

"Certainly," she said, and looked expectant.

Doubt darkened Betty's mind. What if Dot should say "No, I couldn't undertake it. I'll pack up and go back to Mona, and peace and plenty."

"I hardly know how to begin," said Betty, diffidently; "but the truth is, I want to do something similar to what you have been doing. I want to go out into the wilderness and keep myself."

Dot's eyes opened widely. "A companion?" she asked. "No," said Betty; "a scribe. Something of an author, and something of a journalist. But till I'm out of the grublike state, call me a scribe."

"A scribe!" repeated Dot, as one dazed.

"A scribe!" said Betty, "is one who wields a pen. I never could get a chance to wield mine. Now I've got it, and it rests with you whether I take it or not."

"With me?" said Dot. "Yes. You're new to it all—to the house and the children and Mary. Would it be dreadful if I went away and left all on your shoulders?"

"I was going to suggest a division of work," said Dot.

"And now—Oh, Dot. It would be too much for you, wouldn't it? It is a lot. But we might find a way to lessen it—a young girl to come daily and mind the children, for instance."

Something like a smile came to Dot's face. Perhaps she was a little pleased—just a little—at the prospect of being Queen of the Kingdom of Home. She always had been a trifle afraid of Betty, and although these two days she had rigidly kept to her plan of only regarding the surface of things, she had seen beneath it, for how could she help it? And she had been longing for, say, the fourth or fifth day, when she might say:

"Let us make an arrangement, Betty, as to the work and the children. There are so many things I want to see altered, that must be altered. But don't let us quarrel!"

Yet some subtle sense had warned her that Betty was not an easy young person to dethrone.

She would not meekly step down to a lower seat if she felt the higher one was hers by right.

And she had recollections of Betty's eyes flashing, of Betty's lips curling, of Betty's feet stamping!

"If," said Dot, "if you have been able to manage Betty I really think I can. You see I'm so much older!"

"Only four years!" said Betty. "I have had eight years more experience of life," sighed Dot, as one who had been over the rocks of the world and cut her feet.

"Pleasant experience," corrected Betty.

"I've seen how houses are managed," said Dot. "I've seen what you can call the wheels within the wheels."

Betty felt she was being muzzled of something.

"There's such a difference," she said, "between merely looking on and making the wheels go round!"

A little stiffness got into Dot's voice. "Still," she said, "it is possible I can manage."

"It's possible," said Betty doubtfully.

Dot laughed. She saw, for some reason, things were going wrong, and she made an effort to smooth them over.

"Do you want my credentials, my references?" she asked. "I am a fair cook, I can make soups and jellies, puddings and cakes, and entrees. I can sew and darn, do plain and fancy needlework; I—"

"You know as much of children as the heathen know of you I expect," Betty.

"Ah!" said Dot, airily; "but I have in my trunk a book, and it's entitled 'The Care and Management of Children, from their tenderest day,' which will include even Baby."

"Um," said Betty. But her eyes certainly admired her elder sister almost frankly.

"Are you sure you can learn from a book?"

"It's how I learnt drawn thread work and netting," said Dot. "You can learn anything from a book if you only get the right book."

"I give in," said Betty with a sudden laugh. "I didn't expect you to know so much! I thought you'd be a fashionable young lady who would only be able to drink afternoon tea and play tennis. In all probability this household will live to bless the day when Betty turned Scribe, and Dot Head of the Home."

CHAPTER XX.

"FOUR PAIR OF STAIRS."

Betty's advertisement appeared in the two morning papers, and brought a host of replies. She advertised for an unfurnished room in the home of a married, or an elderly lady—must be quiet and central.

And an exhilarating number of elderly ladies replied that they had unfurnished rooms to let, and would be pleased to show them to "Scribe" if she would call.

Betty sorted out half a dozen that she considered likely ones, and went with an eagerly beating heart to view them.

In the first instance there was a baby—and it was crying lustily, so Betty, with a lively recollection of the murdering of supreme moments by the cry of a child, refused. At the second place she was offered a front room off the street; she who longed for an attic; and at the third place the neighbourhood was noisy and unpleasing.

The fourth was central. It was in one of Sydney's main streets, and faced a park. A high three-storey house, in a long terrace of high three-storey houses. There was an iron railing in front, and three steps, and at the side of the door three brass plates bearing the names of two doctors and one dentist.

"The wrong place, of course," said Betty. "Doctors don't let rooms to scribes."

Nevertheless she pressed the bell and put her inquiry to the maid who answered it, whether a Mrs Thornton lived there.

"Third floor," said the maid. "Wait a moment, please."

She put her mouth to a speaking-tube on the wall and whistled. An answering whistle came down again.

"A young lady to see Mrs Thornton," said the maid.

"Will you ask her to come up," said the replying voice.

And Betty mounted the stairs deeply impressed. She had heard nothing like that before in her life.

Up she went, higher, higher. Through an open door on the second floor she saw a luxurious room with a luxurious red plush chair in it, and a glittering machine beside it.

Betty had never been to a dentist's in her life. She had had one tooth only extracted, and that by the local chemist.

She went on, upwards and upwards, like Excelsior, and when she stood on the third storey she saw yet another flight of stairs running skywards.

She stood on a square landing with two doors facing her. One was closed, one stood open.

Out of the open doorway came a woman. Betty scanned her face eagerly for signs of middle-age; but it bore no mark that warranted one in supposing it had looked on more than three and thirty years of life.

The woman scanned Betty just as eagerly, and bade her come in and sit down, somewhat abruptly. She was a tall, thin woman, blue-eyed, golden-haired. Her complexion held the glow, given by colder climes than Australia.

"I came about a room," said Betty, shyly. She felt so very small, so very girlish, so very insignificant all at once.

"Yes, I saw you wanted one without furniture." Then they looked at each other. It seemed to Betty that the woman suddenly grew antagonistic to her.

"I do not know," she said, brusquely. "why I wrote to you. What do you want the room for?"

"To live in," said Betty. "I write—and I want to be quiet."

"To write in?" asked Mrs Thornton. "You would not then want to eat there, or sleep there?"

Betty's eyes widened. "It was stupid of me to forget," she said. "I ought to have said 'with use of kitchen.'"

"Oh," said the woman, and looked more than ever antagonistic.

"I don't think you would find me much in the way in the kitchen," said Betty. "I was hoping—," she hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I was hoping for an attic room," said the girl, and her eyes were eloquent.

"It is what you would call an attic," said the woman, less brusquely. "Would you like to come up?"

"Oh, yes," said Betty, with alacrity. It was the first attic she had been asked to view.

They went up the fourth flight of

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