

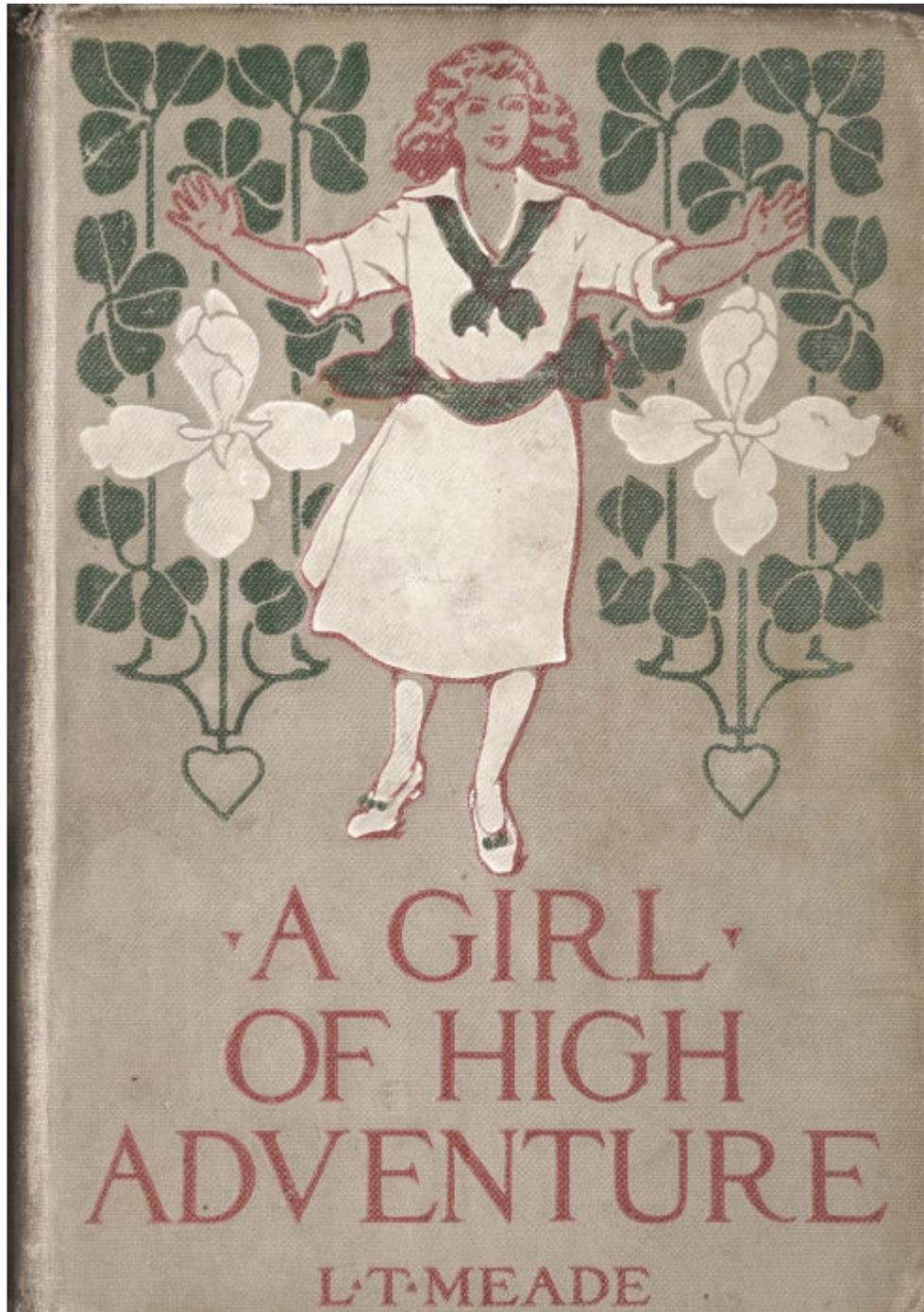


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Meade, L. T. A Girl of High Adventure.

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With these words, he left the somewhat desolate little girl.—[Page 30.](#)

A GIRL OF HIGH ADVENTURE

BY

MRS. L. T. MEADE

AUTHOR OF "OCEANA'S GIRLHOOD," "A WILD IRISH GIRL," "THE GIRLS
OF MERTON COLLEGE," "FOR DEAR DAD," "KITTY O'DONOVAN,"
"PEGGY FROM KERRY," "THE CHESTERTON GIRL GRAD-
UATES," "THE GIRLS OF KING'S ROYAL," "THE
LADY OF JERRY BOY'S DREAMS," "A
PLUCKY GIRL," "THE QUEEN
OF JOY," ETC., ETC.

*WITH FOUR HALF-TONE DRAWINGS
BY CHARLES L. WRENN*

NEW YORK
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With these words, he left the somewhat desolate little girl	<i>Frontispiece</i>
She nestled more snugly than ever into her grandfather's arms	100
Never was there anything quite so delightful as that ride	207
They did find wonderful mosses and * * * snow drops and even primroses	349

[Pg ii]

My noble, lovely, little Peggy,
Let this my First Epistle beg ye,
At dawn of morn, and close of even,
To lift your heart and hands to Heaven.
In double duty say your prayer;
"Our Father" first, then "*Notre Père*."
And, dearest child, along the day,
In everything you do and say,
Obey and please my lord and lady,
So God shall love and angels aid ye.
If to these precepts you attend,
No second letter need I send,
And so I rest your constant friend.
Matthew Prior.

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[Pg 1]

A GIRL OF HIGH ADVENTURE

CHAPTER I. THE CHILD WHO WON HEARTS.

Marguerite St. Juste was Irish on her mother's side, who was born of the Desmonds of Desmondstown in the County Kerry. Marguerite's father was a French Comte, whose grandfather had been one of the victims of the guillotine.

Little Marguerite lived with an uncle, who was really only that relation by marriage; his name was the Reverend John Mansfield. He had a large living in a large town about fifty miles from London, and he adopted Marguerite shortly after the death of her parents. This tragedy happened when she was very young, almost a baby. She did not in the least remember her father, whose dancing black eyes and merry ways had endeared him to all who knew him. Nor did she recall a single fact with regard to her mother—one of those famous Desmonds, who had joined the rebels in the great insurrection of '97, and whose people still lived and [Pg 2]prospered and were gay and merry of the merry on their somewhat tattered and worn-out country estate.

Marguerite adored "Uncle Jack," as she called her supposed uncle. She had a knack of turning this grave and esteemed gentleman, so to speak, round her little finger. It was the Rev. John and his wife Priscilla who taught little Marguerite all she knew. She adored her uncle; she did not like his wife. A sterner or stricter woman than Priscilla Mansfield it would be hard to find. Her husband, it is true, considered her admirable, for she discovered whenever his parishioners tried to impose upon him, and kept the women of his parish well up to the mark.

Mrs. Mansfield was really a good woman, but her goodness was of a kind which must surely try such a nature as little Marguerite's, or Margot's, as her uncle called her. Mrs. Mansfield did her duty, it is true, but her good husband's parishioners dreaded her although they obeyed her. Her husband praised her, but wondered in his heart of hearts why more people did not love her. In especial he could not understand why little Margot objected to her. As a matter of fact, if it were not for Uncle Jack, this small girl would have found her life intolerably dull. She had managed, nobody quite knew how, to get into the very centre of the heart of the grave, patient-looking [Pg 3]clergyman and, because of this fact which she knew and he knew, she got on quite well, otherwise—but little Margot did not dare to think of otherwise. Was she not herself a mixture of both

Irish and French, and could there be any two nations more sure to produce a child like Margot—a child full of life and fearlessness, of fun and daring?

She longed inexpressibly for companionship, but young people were not permitted to visit at the Rectory. She dreamed long dreams of her father's people in the Château St. Juste, an old place near Arles, in South France, and of her mother's people at Desmondstown—an old estate gone almost to rack and ruin, for where was the money to keep it up?

Mr. Mansfield was well aware of the state to which both families had been reduced, but when his little darling, as he called Margot, liked to talk about her father's and mother's people, he invariably encouraged her; that is, provided her aunt was not present. Mrs. Mansfield snapped up the child whenever her own people were talked of. She assured her that both families had gone to the dogs and did not even remember her existence.

"You ought to be very thankful to have an uncle and aunt like myself and your Uncle John," said the good woman. "If my John was not what he is, you would be nothing more nor less than a miserable [Pg 4] little beggar. See that you obey us both and do your best to return the great kindnesses that we show you."

Little Margot St. Juste found it quite easy to respond to her uncle's kindness, but her aunt's was a totally different matter. Mrs. Mansfield's kindness consisted of "Don't, don't, *don't*," repeated with increasing energy from morning to night.

"Don't attempt to stand on the hearth-rug, you bad child." "Don't look so silly; get your seam and begin to sew." "Don't stare at me out of those eyes of yours; you make me quite sick when you do, and above all things don't make a fool of your poor, overworked uncle. He has no right to teach you Latin and Greek. Such languages are not meant for women and I shall tell him so, if you don't do it yourself. Do you hear me?"

But Margot was always coming across what she called "last straws" and this happened to be one. She was not afraid of her aunt, she only hated her. Now she went straight up to her and stared fully into her eyes.

"What's the matter with you, you nasty, rude little beggar?"

"I'm *not* a beggar, auntie," replied Margot. "I'm going to ask Uncle Jack about that. He always tells me the truth."

[Pg 5]

Now Mrs. Mansfield, severe as she was, had a certain wholesome fear of her good husband.

"You dare not repeat what I say," was her remark. "I—I'll whip you if you do."

"Then I'll have that, also, to tell Uncle Jack," replied Margot. "Auntie, you had best leave me alone. I intend to learn Latin and Greek, and I won't say a word of what you said just now to Uncle Jack if you'll let me alone. See, auntie, you had best for your own sake."

Margot gave the angry woman a bright glance of triumph and walked out of the room with the air of a small conqueror. At this time she was eleven years of age but looked younger and not the least like the ordinary English girl. Her little round face was slightly,

very slightly, brown in tint, with a brilliant rose colour on each small cheek. Her eyes were large, soft, and black as night. Her eyebrows were well arched and also black. She had a charming little mouth and quantities of thick curly black hair.

This was the small child who, to a great extent, ruled the Rectory. It is true that Mrs. Mansfield stormed at her a great deal, but Margot was accustomed to her harsh words and by degrees took little notice of them. She was naturally very brave; she did not know what fear meant. She tried to do her best for auntie, but as auntie would never be [Pg 6]satisfied she comforted herself with Uncle Jack. It was easy to get on with him for Uncle Jack and Margot loved each other with a great love.

The study at the Rectory was a very shabby and small room, but to Margot it seemed like Heaven. She sat there day after day for several hours, busy over her Latin and Greek. She did not care in the least for these languages, but they ensured her being for some little time with Uncle Jack, and then, when the lessons were over, the treat followed. It was that treat which supported Margot through the many trials of her small life.

She had arranged this treat for herself some little time ago and Mrs. Mansfield knew nothing about it. Always when the last Greek verb was finished, and the lesson books put away on a shelf which Margot kept in perfect order for the purpose, the little girl used to skip away to the kitchen and there coax Hannah, the cook, to give her two cups of tea and two slices of cake. With these she returned to the study and then deliberately locked the door. The tea and the cakes were placed close to Uncle Jack. Margot swept his books and manuscripts carefully to one side and then, having carefully fed him first with tea and cake, proceeded to munch her own portion.

She was always rather quick in eating her slice[Pg 7] of very plain cake. Then she put all signs of the feast away behind a newspaper, knowing that the cook would fetch them by-and-bye. After this she climbed on her uncle's knee, clasped her little arms round his neck and began her invariable request,

"Now, Jacko, darling——"

"You oughtn't to call me Jacko, little heart's love."

"I like it," repeated the child. "I wouldn't say it for all the world before her, but it makes us sort of equal, don't you understand? You're Jacko and I'm Margot. We are playmates, you know. You are not a great learned clergyman any longer. You are just the playmate of little Margot. Come along, Jacko, don't let's waste time. I know she's out. She's visiting all the poor people; it's her day for collecting their pennies. We'll have a whole lovely hour if you don't waste time. It's the Irish turn to-day; tell me all you can about the Desmonds. My mother was a Desmond, wasn't she?"

"She was, sure," said the Rector, who happened to be an Irishman himself, but was careful to keep that fact a secret except when he and Margot talked together.

"And the Desmonds were mighty chiefs—great warriors?" continued Margot. "They feared nobody[Pg 8] nor nothing. All the women were beautiful and all the men were brave. Now go on, Jacko, go on."

"The castle had a portcullis," said Uncle Jack, and then he burst into imaginary stories of the Desmonds, whom he hardly knew at all.

"You forget what you are talking about to-day," said Margot, taking up the thread. "As you enter by the front door you find yourself in a great hall, covered all over with armour—perfect suits of armour."

"Yes, of course I forget," said Uncle Jack, "and the hall goes up as high as the roof, and there is the ingle nook, where the fire is never let out day nor night."

"Never—never let out," muttered Margot. "Tell me about the men now, Uncle Jack."

"Oh, bless your heart, puss, they are fine fellows, those Desmonds—big and broad and with sparkling eyes."

"And the chief is called 'The Desmond'?" interrupted little Margot.

"Yes, that's true enough. It's a very fine title to be sure."

"And what sort are the ladies?" asked Margot.

"Bless you, child, something like yourself, only perhaps not quite so dark, but to hear 'em laugh and to hear 'em sing would make the water stand in your[Pg 9] eyes, that it would—just for the joy of it; you understand, Margot."

"Yes, uncle, and my mother was one?"

"She was that, and the best of 'em all."

"Now, describe every inch of her, Uncle Jack," said Margot. "Begin—begin, go on—go on."

Now it so happened that the Rev. John Mansfield was not famous for descriptions, but he did draw a certain picture of Kathleen Desmond which was not in the least like that young lady, but which abundantly satisfied her child. Her cheeks grew redder than ever as she listened and she panted slightly as she snuggled against her beloved uncle.

"My mother must have been quite perfect," said little Margot. "Are there any of them left now, Uncle Jack?"

"Any of them left, child? Why, there is Norah and Bridget and Eileen, and there are three fine boys as well, and there's 'himself' as strong as ever, and madam, his wife, who has the finest lace in the county."

"I *would* like to know them," said Margot. "Why can't I get to know them, Uncle Jack?"

"Because they are just too poor to have ye with them, my little *asthore*—that's the truth of the matter. You have got to stay with Uncle Jack and make the best of it."

[Pg 10]

"But if I went for one week—couldn't I stay with them for one week, uncle? I do so dreadfully want to know Norah and Bridget and Eileen."

"'Tis aunts they are to ye, my pretty."

"Yes, and what are the names of the boys, and what are they to me?"

"Uncles to be sure, *acushla machree*. There's Fergus, called after The Desmond, and there's Bruce and there's Malachi."

"Malachi—that does sound a funny name," said Margot.

"It belonged to the finest of the old Irish kings," said Uncle Jack, and he began to hum the well-known tune "*When Malachi Wore His Collar of Gold*."

"There now, that's enough," said Margot. "You are wonderful to-day, Jacko, you are quite wonderful. But can't we go to see them while auntie is away?"

"There's no money. *Acushla machree*, there isn't a penny."

"Look here, Jacko, and don't talk about there being no money. These are mine—they belong to me."

The child thrust her hand into her little pocket.

"Auntie thinks she keeps them for me, but I took them away my lone self ages and ages back and she[Pg 11] has never missed them. They belonged to my father, who was the young Comte St. Juste. See, this seal and this watch and chain and this necklet he bought for mother, and these bracelets. We can sell 'em and get plenty of money to go to Desmondstown."

"Why to be sure, so we could," said Uncle Jack, "but you make me feel like a wicked old man, little puss."

"No, no, you are a perfect darling. Promise faithful and true that you'll take me to Desmondstown when auntie goes away to visit her sick friend. She's going in a week or fortnight and she'll be away for a whole fortnight at least. I was naughty, last night, Jacko, and I eavesdropped when she was telling cook. She's going Friday week and we're going to Desmondstown on Friday week."

"Listen to me, Margot. I can't lie to you, child; it is a thing that couldn't be. I have to stay here to attend to my parochial work and I cannot leave even if I want to, but I'll tell you what I'll do, little puss. I'll sell just as many of these things as are required—not nearly all, for all won't be wanted, and I'll take you myself and I'll put you on board the steamer and look out for a kind Irish lady, who'll put you into the right train for Desmondstown. Now, for goodness' sake, let me sweep these things into a drawer. I hear herself coming in. We[Pg 12] mustn't let a word on to her, child, and you must be back with me faithful and true before she returns."

"That I will, Jacko, you may be sure of that."

The treasures were locked into one of Uncle Jack's drawers. The door of the study was unlocked and little Margot ran out into the garden. She kept singing in her high, clear voice, "*When Malachi Wore His Collar of Gold*." She felt beside herself with happiness.

[Pg 13]

CHAPTER II. A VISIT TO IRELAND.

It so happened that after his last interview with little Margot St. Juste, the Rev. John Mansfield became subject to a strange uneasiness of conscience. Never before had he attempted to do anything underhand. He was a God-fearing and excellent man and was respected and loved by all his parishioners. Mrs. Mansfield was respected and not loved, but it was impossible to see much of the Rev. John without feeling his sympathy, and acknowledging that burning love for all human souls which filled his breast.

Nevertheless this most excellent man was going to act in a deceitful way. He was going to do something, and that something was to be concealed from the wife of his bosom. He had long felt the injustice of keeping little Margot apart from her relations, and when the child pleaded and pleaded as she alone knew how, and even provided means that would secure the necessary cash, he could resist her no longer.

[Pg 14]

Nevertheless the good man was miserable. His sermons seemed to have lost their power. He walked with a decided stoop and a heavy expression on his face, and Mrs. Mansfield wondered if her husband, that most excellent John, was suddenly developing old age.

Meanwhile little Margot was in the highest of high spirits. She was more attentive than usual to her aunt.

"It is quite easy to be good when you are happy," thought little Margot, and she sang with greater spirit than ever "*When Malachi Wore His Collar of Gold.*" But when she ventured to allude to the subject to Jacko, he desired her to hush. He spoke with a certain severity which she had never before noticed on his face. Nevertheless when he saw a look of distress creep into her brilliant, rosy cheeks, he took her on his knee, assured her that all was quite—quite right, that his promise was his promise—only he would rather not speak of it.

The Friday so full of events drew on apace. The house was to receive a thorough spring cleaning. Mrs. Mansfield would be absent exactly a fortnight. During that time Margot was to be a very good child and look after her dear, kind uncle, without whose aid she would be nothing but a beggar maid, and [Pg 15] Margot promised to do her very best for Uncle Jack, her black eyes twinkling as she spoke.

Mrs. Mansfield left home early in the morning and, the moment she had gone, Margot danced into her uncle's study.

"Jacko, Jacko," she cried, "she's gone—she's gone! Good riddance, say I. Now we are going to begin our fun."

"You must not talk of your aunt like that," said Uncle John. "Are your things packed, *acushla machree?*"

"To be sure," said Margot. "Dear, kind Cook Hannah helped me. She brought an old leather trunk down to my room and it is chock full—chock full, Jacko. I'm taking presents to my three aunts, Norah, Bridget and Eileen, and to my uncles, Fergus and Bruce and Malachi. I'd like well, Jacko, that you gave me money to buy a new pipe for The Desmond and something for madam as well. I don't know what great Irish ladies like. Do you think a big box of candy would suit her when she can't sleep o' nights?"

"I would not buy any more presents if I were you, my pet," said Uncle Jack. "Now, see here, I have managed everything. It is very wicked of me, but I'm doing it."

[Pg 16]

"It is nice to be wicked sometimes," said Margot, with untold fun flashing in her beautiful eyes.

"No, no, little one, it is wrong to be wicked, and I am deceiving the best of women; I feel it terribly on my conscience."

"Who is the best of women, Jacko, darling?" inquired little Margot.

"There now, then, I'll tell you if you'll listen to me. It's that aunt of yours, Priscilla Mansfield."

"Oh!" exclaimed Margot. "Jacko, your conscience is too tender. It wants some kisses. Three kisses on each cheek—three kisses on your forehead and three on your lips. Now you are better, are you not?"

"Yes, I'm better," replied Uncle Jack, "but remember, Margot, *asthore*, that you have got to obey me to the very letter."

"Course," replied Margot. "I couldn't do anything else."

"Well then, you listen. You stay at Desmondstown in the county of Kerry for one week and no longer, and during that time you're on no account to speak against your aunt to the Desmonds. This is Friday. You will get to Desmondstown to-morrow. To-morrow week I'll be waiting on the pier to get you off the steamer."

"Yes, uncle, I'll do everything."

[Pg 17]

"Well, child, I have ordered a cab to fetch us to the railway station at 11 o'clock. What's more, I have written to The Desmond to tell him to look out for you. I haven't sold many of your things, my child, but I've got the price of your return ticket all the way to Desmondstown and five shillings over, in case you should want some trifles on the journey. Only remember that you must not waste your precious money. 'Waste not, want not'—that's an excellent proverb, Margot."

"Oh, Jacko, you are getting so like Aunt Priscilla. Don't—don't say any more."

"I won't, my colleen, but see! have you got a pocket in your little skirt?"

"Yes, to be sure, and I sewed up the hole yesterday when Auntie Priscilla wasn't looking."

"Let me feel that it is all nice and tight," said the Rector. He put in his big hand, pronounced the pocket safe enough, and then inserted a tiny purse which he had bought for Margot and into which he put five shillings.

"Here's your purse, Margot child, and here's your money, and when I buy your ticket you must be sure to keep the return half safe in your purse or you'll never come back to your own poor Jacko again."

"Oh, won't I!" said Margot. "I have feet and I can use them—trot, trot, trot, trot; look Jacko!"

[Pg 18]

"You can't trot on the sea, child."

"I'll keep everything safe as safe," repeated Margot. "I'll do every single thing that you want me to do and you may look out for me to-morrow week on the pier. I shall know all about Norah and Bridget and Eileen and Fergus and Bruce and Malachi by then. Oh, shan't I feel rich and aren't you just the darlinest and best of uncles?"

"Run upstairs now, child, and put on your hat. The cab will be round in a moment."

Margot disappeared.

"Bless her little heart," murmured the clergyman, "I'll just miss her terrible, but it stands to reason that she should get to know her own grandparents and her own uncles and aunts. I suppose I'm doing wrong but I can't help myself. May God forgive a weak old man. I haven't the righteous courage of my Priscilla."

Little Margot was a delightful companion in the cab. She was quite as fascinating in the train, which bore them at last to that part of the coast where a steamer sped daily from Fishguard to Rosslare. The old-fashioned trunk was hoisted on the shoulders of a sturdy porter. From him it disappeared by means of a crane into some unknown and apparently awful depths.

The Rev. John looked round him anxiously. Was [Pg 19] there anyone on board who would take care of the little girl and put her into the right train for Kerry? At last he came across a man who undoubtedly hailed from the Emerald Isle. He had bushy whiskers and small, twinkling grey eyes; a wide-cut mouth, and no nose to speak of. Uncle John looked at him, considered him and finally made up his mind to speak to him.

He had hoped to come across a respectable lady of his little darling's own rank in life, but did not see one. Meanwhile the stranger's eyes twinkled more than ever and at last he came up to Uncle John and of his own accord held out a huge paw.

"How bain't I mistook or bain't I not, but be ye never Jacky Mansfield, son of Farmer Mansfield, bless his sowl? Why he was took years and years ago. Stroked he was, and the stroke was so mighty it took the breath out of him, and he didn't live the night out. He's all right, though—he died a good Christian man. Are ye comin' over to Ireland thinkin' to see him, John Mansfield? for ye won't, he's not there. 'It's a poor, disthressful country' we 'as in these times, John Mansfield. You are best out of it. I couldn't help noticin' ye, seein' as we stole so many wild birds' eggs together."

"Let it be," said the Reverend John. "I'm glad to see ye, Phinias Maloney. I'm not goin' to Ireland [Pg 20] at all, but I want someone very badly to look after this little maid here. She's my niece in a kind of fashion and I've had the bringing of her up since her parents died. She wants to go to Desmondstown. You must remember her mother, Phinias?"

"Remember her?" said the Irishman, "remember the 'light of the morning'? She was all that and more. But they are in a poor way now at Desmondstown, although they manage to keep together. The gentlemen are all for the huntin' and so for that matter are the

young ladies, too. Young, I call them, and will, while I live. Why ever should age be added to their burdens? And so this little missie is own grandchild to The Desmond?"

"She is that," replied the Reverend John, "and I'm sending her over to see her own people for one week and no more. I'd take it as a high favour, Phinias, if you would put her into the right train for Kerry and see after her a little bit when she lands, for she is only a wee colleen—half French, half Irish. You might help me that much for the sake of old times, Phinias Maloney."

"Have no fear, man," was Phinias' reply. "I keep me father's old farm and have a wife and three fine childer. They are frettin' like anythin' at me leaving of 'em, but I had to go to get praties that'll [Pg 21] yield a good harvest. What did ye say the little miss's name was?"

"Marguerite St. Juste."

"Ah, well, I can't quite get my tongue round that, but I'll call her Magsie—her'll understand Magsie—it's a good sounding, sensible title wid no foreign blood about it."

Accordingly Uncle John placed his pretty little treasure in very capable hands. Phinias Maloney was a very rough-looking man, but he was the soul of honesty and good nature, and had the highest respect in the world for the Desmonds of Desmondstown. He went and had a chat with the captain, who, as a great favour, allowed him to sit on deck with little Margot. But Margot's black eyes were brimful of tears. She was by no means taken by the look of Phinias, and her frantic desire to see her grandparents and aunts and uncles well nigh vanished when she parted with her beloved Jacko.

"Now then, missie, we'll have a fine time," said Phinias. "The wather smooth as a pond and you going to the most elegant place in the whole of the county of Kerry. I can't make out how 'himself' is your uncle, but there! I don't bother me head wid what I don't understand. He's a good fellow is John Mansfield."

"He's the best man in all the world," said [Pg 22] Margot, crushing back her tears with an effort. "He's a very, very holy man, but my aunt, she's a wicked woman. I mustn't tell the Desmonds about her, Phinias, but she is a very wicked woman, and but for me, that holy saint wouldn't live long. It's me he really loves. He pretends to love her, but that is just because of his holiness. Are you a holy man, Phinias Maloney?"

"Ach, not me!" said Phinias. "I has enough to do without bein' howly as well. My poor knees wouldn't stand it"

"What do you mean by that, Phinias, aren't you a bit silly?" said Margot. She had begun to get over a little of her grief and to enjoy a talk with her peculiar-looking companion. "What do you mean? Speak, man," she repeated.

"I manes this, missie *asthore*. Howly men are most found on their bent knees wid their heads thrown back cryin' out to God A'mighty to have mercy on miserable sinners."

"Uncle Jacko never does anything quite so foolish," replied Margot. "You don't understand him, and we won't talk of him any more."

"I like that," replied Phinias, "when him and me, we took eggs out of every wild bird's nest in the county."

"Well, then, it was you that tempted him," said [Pg 23] Margot. "It was a bitter, cruel thing to do, and you ought to be 'shamed of yourself, Phinias."

"Lawk a mercy, listen to the bit thing," cried Phinias, with a hearty laugh. "Him and me was ekal in those days, though now he's above me—no doubt on that."

"He's a holy man, and you wouldn't have the right to tie his shoes," replied Margot.

Phinias gazed with some complacency and amusement at the quaint little figure. Presently he turned the conversation to long and exciting talks about Desmondstown and the young ladies and the young gentlemen and old madam and The Desmond himself.

"Ye'll have to be mighty particular when ye gets there, little miss. The Desmond won't stand any freedoms like. He's as proud as proud can be, though he's got nothing else to be proud of but that he's *The Desmond*, so ye must mind your p's and q's. Don't ye play any pranks on him, missie, or it'll turn out bad for ye."

"I won't, Phinias, I won't indeed. I'm going to be quite a good girl on account of that holy man, my uncle. But please tell me what Malachi is like."

"Oh," said Phinias, clapping his horny hands and giving vent to a roaring laugh. "There's a boy for ye, if ye like. There ain't a boy in any part of Ireland, from east to west, from north to south, [Pg 24] can beat Malachi; why he could sit a horse that would throw anyone else off its back in a twinklin'. The horse may buck-jump, may do any mortal thing he likes to do, but once Malachi's acrost him, 'tis no use and he knows it, for there Malachi'll stay."

"And tell me about the others, please," said Margot.

"Oh, the ladies, ye mane. They're young, mortal young—they are babes of innocence. They don't know the world and they don't want to. Malachi breaks in horses for 'em, and they ride and ride and ride, and that's about all they can do. Fergus, the wan who is to take the title after his father, is more severe like, but he's a handsome lad for all that, and so is Bruce for that matter."

"And do they all live at Desmondstown?" inquired Margot.

"To be sure, and where else would they live!"

"But they can't be so young if my mother was their sister," said Margot.

Phinias bent towards the little girl.

"Whist, missie, whist, *mavourneen*" he said. "We never talks of birthdays in the ould country. Age! We don't know what age is. If we ever knew it we forgets it. We are all young—young as new-born chicks. Now then, missie, you'd best go and lie down, for it may be gettin' a bit rough [Pg 25] by-the-bye, and we're due at Rosslare early in the morning."

Margot sat very still for a few minutes.

"Phinias," she said, then, "I have a little money, a very little money by me. Can I have a bite and a sup to eat and drink?"

"To be sure ye can; for sartin ye can. What 'ud ye fancy now? A drop of whisky I'd say, or a bottle of Guinness' stout."

"Oh, no, please; may I have a cup of tea and a little bread and butter?"

"I'll get it for ye, honey bird, and for the Lord's sake don't mention the word *age* in Ould Ireland. There ain't sich a thing. Mind me now and be careful!"

"I will," said Margot, "I'll be very careful."

Presently the farmer returned with some very uninteresting tea and bread and butter, which he offered to the little girl. She was hungry and faint, also, for all this unexpected excitement had made her terribly tired. But when she offered to pay, Phinias shook his shaggy head.

"Not me," he said, "not a bit of me. I guess ye'll want your money, for them colleens and boys at Desmondstown. This 'ull pay for some of the eggs that your uncle, John Mansfield, robbed from the birdies afore he turned a howly saint."

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So Margot ate her uninteresting meal, found the stewardess extremely kind, got into the berth reserved for her and slept soundly until she was awakened at 6 o'clock on the following morning by Phinias himself.

"Here we be, missie; here we be. If we are quick we can get lovely coffee at the restaurant in the station and then off we goes to Kerry. I'll take ye as far as the gates of Desmondstown and don't ye fear nuthin'. Be as free as ye like with Miss Norah and Miss Bridget and Miss Eileen, and be playful as a kitten wid Master Bruce and Master Malachi, but hold yeself in a bit with Madam Desmond and The Desmond and Fergus, the future heir. There! I can say no more. We'll be travelling third, forsooth, in order to make the money go, and I'll be surrounded by ould friends—only don't ye forget there's NO AGE in Ould Ireland. Kape that fact stuck in your breast and all 'ull go well. Ah, never mind favouring the stewardess with a tip—shure, Mrs. Mulchi, ye wouldn't be robbin' the poor orphan."

"To be sure I wouldn't, Phinias," replied Mrs. Mulchi.

Margot was now intensely excited, although she did feel a certain sense of disappointment at observing that the grass was much the same colour[Pg 27] as the grass in England. That the trees also appeared much about the same; and even the flowers, the daisies and buttercups were what she was accustomed to. But Phinias Maloney supplied her with an excellent breakfast of good coffee, bread and butter, new-laid eggs and honey.

"Ye'll be wantin' all ye can git," he said, "and I tell ye what I knows. Stuff it in, stuff it in, missie, and thin we'll take our places in the train. Ah, to be sure won't thim giddy young things be glad to lay eyes on ye?"

"Do you think they will, Phinias?" answered Margot, who regarded the uncouth Irishman now as an old friend. "Do you really and truly mean it?"

"Does I think it? Don't I *know* it? It's hugging ye they'll be, and don't ye repulse them whatever ye does, and when the gurrils is kittenish, ye be kittenish too. Ah, well, I can't give any more advice for the present for I see several old friends makin' for this compartment, drat 'em, and ye must hould up your head and look mighty proud. The Desmonds of Desmondstown! there ain't their like in the county."

Poor little Margot endured that long and weary journey as best she could. It was the spring of the year and the feeling of spring seemed to have got into the breast of every individual who crowded into [Pg 28] that uncomfortable carriage. The farmers smoked and talked incessantly about the lambing season and Margot, presently, unable to keep her eyes open, dropped asleep with her head on the shoulder of Phinias.

She felt as though she had known Phinias all her life by now. At Mallow they changed and Phinias provided a second excellent meal, also out of the birds' eggs which Uncle John had stolen before he became a saint. He further told the child that if she was in any sort of a bit of a throuble any wan would tell her where Phinias Maloney's farm was, and he'd help her and so would "herself" help her, and so would the childher help her from the bottom of their hearts.

Then they got into the train, which took them into the famous and lovely county of Kerry and by-and-bye, about five in the evening, they drew up at a little wayside station. Here a very rough-looking cart was waiting for Phinias and a small boy who was addressed as "gossoon" was standing by the horse's head.

Phinias was now most deferential in his manner to Margot. He got Nat, the gossoon, to assist him to hoist her old leather trunk into the cart, and then he whispered a word or two into the ears of the said [Pg 29] gossoon, which induced the boy in question to give Margot many and amazed glances.

"Ye couldn't reach to the height of her forever and ever and ever and a day," remarked Phinias to Nat, the gossoon. "Ain't she own granddaughter to The Desmond and child to beautiful Miss Kathleen—bless her white sowl—and wasn't her father a nobleman of France? You kape your manners tight on your head when ye look at her, Nat. We'll have to drive right round to Desmondstown. The young ladies must be expectin' her by now, belike, and thim young boys must be hankerin' for a sight of her. Now then, gee up, Dobbin, gee up!"

Off they started in the springless cart, up hill and down dale. The evening light flooded the land and Margot was too excited and too fascinated by the beauty of the scene round her to remember either her deadly fatigue or any little stray crumbs of nervousness which might be lingering in her breast.

At last they pulled up at a tumbled-down gate. The last time that gate was painted must have been many long years ago. There was an avenue winding along inside and covered with weeds. Nat lifted the leather trunk out of the cart with reverence. Phinias took off his shabby hat, pulled his forelock and said,

"Welcome, ten thousand times, *céad míle fáilte*, [Pg 30] to Desmondstown, missie *asthore*, missie *mavourneen*." Then he bent his head and, lowering his voice, said,

"We must be about our business, missie, but we'll put the bit trunk under this laurel bush and some of thim young boys 'ull fetch it for ye, and ye walk down the avenue bould and free, wid no sort of shyness in ye, and when ye comes to the front door, ring the bell.

Most like the bell 'ull be broke. If so it be, and like enough it will be, turn the handle and walk in. There ain't no one 'ull interfere wid ye, but bear in mind we are all *young* in these parts."

With these words he left the somewhat desolate little girl.

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CHAPTER III. AN IRISH CHIEFTAIN AT HOME.

Now The Desmond was tall, broad, and of enormous height. Although he was by no means a young man, he walked with great erectness. His hair, somewhat scanty now, was of a soft white. His beard was long and white, also, but his eyes were large and black and his complexion somewhat resembled that of little Marguerite St. Juste. It was of a soft brown tint and, old as he was, there was still a vivid colour in his cheeks.

This ancient descendant of an ancient race was, however, more feared than loved. In short, The Desmond ruled his little kingdom with a rod of iron. He never allowed familiarities between himself and his retainers. He could scarcely be spoken of as affectionate, and yet he had a strain of affection somewhere in his heart. That affection was entirely bestowed upon his lost, most beautiful and most dearly loved child, Kathleen. Like many Irishmen of his race, he was reserved with regard to his secret sorrows. He could not bear Kathleen's name to be [Pg 32] mentioned in his presence and never once did he allude to the orphan child whom his pretty girl had left behind her. If he had any feeling towards the father of the said child, it almost amounted to hatred.

He could not abide, as he said once to Madam, "the Frenchies and their ways."

Henri St. Juste had, beyond doubt, hastened the end of his beautiful Kathleen. This was his belief. He wept the slow, difficult tears of the aged often at night as he thought about her, but he made no enquiries whatsoever with regard to the child and once, when Madam, in her timid, coaxing way, ventured to suggest that Kathleen's child should come to Desmondstown, The Desmond raised a shout of mighty anger and desired her to hold her peace or she would be sorry for herself.

Now of course Desmondstown was a typical old Irish place. It was going to rack and ruin as fast as ever it could. There was no money to keep it in order. There was just enough money to supply food and a sort of clothing for the inmates, to supply Malachi with horses, which he trained, some for himself, some for his sisters, some for his brothers, and the rest of which he sold, giving his father one-half of the profits.

Malachi's horses were almost the only available [Pg 33] assets at Desmondstown; for The Desmond, although fierce, even ferocious at times, was good-natured to his tenants and strictly forbade any evictions on his estates. He gave his sons the scantiest of all possible educations with the exception of Fergus, who was his heir. Fergus, by scraping and toiling, he managed to send first of all to a fairly good school and then to Trinity College, Dublin. Fergus he also supplied with suitable clothes, but he never thought of his earning any money. It never occurred to him that any of his sons should work. Debts abounded all over the place and Desmondstown was in reality mortgaged very nearly up to the hilt.

The gardens had gone to ruin, the ancient avenue was more like a field path than anything else. All the gardeners had been dismissed. Only the stablemen and grooms and the garden boy remained outside the house, and within there were the cook, Biddy Magee, and the housemaid, Grace Connor, and Peter, the old butler. These were typical Irish people, untidy, not too clean, but, as The Desmond said, all that he could possibly afford.

Bit by bit, and by slow degrees, the lovely china, the Chippendale furniture, the coats of mail, which were supposed to decorate the old hall, disappeared in order that there might be food and wine for The Desmond and his tribe. There was also a quantity [Pg 34] of valuable silver, the most famous in the county, which followed the same fate. The carpets were worn to shreds, the curtains hung in tatters from the windows—everything was in a hopeless state of confusion. In fact, a more dilapidated home than Desmondstown could scarcely be found anywhere, even in that region of dilapidated homes, the county of Kerry.

Nevertheless, the Misses Desmond held their heads high, and their brothers, with the exception of Fergus, were highly popular in the neighbourhood. Fergus was grave and dark, like his father before him. Now and then he even felt a degree of sorrow at the rapid decay of the old place. But to work—to have it even *said* that the man who would one day be The Desmond should work—was beyond his wildest dreams. He led a rather melancholy life therefore, taking little or no notice of his sisters, but often walking out with his old father, who was becoming glad of the support of his stalwart arm.

Now it was a custom at Desmondstown, as indeed it was the custom in every house in that part of Ireland, to let letters go their own way, bedad! Letters meant bills, and the best way to treat bills was not to answer them. Accordingly the long and careful letter which the Rev. John Mansfield wrote with regard to little Margot reached her [Pg 35] grandfather, it is true, all in good time. But it only *just* reached him, for after staring for a minute at the handwriting he thrust it unopened into his pocket and forgot all about it.

Little Margot, whatever she went through with Uncle Jack, lived at least in a fairly neat home, where her much dreaded aunt, Priscilla Mansfield, kept everything in apple-pie order. She had no fear but that the letter had travelled on before her, and that she would find her uncles and aunts, who were so *very* young, and her grandfather and grandmother, who were equally old, all waiting on the tip-toe of expectation for the little colleen.

When Margot parted with Phinias, she felt just a trifle lonely, but very soon this feeling passed and she was only conscious of the sensation that she was at last in very earnest going home, but the avenue was long and weedy. A good many broken branches of trees were scattered about and, walk as fast as she might, she could not get a peep of the old house. As a matter of fact, the old avenue was quite two miles in length and the child was already very tired.

There was a broken stump of a tree which offered a fairly comfortable resting place. She sat down on it and burst into tears. Her tears were bitter. This was by no means the Desmondstown of her dreams. In the midst of her sobs, however, she [Pg 36] heard the low-pitched voices of women who were certainly no longer young. She wondered if some of the servants were about and if she might address them, but the next instant, before she could make up her mind how to act, the low voices ended off into peals of laughter,

and two women appeared, dressed from head to foot in very coarse white piqué, one holding the sash of the other, while behind them came a grey-haired and decidedly ugly clergyman, who held the sash of the last and oldest sister. He gave her some infantile pats from time to time with a morsel of briar which he carried and desired her "to hould herself stiddy, and to kape it up."

"Oh, oh, but me heart 'ull break—Bridget, me heart 'ull break. Did I iver hear the like of the way this man goes on! Mr. Flannigan, you belong to the Church of Ireland, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself, beating a poor young colleen like me."

"Hold up, Norah, don't let him get any nearer. Oh, by the powers! whoever is that little pixie seated on the log!"

Margot rose with considerable dignity from her seat. She approached the two excited-looking, old young ladies. Their hair was sandy in tint and much mixed with grey, but their figures were slight[Pg 37] as girls of fifteen, and they were evidently enjoying themselves to the utmost.

"Oh, pixie, pixie, don't come near us," cried Norah. "Mr. Flannigan, keep the pixie away for Heaven's sake."

"I'm not a pixie," said little Margot. "I know you are very young, Aunt Norah, and you are very young, Aunt Bridget, but I'm your niece for all that. I am Marguerite St. Juste. I've come to pay my relations a visit. Uncle Jack wrote a letter to The Desmond. The Desmond is my grandfather. Aren't you expecting me? I'm glad to come, but I'd like well to be expected."

The two Misses Desmond stared with all their might and main at the pretty child, then Miss Bridget Desmond gave a sort of whoop and spring in the air, while Miss Norah laughed till her sides shook.

"Heaven preserve us!" she exclaimed. "You don't suppose letters are *ever* read at Desmondstown? Oh, but we are right glad to see you—don't make any mistake on that point. We are as pleased as Punch, aren't we, Bridget?"

"That we are," said Bridget. "Don't hold my sash so tight, Mr. Flannigan, I can't be bothered playing horse any more."

"Oh, good little girls, dear little girls," said Mr.[Pg 38] Flannigan, "I'll come in again tomorrow and play horses with all three of ye. But ye might introduce me to the small colleen."

"She's my niece," said Norah Desmond. "She's the daughter of my dearest beautiful sister, Kathleen, and there's scarce a year between the child and us, that I can vouch for."

"To be sure, ye needn't be talkin' about that," said Mr. Flannigan. "Why I see it in your faces—ye are three babies together."

Little Margot gave a quick sigh. She remembered, however, the words of Phinias and took no apparent notice of the fact that Aunt Norah must be close on fifty and Aunt Bridget forty-eight.

"We'll take you back home with us, little 'un," said the youngest of the Misses Desmond. "Here, let's scamper down the avenue. Good day to ye, Mr. Flannigan. There's no more playing at horses to-night. The pixie is tired, so she is. Here, catch her under the arm, Bridget, and I'll take her on the other side. Now then, put out your best foot, colleen bawn, you'll soon be home. Eh, but it's an elegant place you are coming to."

The tumbled, untidy sisters managed to get little Margot down the rest of the avenue, and presently they all bounded into the house, Miss Norah giving vent to a loud "Whoop!" as she did so.

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This noise brought two untidy looking men on the scene.

"Be the powers, now, pixie, these are me brothers," said Norah. "This one is Bruce and this one is Malachi—the finest horse-breaker in the whole kingdom."

"Oh, are you indeed, are you indeed?" said little Margot, "and you are very young, too, though you *look* old."

"It's the climate, *acushla*," said Malachi, "but whatever brings ye wandering round, and who are ye, when all's said and done?"

"Let me speak," interrupted Norah. "Bridget and me we were havin' a game of horses with Mr. Flannigan, the new curate, and a rare bit of fun we had out of it, too, when who should we see but this pixie seated on the trunk of an old tree! She said her name was—whatever did ye say your name was, pixie?"

"I don't choose to be called pixie," said Margot. "My name is Marguerite St. Juste, and my father was Comte St. Juste, and my mother was Kathleen Desmond, very own sister to you all. I live with a dear, darling, lovely uncle in England, but I thought I'd like to see Desmondstown, and Uncle John wrote to The Desmond, who is grandfather to me. I'd like well to see him, and there's my leather[Pg 40] trunk, which belonged to my mother, hiding under a big laurel bush at the gate. I want to stay here for a full week and then I'll go away. Oh, I know you are all terrible young. I was taught that on my way here. But you are not as young as I am. Still, I don't mind your being young, if you play with me and not let that dreadful curate talk to me."

While little Margot was speaking, her eyes grew softer and darker and brighter, the flaming red mounted into her cheeks and her young lips trembled slightly.

"I'm a bit hungry," she said after a pause, "and I don't see the armour nor the ingle nook, nor the fire that never goes out day nor night."

"Bless her heart," said Malachi, "who told you those lies about the poor old place?"

"They weren't lies, they were truths," said Margot. "My uncle, my dearest darling Jacko, told me all about everything. Oh, but couldn't I have a sup of milk or something? I'm so terrible thirsty."

Before this very natural request could be granted, a door at the side of the great hall was pushed open and an aged man with snow-white hair and black eyes entered. He was

followed by a little refined gentlewoman, who looked a trifle nervous and kept on repeating, "Whist, now, Fergus; the bit things must have their fun."

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"I don't allow noise and confusion in my house," said The Desmond, "and whoever in the name of the Almighty is that?"

"It is only me, grandfather," said Margot. "Uncle John wrote you a letter about me. I wanted to see you so badly, I couldn't wait any longer, on account of the longing that I had. I'm Margot St. Juste, your very own little grandchild, and I want bitter bad, to have a sup of milk. My mother was your daughter, Kathleen Desmond—and—"

"What?" shouted the old chieftain.

"Uncle Jack wrote to you about me, grandfather," said Margot, who with difficulty was keeping back her tears.

The old man strode a few paces into the great bare, empty hall. He then turned the contents of his various pockets out and presently came across Uncle Jacko's letter.

"Here it is," said Margot, "here it is. Read it at once, will you, and let me sit on your knee. I'm so glad you are old, really old. I don't care for young people, not a bit. I know it is the will of the Almighty that they must be young and keep young, but I like you because you are old and my grand-dad. Please, please, let me sit on your knee."

Just at that moment another door opened and a tall, stern-looking man, with a strong resemblance[Pg 42] to The Desmond, appeared on the scene. "Why, look here, Fergus," said The Desmond, "this little pilcheen has come along, and she is own daughter to my Kathleen, bless her. Bid her welcome, Fergus. She shall have the best the house contains. Here's your grandmother, missie, but you shall talk first with me. Norah, order the dressing-room next to mine to be got ready for her, and have a tray full of the best food brought into my smoking-room. Now then, pilcheen—"

"I'd rather you called me Margot, please, grand-dad."

"Margot," said the old man, "Margot! There's no sense in such a word. There! I'll call you Maggie; but you ought to have been christened Kathleen, after her—her that's gone—her that was as the light of my life. Girls, stir yourselves, and get everything ready for little Maggie. Don't stare and gape any more. The child has come to us and she is welcome and she shall stay as long as she likes. Now, my colleen asthore, this lady is your grandmother, this is Madam Desmond. Girls, stir yourselves and get things for the child to eat. Get the very best the house contains and put the best furniture into the dressing-room. Ain't she Kathleen's child? Madam, you and I and the little pilcheen can sup together in the smoking-room. She's[Pg 43] mighty like our Kathleen, don't you think so, Madam?"

"I do so," said Madam, "and I'm fairly hungry to kiss her, Fergus."

"All right. Little pilcheen, you go along and kiss Madam six times and no more, then come back to me. My God, I thank thee; she's my Kathleen come to life again."

Little Margot had quite got over her shyness. She was bewildered by the queer manners of her so-called juvenile aunts, but grand-dad and Madam delighted her. She climbed willingly on the old man's knee and nestled snugly against his breast.

"You are a very old man, aren't you, grand-dad?"

"I am so, Maggie, and why shouldn't I be?"

"I'm so glad," said little Margot. "And Madam is old, too," continued the child.

Madam smiled, nodded and kissed her hand.

"Yes, darling, I'm quite old; thank the Almighty."

"Then I'm real, real glad," said Margot. "It is so difficult to understand old young people or young old people, I don't know which to call 'em."

"Listen to me, Margot," said her grandmother. "Your aunts, Eileen, Norah, and Bridget, are young maids in their first dawn, and so for that matter [Pg 44] are Fergus and Bruce and Malachi also young as young can be."

"Ah, but I'm sorry," said little Margot. "I suppose it is all right. I can't stay very long, grand-dad, darling, because I have faithful and true to get back to Uncle Jack, for Uncle Jack is both my uncle and my playfellow, but while I am here I would like most of the time to be with you and Madam, 'cause I don't like old-young girls."

"Come, let that be," said Madam. "The girls are only amusing themselves, to be sure they are."

Margot was quite silent for a minute.

Jacko was a big man, but he was not nearly so big as The Desmond, and she felt exceedingly comfortable nestling up in his arms, while his snow-white beard gently touched her little brown face.

"There's a trunk of mine," she said. "It is under a laurel bush by the gate. Could one of the servants go and fetch it down, grandfather?"

"Servants, bedad," exclaimed Malachi, who just then entered the room. "Oh, yes, I'll see about the servants. I'll put everything as right as rain."

He marched out of the room.

"If it is a heavy trunk, missie," he said, turning round with his laughing eyes, "ye'll want about five men to hoist it on their shoulders."

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"Well, that's easily done in a big place like this," he continued.

Margot gave a contented little sigh. Madam followed her son out of the room. She thought it well to lend a hand in the preparation of the wee colleen's supper.

When they were quite alone together, Margot turned and kissed The Desmond several times.

"You are my very own grand-dad," she said.

"Yes, push-keen, I am that," said he.

"I am so happy in your arms," continued Margot. "I'll tell you why. First, because you are so big; second, because you are so beautiful and old, and third because you belong to me."

Again she kissed the brown cheek; and the brown eyes of the man looked into the brown eyes of the child.

"It's my Kathleen before she grew up," he whispered to himself, "before she met that Frenchman, drat him."

"Do you love me, grand-dad?" whispered Margot.

"Yes, push-keen, I think a bit."

"Will it be a good bit, soon, grand-dad?"

"I'm thinking it might."

Margot gave another sigh of intense and complete satisfaction.

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"I wanted to see the house and the place and the young girls and the young boys and Madam, but I wanted most of all to see you, grand-dad."

"Ah, now, that's proper," said The Desmond. Just then there was a rustling outside the door, and Madam came in with a little tray, which contained milk and bread and butter and home-made jam and new-laid eggs.

Margot would not for a moment resign her post on The Desmond's knee, but she allowed Madam to draw a little table forward and to feed her from there. She ate with considerable appetite and looked prettier than ever when her fatigue vanished.

"And now I'm going to take you to bed, my baby," said Madam.

"Yes, yes," said The Desmond. "Ye'll go off like a good colleen and when ye are lying between the sheets—the finest linen for that matter— Mary, you didn't have any but the finest sheets put on the pushkeen's bed?"

"To be sure not, Fergus, why should I?"

"Well, that's all right. You run off, my colleen, and I'll come and kiss you good-night, just as I kissed my own Kathleen before the Frenchman took her."

So Margot, being very weary, obeyed. The leather portmanteau stood in a very old and bare room, and Madam herself unpacked it and took out what[Pg 47] the child wanted

for the night. At last the little tired limbs lay between the soft Irish linen sheets and Madam kissed her grandchild two or three times, whilst big tears filled her eyes.

"What are you crying for, you darling old lady?" said little Margot.

"I'm thinking of my Kathleen," said Madam.

"I'm her little girl, therefore I'm *your* little girl," said Margot, pressing her small lips together in ecstasy. "Kiss me, grandmother. Grandmother, you love me, too."

"I do, my best mavourneen, but now I must go and get himself up, or he'll rage at me."

Madam tripped downstairs and presently returned with The Desmond. He had evidently given her a hint to leave him alone with Margot. When they were quite alone together, he pulled the curtains across one of the windows and opened the window a little wider to let in the fresh air, then he came close to Margot's side and kneeling down by her made the following speech:

"Ye need have no fear in ye, my push-keen colleen. Do ye see that door? It opens into Madam's room and mine. If you call out even a whisper I'll be with ye. Now say your hymn like a good child and God bless ye."

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"My hymn, what hymn?" said Margot in some astonishment.

"Why, didn't they never teach it to ye? What a powerful, wicked shame, but you are young and you'll soon learn. Your mother used to say it to me every night when she was a young 'un. Come, fold your little hands and follow me with the words."

Margot did so. The hymn was a very baby one and very well known, but Aunt Priscilla had never thought it worth her while to teach it to the baby Margot. The Desmond had different views.

"Now begin, *acushla machree*."

Gentle Jesus, meek and mild,
Look upon a little child,
Pity my simplicity,
Suffer me to come to thee.
Fain would I to thee be brought,
Dearest Lord, forbid it not;
In the Kingdom of thy grace
Grant a little child a place.

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CHAPTER IV. OLD YOUNG PEOPLE.

Whether it was her great fatigue or the fact that she was sleeping at last in the home of her ancestors, or the other fact that there was at least *one* dear old man living at Desmondstown, little Margot St. Juste slept like a top during the whole of that first night

in the house where her mother had been born. She slept so soundly that she was quite unconscious of the fact that The Desmond, accompanied by Madam, entered the hastily improvised bedroom at the dawn of day and bent over the child. There was a look of positive rapture on both their old faces.

"Eh, but she's our Kathleen to the life," said Madam.

"It's the Almighty has sent her to comfort us in our old age," said The Desmond. "Step softly Madam, *macree*. Don't for the life of you wake the bit thing."

So little Margot was allowed to have her sleep out, but when she awoke she stared about her in [Pg 50] great bewilderment. Her three old young uncles, and her three old young aunts were collected round the bed. The moment she stirred, Norah made that sort of "whoop" for which she was so celebrated, and disappeared from the room. She danced into her father's presence. She was wearing a pink dress and was attired also in a pale pink sash. Her hair was full of curl papers. She looked singularly old, but had all the actions of a frolicsome kitten.

"The pixie is awake, father," she said.

This was the signal for intense excitement. The Desmond desired his daughter to behave herself and put away some of her childishness.

"I can't help being young, I *am* young," replied Norah.

"You're not; you are a withered twig," said The Desmond. "Find Madam and tell her that the child is awake. Madam will see to her breakfast; and try to dress like a woman of your years, Norah. You are nothing but a figure of fun in that pink dress and pale pink sash."

Norah laughed, winked, showed her really white fine teeth and disappeared from the room. She found old Madam without much difficulty and soon a cosy breakfast was brought up to little Margot. She was in the midst of enjoying her second egg when The Desmond popped in his silvery head.

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"Hullo," he said, "so here we are again."

"Yes, yes, and it is *lovely* to see you, grand-dad, and please come and sit close to me and send the old young girls and the old young boys away. Only Madam may stay if she likes, for she's a perfect darling. Tell her—tell her to feed me. I like to be petted and I love *really* old people, but I don't like old young people to call me 'pixie' and 'pushkeen.'"

With a wave of his hand, which was at once imperative and intensely severe, The Desmond cleared the room of all his sons and daughters. Madam sat down on the side of the bed and fed Margot, who gave herself up to intense present enjoyment.

"I'm so happy, granny," she said, looking at the old lady, "and I'm so happy, grand-dad," she continued, taking the old chieftain's withered hand and pressing her soft lips to it. "Oh, I am so very glad that you are both really old. I don't like old young, I don't, really, truly."

"Now you, child, you," said Madam, "don't you run down your aunts and your uncles. They are all young and kittenish."

"They are not Mary, and you know it perfectly well," said The Desmond. "The child is right; she is full of sense. She's exactly like my Kathleen, God bless her."

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The fuss which was made over the wardrobe of little Margot could scarcely be excelled. There was no such thing as a modern bathroom at Desmondstown, but a great tub, which was used for washing clothes, was hoisted into the room by two stalwart women. Then it was made the exact right heat, and Madam and her three daughters—for nothing would keep these old young ladies a minute longer out of the room—superintended the washing and dressing of little Margot.

Eileen was the quietest of the three sisters. She was also the prettiest and the youngest. She had been out at what was called a barn-dance on the previous evening and this was her first proper view of the little arrival. Eileen, when she was really young, must have been very pretty. She had the deep, dark blue eyes of her countrywomen, and the soft dark hair which curled naturally all over her head. Unlike her sisters, she was not obliged to have recourse to curl papers and little Margot looked at her with her soft, dark brown eyes full of admiration.

Her own dress was very plain, though neat, and Eileen chose out of the child's belongings a simple white dress which she was to wear with a faded green sash that belonged to Eileen herself.

"You must wear it to-day, push-keen," she said,[Pg 53] "as a welcome to old Ireland. Isn't it the country of the green, Madam?"

"Yes, to be sure," replied the old grandmother, "and you might go out and pick a bunch of shamrocks and fasten it in the front of her dress, Norah."

Norah gambolled like a veritable kitten downstairs. She returned presently with a great bunch of shamrocks, which was carefully pinned into Margot's white frock.

"Are ye rested now, pretty dear?" asked Norah.

"Yes, to be sure I am, Aunt Norah, and I feel so—so *fat*."

"Poor lamb," cried Madam, "she hasn't been half fed where she was."

"Yes, but I have," cried Margot. "Uncle Jacko fed me fine and so did Hannah. It was a wicked woman who interfered."

"A wicked woman, lawk a mercy!" cried Bridget. "What in the world had a wicked woman to do with you, pixie?"

"I'm not allowed to mention her name," said little Margot. "Don't ask me any more questions, for I've taken an oath and I won't break it. I'd like to go straight to grand-dad—that's what I'd like."

"You can't just now, pretty dear," said Madam, "he always sleeps at this hour, but he'll be up and about by mid-day dinner."

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"You'd best come and play horses with us on the lawn," said Bridget and Norah, simultaneously.

"No, I don't want to. You'll have that awful old man there."

"Is it Mr. Flannigan you mean?" asked Bridget. "Why he's little better than a chick newly hatched—like the rest of us for that matter," she continued.

"Are you all just newly hatched?" asked Margot, looking with great curiosity at the figures of her old young aunts.

"To be sure, you've about said it," exclaimed Norah.

"Well, I'm a great deal older than you," said Margot, "so I'll let you play with the newly hatched chicken and I'll go and see Phinias Maloney."

"For the Lord's sake what does the child mean now?" exclaimed Madam, a little indignant colour flooding her cheeks.

"I mean what I say," replied Margot. "He's a dear old man—he's not a gentleman, but I like him all the better on account of that, for he's got a gentleman's heart inside his skin. I'll go and see him now while grand-dad is asleep—that is, if you don't mind, Madam."

"We'll all go, if it comes to that," said Norah.[Pg 55] "Think of you picking up with Phinias Maloney, the roughest old farmer in the county."

"But I don't want to go with you, I want to go alone," said Margot. "He and I are great friends, and I slept with my head on his shoulder all the way into Kerry. What are you laughing at? Why are you looking at me as you are doing?"

"I'm fit to let out a screech," said Norah. "To think of one of the Desmonds falling asleep with her head on the shoulder of Phinias Maloney. It's enough to make a cat laugh, let alone a human being."

"Then, please, Aunt Norah, laugh as much as you like while I am away," said Margot. "I must be back in time to sit with my grand-dad. I've a great deal to say to him and the time is short."

"It's Sunday; you oughtn't to be thinking of your pleasures," said Eileen, who had a more refined voice than her sisters. "Mother, she can't go to see Phinias to-day, she really can't. Put on your pretty little white hat, pixie, and we'll take you to church."

Margot was of course accustomed to going to church on Sunday and after a moment's hesitation, during which her little face looked very downcast, she agreed to Eileen's suggestion.

"I'll go," she said, "on a condition—it's all my own."

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"And what's that?" asked Eileen.

"It's that you walk on one side of me, and my young uncle Fergus on the other; then I'll know where I am, for you talk sense."

Norah tried in vain to be offended, but as this was absolutely impossible to her nature and as Bridget was equally the soul of good humour, the little party started for the small village church a few minutes later, Margot looking very neat and even distinguished between her old young aunt and her old young uncle.

She sat very still during service and kept her soft black eyes fixed on Mr. Flannigan. Was it possible that he was the same person who had played horses with her aunts on the previous day? He read the service with a good deal of force and realism, and preached a sermon which was so full of Irish stories that Norah and Bridget kept their handkerchiefs pressed against their mouths to keep themselves from screaming with laughter.

All went apparently well until the service came to an end, but then the curate threw off his church manners and devoted himself to Miss Norah and Miss Bridget. He was invited back to dinner by both these young ladies and eagerly accepted the invitation.

"So this is the pixie," he said, his eyes fixed on Margot.

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"No, it isn't," said Margot, "but you are the newly hatched chick."

Mr. Flannigan felt his red face turning redder than usual.

"Whatever do you mean?" he replied.

Just then they got inside the grounds.

"Thank Heaven for all its mercies," said Norah. "I can let out a good screech now, and no one will be any the wiser. I said, Sam Flannigan, that you were a newly-hatched chicken, when she was taunting me about your age, man. Oh, isn't it fun? I never enjoyed myself so much in my life."

"Nor did I, for that matter," cried Bridget. "It's a pity it is Sunday, for we can't play horses."

"Do let's walk a little faster, Uncle Fergus," said Margot turning to her uncle.

His grave face looked at her searchingly, then he said in a quiet tone,

"The avenue is a bit too long for a wee thing like you. See, I'm going to stoop. Put your arms round my neck, so. Now, then, hold tight. I have you on my shoulder as firm as can be."

"Oh, thank you, thank you," said Margot. "I do like you, Uncle Fergus, and I like Eileen."

"But why don't you like the others? They are harmless enough, poor bit things."

"Yes, but they were not hatched yesterday," said [Pg 58] Margot. "That I do know and I won't play horses with that horrid Mr. Flannigan!"

"Malachi is fit to tear his hair," exclaimed Fergus. "He has just sent off a stud of horses to Dublin for sale, so there isn't one he can offer ye to ride."

"I like *you* very much as a horse, Uncle Fergus," said Margot.

"Do ye now? Well, that's all right."

"Did you love my mother, Uncle Fergus?"

"To be sure, but we don't talk of her."

"Why not, why ever not?"

"Because it hurts the old man; we have to be very careful about the old man. You listen, child, mavourneen. He never got over her marrying a Frenchy."

"But my father had a title, he was Comte St. Juste."

"As if that mattered," said Fergus, in a tone of violent contempt. "A title indeed, the Lord preserve us! The Desmonds don't want any title greater than their own."

"Is it very high up, Uncle Fergus?"

"High up? The stars couldn't reach it. There isn't a royal Duke in England we'd change with."

"Isn't there? I didn't know," said Margot. She [Pg 59] spoke in a very soft, interested voice. "And some day you'll have it," she said.

"Yes; but for the Lord's sake don't mention the awful time when the old man is took from us."

"Oh, Uncle Fergus, I *do* love you," said Margot and she bent down and kissed him on his brow.

It was two or three days later that The Desmond and his son, Fergus, had a long and important conversation behind locked doors. "I'm willing to do my share," said Fergus Desmond.

"I knew you were, my boy. You have never disappointed me yet."

"And I won't begin now, father," said the son.

"We can't let her go," said The Desmond, "that's the thing."

"I see your heart is set on her," remarked Fergus.

"Set on her! It is fastened on her like a vise. I don't know myself since she came to the place. She's her blessed mother back again. Who is that man who has the charge of her, Fergus? Is he her uncle at all, at all?"

"She seems very fond of him," said Fergus, "but I don't see how he can be her uncle. He has taken very good care of her all these years, and never asked us for so much as a penny."

"I tell you what it is, Fergus," said The [Pg 60]Desmond. "You must go across the water and see the man and put it straight to him that we can't give her up."

"I don't see how I can exactly do that, father," said Fergus; "he's had her since she was a babe and maybe she is as much to him as she is to us."

"Fergus, you talk folly. Is The Desmond's heart to be broken because of a common sort of chap like John Mansfield?"

"We must act fair," said Fergus, "and what's more, if we adopt her, we must adopt her properly. She must be schooled. She must be treated like the lady she is. We don't want any more Norahs and Bridgets in the house."

"No, no; of course not, of course not," said The Desmond.

"She must be taught," said Fergus Desmond, "and the teaching will cost money, a sight of money. I know a lady who'd do it," he continued. "Miss Drusilla McNab—she has got fine learning entirely, foreign languages and all else, and she can play the piano and sing to make your heart burst. I might manage to settle it with her if we paid her properly, but we can't have one of the Desmonds disgracing herself and us by eating the bread of charity."

"How old is Drusilla McNab?" asked The Desmond.

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"She's thirty-five, father, and she lives at Rockingham, and Malachi could drive the kiddie over there each morning and fetch her back in the evening. But we couldn't offer Miss Drusilla less than £20 a year. We couldn't in all decency."

"Oh, Lord!" exclaimed The Desmond. "Twenty pounds, when we have scarcely got so many pence. Can't you and I teach the bit thing, Fergus?"

"No, we can't," said Fergus. "She must be taught properly and like a real, out-and-out lady. Miss McNab was educated in Paris and the pushkeen is going to be a wonderful beauty. She must be taught according to her station. She'll make a fine match some day."

"I want her to stay with me," said The Desmond. "I don't wish for any of those fine matches for the pretty dear."

"Well, it will come, father; for she is the handsomest little girl I ever looked at."

"And why not," said old Desmond, his eyes flashing a sort of blue fire. "Isn't she her mother's child?"

"Yes, but she is better-looking than Kathleen. Don't fret, old man, accept the fact. She has got a look of our Kathleen, but she must take after her father, too. She doesn't get those eyes only from[Pg 62] our Kathleen. Why, they look as though you could never reach to the back of them."

"To be sure," said The Desmond. "Well, I can't part with her; that's plain. I'm alive all over again, and quite young with the thought of having her in the house."

"It'll take money to settle this matter, father," said Fergus. "If this John Mansfield is her real uncle, he mayn't want to give her up, and he can't be forced to give her up. It strikes me we'll have to pay him. Money settles most difficulties. Now my notion is this. You have turned against the Comte St. Juste, although you never clapped eyes on him. When our Kathleen took him for better or worse, you said you wouldn't see him or write to him or have anything to do with him. Then our girlieen died after giving birth to the little one and then the poor Comte died, also, and you never breathed the name, never once, of the little colleen. But she came to you of her own accord and you have lost your heart to her."

"Lost my heart! I tell you, Fergus, my man, I'm mad about her."

"Well, then, we must get some one in to settle this question. I'll go by this very night's mail to John Mansfield and then, it strikes me—hold yourself in now, father, don't burst out. It strikes me[Pg 63] I might go on to those French people and perhaps they'd help their son's child. You must keep her here by hook or by crook until I get back. I'll get the address of the French people from John Mansfield."

"But we don't even know Mansfield's address," muttered The Desmond.

"Oh, I see my way to that," said Fergus. "Will you put the matter into my hands, father, and I'll do my level best. There's that nice little farm of Cromartie's. We can mortgage that by-and-bye to get the little bit dear a dowry, but that's for the future. I'd do anything on earth to please you, dad, and Miss Drusilla McNab can turn the wee colleen into a fine lady. I'm thinking that between John Mansfield and those French folks I'll manage something. Can you give me that old gold watch, father, and a couple of pound notes just to take me to Dublin? That's all the money I'll ask for the present."

The interview ended by The Desmond putting two very crumpled and as a matter of fact very dirty one pound notes into Fergus' hand. He then gave him the old gold repeater and told him to be as quick a boy about his business as ever he could.

Fergus said as he was leaving the room, "Now, look you here, old man, this is a scheme between you[Pg 64] and me and neither Madam herself nor the three girls, nor the boys, Bruce and Malachi, are to know anything whatsoever about it. If it can be done, it will be done, and I'm the boy to do it."

"Whist, lad," said his father, "where are you off to now?"

"You leave it to me, father, I must manage in my own way."

The Desmond sank back into his chair, his dark eyes deep and lustrous and a smile playing round his lips.

If only Fergus could succeed, if only he might keep the little mavourneen. He closed his eyes and slowly two tears fell over his wrinkled cheeks. He was thinking of a possible joy and of a past grief, but Fergus was the boy—there wasn't his like in the county.

Meanwhile Fergus made his way out by the backyard, crossed a tumbled-down stile without anyone noticing him and made his way in a bee line to the farm which was rented by Phinias Maloney.

Phinias was one of his father's best tenants and accordingly was entitled to a certain degree of respect. He never bothered about repairs either, and although the farm was going to ruin, he paid his rent each quarter-day like a man, and never asked for improvements.

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"What did a little drop of wather matter," he said to "Herself," when the rain poured in through the badly thatched roof, "and whyever should they be botherin' theirselves about filling up gaps and such like. Wasn't The Desmond as bad off as himself and was *he* goin' to ruin The Desmond, not he! The gaps were mighty convanient for the young chickens and young ducklings to run in and out of the house and to take shelter when it rained hard on the roof of the old barn."

Yes, the farm was good enough for Phinias, if Desmondstown was good enough for The Desmond, and "Herself" must hold her chatter for he wasn't going to ask for what couldn't be done.

Thus the days went by and the weeks went by and Phinias was perfectly happy in the broken-down farm, but his delight knew no bounds when on a certain morning a little figure stepped lightly across the badly-kept yard, which was full of holes and numerous little pools of water in which young ducklings disported themselves.

"Why, if it isn't the little missie herself," cried Phinias. He strode out to meet Margot, who put her little cool hand into his.

"Oh, oh, Mr. Phinias Maloney, I couldn't get away a day sooner. I love The Desmond like mad and Madam and Fergus, but I don't care for the[Pg 66] young old girls—only Aunt Eileen isn't so bad as the other two. They said they was only hatched about yesterday. When was you hatched, Mr. Phinias Maloney? You look miles younger than they do."

"Ah, whist, my little *acushla machree*" said the farmer, "kape it up to thim that they are young and you'll be as happy as the day is long."

"But I don't want to. I like Aunt Eileen tolerable, and I love Uncle Fergus and I dote on my grand-dad and Madam. Oh, I say, I had to run away to come to you, Phinias, and there is Uncle Fergus coming in at the gate."

"Do you want to hide from him, pretty one?" said Phinias.

"Is it I that would hide?" said little Margot. "That's not me. Hullo, Uncle Fergus. I ran away this morning, all my lonesome, to have a talk with dear Phinias."

Fergus Desmond looked decidedly annoyed, but the frown quickly swept from his brow.

"Phinias," he said, turning to the man, "I want to have a few words in private with you. Take little missie in and introduce her to 'Herself' and the youngest baby."

"Oh, a baby!" cried Margot. "When—*when* was it hatched? Does it look as old as young Aunt Norah?"

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"Whist, whist, missie darlint, come this way," said Phinias.

He took the little hand and led the child into the tumble-down kitchen.

"No remarks," he said, "*if* you please," dropping his voice to a whisper and introducing the little girl to "Herself," a handsome blue-eyed young woman of the true Kerry type of beauty. "The place is a bit shook up, I'm not goin' for to deny it; but neither will I let The Desmond be bothered puttin' it right. Now there's a straight tip for you, little missie. Annie, mavourneen, here's a swate little lady from Desmondstown, who I brought across the say all the way from England. She has come to pay us a call, kape her with yourself, Annie. I'll be back again in a twinklin'."

"When was the last baby hatched?" said Margot.

"Bless your heart, little missie," said Mrs. Maloney, "we don't talk of childer as hatched. He's two months old. I've called him Phinias after his dadda."

"Oh, oh, *let* me hold him," said little Margot, "oh, oh, I'm so glad he wasn't hatched. My aunties are hatched about every second day and it makes them so terrible young, and so, so *queer*. Isn't he a perfect darling? May I kiss him, Mrs. Phinias—'cause I'm so fond of your husband."

"Bless you, pretty one, to be sure you may."

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CHAPTER V. "I'LL EXPLAIN TO YOURSELF."

While little Margot and "Herself" were engrossed over the two-months-old baby and Margot was expressing her intense delight that it was *really* a very young baby—"proper young," she said, raising her deep, dark eyes to the young mother's face—Fergus Desmond was giving way to a certain amount of anger. He was a good fellow, one of the best in Ireland, but he was eaten up with an Irishman's pride and he did not want his little niece to be "hail-fellow-well-met" even with so good a man as Phinias Maloney.

A slight consideration, however, caused him to see the absurdity of these feelings. He had no cause to abuse poor Phinias, who was one of his own father's best tenants. The frown, therefore, smoothed away from his brow and he walked beside Phinias into one of the meadows at the back of the tumble-down farm.

"Ye may wonder that missie comes to see me, sir," exclaimed Phinias, who had been quite quick enough to discern the frown of displeasure on the [Pg 69] young mather's brow. "Why, thin, I'll explain to yourself," he continued. "She's a little miss that ain't to be seen often, and she was put into my charge on board the boat. Why to be sure I didn't recognise John Mansfield at the first go-off, but when I did, I couldn't but accept the duty put on me. She's a dear little miss and wasn't no throuble at all even to sphake about, only she was fair mad to get to Desmondstown."

"Now, listen, Phinias, I want to speak to you," said Fergus. "Time is short and there is a great deal to be done. I want you to tell me, my good fellow, all that you know of John Mansfield."

"All that I know, Mr. Desmond? I know nought but what's good about the best gintleman that ever walked. It isn't to say that he's middlin' good, but he's high up among the saints, your honour. He's a priest of the Holy Church. Nobody must say a word against John Mansfield 'fore me, yer beautiful honour."

"I don't want to say a word against the man," said Fergus. "You just told me that he put a little child into your care."

"Yes, he did, and as dacent and as purty a colleen as could be found in the breadth of the British Isles."

"I know all about her," said Fergus. "The child[Pg 70] is a dear child. She is my niece and granddaughter to The Desmond, but what I want to find out is this—how she comes to be niece also to John Mansfield."

"Sure then, did ye never hear of Farmer Mansfield of these parts?"

"What," said Fergus, stepping back a pace and a frown coming over his handsome features. "You don't mean to insinuate that my niece is a relation of that old scoundrel?"

"The man took to dhrink and dhrink finished him entirely," said Phinias, "but his son John was always a good boy, always and forever—good of the good and best of the best, and how could he possibly be responsible for the sins of his fathers? He saved money and had himself eddicated—eh, fine; fine. He's a mighty scholard is John Mansfield and has the gentlest and truest heart in the world and he took missie when she was a babby and reared her up fine and she calls him her uncle."

"Oh, well, he's not her uncle," said Fergus.

"Don't be so sure of that, Mr. Desmond, your honour. He's her uncle near as much as you are."

"What do you mean?" said Desmond.

"I'll tell ye, sir, if ye'll give me time to get me breath. Well, it was like this. You may remember how beautiful, lovely Miss Kathleen went to [Pg 71]London and married a Frenchy, but nobody ever said a word about Miss Priscilla."

Fergus found himself starting.

"Miss Priscilla got tired of the life at Desmondstown and she come to me one evening late, as sure as I'm standing here, and she says, says she, 'I'm going to London after Kathleen, and if Kathleen has married, why shouldn't I?' Eh, to be sure I did what I could to stop her, but she would have her way. She wrote to The Desmond and tell't him that she had married and she didn't want no bones made about it, and she never mentioned the name of her husband, honest man. I've heard tell that she's turned out a sharp, sour woman, but she's married to John Mansfield—the best man that ever walked. So he's uncle by marriage to little missie. It's all a fact, yer honour, ye can't help it. Ye must swallow your pride, and all I can say is this, that John Mansfield deserved a better lot."

"Well, tell me this," said Fergus after a time. "I never cared for Priscilla—we none of us did—she was the eldest of the whole house, even older than my sister Norah, and tried

to rule us with a rod of iron. If it hadn't been for my father, The Desmond, she would have made the place unbearable. So she took the child when her parents died?"

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"She did so," replied Phinias. "It was the only good thing she done as far as I hear tell on."

"Listen to me, Phinias," said Fergus, "I want your help in this matter."

"To be sure, to be sartin sure, yer honour."

"Well, it's like this," said Fergus. "Don't you let it out to your wife or your neighbours. Keep it close within your breast."

"I will that, yer honour. I am wonderful at kapin' a sacret."

"Well, this is the state of things," said Fergus. "My father is an old man and full of years, and Madam, bless her heart, is not too young, and they've both taken a fancy to the little push-keen. We want to keep her, Phinias."

"Oh, Lord, sir; yer honour I mane, whatever for?"

"For the sake of my father," said Fergus. "He's gone fair mad over the child, and if John Mansfield has got a grain of human nature in him, he won't part the child from her own true grandfather. I'm going to see him to-night, but not a word is to be mentioned to little miss, and I want you to give me his address, Phinias Maloney."

"Well, to be sure, I can do that fine," said Phinias. "Didn't he give me his kyard when he put the bit colleen into my care, and didn't he look[Pg 73] nigh to weepin'. He's an elegant man, yer honour, and he loves the little colleen like anythin'. There's nothin' on earth he wouldn't do for the pretty dear, but I can see that he's mortal afraid of 'herself'—that's Miss Priscilla that was. His address is Handley Vicarage, Balderstown, near Earlminter. You won't see much of the old farmer in the Rev. John Mansfield, yer honour. To look at, he's a gintleman as good as yourself and with 'the spiritual eye.'"

"Whatever do you mean by that, Phinias?"

"Ah, thin," exclaimed Phinias, "it's given but to a rare few, and they lives—well, somewhere above the stars I'm thinking—close to the golden gates, by the same token. There's no difference between 'The's' and Priests and Marquises and Counts where *he* has fixed his gaze, yer honour. He's a howly man, that's what he be and 'the spiritual eye' in him is downright wonderful."

"Well, thank ye, Phinias," said Fergus, after a pause. "I don't quite understand your full meaning, but I want the wee push-keen for my father, and if I can get her I will. How, then, will you call her out to me, for she may as well ride home on my shoulder?"

"Ah to be sure, the pretty bit dear," said the farmer.

He entered his untidy kitchen somewhat [Pg 74]sorrowfully. He was thinking of John Mansfield. He did not see—being a very upright man himself—why even The Desmond should be considered, when he had taken no notice at all of the little 'herself' all these

long, long years, and he thought his honour, Mr. Fergus, somewhat cruel to drag the child from his own friend.

Fergus, however, having got the information he required did not give Phinias Maloney a further thought.

Margot, in the highest spirits, rode back to Desmondstown on her uncle's shoulder. She had by this time become great friends with Aunt Eileen and she endured the passionate caresses of old young Aunt Norah and old young Aunt Bridget. She chattered a good deal as they all ate their lunch together about the baby who was real—real young.

Aunt Norah let out one of her whoops and then one of her screeches, but The Desmond was too much absorbed with his plan to take much notice of her. On that same evening Fergus started for Rosslare *en route* for Fishguard. He managed to find time to sell the old gold repeater and had in consequence sufficient money in his pocket for his immediate wants.

Fergus Desmond did not much mind his shabby attire, nor his unwieldy-looking boots, nor his [Pg 75]altogether Irish appearance. He had a goal in view and that goal he was determined to carry through if it cost him half his life. The Desmond was mad about little Margot and The Desmond must be satisfied.

All in good time he arrived at Handley Vicarage. He enquired at once for the Rev. John Mansfield. Hannah opened the door for him and stared at him a good bit. It seemed as though Hannah, who was a most astute woman, was tracing out a likeness between Fergus and somebody else. Who could the somebody else be? Surely—surely not the bit girlie. Hannah was devoted to Margot and had bitterly regretted her visit to Ireland, but she was in all the throes of spring cleaning at the present moment, and altogether it was an awkward time for Fergus Desmond to come.

"My master's out at the present moment," she said, "but if you'll tell me your name, sir, I'll let him know if you'd like to call again."

"I'll wait here for him, thanks," said Fergus, "and I'd rather not give my name."

"He's a burglar like as not," thought Hannah, but there was something so masterful and big and grave about this dark-eyed man that she could not by any possibility attempt to oppose him. She accordingly put him into the study and a few minutes later John Mansfield entered the room. John [Pg 76]Mansfield was thought a tall man by his English parishioners, but as he crossed the room to welcome the stranger, who was totally and completely a stranger to him, he looked small by comparison with Fergus Desmond.

Fergus, however, was immediately fired by that curious admiration for the man himself, which all those who knew him felt. There was, according to Phinias, "the spiritual eye" very distinctly visible in John Mansfield.

"I must introduce myself," said Fergus. "I am an Irishman."

"Ah, to be sure, sit down, won't ye?" said John Mansfield. His heart gave a thump in his breast. Ireland for him at that moment only meant Desmondstown, where his little Margot, his little treasure, was staying.

"And my name," continued Fergus, dropping into a chair, "is Fergus Desmond."

"Not—not of Desmondstown!" gasped John Mansfield. "My God, speak the truth at once, lad—not of Desmondstown?"

"Yes, of Desmondstown, where else?"

"Then you have brought bad news—something has gone wrong with my—my little darling."

"No, sir, nothing has gone wrong. Ease your mind, once and for all. The child has won the love[Pg 77] of everyone in the house, and The Desmond and Madam they want to keep her. That's what I've come about, Mr. Mansfield. For the matter of that, you are my brother-in-law, sir. You have married my sister Priscilla."

"I have so," said Mansfield, "and she's a good woman."

"She's not at home now, is she?" asked Fergus.

"No, thank the—I mean she won't be back for over a week, Mr. Desmond."

"You had best call me Fergus, John," said the other man.

"If you like it, I will, but it don't seem fair. I never set myself up to be one of your class."

"Well, never mind that, you are married to my eldest sister and you are a good man; I can see that by your face."

"I try my best, Mr. Fergus, but we are none of us good. There's a heavy load of sin on us all, and I'm no better than my neighbours."

"You ask Phinias Maloney and he'll tell you a very different story," said Fergus, a grim smile passing over his stern features.

"Ah, Phinias," said John Mansfield. "He always had the heart of the matter in him. But tell me again what you have come about, Mr. Fergus. You don't want to take my girleen from me."

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"That's what I do want. Tell me truthfully, does her aunt love the child?"

"I can't say that she does," replied John Mansfield, "but discipline is good for us all."

"Well now, listen to me, John Mansfield. The Desmond is getting old and when an old man sets his heart on a thing, it's bad—it's terribly bad to upset him. Let him have all his wishes until the breath leaves his body."

"Sir, why didn't The Desmond write about little Margot before now?"

"He didn't think of her and that's the truth," said Fergus.

"But I *did* think of her," said John Mansfield. "She's the light of my heart—the joy of my life. Haven't I trained her and loved her and taught her since her father's death when she was barely two years of age? I had hard work to bring Priscilla round to my keeping her

at all, but now—now she's my sunshine and joy and you want to take her from me. Don't you think you're a cruel man, Mr. Desmond?"

"No I don't; I'm thinking that the old man won't live long. I expect it is a bit of a sacrifice to you, John Mansfield, but you might think of the old who have so few days before them. And the little one shall have every care and be well taught and even[Pg 79] have a dowry provided for her. I am sure your wife would give her consent, and she's *her* niece—not yours—John Mansfield."

"That's true; Priscilla wouldn't mind," said Mansfield. "She'd be glad to get rid of her."

"Then, man, whyever do you hesitate? You are only her uncle by marriage. You can't keep her away from her grandfather if he wants her."

John Mansfield rose from his seat and walked to the window. He stood there for some time, looking out with a very steady and fixed gaze. At the end of that time the cloud which had covered his brow disappeared. Then he went up to Desmond and laid his delicate and refined hand on the other man's shoulder.

"I won't say any longer that you are doing a cruel thing," he said, "but if it's a case of adoption, I must get Priscilla's leave, and I must go to the present Comte St. Juste and see what he says about his son's child being adopted by the Desmonds. If it's done it must be done properly."

"I'm willing; I'm quite willing," said Fergus. "Where does the Comte St. Juste live?"

"At a place called Arles in France. There's the old château still standing and I'm told they are terribly poor, but the child belongs to them as much[Pg 80] as to you. I hear they are greedy, too; they may want a hit of money to give her up."

"John Mansfield," said Fergus, "if you lend me fifty pounds you and I might go together to see the Comte St. Juste and I'll pay it back to you as sure as I am a Desmond of Desmondstown when I return home again. Let us start at once, my good sir. You'll help me to get the little one for my father."

"I got my quarter's income yesterday," said John Mansfield. "I must keep some of it to live on, but I can let you have thirty pounds. I didn't know when I sent my little treasure to Desmondstown that it would come to this. You must do with thirty pounds, Fergus Desmond, I can't spare any more."

"I'll do with thirty pounds," said Desmond.

"Very well; we'll start for London to-night. This is the room where she and I were so happy together. Here is the little shelf where she kept her Latin and Greek books."

"My good gracious, you didn't teach her the dead languages?" said Fergus.

"I did, for certain. She was the aptest little pupil you could find in your march through life."

"I'll have her taught fine," said Fergus, "but you are a good—very good man, Mansfield."

"Don't say that again," replied Mansfield. "The heart knoweth its own wickedness and its own [Pg 81]sorrows. I can't explain what I feel and if I could, I wouldn't. I'll be ready to accompany you this very evening, Mr. Desmond."

"Fergus Desmond, please," said the future heir to The Desmond.

Mansfield left the room. Fergus looked round the shabby little study. He took up the Latin and Greek books and a sense of amazement possessed him. If it had not been for his old father he would not have gone on with this thing. He felt he had never seen a man like John Mansfield before. Fergus thought a good deal of rank and old family, but Mansfield was above all that kind of thing. He was higher up. He had, in fact, reached the soul heights, where earthly rank counts for nothing.

By-and-bye he came back, the colour in his cheeks and a sparkle in his eyes.

"I have news for you, Fergus," he said, "sudden, unexpected. Priscilla has come home."

"My goodness," said Fergus, "we all vowed that we would never speak to her again."

"Because she married me?" said Mansfield, with a sort of angelic smile.

"Yes, we were fools. I should like to see my sister, and I tell you honestly, Mansfield, that I think she has got the best of the bargain."

"But there is one thing I must add," continued [Pg 82] Mansfield. "I cannot go with you to France to-night. I cannot desert my wife on her unexpected return."

There was a loud, harsh voice heard in the hall.

"Maggie, Maggie, where are you, Marguerite?"

Mansfield hurriedly left the study; his firm, refined face assumed a somewhat slight and delicate flush; he drew himself up to his slender height, a half-suppressed sigh rose to his lips and then he disappeared. Fergus Desmond heard him murmur to himself,

"She's a good woman, yes, she's a good woman, and I—I have deceived her," but whether Mrs. Mansfield was good or bad, nothing could exceed her wild rage and anger when she encountered her husband in the little narrow hall and when he told her, which he did firmly and gently, that he had sent little Margot to visit her relations in Ireland.

"I didn't act fair by you, Priscilla," he said, "and I'm more than willing to own it, but the child pined to see her own people, and I—I, yes, I let her go."

"The little brat," said Mrs. Mansfield, "and pray what money did you give her? She couldn't cross the briny with nothing in her pocket."

"She didn't have a penny of yours, Priscilla; but wait, whist, I have something to say...."

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Whatever that something may have been, it was interrupted in a most startling and unpleasant manner, for Fergus Desmond also opened the door of the little study and stood in the hall. He was exactly three years younger than Priscilla, and Priscilla could not mistake him for a moment. She disliked all her family, but perhaps she disliked

Fergus the most, for Fergus would never give in to her or submit to her scoldings, and even the lively Norah and the old young Bridget found their brother a rock of defense on the occasions when Priscilla rounded on them.

"I've come, Prissy," he said, not offering to kiss her or even to take her hand. "I see you are exactly the same as ever. I pity from the bottom of my heart the good man you have made your husband."

"You pity the son of a farmer for having married a Desmond of Desmondstown," almost hissed the good lady.

"I pity the man you have married—I care nothing about his ancestry. He's got a good bit of property I'm thinking in a *more enduring country than this*. But now, about the child. I came over on purpose to speak to you and John about her. My father, The Desmond, wants to keep her and [Pg 84] from what I can see of you, Prissy, you'll be glad to be rid of her."

Mrs. Mansfield was at first so much startled at seeing her brother that she could find no words to reply, but now they came in what in Ireland might be called not only a flow but a rapid torrent.

"Ah, to be sure," she said, "that's a nice thing to come and say and do. I took the child when she was too small for anyone else to think about her. I took her and cared for her and nursed her and trained her and sat up with her at night when she had the whooping-cough and the measles, and now that she is a strong colleen you want to take her from me. All I can tell you is this, Fergus, you don't get her, so there! She can be of use to me now," repeated Mrs. Mansfield, "and I won't give her up. That's my answer. You can go, Fergus. There is nothing more to be said."

"But there is something more to be said, good wife," said John Mansfield. "I have given in—I, who love the little creature as though she were my own."

"Oh, do stop your foolery, John," said Mrs. Mansfield. "Who cares whether you love her or not? It's the plague of my life the way you go on about her."

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"I can't help loving her, dear, no more than you can help—help hating her."

"Who said I hated her? That's a nice thing to repeat to my brother."

"Well, then, give her up, Priscilla."

"I won't, unless I'm paid," said Priscilla. "She's a perfect torment of a child and I never did think when I went away to visit my sick friend that I should be treated in so mean and so deceitful a manner. I won't give her up unless I'm paid," screamed Priscilla. "How much are you prepared to offer me for her, Fergus?"

"I'll give you fifteen pounds, Priscilla. I'll send it to you from Desmondstown, but first of all this good fellow and I must go and see the child's French relations."

"Oh you must, indeed, must you? A fine fuss you are making—a fine hue and cry about a beggar's brat, whom nobody took any notice of at all until the last week or so."

"Come along now, ma'am, and sup up your tea," said Hannah, who just then added her own goodly proportions to the group in the hall. "I have a beautiful egg boiled as light as anything for you and new laid as though it had dropped out of the nest, and a little bit of curled up bacon. Master,[Pg 86] you take the gentleman into the study and I'll see after Mrs. Mansfield."

Now if there was one person in the world whom Mrs. Mansfield both respected and *feared* it was her old-fashioned servant, Hannah. Hannah had lived with her ever since her marriage, solely and entirely first on account of Mr. Mansfield, and then because of the sweet brown-eyed baby. She hated the woman for herself, but she would have done more than put up with her for the sake of that good man, John Mansfield, and for the sake of the bit girleen. She was a Yorkshire woman, firm and determined. She kept the house very clean, she allowed no waste anywhere and in some extraordinary way she managed to rule Priscilla Desmond that was. She ruled her by being outspoken and by letting this Irishwoman see what she really was.

"Here's your supper, ma'am," she said. "You'd better sit down quiet-like and eat it."

"Hannah, I've been treated shameful—shameful."

Hannah put her arms akimbo and stared fixedly at her mistress.

"I can't see for the life of me where the 'shameful' comes in," she said, "and whatever made ye come back a week or more before ye were wanted. Wasn't the master and me in the thick of housecleaning when you come bally-ragging us?"

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"I couldn't help it, Hannah. My friend got a bad attack of pleurisy, and you know I can never stand *serious* illness—it's more than I've nerve for."

"Oh you are not lacking in nerve, ma'am. When you told all those lies about sitting up with the child that time she had measles and whooping-cough. It wasn't *you* that sat up, bless your heart, it was the master and me. There's no sense in what I calls *useless* lies, and them was useless. The master knew it, and he give one of those quick little sighs of his that cut me to the very bone, back behind the heart, and, what's more, that fine gentleman from Ireland knew it—I saw it in his face. You are perjuring yourself more every day, Mrs. Mansfield, and you'd best step easy and go more cautious if you want ever to get to Heaven. There, now, you are crying—that'll do you good. This tea is prime. I bought it at Dawson's out of my own wages this morning, and this little curly crisp bit of bacon with the new-laid egg will hearten you up. Eat and drink, ma'am, and be decent to your good husband and, for the Lord's sake, let the child go where she will be loved. There is no one loves her in this house but the master and me. There, to be sure, haven't I got in a girl who is trying to *smooth* her work? I must get at her to see that she *bottoms* it properly. Take your tea and eat your egg and think on your sins. That's all I have got to say to *you*."

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CHAPTER VI. M. LE COMTE.

Hannah had certainly managed to say a good deal in this short but pungent lecture, and the immediate consequence was that Mrs. Mansfield was comparatively reasonable when her husband and Fergus saw her next. She confessed that children were a nuisance and if Fergus gave her twenty pounds she wouldn't mind parting with the child.

"It can't be done," said Mansfield firmly.

"Whatever do you mean by that, John Mansfield?"

"Exactly what I say, dear love. The little one has been the joy and blessing of my life. I can never express to this good brother of yours what little Margot has been to me and if I give her up at all, I give her up from a sense of duty, but I won't allow you to receive money for her."

"And right you are, sir, right you are," said Hannah, who came into the room at that moment. "The missus wouldn't touch a brass farthing for the kiddy when she gets over the kind of shock of [Pg 89] seeing that fine man her brother. I'll manage her, master dear, you needn't trouble your head."

It so happened that Hannah had her way. She did manage Mrs. Mansfield and, what was more, she got everything in order for her master and Fergus Desmond to start for their expedition to Arles, not that night but on the following morning. How neither of these good gentlemen knew a word of the French tongue, but they did discover by the aid of atlases, etc., the direction in which Arles was situated and they started off on their quest for little Margot's French relations at an early hour the next day.

They arrived at Arles on the following evening and, after making enquiries by means of one of Cook's interpreters, they discovered the Château St. Juste. Arles is a lively and busy place and more than one person watched the singular pair as they passed down an avenue of plane-trees and by-and-bye came to some heavy iron gates, which the said interpreter informed them opened on to the avenue, and eventually led to the Château St. Juste. The interpreter then felt that he had done his duty.

Fergus paid him twenty francs and a sprightly little woman, quite young and very lively, came out of a small and daintily furnished lodge to greet them.

"Ah, but you are Anglais," she said, "it goes without saying. I will take you down to the [Pg 90]château if messieurs so desire. Monsieur *mon mari* is ill, but it matters not—he can talk the English—ah, *charmant!* He has fallen ill of the accursed *grippe*, but I nurse him well and he will soon be restored. Come, then, my good messieurs, come for yourselves and see le Comte St. Juste. I am his wife, it goes without saying. He is old and I am young, that also goes without saying. Follow me, messieurs, you will be rewarded when you see all that I have done for the castle. It was in ruins—ah! but I had my *dot*, *chers* messieurs. I made my money by means of the *chapeaux* and the *très chic* garments for the different *fêtes* which abound at Arles. Ah, but I made my pile—my pile, and the Comte he worships me, and I myself am *la Comtesse*. Think you not it was well done, and think you I am ashamed of how I made my *dot*? Ah, *mais non, mais non!* The beautiful hats are made for the beautiful youth, the beautiful robes, *très distinguées très comme il faut*, are also made for the young and lovely, but see! I get my price, the true price—one hundred and fifty francs for one little *chapeau*, one thousand francs for a robe which might be distinguished in any part of Paris. Ah, think not of it any more. It is over. I am Madame la Comtesse and Monsieur is le Comte and I put the place—ah, into its

bridal dress. See! behold! Not[Pg 91] a weed, not an entanglement—all of the most spotless. Think what the place was! One raises the eyebrow at the thought, and behold it now! Monsieur the Comte, he is that eaten up with *joie* that he can scarcely contain himself. Ah, messieurs, have I not done well?"

"You have done very well," said John Mansfield.

The little French lady turned towards him and gave him a sparkling nod.

"You come from the cold *Angleterre*?" she enquired.

"I live in England and I love that country very dearly," said John Mansfield.

"Ah, and you, monsieur?" the black eyes fixed themselves on the eyes which were almost as black as Fergus Desmond's.

"I come from Ireland," he said. "I have come on a matter of great importance; I wish to speak to your husband, madame."

"Ah, *certainement, certainement*. Oh, la! la! you shall have your way. But Ireland—Ireland, have you not a name, monsieur?"

"My name is Desmond of Desmondstown," said Fergus in his slow, grave voice.

The little madame gave a sort of bounce in the air.

"Then the day of greatest joy has arrived," she[Pg 92] said. "My poor husband, he frets day and night, oh, but he has no reason. He is not ravished as he ought to be with all those good things that I have provided him with. His son, his only son, married! Ah, but it was a Paul and Virginia affair. He married a young Irish lady of beauty the most superb. I know it, for she came here and *I* sold her a *chapeau* and a *robe*. Ah, but you are like her, monsieur—you of Ireland, I mean."

"I am her brother," said Fergus.

"Did I not say it was a day of joy," exclaimed the little Comtesse. "Well, she was beautiful and they loved her all of them, but the Comte, my good husband, he was harassed much because there was not the customary *dot*, and he made the young m'sieur Henri, the husband of the beautiful madame, angry with bitter words and the young m'sieur he took, yes, he took his wife away. She was like a star for loveliness and then we heard that she had died, and shortly afterwards we got the information that the romantic ideas of *mon pauvre mari* were never to be fulfilled, for the young Comte died also somewhere in that bitter *Angleterre* and we lost sight of the good babe that had been put into his hands by his young lovely wife before she departed to *le bon Dieu*. Ah, but those were sad times! This is the house, messieurs, now[Pg 93] we will enter, and I will tell M'sieur le Comte that you have arrived."

The two men were left staring at each other. The château was in truly French style, and although it looked perfectly neat and tidy lacked the air of comfort which John Mansfield's little home possessed, and which was even to be seen in Desmondstown.

After a very short interval Madame appeared again on the scene.

"*Alors, je vais vous présenter à l'instant.* Follow me, I beg. Rest you here, M'sieur." She pointed to a little lounge in a gaily decorated drawing-room, "and I will take M'sieur, the Irish gentleman, to see my husband. I will bring you *l'eau sucrée, tout-de-suite.* Now follow me, M'sieur from Ireland."

Fergus Desmond gave his friend a glance of dismay.

"Be sure that all will be well," murmured the Rev. John Mansfield. There was a sort of intense encouragement in the words, and, holding his head very erect and pushing back his fine square shoulders, Fergus followed Madame la Comtesse into a peculiarly arranged *salon*, which was half a bedroom, half a sitting-room.

On a sofa, supported by many pillows, and [Pg 94]covered by a thick crimson plush rug, lay a thin, very old, very worn man. He had all the inimitable grace of his nation, and would have sprung to his feet to put his heels and knees together, and make the necessary bow if Madame had not interrupted him.

"Alphonse, thou naughty one, thou must not rise," she exclaimed. "Rest at thine ease on thy cushions of down, and I will talk to the stranger with the good face in the other room. M'sieur Desmond will divert thee, my little Comte." Here she pressed a light kiss on his forehead and danced out of the room.

The first thing that Fergus felt when he found himself quite alone with the Comte St. Juste was the extraordinary likeness the old man bore to little Margot. It is true that it was a likeness between extreme youth and extreme age. Nevertheless, it was there. The shape of the face, the aristocratic poise of the head were repeated in the old man and the young child. There was a flush of childish pleasure now on the old Comte's cheeks. He spoke in a hurried voice,

"Behold! are you indeed a Desmond?"

"Undoubtedly. I am the eldest son of The Desmond of Desmondstown and in our country 'The' is the proudest of all titles."

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"All, ah," said the Comte, "I know it not, I know it not. But see—I speak the English tongue. You doubtless bring me information. I have been long, long pining for my grandchild. Do you know whether the little one born to my Henri was son or daughter? All in vain have I made enquiries, but I have dreamt of that little one, by day and by night. Have you brought me news of her—of him?"

Fergus felt his heart sink within him.

"There is a child," he said, "a daughter. She is not so very young now—she will be twelve in ten months. She is beautiful. She came to us of her own accord and The Desmond wants to keep her."

"*Mais non, non,*" exclaimed the old Comte. "Is she not the child of my son, my only son? And if she is eleven, she will ere long be marriageable. Ho, sir, no, M'sieur Desmond, I will *not* give her up."

"I thought, sir, we might *pay* you," began Desmond, who was not very tactful, and longed beyond words to have the clergyman by his side.

The old Comte moved restlessly. He coughed also; he waved his hot hands. At that instant Madame la Comtesse entered, accompanied by the Rev. John Mansfield.

"I have been hearing the story, the romance," she said. "Ah, but it is of the most romantic. See! I deliver myself. *Écoutez*. These are my words:

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"The little Comtesse, for by the French usages she is also a Comtesse, belongs to *us*, M'sieur Desmond. But we do not wish to be unfair. This is what I propose. Ah, mon Alphonse, I adore thee, yes, hopelessly, incurably, I adore thee to the folly. Sip this iced lemonade, my adoring love, and then listen to the words of a French Comtesse, who knows how exactly to make the words come right, to make the thoughts come quickly, to put the ideas straight. The little one, it seems, belongs both to thee, my adorable Alphonse, and also to the father of this good gentleman from Ireland. Let's divide her, therefore. We have her half the time, and the good Desmond the other half the time, and I begin immediately to make her *dot*. See, my beloved one, see! Is it not sense? The two grandpapas shake hands over the head of the little one."

"It seems to me the best idea of all," said the Rev. John Mansfield. Now this man had a wonderfully sweet voice, but while he uttered these words, his heart was like lead within him, for while the two grandfathers claimed the possession of little Margot, she was to him the life of life. She was to him the joy of all joy, but not for the world would he interfere with what he knew was right. He thought of a home no longer joyful, blessed, [Pg 97]cheerful, merry, and then he pushed that thought out of sight. He was here to mediate, to arrange.

The old Comte gave an impatient sigh.

"I tell thee what it is, my good Ninon," he said. "I have not the secret of eternal youth. I must have my little one soon—at once—or behold I die. These limbs grow cold, this heart ceases to beat. M'sieur Desmond, I will have her now—at once—for three months, then your father of the title so high and proud can have her for three months. Is that not fair, will not that suffice?"

"It is fair and it must suffice," said Fergus.

"Then go, my good M'sieur. Go quickly, I entreat, and return with the *bébé* to her French home. Will you not go? It will be good for *l'enfant*, the little Comtesse St. Juste. But hold for one moment, the heart and the head get hopelessly mixed. What *dot* can we settle on her, Ninon, *ma petite*?"

"Fifteen hundred thousand francs," replied Ninon without a moment's hesitation, "and when Monsieur the Irishman brings the little Comtesse here, we will have a notary present to sign the agreement, so that on her marriage day she shall be much looked up to, and I myself will arrange the marriage according to the true French style."

"We do not want any *dot* at all," began Fergus [Pg 98] in an angry voice, but John Mansfield rose and interrupted him.

"We will go home at once and fetch the little one so that you may have three months' joy in her society, M'sieur le Comte," he said. "At the end of that time, I will myself fetch her to spend three months with her Irish grandfather."

"That is well," said the Comte; "that is as it ought to be."

"How soon then may we expect the little Comtesse Margot?" said the present Comtesse St. Juste.

"Within a week from now," said Fergus firmly.

"Ah, then, I must be preparing her little wardrobe. Think of that, my adorable Alphonse. The wardrobe of thy little Comtesse. Of what height is she, M'sieur Desmond, and of what breadth and of what colour? My taste is of the rarest. Come with me for one moment all alone, M'sieur Mansfield; you have seen most of her and can describe her best."

She ushered Mr. Mansfield into the *salon*, which adjoined that of the old Comte.

Mansfield found great difficulty in describing his little angel and Madame did not fail to notice that in spite of every endeavour the tears trembled to his eyes, although on no account would he allow them to fall.

"Oh, la, la! she is beautiful," exclaimed the [Pg 99] Comtesse, when his description had come to an end. "Monsieur Englishman you are good. On that point rest assured. You have the distinction of bearing. I note it. I would that you could talk with our parish priest. You live among the high and holy things, M'sieur. Now, then, I have a little secret to impart, I would not tell it to another, but to you, yes, you have the air—the eye so clear and frank. Now, Monsieur, when I married the Comte, he was great with the notion that I, his little Ninon, had given up all the chapeaux and the robes that brought in the money—the francs so numerous that I could make the old place look like it did so long ago, but I did *not* give up my *établissement*, m'sieur. Mon Dieu! I could not—I could not live without my gifts—I could not live without my silks and my satins, my lace, all real, I assure you; my opera cloaks, my tortoise-shell ostrich feather fans. No, no, I keep my *magasin* going, so that I can give a good *dot* to the little Comtesse, and the old man he knows nothing about it. He must never—never know—must my adorable Alphonse."

[Pg 100]

CHAPTER VII. THE LITTLE COMTESSE.

Margot's last day had dawned at Desmondstown. On the following morning she must leave grand-dad and Madam and young old Aunt Eileen and young old Aunt Norah and young old Aunt Bridget. She must also say good-bye to the boys, to Bruce and Malachi, and she was fully determined somehow or other to manage to give a last good-bye to Phinias Maloney and his wife Annie, and the baby who was so truly young.

Little Margot felt very sad at the thought of going away, and she nestled more snugly than ever into her grandfather's arms and looked up into his stern old face and kissed him on his brown cheek.



She nestled more snugly than ever into her grandfather's arms.—[Page 100.](#)

"Grand-dad," she said, "how much do you love me now?"

"Ah, worra, then, pushkeen, I'm thinking I love you better than all the rest of the wide world."

"Oh, grand-dad," said Margot, with a sort of gasp, "then you love me better than all the old-youngs. It is wonderfully noble of you, grand-dad.[Pg 101] You are a holy man—you are as holy, I'm thinking, as my uncle, John Mansfield."

"Drat John Mansfield!" exclaimed The Desmond.

"You mustn't say 'drat', grand-dad," said Margot, "more particular when you speak of a real holy man. Oh, grand-dad," she continued with a little burst of pain, "I don't *want* to leave you, I don't."

"You won't, pushkeen, you won't—keep your mind easy."

"But I'm going to-morrow," said Margot. "You can't keep me, for I took a vow. We of Desmondstown don't break vows, do we, grand-dad?"

"You're staying along of me, vow or no vow," said the old man, clasping her tighter than ever to his breast.

It was just at this moment that a commotion was heard in the hall. Young old Aunt Norah was heard to utter her celebrated "whoop." People began to run and to exclaim and the next moment, Fergus Desmond and John Mansfield entered the room side by side.

Margot, although she was intensely happy at Desmondstown, had missed Fergus a good deal and could not understand why her beautiful, extraordinary horse had deserted her, but now she had only time to give him a nod and a smile and then she [Pg 102] rushed forward and was clasped in Uncle Jacko's arms. She kissed him over and over and over. Her beautiful eyes grew wet with tears. She turned after a minute and brought him up to her grandfather.

"Here's himself, grand-dad, here's the holy man himself."

Madam had all this time been seated quietly in a corner. She was doing some of the celebrated Irish crochet, which brought in a trifle of money towards the expenses of the place. She glanced now at her son and her son gave her a look which she understood. She went straight up to little Margot.

"You and me, we'll go into the kitchen," she said, "and see about your uncle's tea. Come, *acushla machree*." She took one of Margot's little hands in one of her own, still small and fine and dainty, and the child without a struggle, but with extreme unwillingness, left the room.

The moment the three men were alone together, The Desmond stood up to his great height.

"I'm obliged to you, John Mansfield," he said, "for looking after my granddaughter. You have acted in a very fair way towards her, I'm thinking; but I want her now for the remainder of my days. You are willing to give her up, eh, John Mansfield?"

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"I must give her up," said Mansfield. "I have no say in the matter, alas! She is all the world to me, but I can't keep her against her will and against what is holy and right."

"Don't talk to me of holiness, Mansfield," interrupted The Desmond. "What's settled about my granddaughter? Sit down, man, if you must, you look a bit white and shaky."

"Perhaps, Mansfield, you had best let me speak," said Fergus. "He has had a very hard time, has Mansfield, father, and has behaved like a perfect saint. I'll tell the story and he'll listen and you'll have to agree, for there's no other way out."

"Ah, to be sure, Fergus, you always had the tongue," said The Desmond. "It was havin' ye trained at old Trinity. Well, go ahead, what's settled?"

"You know, of course, that my sister Priscilla married John Mansfield."

"Married John Mansfield," repeated the old man, "one of the Desmonds married *you*?"

"She did, sir, and she's a good woman. She's real aunt to little Margot."

"I call her a scourge," said The Desmond. "She never did anything that anyone else did. She was the torment of my life. But still for her to demean herself by marrying Farmer Mansfield's son!"

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"He's better than she is, father, ten thousand times better," interrupted Fergus. "Don't you turn on him. He's gone through enough. The little one would not be alive now but for his care. Prissy's the same as ever, only a trifle more bitter. She claimed money for the child—"

"Which isn't to be heard of, or thought of," said Mansfield, "but she's a good woman—I won't allow anything else to be said about her."

"Well, let her keep her goodness, but let her keep away from us," said The Desmond. "I'm obliged to you, Mansfield. You have reared up that pretty bit thing and now she is ours, thank the Almighty. I wish I could pay *you*, not Prissy, but I haven't got it, Mansfield. I'm a poor man, bitter poor, but Fergus, who will be The Desmond, will see after the bit colleen when I am took. I can rest easy in my bed to-night thinking that she's in the same house, the pretty, sweet lamb. And she loves me, too, for that matter, Mansfield. Strange as it is to relate, she is wonderful took up with the old grand-dad."

"Father, you must let me finish my story," said Fergus. "Things are not as smooth as you think."

"What—why? What do you mean? Who dares to interfere between me and mine? I'll have him ducked in the horse-pond, that I will."

[Pg 105]

"Father, you must take things easy," said Fergus. "You can't duck him in the horse-pond, for he's too far away."

"Why, he's here, close by. I could lay me hand on him if I'd a mind," said The Desmond. "Bedad, and I will, too, if I'm further roused. He's coming holiness over me when he's an out-and-out scoundrel."

"If you mean John Mansfield, father, he's the best man I know," said Fergus. "He's put up with Prissy and that's enough. Anyone who can do that must have the spirit of the Lord in him, say I."

"She's a good woman," murmured Mansfield. He turned his head a little aside. This interview was trying him inexpressibly.

"Now father, you listen," said Fergus. "Mansfield is the best of the best, and he'll give up the child whom he loved and reared and taught all she knows, for that matter. He'll give her up without asking a penny piece."

"I will so," said Mansfield, "it is the will of the Almighty."

"Then whyever are ye trying to frighten me?" said The Desmond, sinking back into his big grandfather chair.

"It is because of this," said Fergus, "things are fairly smooth, but not as smooth as you think.[Pg 106] Mansfield has nothing to do with it, so, for the Lord's sake, don't you turn on him. You forget that our Kathleen married a French nobleman."

"A Frenchy!" exclaimed The Desmond. "I hate the whole lot of 'em."

"Well, hate them or not, father, you have got to put up with the fact that the child has got two grandfathers; you are one, and the Comte St. Juste of the château near Arles is the other. This good fellow and I had an interview with the Comte and it seems he has been all these years searching and searching for the child of his only son, who died. He didn't even know whether it was a boy or girl, but he knew there was a child and he couldn't find it. Well, we brought him the tidings and luckily for us he speaks English, and so does Madame la Comtesse, his young second wife. He's reasonable enough and he promises a big 'dot' to the little one."

"A dot! What's a dot?" cried The Desmond. "A full stop I suppose you mean, we don't want a full stop."

"No, father, it's the French for a dowry. It means a lot of money. He wanted to have the child altogether, but when we spoke to him, he was amenable to reason. He will give her a lot of money—I can't tell you the exact sum, but with what he can[Pg 107] give and what we can give, the little one will be well off—very well off—only the condition is this: She is to spend half her time with him and half her time with you. He's very old—very much more feeble than you are, father, and he wants Mansfield and me to bring her over to the château near Arles at once. She is to stay there three months and then you shall have her for three months. It's reasonable and I've promised, and it must be done."

"You say he is older than me," said The Desmond, "and a Frenchy, too, bedad. Look at me, do I look young now?"

"No, you have got a bit of a disappointment, but she will be back with you in three months."

The Desmond turned his head aside and it was only Mansfield who noticed his shaking hands.

"My little bit, my little own," he murmured, "my pushkeen, my little own."

Mansfield got up very softly and left the room. In a few minutes he returned with some hot whisky and water, which he gave the old man.

"You must take it, sir," he said. "You are shook up, the same as I am, but she'll be back with you soon, for I'll bring her to you myself."

There was a great excitement in the house when it was announced by Fergus that Margot St. Juste, according to the French law, was a Comtesse, and [Pg 108] that she was to go immediately, that very day, to her French grandfather's château outside Arles.

The place was in a kind of turmoil, but the old man did not appear. Little Margot rushed in and clasped her arms round his neck.

"Grand-dad, I won't go."

"Ye must, pushkeen."

"Grand-dad, is your heart a-breaking?"

"Will you forget me when ye are away, *alanna*?"

"Never—never—never! As long as you live and as long as I live. Uncle John promises to bring me back to you faithful and true. And when he comes may he stay for a couple of days?"

"He may stay forever and ever, if he doesn't bring that wicked woman, his wife. She married beneath her, but she's a scold, for all that."

"I don't know what a scold is," said little Margot, "but I always said she was a wicked woman. Grand-dad, she didn't marry beneath her, she married far, far, far above her."

"Yes, child, perhaps you are right. Let's see when you'll be coming back to me, pushkeen."

"This is the 5th of June," said little Margot.

"June one, July two, August three," said the old man. "Ye'll be back with me on the fifth of September."

[Pg 109]

"I will that; I'll be mad to come back. You and Madam will keep watching and waiting for me."

"Don't you doubt it, *acushla*, don't you doubt it."

"And you won't grow any older, grand-dad, for that would be quite too terrible."

"No fear of that," said The Desmond. "I'll keep up for your sake, *acushla mavourneen*."

"And I for yours," said little Margot. Then she kissed the old man, and left Desmondstown.

The little old trunk was packed and Malachi took it to the gate where the same funny, springless little cart was waiting for it. Bruce and Fergus and the three young old Miss Desmonds accompanied Margot to the little cart. She rode on Fergus's shoulder up the avenue. It was Malachi who lifted her into the cart. Phinias Maloney was there to drive her to the station and Phinias Maloney's young wife and the baby and the other children were all clustering round to bid the little Comtesse good-day.

Meanwhile in the beautiful and celebrated town of Arles in South France great and intense excitement was going on, for Madame la Comtesse St. Juste was making what she considered suitable preparations for the arrival of her husband's granddaughter. She had from her own stores supplied innumerable frocks in French style for the little one to wear. Not only did she provide frocks, but [Pg 110] daintily frilled petticoats and chapeaux of the very best, and open-work silk stockings and little delicate kid shoes to match the frocks—in short, she had a complete wardrobe suitable for the very small Comtesse, who was to be the future delight of that adorable one, her Alphonse.

The railway journey was very long and little Margot was tired. She loved her Irish grandfather, but thought nothing at all about her French one. She was troubled in her mind, too, at the thought of parting with her beloved Uncle John.

"Oh, Jacko, my Latin and Greek," she sobbed. They were getting very close to Arles when she said this, and John Mansfield took her in his big arms and kissed her over and over again, telling her that she must be a very good little girl and that she was indeed lucky to have not only one but two such loving grandparents.

"I would much rather have only one," said little Margot. "I don't understand the double. Why should there be a double, Uncle John? Why, I'd even put up with——"

"With what, *mavourneen*?"

"Why, *herself*, the good woman, to be near *you*," said the child.

"My darling, we must all fit ourselves for the position that Providence assigns," remarked good [Pg 111] John Mansfield, and then they reached the great station and found themselves in the stately town, for Arles is very south and very warm and exceedingly picturesque.

Mansfield made enquiries and discovered that a carriage was waiting for *la petite* Comtesse. Into this the little Margot stepped. John Mansfield followed her. The ugly brown trunk was placed beside the coachman, and they drove in the direction of the *château*, which was quite a mile outside the town of Arles.

They found Madame la Comtesse waiting to greet them. She wore a most wonderful dress, which she considered according to her own ideas, *le juste milieu*. On her head was a chapeau, which consisted mostly of large violets. Her dress was pale green, with a *triste* little bow of black just under the chin. She bounded down the steps and clasped *la petite* Comtesse in her arms.

"I am thy *belle* grand'mère," she said. "My pigeon, my little cabbage, look at me, I am thy *belle* grand'mère in very truth."

"But you are young," said Margot. "My Irish grandmother is beautiful and old."

"Ah, but never mind, little strange one, it cannot be helped. The Irish grand'mère is old—the French grand'mère is young, *très bien*. Come with me and [Pg 112] I will introduce thee to thy grandpère—eh, but he has got the years and well do they suit *mon* Alphonse. Thy grandpère is adorable, my little cabbage."

The French grandpère was certainly very different from the Irish grandfather, and little Margot looked at him out of her soft black eyes with a puzzled mingling of admiration

and surprise.

"Ah, but thou art indeed come, *mon enfant!*"

The old Comte reclined just as of old, on his down pillows. He was covered just as he was a week past with a soft crimson plush coverlet. He looked anxiously out of his sunken black eyes into the soft black eyes of *la petite* Comtesse.

"Thou art here—thou art my own, thou wast born of my Henri. Kiss me, little one, press thy rosy lips on mine."

Little Margot did what she was told.

"My grandfather of Ireland," she said, "is much bigger than you, grandfather of France. You will not perhaps live very long."

"Ah, but *mon enfant*, don't say anything so shocking. *Fi donc, fi donc*," exclaimed the little Comtesse, bending over her beloved Alphonse and kissing him passionately, then she turned to the child. "*A la bonne heure*," she cried, "thou shalt have a *dot* that will astonish thee, and the notary[Pg 113] has come and he will make out the amount that was promised M. Mansfield, of the English Church."

"I wish to say one thing," remarked John Mansfield. "This is the sixth of June, I will return for the child on the sixth of September, but during that time I wish her to learn."

"Ah, *oui, m'sieur, certainement!* What would you wish *la petite* Comtesse to acquire?"

"Not Latin and not Greek," interrupted Margot. "My good uncle, the holiest man in the world, teaches me those languages."

"There is a school where I will send thee, *petite*. There thou shalt acquire the French in all its perfection, and thou shalt learn the dancing. Ah! bravo! everything shall be as it should be. Thou must prepare for an excellent marriage, *ma chère petite* Comtesse."

"What is a marriage?" asked Margot.

"It is—ah, but thou must not know yet. Digest well my counsels. I shall pray to *le bon Dieu* for the success of *votre mari*, that is to be. M'sieur, you are a *religieux?*"

"He is a holy man," said Margot.

"Ah, *oui, oui, mon enfant*—I know all that, but, nevertheless, I am *tout à fait Français* and I love the French the best of all people in the world."

[Pg 114]

"And I love the English and the Irish," said Margot.

"Ah well, wait a while, *ma pauvre chérie*. Thou wilt soon see for thyself. When the marriage time comes on—then will happen the rejoicing, and I can dress thee, ah well! I have thy little garments already arranged, but the *avocat* is waiting. The *dot* must be settled once and for all on this brilliant *petite* Comtesse, and then M'sieur, you will tell those good people in Ireland and your own sacred household what good has befallen *la petite*."

"I like it not at all," said Margot to herself. She stood looking disconsolately out of one of the windows and remembered The Desmond and the old place gone to rack and ruin, and hated the idea of being left alone with grand'mère and grandpère of the French nation.

"It troubles me," she thought, "why did I ever leave my little home with my beloved Jacko?"

[Pg 115]

CHAPTER VIII. BROWN HATS AND FANS.

It is one of the astonishing and also one of the blessed things of life that children of the age of Marguerite St. Juste quickly accommodate themselves to circumstances. She was naturally a very brave little girl, and she had a heart warmer than most, but there was a quiet determination about her, that same determination which had won her way into all the hearts of the good folks at Desmondstown, and this she brought now to her aid.

Her French grandpère was very nice, and she set to work to learn French as quickly as she could, in order to be able to converse with him not only in the English tongue but also in his own. The young new wife said that *la petite* Comtesse was altogether of the most ravishing. The old Comte said nothing at all, but he looked at *la petite* out of his twinkling black eyes and tried hard to see her father in that bonny little brown face—in those steadfast, deep, very dark eyes and in those smiling coral lips, but although little Margot had the dark eyes of her[Pg 116] father, very dark and very beautiful, she had what was better for herself, the soul of her mother. It was because of that soul that Kathleen Desmond had been so loved and because further she had happened to impart that soul to her little child Margot, who was in consequence more Irish than French.

Nevertheless she must remain for three months with Madame la Comtesse and with Monsieur le Comte, her grandpère.

There was one relief, however, for her. She had little or no affection for her French relations, but she did most truly adore the idea of going to school at Arles and of learning something about French girls in general.

Madame la Comtesse had most solemnly promised dear Uncle Jacko to send her to school and Marguerite waited impatiently for the day and hour when she might commence her studies. The day and hour, however, seemed to be a long way off. Each day as it came she was expected to devote all her time to her grandpère and to make the old man laugh by her funny attempts at the French language. Still there was no talk of school. There was, however, a vast amount of talk of dress.

"*Mon grandpère*" laughed until he could hardly stop laughing when he saw Margot in her pretty French costumes. He chuckled when she attempted[Pg 117] to imitate his French and Madame kept on saying, "*Fi donc, fi donc!* Ah! but thou mightst be a child of three and thirty to hear thee talk. See, behold! How thou dost make thy grandpère laugh. Thou dost do him much good. *Fi donc, petite* Comtesse, thou must not make him laugh till he expires. Has he not already the liver too pronounced? We must take care of him, *ma petite*. He wishes for thy company and I—behold I have my château. *Tiens!* it comforts me not a little."

Margot gazed with some amazement at her young grandmother.

"Thou hast made a promise, *ma grand'mère*," she exclaimed. "The days fly and you do not fulfil it—you do not carry it out. See, behold, Madame, it is of the most religious. You said it with those lips to the holiest man in the world. Behold, Madame, there will come a curse on thee if thou dost not carry it out."

"*Non, non, non*," cried Madame, in great distress of mind. "Speak not so cruelly, *ma petite Comtesse*. See, *mon enfant*, I love thee. Thou shalt have another chapeau."

"I don't want another chapeau," said Margot. "I'd like to go to school, where the really young girls—not the old young girls—live. Thou didst promise, Comtesse. Thou must keep thy word."

[Pg 118]

"But thou dost give pleasure to the old man, thy grandpère. Think of that, *ma petite*."

"I will give him greater pleasure when I go to school," said Margot. "I will bring him back day by day stories—ah, of the funniest. He will laugh. Thou wilt see, Comtesse, how he will enjoy himself."

"*Ma petite*, thou hast a wise head," said the Comtesse. "Thou shalt have thy way. There is a school for the trimming of hats and for the perfect education in the French tongue, by one Thérèse Marcelle. I will take thee to her to-morrow morning."

"But I don't want to learn to trim hats," said Margot.

"Ah, but it is a rare accomplishment, little one. Thou will learn it and *peut-être* the piano also, and *peut-être* the French tongue in all its perfection."

"And are the girls at Thérèse Marcelle's old young, or only young?" enquired Margot.

"Ah, *ma petite bébé*, they are one and all of the youngest and the gayest. See, I will take thee to-morrow. I am the last woman in the world to break my word."

Margot skipped away in her light and graceful manner and the next morning she and the Comtesse St. Juste drove into Arles in one of the very newest and best motor-cars of the time. They stopped [Pg 119] before a large *magasin*, which looked to little Margot far more like a gorgeous shop than a school. There were chapeaux innumerable displayed in certain windows, there were all sorts of robes—robes of every sort and description also to be seen.

Madame entered smiling, holding the little hand of *la petite*. She was greeted by smiles from every one in the shop. In fact, her entrance seemed to bring a ray of sunshine with it. All the young women who were walking about and attending to different customers were trying to catch her eye in order to secure one of her much treasured smiles.

Madame la Comtesse, however, knew her own mind and, motioning to Margot to seat herself, entered into conversation of a very earnest and at the same time spirited nature with a young woman who sat behind a sort of raised counter. Margot was left to look around her. She was much, indeed greatly, puzzled by what she saw. What could have happened—what a very queer sort of school this was!

Presently a number of ladies came in and Margot forgot her own immediate interests in the excitement of watching them. They did not look like English ladies nor did they look like French. One of them was very large and very fat and red. She had a square figure planted on large square feet and a firm jaw indicating a tenacity of purpose, which [Pg 120] the ill-natured might call pig-headedness. A young and very pretty French girl came up and spoke to her.

She said that she required a chapeau, condemning as she spoke the entire style of Madame Marcelle's goods.

"There is only one thing here that would suit me," she said. "See, behold!" she pointed to a very small child's hat in a corner. It was trimmed with small bunches of marguerites and violets. Her friend expostulated with her but she did not take the least notice.

"*J'aime beaucoup le chapeau là,*" she said, pointing to the one of her choice.

"Ah," exclaimed the young French shop-girl. "*Le chapeau pour la bébé.* It is nice, is it not? But now, we must find something Parisian for Madame herself."

Before Margot could quite get to the end of this exciting story and find out which hat the red-faced, fat woman required, Madame la Comtesse came to her side.

"I have settled for thee, *ma petite,*" she said. "Thou wilt come here each morning and take lessons in the making of chapeaux, then, after that is over, thou shalt have an hour in which to learn the French tongue and half an hour to do the different [Pg 121] harmonies on the piano. Then thou wilt return to my Alphonse. Thou wilt be a very happy *chère petite.* See, I leave thee now under the care of Madame Marcelle."

Margot did not know whether to laugh or cry. The Comtesse whisked out of the shop amidst more nods and smiles and Madame came and took Margot's little hand.

"Behold," she said, "thou art of the *ancienne noblesse.* Now thou wilt learn. I myself will instruct thee. Dost thou see that woman with the red face?"

"Oh, yes," said Margot, "she is very ugly."

"She wants to find a hat," said Madame, "which would only suit a *bébé.* Now then, come. You and I we will go to her and show her what is right. Thou must flatter her into buying a Parisian chapeau. She would look absurd with her own ideas."

"I thought this—this was a school," said poor little Margot, raising her brown eyes and fixing them on Madame Marcelle.

"So it is a school, *ma petite* Comtesse, and of the most wonderful, the most *extraordinaire.* Ah, Madame la Comtesse is right to have you taught. A little knowledge goes a long way when it is acquired as I will teach it. Now, then, stand aside and listen. [Pg 122] You will soon learn. I manage in this school of all schools the best. Come! Hold my hand."

She brought the pretty child forward and stood right in front of the red-faced lady.

"You want a chapeau, Madame. Ah, *c'est drôle, ne c'est pas?* That is for *la bébé.*" She pointed with scorn at the tiny hat. "Here is one for you. See, I am in the despair to oblige

you, but behold I have the very thing."

Madame produced a hat from off its stand, covered with flowers, butterflies and small feathers of different colours.

"Behold for yourself, Madame! It came from Paris yesterday."

"It is too showy. I like the little hat best," said Madame of the red face.

"Let me speak," suddenly interrupted little Margot. "Your face behold! it is red and must be softened. You shall wear brown. See, I picture it in my eye," continued Margot, speaking as though she had been acting shop-woman all her days. "A brown hat *très doux* and one long feather to match. Have you such a hat, Madame?" exclaimed little Margot.

"It is wonderful the taste of the Comtesse," cried Madame. "She sees at once what will suit you, *chère Madame*."

[Pg 123]

"The Comtesse! That little girl a Comtesse!" cried the astonished red-faced American lady.

"Ah, *oui*, Madame. She is the young Comtesse St. Juste and her taste it is of the most exquisite. Paris itself cannot touch her."

"Why does she come here?" asked the American. "But get me the brown hat with the brown feather. She looks like a child who has pretty taste."

Little Margot stood very silent. She was not going to laugh. Having given her idea she stuck to it. Her grave and lovely eyes were fixed on the American's face. The brown hat was produced in a twinkling. It was tried on. It was pronounced perfect.

"I will have a fan to match," said the American.

"Ah, *oui, c'est bon*," said little Margot. "I will myself choose it for you, Madame."

She chose a fan made of brown feathers with a long tortoise-shell handle.

"Here, behold!" said little Margot.

Immediately the other American ladies buzzed round the brown hat and round the brown fan, and little Margot found herself acting as shopwoman and enjoying herself immensely.

"And now the price, Mademoiselle la Comtesse," [Pg 124] said the red-faced American, when all the ladies had been provided with hats and fans.

"I know not," said Margot. "Madame, you will tell the price. For me, I am *fatiguée*." She marched away, hearing however behind her a perfect buzz of remonstrance.

The prices were monstrous—they were absurd. They were beyond even thinking about.

Madame stood calmly by, holding a pile of hats with brown feathers in her hand.

"It is the will of *la petite Comtesse*," she remarked, and then again she stood silent.

By-and-bye the hustle grew so great, the noise so animated, that Margot wondered how the whole thing would end and when these horrid, disagreeable women would leave the shop. But after storm there came peace. The brown hats and the brown fans hastily arranged themselves, the money was paid, one hundred and fifty francs for each chapeau, and one hundred and thirty francs for each fan.

Madame danced up to Margot and kissed her several times.

"We have made—we have made—oh, so much for your *dot*, little one," she said. "You are the very best saleswoman I ever knew. What will our sweet Madame la Comtesse say when we tell her! [Pg 125] Six chapeaux at 150 francs apiece, six fans at 130 francs apiece! Ah, but it is marvellous! You have the natural gift, little one. Come with me now, into the apartment, where we sell the robes of all sorts and colours. You will make the fortune of this place, little Comtesse."

"I will not go with you, Madame," cried little Margot. "This is not a school—it is a shop. I want to learn my French. I demand that I learn it. I will not again give counsel about hats for ugly women."

"You will learn the tongue of the French so ravishing in those apartments set aside for *les robes*," cried Madame. "Come, my little Comtesse, you are a genius and must not throw away your gift."

"I tell you I am *fatiguée*," cried Margot. "I will not enter a shop; I will go to school. It is a vow taken. Where is my grand'mère? See, I will do nothing more in your horrid shop."

"Ah, *ma pauvre petite*," cried the good-natured Madame. "*La petite*, she is tired out and no wonder. Ah, *ma chérie* is it not for your own *dot*? Now, come, listen. There is one playing in the other room. He is playing those delicious songs of *Wagnère*. Courage, *mon enfant*. You have done well and are tired. Ah, look at that robe in exquisite satin, coloured as the oyster, and that single row of [Pg 126] pearls round the neck and that magnificent diamond star crowning the summit of *le chevelure*! See the air it lends. Will you not help me to sell that costume so ravishing, my little Comtesse?"

"*Non, non*, I hate it all!" said Margot. "I will listen to the music of *Wagnère* until my French mistress comes and then I will return to M'sieur le Comte St. Juste, *mon grandpère*. Ah, but I am miserable—miserable in a shop. What would The Desmond say if he saw his pushkeen in a shop?"

Madame saw that she had gone as far as she could with the little Comtesse. She placed her where she could listen to the beautiful music which delighted the child and soothed her troubled heart, and then a young Frenchman entered the *appartement*, and with his knees and heels tightly pressed together made a very low bow to the little Comtesse St. Juste. He began talking to her in a lively manner in the French tongue, correcting her mistakes and teaching her how to use the French language properly.

Margot was a wonderfully quick little pupil, but she sprang up with delight when she saw the Comtesse enter.

The Comtesse had an earnest conversation with Madame and approached Margot, her black eyes full of smiles and her cheeks very bright.

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"Ah, but thou art of the very best, *mon enfant*," she cried, and she took the little Comtesse in her arms and kissed her before everyone in the shop.

The child and the woman got into the motor-car and drove off as quickly as possible in the direction of the château.

"Thou must never do that again, grand'mère," cried Margot.

"Do what, *ma petite*, my cabbage, my pigeon?"

"That was a shop, not a school. I desire to go to a school," said Margot. "I will tell M'sieur le Comte, my French grandpère."

"Thou wilt not, thou couldst not be so cruel," exclaimed her French grandmother.

"Ah, but I could and I would. I will not learn in a shop."

"Then, however am I to get thee thy *dot*, *ma petite*?" cried the Comtesse, "and thou hast a gift in that way—a gift the most marvellous. Didst thou not sell six brown hats and six brown fans to-day? Thou hast the true taste running in thy veins, *ma petite*."

"But you don't want me to sell hats," said Margot.

"Yes, I do, I do. Thou hast the gift. Madame confirms it. Tell not thy grandpère or he will rage—he would rage in the French fashion and that[Pg 128] might cause *la mort*. Ah, *ma petite*, thou wilt not injure thy *pauvre* grandpère."

"But I do not understand," cried little Margot.

"I will put it clear to thee if thou wilt not tell thy grandpère."

"Perhaps I will not tell," said Margot.

"Thou must not tell, *ma petite*. The hats and fans thou didst sell were mine and the money goes towards thy *dot*. Go to my most beautiful *établissement* each day for one hour, for thou hast most truly the gift of selling, and the title of the little Comtesse goes far. Then I will call for thee and take thee to a school, a school for the daughters of the *ancienne noblesse*. Wilt thou do this for thy *pauvre belle* grand-mère and wilt thou keep it dark—very dark from thy grandpère?"

"But why—why must he not know?" asked little Margot.

"Because, *ma petite*, when I met that most noble and ancient gentleman, the château was going to ruin. He wanted the comfort but he had not *l'argent*. I told him I had *le dot* and he married me. He thinks I have given up the *établissement* where the chapeaux and the robes are, but how could I give them up, *ma petite* Comtesse, when we would have nothing to live on otherwise? See, thou hast the gift and thou canst help me; one hour a day[Pg 129] amongst my chapeaux, one hour a day for *la petite* Comtesse to show her taste, and then I take thee to the very best school in Arles."

"Will you really, Comtesse?" asked Margot.

"I will, really, my most beautiful, my most lovely *bébé*. Do not embarrass thyself. All will be well. It is a bargain between us. No word to the Comte, thy grandpère! He is too feeble and too proud. He has the pride of all the St. Justes in his veins, but he lives in comfort out of my *établissement*. Wilt thou not help me for one hour or two hours a day, little Comtesse?"

"Yes, if you keep your word about the school," said Margot. "I will not otherwise, indeed I will not."

"No fear, *ma petite*, my word is my bond."

"But," said Margot, "when I get back now, what am I to say to grandpère? How can I talk to him about the shop which is thy shop?"

"Tell him thou didst go into an *établissement* with me, thy grand'mère, and describe to him the American lady with the stout figure and the red face. Tell him what she wanted and what thou didst suggest. Ah, but he will laugh—he will roar."

"I like Ireland better than France," said Margot solemnly, "but I will do what thou dost wish on this one occasion, grand'mère, for otherwise I could [Pg 130] not live. To-morrow I will attend thy horrible shop for one hour and one hour only, and then I will go to the school where the young-young girls are and where I can be taught. See, thou hast promised."

"I have promised and I will fulfil," said her grand'mère. "The school belongs to my friend, M'selle la Princesse de Fleury. Thou dost not know how much thou wilt learn there. It is *chic* of the *chic*. Oh, la! la! thou wilt enjoy thyself at the Princesse de Fleury's school."

So little Margot entered the old château fairly satisfied. To be taught by a Princess seemed a very high honour indeed, and she determined to lose no time in picking up knowledge to delight Uncle Jacko and dear, dear grand-dad, The Desmond.

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CHAPTER IX. THE ENGLISH GIRLS AT THE SCHOOL OF LA PRINCESSE.

Margot was the sort of girl who invariably and without any doubt kept her word, but, being of that somewhat rare species, she expected those about her to keep their words also. Accordingly Madame la Comtesse was forced to send *la petite* Comtesse St. Juste to her friend *la* Princesse de Fleury, having made arrangements beforehand with that good woman, that the child should go to her every day for *déjeuner*. After that she was to devote herself to the learning of French and that music which charms even the savage breast.

Little Margot was satisfied with this arrangement, and her grandfather, M. le Comte, little guessed that she was not at school all day long, but devoted the early hours of her day to selling hats innumerable for Madame la Comtesse.

Little Margot kept her word to the letter. She had a real taste for millinery, acquired no one quite knew how, and it soon became the rage in the [Pg 132] *établissement* that

M'selle *la petite* Comtesse should serve the customers, for had she not the taste *magnifique*! At school, too, little Margot was perfectly happy. Her morning hours were hours of duty rather than pleasure, but the rest of her days were full of pleasure. She delighted beyond anything in acquiring knowledge, and very soon discovered to her intense delight that there were several English girls at the school of la Princesse de Fleury.

There was, in particular, Lady Dorothy Duncan. She was living with a French uncle at Arles and went every day to the school of la Princesse. She was a fair, pretty, thoroughly English girl, and, although she was quite three years older than the little Comtesse, she took to the child with the dark bright eyes at once. The child, in her turn, took to Lady Dorothy. She was allowed for the good of her manners, according to la Princesse, to speak English with Lady Dorothy, and many beyond ordinary words were the confidences that each young girl made to the other.

Margot grew tall and graceful for her age; Dorothy was small and very slim. Things went on well both at the school and at the *établissement*, until one day Dorothy Duncan invited her most favoured friend to lunch in the château of *mon oncle*.

"Is it very, very French?" asked little Margot.

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"Oh, no, not any more than anything else here," said Dorothy. "You will enjoy it and you must come. As for me, I am overcome with raptures. My eldest sister—she is just seventeen—has come to us all the way from Rome. She will soon be likely to meet someone whom she can marry. She will be absorbed in getting her trousseau, partly from Paris and partly from that great *établissement* here, kept by Madame Marcelle!" Margot felt herself colouring slightly.

"What is your sister like to look at, Dorothy?" she asked.

"Behold, understand!" exclaimed Dorothy, putting on all the French manners she could acquire. "I think that some day I shall be beautiful but not like Hébé. Hébé is almost as beautiful as you, *ma petite* Comtesse, only of course she is very much older. They say that the establishment of Ninon Lecoques cannot be beaten even in Paris, that city of all the delights. She has sold it now to Madame Marcelle. Ah, but my sister will make a grand marriage and *l'oncle* Gustave will give her a *dot* worthy of her."

"I am to have a *dot*, too," said little Margot, "but, behold, I care not for it! It is—it is less than of no use at all. What I want is to have my heart brimful of love."

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"Eh, but you are a darling," said Lady Dorothy. "I know you will love my sister."

"I am sure I shall," said little Margot. "Go on, describe her to me, Dorothy."

"We are very proud in England," began Dorothy, "very proud indeed. Ah, but our pride is immense. It is like a mushroom, standing up higher than our heads and the top of it covering us and shutting out the world. Of all my sisters there is none so proud as Hébé, and *l'oncle* Gustave says she will make a very great marriage indeed. She is like me, but she has dark eyes, whereas mine are blue like bits of sky, *n'est-ce pas*?"

Margot made no reply.

"When am I going to see your sister, Dorothy?"

"Shall we arrange for to-morrow? You may perhaps see one of the many *prétendants* to her hand. Not that she looks at them. Ah *non, non*. She abides her time. There is one called Maurice de Croix. He is a man of the world with an air superb and distinguished, but my sister, she will not regard him. But there, I must not speak any more on such matters. There is, *peut-être* one in England. I guess—but I dare not say. You will come to-morrow, little Margot, straight from school and be introduced to *ma belle soeur*."

Margot gave a little sigh, said that she must ask [Pg 135] grandpère, and would let her friend know the following day.

Grandpère was highly pleased that his little cabbage should have tea in the true French style with *le pauvre* Gustave.

"He was once a very great man," said grandpère, "but he lived through his fortune and now—now he subsists on his pride. It is a great possession, the pride, *ma très belle* Margot, but it produces the hunger. I took care to do otherwise. I married my Ninon and since then, behold, I live in luxury, and can give thee a glorious *dot, ma petite!*"

While Margot and her grandfather were talking, Madame la Comtesse entered the room. She was dressed in a pale shade of green with quantities of sequins of the same colour arranged on the front of her dress. Her little collar was of the best Honiton lace. Her dress was short, coming barely to her ankles. She wore open-work silk stockings of the same shade and little green kid shoes *en suite*. She looked very charming and young, and no one could tell from her appearance what her age could possibly be.

She rushed up now to "*mon* Alphonse," arranged his down pillows, settled his soft rug of crimson plush and said, "Ah, behold, art thou not full of [Pg 136] comfort, my adored one? And what has *la petite* been saying to thee?"

"Good news, my Ninon," replied grandpère. "Gustave, the present Marquis de Serrègnon, wants this *bébé* to have tea with his nieces Hébé and Dorothy to-morrow evening. Ah, but I fear the food will be poor, but the Marquis is the Marquis, and we must not despise him. This little Margot, this *chère petite*, loves dearly his English niece, Lady Dorothy Duncan, but it is the sister whom Lady Dorothy wishes her to meet."

A cloud, very imperceptible, but undoubtedly there, swept over the face of Madame la Comtesse.

"All shall be as thou dost wish, my most adorable Alphonse," she remarked, and she kissed the old man first on the hand, then on the brow, then on each cheek and then, by an almost imperceptible wave of her own small white hand, motioned Margot to follow her out of the room.

"Answer me, and answer me truly, *mon enfant*," she said. "Hast thou seen the Lady Hébé Duncan in my *établissement*? Hast thou perchance served her, *ma petite*?"

"I have seen her and I have served her," said Margot. "I helped her to choose chapeaux yesterday."

"Then she will know thee again when thou dost [Pg 137] go to that place of desolation where le Marquis de Serrègnon lives."

"Yes, *ma grand'mère*," replied Margot, looking full into the face of the little shop-keeper.

"And yet thou must go," said Madame. "It would offend thy grandpère else. It does not do to offend the old. *Tiens!* The heart beats too slow, it must not receive the shock, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I never wanted to serve in your shop, grand'mère," exclaimed little Margot.

"Ah, but silence, my little beautiful! We have to make the francs to secure the proper *dot* for thee, *mon enfant*. Now, let me consider. Thou wilt not go to my *établissement* to-morrow, and I will dress thee different. I will not even send thee to the school of la Princesse, but I will myself take thee in my motor car to the château of the Marquis. There I will dispose of thee for one short hour. During that hour thou must play the *rôle* of *la malade*. Thou must appear worn and pale and ill. Ah, but I am clever enough to manage, and behold assuredly it shall be done. Thou shalt wear the dress of *la malade*, and thou must speak low and soft and refuse the food which is offered to thee and which in truth is not worth thy accepting. Now see, behold, be guided by me, thy *belle grand'mère*, and *mon* Alphonse will guess nothing."

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Little Margot, not being in the least disturbed or annoyed, readily agreed. She returned to sit with her grandfather and kept him in fits of laughter with accounts of her schoolfellows. Meanwhile, Madame was very busy. She wrote two letters, one to the Marquis de Serrègnon, the other to la Princesse, and she kept Margot away from the shop that day. Margot was undoubtedly making the said shop pay, but that did not matter at all, if only the adorable Alphonse was kept composed and happy in his mind.

When the hour approached for little Margot to visit the Duncans in the tumble-down old château, she was dressed very carefully by her grand'mère. In some curious manner the natural colour seemed to depart from her rosy cheeks, her eyes, so dark and brilliant, looked a trifle dull. She wore her school frock of course, but taking her all round, she had a sort of extinguished appearance.

Madame la Comtesse taught her carefully what she had to say.

"'I have *mal à la tête*,' Thou wilt not say more; thou wilt not say less. The Marquis will be scared for fear thou dost carry the infection. Oh, la, la! It is a good idea, and they will not think of the bright little Comtesse when they see the sad looking *malade* who cannot eat or say much. Thou must keep all the particulars about the *établissement* close [Pg 139] to thy breast. Thou must not allude to Madame Marcelle. Thou wilt go to her to-morrow morning again as arranged and, behold, I will have refreshments the most enticing for thee on thy return to-day! Now then, my Ma'm'selle, come along! The Lady Hébé will not notice the drooping child, who served her with so many chapeaux and at so great a price. See now, thou wilt be thy old self to-morrow and no one will ever guess our little strategy."

Accordingly Margot, accompanied by grand'mère, arrived at the ancient castle of the Marquis de Serrègnon. Dorothy rushed out to meet her. Margot scrambled weakly out of

the motor car, which was closed and which was to call for her again in an hour and a half.

Margot felt terribly inclined to laugh. She longed to say "I am a little shopwoman and this is all nonsense," but if she did so, according to grand'mère, she would destroy the life of that adorable one, Alphonse St. Juste. Accordingly she went languidly into the house and when Dorothy asked her in some surprise what ailed her and why she looked so white and good-for-nothing, Margot said in a voice *très douce*,

"I have *mal à la tête*, Dorothy."

"Ah, but what a pity that is," said Dorothy, "and we are all so gay, so very, very gay. A whole lot of [Pg 140] chapeaux have been sent to us from Madame Marcelle—for Hébé, of course. I have told Hébé that you are beautiful, Comtesse, but you don't look beautiful to-day."

"It is *mal à la tête*," repeated Margot, trying to make her voice sound as weary as possible.

"Ah, *pauvre petite*," said Lady Dorothy. "You must lie on the sofa in this salon. *Mon oncle* Gustave will not come in, because we will ask him not, but you must see Hébé, for I long much to know your opinion of her."

Hébé Duncan at that moment bounded into the room. There was nothing whatever French about her. She was a laughing, highly coloured, rollicking English girl. Her age might have been eighteen—it might have been more, it might have been less. She stared hard for a minute out of her bright eyes at the little Comtesse and then said, "Oh, la, la!" and afterwards went off into fits of laughter.

The little Comtesse murmured, "It is *la mal à la tête*."

Dorothy put soft cushions under the head that did not ache and a rug over the little feet that pined to scamper about. As soon as ever she had done this, Hébé pulled her out of the room.

Then began a violent conversation on the wide landing outside the Marquis' salon.

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Dorothy said, "Impossible!"

Hébé said, "It is true, a certainty!"

Then she re-appeared holding several huge bandboxes in her hands.

"I bought these," she said, "from a *très petite* Comtesse at the *établissement* of la Madame Marcelle. Would you like to look at them?"

"No," said Margot, and she suddenly began to cry. "I hate *établissements*, I hate deceit. I have *not* got *mal à la tête*. Is there any cold water near?"

Lady Dorothy stared and Lady Hébé frowned. But Margot was only thinking of Uncle Jacko, dear Uncle Jacko, and of grand-dad The Desmond.

"Take me where I can find some water, some icy cold water, please," she said to Dorothy.

Dorothy obeyed in a sort of bewilderment. She took Margot to her own room and soon the whitening process was removed from the little cheeks and the brilliant and lovely colour returned. Margot's eyes sparkled as of old.

"Now you look like yourself," said Dorothy. "You have no *mal à la tête*."

"None, none, none," cried Margot. "Never had."

"Ah, but how strange," said Lady Dorothy.

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"But never mind. Hébé will soon love you. Behold, Hébé, behold! This is my little friend."

"And my little shop-keeper," said Hébé in an angry voice.

Margot's big eyes blazed with a kind of fury.

"And are you really, really going to tell the Marquis?" said the child, her eyes blazing. "Take your chapeaux then, here, and here, and here. I have repented of my lie—I have confessed to you both—but—but—"

She pulled the hats out of their bandboxes and flung them in Hébé's face.

"Now I despise you," she said. "I did what I did to help *ma belle* grand'mère and she keeps M. le Comte in all luxury and does everything for me. No, I don't want your tea; I don't want your *gâteaux*. I am not ashamed of helping *ma belle* grand'mère. I help her a little, and she helps me much, but I will never choose a hat for you again. Understand! You can go to Madame Marcelle and you can spread the news, if you like, that I help a little one who helps me much. Behold, our château! It is neat, it is clean, it is white. It is full of things most beautiful and *mon* grandpère eats of the best and lives in the best style and he is happy. I will go on helping *ma belle* grand'mère and you can do as you please, but I will never choose a hat for [Pg 143] you, Lady Hébé. See, I am off home now. I can easily get back to my comfortable home."

"Oh, but no, Margot, no," exclaimed Dorothy. "Do not be so silly."

"I will not be silly, I will be wise," said Margot. "This is worse than being young-old and old-young. Good-bye, for the present, I do not choose to be a guest and be looked down on. It is not the Irish way, and I did not think until now that it was the French way."

She wrapped her pretty little coat round her shoulders and marched down the avenue with the air of a small duchess.

Nevertheless when Margot got back, which she did before the motor-car had time to call for her, she was met by a singularly discontented *belle grand'mère*.

"Why, my pretty, why dost thou come so soon?" she exclaimed.

"Because I couldn't act a lie, grand'mère, and I had to tell the truth, grand'mère," said Margot. "The Lady Hébé is no lady. She calls herself one, but she is not, and I will never,

never sell her another hat."

"Ah, *ma petite*, what mischief hast thou done!" said *la grand'mère*.

"I care not, I care not at all," said little Margot.[Pg 144] "I will not act the lie even for thee, grand'mère. I wish that thou wouldst let me go no more to the shop."

"Ah, but thou must—thou art the fortune of the *établissement, ma petite*," said grand'mère. "And think what fun it will be selling chapeaux to others and never to the proud Comtesse. We will get someone else for her and thou needst not serve her."

"*Très bien*," answered little Margot and she entered her grandfather's presence with a toss of her pretty head.

But the next day at school things did not go so well with the little Comtesse. It was quite evident that much as Dorothy had admired her the day before, Héb e had brought her round to the impossibility of having anything to do with a girl who sold hats at a shop. Dorothy not only came round to H eb e's view of the question, but she enlightened her school-fellows with the true status of the little Comtesse.

"She's all a sham," said Dorothy. "I won't speak to her any more, no, not me!"

Margot was beginning to get rather fond of Dorothy, but she took her English friend's desertion very coolly. She thought out matters in her acute little brain. She let the French girls alone, but there were, including herself and Dorothy, sixteen[Pg 145] English girls in the school. These girls were all very much about the same age as Margot. She got them into one of the very small *salons*, which abounded in the old palace, now converted into a school. They all looked askance at her, but it was difficult to keep from smiling back into those smiling and beautiful dark eyes and it was still more difficult to resist the dimples that played round the lips and cheeks of the little Comtesse.

"See, behold, listen!" she exclaimed. "Dorothy Duncan does not like me because I help Madame Marcelle in her *magasin*. She pretends I am not a lady—that is not true. I am a lady and my Irish grandfather has a title higher up than the stars. What do we think of Comtes in Ireland when we have 'The's' of the most ancient! *Ma belle* grand'mère has asked me to help Madame Marcelle a little bit. *Ma belle* grand'mère does great things for me and for *mon bon* grandpère. She is a woman oh, of the noblest, and there is not a ch ateau greater or better than ours at Arles. Now, behold, listen! What sort of ch ateau does the Marquis keep? Is it tidy, is it neat? Are there good things to eat therein? I guess not. Now, if you English girls will take my part I will take you to the *établissement* of Madame Marcelle and get you a hat each at cost price. You will have to pay ever so much less[Pg 146] than the Lady H eb e paid when I flung her chapeaux back into her face."

"Ah, but didst thou, indeed, little one?" said Agnes Martin.

Jane Raynor burst into a fit of laughter. All the English girls with the exception of Dorothy were brought over to Margot in a body and on the following morning she had a tremendous sale of hats, which she gave by Madame *la Comtesse's* express wish to the bevy of English schoolgirls.

She chose the hats with great care and exquisite taste. Having done this, she went back to *la belle* grand'mère and told her that she did not wish to continue at the school with Lady Dorothy.

"I like those who are faithful," said Margot. "She is not faithful and I will have none of her. I will attend in the shop every morning, *ma grandmère*, and you and grandpère can teach me in the afternoon until the happy, happy day when I return to Ireland."

"And dost thou wish to leave us, *ma petite*?" asked the Comtesse.

"Ah, *oui, oui*, The Desmond is so very noble," said little Margot.

"Thou must abide with us thy full time. Thou canst not leave until September," said *la Comtesse*.

Tears filled the little Comtesse's black eyes.

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"I know," she said, "I know. Uncle Jacko will call for me on that day. Ah, but my heart will rejoice, it will sing! But indeed thou art kind, *ma belle Comtesse*, and so is grandpère, but thou hast never seen The Desmond. I will go to him for three months and come back again to thee and will serve for a little time each day in the shop, and hearken, Comtesse, thou wilt get me masters and mistresses next time, for I must learn—yes, I must learn! I will not be an ignorant Comtesse of France, and nothing will persuade me to disgrace The Desmond of Desmondstown."

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CHAPTER X. THOU ART FAITHFUL AND SO ARE MY BEES.

"I am going to be your little pupil, grandpère," said Margot, raising her beautiful eyes to the old man's face.

"Eh, what," he exclaimed, "eh, what? I thought you were at the school of Madame la Princesse."

"I don't like that school, *mon cher grandpère*. I don't like the girls there. I want you to teach me, yes, you! You can, you know, you know an awful lot."

"I don't know anything, little fledgling," answered grandpère. "What I did learn, I have forgotten. I am an old man on the brink of eternity. It is not given to me to teach even one so *douce* as thou, *mon ange*."

"But can we not read poetry together?" said Margot. "I know you are terribly old, grandpère; you are much—much older than The Desmond. Oh, but The Desmond he is *magnifique*—so big—so tall—so broad, his beard long and white as the snow! And his hair white as the snow! [Pg 149] But his eyes are somewhat like yours, grandpère, only they don't go in so deep in his head. Yes, thou art old, *mon grandpère*, but still thou canst teach thy little Margot. One hour a day; say it is done!"

"But what shall I teach, my pretty?"

"How to talk the beautiful French tongue like thyself. Surely that will not be *difficile*. It will be to thee nothing, thou learned man; *très bien*—ah, but I cannot say all the words I want! But *thou* canst do it, *mon grandpère!*"

"Only for one hour a day, my Margot. But listen! understand! believe! We must not stay any longer than one hour over the French, *si belle*, for it would fatigue the old man."

"After that I will teach thee the Irish language," said Margot, her eyes sparkling. "I will teach thee, and thou wilt laugh—oh, how thou wilt laugh!"

"Thou art a *très bonne petite enfant*," said the old man. "I like to have thee near me, close to my side. For one hour each day, from two to three, we will talk that language the most elegant in the wide world, and after that I will lie back on my pillows of down and thou shalt tell me things to make me laugh, and laugh again, *ma petite*."

It was in this way that Margot's new life began. It was a very busy one and on the whole happy. She was glad to leave the school of la Princesse, and[Pg 150] she greatly liked selling chapeaux and robes for her *belle* grand'mère la Comtesse. She was particularly happy when members of the school of la Princesse de Fleury entered the *établissement*, looked longingly at the pretty, clever child, and she had the opportunity of giving them as she expressed it "*the back*." She had great pride, had this little Comtesse, and when she swept past Lady Dorothy Duncan and even the other English girls who had tried to befriend her, she enjoyed herself immensely. She had become in fact a sort of power in the *établissement* and never did the francs come in so quickly and the robes and the chapeaux and the fans and the *gants* fly so fast.

She had a knack of picking out elderly, rich-looking people and dressing them according to her own taste. Meanwhile she passed utterly by the inmates of the great school and the other aristocrats, of whom she took no notice whatsoever. The people whom little Margot attended to were *bourgeoise* but they were rich, and Margot was clever enough to charge them according to their means. In short, things were going so well, that Madame *la belle* grand'mère felt it only her duty to give the child the very best music lessons which Arles could produce.

The afternoons were sacred to *mon grandpère*, and in short the little incident in connection with[Pg 151] the school was well-nigh forgotten. Oh, what a very happy girl was Margot St. Juste! But she little knew that a cloud was arising in the blue of her sky and that she was not to escape scot free.

Hébé Duncan was really engaged to a young nobleman of great distinction. The marriage was to take place within a very short time. She had an aunt who lived some distance from Arles who would supply her with that *dot* which the Marquis could not possibly raise, and this aunt came constantly to Arles to see about her niece's robes and chapeaux for *le mariage*. The fame, the taste of the small dark-eyed Comtesse had reached the ears of Madame Derode and she was determined that the little Comtesse and no one else should assist in the choosing of the marriage garments for young Lady Hébé Duncan. But it is one thing for man to propose and another thing for God to dispose. The little Comtesse was exceedingly busy that morning turning a fat, ill-made Frenchwoman of the farmer class into an elegant lady.

She was choosing the right robes, the right chapeaux, she was—with a skill all her own—softening the tints of Madame Vollot. Madame Vollot hardly knew herself in her chapeaux

and her robes. She stood in the centre of the largest salon, the admired of all beholders. A group of young girls surrounded [Pg 152] her while *la petite* Comtesse gave her orders in a firm and resolute voice.

"You must wear this green, so dark," she said. "*Tiens*, and here are the very chapeaux for you! Hesitate not, Madame Vollot! You will look—oh, of the most charming!"

A little way to the right stood Madame Derode, the Lady Héb  Duncan, and Dorothy, her sister. *La petite* Comtesse kept her back to the group. She was absorbed with Madame Vollot. Just then Madame Marcelle came up and whispered some words to the little Comtesse.

The little Comtesse shook her pretty head.

"*Non, non*," she said, "it cannot be. I have all my time occupied to the moment. They have offended me and I will not serve them now. See, behold, when I have done with this *ch re Madame*, there are others who are waiting for me. I cannot give any advice at all to the Ladies H b  and Dorothy. You must attend them yourself, Madame Marcelle."

Madame Marcelle did her best, but the deed was done. Dorothy and H b , accompanied by their aunt, left the * tablissement* with their heads in the air and a very significant expression on their faces.

"Behold, I had my way," said little Margot with a smile, and she went on giving all her skill and [Pg 153] knowledge to the wives of the different farmers, who were so rich and could pay so well. But when they got into the street, H b  said a word to her aunt, Madame Derode.

"I have suffered an insult," said H b , "and I wish to repay it."

"An insult, my dear child!" said Madame. "What do you mean? Who would dare to insult a bride-elect? Ah, me, I know life and I know men, also. For thee is perfect happiness, my little H b ."

"Nevertheless I have suffered an insult," said H b  Duncan. "Did you not observe that ugly little girl, who gave herself such airs and who only attended to the farmer folk?"

"You cannot allude to *la petite* Comtesse?" said Madame Derode. "Why she is a most beautiful, very young girl!"

"Nevertheless she has insulted me," said H b . "We have plenty of time. We will not take over long on this business. Aunt Matilda, I want to drive to the Ch teau St. Juste."

"Ah, but certainly," said Madame Derode. "Do you know the Comte, H b ? He is a very proud old man; he makes but few acquaintances."

"I shall get to know him," said H b .

"And I," exclaimed Dorothy.

"Well, have it your own way, my sweet pets. But [Pg 154] I hear that he is of the most delicate. We will not detain him long."

"Not long," said H b , blushing and laughing.

They arrived in a very few minutes at the château, which was in exquisite order. Everything new and fresh and, according to Madame Derode, perfectly lovely, for she was the sort of woman who liked whiteness and spotlessness and everything in perfect present-day taste. Her own château was neat, but not to compare with this. She gave a quick sigh under her breath, but her nieces were too much occupied with their own affairs to observe it.

Now it so happened that always in the morning le Comte St. Juste took what he called his airing. He went out leaning on the arm of his *garçon*, a young man dressed in the ancient livery of the St. Justes. He leant heavily on the *garçon's* arm and went invariably in one direction, and that was first to examine the thriving rows of beehives and second the peaches, which were ripening to a lovely golden red on the high brick wall. The Comte St. Juste used to count the peaches and rejoice in their fragrance. He was a happy old man—very happy since he had married his Ninon. It mattered little to him if she had once kept a shop. She kept one no longer. He could not have married her if that was the case. They lived oh, so happily on the rich *dot* which she [Pg 155] had brought with her. She was one in ten thousand, his pretty Ninon, so young, so gay, and of the taste the most perfect.

It therefore so happened that when the three ladies drove up in their automobile to the Château St. Juste, they only found Madame la Comtesse standing on the front steps and giving directions to one of her numerous gardeners.

Madame Derode got out of her car and, introduced herself and her nieces.

"Ah, but I am in ecstasies to know you, Madame," said the Comtesse, "but if you do indeed seek my Alphonse, you cannot see him now. He is at this present moment resting on his couch of down and must not be disturbed."

"I know him by appearance," said Lady Dorothy, "and he is not on his couch of down. He is in the garden yonder; behold, he is talking to a *garçon*! I go to tell him, to tell him the truth. I will not stand the sins of your little granddaughter, Madame la Comtesse. She serves in your *magasin*, and her rudeness is unthinkable. I go to report to M. le Comte the wicked ways of that ugly child."

"But—but—I entreat you to stop!" cried the anguished voice of the little Comtesse. "He knows nothing—nothing at all—oh, it will kill him, and he with the pride of all the St. Justes in his veins. He [Pg 156] knows not of the *établissement*. *Le petit bébé* and I, we keep it from him as a secret the most profound. Do not be so cruel as to injure him, *chère* Mademoiselle! You go to the school of my friend, Madame le Fleury. I recognize your *bijou* charming face."

"I will have my revenge," said Dorothy. "I mind not at all the age of that stupid old man. I see him and I will go."

"Dorothy, don't—Dorothy, I command thee not to go," said Madame Derode, but Dorothy cared very little indeed for any such command. She had light and agile feet and before the unhappy little Comtesse could prevent her, had rushed into the garden where the peaches and the bees were, dropped a low curtsy to M. le Comte and then said in a hurried tone,

"M'sieur speaks the tongue of England. I am an English girl. My name is Dorothy Duncan. I am at the school of la Princesse de Fleury. *La petite* Comtesse no longer goes to that

school."

The old Comte managed to hold himself very erect. He fixed his eyes on the pale blue eyes of the English girl.

"Will you have a peach?" he said.

"No, I want not your peaches, M. le Comte. But, listen, behold, I want to tell the very truth. *La petite* was practically expelled from our school. We [Pg 157] would have nothing to do with her. Think, M. le Comte, would it be likely? She attends in a shop."

"In a—in a—" began the old Comte.

"In the shop of the present Comtesse. It is now known as the *établissement* of Madame Marcelle and *la petite* Comtesse goes there every day of her life to sell ugly, common things to the wives of farmers. The shop belongs to La Comtesse and she dreads that you should know. Ah, but what a buzzing," continued Dorothy at the end of her sentence. There were innumerable voices; there was the angry tone of Hébé confirming her sister's words; there was Madame Derode in tears, for she could not bear to afflict the aged; and there was the Comtesse, white as a sheet, bending over "*mon adorable* Alphonse," who had sunk slowly but surely to the ground in a state of complete unconsciousness.

Dorothy stood at his back, a little frightened at her own words, and then she uttered a scream and a shriek, for the celebrated bees of M. le Comte St. Juste were surrounding her. They were getting into her hair, they were stinging her neck, her arms, even her lips and her eyes. She could not get away from them. The old man heard nothing—nothing at all, and Dorothy rushed out of the garden extremely sorry for her mean little revenge.

She was immediately followed by Lady Hébé and [Pg 158] Madame Derode. No one had been stung but Dorothy and she could do nothing but cry out at her pain. Madame Derode called her a child of the most *méchantes*—of revenge the most puerile. She said the bees had but done their duty and when she dropped Dorothy at her school, she said that someone who could remove the stings had better be sent for, but that *hélas*, for the rest, she pitied not at all *la pauvre chatte!*

After some difficulty, the unconscious Comte was brought into the house. He was feeling particularly weak and the abrupt sayings of Dorothy caused his heart to stop and then to bound again and then there came a dizziness and a darkness over him and he knew no more.

But when he came to himself on his couch of down and the doctor was bending over him and Ninon was weeping tears on his face, he dimly recalled what had passed. The doctor administered a restorative and then went to another room with Madame la Comtesse.

"Someone has given *le bon mari* a profound shock," he remarked.

"It is true; it is quite true," said the Comtesse. "Oh, Dr. Jacqueline, I must confide in you. Listen and you will know all. Before I met my beloved husband, I was the well-known Ninon Lecoles and [Pg 159] there was not an *établissement* like mine in the whole of Arles, but behold! I met the old man, so gracious, so lonely, so neglected, and I exercised upon him a little piece of what the English would call the deceit. I told him of my wealth and he offered me his hand but only on condition that I would give up the *établissement* which brought me in the francs in such multitudes. Monsieur, I pretended

to agree, but oh, la! la! how could I give up my beautiful *établissement*; how could I keep this château as it is now and give *mon* Alphonse his comforts? So I changed the name of the *établissement* and called it no longer that of Ninon Lecoques, but the establishment unique of Madame Marcelle. But it was mine—mine all the time, kind *M. le docteur*. How could I keep this place going without it? And then when *la petite* Comtesse came, she proved to have the gift *extraordinaire*, and she worked in my *établissement* and does work there every day and she brings in the francs as they never came before. But we decided to keep the knowledge from the old man because he is weak and feeble. Ah, *M. le docteur*, what am I to do? If I give up my *établissement*, the death of *mon* Alphonse will assuredly lie at my door and yet, if I keep it—Oh, doctor, counsel a wretched woman!"

"You must keep the *établissement*, *sans doute*. [Pg 160] *Votre mari* has had a shock but he will not die. That girl was mean who told him, but I have just been removing the stings of bees from her and she will be much swollen and distressed for some days. There is no doubt whatever that she has got her punishment. Ah, and here comes *la petite* Comtesse!"

The little Comtesse stared in some astonishment at the doctor's motor-car, at *la belle* grand'mère's tearful face and at the confusion which seemed to surround the hitherto peaceful place.

"Oh, grand'mère," she exclaimed. "I have sold three thousand francs worth of goods for thee this morning. *Oui, très vrai*, with my own skill I did it! I would not look at Lady Hébé nor at Lady Dorothy, the ugly stuck-up things that they are. But I attended to the wives of the farmers and they paid cash down, grand'mère, and they are going to Paris all three of them in their new chapeaux and robes and fans. Ah, but I made the stout one look slim and the slim one a little *grosse, n'est ce pas?* And the whole of them elegant. And Dorothy and Hébé were fluttering round waiting for my judgment, but grand'mère, I gave it not. I would not speak to them; they offended me. I gave them my back, grand'mère."

"But thou hast injured thy grandpère," said the [Pg 161] poor little Comtesse. "That Dorothy is wicked, and has had her revenge. She found *mon* Alphonse in the garden with the peaches and the bees, and she told him all about thee, *ma petite*. He fell in a swoon, his horror was great, but the *chères abeilles* have stung her well."

"And thou art weeping when I have made three thousand francs for thee," said little Margot. "I will go straight to grandpère and set him right."

"Let the little one have her way, she has the genius," said the doctor.

"You keep away, grand'mère; let me go alone to *mon* grandpère," said Margot. And she ran in the direction of the *salon* with the couch of down.

Margot had a very gentle way of speaking, few things put her seriously out, and she was more pleased than otherwise at grandpère learning the truth. He was lying very still on his sofa; his face was white and a tear or two trickled down his withered cheeks.

"Thou art not like The Desmond, grandpère," said little Margot. "The Desmond would not mind anything so trifling as a shop."

"Ah, *ma petite, ma petite*," exclaimed the old Comte, and now he burst into floods of tears.

Margot knelt by him and wiped his tears away very gently.

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"That flow of tears will give thee relief," she said. "Thou wilt be better, ah, better! Let me arrange *pour vous*, grandpère. I like putting the mighty from their seats. Oh, grandpère, I have such a beautiful story to tell thee!"

The old man ceased crying, and looked at the little Comtesse with wondering eyes.

"Perhaps it is a lie," he said.

"Of course," said Margot, "there is a shop—but it is not *thy* shop. It belongs to Madame Marcelle."

"And not to my Ninon—oh, thank the God Almighty!"

"I help Madame Marcelle a little while I am learning of the French tongue, *si belle*—that is all. Thou wilt not forbid it. Thy Ninon, *ma belle* grand'mère, is crying her eyes out at the thought of hurting thee, but it was done by those wicked girls. Behold I was in the *établissement*, and I have got—ah, the taste *magnifique!* and the farmers' wives—some very red, some very thin, came in to be suited with robes. Ah, but they were of the most superb that I did show them, and I suited the taste of each. I made the fat, red one to look thin and pale and elegant, ah *oui*, and the thin one I gave her a good figure and I chose chapeaux the most suitable. And I put into the pocket of Madame Marcelle three thousand francs this morning. For they are rich,[Pg 163] these wives of farmers, and they pay as they go. But Dorothy, *la petite chatte*, and Hébé, they came in and they wanted me to leave my farmers' wives and attend to them. They meant, doubtless, grandpère, to run up a long bill and keep it going—going—going, so I said I would have nothing to do with them because I love them not and I do love the wives of the farmers. Then they were angry and they came here to see thee, *mon* grandpère, and behold, Dorothy, she was stung by thy bees. It served her right, didn't it, grandpère?"

"Was she stung?" said grandpère. "I offered her a peach, which she deserved not. I did not know that she was stung. *Mon enfant*, thou art faithful and so are *mes chères abeilles*."

"And thou wilt see thy Ninon who weeps outside?" said Margot.

"Of a verity I will see my Ninon. What care I how many *établissements* Madame Marcelle keeps?"

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CHAPTER XI. THUNDER STORM.

Margot had been brought up by severe and much-detested Aunt Priscilla, and by that dearly loved and holy man, Uncle Jacko, to dread a lie beyond anything in the world.

Aunt Priscilla scolded her and told her of the awful fate of little girls who told lies. Uncle Jacko pursued a far gentler and more effective way.

Uncle Jacko's way prevailed. He talked of the holy children who lived in the New Jerusalem. He talked of the smiling Christ, and God, the Father, and of the Holy Spirit, who entered into the heart of the child who tried to be good. He talked very beautifully and little Margot thought *him* very beautiful when he did talk on this subject, and never up to the present moment had she broken her solemn word to Uncle Jacko that she would at all costs and under every circumstance keep to the truth. Nevertheless, here was she now, having broken that solemn word, having made *cher* grandpère St. Juste imagine that the *établissement* was kept by Madame [Pg 165] Marcelle and that *la belle* grand'mère had nothing whatever to do with it.

Oh, it was all terrible, notwithstanding grand'mère's passionate kisses to the little girl, and notwithstanding the fact that Alphonse and his Ninon were once more priceless treasures each to the other. Margot went about with a heavy burden on her small heart. She had told grandpère St. Juste a lie—yes, yes, there was no doubt on the subject. Her spirits, so happy and high; her animation so fragrant, so delightful to watch and listen to, seemed more or less to desert her. She used to sob bitter tears at night in her little cot and long beyond words for the moment when she might confess all to Uncle Jacko.

The old grandpère noticed the difference in *la petite* and much wondered at it. Ninon, his wife, also noticed it and did her best, her very best, to keep the knowledge from the eyes of the adorable Alphonse. Still the fact remained—*la petite* was not what she was. She learnt a certain number of lessons from grandpère and enjoyed her music lessons, which *la belle* grand'mère supplied her with. And she worked wonderful changes in the *établissement* with her beautiful taste and delightful *chic* appearance. But still there was the lie, always the lie, resting on her white little soul.

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On a certain occasion, *la belle* grand'mère found *la petite* Comtesse in floods of tears.

"What is it, *ma chérie petite*?" she exclaimed. "Oh, *très drôle*, Oh *ma petite*, *c'est drôle*, to see the tears flow for no reason!"

"But there is reason, grand'mère," said little Margot. "I have told a black, black lie."

"Thou! *Ce n'est pas possible!*"

"But I have, *ma* grand'mère. I did it for thee, because thy trouble was so great. *Mon* grandpère, he thinks that the *établissement* belongs to Madame Marcelle. I got him to think so and he was contented. Oh, my heart, it is broken, it is broken! Grand'mère, my heart is broken in little bits. Canst thou not see?"

Grand'mère burst into a low sweet laugh, not an angry laugh by any means, but one that puzzled *la petite* Margot not a little.

"Thou hast a genuine worship of the beautiful," she cried. "Thou dost help Madame Marcelle in her *établissement*. For me, my fears are at an end. Why dost thou weep, *ma petite*? Oh, *les belles robes et chapeaux* that thou dost make the old women buy. No one else could do it but thee! The beautiful costumes thou dost give them, at the highest rates. Wherever does the lie come in, *ma petite*?"

"Oh, *belle grand'mère*," said little Margot, "thou dost know the shop is thine."

"*Mais non, mais non*," cried Ninon, clasping her tiny hands. "The great *établissement* at Arles *belongs* to Madame Marcelle."

"Then why didst thou cry and get so frightened that day, *ma belle grand'mère*?" cried little Margot.

"It was an attack of the nerves, *ma petite*. Now run out and play, thou dost want the air. Thou thyself with thy tact did save *mon* Alphonse and I am a happy woman again and the *dot* of my little one—it grows and grows and grows! Ah, but she makes her own *dot*, *n'est-ce pas*? Now run out and play; thou didst tell no black lie."

Margot wondered very much indeed if her grand'mère was right. She was a little comforted but not altogether. She had a shrewd sense of the justice of things and went to her almanac to tick off the number of days which yet remained before Uncle Jacko came to fetch her.

Now this little French mademoiselle gave herself in her own sweet independent way a great deal of liberty. She ran whooping and smiling down the avenue. *La belle grand'mère* saw her and smiled to herself.

"It is dreadful to have *la petite* with a conscience that pricks," thought grand'mère, "but I think I [Pg 168] have soothed her, and to-morrow morning I will communicate with Madame Marcelle and tell her that a lie which rests so lightly on the soul of the French madame must be communicated to little Margot. She must tell little Margot that the *établissement* is altogether her own, then *la petite* will smile again and feel that she has told no lie. Yes, it can be done—it must be done! *Mon* Alphonse notices the cloud on the brow of *la petite*. It must vanish. She must converse, she must amuse. She must be as of old, a French *petite* with the wit of Ireland in her veins. Ah, she is truly diverting with her little pricked conscience, but I can set that matter right for her."

Meanwhile Margot walked along the road thinking very hard indeed and wondering if *la belle grand'mère* had told her the truth. It was now getting to the end of August and in little more than a fortnight she would be returning to that ancient man of might, The Desmond. Oh, how happy she would be; how she would nestle in his arms and tell him of all her sorrows! And on the way to Desmondstown she would confide in Uncle Jacko. Yes, he would tell her what was right to be done—Uncle Jacko, who only feared God, but no man that ever lived—Uncle Jacko with the clear face and soft gentle eyes, who was so unlike Aunt Priscilla, that [Pg 169] woman who was altogether terrible. Ah, but even Uncle Jacko was not quite so dear to her as was her grandfather, The Desmond. He and Madam were perfect and so was Uncle Fergus perfect, and as to the old-youngs—well, she could not help them. They were much nicer than most of the French people she saw around her. So she skipped and ran and sang a gay little French song all to herself, but she did not notice that all the time as she was going further and further away from the château, a heavy cloud was coming up and obscuring the sky, a cloud black and cruel as night when it is hopeless—quite hopeless with gloom.

Pretty little Margot suddenly stopped singing because a great heavy blob of rain fell on the tip of her little nose. This was immediately followed by a flash of lightning and a peal of thunder so loud, so vivid, that it seemed to shake the very ground under her feet.

There was a hedge at the side of the straight French road and Margot took refuge there, crouching in so as not to get too wet. She had just managed to effect her object when she heard an unmistakably English voice saying to her,

"It's you, Margot St. Juste; I'm your late schoolfellow, Matilda Raynes. I came out without leave. I put on my best hat, the one you chose for me. I wanted to go into Arles and to sun myself in the [Pg 170] sight of the French windows of your great shop, Margot. But, behold, look, the rain, it trickles down, it pours in sheets; my chapeau which you chose for me will be destroyed. We were all so glad, Margot, when that horrid Dorothy got stung by the bees of M. le Comte. Oh, but she was a figure of fun, and she howled and screamed when the doctor came and removed the stings. Why did you leave us, little Margot? Could a girl such as Dorothy interfere with you?"

"Yes, she could, she did!" said little Margot. "I'm not going back to the school of la Princesse de Fleury any more."

"Oh, my hat, my hat," sobbed Matilda. "Oh, how it pours—and see the lightning, it flashes through the raindrops. Oh, let us get further under this hedge. My beautiful chapeau will be destroyed and it will be known that I left the grounds without leave."

"Come," said Margot, getting up in her quick and resolute way. "Never mind your chapeau, it is not safe to be under a hedge with thunder and lightning like this. Behold, the lightning may kill you—come, come!"

"Oh, but I cannot have my beautiful chapeau ruined," said Matilda.

"Never mind, I'll speak to grand'mère and [Pg 171] *perhaps* we may contrive another," said Margot. "Come along at once or I must go alone. I don't mean to be killed for the sake of any chapeau."

"Don't leave me, don't leave me; that lightning frightens me!" said Matilda.

"I must leave you," said Margot, "unless you come with me. You don't want both your chapeau and yourself to die. Come, quick!"

Margot pulled her with a strong arm. Matilda found herself forced to come out into the centre of the road. They had half a mile to walk through the drenching rain. The poor little chapeau became like a sponge; both girls were wet to the skin, for the torrents of rain continued and the lightning still played, played brilliantly, unceasingly, and the thunder roared with mighty force. At last they got to the gates of the Château St. Juste, and Margot led her dripping companion into the well-kept hall. Both grandpère and grand'mère were waiting in the hall for their little Margot.

She went swiftly up to them.

"*Mon* grandpère must not touch me," she said, "for I am a pool of water. I met Matilda Raynes—she belongs to the school of la Princesse. May we go upstairs, grand'mère, and take off our dripping things, and when the storm gets less may a message be sent to la Princesse, and may I lend Matilda some [Pg 172] of my clothes, grand'mère, until hers are dry? Ah, *tiens, le chapeau*, it is pulp!" She kicked the offending hat with her foot.

A few minutes later, both little girls were lying warm and snug in Margot's bed. Margot told Matilda that she was nothing but a *bébé*, but that if she stopped crying she would try

to get her another chapeau.

"It shall be for nothing this time," said Margot.

"Ah, thou little shop-keeper!" exclaimed Matilda, "thou little adorable one!"

"Call me not shop-keeper, please. I am Comtesse St. Juste. Now lie still and I will get up and dress. Louise, see, has a message been sent to la Princesse de Fleury?"

"Ah, *mais oui*, Comtesse!" replied Louise.

"Then I will dress. I will wear my coral frock, and thou must get a white frock of mine and undergarments for mademoiselle. *Vite, vite*, Louise! Mademoiselle wants to get up."

"I don't. I want to stay here forever," said Matilda, yawning not a little.

"Thou lazy one," said Margot, "thou must be returned to the school."

Louise went out of the room to return with the information that the bath was hot and ready for both *les petites*. Then the two children were dressed [Pg 173] in Margot's clothes and Matilda flung her arms round Margot's neck and said,

"Oh, but behold me of the most miserable! I am English and I do not like a French school, and I have a stepmother and I love her not, and my father is harsh and cruel. Will you not pity me, Margot? When the time comes for you to leave this so-called beautiful country of France, may I not come, too? I am learning to be a very bad girl at the school and I was always a bad girl at home, because of my stepmother and my harsh cruel father. Could you not get me to that castle of yours in beautiful Ireland? If I lived for even three or four weeks with you I might turn good, I might indeed."

"I can't say," replied Margot, "I must think. There, thou art dressed and my clothes suit thee better than thine own. Hold thy head erect. See, I will dry thy hair and I will go now, this very minute, and speak to Madame, *ma belle* grand'mère, about a chapeau for thee."

"Ah, yes, yes," said Matilda. "You are noble, Comtesse. I love you, I could crawl at your feet."

"But I should not wish it," said Margot. "I hate people that crawl. I want you to become good, and perhaps, God knows, it may be the right thing to do. Stay where you are, Matilda, and I will go and speak to grand'mère."

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She came back in a few minutes with a light dancing step.

"Grand'mère *est un ange*. She will settle with Madame Marcelle and I will choose you a chapeau for nothing at all. I know the kind that will suit you. I can dispose of you in a moment."

"But, but——" exclaimed Matilda. "Am I not to see you again, sweetest Margot?"

"You have got to go back to school this minute. The rain is over and grandpère's automobile is waiting for you. Madame la Comtesse has written to Madame la Princesse

and you will not be scolded and you will send back my clothes after they are well washed and ironed. I cannot tell you anything about Ireland for a long day yet. Go now, Matilda, and don't grovel, I beg."

Matilda looked rather startled and slightly frightened.

Margot danced down to her grandpère.

"I have missed thee so, *ma petite*," he exclaimed.

"The girl would have died, grandpère, if I had not rescued her. A flash of lightning would have taken her up to heaven as Elijah was taken up."

"I know not that story," said grandpère.

"Ah, well, grandpère, thou art a little ignorant in some things, but never mind, I want to ask thee a question."

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"Ask away, my cabbage, my fledgling," said the old man.

"I want to suppose a bit," said Margot.

"Suppose away, then, *ma petite*."

"There was a little girl and she did wrong," said Margot. "It's all suppose, don't forget that, grandpère."

"I'm not forgetting," said grandpère.

"She did wrong, a deep, terrible wrong," continued Margot, "and there came to her a sorrow which was great, which was severe. Her conscience pricked her. For behold, understand, she was a Protestant and could not confide in one of thy Catholic Church. Then it occurred to her that she might make reparation for her wrong and do something that she most badly hated, and so set her pricked conscience at rest. Dost thou think, if she did that thing, that the great God would forgive her, grandpère?"

"I am certain of it, *ma petite*. I am as sure as that I am a very old man and that thou art my best *chérie*. But now, let's talk of something cheerful. What does it matter to thee, *petite*, how wrong others are if thou thyself art free?"

"Nothing at all, grandpère, dear grandpère."

"Then make me laugh, my little pigeon. Turn to the merry things of life. We of the French nation [Pg 176] are always cheerful. That is why we live so long. The gloom, it kills us, but the sunshine, behold, it gives us life. Be my sunshine now, *ma petite*. See, behold, make thy old grandpère laugh. It is all right and good and as it should be. Ah, my little one, but I love thee well!"

"And I love thee, grandpère, but not as well as The Desmond. Thou dost not mind?"

"I could kill The Desmond," said grandpère.

Margot burst into a peal of laughter.

"Indeed, but thou couldst not," she remarked. "Thou hast not got his height nor his strength and thou art older. I see the age in thy sunken eyes. Now I will tell thee a story *très drôle*."

Little Margot told her story and Madame la Comtesse listened to the childish laughter and the clear, happy, childish voice, and said to herself that there never was anybody before quite so sweet as little Margot. She must get that little conscience to prick no more.

"There is no time like the present," thought la Comtesse. "The shower has passed away and the air is fresh and here is the motor car returning, having conveyed that common English girl back to her school. I will go this very moment and speak to Madame Marcelle."

This Madame la Comtesse did, and to such [Pg 177]purpose and with such excellent effect that she did not once upset the nerves of Madame Marcelle and came home to enjoy the society of her husband and granddaughter in the best of spirits.

The next morning Margot went as usual to the *établissement*, but before she began her accustomed work, Madame Marcelle called her into her private room and there she told her that she was working for herself, not for Madame la Comtesse, and that she found *la petite* Comtesse so useful that she was going to pay her two hundred francs a month for every month that she was with her, and that it had been further arranged that the little Comtesse before she left France for Ireland was to receive five hundred francs besides, having her *dot* put carefully away for her in addition.

"Ah, but thou wilt be *riche, ma petite!*" said Madame Marcelle, "and now go and attend to thy duties, for my *magasin* is like no other in the whole of Arles."

Little Margot looked with her firm, clear, very dark eyes full into the face of Madame Marcelle. It seemed to her that she did not believe her in the least. Nevertheless, the woman had told her what was beyond doubt the apparent truth. The little Comtesse attended to her usual duties, and in the end wrote a letter to Matilda Raynes, telling her that [Pg 178] she would write to her grandfather and, if all went well, would invite her to spend two or three weeks with her at Desmondstown.

Margot took a long time in writing her letter, but it was written at last. She would like to bring a girl, an English girl, back to Desmondstown; would The Desmond mind? The girl should never interfere with him, the darling, nor with that dear, dear Madam, but she could play with Norah and Bridget, and perhaps a little bit with Eileen. She was unhappy at home, and not very happy at school and would The Desmond greatly mind?

The Desmond did not mind at all. He said to Madam:

"Put the English miss as far away from me as possible. Hand her over to the care of our young daughters. For me, I await my grandchild. I think and dream of no one else."

"It shall be as you wish, Fergus," said Madam. "It is now the 1st of September. We shall have the little angel with us in less than a week."

"Ah, the good God be praised!" said The Desmond. "I look not ahead, I enjoy the present to the very, very utmost."

"Your little grandchild loves you," said Madam. "We will get her room neat and beautiful for her,[Pg 179] and we will creep in, in the early morning, and see her asleep."

"Hand in hand," said The Desmond, looking at his old wife.

"Yes, Fergus, hand in hand," said Madam.

They looked at each other with a world of love in their eyes. That love had never been so strong as since the adorable grandchild had appeared on the scene. It had nearly killed them to part with her, but she was coming back again. Their night of weeping was turned into a morning of joy.

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CHAPTER XII. GEM OF THE OCEAN.

There was no doubt on this occasion with regard to the welcome prepared for little Margot St. Juste. She and her beloved Uncle John and the *Reparation*, as she called the uninteresting English girl, arrived at the station nearest to Desmondstown somewhat late at night.

Matilda was overcome with delight at the thought of her three weeks at Desmondstown. She begged and implored of Margot to call her Tilly.

Margot said, "That's not your name in my mind," but when Uncle Jacko looked at the little girl out of his kind, thoughtful, sweet eyes, she felt a sudden lump rising in her throat.

Why should she be unkind to Tilly?

"I'll call you Till," she said, "only please don't clasp my hand quite so tight. I'm an Irish girl and this is Ireland, beautiful Ireland."

"The first gem of the ocean,
The first pearl of the sea,"

murmured Uncle Jacko.

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"Yes, that's right," said Margot. "You'll see what it is like in the morning, Till, and grandfather, the blessed darling, says that you may stay for three whole weeks. That is, if you are good."

"Of course I'll be good; I'll be very good indeed," said Tilly. "Anyone would be good with *la petite Comtesse*."

"I'm not *la petite Comtesse* here," said Margot. "I'm 'pushkeen' here, and most likely the old-yongs will call you 'nanny-goat.'"

"Nanny-goat! But I won't be nanny-goat," said Matilda, thoroughly offended.

"Well, we'll see, but you can't help yourself."

"And who are the old-youngs?" asked Tilly.

"You'll see them also, Till," remarked Margot. "Oh, Uncle Jacko, darling Uncle Jacko, have we arrived?"

"We have, *acushla machree, alanna*—heart's best darling," said the elderly clergyman, clasping the child for one swift moment tightly in his arms. "Ah, but you are the soul of my soul," he muttered.

Tilly looked on in amazement. She began to consider all these foolish words, none of which she could understand, as a certain token that the Irish were half mad. Still it was glorious to be close to *la petite Comtesse*.

The train drew up at the station in that slow, [Pg 182] drawling way in which Irish trains mostly do in out-of-the-way places, and lo and behold wherever Margot looked, she saw great bonfires and smiling faces and there, as large as life, were Phinias Maloney and the wife also of Phinias Maloney, and their two big "childer" and the infant who one moment howled, and the next screeched with delight.

"He really—he really came out of a cabbage leaf," said Margot. "He wasn't hatched as lots them are here. The old-youngs are hatched so often they are tired of the job. Oh, I must go and speak to that darling baby! Uncle Jacko, hold Till's hand, I'll be back in a minute."

Oh, but weren't the Maloneys glad—just beside themselves with joy—at the thought of the pushkeen coming back to them again!

"Ah, then, 'tis yez that are welcome!" said Annie Maloney. "Childer, spake to her beautiful mightiness, drop your curtsies as I taught ye. There no, hould yezselves back. Ah, then, my push-keen lamb, it's me that is glad to see ye. It's the heart hunger I had when ye left, and long life to ye and to Mishter Mansfield, who has turned into a beautiful gent, for all that he war but a farmer's son. It was me that thought of the bonfires; do ye see them ablazing to the right of ye and the left of ye, little missie asthore?"

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"I do, I do! It was lovely of you, Annie," said Margot, and she kissed the young woman, who whispered to her back somewhat shyly,

"Is that child to '*himself*'?"

Margot burst into one of her ringing laughs.

"Child to my holy Uncle Jacko!" exclaimed Margot. "No, she's *Reparation*, that's what she is. Don't keep me now, Annie, I'll come to see you to-morrow or next day."

Then Phinias, who intended to offer a very nervous paw for the little girl to shake, but was rewarded by a hearty and most vigorous kiss, lifted Missie and Reparation into the funny cart. The luggage was lifted in also and they started off, bump, bump, uphill and down dale, all the way to Desmondstown.

Margot was almost too excited to speak. The clergyman walked beside Phinias and kept talking to him, and each moment the road became ruddy with more firelight and great shoots of flame rose up and filled the air, for was not the furze dry and firm and were there not great stacks of it, and did not gossoons keep putting fresh supplies on, all in honour of missie asthore, the darling of The Desmond?

Tilly, in her uncomfortable seat, felt very tired and half dropped asleep, but Margot suggested that she should sit on one of the bags and lean her head [Pg 184] against Margot's own knee and, then, disgraceful as it may sound, Tilly did drop asleep.

But when they came to Desmondstown itself, there was such yelling and waving and dancing and laughter—laughter so loud and yet so clear—that even English Tilly could not sleep through it. And behold! All the old-youngs were waiting at the gate to welcome them, and the largest bonfires of all were alongside of the avenue, which Tilly described afterwards to her English friends as a wall of fire.

"It was done in honour of *us*," she wrote. "They know how to welcome people properly in Ireland."

But in addition to the bonfires, great arches had been flung up across the weedy narrow path, and on these were written the well-known Irish words, "*Céad míle fáilte*," which seemed to be to right and left of little Margot; she knew well now the meaning of the generous and noble words.

Tilly was wide awake with a vengeance, and the old-youngs, both boys and girls, ran down the avenue with whoops and cries and "*Céad míle fáilte*, pushkeen," sounding from their lips.

At last they reached the old porch and entered by the wide double oak doors, and there, behold, stood Madam, and Fergus with his grave, still face, and in the distance The Desmond was to be seen, holding a lighted torch in his hand. Very erect indeed was [Pg 185] The Desmond, and his beard seemed longer and whiter than ever, and his eyes blacker and more piercing, and his great stalwart form was like that of a giant.

Margot flew like a little creature all on wires from Uncle Fergus to Madam.

"Madam, darling Madam," she said, "that's the girl, Till. Tell the young-olds to look after her, for my heart is bursting till I get to The Desmond." But when she did get to him the torch was extinguished, and the very tall and majestic old man and the beautiful little girl entered his special sanctum side by side.

They were alone, they were together once more.

Little did Margot think of anyone else in that moment of glad re-union.

"I said I would come back, and I've come!" she said. "Oh grand-dad, oh, grand-dad, how lovely you look! You are worth twenty of Monsieur le Comte, mon grandpère in France."

"Speak not of him, my child," said The Desmond. "I hate him with a deadly hate."

"Oh, no, no!" said little Margot. "He means well and he can't help being very old and feeble. You see, I had to bring Reparation with me."

"Whatever does the pushkeen mean now?" said The Desmond.

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"That tall, ungainly English girl," said Margot. "I had to bring her, she is Reparation."

"That's as queer a name as ever I heard," said The Desmond.

"But, grand-dad," said Margot, "you'll have to be getting in a Reparation on your own account if you speak against *mon* grandpère of France."

"Ah, whist, let him abide," said the old man. "I care nothing so that I have ye, my pushkeen alanna. Ah, but let me look at ye, let me feast my eyes on your little face! Ah, but ye are my pushkeen alanna! No doubt on that, and here comes Madam,—here comes 'herself.' Madam, we've got our child back, we've got our darling back once more!"

But sweet, dainty little Madam looked disturbed.

"There's a gurrl that I can't make head or tail of, she's crying out for you, Margot ashore. I have set my three young daughters in their bloom upon her, but she won't have naught to do with them. She keeps screaming and screeching. You had best speak to her for a minute or two, my little alanna."

"May I go, grand-dad?" asked Margot. "It's only Reparation. I'll soon put her right. Madam, stay with grand-dad and pet him awful. I know my way and I'll smooth down Reparation as quick as a lightning flash. Pet grand-dad a great lot, Madam, for, oh, he's such a darling!"

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Little Margot whisked out of the room in her French frock and with a trifle of her French manner.

"Madam," said the old man, and he lifted up his voice and wept. "I've lost her entirely, bedad! She's turned Frenchy on me, and what are we to do with the gurrl she calls Reparation?"

"She's herself the same as ever she was," said Madam, "sweet and true and dear. Hold up your head, Fergus, man, and don't shame us with your tears."

Meanwhile Margot found her way to that part of the ramshackle old house where the young-old aunts and the young-old uncles, with the exception of Fergus, were doing their best with Tilly.

Tilly was in floods of tears.

"I want Margot, I want la Comtesse," she exclaimed, "and I don't see any old-youngs. I only see the aged round me, the very aged. And I hate the place without la Comtesse."

"La, to be sure, there's no countess, here," said Norah, "and if we young things ain't young enough for you, why ye'd best be going. Ye can sleep in your bit of a bed to-night."

"Yes, and in the morning I'll drive ye back to the station and put ye in the thrain, so that ye can[Pg 188] get to the place only fit for the likes of you, and that's England," said Malachi.

"I'd be ashamed to kick up a fluster in an Irish nobleman's house," said Bruce, "but you English have no manners, none at all."

Just then, Margot appeared on the scene.

"Ah," said Tilly, making a rush at her.

"I can't, Tilly, I can't, Reparation. I told you so when I invited you here. I told you that I had to spend all my time with my grand-dad. I'm ashamed of you, Till, that I am. You'd be frightened to death to sit in the room with *himself*. He'd let out a yell at you if you sat in the room with him and cried; you wouldn't do it twice, that I can tell you. What more can you want than what's provided? Here's Aunt Norah, she's beautiful and young; and here's Aunt Bride, she's hatched about every second day; and here's dear Aunt Eileen, and they're all as young as you, Till. As a matter of fact, their spirits are much, much younger. And Uncle Bruce and Uncle Malachi are so funny; they'll make you laugh all to fits. If you want to go home to-morrow, you can. I'm not wanting you, but you are not to screech in this house."

"Hello, here comes supper," said Bruce, as a huge joint of cold beef was brought in, accompanied by a great dish of pickles and an enormous platter[Pg 189] of the very best potatoes, all bursting out of their skins and showing balls of flour within.

"Come and eat, Till, that's what you want," said Margot. "I must go back to grand-dad, but I'll come to you by-and-bye in your room."

Now the sight of the excellent food was certainly reviving to Matilda Raynes and when Malachi offered to lead her to the festive board, doing so with a succession of hops and skips and jumps, she suddenly found herself bursting into fits of laughter.

"Are you one of the old-youngs?" she managed to whisper to him.

"I'm nothing, I'm only Malachi. I breed horses, that's what I do. Would you like me to mount ye on one to-morrow."

"I would," said Tilly, her eyes sparkling.

"Then I will if ye stop that hullabaloo."

"You'll hold me tight, for I've never rode in my life," said Tilly.

"Ah, blessings on the girleen, but ye can learn for shure!"

"Yes, I can learn."

"I expect you can. Norah, pour out a glass of milk for her. Bidy, acushla, I'm ready for some of that home-brewed beer. Now then, babies all, to supper!"

The supper was so good and the old-young people[Pg 190] were so merry that Tilda forgot her fears. She longed inexpressibly for Margot and for the refined life of the French school at Arles; but nevertheless there were never any potatoes like these, and Malachi

had such a twinkle in his eye, and whenever she glanced at Bruce he winked back at her in the most comforting way.

Then Norah's and Bridget's mirth was irresistible; in short Tilly began to enjoy herself, and when by-and-bye Margot crept into the room set apart for Reparation, in which the young girl was lying sound asleep, she felt comparatively happy about her.

Margot was on her way to her own room, the dressing-room of The Desmond, when she unexpectedly and to her intense joy met her beloved Uncle Jacko. She stopped him at once. He put his arm round her and kissed her.

"Uncle Jacko, you are a holy priest, aren't you?"

"I'm a clergyman of the Church of England, my dear little girl."

"Uncle Jacko, I had to bring Tilly here—I didn't want to, but she—she's Reparation."

"I don't understand you, my pet."

"Oh, Uncle Jacko, I hadn't any opportunity to tell you when we were coming here, and it was a long, a very long journey, and I was tired, and Tilly was tired, and you were tired, but now, oh, I must[Pg 191] tell you in as few words as possible. Uncle Jacko, your own little Marguerite told a black, black lie!"

"You didn't," said Uncle Jacko, starting back as though something pressed against his heart.

"I did, it came about in this way. Madame la Comtesse told the Comte St. Juste that she had given up her enormous *magasin*. She said she had plenty of money without working any more and the Comte, *mon grandpère*, he believed her. But she didn't give it up at all in reality and she sent me there every day to sell hats and robes to the customers, and at last some wicked girls in the school that I went to—they had seen me in the shop—and they went and told grandpère, *le pauvre grandpère*—and he fell down in a sort of fit, and Madame was beside herself. But when he came to, I told him that the *établissement* belonged to Madame Marcelle, and he grew happy again and he forgave *ma pauvre grand'mère*. Oh, but it was terrible, for I had told a black, black lie! Then I thought I would repair it by bringing Tilly here and—I couldn't confess because I'm not a Catholic—so that seemed the—the only thing to do. Oh, Uncle Jacko, can you forgive me?"

"Have you asked God to forgive you, my little child? I am a sinful man, but He—He is perfect. It was a difficult time for you, my little Margot, but you must on no account disturb The Desmond. Say[Pg 192] nothing to him about the shop. You have three months to spend with him, and when I come to fetch you back to Arles, we can talk further on this matter."

"Oh, Uncle Jacko, you *are* good—you *are* good, and you won't cease to love me?"

"I shall never do that, my sweet babe."

"And you will stay here for a couple of days, won't you?"

"I will stay here till Monday," said the clergyman, "and I will do my very utmost to make Tilly happy. Now that I understand why she has come I can manage her. Good-night,

sleep well, my little one."

Margot did sleep well on her soft bed. The big, untidy room had been changed and altogether altered. Malachi had papered the walls white. Norah and Bridget had painted the doors a bright emerald green. There was a little bedstead with white muslin draperies put all ready for the child to sleep in, and there was a writing table in the window, and a chest of drawers which had been bought as a bargain by Phinias by the express orders of Malachi. Then there was a deep cupboard in the wall in which the dainty and innumerable little French frocks could be hung.

But when Margot awoke the next morning,[Pg 193] flushed with sleep, safe and happy, little knowing that Madam and The Desmond had been gazing at her at the dawn of day, she discovered in a deep corner of that same cupboard an ugly little frock, which had been made for her before she came to Desmondstown.

It was a frock made in the ugliest imaginable style by a dressmaker chosen by Aunt Priscilla. Nevertheless it was the dress she had worn when first The Desmond had seen his little grandchild. Without a moment's hesitation she put it on.

Bruce and Malachi had brought her in a hot bath in one of the famous washing tubs; and clean and refreshed, she rushed downstairs to kiss grand-dad. He was in his accustomed place by the great turf fire, and he stared first at the little frock and then at the happy child. Suddenly a cloud seemed to lift from his brow. He opened his big arms wide and folded her into them and said,

"Ah, but the Almighty be praised! I have got you back again, my bit thing. I didn't half know you last night dressed up as a Frenchy."

"I'm an Irishy to-day grand-dad," said Margot with her merry laugh.

"So you are, my bit mavourneen, so you are, the Lord be praised for all his mercies!"

Now Margot had been given by Madame Marcelle[Pg 194] on the last day of her appearance at her *établissement* five hundred francs, which meant the solid sum of twenty pounds. And as her grandmother, Madame, paid all her expenses to England, in fact, beyond England, to Desmondstown, she had this twenty pounds intact. Her first idea had been to buy pretty things to take to the old-youngs and to the dear old-olds in Paris, but an instinct kept her back from doing this and finally she made up her mind to consult Uncle Fergus on the subject.

Uncle Fergus was very reliable. He would tell her what the beloved family at Desmondstown wanted most.

Matilda Raynes had got over her nervous terrors of the night before, and enjoyed beyond words playing horses with the old-young aunts. She was therefore quite off Margot's mind and Margot determined while Uncle Jacko was talking to The Desmond, to seek an interview with Uncle Fergus.

She found him in the great front courtyard. He looked anxious and even when he saw Margot hardly smiled, but when she ran up to him and slipped her hand into his, he said, "Presently, pushkeen, presently."

He then went on giving his orders to the men, but he felt all the time the soft little warm hand in his[Pg 195] as though it were something unsurpassably delightful.

"Well, pushkeen," he said at last.

Pushkeen unfolded her simple story. She had an enormous lot of money, twenty solid pounds, no less, that she wanted to devote to the dearest family in the world—the Desmonds. Would Uncle Fergus teach her how to spend it? There came a flash in the dark eyes of the future Desmond of Desmondstown.

"Tell me, little one," he said, "is it true that that Frenchwoman really keeps a shop? She told John Mansfield and he told me, so you needn't fear to confide in me."

"I won't, Uncle Fergus, I won't. Now I'm sure the shop is hers. As you know so much, you may as well know more. I went every day to sell goods in it, and that's why I have got my twenty pounds."

"And you work, while I am idle, little pushkeen," said Fergus Desmond.

"Oh, I don't mind—I—I like it," said little Margot.

"But it can't be any longer," said Fergus Desmond. "Put that twenty pounds into the ground at Desmondstown, pushkeen."

"Bury it?" said Margot with a look of horror.

"In a sort of way, bury it," said Fergus. "The old fruit trees are worn out, we'll buy new ones, you[Pg 196] and I, and I'll turn into a real son of the soil, and the fruit trees will bring forth fruit and we'll sell them, you and I, pushkeen. It will be a joint concern between us. I'll do the work and I'll give you so much interest on the money. Now, not a word to The Desmond, not a word. We'll turn this rich piece of land into a beautiful thriving fruit garden, and I'll buy the young trees at once and you'll watch me while I'm making the desert blossom as a rose."

"Oh, Uncle Fergus, you are splendid!" said the child.

"Don't you fear but you'll get your money back and more," said Uncle Fergus. "I'm off to-day to get the young trees. I know where I can get them cheap."

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CHAPTER XIII. THE PINES.

Now there dawned an apparently very happy time in the life of little Margot St. Juste. Her whole heart was full of love, and with love was also a keen interest for the Desmonds of Desmondstown. Of course grand-dad, *the* grand-dad, came first, but next to him was Uncle Fergus. As they talked together over the trees they were planting, and the fruit that would come to perfection from the same trees, the little girl rejoiced at the thought that her small efforts were bringing comfort and riches to the home of her ancestors.

In short, whenever she was not with grand-dad, she was with Uncle Fergus, who threw himself into his work as indeed a son of the soil. It was amazing to see this fine-looking

man digging, delving, ploughing, arranging. He also got Phinias Maloney to assist him, and in an incredibly short space of time the brick wall was built and the tiny trees planted, which were to bring forth such a rich harvest by-and-bye. Then Margot suggested strawberries and Uncle[Pg 198] Fergus made a strawberry plot. Then she suggested raspberries and gooseberries, to say nothing of various sorts of roses, little bush roses which would go on flowering during the greater part of the year.

Whatever Margot suggested, Fergus obeyed. He had not been so happy since he had left Old Trinity. Margot called herself his assistant gardener, and The Desmond came out now and then to watch the pair with pride.

"Wherever does the avick get the money, Madam?" he said more than once.

But Madam would only shake her head and say they might safely leave it in the hands of Fergus.

The Desmond happened to make this remark one day at the mid-day meal and in the presence of Reparation. Reparation was going back to England in a couple of days now. She dreaded the thought beyond words. What was grand-dad going to do when he was left to the complete wiles of the little Comtesse? She dreaded "grand-dad," as she called him privately to herself, inexpressibly. She wouldn't dare utter a word in his presence. As to The Desmond, he hardly ever gave the bit colleen a thought. She was welcome to stay in the old house if she didn't bother him, but Margot was equally determined that Reparation should go.

She was not thoroughly happy with her about.[Pg 199] As a matter of fact she was not sure of her. There was a light which she could by no means admire or trust in the small, light-blue eyes of Tilly of England. In short, she avoided her as much as possible, but Tilly was completely taken up with young Aunt Norah and young Aunt Bridget, whom she called by their Christian names, and said that they looked a lot younger than herself.

"I'm fourteen," she said, "but you—you are only kittens!"

Now nothing could please the Misses Desmond more than to be compared to kittens, and they petted Tilly when she talked to them in this strain, and thoroughly believed her. But Tilly had her own object in view. She did not want to leave Desmondstown, and said that she thought the best possible thing she could do would be to explain certain matters to The Desmond. These matters would of course relate to Margot and would require a great deal of courage.

Nevertheless she believed she might manage it and as the days flew by and as the time of her departure approached, so the more strongly did she make up her mind to the final and great step.

Now Malachi was a man of his word. For that matter all the Desmonds were truthful. Malachi had promised to teach Tilly to ride, and he took her[Pg 200] out on a broken-down old mare, a creature so feeble and slow that the timidest person could not fear when seated on her back.

Tilly bore with the mare for a few days, but then she became discontented. She saw Norah and Bridget fly by on thoroughbreds of rare spirit. They bounded over hedges and gates and ditches, they seemed to tread the very air. Tilly got jealous of them and also became exceedingly tired of her slow old mare.

There happened to be a horse in the stable, a young and exquisite creature whom Malachi was taking special care of. He was a thoroughbred from Donegal, and was not yet quite broken in, but every day Malachi put on a sort of skirt and rode sideways on the spirited and lovely creature, and gradually brought the horse into training. He obeyed Malachi's slightest touch. He was of a deep chestnut in tone with a white star on his forehead. His points were perfect, and Malachi was teaching him, as he expressed it, "to 'lep' over everything, so that he might be fit for the hunting when it began."

One day he brought the horse "Starlight" home covered with foam and somewhat disturbed in his temper.

"There now, old boy," said Malachi, "you'll have your feed of the whitest of white oats, and[Pg 201] be ready for another try over that wide ditch to-morrow."

Malachi, as was his custom, spoke his words aloud. He was busy all the time washing down and rubbing the beautiful creature. He then took him to his stall, and said, "Good old boy, dear old boy! You'll be fit for that very wide ditch to-morrow. You funked it a bit to-day but you won't ever again. How then, eat, my mannikin, eat."

"That's a lovely horse," said Reparation standing at the door.

Malachi gave a start when he saw the ugly little girl.

"To be sure he's a jewel, no less," was his instant rejoinder.

"I'd like well to ride him, Malachi," said Reparation. "I'm tired of the old mare. She's so slow—she only crawls. I want to fly like Norah and Bridget and you on Starlight. May I ride Starlight to-morrow, Malachi?"

"May you!" exclaimed Malachi. "Do I want to see yourself broken into little bits? You keep away from this horse. He's not for you."

"But why not?" asked Tilly, coming into the stable now and approaching close to the animal.

"Keep back, if you want to keep your features,"[Pg 202] said Malachi. "He'll kick out if he looks at you, as sure as my name is Malachi Desmond."

"Why should he, Malachi?" but Tilly stepped back a pace or two as she spoke. "Why shouldn't I ride Starlight? What are you keeping him for? And you do look such a figure of fun, Malachi, dressed like an old woman with a skirt over you."

"I'm training the horse for my niece," said Malachi. "He'll be ready for her long before she goes back to that place in France, drat it! There now, you'll never manage more than the mare, Tilly, and I can't stand talking to you any more. Be off and play with the gurrils. They've come in from their ride, and I am sure they are willing enough to amuse you."

"Take my hand for one minute, Malachi," said Tilly.

Malachi with extreme unwillingness complied and led the little girl out of the stables. He shut the door behind Starlight, who was enjoying his oats and feeling soothed and comfortable. He did not like his training at all, but afterwards there always came the

wash down and the rub down and the delicious tender white oats, and he couldn't unseat Malachi, try as he would.

"Is that beautiful horse really for the shopkeeper?" inquired Tilly.

[Pg 203]

"It's for no shopkeeper. What on earth do ye mean? It's for my niece, the pushkeen; and I've saved up and sent for an elegant habit for her to Cork. It will arrive any day now. There, I can't talk to ye any more, ye are so downright foolish."

"Come and play horses with us, Till," said Norah, who appeared at that moment.

As a matter of fact Norah had been standing in the vicinity of Starlight's stable for the last few minutes, and certain words uttered by Tilly had aroused her curiosity.

"Why ever did ye go ballyragging Malachi?" she exclaimed. "He's not a boy to be put out when he's over the horses. Leave him to himself and come with me. Biddy and I and the curate, Mr. Flannigan, are going to have a jolly play."

"I'm willing to come," said Till.

"Well, you must be prepared to run, while the others follow. I say, Till, whatever nonsense did you talk to Malachi about the pushkeen's horse?"

"I said it wasn't a horse fit for a shopkeeper," replied Tilly.

"Well, and whoever said it was? It is for the pushkeen, the sweetest pet in the world. Why, me old father, he is fit to devour her with love."

"For all that she is the shopkeeper," said Tilly. "She keeps a shop at Arles. She goes to the shop; [Pg 204] every day of her life, when there, and sells things and calls herself *la petite* Comtesse, and they all buy from her, more especially the farmers' wives, and she puts on the price like anything. She's a real, real shopkeeper, but I can't see why she should get a beautiful horse like Starlight, and I should have nothing but a stupid old mare who will hardly stir her stumps. You come in, Norah, flying over every obstacle, and there's that beauty being got ready for the pushkeen as you call her. But I know what she is—the shopkeeper of Arles."

"I don't believe it for a single moment," said Norah, but her pretty old-young face turned a little white. "Look here, Till," she said. "You keep that bit of gossip safe in your breast and don't let it out for the Lord's sake, or there'll be a hue and a cry. There now, you understand what I mean. There's no sense in it. My word! A daughter of the Desmonds a shopkeeper! Get out with you and don't be such a fool!"

"I'm not a fool and I know who I'll tell it to," said Till, who was now bursting with rage. She had only two more days at delightful Desmondstown. Little it mattered to her that the house was half bare, that the food was a trifle coarse. Was there not life in the place, and nobody scolded, and no one was cross? She did not want to go. She [Pg 205] would get that old man Desmond to let her stay a good bit longer. Why should Margot, who kept a shop, have everything and she, Matilda Raynes, have nothing but the use of an old mare? And she must go back, oh, in a couple of days now, to her dreadful

stepmother and her cross, cross father. But, but she would have her revenge first. She did not care what happened if only she had her revenge.

While the old-youngs and Mr. Flannigan and Tilly were playing the celebrated game of "Puss in the Corner," Malachi, his face all alight with joy, entered his father's sanctum.

Little Margot had been helping Fergus with the making of the beautiful new fruit garden, but her toils were over for the present, and she was sitting on grand-dad's knee; wrapped up, in short, in grand-dad, as though she was part of him. Her beautiful soft, jet-black hair made a vivid contrast to his white beard. She lay back comfortably in his arms, almost too happy to speak. She felt as though she was indeed part of him, he belonged to her. She was his very own.

Madam, as usual, was crocheting in the distant window. No one took much outward notice of the sweet little Madam, but then she was the very person whom her sons and daughters, and her old [Pg 206]husband adored. And little Margot loved her, also, although not quite so much as she loved The Desmond.

"To be sure, it must be just as you wish, pushkeen," said the old man, and just at that moment Malachi, with his smiling, handsome face, entered the room.

"What are you up to now, Malachi?" said the old man.

"Starlight is quite broken in for gentle exercise," he said. "I wouldn't trust him yet for great gaps or ditches, but he'd be safe, quite safe, for the pushkeen to ride on the highroad, and I'll ride beside her on Brian the Brave. I've come to tell you this, pushkeen. The horse is ready, Starlight is ready. I took a good bit out of her this morning, and your habit has come from Cork, as well as the saddle. You'll look elegant—that's the only word for it—mounted on Starlight with me alongside of you. We might go for a ride after dinner. I've taken some of the nonsense out of Starlight this morning. He'll be as easy as a bit of silk to manage after we have had our early dinner."

"To be sure, that's fine news," said The Desmond, "but you must take precious care of my little treasure, Malachi."

"To be sure and that I will. You can trust me," said Malachi. "We'll go soft and easy along the[Pg 207] highroad and pushkeen can call and see Annie Maloney and her childer."

"Oh, I *would* like it, grand-dad," said Margot, raising her dear, bright little face.

"To be sure you would," said The Desmond. "I suppose the *King of all the Desmonds* is a bit stale for me to mount, Malachi."

"He's a bit old, father, but there's good blood in him still. You sit easy by the fire with little Madam, and I'll take pushkeen for her first ride on Starlight alone—we can talk about your riding the *King of the Desmonds* later."

The habit was a very pretty one of dark blue cloth, and there was a little soft crimson cap with a long tassel for the pushkeen to put over her jet-black hair. Nothing could be more altogether becoming, and the child's total absence of fear communicated itself to the high-spirited horse, who led her bravely up hill and down dale, Malachi riding beside her on Brian the Brave.

Oh, never was there anything quite so delightful as that ride to the little pushkeen, and little, little did she suspect that her happy days at Desmondstown were coming so quickly to an end. She could dance by nature and she could ride by nature. What Desmond had ever funk'd a horse? And this child surely was a true Desmond, a chip of the old block.



Never was there anything quite so delightful as that ride.—[Page 207.](#)

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The old-yongs and Mr. Flannigan were enjoying themselves at special games on the back lawn when little Margot flashed by in her new dark blue habit with her crimson cap and tassel. She came up quite close to the gate, but pulled in Starlight at a word from Malachi, and then the two horses and the man and the girl disappeared up the highroad.

"Isn't she a purty little thing?" said Flannigan.

Tilly felt a sense of madness coming over her. Now was her opportunity—now—now or never. She slipped away from the old-yongs and softly unhasping the door of The Desmond's sanctum entered and stood before him, her hands folded, her heart beating fast.

The Desmond was gently going off into the land of dreams and Madam was motioning to Tilly to leave the room, but Tilly's chance had come and she would not lose it.

"I want to speak," she said. "I want to speak to The Desmond. I won't keep him long. He can grant my request and then nothing need be done, or he can refuse it and then, behold, consider the fruit trees of all sorts, the strawberry beds, the raspberry canes, the roses!"

"Who is talking, who is bothering me entirely?" exclaimed The Desmond.

"I don't want to bother you, sir," said Tilly, [Pg 209]although she had such a queer trembling in her limbs that she never exactly knew the meaning of gooseflesh before.

"Oh you are Tilly Raynes," said the old man. "I couldn't get at the back of your name for a minute. What do ye want, alanna? I'm sleepy and I want to doze. I want to doze while my pushkeen is out."

"Oh, do you indeed?" said Tilly, who, as is often the case, got less nervous as the time went on.

The old man raised his jet-black eyes and looked at the girl.

"What do ye want, young English miss?" he said. He looked very severe and very stately.

Tilly's voice began to choke a little.

"You are The Desmond," she said.

"I'm that, who doubts it?"

"I don't, sir; only you, you frighten me a bit, and I don't like to see you deceived."

"Arrah, then, get out of this!" said The Desmond. "Play with the young gurrils and don't keep botherin' me."

"I will, in one minute; I will, really, only I have something dreadful to tell you."

"Not about my pushkeen? God Almighty help us, not about my pushkeen!"

"Listen to me, sir," said Tilly. "May I stay here as long as your pushkeen stays, and may I ride[Pg 210] Starlight every second day? If you say yes to those two things sir, everything will be right and you'll never, never *know*."

The Desmond rose slowly and ponderously from his chair.

"What are ye after at all, colleen?" he said. "The pushkeen herself says ye are to go in two days and her wishes are to be first considered in this house."

"Oh, are they?" said Tilly, her face almost black with rage, "then I'll tell—I'll tell!"

"You'll tell nothing, Tilly Raynes," said Madam, coming up in her soft and sweet way; and, taking the girl out of the room, she closed the door between her and The Desmond. "Now you behave yourself while you are here," she said. "Himself is not to be worried. You understand that clear and cool. Go back and play with my daughters. You can't hurt our pushkeen nor The Desmond himself for all your trying."

Tilly was terribly disappointed. What with the ferocity of The Desmond and the calm, cool firmness of Madam, she had not a chance to get out those hateful words, but she would punish pushkeen yet, yes she would. She did not go back to join the others but sitting in the porch, thought and thought[Pg 211] out her system of revenge. Presently came the sound of horses' feet tramping down the avenue.

Little Margot leaped to the ground as light as a feather, a groom sprang into view and Margot went straight up to Tilly.

"Why aren't you with the others?" she said. "Oh, I have had a glorious ride!"

"You are a nasty, mean, deceitful thing," said Tilly. "They would have kept me on here but for you, and I just downright hate you."

"Oh, Tilly, you oughtn't," said Margot. "What have I done to you?"

"Done! You've done enough in all conscience. You get everything, I get nothing; and when I went and spoke to The Desmond about staying a little longer, he said you didn't wish it—you, forsooth! I must ride that doddering old mare, and you must have that beautiful horse Starlight. You must have everything and I must have nothing. But I'll revenge myself on you yet, see if I don't!"

"I'm sorry, Tilly," said Margot, in her sweet voice, "but I do think you ought to go back home on Thursday. You have been with us for three weeks and we have all tried to give you a good time."

"You haven't, so don't think it," said Tilly.

"Well, I did my best. I told you I should have to spend most of the time with my grand-dad, and[Pg 212] the people and the place here do belong to me, Tilly, and they don't to you. I'm very, very sorry, but I do think you ought to go home. I wouldn't say it, indeed I wouldn't, if I didn't most truly think it. You'll have been here three weeks on Thursday, and that's a good long time, Tilly, now isn't it?"

"I'll have my revenge, I vow I will," said Tilly.

"I don't know what you can do, but you must just act as you please," said Margot in a very sad voice. "I did want to make you happy, I did most truly, but what was I to do? You wouldn't be happy, try as I would. You can't ride like a Desmond; it isn't in you."

"Little shopkeeper, don't talk any more," said Tilly, and she dashed out of sight, crying as she went.

How it so happened that while Matilda Raynes was planning out her revenge with a certain amount of skill, little Margot had taken off her habit and was seated in her

favourite place on her grandfather's knee. He told her a little about the troublesome girl, and Margot begged of him not to mind, for it was only her way and she was soon going.

"Thank the Lord for that," said The Desmond. "I'd have let her stay, but you put your own big foot down, pushkeen."

"Oh, yes, grand-dad, it is time she went home.[Pg 213] I'm sorry for her, rather, but she's not—not very nice, I mean."

"She's not nice at all," said The Desmond. "She's a common little brat. What sort of school was that they sent you to, light of my eyes? How did you come by her sort entirely?"

"I couldn't help it, grand-dad; she was at the school. Shall I tell you about my ride on Starlight?"

"Yes, do, to be sure. It's real pretty, to hear your sweet voice."

So Margot talked and the old man asked questions. He asked innumerable questions and Margot showed that she was a true Desmond by her replies. Meanwhile Tilly, her heart set on revenge, was creeping nearer and nearer to the stables and the beautiful new loose box which had all been arranged for the comfort of Starlight. There, in a certain corner hung the new saddle, which had just arrived from Cork.

Malachi was having a gentle snooze in a corner of the stall, but he was fond of calling himself a cat who invariably slept with one eye open. Tilly had not the least idea that he was there, but he saw her all the time. She thought herself quite alone with the exception of Starlight and the new saddle. She did not guess even for a moment that Malachi had opened that one eye of his very wide; in fact, that[Pg 214] he had opened both eyes. Tilly produced out of her pocket a pincushion, which contained pins of different sorts and degrees. These she cleverly inserted in the lining of the new saddle.

Malachi watched her, his eyes twinkling. She put the saddle back in its place, but did not do it well, for the saddle fell. Nevertheless, Malachi did not stir. Tilly now rushed out of the stable. Her revenge was in sure progress of beginning and acting well. When she was quite out of sight, Malachi rose, picked up the saddle, which was bristling with pins, and removed all of them except one. This he left in, placing it carefully and with skill in such a position that whoever rode on Starlight would drive the obnoxious pin a little way into the animal's hide. He very carefully folded up the rest of the pins in a piece of paper, slipped them into his vest pocket and entered the house. During the whole of that evening he was in the highest spirits and laid himself out to entertain Tilly.

The next morning he went to his father and said that as this was the very last day that Tilly Raynes would spend with them she might as well have a little bit of a ride on Starlight. His face was all over twinkles as he made the request.

"It won't do the beastie any harm," he said, "and pushkeen will lend Tilly her habit."

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"Of course I will," said pushkeen, who was feeling a little bad at Tilly's cruel words.

Accordingly, at breakfast time, Malachi turned to Tilly, told her that he had been considering matters, and did not see why she should not ride quite as well as the pushkeen, and if she liked he would take her out that morning on the pushkeen's thoroughbred, the pushkeen lending her her habit and he riding beside her on Brian the Brave.

"Oh, but, but will you really!" exclaimed Tilly, then she remembered the pins and became very grave and distrait.

"Please, Malachi," said Tilly, "may I run round to the stables first? I want to look at Starlight before I mount him."

"And what would ail ye not to?" said Malachi.

Tilly rushed as fast as she could to the stables, entered the one containing Starlight and taking down the new side-saddle began to search for the pins, but Malachi had been too clever for Till, for he had placed the one pin in such a way that it would soon begin to annoy Starlight and in such a position that Tilly could not find it.

She came back to the house in the highest spirits for her ride. Someone had removed the pins; she was quite safe. She would show the Irish Margot what riding really meant.

[Pg 216]

CHAPTER XIV. STARLIGHT AND TILLY.

Tilly felt very proud of herself when she put on Margot's smart little dark-blue habit, and although the crimson cap certainly did not look as well on her nondescript sort of hair as it had done on Margot's, she imagined that it did, which comes after all to the same thing.

Malachi was in the best of spirits, his face was all twinkles and light and laughter. His sisters accompanied him as he brought Starlight and Brian the Brave round to the mounting block.

"You are kind, you *are* kind," said Tilly, trying to show some of her gratitude in her face.

"Ah, to be sure, why wouldn't I?" said Malachi. "Here, spring up, missie, you must be quick, for he's a thoroughbred, remember, he's not like the old mare, but when we get him right under way and you show no fear, which of course you haven't got, we'll have a fine spin together on the King's highroad."

Matilda felt altogether uplifted, as she expressed it. The awful pins had been in some mysterious[Pg 217] way removed. Who had done it? One of the grooms, she supposed, and yet there was malicious laughter in Malachi's bright dark eyes.

"Now then, no time to lose," he said. "Stand back, gurrils, both of you, you'll have your rides this afternoon, but it is fair enough that missie should have her turn on this her last day and she so brave—my word, so wonderful brave! Now then, put your foot on my hand, stand on this block and spring."

Tilly, very much excited because of the new habit, highly pleased at having got the victory, feeling quite sure that she could outdo Margot in the art of riding, sprang into her saddle in her somewhat awkward fashion.

Starlight looked askance with almost a wicked look in his eye at the creature on his back. Notwithstanding the habit and the red cap, she was not Margot. She did not know how to sit on him comfortably. He began to feel a sense of annoyance and a great desire to get rid of her, but Malachi whistled to him softly, somewhat as a thrush whistles to her young. Ah, well, he understood *that* note. He settled down to endure and do his best.

He thought, in his dear horsey mind, how very easily he could pitch the thing that he didn't like off his back and get rid of her forever when they reached the wide ditch. He did not object to trying[Pg 218] the wide ditch this morning, anything to get rid of the thing on his back.

Tilly, for a moment, felt inclined to scream.

"Don't let out any noise for the Lord's sake," said Malachi. "You'll set him off if you do and when he does go, it is like a lightning flash, I can tell you. You say you are brave, prove it! Ah, that's better. Hold yourself erect, but for the Lord's sake don't keep the reins so tight. You don't want to strangle the creature. Sit easy, for Heaven's sake, just as though you were part of Starlight and he was part of you. That's the way to ride. That's the way pushkeen rode yesterday."

They had passed the tumble-down gate by this time and Tilly had partly recovered her courage.

"I can ride better than la Comtesse," she said. "I have had far more experience."

"Have ye now? Ye weren't born a Desmond, by any chance?"

"No, I'm a Raynes. The Rayneses are——"

"You needn't tell me," said Malachi. "They are the finest family in the whole of England. They can skim the air on a horse's back like a bit of a bird. Once you put'em on, you can't get'em off. Those are the Rayneses for you. I know the breed, otherwise I wouldn't have mounted you on pushkeen's thoroughbred."

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"Why do you call her pushkeen? It is a very ugly name. She's nothing whatever but a little French shopgirl. I told you so my own self, Malachi."

"Did ye now? Well, ye see I wasn't listening. I never listen to untruths."

"But this isn't an untruth. Oh, my, Malachi—I'm—I'm frightened!"

"Whatever are ye frightened about, Miss Raynes of England? Maybe as you are so uncommon brave, we might try a bit of cross-country riding. Why there you are again, jumping like anything. Whatever has come to ye? It seems to me you are a sort of cuckoo in the nest of the Rayneses."

"I'm not, indeed I'm not. But he does jump so. See, look for yourself. Oh, please, Malachi, hold him. He doesn't like me; he's got a wicked sort of spirit in him."

"Maybe his saddle isn't easy," said Malachi. "You sit still and I'll settle it. For the Lord's sake don't let him think you are afraid of him or you are done, done black and blue."

Malachi slipped off Brian the Brave and without in the least disturbing Tilly managed to push the pin a little further out so that it might work a surer and a graver mischief.

"Now we are all right," he said, jumping on his[Pg 220] own gallant steed. "Go it Starlight, old boy, why it's one of the Rayneses you have got on your back. Think of that, Starlight, old chap!"

Starlight certainly did think of it and thought of it with growing passion and indignation. The pin had now thoroughly worked its way through his satiny hide and he was altogether beside himself with rage.

Just then an old-fashioned lumbering motor car came by. This was the finish to Starlight. He reared upright, bolt upright in the air, shook Tilly off him as though she was a fly, left her sitting on the road and immediately relieved from his burden began to munch some delicious green grass from the roadside.

"I'm killed, Malachi, I'm killed," sobbed Tilly.

"Well, to be sure, are you now?" said Malachi. "I'm thinking perhaps 'twas a pin. I don't think you are killed, but you might have been if I hadn't let you down soft. I took all the pins out, I thought."

"What pins?" said Tilly, turning very white.

"What pins! Oh, but ye are a nasty little beggar; didn't I watch you when ye were sticking them all over the inside of the saddle yesterday? Ye didn't guess I was having a snooze in the loose box. I often sleep there when I'm partial to the beasts. Well, to be sure, I put the pins in a packet. Here[Pg 221] they are, you can look at them. How many do you reckon you put in?"

"I don't remember—oh, none! Don't scold me, Malachi!"

"Don't scold ye, ye little liar!"

"Malachi, I tell you I am dying, I am going to faint, I know I am."

"Well, faint away, colleen, it doesn't matter to me!"

This remarkable announcement on the part of Malachi had also a remarkable effect in restoring Tilly's nerves. It was no use to faint if nobody cared. How dreadful Tilly felt, how sore and bruised and broken.

Malachi led the two horses to the nearest tree, and fastened them there with a piece of rope, which he always kept handy in his pocket. He then proceeded to unfasten Starlight's saddle and to remove the obnoxious pin. It was a black pin, deep and strong, and it had already made a decided mark on the satin coat of the lovely horse.

"Now how came *this* here, to be sure?" said he, going over to Tilly. "I must have missed this, to be sure I did. And here are the others. We will put them all together. Ten pins. Upon my word, it's a goodly number. I want you to make a present of 'em, Tilly."

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"A present?" answered the girl, raising her white and terrified face.

"Yes, to be sure, a present to The Desmond, and you are to tell him why you put them in, and you are to do it at dinner to-day with the pushkeen looking at you. You are not hurt a bit, no, not a bit. You are shook up, whereas you deserved to die, and you may be thankful you are let off so easy. I'm thinking that after you have told the true story of the pins, the story of the shop will go in one ear and out of the other, so far as The Desmond is concerned. The Rayneses may be fine riders—I'm not taking from their merits, not I—but they are black big liars, too, that I can swear by. Now then, get up, I'll mount ye on Starlight. He'll go as easy as a lamb now that that black horror isn't pricking him to death. We'll just get back in time for lunch."

"Oh, Malachi, I—I can't mount that horse again. He fairly terrifies me, and as to that story you want me to tell about the pins, do you think I'd disgrace myself before your father, and me so frightened of him?"

"Very well, Tilly, you can keep silent and I'll tell. But he's got to know."

"It isn't true, it isn't true," wailed Tilly.

"Whist, for the Lord's sake, don't let out any more black ones. Did ye ever see a cat asleep?"

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"Why, yes, Malachi, I suppose I have."

"Have you got a cat at your home?"

"Yes, my stepmother has a cat."

"Well, you watch it the next time it dozes, then you'll learn once and forever how a cat sleeps, with one eye half open, never more, never less. Well that eye is on, we'll call it the alert, for mice or birds or any kind of prey. I was lying like the cat, with my one eye open, when I saw you come along. Soon, from being half opened, it was whole opened, and the other eye was opened, too, and I saw ye sticking in the pins. So ye can't get out of it, Tilly Raynes from England. Very badly ye did your job, very badly, entirely, but when ye left the stables, I crept out all choking with laughter and I thought I'd punish ye after all. I took out nine of the pins altogether, for one properly managed could do the job better than your ten, anyhow. Then I palavered ye a bit and got ye to ride on Starlight. I meant it as a punishment and the punishment will end when ye have confessed the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth to The Desmond and made him a present of the ten pins. You thought you'd kill his pushkeen because you were mad with jealousy. Well, now you have just got to do what I say and no bones about it whatsomdever!"

"Oh, Malachi, oh, Malachi, I can't."

"But I say ye can! I'll keep the pins till the minute arrives, and as ye won't mount Starlight, I must walk the two horses home. We are a good bit out and we'd best start at once. You keep in front of me, for I'm not going to lose sight of ye, not for a moment. Now, then, Till Raynes of England, march is the word!"

It was a very miserable, draggled little girl, with a white face considerably scratched from her fall, who arrived at Desmondstown just as the stable clock struck one. Malachi gave the horses over to his own special groom and followed Tilly to her bedroom.

"I'll be standing outside the door waiting for you," he said. "Go in and take off the habit and wash that scratch off your face, for it ain't pretty, to say the least of it."

"Oh, but please, I don't want any lunch," said Tilly.

"You'll come down and take your place at the table. It don't matter in the least whether ye eat or not."

Tilly felt herself sore and beaten and bruised. She had met her master in Malachi and could not get rid of him. In the end she put on a neat white frock and went downstairs and took her place at the long table. There was a huge sirloin of beef, and new potatoes and peas, and quantities of raspberries[Pg 225] and cream on the sideboard. Altogether it was a refreshing and tempting repast and not one she was likely to get in her own poor home.

Malachi deliberately seated himself beside her. He pretended to be very attentive to her. Margot was openly affectionate and asked eagerly how she had enjoyed her ride.

"Oh, to be sure, she is a wonder, no less," said Malachi, "but don't bother her with talking too much till she has got a little food inside her. I didn't know she was one of those celebrated Rayneses. Why they can ride a bear, a bull, a cow, anything! She let it all out to me to-day when she was scampering so gaily on Starlight."

"I never heard of any Raynes who could ride," said The Desmond.

"You've got an ugly scratch on your cheek," said Norah. "How did ye come by that, Till?"

"Didn't I say, let her eat her meal in quiet!" said Malachi. "A gurrl, even though she is a Raynes, can't take it out of a thoroughbred when he's as fresh as Starlight was this morning. Now eat, Till, eat."

He piled her plate with provisions and The Desmond did not trouble himself to look at her again.

"You're a good, a very good little girl," said Malachi. "You're a true Raynes, that is what you are.[Pg 226] Now, swallow these peas and get ready for the raspberries and cream."

Margot looked on in a puzzled way. She felt sure that there was something behind the scenes which she would know about later on. Malachi never put on that kind of look for nothing. At last the meal came to an end, and just at its close Mr. Flannigan appeared on the scene.

"Who's for Puss-in-the-Corner?" he said, glancing from one young-old aunt to another.

"We'll have a rare game; it's a fine afternoon," said Bride.

"Help yourself to some more raspberries, Flannigan," said Malachi, "and there's the cream jug by you. Pour it on plentiful, for there's a bit of a lark coming on, man. Till and me, we know all about it, don't we, Till?"

Matilda had in reality hardly touched her dinner. She felt her head in a whirl and her limbs aching. The strangely fierce appearance of The Desmond at the head of the board terrified her beyond speaking.

"Now, we'll soon get it over," said Malachi. "Here you are, Till, shaking a bit, well, I'll take your little hand. Come along, you know old Malachi well enough by this time."

"I can't—I won't—I can't!" sobbed Tilly.

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"For the Lord's sake don't have that girl howling in my presence," said The Desmond.

"She's not howling really, father. She's only bringing you a little present. She's taken a mighty fancy to you, dad, and she wants to give you this little parcel with her humble respects."

"I don't mind taking presents if they are properly earned and suitable," said The Desmond. "What's the matter with ye, colleen? I'm not a bear or a lion."

"To be sure no, dad, ye are the finest man in Kerry."

By this time Malachi and Tilly were standing by The Desmond's chair. Tilly thrust the little packet of pins into the old man's hands and then tried to escape, but she was surrounded on all sides, and finally it was Mr. Flannigan who brought her back to stand by The Desmond's side and watch his face as he opened the paper which contained the strange gift.

"Pins!" he exclaimed. "By the mighty archangels, pins! What do I want with them, colleen?"

"Tell the story," said Malachi, who was watching her.

"I won't—I can't—I can't!" sobbed Tilly.

"Then I will," said Malachi. "I have given you every chance, and I can't do more, but The Desmond[Pg 228] shall know and you shall stand by and look at him as he hears those black wicked lies of yours—no less—"

Whereupon Malachi proceeded to enlighten his old father with regard to the pins which Tilly had inserted in the thick deep lining of Starlight's saddle.

He told his story with great verve and passion and made far more of it than Tilly herself would have done. He did not conceal the motive for a moment. He did not attempt to shield the naughty and unhappy girl. Towards the end of the narrative, The Desmond stood up. It was very awful when The Desmond stood up. He looked so much bigger than

anyone else, and so much fiercer. His black eyes seemed to eat through Tilly. The fire in them seemed to burn into her.

"You *go*," he said, "not to-morrow, but *to-day*! This clergyman, Mr. Flannigan, will see you into the train. I'll give him sufficient money to get you out of the house. You are a bad, wicked, deceitful girl. You wanted to kill my heart's treasure! Now, leave the room, and let me never see your face again! As to these pins they bring a curse on you, otherwise they are harmless. You *go*! Flannigan, will you see her off and put her into the train? Nay, it would be safer to put her on board the ship. I [Pg 229] didn't think there was such wickedness anywhere in the world, but I'm learning in my old age; yes, God help me, I'm learning in my old age. Pack your own things and *go*!"

Tilly turned and went like a half-drowned kitten out of the room. She was met, however, in the passage by Margot. Margot's beautiful black eyes were brimful of tears.

"Oh, Tilly, Tilly," she exclaimed, "did you really want to kill me?"

"I—I—I think I did," said Tilly. "I hated you, Margot, and I—I hate you now."

"Anyhow I'm going to help you to pack, poor Tilly. It's an awful thing to hate, and why should you hate one who never hated you?"

"Don't you hate me after this?" said Tilly in bewilderment.

"Oh, no, indeed; no, I love you because you are so miserable."

Suddenly Tilly found quite a different order of tears filling her eyes. Margot swept her dear, little round arms about her and took her quickly upstairs and packed for her because she was incapable of packing for herself.

Phinias Maloney's funny old cart was summoned and Tilly and her belongings were packed into it, [Pg 230] but the last thing she remembered of Desmondstown was the sweet face of little Margot, who kissed her hand to her, and whose eyes were brimful of tears as she watched her drive away.

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CHAPTER XV. I CANNOT TALK PARLEY-VOUS.

If ever there was a girl who was furious in her own mind it was Matilda Raynes. She had enjoyed her life at Desmondstown. Little did she care for the rough and tumble-down old house, the food was good, the young-old aunts were jolly of the jolly. Malachi and Bruce were great fun. Ah no, however, Malachi was *not* great fun! She used to think he was, but she found out her mistake. For a man to sleep with one eye open like a cat, for a man deliberately to get her into a hole, for a man deliberately to betray her and force her to tell her horrible mean little story—oh, no, she could not like Malachi any more.

She also dreaded The Desmond inexpressibly, but perhaps of all the happy Irish folks the one she disliked most was that sweet, loving, forgiving *la petite* Comtesse. How dared she be loving and forgiving? If she had fought her, Tilly would have known what to do, but she did not. She was only gentle and a little sad, in fact very sad; and they [Pg 232]

all, every one of them, made such a fuss about her and she was no real Comtesse at all. She was nothing but a little stupid shopgirl. How in the wide, wide world was Tilly ever to bear with her again?

Mr. Flannigan sat very still by her side. She wished heartily that she might have travelled alone to Rosslare. She did not wish for Mr. Flannigan, he seemed to have no fun in him and he looked from time to time with a sort of horror at Tilly.

When they first got into the railway carriage it was crowded, but by slow degrees the passengers got out. They were going, some in one direction, some in another, until at last Tilly and Mr. Flannigan found themselves alone. Then Mr. Flannigan turned his decidedly ungainly back upon Tilly, and having secured that day's copy of the *Cork Constitution* began to read. He would do anything under the sun for the Desmonds, but he disliked this job with regard to Tilly.

At last she could bear his silence and his gravity no longer. She sprang from her seat in the opposite corner and came and sat facing him.

"How soon shall we get to Rosslare?" she asked.

Mr. Flannigan very slowly dropped his newspaper, looked fixedly at Tilly and then said in a solemn, very sombre voice,

"I'm not tellin' ye, for I don't know."

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"Oh, Mr. Flannigan," said Tilly, with a choking sound in her throat. "Are you hating me as much as the others?"

"I'm not lovin' ye at the present moment," said Flannigan.

He resumed his paper, reading it with such apparent zeal that Tilly might as well not exist. She felt more furious than ever. She began to sob, she sobbed very loud. Flannigan took no notice whatever of the noise she was making for some time, but when it became unbearable he said,

"For the Lord's sake don't slobber, girl!"

"What's slobber?" asked Tilly, who pretended not to be acquainted with the word, and who wanted at any cost to get Mr. Flannigan into conversation, but the clergyman did not reply. He was buried again in his newspaper.

Tilly's sobs, which she thought so affecting, but which the old clergyman called "slobber," grew fainter for lack of nutriment.

By-and-bye they reached Rosslare, where a rather small boat was going to cross over to Fishguard.

"Ye'll have a rough crossing, I'm thinkin'," said Flannigan. "The waves look dirty, to be sure. Ye'd best go and lie down. I'll see ye to your cabin and then say good-bye. There's a return train, which [Pg 234] will take me back to Desmondstown in time for supper."

"Oh, oh, Mr. Flannigan," sobbed Tilly. "You don't believe all these bad things of me?"

"And why shouldn't I? There was the ten pins as large as life. Didn't I count 'em when The Desmond was tellin' ye to begone?"

"But you do know, you must know, Mr. Flannigan, that *she* is only a shopkeeper—"

"*She!* I'm not acquainted with your meaning."

"It's that horrid Margot," said Tilly. "Have I not bought hats from her and robes from her at Arles, and don't I know what she really and truly is like?"

"Oh, do ye? I'm thinkin' ye don't. I'll be wishin' ye a good day now, Miss Tilly. Don't ye try pins on horses again when there are cats about."

"It was a horrid mean thing to do," said Tilly. "Anyone else would have called out, but he's too mean."

"Don't ye be runnin' down Malachi," exclaimed Flannigan. "Ye wanted to kill or injure the darling of the place. I'm thinking one of your stories is about as true as the other. Good day to ye now, I'm off!" He gave a queer, awkward nod and disappeared up the companion and along the deck until he reached the gangway.

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Tilly thought herself quite the most miserable girl in all the world, but still she might have her revenge yet. If she tried very, very, very hard, if The Desmond did not believe in the story of the shop, at least M. le Comte St. Juste would. It would be her business to get things in train and make things very hard for the little Comtesse against her return to Arles.

Tilly Raynes had a horrible crossing. The boat was small, the sea was rough. She hated all physical discomforts. She cried to the stewardess and begged of her to stay with her, assuring her that she was a very ill-used little girl and had no right to be going in that rickety old boat at all.

"Well you are in it," said the stewardess, "and if God is merciful we *may* yet reach dry land."

"What do you mean—what do you mean?" said Tilly, forgetting her terror and hatred of the Desmonds, in the nearer and possible terror of imminent death.

"What I say," replied the stewardess. "We are like as not to see Davy Jones to-night."

"Whoever is Davy Jones?" asked Tilly.

"He's the king of the bottom of the sea. They who sup with him, sup once and never again. Now don't keep me, little gurrl, see there's a poor lady like to faint in the far saloon from here. You are a bit of a coward, I take it, and I can't stay [Pg 236]comforting cowards when there's real illness and real danger."

Then Matilda, somehow or other, forgot her deadly seasickness and her hatred of the Desmonds and shook and trembled in her narrow berth. The wind was blowing great guns and the sailors were rushing here, there, and everywhere. The captain's voice

giving directions sounded to Tilly like great claps of thunder. She forgot about the pins and her fall from the horse.

Gradually, as the sea grew rougher and the danger greater, she found herself looking in imagination at one sweet, dark, sad and yet smiling face. It was the face of the little shopkeeper, whom she had tried, yes, her very best, to injure, perhaps to kill. Now she herself was face to face with death. It would be awful to go down into the depths of those wild and terrible waves. Everyone on board seemed uneasy.

The little steamer swayed from side to side and rocked and shook itself as though it knew that it was small and angry and powerless. Thrills of terror ran through Tilly's frame. The captain's voice was heard to say,

"The dangerous time is when——"

She could not catch the rest of the words. The stewardess did not come near her. Women laughed[Pg 237] and cried and screamed. Tilly was all alone in her little cabin. She wondered how long she would take drowning. She could think of nothing but the horrors of death. Then all of a sudden she made up her mind not to die in a hole. She would creep upstairs and be on deck. She had read stories of shipwrecks and when the worst came boats were put out. The stewardess was a horrid woman and would not think of her. Well, she would think of herself. She would be one of the very first to leave the boat when the appalling hour of danger came, when they got to the—that unpronounceable name which she could not catch.

But it was all very well for Tilly to try to get out of her berth, she found she could not. The sea took her and threw her back again into it. The sea tossed her against the side of her narrow berth, and she had to cling on with one hand to an extremely narrow rail and with the other to the top of the berth. The sea roared, the winds roared. Showers of foam flung themselves against the port-hole. The combined sounds spoke of nothing but death, death, death!

Never in all her life had she been so miserable before. Even The Desmond and Malachi were nothing to this anguish. She would sink to the bottom of the deep, deep sea and no one would be very, very[Pg 238] sorry. Why should they? Had she ever made anyone love her? Her father—had he not punished her and been cross to her all her days! Her stepmother—had she not been sly and told false things about Tilly? Well, they would not have any more trouble with her again; she would eat her last supper with Davy Jones.

She felt confused, slightly raving! What sort of supper would he give her? Fishes, of course, all sorts of fishes and then afterwards the big fishes would eat her and no one would lament unless perhaps, perhaps *Margot*! But no, it was impossible to think that Margot would be sorry. Why should a shopgirl be sorry? She, Margot, was only that—nothing more at all, although they did make such a fuss about her at Desmondstown.

Suddenly in the midst of her meditations there came a curious and remarkable lull. She no longer found it necessary to cling to either one side or the other of the berth. It seemed as though someone, she thought it was Margot, had poured oil on the disturbed waters. Might she, could she, would she be allowed to save even such a wicked girl as Tilly?

Tilly acknowledged now that she was wicked and that Margot was good and then all of a sudden the stewardess bustled in.

"For the Lord's sake get up, missie," she said in [Pg 239] a cheerful tone. "I couldn't come near ye with others so bad, but we are in harbour, thank the Lord, and all danger is over. Yes, we had a rough night, mighty rough. I've never gone through a worse, but I couldn't stay along of cowards. Here's your jacket, missie, I'll slip it on ye, and here's your hat! You do look bad, but we are very late in, and if you want to catch your train for London, ye'd best hurry up. Shall I get a porter for your luggage, missie?"

Tilly answered "yes" in a meek sort of voice and then she gave the stewardess who had done nothing for her all night a shilling out of her scanty store. Presently she was on dry land and in the train. She was not going to eat her supper with Davy Jones, she was going to live after all; she had passed through a fearful night, but she was going to live.

Everything was new and fresh to her now, and when a boy brought her a cup of tea and a plate of bread and butter, she ate greedily and with appetite. Then it occurred to her that she ought to wire to her father. She had money enough for this, too. The Desmond had supplied her with plenty of money.

Mr. Raynes was a coal merchant on a large scale, exceedingly well off. He lived on Clapham Common. The house was ugly and without any pretence to [Pg 240] good looks. Tilly's stepmother met her in London, scolded her, shook her, put her hat straight and asked her why in the world was she coming home so soon.

Tilly felt all the old wicked feelings rising in her breast when her stepmother began to harangue her. She immediately said that she was only wasting time at Desmondstown and wanted to work very hard indeed, so as to get to Arles one week before term began.

The stepmother went on scolding. Tilly hardly listened. She was feeling wicked again, but she was thankful to be on dry land. They reached the big, luxuriously furnished, vulgar-looking house on Clapham Common.

Tilly suddenly felt herself very sick; her stepmother was fairly kind to her when she was really sick. She allowed her to go to bed and sent Mary Ann, the house-parlourmaid, upstairs to look after her.

Mary Ann was a favourite with Tilly and listened with mouth wide open, ears extended to their utmost, and eyes that looked as though they were going to spring out of her head, to Tilly's account of the awful storm at sea. She got the girl swiftly and quickly into bed and gave her a very little hot tea [Pg 241] and dry toast, and then Tilly forgot all her miseries in sleep.

It may have been her fall off the back of Starlight, or it may have been her fearful crossing, but, whatever the reason, for a few days Matilda Raynes was really ill. She was feverish and the doctor was sent for. During the whole of this time she was attended by Mary Ann and very occasionally saw her stepmother, but never once her father.

The doctor said she must have got a very severe shock of some sort. He told this to her father and also to her stepmother.

When Raynes, the coal-merchant, discovered that his daughter had received a shock and had come back home much sooner than she had expected to do so, he sat down and wrote a firm, cold letter to Mr. Desmond of Desmondstown. He said his child had been brought back to him at death's door and he wanted to know the reason of it. Had those wild Irish folk been playing pranks with his only child? He had no idea of addressing The

Desmond as The. He had never heard of such a title, and if he had would not have used it.

At last he received a reply in the neat, firm handwriting of Fergus Desmond. Fergus told him of the letter not being addressed right which naturally came into his possession. His father's title was The [Pg 242]Desmond. He said he did not wish to complain of Matilda Raynes, but as her father wished to know the truth, he would tell him the truth. He then proceeded to give a graphic description of the thoroughbred Starlight and of Tilly's conduct with regard to the ten pins. He wasted no words, but told the story just as it stood.

Tilly was sent away by The Desmond. He could not possibly have such a wicked girl in his house. There was one person whom The Desmond set great store by and that was his little granddaughter Margot, or the pushkeen as he called her. Tilly was jealous of the pushkeen and when she was not allowed to ride her horse she stuck pins into the saddle, hoping thereby to injure if not to kill the little girl. That was the story; he had nothing more to say. He was sorry for Mr. Raynes.

Raynes passed the letter across the table to his wife, who read it with pursed-up lips and glittering pale-blue eyes.

"Well, I must say it was a nasty thing to do," she said.

"It was," said Raynes. "We'll teach her what's what when she's better."

"She's better to-night, Robert. Mary Ann says she is nearly well."

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"We'll wait for what's what until to-morrow," said Robert Raynes.

The next day Tilly was dressed. She had partaken of an excellent dinner prepared for her by Mary Ann, and a bright little fire burnt in her room. She was feeling still weak and tired. Her father came in and looked at her. She shrank away from him in a sort of terror.

"Oh, you are afraid of me, are you?" said the coal-merchant. "You have good cause to be. Read that!"

He passed Fergus Desmond's letter across the width of the little table and laid it in Tilly's hand.

"Take your time," he said, "I'm in no hurry."

He sat down deliberately and looked about him. Tilly could not see the letters at all at first from a queer sense of giddiness. She wished her father would go and leave her alone. But he sat quite calmly by the fire.

"You'll just have the goodness to read that quietly," he said. "I'm in no manner of hurry. Take it in, take it all in!"

By degrees Tilly did take it in. She raised terrified weak eyes to her father's face.

"Oh, daddy, daddy," she said. "Don't be angry with me. She's only a shopkeeper and they make[Pg 244] such a fuss of her—and I—I'm so weak and miserable."

"Perhaps ye are a bit," said Raynes. "I'm not going to be angry, but ye'll get your whipping all the same."

"Oh, dad, oh, dad——"

"Yes, child, there's no escape; just hold on to the foot of the bed and bare your two arms and your shoulders. I don't hold with girls who want to injure other girls. Now for every time you cry out you'll get an extra stroke, so keep as quiet as you can."

Tilly knew there was no help for it. Her father had brought a light, keen-looking cane into the room with him. She had seen it when he had given her the letter to read. He slashed right, he slashed left,—she kept back her screams. After a time she was strangely still, she had fainted.

Then Mary Ann came up and comforted and petted her and put her back to bed and eased her sores by some very delicate ointment. No one else was in the least inclined to be kind. Two days afterwards, however, Raynes entered his daughter's bedroom.

"There isn't the making of a lady in you, Tilly," he said, "and I'm not going to send you back to Arles any more. There's a cheap school for your[Pg 245] sort of girl close by, and you can help your stepmother when you are not working at school, and by the time you are sixteen you'll be sitting in my coal-office taking down orders for tons and tons of coal. No more Arles or French, or fine ladies for you! Bless my soul, you *are* a mean little thing! But now I want to get at the truth of this. Tell me every blessed thing you know about that kind girl you call the little shopkeeper."

Tilly did tell her story. She told it graphically and even with her father's stern eyes fixed on her face, with a certain amount of correctness. She had bought hats and robes from *la petite* Comtesse and the old man the Comte St. Juste didn't know, and the old man The Desmond in Ireland didn't know.

"You are sure of your facts?" said Raynes, when she had stopped.

"Yes, I'm quite positive sure."

"That's all right then. I punished you, my girl, because you did a mean and cruel thing, but I'm not going to let the little shopgirl get off Scot free. I can't talk *parlez-vous*, so I'm going straight to Ireland to-night, where I'll tell the entire story to those folks who think themselves so fine. You needn't begin your school-life, my girl, till I come back. This has got to be seen to and I'm the man for the job."

"Oh, oh, father, don't—don't——" suddenly[Pg 246] cried Tilly. "I see her, she's in the room, she's looking at me!"

"Why you are raving mad, child, who's in the room, who's looking at you?"

"*La petite* Comtesse Margot. She was the only one who was always kind; even when I stuck pins into the saddle she was kind, and I saw her on board ship, when I thought I was going to the bottom. Oh, but she's good, she's *real* good and M. le Comte, her

grandpère, he mustn't be frightened. He loves her like her other grandfather loves her. Oh, father, let it be, let it be!"

"I'm going to Ireland to-night," was Raynes's remark.

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CHAPTER XVI. THE FEAR OF THE SHILLELAGH.

The coal-merchant was a man of his word. He was hard and cruel and unkind, but in his own way he was proud of Tilly. Those people whom he was most proud of he liked to train, and he was under the impression that he trained his daughter Matilda very well. When he beat her, which he did constantly; when he scolded her, he quoted to himself the old words, "Spare the rod and spoil the child." He felt he was following in the footsteps of Holy Writ. He thought himself a very blessed man.

Now in addition to all this scolding and beating on the part of the coal-merchant with regard to Matilda Raynes, there was also a strange feeling of absolute indifference towards her stepmother. Her stepmother's name was Harriet; and Joshua Raynes thought very little of Harriet. In consequence he left her alone. She was only useful in the matter of helping him to train Matilda, but he never fussed over his second wife, and, as far as possible, let her go her own way.

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Harriet Raynes quickly discovered that nothing excited Joshua Raynes so much as to talk about Tilly, more in especial to talk *against* Tilly. He used to listen with his staring eyes fixed on his wife's face and say "Good little woman" and then go upstairs and prove things to his own satisfaction and beat Tilly because he loved her enough to consider beating essential.

She would be a very rich woman by-and-bye, for the coal-merchant did a thriving business and all his money he put by for Tilly. That was the one joy of his life. He could hurt her and torture her and yet in his queer, unaccountable way, she was the only creature he loved.

He was quite determined, however, to get to the bottom of the Irish story. If the thing was true, the girl who put on airs and kept a shop should be publicly disgraced and he would do it. He would enjoy doing it very much. He couldn't hurt the little shopkeeper—not physically, at least—but he could make her feel bad, and this he was determined to do. Mr. Desmond should feel bad, too, forsooth! What name did Tilly call him—"The"—if you please! He had never heard of anything so ridiculous in his life. He'd soon knock "The" out of the old curmudgeon.

It was a calm night when Joshua Raynes took the[Pg 249] boat from Fishguard to Rosslare. He did not go through the miseries his child had undergone and he steamed away through the calm waters in a boat at least three times the size. He had never been in Ireland in his life before, and when he arrived at Rosslare was much bothered with the tongue employed by the good-natured country folks.

He said, "Eh, eh, what do you want to tell me?" over and over again. He told each individual he met that the said individual was stony deaf, and also dumb. The Irish person, be it man or woman, gossoon or girleen, objected to his manner, refused to be considered deaf and dumb when he could sphake the beautiful tongue—the Irish, bedad—to say nothing of that paltry tongue, the English.

Joshua felt himself getting crosser and crosser each moment. What was he to do? How was he to hold out? How was he to find the man called Desmond who had spoken evil things of his Tilly? He did not in the least admire the beauty of the country. He had no eye for the green of the Emerald Isle nor her lofty mountains, nor her flowing streams and rushing rivers.

He talked so angrily that people left him alone and the train that should have taken him to Mallow went off without him. He might have lingered at Waterford goodness knows how long, waiting for a [Pg 250] man of the name of Desmond and trying to talk to stone-deaf and dumb people, who only talked gibberish, when a bright-eyed, sparkling-looking individual came suddenly on the platform, stared at Joshua, said a few words to the people round and presently came up and introduced himself.

"I am told ye are lookin' for The Desmond," he said. "You won't find his high, great mightiness standing in a bit of a shanty like this. I'm Malachi Desmond, son of The Desmond. I've just had a big sale of horses this morning and am going back to Desmondstown in a quarter of an hour. If you want to see The Desmond I've no manner of objection."

"I want to see *Mr.* Desmond of Desmondstown," said the coal-merchant.

"There isn't such a person. *Mr.* Desmond! For the Lord's sake, man, ye are mighty ignorant!"

"Am I, sir? Well, I don't want you to tell me what I am, and what I am not."

"Then you listen to me," said Malachi. "The Desmond is next door to a king, and he lives in his kingdom, and I'm his son, Malachi. Be the powers! I wonder if you're the father of that nasty little bit-thing that stuck pins in the saddle of Starlight. I wouldn't be a scrap surprised if you were, nor flustered neither. You've got the same malicious gleam [Pg 251] of the eye. We have cats at Desmondstown and *I'm* one."

"You are a very big cat," said Joshua.

"Well, I'm one when I like. Do ye want to see The Desmond or do ye not?"

"There isn't such a name, it is silly," said the coal-merchant.

"Don't ye talk in that sort of way in old Ireland," said Malachi, "for at a wink from me, *the cat*, we'll have all the boys out with their shillelaghs. You'd best be careful what you say in our country. The Desmond *is* The Desmond, and he is royal king of Desmondstown. By the same token, here's our train. Are ye coming along with me or are ye not?"

"I'm coming along," said Joshua. "I'm a man of my word. It's a wild, bad country, but I'm coming along all the same. I want to knock 'The' out of a certain person and I'll do it my own way."

"We'll see about that," said Malachi. "Remember the big cat never sleeps."

"Oh, you are all mad in this dreadful place," said Joshua. "I can't make out what you are driving at, but I'll come with you, for I think I can take down your pride a bit."

"Oh, to be sure, that's a fine thing to do," said Malachi. "Here's an empty, third-class carriage we can have all to ourselves. You might begin [Pg 252]pulling out my pride at once. It is stuck very deep, its roots go far and they twist and they turn; and by the powers; they twist and turn again. But if ye give a long pull and a strong pull maybe ye'll have some of them out before I begin to scratch."

The coal-merchant was now quite certain that Malachi was mad, but he kept his object well in view and determined not to show outward fear of him. They started on their journey and before they got to Mallow, Joshua discovered two things about Malachi: first, that he could understand his language; and second, that he was a real clever man, for nothing so thoroughly impressed the coal-merchant with cleverness as the sight of gold and notes.

Malachi pulled out a quantity of money from his pocket; in fact, some hundreds of pounds. This money had been paid partly in notes, and partly in sovereigns and was given for a horse called *Nora Crena* and another horse called *A Bit of Herself* and another horse again called *Brian the Brave*. He had made well on these horses but he was very sorry to part with *Brian the Brave*.

Joshua sat and looked at the man; he looked also at the gold and began to respect him. At Mallow they changed trains and again were lucky enough to have one to themselves. Then Malachi bent forward and said in a grave and very determined voice,

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"Now what may you be wanting to see The Desmond for?"

"He's not The Desmond," said Joshua.

"He is. Let that drop. Anyhow what do you want to see him for?"

"He has turned my child out of his house; he told her to go and she was all but drowned on the deep sea."

"She stuck ten pins into the saddle of Starlight," remarked Malachi. "She did it to injure our pushkeen. It was proved against her and she couldn't deny it. If your name is Raynes, you're a great horseman, I take it."

"Horseman, not I! I never sat on a horse in my life."

"Dear! To be sure! Your girl rode elegant."

"Did she?" answered Raynes, feeling a little proud in spite of himself.

"She did that, she rode like a sylph. I didn't think at first she had it in her, but she was like a bird on Starlight. You see it was this way. I was having one of my cat's snoozes in Starlight's loose box. Starlight wasn't properly broken in at that time, and I was mighty feared to put any young gurrl on him who didn't understand the nature of the beast."

"You were right there," growled Raynes.

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"Well, so I thought I was. And when your bit girleen come and said to me, 'Let me ride Starlight,' I says 'No, I value your precious life too much.'"

"Quite right, too, quite right, too," said Joshua.

"Then you see she was a bit put out, and no wonder with her gift for riding. And she came slipping into the stable and never saw me having my cat's sleep in the loose box, and she fetched down the saddle that had just come from Cork city for our little bit of a pushkeen, and if you'll believe me, she stuck ten pins into it; yes, ten—every one I reckoned. I kept both my eyes wide open and she went away humming to herself and as pleased as Punch. Then I took nine of the pins out, for what was the good of injuring the beautiful creature more than was necessary for my purpose, and I told her she might have a ride on Starlight if pushkeen would lend her her new saddle. You may be quite certain she was not behindhand in that, was pushkeen—she's the best-natured little lambkin that auld Ireland has ever seen. So I mounted Miss Tilly on Starlight and rode Brian the Brave meself, and there was only one pin in the saddle, but I contrived it proper to pierce the hide of the creature. Oh, but she rode like a bird, like a bird, and I was ashamed of meself for misdoubting her. And then we talked of all the famous Rayneses of England, who took every[Pg 255] prize worth mentioning in your queer sort of country, and she said she was hurt at me for doubting her, and of course when I knew she was one of *those* Rayneses I was altogether up a tree; yes, to be sure, that I was. Well, what do ye think? all of a sudden she lets out a screech,—and a motor car, the De'il's own contrivance, comes splashin' and roarin' round the corner, and Starlight stood bolt upright on his hind-legs and I helped missie to a soft fall by the roadside. Then I made her tell The Desmond——"

"*Mr.* Desmond, if you please," said Raynes.

"I made her tell *The* Desmond the story, and he said she was to go and go at once, and she did go, and Flannigan, our good Protestant curate, saw her off, and that's all I can tell you about her. She's not altogether a very nice child, even though she is a Raynes of England, but I can't make out for the life of me what you are wantin' at Desmondstown. You may as well tell me, for I may be able to help you."

"I'm most bitter ashamed of Tilly," said Raynes, when the other man had ceased speaking. "She has told a shocking lot of black lies, and her wanting to injure and perhaps kill the little shopkeeper is perhaps the worst of all."

"The little shopkeeper—my word! What next!"

"I'm coming to that in a minute or two," said[Pg 256] Raynes. "She was a bad little piece and I've punished her according, and I'll punish her still more for the lies she told about us and horses. Why, man, I'm a coal-merchant, that's what I am. I am making my pile and a goodly one it will be if the Lord spares me. But we don't any of us know any more about horses than you know how to act the cat. We are nothing but coal-merchants, that's what we are."

"Well, there is nothing wrong in that," said Malachi. "It seems a pity she descended to lies. But, now whatever is your business with us, Mr. Raynes?"

"I've come for the express purpose of exposing that young girl you make such a fuss about. She was nothing at all but a little shopkeeper at Arles and you set her up to be a fine lady."

"She wasn't no shopkeeper at Arles," said Malachi. "I don't know what you are talking about."

"Well, but I do, and I've come over all this long way for the express purpose of having it cleared up. I've punished my Tilly and I'll punish her more. There came a time in my life when I thought to make a fine lady of my Matilda and I sent her to Arles to the school of a woman who called herself a princess, but Tilly will never be a lady. She'll keep in her father's station and have to be content. Now, I've listened in patience to your story and I'm[Pg 257] very angry indeed with my girl, but there's no doubt whatever that right is right, whether it is on the left side or the right, and that child you think such a power of spends her time at Arles selling hats and dresses. She's the little shopkeeper, that's what she is. She has sold hats and dresses to my girl and that's how my girl knows."

"We're nearly at home by now," said Malachi. "Phinias Maloney will have his bit of a cart waiting for us. I'll look into this matter for ye, Mr.—Mr. Raynes. You keep it dark until I give the word."

"You're certain sure you won't act the cat on me?" said Raynes.

"No, no; I should have to be a very wide-awake cat to act that little game on you. I'm going to ask Phinias Maloney to put you up for the present and I'll be round when the moment comes that you wish to tell my father."

"I don't know that I want to put up for the night at the house of the man you call Phinias Maloney."

"You couldn't do better, his house is clean of the clean, and Annie his wife will give you her bedroom and sleep along of the children, and himself will lay on the settee near the fire. Now then, here we are. I expect ye are a bit hungry. There ain't one in the[Pg 258] countryside for frying eggs and bacon to compare with our Annie. Hullo, Phinias, here ye are!"

The funny little springless cart was brought up. Malachi had a short and very earnest conversation with Phinias, who gave one very solemn twitter of his eyelid but made no further comment of any sort whatsoever. Presently the three men got under way and Raynes, who really felt himself very tired, not to say exhausted and ravenously hungry, began to turn his attention with keen desire to Annie's eggs and bacon.

Malachi parted company with Raynes at the broken-down gate of Desmondstown. He assured Raynes that he would have a word with him that evening, and left him in the complete care of Phinias, who talked the entire way to the cottage of the power of the celebrated shillelagh.

"Be all that's howly," he said, "it would smash a man's brains out whilst he was a-thinkin'. Every man in these parts kapes wan; they're better than any guns I've heerd tell on."

Raynes felt decidedly uncomfortable. He ventured to ask what shape a shillelagh was, but Phinias's reply was,

"They're meant for killing, it don't matter the shape! To be sure now, Annie, mavourneen, here's a gent from England, own father to that dear little[Pg 259] Miss Tilly. He's mad with the hunger. You get him as many new-laid eggs and rashers of bacon and bread and butter and fresh milk and cream and tea as you think he can swaller. Don't overdo the man, but do him well, for the sake of *dear* little Miss Tilly."

Annie felt very much inclined to say that she was never dear little Miss Tilly to her, but there was a look in her husband's face which caused her to "kape herself to herself."

Accordingly the childer were swept out of the room. Raynes from England was given the only decent bedroom in the house and presently Annie appeared with a great tray, which contained half a dozen fried eggs, as many rashers of home-cured bacon, bread and butter, and a great jug of milk, besides rich cream and tea.

"That'll do," said Raynes, who felt almost sinking from sheer exhaustion.

Annie went away and communed with her husband. Raynes ate until he could eat no more, and then thought he couldn't do better than explore the premises a little. But he was met at the doorway by no less a person than Phinias himself. Phinias was twiddling his shillelagh in the air, and it certainly looked a weapon that could not be trifled with; that is, if it was turned *against* you.

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"I'd like to try it," said Raynes, somewhat timidly.

"You try it—*you!* You don't know the swing of the thing; you 'as to be out in the air in the first place, and the next you 'as to swing it through the air with a sort of a swish, and then down it comes—crack!"

"Oh, well, I don't mind about it," said Raynes. "I'm a harmless man, I don't want to hurt anybody. I'm just going out for a bit of a stroll."

"Ho, you ain't," said Phinias. "You'll stay just where you are until you have spoken your mane and dirty words agin our little Miss Pushkeen. The jintlemens will come to see you all in good time, and as soon as ever they have gone, I'll have the greatest pleasure in life in driving ye back to the railway station where ye can take ship for England, and you and your low-down girl Tilly can meet again."

"I tell you, I tell you—" said Raynes, almost stupid with rage, "that the little miss you make such a fuss about is only——"

"Come out into the yard and tell me about her there," said Phinias.

"No, I won't, not while you hold that thing in your hand."

"I'm not going out without it, so don't you think[Pg 261] it. And I'm standing just here to pervent ye takin' a flyin' lep unbeknownst. Oh, be the powers! We are all right now, I'm thinkin'. Here's master Malachi and 'himself' coming across the fields. They'll be here in no time."

"Is he the one they call by the ridiculous name of '*The*'?" asked Raynes.

"'Tain't ridiculous. Whist, now, hide yer ignorance if ye can. They have shillelaghs as well as we. You sphake up to him."

"I'm not afraid," said Joshua.

"To be sure you aren't. How could the father of Tilly mavourneen be afraid?"

"That's what I'm thinkin'," said Raynes.

"Ah, thin, jintlemen, here ye be. Welcome to my hovel, The Desmond, asthore. Welcome, Master Malachi. The gent is gettin' a bit restive. He's anxious to see ye, to relieve a burden on his mind."

"I am, and I don't like those sticks you hold," said Raynes.

The man, who for the time being had adopted the name of The Desmond, was in reality Fergus, the heir to that ancient title. He immediately laid his stick on the table. Phinias went out into the yard whistling. Malachi shook hands with Raynes, as though he was his oldest and dearest friend, whom he had not met for at least twenty years.

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"I hope ye are feelin' comfortable, sir," he said.

"Very much so," replied Raynes, "if I might get a breath of the air and not be frightened to death by that queer man. I want to walk over to Desmondstown to see Mr. Desmond."

"I brought him to you," said Malachi. "Here's The Desmond. Be careful you don't anger him, or he may raise the stick."

Certainly Raynes never felt in a poorer case. Fergus, who already was well acquainted with the story of his beloved little Margot, allowed Raynes to relieve his feelings, looking at him with his steady dark eyes and his calm, unemotional face. Malachi was as usual all twinkles and smiles.

Raynes told his story very badly and, when he came to an end, Fergus rose to his feet, and said in his refined, gentlemanly voice,

"Well, now, this is no news to me. It is the French stepgrandmother's doing and must be put a stop to. I'll see that it is put a stop to and I'm greatly obliged to you for tellin' me the whole story from first to last, so graphically as you have done, Mr.—Mr. Raynes."

"I'm obliged to you, *Mr. Desmond*," said Raynes.

"That's right, call me anything you like. I'm not particular."

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"The car is at the door. We had best be starting, if ye want to catch yez train," said Phinias.

"Oh, yes, yes," cried the coal-merchant, who was only too terribly anxious to get out of the land of the shillelagh.

Phinias and he were soon driving rapidly in the uncomfortable cart to the railway station. He never felt so pleased in his life as when he got into the train. He was heard to remark to one or two farmers on his return journey that "The Desmond, ridiculous name, looked a very young man." The farmers stared but made no comment.

Thus did Malachi and Fergus save their father from a shock, which would have undoubtedly half killed him, for the Irish pride is like no other pride. It sinks into the heart, it eats the very vitals and has been known many and many a time to destroy life.

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CHAPTER XVII. IF IT MUST BE IT MUST.

When one is young and when one is happy time goes fast; nay, more, time goes like lightning. There is the beautiful joy of existence, there is the exquisite feeling of love. There is the happiness in which each hour is occupied, fully, entirely, completely, for the use of others. Such was the case with little Margot St. Juste. She played with the sunshiny passing hours, she sat on The Desmond's knee and brought back such superb and astounding accounts of her rides on Starlight that something stirred in the old man's breast and he felt that he himself must, forsooth, go a-riding with this fascinating little colleen.

Accordingly the *King of the Desmonds* was brought out and Malachi rode at one side of little Margot and The Desmond himself at the other. The old horse knew quite well who was on his back and in some remarkable measure got back some of his lost youth, and noble were the exercises which the three riders took over hills and dales, across country, [Pg 265] over different stiles and various impediments, and each day The Desmond felt younger and laughed and talked more cheerily.

The pushkeen had not only brought him back joy, but she had brought him back his lost youth. Ah, but those were happy days and neither child nor old man thought of the inevitable return to Arles which was coming nearer, like a black cloud, day by day.

When Raynes returned to his large and vulgar house on Clapham Common, he spoke to his daughter in a way which she was never likely to forget. He was, in short, furiously angry. He told her she was a bad, bad girl and that the High School at Clapham was far too good for her. Tilly had always known that the said High School was good, in fact, a great deal too good, but she wanted, if possible, to punish Margot. Although it was now finally settled that she was not to return to the school of la Princesse de Fleury, she could, nevertheless, work mischief, as far as Margot was concerned. She knew the exact date on which the little shopkeeper would return to Arles, when she would be petted by her doting and ignorant grandfather and when morning after morning she would enter the great *établissement* and sell chapeaux and robes innumerable to the *élite* of Arles, the *élite* of England, the *élite* of America. Oh, yes, she had a friend who would help [Pg 266] her. She would write to this friend. The friend's name was Louise Grogan.

Louise Grogan was a considerable character on her own account, was liked at the school of la Princesse, and was always very friendly with Tilly. Tilly wrote to her now as follows:

"Oh, Louise," she began, "I am not coming back any more to your beautiful school. I regret this for many reasons, but my French by the ignorant people here is considered

perfect and I am in consequence to be taught the tongue of England in all its branches. Think not that I will forget you, Louise, and sometime, perhaps, your good *père* will allow you to come to visit me in my father's grand house. It is rich and very grand and nobly furnished. Your *père* Grogan can make the *filet de sole*, the *sauce Hollandaise*, the *entrée bouche à la reine*, but my father—ah, wait until you behold him, sweet Louise! Now then, to business. You know that little Comtesse who sells chapeaux of all sorts and descriptions and robes of all sorts and makes, at the *établissement* of Madame Marcelle. We call her here the little shopkeeper and she likes it not. I went to stay with her at Desmondstown, a ramshackle old place, where they played a very cruel trick on me, and when I told them that *la petite* Comtesse was only a little shopkeeper, they would [Pg 267] not believe me. Now, I want you to help me, and if you do, and do the thing well, I will invite you to my gorgeous home in Angleterre next summer or perhaps even at Easter. We live close to the greatest city in the world, Londres, so big, so mighty, so powerful. It is not as graceful as Paris, but it will ravish your eyes and I will take you there day by day and you will have a glorious time. But what I want you to do now is this. The grandpère of the little Comtesse, M. le Comte St. Juste, does not know at all that his granddaughter helps at a shop. He is a very old and feeble man and he ought to be enlightened. Now, I put this into your hands, my best beloved Louise, to tell him the truth. You must call at the Château St. Juste and ask to see him. Go, I beseech of you, when the weather is cold and the bees do not hum so much and do not trouble themselves to sting. If you convey the news, thoroughly and perfectly, to the ears of the old, old man, I have in my possession forty francs, no less, which I will send you, and afterwards you shall come to see me for long weeks at Clapham Common, which is thought the *most* aristocratic part of all London. Now listen to me, Louise, and as you listen, Louise Grogan, obey! I will promise to you a glorious time and although the food is English, not French, it is of the best and the daintiest."

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This letter was addressed to Mlle. Louise Grogan at her father's large restaurant and Tilda received an answer in due course. Louise could be sure of nothing, but she would do her best. As it happened, she owed forty francs to Madame Marcelle and she knew that her father, whose restaurant was so famous, would be furious if he knew that she had gone into debt. She did not really care for Matilda Raynes, nor was she very keen to go to Clapham Common, nor to see the cold wonders of London. She preferred *la belle* France—with its lovely Arles and its gay Paris. She did not care for pictures nor monuments nor ancient cathedrals. She liked dress better than anything else in the world. If she paid off her forty francs she might run up a further little bill at the *établissement* of Madame Marcelle.

Then it occurred to her as she replied to her friend, or rather her so-called friend, that she might raise the price for this rather nasty little job. Accordingly, she said that she would do what Matilda Raynes desired for sixty francs but not a penny under. Tilly, wild with delight, felt certain that she could secure this really small sum of money, and while Margot rode with all the happiness of her joyous little heart on Starlight and The Desmond rode by her side on the *King of the Desmonds* and [Pg 269] Malachi rode a horse which he called *The Pet Lamb* on the other side, these miserable things were being arranged for the future unhappiness of the little Comtesse.

The day and the hour arrived. There came an afternoon when, true to his word, Uncle Jacko, beloved Uncle Jacko, appeared on the scene. Margot clasped her arms round his neck, kissed him several times and said, "Has it indeed come?"

Uncle Jacko replied with that saint-like look on his beautiful face, "It is the will of the Almighty."

Fergus suddenly appeared and said to Margot, "Keep silence for a time, my child; go and nestle into the arms of your grandfather."

Little Margot went very softly and sadly away. Uncle Jacko and Uncle Fergus went out into the yard. They found a lonely spot and began to talk very earnestly together.

"Yes, I've known all about it from the first," said Fergus Desmond. "It was not our pushkeen's fault. The Comte St. Juste married beneath him and behold the result, but it must come to an end. When you start to-morrow morning for Arles with little Margot, I will go with you, Jack Mansfield, for I have a word to say to Madame la Comtesse. It is she who is doing the mischief. She is using our[Pg 270] little one, our dear little one, for her own worldly purposes."

"I have known it also all along," said Uncle Jacko, "but if we can keep the fact from the two old grandfathers, surely no harm can be done."

"I don't wish it," said Fergus. "I, too, have my pride. Some day, I hope a far distant day, she will be the niece of *The* Desmond. Understand, I choose not to have a shopkeeper as a niece."

"Ah, but that matters so very, very little," said Uncle Jacko.

Fergus gave him a queer smile of non-comprehension.

"I have made up my mind and I go with you," he said after a long pause, and thus it was arranged.

Early the next morning the pushkeen appeared in her grandfather's room, where he was seated in his high grandfather's chair by a huge fire of turf.

"See, see, grand-dad!" said Margot. "See, behold, listen!" She looked wildly excited and wildly pleased. She was keeping back the sorrow that was breaking her very heart.

"See, my own, own, *own* grandfather," she said, seizing his fingers. "First, finger one; next, finger two; third, finger three—I go away for three of these fingers. I come back at the end of that time to my own darlingest grand-dad. I go at once, at once![Pg 271] Oh, grand-dad, kiss me, love me, love me! Oh, grand-dad, I love you too much to cry. Kiss me, my best of all grand-dads, kiss me at once."

The poor astonished Desmond took the child of his heart into his strong arms. He pressed her close to his heart, he solemnly counted out the months.

"You will come back," he said.

"I will come back, my own, own grand-dad."

"Three months," he said. "You came to me on the 6th of September, you will return on the 6th of March. Ah, but surely it is less than nothing. I do not grieve, The Desmond never grieves. It would be contrary to his high dignity."

Then he kissed Margot, although his lips trembled and she ran out into the great hall, so bare, so empty, so desolate, where all the family, including Malachi and Madam, were assembled.

"Don't make a fuss," said the pushkeen. "If you do, perhaps a tear might force itself out and I'm like The Desmond, I *don't* cry. Now then, Malachi, go straight in and talk to grand-dad. Make him laugh about the horses and keep Starlight quite safe for me and—and darling grandmother, Madam, do your lovely crochet in the corner where you always sit and talk about pushkeen and say that I'm so happy and say that I'm coming back again in a[Pg 272] twink. Now don't kiss me and sob over me, anyone, for I belong to The Desmond and he *never* cries."

All the party assembled in the hall were a little astonished at the pushkeen's manner, but they let her go without a word, and Malachi went into the special room provided for The Desmond.

The old man was cowering over the great turf fire and shivering not a little. His face was very white. He seemed to show his years. Madam did not dare to speak to him, but crept to her accustomed corner. Malachi came close and spoke in a determined voice.

"Sir, I've been thinking it out."

"I'm in no mood for your thinking," said The Desmond.

"But, listen, father, it is very important," said Malachi. "It's about her little self, the pushkeen that's gone."

"Don't talk of her or I'll let out on ye," said The Desmond. "I keep my shillelagh within reach. I'm old, but I can let the shillelagh fly."

"Ye wouldn't let it fly on your son," replied the young man. "I'm thinking that you and me will be very busy the next three months getting ready for her little self."

"Getting ready, how and what do ye mean?"

"I thought we might begin to rear a stud of horses for her and sell 'em and put away the money[Pg 273] so as to have a bit of a pile ready for her worthy of her name, and of your name, and when the pile is big enough, she can take your name Desmond, not the whole of it of course because that goes to Fergus, but she can be the little pushkeen Desmond. Only we must set to work at once, you and me, father, a secret all to ourselves."

The old man raised his very bright blue eyes.

"Malachi," he said. "I never heard ye speak a word of sense before, but there's sense in what ye are talking about now. We must prepare for the little one's future, and ye are wonderful with the young beasts, Malachi. We'll go out to the stables at once and talk it over."

"Yes, father, to be sure," said Malachi.

Meanwhile the other old grandfather, *mon* grandpère, was waiting in raptures for the return of *la petite* Comtesse. He spoke about her every moment to *la* Comtesse, *la belle*

grand'mère. He was feeling very feeble and weak but the thought of his Henri's child returning to him brought him peace and strength. Meanwhile, during the journey, Fergus acquainted Uncle Jacko with what he meant to do. The shop must be put a stop to. They could provide for the little one themselves. She must not earn money in the shop. Little Margot pretended not to listen, but in reality she listened very hard.

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As they approached the town of Arles, they found that they were in an empty compartment. All the other passengers had got out at different stations. Then little Margot turned and spoke. She went straight up to Uncle Fergus and put her hand on his knee.

"That time when you thought I was asleep, I was not asleep. I had my eyes shut, but my ears were open and I heard."

"Well, what did you hear, pushkeen?" said Fergus, speaking as calmly as he could.

"I heard you say to Uncle Jacko that I was not to help *ma belle* grand'mère any more in the *établissement*. But how do you think she will get on without me? Has she not to take care of *mon bon* grandpère and is she not providing a *dot* for me? And *mon* grandpère does not know anything, and he will not know. Listen! I mean to help *ma belle* grand'mère. She shall not work for nothing at all—no, she shall not. Uncle Fergus, The Desmond must never, never know and *mon bon* grandpère of Arles must never know. But why should I not help a little?"

"You are a foolish colleen," replied Fergus, patting the little hand which rested on his knee.

That was all Margot could get him to say and she went back to her seat at the other side of the carriage[Pg 275] feeling terribly disconsolate. Why should she not help people? She liked helping people. It was wrong to oppose her when she was doing right. She felt certain, sure, that it was wrong. Then she gave a quick side glance at Fergus's face and noticed the expression on it—the determination, the quiet resolution to have his own way in spite of *la petite* Comtesse, or the little pushkeen as she was called in Ireland.

At last they arrived. The motor-car met them. They drove to the Château St. Juste. Ah, but was not M. le Comte glad to see his little Margot! His black eyes shone, his cheeks grew pink with emotion. Time seemed not to have stirred since he saw her last. He was lying in his beautiful cool *salon* with his pillows of down and his thick soft, crimson rug of plush.

The good clergyman sat down and began to talk to him. He took Margot on his knee and pressed her close to him. During these precious few minutes he felt that he could indulge in the love and the joy of his heart. But Fergus was determined to have his way.

Fergus asked Madame to walk with him in the garden, which was sunny and bright, but which only held some apples, some pears, and such like fruits on the old trees. The peaches had vanished, the[Pg 276] bees had gone into their winter quarters. It was never cold at Arles, but the people there thought it cold. Anyhow the bees felt that they might rest from their labours.

Madame la Comtesse thought Fergus Desmond very handsome. She adored *mon* Alphonse, but she enjoyed talking to any handsome man.

"Thou hast brought *la petite* back with you, Monsieur," she said.

"I have," he replied. "It is her French grandfather's turn to have her for three months. These partings are sore blows. Madame, I would speak with you."

"Ah, but I did think so," replied Madame. "Is not life assuredly of the most miserable unless we speak out our innermost thoughts? Thou hast a weight on thy mind, Monsieur le Desmond."

"I have; it is a bad subject, it must be got through. I have learnt from the lips of John Mansfield, Madame, and also from the lips of a very nasty girl who goes to the school of a certain princess, that our little Margot assists you in a shop. It is kept by a certain Madame Marcelle. But it is in reality your shop. Her grandfather does not know, neither her French grandfather nor her Irish grandfather. Such news would kill either of them. Madame, it must cease. The child goes to her grandfather, she [Pg 277] does not go to you. You must assure me now and here on your word as an honourable woman that you will never allow the little Margot to enter the shop of Madame Marcelle, which is in reality your shop, any more."

"But listen! Understand, monsieur. May not *la petite* enter the apartment where the chapeaux are sold, may not *la pauvre chérie* buy a chapeau for herself? Ah, but *non, non*, you can not say against it, monsieur. *La chère petite* must be dressed according to the wishes of her grandfather and me, and, behold! I am making her *dot* and it will be solid—oh a pile, a pile; francs by the thousand, by the tens of thousands, by the hundreds of thousands! Your little niece will be *très riche*, monsieur, but she must be dressed, ah, *oui*, in the proper way, monsieur. She wears not now the correct garments for *la petite* Comtesse St. Juste, but I was ready for that, and I have a fresh set of little garments all waiting for her in her *chambre de nuit*. You will agree with me, monsieur, *n'est-ce pas?*"

"I do not mind what clothes you buy for the child," said Fergus, "if you promise that she does not sell things herself in the shop."

"Ah, but you are cruel, and she likes it. One little hour per day, monsieur. She has the manners, ah, of the *grande noblesse*, and behold, the people [Pg 278] flock to her and she is making her own little *dot*, by her own clever speeches, and her own wonderful taste. Permit it, monsieur, I entreat!"

"I refuse to permit it," said Fergus. "It must not be. I would rather she had no *dot* and was a lady."

Tears filled the eyes of little Madame.

"Ah, but indeed, she is a lady the most perfect," was her remark. "Think, monsieur, consider what I have suffered. I married *mon* Alphonse because of the love, oh, so mighty, and because I did so pity him. He was so beautiful, so desolate, so poor. He was nearly on the brink of starving, monsieur. Then I come along and I make the wicked lie. He thinks that I have given up the *établissement*, I make out to him that it is so, but I could not give it up, monsieur, and give him the comforts that he needs, the frail, frail old man. Then there came as a ray of sunshine to his heart *la petite* Comtesse, the only

child of his only son, and behold he revived! And I took *la petite* Comtesse into my *établissement* and behold! She had the taste superb. The chapeaux they went like the wind, the fans like the whirlwinds, the robes they vanished as you looked, and all because of *la petite* Margot and her immaculate taste. She is well taught, monsieur, also. She has masters for French and dancing and the piano and [Pg 279] singing. Only a little of the singing, she is too young at present. She spends but two hours a day in the *établissement*, and behold it flourishes as it never did before, and neither of the grandpères know. Where is the harm, Monsieur Desmond? Why conceal a talent so great? Madame Marcelle cannot attempt to dispose of my goods as *la petite* Comtesse does. You see the thing is honourable, *n'est-ce pas*, Monsieur Desmond?"

"I do not. I forbid it," said Fergus. "We care not for fine clothes in Ireland and a little money goes a long way. What we want is to keep up our great, great nobility. You understand, Madame, have I your word that it shall cease?"

"Ah, *oui, oui*, if it must be, it must," said Madame. She spoke in a gay, light sort of voice and picked a luscious pear, which she presented to Monsieur Desmond as a token of her unfailing esteem.

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CHAPTER XVIII. THE GREEN HAT.

There was a strange sort of feeling in the breast of little Margot as she bade Uncle Fergus good-bye. When he took her in his arms he said,

"It's all settled, pushkeen, and you are to do as I wish."

Then Uncle Jacko, with his gentle, angel sort of face, kissed the child very tenderly and said,

"You'll do your duty at any cost, my little colleen."

After that the two men went away and Margot was left with grandpère and *la belle* grand'mère. She felt a little bewildered. She could not help repeating over and over to herself, "I am sorry to come back. I would rather be with The Desmond than anyone else in the wide, wide world," but she was learning self-control and was growing a tiny bit older than her years. She had, however, in her grave, steadfast sort of fashion quite made up her mind.

Grandpère should know nothing about *la belle* grand'mère being helped. She, Margot, *would* help [Pg 281] her. She kept these thoughts, however, quite to herself and *la belle* grand'mère talked rapidly of the handsome appearance of the Irish Desmond and how most truly he fascinated the heart.

Little Margot took no notice of this. She was absorbed in comforting grandpère. He certainly looked very old indeed in comparison with The Desmond. His black eyes had sunk further into his head, but he was rejoiced beyond words to have the child of his only son with him, and he kept patting her hand and saying,

"*Très bien, la petite*, thou blessed one, thou angel, thou little cabbage."

Margot did not feel in the least like an angel, but nevertheless she was determined to do her very utmost for grandpère and on his account for *la belle* grand'mère.

Madame la Comtesse, true to her word, had provided the most ravishing little costumes for *la petite* to wear, and *la petite* felt that the time had come when she might without any difficulty put on the pretty garments, which would be disliked and disapproved of at dear old Desmondstown. Her soft black hair, rippling, curling, flowing, fell far below her waist. Her small feet were encased in shoes of the most perfect and softest kind. This kind was of a delicate shade of blue. Her open-work stockings [Pg 282] were to match her shoes. Then there was a little pale blue embroidered short frock, very simple, but oh, according to Madame and grandpère, *superb*.

As a matter of fact, *la belle* grand'mère had not trusted Madame Marcelle, but had sent to Paris for the little costume. The child danced about the room in delight, the old man's eyes glistened, Madame felt tears somewhere near her own eyes, but Margot of the Desmonds did not attempt to cry. It was not according to her ideas, *comme il faut*—oh, by no means at all, *comme il faut*.

At last grandpère got tired and went to bed, then Margot went up to *la belle* grand'mère, "I'm going to do it," she said. "I'm going to help you."

"Thou blessed *enfant!*" exclaimed Madame. "Ah, *mon Dieu*, but thou art of the very best; distinguished is no word. Repose thyself, *mon enfant*. Thy dainty room is ready for thee, *petite*. To-morrow we will talk."

"No," said Margot, "we will talk to-night. Now, this instant! We will settle, we will arrange, we will not put off. For me, I am under no promise. Thou dost want me in the *établissement*, I will go there for two hours each day. Thou and I between us will look after the old, very old grandpère. Thou art *trop fatiguée* to do it all by thyself."

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"Ah, but thou art a true poem, a romance!" exclaimed the delighted Madame. "And wilt thou really serve in the *établissement*, *petite?*"

"I will on one condition," replied Margot. "Neither of my grandfathers must ever know. I told Uncle Fergus what I thought right and fair. He did not agree and I am sorry, for I love him. But now for three months I will help thee, *ma belle* grand'mère."

"Ah, but thou art of the blessed," said the Comtesse. "Do not the angels sing of thee? Have they not this very night sung a new song to their harps on account of thee, *ma petite?*"

"I care not in the least what the angels do," said Margot, "but I want to help thee and grandpère. I will do it, too. To-morrow I will begin. Two hours daily, except Sunday, when I kneel in my room and pray to the good God; the rest of the time I learn of the French—yes—of the music—yes—of the dancing—yes! Now I will repose as thou dost suggest, *ma belle* grand'mère, for I am weary, not having slept, I may say, anything at all last night."

"Ah, thou blessed one, I will take thee to thy room," said Madame.

Margot undressed quickly and got into bed, a smile on her face. She had a strange feeling that [Pg 284] she was doing right, that this was an occasion when it was her bounden duty to resist dear Uncle Fergus and help la Comtesse. She little guessed, however, that there was a certain girl, well known in the school of la Princesse de Fleury, namely, Louise Grogan, the daughter of Grogan the owner of the big restaurant in the Boulevard des Italiens—she little knew that this young person was watching her and intended for her own purposes to spoil what she called the fun of the little shopkeeper.

Accordingly the next day, when Margot was busy over her duties as saleswoman, Louise Grogan entered the shop. She came straight up to Margot and asked her in a harsh, unpleasant sort of voice for a chapeau, and she was to be *vite*.

Margot smiled in her gentle, pleasant way, said she was busy for the time being, but if Mademoiselle Grogan would wait for a few minutes she would take her to the *appartement* where the chapeaux were sold.

Louise frowned a little, felt decidedly cross, but after a time decided to wait. She was catching the little shopkeeper in the act. Nothing could be more agreeable.

Perhaps never before had little Margot St. Juste looked more beautiful than she did on this occasion. There was the spirit of self-denial in her charming [Pg 285] little face. She was doing what she was doing for others and not for herself. Her appearance, too, was remarkably striking. Madame had dressed the little girl on this occasion in a soft crimson robe, much embroidered, with stockings and dainty shoes to match.

The beautiful child attracted the attention of everyone.

"Behold la Comtesse! Behold la Comtesse!" echoed from end to end of the great *établissement*.

"Now, thou, *chérie*, shalt be dressed according to thy needs," said a happy mother to a blushing daughter.

"And thou, Carlise, shalt wear what suits thee at long last," said an ungainly aunt to an equally ungainly niece. "Ah, but she has the taste, the little Comtesse!"

On all sides there were sounds of rejoicing and pleasure at seeing the pretty child back again. Margot heard the words, but she had all the dignity of her race. She told Madame Coquenne and Madame Lise that she would be with them soon, as soon as possible, and then she went off to attend to Louise Grogan.

"I want a chapeau," said Louise. "You put on wonderful airs, Margot, seeing you are only a shopkeeper."

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Margot looked at Louise out of her beautiful, deep, loving eyes.

"Do you want to say unkind things to me, Louise?" she remarked. "*Ma belle grand'mère* wishes me to help her a little and I am willing to do it, for she is overworked, but *mon bon grandpère* he knows nothing, he thinks me a fine lady, la Comtesse St. Juste. I consider that a fine lady is the one who does best her duty."

"Are you coming back to our school?" interrupted Louise.

"No, I'm too busy for the school."

"Ah, I thought as much. Besides, we do not take shopkeepers at our school."

"But thy *bon père* is a restaurant keeper. I see not the difference."

Louise gave an angry clench of her little fists.

"Dost thou not know, *petite fille*, that I myself keep no restaurant personally? *Mon père*, he works for me; the difference is wide, immense."

"*Mon père est mort*," answered Margot in a sad voice. "Thou didst ask for a chapeau. Wilt thou select?"

Louise chose a very tall, beehive-shaped head-dress of vivid green, trimmed with quantities of grass of the same shade.

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"It will not suit thee, Louise," said Margot, in her gentle, fascinating voice.

"Well, what wouldst thou suggest?" asked Louise, who was too well aware of the excellence of Margot's taste to dare to despise it.

"I would dress thee so," said Margot, and she produced a soft, black hat, very soft, very light, which could be turned up at the side and into which Margot arranged a little piece of ribbon, bright, soft, crimson, which made an arresting note in the blackness of the hat.

"Behold, here is thy chapeau!" said Margot.

Louise pouted a little, looked longingly at the grass-green hat, but finally succumbed to the black hat with the crimson ribbon.

Margot brought her before a large mirror and made her see herself in both hats.

"Ah, bah, thou must not be seen in that!" she said, flinging the grass-green chapeau aside. "Now behold the other hat! The complexion it softens, the eyes they glow, the crimson note of colour softens the colour in thy lips and cheeks. It is *très beau* that chapeau; it suits thee, Louise. It is my wish that thou shouldst wear it."

"Ah, *c'est bien*," exclaimed Louise. "But the price, the price must be low."

"One hundred and fifty francs," said Margot, in [Pg 288] a calm, steady voice, "not a penny less, not a penny more. Behold the quality of the black, look for thyself at the shape, see how the ribbon entwines itself, just enough and no more, as I have placed it. One hundred and fifty francs—I have spoken."

"I cannot pay you now," said Louise. "You will let it lie against my little account."

"*Non, non*, that I never do," said Margot. "Those who buy from *la petite Comtesse* pay as they buy. Thou mayst, if thou dost please, Louise, buy a chapeau of Madame Marcelle;

but for me, I take my black hat to another customer. She is looking at it with eyes that devour."

Certainly Louise Grogan felt inclined to stamp her feet, to rage, to utter a wicked little swear; but Margot did not take the least notice. She sold the beautiful black hat to a striking-looking American girl, and the grass-green hat was purchased by Louise and put down to the account of the said young lady by Madame Marcelle.

Now, indeed, her anger was at its height. She hated little Margot because she could not in the least compete with her. The grave dignity of the child was beyond her power to emulate. She of the people could not imitate that other one of the aristocrats. She might call her the little shopkeeper as much as she liked, but she really was *la petite Comtesse* and [Pg 289] not only the assistants in the *établissement* adored her, but all the customers insisted on having *la petite Comtesse* to serve them.

Louise was now ripe for revenge. She hated the handsome child, who was so grave, so firm and dignified and full of that resolve which can only be called by its true name, the tone of the aristocrats.

Well, well, at least Louise should have her revenge. She wrote a long letter to Tilly Raynes, telling her that she had caught Marguerite in the act, and she was only waiting for her opportunity to communicate with M. le Comte St. Juste. She thought also that it might help her a little if Tilly would give her the address of the Irish grandpère, who was also so eaten up with pride.

Tilly wrote immediately, giving the full address of The Desmond of Desmondstown.

"I know no such name as The," thought Louise. "I will call him Monsieur Desmond. He shall get the letter as soon as possible. I will write the letter to-day; the day after to-morrow I will visit le Comte."

Accordingly she wrote in her broken English to Monsieur Desmond at Desmondstown in the County of Kerry, Ireland, but the letter fell into the hands of Fergus. He read it as best he could, smiled a [Pg 290] little at the invincible spirit of the pushkeen and then tore the letter into little fragments.

Meanwhile Louise took the opportunity to ask la Princesse de Fleury to allow her to go to see her father at the Boulevard des Italiens. La Princesse was always ready to oblige. She said the girl might have a half-holiday, but must be back by six o'clock.

Louise put on her hideous grass-green hat and set out in high spirits. The walk from the town of Arles to the Château St. Juste was a good mile in length. Louise said to herself how thoroughly she would enjoy bowing that pride of the dreadful old man to the dust. Even in the beautiful town of Arles it was not very warm now. Winter was setting in with rigor, so the people of the south of France thought, although the hedges were covered with roses and climbing geraniums, and everywhere the air was perfect with the delicious smell of violets.

Louise had made careful enquiries and knew that she would arrive at the château when Margot and *la belle grand'mère* were out. She was not accustomed to much walking, however, and her steps went slowly. What was to become of the little shopkeeper when she had fully explained her story? She thought that at the very least *la petite Comtesse* would be dismissed, disgraced, sent back to [Pg 291] those Irish people, who were so

wild and ugly and indifferent and even *they* would not receive her, for she had been told that their pride was of the greatest, and Monsieur Desmond must have got her letter or certainly would get it before Margot arrived.

Ah, well, truly had she earned her sixty francs and the grass-green hat was very pretty according to her own ideas. She arrived at the gates of the old *château*. They were opened to her by a tiny Frenchwoman, whom Madame la Comtesse had placed at the lodge.

She walked up the perfectly kept avenue and smelt more strongly than ever the perfume of the violets, the scent of the roses, and the scent also of the sweet pink geraniums which fell in clusters round the trees, helping to adorn the few that were leafless, but most of the trees were olives and they were now in their bloom. Certainly the home of Monsieur le Comte was very perfect.

She reached the front door and pressed the electric bell. A man in the livery of the St. Justes replied at once to her summons.

Louise made her request.

"Ah, *non, non, ce n'est pas possible*. Madame she is out and *la petite* Comtesse is also out," replied the footman.

"I want to see Monsieur le Comte," said Louise.[Pg 292] "I have a message to give him of great importance with regard to his granddaughter."

The man looked hard, very hard indeed at Louise. He longed to ask, "Is it a message of the serious?" but he restrained himself.

"I will enquire," he said. "*Restez tranquille*, Mademoiselle, I have before now eaten of your father's sweetmeats the most superb! Ah, but they melt in the mouth! Behold, a chair, Mademoiselle! I will take your message to the Comte, if it is really not one to do him any injury."

"No, no, he ought to know," said Louise. "It will save him trouble in the future. Go and, behold, if you succeed I will get my father to send you a box of his best chocolates!"

The man gazed again at the queer-looking girl and finally retired into the *salon* where M. le Comte was calmly resting.

M. le Comte was very happy—his beloved Madame was nearly always by his side, and now he had almost three months of *la petite* before him. The adored *la petite*! Could any aged man be happier than he? He did not mind his feeling of weakness, the rapid approach of extreme old age did not trouble him. He was happy in the gentle, soothing present. What else mattered, what else could matter?

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He was interrupted when Gustave came in with his message.

"I want you not, go!" he said. "See you not that I arrange myself for repose? Go, and leave me in peace! I see no one when my wife and granddaughter are away."

"Yes, but you will see me," said Louise, suddenly bursting into the room, her grass-green hat all awry, her features flushed, her small eyes full of a delighted vengeance.

"I have come about your *petite* Comtesse," said Louise. "See, behold, you will listen!"

"Leave us, Gustave," said le Comte, and Gustave closed the door and applied his ear with great skill to the key-hole.

"What have you come about?" said the Comte in a voice of high displeasure. "This is my hour for repose. I see no strangers, more particularly those like yourself."

The eyes of Louise flashed with anger.

"If I suit not your taste, old man," she said, "you have but your granddaughter to blame. She sold me my chapeau in the *établissement* of your good wife. She goes there each day. Ask her, she cannot deny!"

The Comte felt very queer and sick, a kind of giddiness came over him, that terrible faintness from [Pg 294] which at times he suffered was approaching, the world looked very dark.

Suddenly he pulled himself together. He found his eyes fixed on the hideous grass-green hat, never surely could his little Margot sell anything so frightful to so low-down a customer.

"Leave me, I feel faint," he said. "Send to me my man Gustave, and go! I command you to go at once!"

Louise looked wildly round her, but the grass-green hat kept on doing its work, it was quite impossible for M. le Comte to believe her story; it was out of his power even for an instant to suppose that the little hands he loved could have touched anything so impossible.

"You tell lies, my good girl," he said. "It may be possible that you will drop down dead like Sapphira, who followed the example of Ananias, her husband. Go quickly, before my anger begins to boil. Hasten before I attack you with a pistol! There are times when I lose self-control, and that chapeau—*mon Dieu!* That chapeau! Go at once, I beseech of you, before I do an injury, which may mean *la mort!*"

Louise was by now thoroughly frightened. The grand, disdainful manner of *la petite* Comtesse was [Pg 295] nothing to the terrifying manner of le Comte himself.

She did not even wait to speak to Gustave; a shower began to fall from the heavens, and her grass-green hat marked her face with grass-green tints the reverse of becoming as she hurried down the avenue. The woman at the lodge laughed as she saw her, but she was good-natured and did not want to see anyone in trouble.

"Madame la Comtesse and *la petite* Comtesse Margot are out," she said. "I knew well you would have your walk for nothing; but behold! you shall enter my humble dwelling. Le chapeau, why it is a figure of fun. Where did you buy it, Mam'selle?"

Louise was too cross to reply, but she was not too cross to accept the shelter of the little lodge which was offered to her. She was not there two or three minutes before who

should walk in but Madame.

Madame la Comtesse looked very charming. She stared fixedly at Louise and Louise sprang to her feet.

"I must speak to you," she said. "I must talk words all alone."

"I mind not," said la Comtesse. "You will leave us, Susette!"

"Then listen—you are a lying woman," said Louise, "and your granddaughter, she serves in the [Pg 296] *établissement* of Madame Marcelle. Behold for yourself, she sold me this chapeau!"

"Never, never!" cried Madame. "But we will prove it. Come with me now in my motor-car to the *établissement* of Madame Marcelle. She tells the truth in very deed."

Louise did not seem to mind, a pleased smile wreathed her face.

"You are the daughter of Grognan, the restaurant-keeper," remarked Madame.

"I am, I make no bones about it. I am proud of it, and of *mon père*."

"In that you are right," exclaimed Madame. "Ah, how quickly we move, and the rain falls in torrents. *Ma petite Comtesse, ma chère petite Comtesse* is now enjoying her lessons of the French. I do not recognize that chapeau as one belonging to the *établissement* of Madame Marcelle."

"It was your granddaughter sold it to me," said Louise.

"That is impossible," said Madame, calmly, "but we will soon find out. What were you doing in the lodge belonging to the *château*?"

"The woman gave me shelter," said Louise. "I had gone to acquaint M. le Comte with the fact that you kept a shop and *la petite Comtesse* was the little shopkeeper."

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"And you saw *mon Alphonse*?"

"Ah, *oui, oui*," cried Louise, beginning to enjoy herself.

Madame pulled the check-string and desired the chauffeur to fly—to put on all the speed possible. Soon they reached the *établissement*.

"Who sold this chapeau to Mademoiselle Grognan?" enquired la Comtesse.

"I did," said Madame Marcelle. "She has not paid for it yet."

"I admit no debts in the *établissement*," exclaimed Madame la Comtesse. "Madame Marcelle, why did you allow such an ugly thing into *le magasin*?"

"It came by mistake," replied the poor, confused Madame. "The mademoiselle liked it and I sold it to her. I only charged her forty francs, for I thought it so ugly."

"It is a screaming farce," said Madame la Comtesse. "Go back, Mademoiselle. I will write this evening to *votre père*, the restaurant-keeper, for the money."

"Oh, but it pours, it drenches," cried Louise.

"I care not, nay more, I am glad," said Madame.

"You went with intention to act cruelly to me and mine. Madame Marcelle, come back with me at [Pg 298] once to the château—at once, at once! Let the assistants serve here for the rest of the day."

Thus and in this fashion was Mademoiselle served for her evil conduct. Thus was she severely reprimanded by Grogan the restaurant-keeper, and thus did Madame Marcelle explain to the much troubled Comte who had really sold the chapeau to Mam'selle.

"It was the chapeau that saved me," said the old Comte. "I was sinking into one of my worst faints, which are to the life of the aged so dangerous, when I looked at the chapeau and knew it could not be. *Ma petite chérie* could not act as that wicked daughter of the people would try to make me believe."

"Ah, *non*, M. le Comte," exclaimed Madame Marcelle, "the dignity of *la petite* is of the marvellous. When she enters my *établissement*, simply to *buy*, thou dost understand, every one turns to look at the beautiful *enfant*. She chooses for herself and her taste is superb."

"Then that girl told a cruel lie," said the Comte.

"Ah, *certainement*, monsieur."

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CHAPTER XIX. LE CABINET DE BEAUTÉ.

But little Margot was not to get off quite so easily. She was to have her *trials* the same as other people. There was not the slightest doubt whatsoever that Margot had a nature far above the ordinary. It was strong, it was brave, it had a sort of noble simplicity about it. She was proud of her race, both on her father's and her mother's side, but she could not see the slightest harm in assisting *la belle* grand'mère with the *établissement*. She did see, however, a good deal of harm in annoying, nay more, in seriously injuring, the lives of two dear old men, both of them in their own way the dearest old men in the world. Of course The Desmond was the best of all—he was grand, noble, superb; but there was also something *très magnifique*, according to *la belle* grand'mère, in Monsieur le Comte St. Juste. He was so feeble, too, and so old; he must not be hurt for anything in the world.

Margot thought nothing whatsoever about her supposed *dot*, but she sympathised with *la belle* [Pg 300] grand'mère in keeping all knowledge of *le magasin* from M. le Comte. The little Madame idolised the sweet girl, and poured her troubles into those sympathetic ears.

"Behold, behold!" she cried. "There would not be *l'argent* for *mon* Alphonse if thou didst not do thy noble best; if I did not keep the *établissement* going. He wants his comforts, that aged and beloved one."

"Ah, *oui, je comprends*," said little Margot.

And she did comprehend, and kept her word.

After a few weeks had gone by, Madame la Comtesse gave orders to her servants not to admit anyone, old or young, man or woman, into the presence of M. le Comte. The servants assured her that they would obey her to the very letter. They loved her because she was so bright and gay and obliging. They did not in the least mind whether she kept a *magasin* or not. Did she not load them with gifts? Was there ever quite so good a place to serve in as the Château St. Juste?

Yes, they loved Madame, and they adored *la petite* Comtesse.

But it so happened that the old M. le Comte, lying against his pillows of down, thought a great deal about his granddaughter. Henri was indeed a boy to be proud of, but after all he was nothing to [Pg 301] *la petite*. He wasted *l'argent*; *la petite* seemed never to spend anything. Was justice being done to this charming little creature by the father of Henri? He troubled himself about this. He became anxious.

One day he spoke to Madame la Comtesse.

"Madame," he said, "thou hast given up thy *établissement*?"

"Ah, *oui, certainement*, Alphonse," was the quick answer of Madame.

"Tell me now from the bottom of thy heart, Madame, what provision we can make for *la petite* Comtesse."

Madame named a sum which certainly staggered the old man.

"Thou must be *très riche*," he said.

"Ah, *oui*, it is the will of God!" replied Madame. Then she added, stroking his silvery hair and laying her piquant face close to his. "Dost thou not remember, thou superb, angelic one, that on the day we received *la Comtesse*, a notary came and settled on her the sum I have mentioned?"

"Ah, *oui*," answered M. le Comte. "I remember and yet I forget. The aged, they always forget. It is the trial of old age not to remember."

"It is *un fait accompli*," said Madame. "Fret not thyself, *chère* Alphonse."

The old Comte smiled.

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"I like to think of our little one," he said, "always and ever surrounded by the luxuries of life. When she is older, much older, we will marry her to a man, young and beautiful and of great rank. She is worthy of the best and she shall have the best."

"*Mais oui, mais oui,*" answered Madame.

"But I have been thinking," pursued M. le Comte, "that her education is not progressing. We could not permit her to return to the school, where that ugly M'selle was taught to tell the black lies."

"*Non,*" said Madame. "*Certainement, non.*"

"But I want her to go to a school," said M. le Comte. "Why dost thou frown, my adored Ninon?"

"Because I am thinking," she replied. "There is but one school in Arles worthy of *la petite*, and that is held by la Princesse de Pleury; but alas, even that school is not what it used to be. There used to be there only *les demoiselles* the most refined, the highest in rank."

"Not the grass-green, ha! ha!" laughed the Comte.

"Thou art right, my adored one, not the grass-green. I, too, have thought of the education of *la petite*. It is of the utmost importance. Why not place her in the hands of a *gouvernante*? There[Pg 303] is one, M'selle de Close. She is connected with M'selle de Blanc. She is of high rank and of great intelligence, and between M'selle de Close and M'selle de Blanc, we can have *la petite* taught in this, thine own château, all the things that belong to the best society."

"Of what age are those M'selles?" asked the Comte.

"M'selle de Close is eighteen; M'selle le Blanc one year more. They are young, but they are finished—ah, to the most complete!"

"And what knowledge can they impart?" asked M. le Comte.

"They'll teach her all those things that a young M'selle should know. They will keep her mind, mark you, M. le Comte, as white as a white marguerite, and they will impart to her those graces of society which are essential to *le bon mari* by-and-bye. They can come here day about, at two of the clock, and spend until four with *la petite*."

"Send them to me one at a time," said the Comte, "and let me interview them alone."

Accordingly Madame la Comtesse went that very day to a unique and charming little flat in a unique and charming part of Arles. It was called "*Le Cabinet de Beauté*." The lady who entered the room on the arrival of Madame called herself[Pg 304] Félicité. She held up her hands, arched her brows and said:

"Ah, Madame, have you come to me indeed? Have you come at last, that I may perform on you my art? Behold how little it is, and how much. It finishes never, see, Madame? Behold, I will mark out to you your day! You must have the *chocolat*, you must rise never later than eight o'clock, and promenade on foot for *les douches*. This exercise preserves the form. Then, behold, the masseuse appears and makes miracles of the hands. Afterwards you rest as is necessary, and M'selle Blanc does the rest. Ah, but she is a veritable artist is M'selle Blanc. You want us; you have come. I am at your feet, beautiful Madame!"

"I want you not at all," said Madame la Comtesse. "The good God himself has given unto me the cheeks of roses and the eyes so bright and the figure so straight. But behold, listen! There is *ma petite*, the idol of her grandfather, the adored of her *belle* grand'mère. M. le Comte knows nothing of my *établissement*, and he must never know, never, never! There are things which all women of fashion learn, and I want you, M'selle Close, and that other gracious lady, M'selle Blanc, to come day about to the château in order to instruct *la petite*, but you must not touch on the make up, [Pg 305]*comprenez-vous?* It would be fatal. *L'enfant toujours*; that mind so white must be kept white; but you must teach her, M'selle Close, such things as the English and the French and the German and the *géographie* for two hours every other day, and on the other days, M'selle Blanc shall teach her. You must be at the château for two hours each day, but before anything is firmly established, you must go to the château and acquaint M. le Comte with the fact that you are a poor *gouvernante*, one of the high nobility. You must present yourself to him as M'selle de Close, and your friend must be M'selle de Blanc; and I will pay you well, ah well; that is, if you keep strictly to your post; keep firmly to the lessons which I have set you—the white heart to be kept white; the holy things to be instructed to *la petite*, *comprenez-vous?*"

"Ah, *oui*," said M'selle Close. "And you will pay well, Comtesse?"

"According to your merits will I pay. I care not how much, so long as it pleases *mon mari*. Get ready at once and I will drive you, M'selle Close, to the Château St. Juste."

M'selle certainly saw a good thing before her. She dressed according to the directions of Madame very simply and quietly. She removed the rouge from her cheeks and the artificial darkness from [Pg 306] beneath her eyes. She was no longer a pretty woman, but she was, according to Madame, one with *l'air distingué*.

Soon they reached the château. Little Margot had not yet returned home. She was at her dancing class and was perfectly happy.

Madame rushed gaily into the presence of *mon* Alphonse.

"I have found her and she is a treasure. Listen, harken, she belongs to the nobility. She is M'selle de Close. Her friend also is M'selle de Blanc. She is poor, but she is simple, aristocratic, learned. She will teach thy granddaughter for two hours every second day. On alternate days M'selle de Blanc will do likewise. I have brought her back with me for thee to see."

"Ah, but I am tired!" said the Comte. "I did not know that thou wouldst be *si vite*, *ma Comtesse*."

"Ah, but *vite* is the word," cried la Comtesse; "for youth it flies, months go by, years go by. Behold, whilst thou art looking round, taking a little nap—ah, no more, just a little nap, *la petite* will grow up. Wilt thou, then, see M'selle de Close?"

"Yes, thou art ever right, Comtesse," replied the old Comte. "Present me to M'selle. I will treat her with that courtesy which a lady should receive."

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Now M'selle Close, as she was really called knew well where her bread was buttered, and she was in consequence quite able to answer the enquiries made by that gracious and

most aristocratic old person, M. le Comte.

"I will try you for one month," he said. "You will be here at two to the minute to-morrow, and then, behold! it will be my pleasure to be present while you instruct my granddaughter."

But here M'selle drew up her head in a very haughty way.

"Alas, M. le Comte," she said. "I am poor and low in the world, but I have my little pride, my last rag of possession. I share that rag with my beloved friend, M'selle de Blanc. We could not be treated as though we meant to impart evil, we must be trusted or we can do nothing. We must decline this generous offer of yours, M. le Comte, unless we are treated as ladies of rank. *La petite Comtesse* will not suffer at our hands, but we must teach her each in our turn alone. Is it to be, M. le Comte? For there is the house of one who seeks our services, and we can go there if you do not permit."

"For one month I permit," said the Comte. "I did not mean to hurt your feelings, M'selle. I was only full of interest at the thought of listening to [Pg 308] the knowledge which you will pour into the ears of *la petite Comtesse*."

"Ah, well, M'sieur, I cannot change, I await your decision."

"You shall teach her alone," said M. le Comte. "Send your friend to see me to-morrow and come yourself as arranged, to begin those instructions which demoiselles of rank require."

"Ah, *oui*, M'sieur, *oui*, you indeed belong, as I do myself, to the *ancienne noblesse*."

The arrangement was quickly arrived at. The two ladies were interviewed by M'sieur le Comte, and both completely had their own way with him. Madame la Comtesse had a little talk with Margot, and on a certain Thursday the lessons so unique and perfect began.

Unique and perfect they were not, but they interested Margot, who listened with the colour rising to her cheeks and her velvety black-brown eyes fixed on the faces of her teachers. She still pursued her French in the town of Arles and talked it with M'selles de Close and de Blanc. She also read a little history, all in the French tongue, but occasionally her lovely eyes were fixed with a sort of dull amazement on the faces of these faded women, who no longer dressed to captivate their customers [Pg 309] at the *Cabinet de Beauté*, showed their true age which was anything but young.

When the first week was over and the ladies had departed, little Margot skipped into her grandfather's room, flung herself on her knees by his side, and told him about *les pauvres gouvernantes*.

"Dost thou like them, my little one?" asked M. le Comte.

"No, grandpère," was the reply.

"Why dost thou say that? Thy words arrest and alarm me."

"They are only wooden dolls," said *la petite Comtesse*. "They have no thoughts. I do not think they can instruct me, for I—I wish not to be vain, but I know more than they do."

M. le Comte was much distressed at hearing this.

"I like thy teaching best, grandpère. Tell them to go and come back no more."

"I have engaged them for a month, *ma pauvre petite*. Thou must even bear with them for a month, *mon ange*, and then they shall go. But say not to them that they shall go!"

"*Non, non, mon grandpère*, not for the world," said Margot.

The month came to an end. Margot endured it because she began to teach the aged, ignorant governesses herself. She found the task quite agreeable [Pg 310] and did not mind what the ladies felt; in fact, they were fascinated by her talk and found her pretty speeches and gay manners truly diverting. They were earning large sums of money and had nothing to do. They were not teaching, they were being taught.

At last the day came when the thunderbolt fell. Margot was sent up to her room. The two ladies arrived in a hurry together by special request of M. le Comte.

Madame looked at them with anxious eyes. "I did not know that you were quite so ignorant, *Félicité*," she said, "nor you, *Thérèse*. I have given *mon mari l'argent* to pay you both, but my poor friends, behold, you must come here no more!"

The astonished ladies were received by M. le Comte. He received them civilly but with a certain distance. He said he had other views for *la petite*. He paid them their month's money, which Madame had given him for the purpose, and they walked down the neatly kept avenue, burning rage in their hearts. Why had they made themselves so ugly for so poor a reward? Suddenly, as they were approaching Arles, hoping not to be recognised, whom should they see coming to meet them but several girls belonging to the school of la Princesse de Fleury! Amongst these girls was Louise Grogan. [Pg 311] Most of the girls took no notice whatsoever of the faded-looking old ladies, but Louise recognised them. Quick as thought she made up her mind. She said a word to her companion, explained that she knew the *chères demoiselles*, and presently was walking by their sides.

"You keep the *Cabinet de Beauté*?" she said.

"We do and we have almost ruined ourselves for nothing," said M'selle Close. Tears crept between her eyelids.

"Tell me everything," said Louise, "and perhaps I can help."

"You! How can you possibly help?"

"Well, at least tell me; I will do my best."

So the old ladies described how they had to give up their profession. They could no longer use the masseuse on the hand nor the rouge on the cheeks. They could no longer direct as they used to do, the daily programme of their pupils. Everything was at an end because, forsooth, Madame la Comtesse St. Juste required the best part of the day for one of these ladies; turn about truly, ah, yes, turn about, to teach *la petite Comtesse*. But, behold, they could not teach. It was true, alas, more than true! They could give vast instructions as to massage and the brushing of the hair and the delicate touch of rouge on the cheeks but what did they know of German [Pg 312] or of geography? The world for

them consisted of *la belle France*. Was there another land? Ah, well, they did not know of it. Still *la charmante petite Comtesse* was all that was elegant and delightful, and she would beyond doubt have a very great *dot* some day, and she would marry according to the French custom into the high nobility. They found it tiresome to sit with the child and teach her nothing, but behold she taught them, and she knew, ah, ten times as much as they did! It was wonderful to listen to her. There were other countries—Angleterre, Irlande, a country called Germany, and lands many and wonderful across the deep, deep sea. It was like listening to a fairy tale to hear *la petite* talk, and they were getting a good salary. Ah, *oui, très bien, n'est-ce pas!* But behold, the old Comte, he was angry, and *la petite Comtesse* must have told him things. She looked true at heart, but she was not true at heart; and behold, undoubtedly, she had enlightened M. le Comte concerning them. They were sent away in disgrace. Their hearts were broken.

"Do you want your revenge?" asked Louise.

"Revenge, *certainement*, but could there be revenge?"

"I tell you there can," said Louise. "I failed, but you can succeed. You, Félicité Close, will [Pg 313]receive me in your *Cabinet de Beauté* to-morrow, and behold, you will manicure my hands, and while so doing, I—I myself will enlighten you and you shall avenge yourselves upon the Comte."

"*C'est bien, c'est bien*," murmured M'selle Blanc.

"At two o'clock to-morrow I will arrive," said Louise. "Keep me not waiting, I beseech of you, M'selle Close and M'selle Blanc. I will teach you both how to avenge yourselves on M'sieur le Comte at the Château St. Juste."

Accordingly Louise returned home in the highest spirits, and wrote a letter of rapture to Tilly at Clapham Common.

"There is still of the hope," she wrote, "the hope that never dies. Keep up your spirits, Matilda Raynes. Most unexpectedly has the hope arisen. It fills the sky like the most beautiful sunset. Behold, it is golden and close at hand. I shall have earned my sixty francs, and thou wilt invite me to thy château of renown in the aristocratic quarter called Clapham Common. I will visit you in Angleterre, and in Clapham Common we shall clasp hands and meet heart to heart."

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CHAPTER XX. A CONSPIRACY.

Certainly Madame la Princesse de Fleury kept her school with a sort of easy nonchalance, which was much appreciated by the girls. In especial, these girls liked their half-holidays, when they could wander about pretty much as they pleased. It is true that the boarders had to submit to a certain amount of restraint, but as quite half the school were day girls they had only to say that they were going home to visit their dear relations, absolutely to satisfy that very innocent lady la Princesse.

Now, Louise lived at Arles. Her father's restaurant was not far from the great school, and not far away again was the mansion where Louise slept each night, and at times, half-

holidays and such like, enjoyed the pleasure of her friends' company. The day following that on which she met M'selle Close and M'selle Blanc was a half-holiday, and as her father supplied her freely with cash, she had whispered to one or two companions of a fete, ah, *très ravissant*, where certain of her dearest friends [Pg 315] could join her and eat *chocolats* and cakes to their hearts' delight. But Louise did not dare to lose this most precious half-holiday. She accordingly announced to her friends, Marcella and Berthe, that they must put off their time of *ravissement* until the next half-holiday, for behold! consider! she, Louise, had work of the most particular to do. It was urgent, it was immediate—it had to come at once, at once.

The girls, of course, had to submit, and Louise, dressing herself as gracefully as she could, appeared at the *Cabinet de Beauté* at the hour named.

She was received at once by the two ladies, was shown into a private room, and while one manicured her finger-nails, and the other made of her hair an arrangement the most perfect, she told her story. She said what she required. She also declared that when the deed was done, ah, *riche, très riche* would be the reward.

"*Mon père*, he has much *d'argent*," said Louise. "He will pay well. Now listen, M'selle Blanc and M'selle Close. You went as *gouvernantes* to *la petite Comtesse*."

"Ah, *oui, oui*," said the ladies, "and badly, horribly were we treated. It was the doing of *l'enfant*; there is no doubt she is a snake in the grass."

[Pg 316]

"I would say she was a green lizard on the sunny wall," said Louise.

"Ah, make me not to shudder, M'selle Grognan."

"Now, I want to tell you about *la petite Comtesse*," continued Louise. "She is the daughter, it is true, of the late Comte Henri St. Juste, and her grandfather is the Comte St. Juste. She has, therefore, a right to her title of *la petite Comtesse*, but behold, do you think she keeps to that which we desire? Ah, *non, non*, far from that. Would you suppose that *la petite* sold me this chapeau?" for Louise was wearing the grass-green chapeau on purpose.

"*Non, non*," exclaimed both ladies. "It is perfect, assuredly, but *la petite*, she does not sell—to sell is to belong to us. We sell, thy father, M'selle, *he* sells; but *la petite* she belongs to the nobility. I hate them, *pour moi*, still they exist."

"Now will you listen, M'selle Blanc," exclaimed Louise. "It is true, what I tell you—it is true what I tell you both. M'selle has a grand'père, and also *la belle* grand'mère employs her in her *magasin*—kept it is *supposed* by Madame Marcelle, but really it flourishes because of the rare taste of *la petite Comtesse* Margot. She goes there daily for two hours a day, and behold! the chapeaux they vanish; the robes they disappear; the dainty ribbons [Pg 317] and sashes and gloves, they are not; the embroidered stockings they are not; the shoes they are not; and all because of the taste of *la petite*. Think you that the *établissement* would flourish without *la petite*? Well, now, M. le Comte St. Juste, he knows nothing of this, but I want you both to enlighten him. I have my reasons which I need not disclose; will you both, *chères M'selles*, dress as the youngest do—ah, so beautifully; make the variety of the *toilette*, the change that pleases, that enchants? Wear a *chapeau noir*, M'selle Blanc, garnished with roses *la reine*; and you, M'selle Close,

wear *le petit chapeau avec une plume noire et sans roses*. Oh, la, la, you will both look but eighteen; then go straight to see M'sieur the Comte St. Juste, wearing the touch of rouge—only the mere touch—and that tone of darkness under the eyes which gives the expression so *nouvelle et si jeune*. You will know what to do. Do not allude to the fact that you came as *gouvernantes* alternate days to the little snake in the grass and the little green lizard basking in the sun. Speak to him as strangers. Have you got any friends whose names you could assume for the purpose?"

The ladies knew many of the noblesse. They could, ah, *oui, certainement*, choose the names.

"Ah, well, go, my good friends, and fascinate[Pg 318] the ancient Comte. He will admire, he will adore. He is susceptible to the charms of beauty. When you have won his confidence he will talk of your chapeau, M'selle Blanc, and yours, M'selle Close; and then you must raise the hands in rapture, and talk and talk and talk, and when you have roused his enthusiasm, you must tell him that these things were chosen and sold to you by one *très jeune et très belle*. Excite his interest; tell him that there never was one with quite such taste as that *jeune petite*. He will offer to go with you to see that young *marvel*, and behold! you will take him. You will go in my car, and you will take him with you into the town and into the *établissement*; and he will see *la petite Comtesse*; he will know for himself what his granddaughter does. The little green lizard will shine no longer in the sun; the little green snake in the grass must from henceforth conceal herself; and I, see! I will reward you both."

"How much?" asked M'selle Blanc, who felt considerably afraid of M. le Comte.

"I will ask *mon père*; I will tell him all. What do you say to being robed from head to foot by *la petite Comtesse* in the *établissement* Marcelle? Think what a joy that will be! Such a perfect reward. Then listen again—I know mothers and elder sisters of M'selles in my school; they shall[Pg 319] come to you—oh! in numbers, to have their youth renewed. Is not that enough?"

M'selle Close and M'selle Blanc thought that the terms were sufficient and arranged to go on the following morning to visit M. le Comte. Meanwhile M'selle was to send them *les chapeaux ravissants*, admirable, which they were to wear for the occasion. They must look truly *jeunes* demoiselles.

"Now then, I must go, but I will send the chapeaux, rest assured."

Louise departed, and M'selle Blanc and M'selle Close consulted together how they were to turn themselves into *jeunes* demoiselles. They had, it is true, many patrons, and after consulting for a short time together, they decided to adopt the names of two young ladies who had come to the *Cabinet de Beauté* to have their hands manicured, and who belonged to the *noblesse*.

These young ladies, they were assured, were absent from home at present. They might with safety take their names. They were the daughters of the Marquis Odile. They had only lately taken a house at Arles, where they lived with their father and mother, and were called the Marquise Clotilde and the Marquise Rose.

"Ah," exclaimed M'selle Blanc, "that name will suit my *chapeau noir*, garnished with roses *la reine*."

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The Marquise Clotilde would look very sweet indeed in her *très petit chapeau*.

The chapeaux arrived, all in good time. The ladies arranged themselves in fear and trembling; saw that they could appear with perfect ease as *les jeunes demoiselles*; and went to bed that night with hearts beating high with excitement. Ah, but the revenge was good, and the adventure of the whole thing was exciting.

They scarcely slept that night for thinking of their triumph. Early the next morning, by the explicit directions of Louise, they attired themselves in dresses of pure white with little sashes of blue. The ravishing hats were perched on their heads, the slight touch of rouge was delicately applied to each faded cheek, and then large veils were put on to cover any possible defects.

They were naturally slight in figure. Sharp at ten in the morning, at the very hour when Louise told them it would be right for them to go, they started on their mission to the Château St. Juste. Louise had sent one of her father's cars for them. This was to wait to bring them back again.

Madame la Comtesse was always out at that hour. She was in reality occupied in the back premises of the *établissement*; for Madame Marcelle was little better than a figurehead. The old Comte was alone.[Pg 321] He felt well and happy—the day was a mild one. He thought he would enjoy the outside air. He would even go in the direction of the peach garden.

Suddenly, as he was approaching it, he raised his delicate old hand to protect his sunken, dark eyes, and to watch in surprise an automobile which was coming quickly down the avenue. He wanted to fly; but a check string was applied, the chauffeur stopped *à l'instant*, and two pretty girls approached—the Marquises Odile, connections of his. Ah, yes, assuredly. They introduced themselves, they talked, they chatted.

One Marquise, the Marquise Clotilde, insisted on his taking her arm; the Marquise Rose walked at his other side. He forgot his peach garden in the pleasure of talking to them. He called them *très douce et très belle*. He had not the faintest suspicion that they were the withered and ugly *gouvernantes* whom he had turned away with scorn a little while ago.

"Ah, but I must call on your esteemed father, Marquise Clotilde. He is younger than I am, alas, but I will call, *certainement*; and for you, *ma belle* Rose, let me see if I can give you something as ravishing out of my garden as those roses which you wear in your chapeau."

[Pg 322]

"Did you ever see a chapeau more *très belle*?" said the Marquise Rose.

"It is of the most perfect," said the old Comte.

"There is a wondrous lady who sells these things," said Marquise Clotilde. "She sells them at an *établissement* kept by a certain Madame Marcelle. We buy our things there. We have reconstructed ourselves since we came to Arles. The young m'selle, *si jeune et si belle*, does better for us than any of the Parisian *magasins*."

"I can scarcely believe that," said le Comte.

"Will you not come with us, M. le Comte, and see for yourself? Our car waits your orders. The air is of the spring, reviving with its mildness. Get in, M'sieur, get in. We will take you in a flash to the *établissement*, and you will see *la belle petite* with the taste so superb. Afterwards we will go and visit *mon père*."

The old Comte felt in a mood for adventure. These demoiselles were very charming, and he would like himself to see *la petite* who had the taste so rare and simple.

Accordingly he went as far as the house, leaning now on the arm of the Marquise Rose, but holding the hand of the Marquise Clotilde. He desired his valet to clothe him in his coat of fur and to place at his feet a hot bottle. The automobile was closed by [Pg 323] his desire. *Les jeunes* demoiselles nearly fainted with the heat, but their task would soon be over; their revenge would be complete and their reward would be in their hands.

They chattered all the way with the gay prattle of young birds. The very old Comte thought how delightful was youth; he was glad, very glad, to meet his own relations.

At last they stopped at the *établissement*. The old Comte got out, and the les Marquises accompanied him—all seemed going well, of the best. The assistants bowed; the shopwalkers were ready to take these distinguished strangers to whatever department they pleased.

The Comte felt his cheeks flush with eagerness. This was really a very gay adventure. He liked gay adventures; but at that moment there was standing, just behind the Marquises and the Comte, *la petite* Comtesse. She had gone herself to fetch a certain lace for a certain customer. One glance served to pierce the disguise of the ugly *gouvernantes*; one glance told to her horror-stricken eyes that *mon grandpère* le Comte was in the *établissement*.

Quickly, like a flash, she entered that part of the *magasin* which was kept for underclothing, and with which she had nothing to do. From there she [Pg 324] got into the back premises, where she beheld *la belle* grand'mère.

"Oh, hide me, hide me," cried little Margot; "I will tell thee what has occurred. Those *gouvernantes* so ignorant are in the *établissement* with grandpère. They are powdered and rouged and wearing our *chapeaux*—they are pretending the youth. Ah, but if he knows, if he sees, it will break his heart."

"Fret not thyself, *ma petite*," said *la belle* grand'mère. "Stay quietly with me. Thou wilt be asked for of necessity, but I will say that thou hast *mal à la tête*."

"But *non*, grand'mère," cried little Margot, "behold, it is not *mal à la tête*; it is sorrow at the heart."

"Well, that suffices, *mon enfant*."

The Comte, his cheeks growing pinker, his eyes brighter, accompanied by those charming demoiselles, the young Marquises, asked everywhere for *la petite*, *la petite*, the lady who had the taste so ravishing; but although many were waiting for her, there was no sign of *la petite*.

A message came at last to say that she was indisposed for that one morning and could not appear.

The ladies felt a keen and unaccountable sense of disappointment. The old Comte knew that the [Pg 325] adventure was over, but he would occupy himself by buying a brooch of the very finest sapphires for his little Margot.

The Ladies Odile stood behind him. It was just at that moment that two very beautiful, dark young girls, accompanied by a stately gentleman in middle life, entered the *établissement*. The girls were tall; they were really very young; they had a glow of health, not rouge on their cheeks. The eldest called herself Rose, the other was Clotilde. Suddenly the father of these fair young girls made a graceful plunge forward. It was rapid, and only a Frenchman could do it without awkwardness.

He seized the hand of M. le Comte.

"Ah, behold, behold, *mon ami*," he said, "what joy is here. I came to get some pretty trifles for my daughters, Rose and Clotilde; but I will present them first to thee, *mon ami*. I have heard wonderful stories of this *établissement*. We are anxious to see *the little wonder*, as she is called. Ah, we see her not! Clotilde, make thy curtsy to M. le Comte St. Juste; Rose, do thou likewise."

"But—but—" said the astonished and amazed old Comte. "But—but—" mimicked the father of Rose and Clotilde. "I am the Marquis Odile. Thy cousin and thy friend, *mon ami*."

"I am bewildered," said the poor old Comte. [Pg 326] "All day Rose and Clotilde have been with me. They brought me here; I thought them *charmantes*; but I see them not. What does all this mean?"

The trembling, terrified ladies who kept the *Cabinet de Beauté* knew only too well what it all meant. The real Marquis and the real Marquises had appeared in the flesh. As fast as their trembling legs could carry them, they reached the door. They got into the automobile and drove to the *Cabinet de Beauté*.

"We have had a terrible escape," murmured M'selle Blanc. "Never, never will I undertake such work again," said M'selle Close.

Tremblingly they got off their hats and appeared in their usual dress.

The Marquis brought the Comte back to his château in his own automobile. The young Marquises Rose and Clotilde made him lie down, and petted him and talked to him as though they were his daughters.

When *la pauvre* grand'mère entered, an hour or so later, she found her beloved one calm and easy in his mind. It was only after M. le Marquis and his beautiful young daughters had gone that he told her of his very great adventure.

"It was the biggest of all my life," he said. "Two ladies, *très belles* and *très jeunes*, appeared [Pg 327] and introduced themselves as *mes cousines*, les Marquises Rose et Clotilde. Ah, but they were *charmantes*. Then behold, they spoke to me of a wonder, a *très petite* wonder in the *établissement* of Madame Marcelle. They asked me to go with them to see her, and I went."

"Ah, but thou naughty one; thou adorable naughty one," said la Comtesse.

"But behold, listen," continued the old man. "I enjoyed myself; they were so gay, so young, so brilliant in the cheeks, so dainty in the chapeaux. Then I arrived. They took me in their own car; but I could not see that *petite* wonder, who seems to rule the *établissement*; and suddenly, behold, the real Marquis Odile appeared with his beautiful daughters, Rose and Clotilde. Ah, but it was an adventure; it was wonderful. Thinkest thou, Madame beloved, that the others were—were spirits? I looked to right, I looked to left, and nowhere could I see them after the Marquis appeared. Thinkest thou they were spirits, Madame la Comtesse?"

"They were wicked women," said Madame. "They thought to take thee in, but they failed."

"Ah, but indeed they were not wicked," said M. le Comte. "They looked young and elegant. How gently did the one who called herself Clotilde support my feeble steps; and how admirable were the [Pg 328] manners of the one called Rose. I will amuse myself well this afternoon in telling the story of this queer adventure to *la petite* Comtesse."

"Please thyself, *mon* Alphonse; but now lie quietly and rest, while I prepare the bouillon which will nourish thee after those adventures, which only ought to happen to the young."

The entire story was repeated to Margot when she appeared on the scene; but the old man seemed now dull and drowsy and stupid. Perhaps he was too old for adventures—he could not say. As the evening advanced, he talked in a puzzled way of two Marquises called Rose, and two Marquises called Clotilde, and of a "little wonder" in a certain *établissement*. He was decidedly feverish, and Margot held his hand and soothed him as only *she* knew how.

"Oh the wicked, wicked women," sobbed *la belle* grand'mère, after the doctor had come and gone. "The wicked, wicked women, to injure *mon* Alphonse."

When Margot had a minute of time to attend to *la belle* grand'mère, she told her that the false Marquises were only her hideous old *gouvernantes* dressed up to look young, and that she herself meant to give them a piece of her mind.

"I mean to spend the entire night with grandpère," [Pg 329]she said. "Weep not, *ma belle* grand'mère. He got a shock, and only *I* can keep him from being puzzled by the two names—the two names twice over. I will go to him, *ma belle* grand'mère."

"Yes, go, my blessed child," said the little Madame; and she felt at that moment that even the *dot* for Margot, and her *établissement*, were as nothing compared to *mon* Alphonse—*mon* Alphonse the adorable, the love of her life.

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CHAPTER XXI. THE PALACE OF TRUTH.

In the morning, the old Comte St. Juste was less feverish, but nevertheless not himself. He had, as he complained, a confused feeling. The world was full of Roses—oh, the most

charmantes—and of Clotildes equally divine. They were coming up the avenue in automobiles, they were entering the room, they were sitting with him, they were pouring into his ear the fact that his mission was not accomplished. He had gone to the *établissement*, but he had not seen *the little wonder*. He could not rest until he saw her. In vain Margot tried to soothe him. She longed beyond words to quiet his mind by telling him the simple truth—that she was *la petite*, she was the little wonder of the *établissement* Marcelle. But when she hinted at such a proceeding to *la belle grand'mère*, that poor woman gave a cry of bitter horror.

"Thou wilt kill *mon* Alphonse; thou *wilt* not be so cruel, thou *canst* not be so cruel."

"Ah, but I ought, I ought," sobbed Margot.

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Madame la grand'mère consulted with the doctor.

"M. *le docteur* said that if anything was told at the present moment to excite the very old man, it would be his death; if Margot would not promise silence, she must keep out of the room."

"It will soothe him, *ma belle grand'mère*," cried little Margot.

Nevertheless la Comtesse kept the child from the sick man's room. One hour he grew better, another hour weaker, his strength kept fluctuating; then he began to watch the door.

"It will soon be time for *la petite* Comtesse to return; I want *la petite*," he said to his wife.

The distracted woman kept on telling him that she would soon appear; the Comte kept on listening; he fixed his sunken eyes on the clock.

"How soon will the time fly?" he cried impatiently; "how soon will *la petite* be in these arms?" Poor little Margot was upstairs, struggling with the great despair that had visited her. The dear old man—the dearest old man in all the world except The Desmond—why was she not with him?—how wicked of people to tell lies; she would never tell another. She resolved as soon as she returned to Desmondstown to tell The Desmond also the whole truth.

Toward evening the Comte's temperature went [Pg 332] down; it went down to normal—below normal—far below. Madame was thankful, thinking the worst was over.

The old man dropped into a quiet sleep; he looked very aged in that sleep. The doctor came in. Madame exclaimed excitedly:

"Ah, Monsieur *le docteur*, I have news of the best. His temperature is——"

Then she suddenly stopped speaking—the doctor's face was very grave. He prepared a strong stimulant and forced the old man to swallow it in teaspoonfuls. Then he went into another room with Madame la Comtesse.

"What is the matter?" he said. "Has the child betrayed you?"

"*Non, non,*" replied Madame. "I have put her upstairs, but he thinks she is still at school at Arles—learning, ever learning; dancing, ever dancing; making herself *très jolie*—ah, that is what he thinks, *mon* adored one."

"Listen, Madame," said the doctor. "Your husband is ill, very ill indeed. Keep the little one away if you can, but if not, let her go to him. It may be possible that the truth and the truth alone may save him even now. I will come back in two hours. Try to save him from shock, if possible; [Pg 333] but behold! if it is necessary, fetch *la petite* Comtesse."

The doctor departed and Madame went back to her husband's bedside. He was talking in a rambling, feeble way, and kept looking first at the clock and then at the door.

"*La petite*, she does not arrive," he said suddenly. As suddenly a thought flashed through the mind of la Comtesse.

"She will not be here till late to-night, *mon* Alphonse," was her reply. "She has been asked to partake of *tisane* with her cousins, the Marquises Clotilde *et* Rose. She will have much to tell thee when she does enter thy room."

"Ah," said the poor old Comte feebly, "is she also one of those who overlook the old, the very aged, when they can hardly speak, hardly think? Time flies for us both—ah, *ma petite* Comtesse, *mon ange*, I may not be here if thou dost delay. I want her to tell me —"

"What, my unhappy one?" asked his wife.

"All about that wonderful *petite* who performs such extraordinary feats at the *établissement* which once was thine, my Ninon."

All of a sudden the heart of Ninon rose in a great wave. It seemed to struggle for utterance. She could scarcely contain herself.

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"Harken, *mon* Alphonse," she said. "I will go myself and see whether the automobile has yet returned."

"Ah, do, my Ninon," replied the Comte. "Thou, at least, hast always been faithful and true—faithful, loving and true. I trust thee to the uttermost."

The poor woman staggered out of the room. She was met by little Margot, who was standing in the passage, and whose face was the colour of a white sheet. Her deep, dark eyes were full of untold misery.

"*Belle grand'mère*," she began—but grand'mère had no words to express her feelings. She pointed to the door where the sick man lay.

"Thou mayst save him. Thou hast my permission," she said in the lowest whisper; and little Margot with her gentle step entered the darkened room.

She knew at once that it was a trifle too hot. She opened wide one of the French windows; she let in the soft air, which, winter-time as it was in most places, felt like summer here. The old man breathed more easily. He turned on his pillow. He opened his

eyes, so very sunken in his head, but they lit up with a joy beyond expression when he saw little Margot.

"Ah, I am weak, *mon enfant*," he said. "But thou hast come, *ma petite*. Put thy little hand on [Pg 335] mine. There is life in thy little hand; lay it on mine. Ah, *ma petite*, how greatly do I love thee."

"And I thee, *mon grandpère*," cried Margot.

"Tell me," said the Comte, after a few minutes' silence, during which Margot had fed him with some of the doctor's restorative—"tell me what thou didst do at the *établissement* to-day. Didst thou buy a chapeau?—didst thou watch the *little wonder* as she sold chapeaux and robes for Madame Marcelle?"

"I was not there at all to-day, grandpère."

"Ah, *ma petite*, but wast thou there yesterday?"

"*Mais oui*," said Margot.

"And didst thou perchance see the *little wonder*?"

"I saw her; she is not a wonder."

"Ah, *ma petite*, be thou not of the jealous ones!" said the old man. "That would not be worthy of thee. Thou hast thy gifts; she has hers. Her chapeaux, they are perfect. Her taste, it is what I never saw before. Tell me about her, *chérie*."

"I will," said Margot, "if thou, *mon grandpère*, will let me put both of my hands round one of thine, and if thou wilt promise not to—not to turn me away afterwards."

"Turn thee away, best beloved, it couldn't be."

"Ah, but it might be," said little Margot. [Pg 336] "There is a burden on thy mind; there is a—I call it not a *fear*, but it approaches in the direction of a fear. *La petite* who sells *les chapeaux*, *les robes* and all the other articles of refinement in the *établissement*, is *thine own Margot*. Dost thou hear me? I will not keep it back from thee any longer. *La pauvre belle* grand'mère thought that it was best for thee not to know, but there are cruel people in the world who tried to tell thee, but failed, so now *I* tell thee. The ladies who came here yesterday were of the cruel sort; the girl in the grass-green hat was of the cruel sort; but thy Margot—thy Margot—*mon grandpère*, art thou angry?"

"With thee? *Mais non—non!*" His face was whiter than ever; he could scarcely swallow. After a little he seemed to gather strength.

"Call thy *belle* grand'mère back to me, Margot," he said.

Margot fetched the poor woman. She came in, trembling from head to foot.

"I have told him; he had to know," whispered Margot.

The old man's eyes were bright now with some of the brightness of yore; his voice was firmer, too.

"Listen, Ninon," he said, "behold! Keep thy hand in mine, Margot, beloved. Ninon, I thought thou wert truthful, and I thought this child truthful,[Pg 337] but she, *la petite*, has told me all the truth at last. I cannot appear before the Great Almighty with the sin of pride on my soul. Behold, now, we are all alike in Heaven; only make me one promise, Ninon. Never again shall this little one enter the *établissement* of Madame Marcelle, never except to buy."

"She shall not, *mon Alphonse*," said Ninon, falling at his side and burying her face in the counterpane and beginning to weep.

"Thy tears distress me," said the old man. "Behold *la petite*, she does not weep."

"I come of those who regard tears as not wise," said Margot; "but, behold! I promise thee, grandpère, I promise with all—all my heart. I will never again sell in the *établissement* Marcelle."

"Then see! how happy I am," said M. le Comte. "I am in the palace of truth. For a long time I lived in the palace of lies; gorgeous in colour was that palace and very beautiful to the senses, nevertheless it was the palace of lies. Now I breathe the healthy air of truth. Thou hast spoken, *mon enfant*; thou hast promised, *ma* Ninon; there is no pride left. For me, I also did wrong. The spirit of pride led me wrong."

"Then, grand'mère, we are all happy together,"[Pg 338] said Margot; "but see!—do not talk, he has fallen asleep."

The old Comte St. Juste had fallen asleep, and there was a lovely smile, something like that of an angel, on his face. The child and the woman watched him. The doctor came in presently and shook his head. He deliberately took a seat in the room and partly closed the window which Margot had opened.

"The restorative, *M. le docteur*," cried poor Madame.

"He could not swallow now," said the doctor, "but I will stay; yes, I will stay to the end."

The end came in the early hours of the morning. The old Comte slipped silently, softly and painlessly out of this life into a better one; and poor *belle* grand'mère cried as though her heart would break, but Margot did not cry. She made wreaths of violets, out of their own garden, to surround him. She was never idle for a moment. She put in his hands the Rose of France.

He had lost the look of age; he had slipped back twenty, even thirty years; but for his white hair, he did not look so very old.

"It is because the angels have kissed him," said little Margot.

Madame wept nearly the whole of the day; but[Pg 339] Margot kept quiet, thoughtful, busy. She had much to do for *la belle* grand'mère.

Toward evening the tired woman lay down and slept; and little Margot sat in the room with her dead grandfather, where the great wax candles were lighted—seven at the head of the bed, and seven at the feet. The room was full of the scent of violets.

"If that is death, I should like to go, too, some day," thought little Margot.

All in a moment, she observed the sweet smile on the lips of the dead man, and there came a lump in her throat. Had she not remembered that she was a Desmond she might have cried; but being a Desmond she kept back her tears.

The servants sat in the passage outside. They were surprised that Margot should like to be alone with the dead; but Margot was without fear because she loved so dearly.

"I am glad I told him," she said once or twice to herself; and then she thought of The Desmond and resolved that she would tell him, too, for lies were not of the Kingdom of God, and she wanted to belong to that kingdom and to that alone. What did a *dot* matter?—what did riches matter? "*Pauvre belle grand'mère,*" thought the little girl. "I will always uphold her and strengthen her and [Pg 340] help her in my little, poor way; but she shall not spend her money on me."

After the funeral the will was read.

Fergus Desmond and Uncle Jacko came over for the service and the after ceremony. Margot was quietly told of the extent of the funds which would be at her disposal when she came of age, or before that if she married. They were her French grandfather's present to his beloved grandchild.

Poor *la belle* grand'mère looked with anguish at Margot. Margot took her hand.

"I must speak the truth, and now," she said. "*Mon* grandpère was rich only because of this most dear lady; and I will not take the money, no, not a penny of it. She earned it for him, *for him!*"

"You cannot refuse," said the notary. "See, there was a deed of gift made to you. The dead would walk if you did refuse;" but Margot said gently and firmly that she did not believe in that sort of thing, for *chère* grandpère was in the heavenly garden with God, and that anyhow *she* now meant to make a deed of gift.

All those present turned and stared at her.

"Behold!" she cried. "The *dot* was arranged for me, who care not for money at all. I give back every farthing of it to *la belle* grand'mère; and I will come and see her once at least every year; and [Pg 341] I love her, for she has a true, brave heart; but now I must go back to The Desmond, for I hear his voice calling me across the waters."

All in vain did *la belle* grand'mère implore of little Margot not to make the deed of gift for her; to forget her—not to think of her at all; but Margot could never forget, and would never take the money.

In the end her wishes were carried out, and *la belle* grand'mère returned to the *établissement* at Arles. The Château St. Juste was shut up for the present, but once every year it was to be opened and filled with servants, and little Margot was to spend a month there with *la belle* grand'mère. For although she had given up the *dot*, she could not by any manner of means dispose of the Château St. Juste, which was her direct property, coming to her through her own father and grandfather.

CHAPTER XXII. IT IS JOYFUL TO BEHOLD THEE, MY PUSHKEEN.

On their way back to Desmondstown, Margot told Uncle Fergus that she meant to tell The Desmond everything.

"He will be shocked," returned Fergus Desmond.

"No," replied Margot, "the truth told as I shall tell it can never shock anyone. I will not allow him to think me what I am not. Uncle Fergus, I thought you were too great to permit it."

"I have not your strength of character, my child," said The Desmond of the future.

As little Margot had come back to Desmondstown now to live, as it was to be her home in the future, with the exception of the one month which she would spend with *la belle grand'mère*, and as *mon* grandpère was dead, her return was quiet and without that sense of rejoicing which stimulated it on her last return. There were no bonfires; there were no excited, screaming peasants; but Phinias Maloney was there with his little old cart, and the baby had grown so big that his mother thought that she [Pg 343] might bring him out just for the bit colleen to kiss him. They drove quietly up to the rickety old house.

The girls were standing in the hall, all three of them dressed as young and as little like their age as ever. They all came forward to greet her, but Auntie Norah cried out:

"Whyever aren't ye in black, pushkeen?"

"Why should I be in black?" replied Margot.

"Because, for sure, isn't your French grandfather killed entirely?"

"My French grandfather is in heaven, and very—very happy," said Margot. "He is with God, the dear God who loves us all, and I am not going to wear black for him, for if he could speak to me now he wouldn't like it. I loved him most dearly; I shall always love his memory, but now I want The Desmond and Madam."

"Then whip into the room," said Bridget. "Why, to say the least of it, you know your way about, pushkeen."

"Yes," said Margot. She could not help giving a happy little laugh; she could not help feeling a great load rolling off her heart. This was her real home, her beloved home, her home of all homes. There were no people like the Irish; there was no one in the world like The Desmond.

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She was wearing a little dress of thick, white serge, coat and skirt to match, and a piece of white fox fur round her neck; her little cap was also of white and was pushed back off her dark hair. Her cheeks were blooming with roses. The Desmond had felt a momentary fear at the thought of meeting his little granddaughter, but when he saw her with her rosy cheeks and brilliant dark eyes and white apparel, he gave a sigh of rapture.

"Eh, eh, but it is joyful to behold ye, my pushkeen," he cried, and then they were clasped in each other's arms.

Madam went out, as was her custom, to prepare supper for the little pushkeen; and this was Margot's opportunity to tell her proud old grandfather what had occurred.

She told him all from beginning to end; her great dark eyes were fixed on his face; his eyes, nearly as dark, regarded her gravely. She did not leave out a single point. She explained the entire secret, the miserable little secret which had turned her into a shopgirl, all for such a wretched thing as a *dot*.

Certainly The Desmond was very grave at first—the colour mounted to his cheeks and he clenched one of his great strong hands; but when Margot went on to describe *mon* grandpère's death, and then [Pg 345] the arrangement which had been finally decided on after the funeral, by which Margot gave up her *dot*, returning it absolutely to *la belle* grand'mère and only keeping the old Château for herself—which she could not give away, for she inherited it from her father and her grandfather—then the old man changed his attitude.

He burst into a loud guffaw. He rose to his immense height and folded the pushkeen in his arms, and cried:

"Hip, hip, hurrah! Hip, hip, hurrah! Old Ireland forever! The Desmonds forever! Their pluck, their spirit to the world's end!"

Madam, hearing a loud noise, came hastily in, and The Desmond told her to calm herself and to look upon the pushkeen as a gem of the purest water.

"She has been telling me things that set me up," was his remark; "they set me up fine, but they are to go no further. Quit any curious ways, my woman; get my pushkeen her supper. Old Ireland forever! Hip, hip, hurrah! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

So little Margot sat on her grandfather's knee and ate the excellent food provided for her by dear, sweet, dainty little Madam, and then, being really very tired, she dropped asleep, with her head [Pg 346]leaning on The Desmond's breast, and her dark hair pressed against his white beard.

"Eh, but she's the wonder," said The Desmond; "and I won't have her woke, that I won't, if she lies here all night long. She's mine forever and ever now. Thank the Lord God Almighty and His blessed Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit and the angels and the archangels and all the hosts of heaven, for their mercies! I've got her and she's mine! My pushkeen, my mavourneen, my blessed brave little lamb. I tell you, Mary, she's a heroine. She's better than the best—what more can an old man say?"

Margot did awake in time to go up to her own snug little bedroom, to slip into her own cosy bed, and to sleep the sound sleep of the weary. But before he went to bed himself that night, The Desmond had a talk with Fergus.

"We've got her back, Fergus boy," he said. "She's ours now forever."

"Yes, that's true enough, forever."

"She has let out something to me," said The Desmond, "which I can't repeat and won't for the life of me."

"Don't then, father," said Fergus.

"But she's a heroine," said The Desmond.

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"I always reckoned she was born that way," said Fergus.

"I'm not going to tell you her bit of a secret, my man."

"I say, father, I'm not wanting to hear it."

"But you and me, Fergus, we must provide for her. We must settle a bit of a dower on her."

"I'm thinking that way myself," said Fergus.

"We'll talk it over to-morrow," said The Desmond.

"We will, father," said Fergus. "We'll do something fine for the pushkeen; she's worth it."

"Worth it!" cried The Desmond. "There never was her like before in the world. Good-night, Fergus. You are my heir, remember, and you'll be The Desmond after me. But listen here and now—old men die off quick sometimes, and if anything happens to me she's your charge."

"Of course, father; can you doubt it?"

"That's all right. I'm going to bed," said The Desmond. He slowly left the room. There was a great rejoicing in his heart; he saw real, true goodness when it was brought before him. The little pushkeen should not suffer for her confidence in him. He had loved her before; now his love filled his heart to the very brim.

Fergus sat for some time by the turf fire in his [Pg 348] father's sitting-room and laughed quietly and softly to himself at the way the little pushkeen had managed The Desmond, who imagined *he* was the only one of all the family of Desmonds who knew the true story of the *établissement* at Arles.

"I never saw the old fellow so took up with anything," thought Fergus to himself. "The girls and Bruce and Malachi must never know, and of course I'll *pretend* never to know. It's all right—better than right—brave little pushkeen."

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CHAPTER XXIII. THE GLORIOUS SOFTNESS OF IRELAND.

Little Margot soon settled down into the life she loved best. Her object was to please her dear granddad. She was fond of her uncles and her old-young aunts and of dear, stately

little Madam, but there was no one in all the world like The Desmond himself.

In her sweet presence he became a sort of child again. He went out, holding her little brown hand, and although it was still too early in the year to gather many flowers, such as grew in profusion in the south of France, they did find wonderful mosses, and the first, sweet, daring crocuses, and snowdrops and even primroses.



They did find wonderful mosses and snow drops and even primroses.—[Page 349.](#)

Margot used to pick them and bring them into granddad's room and arrange them with her exquisite taste for his comfort and pleasure. Hitherto he had called flowers more or less rubbish, but now this human flower had taught him to love all the flowers and green things of the fields. The mosses, fructifying in their full perfection, delighted the[Pg 350]

old man as much as the child. He polished up an ancient microscope, and they examined these treasures of nature together side by side. They did not want to talk about anything else while the beautiful mosses were in their bloom. The Desmond even went to the expense of getting high glass globes to cover the mosses, which caused them to grow up tall and strong, and the two—the old and the young child—felt the perfection of joy as they watched them.

"Oh, granddad, you are so funny," said little Margot.

Granddad replied by "Hip, hip, hurrah! *Erin go bragh*;^[1] the pushkeen forever."

Her old-young aunts were much entertained by Margot's devotion to the old man. They themselves considered it childish. They began to consider The Desmond in his dotage, whereas, in reality, he had never been so alive and so amusing. A little child was leading him, and surely there could be no safer guide to the Kingdom of Heaven.

But happy days, even the happiest, come to an end. The season of the fructification of the moss was over, and Margot now was fully engaged in filling granddad's room with cowslips and bluebells, and with beautiful, large primroses in quantities.

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One morning she felt unusually wakeful and unusually happy. She had received quite a cheerful letter from *la belle* grand'mère the night before. The *établissement* was flourishing, and Madame could never forget her little Margot. The child was tired of staying in bed. The time was now the middle of March, but in this soft air of the county of Kerry harsh winds were little known, and as to rain, what did a drop of rain matter?—nobody thought of rain in the county of Kerry. "A fine, soft morning," they said one to the other.

"A beautiful, soft morning entirely," they exclaimed, when the rain poured in sheets and torrents.

Margot watched it from her window and felt a sudden frantic desire to go out into this glorious softness. It would not do for granddad, dear grand-dad, but he should have his primroses and cowslips all the same.

She put on a little old shabby frock and, stepping softly, let herself out into the streaming, pouring rain. She had a tiny mackintosh, which she slipped over her shabby frock. She wanted the rain and the beautiful softness to wet her delicate, jet-black hair, and cause it to curl up tighter than ever. She wore old goloshes a little too big for her, on her feet.

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She knew a certain spot, beyond the grounds of the old estate, where primroses and cowslips were growing. She had seen them the day before with her clear black eyes, but the place was too far off for granddad to walk to. She made for it now, however, her little basket on her arm. After a time, she found herself under the dripping trees.

How glorious was the wet softness of Ireland! Was there ever such a place as Erin? Surely, surely, never, never! And then she stooped down and began carefully to pick her

primroses and cowslips, laying them dripping wet as they were, with delicate care into her little basket.

In the midst of her task she was arrested by the sound of voices. Who in the world could be out and near this spot of all spots, early in the morning? She gave a little sigh and stood upright, leaning against a fir tree. Then she saw a sight which caused her small heart to beat.

Her young-old Aunt Norah was walking by, leaning confidentially on the arm of Mr. Flannigan. They were evidently too much absorbed with each other to take the least notice of the child. Margot earnestly hoped they would not stop—she had no desire to act as an eavesdropper, and yet she could not get away without being seen.

"I'm a bit tired, me honey," said old-young Aunt [Pg 353] Norah. "Let me lean on your shoulder, avick. There, that's better. Shall we sit a while? I'm not one for minding the damp, being brought up in it, so to speak."

"Eh, but listen, mavourneen," said the almost husky voice of Flannigan, "ye might catch the bitter cowld, me pretty pet, and then where in the wide world would your Samuel be?"

"Why, you'd be where you always were," replied young-old Aunt Norah.

"Ah, but no! I'd be in the cowld grave," said Samuel Flannigan. "Do ye think I could live another minute without ye, Norah, me bit thing?"

This was too much for little Margot. She would *not* be an eavesdropper. She must explain. She came out from under the shelter of the fir tree, and flinging the cowslips and the primroses into the lap of old-young Aunt Norah, she exclaimed:

"I'm here and I know. It's lovely to listen, but I mustn't listen. I'll leave you to yourselves. I didn't think you two would take up silly at your age, but I forgot you were young-old, and that sort does anything."

The two stared at her with their mouths open, and manifest consternation in their faces.

"Is it tellin', ye are going to be?" said young-old Aunt Norah.

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"To be sure not—I've nothing to tell. If I'd stayed a bit longer I might have heard more. Phinias did say to me once that you and himself there, were familiar-like; but I didn't know what it meant, and I don't know what it means now, only that he calls you 'me honey,' and you stick to him in the dripping, pouring rain. Well, if you like it I don't care; I'm going home."

"No; you are not," said old-young Aunt Norah. "You've heard too much, and you shall hear the rest. We are going to be married, me and this gentleman."

"Married?" cried little Margot. "Whatever is that?"

"My child, it is the gift of heaven," said Samuel Flannigan.

Margot raised her black eyes to the dripping skies.

"It seems to come down in a good pour," she said. "Still, I don't understand."

"You know about Madam and your granddad," cried young-old Aunt Norah.

"To be sure; am I wanting in sense entirely?"

"Well, they're married, the same as we'll be very soon, very soon."

"Oh, deary me!" cried little Margot. "That does sound lovely. Only you know, Mr. Samuel [Pg 355]Flannigan, you haven't got the beautiful face of my granddad, so perhaps your little children won't be *quite* as lovely. I wonder how many you'll have. My old nurse at Uncle Jacko's said that when I cracked my fingers, every crack meant a wee babe. Shall I crack them now for you two?"

"Oh, child, you are too awful," cried Aunt Norah, who found herself blushing in the most uncomfortable way.

But Margot took no notice of the blush, nor did she observe that the Rev. Samuel Flannigan had moved a trifle out of hearing. Margot gravely cracked her fingers. After a time she looked solemnly at young-old Aunt Norah and said:

"You'll have ten. They'll come out of the hearts of cabbages, and I'll order them for you one at a time, if you like; I'll go straight home now and begin to make the baby clothes."

"Margot, you are the most awful pushkeen in the wide world," said Aunt Norah. "You have made himself feel so ashamed that he can't look me in the face."

"All because of the dear little babies," said Margot. "I am more than surprised."

"Listen," exclaimed Norah, "no young girl ever talks on those subjects before marriage."

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"Don't she? But why? I thought it was so interesting."

"It isn't, pushkeen; it isn't done."

"Have you told granddad yet that you are going to marry Mr. Flannigan?" inquired Margot.

"No; we don't want him to know yet. It would spoil the fun; and dear Samuel is so sensitive."

"I suppose so; I never thought it before, but if he's frightened of a wee thing like a babe, he must be. But, young-old Aunt Norah, you ought to tell granddad."

"I will, in good time, child; only it must be in my own way and in my own time. Samuel is the most blessed and holy man in the whole world."

"Well, I don't think he's quite that; for if he were he wouldn't play games like *puss-in-the-corner* and *round the mulberry tree* and *blind-man's buff*; and then, Aunt Norah, you *can't* call him handsome. His nose, it cocks right up, and there's very little of it; and his mouth is *so* wide; and he has teeny eyes; and his head is getting bald. Do you want to marry a man with a bald head, Aunt Norah? I'll tell you how I found it out. I saw you and

him and Aunt Bridget talking and laughing and giggling the other day, and I thought it wasn't to say—well! what old-youngs did."

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"You little prude," said Aunt Norah in an angry voice.

"Well, but it *wasn't*, old-young Aunt Norah."

"You are not to call me 'old-young'; I won't have it."

"Well, old, then."

"I'm not old."

"Whatever am I to call you, for you are not young?"

"Bless the child; she'll break me to bits," said Aunt Norah. "Pushkeen, you don't know what you are talkin' of."

"I do; I know quite well. You sent me to your bedroom the other day and I saw a very long plait of hair that wasn't yours lying on the dressing table. If you were young the hair would sprout like bulbs out of your head, and on the day that I watched you and Aunt Bride and Mr. Flannigan playing in the garden, I thought I'd find out about him, so I got Joe, the garden boy, to fetch me a ladder, and he did so, and I climbed up and sat in the bough of a tree, and Samuel's hair was all bald on the top, so you are neither of you young, and you oughtn't to pretend; it is wrong."

"Oh, you are a dreadful, dreadful pushkeen," said Aunt Norah. "But I'll forgive you all your wild ways and tell you my little beautiful secrets if[Pg 358] you promise not to say a word of this—this meeting, to my father, nor my sisters, nor my brothers." Margot was rather beguiled by the thought of being Aunt Norah's confidante.

"I'll keep your secret as safe—as safe can be for *one week*," she said. "You can tell himself there'll be *only* ten, and that I my very self will pick them out of the choicest cabbages. Now, good-bye. I'd love to see you hugging each other, and I'm sorry they won't be pretty, but, you see, you aren't, and he isn't, and the cabbages are *very particular* whom they send the wee babies to. Well, I must be off." Little Margot rushed back to the house. She felt rather cold and chill. Aunt Norah's news by no means pleased her. She had never liked Mr. Flannigan, and she disliked him more than ever now. Still, she had promised to keep Aunt Norah's secret for a week. It was an awful burden on her little mind; still, she must keep her word.

The week went by, and after the first day, Margot began to enjoy herself. It was so very interesting to watch Mr. Flannigan blush. She had only to stare first at him, then at Aunt Norah, and behold, his entire face was crimson. She made little experiments with his blushes, and they succeeded to such an extent that the poor man was in agony.[Pg 359] At last Aunt Norah had to take her away and speak to her.

"Do you know, pushkeen," she said, "that you are making my Samuel very miserable?"

"I?" said Margot. "I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, but you are. You keep looking at him."

"I can't help it; a cat may look at a king, Auntie Norah."

"Yes; but a little girl ought not to make a very reverend and pious and good clergyman uncomfortable."

"I never before thought he was reverend and pious," said Margot.

"Well, he is; he's a clergyman of the Church of Ireland."

"Do they all play *puss-in-the-corner*?" inquired Margot.

"Oh, you silly, silly child. Now I'm going to show you something. It's a great secret. You must keep it tight in your heart."

"I will, auntie. The week will be up to-morrow, remember, and I think I can bear an extra secret until then."

Aunt Norah first of all walked to the door, which she locked. She then unlocked a certain drawer in her chest of drawers and produced a little box with [Pg 360] a jeweller's name on it. She opened it and showed Margot a small, very poor-looking ring. It was without precious stones and had a twisted knot in the middle.

"It's pretty," said Margot, dubiously. She knew good rings, having seen so many at Arles.

"Pretty! you little cat; it's lovely."

"What does the twist mean?" asked Margot.

"That is a true lover's knot. This is my engagement ring. Dear Samuel went to Cork yesterday and bought it for me. Oh, Margot, when we are really married we'll live in a wee house of our own; and you shall come and see us, if you'll only promise not to talk about babies."

"Indeed, truly I won't," said Margot. "I thought you'd like to have them, but you evidently don't. Will your house be very nice, Auntie Norah?"

"It will be elegant, child. Not a tumble-down place like this."

"There never was a place so perfect as Desmondstown," said Margot.

"Our little house won't be so big, but it will be sweet and fresh and pure," said Auntie Norah. "I can't bear gawds of any sort."

"Can't you, auntie? I should have thought you loved them."

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"You don't know me a bit, Margot. I always felt you didn't."

Margot smiled faintly and was silent. After a very long pause she said slowly:

"Thank you very much for showing me the ring; and I hope you'll keep your word about telling granddad to-morrow."

"We're going to tell Uncle Fergus," said Norah. "He'll break the news to your grandfather."

"Oh, won't you tell him yourself—yourselves, I mean? It sounds so—so—"

"So what?" exclaimed Norah.

"Sort of cowardly," said Margot.

"You have never seen my father in a passion, pushkeen. He'll be angry at a Desmond marrying a Flannigan, and he'll let his anger out and storm and rave, and poor Sam won't be able to bear it. It is best that Fergus should get the brunt of it."

"Are you quite—quite sure that is what you mean to do?" asked Margot after a long pause.

"Well, perhaps—"

"As you are both so finicky I'd best do it for you. I'll talk to Uncle Fergus and get him to tell granddad. I'm going to have a private talk with Uncle Fergus to-night. Shall I tell him about you and the holy, saintly Mr. Samuel to-night, Aunt Norah?"

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"Well, to be sure, child, you have a heart and a half."

"No, I've one heart, but it's big. It can hold you two and your little ring and your *'mendous* big secret."

"I think you are a nice little girl," said Norah. "Well, tell him, but whatever you do, get him not to speak to my father till the morning."

Margot promised to obey. Just before dinner that evening she asked Uncle Fergus to walk up and down the big picture-gallery with her. All the best pictures had been sold long ago, but still there was one very precious Romney left, also a couple of Gainsboroughs, not at that great master's best, and several by unknown artists.

Little Margot was very fond of creeping up to the picture-gallery and looking at the Romney. It represented a little dark-eyed girl exactly like herself. She did not know the likeness, but everyone else remarked it, and the people of the neighbourhood invariably said:

"Oh, do—do look at the little Romney," when Margot and her grandfather passed by.

Now she stood exactly under the picture, her dark eyes raised to the dark eyes of the little girl, who was holding an enormous bunch of cowslips in her hands. With all her likeness to Margot she had [Pg 363] not the fire of Margot in her small face. Still, Margot loved her because she was her very own—her own ancestress, who had been born a Desmond at Desmondstown, and had died before she was old enough to marry. "So she is always a Desmond," said Margot, speaking, as was her custom, aloud. "And that in itself is beautiful. I'll run to her first when I get to Heaven—even before I see dear

grandpère. I do love her. Always a Desmond—a Desmond up in Heaven. She must be wonderfully happy. Oh, is that you, Uncle Fergus?"

Uncle Fergus joined the child. He put his arm round her slim little waist, and they both stood together and looked up at the picture.

"Do you love the Romney picture, pushkeen?" he asked.

"Oh, Uncle Fergus, I just adore it. She must be so happy, never to have changed her beautiful name."

"She was your great-great-great-aunt," said Uncle Fergus. "Her name was Kathleen Desmond, and your own mother was called after her. She died a year after that picture was taken. It is the most valuable thing we possess. If sold it would fetch thousands of pounds, but I am going to ask my father to give it to you for your very own, Margot."

"Oh, oh, are you, Uncle Fergus? But I couldn't [Pg 364] sell her, you know. If I felt she was my own, I'd keep her forever and ever and ever. She is part of me now, I love her so much."

"I don't want you to sell her, little one," said Fergus; "nor would The Desmond hear of it. She would not be yours as long as The Desmond lives. Then, if he consents, we will settle her on you, as well as the dower."

"Not a *dot*; I hope not a *dot*," said little Margot.

"No, I said a *dower*."

"Well, that's all right. How I shall pet you and love you, Great-great-great-Aunt Kathleen Desmond; even up in heaven, where you are now, I'll see your face in the sky, on starlight nights, looking down at me and smiling at me."

"Do you know, Margot, why I want to give you that picture?"

"No, Uncle Fergus. You have a funny thought at the back of your head, but I don't know what it is."

"Because you are like her, very like her."

"Am I—am I truly? Why she's quite bee-uti-ful."

"Well, never mind about that, child. You asked me to meet you here and I have come. Have you anything to say?"

"They are so frightened, poor things," said [Pg 365] Margot, suddenly restored to the present. "They haven't got my courage nor her courage nor your courage, so I thought that you and I had best help them."

"Who on earth are you talking about, pushkeen?"

"He blushes so dreadfully," continued Margot. "It's quite awfully painful. I keep looking away from him now to ease his mind a bit. I suppose he thinks Auntie Norah very beautiful and she thinks him very holy."

"Who on earth—what *do* you mean, pushkeen?"

"Well, Uncle Fergus, they've settled it up and you can't stop it, 'cause Aunt Norah says they are both of age. I'm certain sure they are, for I climbed up a ladder to see the bald spot on his head. It's Mr. Flannigan and Aunt Norah, and they are going to be married at once, almost *immejit*, and *you* have got to tell The Desmond. She says she is not old-young, but that she's young. I know quite well that she's only old-young, but I don't talk of it. She's very happy, though, for she loves him. It seems a pity that God made him ugly, for she's not beautiful, and I don't quite like her taste. She's going to have a teeny house, and he has bought her a little engaged-up ring. It's a very poor sort of ring, really, truly, but oh, she *is* proud of it. You will[Pg 366] be kind to her, won't you, Uncle Fergus! Poor Aunt Norah, she thinks it so more than lovely, going to be married. I was frightened at first, thinking of their wee babies; but they don't seem to want to have babies."

Uncle Fergus burst into a sudden laugh, sat down on a tattered old seat, and took Margot into his arms.

"You little blessed thing," he said. "Don't whisper to anyone, Margot ashore; keep it tight within ye. Your Aunt Norah is fifty."

"What's fifty?" asked the pushkeen.

"Why, half a century, of course. She's the eldest of us all, except your Aunt Priscilla. Well, I'll do my best with The Desmond, but he'll be rare and angry, I can tell you. His pride of birth is his greatest pride of all, and that chap Flannigan, why he is—"

"He's a clergyman of the Church of Ireland," said Margot solemnly.

"My father will think nothing of that. He knows only too well that he's the grandson of a labourer on the Desmond estate, and though he's old, he's ten years younger than your aunt; but keep it dark, pushkeen. I know you never let out secrets. I'll do my best for them for your sake, my pretty[Pg 367] sweet. But what a pair of fools they are, to be sure."

"Oh, Uncle Fergus, don't talk like that. If we can make them joyful, let's try. Let's try very hard."

"Blessings on ye, pushkeen, I'll do my best for your sake. Now I think we must tidy up for supper."

FOOTNOTE:

[1] Means the Irish of *Ireland forever*.

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CHAPTER XXIV. A POUND A DAY—A PICTURE AND A WEDDING.

Notwithstanding all her confident dreams and her bold, resolute spirit, little Margot did not find the next day at Desmondstown either peaceful or happy. Fergus, true to his word, told his father of Norah's engagement. The old man stormed and raved. He sent for Norah, who refused to go to him. His rage grew yet hotter. He said that if she did not appear at once he would have her locked up; that no child of his should disgrace herself by marrying a Flannigan.

Samuel Flannigan was forbidden the house. He was told that his case was hopeless. Aunt Norah, in terror, did appear and was assured by her father that she was nothing but a blessed bit of a fool and mighty old at that, and that she must immediately promise him that she would never speak to that low-down fellow, Samuel Flannigan, again.

Norah cried, sobbed, even screamed, and was finally locked up in her room by The Desmond himself. Then little Margot came in and tried to smooth [Pg 369] matters and comfort the distracted old man. He looked at her bonny face; at her glowing, rosy cheeks; at her wonderful, soft, black eyes; at her thick, curling, black hair; and held out his arms to her. She crept into his embrace and sat there very quiet, without speaking. Margot was singularly wise for her age, and she knew that the time to speak had not come yet.

Presently, however, as the old man was feeling the comfort of her presence, he was startled by one great tear splashing on his hand.

"Why, my pushkeen, alanna," he said. "I thought for sure that the Desmonds never cried—those that are true Desmonds, I mean."

"It was only *one* tear, granddad," said little Margot. "I don't like anybody to be unhappy."

"Eh, now, to be sure, nor do I," said The Desmond.

"But there's Aunt Norah, granddad. She is very mis'rable; she *is* fond of Samuel."

"Don't ye dare," said the old man. His whole manner changed; he pushed her off his knee. She looked at him without reproach, but with intense sadness, and then slowly, very slowly left the room.

He was so wretched after she had gone that he felt inclined to call her back, and to tell her that all the foolish Norah Desmonds in the wide world and [Pg 370] all the ridiculous, low-born Samuel Flannigans might marry, if only she would stay with him and comfort him.

Madam came in presently and found him alone. The one tear that Margot had shed had dried on his horny old hand, but he kept on looking at the hand. He did not attempt to wipe that tear—that pearl of all price—away. It had dried itself. He thought his hand a sort of sacred thing because it held one tear from the little pushkeen.

"What ails your hand, Fergus?" asked Mary, his wife.

"Oh, nothing," he replied. "Why shouldn't I have a hand in all conscience, and why shouldn't I look at it? Where on earth is the pushkeen?"

"Why, didn't you know?" said Madam.

"No; what should I know? For goodness' sake, woman, speak out!"

"Well, I'm thinking you won't see her for a bit," said Madam; "but she'll come back by-and-bye—very soon, most like."

As a matter of fact Margot had taken up the cause of Aunt Norah and Mr. Flannigan; and for her to take up any cause meant far more than the people who benefited by her counsel and advice had any idea of. Now, having left her grandfather, she tried to find Uncle Fergus; but he was nowhere in [Pg 371] the house. Then she went up to Aunt Norah's room. She knocked at the door. She heard sobbing and moaning within.

There were sounds like "Ohone! ohone! Oh, dear me, Oh, dear me! Oh, it's me heart that's torn to tatters!"

Margot could not get Aunt Norah to listen to her; so she left her. She went to her own little room, and opening a certain drawer took out her purse. It had been well stored by *la belle grand'mère*. There were a great many gold pieces in it. Margot did not stop to think how many. The sun was shining to-day. She put on a neat little dark-blue serge frock and her pretty crimson cap, and went straight to the house where Samuel Flannigan lived. It was a very small house and very shabby. It was close to the church; and the front door stood open. Margot entered. She went down the narrow hall and into the tiny front sitting-room, where the blinds were drawn down and where Samuel Flannigan was seated, his face buried in his hands, his great ungainly shoulders shaken with sobs.

Margot went up and touched him somewhat delicately.

"I don't want you, Miss Margot," he said. "It's your sort that does the mischief; but for you I wouldn't have lost my little girl."

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"Mr. Flannigan, I've done no mischief, except that I made you blush. I'm sorry I did that—I am truly. I want to tell you that you need never blush any more, and you'll get your little wee young girlie if only you have patience and behave like a man. I've taken the matter up, Mr. Flannigan, and I mean to succeed. Good-bye, now, and cheer up. Things will come right soon, but not quite immediately. Trust me, Mr. Flannigan, and forgive me for making you blush such an awful ugly red."

Flannigan looked vacantly at the pretty child. Somehow a gleam of hope did stir in his heart. That child was very uncommon and remarkable. He had never, never seen her like before. He wondered whether he could manage to run away with Norah. But ten minutes after Margot had departed, his little flicker of courage had left him, and he sat down a weary, desolate man, who felt very old and good-for-nothing.

He was really fond of Norah, and he did not see why he should be abused because his grandfather was a labourer on the Desmondstown estates.

Meanwhile Margot, having quite made up her mind, went quickly in the direction of Phinias Maloney's bit of a houseen. She kissed the children who were basking in the sun and picking flowers to throw them away again.

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She snatched up the baby and covered his small face with her kisses. Then she went into the little kitchen to Annie Maloney.

"Why, whatever," exclaimed Annie; "my blessed missie, what do you want?"

"Where's Phinias?" asked little Margot.

"He's over beyont; ye can see him if ye look. He's planting cabbages for the summer."

"Annie," said Margot, "are you great enough to be good in a very great cause?"

"Well, now, whatever does the bit thing mean?" said Annie.

"I want Phinias. Will you give him to me?"

"Well, now, I'd do most things for ye, alanna, but *himself!*—I couldn't part with himself. 'Tain't likely now, is it, missie, and he the father of the childer?"

"I only want him for about two or three days at the most," said Margot; "and I'll pay him well," she added. "A pound for every day he's away from you."

"To be sure now, that's powerful big pay," exclaimed Mrs. Maloney. "We could buy another piggeen, and put by for the rint, and tidy up the place a bit."

"So you can," said Margot. "We'd best make it three days."

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"To be sure, my blessed mavourneen—to be sartin sure."

"Well, I'm going to speak to him," said Margot. "You're a very noble woman, Annie. He'll be back with you in three days and he'll have three pounds to put into your hand. Now then, don't tell anybody in the world where we have gone."

"Is it a sacret?" exclaimed Annie. "Lor' love us, I dote on a sacret."

"I'll go and see him at once," said Margot. "I trust you, Annie, more than anyone else in all the world; I do indeed."

"Lor' love ye, my pretty," said Annie.

Margot scampered across the field. Presently she reached "himself" as he was planting the young spring cabbages.

"Phinias," said Margot, "you are just a darling."

"Be I?" said Phinias. "You do use pretty words, missie, asthore."

"It's what I feel, Phinias. Now I've spoken to Annie and Annie is satisfied, and I'll pay all your expenses and my expenses, too. I can't run away alone, because I'm too small; but Phinias, I'm going to run away."

"Lor' bless us and save us," cried Phinias, "and you the idol of The Desmond's dear old heart."

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"Sometimes we must be parted from the people we love," said Margot. "Get the cart ready as fast as you can, Phinias, and put on your best things and come with me. You must take me straight, right away, this blessed minute, to dear Uncle Jacko. As soon as ever I get there *you* can go home again. And when you get home you'll carry a letter with you which I'll have written, and you'll put it *yourself* into the hands of The Desmond. That's all; and you'll get three pounds besides your food and your travelling. Come along this blessed minute, Phinias; there isn't a moment to spare."

Phinias stared out of his truly Irish eyes; his wide mouth grinned a trifle. He looked a little sheepish, a little glad, vastly surprised; but in the end Margot got her way. She was seated beside Phinias in the queer little cart.

They went by a road they did not usually go, and arrived at a railway station which they did not generally get to, and there they took train for Rosslare.

On the following day, quite late in the evening, Margot's little brown face peeped round the shabby door of the study, where Uncle Jacko was preparing his Sunday sermon.

Margot gave a cry of joy and flung herself into his arms.

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"Why, then, by the powers! isn't this too joyful altogether?" exclaimed Uncle Jacko.

"Yes," said Margot, "Phinias brought me. You'll keep him for to-night, and he'll go back to-morrow. Uncle Jacko, is Aunt Priscilla about?"

"No, thank the Lord. She's gone missioning to Manchester."

"I don't know what that is," said little Margot.

"It's good work, very good work. She's a good woman," said Uncle Jacko.

"Then we'll be alone?"

"We will so, my bonny bird."

"Then everything is going to come beautifully right," said Margot. "I think God is almost *too* good, Uncle Jacko. Oh, I do love Him so tremendously."

That evening the little girl told Uncle Jacko the entire story of Aunt Norah and Mr. Flannigan, of her grandfather's unaccountable rage and of her own determination that Aunt Norah and Mr. Flannigan should be happy.

"He—granddad—can't live without *me*, Uncle Jacko, so you see I ran away. I'm going to send him back a letter to-morrow morning by Phinias Maloney. The very moment he says 'yes' about Auntie you'll take me back to him, won't you, Uncle Jacko?"

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"I will, my sweet child, although the parting with you will be a sort of tearing open of an old wound."

"Oh, Uncle Jacko, he won't give way for a bit. We'll have some days to play—to be just a little boy and just a little girl together."

If Uncle Jacko was delighted to see Margot, old Hannah's raptures were also beyond words.

"Thank the Lord the missus is away missioning," she said, and then she hugged and kissed, and kissed and hugged Margot, and got her old tiny room warm and snug for her, and treated those two *children*, as she spoke of her master and Miss Margot, to the very best that the house could afford.

Before she went to bed that night, however, Margot wrote a letter to granddad. It ran as follows:

Darlingest and Best:—

I couldn't live even with *you* at Desmondstown unless we were happy together. I couldn't bear to see your dear face all puckered up with sorrow, and with anger, which the beautiful God hates; so I have come away for a bit to Uncle Jacko; but when you feel that you can give your bit girleen to poor Sammy, why then—then I'll *fly* back to you, for you'll be the noblest old man in the world—nobler than your pride; and I'll never leave you again, never, never. This is to say that I'm here and I'm safe, and my heart is full to the brim with love for[Pg 378] you; so send for me *very* quick indeed, my own granddad.

P.S. Don't let your wee girlie get too old from sobbing. You and I, we both know that it isn't the way of the Desmonds. Be as quick as you can in settling the matter up.

Forever and forever,
Your Pushkeen.

This letter was read by a broken-down old man who, for three days, had given up Margot as lost; whose heart was so completely broken with regard to her, that he did not give either Norah or Flannigan a thought.

When the old man read Margot's letter he gave vent to a sort of yell of delight.

"Why, bless the bit thing," he cried. "Madam, Madam, Fergus, Fergus, she's safe with that good fellow, Mansfield. Wire to her to come home. Fergus, go off at once and send a wire. Norah may go her own way. She's nothing to me compared to my Margot—my pushkeen—my blessing."

So the wire was sent, and as quickly as possible Uncle Jacko and little Margot returned to Desmondstown. Margot flew into her grandfather's arms.

"Is it right?" she said. "May they marry?"

"They may marry every single week of the year[Pg 379] from this time forward, for all I care," said The Desmond.

"Have you told them so?" asked Margot.

"No, and don't want to."

"Granddad, you *must*."

"All right, my pushkeen."

"Madam, darlin,' bring Norah down to granddad this minute."

"I'll fetch her," said Fergus.

He went up to his sister's room, and in a few minutes she appeared, looking very cowed and shaken.

"It's that blessed little Margot's doings," said Fergus. "No one else would have brought him round. Loving my father as much as she does, she was determined to give him up unless he allowed you to be happy."

"I don't understand," said Norah.

"Well, you needn't, colleen. Come with me now and don't keep the old man waiting."

Norah went. Margot was in her usual place on her grandfather's knee. She would not allow him to rise. He just put out his great hand in the direction of Norah.

"Ye're looking a bit white, colleen," he said; "and weak, too, with the weakness of the aged. I give in; you can take him. Why, there he is," for Malachi had rushed round to the house of [Pg 380]Flannigan and brought him straight back—a very red-eyed, feeble man, to meet his red-eyed, feeble bride.

"There, I've settled it," said The Desmond. "You can both go out and spoon. I'm busy with my granddaughter. I had never have given in but for her. She's as cute as she's sweet. Lor' bless her, she's the cutest thing on earth," and then he hugged Margot close to his heart.

The three Sundays were obliged to be gone through in order that the banns might be properly read, and Margot brought her wonderful taste to bear on the subject of the wardrobe of the bride. Knowing quite well that her grandfather would give in, she had wired to *belle* grand'mère from England, telling her what things she would require for the wedding.

Accordingly a huge parcel arrived, containing muslins, silks, laces, hats, gloves, stockings, shoes. Was not Margot busy during that fortnight? Was not Bride busy helping? Did not Eileen show the taste she—Margot—had in a far greater degree? The bride was the most indifferent of all, for did not Samuel come at all hours to her window and sing out to her: "Norah me honey, Norah, asthore;" and was not the entire place alive with the excitement of a wedding in the Desmond family?

It was Margot herself, however, who superintended the making of the bride's dress. She hired a [Pg 381] sewing-machine; and bought the softest cream satin, suitable for a bride of eighteen, and saw that it was properly cut and prepared for old-young Auntie Norah.

At last the wedding day arrived, and a great feast was to be held in the huge dining-room when the ceremony was at an end. Nothing could take Norah's fifty years from her,

but Margot arranged her hair in a marvellous style, and put a bunch of white roses into her dress, and made her look as no one else could have made her look.

"To be sure, she passes the years wonderful," said one old crone to another.

But it was at the wedding breakfast that little Margot shone in all her glory. She was in very simple, pure white, and her cheeks were flushed a little deeper than usual, and her eyes shone with a softer and more beautiful light. By The Desmond's desire there was a chair placed for Margot next to himself. He sat at the head of the board, but in such a position that he could not see the old bride and bridegroom.

"Margot," he whispered, "pushkeen asthore, they'll be making speeches to drown ye like, and they'll be expecting me to take my turn. Will you do it for me, little Margot?"

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"I do it?" said Margot. "What sort is a speech, granddad?"

"What comes into your head and what ye lets out. That's a speech."

"Oh, that's easy enough," said Margot. "May I say that I'm speaking for you?"

"Ye may, pushkeen asthore."

So when the right moment arrived, a very, very tall old man, of immense breadth of stature as well, stood up, holding the hand of a lovely little dark girl.

"My granddad is tired," began Margot, "and he can't speak what he thinks, so he has put his thoughts into me. There's a bride and there's a bridegroom sitting beyont. They were married in church this morning. They are both of them young, for their hearts are young, and they are mighty fond of each other entirely; and my granddad, he wishes me to say ___"

"Whist, pushkeen," came from the lips of the old man. But pushkeen could not be stopped at that moment. She was looking straight into the happy eyes of old-young Aunt Norah, and into the blissful face of old-young Uncle Samuel.

"I'm wishing you," she said, "me and my grandfather, long, long life and prosperity. I'm wishing that your happiness may continue and you may [Pg 383]always, as long as you live, play *puss-in-the-corner* and *blind man's buff*. I'm thinking it's a very good way to begin to get married, by playing those games; and I recommend them to the rest of my uncles and aunts. I'll look out for husbands for them if I can, and for wives for the boys if I can, but for me myself I don't mean to marry, being altogether too much occupied, having one so precious as my granddad to live with forever and forever. Amen."

"Isn't she exactly like the Romney?" said a quaint old lady who was one of the guests invited for the occasion.

"Yes, to be sure, only handsomer," said her companion.

"She's the sweetest, most uncommon child I ever saw," said the first lady; "and doesn't the old man love her? He's bound up in her, bless her little heart."

A few minutes later Norah went upstairs to change her bridal robes and put on the going-away dress which Margot had selected for her. She never felt so stylish in her life, nor so tearful, nor so happy.

"Why, Margot," she said, turning round and looking at the child. "It was you that did it all—all. There was a time when I hated you. But for you, I can plainly see now that I'd never have got[Pg 384] my Sam. Oh, Margot, I *am* happy. And tell me, what does the Rev. John Mansfield think of the holy man?"

"He loves him; he can't do more," said Margot.

"And you love him, don't you, Margot?"

"For your sake I'll begin to twist myself in that direction," said Margot. "Now hurry, auntie, hurry, or you'll miss your train."

A beautiful carriage had been provided. This had been secured out of the proceeds of a small cheque which *la belle* grand'mère had sent to Margot for the wedding; and the bride and bridegroom, when they went away, were not obliged to step into Phinias Maloney's trap.

"For all God's mercies, let's be thankful for that," said Aunt Norah.

But Margot, as she watched them go and helped to throw slippers and rice after them, felt that she herself would prefer the little trap.

"The house is well quit of them," whispered The Desmond; but Margot would not allow him to say these words aloud.

"It's her wedding day; it has come a bit late, but let her be happy in it, granddad."

"Right you are, my dove, my blossom;" and then they sat down—the old, old man, and the young[Pg 385] child—to examine some flowers by the aid of a microscope.

All was indeed well in the heart of little Margot. She and her grandfather were in the midst of their game, and as a matter of fact, had forgotten Norah and her husband when Fergus came in.

"This is a lucky day in the Desmond family," he said, "and to complete it utterly, I think we ought to present little Margot with the deed of gift which will secure to her the Romney picture whenever you pass from this world to a better, dear sir."

"Oh, I won't take it if it means *that*," said Margot. "I want granddad to live forever and ever."

"But I can't do that, my child; no one can. You are quite right, Fergus, my son. The Romney is mine for my life, and I think my life will last for some time yet with such a little dear to put life and joy into it; but I should like to sign the document now to make all sure and safe. She *is* the little Romney, only just twice as beautiful. But we can have the deed signed at once, my son."

So the deed, which Margot did not in the least understand, was brought in by a very old man, who was a solicitor from the city of Cork; and a great many names were put in

certain places, and the old Desmond signed his name, and Fergus Desmond his [Pg 386] name, and the little Margot was requested to write certain words in her clear, childish writing:

"I accept this picture as a most sacred gift whenever my grandfather, The Desmond, goes up to God."

But the signing of this paper, coming on top of everything else, was almost too much for the sensitive child. She had to rush from the room to keep back her tears, for a Desmond, a proper Desmond, *must* not cry.

"I tell you what, father," said Fergus, "I have been thinking that as I, *too*, shall never marry—for I don't care for the colleens round this part—and so, in this case, I shall eventually leave Desmondstown to the little pushkeen, she might take back the name of Desmond, and if she marries, as marry she will some day, her husband must take the name with the property. Somehow, since she came to us everything has prospered in the most wonderful way, and I'm paying off the mortgages, and Desmondstown will be clear of all debt long before you die, father. What do you think of the little dear taking back the old name?"

"I say goroosh! I say hurrah! I say hip, hip, hurrah! I say Erin-go-bragh! I say the Desmonds forever; and beyond and above all other things, I say God bless the little Desmond, the future owner of the Romney. God bless and keep her forever!"

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"Granddad, *what* a noise you are making," said Margot, coming in at that moment, having got over her tears.

"It was about you, my pushkeen. It's all settled and you are to be a Desmond forever and forever and forever!"

Little Margot did not understand, but she was happy beyond words; and what *could* it matter about understanding when you are happy—too happy even to speak?

THE END.

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