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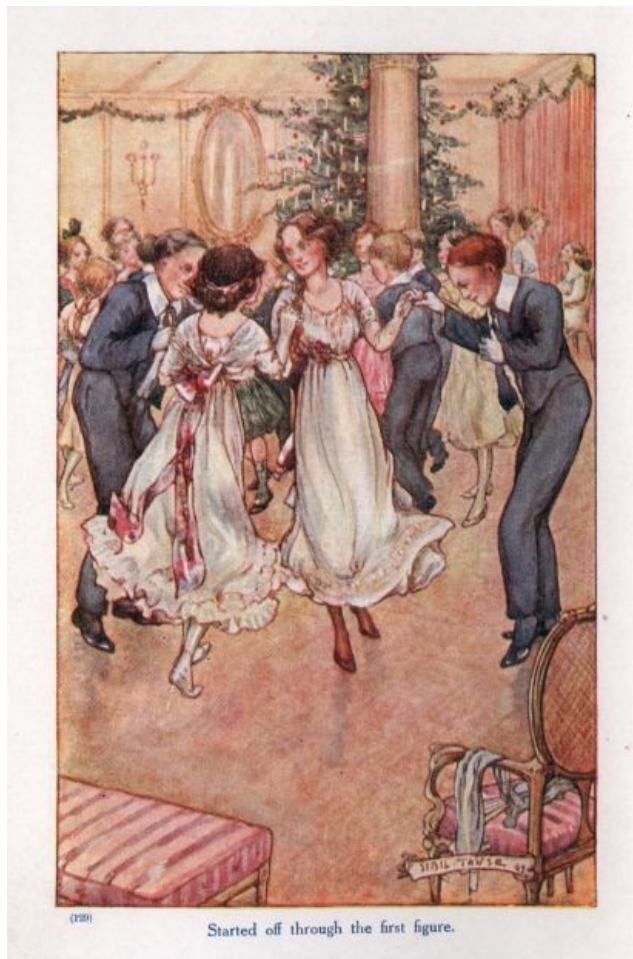
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**AUNT JUDITH**  
**The Story of a Loving Life**

**BY**  
**GRACE BEAUMONT**

THOMAS NELSON AND SONS  
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# AUNT JUDITH.

## CHAPTER I.

### A SCHOOL-GIRL QUARREL.

"Girls, girls, I've news for you!" cried Winnifred Blake, entering the school-room and surveying the faces of her school-mates with great eagerness.

Luncheon hour was almost over, and the pupils belonging to Mrs. Elder's Select Establishment for Young Ladies were gathered together in the large school-room, some enjoying a merry chat, others, more studiously inclined, conning over a forthcoming lesson.

"Give us the benefit of your news quickly, Winnie," said Ada Irvine, looking round from her snug seat on the broad window-ledge; "surely we must be going to hear something wonderful when *you* are so excited;" and the girl eyed her animated school-fellow half scornfully.

"A new pupil is coming," announced Winnie with an air of great solemnity. "Be patient, my friends, and I'll tell you how I know. Dinner being earlier to-day, I managed to get back to school sooner than usual, and was just crossing the hall to join you all in the school-room, when the drawing-room door opened, and Mrs. Elder appeared, accompanied by a lady in a long loose cloak and huge bonnet—regular coal-scuttle affair, girls; so large, in fact, that it was quite impossible to get a glimpse of her face. Mrs. Elder was saying as I passed, 'I shall expect your niece to-morrow morning, Miss Latimer, at nine o'clock; and trust she will prosecute her studies with all diligence, and prove a credit to the school.'" Winnie mimicked the lady-principal's soft, plausible voice as she spoke.

"A new pupil!" remarked Ada once more, her voice raised in supreme contempt; "really, Winnie, I fail to understand your excitement over such a trifle. Why, she may be a green-grocer's daughter for all you know to the contrary;" and the speaker's dainty nose was turned up with a gesture of infinite scorn.

"Well, and what then, Miss Conceit?" retorted Winnie, flushing angrily at her school-mate's contemptuous tone; "I presume a green-grocer's daughter is not exempted from possessing the same talented abilities which characterize your charming self."

"Certainly not," replied the other with the same quiet ring of scorn in her voice; "but, pray, who would associate with a green-grocer's daughter? Most assuredly not I. My mother is very particular with regard to the circle in which I move."

Winnie swept a graceful courtesy.

"Allow me to express my deep sense of obligation," she said mockingly, "at the honour conferred on my unworthy self by your attempted patronage and esteem." Then, changing her tone and raising her little head proudly—"Ada Irvine, I am ashamed of you—your pride is insufferable; and my heartiest wish is that some day you may be looked down upon and viewed with the supreme contempt you now bestow on those lower (most unfortunately) in the social scale than yourself."

"Thanks for your amiable wish," was the answer, given in that easy, tranquil voice which the owner well knew irritated her adversary more than the fiercest burst of passion would have done; "but I am afraid there is little likelihood of its ever being realized."

Winnie elevated her eyebrows. "Is that your opinion?" she said in affected surprise, while the other school-girls gathered round, tittering at the caustic little tongue. "I suppose you study the poets, Miss Irvine; and if so, doubtless you will remember who it is that says:—

'Oh wad some power the giftie gie us  
To see oursels as ithers see us!'"

The mischievous child stopped for a second, and then continued: "I am afraid you look at yourself and your various charms through rose-coloured spectacles, certainly not with 'a jaundiced eye;'—but I beg your pardon; were you about to speak?" and Winnie looked innocently into the fair face of her antagonist, which was now white and set with passion.

The blue eyes were flashing with an angry light, the pretty lips trembling, and the smooth brow knit in a heavy frown; but only for a few moments. By-and-by the features relaxed their fixed and stony gaze; the countenance resumed its usual haughty expression; and, lifting up the book which was lying on her lap, Ada opened it at the required page, and ended the discussion by saying, "I shall consider it my duty to inform Mrs. Elder of your charming sentiments; in the meantime, kindly excuse me from continuing such highly edifying conversation." With that she bent her head over the French grammar, and soon appeared thoroughly engrossed in the conjugation of the verb *avoir*, to have, while her mischievous school-mate turned away with a light shrug of her pretty shoulders.

Winnifred Blake, the youngest daughter of a wealthy, influential gentleman, was a bright, happy

girl of about fourteen years, with a kind, generous heart, and warm, impulsive nature. Being small and slight in stature, she seemed to all appearance a mere child; and the quaint, gipsy face peeping from beneath a mass of shaggy, tangled curls showed a pair of large laughter-loving eyes and a mischievous little mouth.

Was she clever?

Well, that still remained to be seen. Certainly, the bright, intelligent countenance gave no indication of a slow understanding and feeble brain; but Winnie hated study, and consequently was usually to be found adorning the foot of the class. "It is deliciously comfortable here, girls," she would say to her school-mates when even they protested against such continual indolence; "you see I am near the fire, and that is a consideration in the cold, wintry days, I assure you. Don't annoy yourselves over my shortcomings. Lazy, selfish people always get on in the world;" and speaking thus, the incorrigible child would nestle back in her lowly seat with an air of the utmost satisfaction.

Ada Irvine smiled in supreme contempt over what she termed Winnie's stupidity, and would repeat her own perfectly-learned lesson with additional triumph in her tone; but the faultless repetition by no means disconcerted her lazy school-mate, who was often heard to say, with seeming simplicity, "I could do just as well if I chose; but then I don't choose, and that, you see, makes all the difference."

Ada Irvine was an only child, and her parents having gone abroad in the (alas, how often vain!) search after health, had left her with Mrs. Elder, to whose care she was intrusted with every charge for her comfort and advantage—a charge which that young lady took great care should be amply fulfilled. She was only six months older than Winnie, but very tall, and already giving the promise of great beauty in after years. Talented and brilliant also, she held a powerful sway over the minds and actions of her schoolmates, and queened in the school right royally; but the cold, haughty pride which marred her nature failed to make her such a general favourite as her fiery, little adversary.

In the afternoon, when the school was being dismissed for the day, Ada sought the presence of the lady-principal; and consequently, just as Winnie was strapping up her books preparatory to going home, a servant appeared in the dressing-room summoning Miss Blake to Mrs. Elder's sanctum.

"Now you're in for it, Winnie," said the girls pityingly; "Ada has kept to her word and told. How mean!" But the child only tossed her curly head, and with slightly heightened colour followed the maid to the comfortable parlour where the lady-principal was usually to be found.

Mrs. Elder, seated by a small fire which burned brightly in the shining grate, turned a face expressive of the most severe displeasure on the defiant little culprit as she entered; while Ada, standing slightly in the shadow of the window-curtain, looked at the victim haughtily, and shaped her lips in a malicious smile at the lady-principal's opening words.

"I presume you are aware of my reason for requesting your presence here, Miss Blake," she began in icy tones; "and I trust you have come before me sincerely penitent for your fault. I cannot express in sufficiently strong terms the displeasure I feel at your shameful conduct this afternoon. I never thought a pupil of this establishment could be guilty of such unlady-like language as fell from your lips, and it grieves me to know that I have in my school a young girl capable of cherishing the evil spirit of animosity against a fellow-creature. What have you to say in defence of your conduct? Can you vindicate it in any way, or shall I take your silence as full confession of your guilt?"

Winnie pressed her lips tightly together, but did not speak. "I need not attempt to clear myself," she mentally decided. "Ada will have coloured our quarrel to suit herself, and being Mrs. Elder's favourite, her word will be relied on before mine; that has been the case before, and will be so again."

The lady-principal, however, mistook the continued silence for conscious guilt.

"Then I demand that an ample apology be made to Miss Irvine now, in my presence," she said once more in frigid tones. "Come, Miss Blake; my time is too precious to be trifled with."

Winnie's eyes sparkled, and raising her small head defiantly, she replied, "I decline to apologize, Mrs. Elder. I only spoke as I thought, and am quite prepared to say the same again if occasion offers. Miss Irvine knows my words, if distasteful, were but too true."

The lady-principal gasped. "Miss Blake," she cried at length, horrified at the bold assertion, and endeavouring to quail her audacious pupil with one stern, withering glance, "this is dreadful!" But the angry child only pouted, and repeated doggedly, "It is quite true."

Then Mrs. Elder rose, and laying her hand firmly on Winnie's shoulder, said quietly, but with an awful meaning underlying her words, "Apologize at once, Miss Blake, or I shall resort to stronger measures, and also complain to your parents"—a threat which terrified the unwilling girl into submission.

Going forward with flushed cheeks and mutinous mouth, she stood before the triumphant Ada, and said sullenly, "Please accept my apology for unlady-like language, Miss Irvine. I am sorry I should have degraded myself and spoken as I did, but" (and here a mischievous light swept the gloomy cloud from the piquant face and lit it up with an elfish smile) "you provoked me, and I am very outspoken."

Ada coloured with anger and vexation; and in spite of her displeasure, Mrs. Elder found it difficult

to repress a smile.

"That will do," she pronounced coldly; "such an apology is only adding insult to injury. You will kindly write out twenty times four pages of French vocabulary, and also remain at the foot of all your classes during the next fortnight. Go! I am greatly displeased with you, Miss Blake;" and as the lady-principal waved her hand in token of dismissal, she frowned angrily, and looked both mortified and indignant.

Winnie required no second bidding. She drew her slight figure up to its full height, made her exit with all the dignity of an offended queen, entered the now deserted dressing-room, and seizing her books, hurried from the school, and was soon running rapidly down the busy street.

"Hallo, Win! what's the row? One would think you had stolen the giant's seven-league boots," cried a voice from behind. "Did ever I see a girl dashing along at such a rate!" And turning round, Winnie saw before her a tall, strapping boy, whose honest, freckled face, illumined by a broad, friendly grin, shone brightly on her from under a shock of fiery red hair.

"I'll bet I know without your telling me," he continued, coming to her side and removing his heavy load of books from one shoulder to the other. "Been quarrelling with the lovely Ada, eh?" and he glanced kindly at the little figure by his side.

Winnie laughed slightly. "You're about right, Dick," she replied. "There has been a cat-and-dog fight; only this time the cat's velvety paws scratched the poor little dog and wounded it sorely."

"Ah! you went at it tooth and nail, I suppose," Dick said philosophically; "pity you girls can't indulge in a regular stand-up fight." And the wild boy began to brandish his arms about as if he would thoroughly enjoy commencing there and then.

The quick flush of temper was over now, and the girl's eyes gleamed mischievously as she replied, "I've a weapon of my own, Dick, fully as powerful as yours. I'll use my tongue;" and the audacious little minx smiled saucily into her brother's honest face.

A hearty roar greeted her words, and Dick almost choked before he managed to say, "Go it, Win; I'll back you up. Commend me to a woman's tongue!" And the boy, unable to control his risible faculties, burst into a hearty laugh, which died away in a chuckle of genuine merriment.

Richard Blake, or Dick (the name by which he was generally called) was Winnie's favourite brother, and she almost idolized the big, kindly fellow, on whom the other members of the family showered ridicule and contempt. He was a bluff, outspoken lad, with a brave, true heart as tender and pitiful as a woman's; but, lacking both the capacity for and inclination to study, he by no means proved a brilliant scholar, and thus brought down on himself the censure of his masters and the heavy displeasure of his father. "Hard words break no bones. I daresay I shall manage through the world somehow," he would say after having received some cutting remark from an elder brother or sister; and Winnie, always his stanch friend and advocate, would nod her sunny head and prophesy confidently, "We shall be proud of you yet, Dick."

In the meantime they sauntered along, swinging their books and chatting gaily, till a turn in the road brought them to a quiet square where handsome dwelling-houses faced each other in sombre grandeur.

"No. 3 Victoria Square—this way, miss," said Dick, mounting the steps and ringing the bell violently.

"What a boy you are!" laughed Winnie, following, and giving her brother's rough coat a mischievous pull. "Whenever will you learn sense, Dick?" Then the door opened, and with glad young hearts brother and sister entered their comfortable home.

## CHAPTER II.

### AUNT JUDITH.

The October night closed in dark and wild. The wind, rising in fierce gusts, swept along the streets with relentless fury, whirling the cans on the roofs of the houses, and whistling down the chimneys with relentless roar; passers-by drew up the collars of their coats and bent their faces under the pitiless blast; while the rain, falling with its monotonous splash, splash, added to the gloom and rawness of the night.

Up and down the platform of one of the principal stations in the town a lady paced, every now and then peering into the murky darkness, or waylaying a passing porter to ask when the down-train was due. She was tall and slender, but the huge bonnet and thick veil which she wore so effectually concealed her face that it was impossible to make out whether she was young or old.

At last a whistle and the loud ringing of the bell proclaimed that the train was close at hand, and in all the glory of its powerful mechanism the great locomotive swept into the busy station. The lady, stepping nearer the edge of the platform, gazed into the windows of the carriages as the train passed, slackening speed; then with a quick gesture of recognition went forward and turned the handle of one of the doors at which a young girl was standing looking wistfully on the many faces hurrying by. "Nellie Latimer, I am sure," she said in a kind voice; "'tis a dreary night to bid you welcome. I am your Aunt Judith, dear," and assisting the girl out of the carriage, she lifted her veil for a single moment and laid a kiss on the fresh, young cheek. "What have you in the way of luggage? One trunk. Well, stand here while I go and find it," saying which she glided away and was lost to view in the bustling crowd. In a few moments she returned, followed by a porter bearing the modest, black box; and bidding the young traveller come with her, left the platform, hailed a cab, and was soon driving with her tired charge along the wet streets.

Aunt Judith gazed at the lonely little figure sitting so quietly facing her, and mentally deciding that, wearied out and home-sick, the child would naturally be disinclined for conversation, she leaned back on the carriage cushion and fell into a long train of thought.

Nellie Latimer was thankful for the silence. She had left her home early that morning for the purpose of wintering in town with her aunts, and, as it was the first flight from the parental nest, her heart was sore with grief and longing. She was the eldest daughter of Dr. Latimer, a poor country practitioner, whose practice brought him too limited an income with which to meet the expenses of the large family of hardy boys and girls growing up around him. He had sent Nellie to the village school, and when she had mastered all the knowledge to be gleaned there, endeavoured to instruct her himself; but he could ill spare the time, and so hailed with feelings of the deepest gratitude a letter from his eldest sister offering to take Nellie and give her all the advantages of a town education, "Let the child come, John," she wrote in her simple, kindly style; "she will help to brighten the hearts of three old maids, and a young face will be a cheery sight in our quiet cottage home. She will have a thorough education, and we shall endeavour to bring her up so that she may be a fitting helpmate to her mother on her return home." Dr. Latimer showed the letter to his wife, who read it thankfully. "Your sister is a noble woman, John," she said brokenly; "let us accept her offer, and may God bless her."

Thus it was that Nellie had left the home nest and come to live her life in the busy town. She knew almost nothing about her aunts, and had never seen them; for Dr. Latimer dwelt in a far-off country village, and the distance from it to the city was very great. The postman would occasionally bring a letter, book, or paper to the doctor; and every Christmas a hamper filled with choice meats and other dainties would find its way to the house, showing that the young nephews and nieces were not forgotten by the aunts they had never seen. Those "good fairies," as the little children styled them, were three in number: Aunt Judith, the bread-winner—though how, Nellie as yet did not know; Aunt Debby, the Martha of the household, hard-working and practical; and Aunt Margaret, an invalid, seldom able to leave her couch.

"I cannot tell you much about them, dear," Mrs. Latimer had said one night when talking with her eldest daughter over the coming parting. "They (meaning the aunts) were abroad on account of Aunt Margaret's health when I first met your father, and did not return home till some time after our marriage. Aunt Margaret was not any better, and had settled down into invalid habits, requiring the constant attention and care of both sisters. Aunt Judith spoke at one time of coming to spend a few days with us; but Aunt Margaret could not spare her, and so she never came. Your father says Aunt Judith is a brave, true woman, and keeps the little household together, besides the many kindnesses she bestows on us. I trust you will like your aunts, my child, and be happy with them, even though you are away from us all."

Nellie had been thinking all this over while the cab was quickly whirling her along the now deserted thoroughfares, and so deeply had her mind been occupied with these thoughts that she started in amazement when the driver drew up before the entrance of a small cottage, and she saw a bright flood of light streaming out from the hastily opened door.

"Here we are, dear," said Aunt Judith's kind voice breaking in on her reverie; "this is your new home, and there is Aunt Debby waiting to bid you welcome. Run! I shall follow you immediately."

Nellie, obeying, hurried up the little gravelled path, and reaching the door, found herself folded in Aunt Debby's motherly embrace, with Aunt Debby's arms round her, and Aunt Debby's round, rosy face pressed close to her own.

"Dear, dear! to think I should be holding one of John's children to my heart," said the good lady, wiping away an imaginary tear from her soft, plump cheek. "There, come in, child, you are thrice welcome. How strange it all seems, to be sure;" and chatting away, Aunt Debby led her weary niece into the cosy parlour, where the bright fire and daintily spread table seemed to whisper of warmth and home comforts.

"There, sit down, dear, and let me unfasten your cloak," she continued, placing Nellie on a chair and proceeding to take off her hat with its well soaked plume. "Dear heart! how the child resembles her father! John's very eyes and nose, I declare. Well, well, I'm getting an old woman, and the sight of this fresh, young face warns me of the passing years."

"I think, Debby, you should show Nellie her room and let her refresh herself; there will be ample

opportunity for talking to her later on, and the child is wearied with travelling."

Aunt Judith, who had just entered, said this in such a kind voice that it was impossible to take offence, and Miss Deborah, raising her little, twinkling eyes to her sister's face, replied, "Ah! Judith, I need you to look after me still.—I have a sad tongue, my dear (to Nellie), and am apt to chatter when I ought to be silent; come, let me take you to your room now," and off trotted Aunt Debby with an air of the utmost importance.

Nellie followed wearily up the tiny stair with its white matting, and then paused in glad delight as her guide, throwing open a door on one side of the landing, ushered her into a small room. It was simply and plainly furnished, as indeed was everything else in the house; but oh! the spotless purity of the snowy counterpane and pretty toilets. The curtains, looped back with crimson ribbon, fell to the ground in graceful folds. Light sketches and illuminated texts adorned the delicately tinted walls, and on a small table stood an antique vase filled with fairest autumn flowers.

"Are you pleased with your little bedroom, Nellie?" asked Aunt Debby, noting the girl's look of genuine admiration; "there's not much to be seen in the way of grandeur, but it's clean," and practical Miss Deborah emphasized her words by nodding her head vigorously.

"Pleased, Aunt Debby! Why, everything is beautiful. I never had a room all to myself before, and this one is simply lovely. How can I thank you sufficiently for being so good to me?" and there were tears in Nellie's eyes as she spoke.

"Nonsense, my dear," replied the kind woman in her brisk, cheery way; "we are only too pleased to have you with us, and trust you will be happy here;—now, if my tongue is not off again. There—no other word; wash your face and hands, child, then come down to the parlour," and Aunt Debby hurried from the room.

Nellie found the cold water very refreshing, and made her appearance downstairs with a much brighter, cleaner countenance. She found Miss Deborah already seated before the urn, sugaring the cups and adding cream with a very liberal hand; while Aunt Judith lay back on a low rocking-chair looking dreamily into the glowing embers. Both started as the girl entered, and Miss Latimer, rising, placed a chair before the table and bade Nellie be seated, patting her niece's head gently in her slow, kindly fashion, ere she sat down herself and prepared to attend to the young traveller's wants.

Nellie, though tired and home-sick, felt very hungry, and did ample justice to the savoury meal, greatly to Aunt Debby's delight; for that good lady had spared no pains, and had burnt her merry, plump face over the fire, in order to make the supper a success.

Neither aunt troubled her niece with questions, but each talked quietly to the other; and thus left alone, as it were, Nellie found sufficient time to study both faces, and jot down mentally her opinion of each at first sight. One glance at Miss Deborah's rounded contour and twinkling eyes was quite enough; but Miss Latimer's peaceful countenance fascinated the young girl, and seemed to hold her spell-bound. Yet, from a critical point of view, Aunt Judith's was not a pretty face. It was defective in colouring and outline, and there were lines on the quiet brow and round the patient lips; but the look in the eyes—Nellie never forgot that look all her life—it seemed as if Miss Latimer's very soul shone through those dark blue orbs, and revealed the pure, spiritual nature of the woman. A keen physiognomist might have traced the words "I have lived and suffered" in the calm, hushed face with its crown of silver-streaked hair; but Nellie, only a simple child, merely gazed and wondered what it was that made her think Aunt Judith's the most beautiful face she had ever seen.

"Now, dear," said the object of her thoughts, smiling kindly and turning towards her when the dainty repast was over, "I think we shall send you to bed, and after a good night's rest you will be refreshed and ready for school-work to-morrow. Don't trouble removing the plates, Debby; we shall have worship first, and that will free Nellie."

Aunt Debby rose from her chair, handed Miss Latimer the old family Bible, and placing a smaller one in Nellie's lap, reseated herself and waited for Aunt Judith to begin.

A chapter slowly and reverently read, a prayer perfect in its childlike simplicity, then Miss Latimer laid a hand on her niece's shoulder and bade her "Good-night;" whilst Miss Deborah, lighting a candle, led the way as before, and after seeing she required no further service, treated the girl to a hearty embrace, and prepared to depart.

"A good sleep, child. You'll see Aunt Meg tomorrow; this has been one of her bad days, but I expect she will be much better in the morning." These were Aunt Debby's last words, and she bustled away as if fearing to what extent her tongue might lead her.

Nellie undressed, jumped into bed, and then, safely muffled under the warm blankets, cried her homesickness out in the darkness. "O mother, mother," she sobbed, "how I miss you! it is all so strange and lonely. What shall I do?" But even as she wailed in her young heart's anguish, the blankets were gently drawn aside, and a stream of light shining down revealed the flushed tear-stained face on the pillow, and showed Aunt Judith's gentle form bending over the sobbing figure.

"Nellie," she said in that kind voice so peculiarly her own—"Nellie, my child, I was afraid of this;" and putting her arms round the trembling girl, she drew the weary head to her breast, and smoothed the tangled hair with soothing touch. By-and-by the sobs became less violent, and when they had finally

ceased Miss Latimer spoke, and her kind words were to the lonely heart as dew to the thirsty flowers.

In after years Nellie found what a precious privilege it was to have a talk with Aunt Judith; and long after, when the brave, true heart had ceased to beat, and the quietly-folded hands spoke of a finished work, she drew from her treasured storehouse the blessed memory of wise, loving counsels, of grand, beautiful thoughts; and carrying them into her daily life, endeavoured to make that life "one grand, sweet song."

### CHAPTER III.

#### WILL YOU HAVE ME FOR A FRIEND?

"Late again! Winnifred Blake, I am ashamed of you; come, run as fast as you can;" and scolding herself vigorously, Winnie changed her leisurely step to a brisk trot which brought her to the schoolhouse door exactly fifteen minutes after the hour. "Punishment exercise yesterday, and fine to-day—how horrible!" she broke out again, entering the empty dressing-room and surveying the array of hats on the various pegs, all of which seemed to rebuke her tardiness. "Miss Smith will purse up her lips, and utter some cutting sarcasm of course, but I don't care," and Winnie, kicking off her boots, pitched them—well, I don't think she herself knew where. The jacket being next unfastened, she proceeded to divest herself of her hat, and pulled with such violence that the elastic snapped and struck her face severely. Winnie's temper (so Dick declared) resembled nothing so much as a pop-gun, going off, as it were, with a great bang on the least provocation. Flinging the offending article to the other side of the room, and addressing it in anything but complimentary terms, she picked up her books, shook her shaggy mane over her face, and marched straight to the large class-room, where the girls were already busy over their Bible lesson.

"Half-an-hour late, Miss Blake. You really are improving. Allow me to remind you of the fine, also of Mrs. Elder's instructions to take the lowest seat;" and Miss Smith, the senior governess, uttered the words with withering scorn.

"Good-morning," replied the culprit, hiding an angry little heart under a smiling exterior, and slipping her penny into the box on the teacher's desk; "my sleep was slightly broken last night, and that made me late."

Here the girls tittered, and Miss Smith frowned. "Indeed," she commented haughtily; "pray, does your constitution require a stated interval of so many hours for sleep *every* night?" and the governess laid special stress on the word "every."

"Well, perhaps not," replied Winnie, coolly sitting down and proceeding to unfasten her books; "but I always indulge in an extra half hour if I am disturbed in my slumbers. Broken rest tells sorely on my nervous system, and renders both myself and others miserable."

At this point some of the pupils laughed outright, and Miss Smith's anger rose.

"Silence!" she said, rising and tapping rapidly on the desk. "Miss Blake, you are a disgrace to the school. Attend to your lesson, and let me hear no more rude, impertinent language, or I shall punish you severely," and the governess treated Winnie to one glance of supreme contempt as she spoke.

The child ground her little white teeth together as she gazed on the teacher's sour-faced visage and listened to the tones of her high-pitched voice. "Regular crab-apple, and as cross as two sticks," she muttered, knitting her brow in an angry frown, but smoothing it hastily and calling up the necessary look of attention as Miss Smith cast a swift glance in her direction; "how I should like to tell her every horrid thought in my heart concerning herself. She would be edified," and at the bare idea Winnie shook so much with suppressed merriment that the girl next her opened a pair of bright, hazel eyes and stared in amazement at the audacious child.

The little mischief caught the look, and returning it with interest found she was seated beside the new pupil whose advent had occasioned yesterday's quarrel. There was something very engaging in the frank, open countenance, and Winnie smiled pleasantly as she met the astonished gaze.

"Am I very rude and disobedient?" she asked, or rather whispered roguishly; "you look so shocked and amazed. Please, don't judge by first impressions; my bark is worse than my bite, and I can be a very good girl when I choose. Self-praise is no honour, of course, and I ought to be silent with regard to my various perfections and imperfections; but if you wait patiently you will find out that Winnifred Blake is a most eccentric character, and says and does what no other person would say or do."

Nellie Latimer's astonishment increased as she gazed on this (to her) new specimen of humanity. What a dainty, fairy-like creature she seemed, and what a mischievous gleam was lurking in the depths of those great, shining eyes! Nellie felt quite awkward and commonplace in her presence; however, she managed to say shyly, "I am afraid it is I who have been rude staring at you so; but I did not mean any



harm, only you are so different from the other girls."

Winnie gave her an admonishing touch.

"Hush!" she whispered, "the raven is watching us. I mean Miss Smith," as Nellie looked bewildered. "We call her that because she is everlastingly croaking;" and here Winnie, leaning back on her seat, assumed an expression of childlike innocence and solemnity, and appeared to be thoroughly interested in the teacher's explanations.

The lesson proceeded; slowly but surely the hands of the clock moved steadily forward, and at last pointed to the hour, on which Miss Smith, rising, closed her book and dismissed the class with evident feelings of relief.

"Ten minutes' respite, then heigh-ho for a long spell of grammar, etc.," cried Winnie, addressing Nellie as they passed into the hall. "You don't know your lessons to-day of course, and I am so well up in mine that I shall not be able to answer a single word; so come away with me to this quiet nook at the end of the passage and let us enjoy a cosy talk."

The "quiet nook" referred to was a recess at the hall window, partitioned off by a drapery of tapestried curtains. It was a favourite resort of Winnie's, and here the wonderful thoughts, the outbursts of passion, the mischievous plots and schemes, all found free course, and many a childish secret could those heavy folds of curtain have told had they been gifted with tongues wherewith to speak.

Dismissing the other school-fellows who were gathering round, and shooting a triumphant glance at Ada Irvine's haughty face, she half dragged her amused but by no means unwilling companion to the sacred spot; and when both were comfortably perched on the window niche, she began eagerly, "Won't you tell me your name and where you live? I am called Winnifred Mary Blake. I have three big brothers, and a little one; two sisters older than myself; a cross papa and proud step-mamma. We live about a mile from here—No. 3 Victoria Square—and I go home to dinner every day during recess." Having delivered this wonderful announcement in one breath, Winnie paused and waited for her companion to speak.

Nellie smiled as she replied,—

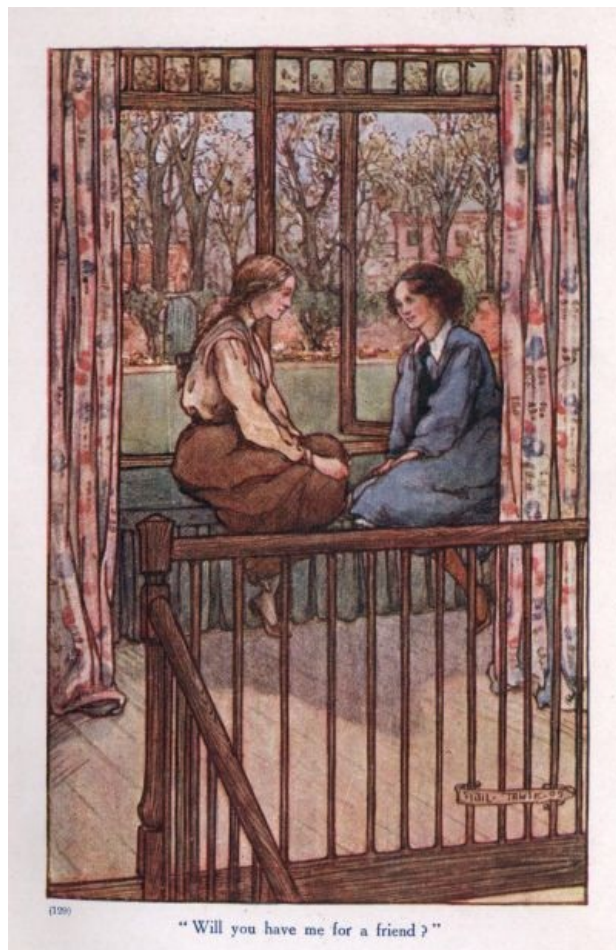
"My name is Helen Latimer, and my home is far away in a country village. I am staying, however, in town with my aunts at present, they live in a small cottage in Broomhill Road."

"Broomhill Road!" echoed Winnie doubtfully; "that is not west, I fancy."

"Oh no, east; I have to take the 'bus, as it is too great a distance to walk daily."

"Not an aristocratic locality," Winnie decided mentally, "and Ada Irvine getting hold of that little fact would use it as a means of exquisite torture to this new girl's sensitive heart. Poor thing! she looks so happy and blithe too." Thinking such thoughts, the mischievous child turned to her companion with a soft, pitying light in her eyes, and holding out a small flake of a hand, said gently,—

"We have not much time at our disposal just now, and I cannot say all I would wish; but you won't find it all plain sailing at school, Nellie, and you will be none the worse of having some one to stand by you, so will you have me for a friend?"



(190) "Will you have me for a friend?"

### **"Will you have me for a friend?"**

The quaint gipsy face with its framework of wavy hair; the bright, sunny countenance and laughing lips; above all, the soft, childish voice, charmed simple-hearted Nellie, who willingly grasped the hand extended, with these words, "I shall be only too pleased indeed." So the compact was sealed—a compact which remained unbroken through the long months and years that followed. Time and adversity only served to strengthen the bond, and the gray twilight of life found the friends of childhood's days friends still.

"Hark to the bell! are you ready?" asked Winnie, stretching her lazy little form and rising reluctantly from the cosy corner; "now for a long, long lecture on subject and predicate, ugh! How I do hate lessons, to be sure;" and Miss Blake, parting the tapestried curtains, stepped along the hall with a very mutinous face.

Nellie having come to school with the fixed determination to make the most of her time, prepared to listen to the master's instructions with all due attention; but Winnie's incessant fidgeting and yawning baffled every attempt, and the ludicrous answers, given with tantalizing readiness, almost upset her gravity, despite Mr. King's unconcealed vexation.

"This is one of her provoking days," whispered a girl, noting Nellie's puzzled face; "she will tease and annoy each teacher as much as possible all this afternoon—she always does so when in these moods. Do not think her stupid, Miss Latimer; as the French master often says, 'It is not lack of ability, but lack of application.' She won't learn," and Agnes Drummond, one of Winnie's staunchest allies, shook her head admonishingly at the little dunce as she spoke; but a defiant pout of the rosy lips was the only answer vouchsafed to the friendly warning, and the next moment an absurdly glaring error brought down on Winnie the righteous indignation of her irritated teacher, and resulted in solitary confinement during recess.

Sitting alone in the large empty class-room, the poor child burst into a flood of passionate tears. "It's too bad," she cried rebelliously, wiping her wet eyes and flinging her book aside with contemptuous touch. "There, I can't go home now, and we are to have jam pudding to dinner. Dick will chuckle—horrid boy! and eat my share as well as his own. I know he will, and I do so love those kind of puddings, especially when they are made with strawberry jam. Oh dear, how I envy Alexander Selkirk on his desert island! I am sure he never had any nasty old lessons to learn, and I think he was very stupid to grumble over his solitude when he could do every day simply what he pleased. Well, if I must study, I must; so, here goes," and, drawing the despised grammar towards her once more, Winnie set herself steadily to master part of the contents.

Meanwhile, Nellie, deprived of the companionship of her new friend, was being sharply catechised by Ada Irvine as to her antecedents and general history. The girl at first innocently replied to each question; but after a time she resented the queries, and thereby incurred that young lady's haughty displeasure, and brought down on herself the sharp edge of Ada's sarcastic tongue.

"Not much of a pedigree to boast about, girls," was the final verdict, given with a slight curl of the lip, signifying unbounded contempt,—the grandfather on the one side a farmer, on the other a draper; the father a poor country doctor; three old maiden aunts living in one of our commonest localities, keeping no servant, doing their own work, and dressing like Quakers. It's a wonder to hear Miss Latimer speak without dropping her h's, or otherwise murdering the Queen's English, ha, ha!" and Miss Irvine shrugged her elegant shoulders scornfully.

"Oh, come, Ada, that is going too far," protested some of the girls, shocked at the rude words and the cool deliberate manner in which they were said; but their insolent school-fellow silenced them with an impatient gesture, as she surveyed the flushed face of her victim and awaited a reply.

Nellie felt both hurt and indignant. She had grown up in her quiet, country home, totally ignorant of the arrogance and pride so much abroad in the busy world; and coming to school with the expectancy of finding pleasant companions and friends, the words struck home to her heart with a chill.

"How unkind you are!" she murmured, struggling to suppress the angry tears; "you have no right to speak so to me. My aunts are not rich, it is true, and cannot afford to dress so extravagantly as many; but that does not prevent them from being perfect gentlewomen, does it? Your own mother cannot be a more thorough lady than my Aunt Judith, I am sure."

"Is that so?" said Ada with mocking sarcasm, and the contempt in her voice was indescribable. "What presumption! the lower classes are beginning to look up, sure enough."

"Shame!" cried some of the girls standing near; "you are cruel, Ada." But at that moment a slim hand touched Nellie's arm, and a merry voice said soothingly, "Never mind her, Nellie; we all know she is not responsible for her statements at times. Her brain is a little defective on one point," and Winnie's great eyes shot a mischievous glance at Miss Irvine's haughty face.

"May I ask the reason of your special interference just now?" inquired Ada, an angry flush deepening the rose-tint on her cheek; "possibly you wish yesterday's scene to be repeated over again."

"Oh dear, no," answered Winnie brightly, "home-truths seldom need repetition; they are not so easily forgotten. But Nellie is my friend, and I intend to fight her battles as well as my own. Please understand that once for all, and remember at the same time with what metal you have to deal.—Come, Nellie, I am free at last," and the spirited little creature led her weeping school-mate from the room.

"Didn't I warn you not to expect plain sailing?" she continued with a knowing look; "and Ada Irvine is a perfect hurricane. She will swoop down on you at every opportunity, and bluster and blow; but let her alone and never mind."

"I wish I had never left home," replied Nellie, dashing her hand across her eyes and winking away the tear-drops vigorously. "How can girls say such dreadful things? I can't bear them;" and a fresh burst of grief followed.

"Phew!" cried Winnie, giving her an energetic shake, and knitting her brow in a childish frown, "that's babyish. You'll strike on every rock and bend before each gale if you talk in such a fashion. Don't be a fool, Nellie; pluck up some spirit, and show Ada Irvine you're above her contempt." Winnie spoke as if possessed with all the wisdom of the ancients, and gave due emphasis to every word. "She and I are always at what Dick calls 'loggerheads,' and I enjoy an occasional passage of arms amazingly; only, sometimes I come off second on the field, and that is not so pleasant. Now," with a pretty coaxing air, "dry your tears; the hour is almost up, and the bell will be ringing shortly. I hate to see people crying, I do indeed, so please stop;" and Winnie eyed the tear-stained countenance of her friend with mingled sympathy and impatience.

"I daresay I am very silly," replied Nellie, wiping her eyes and scrubbing her wet cheeks with startling vehemence; "anyhow I'll stop now. And thank you for taking my part, Winnie; you'll be a friend worth having, I am sure of that."

"Yes," answered the young girl, a strange dreamy smile playing on her lips, and a soft look gleaming in the mischievous eyes, "I shall be true as steel;" and Nellie never forgot the earnest light on the childish face as Winnie made her simple vow.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A TALK WITH AUNT JUDITH.

It was evening; the daily routine of work was over, and the time come for resting and social enjoyment. The ruby curtains were closely drawn in the cosy parlour at Dingle Cottage; the flames leapt and danced in the polished grate, and the soft lamplight fell with mellowing gleam around. Click, click, went Aunt Debby's needles as she sat by the warm glow, knitting industriously; tick, tick, said the little clock, its pendulum swinging steadily to and fro. The cat purred in sleepy content on the rug; and

Aunt Judith's gentle voice fell soothingly on the ear as she read some book aloud from her low seat by Aunt Meg's couch.

Nellie, curled up in the rocking-chair opposite Aunt Debby, rocked herself in lazy comfort, and gazed on her invalid relative with rather a doubtful expression of countenance. Her first impression of Miss Margaret was certainly not favourable; for the girl, though not very keen-sighted, saw how the pale pretty face was marred by lines of peevish discontent, and the brow continually puckered in a fretful frown. She was not old, Nellie decided—not much over thirty, at the very most; but oh, how unlike Aunt Judith! What a contrast there was betwixt that listless, languid form on the sofa, and the quiet figure on the low chair near! Nellie turned with a positive sigh of relief to rest her eyes on Miss Latimer's peaceful countenance and wonder at the marvellous calm that always brooded there.

Every now and then some frivolous demand or complaint would come from the invalid—her pillows required shaking; the fire was too warm; the lamplight not sufficiently shaded; what a noise Aunt Debby's pins were making, and could Aunt Judith not read in a lower tone? Nellie was surprised at Miss Latimer's good-humoured patience, and thoroughly enjoyed Miss Deborah's occasional tart remarks, thrown out in sheer desperation.

"Well, Meg, you would provoke the temper of a saint," she cried, twitching her wool so violently that the thread snapped, and the ball rolled under the table; "there you go grumbling from morning till night, in spite of every endeavour to make you comfortable. Your nurses have a hard time, I assure you, and are to be pitied sincerely."

Miss Margaret's eyes filled, and a flood of tears being imminent, Miss Latimer strove to avert the torrent by saying, "Come, come, Debby; that is strong language to use. You and I great healthy creatures do not know what it is to be confined to a couch day after day, and suffer almost constant pain. I should feel it very hard to be unable to go about and walk in God's beautiful sunshine, and I think one cannot be sufficiently tender and patient towards the sick and helpless."

"Mental pain is harder to bear than physical," quoth practical Miss Deborah, in no way convinced of her harshness by the gentle speech. "If one were to have one's choice, I reckon," with strong Yankeeism, "a headache would be chosen in preference to a heartache," and Aunt Debby nodded her head knowingly.

A white, set look crossed Aunt Judith's face, and a shadow crept into the dark eyes; but they were gone in a moment, and Miss Latimer's lips wore their own sweet smile as she replied, "God grant you may experience little of either, Debby; but if you do, trust me you will find that both bring the richest blessings in their train;" and Aunt Judith's patient face shone with a glad light as she spoke.

"Meg has failed to seize her blessings, then," said Miss Deborah composedly. "No, no, Judith, you are a good woman, but you won't convince me that Margaret is justified in whining and grumbling to the extent she does."

"I need never look for sympathy from you, Debby," broke in the invalid with a low sob; "you are very hard-hearted, but the day will come when all those cruel speeches will rise up and condemn you."

"When?" with provoking gravity.

"When I am no longer here" (low sobs), "and the cold earth hides me for ever from your sight."

"So let it be," retaliated Miss Deborah, coolly proceeding to turn the heel of her stocking, and speaking quite placidly. "I shall remember the amount of exasperation I received when that day comes, and be able to meet the condemnation with becoming fortitude."

"Debby, Debby," said Miss Latimer's voice reprovingly; but the warning came too late. A violent fit of hysterics ensued, and Miss Margaret was borne to her room by the much-enduring sisters, whose services were both required to quell the outburst and settle her comfortably for the night.

Nellie, left alone in the snug parlour, drew her chair closer to the fire, and lifting the cat from its cosy bed on the rug, allowed it to curl up comfortably on her lap. "What a fuss," said the girl, shrugging her shoulders and gazing into the bright, glowing fire. "If I were Aunt Meg, I should be positively ashamed of myself—peevish, cross thing that she is. What a contrast to Aunt Judith;" and here Nellie fell into a fit of musing, which lasted till Miss Deborah came in with the cloth for supper.

"How is Aunt Meg now?" she inquired, watching Aunt Debby bustling about on hospitable thoughts intent. "Is she better?"

"Well, yes," was the reply, given with a little twinkle of the eye; "and a good night's rest will work wonders. You must excuse your aunt this evening, Nellie; she is not always so fretful, and an invalid's life has its hard times."

Miss Deborah spoke earnestly, for although she felt justified in saying a sharp word herself, she could ill brook the idea of any one disparaging or thinking lightly of her invalid sister. Nellie gave a slight nod of assent, which seemed to signify approval of Aunt Debby's words. Nevertheless she retained her own opinion, and mentally condemned poor Miss Margaret as being both weak and silly.

Supper over, Miss Deborah retired to the kitchen, where her reign as queen was undisputed, and

Miss Latimer, bidding Nellie bring a small stool and sit down at her feet, began to stroke the soft hair gently, and ask questions as to the day's proceedings.

"Tell me your first impressions, dear child," said the kind voice pleasantly; and the young girl, whose heart still ached at the remembrance of Ada Irvine's stinging words, poured forth the whole story with a force and passion which astonished even herself.

Aunt Judith listened quietly—so quietly, indeed, that Nellie felt half ashamed of her vehemence, and imagined she had been making "much ado about nothing;" but in a few minutes Miss Latimer spoke, and her tones were very tender as she said:—"So my little Nellie has learned that school is not the sunny place she fancied it was. Dear child, I think your new friend gave you very good advice. Don't be a coward, Nellie, and allow your happiness to be marred by the insolent tongue of a spoiled girl. Show her a true lady is characterized, not by outward dress and appearance, but by the innate beauty of heart and soul, and leave your quiet endurance and pleasant courtesy to speak for themselves. Dear, it seems to me as if you were just beginning life now—as if you had but newly entered the lists, and were preparing for that battle which we have all to fight in this world. The warfare is seldom, if ever, an easy one, and the little stings of everyday life are harder to bear than many a heavy trial; but you must determine to be a brave, true soldier, Nellie, and make your life a grand, noble one. You may say to me it is easy to speak, but difficult to act, which I readily grant; but, my child, although the acting may seem almost impossible, we have one Friend ever able and willing to help us. If we choose Him in all sincerity of heart for our Captain, we need not fear to engage in the very thick of the fight."

Aunt Judith paused; and Nellie, seizing the gentle hand which was stroking her head with tender touch, said, "You make me think of my father, auntie; he speaks so often to us just as you are doing now. Every Sabbath evening, when the little ones are in bed, he gathers us round him; and after reading a portion of the Bible, he closes the book and talks in the same way. Oh, I feel so strong and brave while I listen—I feel as if I could face the heaviest sorrow with all courage; but when Monday comes my good resolutions vanish, and I find myself yielding and sinning as before."

The girl gazed straight at her aunt as she spoke, fearing to see a look of disapprobation over her weakness; but Miss Latimer's face was as calm as ever, only the eyes seemed softer and full of such a tender, loving light as she replied,—

"We have most of us the same story to tell, child,—a story of bravery so long as the battle is far off, but of cowardly shrinking when the time for hand-to-hand conflict comes. Whilst the sunshine is all around us and our hearts full of great gladness, we look up and thank the good Father for his precious blessings, feeling nerved for the fiercest fight; but when the storm-clouds gather and the golden brightness is withdrawn, we bow before the blinding tempest and writhe under our pain, unless—and the kind voice spoke very softly—the Master has our hearts in his own safe keeping, unless we have learned to love his will. Then we can discern the bright stars of his love shining through the darkness, and find that the apparently pitiless storm has left diamond drops of blessing behind it. Never despair, Nellie; strive and pray for grace to follow in the Master's footsteps, and you will learn what a grand, noble thing the consecrated life is, and how truly worth living. You know those lines of Kingsley's, do you not?—

'Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever;  
Do noble things, not *dream* them all day long;  
And so make life, death, and the vast forever,  
One grand sweet song.'

There was a long silence after this, during which Nellie thought deeply, and Aunt Judith lay back in her chair with quietly-folded hands and a far-seeing look in her patient eyes. Then the girl said earnestly, "Aunt Judith, I will try very hard to do my best, I will indeed; and oh, may I come to you when things go wrong, and I can't or won't see the right way? It does me good to have a talk with you, and takes half the home-sickness away. Say yes; please do, dear, dear, dear auntie;" and Nellie's voice sounded very earnest.

"I shall be only too glad, my child," replied Miss Latimer with her rare sweet smile. "Treat me as you would your own mother, dear, and let me help you so far as I am able; only, Nellie, don't depend on your own strength or my aid, but go straight to the Fountain-head, and find the never-failing strength and grace for the needs of every day."

"Thank you, Aunt Judith," was the fervent response; then Aunt Debby entered, and the conversation ceased.

Bedtime came. Nellie retired for the night; Miss Deborah 'followed suit;' and Miss Latimer, extinguishing the light, crossed the tiny hall, and opening a door to the left, entered, and closed it softly behind her.

This, her private sanctum, was like the other apartments—small and plainly furnished, but with the same air of neatness and comfort. A book-case lined one side of the room entirely; a small round table stood close to the window, bright with autumn flowers; a larger one in the centre of the room held a desk, and was strown with papers, magazines, etc.; while soft chairs inviting one to luxurious ease faced the ruddy hearth, and various little nick-nacks scattered here and there showed the graceful touch of a woman's hand.

Going to the centre table, Aunt Judith seated herself before the open desk, looked over several closely-written sheets of manuscript, and then furnishing herself with fresh paper, began to write rapidly.

The fire burned slowly out, and the midnight hour had long sounded ere Miss Latimer dried her pen and laid aside her work with a tired sigh. Crossing to the window, she raised the blind, and leaning against the casement, looked away up at the quiet night sky. There was no moon; but the happy stars, shining with frosty brightness, kept their silent watch over the sleeping world. Oh, how still, how very hushed it was! what a great infinite peace seemed brooding over all—a peace such as millions of weary souls were longing to possess; not a sound to be heard, not a ripple of unrest—only that wondrous calm. For a long time Miss Latimer stood drinking in the sweetness and beauty of the nature-world, and letting her thoughts soar up, upwards to the great Father of all, who neither slumbers nor sleeps. What those thoughts were we do not know; but surely some of that vast peace must have stolen softly, silently, into her patient heart, for when she turned away and entered a tiny bedroom leading off from her sanctum, Aunt Judith's face seemed as it were the face of an angel.

## CHAPTER V.

### A FALLEN QUEEN.

Next morning Nellie set out for school in apparently the best of spirits, returning Aunt Judith's encouraging smile with one as bright and hopeful, and shouting a merry farewell as she ran lightly down the garden path and closed the little gate behind her.

Arriving fully ten minutes before the hour, she found several of the girls already assembled in the large class-room, gathered as usual in knots, and talking gaily to one another.

"Good-morning," said Agnes Drummond, coming forward and holding out her hand in a friendly manner. "You are going to be a punctual pupil, Miss Latimer." And the other scholars, not being overpowered as yet by Ada's presence, nodded blithely and allowed their new school-mate to join in the general conversation.

While girlish tongues were busy and the room was filled with the hum of merry voices, the great bell rang loudly, and at the same moment Winnie came rushing in, crying half breathlessly as she did so, "Just in time, girls; not a minute too soon. Good-morning, everybody. Do I look as if I had been having a good race?" and she turned her piquant face round for a general survey.

"A species of milk-maid bloom," said Ada Irvine, catching the words as she leisurely entered the room, "which makes you appear more suited to your friend of the dairy-maid type;" and Miss Irvine looked insolently at Nellie's fresh bright face as she spoke. The soft tints on the smooth, rounded cheek deepened, and the girl bit her lip hard to keep back the angry words.

Not so Winnie, however. Turning a pair of great, serious eyes on her haughty school-mate's fair, placid countenance, she said with an air of prophetic solemnity,—

"Ada Irvine, you will yet be rewarded for all your contemptuous speeches. Mark my words, and see if you don't get smashed up in a railway accident, or fall a victim to that delightfully disfiguring disease—small-pox. Serve you right too. Every dog has its day: you are enjoying yours at present, and can say and do as you please; but—ugh! I'm disgusted at you," and Winnie "tip-tilted" her little nose with the most charming grace imaginable.

Ada smiled loftily.

"I would not be vulgar, if I were you," she remarked calmly. "I suppose you learn all those choice proverbs from your aristocratic brother. Ah, there is Mrs. Elder coming to open the school. Do alter your expression, my dear; you are regarding me with such loving eyes, I am sure she will think you are too affectionate," and Ada swept to her seat with a mocking laugh.

The lessons commenced, and Nellie, thoroughly prepared, almost forgot the morning's annoyance in the joy at finding herself slowly rising to the head of the class, where Miss Irvine sat with all the dignity of an enthroned queen.

Ten minutes' respite; then came the English, conducted by Mr. King, the most thorough and rigid master in the school. A question was asked—a question calculated to tax severely the skill and ingenuity of the active brain. Ada hesitated for one moment, then made a fatal blunder; and Nellie, answering correctly, slipped quietly into the seat of the deposed sovereign. Winnie's delight was indescribable. One triumphant glance after another flashed upwards to the fallen queen's angry face, and her bright eyes fairly danced with wicked joy when, at the close of the class, Mr. King said a few words of commendation on Miss Latimer's abilities.

"Nellie, Nellie! I'm proud of my friend to-day, She's a regular brick, and deserves any amount of

hugging and petting. Oh joy, joy! how did you manage it, dear? You have taken the wind out of Ada's sails and gained a feather in your cap, I can assure you. It all seems too good to be true. The queen dethroned at last!" and Winnie catching Nellie round the waist, danced her up and down the schoolroom in a regular madcap whirl.

"You'll be late for dinner if you don't hurry home at once, Win," said one of the elder girls, crossing over to the fire and seating herself by its cheery blaze with a tempting book and box of caramels. "There, run away and don't waste your precious time in speaking uncharitable words, dear. Recess will soon be over;" and Elsie Drummond looked kindly down on the little figure dancing before her with such evident delight.

"I'm just going," replied Winnie, stopping to bestow a smile on the elder girl's pleasant face. "But you can't understand why I am so happy. You don't belong to our set, and therefore know very little about Ada's conceit and—yes, I shall say it—priggish ways. She's just as horrid as can be, and I hate her," wound up the malicious monkey, quite reckless of the character of her language.

"Agnes owns rather a sharp tongue, dear, and I hear many a tale from her," replied Elsie, referring to her younger sister; "but I think, Win, if you wish to be a true friend to Nellie, you will refrain from expressing your joy at her success too openly, at least in Ada's presence. Such unconcealed delight will, believe me, dear, do more harm than good."

"Oh, nonsense, Elsie," was the impetuous reply. "I must sing and dance my joy, it's such a splendid opportunity. Why shouldn't I crow over the nasty proud thing? She needs somebody to ruffle her, and I can do that part better than any one else in the school.—You don't mind my having a little fun, do you, Nellie? she's such a cross-patch, you know."

Now, as was quite natural under the circumstances, Nellie did feel not a little elated over her success. It was a triumph certainly, and girl-like she found it both palatable and pleasant to rejoice over a fallen enemy. At the same time, however, she saw the force of Miss Drummond's caution, and the wisdom of yielding to her advice, so turning to Winnie she answered gently,—

"Please say no more about it; it was all chance, and Ada may gain her old seat to-morrow again, though I mean to try to prevent her from doing so."

But the words were simply wasted on the incorrigible child, who resumed her fantastic war-dance as she replied,—

"No, no; I shall not make any false promise. I mean to be a true, loyal friend, Nell; but if a nice little malicious speech comes gliding softly to the very tip of my tongue, I must let the words out, otherwise there will be choking. Prepare then for sudden squalls," and with a mischievous laugh Winnie vanished from the room, and was soon running along the road in the direction of home.

"The old story—late again," said Dick, looking up from his well-filled plate as she entered and sat down opposite him at the table. "You'll never have time to cram down cabinet pudding and tart to-day, I'll be bound;" and the boy grinned teasingly on the bright face before him.

"Won't I, though?" answered Winnie, nodding her head blithely, and eyeing the contents of the plate brought to her by Jane the parlour-maid with decided relish. "Don't imagine you'll get my share to-day, Dicky boy, for I'm as hungry as a hawk. I have something to tell you, however, so please listen;" and between mouthfuls she told in a rambling style the story of Nellie's triumph and Ada's defeat, ending with the following words, "Do you know, Dick, when I saw Ada sitting below Nellie and looking so crestfallen, I could have risen there and then and danced for joy before her. Will you believe me, I felt so glad I could hardly restrain my feet till the hour was up, and whenever liberty was proclaimed, didn't they go well at the Irish jig! Oh dear!" and Winnie's face was all aglow as she waited her brother's commendatory remarks on such behaviour.

Dick coughed, blew his nose violently, filled out some water into his glass, quaffed the draught, cleared his throat, and then said gravely, "I'll tell you what to do, Win. This evening, after we have finished studying, I'll teach you a splendid double-shuffle which you will rehearse to-morrow (with added grace, of course,) in front of the lovely Ada, and before all the class—Mr. King included. My eye, what glorious fun!" and vulgar Dick looked across at his sister with beaming face.

"I dare hardly attempt that," she replied dolefully, "though I should dearly love doing so. But you see, Dick" (with energy), "Mrs. Elder detests me so much, and I have been caught in so many faults lately, that such an awful one as you propose would prove fatal. Your delightful plan must be abandoned, I am sorry to say."

"Well, perhaps after all you are right," replied the boy, changing his teasing tone into a serious one. "I daresay Miss Ada's rage would only increase in fury if she saw you performing a triumph-dance and rejoicing so extravagantly over her defeat. I remember a few years ago something of the same kind occurring in our school, and wasn't there a blow-up at the end! I was one of the little chaps then, but I managed to keep my eyes and ears open, and knew more about the whole affair than any one guessed."

"Tell me the story, Dick," interrupted Winnie, holding a spoonful of tart suspended betwixt her mouth and plate, and speaking eagerly; "do, there's a dear boy." But Dick shook his shaggy head, and answered,—

"Not just now, Win. Our time is almost up. Finish your pudding, old girl, and let us away. By-the-by, don't expect me home till after five this afternoon;" and the boy's bright face clouded as he made this statement.

"Why not?" was the inquiry. "We were going to have such splendid fun together. Is there anything wrong?"

"Kept in," uttered in a growling tone. "Lessons as usual badly prepared—denounced for my stupidity, and ordered to remain after hours and work up. See what it is to have a dunce of a brother, Win," and Dick, curling his lip sneeringly, endeavoured to hide his wounded feelings by putting his hands in his pockets and trying to look perfectly indifferent.

Winnie, on her part, burst forth indignantly,—

"Not another word against yourself, Richard Blake. I won't listen." Then coming to her brother's side and slipping two soft arms round his neck, she raised her eyes with the love-light shining so softly in them, and murmured tenderly, "Don't be downcast, dear old boy—all will come right some day; and I am just as stupid as you are."

"No, no," cried Dick quickly. "Indolence is your fault, Win, not stupidity. But I—I can't learn, and that's the simple truth. I've tried over and over again, but it's no good; and, of course," (doggedly) "no one believes that fact."

"I do," said the soft little voice. "But, Dick, people don't know you. There you go," (with quaint gravity) "hiding that great, kind heart of yours, and showing only a rough exterior. Our father and mother never guess how brave and good and true you are. They'll find all that out some day, however;" and Winnie looked into her brother's honest freckled face with all the affection of her loyal, little heart.

"You're a decided goose, Win," was all the answer vouchsafed to her cheering words, as the boy rose from his chair and prepared to leave the room; but the twinkle in his eye, and kind, firm pressure of his hand, when they parted at the street corner, spoke volumes to little Winnie, and sent her back to school with a happy heart.

She was very thoughtful all that afternoon, however, and so quiet that when school was over and the two girls stood on the steps of Mrs. Elder's Select Establishment, Nellie inquired anxiously if her friend were ill.

"Ill!" repeated Winnie with a light laugh; "not I—only, I've been a-thinking," and a long-drawn sigh accompanied the words.

"What about?" asked her companion, descending the steps and viewing the little figure with the great, serious look on its face. "What a doleful expression, Winnie! You look as if you had, like Atlas, the whole world on your shoulders."

"Nellie," interrupted the child—for indeed she seemed little more than such—with the faintest quiver in her voice, "did you ever think, and think, and think, till your head seemed bursting, and all your thoughts got whirled together? No? Ah, well, I have; and somehow when I get into these moods everything becomes muddled, and I find myself all in a maze. Oh!" and Winnie spoke with passionate vehemence, "often I would give I don't know how much to find some one who could understand and explain away my thoughts."

"Why not speak to your mother?" asked Nellie, rather surprised at this new phase in her friend's character; "surely she should be able to help you."

But the little girl shook her head despondingly. "No, no, Nellie; my stepmother is very kind and pretty, but I don't see much of her, and she would only laugh at me."

They were strolling leisurely along the street now, and the child's voice had a plaintive ring in it as she continued: "I was very ill about a year ago—so ill, Nellie, that I had to lie in bed day after day for a long time. I can't tell what was wrong with me, but I know the doctor used to look very grave when he saw me; and one day, after he had gone away, nurse went about my room crying softly to herself. I was too weak to care or think, and only wondered dreamily what she was crying for, till my stepmother entered, and I noticed that her eyes were red too. They imagined I was sleeping, I suppose, for nurse quite loudly asked, 'Is there no hope?' O Nellie! I shall never forget that moment, never so long as I live. I seemed to realize that I was dying—really, truly dying—and the thought was awful. What would happen to me after death? I could not, I dared not die. Springing with sudden strength from the bed, I tried to rush anywhere, screaming, 'Save me! don't let me die!' in the most awful agony. Then came a long blank. I never forgot that time, but I never spoke of it to any one. Where was the use? I should only have been laughed at, and told to think about living, not dying."

There was something so pathetic in the way all this was told, there was such an amount of pathos in the quivering voice, that Nellie's heart ached and the tears rushed to her eyes.

"Winnie," she began gently, "I know what would do you all the good in the world—a talk with Aunt Judith. I am sure she would never laugh away your thoughts or refuse to listen, she is so good and kind; and when she speaks, one feels as if all one's wicked passions were hushed away."



Winnie brightened visibly.

"Is that so?" she inquired; "then I should dearly like to see her. Won't you invite me to spend some afternoon with you, Nellie, and allow me to see Aunt Judith and your cosy wee home?"

"I shall be only too pleased, Winnie," replied her companion. Then the two friends parted and went their respective roads—one to a fashionable home where gaiety reigned supreme and pleasure filled up every hour; the other to a lowly cottage-dwelling where God's holy name was hallowed, and the Christ-life showed itself clear and bright in Aunt Judith's daily walk.

## CHAPTER VI.

### WINNIE'S HOME.

That same evening Winnie and Dick were alone together in the oak parlour; a room sacred to themselves, where they ate, studied, played, and lived, as it were, a life quite apart from that of the other inmates of the family, who, occupied with business or domestic duties through the day, spent evening after evening in a round of gaiety and amusement. Brother and sister enjoyed little of the society of their elders during the week, but on Saturdays and Sabbaths they were usually expected to lunch with their parents—an honour which, I am sorry to say, neither appreciated; for somehow Dick seldom failed to commit a gross blunder or make some absurd speech at a critical moment, and Winnie, though a general favourite, refused to be happy when he was sternly upbraided for his fault.

The father, a man of wide culture and refinement, had no patience with his son's clumsy movements and slow brain, refusing to look under the surface and see the great loving heart which beat there with its wealth of warm true affection; while Mrs. Blake and the elder brothers and sisters regarded him in the light of a good-for-nothing or general scapegrace. The result was that Dick hid the many sterling qualities of his nature under a gruff, forbidding exterior, and only tender-hearted Winnie guessed how he winced and writhed under the mocking word or light laugh indulged in at his expense. Resenting them bitterly, she gathered up all the love of her passionate little heart and showered it on him, idolizing this big brother of hers to such an extent that even his faults seemed gilded with a halo; and her affection being equally returned, both found their greatest happiness in each other's society.

Oh, what fun they had together in the oak parlour! Oh, the shouts of ringing laughter and the merry jest of words! Now and then Dick would bring home with him his special friend, Archie Trollope, and what a night would follow,—Winnie entering into their games with all the zest of her tomboy nature.

She never felt solitary or out of place in the company of these two boys; and they—why, they looked upon her as one of themselves: Dick describing her to his numerous companions as being a "tip-top" girl, and Archie singing her praises loudly to his own sisters who never knew what it was to join in a madcap frolic, and whose voices were strictly modulated to society pitch.

Sometimes, in the long winter evenings, the trio, tired with play, would lower the gas, and gathering round the large, blazing fire, tell ghost stories with such thrilling earnestness that often the ghastly phantoms seemed to merge almost into reality, and they found themselves starting at a falling cinder or the sound of a footstep in the passage outside. On those occasions the window-blind was usually drawn up to the top, that the pale, glimmering moonlight might stream in; and as the soft silvery beams stole silently into the room and laid their tremulous light on the young forms and awestruck faces, the flames leaping and crackling joined in enhancing the effect of the story by throwing on the walls weird shadows of a moving spectral band.

But the winter days were yet to come, though the cold autumn winds and falling leaves heralded their sure approach; and this evening Winnie and Dick were engaged—not in wandering hand in hand into wonderland, but in the prosaic occupation of making toffy.

Winnie, enveloped in one of nurse's huge bib-aprons, stood at a little distance from the fire, busily studying a book of recipes; while Dick, his honest face burnt to the colour of a lobster, was bending over a saucepan and stirring manfully the tempting contents.

"Yes," said the young lady, laying aside the well-thumbed volume and taking a step forward, "the quantities are correct. I am sure this will be excellent toffy, but—Dick, you shocking boy! whatever are you doing? Licking the spoon, I declare. How very vulgar!" and Winnie opened her eyes in horrified amazement at her brother's lack of good-breeding.

"Well, you see, Win," replied the culprit meekly, "you so often make mistakes and put in some awful compound that I am obliged to guard against being poisoned. Having a sincere affection for life, and not being like Portia 'awearied of this great world,' I consider it my duty to take all due precautions, and therefore *pardonnez-moi* for tasting the toffy."

The young cook drew her slight figure up and said with an air of offended dignity, "I flatter myself that I am quite capable of making excellent toffy, Richard Blake, and am well aware as to the proper ingredients."

"Doubtless," with a sweeping bow, "but 'accidents will happen in the best-regulated families;' and I remember how you substituted salt for sugar the last time, and apparently never discovered your mistake till you had dosed me with some of the vile concoction. It was cracking stuff, I can assure you." Here Dick became thoroughly convulsed at the remembrance of that disastrous night, and laughed so heartily that Winnie fled to the rescue of her beloved toffy, and seized the spoon from her brother's swaying hand.

"What an object you look!" she said scornfully, stirring the clear brown liquid and inhaling its savoury odour with intense satisfaction. "I don't see anything to laugh at;" and she began to hum the tune of an old nursery rhyme, as if utterly indifferent to both Dick and his laughter.

"Don't ape Madame Dignity, Win," gasped the awful boy in an almost strangled condition; "lofty airs are not becoming to such a little creature. You know perfectly well what a 'go' it was, and thought I was about to 'shuffle off this mortal coil.'" Dick had a weakness for Shakespeare. "Oh dear! when I reflect upon it all and remember the taste—" but here Winnie was obliged to give in and join in his merriment, for the boy's face of pretended disgust was too comical to resist.

"Dick, you are dreadful!" she said at length, the tears streaming down her cheeks and her voice still trembling with a lurking suspicion of laughter. "Will you never forget that eventful night!"

"Never," replied her brother with mock gravity; "the remembrance is printed indelibly on the records of my memory, and the taste remains for ever fresh to my palate. Let us change the conversation, Win; the subject is too much for my delicate constitution."

"I am quite agreeable," quoth the young lady composedly, "and in that case allow your hands to be active and your tongue silent. I want the tin buttered, and the bottle of vanilla essence brought from the pantry. Now, do hurry, for the toffy is almost ready."

Dick obeyed orders, and in a short time the candy was cooling outside on the window ledge, while brother and sister, comfortably settled in their respective chairs, were preparing to enjoy a "quiet read."

"This is a splendid book, Dick," said the little chatterbox, toying with the leaves of her dainty volume, and glancing at the tasteful engravings. "All the school-girls are raving about it, and saying how delightfully interesting the story is."

"What's the name and who's the author?" inquired Dick, too much engrossed in his own book of wonderful adventures to give much heed to his sister's words. "Quick, Win; I'm just killing a whale. Ah! now they've got him. Bravo!" and the boy shouted his appreciation of the stirring tale.

"Oh, the title of the book is 'A Summer's Pleasure;' and the author—let me see—why—" and Winnie stopped short, her eyes opened to their widest extent and her rosy lips slightly parted.

"What's up with the girl?" queried Dick, roused by the little sister's surprised tone and bewildered expression. "Lot's wife could not have looked more petrified, I'll be bound. Do satisfy a fellow's curiosity, Win, and don't sit there mute as a fish."

Thus admonished, Winnie gave herself a little shake and laughed lightly.

"No wonder," she said excusingly. "Only think, Dick,—the author of this book calls herself 'Aunt Judith,' and that is the name of one of Nellie Latimer's aunts."

The boy gave a prolonged whistle.

"Well, you are a little fool," he said politely, "to make such a fuss about nothing. Dear me, Win, you don't imagine surely that Nellie Latimer's aunt is the author of that book, simply because her name happens to be Judith. Why, there are hundreds of Aunt Judiths in the world;" and philosopher Dick went back to his whales and icebergs in lofty contempt of his sister's excitement.

"I daresay I am a goose," laughed Winnie apologetically; "but somehow it seemed so strange to see 'Aunt Judith' staring at me from the title-page. Aunt Judith—" and the little girl repeated the name softly, as if those two words held for her some subtle charm.

The minutes passed slowly one by one. Dick was away in the far north fighting the whales, and having wonderful adventures with polar bears; while Winnie, curled up cosy fashion in the depths of a huge easychair, was also absorbed in the contents of her book; when the soft swish-swish of garments was heard coming along the passage, and the door opened to admit a fair, stately lady, whose silken robe fell in graceful folds to her feet, and whose arms, neck, and hair glittered with sparkling jewels. She was followed by two younger ladies, as richly but more youthfully dressed; and as they entered the room a delicious perfume distilled itself and wafted all around the sweetest fragrance.

"Mamma!" cried Winnie, springing up and gazing admiringly on the beautiful figure before her; "how pretty you look! Are you going out to-night again, and Clare and Edith also?"

"Yes, dear," replied Mrs. Blake in a softly-modulated voice; "we are all going to the opera, and the carriage is already at the door. I wished to know, however, why Dick was so late in getting home this afternoon, and so looked in on you as I was passing."

Dick, who had barely glanced up at his stepmother's entrance, and then continued reading, now knit his brow in an angry frown, and seemed unwilling to answer; while Clare, the elder of the two young ladies, laughed carelessly as she said, "Our invasion for that purpose was hardly necessary, I fancy. It is simply the old story over again—badly-prepared lessons."

"You're about right there," replied the boy sullenly, never raising his eyes from the volume before him. "What else could you expect of the dunce?" and a bitter sneer curled the corners of his lips as he spoke, while Winnie's warm little heart was all aglow with love and sympathy.

Mrs. Blake's face assumed an expression of peevish distress. "I am sure, Dick," she began plaintively, "I do not know what the end of all this will be. Your father is perfectly disgusted at your indolence and ashamed of your stupidity." The boy's eyes flashed. "Yes, it is quite true. I am tired listening to his continual complaints;" and the lady drew her fleecy wrap round her with an injured air.

"O mamma," interrupted Winnie eagerly, "you are wronging Dick. He may not be so clever as Algy and Tom, but he is such a dear, good boy, and does try ever so hard to learn his lessons. He does indeed; and I should know best, when I study beside him every night."

"That's enough, Win," answered her brother doggedly. "I don't care what they believe;" and the boy, drawing his chair closer to the fire, gazed angrily into the burning embers.

"What a respectful speech, and what charming manners!" said Edith scornfully. "You would grace any drawing-room, Dick.—Come away, mamma; we shall be late. Papa will soon bring his dutiful son to his proper senses."

"Well spoken, Edith," said Mrs. Blake, sweeping indignantly from the room; "the boy is a perfect boor. I trust he may show more honour to his father than he has accorded to me."

The door closed softly behind the unwelcome guests, the light footsteps died away in the distance, and Winnie and Dick were once more alone in the little oak parlour, with the dancing firelight playing on their faces and roguishly deepening the tint on their youthful cheeks.

Dick's book had dropped from his knees, and was lying with crumpled leaves on the rug, while the boy, his hands tightly clenched, sat in moody silence; and Winnie's tender heart ached as she watched him. Slipping from her chair, she crossed over to his side, and nestling down, laid her pretty head on his arm, saying with a quiver in her voice, "Dick, my dear, good boy, don't look like that; I can't bear it. Oh, why do they say such things to you?" Here the tears forced themselves into the bright eyes as she spoke.

Dick gave the fender a vicious kick ere he replied: "I tell you what it is, Win: one of these days I'll run away. No, no; don't strangle me and say I won't, for I tell you I *will*. A fellow can't be expected to stand this sort of thing all his life. I'm sick of it. Hallo! what's up?" for Winnie's arms were clasped tightly round his neck and the great tears were running silently down her cheeks.

"Don't go, Dick, oh, don't go!" she pleaded frantically, half choking the boy with her violent embraces. "Whatever should I do without you? Dick, you must not go; only wait, and all will come right in the end. Promise, promise!" and the little gipsy face looked pitiful in its wild terror.

Dick's heart melted.

"There, there, dry your eyes, you wee goose; I was only teasing you. Why, what a disconsolate-looking object somebody is!" and laughing his sister out of her fright, the two sat chatting merrily till bed-time, when Winnie went away to her own dainty room, and Dick also sought his den.

Then, when alone in the darkness, the merriment died out of his face, and as he lay thinking over his wrongs, real and imaginary, bitter feelings swept over his heart, and the idle threat began to form itself into fixed determination. "I would go right off to-night were it not for Win," he muttered, tossing restlessly on his pillows; "but I guess she would fret sorely, and—'there's the rub.'" Another Shakespearian quotation. "Well, well, I'll sleep over it;" and then Dick wandered into the land of dreams, to be haunted by the vision of a quaint gipsy face and great pleading eyes—a vision which rose up before him again and again in after years, when he was out on the great waste of waters, and the soft moon and shining stars seemed to whisper of home and loving hearts.

## CHAPTER VII.

### AN AFTERNOON AT DINGLE COTTAGE.

One Saturday afternoon, about a week after the events recorded in the last chapter, Miss Latimer stood at the window of her cosy parlour looking out into the quiet street with its small semi-detached villas and cottages, the tiny gardens of which were now strewn with the falling autumn leaves. There was a slight look of expectancy in her eyes and pleased expression on her face calculated to give any beholder the idea that Aunt Judith was watching for something or somebody. And so she was; for Winnifred Blake had gladly accepted the invitation to spend that afternoon and evening at Dingle Cottage, much to Nellie's delight; and that young lady, too impatient to await her guest's arrival, had gone part of the way to meet the expected visitor.

Aunt Judith, after giving a quick glance round the room to see that everything had a comfortable, inviting look, resumed her quiet watch, and for some time the silence of the house was unbroken, save by a slight sound now and then proceeding from the kitchen, where Aunt Debby, Martha-like as usual, was busy with domestic work. At last two figures appeared coming swiftly along the street, and Miss Latimer, hastening to the door, opened it with words of kindly welcome as Winnie and Nellie danced (I can use no better word) up the tiny garden path.

"Come in, dear; I am pleased to see you," she said in her gentle voice, leading the young guest to Nellie's bedroom, and assisting her to take off her hat and jacket. "Nellie has spoken so often about you that you seem no stranger to me, and I am glad to think my niece has gained such a true, warm-hearted little friend."

Winnie, surveying the kind face bending over her, smiled at the words, but seemed to be too much overwhelmed by an unaccountable fit of shyness to vouchsafe any reply. She kept her usually busy tongue silent till the three were seated in the snug parlour, when, under the influence of Miss Latimer's simple, homely manner, she began, as Nellie expressed it, to thaw, and the fountain once set free produced a play of bright, sparkling conversation.

Aunt Judith's nimble fingers plied the needle industriously, and though she herself said little at first, her thorough enjoyment of the young people's society was evident from the quiet, amused smile which lurked round the corners of her lips, and the close attention she gave to the merry flow of talk. School and school-mates were the two chief themes of conversation, and if now and again a remark savouring rather strongly of girlish malice or jealousy fell from either lips, Miss Latimer wisely made no comment; for she knew what, alas! many pay so little heed to—that for everything there is a season, and that a word of admonition thrown in at a wrong time serves rather to harden than soften the heart.

"Nellie is getting on splendidly at school, Miss Latimer," announced Winnie after a long pause. "Ada Irvine cannot call herself the dux any longer; and I am so glad. It is quite delightful to see her angry, crestfallen look each time Nellie makes a correct answer;" and Winnie's face glowed in thorough appreciation of the present state of affairs. "As for revenge," she continued, "there will be a terrible climax some day, I am sure. Even now, and this is only the beginning, she cannot find anything too horrible for herself or the other girls to say about Nellie."

"I am sorry to hear that," replied Aunt Judith quietly; "but Nellie must try to win Ada's love, and not provoke her by any appearance of triumph or self-esteem. Draw your chairs nearer me, dears, and I will tell you what happened to me long, long ago when I was a girl;" and here Miss Latimer smiled on the upturned young faces and commenced her story.

There was nothing very exciting in the tale—nothing certainly bordering on the wonderful—and yet one might have heard a pin fall, so great was the silence while she spoke.

Winnie sat quite still, her eyes shining like twin stars, and the whole expression of her face denoting the most intense interest; while Nellie, her lips slightly parted as if in expectation, also seemed to have her attention completely absorbed: for Aunt Judith was a splendid story-teller, and entered heart and soul into the spirit of her tale.

Miss Deborah's little bright orbs twinkled when she entered the parlour with the tea-tray and found how the three were occupied. There was little heed given to her entrance, and not even a glimpse of pretty china or a daintily-spread table could tempt the listeners' eyes or attention from Miss Latimer and her story till the last word was spoken, when both roused themselves with a sigh of the utmost satisfaction.

"Oh, that was splendid!" cried Winnie eagerly. "What a nice story-teller you make, Miss Latimer; you talk just like a book." Here Aunt Debby, accidentally, of course, choked slightly. "I could sit and listen to you for ever,—couldn't you, Nellie?" and Winnie appealed to her companion for an enforcement of her statement.

"Scarcely, dear, scarcely," interrupted Aunt Judith, rising from her chair and advancing to the tea-table; "if you were to hear my stories often, the novelty would by-and-by wear away. But here is Aunt Debby with the urn. Let us see what a successful tea-maker she is, and we can talk more about stories and story-telling afterwards."

Both girls jumped up obediently, and gathering round the tempting table the happy party proceeded to enjoy the many goodly things displayed thereon, and kept up such a merry strain of conversation that the room rang with laughter; and Aunt Meg, lying in her darkened chamber, bitterly bewailed her infirmities and the seeming lack of sympathy vouchsafed to her in her affliction.

Tea was followed by games and other interesting amusements, all of which Winnie enjoyed

immensely; and then Aunt Judith inquired if she would like to see an old maid's den. "Nellie has never as yet been privileged to cross its threshold," she finished laughingly, "so it will be something new for both of you to inspect."

With that she led the way and ushered the two girls into her study.

Both stood for a few minutes silent, glancing round the pretty room so simply and tastefully furnished; then with a little cry of delight they sprang towards the bookcase and began to scan the contents eagerly.

"Why, I declare," cried Winnie excitedly, "here are ever so many books like the one I have at home just now. They are all by the same author too.—Miss Latimer," she continued, turning and speaking rapidly, "she must be a good lady who writes those books. I have only read one of them, entitled 'A Summer's Pleasure;' but it was beautiful, and I felt as if I should like, oh *so much*, to talk with the author, and tell her how earnestly I long to be good, and how I can't."

Nellie, who had taken one of the pretty volumes into her hand and was scanning the title-page, looked up at Miss Latimer's face with a half-incredulous light in her eyes; but Aunt Judith, gazing down on the little figure before her, failed to catch the puzzled gleam.

"My child," she said, oh so gently, taking the small white hands and drawing the young girl to the warm fireside, "your words do my heart good, and help to repay me for hours of weary labour. You wish to know the author of those books, dear. You feel you could tell her some of your deepest longings. What will you say when I confess that she stands before you—that it is in very truth Aunt Judith who loves children and sends them through print her best heart-thoughts?"

Nellie's face at this point was a study; but Winnie cried joyfully,—

"I knew it, I knew it! something whispered to me it was you. Oh, Miss Latimer, I am so glad! Will you lend me one of your dear little books, and may I love you because you are so good? I wish you were my aunt; I do indeed," and there was a lonely ache in the girlish voice as she spoke.

Miss Latimer laid her hand on the rough curly head.

"Little Winnie," she said tenderly, "don't you know that love is a treasure to me? I shall prize your warm, true affection very dearly. Call me Aunt Judith, my child; and when you read my little books, to which you are heartily welcome, remember I am speaking simply from my heart, with the earnest wish to raise your thoughts to the good Father who made this beautiful world and gave us all things richly to enjoy."

Words like these had a strange sound to Winnie, and filled her with an awe-stricken feeling; but she made no reply, only raising herself on tip-toe she kissed Miss Latimer warmly, and turned her attention to the bookcase again. At that moment the door-bell rang, and Miss Deborah announced the arrival of Dick with the carriage to take his sister home. So once more they re-entered the little parlour where Aunt Debby, with kind thoughtfulness, had prepared a repast of fruit and cake, and where Master Blake sat looking decidedly awkward and out of place in the dainty little room.

He acknowledged Miss Latimer's greeting with a few unintelligible words, and seemed altogether to be labouring under some restraint, till Winnie said with a light laugh,—

"For the first time in my life, Dick, I am sorry to see you. Whatever made you come so soon?" and at the plain-spoken words there was such a general laugh that the boy's reserve vanished, and—"Richard was himself again."

Nellie and he became fast friends, and chatted away pleasantly; while Winnie, after having partaken plentifully of fruit and cake, went to put on her hat and jacket under Miss Latimer's escort.

"May I come again soon?" she inquired naively, looking round the tiny room with loving eyes; "this is such a dear little house, and you are all so kind, I should like to spend an afternoon often here." Winnie seemed very earnest as she spoke.

"We shall be only too pleased to see you," replied Aunt Judith, smiling down on the upturned face, and neatly adjusting the tie round the girl's soft neck. "I love to have young people about me, and it is good to hear the sound of a blithe young voice."

Those words amply satisfied Winnie, and after many good-nights had been exchanged, she and Dick drove homewards, bearing with them two of Aunt Judith's precious volumes.

"I say, Win, that's a jolly little house," said the boy as they rolled along in the darkness. "What a funny, brisk old lady Aunt Debby is! Did you notice the way she dodged about, and how her front curls shook and bobbed a regular jig every time she spoke? She puts me in mind of a little bird peeping out at you from those small twinkling eyes. She's a rum old customer, sure enough;" and Dick chuckled at the remembrance of Miss Deborah's round chubby face and crisp chirping voice.

"Yes, she is rather queer," assented Winnie musingly; "but I like Miss Latimer dearly. She is awfully good, Dick; and fancy her being the author of those books after all. Is it not strange?"

"Slightly, perhaps; but 'truth is stranger than fiction,' my dear sister.—By-the-by, I did not notice

any Quaker fashion in their dress to-night. Miss Latimer wore some lace fal-lal about her neck, and Aunt Debby's cap was a regular flower-garden." Dick was a severe critic on female attire.

"That's quite true," replied Winnie; "but if you saw them in the street, with their long loose cloaks and huge bonnets, you would speak differently. O Dick, how happy they all seem! don't they? and how cosy everything looks! Such a contrast to our great big rooms, where you feel like a—a—" Winnie stopped short for lack of a simile, and her brother supplied the missing word,—

"Pelican in the wilderness. That's it, Win; and you're about right. Love won't make the pot boil; but money can't buy everything, and I reckon there's a screw loose somewhere in our home."

With that there followed a long silence, and Winnie was almost in the land of dreams when the carriage stopped at No. 3 Victoria Square, and Dick shouted roguishly in her ear the one word—"Awake!"

The windows were ablaze with light, and there were sounds of music and singing as brother and sister, entering the house, wended their way to the oak parlour and warmed their hands at the cheerful blaze. The gas was lit, the curtains drawn, the room tidy and inviting-looking; but no kind motherly face was there to welcome them and ask if the evening had been a pleasant one. At other times Winnie would not, most probably, have felt the blank, having been accustomed to such neglect; but coming straight from Aunt Judith's gentle presence, and with the remembrance of her loving words and kind voice stirring the lonely little heart, it struck home to her with a chill. Leaving Dick to his own meditations she slipped away to the large nursery, where old nurse sat quietly watching the slumbers of her young charge, Winnie's little step-brother.

Here at least there was no lack of sympathy or welcome, for dearly did the faithful servant love her first mistress's children, and bitterly did she bewail the neglect with which the two youngest were treated. Kneeling down by her side, Winnie rehearsed the whole history of the afternoon and evening at Dingle Cottage; and old nurse, listening intently, did not fail to raise her hands and express due astonishment at the knowledge of Aunt Judith's authorship. So the young girl was comforted, and after kissing her little brother lovingly, she rejoined Dick in the oak parlour, and passed the rest of the evening contentedly in his society.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### FORGING THE FIRST LINK.

Autumn, with its sobbing winds and falling leaves, was over now, and cold, sterile winter reigned supreme all around. Day after day the chill northern blasts swept over the busy town, bringing with them now a tempest of blinding sleet, and again showers of softly-falling snow: rich people wrapped themselves warmly in their furs and velvet; and the poor, gathering their tattered garments more closely round them, shivered under the touch of the icy king. But if winter days brought cold, bleak winds and murky skies, they also brought many pleasures in their train; and young hearts beat joyfully as the Christmas-tide drew near, and bright visions of the festive season filled each youthful mind.

Winnie especially was in a state of great excitement, for Mrs. Blake had promised her a party with a real Christmas tree, to which she was at liberty to invite as many of her school-mates as she chose. One little trifle alone damped her happiness—namely, the command to include Ada Irvine in the list of her invitations; and although Winnie pouted and pleaded her dislike of that young lady, Mrs. Blake remained firm, and insisted that her injunction should be carried out. "Your father was formerly on very intimate terms with Mr. Irvine, Winnie, and I will have no slight or disrespect shown to his daughter; so, either post her an invitation or abandon the idea of a party altogether." And when her step-mother spoke in that decided manner, Winnie knew she had no alternative save to yield.

"I sincerely trust Ada Irvine will have the good sense to refuse," she confided to Nellie the day on which the invitations were about to be issued. "She'll spoil the whole affair if she comes, horrid old thing; and I did mean it all to be so nice. Ugh! she will surely never accept," and Winnie's face wore anything but an amiable expression.

School had not been such a very pleasant place those last few weeks, and many of the scenes which occurred there were certainly neither seemly nor instructive. Open warfare reigned between Ada and Winnie, and the skirmishes were becoming serious as well as disagreeable; for Winnie, scouting all Nellie's proposals of being patient and winning by love, made a fiery little adversary, and Ada Irvine's dislike of both was rapidly deepening into the bitterest hatred—the more so when she saw Nellie rising gradually in the esteem of both teachers and scholars: the former being won by her steady attention and modest behaviour; the latter by the simple, kindly spirit which characterized all her actions. There was much still to call for patient forbearance and quiet endurance; but Nellie could see the golden sunlight streaming through the clouds, and hopefully trusted that by-and-by every dark shadow would vanish and leave never a trace behind.

This state of matters was as gall and wormwood to Ada. Nellie's gradual triumph, and Winnie's malicious delight thereat, roused every evil passion in her nature; and out of her deadly hatred she meditated a sure revenge when the opportunity came in her way. What form it would take she hardly knew; events would shape themselves somehow; and then—the cold blue eyes glittered ominously at the thought of what she termed her reckoning-day.

Many a tender, wistful thought Winnie sent to Miss Latimer, though she had never managed to visit Dingle Cottage a second time. Her precious volumes were read and re-read over and over again; and it seemed as if Aunt Judith's quiet, peaceful face shone forth from every page, and the soft, kindly voice uttered each loving word and noble thought. Dick used to protest his utter weariness of Aunt Judith and her books, for day after day she was quoted to him with never-failing enthusiasm; but on those occasions when he did give expression to such sentiments, Winnie merely treated him to a hearty embrace, and pursued the interesting subject with increased earnestness. In the meantime, however, her mind was so fully occupied with the forthcoming party that nothing else was on her lips from morn till eve; and with regard to Miss Latimer, Dick had peace for a season.

Oh, what discussions took place in the old oak parlour over the approaching festivity! How was it to be conducted? What was to be the programme for the evening? and who were to be included in the list of invitations?

"I suppose your friends will be able to dance, Dick?" inquired Winnie one night when they were sitting together talking as usual about the great event in prospect. "Mamma says we cannot play games all the evening."

"Well, I daresay they can do a hop or two when it's necessary," answered the boy lazily. "Just you get hold of Archie Trollope and he'll spin you round and round the room in a twinkling; not very gracefully, perhaps, but with no lack of energy. He's the boy to do it;" and Dick laughed as he pictured the charming spectacle with his mental eye.

Winnie looked dignified.

"If he cannot dance properly," she said, with a touch of contempt in her voice, "most assuredly he will not have the honour of dancing with me. I have no desire to figure ridiculously in a ball-room," and the little lady drew herself up proudly as she spoke.

Dick collapsed.

"The honour!" he gasped spasmodically—"the honour! My eye! listen to the princess!" and rolling himself about in convulsions of laughter, the vulgar boy ended his merriment by tilting over his chair and landing himself gracefully on the floor.

"Why not an honour, pray?" inquired Winnie, looking loftily on the sprawling form at her feet. "Is it not a *great* privilege for any gentleman to dance with a lady?" and the indignant child laid special stress on the word "great."

Dick rose, and treating her to a sweeping Sir Charles Grandison bow, replied, "You are right, madam; the honour is inestimable." At this both laughed, and continued the interrupted conversation.

"Ada Irvine has accepted her invitation, Dick," was Winnie's next announcement, given with ominous gravity. "No one ever imagined she would do so, and all the school-girls are talking about it."

Dick gave a low whistle.

"Depend upon it, Win," he said solemnly, "there's something in the wind. Ada Irvine's not the girl to take such a step without having a reason for so doing. I guess you and Nellie had better look out for squalls, for if Miss Ada's not up to some low dodge, my name's not Richard Blake."

And even while they were speaking, the subject of their conversation sat up in her comfortable bedroom at Mrs. Elder's, thinking over the first link she was about to forge in the long chain of bitter malice and deceit. She was seated in a low basket-chair before the fire, making a pretty picture with her long fair hair floating down her back, and her dainty figure nestling cosily amongst the soft cushions. Her blue eyes had an absent, far-away look, and the small white hands lying on her lap were nervously interlaced one with the other.

"Yes," she muttered in a low, hushed voice, "I shall have my revenge, though I cannot as yet see the way clearly before me. I hardly know towards which I bear the greater hatred, but anyhow both will suffer—Winnifred Blake for her malicious triumph and delight; Nellie Latimer for her upsetting behaviour and quiet contempt. Oh, how I detest them both!" and the girl's eyes gleamed angrily. There was a moment's silence; then she continued, knitting her white brow in a perplexed frown,—"I wonder how I shall manage? One thing is certain: I must do my best on Friday night—make a good impression on the Blake family, and cautiously poison their minds with respect to Nellie Latimer. People are so credulous in this world, it is wonderful what a word skilfully thrown in will do, and how very easily it is credited; but I must be careful, and lay my plans with the greatest caution."

She spoke all this in a low undertone, as if fearful of being overheard, and her eyes wandered round the room with an uneasy light shining in their depths. The fire-flames leaped and crackled, the pretty room was full of warmth and comfort; yet the girl shivered violently, and gave a scared glance

towards the window as the wind went wailing round the house like a sobbing child. What gave her that strange, restless feeling—that weariness of heart? She could hardly tell; only somehow the world seemed all changed of late, and the Christmas-tide so close at hand failed to afford the same joy and gladness it had done heretofore. A great black cloud seemed to be hiding all the sunshine from her sight; a heavy weight would keep dragging at her heart-strings, and a continual thirst after revenge persisted in haunting her every footstep.

Yet this time was a season of peace and holy joy—a time when hand should clasp hand with the fervour of warm friendship, and all past slights and wrongs be blotted out for ever, leaving room for naught in the heart save the pure Christ-like love which makes this world a heaven on earth. Night after night, as the Christmas-tide drew near, the sky spread itself over all—one curtain, of misty blue, studded with the bright, scintillating twinkle of myriads of happy stars. Every evening the quiet, peaceful moon shone forth rounder and mellow; the north wind tempered its cutting blasts and touched the sleeping earth gently, gently with its icy fingers; and the frost-sparkles, glistening from lofty steeple and sloping roof, changed the dingy town to a veritable fairyland.

At first Nellie had often wondered why Miss Latimer took such an interest in the outside world, and what beauty she could see in the busy city with its constant din and bustle. But that was over now, for she had learned that the nature-world was as an open book to Aunt Judith—a treasury from which she brought forth gold, silver, and precious stones, and scattered them throughout the world in the shape of grand, beautiful thoughts.

Nellie found life very pleasant just now at the little cottage in Broomhill Road. Miss Latimer and Aunt Debby vied with each other in every endeavour to add to her comfort and happiness; while even Aunt Meg roused herself occasionally from her selfish torpor and tried to brighten the tiny home. She could gladden it wonderfully when she chose, for Miss Margaret possessed many pleasing traits of character; but, alas! she seldom did choose, and, as Miss Deborah quaintly expressed it, "one had to endure innumerable showers of rain for one gleam of sunshine." Nellie had become so accustomed, however, to the invalid's whims and caprices, that she thought little, if at all, about them, and in the meantime her whole attention was engrossed with Winnie's party. Miss Latimer had bought her a soft white muslin for the occasion, and Miss Deborah was busy converting it into the prettiest party-dress imaginable. The young girl had been at first slightly dubious about Aunt Debby's dress-making capabilities; but her doubts were fast disappearing as she watched the gradual progress made under that lady's skilful fingers, and noted how beautifully and tastefully the work was done.

"I am sure no one will have such a pretty dress, Aunt Debby," she said one afternoon, coming into the parlour and finding Miss Deborah busy over the dainty garment. "It is so good of you to put yourself to all this trouble for me, and I shall never be able to thank you as I ought." Nellie's eyes glistened as she spoke.

"You will soon find out your mistake, my dear," said Aunt Meg from her couch by the fire. "I question if one of your friends will be dressed in so simple and cheap a material. Why, you will be a regular dowdy, and I told Judith so when she showed me her purchase. She could hardly have bought a less expensive fabric."

"Nonsense, Meg," put in Miss Deborah with a displeased frown and rapid glance at Nellie's amazed countenance; "don't place absurd ideas in the child's head. You know perfectly well muslin makes a most appropriate dress for a young girl. I wonder what Judith would say were she to hear you speak in that manner?"

"Look like a saint, and preach to Nellie on the vanity and vexation of the human heart," replied the invalid, who seemed to be decidedly out of humour. "I am well aware of Judith's style, Debby: that is how she covers her stinginess," and Miss Margaret gave a little sarcastic laugh at this point.

"Hush!" almost shouted Miss Deborah, turning a pair of bright, angry eyes in the direction of the couch. "How dare you utter such an untruth? Simply because one of your endless wishes was thwarted. Meg, I am ashamed of you!" and Aunt Debby resumed her sewing with an air of heavy displeasure, while the invalid relapsed into sulky silence, the cause of her ill-humour being Aunt Judith's refusal that morning to grant her a new dressing-gown. "Wait a little longer, Meg; I can hardly afford it just now, and your old one still looks pretty and fresh," had been the quiet answer to the proffered request; but that was sufficient to upset the invalid's equanimity for the rest of the day, and no amount of kindness could soothe her wounded feelings.

Of course Nellie was ignorant of all this. Still, although she did not believe Miss Margaret's statement in reference to Miss Latimer's meanness, the words left a sting, and the pretty dress seemed divested of half its beauty. "Aunt Judith might have purchased something just a trifle more expensive," was the unuttered thought ever rising to her lips; but, oh! how her heart reproached her when, on the evening of the party, Miss Latimer called her into the little sanctum, and, shutting the door, lifted a small box from the table and proceeded to unfasten the lock.

"Aunt Debby has just been showing me your dress, Nellie," she said in her soft gentle voice, "and now that it is finished I think it very pretty indeed. I hardly know why, but I have an idea *you* consider it too simple for evening wear; and although I am sorry should such be the case, I cannot agree with you. The dress seems to me quite suitable, and its charm lies in its very simplicity. A little trinket round the neck, however, might be an improvement, and so, dear, I am going to forestall my Christmas present and give it to you now. I suppose you will value it none the less because I used to wear it long ago in my



girlhood days;" and Miss Latimer, lifting a string of fairest pearls from the box, clasped them round her niece's neck as she spoke.

Nellie's breath came quick and fast.

"O auntie! they are never for me," she gasped excitedly. "They are so beautiful, and I have been thinking such horrid things."

Aunt Judith smiled. "I do not blame you, child. It is only natural such thoughts should crop up; but, Nellie, I am not so very rich, and cannot afford to be lavish with my money. One never knows what may happen, and I must needs guard against a rainy day. No, no; not another reproachful word. I like to see my child look fair and sweet. Good-night, dear." And kissing her softly. Miss Latimer pushed the repentant girl from the room with gentle hands. Then closing the door, she drew a low chair close to the fire, and, as she sat quietly thinking, the white, set look Nellie had noticed before settled over the patient face, while the lips quivered and drooped like those of one in pain.

What was the mystery in Aunt Judith's life? What suffering had stamped its refining image on that noble, true face, and bore witness to the fiery trial through which she had passed?

Few knew of the life of complete self-renunciation lived out in that little home—the quiet acceptance and patient bearing of a life-long sorrow, and the earnest endeavour day after day to follow closely the Master's footsteps, and live his holy, blameless life. But some day in the great hereafter, she knew the mystery of suffering would be explained, and that there what was here sown weeping would be reaped in joy and gladness; and knowing this, Aunt Judith was content to wait.

## CHAPTER IX.

### THE CHRISTMAS PARTY.

It was the evening of the party. The bustle and confusion which had reigned throughout the day were now over, and the whole house blazed with light; while the hall-door, standing hospitably open, seemed to offer a gracious welcome to the approaching guests.

"How do I look, Win?" inquired Dick of his sister as they stood together in the large drawing-room a little apart from the other members of the family. "This get-up is awful," and the boy looked down with a gesture of disgust on his elegant evening suit.

"You'll do beautifully," pronounced Win, pirouetting in front of him, a blithe little fairy, with soft cloudy dress of glistening fabric. "Don't look so fierce, dear boy, however, or you will frighten all the young ladies from your side."

Dick struggled into his gloves. "Much I care so far as that goes," he grumbled. "What I wish to know is, why one needs all this war-paint and tomfoolery. Can a fellow not be allowed to enjoy himself without dressing up a perfect guy? I feel every seam in my coat splitting, and I tell you there will be a tremendous explosion soon. Just listen!" and bending forward, the boy proved the truth of his words as an ominous crack sounded, and Winnie's dismayed eye caught the glimpse of a tiny hole in one of the back seams.

"Be careful," she cried in an awestricken voice; "there is a split, and you'll make it worse if you wriggle about so. Be a good boy, Dickie, and try to prove agreeable to every one."

Saying this, Winnie treated her brother to a charming smile, and then tripped forward as the first bevy of guests were ushered into the room.

Dick made a grimace, twisted his neck, and vehemently denounced high collars and white ties as being decided nuisances; then remembering his sister's parting injunction, he attempted to call up an angelic smile to his face, and to make his most polite bow on every necessary occasion.

The room began gradually to fill. One after another carriages came and went, depositing their happy burdens of laughing boys and girls before the great hall-door, near which some little ragged children were standing, gazing on the fairy figures and joyous faces, and wondering, as the wind fluttered their tattered rags, why the world was so unequally divided—why some should have so much of the good things of this life, and others apparently so little. Poor, weary, aching hearts, on whom the burden and heat of the day had already fallen, they knew not as they watched the carriages come and go, and peeped into the warm hall all ablaze with light, how assuredly "compensation is twined with the lot of high and low," and that the loving eye of the Almighty Father was regarding them with the same tender care he bestowed on their happier brothers and sisters. They only realized, as the door closed at last with a loud clang, and they turned away to their miserable homes, that within that large house there were warmth, light, and gladness, and that they were shut out from them all. The calm hushed sky had for them no lessons of faith and peaceful waiting; the bright stars no tale of an Eye that neither slumbers nor sleeps. They only knew it was cold, cold, and that life had for them no brightness. So the

little naked figures crept shivering away; and the happy boys and girls gathered together in the beautiful holly-decked drawing-room never thought of the dark places of the earth, where the sunshine rarely penetrates, and young hearts know not what it is to laugh the glad joyous laugh of happy childhood.

Dick, who had gathered five of his special friends around him, was evidently holding a consultation in which he himself played the most prominent part. The subject under consideration was that of showing special attention throughout the entire evening to Nellie Latimer, and of completely ignoring Ada Irvine's presence.

"Now, comrades," concluded the young orator, as a loud burst of music warned him that the night's entertainment was about to commence, "I presume you thoroughly understand me. Not a single hop, remember, with Miss Irvine, and any amount of polkas and waltzes with Miss Latimer. The former is one of your stuck-up young ladies, who grow old before their time; the latter, a tip-top girl like Win. I have told you what I know concerning both of them; go ahead and prosper, brethren, with my humble blessing following you." Dick, as he spoke, changed the tragic attitude he had struck, and assumed one of staid demeanour, which contrasted comically with his shock of fiery hair, now standing all on end, as people say, and laughter lurking in his eyes.

The boys, however, entered heartily into the spirit of his scheme, and replied, "You are our leader. Forward then; light the first match, and we will follow the train,"—whereat they all shook hands and indulged in a low chuckle of glee.

At that moment a pretty, gloved hand touched Dick's arm, and Edith Blake's clear, flute-like voice said, "We are forming sets for the lancers, Dick, and you must dance. Mamma requests you to choose Miss Irvine for your partner, so please go and ask her at once."

The boy's eyes flashed mischievously. "You bet I shall," he replied with alacrity; and crossing the room, he stood before Nellie, saying in his most genial tones, "May I have the pleasure, Miss Latimer?"

The young girl looked up with a happy smile. "Certainly," she said, rising and slipping her hand within his arm; "the music is splendid, and I am so fond of dancing."

"That's right," answered Dick, leading her into the centre of the room, and vastly enjoying the indignant glances of his step-mother and Edith. "I like a hop myself at times, so I guess we'll get on well together.—Now then, gentlemen, bow to your partners;" and as he concluded, the wild boy swept Nellie the most profound bow, and started off through the first figure with more energy than grace.

His friends, true to their promise, had all chosen partners, the sets were formed, the music floating through the room, and still Ada Irvine remained in her seat, fair, sweet, and smiling to the outward view, but with a world of angry passion surging in her heart. As she sat watching the merry boys and girls winding joyously through the mazy dance, Mrs. Blake came forward, and, sitting down by her side, proceeded to question her about her parents and their movements abroad; and Ada answered each query in a pretty, graceful manner infinitely charming. Then school and school-life were touched upon. Had Miss Irvine many friends in town? Did she not often feel very lonely? and why could she never come and spend an afternoon with Winnie? These and other questions being asked, the first drop of poison was instilled with the skill and caution of an adept hand.

"Winnie and she had been very good friends once, before Nellie Latimer's appearance on the scene, but since then a misunderstanding had arisen and the friendship had been broken up. Was Miss Latimer an amiable girl? Winnie seemed very much attached to her. Ada would rather not commit herself, but certainly Nellie's position was not such as to justify her in being Winnie's chosen friend. Her family were poor, very poor indeed; her aunts eccentric, winning their own bread, doing their own work, and living in a common locality."

All this, however, was told with much reluctance (at least apparently so) and the earnest endeavour to tone down disagreeable parts. Mrs. Blake was charmed, and wondered how Winnie could prefer a fresh, countrified-looking girl to the sweet, amiable creature Miss Irvine appeared to be. As she sat pondering over these things in her heart, Ada's low voice broke again on her ear.

"Mrs. Blake," she pleaded, "kindly do not betray my confidence. I never meant to tell you anything about myself, and Winnie would hate me were she to discover that I had prejudiced you against her friend; indeed I am very sorry I spoke."

A true, noble woman would have scorned to condemn any one on account of lowly origin and humble rank in life; but Mrs. Blake was a woman of the world—proud, arrogant, and haughty. She took little interest in her younger step-children; they were allowed to live pretty much their own lives and follow their own desires; but still there were some things that must be checked, and this friendship with a low-born girl was one of them.

Turning to her young guest with a swift, bright smile, she replied sweetly, "Do not apologize, my dear; I am only too glad to have received your information in time. I had no idea Miss Latimer's friends were in the position you speak of. Had that been the case, certainly she would not have been here to-night. Winnie is allowed no small amount of liberty, but close companionship with a girl so much her inferior will not be countenanced for a moment. You need not fear, however, my betraying your confidence; and I trust soon to see you and my wilful little step-daughter fast friends once more."

As she spoke Mrs. Blake rose and moved gracefully away, leaving Ada with a bevy of laughing girls, who came flocking towards her as the music ceased.

"Did you enjoy our dance, Nellie?" inquired Dick, wiping his warm forehead and glancing with ludicrous dismay at the rents in his once spotless gloves. "I thought it all tip-top."

"Splendid," replied Nellie decidedly; "and you really managed to get through the figures wonderfully well."

The boy's amazed countenance was amusing.

"I managed to get through the figures wonderfully well!" he reiterated in astonishment. "Why, Nellie, I am an accomplished dancer" (with mock solemnity), "and have been so since the days when I was a little thing. You should see me at the Highland fling and sword-dance. My eye! I go at them well," and Dick's legs began to shuffle about as if they desired to commence the performance.

Nellie laughed. "Forgive me," she said pleasantly. "I did not mean any disparagement; only boys, as a rule, do not care about dancing, and you seemed somehow to enjoy it all so thoroughly."

"That I did" (with emphasis), "but—hallo, Archie! is it really you?" as a boy passed his side at that moment. "Allow me to introduce you to Miss Latimer.—Here, Nellie, is the very partner for you; he will dance you off your feet in a few minutes," and Dick, hurrying away, left the two young people regarding each other with looks of rather comical dismay.

After that, the evening fled by all too quickly for Nellie, to whom every moment was fraught with the purest pleasure. Dick saw she had no lack of partners, and constituted himself her guardian for the night, greatly to Mrs. Blake's annoyance and Winnie's satisfaction. The former could find no means of laying any more commands on him, for the boy mischievously eluded her every attempt to cross his path, and failed most provokingly to catch her eye when a convenient season presented itself for so doing. Nellie, with true appreciation of his kindness, thanked him warmly in her innocent heart, and thought she had never spent such a pleasant evening. There was never a cloud to darken her enjoyment or dim the brightness of her happy face. Mrs. Blake's studied avoidance passed by unnoticed, as also the haughty looks of Winnie's elder sisters; and even Ada Irvine's calm, contemptuous face failed to ruffle her joyous spirit.

Long years afterwards she liked to look back on that evening of thorough, uninterrupted enjoyment, when she could say in all sincerity and truth, "I was happy;" when she danced with what seemed to be winged feet, and the smile of gladness was ever on her lips. Closing her eyes softly, she could see it all again—the large holly-decked drawing-room, with its blazing lights and bevy of merry boys and girls; Winnie's little figure flitting here and there—her flushed cheeks and great starry eyes; Dick's honest freckled face and kindly smile; and the beautiful, stately hostess, who moved in the midst of them all with the dignity of a queen.

The Christmas tree was a great success, the presents being pretty and appropriate. Winnie smiled her delight over a dainty long-wished-for work-box; Dick chuckled at the splendid pair of skates now in his possession; Ada looked gratified when a lovely fan was handed down to her; and Nellie was speechless over a pretty morocco purse.

"It has been all so splendid, Winnie dear," she whispered when good-nights were being exchanged; "just like fairyland. I have enjoyed myself wonderfully. And now be sure and come soon to Dingle Cottage; you will have plenty of time during the holidays, and Aunt Judith is wearying to see you."

"I'll be only too glad, Nell," replied her friend, kissing her warmly; "but I must get mamma's permission first.—Dick, see Nellie safely into the cab." Then the carriage rolled away, and the wonderful Christmas party was over.

"I think," said Winnie, coming into the large diningroom after the last guest had departed, and finding her brother (alas that I should have to confess it!) prowling round the table and surreptitiously pocketing something from every tempting dish he saw thereon, "we have had a beautiful night, and I am sure the party has been a decided success."

"So far as the food is concerned it has," answered the boy, regarding the good things heaped before him with a loving eye. "I say, Win, do let us have a tuck in at this soufflé here; we shall never see it after to-night, and it is such prime stuff."

Winnie laughed. "You'll require to hurry then, Dick," she replied; "the servants will be here in a few minutes." So the two young gourmands sat down and commenced a second supper ere the lights were put out and the mandate issued—"Go to bed."

For a few seconds nothing was said, both being too busily engaged with the contents of their plates to join in any conversation; but at last Dick poised his spoon in the air and commenced in a serio-comic tone,—

"I guess we shall have to pay for our evil deeds this evening. I saw the storm-warning hoisted on our step-mother's face all night, so look out for squalls."

"Whatever do you mean?" inquired Winnie, glancing up from her plate with an innocent look. "I do

not understand you, my dear boy."

"Oh, do you not?" replied the dear boy, mimicking her tones, and twisting his amiable countenance into an altogether indescribable expression. "Do you imagine your conduct towards the lovely Ada was not observed and commented upon by our mother and stuck-up sisters? If so, pray rid yourself at once of such a delusion, for I tell you, Win, there's a storm looming in the distance for you and for me."

Winnie pouted.

"So be it!" she cried defiantly; "I don't care. I am no hypocrite, Dick, and must act as I feel. I did not wish Ada to come to our party. I hate her with my whole heart, and I believe in just letting her see such is the case."

Dick ran his hand through his shock of hair, and opened his eyes as widely as he possibly could. "My word, we're waxing eloquent," he observed approvingly. "Go it, little sister; you're doing first-rate;" and he helped himself liberally to another supply of soufflé as he spoke.

"What a tease you are!" said Winnie, pushing aside her plate with a gesture of petulance; "you know I am in earnest, not in fun."

"True, my queen" (with a mock bow), "therefore I shall no longer descend to vulgar jesting. But seriously, Win, I tell you frankly the mother is awfully angry at us. You did not study her face, perhaps, but I watched closely, and saw a regular thunder-cloud on her brow all night. How could it be otherwise, when she noticed your steady avoidance of her favourite and my open rudeness?"

"I enjoyed your open rudeness vastly, Dick," interrupted the girl, with a twinkle sparkling in her eye and a mischievous smile on her lip. "I could have hugged you every time you danced with Nellie, and when I saw you trooping your boys up to her. Why, she was quite a belle amongst you all."

"Yes; I flatter myself we trotted her out very well, and the fellows all agree she is good fun. But oh, what a dodging I had to manage my point! Every few minutes I descried the mother bearing down upon me, and was obliged to skeedaddle." Dick's language never was remarkable for elegance.

"Well, I am not the least wee bit sorry for my behaviour," said Winnie, rising as she heard the sound of approaching footsteps; "and if I am to get a scolding I must just get it. You'll be able to console me when it is over, will you not? Meantime I intend to forget it all in sleep, so—good-night, Dick;" and the little fairy, in her soft, airy garments, waved him a tiny kiss as she vanished from the room and hurried to her own pretty apartment.

Dick, with his well-filled pockets, retired also; the servants entering, closed the shutters and put out the lights; the feeble fire flickered for a little, then died slowly, and deep, unbroken slumber settled over all.

Meanwhile, outside in the quiet night the snow was falling softly, silently—wrapping the sleeping earth in a pure, unsullied winding-sheet, and covering the church steeples with its feathery flakes. Hush! hush! how silently, yet how quickly, the snow showers fell. Slowly the hours passed by. Morning stealing in swept back the clouds of night and darkness, and the sun, peeping through with his warm, genial ray, shone down with a light which grew brighter and brighter as the world wakened up and the merry Christmas bells sent their happy chimes pealing through the frosty air.

## CHAPTER X.

### GATHERING CLOUDS.

Rough, rumpled hair, two soft eyes drowned in tears, flushed, angry cheeks and pouting lips, was the picture which met Dick's view one morning when he entered the oak parlour two days after the eventful party. Christmas had passed by pleasantly and tranquilly for both children. They had had the regular Christmas dinner—turkey, mince-pies, plum-pudding, etc.—and the afternoon and evening had been filled with youthful pleasure and amusement. Sabbath also was calm and peaceful, so calm, indeed, that Winnie began to think their fears were groundless, and Mrs. Blake's annoyance a mere myth; but Dick, more suspicious, decided it was only the lull before the storm, and on the Monday he found his suspicions verified. The hurricane burst, and resulted in a forlorn little maiden bathed in tears, and a boy whose heart burned within him at the remembrance of cruel words and unjust accusations.

"I say, Win," he cried, coming forward into the room and leaning his elbows on the table with careless disregard to elegance of attitude, "what a miserable object you look! for all the world like a drowned rat. Can't you dry those weeping eyes and speak to a fellow for a few minutes? It is dreadful being treated to a regular shower-bath in this cold weather," and Dick tried to conjure up the faintest glimmer of a smile to the dolorous countenance.

Winnie wailed: "O Dick, I was so happy; and now everything is wrong. Mamma says she is very much displeased with me, and—" but here sobs choked the little plaintive voice, and rendered the latter part of the sentence quite unintelligible.

Her brother's lips curled.

"Win," he said impressively, "you're a good little creature, and the mother is fond of you. In a few days she will forget all this annoyance, and things will go on with you as smoothly as before; but I am different. I shall never be able to blot out of my heart the words the governor" (Dick's usual name for his father) "said to me this morning,—never so long as I live. It was not only about this affair—that I could have stood—but he raked up all my sins and shortcomings from the days when I was a little boy, and heaped them, one after the other, on the top of my devoted head. I was bad, stupid, and awkward—the disgrace of the school, and the butt of my companions. He was perfectly ashamed of me, and so on." Dick's eyes were flaming. "But I tell you, Win, what it is: the crisis has come, and I'll do something desperate."

His sister's tears overflowed again. "I hate crying, I do indeed," she said, scrubbing her cheeks viciously at every fresh outburst; "but the nasty little trickly drops will come. Dick, dear old boy, I'm sorry for you; will you not be sorry for me too? Just listen: I am never to have Nellie for my friend again. She must never come here, and I must never go and see Aunt Judith any more."

Dick looked up in amazement. "Why not, Win? What has all that to do with your conduct towards Ada?"

"I don't know," with another quiver of the lips. "Mamma spoke about Nellie first, asking where she lived, and if her aunts worked in any way. Of course I told her simply what I knew, and then she said all our friendship must end now; she would never have allowed Nellie to be invited to our party had she known so much about her before."

"But dear me, Win," interrupted the boy impatiently, "the mother consented when you asked to spend that afternoon at Dingle Cottage some time ago. Why should she turn round and condemn the friendship now?"

"Oh, I can explain that easily. Mamma was hurrying to go out with Clare and Edith when I begged permission, and said yes without making any inquiries; but she scarcely spoke to Nellie on Friday evening, and I cannot understand what has made her so angry all at once."

"Did she say anything against Nellie personally?"

"No; but she is not in my position in life, and I must not make a friend and confidante of her. We may speak at school of course, but that is all," and Winnie's grief burst out afresh at this point.

Dick meditated.

"I wonder," he said at length, a slow light dawning in his eyes, "if Ada Irvine can have been putting the mother up to this? It would be quite in keeping with some of her low dodges."

Winnie shook her head. "I thought so myself at first, but mamma led me to believe otherwise. She says Ada is such a sweet, amiable girl, and much more suitable in every way than Nellie for a friend. I fired up at that, however, and declared I hated Ada, adding she was a sneak, and did horrible things at school."

"Oh, you would give her true character to the mother, I have no doubt," put in Dick with twinkling eyes; "but the question is, 'What was the effect?'"

"I was prejudiced—and no one is faultless in this world."

A short period of silence followed, during which Winnie wept copiously, and Dick sat beating a tattoo on the table.

"You'll soon have no eyes left," he observed practically, as the little drenched handkerchief was again brought into use to wipe away the flowing tears. "Cheer up, Win, old girl, and don't look as if your grandmother had died half an hour ago."

"But you do not know the worst of it yet, Dick," cried the girl, raising her tear-stained face and speaking in heart-breaking tones. "I promised Nellie I would come and spend one afternoon with her during the holidays, and now I can't get. Oh! I wish so much to go."

"Then do so," replied Dick doggedly. "There's no great harm in that; and after all, what reward does one receive for being conscientious and obedient?"

His sister looked aghast. "I dare not," she whispered; "mamma would be so angry. And yet—if I might go only this once."

Dick being in anything but a filial mood said decidedly, "There's no use in whining and moaning, Win. You can spend Wednesday afternoon at Dingle Cottage if you wish, without any one in the house finding that out. Edith and Clare are away from home; Algy and Tom never trouble about us; and both the mother and governor will be spending that entire day with the Harveys at Springfield. As for nurse

and the servants, I'll manage them."

"Let me think," replied Winnie. She leaned forward towards the table, drooped her head slowly on her little white hands, and then the struggle began—the struggle between good and evil, between the paths of right and wrong.

"Just this once," she murmured yearningly—"only this once;" and as she strove and wrestled inwardly, it seemed as if two figures stole silently to her side and stood with earnest eyes watching the weary battle. "I'll never do it again," she muttered, "but—only to say good-bye;" and at this the dark figure smiled triumphantly, while the white, spotless one listened with saddening eyes.

This was no mean struggle in which Winnie was engaged. Many a one had fallen under a lesser temptation; for a visit to Aunt Judith meant much, oh so much, to her. There was something in the atmosphere of Dingle Cottage that raised the young girl to a loftier, purer standard; something that made her yearn after what was good and holy, and stirred up the childish heart to reach after the things which belong unto our peace. She would never feel so again. How could she, when there was none to guide her in the paths of right—none to tell how she might weave a golden sunshine into her life, and leave lingering tracks of light behind her? All these thoughts passed through her childish brain as she sat with low bowed head and aching heart, thinking and struggling, oh so wearily. At length the contest was ended; and turning to Dick with a look of firm determination on her face, Winnie said briefly, "I will go." So the struggle was over, and the dark figure reigned triumphant, while the white-robed one stole weeping away.

"Write and let Nellie know then," replied Dick, preparing to leave the room. "I am going off to skate with Archie Trollope, and can post your letter on my way to the pond if you choose."

Winnie opened her desk—a birthday gift—and her heart smote her as she wrote in a crude, girlish hand:—

*"December 27th, 18—.*

"MY DEAR NELLIE,—I shall come and spend Wednesday afternoon with you all at Dingle Cottage. If suitable, do not trouble replying to this scribble.—

Your loving friend,  
WINNIE M. BLAKE."

"There," she said, sealing the envelope and handing it to her brother, "I have written; and you—you will come for me at night, Dick."

"Of course I shall, Win," answered the boy, looking down with wistful, loving eyes on his favourite sister, "and we shall have a jolly time for once. Put all gloomy thoughts aside, old girl, and let us be happy while we may." With that he treated her to a rough, hearty embrace, making teasing remarks at the same time about boiled gooseberry eyes and swollen lids; then giving one parting hug, marched out of the room, and a few minutes after the loud clanging of the hall-door intimated that Master Richard Blake had gone out for the day.

The afternoon was spent by Winnie in driving with her step-mother, who tried in many pleasant ways to atone for the morning's harshness; and so well did she succeed that the little girl's heart ached sorely and quailed at the remembrance of the deceit she was practising. But, she would never do it again, no, never again, and only this once could not be such a very great sin.

So the time passed, and Wednesday came at last, a true winter's day, with snow-mantled earth and keen, hard frost.

"Don't be late in coming for me, Dick," was Winnie's parting injunction, as he saw her safely into the 'bus. "I shall expect you soon after tea." And the boy promised.

The little sister looked after him as he strode briskly away. "What a dear, kind brother he is!" she murmured lovingly. "How should I manage without him? Good old Dick. He is all the world to me." And the boy, tramping along the slippery streets with giant steps, was muttering—"Poor Win! she will fret very much at first, and I shall miss her sorely; but it can't be helped—I must run away."

Meanwhile the 'bus, whirling rapidly through the busy streets, stopped in due time at Broomhill Road, and Winnie, alighting with flushed, expectant face, found Nellie awaiting her eagerly.

"How good of you to come, dear! and how pretty you look!" she said, kissing her little guest affectionately. "I was so pleased to get your note on Monday evening."

"You cannot guess how glad I am to be here, Nellie," replied Winnie simply, slipping her hand through her friend's arm as they walked rapidly along the quiet road. "Your home seems like an Eden to me, and spending a few hours with you all there one of my greatest pleasures."

After this both tongues went merrily till Dingle Cottage was reached, and Winnie stood once more

in the snug parlour, listening to the hearty welcomes which fell so pleasantly on her ears. The tiny home wore its usual air of cosy comfort, and the faces of its inmates seemed positively to shine with happiness and content. Aunt Debby's chubby countenance was all aglow, and Aunt Meg's peevish visage, having apparently caught the reflex of her smile, looked very fair and sweet as the invalid turned it brightly towards the youthful visitor.

"A thousand welcomes, child!" cried Miss Deborah delightedly, drawing Winnie to her ample bosom, and treating the girl to a hearty hug (the word, though not eloquent, is singularly expressive); "it is good to see your pretty face again. This is Aunt Meg," pointing to the invalid. "I do not think you have ever met her before." Then Winnie was obliged to cross over to the sofa and shake the thin white hand that looked so small and fragile.

"Is your brother coming for you at night, dear?" inquired Miss Latimer, turning from her seat by the window and giving the young guest a tender, loving glance in answer to a certain wistful look cast in her direction.

"Oh yes; he promised," replied Winnie assuredly. Then with a little burst of vehemence—"Dear Aunt Judith, I wish to enjoy myself so very, very much to-day, and be ever so happy."

All looked startled at the passion in the girl's voice, with the exception of Aunt Debby, who viewed everything in a practical light.

"So, so! very good indeed," she said, knitting industriously, and with added vigour. "We'll do our best to gratify your wish, child; and one ought to be specially happy at this season of the year, I suppose."

The talk then became general, and Aunt Meg, laying aside her fretful voice for the time being, wakened up and became the life of the small party, chatting in such a pretty, graceful manner, and seeming altogether so full of animation, that Winnie wondered if this could really be the cross, peevish invalid Nellie had so often described. Ere long, however, she learned that appearances are sometimes deceitful, and that a gentle face and plaintive air can often be assumed as occasion warrants. It so happened that just as Miss Deborah was preparing to see about the tea the postman's knock sounded at the door, and one of the dear home-letters was handed to Nellie.

"Please excuse me," she said to Winnie, breaking the seal and commencing to read; "the children have been ill with scarlet fever, and I am anxious to know if they are better."

The sheets were large and closely written, consequently some little time was spent over them; but at length the last word was read, and then Nellie, replacing the letter in its envelope, said with a happy smile, "Mother writes the little ones are improving daily, and she thinks they will soon be quite well. She sends you all her love, and is glad to hear Aunt Meg is feeling so much stronger. She hopes, if the improvement continues, to see either you, Aunt Judith, or Aunt Debby home with me in the summer-time."

The invalid's face darkened, and Miss Deborah's merry orbs twinkled ominously. Nothing suited Miss Margaret better than to pose as a saintly sufferer, burdened day by day with a weary load of never-ceasing pain. It was wonderfully pleasant at times to assume the *rôle* of the patient martyr, and talk of lonely days and nights borne without murmuring. But once hint at any visible improvement, once mention an increase of colour on the pallid cheeks or a clearer light in the dimmed eyes, and Aunt Meg's wrath knew no bounds. Having fathomed this secret in the invalid's nature, we can readily understand the twinkle lurking in Aunt Debby's orbs as she scented the coming storm.

"Who told you I was feeling better, Nellie?" demanded Miss Margaret; and Winnie started at the anger in the voice, only a few minutes since so soft and gentle. "Who gave you authority to utter—to write such a falsehood? Better!" (with infinite scorn), "and my poor frame racked with such excruciating pain. Do you imagine, because a load is borne with unmurmuring patience, that the weight is gradually lessening and the burden will soon be lifted? Answer me at once. Who dared to tell you I was much stronger?"

Nellie's amazement was extreme, but she replied quietly, while Winnie sat by Miss Latimer's side, every fibre of her mischievous nature quivering with thorough enjoyment. "I only said what I believed to be true, Aunt Meg. You have been looking better, and I heard Aunt Judith telling a lady the other week that there was a very marked improvement lately, and that she was thankful to be able to say so."

Miss Margaret cast a withering glance at Miss Latimer's quiet face.

"That is all in a piece with the rest of Judith's stinginess," she observed sneeringly. "I know only too well why she speaks of being thankful. Were I to regain my wonted strength, there would naturally be less nourishing food required and fewer doctor's bills. Oh! I only wish I could honestly say I feel a daily increase of health; but, alas! the very thought of being a heavy burden and viewed in the light of a constant nuisance helps to weaken and keep me low."

At this point Nellie drew Winnie towards the window and tried to engage her in conversation; while Aunt Debby, lowering her voice, muttered, audibly enough, however, for the girls to hear, "Don't make a fool of yourself, Meg, and talk such utter rubbish."

The invalid's rage increased, and she was about to make some rejoinder, when Miss Latimer

interposed. "Hush, Margaret," said the quiet, gentle voice; "for my sake do not speak so before the children. You know perfectly well, dear, you are wilfully misinterpreting my words. I am only too happy to be able to gladden your life in any way."

But the invalid refused to be pacified.

"Ah! I understand you, Judith. You do not wish to have your true character exposed to the public. It suits you to pose as the saint abroad, I suppose, and—" but here Miss Latimer interrupted her.

"Margaret," she replied firmly, "you must either be silent or leave the room. I cannot listen to such conversation in the presence of our guest; and if you refuse to comply one way or the other, I shall be obliged to send the girls into my study."

"Oh no! not at all," returned Aunt Meg, her voice suddenly assuming the most plaintive, martyr-like tone; "the house does not belong to me.—Debby, will you assist me to my bedroom? and—no, Judith, I could not think of troubling you; but perhaps Nellie would help her poor aunt for once."

Now all this time Winnie had been enjoying the tragic scene immensely, and shaking inwardly with suppressed laughter, greatly to Nellie's distress.

"Oh, be quiet, Win; she will hear you," whispered the girl hurriedly, as a low ripple of laughter was hastily smothered by a mock cough. But the warning came too late. Aunt Meg caught the choking sound and in a moment the saintly expression on her face gave place to one of intense rage and indignation. This sudden transformation was too much for Winnie's risible faculties. The whole affair struck her in such a comical light that she lost all control over herself, and, with a wild burst of stifled laughter fled hastily from the parlour to Nellie's bedroom, where that young lady quickly followed.

"Close the door—close the door, Nell!" gasped Winnie, holding her handkerchief to her mouth and vainly endeavouring to suppress the laughter. "I know it's dreadfully wicked to behave in this manner, but I can't help myself," and off the child went again; while Nellie, unable to resist, joined in the merry peal. When both stopped at length, the tears were running down their cheeks, at the sight of which Winnie nearly repeated the performance. "This is awful," she panted, wiping her eyes and fanning her hot cheeks violently; "but when I begin to laugh I must just continue till I have emptied all the laughter out of me: then I am all right. No, Nellie, do not go away yet; wait till I am quite calm."

Before Nellie could reply, Aunt Debby opened the door, and looking in shook her head admonishingly. "I should like to know if you are not both ashamed of yourselves," she said severely; but there was laughter lurking in her eyes and playing about the corners of her lips which belied the severity of her words. Winnie jumped up, and throwing her arms round the good lady's neck, replied, "I have been very rude and naughty, dear Miss Deborah; but indeed I did not mean any harm," and she held up her rosy mouth for a kiss of pardon.

"There, there, it's all right, child. I understand. Come down to the parlour now; tea is ready." And with that, active, cheery Aunt Debby trotted away, leaving the two culprits to follow at their leisure.

## CHAPTER XI.

### "IT IS SO HARD TO SAY GOOD-BYE."

When Nellie and Winnie re-entered the parlour they found the table spread, Aunt Debby seated as usual before the urn, and Miss Latimer standing by the window gazing up at the murky sky, where the leaden clouds predicted a gathering snowstorm. Winnie ran up to her. "Aunt Judith," she said humbly, "I am very much ashamed of myself; please forgive me."

Miss Latimer patted the upraised face, and the pained look died out of her eyes. "Never mind, child," she replied pleasantly; "it is all right. I understand" (as the girl still looked anxious); "I know you had no thought of grieving us."

So the subject was dropped, and once more they gathered round the simple board whereon every dainty was displayed with such charming taste. There, tongues loosened and the merry chatting recommenced, while Winnie's spirits rose wonderfully. Putting from her with a strong determined will every sad thought and the burden of grief so new for her to bear, she laughed and talked, the gayest of the gay—speaking in her own quaint style, and laughing her own clear ripple of silvery laughter.

After tea Miss Latimer called her into the cosy study, and bidding her seat herself snugly, she said: "Aunt Debby requires Nellie's assistance for a short time at present, so you will have to endure an old maid's company meanwhile; but before we settle ourselves to enjoy a nice, cosy chat, I wish you to accept a Christmas gift from me. It is my latest work, and I only received the first copies yesterday. I have written your name on the title-page, and I think, dear, you will value the little volume for my sake." As she spoke Aunt Judith handed a small book, beautifully bound in blue and gold, to her young visitor, who received it at first in speechless silence. She looked at the pretty volume—the elegant



binding and clear, bold type; then with a great cry flung herself down by Miss Latimer's side and sobbed out, "Oh, I love you so, you are so kind to me; and it is so hard to say good-bye."

Aunt Judith seemed amazed. "I do not understand you, child," she said simply. "What do you mean? Try to calm yourself and explain, dear."

Then between sobs the story of a child's grief was laid before Miss Latimer, and told with such a depth of pathos that the listener's soft womanly heart ached in response to the plaintive tale.

"And your mother does not know you are here to-day, Winnie?" she inquired when the sad little voice had ceased. "You had no permission from her to come?"

The girl shook her head. "I suppose I am very disobedient," was the simple answer; "but, Aunt Judith, the temptation was too hard to resist. I felt I must see you all again, even though it was only to say good-bye."

Miss Latimer sighed. "You must not come any more, dear, never after to-night—at least not until your mother gives her full, free consent. You think all this very hard, little Winnie, but you do not know how deeply I feel about it also. You had stolen into my heart, child, and I was beginning to find your love very sweet and precious—not that I shall love you less or cease to care for you, but all this pleasant social intercourse must end now. Nay, do not grieve so, darling. It is all very dark and perplexing to you at present perhaps; but rest assured God has some beautiful lessons for us to learn—lessons that will give us a glimpse of, and may yet prove as stepping-stones to, that higher life which is the only life worth living."

Winnie sighed despairingly. "Aunt Judith," she said, raising a pair of wet eyes full of a child's agony to the listener's face, "I shall never be good now. You do not know the pleasure it has been to me to come here, or the strange thoughts that fill my heart when I see how happy you all are in this dear little home. Somehow God seems very near here, Aunt Judith, and the Christ-life you talk about so beautiful, I go away determined to try to lead it too—to be good, brave, and true. But that is all over now; for oh! no one in my home speaks of God and heaven, or talks softly of Jesus and his love, and I can't be good if none will stretch out a helping hand and show me the way."

Miss Latimer drew the little quivering figure closer in her embrace as she answered, "Don't say that, child, don't say that. A human friend often leads astray—God never. We must not rest our entire confidence on human guides, or lean altogether on earthly props, but, holding out our hands to the great Father above, with all the simplicity of little children, leave ourselves unreservedly in his keeping. Sometimes the way is dark—so dark, dear" (and the gentle voice faltered for a moment), "sometimes the path proves rugged and steep; but, little Winnie,—

'The easy path in the lowlands hath little of grand or new,  
But a toilsome ascent leads on to a wide and glorious view;  
Peopled and warm is the valley, lonely and chill the height,  
But the peak that is nearer the storm cloud is nearer  
the stars of light.'

And so, dear, in the time of shadow rest in the hollow of God's hand, and Christ himself will help you to lead his own perfect life."

The conversation at this point being interrupted by the arrival of Dick, Miss Latimer found no opportunity of renewing it that evening; but while Winnie, who had once more dashed the tears from her eyes with a child's abandonment of grief, was busily engaged with Miss Deborah and Nellie, she drew the boy aside, and with his aid was able to gather together the scattered threads of his sister's disconnected story.

Dick could not very well understand how, but there was something about Aunt Judith which seemed to inspire confidence; and although Miss Latimer with delicate tact retrained from asking more than was absolutely necessary, the boy found himself laying bare his heart quite unintentionally, and ended by confessing his determination to run away to sea. "I must go," he finished doggedly; "I can't stand this kind of life any longer, and—I won't."

Miss Latimer looked very grave.

"I have no right to interfere, Dick," she said quietly, "and perhaps I should scarcely have listened to your story; but from what has been told me and my own eyes have seen, I thought Winnie's brother one who would scorn to do a cowardly, dishonourable action."

The boy looked amazed at the strong, emphatic language; while Aunt Judith, nothing daunted, continued,—

"Yes, it is perfectly true, Dick. You see I do not fear to speak as I think, and such a course as you purpose pursuing seems to me both mean and sinful. Running away—stealing out of your father's house like a thief in the night; try to picture it fully, clearly to yourself, and then let me hear your verdict once again. You talk of always having longed for a sailor's life; you speak about the great attraction of the sea. Well, that in itself is good; but why go forth to it in the way you are contemplating? Have you ever spoken to your father on the subject?"

"Never," replied Dick; "but my step-mother and sisters knew all about it."

"And what was their verdict?"

"Laughter, and the information that I was too great a stupid to be a sailor." The boy's tones were very bitter.

Miss Latimer scanned the honest, open face, and replied,—

"Well, Dick, we hardly know each other yet, and it may be you will denounce me as an interfering old maid; but if I may proffer my advice, I would say, Lay your heart bare before your father, tell him simply what your desire is; and if after that he says 'Go,' then God's blessing follow you, my dear boy."

She rose as she spoke, and crossing the room joined the group chatting so pleasantly together, while Dick remained quietly in his seat. But there sprang up in the boy's heart that night a pure, holy feeling of respect, almost amounting to veneration, for all women who, like Miss Latimer, kept their garments white and unsullied in this evil world, and stood up so bravely in the cause of truth and right. He never forgot the soft, tender voice or the warm pressure of the hand as she reasoned with him; but thinking it all over in the still night-hush, he determined to win her approbation, and carve out for himself a noble life.

The evening passed by very rapidly for both Winnie and Dick, and at length it was time to say good-bye.

Nellie and Miss Deborah, being still in ignorance as to the course events had taken, wondered at the child's low sob when Miss Latimer kissed her, and marvelled even more at her strange conduct in running down the garden path immediately after, without pausing to bid one and all her usual merry good-night. But the explanation was soon made; and then Aunt Debby's indignation blazed forth, while Nellie listened in simple amazement to the strange tale.

"The very idea, Judith!" gasped the good lady, shaking her head with such vehemence that all the little curls in front danced and coquetted with one another; "just as if we would contaminate the child, or were so very much her inferiors. Dear heart! I declare the news has given me quite a turn—it is so absurd."

"I think we had better drop the subject altogether, Debby," replied Miss Latimer. "Nellie, I know, will respect her aunts' wishes, and act as we think best.—Will you not, my child?"

"Of course, auntie," murmured Nellie faintly; "but I don't quite understand. Why could Winnie come here with full permission one day and be forbidden the next? I know," she continued bitterly—"at least it is not Ada Irvine's fault if I do not—that I am very much Winnie's inferior in many ways; but still Mrs. Blake knew all that before." Here Nellie burst into tears, for she was only human, and wounded pride and vanity mingled with genuine grief at the loss of her friend.

"Comfort her yourself, Judith," muttered Aunt Debby, meditating a rapid exit to the kitchen. "If I begin, I shall be sure to be saying something spiteful and wicked, for my temper is at boiling-point just now," and with that the good lady disappeared to the humbler regions, there to vent her indignation in violent washing up of unoffending cups and saucers.

Meanwhile Nellie had her evening talk, but for once it failed to soothe her wounded feelings; and when she lay down on her soft warm bed, she carried with her bitter, angry thoughts which chased the slumber from her eyes and the rest from her heart. She could not understand why Mrs. Blake should put an end so suddenly to her intimacy with Winnie; and Aunt Judith either could not or would not throw one single ray of light on the subject. The whole story would leak out at school, and what a time would follow! Nellie writhed inwardly at the awful prospect, and wept bitterly, till at length, thoroughly worn out, she fell fast asleep, and the silent passing hours ushered in the dawn of another new day.

## CHAPTER XII.

### "I ALWAYS SPEAK AS I THINK."

The Christmas holidays were over now, and once more governesses and pupils were busy giving and receiving instruction in Mrs. Elder's Select Establishment for Young Ladies. A few scholars still remained absent, reluctant perhaps to come back to hard work after three weeks' ease and gaiety; and amongst the list of truants was the name of Winnifred Blake, whose blithe little face had been like a ray of sunlight in the dingy school-room. "Confined to the house through indisposition," Mrs. Elder explained to each anxious inquirer after the tiny favourite. "Nothing serious; only a cold caught during holiday-time." But the days passed by, and still no Winnie appeared.

Nellie had never seen or heard of her since that night at Dingle Cottage when they had laughed so heartily together over poor Aunt Meg and her infirmities; and she felt the separation keenly. At first the other school-mates plied her with questions regarding Winnie's absence, all of which she was unable to answer or parry successfully; and so by degrees, and the help of Ada's sarcastic tongue, the secret

oozed out, and Nellie's star paled accordingly. The poisoned shaft of carefully-veiled words struck home with new power: there was no Winnie to whom to turn for sympathy, and so the old cross had to be taken up again and carried day after day. Some of the girls sided sensibly with Nellie, and tried to make school-life pleasant to her; but they were unfortunately in the minority, and often got snubbed and censured by the others for their kindness.

One afternoon, however, as Nellie was wending her way home from school, a hand was laid on her shoulder, while an honest, kindly voice said suddenly in her ear, "Well, it is good to get a peep at you again, Nell. How are you?" and Dick's freckled face shone down on the rosy one by his side.

The girl looked up with a happy smile. "O Dick!" she gasped; and then it seemed as if words failed her, and she stood simply holding his hand, and gazing with such genuine happiness into his eyes that the boy laughed outright.

"What's up, Nell?" he inquired teasingly. "I declare such evident admiration makes me feel quite bashful."

Nellie gave a little soft smile. "Don't be a tease, Dick," she said; "I am only so pleased to see you and hear about Winnie."

Dick placed his hand on his heart and bowed. "The pleasure is mutual," he began; but receiving an energetic shake of the arm he continued, "Oh, Win will soon be all right. She's been croaking like a raven for the last fortnight or so, but is almost well now."

"When did she catch cold?"

Dick lowered his voice. "Coming home that night from Dingle Cottage. We missed the 'bus—walked—and Win caught a chill."

"Was she very ill?"

"Oh no; but the doctor would not allow her to go out or even run from one room to the other, so she has been cooped up in the oak parlour all this time."

"Tell her I am very sorry, and she is to accept my dear love. Will you, Dick?" and Nellie looked pleadingly up in the boy's kindly face.

"That I shall" (with emphasis). "And, here, I may as well give you a piece of information, Nell. This is Wednesday—on Saturday afternoon I sail for Calcutta."

Nellie stared. "What do you mean?" she cried in bewilderment.

"Precisely what I say, my dear girl," replied the wild boy, vastly enjoying her amazement. "Perhaps you'll never see me any more, so do a little weep—no, not here," as Nellie out of mischief slipped her hand into her pocket; "we should have a crowd round us in no time if you did, but in the—ahem!—privacy of your own room;" and Dick's eyes sparkled.

"Calcutta! Does that mean you are going to be a sailor after all? O Dick, have you gained your wish at last? I am so glad for your sake."

Human sympathy is very sweet. Dick's face beamed as he answered, "Yes, Nell; the governor has given his consent. It was not so very difficult to obtain after all" (a trifle sarcastically), "therefore I'm off on Saturday."

"What is Winnie saying to all this?"

The boy's face saddened a little.

"Win's a brick," he replied enthusiastically; "she never says anything about herself, but talks of all the different countries I shall see, and hopes no harm will befall me. Dear little Win!" Dick's voice was very tender as he spoke.

A silence followed, then the boy held out his hand. "Well, Nell, I must say good-bye now. I'm on an errand of importance, and dare not delay. Don't quite forget me, and be good to Winnie. There—ta-ta!" and away sped Dick before Nellie had time to utter a single word.

About two hours afterwards he re-entered his own home, and made straight for the oak parlour, chuckling to himself at the thought of Winnie's delight when he told her his conversation with Nellie. But disappointments sometimes accompany our enjoyments, and Dick's bright anticipations of a quiet hour with his favourite sister received a decided check; for on nearing the door, which was slightly ajar, he heard the murmur of voices, and peering in cautiously saw, to his great dismay, Mrs. Blake and Winnie entertaining no less honourable a visitor than Miss Irvine. Dick smiled derisively at the tones of the carefully-modulated voice, and ground his strong, white teeth on detecting the malicious spite lurking under pretty sentences full of apparent kindness.

"I must apologize, Winnie, for not calling and inquiring after your health before this," Ada was saying as Dick approached; "but I have been assuming the *rôle* of an invalid myself lately, and Mrs. Elder would not allow me to venture out of doors till I was thoroughly convalescent."

Mrs. Blake looked affectionately at her young visitor. "I did not know you were unwell, my dear. Are you quite recovered now?"

"Yes, thank you; but there was not very much wrong with me, dear Mrs. Blake, only a slight touch of cold in the throat. Mrs. Elder is so careful, however, I am sure I owe her a debt of gratitude I shall never be able to repay." Then turning to Winnie, Ada continued with a pretty show of anxiety, "I was very sorry to hear of your illness, Win. How did you manage to catch such a severe cold?"

"That is what I cannot tell," interrupted Mrs. Blake, feeling inclined to shake her naughty little step-daughter for her sullen behaviour towards this amiable young visitor. "I happened to be from home one day during the Christmas holidays, and on my return found Winnie coughing dreadfully and quite fevered with cold."

Ada meditated a few seconds. "I wonder," she said at length, in slow, deliberate tones, "if your illness dated from that afternoon you spent at Dingle Cottage almost a month ago? I was visiting an old woman, a former *nurse* of mine, who lives in the house opposite, that same day, and remember perfectly seeing you and Miss Latimer standing together at one of the windows."

"Surely you must have been mistaken, my dear. Winnie never visits at Dingle Cottage now," Mrs. Blake interposed unconsciously.

"Perhaps, but I hardly think so. However" (with a look of the utmost innocence), "Winnie will be able to solve that riddle," and the spiteful girl turned towards her sick friend and awaited the reply.

Winnie's cheeks were burning, and the great eyes full of a withering contempt. Raising them calmly to her visitor's placid face, and without a trembling of the proud young lips, she answered quietly,—"Your surmise was correct, Ada. I did spend an afternoon lately at Dingle Cottage; and I am afraid, as you so kindly hinted before, that my cold dated from that night."

Mrs. Blake was angry, very angry indeed, but too well bred to show her annoyance before her visitor. She changed the subject with ready tact, and made a most fascinating hostess; while Winnie sat in dead silence, with a great scowl disfiguring her pretty face, and Dick danced his displeasure on the door-mat.

After a short time Ada rose to leave, and holding out a daintily-gloved hand to her sullen companion, said sweetly, "Good-bye, Winnie. I trust you will soon be better; and if I can possibly find leisure for another visit, rest assured I shall drop in on you some day soon."

"Pray, don't," replied Winnie, wilfully disregarding her step-mother's look of heavy displeasure. "Your visit has not afforded me such a vast amount of pleasure that I could wish its repetition at an early date. We never were friends, Ada" (with ungoverned passion), "never so long as I can remember. You hate me, and I—I detest you; why, then, will you persist in assuming a friendship that has no foundation?"

Dick's war-dance continued with greater vigour at this point, while Mrs. Blake in haughtiest tones said to Winnie, "How dare you insult Miss Irvine in this manner? Apologize at once, I command you."

Ada's face, as she turned it towards her hostess, wore a sweet, patient look, with just the tiniest flicker of pain about the curves of the perfect lips. "Please, do not blame Winnie too severely, Mrs. Blake," she pleaded mildly; "her words are to some extent true, but I—" and the lids drooped slowly over the lovely eyes, while a faint flush tinged the delicate cheeks—"I was trying to turn over a new leaf and gain Winnie's love."

"My eye, what a cram!" muttered Dick from behind the door. "Oh, but she acts the hypocrite capitally. Now then for Win's happy reply. It will be both sweet and original, I prophesy, for the little monkey is bristling all over like an insulted hedgehog. Here goes!" and the boy's ear was once more applied cautiously to the keyhole.

Winnie had risen by this time, and was confronting her adversary with a look almost capable of annihilating a less daring foe than Ada Irvine. Quite undaunted by the fear of future punishment, and recognizing only the great wrong this girl was doing her, she said, "I think you are a female Judas, Ada, and your true character will come to light some day. I know—" but Winnie got frightened at the awful look in Mrs. Blake's eyes, and stopped short, while Ada took refuge in tears.

"Come away, my dear," said her hostess, leading her gently from the room; "Winnie is not herself today. When the child is in a passion her language is uncontrollable; but I shall see she sends you a proper apology for her rudeness."

Dick heard no more, having to slip away at that moment and hide behind one of the statues in the passage during the exit of his step-mother with the weeping Niobe; but when the sound of their footsteps had died away in the distance, he rushed into the oak parlour, and seizing Winnie round the waist, treated her to several convulsive hugs and various exclamations of supreme delight.

"Well, old girl, you did the thing first-rate," he panted, throwing himself into a chair and rubbing his hands vigorously together. "You deserve to be commended, Win. Dear heart, as Aunt Debby says, what a tongue somebody has!"

"I don't care," pouted Winnie, endeavouring to straighten her sash, which Dick had been using as a handle during the hugging process; "I only said what was true, and would repeat it all over again if she cared to listen."

"Bravo! what a hard heart the girl possesses! Cold as an icicle, too, not to melt under the influence of such dewy tears shed from—ahem!—'sweetest eyes were ever seen.'"

"Crocodile tears!" (with scorn.) "I don't know how she managed to squeeze them up. I never saw Ada Irvine weep before. As for apologizing, I won't, no matter what happens."

"Perhaps your gentle friend had an onion hidden within the folds of her—*mouchoir*. See how nicely I can speak French. You remember, in the story of Beauty and the Beast, how the wicked sisters rubbed their eyes with onions to 'pretend' they were weeping." Dick's eyes were dancing as he spoke.

Winnie's indignation, however, would admit of no reply, and she sat silently, like a little bird with its plumage all ruffled; while her brother, stretched lazily opposite, gazed on the angry face and soliloquized accordingly.

"Alas for the rarity  
Of Christian charity,"

quothe the incorrigible boy. "Come, Win, be magnanimous for once and forgive. Think what it would be to bask continually in the sunshine of the lovely Ada's smiles. But there—poor little bird! did I stroke its pretty feathers all the wrong way, and make it very cross?"

How much more Dick would have said remains a mystery, for Mrs. Blake interrupted the interesting conversation by her entrance, and commanded him to leave the room.

"I'll take possession of the door-mat once again," he decided, giving Winnie an encouraging look as he passed out. "Eavesdropping is a low, mean thing, I know; but Win may require my assistance, and altogether it's as well I should be on the spot."

There is no need to describe the conversation that ensued between Mrs. Blake and her troublesome step-daughter. The good lady was justified in her displeasure at Winnie's daring disobedience; but her words were cold, cruel words, little calculated to inspire the love and confidence of a warm, tender-hearted child. She would listen to no expostulations, she refused to reason; her commands must be obeyed; Winnie would never dare to set her laws at defiance again; and at the close of the session she would be transferred to another school. As regarded Ada, she must write a humble apology, and in the future show that sweet, amiable girl every respect.

Winnie stoutly refused (Dick chuckled with delight), and Mrs. Blake's anger waxed stronger at the little rebel. She meditated for a few seconds on the best method of punishment, and then said coldly,—"I shall say nothing further in the meantime, Winnie, concerning your flagrant act of disobedience in connection with Miss Latimer. When you feel truly penitent, and confess your sorrow, I shall be pleased to accept your apology; but I insist on a letter being written to Miss Irvine now. One hour is at your disposal, and if at the end of that period I return and find you still obdurate, then to-morrow's pleasure is cancelled,—you will not be allowed, as promised, to see over Dick's ship." With that Mrs. Blake left the room, and Winnie was left to solitude and reflection.

For a long time she sat firmly determined to suffer anything rather than yield. Her young heart burned with anger and pride—she hated everybody and everything; but in the end love for Dick conquered, and the required note was written.

"I don't mean one single word of all that scribble," she cried, pitching the letter to the other end of the room. "I hate to humble myself, so I do, and I should like to say all sorts of horrid things to Ada Irvine; but I can't give up to-morrow's treat, and I wish to see as much of my dear old Dick as possible. Wait till I get back to school, however, and there will be fun." Winnie's face brightened at the thought, and the old mischievous smile came back to her lips. After all there was a good amount of wicked enjoyment to be derived from having an enemy.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### OUR SAILOR BOY.

If one had peeped into the oak parlour on Thursday evening, one would naturally have imagined the room to be untenanted, save for the presence of a little white dog curled in peaceful slumber on the rug; but had the heavy folds of curtain been withdrawn, they would have disclosed to view the form of a young lady nestling back in the window embrasure, with two soft white hands folded wearily on her lap. The night was cold, but bright with moonlight; and the stars peeping in at the window, the blind of which was drawn up to the top, whispered together of the fairy picture she made with the moonbeams straying over her quiet, thoughtful face, and playing hide-and-seek amongst the meshes of her dark

glossy hair.

"How pretty she looks!" they murmured softly, sparkling down their twinkling lights on the frost-gemmed city below. But the little stars failed to notice the weary look of discontent and dissatisfaction on that fair face, which marred all the beauty of the fairy picture.

She had left the gay drawing-room and fashionable company under plea of a headache, and finding the oak parlour untenanted, had hidden herself snugly behind the curtains. But Edith Blake's headache had evidently merged into a heartache; for it was a weary, weary face that turned from the window as approaching footsteps warned her of some one's intrusion. Drawing aside the ruby folds and peering out cautiously, the girl saw Winnie enter and go straight towards the fire, where she proceeded to ensconce herself snugly on the rug, and lift the little white dog into her lap.

"Poor little doggie!" she said, stroking the affectionate animal, which was licking its mistress's gentle hand; "poor Puck! you'll have to love me very much after Dick goes away. I like to be loved, doggie; but no one in this house believes in love except my dear boy, and it is lonely when not a single creature cares, for you. I should like to enjoy a good cry, Puck; but I must not make Dick sad, and it is a baby-fashion to cry when things go wrong and you can't get what you wish. But, oh dear! whatever shall I do after my dear good boy is gone away?"

"Write long letters and think of him every day," put in a blithe, merry voice at the door; and Winnie sprang up with a cry of delight as Dick strode into the room attired in all the splendour of his new uniform.

"How do I look, Win?" he cried, touching his cap, and standing in all the pride of his young, bright strength, ready to be admired. "Am I respectable?"

But he need hardly have asked that question, for the little sister's face was all aglow, and her rosy lips laughing a glad, proud smile.

"Respectable!" (with scorn); "why, Richard, you're simply *splendid!* And oh! you do look every inch a sailor."

"I thought I would let you see me in full uniform before packing up my baggage," said Dick, by way of apology for his childish display. "Look at the brass buttons, Win, and the badge on my cap; they make me feel as if I were a sailor already."

Winnie duly admired.

"I hope you'll have a good voyage, and not find the work too hard," she whispered afterwards, and the boy answered.

"Win," he began impressively, "I intend putting my whole 'shoulder to the wheel.' If I cannot work with the brain, I will strive my very best with hand and heart, and do my duty come what may. I mean to be a true man, and live an honest, upright life, not in order to gain every one's good opinion (though of course I should dearly like that too), but because it is right."

Winnie's eyes were shining. "I told you so," she said, clapping her hands joyously. "You'll be a king amongst men yet. And oh, how proudly our father will some day talk of 'my sailor son!'" The boy's face flushed with pleasure. "But, Dick, you won't care less for me when you become both good and great; will you?" and the pretty voice had a wistful ring in it as Winnie neared the close of her sentence.

"Good! why, you're an angel compared with me, Win," said the boy lovingly; "but we'll both try our best, dear. I'm a great, rough boor of a lad, Win, and you're such a dainty, fairy creature. But think how grand it would be to know that every day you at home and I out on the ocean were striving to do our duty and live as we ought to live. I've been all wrong in the past, I know, and it is little wonder the others don't care much about me; but I mean to strike out afresh and begin all over again. See here, Winnie; this is my farewell gift to you. I thought you would prize it more than anything else," and Dick placed a beautiful pocket Bible in his sister's hands.

Winnie touched the little volume reverently, and the eyes of the listener behind the curtains grew dim as the child's soft voice replied, "I cannot thank you as I would, Dick, for your lovely present; but I love you dearly, dearly. I shall keep it always close beside me, and read a portion every day. Bow down your head, dear boy, and let me kiss you for your goodness."

Dick submitted to the caress, and then invited Winnie up to his room in order to inspect a few presents he had received from some of his school-fellows; and when brother and sister had disappeared, Edith stole softly from her place of concealment, and the dancing fire-flames saw that her eyes were wet with tears.

"I have caught a glimpse of true life to-night," she said, smiling wistfully; "and it has shown me how hollow, hollow is the false one I daily lead. Poor Dick! I am afraid we have misjudged him after all, and may yet find out, as Winnie so confidently prophesies, that he is worthy of all honour and admiration. As for her, she will learn, so far as lies in my power, that love is to be found in the house, although her sailor boy has left the parent nest." Then seating herself in the cosiest-looking chair, she lay back and waited quietly for the return of the owners of the oak parlour.

In the course of half-an-hour they re-appeared, and gazed with wide-open eyes on the fair intruder; but Edith, laughing lazily, bade them come forward and welcome the unexpected guest.

Winnie sprang to her side. "We are both awfully pleased to see you, Edith," she said; "only you surprised us so. Whatever brings you here when there are guests in the drawing-room?"

"I had a headache," replied the elder sister, drawing the little girl close to her side and beginning to toy with the tangled hair; "besides"—looking up at the big, stalwart youth standing near—"I wished to enjoy a little of Dick's society before he goes away."

Dick's face relaxed into a broad grin of unbelief, and Winnie cried out "Oh!" then caught herself and stopped short; but Edith's equanimity remained undisturbed.

"It is quite true," she said with a charming smile. "I see you are in full uniform, Dick. Stand back, and let me admire my sailor brother."

Edith could be very lovable and winning when she liked, and to-night she seemed thoroughly bent on doing her utmost to please. The boy, though mystified at this sudden change in his fashionable sister, obeyed her command, and stood erect before her, feeling perhaps a little bashful, but never flinching under the steady scrutiny.

"You look very well," she said after a little pause. "Sit down, Dick; I wish to speak to you. I know perfectly Winnie is wondering why the cross elder sister is sitting here taking such an interest in you both to-night. But don't ask an explanation for such conduct; only believe that her heart is not so hard as you deem it, and that she has begun to look under the surface for some one's true character."

Winnie gave the speaker's hand a little squeeze of approbation, while a pleased smile lit up Dick's face. As neither spoke, however, Edith continued: "And now, may I crave of you, Dick, a very great favour? Winnie is to be driven down to-morrow afternoon to see through your ship. May I come too? or is she to be the only privileged young lady?"

The boy looked incredulously at his pretty sister. "Are you really in earnest, Edith?" he inquired, "or are you laughing at me?"

"I mean what I say, Dick," was the grave reply; "but if you would rather I remained at home, I shall not trouble you."

"Oh, come! do come!" whispered Winnie delightedly. "Dick will be only too pleased;—will you not, dear old boy?" So it was settled; and Edith rose to leave the cosy room, which seemed to her at that moment like a haven of rest.

"It was very, very good of you to come and spend a wee quiet time with us," said Winnie, as she watched her beautiful sister shaking out her crumpled skirts and pushing back little stray locks of hair from her white forehead. "Do you know we are going to have a great treat to-morrow night? Archie Trollope is coming in; and cook has promised us a delicious supper in honour of Dick's last evening at home."

"I think you ought to give me an invitation," replied Edith, pausing at the doorway. "I should like to enjoy the feast too.—No, no," as Dick and Winnie exchanged doubtful glances; "I was only teasing you both. Accept my best wishes for a happy evening, dears. Good-night;" and then the soft silken figure glided quietly away.

"I'm glad she really did not mean what she said," announced Dick, giving a sigh of relief as he threw himself down on the rug beside Puck and commenced to tease that worthy little animal; "but I think, Win, if we had pressed her she would have come."

"I am sure of it," replied Winnie. "She looked so disappointed when we did not speak. But, Dick, was she not ever so nice to-night? and is she not beautiful?"

"Yes," replied her brother, pulling Puck's tail mischievously; "but we're a good-looking family, Win, with the exception of myself."

The little girl's reply was thoroughly characteristic: "Every house has its ugly duckling, dear boy," she observed quaintly, "and they seldom turn out swans except in story-books. However, it does not matter very much about a man's personal appearance; and you—why, you might have been a great deal worse."

Dick roared at the attempted consolation. "What a Job's comforter you are, Win!" he said with a broad grin; "but as you say, little sister, a man's personal appearance, though it sometimes goes a long way, is not the main thing, and I reckon Dick Blake will manage through the world well enough in spite of freckled skin and fiery hair."

"Of course he will," replied Winnie; "there's no doubt about that."

Then the two began to talk seriously and lovingly their own heart-thoughts, and the minutes passed all too rapidly. Both started when the clock struck the hour for retiring, and there was a little quiver in Winnie's voice as she wished her brother good-night, and thought that only another evening, then the kind face bending over her would be looking out on the wide waste of waters, and she would have to

whisper her loving good-nights to the stars instead. "Oh, my dear, my dear," she sobbed to herself in the darkness, "how sorely, sorely I shall miss you! But I am so glad there is a great, good Father in heaven who will guide and keep you wherever you are. Oh! if Aunt Judith were only here to say something comforting to me—something that would ease this ache of sorrow at my heart and help me to feel strong and brave."

Then, as she lay weeping out her loneliness in the quiet night, some words she had read in one of Aunt Judith's books stole softly into her mind, like a ray of golden sunlight penetrating through the chinks of a darkened room: "Whatever is grieving you, however burdensome or trivial the trouble may be, tell it to Jesus."

Winnie's eyes flashed, and springing out of bed with sudden determination she knelt down, a little, fragile figure, by the window ledge, and prayed reverently and trustingly her first heart-prayer. It was a very simple petition, uttered in Winnie's own quaint style, at the language of which some people might have smiled; but I think that in heaven there would be a great hush amongst the white-robed throng as they bent their heads to catch the first breathings of a child's soul upwards. And oh, the bursts of hallelujahs as the trusting words floated to the throne of grace, and told of a young heart groping in the darkness for the strong, firm clasp of a Father's hand!

Next afternoon, when the carriage drove round to the door as appointed, the little girl, running downstairs warmly muffled up, found Edith wrapped in soft velvets and furs, thoroughly equipped for the drive. There was the faintest suspicion of a smile wreathing the corners of her lips as she stood tapping impatiently the tessellated floor of the hall with her tiny high-heeled boot, and running the gauntlet of a few teasing remarks from her two brothers, who were loitering near; but on Winnie's approach she turned round, and waving a careless farewell, accompanied her little sister down the broad stone steps to the carriage, where Mr. Blake was awaiting them.

The drive proved to be a pleasant one, and in a short time they found themselves at the docks, and saw the great ships ranging far and near, with their tapering masts pointing upwards to the cloudy sky. The *Maid of Astolat* lay close at hand, and as they went on board Dick appeared, his face black and grimy, but all aglow with a welcoming smile.

"You come along with me," he said, drawing Winnie aside, as the captain, a tall, gentlemanly-looking man, stepped forward and addressed Mr. Blake. "I'll do the honours of the ship tip-top, Win, and show you all round in first-rate style;" and the little sister delivered herself over to his guidance.

How they peered about, to be sure—here, there, everywhere; and how proudly Dick aired the small amount of nautical language he had managed to pick up! Rough men turned and smiled half unconsciously as the two blithe figures flitted past and their merry laughter rang out in the frosty air. They seemed so happy, and the hearts hardened by sin and adversity sighed over their bygone childhood's days, and thought what a blessed thing it was to be young.

Returning from their exploration, brother and sister found Mr. Blake and Edith still talking to the captain, whose grave, stern face was rapidly relaxing under the influence of that young lady's winning manner and bright, sparkling conversation. Dick eyed the group as he drew near, and then a comical thought seemed to strike him, for he was heard to mutter, "Jemima! what a lark!" and he twitched his face into a decided grimace of amusement.

There was scant time in which to make remarks, however, for Mr. Blake required to be back in the city at a certain hour, and Winnie must not be exposed to the night air. So good-byes were courteously exchanged. The Blakes, re-entering their carriage, drove rapidly away, and soon the high, tapering masts appeared like specks in the distance.

Next day the *Maid of Astolat* sailed from the harbour, bearing on board the strong, stalwart figure and honest, true face of Richard Blake.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### THE PRIZE ESSAY.

One day, towards the close of the school, great excitement prevailed in Mrs. Elder's Select Establishment for Young Ladies, the cause being a communication made through the lady-principal to her pupils from a gentleman and relative of hers lately returned from India. He had visited the school several times within the last few months, and seemed to take an interest in it; but still there was no lack of astonishment when Mrs. Elder announced one morning that her friend, Mr. Corbett, had intimated his intention of awarding a special prize to the pupil who would write the best essay on any of the three following subjects—namely, Christmas joys, a short account of the French Revolution, and a brief review of one of Sir Walter Scott's novels. The babble of tongues that ensued after this intimation was wonderful. Mrs. Elder laughingly beat a hasty retreat, and Miss Smith lay resignedly back in her chair, and waited till peace and order were restored.



"Of course Ada will win the prize," was the general comment, "she is so clever, and Mr. King always praises her essays. Nellie can't come near her in the way of composition; but we must all try to do our best, for the honour of the school."

The elder girls, who were not included in the list of competitors, felt inclined to second these remarks, and Ada smiled triumphantly when she heard them whispered abroad. There was little doubt in her own mind as to who was likely to be the successful candidate, and she only wondered which subject would best show forth her brilliancy of style and composition.

Winnie and Nellie, firm friends still in spite of all restraints, consulted together, and spoke of the utter uselessness of their most strenuous endeavours. "We've no chance against Ada," they said disconsolately, "but like the others we'll have to attempt something."

"What will you try, Winnie?" inquired Nellie. "I think I'll tackle 'the French Revolution.'"

Winnie's brow was wrinkled in perplexity. "Do you know, Nell," she said at length, looking up with a curious gleam in her eyes, "I never tried very hard in all my life to write a really good essay. I just mixed anything together and popped it down higgledy-piggledy style, as Dick would say. Yet sometimes I have beautiful thoughts, and they run together in such beautiful words that I think I may manage to produce a respectable paper after all. I know nothing about the French Revolution, simply nothing. I have never read any of Sir Walter Scott's novels, and could not criticise or review one to save my life. But Christmas joys—ah, yes, I might attempt that;" and Winnie looked hopeful at this point.

"Very well, Win, we've decided," responded Nellie; then, Agnes Drummond coming forward and addressing them, their conversation was interrupted for the present.

Ada Irvine's triumph was by no means so complete as she fancied it would be, though there was still much to cause her satisfaction. Almost every day she had the pleasure of seeing Winnie grow furious and Nellie wince under some cutting sarcasm thrown out with well-directed aim by some of the most fashionable girls in the school, and not even the former's reappearance and championship could allay to any extent the open insults which beset the defenceless girl during school hours.

"Go! you are not my friends," the stanch little ally had said when she found how matters stood on her return after her illness. "I hate and despise every one of you from the bottom of my heart. You call yourselves ladies, but I tell you no true lady would lower herself to utter such words as fall from your lips. I know who your ringleader is, and if the heartiest hatred will do her any good, she has mine. But act as you please; only remember Nellie is now, and ever will be, the one true friend of my life. And as for her aunts, let me tell you you are not worthy to touch the hem of their garments."

"Oh, nonsense, Winnie!" one of the girls had replied, in a half-condescending manner; "I am sure you can't forget your mother's opinion on the subject."

"And who informed you about my mother's opinion? It must have been Ada; and that throws light on what has puzzled me lately. I think I may thank her for all this trouble I have been and am still experiencing. No, do not try to defend her; one day we shall be quits."

"But Ada is never rude or disagreeable to you now, Win," pleaded another girl. "There has been a marked change in her manner lately. She is very gentle and kind to you. As for blaming her about telling tales, that is hardly fair. She really said very little concerning Mrs. Blake and her opinion of Nellie. Where she got her information we do not know, but she told us decidedly it was not from your step-mother."

Winnie looked incredulous. "That is quite sufficient," she replied with dignity; "I would rather hear no more. But you may tell Ada from me that I am not to be deceived by her new tactics, and have no desire to possess such a treasure as a serpent-friend."

The subject had then been dropped, and from that time Winnie would have nothing to do with any girl who uttered a single word against her friend. Ada she treated with supreme indifference, and disdained to accept a proffered friendship vouchsafed to suit that young lady's amiable plans. As regarded Nellie, she never walked with her after school hours, or sought her society so frequently as she had done in the happy bygone days (Miss Latimer had strictly forbidden that); but still the love betwixt the two was warm and true, and Ada felt her hatred deepen as she saw how all her endeavours failed to break the strong bond of friendship binding the one to the other. A certain circumstance, however, caused her immense satisfaction—namely, Mrs. Elder's growing dislike of Nellie Latimer. The lady-principal was, unfortunately, guilty of favouritism, and ever since Ada had been placed under her charge she had shown a marked preference for and indulgence towards her. Such being the case, one can readily imagine how a woman of such a weak, selfish nature would resent the quiet dethronement of her young favourite, and see the honours she had been accustomed to take now won by an insignificant girl of no particular birth or station in society. Ada, not slow to find all this out, viewed it with supreme delight, and was careful to fan the flame by various hints and insinuations thrown out with becoming modesty.

Nellie marked the change, but bore it uncomplainingly, striving to live it down and let the discipline accomplish its own sharp yet beneficial work. "I shall withdraw you from the school should you choose, Nellie," Miss Latimer had said once when the girl broke down and wept over the heavy burden laid upon her. "But I would like you to fight it out, and grow better, braver, and nobler under the conflict." That was sufficient for Nellie, who, meekly relifting the old cross, strove to carry it cheerfully, feeling

amply rewarded for her quiet endurance when she daily realized the rare love and tenderness that surrounded her in the peaceful home at Broomhill Road.

The examination day was fast approaching, and the prize essays, which had to be given in a week beforehand, were delivered over to the lady-principal's charge—neat rolls of paper prettily tied up with gaily-coloured knots of ribbon. Then followed more excitement, till the hour arrived when guests and pupils met together in the large school-room, and the usual performance took place before the eyes of smiling mothers and friends. At length it was over, and the clergyman stepping forward to award the prizes, Winnie found some leisure to gaze around and scan the sea of faces in front of her.

There was Mrs. Drummond, calm and placid as usual; her own step-mother and Edith, both looking so fresh and fair in their bright summer attire, and—but here Winnie caught a glimpse of a noble, true face looking at her from under the brim of a quiet Quaker bonnet, and in a moment her little face was all aglow with a great throb of love.

What occurred after that seemed a blank. She never heard Nellie's name called repeatedly, or noted Mrs. Blake's haughty look as the young girl modestly received her prizes and blushed under the words of commendation uttered by the clergyman. Her thoughts were far away in the past, and she was living those two happy days over again at Dingle Cottage, when the world appeared so wondrously fair, and life full of bright laughing sunshine.

But now came a pause in the proceedings. The prizes were all distributed, and pupils and friends wakened to a state of great expectancy as old Mr. Corbett stood up by the minister's side and nervously prepared to make his oration. After a few preliminary remarks customary on the occasion, he spoke of the surprise and pleasure he had experienced in reading over the essays delivered to him by Mrs. Elder, his old and esteemed friend. They displayed much talent and brilliancy of style, and reflected great credit on the school. One especially amazed him (here Ada's head drooped modestly) by the rich, beautiful thoughts, set, as it were, in such quaint, original language. He was almost startled by the amount of genius shining forth from every sentence; and although the essay was written in a crude girlish style, it was worthy of the highest commendation, and he had great pleasure in awarding the prize to—Miss Winnifred Blake.

There was a long silence, followed by murmurs of amazement and congratulation. But Winnie did not seem to hear them; she only sat gazing dreamily, with dim, dazed eyes, as if hardly capable of realizing the good fortune which had befallen her.

"Rise, dear," whispered Elsie Drummond, who was standing close by; "every one is waiting to see you receive the prize. We are all so glad over your success. Now go;" and she gave the child a gentle push in the clergyman's direction. The words wakened Winnie, and then, with a great flash, came the realization that she, and not Nellie, had triumphed over Ada; and as the knowledge came home with full power to her heart, her great eyes sparkled their mischievous joy, and she stepped forward, a glad, triumphant gleam shining in their depths.

Few of the onlookers that day ever forgot the scene before them: the little fairy figure clad in daintiest summer attire; the flushed gipsy face and dark, lustrous eyes peeping from under the mass of curly hair; and the wondrously joyous smile which broke over her lips as she bent her pretty head on receiving the glittering medal from the minister's hand. I think Mrs. Blake was proud of her step-daughter for once in her life.

A short time afterwards, just as she was preparing to start homeward, Winnie remembered that her music was lying in one of the school-rooms, and bidding some of the girls wait her return she bounded up the steep flight of stairs to go in search of it.

On reaching the top step, however, Ada met her, and the pale, angry face and haughty mien roused every malicious feeling in Winnie's nature. Looking up with a face in which wicked triumph and delight were plainly depicted, she said sweetly, "O Ada, would you care to inspect my medal? You have been so kind to me lately I am sure you will rejoice at my wonderful success."

Ada returned her gaze with one of steady, contemptuous disdain, and dropping the mask of friendship which had been so hard for her to wear, she replied haughtily, "Wonderful indeed! so wonderful, in fact, that I may be pardoned for refusing to credit the essay as being your own composition. Do you think it is natural for a dunce (I repeat the word), who has been in the habit of writing the most childish nonsense, to break on the world suddenly as a genius, and startle every one with her wonderful thoughts? It stands to reason that some underhand work has been going on; and such being the case, I prefer to hold myself aloof from one who could be guilty of any mean, despicable action."

Strong language to use. Winnie's anger rose to a white heat as she listened. "Explain yourself!" cried the enraged child; "I fail to understand your words."

Ada's lip curled. "You are an admirable actress," she said calmly; "you would make your fortune on the stage. Unfortunately, however, I am not easily deceived. You know perfectly well the prize essay is no work of yours."

"Whose then?" in a voice of suppressed passion; and the quiet, mocking tones answered,—

"Suspensions are easily roused, and when one can disobey a parent once, one can easily do so

again."

Winnie looked bewildered. "You are speaking in riddles," she cried angrily; "I demand a proper explanation."

"Then you shall have it," replied Ada, spitefully enjoying her momentary triumph. "Mrs. Elder, Miss Smith, and ever so many of the girls believe that your wonderful Miss Latimer assisted with your essay. Nay, do not interrupt: we give you credit for the bare outline, but the originality and quaint rich thoughts are decidedly beyond the powers of a dunce."

Winnie listened in amazement, and as the last words fell slowly from the lips of the cold, haughty girl, she cried out in her bitter anger,—

"It is false! false! and you know that too; but, Ada Irvine, I can almost excuse your insulting words. It must be humiliating to see a dunce, and one towards whom you bear so much affection, win a prize of which you deemed yourself secure. I forgive you when I think how hard it must be to feel yourself the laughing-stock of the school; and I would remind you in the future to value your talents at their true worth."

Winnie paused, and it seemed, to use a common-place phrase, as if the tables were turned; for the little girl looked cool and calm now, while her adversary's face was white and set with passion. Springing forward she raised her hand, and Winnie, in order to avert the blow, stepped back, forgetful of her dangerous position. Then rang through the house a wild scream followed by the sound of a heavy fall; and the startled inmates, gathering from various quarters, found lying at the foot of the steep stairs a prostrate figure with white upturned face and firmly-closed eyes.



**A prostrate figure with white,  
upturned face.**

## CHAPTER XV.

### HOW SHALL I LIVE THROUGH THE LONG, LONG YEARS?

A balmy summer morning in the month of July. Outside, and far up overhead, a dappled sky shining down on a world of light and beauty; green verdant slopes and wide sweeps of meadowland glistening still with the early dew; flowers blossoming everywhere, from the modest daisy and golden buttercup to

the queenliest rose and fairest lily; birds singing from every bush and tree their morning trill of flute-like melody; bees humming busily hither and thither; butterflies flitting idly by or resting snugly in the heart of a flower; in short, the world of nature all awake and joying with a pure, glad joy in the golden summer sunshine.

Inside a darkened room, with softly-shaded blinds and peaceful hush brooding over all, a girl—one might almost say a child—lying quietly on a dainty bed with white, weary face and closed eyes, round which dark lines of pain and suffering are plainly circled; and lastly, a young lady nestling back in a low basket-chair and keeping tender watch over the slight figure stretched so motionless before her. Suddenly the heavy lids unclose, and a pair of tired eyes are raised, with a sad, pathetic look, to the watcher's face.

"Is that you, Edith?" asks the weak voice in low, feeble tones; and the young lady, bending down to press a kiss on the white brow, answers,—

"Yes, dear; and I am so glad you have enjoyed such a nice long sleep."

The child raised one thin, fragile hand, and pushing back the hair from her damp forehead, spoke once more. "I was dreaming, Edith,—dreaming the old days were back again, and that Dick and I were having such fun in the oak parlour. Archie Trollope was there too, and we were chasing each other round and round the room; but neither Dick nor Archie could catch me, my feet seemed so nimble. I thought it was true, Edith, and a great weight rolled from my heart; but oh"—and the low wail accompanying the words pained the listener sorely—"I awoke and found it was all a dream."

"My poor little Winnie!" replied the young lady, smoothing the pained lines from the invalid's brow with soft, gentle touch. But the child had not yet finished.

"Edith," she continued, a wild, haunting look of unrest stealing into her eyes, "I am so tired lying here day after day. I want to be out in the sunshine with the birds and the flowers. Tell me, when shall I be able to walk in the sunlight once more?"

Edith's face was wet with tears. "Try to be patient, dear," she said in a somewhat broken voice; "one does not recover very quickly from an illness such as yours."

Winnie seemed dissatisfied. "You don't look me straight in the face when you speak, Edith, and your voice has a little tremble in it. Hush! hear how the birds are singing! They know I dearly love the sunshine, and are calling me out into the midst of it; I hear them every day warbling so happily. Do you think they ever wonder why I never come—why I never dance up and down the garden walks and spend hours with them and the flowers as I did last year? And the sea, Edith—some nights, when the wind is sleeping and not a leaf stirring on the trees, I can hear the waves crooning a low, sweet song as they wash along the wide beach of sand. They also seem to be calling me out into their midst; and I—O Edith, I cannot come."

There was a passionate ring of pain in the voice, and the look of unrest had given place to one of intense yearning. Edith's tears fell fast as she laid her head down on the pillow beside her little sister and pressed warm kisses on the quivering lips.

"Little Winnie," she whispered, "don't you think it is hard, hard for us to see you lying suffering here? Oh, my dear, can't you guess how we miss your little dancing figure, and your bright, merry chatter? Our hearts are sore for you, dearest, in your pain and weariness, and we would sacrifice anything to be able to raise you up strong and well soon. But we cannot; and, oh, little sister, try to wait patiently a little longer."

"You say that every day, Edith," answered the child pettishly. "It is always the old, old story—wait a little longer; and when you speak in that strain a great fear creeps into my heart and won't be shut out. I try not to listen; I think upon other things; I tell it to go away, but it still remains. Edith, O Edith! tell me that some day I shall stand up strong and well; tell me quick, quick, for something whispers that will never be."

"Nonsense, dear!" faltered the elder sister; "you must not become fanciful. In a short time I hope to see you quite better."

"You don't say you are perfectly certain, Edith," cried Winnie, still suspicious, "and you look at anything rather than me. I believe my fear is too true; and if so, how shall I live through the long, long years?"

Edith hardly knew how to reply. "Hush, Winnie, hush!" she began pleadingly; "you are rushing to rash conclusions. And only think, dear, we have you, though weak and helpless, spared to us still. What if you had died?"

"I wish I had," replied the girl wildly; "I would far rather lie quietly under the daisies than live a long, long crippled life. Oh, to think I shall never again run races on the sandy shore, and laugh when the little waves splash my feet; never pluck the wild flowers and make sweet, fragrant posies; never climb the forest trees or sit under the great pines I love so well! I can't bear it, Edith; indeed I can't. I wish I were dead."

Her sister was about to speak, but she pushed her aside, saying feebly, "Oh, if I could only get my

strength back again! I never knew what a blessing health was till I lost it." There was such a depth of pathos in the weak voice, such an undertone of sadness, that Edith almost broke down again.

"Winnie," she said softly, "I wonder how Aunt Judith would answer you just now?"

Winnie looked up through her tears. "I don't know," she replied wistfully; "but she can't understand how awful it is to lose health for life in one day."

"No," responded Edith; "but I think, Winnie, Miss Latimer must have had some exceeding bitter sorrow—some terrible trial to bear in her own time."

"How?" with a gesture of surprise.

"Because, dear, those books of hers which I have been reading to you lately are full of grand, loving thoughts, and strong, helpful words, such as could only come from a heart torn and bleeding through suffering. I never saw Miss Latimer, as you know, Winnie, but I am ready to say with you she must be a good, noble woman."

The little girl's eyes were brimming over again. "Don't speak of her, Edith; it makes me wish so much to see her, and mamma has forbidden that."

"Not now, Winnie, not now!" said Edith eagerly; "she would be only too pleased to see your friend. At first, when you were so ill, you called continually for Aunt Judith, and Algy was sent to Dingle Cottage in search of her. He found, however, only a fast-closed door, and could gain no information as to where she had gone from any of the neighbours. It seems the whole family left town for the summer on the afternoon of the examination day, so that I am sure Miss Latimer does not even know you are ill. She and Nellie were not in the school at the time of your accident." Edith's voice faltered at this point: but rapidly recovering herself, she continued: "Then we bought all Aunt Judith's books, dear, to try to cheer you a little. It was the only thing we could do. Some day, when we return to town, you will see Miss Latimer again."

Winnie lay weeping quietly. At last she said, "Please leave me alone for a short time, Edith; I wish to think it all out myself," and the elder sister obeyed.

Slipping on her hat, she passed out of the house into the sunshine and wended her way slowly towards the shore, the words ringing in her ears with that low wail of intense pain—"How shall I live through the long, long years?"

Poor Winnie! her fears were but too well grounded. No hope was entertained of her ever being able to leave her couch again.

When the kind-hearted doctor had broken the news to the sorrowing family, almost the first thought of each was, How would she bear it? How would she, the little restless sprite, always flitting about here and there, endure perhaps a long life of crippled helplessness? And oh! how were they to tell her of the sad future, stretching far into the coming years? It was all very well to waive her questions in the meantime, but that could not be done much longer. Already the child seemed listening to each word with a haunting sense of fear; and now that they had taken her from the busy town to their quiet sea-side home, where summer after summer she had danced about in innocent glee, the dread deepened as the days went by and she felt no sign of returning strength to her feeble frame. There was no need to tell the sad tidings after all, however—she had found out for herself; and the necessary part now was to teach her how to live bravely and cheerfully through the long, long years.

Edith's thoughts were very dreary as she walked quietly through the little sea-side village, and saw the happy, sun-kissed children, full of health and strength, playing on the sandy shore, and shouting their lusty laughter to each other, while one who would have joined so heartily in their merriment was lying pale and weary on a lonely couch of pain. The little wistful face and tired eyes kept ever rising up before her, while the words rang continually in her ears,—*"How shall I live through the long, long years?"*

With a quick impatient movement she drew out her watch, and noting the hour, saw that the mail had been due some little time ago, and letters would be lying at the small post-office. Entering the little shop, she found another occupant besides herself preparing to receive a small budget of papers from the shopwoman's hands.

"No letters to-day, Miss Latimer; only these papers," the girl was saying as Edith stepped towards the counter.—*"Good-morning, Miss Blake; we are glad to see you amongst us again."*

The lady started at Edith's name, and turning, looked earnestly at the graceful figure from under the brim of a shady hat—a gaze which Edith, busy with her own thoughts, failed to observe.

"Three letters for you to-day, miss," the shopwoman continued, "and one with a foreign post-mark on it. I'm thinking it'll be from Master Dick."

Edith lifted the letters. "Yes," she said with a bright smile, "you are quite right, Janet. It is addressed to my little sister; how pleased she will be!"

The girl's eyes saddened. "Is Miss Winnie keeping stronger?" she inquired in a subdued voice; "we

were all so sorry to hear about her illness, dear lamb."

The young lady shook her head. "Not much, Janet; but of course we have only been here a week as yet. We are hoping she will reap the benefit of the sea-air by-and-by. Good-morning." And Edith, gathering her letters together, left the shop and turned slowly in the direction of home. In a few minutes she heard rapid footsteps behind her, and a low, sweet voice said gently, "May I be pardoned for addressing Miss Blake?"

Raising her eyes in surprise, Edith saw the stranger lady close at her side, looking very much agitated.

"Certainly!" she replied courteously. "Can I assist you in any way?" And the stranger replied—

"I do not know whether you will ever have heard Winnie speak of me or not. My name is Latimer, and your little sister was a great friend of my niece. They were always together at school, and Winnie spent two afternoons with us when we were in town, I—"

But she was allowed to proceed no further, for Edith stood holding out her hands, and saying with shining countenance, "You are Aunt Judith, are you not? I am so pleased to have met you, Miss Latimer. My little sister is very ill. Will you come and see her now?"

Miss Latimer looked perplexed. "I am staying here at present," she said simply, "and intend remaining till the end of August; this air seems so beneficial to my invalid sister. I hardly know how to reply to your invitation, Miss Blake. I never knew till the other day about Winnie's accident, and I should dearly like to see the child; but still—"

"Please do not finish your sentence, Miss Latimer," replied Edith, blushing with confusion. "We owe you an ample apology for our rudeness, and both my father and mother will be only too delighted to see you. Winnie has been calling for you continually, and my brother went to Dingle Cottage, but found you out of town."

"Yes," said Miss Latimer; "the doctor advised us to come here on account of my youngest sister. Nellie was with us during the month of June, but has gone home till we return to town. I thank you for your kindness, Miss Blake, and will call at your house to-morrow. I am sorry I cannot accompany you this afternoon."

Edith looked up at the true, noble face, shaded by the simple summer hat; and as she did so, a slow, sweet smile broke over Aunt Judith's lips and lighted up her whole countenance.

"No wonder Winnie loved her!" thought the gay, fashionable girl. "I feel as if I could kneel in all reverence at her feet, she looks so good and pure." But she only said aloud,—"Then I shall expect you to-morrow afternoon, Miss Latimer. Our house is easily found. You will see the name, Maple Bank, on the gate. Please do not disappoint us; and oh! I am so glad I have met you at last."

So they parted, and Edith stepped homewards with a lightened heart.

Mr. and Mrs. Blake received her news quietly. They would rather the intimacy had not been renewed, but for Winnie's sake no opposition would be made now. They would find out Miss Latimer's present home, and call on her that evening. As for telling Winnie, it might be better, perhaps, to keep her still in ignorance till the following day.

Clare alone turned up her haughty nose when Edith related the morning's adventure, and inquired if she too were becoming infected with the Latimer mania. "For my part," concluded the proud girl, "I think our parents very foolish—encouraging Winnie in all her whims and fancies. There will be no end to them soon. I am very sorry for the child, but I still decidedly disapprove of giving in to her continually. I should not be surprised if this wonderful Aunt Judith becomes a daily visitor before long. However, I wash my hands of the whole affair." And lifting a book, Clare passed out through the window into the garden; while Edith, disgusted at the cruel words, went slowly upstairs, and placed Dick's precious letter in Winnie's hands.

It was a wonderful epistle, spiced with grand nautical phrases, and brimful of the truly marvellous and incredible in nature. Winnie laughed heartily over the absurd yarns, described with sailor-like veracity, and then gave a little cry of joy when Edith, who was reading the letter aloud, ended with the following words:—"And now, my dear little Win, if we have favourable weather you may expect to see your dear old Dick home about the end of September; and won't we have a jolly time of it then! No end of larks and mischief. I suppose you will still be at Maple Bank when my ship comes in, so" (here Edith stopped, but the child bade her read every single word) "see and keep well and strong, that you may be able to enjoy all sorts of capers with—Your loving sailor brother, DICK."

"Don't look at me like that, Edith," said Winnie, when the long letter was carefully folded up and returned to its envelope. "I am not going to cry or even think; my heart is too sore. No one must tell Dick till he comes home. Let him remain in ignorance as long as possible." Then she closed her eyes wearily and remained silent. But Edith was not to be deceived by any apparent calmness or resignation, and knew only too well that the child's whole soul was crying out in rebellion at the sad trial which had befallen her.

Daylight stole softly, silently away; the summer breeze sighing a dreamy even-song through the

forest trees, lulled the singing birds to rest; the little flowers drooped their pretty heads, and closed their dewy petals in slumber; the busy whirr and hum of insects ceased,—and the nature-world was hushed in sleep. Only the restless sea broke on the peaceful calm with its ceaseless swish-swish of waves. And far, far out on the ocean breast, leaning over the bulwark of a gallant ship, homeward bound, was a young sailor, gazing across the moonlit waters, and thinking of the bright fairy sister waiting to give him a joyous welcome back.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### LIGHT IN DARKNESS.

"How pretty my room is to-day, Edith! You have made it all bright and fairy-like with flowers. Yes, open the blinds, please, and let the sunshine in; my head is really better this morning, and I wish all the light I can possibly get." So spoke Winnie, as she watched her sister scattering sweet posies of flowers throughout the entire room, and felt the sweet, subtle perfume of "the flowers that in earth's firmament do shine."

"Why are you so particular to-day, Edith?" she continued, as that young lady flitted about, looping and relooping the soft lace curtains, pouncing on every stray speck of dust, and sweeping every medicine-bottle out of sight. "Jane tidied the room as usual this morning, and yet here you are, poking into every corner, and arranging and rearranging everything. One would think the Queen was coming to see me. What is the reason of it all?" and Winnie looked decidedly curious.

"So you are going to have a visitor, dear," replied Edith, bringing a fragrant nosegay over to the bedside and laying it on the snowy pillow. "Now don't ask me any questions, for I dare not tell. Only wait patiently and you will see for yourself."

The child did not seem particularly charmed. "I hate visitors, Edith," she said, the sunshine dying out of her face, and the restless, weary look stealing into her eyes; "they make my heart full of wicked, rebellious thoughts when I see them coming into the room so well and strong. I detest their long faces and sympathetic remarks. Ugh! I suppose they mean to be kind, but when they speak I feel as if I hated everything and everybody."

"I don't think you will tell me all that this afternoon," replied Edith with a knowing smile. "It is always the unexpected that happens, and I shall be very much surprised if you do not count this day as one of the bright spots in your life.—Ah, there is the bell. Give me a kiss, Win, and keep a pretty smile for the unwelcome visitor." So saying Edith tripped away, and Winnie waited in gloomy silence the advent of the hated guest. Why could people not leave her alone? Why did they require to come and flaunt all their bright, strong health before her? She wished none of their sympathy and condolences—only leave her alone to her grief and misery.

These being her thoughts, it was a very cross, peevish face which met Miss Latimer's gaze as she entered the sick chamber in company with Mrs. Blake and confronted the little invalid.

"I have brought a friend to see you, dear," said the step-mother, smiling down on the quiet figure with its weary, pain-stricken face. "You will be pleased to welcome her, I know, and have so much to talk about that my presence can be easily dispensed with for a little time." As she spoke, Mrs. Blake smoothed the sick girl's brow lovingly, and then withdrew, leaving the two friends together once more.

There was no need to ask, "Are you glad to see me, Winnie?" for the great eyes, shining with a wonderfully joyous light, told the tale the lips refused to utter. Forgetting her helplessness, the child stretched out her arms and tried to rise, but sank back with a low cry of pain, and those piteous words, "O Aunt Judith, come to me quickly, for I cannot go to you."

Miss Latimer was greatly moved, and could do nothing at first but kiss the little face once so fresh and sweet, now pinched and wan with suffering.

"Dear child," she said at length, "my heart is bleeding for you. Tell me, Winnie, how did all this happen?" and with Aunt Judith's arms round her, and a sense of peaceful rest stealing over her weary frame, the sick girl told all that there was to tell, simply, truthfully, with no attempt to screen herself from blame.

"I was wrong to speak as I did," she finished sadly, "but I had provocation. O Aunt Judith, I cannot express the awful feeling of hatred I bear towards Ada, when I think that if it had not been for her I should be running about in the sunshine now."

"Hush, Winnie! do not say that," replied Miss Latimer softly; "her heart will be heavy enough now, I fancy, and—" But here Winnie broke in:—

"No, Aunt Judith. I don't believe she feels the least little particle of sorrow. She ran away when I fell, and never even came to ask for me after the accident. No one knows she had anything to do with

my fall except my own family, and they decided to leave her alone and make no remark. Mamma was awfully good. She said she had formed a wrong estimate of Ada's character, and told me I had been right."

There was a few minutes' pause, then Winnie continued: "I know, Aunt Judith, you think I am very wicked for hating Ada so bitterly; but, oh! look what she has done to me. My life is spoilt" (with the old wail of an infinite pain); "I shall never be able to walk again."

Miss Latimer's eyes grew misty, and Winnie continued:—

"You are good and true, Aunt Judith. You sit there looking at me with such a kind, loving face, and don't say like the others, 'Wait a little longer, Winnie; some day you will be all right again.'" Then repeating the words, with a weary depth of woe in her voice—"I shall never be able to walk again; and, O Aunt Judith, can you guess what that means to me?"

"Yea, my darling, I can," whispered the patient listener, "and your cross is a heavy one to carry."

"Heavy!" muttered the sick girl; "so heavy that I shall not be able to carry it patiently. It is bad enough just now, Aunt Judith, but think what it will be when the months go rolling by and find me still weak and helpless. How shall I bear my life, such a weary, weary life, week after week, and year after year? I loved the world so much—the bright, beautiful world with all its sunshine and flowers; and now I feel as if I were withdrawn from it altogether. What will Dick say when he comes home, and I cannot go with him here and there as in the dear old days? Aunt Judith, I can see no light anywhere. Teach me, you who are so brave and strong, how to bear my life now."

Miss Latimer kissed the little quivering face with its sad, mournful eyes; then drawing her chair closer to the bedside, she kept her loving arms round the sobbing child and tried to comfort her.

"My darling," said the kind, gentle voice, the voice Winnie had so longed and thirsted for, "I do not think you know how deep the pain is, how warm the sympathy, I feel for you. You say the broad, flowery way along which you have hitherto travelled has ended now, and nothing lies stretched before save an interminable waste of blackness through which you imagine it impossible to journey. Yet, will you believe me, dear child, when I tell you that in the blackened tract of moorland you will find a joy, a peace passing all understanding, and learn that the life you now deem too hard to live is a grand, beautiful life, and your weary couch of pain but the school where the Master teaches some of his purest, holiest lessons! The darkness may be very thick and dense for a time, Winnie, but by-and-by light will begin to break through, and night give place to day; and if the flowery way should never again open up before you, you will find in the rugged upland path the sunshine of God's favour, while his presence shall go with you, and he will give you rest. My child, my little Winnie, this grievous stroke may yet prove the greatest blessing to yourself and others. Do not say your life is spoilt; perhaps the true life is only now beginning."

The young girl looked up earnestly into the gentle face. "Speak on, Aunt Judith," she pleaded. "It makes me feel good to hear you talk like that; but then" (with sad despair) "when you go away I know I shall be as wicked and rebellious as ever. Your words lull all the evil passions to sleep; but in the long, dark night they will waken up, and I shall be wishing I were dead again. Say something more, Aunt Judith. Tell me how I am to keep the good feelings always in my heart, and be willing to live through the long, long years."

Then Miss Latimer's soft voice spoke again; and, cradled lovingly in those tender arms, the sick girl learned where to find the daily strength and grace for every need; and how to gather up the scattered threads of her life together, and weave them into a golden web shining with the lustre of simple faith and holy resignation.

Some time afterwards Mrs. Blake entered, and Miss Latimer rose to depart; but Winnie would not let her go just yet. She had so many questions to ask, and there was so much she wished to know. How were Miss Deborah, Aunt Margaret, and Nellie? When would they all return to town? Had Aunt Judith written a new book lately? and if so, what was it called? Miss Latimer had a busy time answering all those queries, but at last the young invalid was satisfied; and promising to come again soon, Aunt Judith said good-bye, and left the room with a heavy heart.

Mrs. Blake following, thanked her for her visit, and hoped she would repeat it at an early date. The young step-mother saw the error she had made in the past, and with graceful tact tried to atone for her open rudeness to this grave, noble woman, who seemed like a queen in spite of the simplicity of her garments.

Miss Latimer's sweet, true nature harboured no feeling of umbrage or malice, and her smile was frank and friendly as she willingly accepted the invitation. Then Edith, appearing at that moment, offered to accompany her part of the way home, and Mrs. Blake returned to the sick-room and Winnie.

The child's face looked flushed and animated. "Mamma dear," she said sweetly, "thank you for allowing me to see Aunt Judith again. I shall not be so cross and troublesome now. She has been telling me what a beautiful life I may yet lead in spite of my pain and helplessness, and her words have hushed the bad thoughts to rest."

The fair, frivolous lady seemed bewildered, but replied, "I am willing to confess my error, Winnie: Miss Latimer is no longer an unwelcome visitor here," then she changed the subject.



Meanwhile the days passed on, and Miss Latimer became a frequent guest at Maple Bank, winning all due respect and honour by the true dignity of her nature and sweet womanly heart. Edith hailed those visits with pleasure; and Winnie—ah! they were like great spots of sunshine to the sick girl fretting sorely under her load of pain.

She was by no means a patient invalid this restless child, and the constant lying day after day and the monotony of sick-room life tried her exceedingly. It was only natural that such should be the case; that the wild tomboy nature, with its bright flow of animal spirits, should chafe and rebel at this heavy discipline. But one becomes wearied of constant murmuring, and sometimes those around her waxed impatient. Then it was that Miss Latimer's soothing words came into use, and the strong hand was stretched out to help the failing feet; and by-and-by, slowly yet surely, the discipline began to show its fruit, and Winnie to learn the first lesson in the school of pain.

August at length drew near to a close. Miss Latimer and her little household returned to town. The days began rapidly to creep in, and the beautiful harvest moon "grew like a white flower in the sky."

"Let us go home, mamma," pleaded Winnie. "I should like to be back in town when Dick's ship comes in; and it is so lonely here. I shall not feel so much at meeting him where we have not the same opportunity to romp about; and oh! although it is very wrong and selfish of me to trouble you, I cannot bear to meet him here."

The child's words were very pathetic, and so, yielding to her wish, the Blakes returned to town.

Winnie sighed her satisfaction when safely deposited in the oak parlour once more. Then the old life began again—the same, yet not the same; for although everything around was as it had been in the bygone days, Winnie herself was changed, and the busy, active life over for ever. But she had her happy times too; for the oak parlour was rapidly becoming the room of the household, and Winnie seldom knew what it was to be left alone. Thither came Aunt Judith with her soft, gentle words; Nellie, fresh from the dear home circle, her troubles all blown away by the happy home atmosphere; Edith and Clare, with their gay young voices and dainty ways; and all the members of the family, slipping in every now and then to see how the little invalid was progressing. Her quiet submission was daily becoming more patent; and as those around noted the efforts at cheerfulness and patience, their love gradually increased, and Winnie the invalid was tenfold dearer to the hearts of her family than Winnie the little tomboy had been. Her days were not idle ones by any means; for as her health in some respects improved, a daily governess was engaged to come and instruct her, and under Miss Montgomery's mild tuition Winnie laid aside her former indolence and began to show an interest in her studies.

The papers were eagerly scanned now for news of the expected ship, but the days sped on and still nothing was heard of the longed-for vessel. At length, however, one evening in the beginning of October, when the gray twilight was creeping silently over the busy town, Edith and Winnie were together in the oak parlour—the one sitting toasting herself cosily at the fire, the other lying on her invalid couch half-asleep. Downstairs in the large drawing-room a few guests were assembled, and the sound of voices singing floated sweetly upwards and fell soothingly on the sick girl's ear.

"Edith!" she said, opening her sleepy eyes for a moment, "I wish you would go down beside the others and enjoy yourself. I feel in a deliciously comfortable mood just now, and will not miss you at all. Do obey me!" and she looked fondly over at the pretty figure basking lazily in the firelight glow.

Edith roused herself. "I should like to join them for a short time, Win; but it seems selfish leaving you all alone, and nurse is too busy to come and sit beside you just now."

"Oh, I shall not weary," was the bright reply; "besides, the music will lull me to sleep in a few minutes. Run away, and think of me as enjoying my forty winks."

The elder sister rose, and kissing Winnie's little face, went slowly from the room, along the passage, and down the broad carpeted stair. She had hardly entered the drawing-room and returned the greetings of the merry guests, when a loud ringing at the door bell was followed by the heavy tread of a man's foot in the hall, and the next minute Richard Blake strode into the gaily-lighted room and confronted the assembled company.

"Just like the old Dick," thought his brothers and sisters, rising to welcome the young sailor, whose sun-tanned face was shining with honest delight. "Fancy stalking into a drawing-room in rough seafaring clothes, and startling every one with his sudden appearance." But in spite of such condemnation their welcome was hearty and genuine; for the boy looked so happy and overjoyed himself, it was impossible not to be infected with his gladness of heart.

"Straight from the ship," he explained to his step-mother, standing like a young hero in the midst of the gay company, with a great joy rippling over his kindly face. "Got into dock only this afternoon; and here I am, turned up again like the old sixpence.—Any yarns to spin? you ask. Why, any amount. But in the meantime I am desperately hungry, and could relish a hearty meal." Then turning to Edith: "Where is Winnie? Up in the oak parlour, I suppose. Well, I'm off to her at once. She ought to have been the very first to bid me welcome."

A silence fell on all, and looks were exchanged of mingled sorrow and perplexity.

"What is to be done?" questioned Mrs. Blake inwardly. "Some one must break the news to him before he enters the oak parlour."

Dick, in complete ignorance of the effect his words were causing, wheeled round towards the door and prepared to leave the room, when Edith stepped forward saying, "Yes; Winnie is in her own sanctum as usual. Come; I will accompany you there."

The boy stopped in amazement. "What for?" he inquired bluntly; "I would much rather go alone first."

"Yes, I know," was the confused reply; "but please humour me this once;" and Edith slipped past him as she spoke.

Dick followed, a little mystified and annoyed; but his amazement increased when Edith, opening the library door, drew him into that room and closed the door swiftly behind him.

"Bless my boots! is the girl mad?" ejaculated the boy, turning to the tables and chairs for sympathy. "I am beginning to wonder if I have fallen into the clutches of some escaped lunatic. I say, Edith, old girl, do you take those fits often?"

His sister, however, had no answering smile on her lips, and her voice shook slightly as she replied, "Dick, please prepare yourself to hear bad news. You ought to have been told before, but we kept the evil day as far off as possible. Dear little—" Then she stopped short, terrified at the expression on her brother's face.

"Don't beat about the bush, Edith," he cried in a voice hoarse with emotion; "I can bear anything better than suspense. Tell me, is Winnie dead? But no,"—glancing at his sister's shining garments—"it cannot be that, thank God;" and he drew a long sigh of relief at this point.

"No, Dick," responded Edith, giving him a glance of warm sympathy, "but—" and very simply and tenderly she broke the sad tidings to the agitated boy.

Then there fell on the silence and stillness of the room the sound of a strong heart's sobs, as Dick, in spite of all his manliness, laid his head on the table and wept like a little child.

Oh, how often, often in his lonely night-watches had he pictured this home-coming—dwelling on and gloating over each little detail as a miser does over his gold, till the whole dream-picture became beautiful with a golden glory. He saw the tiny, fairy figure flying to meet him, the quaint gipsy face glowing its joyous welcome, and the great dark eyes shining their wondrous gladness. He felt the clasp of two soft arms round his neck, the touch of warm kisses on his lips, and heard the bright, merry voice melting into sweetest tones, as words of love and tenderness were poured into his hungry ear. And this was the end of it all—his dream-picture shattered, and a young life blasted through a haughty girl's thirst for revenge.

Dick's heart was full of rage and hatred. "If Ada Irvine were within my reach just now," he muttered, "she would live to regret this day." Then raising his head, he looked, and found Edith had slipped away and left him alone with his grief.

The boy rose, sighing heavily. "I am hardly myself yet," he said, dashing his rough, sun-burnt hand across his eyes, and moving slowly towards the door. "What a fool I am, giving way like this! But these things unman a fellow, and I need not be ashamed of my tears. Where did they say she was? In the oak parlour. Well, here goes;" and off strode Dick, swinging along the lighted hall and up the broad stairs at what he afterwards described as the rate of knots.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### "I SHALL LEARN TO BE GOOD NOW."

"Dick, Dick! is it really you? O my dear boy, I can hardly believe it!" and Winnie clasped her feeble arms tighter round the young sailor's neck, as if fearful of waking and finding it all a dream.

"Yes, it's the same old fellow turned up again, Win," was the reply, given half chokingly. "Nip me, and you will find I am neither ghost nor spirit, but real flesh and blood." And the boy, kneeling by the invalid's couch, felt his eyes growing dim and misty again at the sound of the weak young voice lingering so lovingly over his name.

"I am so glad," said the child, lying back amongst her soft cushions, and looking at the big stalwart form before her. "I have been longing and longing to see you, Dick, through each weary day and night; yearning for the touch of your hand and sound of your voice: and now, to think you are really, truly here, alive and well! God is very good, dear," and the low voice uttered the last words solemnly and reverently.

The boy looked at his little sister wonderingly. "Have you learned to say that from the heart, Win?" he asked with greater earnestness in his tones. "Looking at your life as it is now, as it is likely to be all

through the future years, can you still repeat the words, 'God is very good!'"

The child's lips drooped, and a sad look brooded over the pale white face; but the meek voice continued, perhaps somewhat tremulously, "Not always, Dick; but that is in the wicked hours, when I am full of sinful, rebellious thoughts. Some days like just now, however, his goodness seems to stand out in a bright, clear light, and a great hush of peace falling on me, I find myself whispering over and over again, 'God is very good.' Aunt Judith says it may be a long time, but sooner or later I shall be able to repeat those words, not only now and then, but every day of my life, even in the darkest hours; and that will be splendid. You must not be too sorry for me, dear old boy. Do you remember asking me before you went away to try to live as I ought to live, and do my duty nobly and well? I could not keep my promise, Dick. When I was able to go about in the bright, beautiful world, I did wicked, wrong things whenever I felt inclined. I enjoyed every pleasure to the very full, no matter who suffered; but now—I shall learn to be good now."

Dick was almost overcome again. "Win," he said huskily, "you're an angel! When you speak like that you cause all my sins and shortcomings to rise up before me, and I feel as if I were not worthy of your love and tenderness. Ah, little sister, it is little pure souls like yours that help to keep men right in this world, and guard them in the hours of temptation and danger. God bless you, Winnie darling. I thank him for giving me such a precious sister."

And this was the boy laughed at and mocked by the other members of the family; spoken of as a dunce and scapegrace, and who would never make his mark in the world. Ah, well! what did it matter? The true, honest life now beginning to declare itself would soon tell its own tale, and prove that there are more Sir Galahads walking on the earth than people dream of, whose "strength is the strength of ten, because their hearts are pure."

For a long time the two, brother and sister, sat talking together—talking over past, present, and future, and feeling that the long separation had only served to deepen and intensify the love they bore each other. And now a new link was knitting the twain more firmly together,—the link of pain and helplessness on the one side, and strong protecting strength on the other.

After that the days fled all too rapidly. Sailor Dick made a great difference in the house. It was something new to hear the fresh, hearty voice trolling out wild sea-songs, and to listen to yarn after yarn told with infinite gravity, and yet brimful of the ridiculous and impossible. The rough, hardy seafaring life had improved the boy wondrously, bringing out the noblest traits in his character, making him less sensitive and more self-reliant. Captain Inglis, who had called on Mr. Blake, and was now a welcome visitor at the house in Victoria Square, stated his thorough satisfaction at Dick's conduct during the whole voyage, and spoke of him in the most praise-worthy terms. Altogether there was great cause for commendation; and the boy awoke to the delightful knowledge that he was no longer being down-trodden and treated with disrespect, and that some day Winnie's prophecy might be verified of his father being proud of him yet.

"Blessings on the skipper's head," he said one afternoon to Winnie, when she told of Captain Inglis's genuine satisfaction. "He's a thoroughly good old chap, and not one of the crew could say a word against him. But I say, Win, what makes him come poking about here so often? Why should he not give his old mother the benefit of his spare time? Poor body! it's rather hard lines being left so much alone."

"She's coming to see me," put in Winnie laughingly. "Captain Inglis had been telling her about the cross invalid sister you possessed, and she asked if she might be allowed to call some day."

Dick whistled.

"So that's the way the wind is blowing?" he muttered under his breath. "Well, this is a truly wonderful world in which we live." Then aloud to Winnie: "You'll like her, Win; she's a first-rate old lady, brimming over with kindness. Shouldn't wonder if she invites you to stay with her later on; and, my eye! if she does, just you go. She'll pet and molly-coddle you till you won't know whether you're standing on your head or feet; and I'll bet you'll be as snug as a bird in its nest."

Winnie looked interested. "Has she a nice house?"

"Tip-top, and nobody in it save herself and the servants. The skipper has plenty of money, and goes to sea from choice, not necessity.—Why, I declare, Win, here he is again, coming along the street. He gave me a half-holiday, but I did not think he was going to take one himself as well. If this kind of thing continues much longer, you may congratulate yourself on having another brother soon;" and Dick winked knowingly.

"What do you mean?" asked Winnie, staring open-eyed; but the mischievous boy had vanished and left her alone in her bewilderment.

All good things come to an end, and every day has its close. The *Maid of Astolat* was ready to set sail again, and once more the time drew near to say good-bye.

"Farewell, Win, my little angel sister," whispered Dick, kissing the sweet face with dimmed, misty eyes. "God keep you for ever and ever, and bring me safe home to you again." Then followed a long, lingering embrace; and Winnie was left to wait and hope till the long months and days would pass and her sailor boy return once more.

"Yes, I miss him sorely, Aunt Judith," she said one evening to Miss Latimer about a fortnight after the ship had sailed; "but I have so much to be thankful for, that I feel as if I dared not grumble. You have no idea how greatly he is improved, and how much more highly he is thought of now by every one in the house. I wish you had been able to see him, Aunt Judith."

"So do I, Winnie; but I was too ill the day he called, and this is only my second walk out of doors."

"Were you very unwell?" questioned Winnie, again scrutinizing her friend's face anxiously. "Aunt Judith, I don't believe you are nearly better. There are great hollows round your eyes, and your face looks haggard and worn."

"Nonsense, dear," answered the kind voice, and Miss Latimer's smile was very bright. "Remember I am an old woman, and pain leaves traces on an aged face.—What about yourself, Winnie? is the darkness brightening yet?"

"I think so, Aunt Judith; and Dick helped me so much. Perhaps the beautiful life is within my reach after all."

"There's no 'perhaps' in the matter, dear," said Miss Latimer softly; "but my little Winnie must be patient, for the grand, sweet song of life has its beginning, and the opening chords may be tremulous and low. Child," she continued passionately, "the grandest songs—the songs that echo and re-echo through eternity's limitless bounds—are wrung from hearts crushed and bleeding with anguish, and the infinite peace and calm come only after long strife and pain. Darling, my earnest prayer for you is that God would perfect in you his own image, and that you may come forth from the furnace of affliction with Christ's own brightness shining in your face."

That was the last talk Miss Latimer ever had with Winnie. She had been far from well lately, and after reaching home that night complained of feeling very tired.

"Go to bed, auntie," pleaded Nellie; "I am sure you are fit for no work to-night;" and Aunt Debby seconded the words. But Miss Latimer shook her head with a slow, sweet smile.

"My last chapter must be finished this evening, child," she said, gently yet firmly; "after that I shall please you all by taking a long, long rest."

Persuasion seemed useless; and the midnight hour found Aunt Judith busy at her desk, filling up page after page with those wonderful thoughts of hers.

Aunt Debby could not rest that night. Something in Miss Latimer's manner and appearance had awed and frightened her, driving the sleep from her little bright eyes and chilling her heart with a vague, undefined sense of fear. At length, in the middle of the night, she rose, unable to quell the uneasy thoughts which haunted her, and stealing softly downstairs, opened the door of her sister's sanctum and looked in. The lamp had burned low in the socket, and was casting a sickly gleam over all; the fire had died out, and the gray-white ashes gave a dreary, deserted appearance to the room. A great hush brooded around; and yet not so awful was that intense stillness as the solemn calm which seemed to infold the quiet figure sitting so silently in the midst.

Aunt Judith sat before her desk, her head bent slightly forward on her hands. There was nothing unnatural or alarming in the position, but an awful dread stole into Miss Deborah's heart and caused it to beat with a wild fear.

"Judith!" she called tremblingly; but the quiet figure never stirred, and no response came from the pallid lips. Aunt Debby flashed the light of her candle full on Miss Latimer, and then started back with an exceeding bitter cry, for the face on which the light shone so clearly was white and rigid in death. The eyes, wide-open, were fixed on the sheets of manuscript before her, as if she had been earnestly studying the closing words; and the face, though white with the pallor of the dead, still retained its own sweet expression. Looking down at the written sheets, Aunt Debby noticed the last chapter was finished, and knew Aunt Judith's life-work had ended with it.



1120 The eyes, wide open, were fixed on the sheets of manuscript before her.

**The eyes, wide open, were fixed on the sheets of manuscript before her.**

"My last chapter must be written to-night, child; after that I shall please you all by taking a long, long rest." How those words rung in Miss Deborah's ears as she stood gazing on that silent figure, sitting so quietly in that awful death-hush! Not the quiver of an eyelid; not a tremble of the lip; only that great, solemn calm. It was all over now. The pain and weariness; the constant striving after the true and beautiful; the daily self-renunciation; the life so completely devoted to the service of others; and the last lingering notes of the grand, sweet song had been sung in silence and alone. "Goodness and mercy have followed me all the days of my life," she had remarked to Aunt Debby not so long ago, "and, thank God, even in the darkest night I have never failed to find a star brightening through the gloom." Now the earthly shadows were done with for ever; the bleeding feet had trod the last steps of the thorny way, and entered by the gate into the holy Jerusalem, where "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him."

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### CONCLUSION.

Six summers has the green grass waved and sweet flowers bloomed over Aunt Judith's grave; six long, long years have come and gone since Miss Deborah entered that silent room and found the death-angel casting his dread shadow there. And what have the seasons brought? Ease to the sorrowing heart and laughter to the weeping eyes. "Time heals all wounds; one cannot mourn for ever," say the wise people, and in nine cases out of ten their words hold good, though I think there are some sorrows which no lapse of time can cure—sorrows which deepen and intensify as the years roll on; only the wound, bleeding inwardly, is hid with a sacred reverence from the gaze of the outside world, and is known to the sore-stricken heart alone.

Be that as it may, however, Miss Latimer's friends could afford to laugh and smile now, and joy as she had done in God's beautiful sunshine. The earth is still as fair, the skies as blue as they were in the bygone days when her quiet voice drew the thoughts of those around her to the nature-world with all its wondrous beauty, and each can say with glad accord,—

"Daisies are white upon the churchyard sod,  
Sweet tears the clouds lean down and give;

The world is very lovely. Oh, my God,  
I thank thee that I live."

Let us take one more look at them ere we close the book and lay it aside reverently and tenderly as we would the folded page in a closing life.

It is a cold, wintry evening. Outside the wind is sweeping up and down the streets, wailing like a soul in pain. The rain is dashing against the windowpanes, and beating with wild, ungovernable fury on those exposed to the disturbing elements. But inside warmth and comfort reign supreme. The oak parlour is all ablaze with light, and the laughter and merriment filling the whole room betoken the happy, genial spirits of the occupants. Let us see if we still recognize one and all—if six years have wrought no ravages or particular change on those we knew in their happy childhood days.

Close by the fire, lying on a luxuriously-cushioned couch, is a young lady, whose pale, thin face bears traces of weary pain. Yet the dark eyes are bright and smiling, and the voice has still its own merry ring, which plainly betrays the old Winnie of bygone days. Surely Aunt Judith's words are coming true, and she is learning beautiful lessons in the school of pain; for the pale face shines with a peaceful calm, and the words which fall from her lips are the words of one who has been in the furnace of affliction and come forth tried as silver.

Seated near on a low stool, with legs stretched forth in lazy comfort, is Dick, newly home from a long, perilous voyage. He is very much improved and changed, but in the gallant young officer one can still discover traces of the bluff sailor boy whose kind, honest heart won for him the love and friendship of all with whom he associated. He has continued to rise steadily in his profession, and Mr. Blake is proud of his scapegrace son at last.

A little further away, at the other side of the fire, sits Edith, smiling and light-hearted as ever, and with the same fair, sweet face; but a plain golden band, circling one white finger, proclaims that the gay, laughing girl has found a woman's true place in the world, and that the grave, gentlemanly captain has won his suit in the end.

And now we have come to the last occupant of the room—a young lady, seated in very unladylike fashion on the rug, and so little changed that in the fresh bright countenance we have no difficulty in recognizing our old friend Nellie Latimer. She is spending a few weeks in town with Winnie, and if report speaks true, there is a possibility that in the dim future Winnie may find a sister in her old school-mate of past years.

"How nice and cosy we all look!" she is saying in her blithe young voice; "one values light and warmth on a night like this. Hush! do you hear the wind? I pity those on the sea to-night."

Dick looks grave. "Ah, Nellie," he replies quietly, "pity hearts that are watching and praying in their lonely homes."

"The wind," says Winnie in a low whisper, "always makes me think of Aunt Judith in her quiet grave. I suppose it is a stupid feeling, but I hate the thought of the rain dripping and making a wet, wet sod above her. I should like the sunshine to be always lingering on her quiet resting-place."

The laughter has died out of each face, and eyes become a little misty, showing the dead friend is still near and dear to the hearts of those who loved her.

"Dear Aunt Judith," murmurs Nellie sadly, "we never realized how good she was till we lost her. Every one with whom she came in contact seems to have felt the benefit of her influence; and I—why, I owe her more than I can ever tell."

"I think we may all say that, Nell," adds Dick. "It was she who first inspired me with a reverence for all women, and helped to make me what I am now."

"As for me," says Winnie with a sad, sweet smile, "she showed me the way wherein I should walk, and taught me the great beauty of the Christ-life."

Then Edith's clear voice broke in: "And I—I have learned from Miss Latimer lessons that will help me throughout all my life. She has been, I think, as an angel of light to us all, and I shall never forget what we owe to her goodness and love."

"I have always been going to ask some of you girls," says Dick, "if Aunt Judith knew she was likely to die in such a sudden manner. Every time I came home I had that question on my mind, and yet never managed to ask it."

Nellie replied: "Oh yes! and Aunt Debby knew also. That was why Aunt Judith lived so humbly and simply. She felt she was the mainstay of the family,—that both Aunt Debby and Aunt Meg looked to her for their livelihood; and so she strove hard to win and lay aside money, with the hope that if she were called away suddenly there would be sufficient to keep them snugly and comfortably after her death. She suffered from severe paroxysms of pain at intervals, and each attack left her weaker and feebler. Then, besides, she seemed to have had some great sorrow, though Aunt Debby never told me what it was. Oh! they missed her dreadfully at first; but since they left Dingle Cottage and came to settle down beside my father, they have been more cheerful."

"Do you like having them so near you?" inquires Edith; and Nellie answers truthfully,—

"I like being beside Aunt Debby, she helps us so much; but Aunt Meg is very trying at times."

At that moment Captain Inglis, who has been closeted with Mr. Blake in the library, enters, and then the conversation changes. The old school-days are talked over, pranks and punishments described amidst shouts of laughter; and by-and-by the talk drifts on to Ada Irvine and the prize essay.

"Have you ever heard of or seen Ada lately?" asks Dick curiously. "I suppose she is quite a young lady and a great beauty now."

"Agnes Drummond called the other day," replies Winnie quietly, "and said she had met Ada last week at a friend's house. It seems she is just as haughty and proud as ever; but, O Dick, I am sure you will be sorry when I tell you that all her beauty is gone. The whole face is completely marred by small-pox, which she caught when abroad with her father."

"Serves her jolly well right," cries Dick, the old man in his nature coming to the front. "A girl who can act as she acted deserves a righteous punishment. I don't suppose she has ever eaten humble pie to you girls yet?"

"No, and never will," puts in Nellie. "She persists to this day in saying Win gained Mr. Corbett's medal through Aunt Judith's help, and that I never learned a single lesson without assistance."

"Hark!" says Captain Inglis, "there is the carriage.—Edith, my dear, it is time we were going home." So the merry party breaks up, and soon the silence of midnight settles over the city.

Slowly the wind lulls itself to rest; the storm is over; the rain-clouds sweep back from the sky, and the stars gleam forth with softened brilliancy over the sleeping world; while the fair, placid moon, rising from a mist of vapours, shines down on the sodden earth, and lingering near a quiet churchyard lays her tearful beams, fondly, tenderly, on a peaceful grave marked only by a marble cross and the simple words,—"Aunt Judith."

THE END.

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