

CHAPTER VII.

I LEAVE THE BIRD'S NEST AND MAKE A GREAT DISCOVERY.

LIFE is remembered rather by epochs than by continuous details. I spent five years at The Bird's Nest, visiting home twice every year, and becoming more and more accustomed to the thought that I had practically ceased to be a member of my own family. My home and all my belongings were at the Mansion; and although I kept a deep, warm spot in my heart for my father, which never grew cold, there seemed to be a difference in kind and quality between me and my brothers and sisters which forbade the old intimacy. The life at home had grown more generous with my father's advancing prosperity, and my sisters, catching the spirit of the prosperous community around them, had done much to beautify and elevate its appointments.

The natural tendency of the treatment I received, both at my father's house and at The Mansion, was for a long time to concentrate my thoughts upon myself, so that when, on my fifteenth birthday, I entered my father's door, and felt peculiarly charmed by my welcome and glad in the happiness which my presence gave, I made a discovery. I found my sister Claire a remarkably pretty young woman. She was two years my senior, and had been so long my profoundest worshipper that I had never dreamed what she might become. She was the sweetest of blondes, with that unerring instinct of dress which enabled her to choose always the right color, and so to drape her slender and graceful figure as to be always attractive. My own advance toward manhood helped me, I suppose, to appreciate her as I had not hitherto done; and before I parted with her, to return to the closing term of Mr. Bird's tuition, I

had become proud of her, and ambitious for her future. I found, too, that she had more than kept pace with me in study. It was a great surprise. By what ingenuities she had managed to win her accomplishments, and become the educated lady that she was, I knew not. It was the way of New England girls then as it is now. I had long talks and walks with her, and quite excited the jealousy of Mrs. Sanderson by the amount of time I devoted to her.

In these years Mrs. Sanderson herself had hardly grown appreciably older. Her hair had become a little whiter, but she retained, apparently, all her old vigor, and was the same strong-willed, precise, prompt, opinionated woman she was when I first knew her. Jenks and I had many sals upon the atlas succeeding that which I have described, but something had always interfered to prevent him from taking the final step which would sever his connection with the service of his old mistress forever.

Every time during these five years that I went home to spend my vacation, I invited Henry to accompany me, but his mother invariably refused to permit him to do so. Mrs. Sanderson, in her disappointment, offered to defray all the expenses of the journey, which, in the mean time, had ceased to be made with the old horse and chaise; but there came always from his mother the same refusal. The old lady was piqued at last, and became soured toward him. Indeed, if she could have found a valid excuse for the step, she would have broken off our intimacy. She had intended an honor to an unknown lad in humble circumstances; and to have that honor persistently spurned, without apparent reason, exasperated her. "The lad is a churl, depend upon it, when you get at the bottom of him," was the stereotyped reply to all my attempts to palliate his offence, and vindicate the lovableness of his character.

These years of study and development had wrought great changes in me. Though thoroughly healthy—thanks to the considerate management of my teacher—I grew up tall and slender, and promised to reach the reputed altitude of the old

Bonnicastles. I was a man in stature by the side of my sister Claire, and assumed the dress and carriage of a man. Though Henry was two years older than I, we studied together in everything, and were to leave school together. Our companionship had been fruitful of good to both of us. I stirred him and he steadied me.

There was one aim which we held in common—the aim at personal integrity and thorough soundness of character. This aim had been planted in us both by Christian parents, and it was fostered in every practicable way by Mr. and Mrs. Bird. There was one habit, learned at home, which we never omitted for a night while we were at school—the habit of kneeling at our bedside before retiring to slumber, and offering silently a prayer. Dear Mrs. Bird—that sweet angel of all the little boys—was always with us in our first nights together, when we engaged in our devotions, and sealed our young lips for sleep with a kiss. Bidding us to pray for what we wanted, and to thank our Father for all that we received, with the simple and hearty language we would use if we were addressing our own parents, and adjuring us never, under any circumstances, to omit our offering, she left us at last to ourselves. “Remember,” she used to say, “remember that no one can do this for you. The boy who confesses his sins every night has always the fewest sins to confess. The habit of daily confession and prayer is the surest corrective of all that is wrong in your motives and conduct.”

In looking back upon this aspect of our life together, I am compelled to believe that both Henry and myself were in the line of Christian experience. Those prayers and those daily efforts at good, conscientious living, were the solid beginnings of a Christian character. I do not permit myself to question that had I gone on in that simple way I should have grown into a Christian man. The germination and development of the seed planted far back in childhood would, I am sure, have been crowned with a divine fruitage. Both of us had been taught that we belonged to the Master—that we had been given to

Him in baptism. Neither of us had been devoted to Him by parents who, having placed His seal upon our foreheads, thenceforth strove to convince us that we were the children of the devil. Expecting to be Christians, trying to live according to the Christian rule of life, never doubting that in good time we should be numbered among Christian disciples, we were already Christian disciples. Why should it be necessary that the aggregate sorrow and remorse for years of selfishness and transgression be crowded into a few hours or days? Why should it be necessary to be lifted out of a great horror of blackness and darkness and tempest, into a supernal light by one grand sweep of passion? Are safe foundations laid in storms and upheavals? Are conviction and character nourished by violent access and reaction of feeling? We give harsh remedies for desperate diseases, and there are such things as desperate diseases. I am sure that Henry and I were not desperately diseased. The whole drift of our aims was toward the realization of a Christian life. The grand influences shaping us from childhood were Christian. Every struggle with that which was base and unworthy within us was inspired by Christian motives. Imperfect in knowledge, infirm in will, volatile in purpose as boys always are and always will be, still we were Christian boys, who had only to grow in order to rise into the purer light and better life of the Christian estate.

I am thus particular in speaking of this, for I was destined to pass through an experience which endangered all that I had won. I shall write of this experience with great care, but with a firm conviction that my unvarnished story has a useful lesson in it, and an earnest wish that it may advance the cause which holds within itself the secret of a world's redemption. I am sure that our religious teachers do not competently estimate the power of religious education on a great multitude of minds, or adequately measure the almost infinite mischief that may be inflicted upon sensitive natures by methods of address and influence only adapted to those who are sluggish in temperament or besotted by vice.

My long stay at The Bird's Nest was a period of uninterrupted growth of mind as well as of body. Mr. Bird was a man who recognized the fact that time is one of the elements that enter into a healthy development of the mind—that mental digestion and assimilation are quite as essential to true growth as the reception of abundant food. Hence his aim was never to crowd a pupil beyond his powers of easy digestion, and never to press to engorgement the receptive faculties. To give the mind ideas to live upon while it acquired the discipline for work, was his steady practice and policy. All the current social and political questions were made as familiar to the boys under his charge as they were to the reading world outside. The issues involved in every political contest were explained to us, and I think we learned more that was of practical use to us in after-life from his tongue than from the text-books which we studied.

Some of the peculiarities of Mr. Bird's administration I have already endeavored to represent, and one of these I must recall at the risk of repetition and tediousness. In the five years which I spent under his roof and care, I do not think one lad left the school with the feeling that he had been unjustly treated in any instance. No bitter revenges were cherished in any heart. If, in his haste or perplexity, the master ever did a boy a wrong, he made instant and abundant reparation, in an acknowledgment to the whole school. He was as tender of the humblest boy's reputation as he was of any man's, or even of his own. When I think of the brutal despotism that reigns in so many schools of this and other countries, and of the indecent way in which thousands of sensitive young natures are tortured by men who, in the sacred office of the teacher, display manners that have ceased to be respectable in a stable, I bless my kind stars—nay, I thank God—for those five years, and the sweet influence that has poured from them in a steady stream through all my life.

The third summer of my school life was "Reunion Summer," and one week of vacation was devoted to the old boys. It was with inexpressible interest that I witnessed the interviews

between them and their teacher. Young men from college with downy whiskers and fashionable clothes; young men in business, with the air of business in their manners; young clergymen, doctors, and lawyers came back by scores. They brought a great breeze from the world with them, but all became boys again when they entered the presence of their old master. They kissed him as they were wont to do in the times which had become old times to them. They hung upon his neck; they walked up and down the parlors with their arms around him; they sat in his lap, and told him of their changes, troubles and successes; and all were happy to be at the old nest again.

Ah, what *fêtes* were crowded into that happy week!—what games of ball, what receptions, what excursions, what meetings and speeches, what songs, what delightful interminglings of all the social elements of the village! What did it matter that we small boys felt very small by the side of those young men whose old rooms we were occupying? We enjoyed their presence, and found in it the promise that at some future time we should come back with whiskers upon our cheeks, and the last triumphs of the tailor in our coats!

Henry and I were to leave school in the autumn; and as the time drew near for our departure dear Mr. and Mrs. Bird grew more tender toward us, for we had been there longer than any of the other boys. I think there was not a lad at The Bird's Nest during our last term whom we found there on our entrance five years before. Jolly Jack Linton had become a clerk in a city shop, and was already thrifty and popular. Tom Kendrick was in college, and was to become a Christian minister. Andrews, too, was in college, and was bringing great comfort to his family by a true life that had been begun with so bad a promise. Mr. Bird seemed to take a special pleasure in our society, and, while loosening his claim upon us as pupils, to hold us as associates and friends the more closely. He loved his boys as a father loves his children. In one of our closing interviews, he and Mrs. Bird talked freely of the life they had lived, and its

beautiful compensations. They never wearied with their work, but found in the atmosphere of love that enveloped them an inspiration for all their labor and care, and a balm for all their trials and troubles. "If I were to live my life over again," said Mrs. Bird to me one evening, "I should choose just this, and be perfectly content." There are those teachers who have thought and said that "every boy is a born devil," and have taught for years because they were obliged to teach, with a thorough and outspoken detestation of their work. It is sad to think that multitudes of boys have been trained and misunderstood and abused by these men, and to know that thousands of them are still in office, untrusted and unloved by the tender spirits which they have in charge.

My connection with Mrs. Sanderson was a subject to which Mr. Bird very rarely alluded. I was sure there was something about it which he did not like, and in the last private conversation which I held with him it all came out.

"I want to tell you, Arthur," he said, "that I have but one fear for you. You have already been greatly injured by Mrs. Sanderson, and by the peculiar relations which she holds to your life. In some respects you are not as lovable as when you first came here. You have become exclusive in your society, obtrusive in your dress, and fastidious in your notions of many things. You are under the spell of a despotic will, and the moulding power of sentiments entirely foreign to your nature. She has not spoiled you, but she has injured you. You have lost your liberty, and a cunning hand is endeavoring to shape you to a destiny which it has provided for you. Now no wealth can compensate you for such a change. If she make you her heir, as I think she intends to do, she calculates upon your becoming a useless and selfish gentleman after a pattern of her own. Against this transformation you must struggle. To lose your sympathy for your own family and for the great multitude of the poor; to limit your labor to the nursing of an old and large estate; to surrender all your plans for an active life of usefulness among men, is to yield yourself to a fate worse

than any poverty can inflict. It is to be bought, to be paid for, and to be made a slave of. I can never be reconciled to any such consummation of your life."

This was plain talk, but it was such as he had a right to indulge in; and I knew and felt it to be true. I had arrived at the conviction in my own way before, and I had wished in my heart of hearts that I had had my own fortune to make, like the other boys with whom I had associated. I knew that Henry's winter was to be devoted to teaching, in order to provide himself with a portion of the funds which would be necessary for the further pursuit of his education. He had been kept back by poverty from entering school at first, so that he was no further advanced in study than myself, though the years had given him wider culture and firmer character than I possessed. Still, I felt entirely unable and unwilling to relinquish advantages which brought me immunity from anxiety and care, and the position which those advantages and my prospects gave me. My best ambitions were already sapped. I had become weak and to a sad extent self-indulgent. I had acquired no vices, but my beautiful room at The Mansion had been made still more beautiful with expensive appointments, my wardrobe was much enlarged, and, in short, I was in love with riches and all that riches procured for me.

Mr. Bird's counsel produced a deep impression upon me, and made me more watchful of the changes in my character and the processes by which they were wrought. In truth, I strove against them, in a weak way, as a slave might strive with chains of gold, which charm him and excite his cupidity while they bind him.

Here, perhaps, I ought to mention the fact that there was one subject which Henry would never permit me to talk about, viz., the relations with Mrs. Sanderson upon whose baleful power over me Mr. Bird had animadverted so severely. Why these and my allusions to them were so distasteful to him, I did not know, and could not imagine, unless it were that he did not like to realize the difference between his harder lot and

mine. "Please never mention the name of Mrs. Sanderson to me again," he said to me one day, almost ill-naturedly, and quite peremptorily. "I am tired of the old woman, and I should think you would be."

Quite unexpectedly, toward the close of the term, I received a letter from my father, conveying a hearty invitation to Henry to accompany me to Bradford, and become a guest in his house. With the fear of Mrs. Sanderson's displeasure before my eyes, should he accept an invitation from my father which he had once and many times again declined when extended by herself, I was mean enough to consider the purpose of withholding it from him altogether. But I wanted him in Bradford. I wanted to show him to my friends, and so, risking all untoward consequences, I read him the invitation.

Henry's face brightened in an instant, and, without consulting his mother, he said at once: "I shall go."

Very much surprised, and fearful of what would come of it, I blundered out some faint expression of my pleasure at the prospect of his continued society, and the matter was settled.

I cannot recall our parting with Mr. and Mrs. Bird without a blinding suffusion of the eyes. Few words were said. "You know it all, my boy," said Mr. Bird, as he put his arms around me, and pressed me to his side. "I took you into my heart when I first saw you, and you will live there until you prove yourself unworthy of the place."

For several years a lumbering old stage-coach with two horses had run between Hillsborough and Bradford, and to this vehicle Henry and I committed our luggage and ourselves. It was a tedious journey, which terminated at nightfall, and brought us first to my father's house. Ordering my trunks to be carried to The Mansion, I went in to introduce Henry to the family, with the purpose of completing my own journey on foot.

Henry was evidently a surprise to them all. Manly in size, mould and bearing, he bore no resemblance to the person whom they had been accustomed to regard as a lad. There

was embarrassment at first, which Henry's quiet and unpretending manners quickly dissipated; and soon the stream of easy conversation was set flowing, and we were all happy together. I quickly saw that my sister Claire had become the real mistress of the household. The evidences of her care were everywhere. My mother was feeble and prone to melancholy; but her young spirit, full of vitality, had asserted its sway, and produced a new atmosphere in the little establishment. Order, taste, and a look of competency and comfort prevailed. Without any particular motive, I watched the interchange of address and impression between Henry and my sister. It was as charming as a play. Two beings brought together from different worlds could not have appeared more interested in each other. Her cheeks were flushed, her blue eyes were luminous; her words were fresh and vivacious, and with a woman's quick instinct she felt that she pleased him. Absorbed in his study of the new nature thus opened to him, Henry so far forgot the remainder of the family as to address all his words to her. If my father asked him a question, he answered it to Claire. If he told a story, or related an incident of our journey homeward, he addressed it to her, as if her ears were the only ones that could hear it, or at least were those which would hear it with the most interest. I cannot say that I had not anticipated something like this. I had wondered, at least, how they would like each other. Claire's hand lighted the candle with which I led him to his room. Claire's hand had arranged the little bouquet which we found upon his table.

"I shall like *all* your father's family very much, I know," said Henry, in our privacy.

I was quick enough to know who constituted the largest portion of the family, in his estimate of the aggregate.

It was with a feeling of positive unhappiness and humiliation that I at last took leave of the delightful and delighted circle, and bent my steps to my statelier lodgings and the society of my cold and questioning Aunt. I knew that there would be no hope of hiding from her the fact that Henry had

accompanied me home, and that entire frankness and promptness in announcing it was my best policy; but I dreaded the impression it would make upon her. I found her awaiting my arrival, and met from her a hearty greeting. How I wished that Henry were a hundred miles away!

"I left my old chum at my father's," I said, almost before she had time to ask me a question.

"You did!" she exclaimed, her dark eyes flaming with anger. "How came he there?"

"My father invited him and he came home with me," I replied.

"So he spurns your invitation and mine, and accepts your father's. Will you explain this?"

"Indeed I cannot," I replied. "I have nothing to say, except that I am sorry and ashamed."

"I should think so! I should think so!" she exclaimed, rising and walking up and down the little library. "I should think so, indeed! One thing is proved, at least, and proved to your satisfaction, I hope—that he is not a gentleman. I really must forbid"—here she checked herself, and reconsidered. She saw that I did not follow her with my sympathy, and thought best to adopt other methods for undermining my friendship for him.

"Arthur," she said, at last, seating herself and controlling her rage, "your model friend has insulted both of us. I am an old woman, and he is nothing to me. He has been invited here solely on your account, and, if he is fond of you, he has declined the invitation solely on mine. There is a certain chivalry—a sense of what is due to any woman under these circumstances—that you understand as well as I do, and I shall leave you to accept or reject its dictates. I ask nothing of you that is based in any way on my relations to you. This fellow has grossly, and without any apology or explanation, slighted my courtesies, and crowned his insult by accepting those coming from a humbler source—from one of my own tenants, in fact."

"I have nothing to say," I responded. "I am really not to blame for his conduct, but I should be ashamed to quarrel with anybody because he would not do what I wanted him to do."

"Very well. If that is your conclusion, I must ask you never to mention his name to me again, and if you hold any communication with him, never to tell me of it. You disappoint me, but you are young, and you must be bitten yourself before you will learn to let dogs alone."

I had come out of the business quite as well as I expected to, but it was her way of working. She saw that I loved my companion with a firmness that she could not shake, and that it really was not in me to quarrel with him. She must wait for favoring time and circumstances, and resort to other arts to accomplish her ends—arts of which she was the conscious mistress. She had not forbidden me to see him and hold intercourse with him. She knew, indeed, that I must see him, and that I could not quarrel with him without offending my father, whose guest he was—a contingency to be carefully avoided.

I knew, however, that all practical means would be used to keep me out of his company during his stay in Bradford, and I was not surprised to be met the next morning with a face cleared from all traces of anger and sullenness, and with projects for the occupation of my time.

"I am getting to be an old woman, Arthur," said she, after a cheery breakfast, "and need help in my affairs, which you ought to be capable of giving me now."

I assured her most sincerely that nothing would give me greater pleasure than to make what return I could for the kindness she had shown me.

Accordingly, she brought out her accounts, and as she laid down her books, and package after package of papers, she said: "I am going to let you into some of my secrets. All that you see here, and learn of my affairs, is to be entirely confidential. I shall show you more than my lawyer knows, and more than anybody knows beyond myself."

Then she opened an account book, and in a neat hand made

out a bill for rent to one of her tenants. This was the form she wished me to follow in making out twenty-five or thirty other bills which she pointed out to me. As I did the work with much painstaking, the task gave me employment during the whole of the morning. At its close, we went over it together, and she was warm in her praises of my handwriting and the correctness of my transcript.

After dinner she told me she would like to have me look over some of the papers which she had left on the table. "It is possible," she said, "that you may find something that will interest you. I insist only on two conditions: you are to keep secret everything you learn, and ask me no question about what may most excite your curiosity."

One ponderous bundle of papers I found to be composed entirely of bonds and mortgages. It seemed as if she had her hold upon nearly every desirable piece of property in the town. By giving me a view of this and showing me her rent-roll, she undoubtedly intended to exhibit her wealth, which was certainly very much greater than I had suspected. "All this if you continue to please me," was what the exhibition meant; and, young as I was, I knew what it meant. To hold these pledges of real estate, and to own this rent-roll was to hold power; and with that precious package in my hands there came to me my first ambition for power, and a recognition of that thirst to gratify which so many men had bartered their honor and their souls. In that book and in those papers lay the basis of the old lady's self-assurance. It was to these that men bowed with deferential respect or superfluous fawning. It was to these that fine ladies paid their devoirs; and a vision of the future showed all these demonstrations of homage transferred to me—a young man—with life all before me. The prospect held not only these but a thousand delights—travel in foreign lands, horses and household pets, fine equipage, pictures, brilliant society, and some sweet, unknown angel in the form of a woman, to be loved and petted and draped with costly fabrics and fed upon dainties.

I floated off into a wild, intoxicating dream. All the possi-

bilities of my future came before me. In my imagination I already stood behind that great bulwark against a thousand ills of life which money builds, and felt myself above the petty needs that harass the toiling multitude. I was already a social center and a king. Yet after all, when the first excitement was over, and I realized the condition that lay between me and the realization of my dreams—"all this if you continue to please me"—I knew and felt that I was a slave. I was not my own: I had been purchased. I could not freely follow even the impulses of my own natural affection.

Tiring of the package at last, and of the thoughts and emotions it excited, I turned to others. One after another I took them up and partly examined them, but they were mostly lead documents—old policies of insurance long since expired, old contracts for the erection of buildings that had themselves grown old, mortgages that had been canceled, old abstracts of title, etc., etc. At last I found, at the bottom of the pile, a package yellow with age; and I gasped with astonishment as I read on the back of the first paper: "*James Mansfield to Peter Bonnicastle.*" I drew it quickly from the tape, and saw exposed upon the next paper: "*Julius Wheeler to Peter Bonnicastle.*" Thus the name went on down through the whole package. All the papers were old, and all of them were deeds—some of them conveying thousands of acres of colonial lands. Thus I learned two things that filled me with such delight and pride as I should find it altogether impossible to describe; first, that the fortune which I had been examining, and which I had a tolerable prospect of inheriting, had its foundations laid a century before by one of my own ancestors; and second, that Mrs. Sanderson and I had common blood in our veins. This discovery quite restored my self-respect, because I should arrive at my inheritance by at least a show of right. The property would remain in the family where it belonged, and, so far as I knew, no member of the family would have a better right to it than myself. I presumed that my father was a descendant of this same Peter Bonnicastle,

who was doubtless a notable man in his time ; and only the accidents of fortune had diverted this large wealth from my own branch of the family.

This discovery brought up to my memory the conversations that had taken place in my home on my first arrival in the town, between Mr. Bradford and my father. Here was where the "blue blood" came from, and Mr. Bradford had known about this all the time. It was his hint to Mrs. Sanderson that had procured for me my good fortune. My first impulse was to thank him for his service, and to tell him that I probably knew as much as he did of my relations to Mrs. Sanderson ; but the seal of secrecy was upon my lips. I recalled to mind Mrs. Sanderson's astonishment and strange behavior when she first heard my father's name, and thus all the riddles of that first interview were solved.

Pride of wealth and power had now firmly united itself in my mind with pride of ancestry ; and though there were humiliating considerations connected with my relations to Mrs. Sanderson, my self-respect had been wonderfully strengthened, and I found that my heart was going out to the little old lady with a new sentiment—a sentiment of kinship, if not of love. I identified myself with her more perfectly than I had hitherto done. She had placed confidence in me, she had praised my work, and she was a Bonnicastle.

I have often looked back upon the revelations and the history of that day, and wondered whether it was possible that she had foreseen all the processes of mind through which I passed, and intelligently and deliberately contrived to procure them. She must have done so. There was not an instrument wanting for the production of the result she desired, and there was nothing wanting in the result.

The afternoon passed, and I neither went home nor felt a desire to do so. In the evening she invited me to read, and thus I spent a pleasant hour preparatory to an early bed.

"You have been a real comfort to me to-day, Arthur," she said, as I kissed her forehead and bade her good-night.

What more could a lad who loved praise ask than this? I went to sleep entirely happy, and with a new determination to devote myself more heartily to the will and the interests of my benefactress. It ceased to be a great matter that my companion for five years was in my father's home, and I saw little of him. I was employed with writing and with business errands all the time. During Henry's visit in Bradford I was in and out of my father's house, as convenience favored, and always while on an errand that waited. I think Henry appreciated the condition of affairs, and as he and Claire were on charming terms, and my absence gave him more time with her, I presume that he did not miss me. All were glad to see me useful, and happy in my usefulness.

When Henry went away I walked down to bid him farewell. "Now don't cry, my boy," said Henry, "for I am coming back ; and don't be excited when I tell you that I have engaged to spend the winter in Bradford. I was wondering where I could find a school to teach, and the school has come to me, examining committee and all."

I was delighted. I looked at Claire with the unguarded impulse of a boy, and it brought the blood into her cheeks painfully. Henry parted with her very quietly—indeed, with studied quietness—but was warm in his thanks to my father and mother for their hospitality, and hearty with the boys, with whom he had become a great favorite.

I saw that Henry was happy, and particularly happy in the thought of returning. As the stage-coach rattled away, he kissed his hand to us all, and shouted "*Au revoir !*" as if his anticipations of pleasure were embraced in those words rather than in the fact that he was homeward-bound.