

and I was electrified at beholding the countenance of my own buxom landlady.

"My dear soul, where 'ave you been?" she cried, as I stood staring at her, dumb with surprise and relief.

"From the Crystal Palace to Greenwich, I believe. Come in, M, and ask the man what the fare is," I answered, dropping into a hall chair, and feeling as I imagine Robinson Crusoe did when he got home.

Of course that civil cabby cheated me abominably. I knew it at the time, but never protested; for I was so glad and grateful at landing safely I should have paid a pound if he had asked it.

Next day we were heroines, and at breakfast alternately thrilled and convulsed the other boarders by a recital of our adventures. But the "strong-minded Americans" got so well laughed at that they took great care never to ride in hansom cabs again, or get lost in the fog.

III.

THE BOYS' JOKE, AND WHO GOT THE BEST OF IT.

IT was the day before Christmas, and grandpa's big house was swarming with friends and relations, all brimful of spirits and bent on having a particularly good time. Dinner was over and a brief lull ensued, during which the old folks took naps, the younger ones sat chatting quietly, while the children enlivened the day by a quarrel.

It had been brewing for some time, and during that half hour the storm broke. You see, the boys felt injured because for a week at least the girls had been too busy to pay the slightest attention to them and their affairs,—and what's the good of having sisters and cousins if they don't make themselves useful and agreeable to a fellow? What made it particularly hard to bear was the fact that there was a secret about it, and all they could discover was that *they* were to have no part in the fun. This added to their wrath, for they could have

borne the temporary neglect, if the girls had been making something nice for *them*; but they were not, and the irate lads were coolly informed that they would never know the secret, or benefit by it in the least.

Now this sort of thing was not to be borne, you know, and after affecting to scorn the whole concern, the boys were finally goaded to confess to one another that they were dying to learn what was going on, though no power on earth would make them own as much to the girls. It certainly was very tantalizing to the poor fellows penned up in the breakfast-room (to keep the house quiet for an hour) to see the girls prance in and out of the library with the most aggravating air of importance and delight; to watch mysterious parcels borne along; to hear cries of rapture, admiration, or alarm from the next room, and to know that fun of some sort was going on, and they not in it.

It snowed so they could not go out; all had played their parts manfully at dinner, and were just in the lazy mood when a man likes to be amused by the gentler half of the race (which they believe was created for that express purpose), and there, on the other side of the folding doors, were half-a-dozen

sprightly damsels, laughing and chatting, without a thought or care for the brothers and cousins gaping and growling close by.

The arrival of a sleigh-load of girlish neighbors added to the excitement, and made the boys feel that something must be done to redress their wrongs.

"Let's burst in on them and take a look, no matter if they do scold," proposed Tom, the scapegrace, ready for a raid.

"No, that won't do; grandma said we were to let the girls alone, and we shall lose our presents if we don't behave. You just lean up against the door, Joe, and if it flies open, why it is an accident, you know," said Alf the wise.

So Joe, the fat cousin, backed up to the door like a young elephant, and leaned hard; but it was locked, and nothing came of it but a creak from the door, and a groan from Joe.

"I'll look through the keyhole, and tell what I see," cried little Neddy; and no one forbade him, though, at any other time, big brother Frank would have cuffed his ears for daring to suggest such a prank.

"There's something bright, and the girls are fuss

ing round it. Kitty's got a lot of red and blue ribbons in her hand, and Grace is up in a chair, and Nell—oh, it's cake; a great dish full of the jolliest kinds, and bon-bons, and sugared fruit, just the sort I like. I say, knock the door down, some of you big fellows, and let's have one grab!" cried Neddy, maddened by the sight of the forbidden sweets.

"Be quiet, and take another peep; it's rather interesting to hear what's going on," said Frank, reposing upon the sofa like the Great Mogul, as the boys called him.

Poor little Tantalus obediently applied his eye to the keyhole, but fell back with a blank face, saying in a despairing tone:

"They've plugged it up, and I can't see a thing!"

"Serves you right; if you'd held your tongue they never would have known what you were about," was Frank's ungrateful answer.

A stifled giggle from the other side of the door caused a dead silence to pervade the breakfast-room for several minutes, while Neddy wriggled out of sight under the sofa as if to escape from the finger of scorn.

Suddenly Tom cried in a shrill whisper, "I've got it!" and pointed to a ventilator over the door.

A simultaneous rush of boys and chairs took place; but Tom claimed the rights of a discoverer, and, softly mounting an improvised ladder of tables and stools, he peered eagerly through the glass, while impatient hands plucked at his legs, and the pressure of the mob caused his perch to totter perilously.

The spectacle which he beheld would have touched the heart of any little girl, but to an unappreciative boy it possessed no charm, for it was only a doll's Christmas tree. For weeks, the young mammas had been making pretty things for their wooden, wax, or porcelain darlings, and it was excellent practice, since many a pair of hands that scorned patchwork and towels, labored patiently over small gowns, trimmed gay hats, and wrought wonders in worsted, without a sigh.

It really was a most delightful little tree, set in an Indian jar, snowed over with flour, garlanded with alternate festoons of cranberries and pop-corn, and every bough laden with such treasures that if dolls could stare any harder than they do, they certainly would have opened their painted eyes with amazement and joy. Such "darling" hats, and caps; such "sweet" gowns and cloaks; such "cunning" muffs and tippets! Dressing cases as perfect as grown-up

ones, I assure you; mittens that must have been knit on darning-needles; shoes of colored kid fit for a doll's Cinderella, and sets of brass and bead jewelry that glittered splendidly. Wee bottles of perfume for waxen noses; tiny horns of comfits; travelling bags, and shawl straps, evidently worked by the fairies; and underclothes which I modestly forbear to describe, merely saying that very few of the seams were puckered, and the trimmings "perfectly lovely."

At the moment when Peeping Tom's profane eye beheld the innocent revel, the dolls were seated in a circle, their mammas standing behind them, while the happy little hostesses bestowed the gifts with appropriate remarks. It is needless to say that the dolls behaved beautifully, their cheeks glowing with pleasure as they returned thanks in voices so like those of their mothers that one couldn't tell the difference.

The tree was soon stripped, and then the chatter began again, for every thing must be tried on at once, and more than one doll who came in shabby clothes bloomed out in gorgeous array, or was made tidy for the winter.

"I'm so glad to get a worked flannel petticoat for

my Jemima. Mamma was saying only yesterday that she didn't approve of show at the expense of comfort, and I knew she meant Jemmy, who hadn't a thing on but her pink silk dress and earrings," observed Mrs. Kitty, in a moral tone.

"Clementina has been suffering for shoes, though her feet don't show with a train. I meant to have saved enough to buy her some, but what with limes and candy, and pencils, and fines for saying 'awful,' I do believe the poor thing would have gone bare-footed all winter, if Nell hadn't given her these beauties," replied Mrs. Alice, proudly surveying her daughter's feet in red kid boots of a somewhat triangular shape.

"I couldn't make them fit very well, because the cotton is all coming out of her toes, and it was hard to measure," explained Mrs. Nell, conscious that shoemaking was not her mission.

"They are just the thing; for I'm afraid my poor Clem is going to have the gout, young as she is. It is in our family, so it is well to be prepared," answered Mrs. Alice, with the beautiful forethought of a maternal heart.

"These muffs are made out of our Tabby's skin. I thought you'd like them as keepsakes, for we all

loved her," said Grace, with a pensive sigh, as she smoothed the white fur of a dear departed cat, feeling that black and violet bows would have been more suitable than red and blue for the decoration of these touching memorials.

"I wonder if there isn't a nice place somewhere for good cats when they die? I hope so: for I'm sure they have souls, though they may be little bits of ones," observed Kitty, who felt as if her name was a tie between herself and the pets she most adored.

"I wonder if they have ghosts," said Nell, as if she feared that Tabby's might appear.

A faint "Meou" seemed to float down to the startled girls from some upper region, and for an instant they stood staring about them. Then they laughed like a chime of bells, and accused little Lotty of pinching the kitten in her arms.

"I didn't; it was Tom up dere," protested the child, pointing to the ventilator, from which a round red face was staring at them, like a full moon.

Shrieks of indignation greeted the discovery, and a rain of small articles pelted the countenance of the foe, as it grinned derisively, while a jeering voice called out:

"I don't think much of your old secret. It wasn't

worth the fuss you made about it, and I wouldn't have any if I couldn't do better than that."

"I'd like to see you get up any thing half as nice. You couldn't do it. Boys never invent new games, but girls do. Papa says so, and he knows," answered Nell.

"Pooh! We fellows could beat you as easy as not, if we cared to; so you needn't brag, miss. Men invent every thing in the world, 'specially ventilators, and you see how useful they are," returned Tom, glad that he had kept his place in spite of the maltreatment his extremities were undergoing.

"Boys are more curious than girls, anyway. We should never have done such a mean thing as to peek at you," cried Kitty, coming to the rescue, and hitting the enemy in his weakest spot.

"Oh, we only did it for fun. Give us a taste of your spread, and we'll never say a word about it," returned the barefaced boy, with a wheedlesome air, and a tender glance toward the dainty tea-table set forth so temptingly just under his nose.

"Not a bit, unless you'll say our tree is lovely and own that we are the cleverest at getting up new and nice things," said Kitty, sternly.

"Never!" roared Tom; "we can beat you any day if we choose."

"Then do it, and we will own up; yes, and we will go halves in all the goodies we get off our big tree to-night," added Kitty, bound to stand by her sex and ready to wager a year's bon-bons in the defence of her position.

"By George, I'll do it if the fellows will agree! Honor bright now, and no dodging," said Tom, recklessly pledging himself and friends to any thing and every thing.

"Honor bright," chorused the girls in high glee.

"Only don't be a month about it; you boys are *so* slow," added Grace, in a superior tone, that ruffled the gentleman at the ventilator.

"We'll do it to-morrow; see if we don't," he cried out, rashly heaping difficulties upon his party.

"Then you'd better set about it at once, and leave us in peace," said Nell, tartly.

"I shall go, ma'am, when I please, and not one minute sooner"—began Tom, with immense dignity; but he did not keep his word; for the sudden withdrawal of his head, followed by a crash and howls of mingled merriment, wrath, and pain, plainly proved

that circumstances over which he had no control hastened his departure.

The ladies sat down to their afternoon tea, which was much enlivened by guessing what those "stupid boys" would do. The gentlemen, warned by Tom's downfall, contented themselves with racking their mighty minds to invent some new, striking, and appropriate entertainment which should cover their names with glory and demolish their opponents for ever more.

Perhaps it was too soon after dinner; perhaps the brightest wits of the party had been shaken by the fall, or the cold affected the inventive powers; for, rack as they would, those mighty minds refused to work.

"You ought to have given us more time; of course we can't get up any thing clever in one day and a half," grumbled Frank, much annoyed because all the rest looked to him and he had not an idea to offer.

"I wasn't going to have a parcel of girls crow over me. I'd blow myself up for a show before I'd let them do that," answered Tom, rubbing his bruised elbows with a grim and defiant glance toward the fatal ventilator, for he felt that he had got not only himself but his mates into a scrape.

"Don't worry, old fellows; time enough; sleep on it, and something capital will pop into somebody's noddle, see if it doesn't," counselled Alf, with a sage nod, as he went to discover who was sobbing in the hall.

Little Lotty sat on the fuzzy red mat, with a tortoise-shell kitten in her arms, her white pinafore full of candies, and her chubby face bedewed with tears.

"What's the matter, Toddlekins?" asked Alf, in such a sympathetic tone that the afflicted infant poured forth her woes in one breath, with the brown eyes flashing through their tears and a dramatic gesture of the small hands that told the tale better than her broken words.

"De naughty, naughty girls turned out my Torty 'cause she hopped on de table and drinked de tea, and I comed too, and we is doing to have a kitmouse tee all ourselfs up in de nursery, so now!"

Alf laughed at her indignation, but dried her tears, and sent her away happy with a sprig of hemlock from the decorations of the hall. "Virtue is its own reward" proved true in this case; for as Alf went back to his mates he had an idea — such a superb one that it nearly took his breath away and caused him to

break into a wild sort of jig, as he cried aloud — "I've found it, boys; I've found it!"

"Where? What? How?" asked the others, clinging to him as if they were shipwrecked mariners, and he a rope thrown out to them.

The idea was evidently a good one, for it was received with great applause, and everybody was interested at once in helping Alf elaborate his plan.

"Won't it be heaping coals of fire on their heads after the shabby way they have treated us?" said Tom, chuckling at the thought of the girls' remorse when the touching surprise in store for them should be revealed.

"But how the dickens shall we get enough m——?" began Frank, rather inclined to throw cold water on the affair because he was not the originator of it.

"Hush!" shouted Alf; then added in a melodramatic whisper, "If the girls hear that word we are lost. I've planned how to manage that, but it will take time, and we'd better begin at once, or there won't be enough you-know-whats to go round. Come upstairs; we can talk safely there without a pack of girls listening at the keyhole, as I know they are this identical minute."

Alf raised his voice at the last words, and the boys trooped off with derisive hoots; for a guilty rustle and a sudden outburst of conversation in the other room told them that their shot had hit somebody.

"I wish we hadn't dared them to do it; for they will be sure to get up some dreadful surprise. I shall be expecting it every minute, and that will make me so nervous I shall not enjoy myself a bit."

"I'm not afraid; they won't invent any thing to-night, so we may as well clear up and be ready for our tree," answered Kitty to Nell as they packed the dolls on the sofa to sleep while their mammas enjoyed themselves.

No need to tell about that evening, for every child knows what a Christmas tree is better than we can describe it, so we will skip into the next morning when the boys' joke came off.

The young folks usually slept late after their unwonted revelry by night, but, strange to relate, the lads were early astir. In fact, Mary, the cook, saw several small ghosts whisking up the back-stairs when she went down to kindle her fire, and curious sounds were heard in attic and cellar, store-room and closets.

Something very exciting was going on, and the elders were evidently in it, for, though several mammas were heard to cry out when certain mysterious things were shown them, they never said a word, but looked up bits of gay ribbon without a murmur; while the papas enjoyed the fun and lent a hand in the most delightful manner.

When the girls came down to the late breakfast they found notes under their napkins, inviting them to a surprise party in the drying room at eleven A. M.

"I didn't think they'd be so quick. Shall you dare to go?" whispered Nell to Kitty as they compared notes and tried to make out the device on the seal, which was evidently intended for an animal of some sort.

"We must go, for we promised. Of course it won't amount to any thing, and we can keep our sweeties," answered Kitty, lovingly eying the pretty box of French bon-bons which she had so rashly staked.

"You'll be sorry if you don't, for it is the completest thing you ever saw, and no end of fun in it," began Tom, assuming an ecstatic expression and smacking his lips.

"Hold your tongue and go to work, or we shall not be ready in time. We've got to trim all the *jigamarees*, hang the *thingummies* while they are fresh, and see that the basket of *treasures* arrives safely," said Alf, with such mysterious nods and smiles that the girls were instantly consumed by an intense curiosity to know what "thingummies" and "jigamarees" were, while "treasures" had such a rich sound that they began to hope the boys were really going to atone for the past by some splendid piece of generosity.

"Come punctually at eleven and bring your boxes with you; they will be a good deal lighter when you come down again;" with which cheering remark Frank led off his men, leaving the girls to watch the clock with anxious, yet eager eyes.

Their wonder and suspense was much increased by the fact that Lotty was sent for and carried off by an escort of two. Listening at the foot of the backstairs they heard her little voice exclaim approvingly:

"Oh how funny! how berry nice!" then the door closed, and the girls heard no more.

As the clock struck, up marched seven young ladies, each with a bon-bon box under her arm and

an eager sparkle in her eyes. As they paused at the door Tom's voice was heard saying, "I wish they'd hurry up, for I'm tired of this business and have had scratching enough."

"They are coming! Now mind, no scrambling till I give the word. Each fellow stand in his place, keep the bows right side up and hold tight, or there will be a dreadful piece of work," answered Alf, evidently giving last touches to the spectacle.

"They have borrowed Fred's monkey and are going to scare us; I know they are by what Tom said: and I hear a queer noise — don't you?" whispered Nell, clutching Grace's skirts.

"It cannot be any thing very bad or Lotty would cry. Steady, girls; I'm going to knock," and Kitty gave a bold "rat-tat-tat," which caused a sensation within.

The door opened, and Frank made his best bow as he said, with a flourish:

"Enter, ladies, and join us in the interesting festival which we have prepared at your desire. Take a look first, and then I will explain this charming scene if it is not clear to you."

No need to tell the girls to take a look; they had done that already; but it was evident that an ex

planation would be necessary, for they were quite mystified by the "charming scene;" and well they might be, for it was a curious one.

The middle of the room was adorned by a large tub, in which stood a small spruce tree hung with the oddest things that ever swung from a bough. Mice by their tails, bits of cheese, milk in small bottles, gay balls, loops of string, squares of red and blue flannel like little blankets, bundles of herbs tied with bright ribbons, and near the top hung a cage with several small white animals dancing about in it.

But funniest of all was the circle of boys around this remarkable tree, at the foot of which Lotty sat; for each held a cat or kitten in his arms decorated with a gorgeous bow; both boys and cats so absurdly solemn and ill at ease that after one look the girls burst into a gale of merriment.

"Glad you like it, ladies; we have done our best, and I flatter myself it is a pretty neat thing," began showman Frank, with a gratified air, while the other boys with difficulty restrained their charges from escaping to their mistresses.

"It's very funny, but what does it all mean?" asked Grace, wiping her eyes, and nodding to her

own fat Jerry, whose yellow eyes appealed to her for aid.

"It is a Kitmouse tree, the first one ever known, prepared at great expense for this occasion, to prove that *we* can invent superior amusements, and entirely outdo other folks who shall be nameless."

"It isn't half so pretty as our tree was," said Kitty, as Frank paused for breath.

"But think how much more pleasure it will give; for cats can enjoy and dolls can't. These presents are useful and instructive; for we have not only food and drink, but catnip and cataplasms for the poor darlings, if they have catarrh or any other catastrophe of that sort; but here is a little catechism for the kits, and string for cats' cradles when they have learned their lessons. Cataracts of milk will flow from these bottles for their refreshment, and a catalogue of delicacies will be furnished free to any lady wishing to repeat this performance at a future time."

"Hurry up, and give Jerry a bite of something, or he'll eat me," cried Tom, who had been silently struggling with his puss while Frank delivered the speech, which he considered a masterpiece of wit.

"If the ladies will sit upon the window-seats I

will give out the presents at once;" and Frank proceeded to do so, amid much merriment; for the kittens began at once to play with the balls, the cats to eat and drink, while the boys surveyed the scene with great satisfaction, and the girls applauded as the mice were handed round, one to each cat, as a delicate attention, though few were eaten.

The pussies behaved remarkably well, for the lads had wisely selected the most amiable ones they could find, and the six belonging to the house received them hospitably. Mother Bunch and her three kits did the honors, while Torty and Jerry tried to be polite, though aristocratic Torty arched her back at the half-starved little cat Neddy found in the street, and stout old Jerry growled to himself when Nell's pretty white Snowball took his mouse away.

Such a frolic as they had, boys and girls, cats and kittens, altogether, one would have thought the house was coming down about their ears. The elders took a peep at them, but a very little of that sort of fun satisfied them and they soon left the youngsters to themselves.

"It's almost one, and we are going coasting before dinner, so own up girls, and hand over the goodies,"

said Alf at last, when a lull came and every one stopped for breath after a lively game of tag, which caused the cats to seek refuge in every available nook and corner.

"I suppose we must; for it certainly *was* a bright idea, and we have had a capital time," confessed honest Nell, sitting down in the clothes-basket, where Mother Bunch had collected her family when the romp began, and beginning to divide her candies.

"Stop a minute!" cried Kitty, with a twinkle in her black eyes; "was not the agreement that you should *invent* something newer and nicer than our dolls' affair?"

"Yes; and isn't this ever so much better fun in every way than all that fuss for rag babies that don't know or care any thing about it?" cried Alf, as proud as a peacock of his success.

"Of course it is," admitted sly Kitty.

"Wasn't it clever of us to get it up, and haven't we pleased you by treating your cats well?"

"I'm sure you have, and it was dear of you to do it."

"Well, then, what's the trouble?"

"Only that you did *not* invent the thing all yourselves," coolly answered Kitty.

"I should like to know who did!" cried the boys with one breath.

"Lotty. She put the idea into your heads with her funny word 'kitmouse.' You never would have thought of it but for that. A girl helped you; and a very little one too; you had to call her in to make the cats mind, I'm sure, so you have lost your wager and we will keep our bon-bons, thank you."

Kitty made a low courtesy and stood crunching a delicious strawberry drop as she triumphantly surveyed the astounded boys, who looked as much taken aback as Antonio and his friends when Portia outwits Shylock in the famous court scene.

"She's got us there," murmured Frank, with an approving nod to his clever young sister.

"Oh, come; that's not fair; we had a right to take just a word that meant nothing till we made it. I don't care for the sweet stuff, but I'm not going to own that we are beaten!" cried Alf, in high dudgeon; for he had taken much credit to himself for this bright idea.

"You *must* own that a girl helped you. Do that fairly and I'll go halves, as we promised; for you *have* made a good joke out of Lotty's word," said Kitty, who was generous as well as just, and felt that

the poor lads deserved some reward for their labor.

"All right, if the other fellows agree," returned Tom, helping himself to a handful of candy as he spoke; which cool performance had such a good effect upon the other boys that they all cried out, "We do! we do!" while Alf, swinging Lotty to his shoulder, marched away, singing at the top of his voice,

"Now cheer, boys, cheer,
With three times three,
Our little Lot,
And her kitmouse tree!"