Henry Handel Richardson

THE GETTING OF WISDOM

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e-artnow, 2020
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EAN 4064066058876

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The four children were lying on the grass.

"… and the Prince went further and further into the forest," said the elder girl, "till he came to a beautiful glade —a glade, you know, is a place in the forest that is open and green and lovely. And there he saw a lady, a beautiful lady, in a long white dress that hung down to her ankles, with a golden belt and a golden crown. She was lying on the sward—a sward, you know, is grass as smooth as velvet, just like green velvet—and the Prince saw the marks of travel on her garments. The bottom of the lovely silk dress was all dirty——"

"Wondrous Fair, if you don't mind you'll make that sheet dirty, too," said Pin.

"Shut up, will you!" answered her sister who, carried away by her narrative, had approached her boots to some linen that was bleaching.

"Yes, but you know Sarah'll be awfly cross if she has to wash it again," said Pin, who was practical.

"You'll put me out altogether," cried Laura angrily. —"Well, as I said, the edge of her robe was all muddy—no, I don't think I will say that; it sounds prettier if it's clean. So it hung in long, straight beautiful folds to her ankles, and the Prince saw two little feet in golden sandals peeping out from under the hem of the silken gown, and——"

"But what about the marks of travel?" asked Leppie.

"Donkey! haven't I said they weren't there? If I say they weren't, then they weren't. She hadn't travelled at all."

"Oh, parrakeets!" cried little Frank.

Four pairs of eyes went up to the bright green flock that was passing over the garden.

"Now you've all interrupted, and I shan't tell any more," said Laura in a proud voice.

"Oh, yes, please do, Wondrous Fair! Tell what happened next," begged Pin and Leppie.

"No, not another word. You can only think of sheets and parrakeets."

"Please, Wondrous Fair," begged little Frank.

"No, I can't now.—Another thing: I don't mind if you call me Laura to-day, as it's the last day."

She lay back on the grass, her hands clasped under her head. A voice was heard, loud, imperative.

"Laura, I want you. Come here."

"That's mother calling," said Pin.

Laura kicked her heels. The two little boys laughed approval.

"Go on, Laura," coaxed Pin. "Mother'll be angry. I'll come, too."

Laura raised herself with a grumble. "It's to try on that horrid dress."

In very fact Mother was standing, already somewhat impatient, with the dress in her hand. Laura wriggled out of the one she had on, and stood stiffly and ungraciously, with her arms held like pokers from her sides, while Mother on her knees arranged the length.

"Don't put on a face like that, miss!" she said sharply on seeing Laura's air. "Do you think I'm making it for my own pleasure?" She had sewn at it all day, and was hot and tired.

"It's too short," said Laura, looking down.

"It's nothing of the kind," said Mother, with her mouth full of pins.

"It is, it's much too short."

Mother gave her a slight shake. "Don't you contradict ME! Do you want to tell me I don't know what length you're to wear your dresses?"

"I won't wear it at all if you don't make it longer," said Laura defiantly.

Pin's chubby, featureless little face lengthened with apprehension.

"Do let her have it just a tiny bit longer, mother dear, dear!" she pleaded.

"Now, Pin, what have you got to do with it I'd like to know!" said Mother, on the verge of losing her temper over the back folds, which WOULD not hang.

"I'm going to school to-morrow, and it's a shame," said Laura in the low, passionate tone that never failed to

exasperate Mother, so different was it from her own hearty fashion of venting displeasure. Pin began to sniff, in sheer nervous anxiety.

"Very well then, I won't do another stitch to it!" and Mother, now angry in earnest, got up and bounced out of the room.

"Laura, how can you?" said Pin, dissolving. "It's only you who make her so cross."

"I don't care," said Laura rebelliously, though she was not far off tears herself. "It IS a shame. All the other girls will have dresses down to the tops of their boots, and they'll laugh at me, and call me a [P.4] baby;" and touched by the thought of what lay before her, she, too, began to sniffle. She did not fail, however, to roll the dress up and to throw it unto a corner of the room. She also kicked the ewer, which fell over and flooded the floor. Pin cried more loudly, and ran to fetch Sarah.

Laura returned to the garden. The two little boys came up to her; but she waved them back.

"Let me alone, children. I want to think."

She stood in a becoming attitude by the garden-gate, her brothers hovering in the background.—Then Mother called once more.

"Laura, where are you?"

"Here, mother. What is it?"

"Did you knock this jug over or did Pin?"

"I did, mother."

"Did you do it on purpose?"

"Yes."

"Come here to me."

She went, with lagging steps. But Mother's anger had passed: she was at work on the dress again, and by squinting her eyes Laura could see that a piece was being added to the skirt. She was penitent at once; and when Mother in a sorry voice said: "I'm ashamed of you, Laura. And on your last day, too," her throat grew narrow.

"I didn't mean it, mother."

"If only you would ask properly for things, you would get them."

Laura knew this; knew indeed that, did she coax, Mother could refuse her nothing. But coaxing came hard to her; something within her forbade it. Sarah called her "high-stomached", to the delight of the other children and her own indignation; she had explained to them again and again what Sarah really meant.

On leaving the house she went straight to the flower-beds: she would give Mother, who liked flowers very well but had no time to gather them, a bouquet the size of a cabbage. Pin and the boys were summoned to help her, and when their hands were full, Laura led the way to a secluded part of the garden on the farther side of the detached brick kitchen. In this strip, which was filled with greenery, little sun fell: two thick fir trees and a monstrous blue-gum stood there; high bushes screened the fence; jessamine climbed the wall of the house and encircled the bedroom windows; and on the damp and shady ground only violets grew. Yet, with the love children bear to the limited and compact, the

four had chosen their own little plots here rather than in the big garden at the back of the house; and many were the times they had all begun anew to dig and to rake. But if Laura's energy did not fizzle out as quickly as usual—she was the model for the rest—Mother was sure to discover that it was too cramped and dark for them in there, and send Sarah to drive them off.

Here, safely screened from sight, Laura sat on a bench and made up her bouquet. When it was finished—red and white in the centre with a darker border, the whole surrounded by a ring of violet leaves—she looked about for something to tie it up with. Sarah, applied to, was busy ironing, and had no string in the kitchen, so Pin ran to get a reel of cotton. But while she was away Laura had an idea. Bidding Leppie hold the flowers tight in both his sticky little hands, she climbed in at her bedroom window, or rather, by lying on the sill with her legs waving in the air, she managed to grab, without losing her balance, a pair of scissors from the chest of drawers. With these between her teeth she emerged, to the excited interest of the boys who watched her open-mouthed.

Laura had dark curls, Pin fair, and both wore them flapping at their backs, the only difference being that Laura, who was now twelve years old, had for the past year been allowed to bind hers together with a ribbon, while Pin's bobbed as they chose. Every morning early, Mother brushed and twisted, with a kind of grim pride, these silky ringlets round her finger. Although the five odd minutes the curling occupied were durance vile to Laura, the child was proud of her hair in her own way; and when in the street she heard some one say: "Look—what pretty curls!" she would give her head a toss and send them all a-rippling. In addition to this, there was a crowning glory connected with them: one hot December morning, when they had been

tangled and Mother had kept her standing too long, she had fainted, pulling the whole dressing-table down about her ears; and ever since, she had been marked off in some mysterious fashion from the other children. Mother would not let her go out at midday in summer: Sarah would say: "Let that be, can't you!" did she try to lift something that was too heavy for her; and the younger children were to be quelled by a threat to faint on the spot, if they did not do as she wished. "Laura's faint" had become a byword in the family; and Laura herself held it for so important a fact in her life that she had more than once begun a friendship with the words: "Have you ever fainted? I have."

From among these long, glossy curls, she now cut one of the longest and most spiral, cut it off close to the root, and with it bound the flowers together. Mother should see that she did know how to give up something she cared for, and was not as selfish as she was usually supposed to be.

"Oh .. h .. h!" said both little boys in a breath, then doubled up in noisy mirth. Laura was constantly doing something to set their young blood in amazement: they looked upon her as the personification of all that was startling and unexpected. But Pin, returning with the reel of thread, opened her eyes in a different way.

"Oh, Laura…!" she began, tearful at once.

"Now, res'vor!" retorted Laura scornfully—"res'vor" was Sarah's name for Pin, on account of her perpetual wateriness. "Be a cry-baby, do." But she was not damped, she was lost in the pleasure of self-sacrifice.

Pin looked after her as she danced off, then moved submissively in her wake to be near at hand should intercession be needed. Laura was so unsuspecting, and

Mother would be so cross. In her dim, childish way Pin longed to see these, her two nearest, at peace; she understood them both so well, and they had little or no understanding for each other.—So she crept to the house at her sister's heels.

Laura did not go indoors; hiding against the wall of the flagged verandah, she threw her bouquet in at the window, meaning it to fall on Mother's lap.

But Mother had dropped her needle, and was just lifting her face, flushed with stooping, when the flowers hit her a thwack on the head. She groped again, impatiently, to find what had struck her, recognised the peace-offering, and thought of the surprise cake that was to go into Laura's box on the morrow. Then she saw the curl, and her face darkened. Was there ever such a tiresome child? What in all the world would she do next?

"Laura, come here, directly!"

Laura had moved away; she was not expecting recognition. If Mother were pleased she would call Pin to put the flowers in water for her, and that would be the end of it. The idea of a word of thanks would have made Laura feel uncomfortable. Now, however, at the tone of Mother's voice, her mouth set stubbornly. She went indoors as bidden, but was already up in arms again.

"You're a very naughty girl indeed!" began Mother as soon she appeared. "How dare you cut off your hair? Upon my word, if it weren't your last night I'd send you to bed without any supper!"—an unheard-of threat on the part of Mother, who punished her children in any way but that of denying them their food. "It's a very good thing you're leaving home to-morrow, for you'd soon be setting the

others at defiance, too, and I should have four naughty children on my hands instead of one.— But I'd be ashamed to go to school such a fright if I were you. Turn round at once and let me see you!"

Laura turned, with a sinking heart. Pin cried softly in a corner.

"She thought it would please you, mother," she sobbed.

"I WILL not have you interfering, Pin, when I'm speaking to Laura. She's old enough by now to know what I like and what I don't," said Mother, who was vexed at the thought of the child going among strangers thus disfigured.—"And now get away, and don't let me see you again. You're a perfect sight."

"Oh, Laura, you do look funny!" said Leppie and Frank in weak chorus, as she passed them in the passage.

"Well, you 'ave made a guy of yourself this time, Miss Laura, and no mistake!" said Sarah, who had heard the above.

Laura went into her own room and locked the door, a thing Mother did not allow. Then she threw herself on the bed and cried. Mother had not understood in the least; and she had made herself a sight into the bargain. She refused to open the door, though one after another rattled the handle, and Sarah threatened to turn the hose in at the window. So they left her alone, and she spent the evening in watery dudgeon on her pillow. But before she undressed for the night she stealthily made a chink and took in the slice of cake Pin had left on the door-mat. Her natural buoyancy of spirit was beginning to reassert itself. By brushing her hair well to one side she could cover up the gap, she found; and after all, there was something rather

pleasant in knowing that you were misunderstood. It made you feel different from everyone else.

Mother—sewing hard after even the busy Sarah had retired—Mother smiled a stern little smile of amusement to herself; and before locking up for the night put the dark curl safely away.

II.

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Laura, sleeping flat on her stomach, was roused next morning by Pin who said:

"Wake up, Wondrous Fair, mother wants to speak to you. She says you can get into bed in my place, before you dress." Pin slept warm and cosy at Mother's side.

Laura rose on her elbow and looked at her sister: Pin was standing in the doorway holding her nightgown to her, in such a way as to expose all of her thin little legs.

"Come on," urged Pin. "Sarah's going to give me my bath while you're with mother."

"Go away, Pin," said Laura snappily. "I told you yesterday you could say Laura, and… and you're more like a spider than ever."

"Spider" was another nickname for Pin, owed to her rotund little body and mere sticks of legs—she was "all

belly" as Sarah put it—and the mere mention of it made Pin fly; for she was very touchy about her legs.

As soon as the door closed behind her, Laura sprang out of bed and, waiting neither to wash herself nor to say her prayers, began to pull on her clothes, confusing strings and buttons in her haste, and quite forgetting that on this eventful morning she had meant to dress herself with more than ordinary care. She was just lacing her shoes when Sarah looked in.

"Why, Miss Laura, don't you know your ma wants you?"

"It's too late. I'm dressed now," said Laura darkly.

Sarah shook her head. "Missis'll be fine an' angry. An' you needn't 'ave 'ad a row on your last day."

Laura stole out of the door and ran down the garden to the summer-house. This, the size of a goodly room, was formed of a single dense, hairy-leafed tree, round the trunk of which a seat was built. Here she cowered, her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hands. Her face wore the stiff expression that went by the name of "Laura's sulks," but her eyes were big, and as watchful as those of a scared animal. If Sarah came to fetch her she would hold on to the seat with both hands. But even if she had to yield to Sarah's greater strength—well, at least she was up and dressed. Not like the last time—about a week ago Mother had tried this kind of thing. Then, she had been caught unawares. She had gone into Pin's warm place, curious and unsuspecting, and thereupon Mother had begun to talk seriously to her, and not with her usual directness. She had reminded Laura that she was growing up apace and would soon be a woman; had told her that she must now begin to give up childish habits, and learn to behave in a modest

and womanly way—all disagreeable, disturbing things, which Laura did not in the least want to hear. When it became clear to her what it was about, she had thrown back the bedclothes and escaped from the room. And since then she had been careful never to be long alone with Mother.

But now half an hour went by and no one came to fetch her: her grim little face relaxed. She felt very hungry, too, and when at length she heard Pin calling, she jumped up and betrayed her hiding-place.

"Laura! Laura, where are you? Mother says to come to breakfast and not be silly. The coach'll be here in an hour."

Taking hands the sisters ran to the house.

In the passage, Sarah was busy roping a battered tin box. With their own hands the little boys had been allowed to paste on this a big sheet of notepaper, which bore, in Mother's writing, the words:

Miss Laura Tweedle Rambotham The Ladies' College Melbourne.

Mother herself was standing at the breakfast-table cutting sandwiches.

"Come and eat your breakfast, child," was all she said at the moment. "The tea's quite cold."

Laura sat down and fell to with appetite, but also with a side-glance at the generous pile of bread and meat growing under Mother's hands.

"I shall never eat all that," she said ungraciously; it galled her still to be considered a greedy child with an

insatiable stomach.

"I know better than you do what you'll eat," said Mother. "You'll be hungry enough by this evening I can tell you, not getting any dinner."

Pin's face fell at this prospect. "Oh, mother, won't she really get any dinner?" she asked: and to her soft little heart going to school began to seem one of the blackest experiences life held.

"Why, she'll be in the train, stupid, 'ow can she?" said Sarah. "Do you think trains give you dinners?"

"Oh, mother, please cut ever such a lot!" begged Pin sniffing valiantly.

Laura began to feel somewhat moved herself at this solicitude, and choked down a lump in her throat with a gulp of tea. But when Pin had gone with Sarah to pick some nectarines, Mother's face grew stern, and Laura's emotion passed.

"I feel more troubled about you than I can say, Laura. I don't know how you'll ever get on in life—you're so disobedient and self-willed. It would serve you very well right, I'm sure, for not coming this morning, if I didn't give you a penny of pocket-money to take to school."

Laura had heard this threat before, and thought it wiser not to reply. Gobbling up the rest of her breakfast she slipped away.

With the other children at her heels she made a round of the garden, bidding good-bye to things and places. There were the two summer-houses in which she had played house; in which she had cooked and eaten and slept. There

was the tall fir-tree with the rung-like branches by which she had been accustomed to climb to the very tree-top; there was the wilderness of bamboo and cane where she had been Crusoe; the ancient, broadleaved cactus on which she had scratched their names and drawn their portraits; here, the high aloe that had such a mysterious charm for you, because you never knew when the hundred years might expire and the aloe burst into flower. Here again was the old fig tree with the rounded, polished boughs, from which, seated as in a cradle, she had played Juliet to Pin's Romeo, and vice versa—but oftenest Juliet: for though Laura greatly preferred to be the ardent lover at the foot, Pin was but a poor climber, and, as she clung trembling to her branch, needed so much prompting in her lines—even then to repeat them with such feeble emphasis—that Laura invariably lost patience with her and the love-scene ended in a squabble. Passing behind a wooden fence which was a tangle of passion-flower, she opened the door of the fowl-house, and out strutted the mother-hen followed by her pretty brood. Laura had given each of the chicks a name, and she now took Napoleon and Garibaldi up in her hand and laid her cheek against their downy breasts, the younger children following her movements in respectful silence. Between the bars of the rabbit hutch she thrust enough greenstuff to last the two little occupants for days; and everywhere she went she was accompanied by a legless magpie, which, in spite of its infirmity, hopped cheerily and quickly on its stumps. Laura had rescued it and reared it; it followed her like a dog; and she was only less devoted to it than she had been to a native bear which died under her hands.

"Now listen, children," she said as she rose from her knees before the hutch. "If you don't look well after Maggy and the bunnies, I don't know what I'll do. The chicks'll be all right. Sarah'll take care of them, 'cause of the eggs. But

Maggy and the bunnies don't have eggs, and if they're not fed, or if Frank treads on Maggy again, then they'll die. Now if you let them die, I don't know what I'll do to you! Yes, I do: I'll send the devil to you at night when the room's dark, before you go to sleep.—So there!"

"How can you if you're not here?" asked Leppie.

Pin, however, who believed in ghosts and apparitions with all her fearful little heart, promised tremulously never, never to forget; but Laura was not satisfied until each of them in turn had repeated, in a low voice, with the appropriate gestures, the sacred secret, and forbidden formula:

> Is my finger wet?
> Is my finger dry?
> God'll strike me dead,
> If I tell a lie.

Then Sarah's voice was heard calling, and the boys went out into the road to watch for the coach. Laura's dressing proved a lengthy business, and was accomplished amid bustle, and scolding, and little peace-making words from Pin; for in her hurry that morning Laura had forgotten to put on the clean linen Mother had laid beside the bed, and consequently had now to strip to the skin.

The boys announced the coming of the coach with shrill cries, and simultaneously the rumble of wheels was heard. Sarah came from the kitchen drying her hands, and Pin began to cry.

"Now, shut up, res'vor!" said Sarah roughly: her own eyes were moist. "You don't see Miss Laura be such a silly-billy. Anyone 'ud think you was goin', not 'er."

The ramshackle old vehicle, one of Cobb's Royal Mail Coaches, big-bodied, lumbering, scarlet, pulled by two stout horses, drew up before the door, and the driver climbed down from his seat.

"Now good day to you, ma'am, good day, miss"—this to Sarah who, picking up the box, handed it to him to be strapped on under the apron. "Well, well, and so the little girl's goin' to school, is she? My, but time flies! Well do I remember the day ma'am, when I drove you all across for the first time. These children wasn't big enough then to git up and down be thimselves. Now I warrant you they can—just look at 'em, will you?—But my! Ain't you ashamed of yourself"—he spoke to Pin—"pipin' your eye like that? Why, you'll flood the road if you don't hould on.—Yes, yes, ma'am, bless you, I'll look after her, and put her inter the train wid me own han's. Don't you be oneasy. The Lord he cares for the widder and the orphun, and if He don't, why Patrick O'Donnell does."

This was O'Donnell's standing joke; he uttered it with a loud chuckle. While speaking he had let down the steps and helped the three children up—they were to ride with Laura to the outskirts of the township. The little boys giggled excitedly at his assertion that the horses would not be equal to the weight. Only Pin wept on, in undiminished grief.

"Now, Miss Laura."

"Now, Laura. Good-bye, darling. And do try and be good. And be sure you write once a week. And tell me everything. Whether you are happy—and if you get enough to eat—and if you have enough blankets on your bed. And remember always to change your boots if you get your feet wet. And don't lean out of the window in the train."

For some time past Laura had had need of all her self-control, not to cry before the children. As the hour drew near it had grown harder and harder; while dressing, she had resorted to counting the number of times the profile of a Roman emperor appeared in the flowers on the wallpaper. Now the worst moment of all was come—the moment of good-bye. She did not look at Pin, but she heard her tireless, snuffly weeping, and set her own lips tight.

"Yes, mother… no, mother," she answered shortly, "I'll be all right. Good-bye." She could not, however, restrain a kind of dry sob, which jumped up her throat.

When she was in the coach Sarah, whom she had forgotten climbed up to kiss her; and there was some joking between O'Donnell and the servant while the steps were being folded and put away. Laura did not smile; her thin little face was very pale. Mother's heart went out to her in a pity which she did not know how to express.

"Don't forget your sandwiches. And when you're alone, feel in the pocket of your ulster and you'll find something nice. Good-bye, darling."

"Good-bye… good-bye."

The driver had mounted to his seat, he unwound the reins cried "Get up!" to the two burly horses, the vehicle was set in motion and trundled down the main street. Until it turned the corner by the Shire Gardens, Laura let her handkerchief fly from the window. Sarah waved hers; then wiped her eyes and lustily blew her nose. Mother only sighed.

"It was all she could do to keep up," she said as much to herself as to Sarah. "I do hope she'll be all right. She seems such a child to be sending off like this. Yet what else could I

do? To a State School, I've always said it, my children shall never go—not if I have to beg the money to send them elsewhere."

But she sighed again, in spite of the energy of her words, and stood gazing at the place where the coach had disappeared. She was still a comparatively young woman, and straight of body; but trouble, poverty and night-watches had scored many lines on her forehead.

"Don't you worry," said Sarah. "Miss Laura'll be all right. She's just a bit too clever—brains for two, that's what it is. An' children WILL grow up an' get big… an' change their feathers." She spoke absently, drawing her metaphor from a brood of chickens which had strayed across the road, and was now trying to mount the wooden verandah—"Shooh! Get away with you!"

"I know that. But Laura—The other children have never given me a moment's worry. But Laura's different. I seem to get less and less able to manage her. If only her father had been alive to help!"

"I'm sure no father livin' could do more than you for those blessed children," said Sarah with impatience. "You think of nothin' else. It 'ud be a great deal better if you took more care o' yourself. You sit up nights an' don't get no proper sleep slavin' away at that blessed embroid'ry an' stuff, so as Miss Laura can get off to school an' to 'er books. An' then you want to worry over 'er as well.—She'll be all right. Miss Laura's like peas. You've got to get 'em outer the pod—they're in there sure enough. An' b'sides I guess school'll knock all the nonsense out of 'er."

"Oh, I hope they won't be too hard on her," said Mother in quick alarm.—"Shut the side gate, will you. Those

children have left it open again.—And, Sarah, I think we'll turn out the drawing-room."

Sarah grunted to herself as she went to close the gate. This had not entered into her scheme of work for the day, and her cooking was still undone. But she did not gainsay her mistress, as she otherwise would have made no scruple of doing; for she knew that nothing was more helpful to the latter in a crisis than hard, manual work. Besides, Sarah herself had a sneaking weakness for what she called "dra'in'-room days". For the drawing-room was the storehouse of what treasures had remained over from a past prosperity. It was crowded with bric-a-brac and ornament; and as her mistress took these objects up one by one, to dust and polish them, she would, if she were in a good humour, tell Sarah where and how they had been bought, or describe the places they had originally come from: so that Sarah, pausing broom in hand to listen, had with time gathered some vague ideas of a country like "Inja", for example, whence came the little silver "pagody", and the expressionless brass god who squatted vacantly and at ease.

III.

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As long as the coach rolled down the main street Laura sat bolt upright at the window. In fancy she heard people telling one another that this was little Miss Rambotham going to school. She was particularly glad that just as they

went past the Commercial Hotel, Miss Perrotet, the landlord's red-haired daughter, should put her fuzzy head out of the window—for Miss Perrotet had also been to boarding-school, and thought very highly of herself in consequence, though it had only been for a year, to finish. At the National Bank the manager's wife waved a friendly hand to the children, and at the Royal Mail Hotel where they drew up for passengers or commissions, Mrs. Paget, the stout landlady, came out, smoothing down her black satin apron.

"Well, I'm sure I wonder your ma likes sendin' you off so alone."

The ride had comforted Pin a little; but when they had passed the chief stores and the flour-mill, and were come to a part of the road where the houses were fewer, her tears broke out afresh. The very last house was left behind, the high machinery of the claims came into view, the watery flats where Chinamen were for ever rocking washdirt in cradles; and O'Donnell dismounted and opened the door. He lifted the three out one by one, shaking his head in humorous dismay at Pin, and as little Frank showed sighs of beginning, too, by puckering up his face and [P.22] doubling up his body, the kindly man tried to make them laugh by asking if he had the stomach-ache. Laura had one more glimpse of the children standing hand in hand—even in her trouble Pin did not forget her charges—then a sharp bend in the road hid them from her sight.

She was alone in the capacious body of the coach, alone, and the proud excitement of parting was over. The staunchly repressed tears welled up with a gush, and flinging herself down across the seat she cried bitterly. It was not a childishly irresponsible grief like Pin's: it was more passionate, and went deeper; and her overloaded

feelings were soon relieved. But as she was not used to crying, she missed the moment at which she might have checked herself, and went on shedding tears after they had become a luxury.

"Why, goodness gracious, what's this?" cried a loud, cheerful and astonished voice, and a fat, rosy face beamed in on Laura. "Why, here's a little girl in here, cryin' fit to break 'er heart. Come, come, my dear, what's the matter? Don't cry like that, now don't."

The coach had stopped, the door opened and a stout woman climbed in, bearing a big basket, and followed by a young man with straw-coloured whiskers. Laura sat up like a dart and pulled her hat straight, crimson with mortification at being discovered in such a plight. She had instantly curbed her tears, but she could not disguise the fact that she had red eyes and a swollen nose—that she was in short what Sarah called "all bunged up". She made no reply to the newcomer's exclamations, but sat clutching her handkerchief and staring out of the window. The woman's good-natured curiosity, however, was not to be done.

"You poor little thing, you!" she persisted. "Wherever are you goin', my dear, so alone?"

"I'm going to boarding-school," said Laura, and shot a glance at the couple opposite.

"To boardin'-school? Peter! D'you hear?—Why, whatever's your ma thinkin' of to send such a little chick as you to boardin'-school?… and so alone, too."

Laura's face took on a curious air of dignity.

"I'm not so very little," she answered; and went on to explain, in phrases which she had heard so often that she

knew them by heart: "Only small for my age. I was twelve in spring. And I have to go to school, because I've learnt all I can at home."

This failed to impress the woman.

"Snakes alive!—that's young enough in all conscience. And such a delicate little creature, too. Just like that one o' Sam MacFarlane's that popped off last Christmas—isn't she, Peter?"

Peter, who avoided looking at Laura, sheepishly mumbled something about like enough she was.

"And who IS your ma, my dear? What's your name?" continued her interrogator.

Laura replied politely; but there was a reserve in her manner which, together with the name she gave, told enough: the widow, Laura's mother, had the reputation of being very "stuck-up", and of bringing up her children in the same way.

The woman did not press Laura further; she whispered something behind her hand to Peter, then searching in her basket found a large, red apple, which she held out with an encouraging nod and smile.

"Here, my dear. Here's something for you. Don't cry any more, don't now. It'll be all right."

Laura, who was well aware that she had not shed a tear since the couple entered the coach, coloured deeply, and made a movement, half shy, half unwilling, to put her hands behind her.

"Oh no, thank you," she said in extreme embarrassment, not wishing to hurt the giver's feelings. "Mother doesn't care for us to take things from strangers."

"Bless her soul!" cried the stout woman in amaze. "It's only an apple! Now, my dear, just you take it, and make your mind easy. Your ma wouldn't have nothin' against it to-day, I'm sure o' that—goin' away so far and all so alone like this.—It's sweet and juicy."

"It's Melb'm you'll be boun' for I dessay?" said the yellow-haired Peter so suddenly that Laura started.

She confirmed this, and let her solemn eyes rest on him wondering why he was so red and fidgety and uncomfortable. The woman said: "Tch, tch, tch!" at the length of the journey Laura was undertaking, and Peter, growing still redder, volunteered another remark.

"I was nigh to bein' in Melb'm once meself," he said.

"Aye, and he can't never forget it, the silly loon," threw in the woman, but so good-naturedly that it was impossible, Laura felt, for Peter to take offence.

She gazed at the pair, speculating upon the relation they stood in to each other. She had obediently put out her hand for the apple, and now sat holding it, without attempting to eat it. It had not been Mother's precepts alone that had weighed with her in declining it; she was mortified at the idea of being bribed, as it were, to be good, just as though she were Pin or one of the little boys. It was a punishment on her for having been so babyish as to cry; had she not been caught in the act, the woman would never have ventured to be so familiar.—The very largeness and rosiness of the fruit made it hateful to her, and she turned over in her mind how she could get rid of it.