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Chapter 6 - Last Words

The next day was Sunday, and a goodly troop of young and old set forth to church. - some driving, some walking, all enjoying the lovely weather and the happy quietude which comes to refresh us when the work and worry of the week are over. Daisy had a headache; and Aunt Jo remained at home to keep her company, knowing very well that the worst ache was in the tender heart struggling dutifully against the love that grew stronger as the parting drew nearer.

'Daisy knows my wishes, and I trust her. You must keep an eye on Nat, and let him clearly understand that there is to be no "loving", or I shall forbid the letter-writing. I hate to seem cruel, but it is too soon for my dear girl to bind herself in any way,' said Mrs Meg, as she rustled about in her best grey silk, while waiting for Demi, who always escorted his pious mother to church as a peace-offering for crossing her wishes in other things.

'I will, dear; I'm lying in wait for all three boys today, like an old spider; and I will have a good talk with each. They know I understand them, and they always open their hearts sooner or later. You look like a nice, plump little Quakeress, Meg; and no one will believe that big boy is your son,' added Mrs Jo, as Demi came in shining with Sunday neatness, from his well-blackened boots to his smooth brown head.

'You flatter me, to soften my heart toward your boy. I know your ways, Jo, and I don't give in. Be firm, and spare me a scene by and by. As for John, as long as he is satisfied with his old mother, I don't care what people think,' answered Mrs Meg, accepting with a smile the little posy of sweet peas and mignonette Demi brought her.

Then, having buttoned her dove-coloured gloves with care, she took her son's arm and went proudly away to the carriage, where Amy and Bess waited, while Jo called after them, just as Marmee used to do:

'Girls, have you got nice pocket-handkerchiefs?' They all smiled at the familiar words, and three white banners waved as they drove away, leaving the spider to watch for her first fly. She did not wait long. Daisy was lying down with a wet cheek on the little hymnbook out of which she and Nat used to sing together; so Mrs Jo strolled about the lawn, looking very like a wandering mushroom with her large buff umbrella.

Dan had gone for a ten-mile stroll; and Nat was supposed to have accompanied him, but presently came sneaking back, unable to tear himself away from the Dovecote or lose a moment of nearness to his idol that last day. Mrs Jo saw him at once, and beckoned him to a rustic seat under the old elm, where they could have their confidences undisturbed, and both keep an eye on a certain white-curtained window, half hidden in vines.

'Nice and cool here. I'm not up to one of Dan's tramps today - it's so warm, and he goes so like a steam-engine. He headed for the swamp where his pet snakes used to live, and I begged to be excused,' said Nat, fanning himself with his straw hat, though the day was not oppressive.

'I'm glad you did. Sit and rest with me, and have one of our good old talks. We've both been so busy lately, I feel as if I didn't half know your plans; and I want to,' answered Mrs Jo, feeling sure that though they might start with Leipzig they would bring up at Plumfield,

'You are very kind, and there's nothing I'd like better. I don't realize I'm going so far - suppose I shan't till I get afloat. It's a splendid start, and I don't know how I can ever thank Mr Laurie for all he's done, or you either,' added Nat, with a break in his voice; for he was a tender-hearted fellow, and never forgot a kindness.

'You can thank us beautifully by being and doing all we hope and expect of you, my dear. In the new life you are going to there will be a thousand trials and temptations, and only your own wit and wisdom to rely on. That will be the time to test the principles we have tried to give you, and see how firm they are. Of course, you will make mistakes - we all do; but don't let go of your conscience and drift along blindly. Watch and pray, dear Nat; and while your hand gains skill, let your head grow wiser, and keep your heart as innocent and warm as it is now.'

'I'll try, Mother Bhaer, my very best to be a credit to you. I know I shall improve in my music - can't help it there; but I never shall be very wise, I'm afraid. As for my heart, you know, I leave it behind me in good keeping.'

As he spoke, Nat's eyes were fixed on the window with a look of love and longing that made his quiet face both manly and sad - plainly showing how strong a hold this boyish affection had upon him.

'I want to speak of that; and I know you will forgive what seems hard, because I do most heartily sympathize with you,' said Mrs Jo, glad to have her say.

'Yes, do talk about Daisy! I think of nothing but leaving and losing her. I have no hope - I suppose it is too much to ask; only I can't help loving her, wherever I am!' cried Nat, with a mixture of defiance and despair in his face that rather startled Mrs Jo.

'Listen to me and I'll try to give you both comfort and good advice. We all know that Daisy is fond of you, but her mother objects, and being a good girl she tries to obey. Young people think they never can change, but they do in the most wonderful manner, and very few die of broken hearts.' Mrs Jo smiled as she remembered another boy whom she had once tried to comfort, and then went soberly on while Nat listened as if his fate hung upon her lips.

'One of two things will happen. You will find someone else to love, or, better still, be so busy and happy in your music that you will be willing to wait for time to settle the matter for you both. Daisy will perhaps forget when you are gone, and be glad you are only friends. At any rate it is much wiser to have no promises made; then both are free, and in a year or two may meet to laugh over the little romance nipped in the bud.'

'Do you honestly think that?' asked Nat, looking at her so keenly that the truth had to come; for all his heart was in those frank blue eyes of his.

'No, I don't!' answered Mrs Jo. 'Then if you were in my place, what would you do?' he added, with a tone of command never heard in his gentle voice before.

'Bless me! the boy is in dead earnest, and I shall forget prudence in sympathy I'm afraid,' thought Mrs Jo, surprised and pleased by the unexpected manliness Nat showed.

'I'll tell you what I should do. I'd say to myself:

"I'll prove that my love is strong and faithful, and make Daisy's mother proud to give her to me by being not only a good musician but an excellent man, and so command respect and confidence. This I will try for; and if I fail, I shall be the better for the effort, and find comfort in the thought that I did my best for her sake."

'That is what I meant to do. But I wanted a word of hope to give me courage,' cried Nat, firing up as if the smouldering spark was set ablaze by a breath of encouragement. 'Other fellows, poorer and stupider than I, have done great things and come to honour. Why may not I, though I'm nothing now? I know Mrs Brooke remembers what I came from, but my father was honest though everything went wrong; and I have nothing to be ashamed of though I was a charity boy. I never will be ashamed of my people or myself, and I'll make other folks respect me if I can.'

'Good! that's the right spirit, Nat. Hold to it and make yourself a man. No one will be quicker to see and admire the brave work than my sister Meg. She does not despise your poverty or your past; but mothers are very tender over their daughters, and we Marches, though we have been poor, are, I confess, a little proud of our good family. We don't care for money; but a long line of virtuous ancestors is something to desire and to be proud of.'

'Well, the Blakes are a good lot. I looked 'em up, and not one was ever in prison, hanged, or disgraced in any way. We used to be rich and honoured years ago, but we've died out and got poor, and father was a street musician rather than beg; and I'll be one again before I'll do the mean things some men do and pass muster.'

Nat was so excited that Mrs Jo indulged in a laugh to calm him, and both went on more quietly.

'I told my sister all that and it pleased her. I am sure if you do well these next few years that she will relent and all be happily settled, unless that wonderful change, which you don't believe possible, should occur. Now, cheer up; don't be lackadaisical and blue. Say good-bye cheerfully and bravely, show a manly front, and leave a pleasant memory behind you. We all wish you well and hope much for you. Write to me every week and I'll send a good, gossipy answer. Be careful what you write to Daisy; don't gush or wail, for sister Meg will see the letters; and you can help your cause very much by sending sensible, cheery accounts of your life to us all.'

'I will; I will; it looks brighter and better already, and I won't lose my one comfort by any fault of my own. Thank you so much, Mother Bhaer, for taking my side. I felt so ungrateful and mean and crushed when I thought you all considered me a sneak who had no business to love such a precious girl as Daisy. No one said anything, but I knew how you felt, and that Mr Laurie sent me off partly to get me out of the way. Oh dear, life is pretty tough sometimes, isn't it? And Nat took his head in both hands as if it ached with the confusion of hopes and fears, passions and plans that proved boyhood was past and manhood had begun.

'Very tough, but it is that very struggle with obstacles which does us good. Things have been made easy for you in many ways, but no one can do everything. You must paddle your own canoe now, and learn to avoid the rapids and steer straight to the port you want to reach. I don't know just what your temptations will be for you have no bad habits and seem to love music so well, nothing can lure you from it. I only hope you won't work too hard.'

'I feel as if I could work like a horse, I'm so eager to get on; but I'll take care. Can't waste time being sick, and you've given me doses enough to keep me all right, I guess. Nat laughed as he remembered the book of directions Mrs Jo had written for him to consult on all occasions.

She immediately added some verbal ones on the subject of foreign messes, and having mounted one of her pet hobbies, was in full gallop when Emil was seen strolling about on the roof of the old house, that being his favourite promenade; for there he could fancy himself walking the deck, with only blue sky and fresh air about him.

'I want a word with the Commodore, and up there we shall be nice and quiet. Go and play to Daisy: it will put her to sleep and do you both good. Sit in the porch, so I can keep an eye on you as I promised'; and with a motherly pat on the shoulder Mrs Jo left Nat to his delightful task and briskly ascended to the house-top, not up the trellis as of old but by means of the stairs inside.

Emerging on the platform she found Emil cutting his initials afresh in the wood-work and singing 'Pull for the Shore', like the tuneful mariner he was.

'Come aboard and make yourself at home, Aunty,' he said, with a playful salute. 'I'm just leaving a P.P.C. in the old place, so when you fly up here for refuge you'll remember me.'

'Ah, my dear, I'm not likely to forget you. It doesn't need E. B. H. cut on all the trees and railings to remind me of my sailor boy'; and Mrs Jo took the seat nearest the blue figure astride the balustrade, not quite sure how to begin the little sermon she wanted to preach.

'Well, you don't pipe your eye and look squally when I sheer off as you used to, and that's a comfort. I like to leave port in fair weather and have a jolly send-off all round. Specially this time, for it will be a year or more before we drop anchor here again,' answered Emil, pushing his cap back, and glancing about him as if he loved old Plum and would be sorry never to see it any more.

'You have salt water enough without my adding to it. I'm going to be quite a Spartan mother, and send my sons to battle with no wailing, only the command:

"With your shield or on it",' said Mrs Jo cheerfully, adding after a pause: 'I often wish I could go too, and some day I will, when you are captain and have a ship of your own - as I've no doubt you will before long, with Uncle Herman to push you on.'

'When I do I'll christen her the Jolly Jo and take you as first mate. It would be regular larks to have you aboard, and I'd be a proud man to carry you round the world you've wanted to see so long and never could,' answered Emil, caught at once by this splendid vision.

'I'll make my first voyage with you and enjoy myself immensely in spite of seasickness and all the stormy winds that blow. I've always thought I'd like to see a wreck, a nice safe one with all saved after great danger and heroic deeds, while we clung like Mr Pillicoddy to main-top jibs and lee scuppers.'

'No wrecks yet, ma'am, but we'll try to accommodate customers. Captain says I'm a lucky dog and bring fair weather, so we'll save the dirty weather for you if you want it, laughed Emil, digging at the ship in full sail which he was adding to his design.

'Thanks, I hope you will. This long voyage will give you new experiences, and being an officer, you will have new duties and responsibilities. Are you ready for them? You take everything so gaily, I've been wondering if you realized that now you will have not only to obey but to command also, and power is a dangerous thing. Be careful that you don't abuse it or let it make a tyrant of you.'

'Right you are, ma'am. I've seen plenty of that, and have got my bearings pretty well, I guess. I shan't have very wide swing with Peters over me, but I'll see that the boys don't get abused when he's bowled up his jib. No right to speak before, but now I won't stand it.'

'That sounds mysteriously awful; could I ask what nautical torture "bowsing jibs" is?' asked Mrs Jo, in a tone of deep interest.

'Getting drunk. Peters can hold more grog than any man I ever saw; he keeps right side up, but is as savage as a norther, and makes things lively all round. I've seen him knock a fellow down with a belaying pin, and couldn't lend a hand. Better luck now, I hope.' And Emil frowned as if he already trod the quarter-deck, lord of all he surveyed.

'Don't get into trouble, for even Uncle Herman's favour won't cover insubordination, you know. You have proved yourself a good sailor; now be a good officer, which is a harder thing, I fancy. It takes a fine character to rule justly and kindly; you will have to put by your boyish ways and remember your dignity. That will be excellent training for you, Emil, and sober you down a bit. No more skylarking except here, so mind your ways, and do honour to your buttons,' said Mrs Jo, tapping one of the very bright brass ones that ornamented the new suit Emil was so proud of.

'I'll do my best. I know my time for skirmshander (chaff) is over, and I must steer a straighter course; but don't you fear, Jack ashore is a very different craft from what he is with blue water under his keel. I had a long talk with Uncle last night and got my orders; I won't forget 'em nor all I owe him. As for you, I'll name my first ship as I say, and have your bust for the figurehead, see if I don't,' and Emil gave his aunt a hearty kiss to seal the vow, which proceeding much amused Nat, playing softly in the porch of the Dovecote.

'You do me proud, Captain. But, dear, I want to say one thing and then I'm done; for you don't need much advice of mine after my good man has spoken. I read somewhere that every inch of rope used in the British Navy has a strand of red in it, so that wherever a bit of it is found it is known. That is the text of my little sermon to you. Virtue, which means honour, honesty, courage, and all that makes character, is the red thread that marks a good man wherever he is. Keep that always and everywhere, so that even if wrecked by misfortune, that sign shall still be found and recognized. Yours is a rough life, and your mates not all we could wish, but you can be a gentleman in the true sense of the word; and no matter what happens to your body, keep your soul clean, your heart true to those who love you, and do your duty to the end.'

As she spoke Emil had risen and stood listening with his cap off and a grave, bright look as if taking orders from a superior officer; when she ended, he answered briefly, but heartily:

'Please God, I will!'

'That's all; I have little fear for you, but one never knows when or how the weak moment may come, and sometimes a chance word helps us, as so many my dear mother spoke come back to me now for my own comfort and the guidance of my boys,' said Mrs Jo, rising; for the words had been said and no more were needed.

'I've stored 'em up and know where to find 'em when wanted. Often and often in my watch I've seen old Plum, and heard you and Uncle talking so plainly, I'd have sworn I was here. It is a rough life, Aunty, but a wholesome one if a fellow loves it as I do, and has an anchor to windward as I have. Don't worry about me, and I'll come home next year with a chest of tea that will cheer your heart and give you ideas enough for a dozen novels. Going below? All right, steady in the gangway! I'll be along by the time you've got out the cake-box. Last chance for a good old lunch ashore.'

Mrs Jo descended laughing, and Emil finished his ship whistling cheerfully, neither dreaming when and where this little chat on the house-top would return to the memory of one of them.

Dan was harder to catch, and not until evening did a quiet moment come in that busy family; when, while the rest were roaming about, Mrs Jo sat down to read in the study, and presently Dan looked in at the window.

'Come and rest after your long tramp; you must be tired,' she called, with an inviting nod towards the big sofa where so many boys had reposed - as much as that active animal ever does.

'Afraid I shall disturb you'; but Dan looked as if he wanted to stay his restless feet somewhere.

'Not a bit; I'm always ready to talk, shouldn't be a woman if I were not,' laughed Mrs Jo, as Dan swung himself in and sat down with an air of contentment very pleasant to see.

'Last day is over, yet somehow I don't seem to hanker to be off. Generally, I'm rather anxious to cut loose after a short stop. Odd, ain't it?' asked Dan, gravely picking grass and leaves out of his hair and beard; for he had been lying on the grass, thinking many thoughts in the quiet summer night.

'Not at all; you are beginning to get civilized. It's a good sign, and I'm glad to see it,' answered Mrs Jo promptly. 'You've had your swing, and want a change. Hope the farming will give it to you, though helping the Indians pleases me more: it is so much better to work for others than for one's self alone.'

'So 'tis,' assented Dan heartily. 'I seem to want to root somewhere and have folks of my own to take care of. Tired of my own company, I suppose, now I've seen so much better. I'm a rough, ignorant lot, and I've been thinking maybe I've missed it loafing round creation, instead of going in for education as the other chaps did. Hey?'

He looked anxiously at Mrs Jo; and she tried to hide the surprise this new outburst caused her; for till now Dan had scorned books and gloried in his freedom.

'No; I don't think so in your case. So far I'm sure the free life was best. Now that you are a man you can control that lawless nature better; but as a boy only great activity and much adventure could keep you out of mischief. Time is taming my colt, you see, and I shall yet be proud of him, whether he makes a pack-horse of himself to carry help to the starving or goes to ploughing as Pegasus did.'

Dan liked the comparison, and smiled as he lounged in the sofa-corner, with the new thoughtfulness in his eyes.

'Glad you think so. The fact is it's going to take a heap of taming to make me go well in harness anywhere. I want to, and I try now and then, but always kick over the traces and run away. No lives lost yet; but I shouldn't wonder if there was some time, and a general smash-up.'

'Why, Dan, did you have any dangerous adventures during this last absence? I fancied so, but didn't ask before, knowing you'd tell me if I could help in any way. Can I? And Mrs Jo looked anxiously at him; for a sudden lowering expression had come into his face, and he leaned forward as if to hide it.

'Nothing very bad; but 'Frisco isn't just a heaven on earth, you know, and it's harder to be a saint there than here,' he answered slowly; then, as if he had made up his mind to 'fess', as the children used to say, he sat up, and added rapidly, in a half-defiant, half-shamefaced way, 'I tried gambling, and it wasn't good for me.'

'Was that how you made your money?'

'Not a penny of it! That's all honest, if speculation isn't a bigger sort of gambling. I won a lot; but I lost or gave it away, and cut the whole concern before it got the better of me.'

Thank heaven for that! Don't try it again; it may have the terrible fascination for so many. Keep to your mountains and prairies, and shun cities, if these things tempt you, Dan. Better lose your life than your soul, and one such passion leads to worse sins, as you know better than I.'

Dan nodded, and seeing how troubled she was, said, in a lighter tone, though still the shadow of that past experience remained:

'Don't be scared; I'm all right now; and a burnt dog dreads the fire. I don't drink, or do the things you dread; don't care for 'em; but I get excited, and then this devilish temper of mine is more than I can manage. Fighting a moose or a buffalo is all right; but when you pitch into a man, no matter how great a scamp he is, you've got to look out. I shall kill someone some day; that's all I'm afraid of. I do hate a sneak!' And Dan brought his fist down on the table with a blow that made the lamp totter and the books skip.

'That always was your trial, Dan, and I can sympathize with you; for I've been trying to govern my own temper all my life, and haven't learnt yet,' said Mrs Jo, with a sigh. 'For heaven's sake, guard your demon well, and don't let a moment's fury ruin all your life. As I said to Nat, watch and pray, my dear boy. There is no other help or hope for human weakness but God's love and patience.'

Tears were in Mrs Jo's eyes as she spoke; for she felt this deeply, and knew how hard a task it is to rule these bosom sins of ours. Dan looked touched, also uncomfortable, as he always did when religion of any sort was mentioned, though he had a simple creed of his own, and tried to live up to it in his blind way.

'I don't do much praying; don't seem to come handy to me; but I can watch like a redskin, only it's easier to mount guard over a lurking grizzly than my own cursed temper. It's that I'm afraid of, if I settle down. I can get on with wild beasts first-rate; but men rile me awfully, and I can't take it out in a free fight, as I can with a bear or a wolf. Guess I'd better head for the Rockies, and stay there a spell longer - till I'm tame enough for decent folks, if I ever am.' And Dan leaned his rough head on his hands in a despondent attitude.

'Try my sort of help, and don't give up. Read more, study a little, and try to meet a better class of people, who won't "rile", but soothe and strengthen you. We don't make you savage, I'm sure; for you have been as meek as a lamb, and made us very happy.'

'Glad of it; but I've felt like a hawk in a hen-house all the same, and wanted to pounce and tear more than once. Not so much as I used, though,' added Dan, after a short laugh at Mrs Jo's surprised face. 'I'll try your plan, and keep good company this bout if I can; but a man can't pick and choose, knocking about as I do.'

'Yes, you can this time; for you are going on a peaceful errand and can keep clear of temptation if you try. Take some books and read; that's an immense help; and books are always good company if you have the right sort. Let me pick out some for you.' And Mrs Jo made a bee-line to the well-laden shelves, which were the joy of her heart and the comfort of her life.

'Give me travels and stories, please; don't want any pious works, can't seem to relish 'em, and won't pretend I do,' said Dan, following to look over her head with small favour at the long lines of well-worn volumes.

Mrs Jo turned short round, and putting a hand on either broad shoulder, looked him in the eye, saying soberly:

'Now, Dan, see here; never sneer at good things or pretend to be worse than you are. Don't let false shame make you neglect the religion without which no man can live. You needn't talk about it if you don't like, but don't shut your heart to it in whatever shape it comes. Nature is your God now; she has done much for you; let her do more, and lead you to know and love a wiser and more tender teacher, friend, and comforter than she can ever be. That is your only hope; don't throw it away, and waste time; for sooner or later you will feel the need of Him, and He will come to you and hold you up when all other help fails.'

Dan stood motionless, and let her read in his softened eyes the dumb desire that lived in his heart, though he had no words to tell it, and only permitted her to catch a glimpse of the divine spark which smoulders or burns clearly in every human soul. He did not speak; and glad to be spared some answer which should belie his real feelings, Mrs Jo hastened to say, with her most motherly smile:

'I saw in your room the little Bible I gave you long ago; it was well worn outside, but fresh within, as if not much read. Will you promise me to read a little once a week, dear, for my sake? Sunday is a quiet day everywhere, and this book is never old nor out of place. Begin with the stories you used to love when I told them to you boys. David was your favourite, you remember? Read him again; he'll suit you even better now, and you'll find his sins and repentance useful reading till you come to the life and work of a diviner example than he. You will do it, for love of mother Bhaer, who always loved her "firebrand" and hoped to save him?'

'I will,' answered Dan, with a sudden brightening of face that was like a sunburst through a cloud, full of promise though so short-lived and rare.

Mrs Jo turned at once to the books and began to talk of them, knowing well that Dan would not hear any more just then. He seemed relieved; for it was always hard for him to show his inner self, and he took pride in hiding it as an Indian does in concealing pain or fear.

'Hallo, here's old Sintram! I remember him; used to like him and his tantrums, and read about 'em to Ted. There he is riding ahead with Death and the Devil alongside.'

As Dan looked at the little picture of the young man with horse and hound going bravely up the rocky defile, accompanied by the companions who ride beside most men through this world, a curious impulse made Mrs Jo say quickly:

'That's you, Dan, just you at this time! Danger and sin are near you in the life you lead; moods and passions torment you; the bad father left you to fight alone, and the wild spirit drives you to wander up and down the world looking for peace and self-control. Even the horse and hound are there, your Octoo and Don, faithful friends, unscared by the strange mates that go with you. You have not got the armour yet, but I'm trying to show you where to find it. Remember the mother Sintram loved and longed to find, and did find when his battle was bravely fought, his reward well earned? You can recollect your mother; and I have always felt that all the good qualities you possess come from her. Act out the beautiful old story in this as in the other parts, and try to give her back a son to be proud of.'

Quite carried away by the likeness of the quaint tale to Dan's life and needs, Mrs Jo went on pointing to the various pictures which illustrated it, and when she looked up was surprised to see how struck and interested he seemed to be. Like all people of his temperament he was very impressionable, and his life among hunters and Indians had made him superstitious; he believed in dreams, liked weird tales, and whatever appealed to the eye or mind, vividly impressed him more than the wisest words. The story of the poor, tormented Sintram came back clearly as he looked and listened, symbolizing his secret trials even more truly than Mrs Jo knew; and just at that moment this had an effect upon him that never was forgotten. But all he said was:

'Small chance of that. I don't take much stock in the idea of meeting folks in heaven. Guess mother won't remember the poor little brat she left so long ago; why should she?'

'Because true mothers never forget their children; and I know she was one, from the fact that she ran away from the cruel husband, to save her little son from bad influences. Had she lived, life would have been happier for you, with this tender friend to help and comfort you. Never forget that she risked everything for your sake, and

don't let it be in vain.'

Mrs Jo spoke very earnestly, knowing that this was the one sweet memory of Dan's early life, and glad to have recalled it at this moment; for suddenly a great tear splashed down on the page where Sintram kneels at his mother's feet, wounded, but victorious over sin and death. She looked up, well pleased to have touched Dan to the heart's core, as that drop proved; but a sweep of the arm brushed away the tell-tale, and his beard hid the mate to it, as he shut the book, saying with a suppressed quiver in his strong voice:

'I'll keep this, if nobody wants it. I'll read it over, and maybe it will do me good. I'd like to meet her anywhere, but don't believe I ever shall.'

'Keep it and welcome. My mother gave it to me; and when you read it try to believe that neither of your mothers will ever forget you.'

Mrs Jo gave the book with a caress; and simply saying: 'Thanks; good night,' Dan thrust it into his pocket, and walked straight away to the river to recover from this unwonted mood of tenderness and confidence.

Next day the travellers were off. All were in good spirits, and a cloud of handkerchiefs whitened the air as they drove away in the old bus, waving their hats to everyone and kissing their hands, especially to mother Bhaer, who said in her prophetic tone as she wiped her eyes, when the familiar rumble died away:

'I have a feeling that something is going to happen to some of them, and they will never come back to me, or come back changed. Well, I can only say, God be with my boys!'

And He was.