

Meade L. T.

The Children of Wilton Chase



L. Meade

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THIS STORY

IS DEDICATED, WITH AFFECTION,

TO

MARJORY

A CHILD WHO, POSSESSING THE SPIRIT OF LOVE AND SERVICE,

HAS INSPIRED THE IDEA OF THAT OTHER MARJORY

WHO APPEARS IN THESE PAGES

August, 1891.

CHAPTER I. MARJORIE'S WAY

"I don't care," said Ermengarde. "I won't do it! I won't obey her!"

"What are you saying, Ermie?"

Ermengarde was standing by the dressing-table in her room. She had been talking half to herself; she now turned quickly round, and confronted a plain little girl of between eleven and twelve.

"Is that you, Marjorie? I didn't know you were listening. I had not an idea you were in the room."

"But what *did* you say, Ermie? Who is the person you won't obey?"

Marjorie had puckered up her brows. Her small, shrewd, sensible face looked full of anxiety.

"Now, look here," said Ermengarde, speaking with passion, "don't you interfere! You are always poking your finger into everyone's pie. Leave mine alone. I don't want you to meddle, nor to help me. I understand my own affairs. What is the matter? Are you going to cry?"

"No, Ermengarde. I don't cry. I think it's babyish."

Marjorie walked to the other end of the large bedroom, tied on a shabby brown hat, and prepared to leave the room. When she reached the door she turned again, and looked at her sister.

"When Basil comes home – " she began.

"Oh, don't. Why do you talk about Basil?" Ermengarde tossed her hat off her head as she spoke. "And just when I might have been happy! What are you lingering by the door for, Marjorie? Well, if you must know, I am not going to obey Miss Nelson any more. She went a little too far this morning, and I'll show her that I'm Miss Wilton, and that she's only the governess – and – and – Now, where's that child gone to? I do think Marjorie is a perfect nuisance. I don't see anything good in her. Paul Pry, I call her. Paul Pry, and a little busy-body. I suppose she'll go and make up to Miss Nelson now, and tell her what I've said. No, though, that isn't like her. She does try to stick up for one. Poor little plain mite. Well, I don't intend to obey Miss Nelson, Marjorie or no Marjorie. Basil is coming home from school, and I shall go in the carriage to meet him. I don't care what Miss Nelson said. She's not going to keep me from meeting my own Basil. Why, I was fourteen a month ago – a great many girls are grown up at fourteen. I don't mean English girls, of course, but foreigners, and I'm not going to be kept in surveillance, just as if I was an infant."

Ermengarde was quite alone in her nice room. The house was still, for just now the children – there were a good many children at Wilton Chase – were out. The time was the end of July, and on this very day Basil and Eric, the two public-school boys, were coming home. The whole house, that is the nursery and schoolroom part of the house, were in a flutter of expectation and excitement. Nothing ever disturbed the other end of Wilton Chase, where father and Aunt Elizabeth, and the numerous visitors resided. But the nurseries and the schoolrooms were generally noisy apartments, and it was very unusual to have such a stillness as now reigned over the whole of this important portion of the house.

Ermengarde and Marjorie slept in two pretty white beds, side by side, in this nice, large, cheerful bedroom. Ermengarde was completely mistress, but she did not object to Marjorie's company, for Marjorie was very plodding and useful and self-forgetful, and Ermie liked to be waited on, and her complaints listened to, and her worries sympathized with.

In many ways she was a commonplace child. She had a handsome little face, and a proud, overbearing manner. She thought a great deal more highly of herself than she ought, and she was a constant trial to Miss Nelson, who was a most patient, long-suffering woman.

Ermengarde had been directly disobedient that morning, and as a punishment Miss Nelson had decided that she was not to go in the carriage to meet her brothers at the railway station. The little girl had stared, bridled, drawn herself up in her haughtiest style, and determined openly to defy Miss Nelson.

She had never gone to this length of rebellion before, and when the governess went down to the seashore, accompanied by two or three of the children, she imagined that Ermengarde would attend to her neglected lessons, and presently join them on the beach.

"Marjorie," said the governess, as she suddenly met the little girl in the grounds, "I am deeply sorry, but I am forced to punish Ermengarde. She is not to go to meet your brothers; but would you – only, my dear child, you do look so dirty and untidy – would you like to go in the carriage? You are a good little girl; it would be a treat for you."

"I could get cleaned in a minute," said Marjorie. "There's my brown Holland overall, and Hudson could brush my hair, and make it tidy."

Then she flushed, and the wistful, eager expression went out of her eyes.

"Perhaps I had better not," she said.

"Why so, my dear child?"

Marjorie was thinking of Ermengarde. She could not complain of her sister, but to sit by and witness her disobedience would destroy her own pleasure.

"Ermie wouldn't like it, either," she whispered under her breath. "I wish I hadn't got honest eyes; Ermie says they look so horrid when I don't like a thing."

"Well, Marjorie, are you going, or are you not?" said Miss Nelson.

"I think not, Miss Nelson," said Marjorie, in a cheerful voice. "Nurse says Bob is sure to have another teething fit, so of course he'll be fractious, and she'll want me to pick up shells for him."

"Well, dear, you must please yourself," answered Miss Nelson gently.

She never praised Marjorie for being unselfish – no one did – they only said it was her way, and all the people with whom she came in contact took small kindnesses and small services from her as a matter of course.

Ermengarde was alone in her room, and the house was delightfully still. She waited for another moment, and then going over to the fireplace rang a bell. In a few minutes the schoolroom maid, looking very cross and astonished, answered the summons.

"Hudson, I am going out in the carriage. Please help me to dress," said Ermengarde. "And give directions that I am to be told when the carriage is ready."

"Are you going for the young gentlemen, Miss Ermengarde?"

"Yes."

"Then you must be quick, miss, for Macnab is bringing the horses round now."

Ermengarde had thought of making a very effective toilet, but she had only time to put on a shady hat, her best one, snatch up her parasol and gloves, and run downstairs.

Mr. Wilton was going himself to the station to meet his boys. Ermengarde was always a little afraid of her father. She stepped back now when she saw him, and slightly colored.

"Come, Ermie," he said good-naturedly, "jump in! We must be off at once, or we shall not be in time. I suppose you have been a specially good girl this morning, as Miss Nelson has allowed you to come."

Ermengarde murmured something which her father did not quite hear.

"You have – eh?" he repeated. "Miss Nelson knows you are coming? It is all right, I suppose?"

"Yes, father," said Ermengarde. She raised her eyes; then she got into the carriage with a curious sensation of being suddenly very shrunken and small. She was a rebellious, disobedient child, but she had not often sunk to deliberate falsehood.

The drive through the summer country on this delightful afternoon was so invigorating, and Mr. Wilton was so little awe-inspiring, and such a genuinely pleasant, witty, affectionate father that

Ermengarde's spirits rose. She forgot her disobedience, that horrible lie which fear had wrung from her lips ceased to trouble her, and she chatted quite gayly to her father.

"Why, Ermie, what a big girl you are growing," he said presently, "and how well you express yourself! You will be quite a companion to me when you come out."

Ermengarde lifted her handsome eyes, They sparkled with pleasure.

"Well, puss, what is it?" said Mr. Wilton.

"Only I do so wish I could come out now."

"Now? How old are you?"

"Fourteen – really, quite –"

"We'll talk about it, Ermie, when you are seventeen. Eighteen is a better age, but as your poor mother is not living, and I – I – want a companion, I – we'll see about it."

"Father, I do hate Aunt Elizabeth."

"Pooh, what harm does she do you? You mustn't have such strong likes and dislikes, Ermie. You are exactly like me. I was awfully headstrong in my time. Your aunt is an excellent woman. I wonder what I should do without her. There must be some woman at the head of a house, you know, puss."

"When I come out, you'll let me take care of your house for you, won't you, father?"

"What a chit it is."

"But won't you? Do say you will, father. I should so love to govern!"

"I daresay. Here we are quite close to the station now. Easy, Macnab, don't force the horses up this steep bit. Well, puss, what are you looking so eagerly at me for? So you'd like to govern, eh?"

"Oh, shouldn't I? Dearly, dearly! I'd send Aunt Elizabeth and Miss Nelson away."

"Indeed! A nice household I'd be likely to have."

"Father, I wish you would not laugh at me!"

Mr. Wilton's face generally wore an expression of somewhat kindly sarcasm. Now a sudden look of tenderness came into his dark eyes. He turned and looked at the handsome, restless, dissatisfied girl at his side.

"I don't want to laugh at you, Ermie," he said, "but the fact is, I don't profess to understand half-fledged creatures. If your mother were alive, all would be different. Well, child, well, I'll see what can be done when the time comes; I want you to help me, of course, when the time comes; that is, if you have the real stuff in you, if you are a true Wilton. All the women of our house are women of honor."

"Honor?" repeated Ermengarde vaguely.

"Yes. Truthful, and above-board, and brave. Marjorie is a Wilton, every inch of her. Hullo! the train is in, and there come my scamps. Well, Basil, here you are, sir – and Master Eric, too! Sorry to be home, eh? I make no doubt you are. Now, look here, you villains, you are not going to tear my place to pieces. How many more pets, I wonder?"

"Only some rabbits, gov – father, I mean," said Basil.

"That's right, Basil – you know I don't allow you to 'governor' me – I like the old-fashioned word best. So there are some rabbits, eh? How are they to get home?"

"Oh, they can go with the pigeons and the ferrets," chimed in Eric, a small boy with a freckled face, and bright ruddy-gold hair.

"Isn't the dogcart here, father?" asked Basil.

"No, you're to come home in state in the family coach. A cart ought to be somewhere round for your luggage. The beasts can go in that."

"Oh, not the ferrets," said Eric. "I think perhaps I had better walk home with the ferrets. They might eat through their basket, and get at my fantails."

"Nonsense! stow them away under this seat, and jump in, lads. Do you see Ermie? She's all in a flutter to kiss you."

"How do, Ermie?" said Eric. "Stick your legs well out in front, or the ferrets may bite 'em."

Basil didn't say anything, but he clasped Ermengarde's slim fingers in his big brown hand. Basil's squeeze signified a good deal, and Ermengarde colored up, and her heart swelled with pride and pleasure.

"Jolly weather, isn't it?" said Basil. "I say, aren't we going to have a time! How are all the others? How's Maggie? Are you going to have holidays, too, while we are having ours, Ermie?"

Ermengarde's face flushed again.

"It is unfair," she said. "I wish you'd speak to father about it, Basil. We are only to have half-holidays. Lessons all the morning, and the afternoons with you. I do call it a shame! It's Aunt Elizabeth's doing. She arranged it with Miss Nelson a week ago. I do wish, father, you'd interfere."

"My dear, I never dream of interfering with your Aunt Elizabeth. – A pretty mess I'd get into if I did [*sotto voce*]. – I make no doubt, Ermie, it's a very wise arrangement, and you fellows can have the mornings quite free for long expeditions or anything of that sort."

"Oh, we'll have lots of the girls in the afternoon," said Eric. "I do hope that big ferret isn't making his way out. He *is* a stunner, sir; why, he killed – Ermie, keep your legs away – he has teeth like razors, sir, and once he catches on, he never lets go. He'll suck you to death as likely as not. Now, what's up?"

Ermengarde started from her seat. She felt slightly frightened, and very cross.

"You bring home horrid pets, Eric," she said. "And you have no sympathy, not a bit, and you are selfish, too –"

"Oh, he's a scamp," interrupted Basil; "never mind him."

Again he stretched out his hand and took Ermengarde's.

"Tell me all about the young'uns," he said. "How are the bees? Did you make a good sale of the honey? I want to buy out my share – come close, I've a secret to whisper to you."

Ermengarde and Basil talked in low excited tones to one another all the rest of the way home. Eric entertained his father with the exploits of his favorite ferret, and the prodigious feats of prowess performed by a certain pouter-pigeon of rare lineage. Mr. Wilton laughed and encouraged the boy's chatter. The whole party were in high spirits when they drew up at the lodge gates.

CHAPTER II. SHARK

"Hullo, here's Marjorie!" exclaimed Eric. He vaulted out of the carriage, and flung his arms round Marjorie's little squat figure, lifting her off the ground, and squeezing her in an ecstasy of delight. "Here I am, Mag, and there are two pouters in a cage, and four new fantails – they're coming with the luggage – and I've got a lop-eared rabbit with black spots, and my ferrets – there are two of them in the carriage. Wait until you see Shark's teeth – I call him Shark, he's such a good 'un at biting. We'll have some fun these holidays; don't you make any mistake!"

"Yes, yes, of course we will! I'm delighted, Eric, delighted! Where are the ferrets? When can I see them? Oh, how are you, Basil? Have you on a tight boot to-day? Does your corn pinch you?"

"No, I've got over those small ailments," said Basil. "What a roundabout you are, Marjorie," he continued, pinching her cheek. "Now, what's the matter? You are quite frowning."

Marjorie's round good-humored freckled face wore an expression of consternation.

"I made some slippers during the term for you," she said. "They're large, and I wadded them so that they are most comfortable. But – it isn't that – the slippers are in your room, I put them there – Ermie, won't you get out?"

"No," said Ermengarde. "I'm going to drive down to the house."

Marjorie frowned more than ever.

"They are all coming up from the shore; Miss Nelson, and all of them; and they'll see the horses and they'll run. Even Miss Nelson will run, she's so fond of Basil, and – "

Mr. Wilton, who still remained in the carriage by Ermengarde's side, now interposed.

"We won't wait for the small fry," he said. "We'll drive on to the house at once. Oh, yes, Eric, you can go to meet the party from the shore of course, if you like, and Basil too."

"I'll stay with Ermie," said Basil.

He jumped into the carriage again, and they drove down the long winding avenue to the house.

Great elm trees shaded the avenue, and Basil pushed back his cap and looked up into the green. He was a dark and handsome lad, and his expression was unusually thoughtful for his years.

"How grand those old trees are!" he said. "Whenever I think of home while I'm away, I remember the old elm trees in the avenue, and the rooks' nests – I remember, too – " Here he stopped suddenly, and a wave of red mantled his cheeks. Ermengarde's bright eyes were fixed on him; she guessed his thoughts. Basil had often walked under those elm trees with his mother.

Mr. Wilton had opened the *Times*, and was not attending to the chatter of the young folk.

"You don't look quite the thing, Ermie," said Basil in a low voice.

"I'm perfectly well," she replied.

"But you turned quite white that time at the lodge. I noticed it. That time when Marjorie wanted you to get out. Have you been worrying yourself lately? You know you are such a girl to mope, and make mountains out of mole-hills. School would be the place for you."

Mr. Wilton dropped his paper.

"Are you recommending school for Ermengarde?" he said. "Sometimes I have thought of it, but your mother had a prejudice against school-life for girls, and Ermie does very well with Miss Nelson and the masters who come here to instruct her. Now here we are, and here's your Aunt Elizabeth."

Miss Wilton was not a graceful woman. She was a feminine edition of her brother, and Mr. Wilton, although handsome as a man, had by no means the type of face which best lends itself to womanly graces.

Miss Wilton was standing on the steps in a riding-habit. Her horse had just been taken round to the stables. She had her whip in her hand, and her masses of hair looked untidy – her face, too, was flushed.

"Really, Roderick," she said to her brother, "that groom is past bearing. He had the impertinence – Oh, is that you, Basil? So you've come back – how are you? Now one thing I do beg, and that is, that you never come into the house except by the side door, and that you and Eric keep your pets to yourselves. I don't mind what is done behind the schoolroom doors, but I will not – I cannot – permit messy lounging school-boys in my part of the house. Roderick, what is the matter? Are you laughing at me?"

"I think I am, Elizabeth," replied Mr. Wilton. "Boys will be boys, and no one can accuse Basil of lounging."

Miss Wilton had a very hearty loud laugh herself. She indulged in it now, and going up to Basil, hit him a blow on the shoulders.

"You're a true Wilton," she said. "By and by I'll be proud of you – by and by I'll want your help. You shall ride with me, and keep those lazy intolerable grooms in some sort of order, but just at present your place is in the schoolroom part of the house. Ermengarde! You here? Has Miss Nelson promoted you to drive in the carriage? That is an honor only conferred on very good children."

Ermengarde hated to be called a child. She disliked her Aunt Elizabeth's manner to her at all times, and now she flushed and frowned, and looked decidedly unamiable.

"Come, Basil," she said, touching her brother on his arm.

"No, miss, you're not to go with that cross face on," said her aunt. "Look pleasant, or I shall desire Miss Nelson on no account to permit you to drive with your father again. What is it, Roderick? What's the matter?"

"Leave the poor child alone," said Mr. Wilton. "Run away, chicks, both of you; run off and be happy. Now, Elizabeth, what is this story about the groom?"

Ermengarde slipped her hand within Basil's arm, and they both walked round to the other side of the house. High tea was spread in the pleasant schoolroom. Miss Nelson, who looked worried and over-tired, was desiring her pupils to take their places. All the nursery children were to sup in the schoolroom to-night, in honor of the boys' return, and nurse was bringing in toddling Ethel, and little Dick and Bobby, and placing them in their chairs, and then cutting bread-and-butter for them.

Basil rushed down a side passage to a lavatory to wash his hands, and Ermengarde flew upstairs to dispose of her best hat. Miss Nelson had not noticed it.

When the elder boy and girl came into the room the meal had commenced. Marjorie, as usual, was trotting from chair to chair, helping everyone, pushing the butter nearer to little Mollie, the youngest schoolroom child, stopping Bobby's rebellious lips with strawberries, and lugging a great jug of milk in her arms, and with a red face, and chubby hands that would tremble under their load, refilling mugs of milk as fast as they got empty.

"That will do now, Marjorie; you can sit down," called out Miss Nelson.

Marjorie subsided at once into a seat beside Eric.

"Ermengarde," said her governess, glancing quickly at her eldest pupil; "you are late again for tea. You forfeit five marks."

"Oh, I say," exclaimed Basil, "I'm late, too, Miss Nelson. And it wasn't Ermie's fault, her being late this time; she could not help herself. Why, what is the matter, Ermie?"

Ermengarde had given him a shove under the table. He looked round at her, guessed that she did not wish him to say something, and instantly subsided into absolute silence.

Basil was a favorite of Miss Nelson's. He was a kind-hearted lad; he had something of Marjorie's spirit, and was always willing to throw himself into breaches, to heal disputes, to be a sort of peacemaker and server all round. Miss Nelson dreaded beyond anything the long summer vacation when the boys were home from school, and the girls had only half work. These were

the weeks for disputes, for quarrels, for disagreeables, for scrapes. During these weeks poor Miss Nelson's hair became more gray, and her face more wrinkled and anxious; but she dreaded the holidays, not because Basil was at home, but on account of Eric, who was a perfect imp of mischief, and because all the home children were more or less demoralized by his presence.

Now Miss Nelson smiled into Basil's eyes, handed him a plate of the best strawberries, and after a pause, said: "You'd like me not to punish Ermengarde?"

"Of course I should; she has done nothing to be punished for."

Again Ermengarde kicked him under the table. He was lifting a cup of tea to his lips, and part of its contents were spilt on the white tablecloth, and over his own shirt-cuff. Basil hated messes and awkward ways of doing things. He gave Ermengarde a return kick of some force, murmured, "You're a perfect muff, Ermie," and then looked up, with his momentary annoyance gone, at Miss Nelson.

"Thank you for excusing Ermengarde," he said. "She's under my command now. I'm her captain. I'll see that she's in good time in the future."

"Well, Ermengarde, you may consider yourself excused," said the governess. "I hope you have thoroughly mastered your imposition. If so, as you must want fresh air, you may go out with Basil for an hour after tea."

Basil glanced at his sister's blooming and blushing face. As he did not want to be kicked any more, however, he was silent. Marjorie had left her seat, and was bringing all the cups up to Miss Nelson to be refilled with tea. As the governess poured some hot water into the teapot she turned again to Ermengarde, "Do you know your piece of poetry, Ermie?"

Ermengarde said "Yes." This happened to be true, for the poem selected for her punishment lesson was "Casabianca," which she admired very much, and had long ago committed to memory for pleasure.

"Yes, I know it quite well, thank you, Miss Nelson," she said in a cheerful voice.

The clouds had left her face; she was now in an excellent humor. To be with Basil was always delightful to her, and she sincerely hoped that her disobedience and open defiance of authority might never be discovered. If it was, she was prepared to defend her action, but she had an intuition that Basil would disapprove. His good opinion was of the utmost value to her: she loved Basil; she had no particular affection for any other human being, unless, perhaps, her father; but Basil's presence caused a warm satisfied glow to steal around her heart.

Miss Nelson had supplied all the second cups of tea. She was again at liberty to ask her favorite a question.

"Basil, I should like to ask you in confidence, has Eric brought home any strange pets this time?"

Basil's eyes sparkled.

"Only two ferrets," he said; "and two carrier pigeons, and two fantails, and a pouter (Eric is dead nuts on that pouter), and a lop-eared rabbit. I think that's all. I have some pups, too," he added modestly, "but they are coming by parcel-post to-morrow."

"By parcel-post, Basil!" here almost screamed Marjorie. "Oh, I hope they won't be squashed."

"Silence, children!" said the governess. A red spot had risen on both her cheeks. "I had hoped no more pets were coming. And ferrets! I dread ferrets. Now the pups –"

"But they're of a very wicked breed," shouted Eric. "They're worse than my ferret Shark. They are young bloodhounds. Don't you deny it, Basil. You know you gave a sov. for them to Dandy Macjones."

"But they are quite harmless at present," said Basil. "There are only two; they haven't arrived yet. They'll come by post, or train, or something to-morrow. When they do come, I'll promise to be careful."

"Yes. Basil, I believe you are a boy to be trusted. – Eric!"

"What is it, ma'am?"

Eric put on a comical face, which set all the nursery children laughing.

"Stand up, Eric. While you are at home, at least whenever you are in the schoolroom – in fact, I may say always – you have got to yield to my authority."

"Thank you, ma'am. I didn't know it, ma'am."

Eric pulled his forelock after the fashion of a charity school-boy. The nursery children clapped their hands with delight, and a wave of color swept over Miss Nelson's face.

"I say, shut up and be respectful," growled Basil.

Eric glanced at his brother. His whole funny face became rigid except his eyes, which still danced with mirth. He folded his hands on his breast, and said in a demure, mincing tone, "I beg your pardon, Miss Nelson."

Even the governess had to smile.

"It is granted, my dear boy. Now with regard to your pets. The rabbits are not to be in the house."

"Oh, no, ma'am."

"There's no rabbit-hutch."

"I'll stow them somewhere, Miss Nelson."

"See you do. The pigeons can share the dovecotes, I suppose."

"Very well, Miss Nelson."

"The ferrets – " here Miss Nelson almost shivered. "Dangerous, disgusting beasts!"

"I say, don't," exclaimed Eric. "Shark's a stunner!"

"Their teeth," continued the governess. "I have heard that their teeth can penetrate through any obstacle."

"Shark's teeth!" pursued Eric. "Well, they ought to be strong; he has six rows; when he opens his mouth they start upright."

"Six rows! Nonsense, Eric. Please don't talk in that silly way. And once for all understand that I cannot allow that animal to be kept on the premises."

"But he's a stunner," said Eric. "Shall I bring him in for you to see?"

"You must not attempt it, sir. It is awful to think of such a horrid creature being so close to one, and I forbid you to bring it into the house."

"You shall see him, you shall see him," said Eric. "He's a perfect tip-topper. He'd kill anything. I paid five bob for him, and six ginger-beers, and ten and a half Betty cakes."

"Silence, Eric; I shall have to speak to your father. Keep the ferret in his basket or box until I can have a word with Mr. Wilton."

"But he'll starve, ma'am. He'd gnaw *you* if he was starving."

"That will do. Leave the table now, all children. I can let you know before bed-time, Eric, what is to be done with that monster."

CHAPTER III. ERMENGARDE'S SIN

Late that evening, after the young folk had gone to bed, Miss Nelson, having attired herself in a very neat black silk dress, with ruffles of real lace round her neck and wrists, her best brooch at her throat, and a pretty little head-dress of lace and ribbon becomingly arranged over her iron-gray hair, went down past the schoolroom, past the heavy oak door which divided the children's part of the house from that portion where, according to Ermengarde, all the gay life and all the fun went on, and finally tapped at Mr. Wilton's study-door.

It so happened that there were no visitors staying at Wilton Chase to-night; many friends were expected the following day, but to-night Miss Nelson knew that she would find Mr. Wilton and probably his sister disengaged.

Her tap was responded to by a hearty "Come in!" She was right. Mr. and Miss Wilton were both in the study. Miss Wilton was seated at her davenport scribbling off letters at furious speed, and Mr. Wilton was indulging in a cigar by the open window.

"Well, Miss Nelson," he said courteously; "I am glad to see you."

He placed a chair for the governess, and waited for her to speak.

"I have come – " said Miss Nelson.

She cleared her throat, she felt a little nervous.

"I have come about a – a shark – "

"Oh! oh!" exclaimed Miss Wilton. She quite jumped, and the pen dropped from her hand. "You hear her, Roderick. How interesting! Has one been seen off the coast?"

"I mean a ferret," said Miss Nelson. "Its name is Shark. I've got confused. Pray pardon me. One of the boys has brought it home."

"Oh, Eric," said Mr. Wilton. "I heard him chattering about it, the little scamp. Well, Miss Nelson," he could not help laughing. "Has that young prodigy of mine tried to frighten you unnecessarily?"

"He did say the creature had six rows of teeth," said Miss Nelson; "of course that is nonsense; but is a ferret a safe animal to have in the house, with so many young children about, and nurse not too careful?"

"Certainly not. Thank you for coming and telling us about it, Miss Nelson. Ferrets are not safe creatures to have near children, and Eric's shall be removed to the gamekeeper's to-morrow."

Miss Nelson rose at once to leave the room.

"Sit down, Miss Nelson," suddenly interrupted Miss Wilton. "As you are here I have just a word to say to you. Do you think it well to allow Ermengarde to drive in the carriage without your escort. It so happened that my brother was able to accompany her to-day but I – of course I don't like to interfere – still I should have thought that it was scarcely wise. Ermengarde is inclined to be too forward as it is."

"Ernie in the carriage to-day!" exclaimed Miss Nelson. She forgot to keep her seat. She stood up, her pale face was deeply flushed. "Impossible, Miss Wilton! Pardon me, you must be mistaken. Ermengarde was not – not quite – she infringed some of my rules, and I was obliged to give her a detention lesson. She certainly did ask to go and meet her brothers, but I was obliged to refuse. Ernie spent the afternoon indoors."

Miss Wilton sounded a gong by her side. A page appeared, to whom she gave some letters.

"See they are posted at once," she said. Then she turned to the window. "Roderick, are you asleep, or did you hear what Miss Nelson said?"

"I beg your pardon, my dear, I confess I was not attending. I thought you ladies were discussing some domestic matter."

"We were; a very domestic matter. Roderick, kindly tell Miss Nelson who was your companion to the railway station this afternoon."

"Why, Ermengarde, of course. And very pleasant she made herself. I was going to tell you, Miss Nelson, when I had the opportunity, how pleased I am with the progress of your pupil."

"Thank you," said Miss Nelson. The flush on her face had changed to pallor.

"You did not know of this?" continued Miss Wilton eagerly. "You are astonished!"

Miss Nelson was silent for several seconds.

"I will speak to Ermie," she said; then in a low voice, "there has been a misunderstanding."

She did not add any more, and Mr. Wilton, thinking that the governess looked tired and ill, tried to engage her in some general conversation. She answered a question or two in a very abstracted manner, and presently left the room.

Miss Nelson had a private sitting-room, which was not thrown open to her pupils. It was a tiny room, but the governess loved it very much. She kept her favorite photographs here, and her best prized books. Here she was absolutely her own mistress, and she sometimes called the little room "Home, sweet Home." Miss Nelson was a well-educated woman; she was between forty and fifty years of age; she had a staid and somewhat cold manner, but she was a good disciplinarian, and thoroughly conscientious. When Mrs. Wilton had died three years ago, Miss Nelson had come to the Chase. Mrs. Wilton on her deathbed had asked her husband to secure Miss Nelson's services, if possible, for the children, and this fact alone would have prevented his ever parting with the governess.

Miss Nelson was all that was honorable and kind, but a sort of impenetrable reserve prevented her showing the real affection she felt for her pupils. Consequently Ermengarde disliked her, Lucy tolerated her, the nursery children were supremely indifferent to her, and Marjorie alone loved her. This latter fact did not raise Miss Nelson in anyone's estimation. It was Marjorie's fashion to love people; it would have been unnatural, uncanny to hear round, good humored Marjorie abusing people. Marjorie's affection was bestowed on all creatures, therefore being common, it was in Ermie's opinion at least, a rather worthless thing to secure.

Miss Nelson went into her private room now, shut and locked the door, sat down in her easy-chair, and burst into tears. She was shocked at Ermengarde's disobedience; Ermie's open defiance of her authority almost terrified her. She loved all the children whom she taught, she would have done anything, gone to the length of any sacrifice, for their sakes. She wanted them to grow up good, honorable, worthy of their mother, whose memory she revered. It was easy to prophesy a bright future for Marjorie. Little Lucy, too, was a fairly amenable child; but Ermengarde, who was as proud and reserved as Miss Nelson herself – the governess trembled when she reflected how small was her power over this wayward child.

She thought for a long time; three courses of action were open to her. She might go to Mr. Wilton, open her heart to him, tell him all her doubts and fears, and ask him to remove Ermengarde from her care. Or she might talk to the little girl, tell her that she would shield her from her father's anger, show her in gentle words how wrong her action had been, assure her of the deep love she really felt for her, and finally forgive her. Or again she might speak severely to Ermengarde, and her severe words might be followed by severe discipline. She could promise not to reveal her pupil's guilt to Mr. Wilton, but the punishment she would herself inflict would be a grave one.

Miss Nelson thought far into the night, Before she went to bed, she decided to pursue the last idea which came to her, for it seemed quite plain to her own mind that Ermengarde's sin could not be expiated except through punishment.

CHAPTER IV. THE DAY OF THE PICNIC

Early the next morning Marjorie stirred in her white bed, Then she opened her eyes, raised her head from her comfortable pillow, and gazed around her.

Ermie was fast asleep. The sun was pouring into the room; the clock on the mantelpiece pointed to six.

Softly, very softly, Marjorie poked her pink toes from under the bedclothes. Then the whole of her feet appeared, then she stood upright on the floor. No one should help her over her toilet this morning; she would dress, and go out into the garden. The boys were at home; it was going to be a brilliant day. Marjorie's contented heart danced within her. She washed and dressed herself with expedition. It was not necessary to be particularly quiet, for nothing ever disturbed Ermengarde's slumbers.

Having dressed and plaited her thick hair as well as she could without aid, she knelt down by her bedside, clasped her hands over her plump face, and repeated her prayers. Once, long ago now, Mrs. Wilton had given the children, Marjorie among them, a little model prayer to repeat. One of the phrases in it was this: "Please make me a faithful servant of Jesus Christ."

Marjorie remembered quite well the first time she had used this prayer. She recalled the expression on her mother's face, and could have told anyone who asked her her mother's explanation of the word servant.

The other children had forgotten the model prayer, but Marjorie used it always. Every morning she asked God to make her a faithful servant. It was not at all difficult for this humble little girl really to pray. No one in the house guessed at Marjorie's prayer, or troubled their heads about her comforting, comfortable, unselfish ways. She was there, a plain child, useful enough, and obliging enough, but no one thanked her, or wondered if they should miss her if she were not in the house.

She was leaving the room this morning, when Ermengarde stirred and opened her eyes.

"Is that you, Maggie? oh, you're dressed. Don't go for a minute, I want to speak to you."

Marjorie closed the door which she had half opened, and went and stood by Ermengarde's bed.

"Well?" she said.

"I'm sleepy; it's frightfully early. If I talk to you, I'll get wide-awake. Can't you just wait in the room for a little?"

"I'm going into the garden, and I'll come back again, Ermie. Eric may be up, and he has promised to show me Shark. I don't believe he has got six rows of teeth."

"How you chatter, Maggie! Now I'm quite woke up. I'll have a headache most likely this afternoon. I generally do when my first sleep is disturbed."

"You have had a very long first sleep," said Marjorie. "It's half-past six o'clock."

"Is it? It's all the same to me what the time is; I'm woke up now, and it's your fault. You might be considerate, Maggie; you're the most thoughtless child. If you had sat quietly by my bedside I wouldn't be wide-awake now."

"Well, what can I do for you now that you are awake, Ermie?" asked Marjorie. "Please tell me quickly, for I can't keep Eric waiting."

"Oh, it will be all Eric with you from this out. I might have guessed that."

"No, it won't. It will be all everybody. Now, what am I to do for you?"

Ermengarde laughed.

"Maggie, don't put on that solemn face. Of course you are a good little thing. Now listen. Last night Basil and I made a plan."

"O Ermie! Weren't you in luck that Miss Nelson never found out about your wickedness yesterday?"

"My wickedness?"

Ermengarde colored brightly.

"Don't you remember, Ermie? Going in the carriage when Miss Nelson told you not. Of course you were dreadfully wicked, but I'm glad you were not found out. Now, what's the plan?"

"You're so rude and frank, Maggie. It's a horrid habit you have. I had forgotten all about that drive. And now you remind me and spoil my pleasure. You are a tactless creature!"

"Never mind about me. What's the plan?"

"It's this. Dear, I hope the day is fine!"

"Yes, Ermie, it's a lovely day."

"Well, Basil thinks – are you sure the sky is not cloudy, Mag?"

"No, perfect, not a flake anywhere; go on, Ermie."

"Jolly! Basil thinks we ought to have a whole holiday to-day – we girls, I mean. He says we might have a picnic, and go up the lake, and land and dine on Pearl Island."

"Lovely!" said Marjorie, clasping her hands. "Only Miss Nelson said –"

"That's just it, you always will think first of Miss Nelson."

"Ermie, you said I thought first of Eric a minute ago."

"That's another of your horrid habits, casting one's words up to one."

Marjorie clasped her hands in front of her, and closed her lips. Her round face looked stubborn.

"I'm sure Eric is in the garden," she said.

"I'll let you go in a minute, you impatient child. Of course Miss Nelson wants us to have lessons, but of course father is the person we must really obey. I know father is going to London to-day, and he will leave by the early train. And what I want you to do is this, Maggie; to wait about for father, and catch him, and get him to consent to give us a holiday to-day. If he says so, of course Miss Nelson has got to submit."

"All right," said Marjorie. "I don't mind a bit. Eric and I can watch for the carriage, and perhaps Macnab will let us drive round to the house. Then we'll do our best to get father to consent."

She did not wait to exchange any more words with her sister, but dashed out of the room.

At eight o'clock the schoolroom party assembled for breakfast. Miss Nelson had decided not to say anything to Ermengarde until the meal was over. Her salutation of the little girl was scarcely more cold than usual, and Ermie sat down to the breakfast-table without the least idea that her delinquency of the day before had been discovered.

Marjorie was the late one on this occasion. She rushed into the room with her hair un-plaited and her cheeks glowing.

"A holiday! a holiday!" she cried. "Father has asked you to give us a holiday, please, Miss Nelson, in honor of the boys. A lovely whole holiday! Father has gone to London, but he scribbled you a message on this card. Here it is! You'll say yes, won't you, Miss Nelson? and oh, it is such a lovely day!"

"Get your hair plaited properly, Marjorie, and come and sit down to breakfast," said her governess. She received Mr. Wilton's card without comment.

Ermengarde and Basil, however, exchanged delighted glances, and Basil, bending forward in that courteous way which always won the heart of the governess, said, "You will let us all have the holiday together, as my father wishes it?"

"You can go, of course, Basil," replied Miss Nelson.

She laid a stress on the word "you," but neither Basil nor Ermengarde noticed it. They began to chat together over the delights of the day which lay before them. The holiday spirit was caught up by the younger children, and soon an uproar and excitement of delight arose, which even Miss Nelson could not stem.

In the midst of the general hubbub, she touched Ermengarde on her shoulder.

"I want a word with you, my dear. Come with me."

In some astonishment Ermengarde rose to comply. The governess took her into her own little room.

"Shut the door," she said.

She sat down herself, and Ermengarde stood before her. Her face was pale, her voice shook.

"Ermengarde, will you now repeat your imposition poem."

"Casabianca," said Ermengarde. She had felt a vague sense of uneasiness at Miss Nelson's manner. Now her brow cleared. She recited the whole poem with scarcely a mistake, and with some show of feeling.

"You have said it well," said the governess. "It relates the extraordinary exploit of a noble-hearted child. I grieve to say there are few such in the world. May I ask you when you learned this poem, Ermengarde?"

"Yesterday – " began Ermengarde.

"No, don't go on. I will save you, I must save you, poor child, from yourself. You would tell another lie. You would deceive again. Ermie, I have loved you. I – I – have suffered for you."

"I don't know what you mean," said Ermengarde, in a voice which shook with anger. "Am I to be – are dreadful things to be said of me? Why do you accuse me of telling lies? Why?"

"No more, my dear pupil. For, notwithstanding your refractory and rebellious state, you are still my dear pupil."

"You are not my dear teacher, there!"

"Hush, I cannot permit impertinence! Ermengarde, I did not look for open and direct disobedience from you. You are full of faults, but I did not think deceit was one of them. I have found out about your drive yesterday."

"Oh!" said Ermie. Her face grew very pale. "Did – did Marjorie tell you? If I thought that – "

"No matter who told me. Don't blame your sister. She's worth twenty of you. Think of your own sin. Ermengarde, you have hurt me deeply."

"I don't care," said Ermengarde. "I said I'd go, and I went. I don't care."

"Poor child! I can only be very sorry for you. I can only pray God to bring you to a different state of mind. You thought to hide your sin from me. God knew it all the time."

Ermengarde shuffled from one foot to another. There was not a trace of repentance about her face or manner.

"At one time I thought I must tell all to your father."

Ermengarde started at this.

"I resolved not to do so."

Her face grew relieved.

"But, Ermengarde," continued the governess, "it is my duty, my solemn duty, to punish you severely. The full extent of that punishment I have not yet determined on, but to-day you spend in this room, where your meals will be brought to you."

"Oh, no, no; not that," said Ermengarde suddenly. "Not to-day, not the holiday! Let my punishment begin to-morrow, please, Miss Nelson. Do say yes, Miss Nelson. It would be terrible not to have the holiday with Basil, and for Basil to know the reason. Do yield on this point, please, Miss Nelson, please, please, and I'll try to be a better girl in future, I will truly."

"No, Ermengarde; the punishment, being merited and severe, must begin on the day you feel it most. I am sorry for you, but I cannot, I dare not yield. God help you, poor child, to a sorrow which leads to repentance."

The governess left the room, locking the door behind her.

Ermengarde stood quite still for a moment, as if she was stunned. Then she rushed to the door and tried to open it.

Miss Nelson went back to the schoolroom.

"You can have your holiday, children," she said. "Ermengarde cannot come, nor am I at liberty to explain her absence. No, Basil; you must not ask me. You must be happy without your sister to-day, and trust that what is right is being done for her. Now, about the picnic. Maggie, come here, my love. You shall take a message to cook."

"You'll come too, won't you, Miss Nelson?" asked Marjorie.

"I must, my dear. I could not allow wild young creatures like you to embark on such an expedition without me."

"And may all the babies come, Miss Nelson?"

"Yes, if nurse can accompany them."

"It seems a pity about poor Ermie."

"Do not speak of her, Marjorie. You must trust your governess to do what is right."

Marjorie's round face looked full of concern. She had a way of putting her finger to her lip when she was harassed about anything. This trick gave her the appearance of a great overgrown baby.

"Go at once and see the cook, my dear," said the governess.

Marjorie turned and left the room. In the passage she met Basil.

"What is this about Ermie?" he said at once.

"I think I know," said Marjorie. "I think I can guess."

"You'll tell me, won't you, Maggie?"

"I don't think I can, Basil. Ermie is a little – little – headstrong, and Miss Nelson, sometimes Miss Nelson is severe to Ermie."

"I shan't like her if she is," said Basil. "I don't care a bit about the picnic without Ermengarde, and I do consider it provoking of Miss Nelson to keep Ermie at home on my very first holiday."

"Oh, but you know she must maintain discipline," said Marjorie, putting her finger to her lip again.

Basil burst out laughing.

"Don't use such solemn words, Mag," he said. "You are only a baby; words of wisdom don't suit you a bit."

"I'm eleven," said Marjorie, in a hurt voice.

She ran off to the kitchen, and delivered her message. The cook, who was fond of good-humored little Marjorie, consulted her about the viands. She replied solemnly, and tried to look interested, but the zest had gone out of her voice. The first moment she had to spare she rushed to her school-desk, and scribbled a note.

"Dear Ermie," she said, "I'm miserable that the wickedness is discovered. Don't be a bit frightened though, for Basil shan't guess anything. Your fond sister, Marjorie Wilton."

This note Marjorie inclosed in one of her favorite envelopes, with a forget-me-not wreath in blue on the flap, and before the schoolroom party started for the picnic, she pushed it under the door of Miss Nelson's sitting-room.

Ermengarde had expended her first rage, and she was very glad to pick up Marjorie's note, and to read it. At first the contents of the note gave her a slight feeling of satisfaction, and a glow of gratitude to her little sister rushed over her. But then she remembered Miss Nelson's words, and the conviction once more ran through her mind that Marjorie must have been the one to tell.

"She is a canting little thing," said Ermengarde in a passion, "My wickedness, indeed! Who else would call an innocent drive wickedness? Oh, yes; she let out the whole story to Miss Nelson, and now she wants to come round me with this letter, after her horrid tell-tale way. Little monkey! Horrid, ugly little thing, too. Tell-tale-tit, your tongue shall be slit. No, no, Miss Marjorie; you need not suppose that this note blinds me! I know what you've done to me, and I'll never forgive you – never, as long as I live!"

Ermengarde now tore up the poor little letter, and opening the window scattered the tiny fragments to the breeze. Once again her anger scarcely knew any bounds. They were away, the whole happy party, and she was shut up in a dull room, compelled to endure solitary confinement all through this glorious August day. It was insufferable, it was maddening, and it was all Marjorie's fault!

It is astonishing how soon the mind, when angry, can establish within itself a fixed idea. Miss Nelson had said nothing to really draw suspicion on Marjorie, and yet Ermengarde was now thoroughly convinced that the little girl had been the one to tell of her misdemeanor. She did not trouble herself to examine proofs. All Marjorie's amiable and good-natured ways were as nothing to Ermengarde then. She had certainly told, and as long as she lived Ermie would never forgive her.

Just then, while her anger was at its height, she heard a low whistle under the open window. She rushed over to it, and popped out her head. Basil was standing underneath.

"Don't, Basil," said Ermengarde; "do go away, please. I hate you to find me here a prisoner."

"Oh, stuff, Ermie, don't be tragic over it. It's only for a day at the most, and what's a day?"

"What's a day? One of your holidays – the first of your holidays!"

"Well, there are lots more to follow. Bear it with a good grace. It will soon be over."

"Basil, I thought you had gone with the others."

"I wasn't ready, and Maggie has promised to send the boat back for me."

"Maggie! As if she could give orders."

"She can remind other people though. I'd back Maggie any day never to forget what a fellow wants."

"Oh, yes, she's first with everyone. It's a very nasty stifling hot day."

"Poor Ermie, you're cross, so you see everything distorted. You know whose pet you are, as well as possible – and the day is perfect, superb."

"Am I really your pet, Basil?"

"You conceited puss, you know you are. So is Maggie, too. She's a little darling."

The latter part of Basil's speech brought the cloud once again to Ermengarde's face.

"Oh, of course Maggie is everyone's pet," she said.

Her brother interrupted her. "Don't begin that nonsense over again, Ermie; it's too childish. You are under punishment, I don't know for what. Of course I'm awfully vexed. But why abuse poor little Mag? I say, though, do you like apples?"

"Apples? Pretty well."

"You mean awfully. I have brought you some beauties."

"How can I get them? I'm a prisoner here."

"Oh, rot about your being a prisoner. Well, fair lady, you see if your knight can't come to your assistance. Now, catch!"

He threw up a small piece of cord which he had weighted with lead. Ermengarde secured it.

"Pull, pull away! You will soon be in possession of the spoil."

Ermengarde pulled, and presently a dainty basket, which she recognized as Marjorie's most treasured receptacle for her working things, was grasped by her willing hands.

"Now, good-by, Ermie. I'm off. The boat will be back by now. Of course I shan't botanize without you to-day, never fear. By-by; eat your apples, and reflect on the shortness of a single day."

Basil bounded across the lawn, cleared the haha at the end, and disappeared from view.

His interview with Ermengarde had both a soothing and a tonic effect on her. She felt almost cheerful as she sat by the open window, and munched her apples. That basket contained more than apples. There was one large peach, and two slices of rich plumcake were stowed away under the fruit. Then, perhaps dearest possession of all, Marjorie's own special copy of "Alice in Wonderland" lay at the bottom of the basket.

After making a hearty meal of the fruit and cake, Ermengarde drew Miss Nelson's own easy-chair in front of the window, and taking up Marjorie's book began to read. She felt almost comfortable now; the punishment was not so unbearable when a brother sympathized and a sister lent of her best. The precious little copy of "Alice" had received a stain from the juice of the peach, and Ermengarde tried to wipe it out, and felt sorry for its owner.

After all Marjorie was good-natured, and if she had been base enough to tell, she had at least the grace to be sorry afterward. Ermengarde thought she would ask Marjorie when she had told, how she had told, and where. She felt that she must believe her little sister, for no one had ever heard even the semblance of an untruth Marjorie's honest lips.

Ermengarde sat on, and tried to lose herself in Alice's adventures. She was not at all sorry for her disobedience of the day before, but she was no longer in a state of despair, for her punishment seemed finite, and but for the thought of the wild happiness of the others, her present state was scarcely unendurable.

Just then, raising her eyes, she saw a little girl walking down one of the side-paths which led round to the kitchens. She was a girl scarcely as tall as herself, neatly dressed in a pink cotton frock and white sun-bonnet. Her legs were encased in nice black stockings, and her small dainty feet wore shining shoes with buckles. Ermengarde instantly dropped her book, leaned half out of the window, and called in a loud voice, "Susy – Susy – Susan Collins! come here!"

Little Susan raised an extremely pretty face, blushed, laughed, and ran gayly forward.

"Is that you, Miss Ermengarde?" she said. "I thought you were away with the others. Father has helped to take them up to Pearl Island, better than two hours ago now."

"Did they look happy, Susy? Tell me about them. Did you see them go?"

"Yes, miss, I was standing behind the rose-hedge. Miss Maggie, she did laugh wonderful, and Master Eric, he just dashed in to give us his ferrets to take care of for him, miss."

"And was Basil there, Susy?"

"No, miss, they went off without him. I heard father say he'd bring back the boat for Master Basil, and I thought for sure you'd be going with him, miss. I hope, Miss Ermengarde, you ain't ill."

"I'm not ill in body, Susan. But I've been most basely treated. I've been betrayed."

"Oh, my word!" said Susan Collins. She pushed back her sun-bonnet, and revealed her whole charming curly golden head. She was a beautiful little girl, and Ermengarde had long ago made a secret friend of her.

"I've been betrayed, Susy," continued Ermie. "But I can't tell you by whom. Only *some one* has told tales about me, and so I have been punished, and have been locked up in this room. I'm locked up now; I can't get out. I'm a prisoner!"

Ermengarde felt her woes all the more keenly as she related them. Susy's blue eyes grew bright with pity.

"Ain't it cruel?" she said. "I call it base to punish a lady like you, Miss Ermengarde, and you one of the best of created mortals."

"It's Miss Nelson," said Ermengarde. "She's dreadfully prejudiced; I find it almost impossible to endure her."

"I never did think nothing of that governess," said Susan with vigor. "It ain't for me to say it, but she don't seem fit company for the like of you, Miss Ermengarde. If I was you, I'd pay her out, that I would."

"Oh, I have more than her to pay out," said Ermengarde. "I have been very unkindly treated."

"That you have, miss, I'm sure."

Susy's sympathy was very sweet to Ermengarde. She leaned farther out of the window, and looked down at the pretty little girl.

"I'm glad you were passing, Susy," she said.

"I'll stay for a bit, if you like, miss. I'm in no sort of a hurry."

"I wish you could come and sit with me, Susy; I can't shout to you from the window. People who are passing may hear us."

"That they may, miss. There never was a truer saying than that trees have ears."

Ermengarde looked round her apprehensively. She had been many times forbidden to have any intercourse with Susan Collins, whose father, although he retained his post as gamekeeper, was regarded by Mr. Wilton as a somewhat shady character. Ermengarde fancied she liked Susy because of the little girl's remarkable beauty, but the real reason why her fancy was captivated was because Susy was an adroit flatterer.

When she spoke about trees having ears, Ermengarde glanced to right and left.

"Perhaps you had better go," she said. "I have got into one scrape. I don't want to get into a second."

"There's no one round yet, miss. The men are all at their dinners."

"Well, but some of the house-servants."

"There are none of them in sight, Miss Ermengarde. Do you think I'd get you into trouble on my account? Oh, dear, I wish I could come up and sit with you for a little."

"I wish you could, Susy."

"Well, miss, it's easy done, if you'll only say the word."

"What do you mean? This door is locked. Hudson has to bring me my meals, and no one in all the world can bribe Hudson to open the door."

"I don't want her to, miss. Oh, Miss Ermengarde, you are treated 'ard."

"Yes, Susy, I am treated very hard. Well, as you can't come and keep me company, you had better go away."

"But I can come to you, miss. A locked door won't keep me out. I'll hide my basket of eggs behind that laurel bush, and then I'll be with you in a jiffy."

"Can you really come? What fun! You are a clever girl, Susy."

"You wait and see, miss."

Susan Collins rushed off, adroitly hid her basket, and returning, climbed up an elm tree which happened to grow a few feet from the window, with the lightness and agility of a cat. When she reached a certain bough she lay along it, and propelled herself very gently forward in the direction of the window.

"Now stretch out your two hands, miss."

Ermengarde did so, and in a moment Susy was standing by her side in Miss Nelson's pretty little room.

"My word!" she exclaimed. "I never see'd such a lot of grand things before. Tell me, Miss Ermengarde, do all these fine books and pictures belong to the governess?"

"Oh, yes; those are pictures of Miss Nelson's friends."

"Dear me, what a queer-looking young lady that is, that one in the white dress, and long legs, and the hair done old-fashioned like."

"That?" said Ermengarde. She went over and stood by the mantelpiece, and looked at a large, somewhat faded miniature which held a place of honor among a group of many other pictures and photographs.

"Ain't she a queer-looking child?" said Susy. "Why, she has a look of Miss Nelson herself. Do you know who she is, Miss Ermengarde?"

"No," said Ermengarde. "But I think there's a story about that picture. Marjorie knows. Marjorie has a way of poking and prying into everything. She's awfully inquisitive. I don't interest myself in matters in which I have no concern. Now come over and sit by the window, Susy. You must sit back, so that no one can see us from the grounds; and when Hudson brings my dinner, you must dart into that cupboard just behind us."

"Oh, yes, miss. Hudson won't catch me poaching on these preserves."

Susy was fond of using expressions which belonged to her father's profession. She was a very imaginative child; and one secret of her power over Ermengarde was her ability to tell long and wonderful stories. Horrible, most of these tales were – histories of poachers, which she had partly heard from her father, and partly made up herself. Ermengarde used to hold her breath while she listened. Between these thrilling tales, Susan artfully flattered. It was not necessary to make her compliments too delicate. She could say the same thing every time they met. She could tell Ermengarde that never, since the world was created, was there to be found such another beautiful, clever, and noble little girl as Ermengarde Wilton. Ermie was never tired of hearing these praises.

She was very glad to listen to them now. By the time Susan Collins had been half an hour in the room, Ermie was once more certain that Marjorie had betrayed her, that Miss Nelson was the most tyrannical of mortals, and that she herself was the most ill-used of little girls.

At the end of half an hour Hudson unlocked the door, and brought in some dinner for Ermie. When the key was heard in the lock, Susan hid herself in a deep cupboard which stood behind a screen.

Hudson laid down the tray with Ermengarde's dinner, told her to eat plenty, and retired. As she left the room she said she would return for the tray in half an hour. She did not say any word of sympathy to Ermengarde. Hudson was always on the side of discipline; she thought that the children of the present day sadly needed correction; and when one of the young Wiltons was punished, she generally owned to a sense of rejoicing. That did not, however, prevent her supplying the culprit with an excellent meal, and Ermengarde now raised the covers from a plump duck done to perfection, some green peas, and delicious floury new potatoes. A greengage tart, with a little jug of cream, also awaited the young lady's pleasure.

She called Susy out of her cupboard with a glad voice.

"Come, Susan," she said, "there's plenty for us both. As there are only plates and knives and forks for one, I'll eat first, of course, but you can wash the things up, and have a good meal after me. We must be quick about it though, for Hudson will be back in half an hour."

"Oh, yes, miss, that we will. I'm wonderful hungry, Miss Ermengarde, and your nice dinner do look enticing."

At the appointed time Hudson returned. She brought in a couple of peaches and a bunch of grapes for Ermengarde.

"Miss Ermengarde!" she said in consternation, "you don't mean to say you've eaten up all the duck! And the tart, too! Well, I do call that greedy. Where's the sorrow that worketh to repentance when there's such an appetite? You'll be ill, miss, and no wonder."

"But I didn't eat all the duck, really, Hudson – I didn't truly!"

"My dear, what's left of it? Only a little bit of the back. Why, this plump bird ought to have dined three people. Miss Ermengarde, you certainly will be very ill, and you deserve it. No, I won't leave these peaches and grapes – I'd be afraid. Good-afternoon, miss, I'll look in at tea-time. But don't you expect nothing but dry toast then."

Hudson took her tray down to the kitchen, where she remarked on Ermie's enormous appetite.

"A whole duck!" she said. "I didn't think any young lady could eat so much. And most times Miss Ermie picks at her food."

Upstairs, in Miss Nelson's pretty little sitting-room, Ermengarde was scolding Susy for eating so much duck. Susy was retorting with some passion that she had not had more than her share, and over this dispute the two friends came almost to a quarrel.

Susy, however, had no wish not to keep on the sunny side of Miss Ermengarde's affections, and after her momentary irritation had cooled down, she adroitly changed the subject. Once more she administered broad flatteries; and impressed upon Ermengarde the fact that she was a long-suffering and ill-used martyr.

"I wouldn't stand it," said Susy. "No, that I wouldn't. I ain't a lady like you, Miss Ermie, but I wouldn't stand what you do."

"What would you do, Susy? How would you help yourself?"

"What would I do? Well, I'd go to my pa', and I'd have a talk with him. I'd let him know that – obey that old horror of a governess?"

"You mustn't speak about her like that, really, Susy."

"Miss, I'm open; that's what I am. I says what I means, and when I see a poor dear put upon, and treated worse than a baby, and punished as if we were back in feudal ages, I say that the one who does it is a horror. You think the same, Miss Ermie, though you're too proud to say it."

"We don't express ourselves in that way in our class," said Ermengarde, with a slow distinguished sort of smile which always abashed Susy. "Yes, Miss Nelson is very suitable with the children, but I do think I am beyond her. I am old for my years, and no one can call fourteen young."

"It's a noble age, miss," said Susy, in a tone of rapture. "I'm only twelve, but I aspires to fourteen continual."

"Oh, you," said Ermengarde. "You're different; girls in your class don't come out. You are not presented, you have no future. It is quite a different matter with me. I shall be in society in a few years at latest. What I should like my father to do is –"

"To send you to a select seminary, miss – I know!"

"You don't know, Susan, A select seminary! the very word is vulgar. No; I should like my father to allow me to pursue my own education under the control of masters who are specialists in each branch."

"Miss, you talk very learned."

Susan suppressed a yawn, and going to the window looked out.

"I know what I'd do," she said. "I'd pay that fine lady governess of yours out. It would be tit for tat with me. Couldn't you do something as would put her in a fret, Miss Ermie?"

"I don't know what to do," said Ermengarde. "Miss Nelson is not easily fretted."

"Well, I'd find a way. Certainly I'd do something; see if I wouldn't."

"Hush!" said Ermengarde. "Listen! What is that?" She put her head out of the window. Susy prepared to follow her example, but Ermie pushed her back.

"I hear Basil's voice," she said. "They are coming back – yes, they are all returning. Susy, you had better get into the cupboard. Hide as fast as you can. Miss Nelson is certain to come up here, the very first thing. O Susy, do get into the cupboard at once! I shall be ruined if you are discovered up here."

Ermengarde's tone had risen to one of piteous entreaty. Susy, a little loath – for she could scarcely believe that her fun was so nearly over – was dragged and almost pushed into the cupboard. When she had got her captive, Ermengarde took the precaution to lock the cupboard door and put the key in her pocket.

"Oh, Miss, don't go away and leave me locked in," called the poor prisoner through the keyhole. "Don't you go a-forgetting of me, Miss Ermie, or I'll be found a moldified skeleton here, by and by." Susy's tone was tearful, and Ermie's piteous entreaties to her to hush were scarcely listened to. Footsteps were heard coming down the corridor.

"She's coming! I shall be betrayed. Do be quiet, Susy!" whispered Ermengarde in an agony.

At that moment the room door was unlocked, and Miss Nelson came in.

"I thought I heard you talking to some one, my dear," she said.

"I was only repeating some poetry over," said Ermengarde, raising her delicate brows.

She hated herself for telling this lie. She had yet to learn that one act of deceit must lead to another.

"I am glad you are improving your mind, Ermie," said the governess.

She went up to the little girl, took one of her cold hands, and kissed her.

"Well, my dear, we have all come back, and on your account. Basil pleaded very hard for you. He certainly is a dear fellow; I don't wonder you love him, my dear. He pleaded for you, Ermengarde, and I – my love, I have yielded to his request. I have come back to say that I forgive you, Ermie. You will try to obey me in future, my dear child, and this punishment, owing to Basil's intercession, may be considered at an end. We are all going to have tea in the hay-field, and you are to join us there. Run up to your room, dear, and put on your brown holland frock. I will wait for you here. Kiss me, Ermie, before you go."

Ermengarde went up to her governess. She went slowly, for she had the greatest possible difficulty in keeping her tears back. But for Susy's presence in the cupboard this sudden forgiveness and deliverance would have set her dancing for joy. As it was, her heart felt like lead, and she hated herself for her meanness.

"Kiss me, Ermie," said Miss Nelson. "There, my child. My dear, you need not look down-hearted any more. I was obliged to punish you, but I don't think you will willfully and deliberately disobey me again. Cheer up now, Ermengarde; the past is past. You must ask God to give you strength to do better in the future, my dear. And – one thing – I want you to believe in my love, Ermie; I don't show it much. It is one of my trials that I can't show all that I feel, but – your mother's child is beloved by me, Ermengarde."

"Oh, don't speak of mother," said Ermengarde, with a little sob. She rushed out of the room. When she came back her governess was standing by the window.

"I cannot make out what I did with the key of my cupboard," she said. "I thought I left it in the door."

"Perhaps you have it in your pocket," said Ermengarde.

"No, I have felt in my pocket. Well, we can't wait now. The children will be starving for their tea. I promised to show Basil some photographs which I have in the cupboard, but they must wait for another time. Come, Ermengarde."

CHAPTER V.

LOCKED IN THE CUPBOARD

Punishment has many degrees, and the sense of humiliation which Ermengarde felt, when that morning she had been left prisoner in Miss Nelson's sitting-room, was nothing indeed to the agony which she endured when, supposed to be free and pardoned, she walked with her governess to the hay-field.

Every moment she expected to hear Susy's piercing yells following her. Susy was a child with little or no self-control. She hated dark rooms; her imagination was unhealthy, and fostered in her home life in the worst possible way. Ermengarde knew that she could hear Miss Nelson's conversation, and every moment she expected her voice to arise within the cupboard in protest.

When no sound came, however, a dreadful idea took possession of poor Ermie's brain. The cupboard was not large; suppose Susy had been suffocated. This terror became so insupportable that several times the miserable child was on the point of confessing all. What kept her back from doing this was the thought of Basil. While the ghost of a chance remained she must avert the possibility of Basil looking down on her. For Basil to despise her would have been the bitterest cup which life at present could hold out to poor Ermengarde.

Miss Nelson and her pupil reached the hay-field, and then ensued a scamper, a rush. Marjorie, Eric, Basil, Lucy, all crowded round their sister. They were unfeignedly delighted to have her with them, and Ermie could not but reflect how happy she would now be but for Susy.

"We are going to have such a time," said Marjorie. "After tea we are going to build a hayrick, quite in a new way. It's to be hollow inside, like a room, and pointed at the top, with a hole to let the air in, and – why, what's the matter, Ermie? You look as white as anything. We thought you'd be so fresh, for you have done nothing all day. Now, I am tired, if you like. Oh, haven't I run?"

Marjorie stopped talking to mop her heated forehead.

"But it was glorious fun," she began, the next minute. "I thought Eric would have capsized the boat, he laughed so. Only Basil was a bit mopy. He's not half himself when you're away, Ermie, Now, hadn't you better sit down? You do look white."

Ermengarde glanced round her. At that moment she and Marjorie were a few feet away from the others. Basil was trotting meekly up and down with a small sister aloft on each broad shoulder. Eric was sending all the small fry whom he could reach into screams at his superabundant wit and spirits. Miss Nelson went over to help nurse to get the tea ready. For a brief moment the two sisters were alone.

In an instant Marjorie would be called. She was never long left to herself in any group. Ermie had not a second to lose. She clasped Marjorie's hand convulsively.

"Maggie, I want you to help me."

"Of course I will, Ermie. What is it? Coming, Eric! What's the matter, Ermie?"

"Oh, do get those children away for a minute."

"Maggie, Maggie, Maggie!" shouted several voices, headed by Eric's.

"Coming, Eric. Keep back, all of you. I'm talking to Ermie for a minute. Now, Ermie, quick. What is it?"

"I want to go back to the house, without any one noticing. Help me to go back at once."

"How can I help you! How queer you look."

"O Maggie, it's so important! Don't question me. Only help me."

"Poor Ermie, you do look in a state!"

"And no one must know. Maggie, I did think you'd be clever enough to find an excuse for me. I trusted to you. Don't fail me, Maggie."

"Let me think," said Marjorie. "You'll come back again?"

"Yes, I won't be gone any time."

"I'll fly across to nurse. Stay where you are – I'll be with you again in a minute."

Marjorie ran across the hay-field, stooped down by old nurse's side, had a short and eager colloquy, and returned to Ermengarde.

"Ernie, nurse wants those rusks which baby always has with his tea. She says you'll find the box in the nursery cupboard. Will you fetch them in a hurry? Baby is so hungry."

"Oh, what nonsense!" said Basil, who had now come up. "The idea of sending Ernie! Where's the nursemaid?"

"Alice went to the house with another message. You had better go, Ermengarde; nurse is in a hurry."

"I don't mind going a bit," said Ermengarde. She looked ready to fly. Her lips were trembling.

"You look as tired as anything now, Ernie," said Basil. "I'll go, if it comes to that. Where are those wretched rusks to be found, Maggie?"

"You can't go, Basil. You are to light the fire for the gypsy tea."

"It's lighting."

"Well, it's going out again. I know it is; or the kettle is sure to boil over, or something. Do be on the spot, and let Ernie make herself useful for once in a way."

Ermengarde ran off; the tension of her feelings would permit of no further delay. She heard Basil scolding Marjorie as she hurried across the hay-field. Ermengarde had never run so fast in her life. What should she find when she got back to that sitting-room. Would Susy be dead? If so – But her terrified thoughts would take her no further.

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