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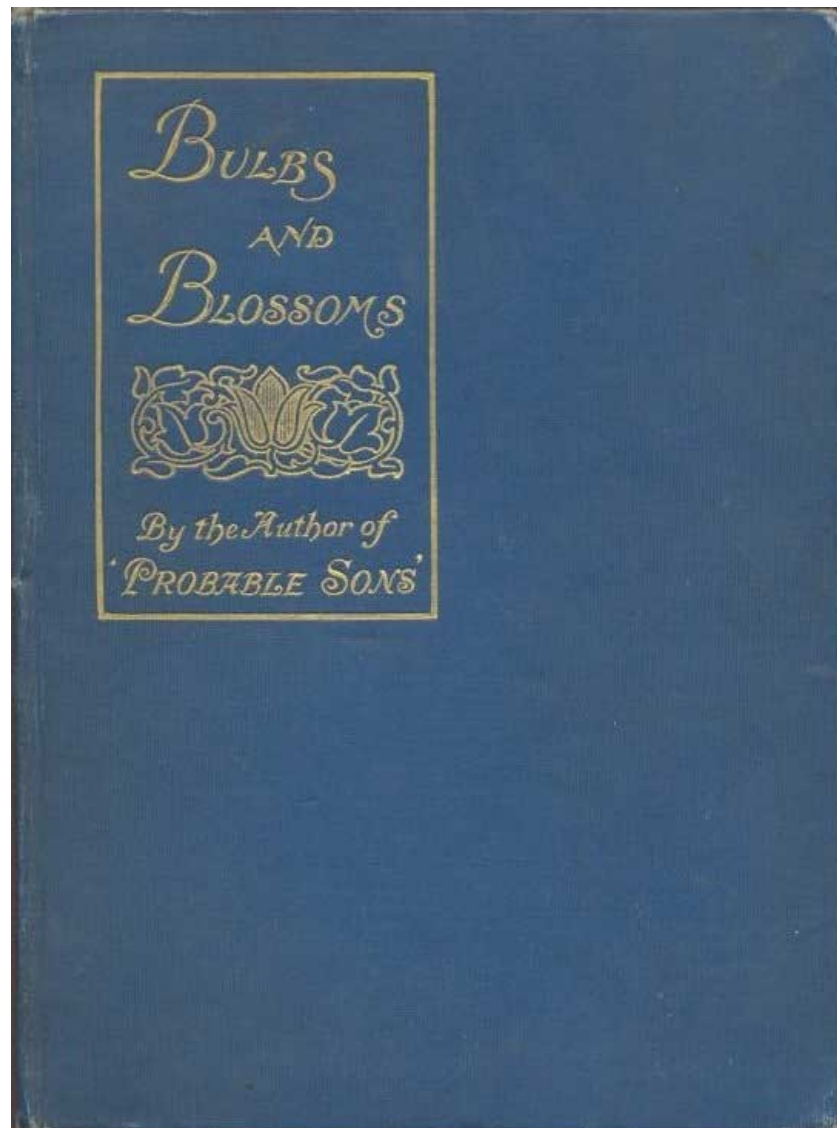
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Illustrator: Eveline Lance

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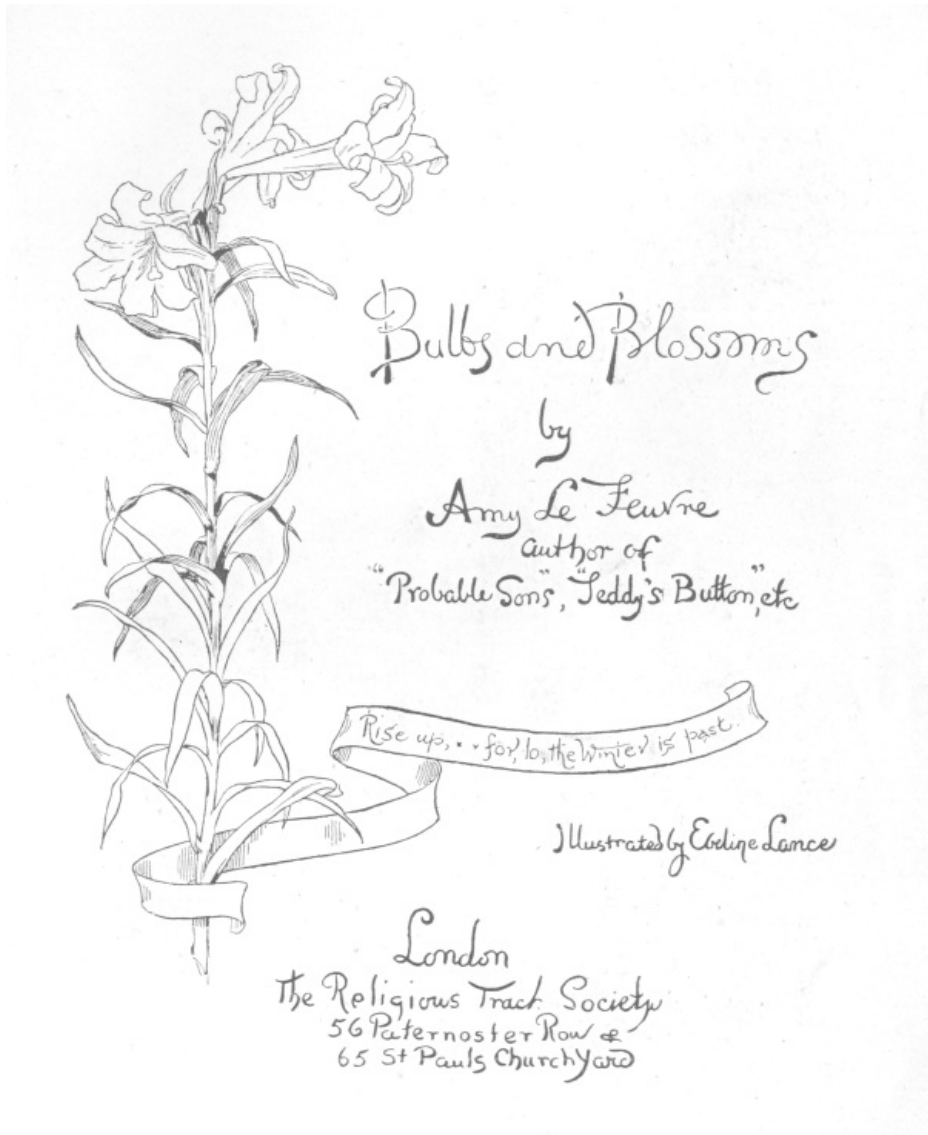
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[See page 23.](#)



Bulbs and Blossoms

by

Amy Le Feuvre

author of

"Probable Sons", "Teddy's Button", etc

Illustrated by Eveline Lance

London

The Religious Tract Society

56 Paternoster Row &

65 St Pauls Churchyard



[Pg 6]

CHAPTER I

The Ugly Flower Pots



It was five o'clock in the afternoon. Miss Hunter, a tall, dignified-looking woman, was presiding at the afternoon tea-table in the drawing-room of Chatts Chase. Miss Amabel Hunter stood at the window in a rather muddy riding-habit, and she was speaking in her sharp, short tones to her twin sister Hester, who lay back in the depths of a large armchair, a novel open in her lap. Sitting by the cheery wood fire was the youngest of the sisters, a frail and delicate invalid. She was turning her face anxiously towards the speaker, and now put in her word very gently.

'We only thought, Amabel, that it would have comforted the poor children if you had returned with them in the brougham. An aunt would naturally have been more acceptable to them than a strange maid.'

'But I tell you, Sibyl, they are with their own nurse, and Graham will be far more likely to put them all at ease than I should. They will hear that "Miss 'Unter, is the missis, and lets every one know she is. Miss 'Ester keeps the maids on their legs all day long because she won't use hers. Miss H'Amabel does the sporting gent, and is never indoors except to meals; while Miss Sibyl—well, there, she is not much 'count in the fam'ly, for she can't say bo to a goose, and doesn't mind how people put on her!'"

[Pg 8]

'You saw the children, I suppose?' questioned Miss Hunter gravely.

'Of course I did. I rode down to the station for that express purpose. They are two skinny, puny little monkeys, enveloped in bundles of wraps. I packed them all up comfortably in the carriage, and rode on to tell you of their arrival. I don't seem to have done the right thing, as usual; but that is always the way. Here is the carriage lumbering up the drive. Now you had all better go out on the steps and overwhelm them with kisses and caresses. Only may I ask that they should be taken straight up to their nursery, and not brought in here?'

'One would think, to hear you talk, that you hated children,' murmured Miss Sibyl; 'it is a good thing that Percy and his wife cannot hear you.'

Miss Hunter left the room at once, and curiosity drew Sibyl and Hester after her, to see the little nephew and niece who had been sent to them from India from their only brother.

The four Miss Hunters lived very comfortably together, though they were all, with the exception of Sibyl, rather self-willed, opinionated women. All of them being well over forty, and grey hairs plentiful between them, they had earned the distinction of being looked upon as 'old maids,' and some wag having one day obliterated the 'h' in Chatts Chase, the house was now familiarly called 'Pussy's Chase.' This did not disturb the good ladies when it came to their ears, for they had large souls, a keen sense of humour, and too much interest in life to be fretted by village gossip.

[Pg 9]

They were now full of plans and purposes regarding the two small children about to be placed in their charge, and no two visitors could have caused more excitement and preparation in the quiet household than did this little couple from India.

'Well,' asked Miss Amabel, as, after a great deal of bustle and talk in the hall, the sisters came back to the drawing-room, 'and what are your impressions of the kids?'

'Poor little mites!' said Miss Sibyl; 'they seem so very white and sickly in appearance, that we were quite astonished at the way they scampered upstairs. I am thankful they were sent back in charge of an English nurse. Those ayahs are always so unsatisfactory.'

Before many days the children astonished their aunts still more by their agility and ingenuity in mischief of all sorts. Roland, a fair, curly-haired little fellow of seven, led his smaller sister Olive into every kind of audacious escapade. Their spirits were unflagging, though at times their frail-looking little bodies seemed to droop under their activity.

Miss Hunter came upon little Olive one afternoon sitting on the stairs in a breathless, exhausted state, and Roland was remonstrating with her.

[Pg 10]

'You've only run up twenty-five times, Olive, and you're tired already; it's a mile race, and you *must* go on.'

'She must do nothing of the sort, Roland,' said Miss Hunter sternly. 'I will not let you tear up and down stairs all day in this fashion. What do you mean by it?'

'We can't be idle, auntie,' said Roland, shaking his curls back, and speaking with decision. 'Nurse has the toothache, and won't take us out. Father says people can be idle very easily, and put it down to the climate, and "idle hands find mischief," he says, and father is never idle. If we don't run up and down stairs, where can we run? We like the stairs best, because we never have stairs in India.'



'Send them into the garden, Marion,' called out Miss Amabel, from the garden door; 'I am going to the stables, and then I will look after them.'

Little Olive jumped up.

'Oh, let us go out, auntie, and see the pretty flowers.'

'You must be very good children then. Go quietly upstairs, and ask nurse to wrap you up well, as it is rather cold out.'

[Pg 11]

And then Miss Hunter, who found children rather a perplexing problem, walked back to her book and her fireside, and thought no more about them.

Roland and Olive danced out of doors a little time after, in delight at finding themselves unattended.

'Now,' said Roland peremptorily, 'we're going for a walk, Olive, and you are not to get tired. And we'll go and find those big iron gates first of all; they're down this road.'

Down the avenue trotted the children; it was fully half a mile long, and the thick shrubberies on either side rather alarmed the little girl.

'You're *quite* sure there isn't a tiger in the bushes?' she asked repeatedly.

And Roland in superior tones replied,—

'I've told you the English people caught all their tigers long ago, and put them in a garden in London. Father told me so.'

'And what's outside the big gates, Roly—a jungle?'

'No, I think the trains are. I want to go and see them. Come on!'

They reached the gates, but found them shut, and as Roland was exerting all his strength to open them, an old man stepped out of the pretty little lodge close by.

'Why, where be ye off to, little master?' he asked with a beaming smile. 'Isn't your nurse with you this afternoon?'

'No; we're taking a walk. Open the gates, please.'

[Pg 12]

But this the old man did not seem willing to do.

'Won't ye come into my little parlour here, and pay me a visit? My niece, Jane, is away to market to-day, and I be very lonely. Old Bob has a lot of pretty things in his room.'



Roland hesitated, but when Olive with sparkling eyes ran in at the open door, he followed, saying,

'We always like to pay visits, so if you're a good and nice man we'll come in. Mother only likes us to talk to very nice people; but I s'pose every one in England is nice, because they're white, and it's only the blacks that don't know better.'

[Pg 13]



The old man laughed, and his quaint, old-fashioned room, with a cheery fire and bright coloured prints round the walls, delighted his little guests. [Pg 15]

'What are those ugly pots in your window without any flowers?' asked Roland presently.

Old Bob gave a little sigh and a smile.

'Ah, you've hit upon my greatest treasures,' he said. 'You won't call them ugly pots when Easter comes.'

'What is Easter?' asked both the children.

'The happiest time in the whole year to me,' said Bob, shaking his head; 'but another day I'll tell you the tale of those pots—not to-day.'

'And have you got a garden?' asked Roland eagerly. 'Olive and me love flowers, but England doesn't seem to have any out of doors.'

'Come and see my garden,' said the old man proudly; 'it's the joy of my life, next to them there "ugly pots"!'.

He led the way to the back of the house, where was a good-sized cottage garden; but the children's faces fell considerably when they saw the barren desolation, for Bob had no evergreen shrubs, and only some rows of cabbages and broccoli showed signs of life.

'It's all brown earth and dead things—no flowers at all!' they exclaimed.

'But this is the wrong time o' year,' Bob said apologetically; 'there be heaps o' beautiful stuff all under the earth, awaitin' to come up in their time.' [Pg 16]

'But why don't you make them come up now? What's the good of a garden without flowers? In India we have lovely flowers.'

'Winter is a-comin' on, my dears; you won't see my pretty flowers just yet. They're fast asleep bidin' their time; no frost or cold can touch 'em—bidin' their time!'

Bob's face looked wistful as he gazed at his empty flower beds.

'What's winter?' asked Olive curiously.

'Bless the little dear, has she never known a winter? 'Tis the dreary dark time of waitin', the sunless, joyless bit o' all the year, when the singin' birds fly away, the butterflies and flowers die, and the very trees sigh and moan in their bareness and decay. 'Tis an empty bit o' life, when all that makes life sweet falls to pieces and fades away.'

This was not quite intelligible to the children; but they shivered a little at the gloom in the old man's tone, and Olive's blue eyes filled with tears.

'I don't want to stay here in winter,' she said; 'let's go back to India, Roly!'

Roland stood with knitted brows considering.

'Who makes the winter?' he asked. 'Does the devil? Because God only makes beautiful things, doesn't He?'

Old Bob raised his hat, and looked up into the grey autumnal sky with a smile.

[Pg 17]



'Nay, little master, the devil wouldn't have wished to give us such a lesson as winter teaches us. 'Tis God Almighty in His love that gives us winter, to try our faith and patience, and teach us hope's lessons. If we had no winter, we should have no Easter, and 'tis well worth the waitin' for!'

'And does everything die in winter?' asked Roland in a mournful voice.

His question was unanswered, for Miss Amabel appeared on the scene.

'Oh, you children!' she exclaimed breathlessly. 'What a chase I have had after you! If I had known you were in such safe quarters, I would have spared myself the trouble of looking for you. Have they been here long, Bob?'

'Nigh on a quarter o' an hour, Miss Amabel. They was for going out at the gate, but I 'ticed 'em in to my place.'

'Much obliged to you. Now, chicks, remember this, you're never to go outside those gates alone.'

Come back to the house with me, and say good-bye to Bob.'

Olive lifted up her little face to be kissed by the old man, and Roland held out his hand.

'Good-bye, Mr. Bob. We will come and see you again, and you will tell us about your ugly pots.'

Then as they walked up the avenue by the side of their aunt, Roland said to her, pointing to the leafless trees above them,—

'We don't have ugly trees like that in India. Why don't you cut them all down? They're quite dead, aren't they?'

'No, indeed,' replied Miss Amabel briskly; 'they'll all come to life again next spring.'

'Is spring Easter that Mr. Bob was telling us about?'

'Yes, Easter comes in spring.'

'And does everything dead come to life in spring?'

'A good many things in the garden do,' said Miss Amabel carelessly.

'Why does God make winter in England, and not in India? Is He angry with the people in England?'

'Bless the boy! What a curiosity-box! Keep your questions for Aunt Sibyl—she will appreciate them. And as for winter, I couldn't do without it, for there would be no hunting then, and I should feel half my enjoyment gone in life.'

'Do you like winter, Aunt Am'bel?' asked Olive.

'Yes, I love it; and so will you when you become hardy and rosy, like English boys and girls!'

The children looked very doubtful at this statement, but did not dispute it.



CHAPTER II

Under the Earth

The next day was still colder, but the children, in company with their nurse, found a delightful retreat in the garden, and this was in the conservatory. James, the old gardener, was always glad of some one to talk to, and he and nurse were soon fast friends. He took them into the vinery, then into the fern house, and lastly into the conservatory next the house, which was a brilliant mass of bloom and blossoms.

Olive clapped her hands in delight.

'We are back in India, Roly. Oh, how nice and warm!'

'We will always come and play here,' said Roland. Then, looking up at the old gardener, he said,—

'You never let winter come here, do you?'

'Not if I can help it,' said James with a dry chuckle. 'Me and Jack Frost have had many a fight, but I gets the better of him generally.'

'Who is Jack Frost?'

'Ha! ha! Not heerd o' Jack Frost? Well, unless I'm much mistaken he'll pay us a visit to-night, and then you'll feel him as well as see him.'

Olive looked puzzled, but Roland's mind was working too busily to heed Jack Frost. He walked round and round the flowers, then he remarked abruptly, 'If you don't have winter here, you won't have a Easter—Mr. Bob said so!'

'Oh, there!' said nurse with a laugh, 'don't heed his curious talk, Mr. Jenkins; he's such a dreadful child for arguing.'

She and James continued their chat, and the children sat down on a low wicker seat, playing with the fallen fuchsia buds, and comparing their present life with the one they had so lately left.

'I wish Mr. Bob had a nice glass house like this,' said Olive thoughtfully. 'Why doesn't he, Roly?'

'We'll ask him next time we see him. I expect he is too poor.'

'And, Roly, do you think Jack Frost is a thief who tries to steal James's flowers?'

'I don't know.'

A little later, when nurse was taking them into the house, Olive inquired again, rather anxiously, 'Nurse, I hope Jack Frost won't come to us when we're in bed; James seemed to think we should feel him.'

[Pg 21]

'No, no, Miss Olive; I'll tuck you up too warm for that. There will be no Jack Frost in our nursery, I can tell you. I keep too big a fire.'

But the little girl was anxious and ill at ease, till at last she unburdened her mind to Miss Sibyl, when she went to wish her 'good-night' in the drawing-room.

'Why, Olive dear, Jack Frost isn't a man; that is only a joke. When it is very cold the air freezes, and the pretty dew-drops on the grass and flowers all turn to ice. Have you never seen a frost?'

'No, never.'

'Frosts kill all the flowers—that is why James does not like it coming; but it is the flowers out of doors that feel it most.'

'But,' said Roland, edging up to his aunt, 'there are no flowers to kill; there are only bare, dried-up trees and dark bushes. Mr. Bob told us they had all gone to sleep under the ground.'

'So they have, but it is frost and cold that has killed them off.'

'I don't like England,' said little Olive mournfully; and when she was comfortably tucked up in bed that night, she said sleepily, 'If I had a nice garden of flowers, I wouldn't leave them all out in the cold and dark to die, and I'll never live in England when I grow up, for winter is a dreadful thing!'

[Pg 22]

The children soon found out what frost and cold meant; but the novelty of the small icicles outside their windows, and the beauty of the hoar frost glittering on the trees and bushes in the sunshine, more than compensated for the uncomfortable experience of cold hands and feet.



They soon paid a visit to old Bob again, and this time he took them into the old-fashioned churchyard, which lay just outside the lodge gates on the other side of the road.

'This is my other garden,' he said gravely, 'for I gets so much from the rector every year for keeping the ground tidy.'

Roland and Olive looked round them with much interest.

Old Bob took them to a quiet corner soon, and pointed out five grassy mounds all in a row.

[Pg 23]

'There!' he said, his old face quivering all over; 'underneath them mounds are my dear wife and four children, all taken from me in less than one month.'

'Did they die?' asked Roland with solemn eyes.

'The Lord took 'em. 'Twas the scarlet fever was ragin' in our village; little Bessie, our baby, was the first one to take it. She were only five year old, and as merry as a cricket; then Rob and Harry, big lads o' twelve and thirteen, were stricken next, and then Nellie, her mother's right hand; and the poor wife nursed 'em all through herself, and just lived to see the last o' the four buried, and then she follered them, and I were left in the empty house alone.'

Little Olive squeezed the old man's hand tightly.

'I feel as if I was going to cry,' she said. 'Why did God make them die, Mr. Bob?'

Bob raised his face to the sky above him.

'He didn't tell me why,' he said; 'but He'll tell me one day. 'Twas just at this time o' year they were taken. Ah, dear! That were a terrible winter for me! It all seemed dark and drear, and not a gleam of sunshine in sight. But thank the good Lord I got my bit o' cheer when Easter came. And it have come reg'lar and fresh like every Easter since. Do you mind them "ugly pots" in my window? Now you come back with me, and I'll tell you their story. 'Tis too cold for us to be standin' here, but don't forget my five grassy mounds in this corner when I tells the tale!'

As the children turned away to follow him, Roland said thoughtfully, 'They're all under the ground, just like you say the flowers are!'

[Pg 24]

Old Bob smiled.

'That's it, Master Roland! That's my comfort. You've hit upon the very thing I was agoin' to explain!'

And then a few minutes after, taking little Olive upon his knees, and making Roland sit in a small chair on the opposite side of the fireplace, the old man began,—

'My dear wife were powerful fond o' flowers, and she were quite as clever at rearing 'em as ever I were. She would get cuttin's from James Green up at the house, and in summer our garden was just a pictur.' Just before she were a taken ill, James had sent her down a lily bulb, a beautiful pure white one, and she'd put it in a pot in our cellar, and says she to me, "Bob, I means to bring that lily out by Easter; with care I'm sure I shall do it!" Then when she were near her end, and she seed me a-frettin' my heart out, she calls me to her bed. "Bob," says she, "take care o' my lily, and, Bob dear, when Easter comes and you see it a-burstin' out in all its beauty, then think o' me and the children." "So also is the resurrection of the dead.... It is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power." "For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him!" Them were the very two tex's she said to me, and then she says: "The nex' time you'll see me, Bob, will be in my body o' glory! Unless you foller me first, but I can't help thinking," she says, "that the Resurrection mayn't be far off!" And so she left me!'

[Pg 25]



There was a pause. Bob wiped his eyes with his handkerchief, then put Olive down from his knees and walked across to his flower-pots. [Pg 26]

The children followed him silently, and peeped over the edge of the pots, only to see bare brown earth, and their faces fell at the sight.

Bob turned to them with a smile: 'This here big pot in the middle is my wife's lily; I set to work when she went, and got four other o' the same kind o' bulb and planted them in these smaller pots. This one is Bessie's, that one is Nellie's, and the others are just Bob's and Harry's. Well, all that winter I goes to my graves in the churchyard, and comes back to these pots, and I shakes my head over them all, and couldn't get no comfort nohow. But shall I ever forget a-comin' into my kitchen on Easter Sunday, and seein' the sun shine in upon five pure white lilies! I just fell a-sobbin' on my knees beside them.'



"Lord," I says, "I knows as certain sure as I sees these lilies now, and remembers all the silence and darkness that came upon them from the time they were put in the earth, that Thou wilt give me back my dear ones ten thousand times more beautiful than ever I saw 'em here! And if their Easter will come a little later, 'tis just as sure!" Ay, little ones, and for three years the Lord has delighted my soul by bringin' up these lilies at Easter time, just to tell me that my graves is goin' to be opened like the Lord's Himself, and I'm a-goin' to see my family again. The devil himself may tempt and try one in the winter, but away he goes in the spring, when every bit o' this blessed earth is preaching the resurrection to us!"

[Pg 28]

Much of this was above the children's heads, but Roland said, after a minute's thought, 'Will dead people come up out of the ground like the flowers?'

'Ay, Master Roland, the flowers are a very poor picture of the glorified body.'

'And they go to sleep in the winter time?' the boy went on; 'and how often does Easter come?'

'The flowers have their Easter every year, but we have to wait a little longer for ours. I oftentimes think that when the Lord do come down from heaven with a shout, He will choose Easter Sunday to wake the dead, for 'tis the day He rose Himself!'

Old Bob did not say much more, and Roland and Olive went back to the house thinking busily.

The next day was Sunday, and they went to church with their aunts; but directly the service was over, Roland, who was walking with Miss Hester, pulled her by the hand towards Bob's five graves in the corner.

'Do just let me look at them again! Have you got any graves here, Aunt Hester? I wish I had some. Poor Bob has too many, hasn't he?'

Miss Hester gave a little shiver.

[Pg 29]

'What an extraordinary child you are! You don't know the meaning of graves, or you wouldn't talk so!'

'Yes, I do,' said Roland earnestly; 'the earth is full of graves in winter; these graves in the churchyard belong to dead people, but the dead flowers are everywhere, and they're all coming up at Easter—Mr. Bob said so.'

'Bob fills your head with a lot of nonsense; come along.'

The boy felt snubbed, and said no more; but that afternoon, when he and his little sister came down to the drawing-room, the subject was opened afresh.

Their aunts found Sunday afternoon long and tedious, especially as now a heavy downpour of sleet and rain had set in, and it was in the hope of being amused that Miss Hunter sent for the children.

Miss Hester was on one of the sofas half asleep; Miss Amabel standing on the hearthrug with her back to the fire; whilst Miss Sibyl and Miss Hunter were both trying to read books of a religious character, and feeling very dull and bored.

'Now come and talk to us,' said Miss Amabel briskly, as the children appeared; 'we are all bored to death, and we want you to entertain us.'

Roland sat down on a footstool, and clasped his knees in an old-fashioned way. Olive ran to Miss Hunter and climbed into her lap. She was accustomed to be petted, and looked upon grown-up people's knees as her rightful privilege.



[Pg 30]

'What shall we talk about?' asked Roland.

'Let's ask Aunt Marion to tell us the story of Easter Sunday,' suggested Olive.

'Yes, nurse doesn't know it properly—she makes it so short.'

Miss Hunter looked helplessly at her sisters.

'I'm not good at Bible stories,' she said; 'I forget them so.'

'You tell us what you know about it,' said Miss Amabel.

Roland puckered his brows for a moment, then he began,—

'Jesus was dead—quite, quite dead. He had been hung on the cross, and killed by wicked, cruel men; and all His friends were crying and sobbing, and He was put in a grave, and soldiers stood outside.'

'All His friends were crying and sobbing,' repeated Olive, shaking her little head mournfully at Miss Hunter, 'and they thought they were never going to see Him again; never, *never!*'

'And then,' continued Roland, 'suddenly, bang! bang! the great stone grave broke open, and two beautiful angels flew down from heaven, and Jesus Christ came rising up from the grave quite well and strong again, and the soldiers ran away, and the good women came near.'

'And the good women were sobbing and crying,' put in Olive again, 'and they thought they were never going to see Him again, *never!*'

'And then one of them, called Mary, saw some one in the garden, and she didn't quite know who it was; and then He called out her name, and then she saw it was Jesus Himself.'

[Pg 31]

'Jesus Himself, quite well and strong, and wasn't she glad!' repeated little Olive.

'And that's what happened on Easter Sunday,' said Roland.

There was silence. The children's soft, earnest voices and the sweet Bible story touched the hearts of those who heard it.

'And how long will it be before Easter?' asked Olive, after a pause.

'Oh, a long, long time. Why, we haven't come to Christmas! We don't want Easter to come yet.'

'Mr. Bob says Easter is the happiest time in all the year; he likes it better than Christmas.'

'Yes, and so will we, when we see the dead flowers come up, and all the dead people too!'

'Oh, don't get them on the subject of "dead people" and graves,' murmured Miss Hester sleepily; 'they can talk of nothing else at present.'

'Tell us about your life in India, Roland,' said Miss Hunter, quite willing to change the subject; and the boy instantly obeyed, whilst his little sister, with knitted brows, was trying to puzzle out in her small mind why Aunt Hester did not like graves.

But when they left the drawing-room an hour afterwards, she said to her brother, 'All our aunties like the winter. It is only Mr. Bob who says Easter is best.'

'They haven't got any graves like Mr. Bob,' responded Roland thoughtfully, 'nor lilies buried in flower-pots. If they had, they would like Easter quite as much as he does.'



[Pg 32]

[Pg 33]

CHAPTER III

Signs of Life



winter came on. The days grew darker and colder, and the children were loth to leave their nursery with its warm fire, and sally out into the cold December air for their constitutional walk with nurse. Only the thought of old Bob at the lodge kept their spirits up, and if they were allowed to have a word or two with him occasionally, their walks were more cheerfully taken. The conservatory was their chief joy, and often would they steal down from the nursery, and be found by one of their aunts comfortably established with their toys and picture-books in a corner of it.

'I never thought Indian children would hate the winter so much as these two mites do,' said Miss Hunter one evening at dinner; 'they seem to look upon it as a regular curse. I should have thought the very novelty would have attracted them.'

'They seem to have such ridiculous theories about it,' said Miss Hester. 'I fancy Bob has been stuffing their heads with his gloomy views.'

[Pg 34]

'I always think Bob looks as happy as can be,' put in Miss Amabel briskly. 'I don't think the children were prepared for the barrenness and dreariness of an English winter. They have come from the land of brilliant flowers and sunshine, and naturally feel the difference.'

'Yes,' remarked Miss Sibyl gently. 'They told me this afternoon, when I found them in the conservatory, that they were pretending it was summer. And Roland added shrewdly, "You see, Aunt Sibyl, James shuts out the winter in here, doesn't he? And so he makes it easy for us to forget it. We pretend there is no cold, and no dead trees and flowers and graves, when we are here. Don't you think it a good plan?" I told them I thought it a very good plan. It is the same game we older people play at sometimes. We shut out from our minds and thoughts what we would rather not remember.'

'Sibyl is turning into a parson,' said Miss Amabel with a laugh.

Miss Sibyl did not mind the laugh.

'The children are unfolding a parable to me,' she said quietly, 'and I am getting the benefit of its interpretation.'

Christmas came and went, and Roland and Olive, with the delights of a Christmas tree, and a party, and all the brightness attending that festive season, were a little shaken in their views upon an English winter. They went down to the lodge to talk it over with old Bob.

[Pg 35]

'I don't think Easter can be much nicer than Christmas!' said Olive, as she climbed up on the old man's knees. 'Don't you like Christmas, Mr. Bob?'



'Yes, Miss Olive, I loves the Christmas in the Bible; but not as some folks make it here. 'Tis very nice for you little ones, with all your bright spirits; but when you get old, you somehow never feel so sad as when every one round you is extra happy. I'm a lonely old man, and I miss my dear ones at these times.'

'It seems *years* since we came to England,' said Roland, his thoughts taking another direction, 'and it has been winter ever since we came from India. I can't think how it will ever look any different You're quite sure we shall see all the gardens full of beautiful flowers at Easter, Mr. Bob? I don't see how it is going to happen.'

'No more do any of us,' said Bob, with shining eyes; 'we just hope and wait, and the good Lord never fails. You won't see the garden at its best at Easter, perhaps, Master Roland, but you'll see the beginning of it all, like "the shining light that shineth more and more unto the perfect day.'"

So time passed, and then one day when the children were passing by the lodge, Bob called them in with a mysterious face.

'Look inside my dear wife's pot,' he said.

Eagerly the little faces peered down into it, and then little Olive laughed and clapped her hands.

'A dear little tiny weeny green stem! It's coming up at last!'

[Pg 36]

'And look! In two other pots I can see something!' exclaimed Roland excitedly.

'Ay, I remember the first sight I ketched of it after my loss,' said Bob. 'I were very broken-hearted, but it seemed to bring a tiny spark of hope to my heart, to see what I had only believed by faith was goin' on underground. It's grand to see the Lord's workin's; but mind, you little ones, that there plant is just as much alive before it shows itself. There is a deal goin' on in the silence and darkness that we knows nothin' about, but it's fact all the same.'

The children could talk of nothing else all that day, and little Olive was found by her nurse standing over Bob's graves, giving them most careful scrutiny a short time after.

'What are you doing here?' asked nurse. 'I've been looking for you everywhere.'

'Mr. Bob's lilies have come through the earth at last, nurse,' said Olive, raising her blue eyes earnestly to her

[Pg 37]

nurse's face; 'so I came to see if these graves were cracking yet. They'll be like Jesus' grave in the garden, you know, at Easter.'

Only a few weeks after this, both Olive and her brother lay prostrate in their beds with a severe attack of measles. Their aunts had been so long unaccustomed to children's ailments, that perhaps they may have exaggerated the danger; still, even the family doctor looked grave and talked about 'Indian constitutions,' 'no stamina,' etc., etc., and the old house that had so lately rung with childish voices and laughter now lay hushed and silent in the sweet spring sunshine.

'They're too precocious,' said Miss Hunter with tearful eyes, as she came down from the sick room one day; 'it is always the good precocious children that die young. Roland has just said, in his little weak, quavering voice, "Auntie, perhaps Olive and I are going to die and be put in a grave." And when I told him that wasn't likely, and he mustn't think of such things, he said in quite a cheerful tone, "Oh, well we shall come up at Easter, you know. If it isn't this Easter, it will be another one, and you'll have our graves to look after, like Mr. Bob. Jesus will take care of us till we come up, like Mr. Bob takes care of his lily pots." I don't half understand their talk.'

'I do,' said Miss Sibyl, with a wistful smile; 'and I believe they are going to get well, and give us more of faith's lessons to learn and understand.'

They did get well, though their recovery was somewhat slow; and Easter, late as it came that year, was close at hand before they were quite convalescent.

It was a lovely spring morning when, wrapped up in shawls, the two little invalids were brought out of the house to take their first airing.

Never as long as they lived would the children forget the scene before them! The budding trees,



[Pg 38]

the singing of the birds, and the sweet scents that came to them were only part of the great surprise that awaited them. Golden sheets of daffodil and white narcissus bordered the dark evergreen shrubberies; edging the old lawn were clumps of violets and primroses. Hyacinths, tulips, and other bulbs were making the flower beds a mass of bright colour, and the lilac and laburnum trees seemed overweighted with their bloom.

Roland could hardly find voice to express his delight, but Olive trotted here and there, breaking out into happy peals of laughter.

'It's better than ever I thought! It's lovelier than India! It's all true, and Easter is here at last!'

Then, after their admiration had worked itself out, they implored to be taken down to the lodge.

'No, no,' said nurse; 'you have been out long enough You must get stronger before you can take that walk. Be good children and come indoors now.' [Pg 39]

'When does Easter Sunday come?' asked Roland, as he and his sister were enjoying their basins of beef-tea at the nursery table shortly afterwards.

'It is only a week to-morrow,' was the reply.

Roland nodded across at his sister.

'That's the proper real Easter,' he said; 'that's when Mr. Bob's lilies will be out.'

'How glad the flowers must be, now the winter is over!' said Olive dreamily. 'What a long, long time they've been under the ground! If Mr. Bob hadn't told us about them we shouldn't have known they were there, should we? This is nicer than India, Roly!'

'Much nicer. When we get quite well we will stay out in the garden always. We shan't want James's flowers now.'

'And we'll go and see Mr. Bob's lilies to-morrow, and we'll see his graves too, won't we?'

'I don't think,' Roland said slowly, pausing between his spoonfuls of beef-tea, and regarding his sister with serious eyes, 'I don't think Mr. Bob said his graves would open for certain this Easter. They may; but perhaps he will have to wait.'

'He said his lilies were sure to come up, and that made him sure about his graves,' said Olive, with disappointment in her tone. [Pg 40]

'Yes; but I think he meant his graves might take longer than his lilies. I think he told us that, Olive.'

'Well, we'll ask him all about it to-morrow.'

But they were not allowed to go down the avenue on the next day, nor yet the day after, and Easter Eve arrived before they had been able to visit their old friend. [Pg 41]

CHAPTER IV

Easter Morning

It was indeed a lovely morning for Easter Sunday; the sky was a cloudless blue, and the birds awoke the children early by their jubilant thanksgiving.

Nurse was in good spirits as she dressed the children. She had received a pair of new kid gloves 'from a gentleman friend,' and 'of course,' she said to the children, 'it would be very bad luck not to have something new on Easter Sunday!'

'And what have we got new?' asked Olive with great interest.

Nurse showed her a little white serge frock, and put into Roland's hands a new tie and a pair of gloves.

'Your Aunt Marion brought the frock up to the nursery last night, and said that you were to put it on. So I looked out a fresh tie and gloves for Master Roland, so that he might not be left out. And if it keeps fine, you can go down to the lodge to-day.'

'But we shall go to church, shan't we?'

'Oh no, your aunt said she couldn't hear of it. But if you're good children, I'll take you down that way this afternoon, and you can peep in and see the pretty flowers. James says it is lovely, and he has sent a lot of flowers himself.' [Pg 42]

Roland and Olive went downstairs to greet their aunts in great excitement. They were to have breakfast in the dining-room for a treat, and when they caught sight of the glittering glass and silver, with great bowls and vases of golden daffodils in the centre of the table, Olive exclaimed,

—

'It's going to be a lovely day, Roland, from the very beginning! I wish our breakfast table in the nursery was like this!'

'Olive looks very well in that little serge frock,' remarked Miss Amabel presently, looking across at her little niece with approval in her eyes; 'she is getting quite a pink colour in her cheeks, and has lost that pinched, peaky look. I really think the measles did them both good!'

'And does Roland look nice too?' asked Olive quietly, being quite accustomed to personal remarks from her aunts, 'because he has got a new tie on. It's a pretty blue one.'

'Does everybody wear something new on Easter Sunday?' Roland asked quickly.

'It's an old superstition, dear; no, everybody does not.'

'Why ought we to wear new things?' demanded Olive.

'Why, Olive, of course it's because it's the proper time,' answered Roland. 'Easter is when people get their new bodies, and the flowers are all new.'

Olive was quite satisfied with this explanation.

Miss Sibyl, who did not seem quite as bright as usual, looked at them with wistful eyes. After breakfast was over she took Olive into the garden with her. The child begged to be told the 'Easter story,' and Miss Sibyl tried to oblige her, saying as she did so, 'But you know it much better than I do.'

When she had finished her rather halting narrative, Olive looked up and added,—

'So everybody dried their tears and were very happy, because they knew Jesus would never die again.'

Then after a pause she asked, 'Why didn't Jesus always stay down in the world, Aunt Sibyl? Why did He go back to heaven so soon?'

'I think He told us He had finished His work, my dear.'

'What work?'

'Well—dying on the cross for us. He came down from heaven to do that. When He had died for our sins, He went back to heaven.'

'But He came out of His grave first!' said the child triumphantly.

Their conversation was interrupted by Roland, who came flying out of the house.

'Aunt Marion has changed her mind; she says we can go to church, Olive. Come along and tell nurse!'

Olive scampered into the house, and Miss Sibyl walked along, thinking deeply. For some weeks past she had been anxious and ill at ease. She realized how fruitless and empty her life had been, but could not see how to remedy it. Her own words to Olive came back to her,—

'He had finished His work. When He had died for our sins He went back to heaven.'

'Has He indeed died for mine?' she murmured. 'Can I trust Him like these innocent little ones to "wash me and make me whiter than snow"? Oh, I wish I could, I wish I could!'

She was very silent on the way to church; not even the glee of the children could distract her thoughts.

Roland and Olive thoroughly enjoyed themselves; the sweet spring flowers in the church, the joyous Easter hymns, and the familiar story read once again by the rector, satisfied their little souls. They sat with radiant faces in the family pew, and when they caught sight of Bob singing away with tearful eyes and a happy smile in the village choir, they nodded across at him with great satisfaction.

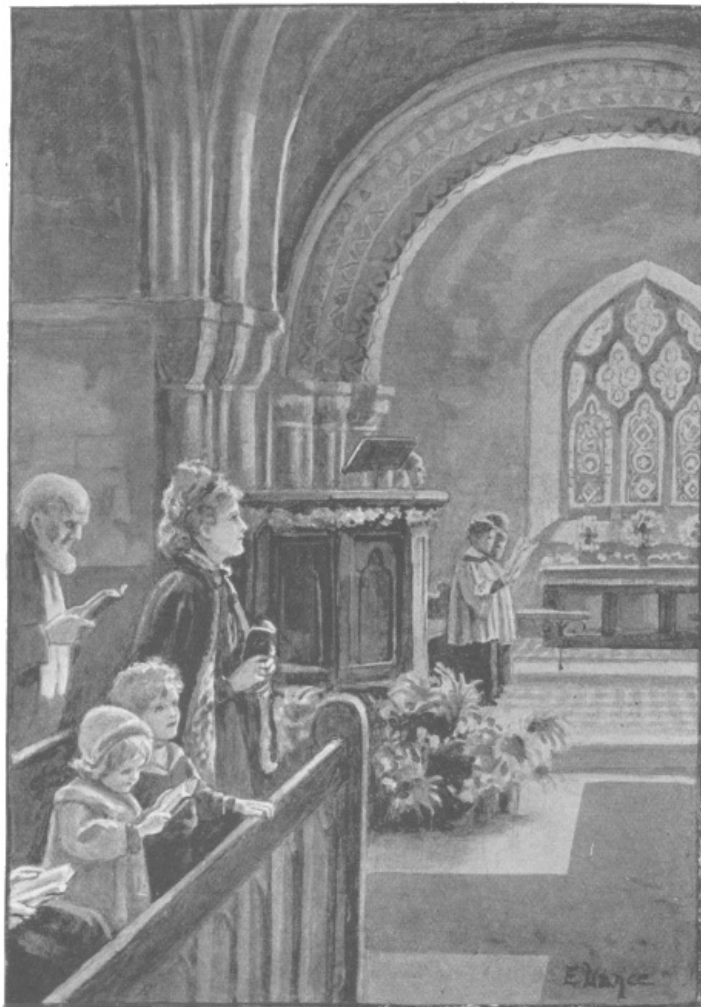
Miss Sibyl came into church with a burden upon her soul; but when the Easter anthem fell upon her ear, she listened with more interest than she had ever felt in it before. 'Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin: but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.' What did it mean? And then with a burst of triumph the words came to her: 'For as in Adam all die: even so in Christ shall all be made alive.'



[Pg 43]

[Pg 44]

[Pg 45]



Like a flash of light Miss Sibyl saw it all, and then and there her poor dead soul reached hold of its Saviour, and life—that 'life more abundant,'—flooded the empty corners of her anxious heart. [Pg 46]

The service over, the children begged their aunt's permission to speak to Bob.

Seizing hold of his hands, they led him to his graves.

'Let's come and see them, Mr. Bob, first, and then we'll see your lilies. Do tell us. Have they come out? We have been ill such a long time, and they wouldn't let us come and see you before. Isn't it a lovely day? And hasn't it all come true about the flowers? We never thought England could have such pretty ones. Oh, I hope the winter will never come again!'

'Eh, my dears, how you run on! Old Bob has missed you sure enough, and as for his lilies, well, you shall see them, for 'tis my custom to do the same every year.'

He paused as they came in sight of those grassy mounds, and the children pressed forward with eagerness. There on each mound stood one of the 'ugly flower pots,' but the pot itself was sunk in a bed of moss, and a lovely pure white lily raised its glorious head in the sunshine. Five lilies stood on the five graves, and old Bob, gazing at them through a mist of tears, said in a solemn tone, "'And white robes were given unto every one of them, and it was said unto them that they should rest yet for a little season.'" Life out of death, my dears. That is the lesson of those lilies. The good Lord has never failed to teach me from them every Easter.' [Pg 48]

The children stood awed and silent, then Roland said timidly,—

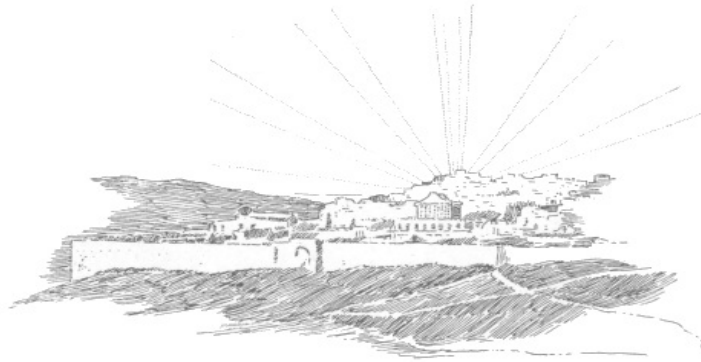
'But this Easter hasn't brought the dead people to life, only the flowers.'

'It has brought a dead soul to life, which is even better.'

The old man and the children turned at the murmured voice; but Miss Sibyl passed them quickly by, and tears were dropping as she went.

Finis.

FINIS.



Butler & Tanner, The Selwood Printing Works, Frome, and London.

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