratic niece.

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Miss Dorinda was as much perturbed as her sister, but she made no effort to hide it. She fluttered about the room, looked out of the window, tried the door-knob, and at last sat down in a big rocking-chair and began to rock violently.

Suddenly the door burst open and Ladybird came flying in.

“Aunties,” she cried, “the house is on fire! What do you want to save most?”

“Mercy on us!” cried Miss Priscilla, rushing from the room, “let me get my Lady Washington geranium. The buds are just ready to open.”

“Where is it? I’ll get it,” said Ladybird, dancing around in great excitement.

“Up-stairs, on a stand by the south-room window; but you can’t go up—you’ll be burned to death.”

“No, I won’t,” screamed Ladybird, already half-way up-stairs; “I’ll get it. What do *you* want, Aunt Dorinda?”

“I don’t know,—everything! Oh, my lace handkerchief,” called the distracted lady. “And get some of your own things; and bring our fire-gowns.”

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Meantime volumes of smoke rolled into the hall through the dining-room door.



“Suddenly Matthew’s face appeared”

Suddenly Matthew’s face appeared in the midst of the smoke.

“Don’t be frightened, ma’am,” he said; “it’s all right now. The

soot got afire in the chimbley; but we've put it out. But if the little lady hadn't been afther runnin' down an' tellin' me that the wall felt hot, I'm thinkin' the house wud have been burned to the ground."

"Oh, Matthew, are you sure the fire is all out?" asked Miss Dorinda.

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"And are you sure my house would have burned up but for that child?" asked Miss Priscilla.

"Yis, ma'am, sure as sure! An' I'll jist open the windies till the shmoke disappears."

Then Miss Priscilla called, "Come down, Ladybird; it's all right now." And in a moment the child came flying down-stairs.

"I put the geranium back in its place," she said, "and I left your lace handkerchief on your bureau, Aunt Dorinda; but I brought both your smell-salts bottles, 'cause I thought you might be faint from the scare. Now sit down and rest, won't you?"

She hovered about her aunts, ministering to each in turn, and her caressing touch was so gentle, and her sympathy so sincere, that Miss Priscilla, who was unaccustomed to such attentions, quite forgot she had called her niece a vixen, and that, too, with good and sufficient reasons.

But after a while, as her nerves became quieted and she felt more composed, Miss Priscilla Flint determined to attempt again the dismissal of her unwelcome guest.

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"Lavinia," she said in a tone of firm decision.

"Oh, aunty, don't call me that; it makes me feel so old and grown up!"

"It is your name, and I have no desire to call you by any other. Lavinia, you are my niece, and the child of my dead sister; but I am in no way inclined to take you into my home for that reason. You have some kind and winning ways, but you appear to have an ungovernable temper, which would make you impossible to live with. How dared you lock the door on me in my own house?"

"Why, aunty," said Ladybird, laughing at the memory of it, "that wasn't temper, and I didn't mean to be rude; but truly, there was nothing else to do. Why, if you had been out on the veranda when my trunks came, you would have sent them back to Boston, and I didn't want them to go back; so I just left you by yourselves until the man took them up-stairs."

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"You think you have outwitted me, miss, but you will find that Priscilla Flint is not so easily set aside."

"Oh, I'm not going to set you aside, aunty; that isn't it. I'm just

going to stay here and be your little girl—yours and Aunt Dorinda's."

"I think, sister, we might keep her a week on trial," said Miss Dorinda, timidly.

Miss Dorinda always said everything timidly. In this respect she was not like her niece.

"I shall *not* keep her a week, nor a day; and no more hours than I can help. I am going now to write a note to Mr. Marks, and tell him to come back at once for her and her trunks. So, Miss Lavinia Lovell, you may as well get yourself ready, for this time you will have to go."

"Do you know, it doesn't seem to me as if I would go this time," said Ladybird, thoughtfully; "it seems to me as if I would stay here years and years, until I get to be a dear old lady like you," and she patted the top of Miss Priscilla's head. Then she danced out of the room, and out to the garden, singing as she went:

"I am not going away to-day;
I'm going to stay and stay and stay."

When the luncheon-bell rang, she danced back again, and seeing a letter on the hall-table addressed to Mr. Marks, she tore it into bits and threw it into the waste basket.

The gay good humor of their visitor was infectious, and the Flint ladies laughed and chatted over their luncheon, so that the meal was nearly over before Miss Priscilla said:

"Mr. Marks will call for you at three o'clock, Lavinia."

"I don't think he will," replied the child, "because I tore up that letter you wrote to him and threw it away."

"What!" gasped Miss Priscilla. "This is too much!"

"Well, you see, aunty, there was nothing else to do. If he'd got that letter he would have come, and I don't want him to come, so I tore it up. Don't write another."

"I won't," said Miss Priscilla, in an ominous voice, and snapping her teeth together with a click.

But half an hour later the Primrose Hall carriage went down toward the village, and inside of it sat a very determined-looking old lady.

She went to Mr. Marks's office and asked him to get his wagon and follow her home at once, and bring back the young miss and her luggage.

"That firebrand as I saw at your house this morning?"

exclaimed the old countryman. "Wal, I guess she won't be so easy brung."

He chuckled to himself as he drove along the road behind Miss Priscilla Flint; and when they reached the farm-house, he waited decorously for further orders.

Then the hunt began. For Ladybird was nowhere to be found. Miss Priscilla called in vain. Then Miss Dorinda called. Then they went up and looked in the room which Ladybird had appropriated as her own.

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Her three trunks stood there wide open and empty. Their contents were all around: on the bed, on the bureaus, on the chairs, and many of them on the floor. But no trace of the missing child.

Then Miss Priscilla called the servants.

"The little girl is hiding somewhere," she explained, "and she must be found."

"Yes, 'm," Bridget said; and she began systematically to search the house from attic to cellar.

Matthew shook his old head doubtfully.

"I'm thinkin' yez'll niver find her," he said. "She was a spookish piece, an' the likes of her flies up chimbleys an' out of windies an' niver appears ag'in."

Martha, much mystified, stared helplessly around the room, and in doing so noticed a bit of paper pinned to the pin-cushion.

She handed it to Miss Priscilla, who read:

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Aunty, Aunty, Do not look for me;
Until you send that man away, I'll stay just where I be.

"Oh," groaned Miss Priscilla, "what *can* I do? We *must* find her!"

Miss Dorinda felt pretty sure, in her secret heart, that they *wouldn't* find Ladybird until that strange being was ready to be found; but she continued looking about in her placid way, which did no good nor harm.

After an hour's search, the case did seem hopeless, and Mr. Marks declared he couldn't wait any longer; so Miss Priscilla reluctantly let him go away.

Two more hours passed; and then it was five o'clock, and still no sign from the missing child.

Although they hadn't confessed it to each other, the Flint ladies were both a little scared.

Finally Miss Dorinda said:

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“You don’t think she’d do anything rash, do you, sister?”

“From the little I’ve seen of her,” replied Miss Priscilla, “I should say that what she does is never anything but rash. However, I don’t think she has drowned herself in the brook, or jumped down the well, if that’s what you mean.”

That was what Miss Dorinda had meant, and somehow she was not very much reassured by her sister’s word.

They sat silent for a while; then Miss Dorinda, with a sudden impulse of determination such as she had never known in all her life, and, indeed, never experienced again, said:

“Priscilla, I think you are doing wrong; and you needn’t look at me like that. For once, I’m going to say what I think! This child has been sent to us, and in your secret heart you know it is our duty to keep her and do for her. The Bible says that those who neglect their own families are worse than infidels, and we have no right to turn away our kin. Your dislike of visitors has nothing to do with the matter. The child is not a visitor, as she says herself. And it makes no difference what kind of a child she is: she is our sister’s daughter, and we are bound by every law of humanity and decency to give her a home. If father were alive, do you suppose he would turn his orphan grandchild from his door? No; he would do his duty by his own: he would be just, if he could not be generous; and he would accept a responsibility that was rightly thrust upon him.”

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Miss Priscilla looked at her sister in utter amazement. Dorinda had never spoken like this before, and it seemed as if the spirit of old Josiah Flint was manifesting itself in his daughter.

But if Miss Dorinda had acted in an unusual manner, Miss Priscilla proceeded to behave no less strangely.

At the close of her sister’s speech, she suddenly burst into tears; and the times in her life when Miss Priscilla Flint had cried were very few indeed.

Then the younger sister was frightened at what she had done, and tried to pacify the weeping lady.

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“I know you’re right, Dorinda,” said Miss Priscilla, between her sobs; “I—I knew it all along,—and I suppose we shall have to keep her. Father would have wished it so,—and—and I wouldn’t mind it so much if she wouldn’t—wouldn’t leave the doors open.”

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CHAPTER VI

UP A TREE

While the aunts were deciding upon Ladybird's future, old Matthew was wandering down the garden path toward the orchard.

"She bates the Dutch, that child," he said to himself. "Now I'll wager me dinner that she's hidin' under a cabbage-leaf, or in some burrd's nest."

But if so, Ladybird made no sign, and old Matthew tramped up and down the orchard, peering anxiously about while the shadows deepened.

At last, as he stood beneath an old gnarled apple-tree, he heard what seemed to be a far-away crooning sort of song.

"Bird, bird,
Ladybird;
They called and called,
But she never stirred."

"Arrah, miss! an' are ye up there? Come down, ye rascally baby. Yer aunts is afther huntin' high an' low for ye. Do ye hear?"

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"I hear and I hear, and I don't heed," came back the answering voice.

"Ye must heed," said old Matthew, earnestly. "Yer aunts is clean daft. Come down, little lady, come down now."

"Nixy," said Ladybird, saucily. "You know very well, Matthew, that if I come down my aunts will send me away, and I won't be sent away."

"But ye can't stay up in the tree forever, miss."

"Well, I can stay for the present. I don't think it's going to rain to-night, do you, Matthew?"

"The saints presarve us, miss, how ye do talk! And are ye going to stay up there all night, now?"

"Of course I am; I've got to sleep somewhere. And say, Matthew, I'm awful hungry."

"Are ye that, miss? Well, thin, come down to yer supper."

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"Nay, nay," said Ladybird, laughing merrily; "but do you, O good Matthew, go to Bridget and beg for me a bit of supper."

"Oh, miss, what dratted foolishness!"

“Foolish nothing! I am a captive princess; you are my henchman. Do you hear, Matthew?—henchman.”

“What’s that, miss?”

“Oh, well, it only means that you must do just as I tell you, because you love me.”

“Yes, miss.”

“So go to Bridget and ask her to put up some supper in a basket, and bring it out here to me.”

“And thin will ye come down and get it, miss?”

“Go at once, Matthew! Henchmen do as they’re told without question.”

“Yes, miss”; and half dazed, the old man shuffled away, followed by a ringing peal of Ladybird’s laughter.

He soon shuffled back again, bringing a fair-sized basket well filled with good things.



“Come down, little lady”

“Hello, henchman!” called Ladybird, “you’re mighty spry. What did you tell my aunt?”

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“Nothing, miss,” said Matthew; “sure, ye gave me no message.”

“Good Matthew,” said Ladybird, approvingly. “It seems to me we shall be great friends, you and I. And now for my supper.”

“But I can’t climb up with it to ye,” said Matthew.

“Small need,” said Ladybird, who was already uncoiling a long bit of string.

Tying a bunch of twigs to the end of it, she carefully let the string down through the branches of the old apple-tree.

“Tie the basket on, Matthew,” she called, and the old man,

mumbling, "It's as much as me place is worth," tied the basket firmly to the string and started it on its ascending course.

After safely passing several dangerous obstacles in the way of knots and twigs, the savory basket-load reached Ladybird, and she gleefully examined the contents.

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"It seems to me," she said reflectively, "that Bridget is a duck—a big fat duck."

"She is that, miss," said Matthew, agreeably.

The conversation flagged then, for Ladybird was busily engaged; and Matthew was bewildered, and quite uncertain what course to pursue. He could not see the child, though between the thickly leaved branches he could catch glimpses of her red frock at the very top of the tree.

Presently he heard her voice again.

"Matthew, there's no use of your staying there; you'll get rheumatism. You may go now. I shall stay here. There is no message for my aunts. Good night."

"Oh, miss, don't be foolish now; come down; let me take ye to the house."

"Good night, Matthew."

"Miss, yer aunts is that worrited!"

"Good night, Matthew."

"Well, miss," with a sigh of resignation, "it does be awful cold here after dark. Sha'n't I bring ye a blanket jist?"

[75]

"Good night, Matthew."

Baffled, the old man went back to the house. His emotions were rioting within him; his sense of duty was dulled. He well knew he ought to tell the Flint ladies where the child was; and yet she had said there was no message, and somehow the little witch's word seemed like an iron law.

But when he reached the farm-house and found the Misses Flint pale with real anxiety concerning their niece, he felt intuitively that their feelings had changed, and so he said:

"Well, yes, ma'am; I do know where she is."

"Oh, Matthew, where?" cried Miss Priscilla, mistaking the cause of his hesitation; and Miss Dorinda said faintly:

"Is she down the well?"

"Down the well!" exclaimed Matthew. "No, indeed, ma'am;

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she's up a tree. She's up in the tiptopmost branch of the old Bell-flower apple-tree, and she won't come down. She says she's going to stay there all night, ma'am."

"Stay there all night!" cried Miss Priscilla. "How ridiculous! She must come down at once."

"Perhaps we can coax her down with something to eat," said Miss Dorinda.

"Perhaps, ma'am," said Matthew, his eyes twinkling.

"Bring us our things, Martha," said Miss Priscilla, with a dogged, do-or-die air, "and then Matthew can show us where our niece is, and we will bring her back."

"If yez do, she'll come home holding the ribbons," thought Matthew to himself, as he respectfully waited his mistresses' pleasure.

Martha brought to each of the Flint ladies a long black cloak, a wool crocheted cloud, and black worsted gloves; for without such sufficient protection the sisters never went out after dusk.

"And I think rubbers, Martha," said Miss Priscilla, anxiously scanning the sky.

[77]

"Oh, sister, the grass is as dry as a bone," said Miss Dorinda.

"No signs of rain, ma'am," said Matthew.

"Rubbers, Martha," said Miss Priscilla.

Martha obediently brought four large rubber overshoes, and in a few moments the two aunts were following old Matthew in search of their wayward and erratic niece.

The party paused under the apple-tree which Matthew had designated. But though the old ladies peered anxiously up into the tree, they could see nothing but leaves.

"Lavinia," called Miss Priscilla, in a calm, dignified voice.

No answer.

"Lavinia," she called again, and still no sound came from the apple-tree.

Then Miss Priscilla Flint, moved by the exigencies of the occasion, made what was perhaps the greatest effort of her long and uneventful life.

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"Ladybird," she called, more graciously; and a little voice piped down from the tree-top:

"What is it, aunty?"

Like the larger proportion of human nature, Miss Priscilla, having gained her point, returned to her former mental attitude.

“Child,” she said sternly, “come down at once from that tree!”

“Why?” said Ladybird.

“Because I tell you to,” said Miss Priscilla.

“Why?” said Ladybird.

“Because I wish you to,” said Miss Priscilla, with a shade more of gentleness in her tone.

“Why?” said Ladybird, with two shades more of gentleness in hers.

“Tell her she’s going to stay with us,” whispered Miss Dorinda; “tell her we want her to.”

But such was the perversity of Miss Priscilla’s nature that a suggestion from her sister to do the thing she wanted to do most, made her do just the reverse.

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“You are to come down,” she said, again addressing the top of the tree, “because I command you to do so. You are a naughty girl!”

“Am I a naughty girl?” called back Ladybird; “then I’ll stay up here and be naughty. It will make you less trouble than if I’m naughty down there.”

“Tell her, sister,” urged Miss Dorinda.

“Tell her yourself,” said Miss Priscilla, shortly.

Dorinda needed no second bidding.

“Ladybird,” she cried gladly, “come down, dearie. You are going to stay with us. So come down and be a good girl.”

“Of course I’m going to stay with you;
I told you, and I told you true,”

chanted Ladybird, in her crooning, musical voice.

“Then come down at once,” said Miss Priscilla, whose patience was nearly exhausted.

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“Why?” said Ladybird, gently, but aggravatingly.

“Because I want you,” said Miss Priscilla Flint, with a sudden burst of whole-hearted welcome. “Because I want you to live with us and be our little girl,—my little girl.”

“All right, aunty dear, I’ll come right straight smack down!” and Ladybird, gathering up her basket of fragments, began to

scramble rapidly down through the gnarled branches of the old apple-tree.

CHAPTER VII

CIVIL WAR

Miss Priscilla Flint was a lady who never did anything by halves or any other fractions.

Once having accepted the fact that Ladybird was to remain at Primrose Hall, Miss Priscilla began to lay plans as to how her small niece should live and move and have her being.

Details were the delight of Miss Priscilla Flint's heart, and she prepared to attend to the details of Ladybird's life with a great and large gusto; but in her planning she reckoned without her niece, who proved a not unimportant factor in the case.

Although Miss Flint's indomitable will could unflinchingly face battle, murder, and sudden death, the will of her young relative was of the sort that jumped right over such obstacles and came down smiling on the other side.

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One of the first of these Greek tugs of war was in reference to Ladybird's dog.

"Of course, Lavinia," Miss Priscilla said, "you must see that it will be impossible for you to keep that beast here."

There was no reply from Ladybird, who sat with a happy, beaming countenance, swaying back and forth in a tiny, old-fashioned rocker, with her blinking terrier closely clasped in her arms.

Miss Priscilla had effectually learned that to get any answer from her niece she must call her Ladybird. But the good lady compromised by using the more dignified title when making a statement which required no answer.

"I say you cannot keep that dog here. What are you going to do about it—Ladybird?"

Ladybird smiled at her aunt in a bewitching way.

"I don't know, aunty," she said. "Where *could* I keep him?"

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"You can't keep him at all, Lavinia. You know both your Aunt Dorinda and I detest dogs, and so you must either sell him or give him away."

Ladybird gazed at her aunt with great, serious eyes.

"I won't sell him," she said slowly; "but I will give him away."

"That's a good girl," said her aunt, approvingly. "And will you do it to-day?"

“Yes; right away,” said Ladybird, rising, with Cloppy still cuddled in her arms.

“Ah!” said Miss Priscilla, uncertain how to account for such docility. “And to whom will you give him?”

“To you,” cried Ladybird, and depositing the moppy mass in her aunt’s lap, she ran laughing from the room.

Miss Priscilla rang a furious peal on the bell, and when Ladybird, who was dancing through the hall, saw Martha appear and answer to the summons, she sauntered leisurely into the room behind the rustling maid.

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“Martha,” said Miss Priscilla, pointing to the dog, which she had slid from her lap to the floor, “take that animal and dispose of it somehow. You may give it away or sell it, or take it to the pound; but never let me see it in or near this house again.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Martha, picking up Cloppy, while Ladybird burst into a peal of ringing laughter.

“Such a funny aunty!” she cried, dancing over to Miss Flint, and putting one little thin arm round the old lady’s neck. “Martha, of course aunty is only joking. Please put Cloppy in his basket in my room; I’m sure he wants a nap.”

“Yes, miss,” said Martha, glancing furtively at Miss Priscilla.

But whether it was the touch of the child’s tiny fingers on her old cheek, or whether her will bowed perforce to a superior one, Miss Priscilla’s face expressed no contrary orders.

Martha left the room, and Ladybird, dreamily curling a wisp of her aunt’s hair over her forefinger, remarked:

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“That lemon-pie yesterday was so good, aunty, can’t we have another to-day?”

“Yes, child, of course, if you want it. Run and ask Bridget to make one, and then come back here; for I want to talk to you about some new clothes.”

“Geranium blossom!” said Ladybird to herself, as she walked slowly along the hall. She always manufactured her own expletives.

“Now I shall have a high old time! It seems to me that Aunt Priscilla won’t have the same ideas about clothes that I do; and the trick is to change her opinions.”

Without having formed any definite plans, but with a sublime determination to conquer in the fray, Ladybird came back and sat down demurely in a small chair facing her aunt.

“Your clothes, Lavinia,” Miss Priscilla began, “are shocking,

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and quite unfit for you to wear.”

“Do you think so?” said Ladybird, with the air of polite interest which her aunts had learned to regard as ominous. “Now I think they’re real pretty. They were made for me in Bombay. I picked out the stuffs myself.”

“I should think you did,” said Miss Priscilla; “and they’re hideous. Now that white dress with the huge round red spots is something awful, and you shall never wear it again.”

“Oh, I guess I will, aunty,” said Ladybird, cheerfully; “that’s my very favoritest dress of all, and I wouldn’t let you send that to the heathen for anything.”

“It’s far more suitable for a Fiji cannibal than for a Christian child. Your clothes are all too gaudy in coloring, Lavinia, and they must be discarded. I shall buy you some neat, quiet patterns in soft grays and browns, which will be much more suitable for a refined little gentlewoman.”

“Aunty,” cried Ladybird, springing up, her black elf-locks flying about her thin little face, and her long arms waving, while her whole body quivered with excitement, “do I look like a refined little gentlewoman?”

[87]

“You do not,” said Miss Priscilla Flint, staring critically at her niece; “but I shall do all in my power to make you look like one.”

Ladybird leaned her head on one hand and gazed thoughtfully at her aunt. After a few moments’ pause, she said reflectively:

“Well, that black-and-yellow striped frock of mine is really a fright; and the red-and-green plaid isn’t much better: it’s such a ’normous plaid; but”—and Ladybird shook her forefinger decisively at her aunt—“it seems to me I shall keep that white dress with the great big red spots. And so we’ll consider that matter settled.”

“It *is* settled,” said Miss Flint, rising, “but not in the way you seem to think. You shall never wear that dress again, Lavinia. Now the Dorcas Circle meets here this afternoon, and I wish you to do me credit. Wear that new brown dress I had made for you, and do not dare to appear before my guests in those red spots.”

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“Aunty,” said Ladybird, and the little forefinger was again wagged at the old lady, not threateningly, but as a token of final decision, “if I don’t wear those red spots to the Dorcas meeting, you’ll have to wear them yourself.”

“Whatever nonsense are you talking, child?” inquired Miss Priscilla, whose thoughts were already busy with the supper for the Dorcas Circle.

“’Tisn’t nonsense, aunty; it’s plain, ungarnished truth.”

“Well, wear your brown dress, Lavinia,” said Miss Priscilla, as she started for the kitchen in the interests of the elaborate feast demanded by the august and self-respecting Dorcas Circle.

Ladybird, with a peculiar nod of her head that betokened a completed plan of action, went up-stairs to her room.

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“It seems to me,” she said to herself, “that I just *must* do it.”

She took the red-spotted dress down from its hook and threw it on the bed. Then she knelt beside it, and burying her little face in its soft folds, she burst into furious tears.

“I do love it so,” she sobbed, “it’s so bright and gay and comforting: and I think Aunt Priscilla is mean. Hominy hornets, but she’s mean! *I* wouldn’t treat a little girl so. *I* wouldn’t make her wear old mud-colored frocks when she loves red, *red*, RED! And these red spots are so beautiful! But since I can’t wear them, Aunt Priscilla *shall*.”

Stamping her feet as she rose, and angrily brushing the tears from her eyes, Ladybird took her sharp little scissors and carefully cut out a score or more of the large disks from the condemned dress. She grew more cheerful as she did this, and her merry smiles came back, though they alternated with an expression of angry sadness.

Gathering up the red scraps, she went to her Aunt Priscilla’s room. Spread out in stately grandeur on the bed lay the black silk dress that was as much a part of the Dorcas meeting as the lady who wore it.

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Taking the paste-pot from her aunt’s writing-table, Ladybird proceeded to paste the bits of red fabric at intervals over the black silk skirt and bodice. She worked diligently and rapidly, and after a few moments surveyed the effect with great satisfaction.

“Now,” she said to herself, as she replaced the paste-pot, “I think it would be wise for me to go out to spend the day.”

Slipping on the despised brown frock, a mild and amiable-looking Ladybird walked through the kitchen, humming a little tune.

“I’m going out, aunties,” she said, “and I won’t be back until late this afternoon.”

The Flint ladies were not surprised at this, for Ladybird often spent a whole day out in the fields and orchards.

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“Take something to eat before you go,” said Miss Dorinda; “here are some fresh seed-cakes.”

Ladybird accepted half a dozen, and Miss Priscilla, looking approvingly at the brown frock, said:

“Be back by four. The Dorcas ladies will be here, you know.”

“Yes, aunty,” said Ladybird, “and I hope they’ll think the red spots are becoming to you.”



“She worked diligently and rapidly”

“What does she mean?” asked Miss Dorinda, as Ladybird disappeared down the garden path.

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“Who can ever tell what her nonsense means?” said Miss Priscilla, feeling rather irritated at having carried her point regarding the brown frock.

But the brown frock arrayed a very gay and mischievous Ladybird, who danced along through the sunshine, singing:

“It was best to leave you thus, dear—

Best for you and best for me.”

CHAPTER VIII

STELLA RUSSELL

With no other intent than to put as great a distance as possible between herself and Primrose Hall, Ladybird wandered on through the last of the Flint orchards, and found herself confronted by a rail fence, over which she promptly climbed. She crossed a small brook, two fields, and another orchard, when from one of the trees she heard a pleasant, young voice say:

“Hello, little girl!”

Although, as a rule, not many creatures, except birds, are looked for in trees, yet Ladybird’s mind was of the type which accepts without question, and looking up, she called back, “Hello!” though she could see of the person addressed only some pink muslin and a small swinging slipper.

“What do you want?” said the voice again, and a pretty, smiling face appeared above the pink muslin.

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“I don’t want anything,” said Ladybird; “I’m just taking a walk.”

“Oh, well, if you’ve walked from Primrose Hall ’way over here, you must be tired. Won’t you come up here and sit by me?”

“Yes, thank you,” said Ladybird; and she easily swung herself up the crooked old boughs of the apple-tree, and seated herself facing her hostess, who proved to be a very charming young woman indeed.

“Aren’t you the little girl who lives with the Flint ladies?” she said.

“Yes,” said Ladybird; “they’re my aunts.”

“I am Stella Russell, and I live on this farm, which is next to Primrose Place. I live with my grandfather and grandmother.”

“Oh, haven’t you any mother, either?” said Ladybird, quickly, and her little brown paw slid into the girl’s white hand.

[95]

“No,” said Stella, silently accepting Ladybird’s unspoken sympathy. “I haven’t a friend in the world, except my grandparents.”

“Why, how funny!” said Ladybird. “I should think you could have lots of friends, you are so pretty and so bright. I’ll be your friend.”

"I think I should like to have you," said Stella, but slowly, as if considering a weighty matter; "but you see, I am queer about my friends."

"How?" asked Ladybird.

"Well," said Stella, wearily, "of course I know all the people in Plainville,—I have lived here a great many years,—but I can't seem to persuade myself that they are the kind of people I want for my friends. Oh, of course they are nice, good people, you know—"

"Yes, I know," said Ladybird, nodding her head wisely.

"It isn't that they're plain," Stella went on, "or countrified. I don't mind those things. But they're uninteresting. When I go to see them, they just talk about the minister, and the dressmaker, and the village gossip."

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"Yes," said Ladybird, again nodding her head like an owl, "I know."

"How do you know, you ridiculous child?" said Stella, laughing. "How old are you, you mountain of knowledge?"

"I do know," said Ladybird, shaking her thin forefinger at her companion across an intervening apple-twig—"I do know just what it is you want and can't get,—and I'm twelve."

"Oh, you are. Well, my twelve-year-old Solomon, what is it that Stella Russell wants and can't get?"

"You don't want beauty," said Ladybird, who was gazing in sheer delight at the lovely face before her, "for you've got it; and I think you have education, and accomplishments, and all those things. But you want to be in a place where you can give all those things to others and take some of theirs in return."

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"You're a witch," said Stella, looking at the pale child before her with amazement.

"Oh, I know," went on Ladybird, her big eyes growing bigger, and her head nodding most expressively. "You want to be among people who talk quick, shining talk that doesn't mean much, but that's witty and bright, and most pleasant to hear; and people can't talk like that unless they have a whole lot of big knowledge, too, that they can use when they need it; and of course," and now the head was shaking slowly from side to side, "the Plainville people aren't like that."

"No, they're not," said Stella. "But will you please tell me how you know all this?"

"I know it," said Ladybird, "because it is true, that's all. I always know true things; and besides, my mamma ran away from Plainville because she wanted to marry my papa, who

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was the other kind.”

“Well, I can’t run away,” said Stella, laughing.

“You could if you had any one to run with,” said Ladybird, gravely.

“Well, perhaps I could, but I certainly wouldn’t.”

“No, I s’pose you wouldn’t.”

“Well, never mind about me,” said Stella; “it doesn’t make any difference what sort of people I want if I can’t get them; and since you’ve offered, I think you’ll do very nicely for a friend.”

“Yes; I’m a good friend,” said Ladybird, with an air of calm confidence in herself; “but I’m not always good. Sometimes I’m very naughty, and I try my dear aunts most exceeding; but then,” she added, with a sigh, “sometimes they are a fearsome trial to me.”

“I’ve heard of some of your pranks,” said Stella, smiling; “and I’m not sure but you are a naughty little girl.”

“I guess I am a naughty girl,” said Ladybird, soberly; “and sometimes I do it on purpose, and sometimes it’s just because I was born so.”

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“Well, there’s the dinner-bell,” said Stella; “even if you are a naughty girl, I’d like to have you come in and take dinner with us, if you will. My grandparents will be glad to see you.”

“I’d like to come very much, thank you,” said Ladybird; and the two scrambled down the old apple-tree to the ground.

Seen at this better advantage, Stella Russell proved to be an exceptionally beautiful girl. Tall and slender, with brown eyes and dark-brown hair, her fresh, sweet color and dainty grace showed the best type of physical beauty, combined with an unusual amount of perceptive and responsive intelligence. Unsophisticated in many ways, she was possessed of an inherent power to see things clearly, and this showed in her beautiful, sensitive face.

Ladybird, too, possessed this power; but while hers was quicker, Stella’s was truer.

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As the two girls walked up the path to the house, Stella said:

“It’s very strange, but though you are twelve and I am twenty-one, I see very clearly that we shall be good friends.”

“Oh, twelve from twenty-one doesn’t leave much,” said Ladybird, laughing.

Stella’s grandparents, old Mr. and Mrs. Marshall, were very

much pleased to meet the young stranger.

“I knew your mother,” said Mr. Marshall, as he looked at Ladybird; “but you do not look a bit like her.”

“No,” said Ladybird; “that’s what my aunts told me.”

The two girls spent a long and pleasant afternoon together. Stella showed Ladybird all her books and other treasures, and notwithstanding the difference in their ages, the girls became congenial friends.

As it neared four o’clock Ladybird said she must go home, for her aunt had told her to come at that time.

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“I am going over to Primrose Hall,” said Mrs. Marshall, “to the meeting of the Dorcas Circle. You can drive over with me.”

So among the earliest arrivals at the Dorcas meeting were Mrs. Marshall and Miss Ladybird Lovell.

Now that Ladybird’s quick and tempestuous anger had spent itself, she felt sorry to see her Aunt Priscilla arrayed in her second-best black silk, for she knew how it must have hurt that good lady to appear before her guests in anything less than the resplendent glory of her best and cherished black silk gown.

Both the Misses Flint wore a look of sternness that Ladybird could not misinterpret. But they said nothing to the child, and cordially invited Mrs. Marshall to step into the bedroom and lay off her bonnet.

Many successive guests were treated with the same punctilious courtesy.

The Dorcas meeting came, the Dorcas meeting ate its supper, the Dorcas meeting went, and after the door of Primrose Hall had closed behind the last departing guest, Miss Priscilla said:

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“Now, Lavinia, I will talk with you, if you please.”

“Good for you, aunty,” said Ladybird, clambering into her Aunt Priscilla’s lap and twining her thin brown arms about the old lady’s neck, thereby—although unconsciously—seriously modifying the tenor of the remarks which Miss Flint had meant to make.

“Lavinia,” she said, with much sternness in her voice.

“Now, aunty,” murmured Ladybird, “please!”

“Lavinia,” went on Miss Flint, unmoved by her niece’s words, “I am more pained than I can tell you at your unkindness to me to-day.”

“Aunty,” said Ladybird, solemnly, “I was more pained than I

can tell you at your unkindness to me to-day.”

“But,” said Miss Priscilla, “you must realize, my child, that I am older than you are, and know more.”

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“But, aunty,” said Ladybird, “you must realize that I am younger than you are, and care more.”

“Care more for what?” said Miss Priscilla.

“For red spots,” said Ladybird. “Of course I know, Aunt Priscilla, that you have a right to say what kind of horrid old clothes I shall wear; but it seems to me, if I had a little girl to look after, and she wanted to wear red spots, I’d let her wear them. It wouldn’t kill anybody, you know.”

“Priscilla,” said Miss Dorinda, “I think the child is right.”

“I’m not aware, Dorinda,” said the elder Miss Flint, “that I asked your opinion concerning our niece’s conduct.”

“No,” said Miss Dorinda, humbly.

“Aunty,” said Ladybird, still refusing to be pushed from her position on the old lady’s lap, and still with her arms clasped about Miss Priscilla’s stately, if withered, neck, “aunty, are red spots wicked?”

[104]

“Not that I know of,” said Priscilla Flint.

“Then don’t you think, aunty, that you might as well have let me keep them, in the first place? Then I wouldn’t have pasted them on your dress; then I wouldn’t have been naughty; and then everything would be lovely, and the goose hang high,” concluded Ladybird, with an airy, careless gesture of her thin, brown, little paws.

“Ladybird,” said Miss Priscilla, and her voice softened as she used the more endearing title, “I am not sure but that you are right in this case. There is no sin in bright colors, and if you want them, I suppose there is no real reason why you should not have them. I am sorry for my part of this unfortunate episode. I was unjust—”

“Never mind, aunty,” said Ladybird, clasping her arms tighter round the old lady’s throat and kissing her hard, “I was unjust, too, I was naughty, and I was a bad, bad girl, and I—that is, we’re both sorry, aren’t we?”

[105]

“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla Flint, “we’re both sorry, and I will get you a new red dress.”

“Do,” said Ladybird, cheerfully: “and get yourself a new black silk one, won’t you, aunty?”

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CHAPTER IX

DOING RIGHT

Ladybird hated school. Not the lessons, they were learned quickly enough, and with but little study; but the out-of-doors child grew very restive in the restraint and confinement of the school-room, and her whole touch-and-go nature rebelled at the enforced routine.

Many battles were fought before she consented to go at all; but though Ladybird was strong-willed, Miss Priscilla Flint was also of no pliable nature, and she finally succeeded in convincing her fractious niece that education was desirable as well as inevitable.

So Ladybird went to school—to a small and not far distant district school—whenever she could not get up a successful excuse for staying at home.

With her sun-dial-like capability of marking the bright hours only, she eliminated as much as was possible of the ugly side of school life.

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She enjoyed the walks to and from the school-house, across the fields and through the lanes, and she enjoyed them so leisurely that she was a half-hour late nearly every morning, thus escaping the detestable “opening exercises.”

During school hours, when not studying or reciting her lessons she read fairy-tales or else worked out puzzles. Though this was not exactly in line with the teacher’s methods of discipline, yet it was overlooked after several experimental endeavors which showed unmistakably what was the better part of valor.

Also, Ladybird always kept fresh flowers on her desk, and kept lying in her sight any new toy or trinket which she might have recently acquired.

She would have been fairly happy during school hours if she could have had her dog with her; but the teacher’s discretion did not extend as far as this, and so Cloppy was left at home each day to add to the gaiety of Primrose Hall.

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“Ladybird at school”

One day after he had added gaiety with especial assiduity, Miss Priscilla announced that she was at the end of her rope, and the dog must go.

It happened that Ladybird came in from school that day in an unusually docile frame of mind. To begin with, it was Friday afternoon and the next day was a holiday. Furthermore, she had wrested a good half-hour from the long school afternoon, with its horrid “general exercises,” by the simple method of rising from her seat and walking out at the door. The teacher saw her do this, but allowed her feeling of relief to blunt her sense of duty. Not but what she liked Ladybird: no one could know the child and not like her; but when one is teaching a district school it is easier if the disturbing element be conspicuous by its absence.

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And so, with her course unimpeded, Ladybird marched out of school into the fields, and drawing a long breath, sauntered slowly and indirectly home.

“I had a beautiful time,” she announced to her aunts. “There’s the loveliest afternoon outdoors you ever saw, and I’ve walked all around it. Such a big, fair, soft afternoon, and the sunlight is raining down all over it, and it’s full of trees, and sticks, and fences, and dry leaves; and where’s Cloppy? I’m going out in the orchard.”

“Wait a moment, Lavinia,” said Miss Flint, “I wish to talk to you; sit down in your chair.”

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“Yes, ’m,” said Ladybird, dropping into a chair suddenly,

“And hurry up your talking
For I want to go a-walking.”

“That will do, Lavinia, I’m in no mood for foolishness; I want to say that that wretched dog of yours *cannot* stay here any longer.”

“Is that so, aunty?” said Ladybird, with her most exasperating air of polite interest. “Well, now I wonder where we *can* stay? Would they take us to board down at the hotel? I don’t know. Or perhaps Mrs. Jacobs would take us, if I helped her with the housework and sewing.”

“That is enough nonsense, Lavinia. I tell you that dog is to be put away.”

“I understand that, Aunt Priscilla; I’m not stupid, you know; I’m only wondering where we can go, for whithersoever Cloppy goest, I’m going, and there will I be buried.”

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“Very well, you may go if you choose; but that dog shall not remain in this house another day.”

“You don’t like him, do you aunty?” said Ladybird, leaning her chin on her hand and gazing thoughtfully at her aunt. “Now I wonder why.”

“He’s always under foot,” said Miss Priscilla, “and he’s such a moppy, untidy-looking affair!”

“He’s a smart dog,” said Ladybird, meditatively.

“That’s just it,” said Miss Flint, “he’s too smart: he looks at you just like a human. Why, when I scold him for anything, he sits up and stares at me, and those brown eyes of his blink through that ridiculous fringe of hair, and he never says a word, but sits there, and looks and looks at me until I feel as if I should just perfectly fly.”

“Aunt Priscilla,” said Ladybird, looking at Miss Flint very steadily, “you haven’t been doing anything wrong, have you?”

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“What do you mean?” said her aunt, angrily.

“Oh, nothing, but when *I* think Cloppy’s looking at me like that, it’s really my conscience inside of me telling me I’ve done wrong, when I think it’s only a little dog blinking.”

Miss Flint sat quiet for a moment. Then the fact that there was a modicum of truth in her niece’s remarks caused her annoyance to find vent in sarcasm.

“I did not know, Lavinia, that you ever thought you had done wrong.”

“Oh, aunty, what a foolishness! Of course I know when I’ve done wrong, and you know I know it; and you know I’m as sorry as sorry as sorry! But sometimes I don’t know it until I see that Cloppy-dog staring at me, and then I realize what’s up; and so you see, aunty, I have to keep my little blinky doggy as a sort of a conscience. And now we’ll consider that matter settled.”

“*You* may consider what you choose,” said Miss Priscilla, looking at her niece very sternly; “*I* consider it is not settled, and will not be until the dog is disposed of permanently, and if you don’t attend to it, I shall.”

“Aunt Priscilla,” said Ladybird, rising from her chair with great dignity, “I will go to my room and think this matter over.”

“Do,” said Miss Priscilla, dryly, “and take your conscience with you.”

“Come on, Conscience,” said Ladybird to Cloppy, and swinging the dog up to her shoulder, she went to her room.

She was not in one of her stormy moods; she closed her chamber door quietly behind her and gently deposited Cloppy on his favorite cushioned chair. She then seated herself on a low ottoman directly in front of him, and resting her chin on her hands and her elbows on her knees, she gazed intently at the dog.

“It seems to me, Cloppy,” she began, “that something is going to happen. You heard what Aunt Priscilla said, and I have learned my Aunt Priscilla well enough to know that when she clicks her teeth and waggles her head over her glasses like that she’s made up her mind most especial firmly, and it is ours but to do or die. Now, Clops, the whole question is, shall we do or die?”

Save for an occasional blink, the dog’s brown eyes gazed straight through his wispy locks of hair at Ladybird, who gazed steadily back at him also through stray, straight wisps of hair, and also blinking now and then.

“You see, Cloppy-dog, it’s a crisis; like the heroes in the history book, you’ve got to cross the Rubicon or cut the Gordian knot, or something. Of course I sha’n’t let you go away from me; you know that as well as I do. Why, I’d rather have *you* than all the aunts in the world, yes, or uncles either, or man-servants, or maid-servants, or cattles or strangers within our gates. Why, Cloppy, if they tried to take you away from me, I’d—I’d kill them! Yes, I would! I’d kill them all, and burn the house down, and I’d—oh, I’d even break the buds off of Aunt Priscilla’s Lady Washington geranium! Cloppy, don’t sit there staring at me like that! Don’t you think so too? Wouldn’t you kill and murder and massacre anybody that tried to take me away from you? Stop it, Cloppy; *stop* looking at me in that reproachful way! I’m not naughty; Aunt Priscilla is naughty: she says you’ve got to go—*go*, do you understand, GO!”



““You see, Cloppy-dog, it’s a crisis””

By this time Ladybird was on her knees in front of the dog, alternately caressing and shaking him to emphasize her remarks; but Cloppy, being used to his emotional mistress, continued to gaze at her without sharing her excitement.

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“Dog! if you don’t stop looking at me like that I’ll tie a bandage over your eyes. I know perfectly well what you mean, but I won’t pay a bit of attention to it: you mean that I ought not to let my angry passions rise; but I guess you would too if you had an Aunt Priscilla like mine! Suppose you had an old aunt dog with gray hair and spectacles, who wouldn’t let you have *anything* you wanted, wouldn’t you get mad at her, I’d like to know?”

“Oh, I understand you; don’t trouble yourself to put it into words: you mean that aunty does let me have some things that I want,—most things, in fact,—and you mean I’m a bad, ungrateful girl to act like this, and you mean that no decent dog would act so. Well, I suppose they wouldn’t; I suppose I *am* worse than a dog, or a cat, or a hyena. But I’m sorry, Cloppy, I *am* sorry, and I guess I’ll be good. Yes, I believe I will be good!”

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As this high and noble resolve formed itself in Ladybird’s mind, the glory of it appealed to her, and she began at once to elaborate upon it.

“Now will you stop piercing me with those daggery eyes of yours? I’m going to do right; I’m going to honor and obey my Aunt Priscilla Flint; and though I shall be a martyr in the cause, I sha’n’t mention that, because it would spoil all the goodness of my deed. Of course my duty is to my aunt—my dear aunt who feeds and clothes me, and lends me her roof to keep off the rain; and though she has asked me for the apple of my eye

and the apple-core of my heart, I will give them. I will sacrifice them on the altar of duty, even though they are my dear little dog. And now I shall go right straight down and tell my aunt before I change my mind.”

Buoyed up by the elation of her noble resolve, and enveloped in an atmosphere of conscious rectitude, Ladybird gathered up Cloppy and marched down-stairs, with her head erect and her eyes shining.

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“Aunty,” she announced, “I am ready to obey you; I’m going to take Cloppy away, and you will never see him again.”

“What’s that, child?” said Miss Priscilla, looking up from an article she was reading, and in which she was deeply absorbed.

“I say,” repeated Ladybird, with dignity, “that since you say Cloppy must go, he is going.”

“That’s a good girl,” said Miss Priscilla, half absent-mindedly, and she returned to her reading.

“*I am* a good girl,” said Ladybird; “but this is the goodest thing I have ever done, and I wish you appreciated it more.”

But Miss Flint was again deep in her book, and made no reply.

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Ladybird left the house, her enthusiasm somewhat impaired, but her purpose strengthened by a certain contrary stubbornness which her aunt’s indifference had aroused.

“I’m a martyr, Cloppy,” she said—“a perfectly awful martyr; but I’m not going to show it, for I detest people who act martyrish outside. Of course you can’t help what you feel inside.

“And, anyway, if I’m the martyr, Aunt Priscilla is the tyrant and the oppressor and the Spanish Inquisitor, and all those dreadful things, and that’s a great deal worse! I’m ground under her iron heel, and crushed beneath her yoke, and chastised with her scorpions; but I’ll bear it all cheerfully, and never even mention it. Because you see, Cloppy, we’re doing right; and it’s a great thing to do right, and *very* exciting.”

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CHAPTER X

A SELF-MADE BURGLAR

Thus steadfastly pursuing the straight and narrow path of rectitude, Ladybird arrived at Mr. Bates's farm and turned in at the gate.

Her purpose had begun to waver a little, but she bolstered it up with her determination and enthusiasm, and vigorously rang the Bates door-bell.

In a few moments a little girl tense with suppressed excitement, and a blinking, quivering dog sat facing a large, strong-looking man whose face betokened humorous as well as muscular Christianity.

"It's a crisis, Mr. Bates," began Ladybird; "it's a perfectly awful crisis; but of course when crises come they have to be met, and I'm fully prepared to meet it. I hate it, I hate it something fearful! But I'm going to do right, the whole right, and nothing but the right, and I want you to help me, Mr. Bates. Will you? I pause for a reply."

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Ladybird paused dramatically, and Mr. Bates, impressed with the spirit of the situation, placed his hand on his heart and replied:

"You have only to command me, madam; my time and talents are entirely at your service."

"Well, you see it's this way," said Ladybird. "I have here a dog—a most beautiful and valuable dog—which I want to present to you."

"To me?" said Mr. Bates, much astonished. "Don't you care for him yourself?"

This simple question proved too much for Ladybird's unstable, though carefully built structure of heroism.

"Don't I care for him!" she repeated; and dropping her head on Cloppy's fat back, she burst into one of her most spectacular storms of tears.

Mr. Bates, though much distressed, had sufficient tact to say nothing for a few moments. Had his wife been at home, he would have called her to minister to the sobbing child; but as it was, he sat regarding Ladybird with a grave and kindly sympathy.

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"What is it, dear?" he said gently when there was a break in the storm and a pair of large dark eyes looked brightly through their wet lashes.

“Oh, it’s such a comfort to give way to your feelings, isn’t it?” said Ladybird, conversationally. “But I really ought to have a waterproof handkerchief; this one is perfectly soaked.”

Mr. Bates quietly took a folded handkerchief from his pocket, and shaking out the ample square of cambric, politely offered it to his visitor, who took it gratefully.

“It’s a beautiful October day,” he said, glancing out of the window, and desiring to introduce a commonplace subject.

“Yes,” said Ladybird; “October is one of my favorites. I think it is the prettiest-colored month of the whole year, except, perhaps, April. But I must proceed with my business; I’ll promise not to cry again: that’s over now; but you see I care so very much for my dog that I forgot myself. But my aunt, Miss Flint, doesn’t care for him just in the way I do, so she desires that I should give him away; and as it is my duty to do as she wishes me, I have brought the dog to you as a free-will offering.”

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“How do you know I want him?” said Mr. Bates, a little quizzically.

“Oh, you couldn’t help wanting him! Why, in the first place, he has a wonderful pedigree: he’s a real Yorkshire; but besides all that, he’s the dearest, best, loveliest, sweetest dog in the whole world. Of course you couldn’t be supposed to feel intimately acquainted with him yet; but in a day or two you’ll name him but to praise.”

“And your Aunt Priscilla doesn’t like him? Why is that?”

“Well, sir, you see my aunt, Miss Flint, is a very handsome and dignified lady. She doesn’t admire such frivolous things as flippy-floppy little dogs, and they seem to interfere with her nerves. My aunt, Miss Flint, is of an old family and very exclusive, and has a great deal of what they call the—the infernal feminine.”

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“Yes, she has,” said Mr. Bates, with grave acquiescence. “And your other aunt, Miss Dorinda, doesn’t she like your valuable dog either?”

“Oh, Aunt Dorinda is different. She’s younger, you know; or at least she can’t seem to let go of her youth as Aunt Priscilla does. But that doesn’t matter; my aunt, Miss Flint, is head of the house, and she says the dog must go, so go it’s going to! Now the thing is, will you take him, Mr. Bates? I’m sure Mrs. Bates would like him—he’s a dear dog.”

At this Ladybird’s head went down on Cloppy’s back again, and Mr. Bates feared another deluge; but suddenly the child looked up with a bright smile. “I could come to see him sometimes, couldn’t I, Mr. Bates?”

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"I haven't said I'd take him yet. I'm a business man, you know. What is your dog good for?"

Ladybird considered.

"Well now, do you know, I never thought of that; I don't know as he is good for anything."

"Bless my soul, child, do you expect me to accept a dog that is good for nothing?"

"He isn't good for nothing," said Ladybird, indignantly; "he's a wonderful comfort, and I guess that counts for a lot! Oh, and he *is* good for something, too: he can scare burglars away."

"But no well-conducted burglar would stand greatly in awe of such a small bundle of dog as that."

"No," said Ladybird, earnestly; "but he would bark, you know, and rouse the family, and then they could shoo the burglar out."

"Has he ever scared a burglar away from Primrose Hall?"

"No, because we never had any to scare; but I know he could do it, and I just wish burglars had attacked us in the watches of the night, because I know Cloppy would have barked like fury, and so saved us all from murder and pillage; and then Aunt Priscilla would have loved him and wanted to keep him."

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"Oh, you think she would?" said Mr. Bates, a queer look of mischief coming into his eyes.

"I'm sure of it," said Ladybird.

"But burglars never could get into Primrose Hall; isn't it securely locked up every night?"

"Aunty means to have it so," said Ladybird; "but old Matthew is so forgetful. Why, sometimes he leaves the parlor windows unfastened, and they open right on the front piazza."

"Oh, well, there are no burglars around here," said Mr. Bates, reassuringly; but his whole big frame seemed to be shaking with suppressed laughter, for which Ladybird could see no just cause.

"Now, I'll tell you what, child," he said: "I'll take your dog; but I must speak to Mrs. Bates about it first, and she isn't home now. So you take that animated mop back with you and tell your respected aunt that his doom is sealed, but that he will have to stay one more night under her roof; then to-morrow you bring him back here, and I'll guarantee he'll be well taken care of."

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"All right; and thank you, sir," said Ladybird, her grief at parting with the dog temporarily forgotten in the fact that the

farewell was to be postponed for twenty-four hours. Then with a brief good-by, as if fearful lest Mr. Bates should change his mind, she darted out of the door and across the fields.

"It's all right, aunty," she cried as she flew into Primrose Hall: "the Bateses are going to take Cloppy, but he can't go till tomorrow; they haven't got his room ready; but that's all right if you'll just let him stay here one more night. And now am I a good girl, aunty? I *do* want to be good."

"Yes, you're a good girl," said her aunt, "and you have done your duty; but don't expect to be praised for it every minute. To do one's duty is right and even necessary, but not praiseworthy."

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"I think I'll go down to the orchard, Aunt Priscilla," said Ladybird; "the trees are so sympathetic."

That night a strange thing happened at Primrose Hall.

As he did nine times out of ten, old Matthew had left the front parlor windows unfastened. But in that quiet country neighborhood no marauder had ever profited by the old man's carelessness.

The family went to bed as usual; the Flint ladies slept calmly in their ruffled night-caps behind their dimity curtains; the objectionable Cloppy was curled up on the foot of Ladybird's bed; and though that sad-hearted maiden had firmly made up her mind to cry all night, she soon fell asleep and had only happy dreams.

About midnight a large man with a firm tread walked boldly, but quietly, across the dooryard to the front door of Primrose Hall.

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He was presumably a burglar, but his attitudes and effects were by no means of the regulation type. Instead of skulking as the traditional burglar always does, he walked fearlessly and seemed to know exactly where he was going; while instead of a black mask his face wore a broad grin, and he chuckled noiselessly as he looked at a large hatchet which he carried in his hand.

Although he walked quietly up the veranda steps, he used no especial caution in opening the front window. It slid easily up, and the burglar stepped over the sill, heedless of the fact that his muddy boots made huge tracks on the light carpet. He struck several matches in quick succession, blowing each out and throwing it on the floor; he then deliberately pocketed two or three articles of value which lay on the center-table. An old silver card-case, an antique snuff-box, and a small silver dish were appropriated; and then turning to a white marble bust of a foolish-looking lady in a big hat, which stood on a mottled-green pedestal, he calmly knocked it over, and laughed as it

crashed into a thousand pieces.

This sound was quickly followed by a few short, sharp yelps from above, which developed into a loud and ferocious barking.

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A smile of intense satisfaction spread over the burglar's features; he laid his hatchet carefully in the middle of the floor, removed his old felt hat and placed it half-way between the hatchet and the window, and then went out the way he came in. On the steps he laid gently the snuff-box and card-case, and dropped the silver tray on the grass in the yard; then turning for a last glance, to make sure that the family were aroused, and seeing flickering lights in the windows, he pulled a cloth cap from his pocket, put it on his head, and went back home, still chuckling.

Inside of Primrose Hall all was confusion. Cloppy's frantic and continued barking had awakened everybody, and though all were convinced that burglars were in the house, none dared go down-stairs to investigate.

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The Flint sisters, though scared out of their wits, possessed a certain sub-consciousness that was pleased at this opportunity of donning their fire-gowns and best caps. The servants were variously frightened according to their respective dispositions; and Ladybird was quite in her element, for to her any excitement was pleasurable, no matter what might be its cause.

"Let me go down! Let me go down, aunty!" she cried, dancing about in the upper hall.

"Be quiet, child! Of course you can't go down; there is probably a whole gang of burglars, and they'd kill you and then come up for us. Look out for Cloppy; don't let him get down."

"But I don't hear any noise down there now, aunty; I think the burglars have gone: Cloppy scared them away by his barking."

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“Come on, Matthew”

“Stay where you are, Ladybird,” said Miss Priscilla, sternly.
“Matthew, go down-stairs and see what caused that commotion.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Matthew; but his old knees were shaking with fear, and he made no motion to carry out his mistress’s orders.

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“Come on, Matthew,” cried Ladybird, grasping his hand, “don’t be afraid; I’ll go with you,” and before Miss Flint could stop her, Ladybird was dancing down-stairs, dragging the old man with her.

The child had provided herself with a candle, and hand in hand, she and Matthew reached the parlor door and looked in.

Then Ladybird treated the listeners to one of her best blood-curdling yells.

“Oh, gracious, glorious goodness!” she cried, “here’s a hatchet! They *were* going to kill us! Come down, aunty; there’s nobody here but a hatchet. And your white lady is all smashed to smithereens! And here’s matches all over! And here’s one of the burglar’s hats! Oh, aunty, come down; truly there’s nobody here!”

Timidly the Misses Flint, followed by Bridget and Martha, came down and viewed with dismay the havoc in the parlor. At first Miss Priscilla was overcome with sorrow at the smashed marble; then appalled with fear at their narrow escape from the

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dreadful hatchet; but was most deeply stirred by indignation at the muddy footprints on the carpet.

“They’ll never come out,” she wailed; “those spots will always show!”

“Don’t be foolish, Priscilla,” said her sister; “be thankful you’re here to scrub at them, and not dead in your bed, hatcheted into eternity by a gory villain!”

“Oh, I *am* thankful,” moaned Miss Priscilla. “And to think we owe our lives to that blessed little dog! Ladybird, don’t you ever hint at giving him away! The Bateses can’t have him. Why, I wouldn’t be safe a minute without that dog in the house!”

And so the next day Ladybird went over to tell Mr. Bates she had changed her mind about giving him the dog.

That good man was greatly interested in the story of the burglars, but he seemed much more anxious to hear how the Flint ladies were affected by it than to learn the details of the burglary itself.

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“And when the burglars heard Cloppy bark,” went on Ladybird, thrilled by the exciting mental picture, “they dropped their hatchet and ran. And the hatchet had a B cut on it.”

“It did?” said Mr. Bates, suddenly startled. “Oh, well, that stands for Burglar.”

“And he left a horrid old hat. And he must have been awful scared, for he only stole three things; but they were three of aunty’s pet treasures. And what do you think! We found them, all three, this morning, out on the piazza and lawn!”

“Then he did no real damage?” said Mr. Bates.

“Oh, yes; he smashed Aunt Priscilla’s head.”

“What?”

“Oh, I don’t mean her own head, but that big marble one, or plaster or something; it’s called ‘Cherry Ripe,’ and it was a work of art.”

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“It was a civic calamity,” said Mr. Bates.

“I don’t know what civic means,” said Ladybird; “but it was an awful calamity, and Aunt Priscilla feels perfectly dreadful about it. But anyhow, Cloppy saved us all from our untimely ends, and so aunty says we’re going to keep Cloppy, and so it has all turned out right.”

“Yes,” said Mr. Bates, with a smile of deep satisfaction, “it all

turned out right.”

CHAPTER XI

A MATRIMONIAL BUREAU

"Ladybird and Stella Russell seem to be great cronies," observed Miss Dorinda one afternoon as she sat knitting by the window and watched the two girls walking down the garden path.

"Yes," said her sister; "and in some ways it is a good thing for Lavinia. She is so hoydenish and daring that I think a nice, quiet girl like Stella Russell will have a refining influence over her."

"Ladybird isn't unrefined, Priscilla," said Miss Dorinda. Insinuations against her niece were the one thing which could rouse the meek and mild ire which this good lady possessed.

"No, not unrefined, since she is a Flint; but you must admit, Dorinda, that at times she is exasperating beyond all measure. Why, only this morning she cut the strings from my best bonnet, and tied them round the kittens' necks, because, she said, she never had seen kittens with black ribbons on, and she wanted to see how funny they looked; and she said, too, that the bonnet looked better without strings."

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"Yes, she's thoughtless and careless," sighed Miss Dorinda, "but not wicked. I think she means all right."

"Then she very seldom expresses her meaning," snapped Miss Priscilla.

"Well, she's only a child," said Dorinda; "you can't put old heads on young shoulders. Sometimes I think perhaps Stella's influence isn't altogether good for her: it may fill her head with grown-up nonsense. You know she's so imaginative."

"Oh, Stella isn't flighty," said Miss Priscilla. "She's a fine, wholesome young woman, and I am sure Lavinia is already better for having known her."

At that moment Ladybird came flying in. Her cheeks were red, her eyes big and bright, and she seemed in a state of wild excitement. She flung her hat one way and her cape the other, and dropped into a chair.

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"My, aunties," she exclaimed, "what do you think! Stella Russell thinks maybe—perhaps—she's going to be engaged to be married!"

"Goodness gracious me, child!" exclaimed Miss Priscilla, "what are you talking about?"

"I told you so," said Miss Dorinda.

“And she doesn’t want to a bit,” Ladybird went on; “it’s perfectly awful. They’re making her do it—her cruel, cruel grandparents and that silly Charley Hayes; and there isn’t anybody else. And she wouldn’t have confidanted to me only I guessed it, and she said yes; and then I made her tell me all about it. And isn’t it perfectly awful, and can’t we help her some way?”

“Lavinia Lovell,” said Miss Priscilla, “do you know what you’re talking about? And if so, can you tell it so any one can understand it?”

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“That’s the way it is, aunty; and if you can’t understand it, I can’t help it. Charley Hayes wants to marry Stella, and he says she must; and Stella’s grandfather and grandmother they say she must; so everybody wants her to, except Stella herself and me. I think it’s just dreadful. He’s as silly as a loon. He doesn’t know anything, and he’s awkward and rude and countrified and awful homely, and I don’t care if he is rich.”

“Lavinia,” said Miss Priscilla, with a tone of displeasure, “you have no business with these matters at all, and I am surprised that Stella should have talked to you about this.”

“She didn’t mean to, aunty,” said Ladybird, eagerly; “honest injun, it wasn’t her fault. She wasn’t going to say a word to me about it; but I couldn’t help seeing there was some fearful thing going on in her heart, and so I made her tell me what it was; and of course after I got her started she kept going, and now I know all about it.”

“You do!” said Miss Priscilla. “And, pray, what do you propose to do about it?”

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“Oh, aunty, I don’t know; but let’s help her out some way, can’t we?”

“No, we can’t,” said Miss Priscilla, shortly. “It’s none of our affair, and I forbid you, Lavinia, ever to refer to the subject again.”

“Yes, aunty, I’ll remember; but just listen a minute.”

Ladybird had gone to her aunt’s side, and she perched on the arm of her chair, and caressed the withered old face as she talked.

“You see, aunty,” she went on, “both aunties,”—for she felt instinctively that Miss Dorinda would show more sentiment in this matter than her sister,—“Charley Hayes is not half, nor quarter, nor not even the least little mite good enough for my beautiful, lovely, sweet Stella. She’s so pretty, and so wise, that she ought to marry an earl, or a duke, or a king, at least.”

“Yes,” said Miss Dorinda, timidly, “I can’t help thinking it is all true, Priscilla.”

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“It makes no difference how true it is,” said Miss Priscilla, angrily, “it is nothing to us; and I repeat, Lavinia, that I wish you to drop the subject at once and forever.”

“Yes, aunty,” said Ladybird, with every outward show of obedience; “but I’ve got the loveliest plan. You know there are places where you can advertise and get husbands.”

“What?” cried Miss Priscilla Flint, unable to believe her own ears.

“Yes, really, aunty; didn’t you know it? I’ve often wondered why you and Aunt Dorinda didn’t get some husbands that way. I didn’t know you didn’t know about it. It’s perfectly lovely. Martha told me about it; and you just send your name and the color of your eyes, and you say what kind of a husband you want, and they send them to you right away. What kind would you like, aunty?”

Miss Dorinda was speechless at these fearsome revelations; but Miss Priscilla was rarely affected that way.

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“Lavinia Lovell,” she exclaimed, with flashing eyes, “hush this talk at once! I am more ashamed of you than I can say. Hush! do not speak another word.”

“No,” said Ladybird, “I won’t; but truly, Aunt Priscilla, it’s a great scheme. Martha knew a lady who got a lovely husband that way, and—”

“Silence, Lavinia!”

“Yes, ’m. And he married her, and they lived happy ever after. Martha said so.”

“Lavinia, be quiet.”

“Yes, ’m. And so you see, aunty, if we could just get a real nice husband for Stella, instead of that horrid Charley Hayes, we’d be doing as we’d be done by, and our neighbor as ourselves.”

“Lavinia,” began Miss Priscilla again.

“Now, Priscilla,” said her sister, “there’s no use talking to her like that. She doesn’t understand. Ladybird,” Aunt Dorinda went on gently, “these institutions you speak of, and which Martha had no right to mention to you—”

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“I’ll attend to Martha,” said Miss Priscilla, with a competent snap of her eyes.

“Are not nice,” went on Miss Dorinda, “and are not even spoken of by nice people. If you love Stella, the most dreadful thing you could do would be to think of her in connection with

such a place as you spoke of.”

“Is that so, Aunt Priscilla?” said Ladybird, who, though she loved Aunt Dorinda, always referred her opinions to Miss Flint for sanction.

“Yes,” said Aunt Priscilla, “of course it’s true—more than true; and you did very wrong, Lavinia, to listen to Martha’s tales.”

“Well, but, aunty, then if I can’t help Stella that way, how can I help her?”

“You cannot help her at all,” said Miss Priscilla, very sternly. “Am I to be mistress in my own house, or am I not? Cease talking, Lavinia, and go at once to your room.”

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“And I can’t help Stella in any way?” said Ladybird, slowly.

“You cannot. Go!” and Miss Priscilla pointed to the door.

Ladybird gathered up her dog, which had been lying, a shapeless mass, at her feet, and without a word walked from the room.

“She’s gone up-stairs to cry, Priscilla,” said Miss Dorinda; “she always does that when she feels very bad about anything.”

“I can’t help it,” snapped Priscilla Flint; “she’s a spoiled child. We over-indulge her in her whims; and in this case she ought to be made to feel ashamed of herself.”

“She didn’t do anything wrong, Priscilla; Martha did the wrong. Ladybird thought only of helping her friend.”

“She’s old enough to know better,” said Miss Priscilla, sternly. “And now I will see Martha.”

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After what was undoubtedly a very stormy interview, Miss Flint returned with the edge of her anger a little dulled.

“I suppose Lavinia wasn’t altogether to blame,” she said.

“No,” said Miss Dorinda, timidly. “Shall we go and find her, Priscilla?”

“Yes; but we must make her understand that it is wrong for her even to think of interfering in Stella’s love-affair. Lavinia’s too romantic already to be mixed up in such doings.”

“I suppose so,” said Miss Dorinda, meekly.

“Suppose so? You know it. You know as well as I do, Dorinda Flint, that Lavinia’s head is chuck-full of silly, romantic ideas, just as her mother’s was; and unless we’re careful, she’ll only get more and more so, until she’ll run away with some good-

for-nothing, as her mother did before her.”

“I suppose so,” said the meek Miss Dorinda again. “But I do think, Priscilla, we ought to do something to entertain the child. We might have a children’s party for her.”

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“Well—we might,” said Miss Priscilla, who had begun to relent a little. “It would be an awful lot of extra trouble; but romping play would be better for that child than sentimental twaddle.”

“I suppose so,” said Miss Dorinda.

“We could get the ice-cream from the village,” said Miss Priscilla, who had already begun to see the party in its details.

“Yes,” said her sister, eagerly; “and I could make my sunshine cake, and Martha could make cookies. It would be a very nice party.”

“And they could play games on the lawn,” said Miss Priscilla; “that wouldn’t make the house quite so topsyturvy.”

“Well, let us go and find the child and tell her about it,” said Dorinda; “I’m sure she’ll be pleased.”

Meantime Ladybird, holding Cloppy fast in her arms, had gone up-stairs. Angry tears were rolling down her cheeks, and her whole thin little frame was shaking with sobs.

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“It’s awful,” she whispered as she buried her face in the dog’s soft, silky hair; “it’s just awful; and I wish I could find a place where you and I could get away from everybody.”

She turned toward the great linen-closet, opened the door and went in. The piles of lavender-scented linen looked very cool and pleasant, and throwing Cloppy over her shoulder, which was one of his favorite positions, Ladybird climbed, with a monkey-like agility, up the broad shelves until she reached the top one. There she curled herself up in a little heap, pillowing her head on the dog, and the dog on a pile of sheets. Being thus comfortably settled, she indulged in one of her first-class crying spells, a thing so turbulent and volcanic that it defies all description. It was during this performance that the aunts came up-stairs in search of their agonized niece.

Ladybird had no intention of responding to their repeated call, but her tumultuous sobs easily guided the old ladies to her hiding-place.

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“Come down, Lavinia,” said Miss Priscilla, sternly, as she saw her precious linen in imminent danger of being spoiled by the tears of her weeping niece; “come down at once.”

“Can’t get down, aunty,” said Ladybird, between her choking sobs; “it’s easy enough to get up, but I can’t get down; the

shelves will come down if I try.”

“Then what do you propose to do?” exclaimed Miss Priscilla, exasperated beyond measure at her ridiculous relative.

“I don’t know,” said Ladybird, cheerfully, her tears quite dried by the interest of the situation in which she now found herself; “I expect I shall have to stay up here always.”

“Don’t be silly,” said her aunt. “And I don’t want my shelves broken. I will send Matthew for the step-ladder, and you must come down at once.”

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Once more on the floor, with Cloppy still clasped in her arms, Ladybird looked at her aunts’ faces and sagely concluded they had come in search of her to propose a truce. Always ready to meet them half-way, she sat down in her little chair and said pleasantly:

“I’m sorry I cried; but I couldn’t help it. I always have to cry until my tears are all gone, and then I feel better.”

“Well, dearie,” began Aunt Dorinda, “we’re sorry to make you feel bad, but—”

“But,” interrupted Miss Priscilla, “we’re older than you are, and we know what is best for you; but we do not wish you to have *no* pleasure, and so, if you will give up your absurd idea of helping Stella Russell, we will let you have a children’s party.”

“A very nice children’s party,” supplemented Aunt Dorinda.

“I don’t want any children’s party,” said Ladybird; “but it would comfort me to have hot waffles and syrup for supper.”

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“You shall have them,” said her Aunt Priscilla.

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CHAPTER XII

A SCRIPTURAL COMMAND

Every one knows the comforting qualities of hot waffles and syrup, so none will be surprised to learn that after supper Ladybird was in a frame of mind nothing short of angelic.

“My aunties,” she remarked, as she extended her thin length along the old-fashioned sofa in the sitting-room, “I think I *would* like to have a children’s party, if it wouldn’t make too much trouble.”

“Hospitality is a duty,” said Miss Flint, laconically. “And though it will doubtless make more or less trouble, I shall be very glad to give you a party, Lavinia, and you may invite your school-mates.”

“How many?” said Ladybird.

“Not more than twelve, including yourself; because everything is in dozens, and I don’t want to get out the extras.”

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“That’s eleven besides me. Why, Aunt Priscilla, I don’t like that many children in the whole school!”

“I’m ashamed of you, Lavinia; you should feel more kindly toward all your fellow-creatures.”

“Oh, I feel kindly enough about them, and I like them well enough, but I just don’t want to make a party of them. A party ought to be a few people that you can really enjoy.”

“That’s a very selfish way to look at it,” said Miss Flint; “a party is intended to give your guests pleasure.”

“And it ought to give you pleasure,” put in Aunt Dorinda, in her gentle way, “to know that your guests are enjoying themselves. Wouldn’t that please you, Ladybird?”

“Oh, yes, I’d be awful glad to have them enjoy themselves; but I don’t see why I couldn’t be enjoying myself at the same time. Why not let the party come, and you and Aunt Priscilla give them their supper, and let Edith and Cloppy and me go down by the brook and have some fun?”

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“Don’t be absurd, Lavinia,” said Miss Priscilla. “It is quite right that you should give a party to your young friends, and I think you will enjoy it quite as much as they do. It will be a very nice party; your Aunt Dorinda and I will provide a pretty supper, and the young people can stroll about the lawn, or, if the day is chilly, you can play at games in the house.”

“It doesn’t sound a bit nice,” said Ladybird; “but I suppose the

other children will like it, and so I don't mind. When shall we have it?"

"To-morrow is Saturday," said Miss Priscilla, "and I think to-morrow afternoon from three to six will be a good time for it. You can go out in the morning and invite your friends, while we make the cakes and jellies."

"All right," said Ladybird, with an air of resignation. "Who shall I ask?"

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"Oh, I don't care," said Miss Flint, who was already looking into her recipe-book; "ask any one you choose. But be sure to get eleven; I like to have just twelve at the table."

"I'll help you make out a list, dearie, if you want me to," said Aunt Dorinda.

"No, thank you," said Ladybird; "the list will be easy enough. I like Edith Fairchild and Bob Sheldon the best, and then I'll ask the Smith girls and Tom Cooper,—it will be easy enough to get eleven, and they'll be awfully glad to come."

"That's a good child," said Aunt Dorinda, patting her head; "and if you're undecided, give the preference to those who will enjoy it most."

"Yes, 'm," said Ladybird, a trifle absent-mindedly, for she was trying to make Cloppy stand on his head.

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The next morning all of the Flint household, except Ladybird, were busily engaged in preparations for the party, and that light-hearted damsel started out in high spirits to deliver her invitations.

"It seems to me," she said to herself as she went along, "that my aunts are very good people. I know it's a trouble to them to have this party, and yet they do it just out of kindness to me, and kindness to these other children that I'm going to invite. I wish I had a kinder heart. Somehow I never think of doing good to people until somebody puts me up to it. But now I've got a chance, and I'm in the notion, and I'm just going to invite those that it will do the most good to. I believe I'll ask Jim Blake; he's the poorest boy in school, and he's awful dirty, but I know he'd like to come, and I think that's what aunty meant. Anyway, she said to invite those who would enjoy it most, and I know Jim would enjoy it like a house afire. I'll go right to his house and ask him first."

Arriving at the Blakes' small and exceedingly unattractive residence, Ladybird entered and seated herself with her most conventional calling manner.

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"I'd like to have your son Jim attend my party this afternoon, Mrs. Blake," she said; and her hostess responded:

“Laws, miss, are you in earnest now? Does your aunts know you’re askin’ him?”

“I’m inviting any one I choose,” said Ladybird; “and I want Jim to come if he’ll enjoy it.”

“Oh, he’ll enjoy it tiptop, miss, and I’m terrible glad to have him go.”

“Then that’s all right,” said Ladybird, joyously. “And I must go now, as I have to invite the others.” But as she reached the door she turned, and added, with a smile that entirely cleared the words of any rude effect, “My aunts are very particular about people’s personal appearance.”

“Oh, never fear,” said Mrs. Blake, comprehendingly, “I’ll redd Jim up until nobody’ll know him.”

Ladybird went away thrilling with an exalted sense of having done a most meritorious act, and eager to let the good work go on.

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“It seems to me,” she thought, “that people like Jim Blake will enjoy the party heaps more than the Smiths and Fairchilds, and I’m going to ask all the poor ones I know first, and then fill up with the others. Why, it says in the Bible, when ye make a feast to scoop in the halt and the blind and the maimed and the lamed; and that reminds me, Dick Harris is lame, and so is his grandfather, for that matter. I believe I’ll ask them both; Aunt Priscilla didn’t say I had to have only children. And Mr. Harris got lame in the war, so I’m sure he’ll enjoy it; he’s a veteran G. A. R., and I just know Aunt Priscilla will like him.”

The Harris gentlemen were delighted to accept; and Ladybird gracefully apologized for not inviting the other members of the family by saying, “I’d love to ask you all, but I can only have eleven, and there are so many who seem to need invitations.”

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“The two firemen”

As Ladybird proceeded, her charity grew wider, and finally acknowledged no bounds either social or ethical.

She invited old Miss Leech, who had lost most of her physical and many of her mental faculties; and whose acceptance was unduly delayed because for a long time she could not make out what her excited visitor was driving at.

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Next, Ladybird invited two firemen. This she did with mixed motives: partly because she happened to meet them, and their red shirts and shiny helmets attracted her color-loving eye, and partly because she had a vague impression that it was always wise to keep on good terms with firemen. But to her surprise, though evidently highly appreciating the invitation, they positively declined.

This experience moved Ladybird to confine her invitations to younger guests, and she succeeded in securing Sam Scott, an idiot boy, and the widow Taylor's two small twins. The widow Taylor frankly announced that she would have to accompany the twins, as they were imps of mischief and would destroy everything in sight; but as she seemed so anxious to come, Ladybird concluded she was a most desirable guest.

The Tuckermans, a family of ten, were all clamorous to come, but Ladybird was obliged to select two, as that made her number ten, and she was determined to invite Stella Russell.

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Her errands all accomplished, she went home with a light

heart, and found her aunts just putting the finishing touches to a daintily set table.

Although buoyed up during the morning by a firm conviction that she was following out her aunts' wishes in spirit, if not in letter, the incongruity between the pretty table and the forlorn-looking specimens of humanity she had invited to sit at it suddenly came home to her, and she began to doubt whether she had acted wisely after all. So grave was this doubt that she could not bring herself to tell her aunts what she had done.

"Did you invite eleven?" asked Miss Priscilla, who was placing the chairs which Martha brought from other rooms.

"Yes, 'm," said Ladybird; "and Stella Russell is one of them."

"Very well," said Miss Flint; "she seems somewhat old for your party, but she can help entertain the children. Now we will eat our luncheon at the side-table, for I don't want this one disturbed, and then after that you can dress for the party. You may wear your white cashmere frock with red ribbons, and see that your hair is smooth and tidy. I want you to look as neat as any of your guests."

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"Yes, 'm," said Ladybird, with a growing conviction that her aunts would not care to practise what they preached, so radically as she had arranged.

"Aunt Priscilla," she said at luncheon, "perhaps you won't like some of the people I have invited; but you know you told me to invite those who would enjoy it most."

"For the land's sake, Ladybird, what have you been doing now? If you've done anything ridiculous, you may as well out with it first as last."

Like a flash, Ladybird realized that what she had done *was* ridiculous. Right it might be, charitable it might be, even according to Scripture it might be, but none the less it certainly was ridiculous.

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"What is it, dearie?" said Aunt Dorinda, noticing Ladybird's dismayed countenance. "Whom have you invited?"

"I asked Jim Blake," said Ladybird, thinking it wise to begin with the least objectionable one.

"Jim Blake!" exclaimed Miss Priscilla. "Why, Lavinia Lovell, whatever possessed you to ask that ragamuffin! I shall send him home as soon as he appears."

"Why, Aunt Priscilla, he's perfectly crazy to come, and you said to ask those who would enjoy it most."

Miss Flint looked utterly exasperated.

“Of course I meant within the bounds of decent society,” she said; “I didn’t suppose you intended to disgrace yourself and your relatives and your home! But never mind now. Go to your room and get dressed, and I will attend to Jim Blake when he arrives.”

“But, aunty—”

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“Not a word more. Do as I told you. I am busy.”

Ladybird went up-stairs feeling crushed and despondent; but when she began to array herself in the white cashmere with red ribbons, which was her favorite frock, the humor of the situation appealed to her. What her aunt would do when the unwelcome guests arrived she did not know; but, on the other hand, there was no way to avert the issue, and so there was nothing to be done but to await developments.

“And anyway,” she said to herself, “I haven’t done anything wrong; I’ve done just what the Bible says, even if it is ridiculous.”

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CHAPTER XIII

A RIDICULOUS PARTY

Stella came early, and Ladybird was tempted to confide in her, and perhaps ask her to enlighten Aunt Priscilla.

But the child's sense of the dramatic was too strong for this, and notwithstanding her own precarious position, she preferred to wait and let the whole remarkable situation burst unheralded upon her unsuspecting aunts.

And it proved to be worth while; for the expression on Miss Priscilla Flint's patrician countenance as she saw a motley crowd coming in at her front gate was never forgotten either by Ladybird or Stella.

The guests had been bidden to come at three o'clock, and as they obeyed with scrupulous promptness, the greater part of the party arrived all at once. As they came up the path, Ladybird grasped the situation with both hands, and turning to her Aunt Priscilla, said:

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"This is my party, aunty, that is coming in, and I hope they will like you. I did as you told me: I invited those who would enjoy it most, and I also followed the Bible command, 'If you must make a feast, make it for the poor, and the halt, and the maimed, and the blind'; and if you can find anybody poorer or maimeder or halter than these people, I don't know where they are. I am now going to open the front door and admit my guests, and I expect them to receive the welcome of Primrose Hall; and for goodness' sake, aunty, brace up!"

The last admonition was by no means unnecessary, for Miss Flint certainly looked as if she were about to fall in a faint.

"Did you know of this?" she demanded, turning to Stella, who stood by, uncertain whether to laugh or sympathize.

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"No," said the girl; "I knew nothing of it, and I don't understand it yet; but I think, Miss Flint, you will be glad afterward, if you rise to the occasion and show to these friends of Ladybird's, whoever they may be, the hospitality for which Primrose Hall is so justly famous."

Now Primrose Hall was not famous for its hospitality; indeed, the reverse was nearer the truth. But Stella's remark touched the old lady's pride, and she answered:

"Hospitality is all very well, but it does not mean inviting a parcel of paupers to come in and make themselves at home in one's house."

"No," said Stella, soothingly; "but since Ladybird has asked

these people, and apparently from good and honest motives, is it not your duty to uphold your niece, at least before strangers?"

"No, it is not!" said Miss Priscilla, angrily. "My niece can bear the consequences of her own rash act. I'm going to order those people out of my house at once! Where is Dorinda? Does she know of this outrage?"

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Just then Miss Dorinda appeared from the dining-room. She was flushed, but smiling, and her face wore a satisfied expression which betokened that all was well in the commissariat department.

Her smile faded as she caught sight of Miss Priscilla's face; but before that irate lady could say a word, Ladybird came in from the front hall, marshaling her guests in a decorous line to be presented.

The widow Taylor came first, and she held a twin on either arm. The Taylor children were about a year old and of strenuous disposition.

Ladybird's eyes were dancing with excitement, but with a demure politeness that had in it a charming touch of gentle courtesy she introduced Mrs. Taylor to her aunts.

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“Ladybird marshaling her guests”

The widow was of the affably helpless type, and encumbered as she was with fidgety impedimenta, found herself unable to offer the hand of fellowship.

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“I’m glad to meet you,” she said, earnestly looking the Misses Flint in their stony faces; “and if you’ll just hold these children a minute, I’ll shake hands, and then I’ll take my bonnet off, for this long veil is dreadfully in the way, and the babies do pull at it so!”

While Mrs. Taylor talked she distributed her offspring impartially between her two hostesses, and as the visitor’s movements were far quicker than the Flint ladies’ wits, Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda each found herself with a fat, roly-poly baby securely seated in the angle of her thin, stiff old left arm.

It may have been that some latent chord was touched in the

hearts of the good ladies, or it may have been that their muscles were actually paralyzed with amazement, but at any rate they did not let the babies drop to the floor, as Ladybird confidently expected they would.

Having shaken hands politely, Mrs. Taylor proceeded to take off her bonnet, talking all the while in a casually conversational manner.

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“Nice and neat, isn’t it?” she said, viewing with satisfaction the tiny bonnet which only served as a starting-point for the long black crape veil and a resting-place for the full white crape ruche. “I don’t often get a chance to wear it; but I’m so fond of it; it’s my greatest consolation since Mr. Taylor died. I call it my cloud with the silver lining.”

Stella took the precious bonnet from Mrs. Taylor’s hands, promising to put it safely away, and by that time Ladybird was presenting the elder Mr. Harris.

Though the old soldier was disabled and poor, he was a courtly gentleman of the old school and greeted the ladies with a quiet comprehension of his own dignity and theirs. Moreover, Richard Harris had been a friend of the Flint ladies in their youth, and though circumstances had pushed them far apart, a few slender threads of memory still held.

Ignoring their squirming left-armfuls, Major Harris shook hands with the Primrose ladies, and then, with the aid of his crutches, limped away.

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It seemed a pathetic coincidence that his grandson Dick, who followed him, should also be on crutches, especially as his lameness lacked the patriotic glory of his grandfather’s.

Dick Harris was frankly delighted with the whole occasion, and did not hesitate to say so. He shook hands vigorously with the Misses Flint, and his face beamed as he expressed his gratitude for their invitation.

“But you ladies oughtn’t to be holdin’ them heavy kids,” he said. “I wish I could take ’em, but I can’t. Here, Jim Blake and Tom Tuckerman, you take these infants away from the ladies, so’s they can shake hands decent.”

Apparently the lame boy’s word was law, for the two boys he had called, though looking a little embarrassed, darted up and secured the twins with an awkward but efficacious clutch.

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Miss Leech and Sam Scott were then presented together.

Ladybird didn’t do this for the logical reason that two half-witted people ought to count as one, but because she was impatient to get the introductions over with and begin the party.

Miss Leech wandered a little, confused the ladies’ names, and

asked Miss Priscilla if she had paid off her mortgage yet. Sam Scott wandered a great deal, and grasping Miss Priscilla's hand, shook it up and down continuously, while he babbled, "Beautiful day, beautiful day, beautiful, beautiful day, beautiful day, beautiful—"

He was still expressing his opinion of the weather when Stella led him away and seated him in a corner with a picture-book to look at.

By this time Miss Priscilla had reached that state of mind which can only be described as the obtuseness of the tumultuous. Her brain was benumbed by rapid and successive emotions, and as the climax of each had proved absurdly inadequate to the situation, Miss Priscilla was perforce in a condition of helpless docility, and Ladybird recognized this, and was not slow to take advantage of it.

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Realizing that her aunt had interests, or at least memory, in common with Major Harris, she contrived to establish the two on a comfortable old sofa, where, despite the differences of the present, they were soon lost in the past.

Then Ladybird, with her natural talent for generalship, but with a tact and ability really beyond her years, arranged her other guests to the happy satisfaction of each.

Miss Dorinda found herself entertaining, or rather being entertained by, Mrs. Taylor, and each of these ladies held one of the romping twins, and actually seemed to enjoy it.

Miss Leech required no entertaining save to be allowed to wander about at will, touching with timid, delicate fingers the ornaments or curios about the room, and making happy, though inarticulate, comments upon them.

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Then Ladybird and Stella devoted themselves to the amusement of the rest of the guests, who were all children and easily pleased by playing games or listening to Stella while she sang funny songs to her banjo accompaniment.

During one of these songs, Ladybird slipped out to the kitchen in search of Martha and Bridget, who were as yet unacquainted with the character of the Primrose Hall guests.

"I expect they'll raise Cain," she said to herself; "but I feel like Alexander to-day, and I'd just as soon conquer a few more worlds as not.

"Martha," she began in a conciliatory tone, though determination lurked beneath her eyelashes, "the people who have come to my party are not the ones I expected to invite at first. They're—they're different."

"Yes, miss," said Martha, impassively.

“And two of them are lame, Martha, and two of them are babies, and two of them are not quite right in their heads.”

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“Luny, miss?”

“Well, yes; I think you might call it that,” said Ladybird, gravely considering the case. Then after a pause she added, “And Martha, we’ll have to fix high chairs for the babies; put cushions in the chairs, you know, or dictionaries, or something.”

“Did your aunts invite these people, miss?” said Martha, suspecting, more from Ladybird’s manner than her words, that there was something toward.

“I invited them,” said Ladybird, with one of her sudden, but often useful, accessions of dignity, “and my aunts are at present entertaining them. You’ll see about the high chairs, won’t you Martha?”

In reality, Ladybird’s strong friend and ally, Martha, was always vanquished by the child’s dazzling smile, and she answered heartily, “Indeed I will, miss; you’ll find everything in the dining-room all right.”

Reassured, Ladybird went back to the parlor, to find her party still going on beautifully. Stella’s graceful tact and ready ingenuity were the best assistance Ladybird could have had, and the child gave a sigh of relief as she thought to herself she had certainly succeeded in inviting the ones who would enjoy it the most.

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At five o’clock supper was served. Although the technical details of the table proved a trying ordeal to most of the guests (indeed, only the half-witted ones were wholly at ease), yet the delicious viands, and the kind-hearted dispensers of them, went far toward establishing a general harmony.

The guests took their leave punctually at six o’clock, as they had been invited to do, and Miss Priscilla’s parting words to each evinced a mental attitude entirely satisfactory to Ladybird.

“Though I wish, Lavinia,” she said much later, after they had discussed the affair in its every particular—“*I do* wish that when you are about to cut up these fearfully unexpected performances of yours you would warn us beforehand.”

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“I will, aunty,” said Ladybird, with a most lamb-like docility of manner, “if you’ll promise to agree to them as amiably beforehand as you do afterward.”

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CHAPTER XIV

SOME LETTERS

As the weeks and months went on, life at Primrose Hall adjusted itself to the new conditions made necessary by the addition of a child and a dog to its hitherto unrippled routine.

Miss Priscilla lived with her usual energy; Miss Dorinda existed a little more calmly, and Ladybird lived and moved and had her excited being with all sorts of variations, from grave to gay, from lively to severe, *ad libitum*.

The winter passed much in its usual way, and after that the spring came, laughing. April tumbled into May, and May danced into June, bringing ecstasy to one little heart, for with late June days came the summer vacation from school.

“My aunties,” said Ladybird, looking up from a lesson she was studying, “who is the governor of this State?”

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“Hyde,” replied her Aunt Priscilla. “Governor Horace E. Hyde.”

“Is he a nice man?” asked Ladybird, drumming on the table with both hands, and on the floor with both feet.

“Do stop that fearful noise, Lavinia. Yes, he is a fine, capable governor, and a true gentleman. Why?”

“Are you studying your history lesson, dear?” asked Aunt Dorinda. “Is it about the governor?”

“I’m studying my history lesson, but it isn’t about the governor,” answered Ladybird, truthfully. “I only asked because I wanted to know.”

“That is right, Lavinia,” said Miss Priscilla, approvingly. “It is wise to inquire often concerning such matters of general information; by such means one may acquire much valuable knowledge.”

“Yes, ’m,” said Ladybird. “Where is his office?”

“Whose, the governor’s? Oh, in the State House, I suppose, though he would doubtless have a private office at home.”

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“Yes, ’m,” said Ladybird.

That same afternoon Ladybird collected some apples and cookies, and with a pad of paper and a pencil in her hand, and Cloppy hanging over her arm, she remarked that she was going down to the orchard, and went.

“You see, Cloppy,” she said as they walked along, “we’ve just

got to help Stella,—my pretty Stella; she has no one to help her but you and me. She's a damsel in distress, and we're a brave knight. Of course we can't fight for her with spears and lances; but we can do better than that. The pen is mightier than the sword, and, Cloppy, I've got the very elegantest scheme. I'm going to write to the governor—the governor of the State, you know. He can do anything, and if I write him a nice letter, I'm sure he'll send a duke, or a belted earl, or something that's nicer than Charley Hayes, anyway. But oh, Cloppy-dog, how I do hate to write a letter! I can't write very good, and I can't spell very good, and I'm scared to death of the governor. You know he's an awful big man, Cloppy, a great man, with a white wig and a cocked hat; but I'm going to do it, and I won't tell my aunties, because I'm 'most sure they wouldn't let me. But I must do something to rescue my beautiful Stella from dire dismay."

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"Writing the letter"

Ladybird climbed one of her favorite apple-trees, settled Cloppy comfortably in her lap, and placing her paper pad on him as on a desk, prepared to write. A puckered brow was for a long time the only outward and visible sign of her inward and spiritual resolve to help her friend.

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"Oh," she said at last, "it is harder even than I thought it would be; but I'll do it for my Stella."

"Of course," she thought, "'Dear Mr. Governor' must be the way to begin it, because there isn't any other way."

After writing the three words, she paused again, trying to remember what her language lessons had taught her. "I only remember one rule," she said to herself, talking aloud, as she was in the habit of doing, "and that is: 'Never use a preposition to end a sentence with.' But goodness me! if I can't begin a sentence, it doesn't make much difference what I use to end it with; does it, Clops?"

She poked the dog with her pencil, to which he responded by a series of wriggles.

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"Do keep still, Cloppy, or I'll never get my letter done. Now let me see. I think another rule was something like, 'If you have a story to tell, state it clearly, and in as few words as you can't get along without.' Now I'm not going to tell any story; it's the solemn truth; but I suppose the rule's the same for that."

After long and hard work, and much scratching out and putting in again, Ladybird succeeded in producing the following epistle:

DEAR MR. GOVERNOR:

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It is a tragedy! Stella is a lovely girl, and that silly Charley Hayes is not good enough; but I don't know of any other men in Plainville, except married ones, and the ragman, so what can I do? But you are noble, brave, and powerful, so please send by return mail a nice, handsome, good, young man. I mean send a letter about him, with blue eyes if possible, and anyway, an earl. Don't tell Stella right off. Send the earl to me, and I will see if he will do. Please write to

LADYBIRD LOVELL,
Primrose Hall,
Plainville.

P. S. And I am much obliged. I would have said more thanks but this is a business letter.

LADYBIRD.

"Now, Cloppy," said Ladybird, as she finished reading her work of art, "I do really think that's a very nice letter, and I do really believe the governor will send a perfectly lovely young man for my Stella, and then Charley Hayes can go and marry somebody else."

Cloppy wagged his tail, and blinked his eyes in his usual bored fashion, and Ladybird scrambled down from the apple-tree and trotted off to the post-office to mail the important letter. She stamped it carefully, and addressed it to "Governor Hyde, State House."

“Now,” she said, as she walked home in great satisfaction, “I just guess I’ve done something for my friend, and I wish the answer would come quick.”

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It is not remarkable that Ladybird’s letter should have safely reached its destination. It was opened among the other mail by Gilbert Knox, the governor’s private secretary. As letters of a similar type had been received before, and found no favor in the governor’s eyes, not even as interesting curiosities, young Knox was about to toss it into the waste-basket, when his chum Chester Humphreys came into the office.

“Hello, Chester,” he said; “you like odd tricks. Here’s a letter that may interest you. Want to read it?”

Chester Humphreys read Ladybird’s letter.

“You might go down to Plainville,” said Gilbert Knox, “and personate the earl.”

“I don’t think I care for the lovely Stella,” returned Humphreys; “besides, I’m not an earl. But I’d like to see the kid that wrote that letter. I think I’ll write and make an appointment with her just for fun.”

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“Do,” said the secretary; “that is, if you see any fun in hunting up a little freckle-faced child, who will probably be too shy to speak to you after you get there.”

“I don’t see anything in this letter,” said Humphreys, scanning it again, “to make me inevitably deduce freckles, nor yet shyness. In fact, the more I look at it, the more I think that baby’s a genius; and anyway, I’ve nothing to do, and it’s lovely country down there, and I’m going to chance it.”

“All right,” said Knox. “You’d better write her that you’re coming.”

“I will. Give us a pen.”

And that’s how it happened that in due time Ladybird received a letter which set her eyes and heart dancing. It caused no comment when old Matthew handed her the precious document, for the child often had letters—often, too, from distant cities, where she exchanged souvenir-cards with other young collectors.

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Stopping only to catch up Cloppy, she ran to the orchard and tore open the envelope.

Over and over again she read these lines:

Miss Ladybird Lovell,

DEAR MADAM:

Without committing myself definitely to an offer to aid you in your project, I may say I would be glad to have an interview with you regarding the matter, and will be pleased to keep any appointment that you may make.

Yours obediently,

CHESTER HUMPHREYS.

“Oh,” said Ladybird, with a sigh of rapturous delight, “isn’t it grand! I can’t understand hardly a word of his letter, but he says he’ll come to see me about it, and that’s all I want to know. Now I suppose I’ll have to write him again. It’s awful hard work, but to think what it may mean to Stella!” With a little sigh, she went to fetch paper and pencil, and, returning, composed the third document in the case.

Mr. Chester Humphreys [she began],

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DEAR EARL:

I am glad you’re coming [the letter went on] Hurry, oh, hurry, the day draws near. I hope you are the right one, but I can tell the minute I look at you. I will be in the plum-orchard, at half-past three Thursday afternoon. Come, oh, come.

LADYBIRD LOVELL,
Primrose Hall.

“He may not be an earl,” she thought, “but then he may; and if he is, it will be dreadful if I don’t tell him so.”

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CHAPTER XV

THE ARRIVAL OF THE EARL

At half-past three Thursday afternoon Ladybird was in the plum-orchard. It had never occurred to her to doubt the arrival of Chester Humphreys, or that he could experience any difficulty in finding her at her somewhat indefinite address.

And being a fairly clever and up-to-date young man, Chester Humphreys did not experience any difficulties, or, if he did, he overcame them; for promptly at the appointed hour he stood before Ladybird, and bowed politely, saying, "Miss Ladybird Lovell?"

"Yes," said Ladybird, rising from her seat on the grass, and suddenly acquiring a new dignity as she heard her name pronounced in such a formal tone. Then she looked at him steadily, without a touch of impertinence, but with an air of gravest criticism.

She saw a tall, well-built young man with broad, strong shoulders, and a frank, honest face which showed both perception and responsiveness.

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"You're not an earl," she said; and though her tone showed disappointment, it was more in sorrow than in anger.

"How do you know I'm not?" he said, smiling a little.

"By your clothes," said Ladybird, simply. "Of course I know you wouldn't wear your coronet and robes; but you'd wear something prettier than blue serge."

"I am not an earl," said her visitor; "but if I were, I would wear on this occasion these very same clothes. And now, tell me all about it."

With a smile that seemed to compel a comfortable confidence, he motioned Ladybird back to her grassy seat under the plum-tree, and then sat down by her side.

"First of all, who are you?" he said.

"No; first of all, who are you?" said Ladybird.

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"Quite right," said the young man; "I accept the rebuke. My name you already know; my home is New York. Just now I'm on my vacation, and in vagrant mood I'm enjoying this part of our country."

"Are you a good man?" said Ladybird.

"I am a good man," said Humphreys, "though very few people

know it; still, I'm prepared to prove it whenever it may be necessary."

"Are you accomplished?" said Ladybird.

"I can play a few things, work at a few more, and I can sing."

"I'm glad you can sing," said Ladybird; "Stella is very fond of music."

"But, my dear child," said Humphreys, "I told you I didn't come down here in the interest of that philanthropic scheme of yours; I came only to see you. And now it's your turn to tell me who *you* are."

"Me? Oh, I'm just Ladybird."

"Is that your real name?"

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"No, I suppose not," with a slight frown; "my aunties say it is Lavinia; but I never knew that till I came here. They say, too, I'm fourteen years old; but I know I'm twelve. And they say I used to have yellow hair and blue eyes; but I can't think I ever did, can you?"

"It is hard to think so," said Humphreys, looking at the little brown face with its big dark eyes and elfish wisps of straight black hair. "At the same time, I dislike to doubt your aunts' word. Why do they have such apparently contradictory notions?"

"I don't know," said Ladybird; "I've only lived here a little while, you know. My mama was my aunts' younger sister, and she ran away with my papa, and they lived in India. And I lived there, too, until papa died; and then I was sent here to aunties'. And at first my aunties didn't like me a bit, and didn't want me to stay; but I had to stay, so of course they had to like me. You can't live with people without liking them, you know."

"Can't you?" said Humphreys. "And do you like them?"

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"Yes," said Ladybird, "I *love* them. I love Aunt Dorinda best; but I love Aunt Priscilla most."

"I should like to know them," said Humphreys. "Can't you take me in and introduce me to them?"

"I will pretty soon," said Ladybird; "but first I want to settle about Stella."

"What is this Stella story, anyhow, you ridiculous child? Do your aunts know you wrote that letter to Governor Hyde?"

"No," said Ladybird, seriously, "they don't. If they had they wouldn't have let me write it. You see, everything I've tried to do to help Stella they scolded me about it, and told me I

mustn't do it, and that it was none of my affair. Now it *is* my affair, for Stella is my friend; and what can be more your affair than your friend?"

"Nothing," said Humphreys, seeing that an answer was demanded of him.

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"No, of course not. And so I thought, and I thought; and I decided this was the only way to do it; and I was sure the governor would send somebody nice, because my aunties say he is such a nice man."

"But tell me about Stella; I don't understand it all yet."

"Well, you see," said Ladybird, "Stella is the beautifullest, loveliest, angelest girl in the whole world, and she has a horrid old grandfather and grandmother who want her to marry Charley Hayes, and Charley Hayes is horrid too. And Stella doesn't love him, but she doesn't hate him as much as I do."

"I should hope not, if she's going to marry him," said Humphreys.

"But she thinks she's got to marry him," went on Ladybird, "because her grandparents say she must, and because there isn't anybody else in Plainville that would be any better."

"And must she marry somebody?"

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"Well, she doesn't want to marry anybody; but old Mr. and Mrs. Marshall say she's got to. And I mean that I can't find anybody better for her in Plainville, and so that's why I wrote to the governor; and I'm glad he sent you, for you're ever so much handsomer than Charley Hayes, and I really think you'll do very nicely."

"My dear little girl," said Humphreys, "you must get that notion out of your head. I told you in my letter that I did not come down in the interests of the fair Stella, but to see you."

"Why did you want to see me?" said Ladybird, her big eyes wide with bewilderment.

"Because I wanted to know what kind of a child it was who wrote that letter."

"And the governor didn't send you?" cried Ladybird.

"No, of course the governor didn't send me."

"Oh, well, it's all the same," she said airily; "you came because I wrote that letter to the governor, so it doesn't make any difference. And you'll have to marry Stella, you know, because that's what I sent for you for. You aren't married to anybody else, are you?"

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“No, of course not,” said the young man.

“Then that’s all right; and Stella is so sweet and beautiful you won’t mind it a bit.”

“You said she was beautiful, before,” observed Humphreys. “And now I think, if you please, we will go up to the house and see your aunts. I would like to pay my respects to them. You have a nice dog there.”

“Cloppy?” said Ladybird. “Yes; he is the beautifulest dog in the world.” She was kneading him like a mass of dough as she spoke. “He’s such a comfort! He never minds what I do to him.”

“And Stella, doesn’t she mind what you do to her, either?”

“Stella! Oh, she doesn’t know what I do for her. Of course when you do things for your friends you don’t tell them about it.”

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“And doesn’t Stella know that you wrote to the governor in her behalf?”

“Of course *not*!” said Ladybird, with great dignity; and rising, she gathered up Cloppy, hung him over her arm and said: “Now, if you please, we will go to the house.”

Remarking to himself that this was certainly a jolly go, Chester Humphreys followed the picturesque figure of Ladybird as she flew through the orchards.

Crossing the great sweep of lawn, they came to Primrose Hall, where, on the front veranda, sat the Misses Flint, placidly knitting.

“My aunties,” cried Ladybird, as she came near them, “this is a friend of mine I have brought to see you. His name is Mr. Chester Humphreys, and he lives in New York, and he came here to see me.”

“Chester Humphreys!” exclaimed Aunt Priscilla, rising and dropping her knitting. “Excuse me, sir, but was your mother a Stedman?”

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“She was,” said the young man; “and my father was Chester Humphreys of Newburyport.”

“Then you are the son of one of my dearest girlhood friends,” said Miss Priscilla, “and I am very glad to see you.”

Miss Dorinda fluttered about, brought a piazza chair and cushions to make their guest comfortable, while Ladybird seated herself on a cricket, took her chin in her hands, and sat gazing at the young man.

“Do you know,” Humphreys observed, “that, notwithstanding my interview with your small niece here, and my subsequent introduction to you, I don’t even yet know the name of my hostesses?”

“Flint,” said Miss Priscilla. “We are the daughters of Josiah Flint.”

“Then,” said young Humphreys, “I have always known of you; for I have heard of the Flints all my life.”

“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla, “Esther Stedman was not one to forget her old friends. And though I have not seen her for many years, I am more than glad to welcome her son to my house.”

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“And I,” said Miss Dorinda. “But may I ask how it came about? Were you passing through Plainville? And how did you chance to meet Ladybird?”

“Perhaps Ladybird would prefer to tell you that herself,” said Chester Humphreys, his grave eyes looking quizzically at the child.

“Why, you know, aunties,” said Ladybird, “you know very well, for I’ve told you a hundred million times, that I wanted to find a nice, handsome young man for Stella; and so you see I wrote to the governor for one, and—and Mr. Humphreys came.”

“Lavinia Lovell,” exclaimed Miss Priscilla Flint, “do you mean to tell me—”

“One moment, Miss Flint,” said Chester Humphreys. “Let me assure you that Ladybird’s letter was quite decorous and proper. Every citizen is privileged to write to his governor; that’s what governors are for. And it was a very nice, ladylike letter. But let me also assure you that I did not come down here in response to what the letter asked for, but merely to meet the plucky and loyal friend who wrote it.”

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“I am glad to see you, Mr. Humphreys,” said Miss Priscilla. “I beg you will dismiss entirely from your mind this ridiculous performance of my niece, and I will promise you that Lavinia shall not be allowed to think of it again, or to mention it to that very estimable young lady, Miss Stella Russell.”

“Oh, no, aunty,” said Ladybird; “I wouldn’t say a word to Stella for anything; but won’t Mr. Humphreys be gorgeous for her?”

“Go to your room, Lavinia,” said Miss Priscilla, sternly; and picking up Cloppy, Ladybird went.

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CHAPTER XVI

LADYBIRD TRIUMPHANT

“Mr. Humphreys,” said Miss Priscilla Flint, “I cannot tell you how sorry I am that my niece should have been guilty of this escapade; but I beg you to believe that we regret it sincerely, and that she shall be appropriately punished.”

“Oh, don’t punish her!” said the young man, impetuously. “I’m very sure she had no other thought than a kind interest in her friend’s welfare.”

“That makes no difference,” said Miss Priscilla; “she is old enough to know better, and she should have come to us for advice, and then this ridiculous piece of business would not have happened.”

“And we should never have met Mr. Humphreys,” said Miss Dorinda, smiling at the pleasant-faced young man.

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“That would have been my misfortune,” he replied. “But truly, dear ladies, you take this affair too seriously. Your niece is apparently full of wild and erratic schemes; but she is a dear little girl, and most true-hearted, and loyal to her friend. How old is she?”

“She is fourteen,” said Miss Flint, decidedly, “but she insists that she is only twelve. It is very strange,” she went on musingly; “but her whole history is strange. She is the daughter of my dead sister, but in no way does she resemble her, nor is she at all like her father. Although we knew him but slightly, he was a firm, well-balanced character, while Lavinia is wilful, mischievous and erratic.”

“But she is a clever child,” put in Miss Dorinda, “and most loving and affectionate.”

“She seems to be,” said Mr. Humphreys. “And I beg, dear ladies, that you will dismiss entirely from your mind this incident of her letter to Governor Hyde; for you may rest assured that no one else shall ever hear of it; and personally, I am very glad that it has given me the pleasure of knowing some of my mother’s friends.”

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“I, too, am glad of that part of it,” said Miss Priscilla Flint. “And we shall be most happy to have you dine with us and remain overnight.”

Chester Humphreys gladly accepted the invitation, privately wondering if Ladybird were allowed to sit up to dinner. A few moments later, light footsteps crossed the veranda, and a flushed and smiling young woman entered the room quickly.

“How do you do, Miss Dorinda?” she said. “How do you do, Miss Flint? Is Ladybird ill?”

“No,” said Miss Priscilla, rising, and looking severe. “What nonsense has that child been up to now? But first, Stella, may I present Mr. Humphreys? Miss Russell, Mr. Chester Humphreys.”

Ladybird’s description of her friend had been inadequate. Chester Humphreys, though a man of no little experience, felt sure he had never before seen such a beautiful girl. Tall and graceful, with soft, dark hair and eyes, Stella had, moreover, a wonderful charm of her own, and her perfect features were merely a setting for an exquisite and individual beauty which young Humphreys had never seen equaled.

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“Ladybird sent for me,” said Stella; “she sent a note by Jackson saying she was not well, and nothing would help her but for me to come over to dinner. So I came.”

“Where did she see Jackson?” said Miss Priscilla.

“That’s the funny part of it,” said Stella. “He was passing the house, and she called to him from her window; so I hurried over at once. May I see her?”

“She is not ill at all,” said Miss Priscilla.

“Oh, yes I am, aunty,” cried a roguish voice, and Ladybird flew into the room.

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She was dressed in her new red frock, her eyes were starry and dancing, and Cloppy was perched on her shoulder. He wore a red neck-ribbon, and a festive air generally.

“I’m awful miserable, aunty,” Ladybird went on: “I have a misery in my foot; but I’m so glad to see Stella that it may cure it. She may stay to dinner, mayn’t she, aunty?”

Taken thus by storm, Miss Flint could only say yes. So Stella stayed.

Such a merry dinner as it was! Ladybird was in her element. She made such droll remarks, and her gaiety was so infectious, that Chester Humphreys appeared quite at his best; and his best was very good indeed.

Stella looked radiant, and met Mr. Humphreys’s banter with a pretty, graceful wit of her own.

The Flint ladies, though a little bewildered, were affected by the general joyousness of the atmosphere, and beamed most amiably.

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After dinner they all sat on the veranda.

“Stella might sing for us,” suggested Ladybird, in an insinuating tone.

“I might,” said Stella, calmly, “if I thought any one would listen to me; but I fear you would all run away, except Ladybird; she, I believe, really enjoys my songs.”

“I can sing a little, too,” said Mr. Humphreys; “we might warble together.”

“No,” said Stella, “I can’t sing, really; but if I had my banjo here, I could play accompaniments for you to sing, Mr. Humphreys.”

“Your banjo *is* here,” said Ladybird; “you left it here day before yesterday.”

“Did I?” said Stella. “Well, I shall be glad to pick at it, if Mr. Humphreys will sing.”

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“After dinner they all sat on the veranda”

Mr. Humphreys was most willing to sing, so Ladybird brought the banjo, and Stella began to play. The girl had a real talent for music, and not only played well, but sang with a beautiful, though untrained voice.

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Together they sang many of the popular airs of the day; and then, at the request of the older ladies, they sang old-time songs, catches, and glees. Ladybird could sing these too, and though her voice was shrill and light, it rang clear and true.

Stella, in her white gown, looked very fair and sweet as she sat in a veranda rocker swaying to and fro to the time of her banjo; and when, promptly at ten o'clock, Miss Flint announced that she must send her home, Chester Humphreys half hoped that he might be allowed to escort her. But Miss Priscilla ordered that Martha should take charge of the young lady, and Humphreys disappointedly refrained from offering his services.

“Your Stella is very beautiful,” he said to Ladybird after Miss Russell had gone.

“Yes,” said Ladybird, calmly; “I told you so.”

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“And she looks amiable as well.”

“She is,” said Ladybird, earnestly; “she is the amiablest girl on the face of the great round world. She can't refuse anybody anything. That's why it's so hard for her to say she won't marry Charley Hayes. But now she won't have to, so it's all right.”

“Lavinia,” said Miss Priscilla Flint, with her sternest and most decided air, “once for all, now, you are to stop that wicked nonsense. Unless you do, I shall lock you in your room and keep you there until you are ready to obey me.”

“Goodness gracious me!” said Ladybird, laughing, “whatever could I do—staying in my room so long? I do so like to play out of doors. Now it seems to me that you and Aunt Dorinda ought to be locked in your rooms until this matter is all settled, for you certainly do interfere with my plans.”

“Go to bed at once, Lavinia,” said Miss Priscilla, in cold, level tones; “at once, I say! Not another word!”

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“Yes, aunty, certainly,” said Ladybird, making no move to go, however.

“Miss Flint,” said Humphreys, “as I am, in a way, a part of this situation, couldn't I be permitted to discuss it with little Miss Lovell?”

“I should be very glad, Mr. Humphreys,” said Miss Flint, “if you could say anything to my niece that would cause her to behave like a rational human being.”

"Then, child," said Chester Humphreys, turning to Ladybird, "I will ask you a few straightforward questions."

"Do," said Ladybird, looking at him with an air of such intense interest that the young man felt a little discomfited.

"First," he said, "do you realize that a child of twelve—"

"Fourteen," corrected Miss Priscilla.

"Very well—that a child of fourteen has no right to meddle with the love-affairs of a young lady of twenty-one?"

"I realize," said Ladybird, putting on her wise-owl expression, and shaking her thin brown forefinger at Chester Humphreys —"I realize that a child of twelve—or fourteen—has a right to do anything to help a friend, unless it's against the law and she'll get arrested."

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"But you must know," went on young Humphreys, warming to his task, "that if Miss Russell knew what you had done, she would not be your friend any longer."

"*Wouldn't she!*" exclaimed Ladybird. "*Wouldn't she!* That's all you know about Stella! She would be my friend though the heavens fall: because she understands friends, *she* does, and she would know that whatever I did, I did single to her glory! But never mind about me now: the thing is, Mr. Humphreys, will you marry Stella, and so save her from the awful jaws of Charley Hayes? Will you?"

Miss Priscilla Flint, almost choking with wrath and indignation, undertook to speak, but Chester Humphreys stopped her.

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"Wait, Miss Flint," he said; "please let me answer for myself."

"Will you?" said Ladybird.

"Ladybird," he said, "you are indeed a true, loyal, and warm-hearted friend; and you are sinning through ignorance, and not through any wrong intent."

"Will you?" said Ladybird.

"When you are older you will learn that people do not marry, or allow themselves to be given in marriage, at the whim of a wayward child. But as you cannot seem to grasp that fact now, you must accept the wisdom of your elders, and drop at once and forever this well-meant but impossible plan of yours."

"Will you?" said Ladybird.

She had not seemed to hear anything Mr. Humphreys had said, but sat with her sharp elbows on her knees, and her chin in her little brown hands, while her great dark eyes looked at him

wistfully, pleadingly, and insistently.

“Ladybird,” said Aunt Dorinda’s gentle voice, “you don’t seem to comprehend what Mr. Humphreys has been saying, and perhaps it is because you are not capable of understanding it; but I want to say this to you: you know that your aunts, who love you very dearly, would not advise you except for your own good and the good of your friend. And so, dearie, because we love you, and because you love us, won’t you give up this foolishness and do as we tell you?”

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“Aunt Dorinda,” said Ladybird, “you and Aunt Priscilla do love me, and I love you both; but you see you’ve never been married, either of you, and so you don’t know anything about it; but if you would do a little realizing yourself, and just think of the difference whether my sweet, beautiful, angel Stella marries that horrid, awkward, ignorant Charley Hayes, or this handsome, refined, and nobly educated Mr. Humphreys!”

Ladybird waved her hands dramatically, and with a triumphant air of having incontrovertibly proved her case, she continued: “And so we’ll consider that matter settled. And now the only thing to find out is if Mr. Humphreys will marry Stella. Will you?”

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Impressed by the futility of further argument of any sort, Chester Humphreys sat looking at Ladybird in a helpless sort of way.

“You see,” Ladybird went on, and now her voice was soft and gentle, and the expression on her elfish face very sweet and tender—“you see she is so good and lovely you couldn’t find anybody better or more beautiful; and she loves to have fun; and she can make gorgeous cake; and she’s awful fond of me and Cloppy: and altogether she’s the best one in the world for you to marry. Will you?”

“I am not sure but I shall,” said Chester Humphreys.

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CHAPTER XVII IN THE APPLE-TREE

Chester Humphreys was by no means a fool, nor was he unduly influenced by Ladybird's rhapsodies; but the winsome and beautiful Stella had attracted him very strongly, and were it not for the absurd complications of the case, he would have greatly enjoyed making her further acquaintance; and although he realized that it would perhaps be wiser for him to go away at once, he felt a strong, though vague and undefined hope that he might see the young woman again before his departure.

At breakfast next day, then, when he announced his intention of leaving that morning, and his hostesses hospitably begged him to stay until afternoon, he willingly accepted.

"Let's go for a walk," said Ladybird, as they rose from the table; and the young man assented cordially, for this strange child had a peculiar fascination for him, and he was glad of a further opportunity to study her.

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Ladybird chattered gaily as they walked through the gardens and orchards, and showed Mr. Humphreys all of her favorite haunts, and the trees which she liked best to climb. She led him through all the orchards of Primrose Place, and as they left the last one, they found themselves at the little brook, and sat down on the bank.

"I'm very glad," said Ladybird, hugging her knees up under her chin, "that you have decided to do what I want you to do; but it seems to me you needn't have been so long making up your mind."

"Long!" cried Chester Humphreys, in astonishment. "What do you mean? And besides, I haven't made up my mind!"

"Oh," exclaimed Ladybird, "don't begin to wobble again! Why, there's only one thing *for* you to do! The greatest, beautifullest thing any man can have a chance to do is to rescue a fair lady from distress; and there's plenty of distress; and here you are, and there's the fair lady."

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"Where?" asked Humphreys, looking around.

"Never you mind," said Ladybird, significantly. "But I'll just tell you this while I think of it: there's one thing you didn't do that you ought to have done."

"What's that?" asked Humphreys, lazily. He was absently twisting a stem of timothy-grass around his finger and thinking about Stella.

"You didn't bring me any candy. Now I would have preferred

a man for Stella who knew enough to bring candy to *me*.”

“I don’t blame you,” said Chester Humphreys, heartily; “you’re quite right; and though I never can forgive myself, it may help a little if I send you a box as soon as I go back.”

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“That will do nicely,” said Ladybird, gravely. “And now shall we go on?”

“Go on where?”

“Go on with our walk; we’re taking a walk, you know. Now we’ll cross the brook.”



“Across the line of stepping-stones”

Humphreys followed his elf-like guide as she swung herself across the line of stepping-stones, and together they walked through two fields. This brought them to another orchard—the same one in which some time ago Ladybird had discovered Stella; and the child well knew that the girl was more than likely at this hour of the morning to be up in the same old gnarled apple-tree.

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Without so much as mentioning the fact that this particular orchard was the property of Stella’s grandparents, Ladybird led her companion to the apple-tree in question, and invited him to sit down beneath it.

“You haven’t told me yet,” said Ladybird, as they leaned comfortably back against the great crooked trunk, “what you really think of Miss Russell.”

She spoke in a high, clear voice, quite loud enough to be heard by any one who might happen to be sitting in the tree above

them.

“I told you I thought her very beautiful,” said Chester Humphreys.

“But do you think her the most beautifulest girl you have ever seen?” persisted Ladybird.

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“Yes,” said Humphreys, “I really do, and I have seen a great many; but never one with such exquisite coloring and such perfect features.”

“And don’t you think she’s as good as she is beautiful?” was the next question.

A slight disturbance was heard in the branches, and then a voice cried: “Ladybird, you’ll have to stop that. I really can’t allow myself to hear any more of it.”

“Miss Russell!” exclaimed Chester Humphreys, starting to his feet.

“Why, Stella,” cried Ladybird, innocently, “are you there? Won’t you come down; or shall we come up?”

“I’m not coming down,” said Stella; “and if you choose to come up, I shall be glad to receive you. There are plenty of vacant seats.”

“Thank you,” said Ladybird, “we’ll be delighted. Will you go first, Mr. Humphreys?”

Being sufficiently athletic, Chester Humphreys swung himself up by the low branches, and after shaking hands with Miss Russell, comfortably settled himself on a bough near her.

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“Will you look at that child!” exclaimed Stella, pointing down the orchard, where, among the trees, Humphreys could see Ladybird’s flying figure, running as if her life depended upon it.

“What is she, anyway?” he exclaimed. “I never saw such a child. And yet she fascinates me by her very queerness.”

“She *is* fascinating,” said Stella; “and she has the dearest, sweetest nature in the world. I don’t always understand her vagaries, but I do understand her warm, loving heart, and her brave, impetuous soul.”

“She doesn’t seem to inherit the characteristics of her aunts,” said Humphreys.

“No, she is not like them, except in her courage and indomitable will. Her father must have been something unusual. She is probably like him.”



“Ladybird’s flying figure”

“And she was brought up in India.”

“Yes; that might account for many of her peculiarities; or perhaps the truth is that she grew up in India without having been brought up at all.”

“That’s more like it,” assented Humphreys. “But she is not here now, and you are, so I wish you would tell me something about yourself; won’t you?”

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“Oh, there’s nothing interesting about me,” said Stella, laughing: “I’m not eccentric, I didn’t grow up in India, and I’m really very much like all the other young women you’ve ever met.”

“Not exactly,” said Humphreys; “for none of them ever received me in a tree before.”

“Oh, that’s mere force of circumstance—I had no intention of doing so; and it’s really only through one of Ladybird’s crazy pranks that you are here now.”

“That is true,” said Humphreys, with more meaning than she knew.

If Stella Russell had seemed to him beautiful the night before, she seemed a thousand times more so now. Her type is often at its best in the morning.

Her youth and wonderful color, with the accessories of fresh, crisp, pink muslin, and the green leaves of the apple-tree, made

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a picture which Chester Humphreys never forgot.

And beside all this perfection of æsthetic beauty, he saw in the girl a beauty of mind and soul which shone in her dark eyes as they met his across the apple-boughs. All this was brought home to him so positively that only his subconscious sense of the fitness of things kept him from speaking his thoughts aloud; and the situation was appreciably relieved when Stella said casually:

“Are you staying down to-day, Mr. Humphreys?”

“Yes,” he said conventionally; “I go back this afternoon.”

“Ah! you are a relative of the Misses Flint?”

“No, not that, but my mother was an old friend; though I had never met the Flint ladies until yesterday.”

“And you live in the world?—the great outside world? I have always longed for it.”

“And why shouldn’t you have it?” Humphreys’s eyes across the green apple-boughs looked straight into Stella’s.

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“Because I am not of the world,” she said simply; “because I’m a country girl—country born and bred.”

“But that doesn’t mean that you must always continue to live in the country.”

“No; though I feel sure I shall. But tell me of the great world. Have you been all over it?”

“Not quite that; but I’ve seen the best and worst of it.”

“And which did you prefer?”

“Neither, I think—I’m not an extremist.”

“Nor an enthusiast?”

“That, of course. Life wouldn’t be worth living without enthusiasm. It is a part of our youth. Don’t you possess it?”

“Yes,” said Stella, very earnestly, “I’m sure I do. But mine has so little to feed on that I fear it may die of insufficient nutrition.”

“That seems a pity,” said Humphreys, “when the world is so full of a number of foods for enthusiasm.”

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“It is a pity,” said Stella, quietly.

Their conversation was interrupted just then by Enthusiasm Incarnate, which, in the shape of Ladybird, came flying across the orchard to announce luncheon.

“And Stella is invited too,” she declared; “Aunt Priscilla said so.”

But Stella declined the invitation, and so Chester Humphreys and Ladybird strolled back to Primrose Hall the same way they had come.

“Now,” said Ladybird, with an air that would have sat well upon Napoleon after the battle of Austerlitz, “what have you to say for yourself?”

“I have a great deal to say for myself,” said Humphreys, “and it is to be said now, and it is to be said to you, and it is strictly confidential.”

“That means I mustn’t tell, doesn’t it?” inquired Ladybird, nodding her wise head.

“It means just that; and it also means that I trust you implicitly: that I have faith in your honor, loyalty, and truth.”

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“You may,” said Ladybird, looking at him with her eyes full of an integrity suggestive of the rock of Gibraltar—“you may depend on me. I am a Flint.”

“Very well, then,” said Chester. “Now, my little Flint, listen to me. You did a rash and daring thing when you wrote that letter to the governor; but never mind that part now: it may be that an inscrutable Fate used you for a straw to show which way the wind was blowing.”

“Are you going to marry Stella?” demanded Ladybird, who took little interest in proverbial philosophy.

“That’s the first thing I want to speak to you about,” said Humphreys; “you *must* overcome your propensity for asking that question. It is a habit, and unless broken, it may defeat your own ends.”

“Oh, talk so I can understand you,” said Ladybird, impatiently. “And, anyway, *are* you?”

“Listen, Ladybird,” said Chester Humphreys, suddenly becoming very straightforward and serious. “You are very fond of your friend Stella, and you want to help her; and it may be that you will be able to do so if you are willing to listen to reason. And first you must stop asking me if I’m going to marry Stella, because that is a thing that a man does not tell other people until he has discussed it with the lady most interested. Also, if it is your wish that I shall marry Miss Russell, the surest way to prevent it is for you to go about repeating that foolish question. Now I told you I intended to be confidential with you, so I will say that I admire Miss Russell very much indeed—more, I think, than any other young woman I have ever met; but it is not nice nor wise from that fact to jump immediately to the conclusion of a wedding. Because I admire

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Miss Russell is an especial reason why I wish you to treat her with deference, consideration, and delicacy. Matters of this sort must advance slowly and unfold their possibilities as they go on. What may happen in the future cannot be decided now, or even discussed. You have done your part, and though your methods were unusual, your plan succeeded. Now any further attempt on your part to assist will prove only a hindrance. Am I clear?"

"You're not *very* clear," said Ladybird, with a thoughtful pucker between her eyebrows, "but I think I understand what you mean. You mean that you'd like to marry Stella, but it isn't polite to hurry her so, and, anyway, you're not quite sure about it."

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"Well," said Humphreys, "that states the situation pretty fairly, though without mentioning its more subtle details."

"Well, I'm satisfied," said Ladybird; "it's all right, and I think we understand each other. Don't hurry any faster than you choose; and, anyhow, now that Stella has seen you, I know she'll never look at Charley Hayes again. And as to your not being quite sure of yourself, I know very well that you'll only get surer every time you see her."

"Very likely," said Humphreys. "But remember, Ladybird, this is a confidence that I have intrusted to you, feeling sure that you will prove yourself worthy of it."

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"See my finger wet,
See my finger dry,
See my finger cut my throat if I tell a lie!"

chanted Ladybird, suiting to her words actions rather more realistic than dramatic, but which carried conviction.

After luncheon Chester Humphreys had an interview with the Misses Flint that somehow induced those ladies to invite him to remain longer under their roof.

"You see, aunty," said Ladybird, when she heard of Humphreys's acceptance of this invitation,—“you see I am not such a fool as I look.”

"Which is fortunate for us all," said Miss Priscilla, grimly.

"Quite so," said Ladybird, serenely; "for I know sometimes I do look and act most exceeding foolish. But I suppose that is because I am really a Flint."

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Whereupon, for some inexplicable reason, Miss Priscilla kissed her.

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CHAPTER XVIII

LAVINIA LOVELL

It must be that the exception proves the rule, for though the love of Chester Humphreys and Stella Russell was undoubtedly true, its course ran smooth.

One afternoon in August, Stella, Chester, and Ladybird sat out in the orchard.

“Now that you two are engaged,” said Ladybird, “if you wish, I will go away and leave you to your own self.”

“Don’t bother, Ladybird,” said Chester; “understand once for all that when we wish to be left to our own ‘self,’ we will either arrange it cleverly and unostentatiously, or else ask you frankly to take your departure.”

“Then that’s settled,” said Ladybird, leaning comfortably against a tree-trunk; “you are really the nicest engaged couple I ever knew.”

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“Have you known many?” asked Stella.

“Not many,” said Ladybird, truthfully; “but I knew a few in India, and India’s the place for them.”

“Child,” said Chester, suddenly, “tell us something of your life in India. It seems to me a bit mysterious.”

“I don’t see any mystery about it,” said Ladybird, cheerfully. “My mama died when I was born, and I lived all my life with my old ayah. Sometimes I didn’t see my papa for two or three years at a time; but when he did come he brought me the most beautiful presents.”

“Have you no picture of your mother,” said Chester, “no letters or books, or anything that was hers individually?”

“No,” said Ladybird; “my papa died of that fearful fever, and everything was burned up. The gentleman who came and brought me away said that my mama was the sister of Aunt Priscilla and Aunt Dorinda; so he sent me here; but that was the first I had ever heard of them.”

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“Had your father never mentioned them?” asked Stella.

“No; but then, papa never mentioned anything. When he was at home, he was always having company and gay parties, and he never talked to me, except to ask me if I was happy, and if I wanted any dolls, or candies, or new clothes.”

“And were you happy?” said Stella.

“Yes; I’m always happy. I can’t help it. I was happy there, with my native servants and my Indian entertainments; and I’m happy here, with my aunts and Primrose Hall. And I’m specially happy because I’ve made you two happy; haven’t I?”

“You have, indeed!” said Chester, heartily kissing the wistful-eyed child.

“I’m glad,” said Ladybird; and with her queer suddenness, she walked away.

“Just suppose,” said Ladybird to Cloppy, as she strolled toward the house—“just suppose, Clops, that we hadn’t sent for Chester, and suppose—but that’s too perfectly horrid to suppose—that Stella had still been intending to marry that unpleasant Charley Hayes. For as you well know, Cloppy, Charley Hayes is not fit to tie Stella’s apron-string. Of course she doesn’t wear aprons, but I mean if she did. And now everything is beautiful: my aunts are happy as clams; Stella and Chester are happy as oysters; and you and I are happy as—as *whales*, aren’t we, Clops?”

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She flung the dog high in the air and caught him as he came down; and then running into the house, discovered a letter for herself on the hall table. With a curious glance at the foreign epistle, Ladybird took it, and holding Cloppy firmly under her arm, went up to her bedroom.

“You see, Clops,” she said as she reached her haven from all interruption—“you see, Clops, we’ve got a letter now that means something. Of course I love Stella and Chester, and Aunt Priscilla and Aunt Dorinda, but furthermore, and beyond, and notwithstanding, there is something in our lives, Cloppy, that is outside of all these, and of course, my blessed dog, it would be postmarked India. And so, Cloppy, we will now sit down and read it.”

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Read it they did; and in the quaint, old-fashioned bedroom at Primrose Hall, Ladybird read these words:

MY DEAR MISS LOVELL:

I am writing you, as you will observe, from London, and I am the daughter of John Lovell and Lavinia Flint. This daughter, they tell me, you think you are; but it is not so: you are the daughter of John Lovell and his second wife; while I am the child of Mr. Lovell and his first wife, who was Lavinia Flint.

My attorney, Mr. William H. Ward, tells me that he recently met a Mr. Bond who sent you to Primrose Hall thinking you were the daughter of Lavinia Flint. But you are not the right one, and I am, so you see you will have to resign your supposed rights in favor of me. Mr. Ward is

dictating this letter for me to write; and as soon as I hear from you I shall go straight to Plainville, and as I have proper identifications of all sorts, I shall claim my birthright.

Yours very truly,

LAVINIA LOVELL.

“It is just as I thought, Cloppy,” said Ladybird, shaking the moppy dog, and looking straight into his blinky brown eyes; “it is just as I thought, and we are not Flints, after all; but goodness gracious me, Cloppy, I’d rather be a Flint than anything else in this world, and I’d rather be Lavinia Lovell than—than—than *Ladybird*, though I never realized it before.”

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A deep sob interrupted this last utterance, and Ladybird flung her face down on the little dog and cried bitterly.

But after a time she calmed herself and said:

“We are not to be downed, you and I, Cloppy, and so we will answer this Miss Lovell’s letter quite as it calls for.”

With great dignity, Ladybird went to her little desk and wrote the following note:

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MISS LAVINIA LOVELL,
MY DEAR MISS LOVELL:

I suppose what you say is true, and if it is, then you belong to my aunts and I don’t. But all I have to say is, you come right straight here, and Chester and Stella and my aunts and I will see about it.

Yours very truly.

LADYBIRD LOVELL.

With a sigh of successful attempt, Ladybird sealed her letter, and laid it on the hall table to be mailed. Then she went into the drawing-room, where her aunts were.

“Aunt Priscilla,” she said, addressing the elder of the Flint ladies—“aunty, why do you think I am the daughter of your sister?”

“Ladybird,” said Aunt Priscilla, smiling kindly at her, “what new crotchet is in your head now? You know Mr. Bond told us that you were the daughter of our sister Lavinia and Jack Lovell, to whom she was married fifteen years ago.”

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“Yes; but, aunty,” said Ladybird, “Jack Lovell might have had two wives; and I might be the daughter of the second wife, you know. How would that be?”

“Ladybird, you’re crazy,” said Miss Priscilla. “You’re often crazy, I know, but this time you’re crazier than ever. Have you any reason to think Jack Lovell was married twice?”

“I have, aunty,” said Ladybird, solemnly, and she handed to her aunt the letter which was signed Lavinia Lovell.

Miss Priscilla read it through, and then saying, “Dorinda!” she handed it to her sister.

Miss Dorinda Flint was slow. She carefully read the letter through three times before she handed it back to her sister, and then she said:

“It does seem, Priscilla, as if Ladybird could not be Lavinia’s child. But that does not matter. In any event she is *our* child.”

“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla, in a tone which seemed to Ladybird almost solemn.

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“Well, then,” said Ladybird, quivering with excitement, “what are you going to do about it? Because I’ve written to this girl, whoever she is, to come here.”

“You have!” said Miss Priscilla; and Miss Dorinda said:

“Well, perhaps it’s just as well. Now we can straighten this thing out at once and forever. And it always has bothered me why Ladybird should have black eyes and hair.”

That afternoon, down under her own apple-tree, Ladybird told the whole story to Chester Humphreys.

“I don’t know, child,” he said, “but it seems to me this Lavinia must be the Flint heiress and not you; but don’t mind that, for you belong to Stella and me, and always will so long as we three shall live.”

“That’s all right,” said Ladybird, “and that’s satisfactory as far as you and Stella are concerned: but I just guess I don’t want some other girl taking my place with my aunts.”

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“Of course you don’t,” said young Humphreys; “but still, if she is the rightful niece, and you’re not, what are you going to do about it?”

“I’ll kill her!” said Ladybird, passionately. “I’ll hang her! I’ll drown her!”

“There, there,” said Chester Humphreys, soothingly; “there, there, baby, what’s the use of talking nonsense? Those threats don’t mean anything and you know it. Now if Miss Lovell is your aunt’s niece and heiress, it is she who is the legal inheritor of Primrose Hall, and you—are nothing; that is, nothing to the Flint ladies.”

“Indeed I am,” said Ladybird; “I just guess you’ll find that my aunts, or whatever they are, love me for myself alone, and not because I’m the daughter of anybody.”

Chester Humphreys smiled uncertainly as he said:

“Well, I don’t know, Ladybird; but anyway, we’ll go now and talk to the Flint ladies, and see what they have to say.”

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The interview with the Misses Flint resulted in long and earnest arguments by each of the four concerned; but Miss Priscilla wound up by saying:

“It may all be so; I don’t say it isn’t. There may be another child named Lavinia Lovell who is really the daughter of our sister; but this child, the one we call Ladybird, and who has lived with us for nearly a year, shall be our heir, the inheritor of our estates, and to all intents and purposes our grandniece, Lavinia Lovell.”

“Hooray for you, aunty!” cried Ladybird, and flying across the room, she wrapped her arms around Miss Priscilla’s shoulders and buried her face in the old lady’s neck. “You do love me, don’t you?”

“Yes, Ladybird,” said Miss Priscilla, with a dignity that seemed possibly more than the occasion called for. “Yes, we do love you, and no other shall succeed in winning our love away from the little girl who has fought for and gained it.”

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“Good old aunty!” cried Ladybird, pounding Miss Flint on the top of her somewhat bald head by way of approbation and encouragement. “You’re a dear, and Aunt Dorinda is another, and Chester is three, and Stella is four; and I just rather guess we four can come it over that ridiculous, absurd Lavinia Lovell, who’s going to thrust herself upon us.”

“I think so, too,” said Aunt Dorinda, placidly.

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CHAPTER XIX

LADYBIRD vs. LAVINIA

One day, Ladybird, watching from her window, saw a hack drive up to Primrose Hall. A middle-aged gentleman got out.

“Mr. William H. Ward,” she said to herself, serenely.

Next appeared a golden-haired, blue-eyed girl of about fourteen.

“Lavinia Flint!” said Ladybird; and putting her little black head down on Cloppy’s fat back, she cried as if her heart would break.

“We ought to be ashamed of ourselves, you and I, Clops,” she said, “because, if that isn’t the real Lavinia, there’s no use in our making a fuss; and if it is, why, then she is It, and we’re nothing, and that’s all there is about that!”

A little later Martha came to the door and said, “Miss Ladybird, you’re wanted in the parlor.”

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“Martha,” said Ladybird, looking straight at the maid, “you go down and say to my Aunt Priscilla that I want that Lovell girl to come up here. And after I have seen her, we will both go down to the parlor.”

“Yes, miss,” said Martha.

She soon reappeared, bringing the visitor with her.

Ladybird took the new-comer by the hand, drew her into the room, and shut the door.

“I wanted to see you,” she explained, “before I make up my mind what I am going to do. I suppose it’s all true,—of course it must be,—that you’re Lavinia Flint’s daughter, and I’m not, though we are both the children of John Lovell.”

“Goodness,” said the yellow-haired girl, “you talk like a lawyer!”

“I am serious,” said Ladybird, with all her dignity, and she had a good deal, “because I have to be. It’s a pretty big thing to think that you’re not the person you thought you were; especially after you’ve had to fight for your place, anyhow.”

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“You talk like a lawyer”

“What are you talking about?” said the other.

“Never you mind what I’m talking about,” said Ladybird; “the question is, What can *you* talk about? If you’re going to live here with my aunts,—with your aunts, I mean,—and I suppose you are, can you love them and do as much for them as I could?”

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At this Ladybird, much to her own disgust, broke down entirely, and wept again on Cloppy’s already soaking back.

“Don’t be silly,” said her visitor. “I think you’re making a great fuss over nothing; probably we’ll both stay here. That would suit me, and I’m sure there’s room enough.”

“Oh, there’s room enough,” said Ladybird, impatiently; “that isn’t the question; there’s room enough in Primrose Hall for a whole army. But right is right, and if you’re Lavinia Lovell, the daughter of Lavinia Flint Lovell, why, you belong here, and I don’t. And of course I’m not going to make any fuss about it; but please be good to my aunts,—your aunts, I mean,—and especially Aunt Priscilla.”

“Why Aunt Priscilla?” said Lavinia Lovell, curiously. “I haven’t seen much of them, but I like Aunt Dorinda better.”

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“That’s just the reason,” said Ladybird, nodding her wise head: “it’s because you haven’t seen much of them that you like Aunt Dorinda better. I did, too, when I hadn’t seen much of them.”

“But now?” said Lavinia Lovell.

“But now,” said Ladybird, “I love Aunt Priscilla most. There’s no use talking, I do. You see, Aunt Dorinda is lovely, and sweet, and placid, but Aunt Priscilla is decided, and that’s the thing! Lavinia Lovell, if you’re going to live here in my place, and I suppose you are, just remember that Aunt Priscilla’s decision is worth more than Aunt Dorinda’s sweetness.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Lavinia Lovell.

“I’m talking about what I know about, and you don’t seem to know anything,” said Ladybird. “And now, if you please, we’ll go down-stairs.”

They went down the broad staircase hand in hand,—the real Lavinia Lovell, golden-haired and blue-eyed, and the other one, Ladybird, black-haired and dark-eyed,—and together, hand in hand, they entered the drawing-room, where the two Flint ladies sat talking to Mr. Ward.

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“It’s all right, my aunties,” said Ladybird, advancing, and almost dragging the other, “it’s all right; and this new girl is Lavinia Lovell, and I’m not. I’m Jack Lovell’s daughter, but I am not the daughter of Lavinia Flint, and so, aunty dear, I’ve no claim on you.”

Ladybird threw herself into Aunt Priscilla’s arms, and for a moment Miss Flint held her close, without saying a word.

Then she said: “Dear, Mr. Ward has told us all about it. Sister Dorinda and I understand it all. You are not our niece; you are in *no* way related to us.” Here Miss Priscilla’s grasp tightened. “You are in no way related to us. Lavinia Lovell, who has just come, is our niece; but, Ladybird, I love you.”

“That’s all right, aunty,” said Ladybird, cheerfully; “I understand the whole business. Lavinia Lovell, the new girl, who has just arrived, is the daughter of Lavinia Flint, your sister, and I am not. But, Aunt Priscilla,—oh, no, you are not even my aunt. Well, then, Miss Priscilla Flint of Primrose Hall, do you love me?”

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“I love you,” said Miss Priscilla, and the embrace in which she held Ladybird left no doubt in the mind of anybody present.

“Quite so,” said Mr. Ward, “quite so. But may I remind you, Miss Flint, that the young lady whom I have brought with me, Miss Lavinia Lovell, has a claim, I may say a previous claim, upon your recognition?”

“You may say a previous claim,” said Miss Dorinda Flint, who had not spoken for some time; “but is a previous claim to take precedence of a claim preferred?”

“Oh, aunty,” cried Ladybird, flying to Aunt Dorinda, and

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throwing her arms around the old lady's neck, "that's just it; relationship can't come in ahead of me, can it?"

"No," said Aunt Dorinda, slipping her arm round the excited child.

"But," said the smooth lawyer voice of Mr. Ward—"but, my dear Miss Flint, and my dear Miss Dorinda Flint, you must realize that my client and protégée, Miss Lavinia Lovell, has a claim upon your interests that this child whom you call Ladybird never can have."

"Never!" said Ladybird; and dropping her head on Cloppy's silvery back, she wept as one who could not be comforted.

"That's not true," and Miss Priscilla Flint's voice rang out like a clarion. "You have proved to us, beyond shadow of doubt, that this new little girl, this Lavinia Lovell, is our niece, the daughter of our sister—and yet—you cannot take away from us the fact that Ladybird, our Ladybird, is ours forever and ever!"

At this Ladybird flew back to Miss Priscilla, and was clasped in her arms. But Miss Dorinda, holding Lavinia Lovell by the hand, said:

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"Sister, you love Ladybird, and so do I; but this child is Lavinia Lovell, the daughter of our sister Lavinia; and while we can love Ladybird as a friend, and as an outside interest, yet here is our niece, here is our inheritance, and to her is due our affection."

Miss Priscilla, still holding Ladybird in her arms, said:

"Let her then prove herself worthy of it."

"No, aunty," said Ladybird, rousing herself, "no; that is not necessary. If Lavinia Lovell is your niece, and she is, then her place is here and my place is not."

"What are you going to do, baby?" said Miss Priscilla, kissing Ladybird with unusual tenderness.

"Well," said Ladybird, judiciously, as one who was thinking out a great problem—"well, I don't know; but I think I shall go to live with Chester and Stella."

"You couldn't do better," said Aunt Priscilla, laughing.

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"Will you come, too?" said Ladybird, patting Miss Priscilla's apple-cheek.

"Yes," said Miss Priscilla; but nobody heard her except Ladybird, for Mr. Ward had already begun to speak.

"In the interests of my client," he said, "I am obliged to press the claims of Lavinia Lovell, the oldest daughter of John

Lovell, against the claims of Ladybird, a younger daughter of the same man.”

“But I make no claims,” said Ladybird, who was cuddling in Miss Priscilla’s arms. “If that other Lavinia wants my place, and if she has claims and papers and things to prove she has a right to it, why, let her come and take it, that’s all.”

“That’s all,” said Miss Priscilla.

“Well, she has,” said Mr. Ward,

“Yes,” said Miss Dorinda; “go on.”

“There is only this,” said Mr. Ward: “my papers, which I have shown to you ladies, prove conclusively that Lavinia Lovell, whom I have just brought to you, is your niece; and this other child, whom you have accepted as your niece, is not such, although she is the daughter of your sister’s husband by his second wife.”

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“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla Flint, holding Ladybird closer.

“Yes,” said Ladybird, in a contented tone.

“And so,” said Mr. Ward, going on with some difficulty—“and so, Lavinia Lovell, the child I have brought to you, is your niece, and consequently dependent upon you.”

“Yes,” said Miss Priscilla Flint, still holding Ladybird close.

“Yes,” said Ladybird, still contentedly.

“And of course,” went on Mr. Ward, “you, as her aunts, and her only living relatives, are responsible for her welfare.”

“Certainly,” said Miss Dorinda, who was holding the calm, golden-haired child by the hand.

“Certainly,” said Miss Priscilla, who was holding Ladybird and Cloppy both in her arms.

“Then,” said Mr. Ward, “may I assume that you, the Misses Flint, undertake the maintenance and support of Lavinia Lovell?”

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“Certainly,” said Miss Priscilla Flint, with great dignity, although she spoke over the shoulder of a turbulent child, and a no less quivering dog—“certainly we undertake the support and maintenance of the child who is, as you have proved to us, the daughter of our sister Lavinia.”

“And what about me, aunty?” said Ladybird.

“You are ours, also, child,” said Miss Priscilla; “and I would just like to see you get away!”

“You’re a nice lady, aunty,” said Ladybird, stroking the withered cheek of Miss Priscilla. “And do you mean that it is settled that I am to live here with this new Lavinia Lovell?”

“It isn’t a new Lavinia Lovell,” said Aunt Dorinda, “for you aren’t Lavinia Lovell at all; you’re only Ladybird Lovell.”

“That’s enough for me,” said the child, chuckling; “for you know perfectly well, Aunt Dorinda, that I never wanted to be anything but Ladybird.”

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“Well, then,” said Mr. Ward, “do I understand, Miss Flint, that you will keep both of these children?”

“It seems to me,” said Miss Priscilla, grimly, “that I have no choice. Lavinia Lovell I will keep with pleasure, because she is the daughter of my sister; and Ladybird Lovell I keep because I love her.”

“And because I love you,” said Ladybird, as she flung her arms round Miss Priscilla’s neck.

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CHAPTER XX

HALF-SISTERS

The next day Chester Humphreys and Stella Russell sat talking together. They were sitting on the ground under a certain historic apple-tree, and the young man held the girl's very pretty hand in both his own.

"Stella mine," he said, "I don't like the idea of that new Lavinia taking the place of our Ladybird."

"She doesn't take her place," said Stella; "anybody can see that Ladybird has her own place with the Flint ladies, and nobody can put her out of it."

"I understand all that," said Chester, in his decided way; "but all the same, this new girl is the Flint heiress, and will eventually be the owner of Primrose Farm—that dear old place that has belonged to the Flints for generations."

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"So she will," said Stella; "and it's perfectly horrid! I think Miss Priscilla ought to deed the place to Ladybird. That child loves every nook and corner of it. In the short time she has been here she has made herself a part of it, and I can no more think of Primrose Hall without Ladybird, than without Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda."

"But in a few years," said Chester, musingly, "there will be no Miss Priscilla and Miss Dorinda."

"Of course," said Stella, "that's what I often think. And after they're gone, that place must belong to Ladybird."

"But it can't, dear," said Chester. "You see, Lavinia is the rightful heir, and of course, after the death of the old ladies, the farm must belong to her. But they aren't dead yet," he went on, cheerfully, "and meantime I have troubles of my own. Little girl, when are you going to marry me?"

"Is that one of your troubles?" said Stella, smiling straight into his brown eyes.

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"It will be a trouble," said Chester, "until you tell me the day when my troubles shall end."

"Then you'll be troubled for a good while," said Stella, still smiling, "because I'm not going to marry you for ever and ever so long."

"You're not! Well, I just guess you are, miss!"

"Indeed!" said Stella. "And, pray, what have *you* to say about it?"

“Oh, I haven’t anything to say,” responded young Humphreys, airily; “but I can scream for help; I’ll call in Ladybird.”

“Here she is now,” called Ladybird’s cheery voice. “What do you want of her?”

“Nothing,” called back Stella, quickly; “nothing but your delightful society. Come and sit with us.”

“Thank you, we will,” said Ladybird, who was accompanied by Lavinia; and the two children came and seated themselves on the grass under the old apple-tree.

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“We’re getting acquainted with each other,” said Ladybird, as, drawing a long sigh, she settled herself in a comfortable position, and rolled Cloppy into a small ball in her lap.

“How do you like the process?” said Stella, turning to Lavinia with a pleasant smile.

“She doesn’t like it a bit,” said Ladybird; “but she’s too polite to say so. You see,” she went on, “we’re half-sisters, Lavinia and I, and so we only half like each other. She only likes half the things I like. She likes me, but she doesn’t like Cloppy. She likes my aunts,—her aunts, I mean,—but she doesn’t like Primrose Hall.”

“Well, then, what of us?” said Chester, indicating himself and Stella. “I suppose she likes only one.”

“I suppose so,” said Ladybird, her eyes dancing; “but I don’t know which one.”

“Never mind,” said Stella, hastily. “We don’t want to know which one. We’re both vain enough now. But tell me, Lavinia, don’t you like Primrose Hall?”

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“No,” said Lavinia, who was of a straightforward, not to say blunt, nature, “I don’t. It’s not like England, and though my aunts are very kind, they’re not like my grandmother.”

“You mean your grandmother Lovell, I suppose?” said Chester.

“Yes,” said Lavinia—“my father’s mother.”

“My father’s mother, too,” said Ladybird. “But I don’t care a cent about her; I’d rather have my aunties, who are no relation to me, than all the mothers my father ever had.”

“Ah, but you don’t know Grandma Lovell!” said Lavinia.

“No, I don’t,” said Ladybird, “and I don’t want to.”

“But she’s such a dear!” said Lavinia, with almost the first spark of enthusiasm she had shown since coming to America.

“Why is she?” said Ladybird. “What does she do?”

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“Oh, she has such a jolly place in London, and we go out driving, and shopping, and even calling. I sit in the carriage while she goes in. Oh, we had beautiful times, and it’s very different from this dull, stupid, farmy old place!”

“Yes, it *is* different,” said Ladybird, seriously, “I know. I know all about shopping, and calling, and all those things. I did it in India, but I didn’t like it one bit; and I think it’s a thousand times nicer to be at Primrose Hall, with orchards and brooks and trees and birds and sunshine, and my aunts.”

“Oh, *do* you?” said Lavinia. “Well, I’d rather have one year of London life than a thousand years of Primrose Hall.”

“Well, then, you’re all right,” said Ladybird, “for probably you can get one year of London life again before you die.”

“I hope so, I’m sure,” said Lavinia, so earnestly that they all laughed.

“And if I can help you in any way,” said Ladybird, “I shall be very glad to.”

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“I never saw anybody you couldn’t help,” said Stella; whereupon, for some reason, Chester kissed Ladybird, and they all went back to Primrose Hall for dinner.

After dinner, the Flint ladies asked Stella and Mr. Humphreys into the drawing-room for a conference, from which Ladybird and Lavinia were excluded.

“I have had a letter,” began Miss Priscilla, “from London—from Mrs. Lovell, the mother of Jack Lovell, who married our sister Lavinia. In it she says that she is old and alone, and that she wants one of her son’s daughters to live with her. She suggests that Ladybird should come, because, she says, we will naturally want to keep our own niece ourselves. She seems so positive of this that she takes the situation quite for granted and says that we are to send Ladybird over to her at the first opportunity. Now, of course, she is quite right in stating, as she does, that Lavinia is our own blood-niece, while Ladybird is no relation to us whatever; but she is not right in assuming that for those reasons we love Lavinia best.”

“Lavinia seems to be a very sweet girl,” said Stella.

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And Miss Dorinda said: “She is indeed a sweet, modest, amiable young girl.”

“She is all of that,” said Miss Priscilla; “and, on the other hand, Ladybird is a fiery, mischievous little scamp; and yet I suppose it’s because I’ve known her longer, but somehow I love Ladybird a thousand times the most.”

The portières at the doorway parted and Ladybird came in. Calmly walking toward the open piano, she seated herself on the keyboard of that instrument with her feet on the piano-stool. This position she took and kept in such a serene, gentle way that it seemed, after all, the only correct place for her to sit.

“No, aunty,” she said placidly, resting her chin on her little, thin brown hand, “it isn’t because you’ve known me longer than Lavinia that you love me more; it’s because I suit you better. Lavinia is a dear girl, and I like her—pretty well; but she isn’t our sort; and somehow she hasn’t any gumption about fun.”

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Ladybird was not familiar with the phrase “sense of humor,” or she would have used it right here.

“And so,” she went on cheerfully, “I hear you’ve had a letter from old Mrs. Lovell.”

“Your grandmother, Ladybird,” said Miss Priscilla, a little severely. “And how did you hear it?”

“Yes, my grandmother,” said Ladybird. “And I heard it by listening at the hall door.”

“You’re a naughty girl,” said Miss Dorinda.

“I am,” said Ladybird, serenely; “no nice old lady in London would want such a naughty girl as I am, would she?”

“That doesn’t matter, Ladybird,” said Miss Priscilla. “And you must stop your nonsense now; for your grandmother Lovell has really sent for you, and you must go to her.”

“Indeed!” said Ladybird, with a most derisive accent. “*Indeed!*”

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“Be quiet, Ladybird,” went on Miss Flint; “I am in earnest now—very much in earnest. Mrs. Lovell has sent for you; for naturally she wants one of her grandchildren with her, and Lavinia, being our niece, and the rightful heir to the Flint estates, must, of course, stay with us. By the way, where is the child?”

“She’s up in her room,” said Ladybird; “and she’s crying her eyes out because she can’t go back to England and live with her grandmother Lovell. But she’ll get over it. Oh, yes, she’ll get over it! She’ll change her mind, and she’ll love to live with her Primrose aunties; and she’ll forget all about her London grandmother! Oh, yes! *Oh, yes!* OH, YES!”

Ladybird had bounded down from the piano-stool, and with her eyes flashing, and her voice rising to a higher pitch at each word, she flew out of the room, and was heard stamping up the stairs.

“Something must be done, Clops!” she said, shaking her dog almost viciously as she reached her own room. “Something must be done, and it must be done right away! Right here and now, and we’re the ones to do it, Cloppy-dog!”

Apparently the thing to be done was to write a letter, for Ladybird, with the force and flutter of a small cyclone, flew to her desk and began to write. She blotted and tore up many sheets of paper. She made Cloppy’s existence an exceedingly uncomfortable one. She reduced her small pocket-handkerchief to a damp string; but she finally achieved a result which seemed to her successful, and this was it:

TO MY GRANDMOTHER LOVELL,
MY DEAR GRANDMOTHER:

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I am Ladybird Lovell, the daughter of your son Jack’s second wife. Perhaps you think I’m a nice child, but I am not, and this letter is to warn you. I am very, *very* bad; in fact, I am a turnmigrant of all the vices. Only to-day my Aunt Dorinda, who is sweetness itself, said I was the naughtiest child she ever saw. I think she has never seen any other, except Lavinia Lovell, my lovely and amiable half-sister and your beloved granddaughter. Which is the reason I am writing this to say I am quite sure you would prefer the gentle, charming, and delicious Lavinia, to the bad, naughty, and altogether disreputable Me.

And I am, my dear madam,
Your disobedient servant,
LADYBIRD LOVELL.

P. S. Lavinia wants to go back to you just fearfully; she’s crying about it.

CHAPTER XXI

AN ORCHARD WEDDING

After Ladybird's letter was safely on its way to her grandmother, the child told the Flint ladies what she had done, and Miss Priscilla decided to await the outcome of Ladybird's communication before sending one of her own to Mrs. Lovell.

Matters went on quietly enough at Primrose Hall. The two children got on amiably, though by nature as far apart as the poles.

Chester came down often, and Stella had decided that her wedding should take place the following spring.

About the middle of September the letter for which Ladybird had been looking came. It was addressed to Miss Priscilla Flint, and was a most businesslike proposition, to the effect that Mrs. Lovell very much preferred her grandchild named Lavinia to the one called Ladybird, and if the Misses Flint were willing to renounce legally all claim to Lavinia, Mrs. Lovell would be only too glad to adopt the child and leave the Misses Flint in undisputed possession of her other grandchild, called Ladybird. A condition attached to this arrangement, however, was that, since the will of the child's grandfather Flint entailed to her the title of the Primrose estate, the Misses Flint should pay to the estate of Lavinia Lovell such a sum of money as should represent her lawful inheritance of Primrose Hall, or such other Flint property as the Misses Flint might possess.

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All of this arrangement found great favor in the eyes of those most concerned, except the clause relating to the inheritance; for the Flint ladies, although possessed of Primrose Hall and Farm, had no more money than was sufficient to maintain their home in such manner as they deemed appropriate.

The case was laid before Chester Humphreys, and he promised to think about it, which, in his bright lexicon of youth, meant to discuss it with Stella.

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"You see, my dear," he said as they talked it over, "the Primrose estate is not such a very great affair, after all, and it seems to me that as you and I owe our happiness primarily to Ladybird, there is only one thing to be done."

"Can you afford it?" said Stella, simply.

"I certainly can," replied Chester. "I can easily afford to buy Primrose Hall from the Flint ladies and settle it on Ladybird. The money can go to Lavinia, and she can return it to her grandmother Lovell. Then Ladybird will own Primrose Hall. The aunties can stay there as long as they live, and we'll all be

happy.”

“Two of us will, at any rate,” said Stella, as Chester kissed her.

“Not until the two are one,” he responded.

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When the plan was submitted to the Flint ladies, they hesitated more than a little. It seemed a fearful thing to have the Flint property pass into other hands. But when those hands were Ladybird’s little brown claws, it altered the matter, and they finally agreed.

Lavinia was calmly pleased, and Ladybird was ecstatic.

“Chester,” she cried, “my own sweet, darling Chester, are you really going to do this for me?”

“I am,” said Chester, “in token of my deep gratitude.”

“Yes,” said Ladybird, nodding her wise little head, “I know, and you ought to be grateful. For nobody but me could ever have got Stella for you.”

“Quite so,” said Chester.

“And now,” said Ladybird, “since you have decided to do this, why can’t it be done at once?”

“It can,” said Miss Priscilla.

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“Certainly,” said Chester; “the deeds can be drawn up at once.”

“And can I go to London?” said Lavinia, with more amiability than she had shown at any time since her arrival.

“You can go,” said Miss Priscilla, “as soon as we can find any one to take you. You’re enough to drive any one distracted, the way you worry and fret about going back home.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” cried Ladybird. “I didn’t mean only to draw up the deeds at once: I mean, why can’t Chester and Stella be married right away? What’s the use of waiting?”

“Ladybird,” said Miss Priscilla, sternly, “you promised me you’d stop meddling with Stella’s affairs.”

“Yes, I know, aunty, and so I will after she’s married. Chester can do it then; can’t you, Chester?”

“I can, indeed,” said the young man, heartily.

“And you’d like to begin right away, wouldn’t you?”

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“I would, indeed,” he replied.

“Then that’s what I say,” went on Ladybird. “You two get married now and go to Europe on your wedding-trip, and you can take Lavinia over with you and leave her at her grandmother’s.”

“I don’t think that’s at all a bad scheme,” said Chester, looking at Stella.

“Ridiculous nonsense!” replied the girl. “We’re to be married next spring. That’s my ultimatum, and you can’t over-rule it this time, Ladybird!”

“Can’t I?” said Ladybird. “Well, maybe I can’t. But if I were you, Stella Russell, and a beautiful young man wanted me to marry him, I wouldn’t keep him waiting a thousand years. And if I were you, Mr. Chester Humphreys, and wanted to marry a dear, beautiful, lovely angel like Stella, I’d just do it—that’s what I’d do!”

Nothing more was said then on the subject; but the ridiculous remark of the absurd child so affected Mr. Humphreys that that evening, alone with his betrothed, he said a little diffidently:

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“Ladybird’s arguments seem to me at least worthy of consideration.”

“Then let us consider them,” said Stella, promptly; and before the consideration was concluded, those two foolish young people had decided that Ladybird’s advice was wisdom, and that the only possible date for their marriage was not later than the following month.

“Of course,” said Ladybird, when told of this decision—“of course I knew you’d do it. There isn’t anything else to do; and we’ll have the wedding out in the orchard, under the apple-trees, and Lavinia and I will be bridesmaids, and oh, it will be perfectly lovely!”

It *was* perfectly lovely. The pretty outdoor wedding did full justice to all the traditions of Primrose Hall in the matter of festivities.

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“The wedding under the trees”

Stella in white muslin and blue ribbons was a lovely country bride, and Lavinia and Ladybird, in more white muslin and more blue ribbons, were lovely country bridesmaids. Their rôles, however, were decidedly different, for while Lavinia was quietly sweet and amiably indifferent, Ladybird was the mainspring of the whole affair. She was more than ever like a will-o'-the-wisp. She attended to everything, and flew here and there with sparkling eyes and burning cheeks, in a wild state of excitement.

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“Isn’t it just perfect?” she cried, tumbling into Aunt Priscilla’s arms as the carriage drove away with the bride and groom. “Now they’ll go off on their honeymoon, but they won’t stay more than a fortnight. Chester promised me that. And then they’ll come back, and we’ll see them again, and then they’ll go to England and take Lavinia. Of course I like Lavinia; she’s very, very nice; but she wants so much to go to England that I can’t help being glad to have her go. No, that isn’t true,” she said as her aunt looked at her inquiringly; “I do like her, but I

don't want her here, and the real reason I'm glad she's going is because I want to live here at Primrose Hall alone with you and Aunt Dorinda. Isn't that what *you* want, aunty?"

Miss Priscilla Flint hesitated. The child Lavinia was the daughter of her own sister, and yet—

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"Say true, aunty!" said Ladybird.

So Miss Priscilla Flint said "true."

"It *is* what I want, dearie," she said. "They say blood is thicker than water, but I don't know about that. If we had known Lavinia first, we probably would have cared more for her than for you. But after you came and twined your foolish, ridiculous little self around our old hearts, we wanted no one else. I don't know exactly what it is myself: there must be some reason."

"It is because I love you," said Ladybird, simply.

Transcriber's Notes

- Copyright notice provided as in the original—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.

[The end of *The Staying Guest* by Carolyn Wells]