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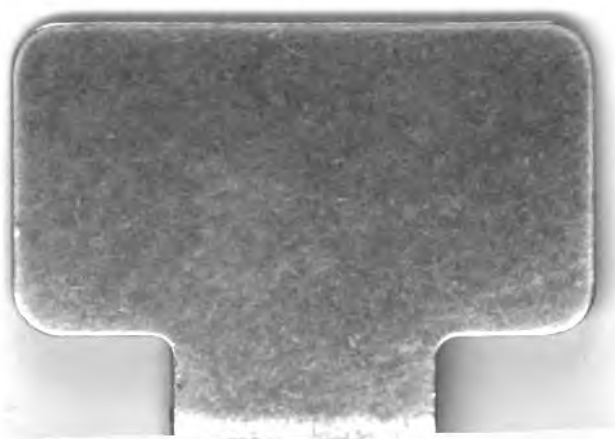
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A YEAR AT COVERLEY



BY

ANNIE · S · SWAN ·



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LONDON: BLACKIE & SON, 49 & 50 OLD BAILEY, E.C.;
GLASGOW, EDINBURGH, AND DUBLIN.

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

A YEAR AT COVERLEY.



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"WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN DOING, LOUIS?"

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A YEAR AT COVERLEY.

BY

ANNIE S. SWAN,

Author of "Aldersyde."



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1884.

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A YEAR AT COVERLEY.

CHAPTER I.

NEWS.

THE young Raynes thought there could not be, all the world over, so dear and beautiful a spot as Coverley. Other people did not think it such a desirable place, though it had a lovely situation and was so picturesque to look at, but the five Raynes thought it quite perfect in every respect; and most assuredly there never was a home so well fitted for all the needs and pleasures of childhood. It had a great wild garden which nobody ever cultivated, and in which each child had a plot; and which opened out into a large paddock where Bobby,

the old pony, browsed peacefully when he was not in requisition for driving or riding.

The father of the Raynes was a physician with a large practice, but he was not a rich man. Their mother was—well, just *mother*; I need not say any more.

Hubert, the eldest of the five, was at Eton; then came Mabel, a gentle-eyed sweet-tempered girl of twelve; then Charlie, a good-natured rather stupid boy, whom everybody liked; then Sunbeam, or Katherina Mary, as she would say with great dignity sometimes, a wild laughing sunny-hearted sprite brimming over with happiness and love to every human being. Then there was a fat baby just able to toddle alone. So now you have been introduced to all the Raynes, and I will go on with my story.

On a raw damp January morning Dr. and Mrs. Rayne were alone together in the dining-room. Breakfast was over, and the children were in the school-room with their governess. Mrs. Rayne was sitting at the table looking at an open letter with an anxious and perplexed expression on her sweet motherly face. The doctor was standing on the hearth looking expectantly at his wife, as if waiting, and waiting

with very remarkable patience, for her to say something.

"Well, Mamma?" he said presently, in a slightly questioning tone.

"I suppose they must come," said Mrs. Rayne, with a half sigh. "In fact we are given no alternative. William simply says the doctors order a voyage to Australia for Marion, and that the children will be sent here on Monday."

Dr. Rayne laughed.

"That is William's way, dear. Read a little further, his offer is very liberal."

"So I see; but it will upset this house, I fear," said Mrs. Rayne. "I remember Louis and Fanny as very spoiled children five years ago. What if they don't agree with our little ones, Papa? and they will be here a year at any-rate."

"Don't worry, dear, let the poor little mortals come. *You* will do them good if anybody can, and children's quarrels are only summer squalls. Well, I must run; good-morning," said Dr. Rayne in his light-hearted way, and, stooping to kiss his wife, went off on his rounds.

Mrs. Rayne sat quite ten minutes after her husband left her, thinking over the letter, and the advent of two strangers into her home.

She was not pleased about it, for there was sufficient work in the house already for herself and the two maids, and the little Vernons had been accustomed all their lives to every luxury which money could buy.

Mr. Vernon was Mrs. Rayne's cousin, and the owner of a large estate in Herefordshire, where he seldom resided owing to his wife's delicate health. The weak ailing mother had been unable to give to her children any training, and Mr. Vernon could see no faults in them, nor any need for correction; consequently they had grown up self-willed, idle, and quarrelsome. Never having had a whim or fancy crossed in their short lives, they could not brook contradiction, and were the very plague of the servants' lives at Vernon Lee. Mrs. Rayne knew all this very well, so you will not wonder that she did not regard their coming with pleasure. By and by she rose, folded up the letter, rang the bell for Ellen to remove the breakfast tray, and went upstairs to the school-room.

Mabel was practising her music, but paused at this unusual visit of her mother. At the table Miss King was giving Charlie and Kitty a history lesson, which she, too, stopped when

Mrs. Rayne entered the room. The governess was a woman past her early youth, very plain-featured and uninteresting in appearance, but she was an accomplished teacher, and a person of kindly yet firm disposition. She was much respected by Dr. and Mrs. Rayne, and the children had learned to love her during the four years she had been with them.

"Excuse me for interrupting you, Miss King, but I have just come to tell you that you will have two additions to your scholars next week. Mabel, dear, your cousins Louis and Fanny are coming from Vernon Lee on Monday," said Mrs. Rayne.

"Will they remain a long time, Mamma?" asked Mabel.

"About a year, I think. Poor Aunt Marion is very ill, and Uncle William is going to take her to Australia, as the doctors recommend a long sea voyage. So as Louis and Fanny cannot go they are coming to us."

"Oh, Mamma, how jolly!" cried Charlie. "Louis will do for me to play with. How old is he?"

"About thirteen, dear; Fanny is eleven. Miss King, we can talk this matter over again,"

she added to the governess. "There will have to be some new arrangement about the lessons, so as to make as little difference as possible to you."

"I shall be quite pleased with my two new pupils, Mrs. Rayne," replied the governess, grateful for Mrs. Rayne's never-failing consideration. They will make very little difference, as they are all nearly of an age. It is as easy to give a lesson to four as to two."

Mrs. Rayne smiled, and laid her hand a moment on the shoulder of the governess.

"You are a great help and comfort to me, Miss King," she said in her gentle way, which, to the governess, was sufficient reward. "Well, I must go and see about rooms for the strangers. I think Miss King will give you a half-holiday to-day. I shall want you to go to Arnborough with me after dinner, Mabel."

Then she went away, and Miss King continued her lessons. But the thoughts of the pupils wandered, in spite of themselves, to the event which was to make such a difference to Coverley.

CHAPTER II.

THE NEW ARRIVALS.

THERE was great excitement at Coverley on Monday evening when the travellers were expected from Herefordshire. Tea was delayed an hour on their account, so that Baby and Kitty were in bed, and only Mabel and Charlie waiting with Mrs. Rayne in the dining-room when the dog-cart drove up to the door.

Mrs. Rayne immediately hurried out to the hall, and Charlie, unable to restrain his excitement, began to walk restlessly up and down the floor. Nothing ever excited Mabel; she possessed one of the calmest and most equable temperaments in the world, and she sat quite still on her chair, laughing at Charlie's exhibition of restlessness.

In a few minutes Mrs. Rayne re-entered the dining-room, leading by the hand a little girl wrapped up in costly furs, so closely and warmly that only the tip of her nose and a pair of rather weak-looking blue eyes were visible. Behind came a lad quite as tall as Hubert, who

prided himself on his height, but much more slenderly built.

"Mabel, dear, here are Louis and Fanny. You will make friends with my little ones, dear," she added to Fanny, and beginning at once to unfasten her wraps.

Mabel came forward with outstretched hand, and offered to kiss Fanny, but she drew back petulantly, shook off Mrs. Rayne's hand, and tossed her fur cloak to the floor.

Meanwhile Louis had given the tips of his fingers patronizingly to Charlie, and then offered them to Mabel.

"Are you going to have tea now? how funny! We dine at eight at home," he said, glancing rather contemptuously at the table. "I am frightfully hungry. Will it be long, Aunt Emily?"

"No, dear; in just a few minutes. You had better come upstairs with me, and I shall show you your room, and you can remove your boots."

"All right; hurry up!" he said familiarly, and stalked out of the room, followed by Mrs. Rayne and Fanny, and leaving Charlie and Mabel in a state of considerable astonishment.

"Oh, I say, Mab!" began Charlie; but find-

ing words quite inadequate for his feelings, gave vent to a long whistle, and finally executed a kind of war-dance round the table.

In about a quarter of an hour Louis reappeared, and going over to the hearth, drew in a chair just in front, and took up all the fireplace.

"I say, this is surely Greenland; what a wretched old thing that is we came up from the station in. Why doesn't Uncle Hubert get a carriage?"

"Ask him," said Charlie expressively, and giving Mabel a look which nearly upset her gravity.

"You are quite a young lady, Cousin Mabel, and rather pretty," continued the precocious youth, leaning back in his chair and fixing his eyes critically on Mabel's fair face. "Isn't there a brother older than you?"

"Yes, Hubert; he is at Eton," replied Mabel a little dryly, not being greatly impressed by her cousin's manner.

"I hope Uncle Hubert will bring him home jolly soon, anyway, or I shall not be able to support life without a chum."

Just then Dr. Rayne entered the room and glanced at the lad in the chair with a curious look in his eyes.

"Holloa, young man! monarch of all you survey, eh? but it won't do, there are other monarchs in Coverley, and we go by shares, so move round a little. Where's Mamma? are we to have any tea, I wonder?"

"Here's Mamma and tea too," said Mrs. Rayne's pleasant voice, and she entered the room followed by Fanny, and they all took their places at the table. Now that her cousin was divested of her outer wraps Mabel got a good look at her. She was tall for her age, and dressed too richly and elaborately for a child. She looked delicate, and her face wore a discontented peevish expression which marred any beauty it might have possessed. She sat perfectly silent during the meal, but Louis talked so much and so boastingly that his uncle had to administer a mild reproof, whereat he coloured up and answered in a hasty and unbecoming manner. Dr. Rayne said nothing, only his mouth became very stern, and his own children knew he was angry. Louis Vernon was supremely indifferent whether he had offended or not, but he was to learn very soon that obedience and respect were among the lessons taught at Coverley.

All were glad when the meal was at an end, and Mrs. Rayne took Fanny up to bed at once. She was to share Mabel's room—which was rather a trial to Mabel, though she would not for worlds have hinted to her mother that she felt about it at all. Mabel Rayne was by nature and habit so unselfish and thoughtful that she would suffer all kinds of inconveniences herself rather than inconvenience others.

Finding the dining-room not altogether to his liking, Louis very shortly followed his sister's example and went up to his own room. Charlie and Mabel lingered a little while, anxious to hear a little more about the strangers.

"He isn't any use for me," said Charlie, so dolefully that his father laughed. "He isn't half such fun as Hubert, and he is fourteen."

"They are both old for their years, but they have never had any society except their own," replied the doctor; "perhaps they will improve at Coverley. Now off to bed; it's half-past nine, see! Good-night!"

Both children, not dreaming of begging to sit up a little longer, bade Papa and Mamma good-night, and went off together. Half-way upstairs they sat down on a step and looked at

each other blankly for a moment. Then Charlie laughed.

"Pokey, isn't it, Mab?"

"Very," was her brief but expressive reply.

"Louis is a prig, a worse one than Jimmy Walton, Hubert fetched with him from Eton two years ago. What'll I do?"

"What'll *I* do?" repeated Mabel dismally; "you dont have to have him in your room at nights, and I have to give Fanny half of mine."

"Never mind," said Charlie reassuringly; "but I say, our good times are all over—I feel it. Well, I'm off; there's Papa at the dining-room door; good-night!"

Mabel nodded, and running lightly up the steps, entered her own room. The gas was lowered, and she did not turn it up for fear of waking her cousin. Stealing softly over to the side of the bed before she began to undress, she held back the curtain and looked at her. She was asleep, and her face was pleasant, pretty almost in its expression of perfect peace. There were traces of tears on her cheeks, and somehow Mabel's kind heart went out in a rush of pity and tenderness to the poor child who had cried herself to sleep, doubtless thinking of her mother.

"I will be good to her," she whispered softly to herself; "poor Fanny! I wonder how I should feel if it were my precious mamma who had gone to Australia. Yes, I'll be as kind to her as I can."

And Mabel kept her word.

CHAPTER III.

THE NEXT MORNING.

EIGHT o'clock was the breakfast hour at Coverley.

At half-past seven Ellen knocked at Mabel's door, and she jumped up at once, knowing by experience that every minute spent in bed after awaking made it the harder to get up.

It was nearly dark in the room, and very cold, for it was the depth of winter. She ran across the floor, drew up the blind, and then stood still, uttering a little cry of delight. It had snowed in the night, and it was lying quite three inches deep, while every hedge and tree had its pure and graceful covering, and even the ivy had a lovely fretwork of frosted snow on the leaves.

Away down in the hollow the clustering roofs of Gaythorpe lay white and dazzling in the clear light of the new day; and the whole world about Coverley was as fair and beautiful a picture as eyes could wish to see.

"Oh, I say, Cousin Fanny, do get up and see the snow!" she cried. "You never saw anything so lovely in your life. We shall have some fun to-day."

Fanny opened her sleepy eyes, and looked round rather ungraciously. "Why did you wake me? I hate snow, it is so frightfully cold. I'm sure it must be in the night yet, it is so dark."

"No, indeed, it is twenty minutes to eight, and the first bell will ring for breakfast in a quarter of an hour. Aren't you going to get up?"

"At this time! no, thank you," said Fanny, pulling the clothes up round her neck. "At home we didn't breakfast till ten, sometimes eleven."

"Why, we are thinking of dinner at eleven," laughed Mabel. "And we begin lessons at nine. However, I daresay Mamma won't mind though you are late this morning; you must be tired."

There was no response, and presently Fanny was sound asleep again.

Mabel got on her things hurriedly, for it was certainly very cold, and then pouring some water into the basin, plunged face and hands into it with great good-will. When that was over she was as fresh as a daisy. While she was brushing her hair there came a tiny tap to the door. "May I come in, Mab?" asked the sweet ringing tones of a child's voice.

"Yes, dear," and in a moment Kitty had bounded into the room, and held up her face to be kissed. I wish I could tell you how sweet, and pretty, and delightful to see was Kitty Rayne. She was the beauty of the family, as well as the pet and plaything and darling of them all. She was just six, and so slightly built that she was like a fairy flitting about the house, and so full of fun and nonsense and merriment, that she was a sunbeam as well as a fairy. In fact "Sunbeam" was quite as much her name as Kitty.

"Is that Cousin Fanny?" she whispered, glancing towards the bed. "I came to see her; why doesn't she get up?"

"She's asleep," said Mabel, and in a moment

Kitty was on the top of the bed, pulling down the clothes from her cousin's face, her lovely eyes brimming over with fun.

"Oh, I say, stop, who's that?" said Fanny crossly. "Don't pull all the clothes off, I'm starving of cold."

"Well, get up, it's five minutes to eight, there's the bell," said Kitty serenely. "Oh, Cousin Fanny, what a cross face, I wouldn't kiss you for anything!"

"I don't want you to; get off my bed. Cousin Mabel, I wonder you don't teach your sister better manners," said Fanny, more crossly still. Then Kitty's face fell, and slipping from the bed she ran out of the room. Mabel fastened her collar before she spoke.

"You musn't mind Kitty, she is so full of fun; she is always doing some queer thing," she said gently. "She would not annoy or hurt you for the world."

"All right! don't let her come in again. Are you away? Tell Aunt Emily I am too sleepy to get up," said Fanny drowsily; and when Mabel looked back at the bed she saw her cousin pull the clothes right over her head and compose herself for another nap.

Breakfast was begun without either of the new members of the family; but towards the end of the meal Louis appeared without a collar on, and he had evidently neglected to brush his hair. Mrs. Rayne noted these things, and resolved to tell him about it quietly later in the day. It was one of the rules at Coverley that all should appear neat and tidy at the breakfast table, Mrs. Rayne herself setting the example. She spoke to him pleasantly, made room for him beside her, but Louis was cross and sulky this morning, for what reason was best known to himself, seeing that Mrs. Rayne left him alone, and the others chatted pleasantly together, making plans for the building of snow forts, and expressing many hopes that Coverley Pond would be safe for skating by to-morrow.

"I think we shall have three holidays this week, dears," said Mrs. Rayne, "if Miss King will permit us. And you will have time to show Louis and Fanny all there is to be seen at Coverley and round about."

Charlie clapped his hands, Mabel looked pleased, and Kitty uttered an exclamation of delight. Only Louis preserved his sullen demeanour, and presently rose from the table,

and, striding over to the window, began to whistle, greatly to Dr. Rayne's annoyance.

"Run outside if you want to whistle, my boy," he said pleasantly; and Louis stopped immediately, but his face was not pleasant to see.

Presently the children left the dining-room to hunt for their show-shoes; then Mrs. Rayne went up to Louis and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Are you quite well, dear?" she said in her kind way; "you look so out of sorts."

"Yes, well enough; but I don't think I shall like this place, and I don't see why Papa need have left us in England," he said sullenly, and went away out of the room.

When they were alone Dr. Rayne and his wife looked at each other a moment in silence.

"I am afraid you were right, and I was wrong, dear, and that William's children will make trouble at Coverley," said the doctor at length.

Mrs. Rayne sighed. Her heart was heavy somehow, she could not tell why.

"I hope not, poor things. They seem very miserable, both of them, and they have been woefully neglected. But we will do our best,

and who knows but that with kind but firm and wise dealing Coverley may prove the birth-place of a new life for them both."

CHAPTER IV.

LOUIS IN TROUBLE.

THE Vernons were far behind in their lessons. There had been a tutor at Vernon Lee, but Mr. Vernon did not uphold his authority, and as Louis only learned when he pleased (and that was very seldom indeed), the post had been a sinecure, and teaching hours a myth. Dr. and Mrs. Rayne, after talking the matter over, decided to ask Mr. Tremaine, the rector of Gaythorpe, to take Louis for lessons every day. He was too old to be placed with a governess, even supposing his disposition had been more amiable than it was. Fanny, of course, went to the school-room with the others, but she was so idle and peevish and disobedient that she occasioned Miss King more trouble than all the rest of her pupils combined. Louis made a wry face when he was told, a week later,

that he must walk to the rectory every morning at ten o'clock; but even in these few days he had learned that he must obey at Coverley, therefore he did not demur.

He altogether ignored Charlie's existence, greatly to that young gentleman's disgust. When he did speak to him it was to address him as "kid" or "youngster," terms which Charlie highly resented, and which tried his good nature to the utmost. But he did his best not to quarrel with Louis, and kept out of his way as much as possible. Disdaining the society of his cousins, it was natural that Louis Vernon should seek out other companions for himself, and as there were no lads of his own age and station near Coverley he began to associate with Ben Barton, the idle good-for-nothing son of the landlady of the Whitefeather Inn in Gaythorpe. Ben, you may be sure, was only too glad to make friends with so fine a young gentleman as Louis Vernon, who had always plenty of money in his pockets, and was not loath to spend it either, so the two became inseparable companions, and Louis began to learn all kinds of mischief from Ben Barton, and to think very lightly of such sins as lying, swearing, and even

drinking. He had to tell falsehoods to his uncle and aunt to account for his long absences from Coverley, and they were easily deceived because his stories had all the semblance of reality, and because the children of Coverley were all as truthful and as open as the day in every action of their lives.

One afternoon, about a month after the arrival of the Vernons at Coverley, Dr. Rayne, riding home from Arnborough, saw, as he passed the rectory gate, the figure of the rector busy in his garden. He drew rein, and they spoke for a few minutes over the wall.

"How does Louis get on, Mr. Tremaine?" asked the doctor after a few general remarks.

"Slowly; he is very indolent, Doctor; his wits are sharp enough if he had energy to exercise them. Been spoilt at home, I fancy."

The doctor nodded.

"Ay, I remember his mother when she was giddy pleasure-loving Marion Churchill. I should think she will make a very indifferent mother," said the clergyman gravely. "I say, Doctor, I have often wondered whether you are aware of your nephew's intimacy with that idle wickedly-inclined lad down at the Whitefeather."

The doctor looked genuinely astonished.

"With Ben Barton? no! Louis does not make a companion of him, does he?"

"More than that, they are bosom friends, and it is a very broad road they are upon at present. I met the pair last night away over by the Upland Farm smoking as if they were thirty instead of thirteen. I hate to tell tales, but a word from you might influence him."

The doctor looked very stern.

"Last night!" he repeated. "Was he not giving your pony an airing last night, Mr. Tremaine?"

"My pony! My dear sir, I rode him myself to Prendergast to see a sick person. I was on his back when I met the lads; I took a by-path through the fields, and it was just at the edge of Squire Courtenay's preserves I met them. Ben Barton was there for no good. He has been fined at Arnborough for poaching before to-day, Dr. Rayne."

"This is very serious. I fear Louis has been telling us downright lies for a time back. Is he never out with your Tom in the evenings, Mr. Tremaine?"

The rector shook his head. "Tom doesn't

like him, that's the truth, Doctor, and they merely exchange words."

Still sterner grew the doctor's face.

"I was hardly prepared for this. Well, I must be off; good-afternoon. I shall clear up this affair, you may be sure, Mr. Tremaine," he said, and rode off at a brisk trot, in a distressed and annoyed frame of mind.

It was nearly five o'clock when he reached Coverley, and dinner had been waiting for an hour, but he did not go at once to the dining-room. "Where's Louis?" he asked Ellen when she opened the door.

"Out about the stables, sir, with Master Charlie," Ellen answered, and her master strode off in the direction of the stables at once.

He found the boys in the stable loft, Louis busy with some pieces of wood, making a snare to catch rabbits, but that, of course, neither Charlie nor the doctor knew.

"Run into the house, my son," said the doctor to Charlie. "Wait, Louis, I have something to say to you."

Charlie slipped off at once knowing Louis was in some scrape; then Dr. Rayne bent a pair of stern and searching eyes on his nephew's face.

"Where were you last night, Louis, that you did not appear at Coverley till nine o'clock?"

"I told you, Uncle Hubert. Tom Tremaine and I were out with his father's pony," answered Louis, his face changing somewhat.

"You are telling me a deliberate falsehood, Louis!" said his uncle in his sternest tones. "Mr. Tremaine told me he met you up at the Upland Farm last night, and you were not alone—who was your companion?"

"Ben Barton; and Tremaine is a mean sneak. What if I do walk round the Upland Farm with Ben Barton of an evening, is there anything in that to kick up a row about?"

"Speak more respectfully, if you please!" said Dr. Rayne. "Now listen to me, Louis. Ben Barton is no fit companion for you. I would not permit any of my boys to be intimate with him. He has been a wicked disobedient boy all his life, and is likely to turn out a truly bad man. Even if he were not that, he is too far beneath you in station to permit of such intimacy between you, so it must be put a stop to. I say it, and I expect to be obeyed."

"I was chummy with all the grooms and keepers at Vernon Lee, and my father never

made a row about it," said Louis with sullen defiance.

"That has nothing to do with this question. You are under my roof at present, and I require you to obey me," said Dr. Rayne quietly. "I am speaking only for your good, my boy."

A dull red flush overspread the face of Louis Vernon, and his under lip quivered with passion. During all the thirteen years of his life he had never been spoken to like that, and it seemed as if every evil impulse in his nature rose up in wild anger against his uncle.

"I won't obey you! I'll have who I like for my friends!" he burst forth in fury. "I'm not a baby to be ordered about like that. I hate this place—I wish I'd never come to it. I'll write to my father and tell him how you treat us. I—"

The next moment, to the lad's unutterable astonishment, his uncle was gone, and the grating of the key in the door told him that it was not intended that he should follow.

Yes, insult had been added to injury, and he, Louis Vernon, who regarded himself in the light of a man, was locked into the stable loft,

just as if he was a six-year-old punished for a childish misdemeanour.

Uncle Hubert was not easily roused, but when really angry he administered justice so little tempered by mercy that sometimes Aunt Emily herself had to interfere.

CHAPTER V.

FOR SUNBEAM'S SAKE.

IF there was one individual at Coverley who really loved Louis it was Sunbeam. She was not afraid even of his sulkiest moods, and would laugh at and tease him till he was obliged to smile and have a romp with her. Nobody could possibly resist Sunbeam's ways, they were so winning and so sweet, and she herself was so bright, and happy, and sunshiny, just like her name.

Louis, of course, was not at the dinner-table that night, and when Sunbeam came in to dessert, and saw her papa's face, she knew that Louis must have been doing something which had made him very angry indeed. By-and-by

she crept round to his chair and laid her hand on his arm.

"Where's Louis, Papa?" she whispered.

"Louis has been naughty, dear," answered the doctor gravely.

"Is he not to have any dinner, Papa?"

"No, dear, till he is in a better frame of mind."

"But, Papa, surely he must have been *very* naughty not to get any dinner. I am sure he is sorry if he made you angry. May I go and ask cook for something and take it up to him?"

"No, Kitty. Louis is not to have any dinner till he comes and talks to me. He knows that. You will not take anything to him, dear."

"Oh no, Papa, not when you say I mustn't; but I'm very sorry for poor Louis," said Sunbeam softly, and stole away out of the room, to beg a little milk for her kittens, who lived with their mother, dear, cross, old Toddles, out in the stable.

It was a funny yet touching sight to see Sunbeam feeding her cats. She carried a little basin of milk in one hand, and some pieces of bread in the other, and going into the stable she

called to Toddles, who immediately came running out of her nest among the hay, followed by two fluffy little gray kittens, just like balls with very wee faces, and great staring black eyes.

“Now, Toddles, my dear, do teach your children better manners,” she said, sitting down and beginning to break the bread into the basin, while the kittens clambered all over her. “I really am quite ashamed of them, and of you, you lazy old thing, for letting them be so rude. There now, don’t be greedy, eat nicely, genteelly, as cook says. Isn’t it nice? Well, be grateful, for poor Cousin Louis has had no dinner. Oh, dear, I am so sorry for Louis!”

At that moment the noise of someone walking in the loft overhead made Sunbeam jump up, and run round and up the outside steps to the door. It was locked and the key was gone, so who could be there?

“Who’s in, who’s walking about?” she called through the keyhole; but there was no response. Then Sunbeam bethought herself of a little trap-door, opening through the roof of the harness-room into the loft, and in a second she was flying down the steps, and in another was in the

harness-room, scrambling up the narrow ladder to the trap-door. Sunbeam's arms were not very strong; but it was a very tiny door, and not stiff on its hinges, so, by a mighty effort, she swung it back, and poked her head out. And there was Louis sitting whittling a stick on a bag of corn.

"Louis! I say Louis, what are you doing there?" she squeaked.

"Hulloa, Kit! what are *you* doing there? Where did you come from? I didn't know there was a door there," said Louis.

"Yes there is; I'm coming through, see. If I fall down I'll be killed likely, then there'll be a funeral, and Toddles and the kittens will die of starvation, as nobody would ever mind to feed them," said Sunbeam breathlessly, and in another moment she had crawled through the door and stood upright in the loft.

"There what an—an—undertaking," said she, getting out the long word quite triumphantly. "What are you doing here, Cousin Louis?"

"Amusing myself. Uncle Hubert locked me in," said Louis grimly. "You'd better get out, Kit, in case he beats you for speaking to me."

"Papa never beats anybody," said Sunbeam

gravely. "He didn't forbid me to come, only said I hadn't to bring you any dinner."

"Oh! he said that, did he?" said Louis sarcastically. "I suppose he was making an example of me at the table?"

"No, indeed, he never said your name at the table, Louis Vernon," answered Sunbeam indignantly. "Only I asked where you were, and if I might take you some dinner, but he wouldn't tell me. I thought you were upstairs, and I came to feed my cats, and heard you walking about. What have you been doing, Louis?"

Sunbeam sat down on a sack as she said this, and crossing her small hands on her lap, looked at her cousin as gravely as a judge. Somehow, at sight of that dear, sweet, childish face, all feelings of anger and resentment died out of the boy's heart.

"Tell me what you were doing, do tell me, Louis," pleaded Sunbeam. "It must have been something bad, surely, for Papa was very angry."

"I went out walking with Ben Barton last night; that's what Uncle's mad about," said Louis.

Sunbeam opened her eyes very wide. "Ben Barton, Louis! that bad, wicked, cruel boy,

who robs poor little birds' nests, and drowns cats, and throws stones at dogs, and who has even been in jail! I don't wonder Papa was angry."

Louis was silent, somewhat ashamed of himself, it must be told. His uncle's anger had only hardened him, but Sunbeam's sorrowful surprise was a very different thing, and very much harder to bear.

Presently she slipped from her seat, and coming very close to her cousin, laid one pleading arm about his neck. He would have permitted no one else, not even Fanny, to take such a liberty with him.

"Dear Louis," said the sweet voice, "don't go with Ben Barton; you might learn to be like him, and then we couldn't love you, you know."

"Who loves me here, I'd like to know? Uncle Hubert doesn't; Aunt Emily doesn't; Mabel looks at me in a quiet way, as if I were a snake."

"*I* love you, Cousin Louis," said Sunbeam softly.

"You are a good little soul, Kit, the best of the lot," said Louis less bitterly, and there followed a little silence.

"Suppose we go down now, and you have some dinner," suggested Sunbeam presently.

"Can't; Uncle Hubert locked me up; must stay here till he lets me out."

"Well, but if you tell him you are sorry—I know you are sorry, Louis—it will be all right. Come on, down the trap-door; what fun!"

Louis threw away the stick he was whittling, shut up his knife, and began to whistle.

"Come on, Cousin Louis," urged Sunbeam, already moving towards the trap-door.

He hesitated a moment, but he was very hungry, and Sunbeam had made him ashamed of his rudeness to his uncle.

"All right, Kit, lead on. I don't know how on earth you manage it, but you always make me do what you want."

"Everybody does what I want," said Sunbeam contentedly. "I guess it's because I love the whole world; Mamma says so. You go down first, and then you can help me. It's worse going down than coming up."

In a very few minutes the pair were safely landed on the ground, and keeping firm hold of her cousin's hand, Sunbeam hurried him towards the house. Two pairs of eyes watched them

from the drawing-room window, unobserved. They encountered no one, except Ellen, in the hall, who told Sunbeam her father and mother were in the drawing-room.

So the pair went up together, but at the drawing-room door Sunbeam stopped and said she would wait for him outside. So scarcely believing what he was about to do Louis opened the door and marched straight up to his uncle.

"I'm sorry I was so rude to you, Uncle Hubert," said he with an astonishing amount of frankness; "and I'll try to remember what you said about Ben Barton," and they heard him mutter under his breath, "for Sunbeam's sake."

"That's right, my lad!" said the doctor, taking his nephew's hand in a strong hearty grasp; "this is manly, and I'm proud and glad to see it—now off and have some dinner."

"Yes, sir," said Hubert confusedly; but before he had time to go he felt a gentle hand touch his shoulder, and Aunt Emily bent over him and kissed him for the first time since he came to Coverley.

"God bless and help you, Louis!" she whispered very earnestly; and Louis hurried out of the room.

"Sunbeam's doing, Emily," said the doctor, with a falter in his voice; "bless the child; what a heart she has!"

"Yes," answered Mrs. Rayne with a smile and a tear. "God bless her! she is rightly named a Sunbeam."

CHAPTER VI.

FANNY'S LESSON.

"**I** REALLY wish I had a new dress," said Fanny Vernon discontentedly one Saturday afternoon when Mabel and she were in the school-room together. Mabel was busy making a needle-case of satin and crewel-work for her mother's birth-day gift, and Fanny was lying on the hearth-rug with her head on a stool, heartily sick of herself, longing for something to do, yet too indolent to exert herself in the slightest.

"A new dress, Fanny! why, you have five or six, I am sure, quite good. You can't wear more than one at a time anyway."

"No, but I am sick of that old silk, and that ugly blue merino, and this check, and—"

"You are always sick of something, Fanny. What a miserable little creature you must be!"

"It's this place. I should die if I lived here always. At home there was always something new, and I had a dress whenever I wanted one; sometimes I got three new at once. I shall want a dozen, I expect, when Mamma comes home, to make up for wearing old ones so long. I say, don't you get sick to death of that old gray tweed?"

Mabel looked at her neat and pretty dress with affectionate eyes.

"No, I always like things I have worn for a bit; they get like old friends. I say, Fanny, do get something to do. How *can* you lie idle half a day?"

"Nicely," answered Fanny with a yawn. "I wish I was grown up and had a maid like Mamma has, and that I could go to parties, and picnics, and balls, and have lots of pleasure, and then get married, and wear white satin and diamonds like Sir Julian's daughter did down at Hatherden."

Mabel laughed.

"You will have to wait a long time for that, Fanny."

"Not long—only seven years. I mean to marry when I am eighteen—quite old enough; Sir Julian's daughter was just nineteen. I suppose you will wait till you are thirty, and then marry Tom Tremaine, who will be the rector by that time, and sew flannels for these ugly old women and dirty children in Gaythorpe."

"Who'll sew flannels, Tom or me?" laughed Mabel.

"You. Tom'll make up sermons and read prayers. I say, hasn't Miss King gone home? What a fright she is in that ugly old black frock! Why doesn't she get a new one and make herself smart? I wouldn't look so ugly for anything."

"Nobody thinks Miss King ugly," said Mabel soberly. "I love her in that old frock, or in anything. I'm sure she is dear and kind, Fanny?"

"Oh, well, for a governess, yes. Fraulein I had at home had a frightful temper. She used to throw things at me, and Mamma said she swore in German, but I just laughed at her and never learned anything unless I wanted. Miss King is frightfully stingy, surely; why does she wear those old woollen cuffs instead of linen ones, or bracelets?"

"We have no business with what Miss King wears," said Mabel, still soberly. "There, that's done; suppose we go out and hunt for the others. I hear Sunbeam shouting, so I suppose they're having some fun."

"How can you all be so fond of that child! She is too pert for anything. Baby is nicer in my eyes," said Fanny, picking herself up lazily. "Ugh, what a dismal day! I don't think I shall go out, Mabel."

"All right, stay in, I'm off," said Mabel, putting her work in a drawer and dancing out of the room. Left alone, Fanny opened the old piano, and proceeded to bang upon it for a few minutes. In the middle of her performance Mrs. Rayne entered the room. She had been in her dressing-room, which was only separated from the school-room by a thin partition, and had overheard a part of the girls' conversation.

"All alone, Fanny!" she said pleasantly. "I am just going to drive to Arnborough with Bobbie in the phaeton—suppose you get your hat and come with me?"

"I shall be very glad, Aunt Emily," said Fanny with alacrity. "I don't know what to do with myself. I shall be ready in a minute."

In about half an hour Bobbie was trotting briskly along the smooth wide highway to Arnborough, drawing the phaeton containing Mrs. Rayne and Fanny.

Arnborough was a smoky town, in which there were a great many ironworks. When you were on the top of the hill coming down from Gaythorpe there seemed to be quite a forest of chimneys down in the hollow. The people were chiefly of the working-class, for none except those who were obliged made their residence in Arnborough. Fanny had not been in the town before, and was much interested. Her aunt drove to several shops, and made some purchases, then turned Bobbie's head down a quiet and dingy street in which there were very few shops, and where the dwellings were two-storied buildings, very black and murky to look at from without, whatever they might be within.

"I have a call to make here, Fanny," said Mrs. Rayne, drawing up Bobbie at the door of one of these houses. "Bobbie will stand quite still."

"Am I to come too, Aunt Emily?"

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Rayne.

So Fanny followed her aunt out of the car-

riage, and stood beside her while she rang the bell. To Fanny's astonishment it was answered by Miss King, who wore a shabbier gown even than the one Fanny had spoken of so slightly to Mabel, and she had a big white apron over it too, just like a housemaid.

She looked very pleased indeed to see Mrs. Rayne, and asked her in at once. Through an open door Fanny caught sight of two children playing, and wondered who they were, and what was their relationship to Miss King. The visitors were shown into the front sitting-room, which was the least dingy place in that dingy house, and there, on a sofa drawn very near to the hearth, Fanny saw the figure of a lad about sixteen, lying as if he had lain there a very long time, and was getting used to it now. His face, though painfully thin and worn, was very pleasant and peaceful to look upon, and yet it told of much weariness and suffering, more than Fanny Vernon had ever dreamed of in her life.

"Well, Walter, how are you to-day?" said Mrs. Rayne kindly; and it was easy to see, from the bright smile which touched Walter's lips, how dear and welcome a visitor she was.

"I am no worse, thank you. Is this Rachel's new pupil?" he asked, holding out his hand.

Mrs. Rayne nodded, and Fanny touched the outstretched hand, and then crept away over to the window and sat down.

"Rachel is away for Mother. She has not been so well to-day, and was lying down," Walter explained. "Is the doctor quite well?"

"Yes, thank you. Well, Mrs. King, I hope I see you a little better?"

The last words were addressed to an old white-haired lady, who just then entered the room. She looked as ill as Walter almost, only her figure was quite straight, and his was not.

"Thank you, it is only the head," replied Mrs. King. "You are well: your face tells me so."

"Coverley air keeps Mrs. Rayne in health, Mother," said Rachel King, with her wonderfully pleasant smile. "Well, excuse me, Mrs. Rayne, I have something cooking in the oven, and I must see after it."

So saying, she left the room.

Then Mrs. King turned to the visitor, smiling a little, though Fanny saw a tear on her eyelash.

"Rachel works like a slave on Saturdays, Mrs. Rayne, for Walter, and the children, and me. Last night it was one when she left off sewing, and I heard her up at five this morning. And always so cheery and pleasant, and never tired. She is an unspeakable blessing to me."

"I know it. I see it," answered Mrs. Rayne.

"She is saving up to send us all down to Sandybar in June. She is making up her old gowns for herself, and cutting up some of the very oldest for the children. She's a perfect genius, my Rachel," said the old lady, with the garrulous pride of age and motherliness.

"Nobody knows that better than we do," returned Mrs. Rayne. "Dr. Rayne was saying the other day he thought Walter might be able to get up some day off the sofa."

"I know I shall," said Walter, smiling, "when I move into a larger room."

Mrs. Rayne knew what he meant, but Fanny only wondered.

Presently Rachel came back, and they had a little talking together, and then Mrs. Rayne rose. During all this time Fanny had never spoken, but her aunt knew that nothing which had passed was lost upon her.

They drove through quite a number of streets before there was a word spoken on either side.

"Do you still wonder why Miss King wears her old gown till it is very shabby, Fanny?" asked Mrs. Rayne at length.

"Whose children are these two?" Fanny asked, just as if she had not heard the question.

"Her sister's orphans, whom Miss King pledged herself to care for. That house belongs to Mrs. King, together with a very little money. It is Miss King who supports them all; so you see now, Fanny, it is not wise to condemn the appearance of any fellow-creature. We never know what glory and loveliness of self-sacrifice may be wrapped up in the folds of an old gown."

Fanny said nothing at all, and the three miles to Coverley were accomplished in perfect silence. When they turned in at the avenue gate Fanny turned suddenly to her aunt.

"Aunt Emily!"

"Yes, dear."

"Papa gave me five sovereigns when he went away. They are in my purse yet; may I do what I like with them?"

"Let me hear what you would do."

"May I send them to Miss King to take Walter and her mother and the children to Sandybar? Send it, you know, so as she wouldn't guess where it came from."

"Yes, dear," answered Aunt Emily, and turned upon the child beside her a look Fanny had never seen before.

"I am sorry I said these things about Miss King, Aunt Emily, and I never will again, for I am quite sure she must be the best woman in the world."

So Fanny's lesson had not been learned in vain.

CHAPTER VII.

A MIDNIGHT ADVENTURE.

IT must not be supposed that though Louis had been touched that night, even to confession of his fault, he became a good boy all at once. Very far from it. For a few days only he strove to keep his word to his uncle and to Sunbeam, and did not go near the Whitefeather in the evenings. Very soon the passing influence wore off, and he would be

away for hours at a time. The evenings were lengthening, and he was not so often missed as when they were always in the house. Besides, the chill east winds of an unusually bitter spring caused much sickness among children and old or delicate folks, and Dr. Rayne was kept so busy he had not much time to think about the children.

One afternoon Louis was walking slowly up the road from the rectory towards Coverley, when he met Ben lounging, as usual, with hands in pockets and pipe in mouth. It was a mystery what attraction Louis saw in him; he was a big, rough, rather repulsive-looking fellow, with a very low type of face, and a particularly uninviting pair of black eyes.

"Hulloa, Louis!" he said familiarly. It was long since he had dropped the "Master" in addressing his companion. "Got school over, eh?"

"Yes; what's going on, Ben?"

"Nothin' particler, at least that you'd care to hear; you've been fighting so shy o' me for a while, I daren't tell you anything."

Louis looked suddenly interested.

"Oh, stuff! it's only you imagine it. Tell me something fresh."

"Well, look here; are you on for a lark, Louis?"

"I rather think I am. I'm half fossilized up yonder," answered Louis, nodding in the direction of Coverley.

"Well, I say; Jim Curtis an' me's goin' over the Upland Farm to-night, you know what for. Twelve sharp at the High Meadow gate. Are you on?"

Louis looked eager and excited, and yet dubious.

"I'm on if I could get out; but what would my uncle say?"

"Oh, well, if you're such a baby you can't expect to get a lark, of course. *We* ain't feared, and my, it is fun. I've been before in the night, and it's the best sport out. Jim's got a new snare; made it himself, the neatest little thing you ever saw."

"Well, I'll be there," said Louis firmly. "I'll climb out of my window out to the pear-tree, and then down to the scullery roof."

"That's it; twelve sharp; just before the moon's up," said Ben, and nodding familiarly, sauntered off.

Louis was in a very uneasy frame of mind all

day, but he was also eager to share the poaching expedition, especially a midnight one, which had a flavour of adventure in it, very enjoyable.

When he went to bed he carefully examined the fastenings of his window, and finding them easily adjusted, lay down on the top of the bed with his clothes on. Needless to say he did not sleep, and about half-past eleven he rose, shoved up the window very softly, and climbed out, taking care to leave it open so that he might enter without difficulty on his return. A few minutes saw him safely landed in the yard behind the scullery, standing rather forlornly in the chill darkness of a moonless March evening, and if the truth must be told, rather wishing himself safely back in bed. However, the thought of the scornful grin and chaffing words Ben would bestow on him the next time they met gave him courage, so he set off briskly down the avenue, across the highroad, and on to the squire's lands. It was twenty minutes' walk to the High Meadow gate, and to his unspeakable relief Ben and Jim Curtis were waiting for him there. The latter was the ostler at the White-feather, and to him Ben Barton owed much of his training in the ways of sin.

Curtis greeted Louis with a grin and opened the gate into the field. When they were half across he put his finger on his lips.

"Hush! we must be like mice, you fellows. No saying where Collins and the rest may be lurking, and he won't spare us if he catches us at it to-night."

Collins was the squire's head keeper, and, needless to say, the enemy of all such as Jim Curtis and Ben Barton. Louis felt a cold sweat break over him, and he actually shivered with fear, but there was nothing for it but to hold his tongue and follow his neighbours.

Away over at the edge of the Upland Wood they began to move even more stealthily and cautiously, and coming to a stand at last, Curtis took his snares out of his pocket. Stooping down he set one carefully and snugly in a rabbit-hole, and was just getting to his feet when, lo, a heavy hand was laid on his arm, and Collins flashed his lantern full in his face.

"I've got you cleanly to-night, my lad," he said grimly; and in a minute a policeman standing in the background slipped a pair of handcuffs on Curtis's wrists.

Meanwhile the underkeepers had secured Ben

and Louis, the latter as white as a sheet, and his teeth chattering in his head. Having seen the chief culprit safe Collins turned to look at the others, and you may imagine his surprise when his eyes fell on Louis Vernon, whom he knew quite well by sight.

“Hulloa, Master Vernon, *you* mixed up in this rascally business! A pretty kettle of fish for the doctor; but I can’t help it, you must march with me. I’ll give you a night’s lodgings—say good-night to your chums, they’ll sleep sound and sweet to-night in Arnborough jail.”

Louis could not reply, but suffered himself to be led off by Collins, who took him home to his own place, and locked him in an outhouse. Yes, Collins had little respect of persons; it did not matter to him though Louis Vernon was the son of a squire ten times richer than his own master. He had been found trespassing in pursuit of game, which in Collins’s eyes was a very grave offence, and must be gravely punished.

In the gray dawn Louis fell asleep through sheer exhaustion, and when he awoke the sun was shining broadly outside, but he had no idea of the time, for his watch, not having been wound up the previous night, had stopped. A

few minutes after he awoke the key turned in the lock, and Collins threw open the door.

“Walk out, young gentleman, you may go home to breakfast now, if you like. How did you like your downy pillows, eh?” he asked grimly. “I’ve just been at Coverley relieving their minds, which were rather uneasy this morning when they found the bird had flown.”

Louis crept out, too miserable and ashamed to answer a word, and he went straight home at once. He knew it was the better plan, and he did not seem to care, somehow, whether his uncle punished him or not.

He did not. He met him near the house, and stopped, looking at him with eyes in which there was more of sorrow than of anger.

“I am sorry you thought your promise so little binding, Louis,” he said gravely. “As you have so disgraced us, your aunt and I cannot of course permit you to remain at Coverley till your parents return to England. I have written to make arrangements for your return to Eton with Hubert after Easter; till then I will try to hope you will behave yourself.”

Then he passed on and Louis continued his walk to the house, feeling that a burst of

passion, or a horse-whipping even, would have been preferable to these sorrowful words.

But harder still to bear was the look of pain on Aunt Emily's face when he reached the house, and hardest of all were these words which fell from Sunbeam's lips, followed by a burst of tears:

"Oh, Cousin Louis, how could you be so wicked? I never thought you could, and now I musn't love you any more, you have made Papa and Mamma so miserable. Can't you be a good boy, Cousin Louis, won't you try?"

Louis made no reply; but if ever boy made an earnest resolution to turn over a new leaf, he did on that memorable morning at Coverley.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN HAWTHORN DELL.

THE children were gypsying down in Hawthorn Dell, a lovely spot in the woods about three miles from Coverley.

It was a beautiful and picturesque sight that sunny April afternoon: Mabel busy over her stick fire, her hands very black and her face

very red, Fanny and Hubert busy spreading the table, Charlie rubbing down the perspiration on Bobbie's shaggy sides with a bunch of grass, and Louis and Sunbeam getting the eatables out of the phaeton.

Hubert had been home a week, and he had brought sunshine and peace with him, for there had not been a cloud or a jar to break the harmony of these happy days.

Even Louis was influenced by that bright and happy spirit, liker Sunbeam's than any of the others, and the two boy cousins were, on the whole, good friends.

There had been no more stolen visits to the Whitefeather for Louis, and he was really trying to retrieve his character, and prove that he could be good if he chose. Dr. and Mrs. Rayne, never slow to appreciate honest effort in the right direction, spoke many good and helpful words to the lad, which sank deep into his heart, and would bear their fruit in after years. But nobody knew except the boy himself how much Sunbeam's love and faith had to do with his earnest striving after a better life. They were never apart, and the child's clinging to her boy cousin was something wonderful to see.

"There must be real good in Louis, Papa," said Aunt Emily once, "or Sunbeam wouldn't be so fond of him. The instinct of childhood is unerring."

"Of course there is good; but just like that garden of ours, my love, the weeds have grown stronger than the flowers, though there are many good roots in the soil. We'll make a man of Louis yet."

"I say, Louis, my eyes are about scorched out," cried Mabel presently, "come you and watch the kettle."

"Let me do it, Cousin Mabel," said Fanny, springing forward and beginning vigorously to poke twigs under the refractory kettle. Fanny had grown strangely unselfish during these past weeks: it seemed as if the lesson learned in Miss King's home at Arnborough was likely to be a lasting one, there was such a change in her in all ways.

"*I'll* do it, Fan," said Hubert, coming to the rescue. "Nice gentlemen we are, Louis, to allow the girls to do the worst part of the affair."

Under Hubert's supervision the kettle speedily boiled, tea was infused, and a very hungry and happy party sat down to enjoy the repast.

They did such justice to it that there was not a scrap left, which occasioned Hubert to make a great many funny remarks, and Mabel to express a great deal of motherly concern lest they should be hungry again before they got home. Before they rose it had to be settled what they were to do with themselves for the next couple of hours.

"We must leave at seven, you know," said Mabel, "not a minute later, for Mamma is always anxious when we are out by ourselves."

"All right! I'm off to hunt for the source of that brook, and to try and get some rare stones for old Antiquity, our science master, you know. He is a great geologist, and is always after specimens. Who'll come?" asked Hubert.

"I will," cried Charlie and Fanny together.

"I'll come too, then, at least a little bit up the stream, I want some real nice ferns. Sunbeam, dear, you had better come with me," said Mabel.

"I'll take care of Sunbeam, Mab.," said Louis. "I'm going off after some wild flowers for Aunt Emily. I know the ones she likes, and there'll be hawks' nests here, I think; I'll have a hunt for one."

"Mamma told us to be sure and keep away

from the tops of these dreadful cliffs, they are so treacherous, and you can fall over so easily," said Mabel anxiously. "You will be sure to take good care of Sunbeam."

"Of course. Aunt Emily warned me of the cliffs too; I won't go far, Mab. Sunbeam and I will just poke about here and pick wild flowers, and watch the goods and chattels."

But still Mabel was uneasy.

"I think Sunbeam had better go with us," she said; but Sunbeam herself declared she would remain with Louis, so there was nothing for it but to go off and leave them.

The right side of the dell was bounded by very high and steep cliffs, almost overgrown by wild rose and bramble bushes, and in the cunning clefts of which nestled all kinds of rare and beautiful wild flowers not to be got anywhere else. Louis and Sunbeam walked slowly along the smooth green turf at the base, looking up at the lovely leaves and blossoms which grew so temptingly far out of their reach.

"I must have some of these for Aunt Emily. Could you stay here, dear, till I run round and up to the top of the cliff. I could swing down to some of them, but I can't climb up from here."

"I'll come too, Louis, and hold your jacket while you hang over to get them," answered Sunbeam.

"A bright idea, which would end in us both tumbling over and breaking our necks. Well, come on round, there's no harm in seeing whether I can get them from the top or not."

So they went off, Louis quite forgetting that he had promised his aunt to take care of Sunbeam, and especially to keep her far away from the cliffs. She was so fearless and daring, that on one occasion when they had been gypsying in Hawthorn Dell before, she had been found hanging by a bush half-way up the face of the cliff, where she had climbed in search of a bright-coloured flower, and from which she was rescued with difficulty. Since then, Mrs. Rayne had been very loth to allow Sunbeam to go picnicking with the rest, and had only consented that day on condition that they all looked after her and kept her out of mischief. In a short space of time the two were standing on the edge of the cliff, from which they had a superb view, even as far as Sandybar with its blue line of sea. But both were too eager about the flowers to think of the view. Louis got down on his knees and peered over.

"Yes, I can do it fine; there are plenty of things to hold on to. Now, Kit, stand far back, you'll be sure to fall; mind I won't be two minutes."

So saying, Louis began carefully to descend, holding firmly by the strong bushes which grew thickly round him, and in a few minutes he had a footing on a narrow ledge, within reach of the blossoms he had envied. He leaned over and began to pick them as quickly as possible, and soon became so intent on them that he quite forgot Sunbeam, till a crackling noise made him start and look up. There was Sunbeam coming down ten times quicker than he had done, her tiny hands slipping from bush to bush with ease and assurance, and her face flushed with excitement.

"Here I am, oh what fun!" she cried, and waved one hand triumphantly at her cousin. Then a terrible thing happened: the loosely-rooted shrub to which Sunbeam was trusting her whole weight gave way, and Louis shut his eyes.

Though he lives to be an old man he will never forget the unutterable horror of that moment. A faint scream broke upon his ears, and he looked down to see Sunbeam lying on

the green sward in the dell beneath, still and prostrate, and to all appearance dead.

And he had killed her! With what words would he answer to them all for Sunbeam's life?

CHAPTER IX.

SUNBEAM'S STICK.

I NEED not pause to describe to you the horror and grief of the others, when, hearing Louis's frantic shouts and whistling, they came hurrying back to the dell. Nor shall I tell you how they got Bobbie harnessed in an incredibly short space of time, and lifting poor Sunbeam in, drove quickly away home. She was not dead, for she would moan from time to time as if in great pain; but the golden lashes closed over the violet eyes never stirred, and so they took her home.

Mrs. Rayne was calm when she saw her darling, calm and self-possessed, though her face became as white and rigid almost as Sunbeam's own.

Happily the doctor was in the house, and the

child was attended to at once. I must not try to describe to you Louis's state of mind. Guessing what it was, no word of reproach or of anger passed the lips of any one.

Father and Mother watched by Sunbeam's bed all night, watched and prayed till the rosy morning light broke upon the world, and the sun rose upon a new day. At last the white lids stirred, and slowly lifted from the violet eyes, and she looked round in a slow, dazed way, as if wondering to see Father and Mother bending over her.

"Oh, I was hurt; I fell down, I remember. Yes, Louis, I'm coming," she said eagerly, and then rambled on about the flowers, and the hawk's nest, and the cliffs, showing that the poor little brain was sorely disturbed. And thus she continued for days.

But God was merciful. He had compassion on the stricken household, he heard the passionate prayers which Louis Vernon uplifted to heaven, and spared Sunbeam to Coverley. Ay, but it would be a very long time before she was the Sunbeam of old, and when, two months after, Hubert and Louis came home again, at midsummer, there was a pale-faced, thin little

maiden, hopping about on a stick, for her right leg had been much injured, and would not be quite well for months.

Louis burst into tears when he saw her, but she laughed, though her own eyes were wet, and said she was learning to be good and patient, and would, doubtless, be glad some day that her daring had met with such severe punishment.

There was no fear of her complete recovery ultimately. So after a little Louis began to feel less agony at the sight of the stick; but he could never smile with the rest at Sunbeam's absurd talk about her crutch. I think none but Aunt Emily knew the depth of his feeling in the matter.

That was the most powerful as it was the most painful lesson of Louis Vernon's life; and by and by, when Sunbeam was strong and well again, and had no further use for the stick, he begged that he might have it to keep.

"I want it for a warning, a kind of finger-post when I am going wrong," he said to his aunt, to whom he now spoke quite freely about all his faults and failings. "It will call up all the dreadful consequences of carelessness and disobedience. May I have it, Auntie?"

"Surely, dear, and if it proves so useful as all that, we may have occasion yet to bless Sunbeam's stick," said Aunt Emily, with a smile and a tear.

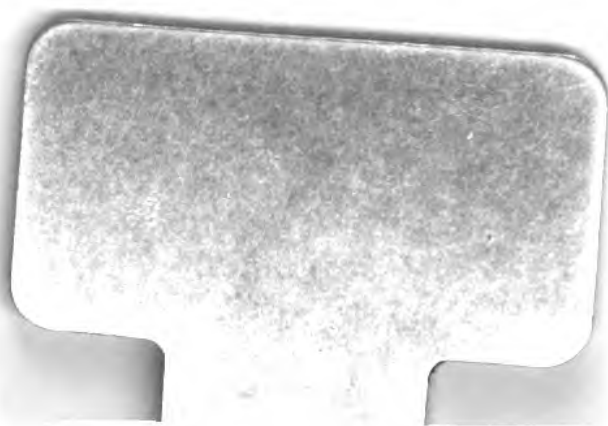
The latter part of the year the Vernons spent at Coverley was very different from, and very much happier than the first, and when they went home to Vernon Lee to welcome their parents home, true regret and loving wishes followed them from all.

And they were better children from that time, for even as Mrs. Rayne had hoped, Coverley had been to them both the birthplace of a new and better life.

Louis Vernon is a man now, filling nobly a man's place in the world, and Fanny is the gentle, loving mistress of a happy home of her own.

And they say sometimes to Uncle Hubert and Aunt Emily, who are growing old and gray, and have many little grand-children about their knees—that they owe all they are, and may be, to that year at Coverley.

THE END.





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