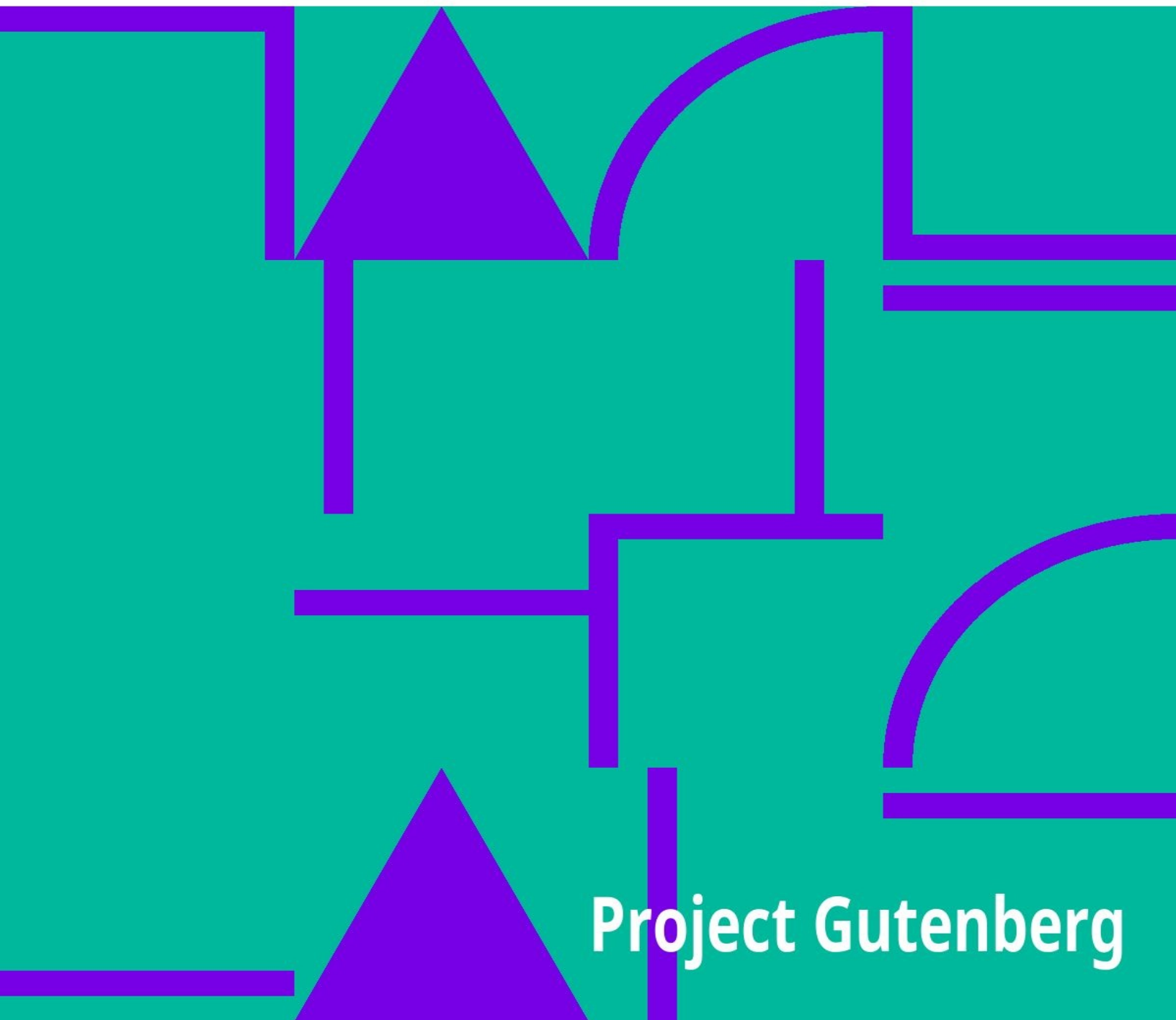


Paul the Courageous

Mabel Quiller-Couch



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Title: Paul the Courageous

Author: Mabel Quiller-Couch

Release Date: July 19, 2008 [eBook #26087]

Language: English

Character set encoding: ISO-8859-1

***START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PAUL THE
COURAGEOUS***

E-text prepared by Lionel Sear

PAUL THE COURAGEOUS.

By

MABEL QUILLER-COUCH.

1901

This e-text was prepared from a reprint of a version published in 1901.

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CHAPTER I.

A DISAPPOINTMENT.

Slewbury was a very fine town in its way; a little quiet and sleepy perhaps, as country towns often are, but it was large and handsome, and beautifully situated on the side of a steep hill. It had a grand market-place, a large town-hall where concerts were often given, and some well-kept public gardens, of all of which the Slewbury people were very proud, and justly so.

But then, as Paul Anketell and his friends often remarked, "What was there for boys?" There was absolutely nothing. No river, no sea, no mountains, or anything. All there was for them in the way of amusement was to go for walks and pick flowers, and wander about a field or two. Certainly one could climb a tree, and whittle sticks or make whistles, but one could not be doing that all the time. No, Paul had long since come to the conclusion that Slewbury was a miserable place in which to live; he hated it; and he could not understand why his father had ever settled there.

When he was a man, he declared over and over again to Stella and Michael, he would have a house close to a river, a mountain, and the sea, then he would have boats and rods, and a sailing boat, so that he would never be hard up for something to do. To a great extent Paul was right; Slewbury was a dull, sleepy and prim old town, but boys ought to be able to make amusements for themselves anywhere; they should have resources within themselves. Paul had loads of toys, and books, and tools, and a nice large garden to play in when the weather was fine. But he was a restless boy, full of longing for adventure and travel, and new sights, and sounds, and experiences, and the happiest time of the whole year to him was the summer holiday when all the family went away to the sea, or to some beautiful spot amongst the mountains.

True, the sea had always been the English sea—at least it had come to them at an English seaside town—and the mountains had been either Welsh or Scotch mountains, but the three little Anketells were true British children and were quite sure there could be no more beautiful mountains or coasts anywhere in the world.

As soon as the Christmas holidays were over and school work had set in, the children began to think of where they should go when the summer holidays came, and what they would do, and many and many a discussion they had as to their favourite spots, and whether they should go to an old favourite, or try a new one. Plans were made, toys collected, and boxes packed long before the happy day came, but it all added to the pleasure and excitement and importance of the long-looked-forward-to event.

But dearly as they loved their own country, they had no objection to going further afield, and when one day Mr. Anketell suggested that that year they should spend their holiday in Norway, their excitement knew no bounds. All previous travels and expeditions seemed to sink into insignificance beside this. To be actually going to live, and sleep, and eat, on board a real steamer, and to cross the sea to another land seemed to them a splendid outlook. Every book and picture that could tell them anything about Norway was eagerly hunted up, all the Norwegian fairy tales were read again and again, until Stella and Michael at last felt quite sure that they would meet fairies, and dwarfs, and Vikings wherever they went. They had no idea what a Viking was like, but they thought it must be something between a giant and a knight, with all the good qualities of both.

There never could have been a greater inducement to learn geography and history than this long-talked-of trip. All through the term Stella and Mike studied the map of Norway until they very nearly knew it by heart, and when Paul came home for the Easter holidays they met him brimful of information on the subject. But Paul was not going to allow himself to be taught anything by 'the children,' as he called them, and he soon had them sufficiently awed by his superior knowledge and loftier understanding. He cared nothing for fairies, and quickly dashed all Stella's hopes of seeing any, but he could teach them a great deal about the sports, and the shooting, and the other attractions to be found there—at least, he thought he could—but his father and mother had often to smile to themselves as they listened to the marvellous stories he told the children, and sometimes they had to check him to set him right on various points, a thing he objected to very much indeed. For Paul had read so much, heard so much, and thought so much of the marvels of that northern land, that nothing was too impossible and improbable for him to believe, and one night, just as he was going to bed, a new idea came to him, an idea so splendid that it prevented for a long time his going to sleep, and even after he was asleep he dreamed the whole night through that he was having a terrific fight with a huge bear, and when he

awoke in the morning and thought that his dream might very likely prove a reality, he hardly knew how to contain himself until he had made sure.

He tumbled into his bath and out again, and into his clothes in a shorter time than it usually took him to make up his mind to get out of bed; and rushing downstairs two or three steps at a time, burst like a tornado into the dining-room, where his father and mother had assembled for prayers.

"I say," he shouted, without a thought as to whether he was interrupting any conversation—"oh, I say, father, mother, aren't there big white bears in the Norwegian fjords, white Polar bears, I mean? And shall we see them, and if there are, may we go hunting when we are there? It would be simply splendid; I'd rather go bear-hunting than anything; it would be grand to kill a bear."

He had been so eager to get down and satisfy himself on this point that he had not stayed to dress himself properly, and he burst into the room with his collar unfastened, and his tie missing altogether. He was so eager, too, that he did not notice the anxiety on his parents' faces, or in their manner, and only wondered why they looked at him so sadly, and without answering any of his burning questions.

At last he grew impatient. "Father, do tell me, shall you take your guns with you? and mayn't I have one?"

"Hush, hush, dear, do not be so excitable! There are no bears to shoot where we thought of going, nor wild animals of any kind, you may be quite sure, or we should not have dreamed of taking Stella and Michael there for their holidays."

"But, mother, dear, they would be quite safe with father and me to take care of them. Do let's go to a part where there are bears! I'd give anything to bring home a fur rug with a great head on it, and say I'd shot it myself."

"Paul, do not talk any more now. Father is dreadfully worried, and has a very great deal to think of. You understand, dear. Now fasten your collar and go to your place, I hear the servants coming in to prayers." And Mrs. Anketell stooped and kissed him. "Pray God to help dear father in his troubles," she whispered, "and make us all brave to bear our share."

Paul went to his seat quietly, wondering very much what it all meant. Surely his father had plenty of courage to face anything and everything, and he knew

that he himself had. As for his mother and Stella—well, mother did not need to be brave with father to take care of her, and Stella was only a girl, and no one would expect much of her; as for Michael, he was only six, a mere baby. He sat in his chair puzzled, and wondering, and coming no nearer a solution of his mother's meaning. But Paul was soon to learn it, and he never forgot the hour which followed, when the servants had left the room, and he and his father and mother were seated alone at the table.

The urn was hissing and singing, the sweet spring sunshine shone in on the silver on the table, on the bright covers, and on the big bowl of yellow daffodils on the old oak sideboard. A deep consciousness of all these details, and of the beauty of the scene, was impressed on his mind then— though at the time he was wholly unaware of the fact—and through all his after life remained with him so vividly that he could recall every detail of the scene, and the look of everything in the low, familiar room as it was that morning. He could recall, too, the unusual gravity of his parents, the anxious face of his mother, and how the tears sprang to her eyes when his father looked up and noticed her anxiety and tried to cheer her.

"Darling, you must not take it so hardly," he said tenderly; "things might be much worse. With some self-denial and economy we shall weather this storm, as we did many when first we were married." Then they smiled at each other, and Paul saw that they grew happier again at once.

"Shall I tell the boy about it now?" asked Mr. Anketell. "He must know sooner or later."

Mrs. Anketell looked at Paul for a moment with an expression on her face that he could not read, but he thought she looked sorry about something, and very, very sad; then she looked away at her husband and nodded assent.

"Paul, my son," said his father, turning to him and laying his hand gently on the boy's arm, "I want you to listen to me, and give me your whole attention. You are old enough now to be our confidant in many things, and of course you will understand that what we may confide in you we trust to your honour to respect as a confidence, and to speak about to no one."

Paul said, "Yes, father," in rather a frightened voice. He knew that it was considered 'sneakish' to tell a secret, but he had never dreamed that secrets could be such very solemn things.

"Well, my boy, we have met with a very great misfortune, and have lost a large sum of money, and from being a comparatively wealthy man, I have suddenly become a comparatively poor one. If only I myself were concerned I would not care, but for your mother's sake, and for the sake of you children, I am very much troubled and grieved. I am afraid we shall all have to give up many things, and do without many things, and save in every way we can."

Paul had grown very grave, and for a moment he sat thinking, wondering what he could do; he was very anxious to help. "Father," he cried, at last, "I know one way we can save a good bit of money every year: I can leave school, and I could go out to work. I know Farmer Vinning would give me a job; he said he wished he had a boy half as spry as I am, and— and then I could bring home my wages every week to mother." And for the moment Paul could not see what hardship people found in being economical. But his father only shook his head and laughed.

"It would be poor economy to take you away from school for a long time yet, my son," he said. Then, seeing how Paul's face fell, he went on: "The things we can do for the greatest advantage to others and ourselves, too, are not always the things we would like best to do. To be a real help and comfort to us, you must stick at your work as hard as you can, and make the best use possible of the next few years. Then you will, I hope, be able not only to help your mother, but to give them all a home if they should need one."

"But I want to help now," said Paul, dolefully. To work harder at school seemed a very poor way of saving money.

"You will be able to, dear, at once, too. We shall all have to give up something, many of the things we care for most. You can help by giving up cheerfully," said his mother.

"Oh, that's nothing," said Paul, still doleful.

"It means more than you can imagine now," she said, softly; "a trouble bravely born and smiled over is lightened for everyone of half its weight."

"Can't I give up my music;" Paul burst in on his mother's speech, too eager to notice what she was saying.

Mrs. Anketell laughed in spite of her sadness. "We are very anxious to give

you all as good an education as is possible, and for the sake of the future you must not give up any of it yet. No, what we shall have to give up will be our pleasures. The horses must go, all but Nell for father, and Jumbo for the hard work. Some of the servants will have to go, too, I am afraid," she said, looking at her husband, and once more the anxious look came back to her eyes.

"I can clean boots," said Paul, "and I can wash the dog-cart."

"Very good," said Mr. Anketell, encouragingly. "You can learn to work in the garden, too. A boy of your age can give a good deal of help there."

Now, if there was one thing more than another that Paul hated, it was gardening, and his response to this suggestion was not hearty. Mrs. Anketell was silent for a few moments, then she said with, Paul thought, but little concern, "We shall have to give up the Norwegian cruise, of course, John; but that is only a trifle compared with other things."

Paul's heart seemed to leap right up into his throat, and then sank right down, down, as, it seemed to him, no one's heart could ever have sunk before. He could not believe but that there was some mistake, that his ears were deceiving him. "What did you say, mother?" he cried. "Give up the Norwegian cruise! Oh, no, no, we couldn't give that up! We *must* go to Norway; we can save in other ways—I'll begin at once. I won't want any new clothes for a year, and I'll go back to school without a hamper,— but we *must* go to Norway."

"I see you have already begun to save your neckties," said his father mischievously; but Paul was far too much upset to laugh at anything.

"Father, we *must* go!" he cried. "We have counted on it for weeks, and had planned everything, and—"

"So had we, Paul, and it will be a keen disappointment to us, keener than you can understand; but it has to be, and we must put a brave face on it. This is the first trial, my boy. It is very easy to talk of trials, and how we will face them; but it is the actual facing them, not the talking, that tries our courage and shows what we are made of. It requires no courage to give up what we care little or nothing about. Be as brave as you know how to be over this disappointment, my boy, and don't add to your mother's troubles by grumbling and complaining. We feel terribly any pain that this loss may bring to you children, and to know you are fretting and grumbling will make it a hundred times harder for us."

"Of course we will go somewhere for the summer holidays," said Mrs. Anketell gently. "Stella and Michael will need a change before winter, and father needs one too, I am sure."

"Not as much as you do, dear," he said, tenderly, looking sadly at her pale face.

She shook her head and smiled. "I don't deny I shall be glad of one; in fact we shall all be better for it," she said; "but it must be a much less expensive one than the one we planned."

Here was another grievance to add to his list. Paul's feelings were hurt that he had been left out as not requiring a change, and altogether the blow which he had had was too much for him to bear well at the first shock; so that he felt a very unhappy and ill-used boy as he left the table and made his way slowly up to the nursery.

CHAPTER II.

HOW PAUL BORE IT.

Stella and Michael had finished their breakfast and were playing together. Michael was standing up in the high window-seat, grasping a long pole with a curtain hook at the end of it, with which he made frantic but futile efforts to land Stella, who was dashing about in a perfectly break-neck fashion in a box on the floor.

"We are playing at being in Norway," he shouted, when he caught sight of his elder brother. "Stella has been wrecked, and is trying to get to land in a boat, but the waves are dashing it on the rocks so hard, she will be wrecked before I can land her, if I don't take care."

Here Stella banged her box against the wall, and rebounded again. "I have got to catch her with the boat hook, and then I shall drag her boat—" But Stella had caught sight of Paul's face, and abandoning her boat to the mercy of the waves, she walked out of her apparently perilous position and caught Paul's arm.

"What is the matter?" she asked anxiously. "They haven't made the holidays shorter, have they?" This was always one of her greatest fears.

"Don't be silly!" snapped Paul crossly. "As if they could. Why, if they were to try to I'd refuse to go."

Stella looked awed, but anxious. "Do tell me, Paul, what is it! Is father cross with you?"

At these words a recollection of his father's gentleness and trouble came over him, and he felt a little ashamed and sorry. "No, no," he said, sinking into a chair by the table, and letting his head fall forward on his arms, "I wouldn't mind that so much if—if, oh, it's awfully hard lines, it—"

Stella waited patiently. She was a sensible little woman, and not such a baby as Paul chose to consider her. Because she had meals with Michael in the nursery, that she might be a companion for him, Paul was in the habit of looking

on her as of Michael's age, and understanding. He forgot that at her age he had considered himself old enough to quit the nursery meals for the dining-room, and had done so too. Stella was four years older than her younger brother, and there was a great deal of the little mother in the way she cared for him. But Paul, boy-like, saw only that she joined in Michael's games, and was apparently quite content, so he rather despised her.

"What is it, Paul? Do tell me!" she pleaded at last. She longed to put her arms about him, and try to comfort him; but since he had been at school he had grown, as does many a boy, to object to endearments, and to think them something to be ashamed of. Her heart grew heavy with a nameless fear. Michael, too, ceased to complain of Stella's having left her boat and her game, and looked with wondering eyes at his grief-stricken elder brother. It was so unusual to see Paul cast down like this.

"We aren't going to Norway, after all," said Paul—he spoke gruffly to try to conceal the sob in his throat,—“and I call it beastly hard lines. It isn't as though it would cost so very much more than any other holiday, and father knows we have never been so far before, and how we were looking forward to it, and that I —”

"Not going to Norway!" cried Stella, in an accent almost of relief. "Oh, is that all? I was afraid something dreadful had happened." She could not help the feeling, she had been so frightened by a nameless fear she could scarcely have put into words. But when the first relief was over the disappointment came home to her keenly. Paul had painted in such glowing colours all the joys, and adventures, and wonderful things which lay in store, that that trip was no ordinary one for them. It was the great event of their lifetime. It was to have been one long experience of travel by day and night, by sea and land, and of adventure with strange and wild creatures—Vikings, wolves, reindeers, Valkyries, giants, ice-mountains, and caves, fairies and fairies' homes. Stella had never been able to make up her mind as to what Vikings and Valkyries would be like, but they were all one delightful thrilling jumble of wild animals, giants, and strange people, such as ordinary persons never set eyes on.

"Oh, Paul, it can't be really true?" she cried, in great distress.

"Oh, you don't care," snapped Paul, crossly, "so don't pretend. You can't care, so don't put it on. You said 'Is that all?' as if it were nothing. But of course one

can't expect much from a girl. I believe you were really frightened at going and are glad we are not."

Stella's lip quivered. "I was *not* frightened," she said stoutly, "and I am *not* glad; but I thought at first something dreadful had happened to father or mother—I didn't know what, but something dreadful."

Paul snorted contemptuously. "I wouldn't have minded anything else as much as this," he said loftily, putting on a very superior air.

"If you had your leg cut off you couldn't *never* go to fight wolves," said Michael soberly. He had been standing, boat-hook in hand, listening to the conversation. To him to have a leg cut off seemed the most dreadful thing that could happen.

"But, Paul, why can't we go?" asked Stella, her brother's injustice fading at once from her mind. "Do you know?"

"Yes, I know. Father told me all about it. He has lost a heap of money, and we've got to get rid of most of the horses and the servants, and—" He stopped suddenly in alarm; he was already abusing that confidence his father had placed in him. Nurse was in the adjoining room and the door between was open. Supposing she had heard, what should he do? He could never undo his foolish speech! He peeped at her in a state of great alarm. No, she was dusting under the bed, and could not have heard,—at least he thought not. Stella and Michael must be bound over to secrecy. "Don't you ever dare to tell any one what I have told you!" he said sternly. "Promise, honour bright. Mind Mike, if you do, I'll—I'll—well, you'll soon find out who comes after sneaks!"

"Be quiet, Paul. How dare you? You are not to frighten him like that," cried Stella indignantly. "Mikey is not a sneak, and you ought not to tell stories about bogies coming. You know there aren't any."

"Frighten!" retorted Paul; "he *must* be a coward if that frightens him," but he had the grace to look ashamed.

"You meant to frighten him," said Stella stoutly; "you know you did, and you are very mean."

Paul tried to turn the conversation. He felt ashamed of himself, and did not

like the feeling at all. "Well, if you want to know why we are not going to Norway, you had better go and ask mother. I mustn't tell you what father told me, so it is no use to try to make me."

"Is mother—is mother unhappy about it, Paul?"

"I should just think she is, and father too."

"Did daddy cry?" asked Michael, his big eyes growing bigger with awe.

"Cry! Men don't cry; but mother did."

At which Stella's little heart overflowed with love, and her eyes filled with tears. "I'm going to see her," she said tearfully. "She mustn't be sad. I'll tell her it doesn't matter a bit, we don't mind not going. I don't want to go for a cruise. I'd quite as soon stay at home, and—I can take care of Michael, or I can dust, or—or—" The rest of her sentence was lost as she rushed out of the nursery and down to her mother's room.

"Mother!" she cried, flinging herself into her arms, and clasping her round the neck. "Mummy, dear, I am so sorry; but we don't mind the least little bit. We don't want to have any holiday at all this year, only don't you cry any more, mummy darling," and she kissed her again and again, striving all she knew to make up to her for the trouble which had befallen them.

CHAPTER III.

PAUL'S HOPES RISE.

A few days later Paul returned to school, and Stella and Michael settled down to lessons at home with their governess. They missed their elder brother very much, for though he domineered over them a good deal, they looked up to him as a hero, and a very splendid fellow, and they felt sad and lonely when he went back to school.

At first Paul, too, felt very miserable, and out of spirits. When it came to leaving his home he felt more real sorrow for the trouble they were in than he had at all, and real shame for having behaved so crossly and unkindly about his disappointment, and he became filled with a great desire to work well, and make up in that way for his past behaviour. So the weeks sped by; half term came and went, and early in July came a letter from Stella. They were to go away for a summer holiday, after all, she wrote excitedly, and evidently impressed with the idea that she was conveying wonderful news. They were to go to Dartmoor. Father had taken rooms in a big farmhouse on the moors, and it was lovely; there were horses and wagons, and hay-fields and orchards, and big tors where they could go for picnics.

"Dartmoor!" exclaimed Paul, as he thrust the letter into his pocket. "What a place! What is there for me to do? Just go for walks with the kids, I s'pose; I'd quite as soon stay at home." And he sniffed scornfully, and went about all day in a bad temper.

"Dartmoor is a ripping fine place!" Paul had confided his woes to his chum, Dennis Rogers, and that was the response he met with. "I only wish I was going there this summer. We were there two years ago; oh, my, it *was* jolly! I wonder what part you are going to, and if you'll be anywhere near the convict prison."

Paul pricked up his ears.

"The convict prison," he cried eagerly. "I'd forgotten that that was down there. Oh, I do hope we go quite close to it. I'd like awfully to see the convicts."

Did you ever see any of them? Were you near them?"

"See them! I should just think so. I saw a convict's funeral once, too; the coffin was carried by the convicts all in their prison clothes, with whacking great broad arrows over them."

"What were they like? Did they look like murderers? Did you see any of those that are in Madame Tussard's?" asked Paul, full of curiosity.

"Some of them were pretty bad-looking, but the rest were just like ordinary people. You'd never think from their faces, that they were murderers, and burglars, and forgers, and all that sort of thing. I felt awfully sorry for them, but my mater hurried me away, and wouldn't let me have a good look at them. I know one thing, I would have helped them to escape if they had tried to."

"I do hope we shall be in that part," said Paul, excitedly. "I'd give anything to see the prisoners and the prison. I say, did any escape while you were there?"

"No, 'twas hard luck. One got away in the winter after we left, and wasn't caught for a day or two; it was foggy, and that helped him, of course. Then there is otter-hunting in some of the rivers," went on Dennis, tiring of the subject of the convicts. "Oh, it's an awfully fine place! There are wild cattle on the moor too, and they are no end of excitement; they go for you like anything if you rile them. You *are* in luck's way, old chap. I wish I was going too, instead of to some silly place in Norway where there's nothing to do when you get there but walk. I hate being shut up in a stuffy steamer too. I'm ill all the time—so are most of the people—and I don't see where the fun comes in. But my people are set on it, so I suppose I've got to go. I don't want to, a bit."

"Don't you!" said Paul sarcastically, all his old disappointment returning. "I wish we could change places then. I think Dartmoor is awfully tame compared with Norway."

And then a hot discussion followed, each boy sticking up, of course, for his own favourite place.

But when, three weeks later, Paul travelled homewards, his disappointment was quite forgotten, and he was in the best of spirits, for it is beyond the power of any ordinary boy to feel morose and sulky the day his school breaks up and he goes home for his summer holiday; and when the family joined him at Slewbury

station,—all except his father, who was to follow later,—and they journeyed on together, he was the life of the whole merry party.

"Mother," he exclaimed with sudden recollection, after the home news had been listened to and school news told, "what is the name of the place we are going to? Shall we be near the convict prison?"

"Oh, I hope not," cried Stella, her pretty blue eyes becoming round with dismay, "I should hate to be near convicts, I should be afraid of them. Supposing any of them run away, and come to Moor Farm, whatever shall we do?"

"We are not any very great distance from the prison, I am afraid," Mrs. Anketell answered, "though it is further than either of us could walk. But you know, dear, the poor creatures are well guarded and we shall be well guarded; and I want you to feel nothing but pity for them, my Stella. You must be a brave little woman. Many of the poor creatures there are quiet and harmless, and would not hurt a little child."

"I am jolly glad we are so near," said Paul delightedly; and he talked so much about it that Stella soon began to share his excitement, and lose much of her nervousness, while Michael sat very still and quiet, listening to all that was being said. But presently they grew tired of that subject, and turned their attention to the country through which they were hurrying, and the quaint little stations at which they stopped, where the one porter shouted such odd names in so funny a voice that they could not help laughing; then on they went again through rich yellow cornfields, past streams where men were fishing, and then they saw the high hills in the distance, standing so solitary on the great brown-grey moor.

It was hard to picture a big, gloomy prison anywhere near such a lovely land, or hundreds of sinful, unhappy men shut in behind high grey walls, seeing nothing of the beauty about them.

"Mother, mother, there's Row Tor, and there's Brown Willy, and there—"

"And here is our station," said Mrs. Anketell, smiling, getting up to collect baskets and parcels, "and there is Farmer Minards himself with his car and a cart for the luggage." Then out they got, the only passengers for that little station, while the people in the train stared at them, enviously the children thought, and the people on the platform looked with curiosity and interest at them, and their big pile of luggage. Then Stella and Michael and Mrs. Anketell were shown in to

the funny little car, which was called the 'pill-box,' but Paul asked if he might ride up in the front of the cart on which the luggage was piled, and was allowed to, and a few minutes later they started off in procession down the road on their way to Moor Farm.

The boy who drove the cart was shy at first, and sat very stolid and stiff beside Paul apparently absorbed in guiding his horse, but Paul was not troubled with shyness, or anything else but curiosity, and after he had looked at the horse and cart, and everything about him, his tongue refused to be silent any longer, and a stream of questions was poured into the shy boy's ears. As they were nearly all questions he could answer he did not mind, and replied very patiently, and soon grew more at ease, especially as some of Paul's questions made him laugh too, and feel how much more he knew than 'the young master,' which is always a comfortable feeling.

"And that is Cawsand Beacon, isn't it?" said Paul at last, pointing to a big, big hill, in the near distance. He spoke in an off-hand casual sort of way, and was rather proud of his knowledge until the boy laughed.

"No, sir, that there is Crockern Tor. Cawsan' Baycon be right 'way 'tother side of Dartymoor, right 'long up in the narth, Oke'ampton way."

"Is Crockern Tor as high as Cawsand Beacon?" asked Paul, more humbly.

"I reckon not, not by a brave bit," said the boy, "but it's a purty place to go to."

They were driving now along a rough road across the moor itself; the 'pill-box' had outstripped them and was out of sight. "Let's drive on the grass," said Paul suddenly, "t'would be ever so much jollier than jolting along like this. Why don't you drive across there to the farm," pointing to a stretch of smooth, green turf, "instead of going all around by this road?"

The boy laughed again. "I reckon 'twouldn't be no quicker by time us had hauled the 'orse and cart out. That there green is'n' no turf 't'all, 'tis a bog."

Paul's attention was riveted in a moment. "That isn't one of the bogs that suck people right down, and kill them, is it?" he asked excitedly.

"That's one on 'em," answered the boy; "that isn't so bad as some. Anybody

small and light might get across by keeping right 'way out to the very edge if they was quick, but a horse and cart wouldn't stand no chance. Don't you never go trying of it, sur, you'd be swallowed up in no time. Gee, wug, Lion," he called to the lazy horse. "Would 'ee like to drive a bit, sur?"

But Paul's thoughts were far away. "Anybody light and small might get across," he was repeating to himself, and he made up his mind that somebody light and small would try. After all, Dartmoor wasn't such a bad place, he admitted already. He would have something, anyhow, to tell the boys when he got back. Something worth telling too. He thought there would be few with a better story than his to tell.

CHAPTER IV.

THE REWARD OF OVER CONFIDENCE.

For a day or two their new surroundings kept the children fully occupied in and about the farmyard, and the barns and orchards. Everything was new to them and delightful, from the pump in the yard, and the chickens, to the horses and wagons, the lofts with their smell of hay, the sweet-smelling wood-ricks, the cool dairy, the 'pound' where the cider was made. Then there were sheep-shearing, rat-hunting and countless other joys. But before very long the desire to wander further in search of adventure grew strong in Paul's breast. The children were left wonderfully free in those days, for, owing to their straitened means, Mrs. Anketell had determined to do without a nurse, and she was necessarily obliged to leave them much to themselves, and trust them not to get into any serious mischief.

But in the holidays no boy is quite as wise as he should be. Certainly Paul was not, when he determined to go and find out for himself if that morass was really as dangerous as Muggridge had said. Muggridge was the boy who had driven the cart, and Paul had begun to have a galling feeling that Muggridge had been treating him as though he were a baby, which of course was a thing not to be tolerated for a moment. He must show him that he was a public-school boy, and had already seen more of the world than Muggridge was ever likely to.

It was Saturday morning, and every one in the house, excepting the children, seemed to be unusually busy and occupied. Stella and Michael sauntered out into the yard, and hung on the gate, swinging. Paul strolled out presently and joined them, but the amusement was not to his liking, so he went outside and stood in the road, and looked at the country.

"Let's go for a walk on the moor," he said presently; "there is nothing to do here, and it's looking jolly out there."

Stella and Michael, only too glad to be invited by their elder brother to join him, followed at once with a shout of joy. Paul looked back several times to make sure no one was watching them, but there were no windows at that end of

the house, and everyone was busy. When they had gone a little distance they got off the road on to the soft turf at the side, and began running about here, there, and everywhere. "You had better see where you are going," said Paul; "they say there are morasses here that suck one in until one is gone right down, head and all."

Stella looked about her with wondering eyes, and seized Michael's hands. "What do they look like, Paul? Are they pools?"

"I don't know," said Paul, "I should think so."

"There aren't any here, then," she said eagerly, and with a sigh of relief, letting Mike go again. "I don't see any, do you, Paul?"

"Muggridge said there were, and that is why they go round by that silly old road; but I don't believe him, and I'm going to find out for myself. Perhaps he thinks I will swallow everything he chooses to tell me, and is trying to see how much he can take me in."

"Did he tell you not to go there?" asked Stella, nervously.

"No, he did not tell me any such thing. Why should he? I should like to see him dare to order me about. He just said that I had better not; but that was nothing. I'm sure he was only trying to gull me. He said anybody light could get across if they kept to the edge, and nobody could be much lighter than I am."

"But, Paul, you won't go?" pleaded Stella, anxiously. "Don't go, Paul! *Please* don't! you might be killed."

"Killed!" with terrific scorn. "You girls are such babies you are afraid of your lives to do anything for fear you will be killed, or hurt."

"I am not," said Stella proudly. "You would be frightened though if you got into one of those marshes, and were sucked down."

Paul grew more and more nettled, and defiant. "Anyhow, I am going right away at once to look for one, and that'll show if I am afraid or not. You *babies* can stay where you are." And he walked boldly forward.

Stella bore the taunt bravely, though her feelings were cruelly hurt, too deeply

hurt to allow her to follow her brother and appear to be thrusting her society on him. So she remained where he had left her, tightly grasping Mike's hand as though to make sure that he at any rate came to no harm. For nearly half-an-hour Paul wandered about without finding himself on the dangerous spot, and the more he searched the more convinced he became that Muggridge had been laughing at him.

"Won't Farmer Minards be pleased when Paul tells him," said Michael after a long and anxious silence, and Paul had wandered about in all directions in safety. But before he had finished his sentence they saw Paul stagger as though he had stepped on something which had given way beneath his feet, try to recover himself, and stagger again. Stella jumped up instinctively and ran to him; even then she did not dream of the real danger he was in, until, as she flew towards him, his cry of "Help, help!" reached her. "Keep back!" he shrieked, as she came close. "It's the bog! My feet are stuck, I can't free them, Stella; what can I do? Help, help, help!"

Stella's heart stood still with fright. Paul was in the mud; it would suck him down till it closed over his head, unless some one saved him, and there was no time to be lost. What could she do, without a single creature there to help her? "Mike," she called, "run home as fast as ever you can, and tell them to come at once. Paul is in the bog, and it is sucking him down." The tears were trickling fast down her face, and at sight of them Michael began to cry too.

"Help, help!" called Paul again, then suddenly burst into tears. The mud was half-way up his legs now, and his attempts to free himself seemed only to hasten his fate. Inspiration came to Stella; in another moment she had torn off her big over-all apron. It was strong and wide. If Paul could reach it she might be able to pull him out by it. She threw it towards him, but, in her anxiety, threw it to one side; she tried again, but the breeze carried it away. The third time it reached him, and he caught it by the tips of his fingers, but the effort to reach it dragged him forward, and swaying, staggering, in his endeavours to steady himself he dragged poor Stella beyond her powers of resistance, and in another moment she was in the morass too, and, losing her balance, fell forward on her hands and knees. Their condition now was truly appalling. Paul grew frantic with alarm. "Pick yourself up, Stella, or crawl to the edge; you are quite close."

"I can't," she said in an awe-stricken whisper. She was too frightened to cry now; the fearfulness of the fate which seemed to await them partially numbed

her senses. "I can't, Paul," she said in laboured tones; "the more I try the worse it is. I think we had better keep as still as we can. Poor mummie," she added presently, and at the thought of her mother's grief her tears did flow, but she kept quite still, though she saw that her hands had disappeared entirely, and her arms were fast being sucked down.

CHAPTER V.

THE RESCUE.

Paul and Stella never forgot, to the end of their lives, that awful time of waiting, when they were face to face with death, their hearts filled with agony at the sight of each other in the clutches of that fearful morass, and at the thought of their parents' grief.

All around them stretched the great brown moor, weird and lonely looking, except for where, less than a mile away, Paul could see the chimneys of Moor Farm smoking, and the sunlight shining on the windows. Stella had fallen with her back to the house, and all she could see was the moor, and the hills in the distance. She could not see even if any one was coming to their assistance. "Mike must have lost himself," she thought, "they are so long—"

But at that moment Paul broke in on her thought. "They are coming," he shouted. "Help! help! help!" and he waved his handkerchief excitedly. Stella bowed her head and prayed, she hardly knew then in what words, but to ask God's help, and to thank Him; she knew He would understand.

Three or four persons came running towards them with ropes and planks, while behind came another and larger group with their mother amongst them. Stella could only hear their voices, and do as they bade her.

"How be 'ee going to get the little maid, now?" said a voice she recognised as Farmer Minards'; "'er's the awkwardest of the two to get 'old on, by a long way. Hold up yer 'ead, missie dear, don't let yer face touch the mud."

Stella raised her head as high as she could, but she was so exhausted that it fell forward again, and she lost consciousness altogether.

"I can save the boy," said a voice, "if you'll give me a rope." In a moment more a deftly thrown lasso quivered in the air, and falling over Paul encircled his waist; then, by the aid of planks thrown across the margin, long, strong arms soon dragged him into safety, and he lay trembling, but safe, on solid ground, with his mother's arms around him, and nothing but words of sympathy, and

love, and kindness greeting him instead of the sound scolding he so richly deserved. But she saw he was in no state to be scolded then.

A few moments later another shout went up. Stella was safe. Paul raised himself, and called to her as they carried her towards him, but no answer to his joyful cry came from the limp and senseless little form lying in Farmer Minards' arms. Her face was as white as the clouds above, her eyes were closed. Paul gave a great cry of fear. "Stella, Stella," he called in agony. "Stella, speak! She tried to save me, and—and it is all my fault, and I've killed her." And he burst into an agony of tears, for he really thought his sister was dead.

Mrs. Anketell, who had run to her little daughter, quickly came back to him. "She is not dead," she said soothingly, great tears of thankfulness in her own eyes. "Thank God, Paul. You cannot thank Him enough for having spared you both. She has fainted, that is all, dear. Act like a man now, and be ready to comfort her when she recovers. This is bound to be a terrible shock to her."

Mrs. Anketell was herself faint and trembling from the shock and the anxiety; her hands shook visibly as she laid them on Paul's hot brow, and her head swam so she feared she would have fainted too, but for the sake of others she made a great effort to control herself, and succeeded.

They laid the little maid on the grass, and loosened her clothes. The sight of her little hands hanging so helplessly, with the brown mud dripping off them, and her little white feet, for her shoes and stockings had come off in the mud, and her dead-white face, brought tears to many an eye there, and Paul himself turned over on the grass and wept bitterly, without shame, before them all.

"Better let him have his cry out," said the gentleman who had thrown the lasso, and who proved to be a doctor; "it will relieve him and do him good. Now, you men, some of you carry him carefully home, he is not fit to walk; and I will carry her, if you will allow me," he said, stooping over Stella. "I think they had better be got to bed as quickly as possible. And you, can you walk, do you think?" he added, kindly, to Mrs. Anketell. She nodded in reply; she was too much agitated to speak. "Take my arm, please, if it would be any support to you." His quick eye noted the strain she was enduring, and he quietly did all he could to cheer and distract her thoughts from the contemplation of the awful tragedy which might have befallen two of her children.

So the sad little procession wended its way across the sunny moor again, and Paul, all the way, was saying over and over again to himself he would never, never again try to do what he had been told not to. He would be good, obedient, and humble, he would take care of Stella, and his mother, and Mike. And that night when his mother came to see him the last thing before going to bed herself, he told her the whole story from beginning to end. "Stella is awfully plucky, for a girl," he added at the conclusion of his tale. "She was afraid for me to try to cross, but she didn't seem frightened when she was being sucked down by the mud, she never screamed at all."

"Stella has far more courage than you think," said his mother gravely, "and I hope you will never again jibe at the cowardice of girls; it only shows that you do not know what real courage is. Good muscles do not always mean true courage. You must learn that it is often far more brave to stand by and not do a thing, knowing all the time you will be called a coward for it, than it is to be daring and defiant, as you were to-day. Obedience in all things, pleasant or unpleasant, is true courage, and that is what you lacked to-day, and so brought misery and pain to many, none of whom you consider as wise or brave as yourself."

Paul certainly felt the greatest shame as he realised how foolish he must seem in the eyes of everybody, and he certainly suffered the keenest remorse when he saw how ill Stella was; it was Stella who suffered most from his wrong-doing. For many days she was very, very ill, and it was some time before she was quite her old merry self again.

CHAPTER VI.

A SLOW LEARNER.

A few days later Mr. Anketell arrived for a fortnight's holiday, and all the sad story had to be told to him. He was terribly grieved and upset—grieved to see his bright, happy Stella so wan and quiet, and troubled sorely to think Paul had so far forgotten himself and his duty to the younger ones as to place their lives in danger.

"You cannot expect Michael to look up to you," said his father sternly. "And you are setting him a very bad example. I shall have to send for one of the maids to come and look after you all, for we cannot have such things happening! I will not have your mother so worried and frightened, and the children's lives jeopardised by your disobedience and foolhardiness."

And the maid would have been sent for had not Paul given his word to be more careful and better behaved in future.

Another person with whom Mr. Anketell was very irate was Farmer Minards; he blamed him greatly for leaving so dangerous a spot unguarded in any way, and he spoke so plainly about it that that very same day a man went out with a cartload of white hurdles to place around the margin of the morass. To every one else they were a comfort and a safeguard, but to Paul they were a shame and a constant reminder of his foolishness.

"Us'd have the moor speckled all over with white hurdles if we had you living here for long, sur." They were driving slowly along the road, Paul sitting beside Muggridge in the cart, when Muggridge pointed with his whip at the hurdles and laughed. A hot blush rushed over Paul's face, and a sudden furious anger against his companion surged up in his heart. How dare he laugh at him, a gentleman, and a visitor?

"You told me anybody light could get across," he said sulkily, and he looked away across the moor that Muggridge might not see the tears of anger and mortification which would well up in his eyes.

"So he could."

"Well you couldn't find anyone much lighter than I am, and I went in," and he shuddered at the recollection.

"Of course you did, and so would any one who hadn't the sense not to go right slap in the middle as you did. I meant right 'long out the edge, where Jim has put the hurdles."

Paul laughed contemptuously. "Why, any stupid could do that!" he said loftily. "Farmer Minards himself could walk there!"

"That just shows how much you know," said Muggridge, with an air of great knowingness. "It wouldn't bear me, and I ain't what you would call heavy."

"You are afraid, that's all," said Paul rudely.

For a moment Muggridge looked angry too. "I ain't feared," he said after a pause, "but I've got too much sense. I can't afford to spoil a pair of boots, and I doubt if any one would take the trouble to haul me out; but if they did—why, maister'd give me the sack before the mud had stopped running off me."

Paul laughed derisively. "It's easy enough to make excuses," he said, beginning to scramble down from the cart. "You are afraid, that's what it is, but I'll just show you I am not," and, paying no heed to Muggridge's call, he ran lightly round outside the hurdles. To his surprise the ground was almost hard. The man had placed the hurdles further out than Muggridge had thought, but Paul did not let him know that. The very spirit of bravado and mischief seemed to fill him as he mocked at his companion, and then, with a sudden mad impulse, he climbed over and attempted to run around inside. But here matters were different; the ground was soft and slimy, his feet stuck and began to sink; he tried to run lightly, but 'twas no good, and he clung to the hurdles in real fear. Muggridge, too, was alarmed. He realised suddenly that he was responsible for the young master's safety, that he had taunted him into his foolhardy action, and that the episode would not make a pleasant story for either of them to tell.

Springing out of the cart he ran to Paul's help, and had him out of the morass and in safety in less time than it takes to tell it. Both were so alarmed now that all thought of their quarrel had vanished from their minds. They were grateful that they were safe and the episode had ended as easily as it had; but their joy

was short lived, for at the sight of Paul's boots they looked at each other with grave faces and frightened eyes. What was to be done? The state of them was bound to be noticed, for the weather was fine and dry, Muggridge scraped off what he could with bits of stick, and tufts of grass, but his efforts were not very successful, for the mud was thick and clinging, and Paul clambered back into the cart with a very, very heavy heart. He did not gloss over to himself the wrongfulness of his behaviour, or the seriousness of the situation. He was bound to be found out, and then he would perhaps be sent back to school, or one of the maids would be sent for to take charge of him, and a flush of shame mounted his forehead at the thought.

Then to avoid all the trouble he knew he would get into, Paul made the grave mistake people often make when once they have done wrong. To cover the first fault they commit another, and so start on what is often a long road of sin and misery, rather than courageously face at once the blame and punishment they deserve. The rest of the drive he did not enjoy at all, though it was one of the pleasures he loved most, as a rule; but his mind was fully occupied in trying to plan how he should escape detection and punishment.

Muggridge at first promised to clean the boots for him before anybody could see them, but the delay Paul had caused made them so late in getting home that he had to go at once to put the horse in his stable, and then hurry off to his own dinner. Besides, the mud was too wet as yet to be cleaned off. Paul was terribly upset at that. What *would* become of him, he wondered, and how could he manage? By that time all thought of confessing at once had gone from his mind; it seemed to him impossible to do it; he could think of nothing but concealment. But, luckily he thought, when they got back to the house there was no one about. It was close to the hour for the mid-day dinner. Mrs. Minards and the maids were busy in the kitchen, Mrs. Anketell and Stella were upstairs in their rooms. Paul could hardly believe his good fortune when he got past the windows, into the house, without meeting any one, and as he stood at the foot of the stairs listening, to try to discover where everyone was, and could hear no voices or footsteps near, his spirits rose. He crept upstairs swiftly and stealthily, almost without a sound, except for the creaking of a board in the passage outside his mother's door. She heard it, and called out, "Who is that? Is that Paul?" But he went on without answering, though he felt very mean for doing so, and soon gained his own room. He was scarcely a moment taking off his muddy boots and hiding them in the bottom of his play-box; then he put on his slippers, dabbed over the front of his head with a wet hair brush, smeared a little water over his

face and hands, wiped the dirt off on the towel, and crept downstairs again in a few moments, as softly as he had crept up.

When Mrs. Anketell came down ten minutes later, saying, "I wish Paul had come, he will be late for dinner," she found him coiled up in the big arm-chair with a book on his knee, and apparently absorbed in the story. He was so deeply absorbed in fact that he did not look up when she spoke, not, indeed, until she exclaimed, "Oh, Paul, dear, then you are back. Have you been here long? I did not know you were in the house, and I was quite anxious about you."

Then he looked up at her with an abstracted air, as though his mind was still so deep in the story that it was closed to everything, and he could hardly hear or take in what she was saying. "No-o not very long," he answered vaguely, and to hide his eyes, which could not meet his mother's, he dropped them on to the pages again.

"Did you hurry back to go on with your book?" asked his mother, standing by him, and looking over his shoulder. "I am glad you find it so interesting. Father was afraid you did not care for it, as you never looked at it. But why do you hold it upside down, dear?"

Paul coloured hotly, and held his head lower to hide it. "To—to—the picture looks so funny this way," he said lamely, and then, to his great relief, the maid said dinner was ready, and he escaped any further embarrassment for the moment. But only for the moment.

CHAPTER VII.

A TROUBLESOME PAIR OF BOOTS.

Muggridge had told him to bring his boots out to the boot-house, when he could manage to get them there without any one seeing him, that he might clean them for him, and nobody be the wiser. So Paul waited anxiously for the opportunity. He knew it must be done soon, as his mother would miss the boots and make inquiries about them, for he had only the one pair of strong everyday boots now besides his best ones, as the others had been almost spoilt by his first adventure in the morass, and had been sent away to the shoemaker's.

As soon as dinner was finished his troubles began again.

"I am going to walk to Four Bridges this afternoon," said Mr. Anketell; "who will go with me? We will have tea there, and walk home in the evening."

Stella and Michael jumped with delight. They enjoyed this sort of excursion more than anything that could be offered them; and, as a rule, Paul enjoyed it even more than they. But to-day he did not express his usual pleasure, and sat looking red and embarrassed when his father looked questioningly at him.

"Well, Paul, what do you say?" he asked, wondering at the boy's silence.

"I—I should like to go very much," stammered Paul awkwardly, "but I've hurt my foot. I hurt it jumping out of the cart."

This, to a certain extent, was true, but under ordinary circumstances Paul would have been the last to allow such a trifle to keep him from anything he desired. A series of questions followed, which he found very difficult to answer, and finally Paul had to submit to having his ankle bound with a wet cloth, while Mrs. Anketell decided to give up the afternoon's excursion and stay at home with him. "And we will have tea in the orchard," she said consolingly, "to make up for the loss of our tea at Four Bridges; that will be pleasanter than having it indoors." The kinder they were to him the more unhappy and uncomfortable Paul felt, and the less chance he saw of carrying out his plan; but his lowness of spirits stood him in good stead here, for his mother and father put it down to the

pain he was suffering, and no one questioned the truth of his story about the injured foot.

But his impatience and his anxiety were such as he never forgot. It seemed to him ages before the little party started off on their expedition; first there was one hindrance and then another, until he could have screamed with impatience and anxiety, and even when they were gone he could not get away, for his mother sat with him and read to him, and he watched with dread the hands of the clock go round, as the afternoon wore quickly away. The boots must be cleaned before tomorrow morning, or the traces of his escapade would betray him.

At last, however, Mrs. Anketell stopped reading, and said she must write a letter. And Paul, without a moment's delay, seized the opportunity to limp from the room. He really had to limp now, for the bandage was so tight about his ankle that he could not bend it. Mrs. Anketell, hearing his uneven steps, called to him not to use his foot too much. "All right," he called back willingly, for he was only too thankful that she did not prohibit him from using it altogether. Then he stumbled out to the stairs, and clambering up them a good deal faster than he usually moved, reached his room without further interruption. His heart was beating furiously with excitement and fear, but he could not pause a moment to steady himself, for he felt he had not a second to lose. Dragging his play-box softly out from under the bed, he plunged his hand to the bottom and soon drew out his troublesome boots; then tucking them under his coat, which barely served to cover them, he slid down the banisters to save all noise, and tore out into the yard, and around the corner to the boot-house, as though a pack of wolves was after him. But, in turning the corner, he came face to face with something he had not expected, and that was the burly form of Farmer Minards himself. Paul's heart sunk like lead, and he went cold all over with apprehension.

"Hullo, young gentleman," said the old man, "I thought you was laid by the heels?"

Paul tried to smile. "I hurt my foot, and couldn't walk to Four Bridges, but it isn't much."

"Where be 'ee off now?" asked the farmer, looking anxiously at the funny-shaped protuberances under Paul's arms. "Be 'ee going for a stroll by yerself? Can't keep in, I s'pose, but must be out in the fresh air."

"Oh, I—I ain't going far," stammered Paul. "I am only just having a look round."

"Would 'ee care to come and see 'em cutting the hay in the Little Meadow? It wouldn't be far for 'ee to walk; we've got the new machine, and 'tis a real beauty. All the men are out there looking at un."

It did seem to Paul altogether too cruel that so many things he would have given anything to see and do should happen that afternoon, and that he should have to refuse them. "Oh, I—I—" and then he stopped. He could not go all out there with his boots under his arms, nor could he get rid of them while Farmer Minards stood looking at him; he had to keep up the pretence, too, about his foot. "I've strained my ankle, rather," he said lamely. "I'm afraid I could not walk so far. Mother has bandaged it, and I've only got my slippers on. I'm awfully sorry," he added with genuine regret.

"Never mind, sir, you can come another time. I'm sorry you're so bad, but when I saw you cutting along so spry I thought perhaps you was all right again; but we shall be using un again next week, and you can come then, perhaps," and Farmer Minards at last moved away, to Paul's intense relief, for he had been terrified all the time lest someone else should come along and catch him.

He ran on to the boot-house, but with little hope of finding Muggridge there now, for he would probably be out in the hay-field with the rest of the men. A thought had come to him, however, that he himself might manage to clean the mud off the boots, if he was quick. When he reached the boot-house it was as he feared, no Muggridge was there; but to his horror someone else was—no other than Mrs. Minards herself, and at sight of her Paul turned and fled in dismay. Too much scared to know what he was doing he ran swiftly through the yard, and into the kitchen-garden. At that moment a clock struck five and he knew that his mother would be expecting him down to tea now. What could he do? He could not get back to the house again; he peeped out and saw people moving about in the yard and at the doorway; it was impossible to get past unobserved. But those boots must be got rid of somehow. He looked about the garden eagerly for a spot in which to hide them, but a high stone wall surrounded the place, and the garden itself was so neat and tidy there was no chance of hiding anything there without the risk of being found out. And Mrs. Minards, he remembered, was always pottering about in her garden.

There was no time to spare either, and at the thought that in a moment his mother or some one would be searching for him, he fled out of the garden into the open country beyond. Outside the walls lay the moor, the big brown old moor. Surely here he could find a hiding-place for his unfortunate boots, and could tell Muggridge where to look for them. It was a splendid idea, he thought; there could not be a better hiding-place, and running as fast as his feet could carry him to a clump of furze, he pushed his boots far in under the bush, took one glance to see that all was safe, and fled back again to the garden-door.

"Paul, Pau—aul." He heard his own name being called, and ran on with a new fear in his heart. What would they think of him and his tale of his sprained foot if he reached them breathless and hot? So he slackened his pace, and when he came to the door leading from the garden into the yard he sauntered through in the most easy, casual manner he knew how to assume. When he came in sight of the house he saw his mother standing at the door. As soon as she saw him she beckoned him to hurry.

"Why, Paul dear, where have you been? Tea has been ready a long time, and I have searched for you all over the house. How hot and flushed and tired you look. Is your foot paining you? You should not have gone out, you know."

He was afraid to speak lest his breathlessness should betray him. "It is not so very bad now, thank you. I think it is getting better." He spoke so oddly and looked so unlike himself that his mother wondered what was the matter with him.

"Have you been out in the sun long?" she asked anxiously.

"No—o," he answered. "I've only been strolling about a little."

"It is hard to keep at home on such a lovely afternoon, but I think you would have done wisely to have rested," said Mrs. Anketell, sympathetically; and putting her arm about his shoulders they went to the orchard, where a glorious tea was spread for them. At any other time Paul's delight would have been boundless, but to-night he was so listless and distracted that Mrs. Anketell grew quite anxious about him, and his depression depressed her.

"Is there anything troubling you, dear?" she asked. "Can't you tell me what it is and trust me?"

There were tears in her eyes at the thought that her boy could keep aloof from her in his troubles. Her tender glance, her loving voice, touched Paul's heart. The whole confession trembled on his lips, and would have been poured forth, but at that moment the maid came up to say the clergyman had called, and Mrs. Anketell had to go away to see him, leaving Paul with his confession unmade.

CHAPTER VIII.

A MIDNIGHT SEARCH.

All the evening Paul watched in a fever of anxiety for Muggridge. He could not rest. He knew that the boots must be cleaned from all traces of his folly of the morning, and must be in their place by breakfast time the next day, or searching inquiries would begin. And matters were a hundred times worse now that the poor things were hidden away so suspiciously than if they had been found in his room.

But night came on without bringing any sign of Muggridge, and Paul could not shake off his depression, which deepened until every one wondered what was the matter with him. When the others came home, full of all they had done and seen, the children's pleasure was greatly spoiled by his gloomy indifference.

After they had all gone to bed Mr. and Mrs. Anketell sat for a long time discussing the change in their boy, and wondering with pain what it was that was troubling him, and why he would not confide in them.

Paul, lying awake in his own little room, heard his father and mother come up to bed. He could not sleep, his mind was in such a turmoil, and he felt himself in such a terrible situation. It seemed to him now that it would have been but a little thing to have taken the chance of his muddy boots being found, and of having to own up, compared with what he had to face now, unless—

He sprang up in his bed as a sudden inspiration came to him. Here was a way out of his troubles, if he could but carry it through. Everything could be set right, and nothing need ever be known. And if, he told himself, he got off this time, he would be a good boy for ever after. If he could only get his boots now from their hiding-place and put them where Muggridge would be sure to find them in the morning, all would be right. No sooner had the idea entered his head than he felt he *must* carry it out. It was his one and only chance—but there were difficulties. He got out of bed and crept to the window. The moon was giving a fair light, and would be brighter later. He thought if he could only get free of the house he could make his way to the clump of furze though, of course, it would be

difficult, for he would not be able to get out of the garden as he had before, the door being always locked at night, and the walls too high to climb. And to try to find one particular furze bush unless one approached it from the same point would be no easy task. He determined, however, to make the attempt, and began at once to drag on some garments. Then he bethought him that he must not make the attempt just yet, for the household might not have fallen asleep, and he lay down again to wait with what patience he could. But at last he thought he might venture, and raising the latch of his door softly, he popped out his head, first an inch or two, then further and further, and listened for any sound of voices from his father's and mother's room. They were talking, and they went on doing so for what seemed to Paul an endless time—he little guessed that it was his behaviour which was keeping them awake and sleepless—but at last, to his great relief, other sounds reached him; he heard his father snoring gently, and determined to put his fortunes at once to the test.

His depression had gone now, and for the moment he felt only the excitement of the adventure. Stuffing a piece of candle and a box of matches into his pocket, he crept downstairs more quietly than he had ever moved in his life before, and through the stone passage to the kitchen, for the front door, when opened, grated on the stone floor, and made a noise which could not fail to rouse the whole household. Everything, looked strange and uncanny in the dim light, but Paul was too anxious and eager to feel fear, and of ordinary pluck and spirit he had plenty; it was moral courage, which is, after all, the true courage, that he lacked. His spirit was dashed, though, when he reached the back door and saw the huge bolts by which it was secured. It was locked too, and the key taken away. "I must try a window," he thought, rallying from his disappointment. Shutters were fastened over the kitchen window, and he had had to light his candle to see anything. But the shutters were easily unfastened, and the window opened, and with very little trouble Paul clambered through and reached the ground. His stockinged feet made no sound on the paved yard, and all was easy now for him if he could but find the right bush. But when he got away from the house, and found himself, to all appearances, alone on the great empty moor with its hushed, mysterious noises, its strange shadows, its rises and dips, here and there a gleaming pool, and here and there a strangely shaped form, all looking to him odd and uncanny in the dim, weird light, a great awe fell on him. He thought of the wild animals wandering about there, the treacherous ground, the people who had been lost there, and never heard of again, and it seemed to him that a white mysterious light moved about over some of the hollows. His heart beat fast and heavily, his throat felt dry and stiff, but he did not dare hesitate. He felt only one

great longing to have his errand done, and be safely back in the house again. How snug, and safe, and comfortable his little bedroom seemed now! How he envied those who were able to lie in their beds with clean consciences, and no unconfessed sins to haunt them! How silly, and worse than silly—how bad had been the act which had brought all this trouble on him! And he felt no pride in himself now.

It seemed to him he would never reach the spot he wanted; the distance around the house to it seemed far, far greater than he had thought, and all looked so different and strange, approached from this point. He began to fear he would never find the particular bush he sought; it seemed such a hopeless task to embark on in the dark, and alone. In order to make it more easy, he made his way to the door in the wall, and tried to retrace his steps of yesterday, as nearly as possible, but even that was more difficult than he had imagined. He thought the bush was straight ahead, and not very far off, but when he acted on this idea he found himself on the edge of a pool, into which he nearly fell. He did not know that when one walks in the dark, one instinctively bears away to the left all the time, and that, consequently, he was going straight away from the poor boots.

Then a cloud came over the moon, and Paul almost despaired. He was shaking with excitement and cold, for the wind blew fresh across that spot all the year round, and Paul was very slightly dressed. At last he lit his candle, after a great deal of trouble, and holding it carefully in the hollow of his hands, managed to keep it alight; and finally, more by good luck than anything else, found himself close to the very bush he was looking for. In another moment he was on his knees, and diving his arm cautiously under it. Joy! there were his boots, his poor old boots, the source of all his trouble. He grabbed them delightedly, and rose. At the same instant his candle went out, and his heart almost stood still with terror, for, close by him he heard the sound of stealthy footsteps, and the clank of a chain.

CHAPTER IX.

THE OPEN WINDOW.

"A convict escaped!" was the thought which flashed into his brain, paralysing his limbs with fear. For the moment he was too frightened to move, and as for looking around,—he could not have made himself do it at that moment for all the wealth the world could offer. Then, fearing he knew not what, he turned with a sudden swift impulse, and rushed madly, as though the furies were after him and any moment might lay a hand on him, back to where he could just see the white road gleaming in the distance. His heart thumped so he thought it would choke him, his head swam, a numbness seemed to be gripping his limbs, blackness creeping over his sight. Before he reached the road he staggered, stumbled, fell—and for a few moments lay, a small unconscious heap, on the damp grass.

When his senses returned to him he sat up, wondering vaguely at first what had happened, and where he was. He only knew he was trembling, aching, and feeling miserably ill. Then memory returned, and a sickening fear mingled with his shame of his own terror. In his shame he made himself look all about him, he made himself stay quietly where he was and try to fathom the mystery. And as soon as his eyes grew accustomed to the strange light, he could distinguish a mysterious form moving stealthily from bush to bush.

In another second Paul was on his feet and flying as though for his life along the road towards home. His first idea and aim was to get back through the window again, and bar himself in from all danger, but the banging of his boots as he ran, reminded him that he had not yet fulfilled his object, and another terror was added to his burthen. When at last he got back out of sight of the lonely moor, and within the shelter of the farm, some of his courage returned, and greatly though he dreaded it, he made his way to the boot-house instead of scuttling into the house, and into safety at once. Strangely enough the window of the boot-house was open and he had soon dropped his boots inside, in the hope that they would appear in the morning with the others, all black, shiny, and innocent looking; and crept away back to the open window whence he had escaped. It was not as easy to get back as it had been to get out; the window was

higher from the ground on the outside, and Paul barked both his knees badly before he succeeded. Then, gently dropping to the floor, he crept softly upstairs and into his bed. The sight of the cosy room, the safety, warmth, and comfort of it all, helped him to forget all his woes, his smarting knees, the thorns in his feet, and his shivering, aching body.

"I wouldn't mind a bit," he thought, "if I'd only got something to eat; but what a tale it'll be to tell the other fellows when I get back to school." And so comforting himself he fell asleep.

When he awoke it was with a feeling that he had overslept himself, and that the morning was well advanced. This feeling grew stronger, too, when, on turning and stretching, he heard his mother's voice: "Paul, Paul, awake at last? Why, what a sleepy boy you are! Have you had a disturbed night, dear?"

He opened his eyes with a puzzled stare. "Is it late, mother? Have you had breakfast? What's the time?"

"Eleven o'clock. Yes, we had breakfast hours ago, but when we found we could not rouse you, we let you sleep on. Were you disturbed in the night, dear?"

He opened his still drowsy eyes again. "Disturbed!" he said stupidly. He really did not remember at once all that had happened. "No, I don't think so. Why?"

"We think someone broke into the house last night. At least, one of the kitchen windows and the shutter were found open, and there were footmarks on the window-sill, and about the floor. The strange thing is that nothing has been moved or taken away, but Mrs. Minards is greatly frightened, so are the maids; the foolish girls seem to have lost their heads entirely."

Long before she had finished speaking, Paul had remembered that he had left the window and the shutters open, and that he must have left footmarks where he trod. He felt thoroughly despicable as he lay there, listening to his mother's story, knowing that he could explain all, and so save every one much alarm and trouble. "I should not have told Stella and Michael," she went on, "lest they should be nervous another time, but they had heard it all from the maids before I could prevent it."

But Paul did not hear what she was saying; he had suddenly thought of his

clothes, those he wore last night, and his tell-tale stockings. If his mother noticed them now, the whole affair would be shown up. And at that moment Mrs. Anketell did catch sight of the stockings, lying inside out and rolled up anyhow, on the floor, and instinctively she picked one up and began to straighten it, while Paul watched her actions with feelings such as an animal must suffer when caught in a trap.

"Why, Paul," she exclaimed, as she thrust her hand into the foot of it, "your stockings are quite wet, and—oh, look, my dear child, what have you done to them?" She held up the foot on her hand for him to see. The bottom of it was riddled with holes!

He had never thought of their wearing out like that, and he leaned up, gazing at the stocking in sheer astonishment. His mother mistook the look on his face for another kind of surprise. "How can they have got into such a state? They were quite sound when I bandaged your ankle. Were they sound when you took them off last night?"

"They were all right when I came to bed," stammered Paul.

"But they have thorns and bits of grass stuck in them," she cried, examining them closely. "Some one must have walked about in them on grass, and wet grass too." She put down the stocking, and picked up the knickerbockers which were lying on a chair. "My dear child, these are all muddy too!" And as she held them up Paul saw on them the clear marks of his fall, and his attempts to scale the window.

"Can't you tell me anything about it, dear?" she asked, puzzled and amazed; "can't you give me any explanation?"

"No," said Paul faintly. And his mother, never for a moment suspecting that he could wilfully deceive her, or that such a thing as had really happened could be possible, began to look elsewhere for the explanation.

"Do you know if any of you walk in your sleep?" she asked, with a sudden thought.

"I never saw the others do it," said Paul quickly, delighted at the possibility of a new way out of his dilemma, "and of course I shouldn't know if I did myself, should I?"

"Perhaps not, unless something happened to wake you. But don't worry, or frighten yourself. Of course no one is to blame if it is a case of sleep-walking,—only it will be a great anxiety for the future. You had better get up now and dress. I will take these things down; they may help to explain what is such a puzzle to us all, and to relieve their minds."

As soon as his mother had gone, Paul quickly began to bestir himself; he was not particularly anxious to face people and all the questions which would probably be levelled at him, but never could he lie still and think of the deception he had practised on his mother. When he came to move, the stiffness and pain in his scraped knees almost made him cry out, and when he put his feet on the floor, he quickly sat back on the bed again, for the bottoms of his feet were full of tiny prickles, and the pain, when he pressed on them, was almost unbearable.

CHAPTER X.

RUMOUR AND APPREHENSION.

In the excitement and talk which the events of the night called forth, Paul's boots escaped notice, and Paul himself many times wished he could have done the same. But he was the most interesting person in the house just then, and was questioned, cross-questioned, pitied, talked at, until he was heartily sick of everything, and longed to run away, back to school, or anywhere, to escape it all; for he could not answer a question without involving himself in deeper deceit, and he did honestly long to be able to throw it off, and stand with a clear conscience again.

Another part of his punishment was the attention he came in for. He was cossetted for a cold they felt sure he must have caught, his knees were bandaged with ointment, his feet were prodded and poulticed to get out the prickles; and, worst of all, there was talk of putting him to sleep in his father's dressing-room, which opened out of his parents' bedroom, that he might be heard and checked if he attempted again to take any more midnight strolls. For the matter assumed a very serious aspect as the day wore on, and they began to think less lightly of Master Paul's habit of undoing bolts and windows, and leaving the house open to any one all the night through.

Farmer Minards came home to tea looking grave and troubled. "Here's a pretty business!" he exclaimed as he came in. "Two convicts got away from the prison yesterday morning early, and haven't been caught yet. One of 'em broke into Perry's farm last night, and stole a whole 'eap of Farmer Perry's clothes; 'tother one they've lost sight of altogether, but 'tis thought he made for this direction. And they say they are two of the most desperate villains they've ever had within the walls."

Paul's heart almost ceased beating with the sudden fear that filled it.

"It be'oves us to keep the place well barred up," went on the old man, "and not be leaving windows open all night," nodding knowingly at Paul. "They're not nice chaps to meet, they there convicts, and they don't stop at much when they're

trying to get off."

Every vestige of colour had left Paul's face as he realised what his danger had been the night before. That must have been the convict he had heard. He longed to tell the farmer how close the danger was, that he might take extra precautions to guard the house.

"Do they—haven't they got on handcuffs, and—and chains on their ankles?" he asked.

"Yes, but they pretty soon gets rid of they, you may be sure," answered the old man. "Why, what do you know about 'em, young sur?"

It seemed to Paul that he was looking at him almost suspiciously. "Oh, nothing—only—I've—I've been told—I know a fellow who stayed near Princetown once, and he told me a heap about them," he stammered, and Farmer Minards seemed satisfied and rose to go back to his work.

"Don't you young folk wander far for a few days," he said, turning round as he was going out at the door; "they're nasty chaps to meet on a lonely spot. There's one thing, *you* won't be able to go out and get into any mischief for a day or two, I reckon. 'Tisn't a bad thing to have 'ee tied by the leg for a bit, it'll give your mother a bit of peace of mind," he said to Paul, and he laughed in a way which made Paul flush with mortification.

But he was mistaken as to the length of time Master Paul would be tied by the leg. No schoolboy of fourteen would consent to spend a second perfect summer day in the house, for the sake of a pair of scarred knees, if he could possibly manage to use them.

Paul found it almost unbearable to be in as long as he was, and especially to be the object of as much notice as he was, so the second day he declared himself quite fit to go out and stroll around, and Mrs. Anketell was glad for him to be out in the sunshine and air again, he was so pale, and his spirits seemed so low.

On one point Mrs. Anketell had been most imperative—not a word as to the escaped convicts was to be mentioned before Stella and Michael. They had had so much to excite and alarm them lately, she was most anxious to keep this last terror from them. Mike, she knew, had a childish dread of the prison and its occupants, and Stella, who was not strong yet after her illness, had also been

nervous of being in the near neighbourhood of the prison. So the two younger ones ran out and played about with light hearts, full of pleasure that Paul was with them again, and anxious only to make him laugh and romp about, and tease them as he used to do. But Paul, though he was out in the sunshine once more, and though he had escaped the detection of his wickedness, could not laugh, or joke, or take any interest in the others' amusement, for a great weight lay on his heart and his conscience, and he wondered if he should ever be a happy, light-hearted boy again.

It was such a lovely day, that first day he was out, so warm, and bright, and perfect, that Mrs. Anketell promised them they should have all their meals in the orchard, for there she felt they would be safe from harm, and Farmer Minards sent out for one of the shepherd's dogs to be with them too. So they had their mid-day dinner under the apple-trees, and played there contentedly enough, the children unconscious of any danger, their mother feeling for the time safe, and trying to put all fear from her, Paul in constant dread of he scarcely knew what.

In the afternoon Mr. Anketell had to leave them, as a telegram had come calling him to London at once. He was very vexed about it, for he felt peculiarly loath to leave them just then, he too being filled with a foreboding of fear, for which he could not account except by telling himself that Paul's extraordinary night adventure, and the narrow escape from the morass, had upset his nerves, and made him unusually fearful. When the car came round to take him to the station, he called Paul aside, and spoke to him very gravely.

"Paul, my son," he said kindly, "I have to leave you all, though I am more than unwilling to do so, but I am going to leave your mother and the children in your charge. Keep the little ones in your sight, guard them all carefully. Cease to be a thoughtless child for the time, and try to be a man, with a man's grave sense of responsibility. Take care of them and of yourself, and remember a great trust rests on you."

"I will, father," said Paul earnestly, and his lips quivered as his father leaned affectionately on his shoulder. Confession trembled on his lips, but there was no time for it, though he felt that here was a chance to expiate his wickedness and deceit of the past. But if he could not confess, he could at any rate live down that past and wipe it out by his future conduct, and he would, he vowed he would. "I will take care of them, father, I promise you," he repeated earnestly.

The spirits of all flagged a good deal after Mr. Anketell's departure, and it was quite a sober little party that gathered round the tea-table in the orchard, and after tea they were quite content to sit and read instead of indulging in their old lively games.

At seven o'clock Mrs. Anketell rose and went in with Mike to give him his glass of milk before putting him to bed. "I think you had all better come in now," she said. "Can you bring in the rugs and things between you?"

The elder ones followed her in a few moments with their first load, and laid the things down in the passage. Mrs. Anketell was outside calling to the maids, "I can't think where they are," she said anxiously, as the children passed her on their way out. "Mrs. Minards, I know, has gone out in the car which took father; she had some shopping to do, but she left Laura and Ann in charge. It is very wrong of them to leave the house like this."

Paul went outside and shouted the girls' names at the top of his voice, but he and Stella were bringing their last load before he saw them coming in at the yard gate. They had been down to the hind's cottage, gossiping with his wife.

About nine o'clock Mrs. Minards came back in the car, driven by her husband, and soon after all the household retired to bed.

CHAPTER XI.

A TEST OF BRAVERY.

It must have been three or four hours later that Paul heard what he thought were mysterious noises and stealthy footsteps downstairs. He had been lying restless and wakeful, haunted by a dread of he knew not what, his mind continually dwelling on the runaway convicts out on the moor, the clank of the iron as he had heard it that night sounding plainly in his ears. He remembered, too, how deserted the house had been when his mother and Mike had come into it, and how easily any one could have walked in, had he or she been so inclined.

Then in on his thoughts broke those sounds. A dreadful certainty of harm to come came to him, but he had plenty of pluck, and the memory of his promise to his father was strong in his mind. He got out of bed softly and opened his door; then he crept to his mother's door and listened; no sound came from there, and he hoped she was fast asleep, and Michael, too, whose cot had been moved in there for the time. Paul felt sincerely thankful. But though it was plain that the sounds had not come from there, he was certain they came from somewhere within the house. He crept softly along the passage and stood at the head of the stairs listening. At first all was quiet, but just as he was thinking of creeping back to his bed again, telling himself he had made a mistake, there came from below a faint sound of scraping, and of stealthy movements. At the sounds, so unmistakably those of a person bent on concealment, his heart thumped madly, a cold sweat broke out on his brow; his heart indeed thumped so loudly he was afraid it would be heard by the person below, but he went bravely down a few steps further and listened again. Yes, there was no doubt there was someone down there.

What could he, a small boy, do against a desperate man? Farmer Minards slept on the other side of the house, and his room could only be reached by a flight of stairs running up from the kitchen. To get at him Paul must go right down, and through the house, close to, if not actually passing by the burglar, or whoever it might be who was acting so stealthily. But Farmer Minards must be roused somehow. This was the one thing Paul was certain of. Without making a sound he crept down another stair or two. Whoever it was down below, he had a

light, for Paul could see a faint glimmer, and it came, he imagined, from the little room the farmer called his 'office.'

Scarcely knowing to what his thoughts led, Paul thought he might possibly creep down and pass the office unnoticed, then fly softly through the kitchen and up to the farmer's room. All chance of success would depend, though, on the man not being near the office door, or facing that way. But before his thoughts were really formed Paul had put them into action. He was too much alarmed and too full of the responsibility of his position to dawdle. Suppose any harm should come to his mother or the children! He grew sick with terror at the thought, and flew on faster.

There was only a faint swish in the air to indicate that anyone had moved, a sound so faint that the thief in the office did not hear it. He was busily engaged on the lock of the farmer's safe.

The kitchen reached, Paul flew up the back stairs, and burst like a hurricane into the first room he came to. Luckily it was the right one. It took him some time to rouse the old farmer and to make him understand what was happening, and when that was accomplished nothing would satisfy him but that he must dress as fully as on every other morning, and then rouse the household in that part of the house.

Paul quivered with impatience. "Quick! quick!" he groaned. "He may go up and murder mother or Stella while we are here." But the farmer had never been quick in his life, and did not know the meaning of the word.

"Plenty of time," he said, and Paul groaned with anguish. "Plenty of time, sir. That there lock'll keep un quiet for a brave bit, and I ain't going to trust myself in that place without plenty to back me up."

"I must go back alone, then," said Paul at last, in an agony of impatience; "I promised father I'd take care of them." And he began to descend the stairs, hoping by his departure to accelerate the movements of the others. But his hope was a forlorn one, and he went back by himself, in spite of the farmer's repeated injunctions to "wait a bit."

He hoped by being equally swift and silent to escape the notice of the thief again, but the man was no longer in the office. Whether he had succeeded in robbing the safe or not Paul did not know, but he soon gathered that he had gone

upstairs; in fact, as Paul himself reached the landing, he heard him raise the latch of Stella's door and creep into the room.

"Who are you—what do you want?" gasped Paul. He was rendered well-nigh speechless at coming suddenly face to face with the burglar.

The man turned on him like a hunted animal at bay. "If you make a sound I'll shoot you!" he snarled, and with the same he whipped a revolver from his pocket. "If you'll hold your tongue and say nothing no harm'll come to anybody, but if you give the alarm I'll—"

But he did not complete his sentence, for their voices had wakened Stella, and at the sight of the stranger she started up in bed with a scream.

Frantic and desperate, the man turned from Paul to her. "Stop that noise, will you?" he hissed, "or I'll—" But at that moment Paul rushed past him, sprang on the bed, and placed his own body in front of his sister's. "No, you don't," he half sobbed, half screamed, "you—you coward, you'll hit me first!"

It is doubtful if the man would have fired at little Stella; probably he meant only to frighten the children, but at that instant he heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs, and with a frenzied look around him for a means of escape, he saw the doorway filled by the burly form of Farmer Minards.

Now Farmer Minards was not accustomed to the capturing of desperate men. A better man with a kicking horse, or a savage bull, could not perhaps, be found on Dartmoor, and if the convict had stood and allowed himself to be pinioned with only a moderate amount of struggling and kicking, the farmer's presence of mind would have been sufficient, but, as it was, when the man made one bold rush, with pistol cocked, for the very spot where he stood, he gave way before the rush; but for an instant there was a struggle and a fight, for Muggridge and the man who slept at the farm were close behind the farmer, little expecting their master to give way so soon, and leave them to grapple with their visitor, and it may have been that he intended to shoot down one of them, or that in the struggle the pistol accidentally went off, but in another second a bullet whistled through the air, and, passing clean through the fleshy part of Paul's arm, became embedded in the wall behind.

Certain it is that if Paul had not dragged his sister flat down behind him on the bed poor Stella's life would have been ended then and there. But Paul had

expiated his sin nobly, and he had nearly laid down his life for hers. Stella really thought he had laid it down in very truth when he fell forward on his face with blood pouring from him, and, overcome with grief and horror, she fainted dead away beside him.

Farmer Minards saw the children fall, and he, too, thought Paul was killed. In fact, for the moment he thought they both were, and with the horror of it, forgetting the convict and everything else, he rushed to the bedside, leaving Muggridge and Davey to manage as best they could. But the convict had the best of it, and the two had never a chance to close with him. By the force and unexpectedness with which he came he burst through them, and dealing Davey a blow on the head with his pistol, and Muggridge one in the face with his fist, which left them both stunned and bleeding, he flew down the stairs and out of the house by the very window through which he had entered.

When Stella and Paul at last awoke again to life, and to a recollection of what had taken place, it seemed to be everybody's aim to banish from their minds the painful past, and the memory of that terrible night, and to fill their lives with everything that could brighten and cheer them and help them to forget. Paul was quite a hero in all their eyes; to Stella he seemed the very ideal of all that was splendid and brave, and to Paul's credit it must be said that the opinion he had of himself was far lower and more contemptuous than he deserved, and he would not listen to one word of praise.

CHAPTER XII.

STELLA'S ADVENTURE.

Naturally, one of the first inquiries of the children on recovering was as to whether their assailant had been captured, and Mrs. Anketell was greatly troubled, fearing it would make them nervous of the place if they knew he was still at large, and she longed to be able to assure them that the man was safely under lock and key again. Another thing she feared was that the children would be too terrified to stay in the neighbourhood, and would wish to be taken home. But when by-and-by an immediate return home was suggested to them they pleaded so hard—to her great relief—to be allowed to stay, that she gladly fell in with their wishes, being anxious to leave with a happier impression of the place than that given by the fright, almost tragedy, they had just sustained.

So they stayed on. Stella soon grew bright and rosy again when she saw that Paul was not dangerously hurt, and with the happy knack which healthy, plucky children, have, she soon threw off any dread she might have of going out and about, and with 'Watch' (the dog Farmer Minards gave the children to be their own special protector) at their heels, she and Michael wandered about, within reach of home, as happily as if no such person as a convict existed.

Paul, of course, did not recover so quickly; he had to be quiet until his wound had healed, and Stella and Michael missed him very much in all their games and walks, so much so indeed that Mr. Anketell, who had been sent for at once, took to planning little excursions to various picturesque spots in the neighbourhood, where they would have tea in a cottage, or in a cottage garden, and drive home in the cool of the evening.

One day, soon after the accident, while Paul was still too weak to get about, Mr. Anketell suggested that they should drive that afternoon to a village called Windycross, walk on a mile to the little town which was their nearest shopping-place, and come back to Windycross to tea. Stella was delighted. For days she had been longing to buy a little present for Paul, but did not know how to manage it; here was her opportunity, and with her purse in her pocket, and heart full of delightful importance, she clambered up into the carriage and drove off.

It was a lovely day, and the children were in the highest spirits, only saddened every now and again by the sight of the searchers still scouring the country for the escaped man, and the fear that the poor fellow might at any moment be caught, for, strange though it may seem, all the children's sympathies were with him, and they longed to hear that the search had been abandoned.

The drive to Windycross was a long one, but they reached there in good time, and Michael and Stella stood looking about them full of interest at the funny little low white cottages, while their father went into one and ordered tea. Then they strolled slowly on to the town, and Stella laid out two of the five shillings she possessed on a book she knew Paul was longing to possess. Her pleasure and excitement over her purchase were immense; she could not allow anyone else to carry it, and every now and again she was filled with a longing to untie the string and look at her treasure, to turn over the crisp new leaves, and glance at the pictures. At last, when they reached the village, she could restrain herself no longer. They had got back earlier than they thought they would, and the tea was not ready, so Mr. Anketell, who wanted to call on a friend near by, thought he would go and do that while they were waiting, and take the children with him.

But Stella wanted so much to undo her precious parcel and look at her book that she pleaded to be left behind, and Mr. Anketell and Michael left her at the cottage. But she soon found that that did not suit her; there were too many people about, and she was shy under the glances of so many eyes; so she strolled into the garden, but that was close to the village street, and a girl who was working there dropped her work to stare at the stranger.

Stella began to feel quite cross, and she looked around to see if there was no secluded spot in all that place. Then her eye fell on the little church hidden away amongst trees at the bottom of the village, and her heart leaped. She turned to the girl who was picking fruit and watching her at the same time. "I am going down to the churchyard to sit in the shade," she said. "I will be back again by the time tea is ready," and before the girl could reply she had hurried away.

The top of the village seemed to be the favourite spot at Windycross for the villagers to congregate; most of the houses were up there, too, while the lower end where the church stood was as deserted as the other end was sought after; to Stella's great joy she did not see a single person, and as she clambered over the stone stile which led into it, and wandered along the overgrown paths, she felt as though she was as safe from intrusion as though she had been in the middle of

the moor. The fact was, the yard had long ceased to be used as a burying-ground, and the church itself was as nearly deserted by the present generation of villagers, for a clergyman came only once a month to hold service there, and while the old building gradually became a ruin, a flourishing chapel sprang up to satisfy the needs of the neglected people.

But Stella knew and thought nothing of this; she was only bent on finding a comfortable, secluded seat, where she sat and unwrapped her parcel. She thought of Paul's surprise, and how pleased he would be, she dipped into the pages here and there and read a few lines, admired the covers, and enjoyed the delightful smell new books so often have, and at last, half reluctantly, she wrapped her treasure up in its paper again, trying to make it look as neat as when the shopman had handed it to her. That done she got up to explore further. It was a weird, neglected spot she had got into. Numbers of tombstones lay about as they had fallen, others were leaning over looking as though another gale would lay them flat too. The shrubs which had been planted on the graves had grown to be great, unkempt bushes, spreading over many other graves than the one they had been planted on; tiny saplings had become big trees, forcing out tombstones and curbs, and everywhere the rank grass grew high up into the bushes. But greatest of all dilapidations was that of the church itself; many of the windows had been broken, and were left unrepaired; here and there a great piece of stonework had fallen away; the outer gates of the porch hung loose on one hinge. Stella entered the porch and sat for a moment on one of the stone benches.

Then, scarcely knowing why she did it, she raised the latch of the church door. To her great surprise the door opened, and without a thought she entered. She had never been in so tumbledown and neglected a place in her life; the pew-doors were either hanging or gone altogether, some of the pews were too rotten to use, the plaster and paint hung off in scales, and a large hole in the roof showed that the risk of attending service there was no slight one.

But Stella did not heed the danger; she was too much charmed to find herself alone and exploring. A sense of importance filled her, and a good deal of curiosity. She looked at the names in some of the mouldy hymn books lying in the pews, and mounted the pulpit to see how the church looked from there. Then she went into the vestry, and coming out of it she found herself at the entrance to a low dark place which she thought must be a family vault. It was so low and dark she could at first see nothing within, and instinctively she drew herself up sharply on the threshold, doubtful, but of what she did not know. But, somehow,

she did not like to enter, a sudden nervousness came over her, a desire to get away from the place and be out in the open again.

And then, with a terrified scream, she saw close to her, gleaming out of the darkness, a wild looking, savage face; two eyes full of desperation, and hunger, and despair, were fixed on hers; and in another moment she recognised the hiding convict. The fear in his face lightened when he found that the footsteps he had listened to for what seemed so long were only those of a little girl.

"Are you alone?" he asked, in a low, gruff voice.

With the shock, and the fright, and her fear of the man, a sudden panic seized Stella; she could not answer, and with another terrified cry she turned and ran. But she did not know her way, and in her hurry she tripped over a step, and before she could recover herself the man was at her side. But instead of killing her, as she really thought he would, he lifted her up, not roughly, and put her on her feet, then picked up her parcel and after carefully feeling it, handed it to her, though he kept a tight grip of her hand.

"Missy," he said in a low voice, so hoarse she could hardly make out what he said—"Missy, I ain't goin' to hurt you. I give 'ee my word I won't harm you if you'll only promise not to breathe a word about my being here."

A sound outside, probably only a bird fluttering in the ivy, made him start nervously, and Stella saw that he shook, and that the perspiration stood out on his face. He drew her quickly back to the entrance to the vault. "Swear you won't ever breathe a word to anybody that you have seen me. Swear it! Do you hear?"

He looked so ferocious, that Stella began to cry. "I won't tell, of course not," she said, earnestly. "I am not a sneak, and we wanted you to escape; we all hoped you were far away by this time. Paul and I thought you must be."

He gave a sort of snarl. "There's no getting away from this place, unless anybody's got friends outside to help 'em. They are too sharp, and there are too many of 'em. But I've gone free longer than any before me, and that's something. Who is Paul?" he asked suddenly. "And where do you live?"

"We live at Moor Farm. Paul is my brother, the one you shot."

The man looked at her sharply, "Did I—did I hurt him much?"

"The bullet went through his arm. He didn't die."

"I'm glad of that," said the man, and he spoke as though he really meant it. "I'm starving," he said a second later. "I haven't had a mouthful since the day before yesterday, and I can't hold out much longer. Have you got any food about you?"

Stella shook her head. "No, I haven't. I am so sorry," she said wistfully, and the man's hard face grew soft as her blue eyes looked pityingly up at him. "I *wish* I could help you," she said earnestly; then with sudden recollection, "I have three shillings, if that would be of any use to you."

"Thank you, Missy, it might be," he said gratefully; "but I wish you'd got a bit of bread."

She took out her little purse, and counted out the money into his rough hand. "Thank you, Missy," he said again. "I shall never forget you, if I gets away, or if I'm took I shall always be humbly grateful to you, and think of you as one of the pluckiest little ladies that ever lived."

"Thank you," she said politely, "but I think I must be going now, or someone may come to look for me."

The man's face again was filled with a desperate fear, and he shrank back further into the gloom of the vault, "Before you go you must swear you won't give me away. Swear!—do you hear, on your solemn oath!"

"I don't know how to swear," said Stella simply, "but I promise solemnly not to tell anyone who would do you any harm."

"That won't do. You must not tell anyone at all, unless you hear I'm— took— or killed," with a bitter laugh.

"Very well," said Stella. "I don't like keeping it from mother, but I *will* keep the secret, for your sake. I hope you will soon get some food. Good-bye," and she held out her hand to shake hands with him.

The man took it, but did not speak, and Stella, drawing her hand away, ran down the aisle and through the church as fast as she could. Not until she was outside did she realise how her limbs were trembling, and she wondered how she

should ever get back to the cottage and escape notice and questioning. But in her great desire to shield the man she made such efforts to laugh and talk and be like her usual self, and Michael had so much to say too, that nothing unusual was observed in her look or manner. And if, during the next few days, any of them thought her unusually quiet and thoughtful, it was all put down to the shock the burglar had given her that night, no one dreaming that she had had a long and solitary interview with that same desperate creature, and had come out of it unhurt.

But only for a week did her silence last, for at the end of that time the poor, wretched convict was captured, miles from Windycross, just as he was making his way to a train which would have borne him, probably, to safety. As usual, all sympathy was with the captured man, but to Stella his arrest was a real and lasting grief, and when amidst many bitter tears she told the story of her adventure at Windycross, her one hope was that he did not think she was in any way concerned in his capture.

CHAPTER XIII.

PAUL CONFESSES.

But though Stella recovered so well, and so much more quickly than they had dared to hope, from the shock she had received that night, Paul remained ill and low in spirits and in strength. Of course at first he was very weak from loss of blood and shock, and no one wondered; but, as time went on, and in spite of all that was done for him, he did not pick up health as they expected him to. They fed him, and physicked him, and tried to cheer him, but nothing seemed to do him any good, until at last the doctor, the same who had pulled him out of the morass, and carried Stella home, began to be puzzled about him. "Has he anything on his mind that can be troubling him?" he asked Mr. Anketell, one day. "Something is keeping him back; he is spiritless and depressed. It must be his mind; his body is sound enough, and the wound is healing nicely. I wonder if he has been up to any other escapade, and is uneasy about it? It is probably quite a trifling thing, but I feel sure something is preying on the boy's mind."

After the doctor had gone, Mr. Anketell wandered about the moor, thinking deeply. The doctor's words had impressed him very much, and even while he had been speaking the memory of the sleep-walking night, and Paul's odd behaviour of the day previous to that, came back to him. Could Paul have deceived them all as to the events of that night? Had something happened then which he had not liked to confess?

He went slowly back to the farm, his heart heavy, his face stern. But before he sought his son, he went to his own room, and prayed to God to help him in his guidance of this boy of his.

Paul was alone, lying on a couch in his own room, to which he had been carried after he had been shot. The sun had set, and a soft twilight was filling the room, but the light which still came in at the window fell full on Paul. Mr. Anketell, entering softly, saw the expression on the boy's face, the look in his eyes, and his heart ached, and all his sternness vanished. "My boy," he said, oh, so tenderly, "tell me what it is that is troubling you; tell me all about it, I know there is something. Can't you bring yourself to trust me not to be hard on you?"

No one knew what transpired at that meeting. No one but Mrs. Anketell in fact ever knew it had taken place. It was to remain for ever a confidence between them, and it was a confidence which bound father and son more closely together all their lives after. They had a long, long talk; much was confessed, much help given, much strength and courage. Paul never forgot that evening and that talk in the twilight, or his first realisation of the greatness of his father's love for him. No shyness, no self-consciousness was left, no fear of meeting his father's eyes, no more secrets lay between them. To Paul, though he but dimly realised it then, and could not have explained it, that hour was a turning-point in his life, and in all his after-life he thanked God for that one evening's talk. But after the confession and the forgiveness was over, and all had been told, they sat so long talking that presently the supper-bell rang, and then came a light, slow step upon the stair. It was Stella's, they knew. "Will you tell her?" whispered Paul, and though his heart was sore with shame he did not falter.

"No," whispered back his father. "I shall tell no one. I want the children to feel nothing but affection and respect for you, to look up to you. Nothing must smirch Stella's beautiful love for you, Paul. It is something you cannot prize too highly, and will some day know the true value of."

"I will try not to let anything," said Paul gravely, and there came a tap at the door. "Is daddy here?" asked Stella's voice, and then, opening the door, "Oh, you are in the dark. Poor Paul, weren't you frightened?"

"Oh, no," said Paul simply, "father is here."

And then a happy little procession went down the stairs to supper—Paul in his father's arms, Stella running in front to open doors. Exclamations of joy greeted them as they appeared, for this was Paul's first appearance below stairs. And his mother, who at the first glance saw that it was her old, happy Paul who had come back to them, and that all the shadow which had come between them had been cleared away, felt happier than she had for many a long day. For one wilful mischievous boy can not only make himself thoroughly unhappy, but everyone about him becomes unhappy too.

A week or two later they left Moor Farm for home, their holiday ended.

"Well," said Mr. Anketell, drawing a deep breath as he took his seat beside them in the train, "it seems to me we lost nothing in the way of excitement by

not going to Norway. Dartmoor was able to give us as much as we could manage with."

"I have never regretted the change," said Mrs. Anketell heartily, "have you children?"

"Oh, no," cried Michael, excitedly. "We had adventures all the time, and shooting, and everything."

"Yes," said Paul, laughing ruefully, "and I provided most of them."

***END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK PAUL THE
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