

Marjory

By F. Antsey

I have thought myself justified in printing the following narrative, found among the papers of my dead friend, Douglas Cameron, who left me discretion to deal with them as I saw fit. It was written indeed, as its opening words imply, rather for his own solace and relief than with the expectation that it would be read by any other. But, painful and intimate as it is in parts, I cannot think that any harm will be done by printing it now, with some necessary alterations in the names of the characters chiefly concerned.

Before, however, leaving the story to speak for itself, I should like to state, in justice to my friend, that during the whole of my acquaintance with him, which began in our college days, I never saw anything to indicate the morbid timidity and weakness of character that seem to have marked him as a boy. Reserved he undoubtedly was, with a taste for solitude that made him shrink from the society of all but a small circle, and with a sensitive and shy nature which prevented him from doing himself complete justice; but he was very capable of holding his own on occasion, and in his disposition, as I knew it, there was no want of moral courage, nor any trace of effeminacy.

How far he may have unconsciously exaggerated such failings in the revelation of his earlier self, or what the influence of such an experience as he relates may have done to strengthen the moral fibre, are points on which I can express no opinion, any more than I can pledge myself to the credibility of the supernatural element of his story.

It may be that only in the boy's overwrought imagination, the innocent Child-spirit came back to complete the work of love and pity she had begun in life; but I know that he himself believed otherwise, and, truly, if those who leave us are permitted to return at all, it must be on some such errand as Marjory's.

Douglas Cameron's life was short, and in it, so far as I am aware, he met no one who at all replaced his lost ideal. Of this I cannot be absolutely certain, for he was a reticent man in such matters; but I think, had it been so, I should have known of it, for we were very close friends. One

would hardly expect, perhaps, that an ordinary man would remain faithful all his days to the far-off memory of a child-love; but then Cameron was not quite as other men, nor were his days long in the land.

And if this ideal of his was never dimmed for him by some grosser, and less spiritual, passion, who shall say that he may not have been a better and even a happier man in consequence.

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It is not without an effort that I have resolved to break, in the course of this narrative, the reserve maintained for nearly twenty years. But the chief reason for silence is removed now that all those are gone who might have been pained or harmed by what I have to tell, and, though I shrink still from reviving certain memories that are fraught with pain, there are others associated therewith which will surely bring consolation and relief.

I must have been about eleven at the time I am speaking of, and the change which--for good or ill--comes over most boys' lives had not yet threatened mine. I had not left home for school, nor did it seem at all probable then that I should ever do so.

When I read (I was a great reader) of Dotheboys Hall and Salem House--a combination of which establishments formed my notion of school-life--it was with no more personal interest than a cripple might feel in perusing the notice of an impending conscription; for from the battles of school-life I was fortunately exempted.

I was the only son of a widow, and we led a secluded life in a London suburb. My mother took charge of my education herself, and, as far as mere acquirements went, I was certainly not behind other boys of my age. I owe too much to that loving and careful training, Heaven knows, to think of casting any reflection upon it here, but my surroundings were such as almost necessarily to exclude all bracing and hardening influences.

My mother had few friends; we were content with our own companionship, and of boys I knew and cared to know nothing; in fact, I regarded a strange boy with much the same unreasoning aversion as many excellent women feel for the most ordinary cow.

I was happy to think that I should never be called upon to associate with them; by-and-by, when I outgrew my mother's teaching, I was to have a tutor, perhaps even go to college in time, and when I became a man I was to be a curate and live with my mother in a clematis-covered cottage in some pleasant village.

She would often dwell on this future with a tender prospective pride; she spoke of it on the very day that saw it shattered for ever.

For there came a morning when, on going to her with my lessons for the day, I was gladdened with an unexpected holiday. I little knew then--though I was to learn it soon enough--that my lessons had been all holidays, or that on that day they were to end for ever.

My mother had had one or two previous attacks of an illness which seemed to prostrate her for a short period, and as she soon regained her ordinary health, I did not think they could be of a serious nature.

So I devoted my holiday cheerfully enough to the illumination of a text, on the gaudy colouring of which I found myself gazing two days later with a dull wonder, as at the work of a strange hand in a long dead past, for the boy who had painted that was a happy boy who had a mother, and for two endless days I had been alone.

Those days, and many that followed, come back to me now but vaguely. I passed them mostly in a state of blank bewilderment caused by the double sense of sameness and strangeness in everything around me; then there were times when this gave way to a passionate anguish which refused all attempts at comfort, and times even--but very, very seldom--when I almost forgot what had happened to me.

Our one servant remained in the house with me, and a friend and neighbour of my mother's was constant in her endeavours to relieve my loneliness; but I was impatient of them, I fear, and chiefly anxious to be left alone to indulge my melancholy unchecked.

I remember how, as autumn began, and leaf after leaf fluttered down from the trees in our little garden, I watched them fall with a heavier heart, for they had known my mother, and now they, too, were deserting me.

This morbid state of mind had lasted quite long enough when my uncle, who was my guardian, saw fit to put a summary end to it by sending me to school forthwith; he would have softened the change for me by taking me to his own home first, but there was illness of some sort there, and this was out of the question.

I was neither sorry nor glad when I heard of it, for all places were the same to me just then; only, as the time drew near, I began to regard the future with a growing dread.

The school was at some distance from London, and my uncle took me down by rail; but the only fact I remember connected with the journey is that there was a boy in the carriage with us who cracked walnuts all the way, and I wondered if he was going to school too, and concluded that he was not, or he would hardly eat quite so many walnuts.

Later we were passing through some wrought-iron gates, and down an avenue of young chestnuts, which made a gorgeous autumn canopy of scarlet, amber, and orange, up to a fine old red-brick house, with a high-pitched roof, and a cupola in which a big bell hung, tinted a warm gold by the afternoon sun.

This was my school, and it did not look so very-terrible after all. There was a big bow-window by the pillared portico, and, looking timidly in, I saw a girl of about my own age sitting there, absorbed in the book she was reading, her long brown hair drooping over her cheek and the hand on which it rested.

She glanced up at the sound of the door-bell, and I felt her eyes examining me seriously and critically, and then I forgot everything but the fact that I was about to be introduced to my future schoolmaster, the Rev. Basil Dering.

This was less of an ordeal than I had expected; he had a strong, massively-cut, leonine face, free and abundant white hair, streaked with dark grey, but there was a kind light in his eyes as I looked up at them, and the firm mouth could smile, I found, pleasantly enough.

Mrs. Dering seemed younger, and was handsome, with a certain stateliness and decision of manner which put me less at my ease, and I

was relieved to be told I might say good-bye to my uncle, and wander about the grounds as I liked.

I was not surprised to pass through an empty schoolroom, and to descend by some steep stairs to a deserted playground, for we had been already told that the Michaelmas holidays were not over, and that the boys would not return for some days to come.

It gave me a kind of satisfaction to think of my resemblance, just then, to my favourite David Copperfield, but I was to have a far pleasanter companion than poor lugubrious, flute-tootling Mr. Mell, for as I paced the damp paths paved with a mosaic of russet and yellow leaves, I heard light footsteps behind me, and turned to find myself face to face with the girl I had seen at the window.

She stood there breathless for an instant, for she had hurried to overtake me, and against a background of crimson creepers I saw the brilliant face, with its soft but fearless brown eyes, small straight nose, spirited mouth, and crisp wavy golden-brown hair, which I see now almost as distinctly as I write.

'You're the new boy,' she said at length. 'I've come out to make you feel more at home. I suppose you don't feel quite at home just yet?'

'Not quite, thank you,' I said, lifting my cap with ceremony, for I had been taught to be particular about my manners; 'I have never been to school before, you see, Miss Dering.'

I think she was a little puzzled by so much politeness. 'I know,' she said softly; 'mother told me about it, and I'm very sorry. And I'm called Marjory, generally. Shall you like school, do you think?'

'I might,' said I, 'if--if it wasn't for the boys!'

'Boys aren't bad,' she said; 'ours are rather nice, I think. But perhaps you don't know many?'

'I know one,' I replied.

'How old is he?' she wished to know.

'Not very old--about three, I think,' I said. I had never wished till then that my only male acquaintance had been of less tender years, but I felt now that he was rather small, and saw that Marjory was of the same opinion.

'Why, he's only a baby!' she said; 'I thought you meant a real boy. And is that all the boys you know? Are you fond of games?'

'Some games--very,' said I.

'What's your favourite game?' she demanded.

'Bezique,' I answered, 'or draughts.'

'I meant out door games; draughts are indoor games--is indoor games, I mean--no, are an indoor game--and that doesn't sound grammar! But haven't you ever played cricket? Not ever, really? I like it dreadfully myself, only I'm not allowed to play with the boys, and I'm sure I can bat well enough for the second eleven--Cartwright said I could last term--and I can bowl round-hand, and it's all no use, just because I was born a girl! Wouldn't you like a game at something? They haven't taken in the croquet hoops yet; shall we play at that?'

But again I had to confess my ignorance of what was then the popular garden game.

'What do you generally do to amuse yourself, then?' she inquired.

'I read, generally, or paint texts or outlines. Sometimes'--(I thought this accomplishment would surely appeal to her)--'sometimes I do woolwork!'

'I don't think I would tell the boys that,' she advised rather gravely; she evidently considered me a very desperate case. 'It's such a pity, your not knowing any games. Suppose I taught you croquet, now? It would be something to go on with, and you'll soon learn if you pay attention and do exactly what I tell you.'

I submitted myself meekly to her direction, and Marjory enjoyed her office of instructress for a time, until my extreme slowness wore out her patience, and she began to make little murmurs of disgust, for which she invariably apologised. 'That's enough for to-day!' she said at last, 'I'll take

you again to-morrow. But you really must try and pick up games, Cameron, or you'll never be liked. Let me see, I wonder if there's time to teach you a little football. I think I could do that.'

Before she could make any further arrangements the tea-bell rang, but when I lay down that night in my strange cold bed, hemmed round by other beds, which were only less formidable than if they had been occupied, I did not feel so friendless as I might have done, and dreamed all night that Marjory was teaching me something I understood to be cricket, which, however, was more like a bloated kind of backgammon.

The next day Marjory was allowed to go out walking with me, and I came home feeling that I had known her for quite a long time, while her manner to me had acquired a tone even more protecting than before, and she began to betray an anxiety as to my school prospects which filled me with uneasiness.

'I am so afraid the boys won't like the way you talk,' she said on one occasion.

'I used to be told I spoke very correctly,' I said, verdantly enough.

'But not like boys talk. You see, Cameron, I ought to know, with such a lot of them about. I tell you what I could do, though--I could teach you most of their words--only I must run and ask mother first if I may. Teaching slang isn't the same as using it on my own account, is it?'

Marjory darted off impulsively to ask leave, to return presently with a slow step and downcast face. 'I mayn't,' she announced. 'Mother says "Certainly not," so there's an end of that! Still, I think myself it's a decided pity.'

And more than once that day she would observe, as if to herself, 'I do wish they had let him come to school in different collars!'

I knew that these remarks, and others of a similar tendency, were prompted by her interest in my welfare, and I admired her too heartily already to be offended by them: still, I cannot say they added to my peace of mind.

And on the last evening of the holidays she said 'Good-night' to me with some solemnity. 'Everything will be different after this,' she said; 'I shan't be able to see nearly so much of you, because I'm not allowed to be much with the boys. But I shall be looking after you all the time, Cameron, and seeing how you get on. And oh! I do hope you will try to be a popular kind of boy!'

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I'm afraid I must own that this desire of Marjory's was not realised. I do not know that I tried to be--and I certainly was not--a popular boy.

The other boys, I now know, were by no means bad specimens of the English schoolboy, as will be evident when I state that, for a time, my deep mourning was held by them to give me a claim to their forbearance.

But I had an unfortunate tendency to sudden floods of tears (apparently for no cause whatever, really from some secret spring of association, such as I remember was touched when I first found myself learning Latin from the same primer over which my mother and I had puzzled together), and these outbursts at first aroused my companions' contempt, and finally their open ridicule.

I could not conceal my shrinking dislike to their society, which was not calculated to make them more favourably disposed towards me; while my tastes, my expressions, my ways of looking at things, were all at total variance with their own standards.

The general disapproval might well have shown itself in a harsher manner than that of merely ignoring my existence--and it says much for the tone of the school that it did not; unfortunately, I felt their indifference almost as keenly as I had dreaded their notice.

From my masters I met with more favour, for I had been thoroughly well grounded, and found, besides, a temporary distraction in my school-work; but this was hardly likely to render me more beloved by my fellows, and so it came to pass that every day saw my isolation more complete.

Something, however, made me anxious to hide this from Marjory's eyes, and whenever she happened to be looking on at us in the school grounds or the playing fields, I made dismal attempts to appear on terms of

equality with the rest, and would hang about a group with as much pretence of belonging to it as I thought at all prudent.

If she had had more opportunities of questioning me, she would have found me out long before; as it was, the only occasion on which we were near one another was at the weekly drawing lesson, when, although she drew less and talked more than the Professor quite approved of, she was obliged to restrict herself to a conversation which did not admit of confidences.

But this negative neutral-tinted misery was not to last; I was harmless enough, but then to some natures nothing is so offensive as inoffensiveness. My isolation was certain to raise me up an enemy in time, and he came in the person of one Clarence Ormsby.

He was a sturdy, good-looking fellow, about two years older than myself, good at games, and, though not brilliant in other respects, rather idle than dull. He was popular in the school, and I believe his general disposition was by no means bad; but there must have been some hidden flaw in his nature which might never have disclosed itself for any other but me.

For me he had displayed, almost from the first, one of those special antipathies that want but little excuse to ripen into hatred. My personal appearance--I had the misfortune to be a decidedly plain boy--happened to be particularly displeasing to him, and, as he had an unsparing tongue, he used it to cover me with ridicule, until gradually, finding that I did not retaliate, he indulged in acts of petty oppression which, though not strictly bullying, were even more harassing and humiliating.

I suspect now that if I had made ever so slight a stand at the outset, I should have escaped further molestation, but I was not pugnacious by nature, and never made the experiment; partly, probably, from a theory on which I had been reared, that all violence was vulgar, but chiefly from a tendency, unnatural in one of my age and sex, to find a sentimental satisfaction in a certain degree of unhappiness.

So that I can neither pity myself nor expect pity from others for woes which were so essentially my own creation, though they resulted, alas! in misery that was real enough.

It was inevitable that quick-sighted Marjory should discover the subjection into which I had fallen, and her final enlightenment was brought about in this manner. Ormsby and I were together alone, shortly before morning school, and he came towards me with an exercise of mine from which he had just been copying his own, for we were in the same classes, despite the difference in our ages, and he was in the habit of profiting thus by my industry.

'Thanks, Cameron,' he said, with a sweetness which I distrusted, for he was not as a rule so lavish in his gratitude. 'I've copied out that exercise of yours, but it's written so beastly badly that you'd better do it over again.'

With which he deliberately tore the page he had been copying from to scraps, which he threw in my face, and strolled out down to the playground.

I was preparing submissively to do the exercise over again as well as I could in the short time that was left, when I was startled by a low cry of indignation, and, looking round, saw Marjory standing in the doorway, and knew by her face that she had seen all.

'Has Ormsby done that to you before?' she inquired.

'Once or twice he has,' said I.

'And you let him!' she cried. 'Oh, Cameron!'

'What can I do?' I said.

'I know what I would do,' she replied. 'I would slap his face, or pinch him. I wouldn't put up with it!'

'Boys don't slap one another, or pinch,' I said, not displeased to find a weak place in her knowledge of us.

'Well, they do something!' she said; 'a real boy would. But I don't think you are a real boy, Cameron. I'll show you what to do. Where's the exercise that--that pig copied? Ah! I see it. And now--look!' (Here she tore his page as he had torn mine.)

'Now for an envelope!' and from the Doctor's own desk she took an envelope, in which she placed the fragments, and wrote on the outside in her round, childish hand: 'With Marjory's compliments, for being a bully.'

'He won't do that again,' she said gleefully.

'He'll do worse,' I said in dismay; 'I shall have to pay for it. Marjory, why didn't you leave things alone? I didn't complain--you know I didn't.'

She turned upon me, as well she might, in supreme disdain. 'Oh! what a coward you are! I wouldn't believe all Cartwright told me about you when I asked--but I see it's all true. Why don't you stick up for yourself?'

I muttered something or other.

'But you ought to. You'll never get on unless,' said Marjory, very decidedly. 'Now, promise me you will, next time.'

I sat there silent. I was disgusted with myself, and meanly angry with her for having rendered me so.

'Then, listen,' she said impressively. 'I promised I would look after you, and I did mean to, but it's no use if you won't help yourself. So, unless you say you won't go on being a coward any more, I shall have to leave you to your own way, and not take the least interest in you ever again.'

'Then, you may,' I said stolidly; 'I don't care.' I wondered, even while I spoke the words, what could be impelling me to treat spirited, warm-hearted Marjory like that, and I hate myself still at the recollection.

'Good-bye, then,' she said very quietly; 'I'm sorry, Cameron.' And she went out without another word.

When Ormsby came in, I watched him apprehensively as he read the envelope upon his desk and saw its contents. He said nothing, however, though he shot a malignant glance in my direction; but the lesson was not lost upon him, for from that time he avoided all open ill-treatment of me, and even went so far as to assume a friendliness which might have reassured me had I not instinctively felt that it merely masked the old dislike.

I was constantly the victim of mishaps, in the shape of missing and defaced books, ink mysteriously spilt or strangely adulterated, and, though I could never trace them to any definite hand, they seemed too systematic to be quite accidental; still I made no sign, and hoped thus to disarm my persecutor--if persecutor there were.

As for my companions, I knew that in no case would they take the trouble to interfere in my behalf; they had held aloof from the first, the general opinion (which I now perceive was not unjust) being that 'I deserved all I got.'

And my estrangement from Marjory grew wider and wider; she never spoke to me now when we sat near one another at the drawing-class; if she looked at me it was by stealth, and with a glance that I thought sometimes was contemptuously pitiful, and sometimes half fancied betrayed a willingness to return to the old comradeship.

But I nursed my stupid, sullen pride, though my heart ached with it at times. For I had now come to love Marjory devotedly, with a love that, though I was a boy and she was a child, was as genuine as any I am ever likely to feel again.

The chance of seeing her now and then, of hearing her speak--though it was not to me--gave me the one interest in my life, which, but for her, I could hardly have borne. But this love of mine was a very far-off and disinterested worship after all. I could not imagine myself ever speaking of it to her, or picture her as accepting it. Marjory was too thorough a child to be vulgarised in that way, even in thought.

The others were healthy, matter-of-fact youths, to whom Marjory was an ordinary girl, and who certainly did not indulge in any strained sentiment respecting her; it was left for me to idealise her; but of that, at least, I cannot feel ashamed, or believe that it did me anything but good.

And the days went on, until it wanted but a fortnight to Christmas, and most of us were thinking of the coming holidays, and preparing with a not unpleasant excitement for the examinations, which were all that barred the way to them now. I was to spend my Christmas with my uncle and cousins, who would by that time be able to receive me; but I felt no very pleasurable anticipations, for my cousins were all boys, and from boys I thought I knew what to expect.

One afternoon Ormsby came to me with the request that I would execute a trifling commission for him in the adjoining village; he himself, he said, was confined to bounds, but he had a shilling he wanted to lay out at a small fancy-shop we were allowed to patronise, and he considered me the best person to be entrusted with that coin. I was simply to spend the money on anything I thought best, for he had entire confidence, he gave me to understand, in my taste and judgment. I think I suspected a design of some sort, but I did not dare to refuse, and then his manner to some extent disarmed me.

I took the shilling, therefore, with which I bought some article--I forget what--and got back to the school at dusk. The boys had all gone down to tea except Ormsby, who was waiting for me up in the empty schoolroom.

'Well?' he said, and I displayed my purchase, only to find that I had fallen into a trap.

When I think how easily I was the dupe of that not too subtle artifice, which was only half malicious, I could smile, if I did not know how it ended.

'How much was that?' he asked contemptuously, 'twopence-halfpenny? Well, if you choose to give a shilling for it, I'm not going to pay, that's all. So just give me back my shilling!'

Now, as my weekly allowance consisted of threepence, which was confiscated for some time in advance (as I think he knew), to provide fines for my mysteriously-stained dictionaries, this was out of the question, as I represented.

'Then go back to the shop and change it,' said he; 'I won't have that thing!'

'Tell me what you would like instead, and I will,' I stipulated, not unreasonably.

He laughed; his little scheme was working so admirably. 'That's not the bargain,' he said; 'you're bound to get me something I like. I'm not obliged to tell you what it is.'

But even I was driven to protest against such flagrant unfairness. 'I didn't know you meant that,' I said, 'or I'm sure I shouldn't have gone. I went to oblige _you_, Ormsby.'

'No, you didn't,' he said, 'you went because I told you. And you'll go again.'

'Not unless you tell me what I'm to get,' I said.

'I tell you what I believe,' he said; 'you never spent the whole shilling at all on that; you bought something for yourself with the rest, you young swindler! No wonder you won't go back to the shop.'

This was, of course, a mere taunt flung out by his inventive fancy; but as he persisted in it, and threatened exposure and a variety of consequences, I became alarmed, for I had little doubt that, innocent as I was, I could be made very uncomfortable by accusations which would find willing hearers.

He stood there enjoying my perplexity and idly twisting a piece of string round and round his fingers. At length he said, 'Well, I don't want to be hard on you. You may go and change this for me even now, if you like. I'll give you three minutes to think it over, and you can come down into the playground when I sing out, and tell me what you mean to do. And you had better be sharp in coming, too, or it will be the worse for you.'

He took his cap, and presently I heard him going down the steps to the playground. I would have given worlds to go and join the rest at tea, but I did not dare, and remained in the schoolroom, which was dim just then, for the gas was lowered; and while I stood there by the fireplace, trembling in the cold air which stole in through the door Ormsby had left open, Marjory came in by the other one, and was going straight to her father's desk, when she saw me.

Her first impulse seemed to be to take no notice, but something in my face or attitude made her alter her mind and come straight to me, holding out her hand.

'Cameron,' she said, 'shall we be friends again?'

'Yes, Marjory,' I said; I could not have said any more just then.

'You look so miserable, I couldn't bear it any longer,' she said, 'so I _had_ to make it up. You know, I was only pretending crossness, Cameron, all the time, because I really thought it was best. But it doesn't seem to have done you much good, and I did promise to take care of you. What is it? Ormsby again?'

'Yes,' I said, and told her the story of the commission.

'Oh, you stupid boy!' she cried, 'couldn't you see he only wanted to pick a quarrel? And if you change it now, he'll make you change it again, and the next time, and the next after that--I know he will!'

Here Ormsby's voice shouted from below, 'Now then, you, Cameron, time's up!'

'What is he doing down there?' asked Marjory, and her indignation rose higher when she heard.

'Now, Cameron, be brave; go down and tell him once for all he may just keep what he has, and be thankful. Whatever it is, it's good enough for _him_, I'm sure!'

But I still hung back. 'It's no use, Marjory, he'll tell everyone I cheated him--he says he will!'

'That he shall not!' she cried; 'I won't have it, I'll go myself, and tell him what I think of him, and make him stop treating you like this.'

Some faint glimmer of manliness made me ashamed to allow her thus to fight my battles. 'No, Marjory, not you!' I said; 'I will go: I'll say what you want me to say!'

But it was too late. I saw her for just a second at the door, my impetuous, generous little Marjory, as she flung back her pretty hair in a certain spirited way she had, and nodded to me encouragingly.

And then--I can hardly think of it calmly even now--there came a sharp scream, and the sound of a fall, and, after that, silence.

Sick with fear, I rushed to the head of the steps, and looked down into the brown gloom.

'Keep where you are for a minute!' I heard Ormsby cry out. 'It's all right--she's not hurt; now you can come down.'

I was down in another instant, at the foot of the stairs, where, in a patch of faint light that fell from the door above, lay Marjory, with Ormsby bending over her insensible form.

'She's dead!' I cried in my terror, as I saw her white face.

'I tell you she's all right,' said he, impatiently; 'there's nothing to make a fuss about. She slipped coming down and cut her forehead--that's all.'

'Marjory, speak to me--don't look like that; tell me you're not much hurt!' I implored her; but she only moaned a little, and her eyes remained fast shut.

'It's no use worrying her now, you know,' said Ormsby, more gently. 'Just help me to get her round to the kitchen door, and tell somebody.'

We carried her there between us, and, amidst a scene of terrible confusion and distress, Marjory, still insensible, was carried into the library, and a man sent off in hot haste for the surgeon.

A little later Ormsby and I were sent for to the study, where Dr. Dering, whose face was white and drawn as I had never seen it before, questioned us closely as to our knowledge of the accident.

Ormsby could only say that he was out in the playground, when he saw somebody descending the steps, and heard a fall, after which he ran up and found Marjory.

'I sent her into the schoolroom to bring my paper-knife,' said the Doctor; 'if I had but gone myself--! But why should she have gone outside on a frosty night like this?'

'Oh, Dr. Dering!' I broke out, 'I'm afraid--I'm afraid she went for me!'

I saw Ormsby's face as I spoke, and there was a look upon it which made me pity him.

'And you sent my poor child out on your errand, Cameron! Could you not have done it yourself?'

'I wish I had!' I exclaimed; 'oh, I wish I had! I tried to stop her, and then--and then it was too late. Please tell me, sir, is she badly hurt?'

'How can I tell?' he said harshly; 'there, I can't speak of this just yet: go, both of you.'

There was little work done at evening preparation that night; the whole school was buzzing with curiosity and speculation, as we heard doors opening and shutting around, and the wheels of the doctor's gig as it rolled up the chestnut avenue.

I sat with my hands shielding my eyes and ears, engaged to all appearance with the books before me, while my restless thoughts were employed in making earnest resolutions for the future.

At last I saw my cowardice in its true light, and felt impatient to tell Marjory that I did so, to prove to her that I had really reformed; but when would an opportunity come? I might not see her again for days, perhaps not at all till after the holidays; but I would not let myself dwell upon such a contingency as that, and, to banish it, tried to picture what Marjory would say, and how she would look, when I was allowed to see her again.

After evening prayers, read by one of the assistant-masters, for the Doctor did not appear again, we were enjoined to go up to our bedrooms with as little noise as possible, and we had been in bed some time before Sutcliffe, the old butler, came up as usual to put out the lights.

On this occasion he was assailed by a fire of eager whispers from every door: 'Sutcliffe, hi! old Sutt, how is she?' but he did not seem to hear, until a cry louder than the rest brought him to our room.

'For God's sake, gentlemen, don't!' he said, in a hoarse whisper, as he turned out the light; 'they'll hear you downstairs.'

'But how is she? do you know--better?'

'Ay,' he said, 'she's better. She'll be over her trouble soon, will Miss Marjory!'

A low murmur of delight ran round the room, which the butler tried to check in vain.

'Don't!' he said again, 'wait--wait till morning.... Go to sleep quiet now, and I'll come up first thing and tell you.'

He had no sooner turned his back than the general relief broke out irrepressibly; Ormsby being especially demonstrative. 'Didn't I tell you fellows so?' he said triumphantly; 'as if it was likely a plucky girl like Marjory would mind a little cut like that. She'll be all right in the morning, you see!'

But this confidence jarred upon me, who could not pretend to share it, until I was unable to restrain the torturing anxiety I felt.

'You're wrong--all of you!' I cried, 'I'm sure she's not better. Didn't you hear how Sutcliffe said it? She's worse--she may even be dying!'

I met with the usual treatment of a prophet of evil. 'You young muff,' I was told on all sides, 'who asked your opinion? Who are you, to know better than anyone else?'

Ormsby attacked me hotly for trying to excite a groundless alarm, and I was recommended to hold my tongue and go to sleep.

I said no more, but I could not sleep; the others dropped off one by one, Ormsby being the last; but I lay awake listening and thinking, until the dread and suspense grew past bearing. I must know the truth. I would go down and find the Doctor, and beg him to tell me; he might be angry and punish me--but that would be nothing in comparison with the relief of knowing my fear was unfounded.

Stealthily I slipped out of bed, stole through the dim room to the door, and down the old staircase, which creaked under my bare feet. The dog in the yard howled as I passed the big window, through which the stars were sparkling frostily in the keen blue sky. Outside the room in which

Marjory lay, I listened, but could hear nothing. At least she was sleeping, then, and, relieved already, I went on down to the hall.

The big clock on a table there was ticking solemnly, like a slow footfall; the lamp was alight, so the Doctor must be still up. With a heart that beat loudly I went to his study door and lifted my hand to knock, when from within rose a sound at which the current of my blood stopped and ran backwards--the terrible, heartbroken grief of a grown man.

Boy as I was, I felt that an agony like that was sacred; besides, I knew the worst then.

I dragged myself upstairs again, cold to the bones, with a brain that was frozen too. My one desire was to reach my bed, cover my face, and let the tears flow; though, when I did regain it, no tears and no thoughts came. I lay there and shivered for some time, with a stony, stunned sensation, and then I slept--as if Marjory were well.

The next morning the bell under the cupola did not clang, and Sutcliffe came up with the direction that we were to go down very quietly, and not to draw up the window-blinds; and then we all knew what had happened during the night.

There was a very genuine grief, though none knew Marjory as I had known her; the more emotional wept, the older ones indulged in little semi-pious conventional comments, oddly foreign to their usual tone; all--even the most thoughtless--felt the same hush and awe overtake them.

I could not cry; I felt nothing, except a dull rage at my own insensibility. Marjory was dead--and I had no tears.

Morning school was a mere pretence that day; we dreaded, for almost the first time, to see the Doctor's face, but he did not show himself, and the arrangements necessary for the breaking-up of the school were made by the matron.

Some, including Ormsby and myself, could not be taken in for some days, during which we had to remain at the school: days of shadow and monotony, with occasional ghastly outbreaks of the high spirits which nothing could repress, even in that house of mourning.

But the time passed at last, until it was the evening of the day on which Marjory had been left to her last sleep.

The poor father and mother had been unable to stay in the house now that it no longer covered even what had been their child; and the only two, besides the matron and a couple of servants who still remained there, were Ormsby and I, who were both to leave on the following morning.

I would rather have been alone just then with anyone but Ormsby, though he had never since that fatal night taken the slightest notice of me; he looked worn and haggard to a degree that made me sure he must have cared more for Marjory than I could have imagined, and yet he would break at times into a feverish gaiety which surprised and repelled me.

He was in one of these latter moods that evening, as we sat, as far apart as possible, in the empty, firelit schoolroom.

'Now, Cameron,' he said, as he came up to me and struck me boisterously on the shoulder, 'wake up, man! I've been in the blues long enough. We can't go on moping always, on the night before the holidays, too! Do something to make yourself sociable--talk, can't you?'

'No, I can't,' I said; and, breaking from him, went to one of the windows and looked vacantly out into blackness, which reflected the long room, with its dingy greenish maps, and the desks and forms glistening in the fire-beams.

The ice-bound state in which I had been so long was slowly passing away, now that the scene by the little grave that raw, cheerless morning had brought home remorselessly the truth that Marjory was indeed gone--lost to me for ever.

I could see now what she had been to me; how she had made my great loneliness endurable; how, with her innocent, fearless nature, she had tried to rouse me from spiritless and unmanly dejection. And I could never hope to please her now by proving that I had learnt the lesson; she had gone from me to some world infinitely removed, in which I was forgotten, and my pitiful trials and struggles could be nothing to her any more!

I was once more alone, and this second bereavement revived in all its crushing desolation the first bitter loss which it so closely followed.

So, as I stood there at the window, my unnatural calm could hold out no longer; the long-frozen tears thawed, and I could weep for the first time since Marjory died.

But I was not allowed to sorrow undisturbed; I felt a rough grasp on my arm, as Ormsby asked me angrily, 'What's the matter now?'

'Oh, Marjory, come to me!' I could only cry; 'I can't bear it! I can't! I can't!'

'Stop that, do you hear?' he said savagely, 'I won't have it! Who are you to cry about her, when--but for _you_----'

He got no farther; the bitter truth in such a taunt, coming from him, stung me to ungovernable rage. I turned and struck him full in the mouth, which I cut open with my clenched hand.

His eyes became all pupil. 'You shall pay me for that!' he said through his teeth; and, forcing me against a desk, he caught up a large T-square which lay near; he was far the stronger, and I felt myself powerless in his grasp. Passion and pain had made him beside himself for the moment, and he did not know how formidable a weapon the heavily-weighted instrument might become in his hand.

I shut my eyes: I think I rather hoped he would kill me, and then perhaps I might go where Marjory was. I did not cry for help, and it would have been useless if I had done so, for the schoolroom was a long way from the kitchen and offices of that rambling old house.

But before the expected blow was dealt I felt his grasp relax, and heard the instrument fall with a sudden clatter on the floor. 'Look,' he whispered, in a voice I did not recognise, '_look there_!'

And when I opened my eyes, I saw Marjory standing between us!

She looked just as I had always seen her: I suppose that even the after-life could not make Marjory look purer, or more lovely than she was on

earth. My first feeling was a wild conviction that it had all been some strange mistake--that Marjory was not dead.

'Marjory, Marjory!' I cried in my joy, 'is it really you? You have come back, after all, and it is not true!'

She looked at us both without speaking for a moment; her dear brown eyes had lost their old childish sparkle, and were calm and serious as if with a deeper knowledge.

Ormsby had cowered back to the opposite wall, covering his face. 'Go away!' he gasped. 'Cameron--_you_ ask her to go. She--she liked you.... I never meant it. Tell her I never meant to do it!'

I could not understand such terror at the sight of Marjory, even if she had been what he thought her; but there was a reason in his case.

'You were going to hurt Cameron,' said Marjory, at length, and her voice sounded sad and grave and far-away.

'I don't care, Marjory,' I cried, 'not now you are here!'

She motioned me back: 'You must not come nearer,' she said. 'I cannot stay long, and I must speak to Ormsby. Ormsby, have you told anyone?'

'No,' he said, shaking all over, 'it could do no good.... I thought I needn't.'

'Tell _him_, ' said Marjory.

'Must I? Oh, no, no!' he groaned, 'don't make me do that!'

'You must,' she answered, and he turned to me with a sullen fear.

'It was like this,' he began; 'that night, when I was waiting for you down there--I had some string, and it struck me, all in a moment, that it would be fun to trip you up. I didn't mean to hurt you--only frighten you. I fastened the string across a little way from the bottom. And then--he had to moisten his lips before he could go on--'then _she_ came down, and I tried to catch her--and couldn't--no, I couldn't!'

'Is that all?' asked Marjory, as he stopped short.

'I cut the string and hid it before you came. Now you know, and you may tell if you like!'

'Cameron, you will never tell, will you--as long as he lives?' said Marjory. 'You must promise.'

I was horrified by what I had heard; but her eyes were upon me, and I promised.

'And you, Ormsby, promise me to be kinder to him after this.'

He could not speak; but he made a sign of assent.

'And now,' said Marjory, 'shake hands with him and forgive him.'

But I revolted: 'No, Marjory, I can't; not now--when I know this!'

'Cameron, dear,' she said, 'you won't let me go away sorry, will you? and I must go so soon. For my sake, when I wish it so!'

I went to Ormsby, and took his cold, passive hand. 'I do forgive him, Marjory,' I said.

She smiled brightly at us both. 'And you won't forget, either of you?' she said. 'And, Douglas, you will be brave, and take your own part now. Good-bye, good-bye.'

I tried to reach her. 'Don't leave me; take me with you, Marjory--dear, dear Marjory, don't go!' But there was only firelit space where she had stood, though the sound of her pleading, pathetic voice was still in the air.

Ormsby remained for a few minutes leaning against a desk, with his face buried in his arms, and I heard him struggling with his sobs. At last he rose, and left the room without a word.

But I stayed there where I had last seen Marjory, till the fire died down, and the hour was late, for I was glad to be alone with the new and solemn joy that had come to me. For she had not forgotten me where she was; I had been allowed to see her once more, and it might even be that

I should see her again. And I resolved then that when she came she should find me more worthy of her.

* * * * *

From that night my character seemed to enter upon a new phase, and when I returned to school it was to begin my second term under better auspices.

My cousins had welcomed me cordially among them, and as I mastered the lesson of give and take, of respecting one's self in respecting others, which I needed to learn, my early difficulties vanished with the weakness that had produced them.

By Ormsby I was never again molested; in word and deed, he was true to the promise exacted from him during that last strange scene. At first, he avoided me as being too painfully connected with the past; but by degrees, as he recognised that his secret was safe in my keeping, we grew to understand one another better, although it would be too much to say that we ever became intimate.

After he went to Sandhurst I lost sight of him, and only a few months since the news of his death in the Soudan, where he fell gallantly, made me sorrowfully aware that we should never meet again.

I had a lingering fancy that Marjory might appear to me once more, but I have long since given up all hope of that in this life, and for what may come after I am content to wait.

But the charge my child-friend had undertaken was completed on the night she was allowed to return to earth and determine the crisis of two lives; there is nothing now to call the bright and gracious little spirit back, for her influence will remain always.