CHAPTER VI

A NARROW ESCAPE

To Hetty Hazlet the new life at Broomfields was a busy one, and brought with it the happiness that accompanies useful activity. Now and again Eva would startle her teacher by questions as to the action of the moon on the tides, the people who live in the planet Jupiter, the kind of breath the flowers breathe, and other matters suggestive of Miss Vanderbilt; but Hetty discouraged all irrelevant discourse by telling her that, interesting as these subjects might be to the elder girls for whom her early teacher intended them, she could only reach and know them by diligently following the course of instruction now prescribed for her. The thirst for higher knowledge was thus made an incentive to overcome the rudimentary difficulties that formed her every-day task.

Hetty's influence, exerted primarily in the school and play-room, soon radiated and filled a wider circle. Mistress Izet had so long been without a rival in the house, that naturally the presence of the governess was at first a trifle disturbing, probably from her fear of divided authority. But when she realized that this authority applied only to the child, and saved her the ordeal of answering embarrassing questions, she breathed more freely. Before the advent of the governess Mrs. Izet complacently thought she could give a good reason for her own simple faith, but the child's eager and puzzling inquiries when the housekeeper came to close quarters with herself stimulated humility. Hetty knew her place, and kept it with prudence. Her comings and goings were cheerily sympathetic. Association with refinement had been no part of the elder woman's experience, and Hetty's courteous, practical manners soon won her confidence. Trust once established makes the reception of new ideas easy: Mrs. Izet learned many things from the governess without awaking the consciousness of being taught, so it happened in time that the younger

woman, not by assumption, but by the inevitable influence of the superior over the inferior mind, became practically the controlling spirit of the house. Isaac Kilgour, on the other hand, stood apart in his superior masculinity. He regarded the new-comer as probably a suitable mentor and companion for his master's child, but he had not an exalted opinion of her sex generally. He was not unconscious that they became wonderful creatures sometimes in books, but he felt that that was largely the outcome of imaginative minds. For his own part he had never yet met the woman he could canonize. That they were useful, almost essential to man's well-being in the minor details of life, he was willing to concede, but that they were also at the root of most of his moral ills and perplexities was borne in upon him by his own observation. Isaac lived in a single apartment above the coach-house. His sole companion was a parrot. It had capacity for speech, but all it could say when it came to Broomfields was — "Irr ye there?" He got it from a Paisley man, who plumed himself on the purity of his accent. The bird

was no favourite with the housekeeper, but she, in her comings and goings, was unconsciously responsible for most of the words it knew. Isaac reasoned that this accounted for "the bruit's ill-tongue."

The gardener was a hale man all week round, but had rheumatics on Sundays. The main cause of this ailment was his distrust of the minister. It was then the bird and he had their sweetest communion.

"It's no muckle to look at," Mrs. Izet was saying to the governess as she took her and Eva up to Isaac's quarters one day in his absence, "but it has an oncommon tongue." The parrot was a small ash-grey bird about the size of a pigeon, with a broad crimson tail. The housekeeper's voice startled the creature into activity. It made a sudden circuit on the upright wires of the cage, threw a somersault, and alighted again on its ring with an interrogation in its eye. To the housekeeper its supreme impudence seemed to say, as its master might have done, "Can ye touch at that, Janet?"

"Pretty Poll," said Hetty, looking with kindly eyes through the bars. The bird jerked its

head on one side to think of this fresh voice. The words were unfamiliar — it was not accustomed to flattery.

"Pretty Polly, you might speak," Eva added coaxingly. The parrot tossed its head and turned up a meditative black eye, as if committing another tit-bit of musical articulation to memory.

"Fule craitur," Janet remarked tartly. "What ails ye, glowerin' that gate, without a word? Ye can chatter enoch whiles when it's no wanted."

"Isaac —" cried the bird, blinking hard — "Isaac — irr ye there? — Here's Janet — nesty cuttie." Eva screamed with delight.

"I declare ye wud think the beast was human — I never hear its voice but it puts me in mind o' a wumman in Houston parish — she had an awesome gift ——"

"O' bad language," interrupted Isaac, who had come quietly on the scene, and completed the remark after his laconic fashion.

The vulnerable spot in the gardener's armour of indifference was the parrot. They once had a parrot at the manse, Hetty told them, and she

narrated amusing stories of its antics. Her uncle in Glasgow had a starling that had an extraordinary gift of speech, and could sing "Up in the morning's no for me — up in the morning ear — ley." Hetty imitated the bird's tone and manner to Isaac's delight. She also informed him that West African parrots had been known to live for a hundred years.

"D'ye hear that, mistress?" Isaac eyed the housekeeper gleefully.

"Oh, that'll please ye fine," she replied with a laugh; "but, my surce, he'll leeve a heap less than a hunner years gin he be na taught to keep a ceeviller tongue in his haed."

Isaac's regard for the governess, stirred at first by her interest in talking birds, ripened by fuller intercourse. Her knowledge of botany and flower culture was a source of wonder to him. He would stand by silent while she discoursed to her pupil on the nature, habits, and structure of flowers. He believed she could name them all in Latin as well as English. It may be supposed that the gardener had got pretty well beyond himself, and was on the way to a higher estimate of woman-kind when he

confided to the housekeeper that that Miss Hetty "was a by ordn'ar lass: no content wi' birds and garden-flowers, she had e'en set to in his hearing and made a grand thing oot o' a sheuch o' weeds."

Hetty's scheme of education for the child embraced nature as one of its class books. This wholesome branch of study was taken every day when the weather was propitious, but Saturdays were their gala days. Isaac gradually became interested in these excursions. He himself suggested a visit to Crosby Glen, and on a bright Saturday morning personally escorted them thither. "Ise warrant ye'll have plenty to talk about till denner-time," he said, as he left them at Park-yett gate. A small brown road, veined and knotted with roots, led them into the bosky depths of this umbrageous place. It was a scene in which nature ran riot in the exuberance of her occult forces. In mossy hollows, at the roots of spruce and larch, lingering primroses peeped from their encircling leaves like eggs in their soft green nests, startled rabbits darted hither and thither, and lo, as if to illustrate the lessons of the week, a large brown squirrel paused in its ascent of a syca-

more to scan the intruders, and give them leisure to admire its grace and beauty. The eye and ear of the child found grateful surprise at every turn. The flutings of birds; the soft tenor of the bee; the velvety yellow-green of the moss; lichened boulders, half buried in the lush undergrowth of bracken and grass. Sharp lines of sunshine sliced the sylvan gloom, gilding root and bole. An ancient trunk, with snake-like roots turned skyward, bore a slender aspen whose leaves twittered joyously above the ruin on which it flourished. In the hollow the stream gurgled dolefully out of sight. Eva was fascinated by the vast, dome-like magnificence as well as by the minute beauty of the objects around her. Inquiring enthusiasm gave little pause to the teacher. This infinite wealth of greenery through which they waded, how marvellously fashioned in detail? The hemlock with its pinkish-white coronet of flower; the graceful corrugated leaves of the despised dock; bending spindles of grass swaying under a weight of tasselated silver-grey flowers; the wild hyacinth, now entirely denuded of leaves, bearing its shiny globes of seed above the encroaching grass.

To the imaginative Eva this was a memorable afternoon, but the recollection of it was grimly impressed on the minds of both by the almost tragic occurrence that brought it to a close. Returning home through the Crosby meadows, they were alarmed by the angry bellowing of a young bull at a barred space in an adjoining field. Hetty seized her pupil's hand, and had barely run a dozen steps when they heard the barrier giving way. The governess directed their flight to the nearest refuge — a dry-stone dyke, lifted the child in her arms, and dropped her safely on the other side. She had not time, however, to save herself, for the infuriated animal was at her heels, and ere she knew tossed her out of further harm's way over the wall. Fortunately McLennan the carrier was on the brow of the hill road returning to Kilspindie, and saw the race as well as the subsequent disaster. In a few minutes he was on the spot, for he stopped Brownie and ran. Hetty was stunned, but soon regained consciousness. Her foot was sprained by the fall, and as she was unable to walk, McLennan took her up in his strong kindly arms, carried her to the cart, and

conveyed her and her charge safely home. In addition to the sprain she was slightly gored in the arm, but made light of the injury, and begged that it might not be spoken of lest an exaggerated account of the incident should reach and alarm her parents. This injunction of silence was too much for the honest carrier. The air in these slumberous by-ways did not often vibrate with real adventures. Yet here was an adventure in which he himself had borne a chivalrous part. It was not every unmarried man who could boast truthfully of carrying a full-grown young woman in his arms over two and a half acres of ground without resistance. The thought fired his imagination, and made him think of the days of knight-errantry. He longed to tell it to Alec Brodie, who would probably make a "po'm" about it. In fancy he had already crowned his heroine with the nimbus of a heroic deed.

"No tell!" he said to his sister; "gey like! It was her modesty. But what I'll tell will be to nobody's disadvantage. If Robin Barbour sen's owre for that bag o' tenpenny nails ye'll fin' me at the candle-maker's workshop."