



MARGARET DELAND

THE IRON WOMAN

HISTORICAL NOVEL

Margaret Deland

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CHAPTER I

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"Climb up in this tree, and play house!" Elizabeth Ferguson commanded. She herself had climbed to the lowest branch of an apple-tree in the Maitland orchard, and sat there, swinging her white-stockinged legs so recklessly that the three children whom she had summoned to her side, backed away for safety. "If you don't," she said, looking down at them, "I'm afraid, perhaps, maybe, I'll get mad."

Her foreboding was tempered by a giggle and by the deepening dimple in her cheek, but all the same she sighed with a sort of impersonal regret at the prospect of any unpleasantness. "It would be too bad if I got mad, wouldn't it?" she said thoughtfully. The others looked at one another in consternation. They knew so well what it meant to have Elizabeth "mad," that Nannie Maitland, the oldest of the little group, said at once, helplessly, "Well."

Nannie was always helpless with Elizabeth, just as she was helpless with her half-brother, Blair, though she was ten and Elizabeth and Blair were only eight; but how could a little girl like Nannie be anything but helpless before a brother whom she adored, and a wonderful being like Elizabeth?—Elizabeth! who always knew exactly what she wanted to do, and who instantly "got mad," if you wouldn't say you'd do it, too; got mad, and then repented, and hugged you and kissed you, and actually cried (or got mad again), if you refused to accept as a sign of your forgiveness

her new slate-pencil, decorated with strips of red-and-white paper just like a little barber's pole! No wonder Nannie, timid and good-natured, was helpless before such a sweet, furious little creature! Blair had more backbone than his sister, but even he felt Elizabeth's heel upon his neck. David Richie, a silent, candid, very stubborn small boy, was, after a momentary struggle, as meek as the rest of them. Now, when she commanded them all to climb, it was David who demurred, because, he said, he spoke first for Indians tomahawking you in the back parlor.

"Very well!" said the despot; "play your old Indians! I'll never speak to any of you again as long as I live!"

"I've got on my new pants," David objected.

"Take 'em off!" said Elizabeth. And there is no knowing what might have happened if the decorous Nannie had not come to the rescue.

"That's not proper to do out-of-doors; and Miss White says not to say 'pants.'"

Elizabeth looked thoughtful. "Maybe it isn't proper," she admitted; "but David, honest, I took a hate to being tommy-hocked the last time we played it; so please, *dear* David! If you'll play house in the tree, I'll give you a piece of my taffy." She took a little sticky package out of her pocket and licked her lips to indicate its contents;—David yielded, shinning up the trunk of the tree, indifferent to the trousers, which had been on his mind ever since he had put them on his legs.

Blair followed him, but Nannie squatted on the ground content to merely look at the courageous three.

"Come on up," said Elizabeth. Nannie shook her little blond head. At which the others burst into a shrill chorus: "'Fraid-cat! 'fraid-cat! 'fraid-cat!" Nannie smiled placidly; it never occurred to her to deny such an obviously truthful title. "Blair," she said, continuing a conversation interrupted by Elizabeth's determination to climb, "Blair, *why* do you say things that make Mamma mad? What's the sense? If it makes her mad for you to say things are ugly, why do you?"

"'Cause," Blair said briefly. Even at eight Blair disliked both explanations and decisions, and his slave and half-sister rarely pressed for either. With the exception of his mother, whose absorption in business had never given her time to get acquainted with him, most of the people about Blair were his slaves. Elizabeth's governess, Miss White—called by Elizabeth, for reasons of her own, "Cherry-pie"—had completely surrendered to his brown eyes; the men in the Maitland Works toadied to him; David Richie blustered, perhaps, but always gave in to him; in his own home, Harris, who was a cross between a butler and a maid-of-all-work, adored him to the point of letting him make candy on the kitchen stove—probably the greatest expression of affection possible to the kitchen; in fact, little Elizabeth Ferguson was the only person in his world who did not knuckle down to this pleasant and lovable child. But then, Elizabeth never knuckled down to anybody! Certainly not to kind old Cherry-pie, whose timid upper lip quivered like a rabbit's when she was obliged to repeat to her darling some new rule of Robert Ferguson's for his niece's upbringing; nor did she knuckle down to her uncle;—she even declared she was not at all afraid of him! This was almost unbelievable to the

others, who scattered like robins if they heard his step. And she had greater courage than this; she had, in fact, audacity! for she said she was willing—this the others told each other in awed tones—she said she had "just as lieves" walk right up and speak to Mrs. Maitland herself, and ask her for twenty cents so she could treat the whole crowd to ice-cream! That is, she would just as lieves, *if she should happen to want to*. Now, as she sat in the apple-tree swinging her legs and sharing her taffy, it occurred to her to mention, apropos of nothing, her opinion of Mrs. Maitland's looks:

"I like Blair's mother best; but David's mother is prettier than Blair's mother."

"It isn't polite to brag on mothers," said David, surveying his new trousers complacently, "but I know what I think."

Blair, jouncing up and down on his branch, agreed with unoffended candor. "'Course she's prettier. Anybody is. Mother's ugly."

"It isn't right to say things like that out of the family," Nannie observed.

"This *is* the family. You're going to marry David, and I'm going to marry Elizabeth. And I'm going to be awfully rich; and I'll give all you children a lot of money. Jimmy Sullivan—he's a friend of mine; I got acquainted with him yesterday, and he's the biggest puddler in our Works. Jimmie said, 'You're the only son,' he said, 'you'll get it all.' 'Course I told him I'd give him some," said Blair.

At this moment Elizabeth was moved to catch David round the neck, and give him a loud kiss on his left ear.

David sighed. "You may kiss me," he said patiently; "but I'd rather you'd tell me when you want to. You knocked off my cap."

"Say, David," Nannie said, flinging his cap up to him, "Blair can stand on his head and count five. You can't."

At this David's usual admiration for Blair suffered an eclipse; he grew very red, then exploded: "I—I—I've had mumps, and I have two warts, and Blair hasn't. And I have a real dining-room at my house, and Blair hasn't!"

Nannie flew to the rescue: "You haven't got a real mother. You are only an adopted."

"Well, what are you?" David said, angrily; "you're nothing but a Step."

"I haven't got any kind of a mother," Elizabeth said, with complacent melancholy.

"Stop fighting," Blair commanded amiably; "David is right; we have a pigsty of a dining-room at our house." He paused to bend over and touch with an ecstatic finger a flake of lichen covering with its serpent green the damp, black bark in the crotch of the old tree. "Isn't that pretty?" he said.

"You ought not to say things about our house," Nannie reproved him. As Blair used to say when he grew up, "Nannie was born proper."

"Why not?" said Blair. "They know everything is ugly at our house. They've got real dining-rooms at their houses; they don't have old desks round, the way we do."

It was in the late sixties that these children played in the apple-tree and arranged their conjugal future; at that time

the Maitland house was indeed, as poor little Blair said, "ugly." Twenty years before, its gardens and meadows had stretched over to the river; but the estate had long ago come down in size and gone up in dollars. Now, there was scarcely an acre of sooty green left, and it was pressed upon by the yards of the Maitland Works, and almost islanded by railroad tracks. Grading had left the stately and dilapidated old house somewhat above the level of a street noisy with incessant teaming, and generally fetlock-deep in black mud. The house stood a little back from the badly paved sidewalk; its meager dooryard was inclosed by an iron fence—a row of black and rusted spears, spotted under their tines with innumerable gray cocoons. (Blair and David made constant and furtive attempts to lift these spears, socketed in crumbling lead in the granite base, for of course there could be nothing better for fighting Indians than a real iron spear.) The orchard behind the house had been cut in two by a spur track, which brought jolting gondola cars piled with red ore down to the furnace. The half dozen apple-trees that were left stretched gaunt arms over sour, grassless earth; they put out faint flakes of blossoms in the early spring, and then a fleeting show of greenness, which in a fortnight shriveled and blackened out of all semblance of foliage. But all the same the children found it a delightful place to play, although Blair sometimes said sullenly that it was "ugly." Blair hated ugly things, and, poor child! he was assailed by ugliness on every side. The queer, disorderly dining-room, in which for reasons of her own Mrs. Maitland transacted so much of her business that it had become for all practical

purposes an office of her Works, was perhaps the "ugliest" thing in the world to the little boy.

"Why don't we have a real dining-room?" he said once; "why do we have to eat in a office?"

"We'll eat in the kitchen, if I find it convenient," his mother told him, looking at him over her newspaper, which was propped against a silver coffee-urn that had found a clear space on a breakfast table cluttered with papers and ledgers.

"They have a bunch of flowers on the table up at David's house," the little boy complained; "I don't see why we can't."

"I don't eat flowers," Mrs. Maitland said grimly.

"I don't eat papers," Blair said, under his breath; and his mother looked at him helplessly. How is one to reply to a child of eight who makes remarks of this kind? Mrs. Maitland did not know; it was one of the many things she did not know in relation to her son; for at that time she loved him with her mind rather than her body, so she had none of those soft intuitions and persuasions of the flesh which instruct most mothers. In her perplexity she expressed the sarcastic anger one might vent upon an equal under the same circumstances:

"You'd eat nothing at all, young man, let me tell you, if it wasn't for the 'papers,' as you call 'em, in this house!" But it was no wonder that Blair called it ugly—the house, the orchard, the Works—even his mother, in her rusty black alpaca dress, sitting at her desk in the big, dingy dining-room, driving her body and soul, and the bodies and souls of her workmen—all for the sake of the little, shrinking boy,

who wanted a bunch of flowers on the table. Poor mother! Poor son! And poor little proper, perplexed half-sister, looking on, and trying to make peace. Nannie's perplexities had begun very far back. Of course she was too young when her father married his second wife to puzzle over that; but if she did not, other people did. Why a mild, vague young widower who painted pictures nobody bought, and was as unpractical as a man could be whose partnership in an iron-works was a matter of inheritance—why such a man wanted to marry Miss Sarah Blair was beyond anybody's wisdom. It is conceivable, indeed, that he did not want to.

There were rumors that after the death of Nannie's mother, Herbert Maitland had been inclined to look for consolation to a certain Miss Molly Wharton (she that afterward married another widower, Henry Knight); and everybody thought Miss Molly was willing to smile upon him. Be that as it may, he suddenly found himself the husband of his late partner's daughter, a woman eight years older than he, and at least four inches taller; a silent, plain woman, of devastating common sense, who contradicted all those femininities and soft lovelinesses so characteristic, not only of his first wife but of pretty Molly Wharton also.

John Blair, the father of the second Mrs. Maitland, an uneducated, extremely intelligent man, had risen from puddling to partnership in the Maitland Works. There had been no social relations between Mr. Maitland, Sr., and this new member of the firm, but the older man had a very intimate respect, and even admiration for John Blair. When he came to die he confided his son's interests to his partner with absolute confidence that they would be safe. "Herbert

has no gumption, John," he said; "he wants to be an 'artist.' You've got to look after him." "I will, Mr. Maitland, I will," said John Blair, snuffling and blowing his nose on a big red pocket-handkerchief. He did look after him. He put Herbert's affairs ahead of his own, and he made it clear to his daughter, who in business matters was, curiously enough, his right-hand man, that "Maitland's boy" was always, as he expressed it, "to have the inside track."

"I ain't bothering about you, Sally; I'll leave you enough. And if I didn't, you could scratch gravel for yourself. But Maitland's boy ain't our kind. He must be taken care of."

When John Blair died, perhaps a sort of faithfulness to his wishes made his Sally "take care" of Herbert Maitland by marrying him. "His child certainly does need a mother," she thought;—"an intelligent mother, not a goose." By and by she told Herbert of his child's need; or at any rate helped him to infer it. And somehow, before he knew it, he married her. By inheritance they owned the Works between them; so really their marriage was, as the bride expressed it, "a very sensible arrangement"; and any sensible arrangement appealed to John Blair's daughter. But after a breathless six months of partnership—in business if in nothing else—Herbert Maitland, leaving behind him his little two-year-old Nannie, and an unborn boy of whose approaching advent he was ignorant, got out of the world as expeditiously as consumption could take him. Indeed, his wife had so jostled him and deafened him and dazed him that there was nothing for him to do but die—so that there might be room for her expanding energy. Yet she loved him; nobody who saw her in those first silent, agonized months could doubt

that she loved him. Her pain expressed itself, not in moans or tears or physical prostration, but in work. Work, which had been an interest, became a refuge. Under like circumstances some people take to religion and some to drink; as Mrs. Maitland's religion had never been more than church-going and contributions to foreign missions, it was, of course, no help under the strain of grief; and as her temperament did not dictate the other means of consolation, she turned to work. She worked herself numb; very likely she had hours when she did not feel her loss. But she did not feel anything else. Not even her baby's little clinging hands, or his milky lips at her breast. She did her duty by him; she hired a reliable woman to take charge of him, and she was careful to appear at regular hours to nurse him. She ordered toys for him, and as she shared the naive conviction of her day that church-going and religion were synonymous, she began, when he was four years old, to take him to church. In her shiny, shabby black silk, which had been her Sunday costume ever since it had been purchased as part of her curiously limited trousseau she sat in a front pew, between the two children, and felt that she was doing her duty to both of them. A sense of duty without maternal instinct is not, perhaps, as baleful a thing as maternal instinct without a sense of duty, but it is sterile; and in the first few years of her bereavement, the big, suffering woman seemed to have nothing but duty to offer to her child. Nannie's puzzles began then. "Why don't Mamma hug my baby brother?" she used to ask the nurse, who had no explanation to offer. The baby brother was ready enough to hug Nannie, and his eager, wet little kisses

on her rosy cheeks sealed her to his service while he was still in petticoats. Blair was three years old before, under the long atrophy of grief, Sarah Maitland's maternal instinct began to stir. When it did, she was chilled by the boy's shrinking from her as if from a stranger; she was chilled, too, by another sort of repulsion, which with the hideous candor of childhood he made no effort to conceal. One of his first expressions of opinion had been contained in the single word "uggy," accompanied by a finger pointed at his mother. Whenever she sneezed—and she was one of those people who cannot, or do not, moderate a sneeze—Blair had a nervous paroxysm. He would jump at the unexpected sound, then burst into furious tears. When she tried to draw his head down upon her scratchy black alpaca breast, he would say violently, "No, no! No, no!" at which she would push him roughly from her knee, and fall into hurt silence. Once, when he was five years old, she came in to dinner hot from a morning in the Works, her moist forehead grimy with dust, and bent over to kiss him; at which the little boy wrinkled up his nose and turned his face aside.

"What's the matter?" his mother said; and called sharply to the nurse: "I won't have any highfalutin' business in this boy! Get it out of him." Then resolutely she took Blair's little chin in her hand—a big, beautiful, powerful hand, with broken and blackened nails—and turning his wincing face up, rubbed her cheek roughly against his. "Get over your airs!" she said, and sat down and ate her dinner without another word to Blair or any one else. But the next day, as if to purchase the kiss he would not give, she told him he was to have an "allowance." The word had no meaning to the

little fellow, until she showed him two bright new dollars and said he could buy candy with them; then his brown eyes smiled, and he held up his lips to her. It was at that moment that money began to mean something to him. He bought the candy, which he divided with Nannie, and he bought also a present for his mother—a bottle of cologne, with a tiny calendar tied around its neck by a red ribbon. "The ribbon is pretty," he explained shyly. She was so pleased that she instantly gave him another dollar, and then put the long green bottle on her painted pine bureau, between two of his photographs.

In the days when the four children played in the orchard, and had lessons with Miss White, in the school-room in Mr. Ferguson's garret, and were "treated" by Blair to candy or pink ice-cream—even in those days Mercer was showing signs of what it was ultimately to become: the apotheosis of materialism and vulgarity. Iron was entering into its soul. It thought extremely well of itself; when a new mill was built, or a new furnace blown in, it thought still better of itself. It prided itself upon its growth; in fact, its complacency, its ugliness and its size kept pace with one another.

"Look at our output," Sarah Maitland used to brag to her general manager, Mr. Robert Ferguson; "and look at our churches! We have more churches for our size than any town west of the Alleghanies."

"We need more jails than any town, east or west," Mr. Ferguson retorted, grimly.

Mrs. Maitland avoided the deduction. Her face was full of pride. "You just wait! We'll be the most important city in this country yet, because we will hold the commerce of the

world right here in our mills!" She put out her great open palm, and slowly closed the strong, beautiful fingers into a gripping fist. "The commerce of the world, right *here*!" she said, thrusting the clenched hand, that quivered a little, almost into his face.

Robert Ferguson snorted. He was a melancholy man, with thin, bitterly sensitive lips, and kind eyes that were curiously magnified by gold-rimmed eyeglasses, which he had a way of knocking off with disconcerting suddenness. He did not, he declared, trust anybody. "What's the use?" he said; "you only get your face slapped!" For his part, he believed the Eleventh Commandment was, "Blessed is he that expecteth nothing, because he'll get it."

"Read your Bible!" Mrs. Maitland retorted; "then you'll know enough to call it a Beatitude, not a Commandment."

Mr. Ferguson snorted again. "Bible? It's all I can do to get time to read my paper. I'm worked to death," he reproached her. But in spite of being worked to death he always found time on summer evenings to weed the garden in his back yard, or on winter mornings to feed a flock of Mercer's sooty pigeons; and he had been known to walk all over town to find a particular remedy for a sick child of one of his molders. To be sure he alleged, when Mrs. Maitland accused him of kindness, that, as far as the child was concerned, he was a fool for his pains, because human critters ("I'm one of 'em myself,") were a bad lot and it would be a good thing if they all died young!

"Oh, you have a fine bark, friend Ferguson," she said, "but when it comes to a bite, I guess most folks get a kiss from you."

"Kiss?" said Robert Ferguson, horrified; "not much!"

They were very good friends, these two, each growling at, disapproving of, and completely trusting the other. Mrs. Maitland's chief disapproval of her superintendent—for her reproaches about his bark were really expressions of admiration—her serious disapproval was based on the fact that, when the season permitted, he broke the Sabbath by grubbing in his garden, instead of going to church. A grape-arbor ran the length of this garden, and in August the Isabellas, filmed with soot, had a flavor, Robert Ferguson thought, finer than could be found in any of the vineyards lying in the hot sunshine on the banks of the river, far out of reach of Mercer's smoke. There was a flagstone path around the arbor, and then borders of perennials against brick walls thick with ivy or hidden by trellised peach-trees. All summer long bees came to murmur among the flowers, and every breeze that blew over them carried some sweetness to the hot and tired streets outside. It was a spot of perfume and peace, and it was no wonder that the hard-working, sad-eyed man liked to spend his Sundays in it. But "remembering the Sabbath" was his employer's strong point. Mrs. Maitland kept the Fourth Commandment with passion. Her Sundays, dividing each six days of extraordinary activity, were arid stretches of the unspeakable dullness of idleness. When Blair grew up he used to look back at those Sundays and shudder. There was church and Sunday-school in the morning, then a cold dinner, for cold roast beef was Mrs. Maitland's symbol of Sabbatical holiness. Then an endless, vacant afternoon, spent always indoors. Certain small, pious books were

permitted the two children—*Little Henry and His Bearer*, *The Ministering Children*, and like moral food; but no games, no walks, no playing in the orchard. Silence and weary idleness and Little Henry's holy arrogances. Though the day must have been as dreary to Mrs. Maitland as it was to her son and daughter, she never winced. She sat in the parlor, dressed in black silk, and read *The Presbyterian* and the Bible. She never allowed herself to look at her desk in the dining-room, or even at her knitting, which on week-days when she had no work to do was a great resource; she looked at the clock a good deal, and sometimes she sighed, then applied herself to *The Presbyterian*. She went to bed at half-past seven as against eleven or twelve on other nights, first reading, with extraordinary rapidity, her "Chapter." Mrs. Maitland had a "system" by which she was able to read the Bible through once a year. She frequently recommended it to her superintendent; to her way of thinking such reading was accounted to her as righteousness.

Refreshed by a somnolent Sunday, she would rush furiously into business on Monday morning, and Mr. Robert Ferguson, who never went to church, followed in her wake, doing her bidding with grim and admiring thoroughness. If not "worked to death," he was, at any rate, absorbed in her affairs. Even when he went home at night, and, on summer evenings, fell to grubbing in his narrow back yard, where his niece "helped" him by pushing a little wheelbarrow over the mossy flagstones—even then he did not dismiss Mrs. Maitland's business from his mind. He was scrupulous to say, as he picked up the weeds scattered from the wheelbarrow, "Have you been a good little girl to-day,

Elizabeth?" but all the while, in his own thoughts he was going over matters at the Works. On Sundays he managed to get far enough away from business to interrogate Miss White about his niece:

"I hope Elizabeth is behaving herself, Miss White?"

"Oh yes; she is a dear, good child."

"Well, you never can tell about children—or anybody else. Keep a sharp eye on her, Miss White. And be careful, please, about vanity. I thought I saw her looking in the mirror in the hall this morning. Please discourage any signs of vanity."

"She hasn't a particle of vanity!" Miss White said warmly.

But in spite of such assurances, Mr. Ferguson was always falling into bleakly apprehensive thoughts of his little girl, obstinately denying his pride in her, and allowing himself only the meager hope that she would "turn out fairly decently." Vanity was his especial concern, and he was more than once afraid he had discovered it: Elizabeth was not allowed to go to dancing-school—dancing and vanity were somehow related in her uncle's mind; so the vital, vivid little creature expressed the rhythm that was in her by dancing without instruction, keeping time with loud, elemental cadences of her own composing, not always melodious, but always in time. Sometimes she danced thus in the school-room; sometimes in Mrs. Todd's "ice-cream parlor" at the farther end of Mercer's old wooden bridge; once—and this was one of the occasions when Mr. Ferguson thought he had detected the vice he dreaded—once she danced in his very own library! Up and down she went, back and forth, before a long mirror that stood between the windows. She had put a

daffodowndilly behind each ear, and twisted a dandelion chain around her neck. She looked, as she came and went, smiling and dimpling at herself in the shadowy depths of the mirror, like a flower—a flower in the wind!—bending and turning and swaying, and singing as she danced: "Oh, isn't it joyful—joyful—joyful!"

It was then that her uncle came upon her; for just a moment he stood still in involuntary delight, then remembered his theories; there was certainly vanity in her primitive adornment! He knocked his glasses off with a fierce gesture, and did his duty by barking at her—as Mrs. Maitland would have expressed it. He told her in an angry voice that she must go to bed for the rest of the day! at least, if she ever did it again, she must go to bed for the rest of the day.

Another time he felt even surer of the feminine failing: Elizabeth said, in his presence, that she wished she had some rings like those of a certain Mrs. Richie, who had lately come to live next door; at which Mr. Ferguson barked at Miss White, barked so harshly that Elizabeth flew at him like a little enraged cat. "Stop scolding Cherry-pie! You hurt her feelings; you are a wicked man!" she screamed, and beating him with her right hand, she fastened her small, sharp teeth into her left arm just above the wrist—then screamed again with self-inflicted pain. But when Miss White, dismayed at such a loss of self-control, apologized for her, Mr. Ferguson shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't mind temper," he said; "I used to have a temper myself; but I will *not* have her vain! Better put some plaster

on her arm. Elizabeth, you must not call Miss White by that ridiculous name."

The remark about Mrs. Richie's rings really disturbed him; it made him deplore to himself the advent as a neighbor of a foolish woman. "She'll put ideas into Elizabeth's head," he told himself. In regard to the rings, he had not needed Elizabeth to instruct him. He had noticed them himself, and they had convinced him that this Mrs. Richie, who at first sight seemed a shy, sad woman with no nonsense about her, was really no exception to her sex. "Vain and lazy, like the rest of them," he said cynically. Having passed the age when he cared to sport with Amaryllis, he did not, he said, like women. When he was quite a young man, he had added, "except Mrs. Maitland." Which remark, being repeated to Molly Wharton, had moved that young lady to retort that the reason that Sarah Maitland was the only woman he liked, was that Sarah Maitland was not a woman! "The only feminine thing about her is her petticoats," said Miss Wharton, daintily. For which *mot*, Robert Ferguson never forgave her. He certainly did not expect to like this new-comer in Mercer, this Mrs. Richie, but he had gone to see her. He had been obliged to, because she wished to rent a house he owned next door to the one in which he lived. So, being her landlord, he had to see her, if for nothing else, to discourage requests for inside repairs. He saw her, and promised to put up a little glass house at the end of the back parlor for a plant-room. "If she'd asked me for a 'conservatory,'" he said to himself, "I wouldn't have considered it for a moment; but just a few sashes—I suppose I might as well give in on that? Besides, if she likes

flowers, there must be something to her." All the same, he was conscious of having given in, and to a woman who wore rings; so he was quite gruff with Mrs. Richie's little boy, whom he found listening to an harangue from Elizabeth. The two children had scraped acquaintance through the iron fence that separated the piazzas of the two houses. "I," Elizabeth had announced, "have a mosquito-bite on my leg; I'll show it to you," she said, generously; and when the bite on her little thigh was displayed, she tried to think of other personal matters. "My mother's dead. And my father's dead."

"So's mine," David matched her, proudly. "I'm an adopted child."

"I have a pair of red shoes with white buttons," she said. David, unable to think of any possession of his own to cap either bite or boots, was smitten into gloomy silence.

In spite of the landlord's disapproval of his tenant's rings, the acquaintance of the two families grew. Mr. Ferguson had to see Mrs. Richie again about those "sashes," or what not. His calls were always on business—but though he talked of greenhouses, and she talked of knocking out an extra window in the nursery so that her little boy could have more sunshine, they slipped after a while into personalities: Mrs. Richie had no immediate family; her—her husband had died nearly three years before. Since then she had been living in St. Louis. She had come now to Mercer because she wanted to be nearer to a friend, an old clergyman, who lived in a place called Old Chester.

"I think it's about twenty miles up the river," she said. "That's where I found David. I—I had lost a little boy, and

David had lost his mother, so we belonged together. It doesn't make any difference to us, that he isn't my own, does it, David?"

"Yes'm," said David,

"David! Why won't you *ever* say what is expected of you? We don't know anybody in Mercer," she went on, with a shy, melancholy smile, "except Elizabeth." And at her kind look the little girl, who had tagged along behind her uncle, snuggled up to the maternal presence, and rubbed her cheek against the white hand which had the pretty rings on it. "I am so glad to have somebody for David to play with," Mrs. Richie said, looking down at the little nestling thing, who at that moment stopped nestling, and dropping down on toes and finger-tips, loped up—on very long hind-legs, to the confusion of her elders, who endeavored not to see her peculiar attitude—and, putting a paw into David's pocket, abstracted a marble. There was an instant explosion, in which David, after securing his property through violent exertions, sought, as a matter of pure justice, to pull the bear's hair. But when Mrs. Richie interfered, separating the combatants with horrified apologies for her young man's conduct, Elizabeth's squeals stopped abruptly. She stood panting, her eyes still watering with David's tug at her hair; the dimple in her right cheek began to lengthen into a hard line.

"You are very naughty, David," said Mrs. Richie, sternly; "you must beg

Elizabeth's pardon at once!" At which Elizabeth burst out:

"Stop! Don't scold him. It was my fault. I did it—taking his marble.

I'll—I'll bite my arm if you scold David!"

"Elizabeth!" protested her uncle; "I'm ashamed of you!"

But Elizabeth was indifferent to his shame; she was hugging David frantically. "I hate, I hate, I *hate* your mother—if she does have rings!" Her face was so convulsed with rage that Mrs. Richie actually recoiled before it; Elizabeth, still clamoring, saw that involuntary start of horror. Instantly she was calm; but she shrank away almost out of the room. It seemed as if at that moment some veil, cold and impenetrable, fell between the gentle woman and the fierce, pathetic child—a veil that was not to be lifted until, in some mysterious way, life should make them change places.

The two elders looked at each other, Robert Ferguson with meager amusement; Mrs. Richie still grave at the remembrance of that furious little face. "What did she mean about 'biting her arm'?" she asked, after Elizabeth had been sent home, the bewildered David being told to accompany her to the door.

"I believe she bites herself when she gets angry," Elizabeth's uncle said; "Miss White said she had quite a sore place on her arm last winter, because she bit it so often. It's of no consequence," he added, knocking his glasses off fiercely. Again Mrs. Richie looked shocked. "She is my brother's child," he said, briefly; "he died some years ago. He left her to me." And Mrs. Richie knew instinctively that the bequest had not been welcome. "Miss White looks after her," he said, putting his glasses on again, carefully, with both hands; "she calls her her 'Lamb,' though a more unlamblike person than Elizabeth I never met. She has a little school for her and the two Maitland youngsters in the

top of my house. Miss White is otherwise known as Cherry-pie. Elizabeth, I am informed, loves cherry-pie; also, she loves Miss White: ergo!" he ended, with his snort of a laugh. Then he had a sudden thought: "Why don't you let David come to Miss White for lessons? I've no doubt she could look after another pupil."

"I'd be delighted to," Mrs. Richie said, gratefully. So, through the good offices of Mr. Ferguson, the arrangement was made. Mr. Ferguson did not approve of Mrs. Richie's rings, but he had no objection to helping her about David.

And that was how it happened that these four little lives were thrown together—four threads that were to be woven into the great fabric of Life.

CHAPTER II

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On the other side of the street, opposite the Maitland house, was a huddle of wooden tenements. Some of them were built on piles, and seemed to stand on stilts, holding their draggled skirts out of the mud of their untidy yards: some sagged on rotting sills, leaning shoulder to shoulder as if to prop one another up. From each front door a shaky flight of steps ran down to the unpaved sidewalk, where pigs and children and hens, and the daily tramp of feet to and from the Maitland Works, had beaten the earth into a hard, black surface—or a soft, black surface, when it rained. These little huddling houses called themselves Maitland's Shantytown, and they looked up at the Big House, standing in melancholy isolation behind its fence of iron spears, with the pride that is common to us all when we find ourselves in the company of our betters. Back of the little houses was a strip of waste land, used for a dump; and beyond it, bristling against the sky, the long line of Mercer's stacks and chimneys.

In spite of such surroundings, the Big House, even as late as the early seventies, was impressive. It was square, with four great chimneys, and long windows that ran from floor to ceiling. Its stately entrance and its two curving flights of steps were of white marble, and so were the lintels of the windows; but the stone was so stained and darkened with smoky years of rains and river fogs, that its only beauty lay

in the noble lines that grime and time had not been able to destroy. A gnarled and twisted old wistaria roped the doorway, and, crawling almost to the roof, looped along the eaves, in May it broke into a froth of exquisite purple and faint green, and for a week the garland of blossoms, murmurous with bees, lay clean and lovely against the narrow, old bricks which had once been painted yellow. Outside, the house had a distinction which no superficial dilapidation could mar; but inside distinction was almost lost in the commonplace, if not in actual ugliness. The double parlors on the right of the wide hall had been furnished in the complete vulgarity of the sixties; on the left was the library, which had long ago been taken by Mrs. Maitland as a bedroom, for the practical reason that it opened into the dining-room, so her desk was easily accessible at any time of night, should her passion for toil seize her after working-hours were over. The walls of this room were still covered with books, that no one ever read. Mrs. Maitland had no time to waste on reading; "I *live*," she used to say; "I don't read about living!" Except the imprisoned books, the only interesting things in the room were some *cartes-de-visite* of Blair, which stood in a dusty row on the bureau, one of them propped against her son's first present to her—the unopened bottle of Johann Maria Farina. When Blair was a man, that bottle still stood there, the kid cap over the cork split and yellow, the ribbons of the little calendar hanging from its green neck, faded to streaky white.

The office dining-room, about which Blair had begun to be impertinent when he was eight years old, was of noble proportions and in its day must have had great dignity; but

in Blair's childhood its day was over. Above the dingy white wainscoting the landscape paper his grandfather had brought from France in the thirties had faded into a blur of blues and buffs. The floor was uncarpeted save for a Persian rug, whose colors had long since dulled to an even grime. At one end of the room was Mrs. Maitland's desk; at the other, filing cases, and two smaller desks where clerks worked at ledgers or drafting. The four French windows were uncurtained, and the inside shutters folded back, so that the silent clerks might have the benefit of every ray of daylight filtering wanly through Mercer's murky air. A long table stood in the middle of the room; generally it was covered with blue-prints, or the usual impedimenta of an office. But it was not an office table; it was of mahogany, scratched and dim to be sure, but matching the ancient claw-footed sideboard whose top was littered with letter files, silver teapots and sugar-bowls, and stacks of newspapers. Three times a day one end of this table was cleared, and the early breakfast, or the noon dinner, or the rather heavy supper eaten rapidly and for the most part in silence. Mrs. Maitland was silent because she was absorbed in thought; Nannie and Blair were silent because they were afraid to talk. But the two children gave a touch of humanness to the ruthless room, which, indeed, poor little Blair had some excuse for calling a "pigsty."

"When I'm big," Blair announced one afternoon after school, "I'll have a bunch of flowers on the table, like your mother does; you see if I don't! I like your mother, David."

"I don't; *very* much," Elizabeth volunteered. "She looks out of her eyes at me when I get mad."

"I don't like to live at my house," Blair said, sighing.

"Why don't you run away?" demanded Elizabeth; "I'm going to some day when I get time."

"Where would you run to?" David said, practically. David was always disconcertingly practical.

But Elizabeth would not be pinned down to details. "I will decide that when I get started."

"I believe," Blair meditated, "I will run away."

"I'll tell you what let's do," Elizabeth said, and paused to pick up her right ankle and hop an ecstatic yard or two on one foot; "I tell you what let's do: let's all run away, *and get married!*"

The other three stared at her dumfounded. Elizabeth, whirling about on her toes, dropped down on all—fours to turn a somersault of joy; when she was on her feet she said, "Oh, *let's* get married!" But it took Blair, who always found it difficult to make up his mind, a few moments to accept the project.

They had planned to devote that afternoon to playing bury-you-alive under the yellow sofa in Mrs. Richie's parlor, but this idea of Elizabeth's made it necessary to hide in the "cave"—a shadowy spot behind the palmtub in the greenhouse—for reflection. Once settled there, jostling one another like young pigeons, it was David who, as usual, made the practical objections:

"We haven't any money."

"I suppose we could get all the money we want out of my mother's cash-box," Blair admitted, wavering.

"That's stealing," Elizabeth said.