

CHAPTER VIII

THE BROKEN KEY

"OH! Uncle David! Uncle David!" cried Laura, when they arrived from Holiday House, "I would jump out of the carriage-window with joy to see you again, only the persons passing in the street might be surprised!"

"Not at all! They are quite accustomed to see people jumping out of the windows with joy, whenever I appear."

"We have so much to tell you," exclaimed Harry and Laura, each seizing hold of a hand, "we hardly know where to begin!"

"Ladies and gentlemen! If you both talk at once, I must get a new pair of ears! So you have not been particularly miserable at Holiday House?"

"No! no! Uncle David! we did not think there had been so much happiness in the world," answered Laura eagerly. "The last two days we could do nothing but play, and laugh, and——"

"And grow fat! Why! you both look so well fed, you are just fit for killing! I shall be obliged to shut you up two or three days, without anything

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to eat, as is done to pet lap-dogs, when they are getting corpulent and gouty."

Harry and Laura stayed very quietly at home for several weeks after their return from Holiday House, attending so busily to lessons that Uncle David said he felt much afraid they were going to be a pair of little wonders, who would die of too much learning.

"You will be taken ill of the multiplication table some day, and confined to bed with a violent fit of geography! Pray take care of yourselves, and do not devour above three books at once," said Major Graham one day, entering the room with a note in his hand. "Here is an invitation that I suppose you are both too busy to accept, so perhaps I might as well send an apology; eh, Harry?"

Down dropped the lesson-books upon the floor, and up sprang Harry in an ecstasy of delight. "An invitation! Oh! I like an invitation so very much! Pray tell us all about it!"

"Perhaps it is an invitation to spend a month with Dr. Lexicon. What would you say to that? They breakfast upon Latin grammars at school, and have a dish of real French verbs, smothered in onions, for dinner every day."

"But in downright earnest, Uncle David! where are we going?"

"Must I tell you! Well! that good-natured old lady, Mrs. Darwin, intends taking a large party of children next week, in her own carriage, to pass ten days at Ivy Lodge, a charming country house about

twenty miles off, where you are all to enjoy perfect happiness. I wish I could be ground down into a little boy myself, for the occasion! Poor, good woman! what a life she will lead! There is only one little drawback to your delight, that I am almost afraid to announce."

"What is that, Uncle David?" asked Harry, looking as if nothing in nature could ever make him grave again. "Are we to bite off our own noses before we return?"

"Not exactly; but somebody is to be of the party who will do it for you. Mrs. Darwin has heard that there are certain children who become occasionally rather unmanageable! I cannot think who they can be, for it is certainly nobody we ever saw; so she has requested that Mrs. Crabtree will follow by train."

Harry and Laura looked as if a glass of cold water had been thrown in their faces, after this was mentioned; but they soon forgot every little vexation in a burst of joy, when, some days afterwards, Mrs. Darwin stopped at the door to pick them up, in the most curious-looking carriage they had ever seen. It was a very large open car, as round as a bird's nest, and so perfectly crowded with children, that nobody could have supposed any room left even for a doll; but Mrs. Darwin said that whatever number of people came in, there was always accommodation for one more; and this really proved to be the case, for Harry and Laura soon elbowed their way into seats, and set off, waving their handker-