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**BETTER THAN PLAY.**

By

**MABEL QUILLER-COUCH.**

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## CHAPTER I.

### WASHING DAY TEMPERS.

Down at the Henders' cottage all was misery and discomfort; the house was full of bad temper, steam, and the smell of soap-suds. It was washing-day, and the children hated washing-day. For one thing, Aunt Emma was always very cross, and for another, they never knew what to do with themselves. They were not allowed indoors, for they "choked up the place," she said, "and there wasn't room to move,;" so they had to stay outside; but they must make no noise, for she could not bear it, and they must not wander away to play, for

they might be wanted at any minute, to run an errand, or chop up a few sticks. Bella, too, the eldest of them all, was needed every now and again to hang a few things on the bushes; but that was all the break they had in the weary day.

Bella often wished her aunt would let her do more to help her. She was sure she could, and it would have been ever so much more pleasant than standing around seeing everything go wrong, yet doing nothing.

Her aunt was always scolding her for being idle, and grumbling at the amount of work she herself had to do; yet, if Bella attempted to help in any way, there was a great to-do, and her aunt grew so angry about it that Bella soon gave up attempting. It grieved her dreadfully, though. The home had been so different when her mother was alive, so neat and pretty, and all of them so happy.

There had rarely been any scolding, and certainly there was never any grumbling about the work.

"Why, work is pleasure, if you take it in the right spirit," Mrs. Hender used to say, cheerfully; "it means life and happiness—but everything depends, of course, on the spirit in which you take it."

Certainly Aunt Emma did not take it in 'the right spirit.' She was always grumbling, and never what you would call cheerful. If she had to go up the few stairs to the bedrooms, she grumbled, and if she had to go to the door to answer a knock, she grumbled. If the children used an extra cup, or the windows got dirty, or the steps muddy, she complained bitterly of the hardship it was to her. And few things are harder to bear than to have to live with a perpetual grumbler, to listen to constant complaints, —especially, too, if the grumbler will not let any one help her to do the work she grumbles so much about. A grumbler spoils every one's pleasure, and gets none herself; and the worst of it is, it is a disease that grows on one terribly.

In the Henders' case it was doing great harm, as Bella was old enough to see. Her father had always, in the old days, come home after his work, and, after they had all had a cosy meal together, had worked in the garden through the summer evenings, or, in the winter, sat by the fire reading the paper or a book to his wife while she sewed. He had long since ceased all that, though, for one can't sit and read in any comfort in a kitchen that's all of a muddle, and to a woman who is grumbling all the time; and soon he found there was a cosy, quiet resting-place at the 'Red Lion,' with plenty of cheerfulness and good temper, and no grumbling.

The children, too, never came indoors if they could stay out, and as Aunt Emma complained of their noise if they played in the garden, they naturally went farther away, if they could manage to escape.

But for Bella, this was not so easy. She was useful, though her aunt would never admit it, and she liked to have her within call. There was nowhere that Bella cared to go, except to Mrs. Langley's, farther down the lane, and thither Miss Hender did not allow her to go very often, though no one knew why.

Mrs. Langley, or 'Aunt Maggie,' as the children had been taught to call her, had been their mother's greatest friend and nearest neighbour, and during their mother's lifetime they had felt almost as much at home in her house as in their own. Little Margaret, indeed, had been called after her.

Altogether life was very, very different now, and to Bella's mind the present seemed anything but a happy time.

She sat on the step to-day, and looked soberly at the sky. The weather was dull and gloomy, with a moisture in the air which would entirely keep the clothes from drying; and a bad drying day is in itself enough to try the temper of the most amiable of washerwomen.

"Oh, I do wish the sun would shine," she thought anxiously; "it would make such a difference." Bella spent her days in a state of mingled hope and dread—hope that things would happen to please her aunt, and dread of things happening to ruffle her.

The baker's cart drew up at the gate, and the man, springing lightly down, came up the garden-path with a basket of loaves. "Now she will be vexed at having to answer the door," thought Bella. "I wish I knew what bread to take in."

That, however, was more than she dare do, so she contented herself with going in, to warn her aunt of the baker's approach.

"The baker is coming, Aunt Emma," she said quietly.

"Well, s'posing he is! Surely you'm old enough to take the bread from him; or do you want me to do it while you look on? It won't soil your hands to touch a loaf of bread."

"How many loaves shall I take in?" asked Bella patiently.

"Oh, I don't know! I don't know what we've got, and I can't stay to see. Three would do, I should hope."

Bella looked at the baker's basket, and her spirit sank; there were pale loaves and brown ones, and loaves of all shapes. Which should she take? Which would please her aunt? At last she picked up what she thought was a nice tempting-looking one. Surely that would do for one, she thought.

The baker interposed. "Miss Hender don't like that shape," he said shortly; "she thinks 'em too crusty. Most folks prefer 'em," he added meaningly.

Bella laid down the loaf and took up another.

"Miss Hender don't—" the man began again, but stopped. What did it matter to him, he thought, what the cross-grained woman liked or didn't like? He had trouble enough when she came to the door herself; so he hastily put two other loaves in Bella's hands, and left as quickly as he could.

Of course, when Aunt Emma caught sight of the loaves, there was a nagging and a scolding. They were wrong in shape and colour and size, and everything else. "I should have thought a great girl like you might have known the kind of loaf we generally have, and not have taken in such things as those!"

"As you are always complaining of those we do have, I thought you'd like a change," was the retort that trembled on Bella's lips, but she kept the words back. "I thought these looked nice," was all she said.

Indeed, they looked so nice and smelt so deliciously, she could have eaten a large crust of one then and there. She was very hungry, poor child; but on washing-days the children were not expected to be hungry, and, as a rule, no meal was got for any one between breakfast and the evening one, when their father came home. On washing-days nothing could be attended to but the washing.

Bella heard little Margery crying softly in the garden. The child was hungry too, she knew. She was but four years old, and she needed something. Bella's heart ached for her baby sister, the little one who had been the pet and darling of the household during her mother's lifetime. As she listened to the plaintive crying, the thought would come into her mind, "What would her mother feel if she knew that her baby was hungry, and neglected and unhappy?" and at last she could bear the thought and the crying no longer. Summoning up all her courage, she went out to the scullery, where her aunt was bustling about, grumbling to herself all the time.

"Aunt Emma," she said half-timidly, "may I give Margery something to eat? She is so hungry. I hear her crying."

Miss Hender did not answer. "Have you seen the poker?" she demanded, impatiently. "One of those boys has walked off with it, I'll be bound! and here is my fire going out for the want of a stirring up. How anybody can be expected to get on where there's a parcel of children——"

"I am sure the boys haven't had it, Aunt Emma," declared Bella patiently. "I saw it here just now, and they haven't moved from the garden; they've been reading all the morning."

"Well, I can't waste any more time," cried the angry woman, "I'll take this," and impetuously catching up the stick that she used for lifting the clothes out of the copper, she thrust it into the fire.

Bella stood by wondering and embarrassed. The fire burnt up the better for its stirring, it is true, but the stick was ruined for its usual purpose. Blackened and charred as it was, it was only fit for putting back into the fire again as fuel. Even to Bella's childish mind the foolishness and wickedness of such a hasty action was only too plain.

A moment later, when the copper-stick itself was wanted, it was unusable, and there was no other at hand. One would have to be bought, or made, or found. While looking for something that would do in place of it, the poker was found lying on the table, amongst the pans and things littered there. This only made Miss Hender more irritable than before.

"To think it should have been there all the time, and me wasting all that time looking for it!" she exclaimed, as indignantly as though the poker were actually to blame.

In the corner of the scullery was a chair with one leg loose, waiting for the father to find time to mend it. Miss Hender's flashing eye fell on this, and seizing the leg and plunging it into the boiling copper, she lifted out the clothes into the washing-tray with it. The chair leg was dusty and it was covered with yellow varnish and paint, but in her foolish and senseless rage she never stopped to think of this, and for months and months after the stains on the

clothing stood as a reminder and a reproach, for not even time and frequent washings could remove them altogether.

Bella turned away miserable enough. The chair was ruined, of course, as well as the clothes, and she was old enough to understand the wicked waste such an outburst of temper may cause.

"It was one of those mother saved up for and bought," she said to herself, the tears welling up in her eyes, "and she was so proud of them. I wish father had mended it at once, then it wouldn't have been lying about in the scullery, in her way."

A voice from the garden, though, drove the other thoughts from her mind; it was Margery's calling softly to her, "Bella, I'm so hungry. Give Margery something to eat, she's so hungry."

Bella's misery deepened to anger against the cause of all this wretchedness; the bad-tempered woman who was spoiling all their happiness.

"It isn't her house," she argued to herself; "it's father's house, and ours, and I am sure he wouldn't have Margery or any of us go hungry. It is cruel to starve a little thing like that, and I've a good mind to go to the larder and get her something to eat."

But fear of the storm such an act would raise, and fear lest some of it should fall on Margery, a feeling of respect too for her aunt's authority, kept her from doing this, but did not lessen her determination to relieve her little sister's wants, and an idea came to her that sent her quickly to the garden with a brightened face.

"Tom," she said softly to the elder of her two brothers, "Margery is so hungry, and I believe there won't be any dinner at all to-day. Aunt Emma hasn't said anything about it, and she's in an awful temper."

Tom and Charlie groaned, "And we're starving!"

"I shall go and pull up a turnip to eat," said Charlie defiantly. "I wish the apples were big enough to be any good."

"I wish I'd got a penny to buy some buns," said Tom.

Bella's face grew thoughtful. She had four-pence of her own in her money-box, that she had been saving to buy herself a pair of gloves for Sundays. She had long wanted them, and twopence more would enable her to get them, but—

"I'll give you a penny each to buy some buns," she said impulsively, "if you will do something first, and promise to be very careful."

Of course they both promised vigorously.

"Well, I want you to take Margery down the lane to Aunt Maggie, and ask her if she will give her something to eat. I am sure she will, if she knows how hungry she is. Then you can run and buy your buns, and you must go back and fetch Margery again, and bring her home, without Aunt Emma's knowing anything about it. It would only make her more angry."

Of course the boys promised again to do their best. A whispered word stopped Margery's wailing, the pennies were soon abstracted from the money-box, and then the little trio made their way quietly down the garden, and out at the gate into the lane. Once outside their pace, spurred by hunger, quickened considerably, and famished little Margery was very soon sitting perfectly happy in Aunt Maggie's kitchen, with a mug of milk before her and a large slice of bread and butter and sugar.

## CHAPTER II.

### HOW THE DAY ENDED.

Bella stood for a moment looking out at the cold grey sky and the neglected garden, but

her thoughts were with the children, and her ears following the sounds of their retreating footsteps. Her mind was greatly relieved by the thought that they would soon be having some food.

For herself and her own hunger she did not care, and she would not let herself think of the two pennies she had given up, and the gloves that she had been so looking forward to possessing, but would now have to do without.

A thrill of dread passed through her at the thought of her aunt. Would she be very angry, she wondered, if she found out what she had done? Most probably she would, thought Bella, though there was no harm in it. It never occurred to her that nothing could have been much more annoying to Miss Hender than for a neighbour to be asked to feed the children she was supposed to be there to look after. It was making public her neglect and bad temper.

It would have been far better to have done the straightforward thing, without any deception; to have gone to her bravely and asked to be allowed to give the children some food, and have borne patiently her annoyance and angry words. Now Bella's great anxieties were that her aunt should not find out that the children had gone, and that they should be back before she should miss them. The thought of this sent her quickly into the house.

"Are there any more things for me to hang out, Aunt Emma?" she asked, cheerfully. "There seems to be a little breeze springing up."

Miss Hender, without replying, handed her a dish piled high with wet clothes. "Hang them so that they'll catch the wind, if there is any." And Bella went out, anxiously wondering how one did that, but not daring to ask her aunt.

In her perplexity she stood for a few moments looking at the garments already on the lines, to see if some were blowing out more than others, but, apparently, the little breeze had not power enough to stir them, and Bella had to hang up her last load and trust to chance for its being according to her aunt's pleasure. She had very little hope, though, of such good fortune.

When she got back to the kitchen again Miss Hender had emptied the tub she had been washing at, and was preparing to dry her wrinkled, water-soaked fingers.

"I've finished the white clothes, so now I'll see about giving you children something to eat, before I take the coloured things out of the copper," she said, speaking less snappishly than before. She was, in fact, somewhat ashamed of her recent display of temper over the missing poker, and was anxious to make a better and more dignified impression on Bella's mind.

All Bella felt was a great sinking of her heart. What could she do? What would be best? Would it be better to confess at once and tell exactly what had happened, or should she let her aunt go on and get the meal, and trust to the children's being back before it was prepared, and to the incident of the buns and bread-and-butter meal never being found out by her? After all, she had told them they would get no food until the washing was all done, and no one could have guessed that she would have changed her mind within so short a time; and there was no real harm in Bella's putting them in the way of getting something to eat when they were so very hungry.

So poor Bella argued and argued with herself, her courage sinking lower with every preparation her aunt made. If only Miss Hender had been a little kinder to Bella, if only she had taught her to trust, and not to fear, her, Bella would have explained then and there, and all would have blown over.

While Bella was thinking it all out and trying to make up her mind what she should do, she was standing idle—and that, to begin with, was not the way to please and pacify her aunt, tired as she was with long hours of hard work, exhausted from want of food, with her back aching, and her feet throbbing with long standing on the stone floor. If only Bella had made her a cup of tea and got the simple meal ready while she sat and rested a little, what a relief it would have been, and what good it would have done her, but her own temper prevented that. For one thing, Bella would not have dared to touch anything without being told she might, and, for another, she was so frightened now at the thought of what she had done and of her aunt's probable anger, that she stood absorbed and perplexed, and did not even do the things she might have done.

Naturally the weary woman grew irritated by such thoughtlessness. "I don't know how long you expect me to wait on you!" she said tartly, "while you stand by, too lazy even to do the little you know how to. Go and draw a jug of water this minute, and tell the children to wash their hands. I s'pose you're capable of doing that much."

Bella, still without explaining, took the jug and went out to the pump. By the time she came back her aunt had cut off several slices of cold bacon and put some on four plates, one for each of them. Bella felt perfectly ill with fear when she saw these preparations.

"Aunt Emma!" she began, but so tremulously that her aunt did not hear her.

"Where are the children? Didn't you tell them?" demanded Miss Hender tartly.

"They aren't there," stammered Bella nervously, "they haven't come back——"

"Back from where?"—Bella's manner struck Miss Hender more than her words—it made what was apparently a trifling matter seem important.

"I—they—they were so hungry, and—I didn't know there was going to be any dinner, and—and I gave them money to go and get some buns."

"And you trusted those two boys to take Margery right down to the village——"

"No," broke in Bella, anxious to explain; "they took her only as far as Aunt Maggie's, and when they'd got their buns they were to come back there for her, and——"

"Couldn't she have waited here for her bun? Whatever made you send her to Mrs. Langley's?"

Bella grew more embarrassed than ever. "She—was so hungry," she began; "she kept on crying for bread and butter, and I sent her to—to ask——" but her words failed her altogether at the sight of the expression on her aunt's face.

"You didn't send and ask Mrs. Langley to give Margery something to eat, did you?" she demanded slowly, dwelling on each word with an emphasis that nearly drove Bella crazy.

"I—I only—yes, I did!" the last words bursting from her as though she could explain or justify herself no more.

Miss Hender's eyes blazed. "You as good as told that woman that I kept you hungry, that you hadn't food to eat, and were afraid to ask for it. You as good as told her that I ill-treated and starved you!" her words caught in her throat. Step by step she had been drawing nearer to the frightened child, her mouth set, her eyes glowing with rage. Bella, for the first time in her life, almost screamed with terror.

"I—I didn't mean that!" she gasped.

"You couldn't come and ask me! You couldn't be straightforward and honest, oh no, you must go mischief-making to that woman down the lane, when you know I hate her! Why," with a sudden clutch, at Bella's thin arm, "couldn't you have come and asked me? Answer me that! Do you hear? Answer me, I tell you!"

"I was afraid," stammered Bella.

"Afraid? I'll make you afraid of me yet, you young hussy! I'll give you something to make you afraid of me. I s'pose you told her, too, that I treated you so bad you were afraid of me. Did you tell her that, too? Answer me!" giving Bella another shake.

Bella's fear gave way to anger. "There was no need to," she said cruelly. "Everybody knows it."

The next minute she was staggering across the kitchen from a violent blow on the side of her head, and then, before she could recover herself or realise what had happened, her aunt was beside her again, raining down blow after blow upon her thin shoulders.

"Take that, and that, and that!" gasped the infuriated woman; "and now go out and tell every one. And there's another to teach you to speak properly to me, or you or I leave this house!"

How long the blows would have continued to pour down on Bella no one knows, had not scream upon scream suddenly rent the air, startling every one near.

They did not come from Bella herself, for, after the first startled cry, she made no sound. They came from the three children who had reached home just in time to be witnesses of the terrible scene, and were frightened almost out of their senses.

Miss Hender dropped her uplifted hand and sank exhausted and speechless into a chair. Bella, white and almost fainting, lay on the floor motionless. At sight of her Charlie began to scream again. "You've killed our Bella! You've killed our Bella!" he cried, while Margery ran over to the still heap on the floor. "Bella, look up, look up! Bella, it's me, it's Margery; speak to Margery!" Tears poured down her little white cheeks, and one, falling on Bella's, roused her. Putting out one stiff, aching arm, she feebly drew her little sister to her and kissed her.

Margery was delighted, for she had really thought Bella was dead, and she hugged her in an ecstasy of relief. "Can't you get up?" she asked. "Oh, do get up, Bella."

Bella made an effort but she was too exhausted, and falling back again, she, for the first time, lost consciousness.

And so, when Tom presently arrived with his father, whom he had rushed at once to fetch, they found her, with Margery beside her weeping and beseeching her to speak; Charlie standing at the door, too scared to go nearer; and Miss Hender seated, white and frightened and ashamed, gazing at her temper's handiwork, too ashamed to go near to render the child any aid after reducing her to that, for in her heart of hearts she felt that after the scene of that afternoon Bella would shrink from even a kindness at her hands.

Without a word the father strode across and picked his little daughter up. "Get some water," he said, in a low, hoarse voice to Tom, and, still holding her in his arms, he bathed the brow and the limp, lifeless hands, and the pale cheeks, where the scarlet patch across one told its own tale.

Emma Hender rose stiffly from her chair and handed him a soft cloth, but he would not take it from her. "Keep away!" he said harshly; "don't you dare to touch her again. You've done enough harm for one day, you and that temper of yours!" Emma Hender shrank back without a word, then, after a moment's struggle for self-control, dropped into a chair and burying her face in her apron burst into violent weeping. She was so tired, so faint, and so ashamed of herself, and no one cared, she thought bitterly; no one cared for her, or believed her, or pitied her.

She worked for them all, and looked after their home from morning till night, but it was all nothing, she told herself bitterly, and felt herself a very ill-used person. But what she did not tell herself, or perhaps did not realise, was that it is not so much what we do for people but the spirit in which it is done, that makes it a real kindness and wins their affection.

There was one tender little heart there, though, that bore her no ill-will, that, indeed, forgot everything but that she was in trouble and needed comforting.

"Auntie Emma, don't cry! Bella'll be better soon. Don't cry, Auntie Emma, or Margery'll cry too!" and two soft little hands tried to pull the work-worn ones away, and a gentle baby voice tried to bring comfort and cheer to the unhappy woman.

Aunt Emma, in a burst of real feeling, let the little hands uncover and gently pat her face, then, clasping the baby form to her, kissed her passionately again and again.

"You do care for your auntie, don't you, dear?" she sobbed, but softly and sorrowfully now. "You always will care for your poor auntie, won't you, dear?"

"Oh yes," promised Margery readily, anxious only to comfort and cheer, "when auntie isn't cross," she added innocently.

Miss Hender's loving clasp loosened a little. "Everybody is cross sometimes," she muttered excusingly. But many and many a time after that the memory of Margery's words came back to her, and stayed the first angry word or ill-natured act, and so averted a storm and hours of reproach.

"Bella is better! Look, her eyes are open!" and Margery clambered joyfully down from her aunt's lap and ran over to her sister's side.

For a moment Bella looked about her in a dazed fashion, then, memory returning, she raised herself and tried to stand.

"I am all right, thank you," she said, but she was glad enough to drop on to the old sofa and rest. Miss Hender rose too.

"I—think she'll be better for a cup of tea," she said; "we all shall." It cost her an effort to speak, for she felt awkward and embarrassed, and her words were very faint and stumbling, but she went to the fire and stirred it up to make the kettle boil. Then, by degrees, recovering herself, she quietly cut some bread and butter for all, and made the tea.

Bella shrank a little from her aunt when she handed her cup, and beyond the faintest "Thank you," did not utter a word. She was still suffering from the shock of the sudden assault and the blows. Her nerves were quivering, her head throbbing, and the only feeling she as yet experienced strongly was a kind of shame—shame for her aunt and for herself.

It was a most uncomfortable meal that, in spite of Miss Hender's efforts. William Hender sat morose and thoughtful; Bella, like her aunt, was embarrassed and very silent. The two boys and Margery alone found anything to say, or spirit to say it, and though all felt better and more cheerful for the meal, no one was sorry when it was ended.

Miss Hender was the first to rise. She returned to her washing-tub, William Hender to his work, and the children went out to their play in the garden. All went on as usual, and not a word more was said of the scene that had brought them all together. Yet all felt that in that short hour things had altered, and for ever. That something had happened which meant changes, perhaps not great, but changes for them all, and that life would never be quite the same again.



### CHAPTER III.

#### THE LITTLE HERB-BED.

For some days after that unhappy Monday Bella and her aunt scarcely exchanged a word. It was not that Bella was sulky, or bore malice in her heart; it was chiefly that she felt embarrassed and awkward still. Indeed, they both felt so. That scene seemed to be for ever between them, and neither could forget it.

It was holiday time, too, so there was no school to take Bella away from her home, and as she did not like to ask Miss Hender to give her something to do, she wandered about, idle and unhappy, not knowing how to fill her days. Consequently she wandered more than once down the lane to Mrs. Langley's little cottage. The peace and the cheerfulness of that little home drew her irresistibly.

"Oh! if only our house was like this!" she exclaimed one day. "So quiet, and tidy, and clean. I should like to live in a little house like this all by myself when I grow up."

Mrs. Langley looked at her with a shade of sadness in her gentle brown eyes. "My dear, don't say that! It isn't from choice, you know, that I live alone, and it is terribly lonely sometimes. If I had been allowed to have my way, my home would have been as full and noisy as ever yours is; but God saw fit to take them all first, and leave me to follow in His own good time. I expect He has work for me to do first; in fact, I know He has, for He has some special work for each of us, though we don't understand at the time what it is."

Bella felt vexed with herself, as soon as ever the words had left her lips, for she knew quite well the story of the tragedy that had left that home empty—of the fatal epidemic that had taken from it the husband and four children, and left the poor mother alone and heart-broken. Before she could say anything Mrs. Langley's last words arrested her attention.

"Has He got special work for me?" she asked eagerly, her interest swallowing up her shyness for once. "Oh no, He couldn't have, I am so young, and I don't see that there's anything I can do. I only wish there was," she added hopelessly. "I don't seem to be wanted anywhere, and I haven't got any money, and——"

"Don't you make that mistake, dear. It isn't money that's most wanted, it is the wish and the will. Children can do a very great deal, and you especially have many fine opportunities right at your hand, in your own home."

"But Aunt Emma does everything, and she won't let me help."

"I think she would, dear, if you went to work in the right way. Either ask her boldly to give you some part of the work to do, for you would like to help, and you feel you are old enough now; or bide your time, and do all the little things you can, without making any fuss or display. Then, if you do them well, you will find that in time they are left to your care to do always. Even if your aunt will not let you do that much, surely there is plenty to be done outside the house. Your garden is not kept as it was in your mother's time."

"Father doesn't stay at home in the evenings now, like he used to," said Bella, sadly.

"Well, can't you coax him to? Can't you help to make his home more cheerful and comfortable? All this is part of the work God has for you to do, Bella. It seems to me a lot. Can't you show an interest in the garden, and ask your father to help you to make it neat and nice again? I think he would; I am sure he would."

Bella sat with a very thoughtful face, but not such a hopelessly depressed one as she had been wearing. Suddenly, so it seemed to her, a bright light had been flashed upon the road she had to travel, and so many things stood out that she had not seen before, so many hills to climb, so many pleasant valleys to cross, that for a moment she felt awed and silenced. It was cheering and bracing to feel that she was needed, that, after all, there was work for her to do. Lots of work!

"And then there are the boys and Margery. You have many duties to them, dear. They

have no mother, and you are left to take her place, as far as you can, and make their lives happy, and teach them to be good. Oh, there is so much for you to do, child. I almost envy you, there is so much."

Bella looked up with shining eyes and a flush on her cheeks. "Aunt Maggie, I came to-day to ask if you would help me to get a little place. I felt as if I couldn't go on living at home as it is now. It is so uncomfortable, and I thought I would like to go out in service. I know I am very young, but——"

Mrs. Langley was looking at her with a grave face, but very kindly eyes. "I know how you felt, dear; but it seems to me plain enough that your place is at home. You see, you're the eldest, and the others are but little things, and if you want Margery to know anything about her dear mother, you must teach her, and 'tis you must help to train her up to be what her mother would have wished her to be."

Bella's bright, eager eyes filled with tears. "I wish mother was here," she cried, "it's all so different now, and so miserable!"

"I know, I know; but, child, you must try and remember how it would have grieved your poor mother, if she could know that her children's home was unhappy, and then tell yourself that it is going to be your work to make it different—to make it what she would wish it to be."

Bella's tears gradually ceased. "But how can I begin, and when?" she asked hopelessly.

"Begin to-day, and with the first chance you see. Be content to begin with little things in a little way. Don't expect to make great changes, and set all right at once. You have to take these words as your motto, 'Patience, Pluck, and Perseverance.'"

Bella's face brightened. It cheered her heart to feel that she could do something, and do, too, what her mother would have had her do. It was with less reluctance than usual that she got up to go back to her home.

"I often wish, Aunt Maggie," she said affectionately, "that I could live with you, but it would never do, would it?"

"I often wish so, too, dear. Good-bye now. Run home quickly, you may be wanted."

Bella ran up the lane with a very much lighter heart than she usually bore. She was fired with the thought of her new endeavours, and anxious to begin. She would keep her eyes always open to see things that she could do,—and almost as the thought was passing through her mind her chance came, for as she opened her own gate she saw that the fowl-house door was standing wide, and that the hens were scattered all over the garden, scratching up the beds.

"Tom promised to put a nail in the latch of that door," she sighed, "and he has never done it." Then the thought flashed through her mind that here was a beginning! Here she could help. By the aid of a long pea-stick she collected the greedy hens and drove them all into their run again, and fastened them in securely; but it took her some time.

"Wherever have you been?" demanded Aunt Emma coldly; "here's tea-time nearly, and you've been out all the afternoon."

"I was down at Aunt Maggie's part of the time, and when I got back I found the hens all out and all over the garden, and I drove them in and shut them up."

"Oh!" Aunt Emma was visibly mollified. If there was one thing she disliked more than another, it was struggling with stupid, obstinate hens, as she called them, and she was really thankful now that she had been spared the task of getting them out of the garden. In her relief at this she forgot her annoyance at Bella's having been down at Mrs. Langley's.

"If there's time before tea I'll go and put the nail in the latch," said Bella, "for it won't stay shut very long, unless the latch is mended."

The hammer, though, was not to be found, and the only nail was a crooked one, so the latch-mending was put off till after tea. The children came in from the orchard, and went to the pump to wash their hands and faces. Bella spread the cloth and arranged the cups and plates and mugs. As a rule, she put them down in any haphazard fashion, but to-day she did try to arrange the things nicely.

Miss Hender was busily taking out cake and cutting bread and butter. Bella knew it would be of no use to offer to do either of these, but she did ask if she might put some water in the teapot to warm it, and, to her astonishment, her aunt said, "Yes, you may if you like."

The meal would have been a very silent one if it had not been for the children, but with their chatter it passed off pleasantly enough, and when it was over they all made a hunt for the lost hammer and another nail, and then trooped out with Bella, to mend the latch of the

hen-house door.

"That's easy enough," exclaimed Tom, as he watched Bella; "I could have done that."

"Then why didn't you?" retorted his sister. "That bit of latch has been hanging loose for weeks, and the hens were always getting out."

"I didn't think about it. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think about it, either," admitted Bella; "but I am going to try and remember things better. Tom, if you want a job, there's one of the palings of the pigsty broken away. If it isn't mended, the pig'll break it away more, and get out, and there's no knowing what trouble we shall have. You can mend that, I'm sure."

Tom, well pleased, went off at once. It made him feel manly to be doing real work. Charlie, of course, followed his brother. Bella was strolling back through the untidy garden with Margery by her side, when a sudden thought sent her hurrying back to the house.

"Aunt Emma, can I help you wash up the tea-things?"

She put her question rather nervously, and her cheeks were rosy red, but she had broken through her shy reserve, and was glad of it.

Miss Hender was standing at the table with a pan of water in front of her. "I've nearly finished," she said shortly, in her usual ungenial tone, but added, a moment later, "leastways I soon shall have." Bella had seen that although several cups and plates were washed, none of them were wiped, so she took up the tea-cloth lying on the table, and began to dry the things and put them away. She was very anxious to do it all carefully and well, so that her aunt might have no cause for complaining.

It almost seemed as though Miss Hender did not want to find fault if she could help it, for when Bella hung the cups on the wrong hooks on the dressers, she only said, "I don't know that it matters;" which was so unlike her usual self that Bella marvelled.

"I s'pose you didn't see any sage in the garden when you were there just now?" she asked presently. "I wanted some sage and onions to cook for supper, and I don't believe we've got either. There doesn't seem to be scarcely anything in the garden."

"I'll go and see," said Bella, "but I don't believe there's any."

She walked down the rambling old garden, and all over it, and looked in all directions, but not a leaf of sage or any other herb could she see. The herb-bed was empty and trampled flat, a few onions lay ungathered in the onion-bed, and there were some potatoes, but that was all, except some gooseberry bushes and roots of rhubarb.

When Bella remembered what their garden used to be, and all that they used to get out of it, she, young though she was, was startled. She was more than startled, she was shocked too, for if this was the state of things now, what were they going to do for vegetables all the rest of the year? There was nothing to come on for the winter, no carrots or turnips, no onions or cabbages, leeks or celery,—and they used to have all in abundance. The difference between care and neglect, thrift and waste, plenty and want, were brought home to her very plainly at that moment.

She had always been so much with her father and mother and other grown-up people, that she understood as well as a woman how much they depended on the garden for food.

Tom and Charlie came up and joined her, wondering what she was looking at so solemnly.

"What's wrong?" they asked. "What are you looking for?"

"Sage," said Bella, gravely, "and there isn't a bit; there isn't anything. Whatever we shall do all the winter, I don't know."

"Where's the herb-bed?" asked Tom.

"Here, we're looking at it. Mother used to keep it nice and full, she used to see how many kinds of herbs she could grow. Oh, you remember, Tom, don't you?"

"Yes," said Tom; "she had thyme and lemon-thyme, parsley, and sage, and endive and borage, and—oh, I forget. She used to make me say them over, and tell her which was which. I wish we'd taken more care of it," he added, with sudden shame for his neglect.

A brilliant idea flashed into Bella's mind, filling her with pleasure, "Oh!" she cried, excitedly, "I know what I'll do, I'll make it nice again, I'll take care of it, and plant herbs in it, just as mother used to do. Where's the fork, Tom? I want to begin."

"I'll get it, but let me help. Let me dig it over the first time; shall I, Bella?"

Bella agreed, but reluctantly. She wanted to do it all herself. "I wonder where I can get parsley seed, and all the rest of it. Oh, I know, Aunt Maggie will give me a little sage-bush, she has lots; and p'raps she'll be able to give me some lemon-thyme too!" and away she ran through the garden and out of the gate and down May Lane as fleet as a hare.

Miss Hender saw her dash past the house, and pressed her lips tightly together. "Forgotten all about what I sent her for, of course," she said sourly. "I thought that new broom was sweeping too clean."

When Bella returned in about ten minutes' time, carrying a basket full of roots, and a sage-bush on the top, her aunt came to the door to greet her.

"How about that sage I asked you to look for?" she began, but when her eye fell on the basket the rest of her scolding died away,— "Oh, so you've got some. Well, it isn't too late," she stammered, trying not to look foolish, and to speak graciously. It was Bella's turn to colour now. She had completely forgotten all about her aunt and the supper. "There wasn't a bit, Aunt Emma, and—and I forgot to come in and tell you, but I am going to plant some fresh things in the herb-bed. Tom's digging it over, and I am going to look after it. I asked Aunt Maggie to give me a root or two, and you can have some of the sage leaves before I plant it; but"—and she put down her basket, and began to grope in the bottom of it—"Aunt Maggie sent you a bottle of dried sage, and one of parsley. She dried them herself. She said if you hadn't got any at any time, they might be useful,"; and she put the two little bottles into her aunt's hand with great joy, looking up at her to read her approval in her face.

But Miss Hender's face showed nothing of the sort. "I don't believe in such new-fangled notions," she said ungraciously; "here, give me a bit of that," breaking off a sprig of sage, "I want something that's fit to eat, and has got some goodness left in it!"

The light and pleasure died out of Bella's face. It always hurt her to hear her Aunt Maggie, or anything of Aunt Maggie's, spoken contemptuously of, and sudden anger at such petty spitefulness swelled up in her heart, for it was petty of her aunt, and it was spiteful, and Bella knew it. Indeed, every one knew it, but no one dared say anything to the foolish woman, for fear of making matters worse.

In her pleasure, though, at the sight of the work Tom had done in her absence, Bella recovered herself, and this time she did not forget her aunt or the supper, but coming upon a few onions she gathered them into her basket and sent them in by Margery.

By the time Miss Hender came to the door again to call them all in to supper and bed, the sage bushes and thyme, the roots of mint and borage, were standing sturdily erect in the newly-turned bed, which was neatly outlined by large stones. Bella went to bed that night very tired and very happy, and dreamed of her mother.

While the children lay asleep, their father, coming home late and taking a turn round his neglected garden while he finished his pipe, drew up before the little herb-bed with almost a startled look on his face. He stood there minute after minute, gazing at the newly-turned earth and the sturdy little bushes showing out so clearly in the moonlight; the one neat and hopeful spot in the whole untidy waste, it seemed almost to speak reproachingly to him.

What his thoughts were no one knew, but he sighed deeply more than once, and when at last he moved away his pipe had gone out, though it was not empty.

## CHAPTER IV.

### SAGE BUSHES AND ROSE BUSHES.

The next morning William Hender was more than usually silent at breakfast, and he went off to his work without making any reference to what he had seen in the garden over-night. The children's thoughts, though, were full of it. As soon as they were dressed in the morning they ran out to see how everything looked, and how their new treasures had borne the night.

"Bella, I am going to have a bit of garden too," cried Tom, as soon as he saw her. "Father wouldn't mind, I'm sure. He doesn't seem to want it now, and it'll be better for me to have a

little bit than to let it all be idle."

Tom had thought of it in the night, and could hardly wait until daylight to begin. And, of course, as soon as Charlie heard of the plan, he must do the same. "So shall I," he cried sturdily. "I shall have a garden, and grow strawberries and gooseberries, and—and all sorts of things. Won't it be fine!"

"Margery wants a garden too. Margery wants to grow fings." Margery was tugging at Bella's skirt, and dancing with eagerness.

"What can Margery do?" asked Bella gently. She was always gentle and kind to her little sister. "Little girls like Margery can't dig up earth."

"Margery'll grow flowers," urged the little one eagerly, "Margery wants to grow flowers, woses and daisies, and pinks, and sweet peas, and—and snowdrops, and—oh, all sorts. Do give Margery a little garden, please, Bella, please. Only just a little tiny, weeny one."

The baby voice was so urgent that Bella could not say 'No'; nor had she any wish to. Anything that pleased Margery pleased her, and would, she knew, please her father. "Come along, then, and choose which bit you will have."

"I want it next to yours."

"Very well. I don't s'pose father will mind."

"Let me dig it over for her the first time," urged Tom, and he left the marking out of his own new bed to come and dig up Margery's.

Charlie and Bella and Margery herself collected large stones to outline it with, and by dinnertime there was a very neat and inviting-looking patch beside Bella's herb-bed.

"What'll you do for flowers to put in it, though?" laughed Charlie.

"Have you got any?"

"I've got the double daisy that Aunt Maggie gave me, and Chrissie Howard is going to bring me a 'sturtium in a pot. She said it was to put on the window-sill, but I shall put it in my garden."

"I can get you a marigold the next time I go past Carter's, on my way to Woodley. Billy Carter offered me one the other day; they're growing like weeds in their garden."

Margery danced with joy. "That'll be three flowers in my garden; I'll be able to pick some soon, won't I?"

That night William Hender came home earlier from his after-supper gossip at the 'Red Lion,' and, as usual, strolled about outside the house while he finished out his pipe. To-night his footsteps led him down his garden, and instinctively he went in search of the herb-bed again. Before he reached it he came upon fresh signs of digging and raking, and a larger patch of newly-turned earth, with the tools still lying beside it.

"This must be for one of the boys," he thought to himself, as he stooped to look closer. He admired the thoroughness of the work, or as much of it as he could see in the moonlight. On his way to the tool-shed with the tools he passed Bella's herb-bed, and then the newly-turned piece beside it caught his eye and brought him to a standstill.

"That must be the little one's," he said to himself, as he looked down at it. "Of course she must have what the others have! I wonder what she's got planted in it?" He bent lower and lower, but in the uncertain light he could not distinguish what the little clump of green was, and at last he had to go down on his knee in the path and light a match.

"One double daisy, bless her heart! It's that daisy root she has set so much store on ever since Maggie Langley gave it to her. Bless her baby heart!" he said once more and very tenderly, and as he rose from the ground again he sighed heavily, and passed his hand across his eyes more than once.

"I'd like to give her a s'prise," he thought to himself. "I'd dearly love to give her a s'prise, and I will too. It'll please her ever so much."

The thought of it pleased him ever so much too, and he went in and went to bed feeling in a happier mood than he had done for a long time. The mood was on him the next morning too, when he came down to breakfast.

"Where are the children?" he asked, as he went to the scullery for his heavy working boots.

"Oh, out in the garden. They are mad about the garden for the time," said Aunt Emma, with a laugh. "Bella seemed troubled 'cause there was nothing in it, so they're going to set

matters right. She has planted a few herbs, and Charlie is making a strawberry bed. I don't know how long it'll last, I'm sure. They soon tires of most things."

"Ay, ay, children mostly do," was all that their father answered, but as soon as his boots were fastened he sauntered out into the garden in search of them.

"Breakfast's ready," called his sister after him. "Call the children, will you?"

"I'll go and fetch them," he said, and made his way to where he heard their voices.

When she caught sight of him Margery left the others and ran towards him. "Daddy! daddy! come and look at my garden. Bella says she thinks my daisy has taken root! Now it'll soon have lots of daisies on it, won't it? and I'll give you a piece of root. Wouldn't you like that? Daddy, won't you have a garden too, and have flowers in it?"

"Why, all the garden is father's," cried Charlie, laughing at her, and with one accord they all turned and looked over the garden which was 'all father's,' and the untidiness, the look of neglect stamped upon everything, brought a sense of shame to the father's heart.

"But there aren't any flowers," sighed Margery.

Aunt Emma's voice was heard calling them in to breakfast.

"No, there ain't any now, but there will be," said her father gravely. The words, though to Margery they sounded so simple, were a promise made to himself and to his dead wife to do better in the future than in the past. "By God's help!" he added, under his breath.

That evening, when he came home from work, he made his way at once out into the garden. He had brought home some bundles of young cabbage plants, and was going to make a bed for them.

"It's too late for most things, but I can do something with the ground," he said to himself, as he went to the tool-shed for his fork and shovel.

The children had gone into Woodley on an errand for their aunt, but might be back at any moment now. The four tidy little patches of ground made the rest of the garden look more wretchedly neglected than ever before; they were to him like four reproaches from his four neglected children.

He began to dig with almost feverish haste, in his desire to get some more of the ground in order, and so absorbed did he become in the improvement he soon made, that he forgot about time and tea, and everything else.

A shout at last made him look up. It was a joyful shout from little Margery, who, catching sight of him at once, came flying along the path to him.

"Oh, daddy's got a garden, too!" she cried delightedly. "Daddy is making a garden too! Oh, how nice! What are you going to grow in your garden, daddy? Flowers?"

"Ay, I must try and have a few flowers here and there; but I've got to have cabbages and leeks and potatoes, and all sorts of things in my garden,—things that ain't so pretty as flowers, but are more useful."

Margery stood for a moment looking very soberly at the newly-turned earth, and holding tight a paper bag that she had been carrying very carefully all the time.

Suddenly she held the bag out to him. "I'll give you that for your garden, daddy," she said, eagerly, "then you'll have a flower."

Her father took the bag from her and began to open it. "What is it? What have 'ee got there, little maid?"

"It's a 'get-me-not root. Mr. Carter gave it to me for my garden; but I'll give it to you, daddy, 'cause there isn't anything pretty in your garden."

The man's heart was very full as he looked in on the little root; then, without speaking, he laid it gently down, and taking his little girl very tenderly in his arms he kissed her.

"Daddy'll plant it this very minute, little one;" and to himself he added, "and I'll plant it where I can see it best—in case I should forget again."

A voice came calling down the path to them, "Father, supper's ready. Margery, come in to supper;" but the little forget-me-not had to be planted first, and Margery had to stay and help, of course. When it was firmly placed in the ground in a nice little puddle of water, and the earth pressed tightly about its roots, Margery stood back and gazed at it contentedly.

"I think it looks lovely there, don't you, daddy? and you see I've got my daisy and a marigold in my garden, so I have plenty; and p'raps I'll get something more 'nother day."

That night, after supper was over and the children were in bed, William Hender went softly down the garden again to Margery's very neat but very bare little garden plot, and at the back of it, against the wall, he carefully planted a fine rose bush. He had brought it home with him on purpose for her, and, that the children might not see it, he had hidden it in the hedge in the lane until he had an opportunity of planting it, for he wanted it to be a surprise for the little maiden. All the time he was planting it he was picturing to himself what she would say and do when she first saw it; and he laughed to himself more than once, but very tenderly, as he pictured the surprise on her face.

In the morning he was up and dressed before any of them, and out in the garden at work. He had a glance first at the forget-me-not, and then at Margery's rose bush and daisy. All of which were looking very healthy and happy in their new surroundings. Then he began to dig up a piece of ground not far off, where, while pretending to be paying no heed to them, he could hear all that they said and did.

Then, as the minutes went by, he began to grow impatient for the children to come, but his patience was not tried for long, before the house-door was flung open, and a stampede along the path announced their coming.

"Why, father is up already!" he heard Tom exclaim, "and just see what a lot he's done."

"How nice it looks! Doesn't it make a difference?" said another voice that he guessed was Bella's. "Wait a minute; I've got to let out the fowls, and give them their breakfast. Come along, Margery, if you want to throw it to them."

For once Margery was quite indifferent to the fowls. "Is your 'get-me-not growing, daddy?" she shouted anxiously, as she raced up to him.

"My dear life, yes! I should just think it is. You give it a look as you go by. I think it is wonderful."

"Oh, it is, isn't it? I think it's lovely. I am so glad I gave it to you. Are you glad, daddy?"

"Glad, I should think I am, and no mistake! Never was gladder of anything in my life," said her father heartily.

Margery's face was radiant with joy. "What are you going to plant in your garden now, daddy?"

"Cabbages."

"Oh!" disappointedly, "I don't like cabbages, they haven't pretty flowers, and they haven't a pretty smell."

"Well, we can't have everything pretty, and glad enough we are of cabbages for dinner sometimes. The hens like them better than any flower, don't they?"

"Yes, so they do. I'll be able to give some of the leaves to the fowls, won't I?"

"Yes, if you don't give them too many."

"I must go now and see if my daisy is growing, and the marigold. I'll be back again in a minute," and away she trotted.

The others were sauntering slowly back from the fowl-house, and pausing to look at Charlie's strawberry plants on their way, when suddenly the silence was broken by a succession of squeals and shrieks and frantic calls to each one by name.

"Oh-h-h! oh-h! oh!! Bella! Daddy! Tom! Do come here. Charlie! oh, look, do look! there's a lovely rose bush growed up in my garden through the night, and it's got leaves on it! Oh, how did it come? Daddy, do come and see it. You never saw anything so wonderful."

They all ran, of course. Bella and the boys nearly as excited as Margery, and full of curiosity, their father full of pleasure with the success of his surprise.

"Daddy, do come and look. It is a real one, isn't it?" Clutching him by the hand to hurry him. "It isn't a fairy rose, is it?" anxiously.

"It's a real one right enough, in my opinion," said her father, looking very grave, and stooping down to inspect the little bush. "It's a real one right enough," he assured her solemnly, as he straightened himself again. "Looks healthy too."

"Do you think the fairies put it there for me?" she asked, breathlessly, watching her father closely and trying to read his face. "Or do you think God sended it to me 'cause I've been a good girl?"

"Have you been a good girl?" doubtfully. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I think so," hesitatingly; "haven't I, Bella?" turning her anxious little face from one to the other.

"Yes," said Bella loyally, "you've been very good."

"That's it, then, I expect it has been sent to your garden because you've been good."

"P'raps God telled the fairies, and they put it there," and her little face grew all bright again at this wonderful explanation.

The beauty and wonder and mystery of it all took up so much of their time and attention that there was no more work done that morning, for when Aunt Emma's call to breakfast came sounding along the path they were still gathered about Margery's little garden, gazing and marvelling at the mysterious rose.

"I must have one look at my herbs before I go in," said Bella to herself as the call to breakfast reached her; "they are not as lovely as Margery's rose, but my herb-bed was the beginning, and—and oh I do hope it is all going to be nicer again, and as happy as it used to be. It really does seem as if there was a difference already."

## CHAPTER V.

### WHAT AUNT MAGGIE SUGGESTED.

Bella was right,—there really was a difference already, and, best of all, the difference continued. Never again could any one say that the Henders' garden was neglected and untidy. As of old, William Hender worked there every evening, but now he usually had one or more of his children with him, and the garden in time became a perfect picture.

Bella had another and a larger piece of ground given her, in which to grow flowers, and, as her father often remarked, she must have had the true flower-lover's hand, for she had only to put in roots or seeds or cuttings of any kind, for them to grow and blossom their best, and throughout the spring, summer, and autumn her garden was a picture.

A year passed by, and Charlie's strawberry bed had yielded its first crop, and Tom's vegetables had provided more than one meal for the family, and, of course, had tasted better than any others that were ever grown. Over the wall at the back of Margery's garden the fairy rose had grown rapidly, covering the old stones with clusters of snowy blossoms. The whole of Margery's garden was well stocked by this time, for night after night mysterious plants had been placed there,—planted, as she firmly believed, by the fairies, who had 'been telled by God' to take it to her because she had been good; and that must have been the reason, she felt sure, for whenever she was very good, some new flower always appeared.

Another winter passed over the little household, a happy one, on the whole, in spite of stormy scenes at times with Aunt Emma, sharp words and sharp answers. The boys, as they grew older, found it harder to bear with her short, cold answers, her sharp commands, and constant snubbings of them in almost everything they said and did. Bella, who had never quite recovered from the shock of the scene when her aunt had beaten her so unmercifully, had an anxious time trying to stave off quarrels between them, and soften harsh words and pert answers, which might lead to them.

Bella had never forgotten that dreadful Monday, nor had she ever forgotten the talk with Aunt Maggie after, and the aim she had set before herself to do her best to make the house more comfortable and happy, and more what her mother would have made it had she been alive. She often failed, very often, in fact, and often despaired, but she never quite gave in, or, if she did, it was for a little while only.

There were many hills to climb on the road she had chosen, but there were many pleasant valleys too, and if sometimes her feet faltered and stumbled, and she felt weary and disheartened, and looked at the next hill hopelessly, feeling that she never could mount it, there were also happy hours, and sweet flowers and sunshine to cheer her, and sometimes there was such a feeling of hope and joy over all as made her heart sing and her spirits dance. For the house really was tidier and less neglected, her father came home regularly



now, and was with them more, and she herself had something to do, some object in life, some work that she could do herself, and take a pride in.

Thus it was, when the spring came that was to bring such changes to their lives, such steep hills to climb that they wondered sometimes if there was any valley beyond, where they could rest a little, or any sunshine anywhere, so heavy were the shadows.

Bella's flower-beds were a picture that year, and her herb-bed too, with its great sprays of curly parsley, and bushes of mint and thyme, sage and borage. In fact, all the garden was a goodly sight, and no one would have recognised it for the garden of a year ago. There were rows of peas and beans, just coming to perfection, and every other kind of vegetable that space could be found for. The fruit bushes were laden with promise of supplies in store, and already Miss Hender was making jam of the rhubarb, which filled up one corner of the garden with its handsome great leaves.

"It does seem a pity sometimes that I can't do more with all my flowers," said Bella one day. She had carried a glorious bunch of sweet peas and a basket of vegetables to Mrs. Langley. "I give away a good many, but most people have their own, and don't really want any more, and they just grow and flower and fade, and nobody but ourselves see them. Aunt Emma won't let me bring in more than one little bunch at a time, so they just waste, and it does seem a pity when there's a lot, and all so pretty."

Mrs. Langley looked at her lovely nosegay thoughtfully. "Child," she said at last, "why don't you do up some bunches, and carry them into Norton on a market day, or any other day, and try to sell them? Why, I've known my missis, when I was in service, give shillings for flowers no better than you bring me day after day, and not as fresh and strong either, by a long way."

"Sell my—flowers!" The suggestion, coming so suddenly, made Bella gasp. "Oh, but, Aunt Maggie, how could I? I should have to go to people's houses and ask them to buy, shouldn't I? I don't believe I'd ever be able to make up my mind to." Bella looked alarmed at the mere idea, but though alarmed she was also pleased with the daring suggestion, and her cheeks grew rosy red with excitement. Mrs. Langley nodded thoughtfully, but she did not reply at once. With many girls she would not have approved of such a plan, but she thought Bella could be trusted.

"Yes," she said at last, "I think you could be trusted, child, not to grow bold and rude and pushing, even if you had to ask people to buy your flowers. You might, perhaps, be able to arrange with a florist to take all you had every week. Of course, he would want to make a profit, so you wouldn't get so much for them, but you would be saved a good deal of time and trouble, maybe."

"Oh, but, Aunt Maggie, do you think I could? Do you think I should ever sell any?"

Bella was still half bewildered by the suddenness and boldness of the new proposal. There were so many sides to it, too, pleasant and unpleasant. It would be splendid, she thought, to be able to turn her garden to account, and to feel her lovely flowers were not wasted. It would be splendid, too, to be able to put her money each week in her money-box. She had been longing for some time past to be able to buy a glass frame to protect some of her seedlings through the winter,—and who knew but what her flowers would make this possible for her? The thought thrilled her.

On the other hand, she did shrink shyly from the prospect of going up to people and asking them to buy, and also from the thought of what her father and Aunt Emma would say. She mentioned this last thought to Aunt Maggie.

"If you would really like me to," said Mrs. Langley, "I will speak of it to your father before you do, and then, if he falls in with the plan, he can talk to your aunt about it. You see, Bella, child, there is another thing to bear in mind. You are nearly fourteen now, and before very long you'll have to be thinking about earning your living, and you'll have to go to service, or think of some way of earning it at home."

"I've been thinking of that, Aunt Maggie;" and a moment later she added sadly, "and if I went to service I'd have to leave all my flowers."

"Of course you would, dear. It would be a great loss to you, wouldn't it?"

"Oh," sighed Bella, realising for a moment how great a loss it would be, "I don't believe I could ever bear it."

Aunt Maggie smiled sadly. "You could, dear. You will have far harder trials than that to bear, I am afraid, or you will be more than fortunate," and she added after a moment's silence, "We can make our garden wherever we are, and plant our seeds, and raise our flowers."

"Not in service, Aunt Maggie?" cried Bella, incredulously, "they wouldn't give me a bit of ground, would they, anywhere I went?"

Mrs. Langley smiled. "They might in some places where the servant makes it her home, and the mistress tries to make it a real home to her, they let her have a little bit of ground to call her own. But I was thinking, dear, of another kind of garden,—the garden of life, where we can sow good seed or bad, and raise flowers, where we and others have to tread. Flowers of patience and honesty, good-temper, willingness, and cheerfulness. They are very precious flowers to most people, for few get many such along the way they have to tread; and a sunny smile or a cheery word, or a kind act will often lighten the whole of a dull, hard day. Don't ever forget to grow those flowers, my dear, or to shed sunshine wherever God may order you to dwell."

"Does God order that, Aunt Maggie? Does He tell people where they must go? and shall I have to do as He tells me, and go where He sends me?"

"Yes, dear, and you can trust Him. He will only send you where you are needed, and where it is best for you to be."

Bella went home in a very, very thoughtful mood that night. "I wonder where God is going to send me, and what work He has for me to do?" The idea filled her mind until, as she reached home, the thought suddenly rushed into her head, "I wonder what father will say, when he hears what Aunt Maggie wants to talk to him about!"

What her father did say when first the plan was mooted, was a downright "No! I can keep my children as long as I can work, and Bella can find enough to do at home."

"Yes, I know," answered Aunt Maggie gently, when he had repeated this more than once, and each time more emphatically. "And what about the time when you can't work, William? or, if anything was to happen to you? Do you think it is right or fair to bring up children without any knowledge that'll earn them a decent, respectable living?"

William Hender had no answer ready, and sat trying in vain to find one.

"If she were to begin in a small way, such as I'm suggesting, who knows but what, in time, she might work up a little business, and be able to make quite a nice little living out of her flowers and things? She has a wonderful gift for raising them and understanding them, and it does seem a sin not to make use of it. Don't you think so?"

William Hender nodded thoughtfully; this new way of looking at things impressed him. He was proud, too, of Bella's skill with her garden, and his thoughts flew beyond the present to the future, where in his mind's eye he saw a tidy little shop well stocked with fruit and flowers and vegetables, and Bella the prosperous owner of it all, and his heart swelled with pride.

"You are right, Maggie," he said, as he rose to go. "You always are, I think. I'll talk to Emma about it, and I'll look about me the next time I go to Norton, and see if there's any shop there that'll be likely to take her flowers. It might be better for her to sell them that way. Good-night."

Bella's heart beat fast and furious when she heard that her father approved of the scheme, and when the children were told about it they all flew into a state of wild excitement. Of course they all wanted to be market-gardeners at once. "Why can't we all go shares in a stall in Norton Market?" cried Tom. "Bella can sell flowers and herbs, and me vegetables, and Charlie fruit, and Margery—"

"Fairy roses," said Margery eagerly. She always called her flowers that had come so mysteriously 'fairy flowers.'

"I was in Norton Market-house once," went on Tom, "and oh, it's a fine place!"

Norton, their nearest and largest market-town, was five miles off, and as there was no railway to it, and they had no cart to take them, a visit to the town was one of the rarest treats they knew.

When the first excitement had worn off, and Aunt Emma had been talked to and won over, and all that remained to be done was for their father to go to Norton and look out for a florist, matters seemed to go no further. He was at work on every day of the week except Saturday afternoons, and then there was always so much to be done at home he never seemed able to spare the time. Five miles to Norton and five miles back was a long distance to cover, with no other means of covering it than one's own two feet, or a chance 'lift'; and he kept on putting the matter off.

"All my sweet-peas are passing," sighed Bella, when another Saturday had come and gone, and her father had not again spoken of going to Norton. "Tom, I've a good mind to go myself next Saturday, and take some flowers, and try to sell them. Will you come with me? Do you think you could walk so far?"

Tom was indignant at this reflection on his manliness. "Walk it! I should rather think so! I can if you can, anyhow!"

"It's a good long way," said Bella reflectively; "p'raps we could get a lift home. I wonder if Aunt Emma will let us go? Oh, Tom, I wish she would. I shall hate it at first, but it does seem a pity to waste all my flowers, and I do want to earn some money to buy a hotbed and some more seeds; there's ever so many kinds I want to get."

To their great surprise, Aunt Emma agreed quite willingly to the scheme as soon as she was told of it. She saw nothing to object to in it, she said, and it never entered her head to think that the walk might be too long for either of them. "If Saturday turns out wet or rough, you needn't go," she said cheerfully.

"I should have to if I'd got customers waiting," thought Bella; but she did not argue the point; she was thankful to have won the permission she wanted, and too fearful of losing it, to run any risks.

How the four children lived through the excitement of the next few days they scarcely knew. For Charlie and Margery there was disappointment mingled with the excitement,—disappointment that they could not go too; but there was much that was thrilling, even for those who stayed at home, and they were promised that they should walk out along the road to meet the others at about the time they would be expected back.

Tom, on the whole, got the most enjoyment out of it all, because for Bella there was a good deal of nervous dread mingled with the excitement and pleasure.

"I do hope I meet with nice customers," she said to Aunt Maggie the day before, when she went down to ask her to help her re-trim her rather shabby Sunday hat for her. "I hope they don't speak sharp when they say they don't want any flowers."

"You generally find folks speak to you as you speak to them," said Aunt Maggie consolingly. "If you are civil, you will most likely meet with civility from others. Look, I've got a large shallow basket here that I thought would do nicely to hold your flowers and show them off prettily. The cover will help to keep them fresh. You'll have to be up early to gather them, child. And do give them a drink of water before you start. You'll find they'll last fresh twice as long. In fact, I believe it would be even better to gather them the evening before, and let them stand in water all night, then you would only have to arrange them in bunches before you start."

Bella thanked her delightedly, and ran off home with her new basket and her old hat, feeling as proud and pleased as any child in the land.

That night she went to bed early, but scarcely a wink did she sleep, and glad enough she was when the old grandfather's clock in the kitchen at last struck four. She got up then, and very quietly began to dress herself, after which she called Tom. It was early, but not too early, considering all that they had to do. For this once, at any rate, the flowers had to be gathered and arranged in bunches and given a drink. Bella and Tom had to dress themselves in their best, and make themselves look as neat and nice as possible, and walk the five miles and be in Norton in good time, for Aunt Maggie had told them that the ladies of the place would most probably be the best and most pleasant customers, and that as a rule they went out to do their shopping as soon as they could after breakfast.

"You ought to be there by ten at the latest," she had said, and Bella promised not to be later.

## **CHAPTER VI.**

### **FIRST CUSTOMERS.**

On such a beautiful morning, before the sun had grown too hot, walking was pleasant enough, and Bella and Tom, excited and very eager over their new experience, did not feel tired; and if they did wish the distance shorter, it was only that they might be on the scene of action more quickly.

For the first part of the way they had the road mostly to themselves, but as the morning advanced, and as they drew near to Norton, they were constantly being overtaken by carts

laden with all sorts of people and things: live fowls in coops, calves, little pigs under nets, or a fat sheep fastened in at the back of a market cart. Many of the market carts had women seated in them, carrying large white baskets full of fowls and ducks, or eggs and butter, all carefully tucked away under snow-white cloths. There were smaller carts, too, full of vegetables and fruit; and one which particularly roused Bella's interest was a florist's cart laden with beautiful ferns and flowers in pots, and, alas! for her own little supply, boxes of cut flowers.

A wave of hot blood swept over her cheeks. Her pretty bunches, so daintily and carefully arranged, seemed to her suddenly to become poor and shabby and worthless beside that handsome show of hothouse geraniums and roses, maidenhair and other ferns, and her step grew slow as her spirits sank. How could she ever go on and face all the people, and show them her poor little store?

Tom looked round at last, to see what the matter was, but he only laughed when Bella told him. "Oh, well," he said cheerfully, "I don't suppose he began with a pony and trap, and who is to say that we shan't be driving one some day! My eye, Bella, wouldn't it be fine to have a little turn-out like that!" and he capered in the road with delight at the thought.

Bella's spirits rose again. "If I had a greenhouse," she said, "I dare say we could grow maidenhair ferns, and roses too. Tom, do you think it would cost a lot of money to build a greenhouse?"

"No," said Tom sturdily; "I believe we could build one ourselves if we'd got the stuff. Bella, I'm going to learn carpentering, you see if I don't, and then I'll be able to make lots of things, hot-beds and greenhouses, and hencoops, and wheelbarrows."

Bella laughed. "We seem to be going to do a lot—some day, but I think we shall be old men and women before that day comes." Tom's enthusiasm was very cheering, though. "There are lots of lovely flowers I can grow without a greenhouse," she said, more contentedly; "just think, Tom, of stocks and carnations and roses, and—and lavender. Oh, Tom, won't we have a load to bring, in time, if we can get people to buy them!"

They had reached the town by this time, and all Tom's attention was taken up by the busy crowds. "We'd better go to High Street first, hadn't we? That's where all the shops are, and the Market-house, and most of the people."

"We'd better uncover our baskets first, and show what we've got to sell, hadn't we? I don't think it's too soon, do you?"

Bella rested hers against the railings of a church they were passing at the moment, and lifting off the cover, and turning back the damp cloth, she carefully raised her pretty bunches, and arranged them to what she thought was the best advantage. Her spirits rose again at the sight of them, for they certainly were very lovely, and so sweet! There were bunches of sweet-peas of all colours, and some of white only, and pink only, and some of every shade of violet, from the deepest to the palest. There were roses too, and 'boy's love,' mignonette, stocks, and pinks.

"Oh, they are sweet!" exclaimed Bella, as she drew in great breaths of their fragrance. "I am sure I should want to buy them if I saw any one else selling them."

"Come on," said Tom impatiently; he could not see that it mattered much how the bunches were arranged.

They strolled slowly on again, Bella feeling very conscious now, and very shy. She was wondering how she must begin. Must she go up to people and stop them, and ask them to buy her flowers?

Tom was so taken up with watching a sheepdog guiding a flock through the busy street, he forgot all about his duties as a salesman.

"Do stand still a minute and watch," he pleaded, and Bella stood.

How long they had stood she never knew, when she was suddenly recalled to the present, and her duty, by a voice saying, "What a perfectly lovely show of flowers! and, oh, the scent!" and looking quickly round, she found two ladies standing beside her gazing at her basket.

"Are they for sale?" asked one of the ladies, looking at Bella with a pleasant smile.

"Oh yes, ma'am, miss, I mean," stammered poor, shy Bella, and, to hide her blushing cheeks, she bent and lifted out some of her flowers that the ladies might see them better.

"How much a bunch are they?"

"Tuppence each the big ones, ma'am, and a penny the little ones," stammered Bella. She longed to give them to the lady, and ask her not to pay any money at all for them. "Some are

all shades of one colour, and some are mixed."

"It is wonderful," she heard one lady say softly to the other. "I gave a shilling in London a day or two ago for a much smaller bunch than this."

"Where do you get such beautiful flowers?" she asked, turning again to Bella with her pleasant smile.

"I grow them myself, ma'am," said Bella, with shy pride.

"Do you really? Well, you must be a born gardener, I am sure, and you deserve to get on. Mary,"—turning to her companion again,— "I will have pink sweet-peas of different shades for the dinner-table to-night, and then that point will be settled and off my mind. Nothing could be prettier. Can you,"—to Bella—"give me six bunches of pink ones? At least four of pink, and two of white?"

Bella turned over her store eagerly, and found the number wanted.

"I must have some of your mignonette," said the other lady, "for the sake of the smell, and a bunch of those roses too. How much each are they?"

"Tuppence the roses, and a penny the mignonette, ma'am," said Bella.

"There is my money," said the sweet-pea lady, handing her a shilling.

"And there is my threepence," said the mignonette lady. "Do you come every week with flowers?"

"I am going to try to, ma'am," said Bella. "This is the first time I've been."

"Well, if you will call at my house when you come, I dare say I shall often be glad to have some of your flowers."

Bella's face brightened. She was so glad she would have this kind, friendly lady to go to; it would be splendid, too, to have a regular customer. That was what Aunt Maggie had hoped she would get.

"I live in the house next to the church. Do you remember passing a church at the top of the street, just as you come in to Norton?"

"Oh yes!" Bella and Tom exclaimed together. "We stopped by it to arrange our flowers."

"Well, the house next to it is mine. You won't forget, will you? Mrs. Watson, No. 1 High Street."

"Oh no, we shan't forget," they both answered her earnestly. "As if we could," said Tom, as he watched their two customers disappearing down the street. "I wish we could meet with some more customers like them."

Half an hour went by without bringing them another of any kind. The fact was, they were so shy they stood back in a quiet corner, where they were hidden by the crowd from any likely customers.

"I'm afraid the flowers will begin to droop, if we don't sell them soon," said Bella at last; and the thought spurred her into going up to a house near by and knocking at the door.

"Please, do you want any flowers?" she asked timidly of the rather grim-looking woman who came to the door.

"No, I don't," snapped the woman crossly. "The idea of bringing me to the door for nothing! Anybody'd think I'd got nothing else to do!" And the door was shut in Bella's face with a bang.

"Doesn't it make a difference how anybody speaks?" said Tom, receiving unconsciously a lesson in good manners and bad that he never forgot to the end of his life. But the woman's bad manners and temper had affected Bella so strongly that her eyes had filled with tears, and the little courage she had had ebbed away.

"I shall know now what it feels like to be spoken to so," she said in a husky voice, as she hastily wiped her eyes.

"Flowers, ma'am? Tuppence and a penny a bunch. Fresh this morning," said Tom brightly.

An old lady was peering closely into his basket, examining the contents.

"Give me three of those that are smelling so sweet."

Tom picked out one of stocks and 'boy's love,' and one of pinks and mignonette, and a

bunch of roses.

"Have you got any lavender?"

"No, ma'am."

"I could bring you some in a week or two, ma'am," said Bella promptly, forgetting the snub she had received in the old lady's enjoyment of her flowers. "It isn't quite ready to cut yet."

"Very well, bring me two shillings' worth. I make it up into cushions to sell for Missions. If it is nice, I may order more."

"Thank you, ma'am; I'll cut it fresh the morning I bring it," said Bella delightedly.

"Very well; I live in this house we are standing by," and she pointed to the very one they had just been turned away from.

Bella's face flushed at the mere thought of having to face the bad-tempered servant again, but, as she remarked to Tom afterwards, they were told to call, and they wouldn't have gone unless they had been.

"That makes eighteenpence," said Tom, as Bella slipped the money into her purse, "and an order for two shillings' worth for another week. Ain't we getting on!"

"If we can only sell a few more bunches we'll go and get something to eat," said Bella. "I'm hungry; ain't you?"

"Starving," said Tom, with emphasis. "Let's get into a better place, where the people can see us."

"Flowers, penny a bunch," he called to the people as they passed by, and so many turned and looked, and then stopped, that they had soon sold half a dozen of their big bunches and many of the small ones. Their flowers were certainly very good and very cheap, and Norton people had not had the chance of buying such before. The florist who had passed the children on the road had a stall in the market-place, but he only sold hothouse flowers, and charged very highly for them.

"We have only six bunches left," said Bella joyfully; "we'll go and have something to eat now. Where can we go for it, Tom?"

"There's a stall in the market-house where they sell limpets and cockles, and——"

"Oh, I don't want limpets and cockles! I want a glass of milk and some buns. Don't you?"

"Rather," said Tom; "let's buy some buns at that shop down there, and go somewhere quiet to eat them. I wouldn't like to eat them in the shop, with every one looking, would you?"

"No; but we can't take milk away without something to carry it in."

"Well, we'll drink water. There's sure to be a pump or a drinking-fountain near."

So they went to the shop, and very proud Bella felt as she took out her purse and paid for the four buns the woman put in a bag for her.

"Anything else, missie?"

"No, thank you," said Bella, but rather regretfully, as her eyes fell on the tarts and sausage-rolls, and the bottles of sweets, and on the glasses of milk labelled 'Penny a glass.' A glass each would have cost twopence, and that with the buns would amount to sixpence. "It would be a dreadful lot out of what we've made," thought Bella, and bravely turned away.

The smell of the new buns was very enticing to two hungry little people who had had nothing to eat since their seven o'clock breakfast, and they did not dawdle on their way back to the friendly shelter of the church steps.

"Won't Charlie and Margery be excited to hear all about it?" laughed Bella, as she munched in placid content. "We ought to take something home to them."

"We'll take them one of those peppermint walking-sticks," said Tom, "shall we? They love that. I had one once, and Charlie always wanted one like it. I saw some in the market."

"We'll take them one each. Isn't it lovely to have money, and be able to buy things for people?"

"Rather," agreed Tom heartily. "Bell, I'm going to bring something from my garden next week. I've got French beans and marrows ready to cut."

A lady passed, and looked hard at the children and at the baskets standing beside them.

"Flowers, ma'am?" said ready Tom.

The lady paused. "I must see if I have any change," she said, and stood still while she looked in her hand-bag. "Yes, I've just threepence," and she went away carrying two of their remaining bunches.

For a few minutes longer they sat on, loth to move. "My legs are aching a bit, aren't yours?" asked Bella.

Tom nodded. "I shouldn't be sorry if we were at the other end of the five miles, should you?"

"I wish we were," sighed Bella, "and just meeting Charlie and Margery. I wonder if they've started yet?"

A lady came along pushing an invalid carriage, on which a little girl was lying. She lay perfectly flat, and looked very white and ill. As she passed she looked with wistful, weary eyes at Tom and Bella. Bella had picked up her basket to make room for the carriage to pass.

"Oh, what lovely flowers!" cried the little girl. "Mummy darling, do buy some. Are they for sale?" she added quickly, looking at Bella, a hot blush passing swiftly over her pale face.

"Yes, miss," said Bella, blushing too.

"I am sorry, darling, but I came out without my purse. I haven't a penny with me."

"Oh!" there was deep disappointment in the little invalid's tone.

Bella picked out the nicest bunch she had left. "Will you please to accept one?" she asked, blushing again, but very prettily. "I grew them myself. Will you take one, miss?"

The lady looked pleased, yet embarrassed. "It is very, very kind of you," she said, hesitating, "but I hardly like to. It seems almost like asking for them, and I expect you wanted to sell them?"

"We have sold a lot, nearly all we brought in. Please take them, ma'am;" and the lady, feeling it would give Bella more pleasure to have them accepted as a gift than paid for, did so with many thanks, and the little lady's delight was the richest payment Bella had had that day.

"Oh, thank you, thank you very much!" she cried delightedly, pressing the flowers to her pale face and breathing in the scent. "Do you come here often with flowers?"

"This is the first time," said Bella; "but we want to have some to bring every week. We've sold all we brought but these."

The lady looked in her basket. "If only I had my purse with me I should be glad to have those from you. Do you mind coming back to my house with me? It is not very far."

"No, ma'am, we'll come, but,"—Bella hesitated, wanting to say something, yet hardly knowing how to—"but if you don't want to go back, and—and if you like to take them, we'll trust—I mean, next week will do." It was out at last, amid a great deal of blushing.

The lady smiled. "Well, that is very thoughtful of you, and if you are sure you don't mind trusting me I shall be much obliged to you, for I have to be at my mother's house at one o'clock, and I think it must be that now. Stella, darling, you would like to carry the flowers, wouldn't you? That's it. Then I owe you fourpence for two twopenny bunches. I will not forget. Perhaps I shall see you here at this same place at the same time next week?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good-morning, and thank you."

"Good-morning, ma'am," they both answered; and the little invalid called back gratefully, "Good-bye, and thank you ever so much for my lovely flowers."

"Now," said Tom excitedly, "all we've got to do is to walk home."

"When we've got the children's walking-sticks," corrected Bella, and they both hurried down to the market-house to get them.

"We'll take home some cinnamon rock to Aunt Emma," said Bella; "she likes that better than anything."

At last, with their baskets empty save for their purchases, they proudly and joyfully turned their faces homewards, delighted in every way with their day's experiences.

The walk home certainly did seem rather long, far longer than the walk out, but they were very tired, of course, for they had been on their feet, with scarcely any rest, since four in the morning. The sun was hot too, and the road dusty, and such a number of carriages and carts passed them that the air all the time seemed full of a haze of dust—at least it did until they had got a couple of miles or so away from Norton. After that it grew less bustling and much pleasanter. And then by the last milestone, which was a good mile from May Lane, they found their father and Margery and Charlie waiting for them.

All their tiredness vanished then in a trice, and the last mile was covered and home reached almost before they had begun to tell all they had to say.

It was not much past four o'clock by the time they reached the cottage, but Aunt Emma had finished all her scrubbing and cleaning, and had tidied herself, and got tea all spread ready for them, and she actually came out to meet them, seeming really glad to see them, and when they gave her the cinnamon rock it was plain to see that she was really pleased that they had thought of her.

"Now come in and take off your boots, and put on your old slippers to rest your feet; you must be tired out," she said kindly. They certainly looked very tired, though they were too excited just then to feel so.

"There's apple-tart for tea," whispered Margery, as she followed Bella upstairs. "I saw Aunt Emma making it. It's for you and Tom!"

Bella could hardly believe her ears, but when they sat down to table there was the tart, sure enough; and as they sat there eating and talking over their adventures and drinking their tea and laughing, Bella thought she had never known such a perfectly happy, lovely day in all her life before.

And how splendid it was to hear them all exclaim when Bella took out her purse and counted out on the table the money she had earned that day! "And there's sixpence owing, and four-pence we spent on buns, that would make ten-pence more!" she said proudly.

"You must put it in the Savings Bank towards buying your cold frame," said her father; "and it won't be so very long either before you'll have enough to get it with, if you do as well every week as you have to-day. You can't always expect, though, to have such a lot of flowers as you've got just now."

"I think I shall take some bunches of herbs in with me next time," said Bella. "Don't you think they'd sell, father?"

"I should think most people grow their own," said her father; "still, you can but try. The weight of them won't hurt you, even if you have to bring them back again."

"Bella, if I've got some flowers next Saturday, will you take in a bunch and sell them for me?" asked Margery excitedly. "Then I'll have a penny to put in the bank too."

"Oh, yours are fairy flowers," teased Charlie; "they would die on the way, or turn into something else."

Margery was not going to be teased. "P'raps they'd turn into fairies," she said, nodding her head wisely at her brother; "then they'd turn all Bella's pennies into golden sov'rins, and make a little horse and carriage to drive her home in."

"I'll find you some sandwiches or cake or something to take with you next week," said Aunt Emma; "it's a pity you should spend your money on buns and things. It'll be better for you, and cheaper, to take your own with you."

Tom and Bella could scarcely believe their ears, but they felt very pleased, and thanked her very gratefully.

## CHAPTER VII.

### WHAT LAY BEYOND THE MILESTONE.



The next week the children went off far more heavily laden than they had been when they made their first venture. Bella had added a few bunches of herbs to her large supply of flowers, and a bunch or two from Margery's garden, and she had to carry both her baskets herself, for Tom's vegetables proved load enough for him. He had wanted to take some currants for Charlie, but his father would not allow that.

"They ain't good enough," he said; "it won't do for to begin offering poor stuff to your customers, or you'll lose those you've got and never get any more, and you'll have all your load to carry for nothing. You learn to grow better ones, Charlie, my boy, and then another year you'll be able to make something by them."

Charlie's face fell, but he had not given the time or care to his garden that the others had, and he knew it, and that only made him more vexed. Life was disappointing to Charlie just then. It seemed to him, and to Margery too, hard that they also could not go to Norton every Saturday. The ten-mile walk they forgot all about, they only thought of the pleasure of being in the midst of all the people and the bustle, and the shops and market-stalls, with their loads of fruit and sweets and buns. The great aim of Margery's life then was to grow big enough to carry in a basketful of flowers too, and sell them, and to possess a purse to put the money in, and a Savings Bank book, just as Bella had. As the summer wore on and the days grew hotter and hotter, the eagerness of both died down a good deal. It was far more pleasant, they found, to stay at home and play in the cool lane or orchard, than to get up at four in the morning and tramp about all day long under the weight of heavy baskets. Some days they even found it too hot to walk with their father as far as the milestone.

Those were trying, tiring days for Tom and Bella, days that put their courage to the test, and made their perseverance waver more than once. The walk in the morning was lovely still, but the standing about in the close, narrow streets, crowded with people and animals, without even a rest at the end of their five-mile walk, was so wearying that Bella often longed to sit down on the edge of the pavement to rest her aching feet.

Her cheeks would grow scarlet, and her head throb, and her eyes ache with the glare, and the heat and the weight of the baskets, but she could not do anything to get relief. She had to stand or walk about, trying to sell her flowers as quickly as possible. There was nothing else to be done. The poor flowers suffered too, and hard work it was to keep them looking fresh.

Sometimes a farmer or carter would offer the two tired little market-gardeners a 'lift' on their homeward way, but this did not happen often, for, as a rule, they were all going in the opposite direction. There were few besides Bella and Tom who left the town so early; and it would have been cooler and pleasanter for them if they had waited until the evening and the heat of the day was over, but they were always anxious to get home, and they really did not know where to go or what to do with themselves all the weary day until five or six o'clock.

That was a very long, hot summer. The flowers opened and faded quickly, in spite of the hours the whole family spent every evening watering them; and more than once, if it had not been for the fruit from the orchard and the vegetables, Bella and Tom would have had but a scanty supply to take to their customers. As it was, they could not carry enough to make very much profit, for fruit and vegetables are heavy, and to carry a load of them for miles is no joke.

Several times that summer, when she awoke after a hot, restless night to another stifling, scorching day, Bella felt inclined to shirk her business and remain at home. It would have been so jolly to have spent the day lazily in the shady orchard, instead of tramping those long, dusty miles. Tom felt the heat less, and his energy helped to keep her up.

"We'll have a donkey before so very long," he said cheerfully. "If we can have a good sowing and planting this autumn, and good crops next spring, father and all of us, we'll have enough to carry in to make it worth while to hire Mrs. Wintle's donkey."

So with the thought of all they were going to do in the future to buoy them up, off they would start again, hoping that before another Saturday came the heat would have lessened, and some rain have fallen to refresh the land and lay the dust.

Yet, with all its weariness and hard work, that summer ever after stood out in Bella's memory as a very happy one; and the evenings after their return, and the Sundays, remained in her memory all her life through.

Even if Charlie and Margery did not come to meet them, their father was always there to carry their baskets home for them. And then there was the change into cool, comfortable old garments, and the nice tea, and the long rest in the orchard, or sitting about in the porch outside the door, while they talked over all that had happened during the day.

They all went to bed by daylight on those light nights, and Bella, as she stretched out her weary body restfully on her little white bed, could see through the open window the stars come up one by one in the deep blue-black sky.

She was always quite rested by the time Sunday came, and was up and out early for a look at her garden before getting ready for Sunday-School. She loved the Sunday-School, and she loved her teacher, and the service after in the dear old creeper-covered church, where the leaves peeped in at the open windows, and the birds came in and flew about overhead, and all the people knew and greeted one another in a friendly spirit.

On Sundays, too, it was an understood thing that Bella should go to tea with Aunt Maggie, and this was to her, perhaps, one of the happiest hours of the whole week, for Aunt Maggie had a little harmonium, to the music of which they sang hymns. Sometimes, too, she told stories of the days when she was young, and of people and places she had seen—told them so interestingly, that to Bella the people and places seemed as real as though she had known them herself. They had long talks, too, about all that Bella was doing, and the things that puzzled her, and her plans for the present and the future.

"You never seem to be years and years older than me, Aunt Maggie," Bella said one day, "for you always seem to understand and to like what I like."

Aunt Maggie smiled. "Some people's hearts don't grow old as fast as their bodies," she said thoughtfully. "I think it must be that which makes them understand."

"I hope my heart won't ever get old," said Bella seriously. "It must be dreadful not to take any interest in people or anything."

One Sunday, the last of this old life, so comparatively happy and free of care, Mrs. Langley stopped Bella just as she was leaving.

"I want you to come in to see me to-morrow," she said, "and bring Tom with you. I am making a print frock for you, and a holland coat for him to wear to market on Saturdays. They'll be much more comfortable for you both than your thick cloth ones." Then, in answer to Bella's cry of delight, "You must thank your Aunt Emma, too; 'twas she thought of it first, and I told her that if she'd get the stuff I'd make the things. There now, run away home, it is time you were putting Margery to bed. No, I shall not tell you the colour," laughing, as she loosened Bella's arms which she had flung round her in her delight; "you will know to-morrow."

"I hope it is pink," said Bella earnestly, eyeing her aunt closely, to see if she could read anything from her face, but Mrs. Langley only smiled.

"Well, you will know by this time to-morrow. Now, run away, or they will be wondering what has become of you."

"To-morrow is such a long way off," sighed Bella. "It'll never come!"

To-morrow came, as all to-morrows do, and, to Bella's great delight, the frock turned out to be as pretty a pink as she could possibly desire. It was very simply made, with just a plain skirt and belted bodice, but when she saw it finished, and with little white collar and cuffs added, Bella thought it the prettiest frock she had ever seen in her life. Perhaps it was the prettiest she had ever possessed, for Aunt Emma did not understand that clothes could be pretty as well as serviceable, and most of poor Bella's frocks had been of heavy brown or black stuff, made without any trimming, and with never a vestige of white at neck or wrists,—a dainty finish which Bella loved the look of.

In spite of the heat and the long walk in it, Bella waited impatiently for the following Saturday, and surely, she thought, never had a week been so long in passing.

It was September now, but the weather was as hot and stifling as it had been in July. The days were shorter, and the sun went down earlier, but, apart from the sun, the oppressive heat lasted on throughout the nights, which were almost as trying as the day. The earlier summer flowers were over, and the drought had prevented the later ones from coming on well, so that it was difficult to get a good supply week by week.

Bella and Tom no longer carried in the things from their own little gardens only, or they would often have found they had not enough to make it worth their while; but all contributed something that they had to sell, and it was quite a serious business to make up the accounts and divide the money when the little market-gardeners got home from market.

Each one now had a money-box or Savings Bank account. Aunt Emma was delighted. "It is ever so much better for them than wasting their time playing," she said to Mrs. Langley one day. "Much better."

"They ought to play, too," said Aunt Maggie quietly; "this is their play-time. All the rest of their life will be taken up with trying to earn a living. Let them play too, when they can."

As Bella and Tom started off that morning in their nice new cool garments, they thought that work would be ever so much nicer than play, if one could only go about it dressed like that always. Tom felt quite grown-up and business-like in his linen coat, and Bella felt another being, her frock was so much lighter and so pretty, too, and cool and clean.

"I think our new clothes have brought us good luck," she said, as long before the morning was over they had sold out most of what they had brought. The 'good luck' was that in their new garments, looking cool and fresh, they attracted the notice of those who had overlooked them in their heavier, uglier clothes.

When the time came for them to have their meal, they had sold out everything, to the very last apple.

"We could start for home now," said Bella, who was suffering much less from the heat than usual, "only that I've got some shopping to do for Aunt Emma."

"And we've got to buy the seeds," said Tom. "It wouldn't do to start back too early; father wouldn't have time to get to the milestone to meet us."

So they went and had their lunch in a leisurely, lazy way, talking all the time they munched at their sandwiches and apples. "I've got four shillings for father, and threepence for Margery," said Bella, counting up her takings, "and two shillings for myself."

"And I've got two shillings too," chimed in Tom.

This was a large sum to children brought up in the country, where the best-paid workmen earned only twelve and sixpence a week.

Their meal ended, they went back to the shops and people again, and made their purchases, and at last were able to turn their steps homeward.

"Instead of being early, we're later than usual," said Tom. "Father will have to wait a bit for us."

"Never mind; I dare say we shall be able to walk a little faster to-day," said Bella, "and make it up. Margery said she would come to meet us. I wonder if she will. She's dying to wear her pink frock like mine, but I don't s'pose Aunt Emma will let her. I shall be able to see as soon as we turn the last bend of the road. The pink will show out fine against the hedge. Oh dear, I wish we were there! I shall be glad to give these baskets up to father, these groceries weigh heavy," and Bella sighed wearily.

"Only one more hill and two more bends, and we shall see him," said Tom cheerfully, for one of the chief pleasures of their day was to catch sight of the milestone where their father had never yet failed to meet them, to take their baskets from them, and listen to their account of the day's doings.

"Only one more hill and two bends!" the thought sent them trudging on with renewed spirit, and the hill was climbed before they realised it. Then one bend in the road was rounded, then the other, and there in the distance could be seen the milestone. But, except for the milestone, the road was empty!

"Why, father isn't there!" cried Bella disappointedly; "he is late."

"P'raps somebody has met him, and kept him talking," suggested Tom; "we shall see him hurrying along in a minute." So they finished the rest of the distance with their eyes eagerly scanning the white road stretching away before them.

"We will have a rest here, shall we?" said Bella, placing her baskets on the ground by the old grey stone; "he won't be more than a few minutes, I expect. Oh, I am so tired, aren't you?"

Tom, seated on the milestone, only nodded, his eyes never wandered from the road along which their father was to come. It was very still and quiet there, almost oppressively so. No one passed, and no sound, except the voices of the birds and the distant mooing of a cow, broke the silence.

"P'raps after all we'd better go on," said Bella at last, after restlessly fidgeting about, and staring along the dirty road until her eyes ached.

"It doesn't seem to be much use waiting," said Tom quietly, and they started on their way again, but far less cheerfully now. Indeed, for such a trifling and easily explained incident, their spirits were strangely cast down. A dozen simple things might have happened to prevent their father's coming; he might have been detained at his work, or have met some one, and be staying talking to them; or he might have been busy and have forgotten the time.

Perhaps it was because they were over-tired and hungry, and in the state to look on the gloomy side of things, that they could not take a cheerful view of the matter, or shake off the feeling of depression which filled them.

Whether this was so or not, they felt anxious and troubled, and all the sunshine and pleasure seemed to have gone out of their day. It was almost as though a foreboding of the truth had come to them—that when they left the old milestone they were leaving their light-

heartedness and childhood behind them, never quite to find them again. Never, at any rate, the same. When they left it they set their faces towards a long, dark road, with many a weary hill and many a desolate space to cross, and with a heavier burden to bear than any they had yet borne.

Had they known, their hearts might have failed them altogether, perhaps, though the way was not to be all as dark and stony for their tired feet, as at first it had seemed to promise. There would be sunshine on the road for them too, and pleasant resting-places.

To them then, as they trudged along in silence, the road they had to tread seemed hard and gloomy enough, even though it was the road towards home. Every yard seemed as six, and never a glimpse did they catch of their father, or Margery, or Charlie. Bella walked that mile often and often in the years that followed, but never again without remembering that afternoon.

At last, as they drew near the top of 'their own lane,' as they called it, they saw a woman standing; she had no hat on her head, and appeared to be waiting and looking eagerly for some one. When she caught sight of the children, she hurried forward to meet them. Bella soon recognised her, it was Mrs. Carter, Billy Carter's mother, and she wondered why she was there in her working-dress, and why her face was so white.

"Where's father?" asked Bella sharply. She never could tell afterwards why that question sprung to her lips, or why with a sharp thrill of fear she knew what the answer would be, before it was spoken.

"I've come to tell you, my dears,—your—your father's bad; there's been an accident, and—and you've got to be very quiet."

"What is it? What's happened? What accident, oh, do tell!" cried Bella in an agony of alarm at once. It seemed to her then that she had known of this all along, or expected it.

"Is—he—dead?" gasped Tom, white and shaking.

Mrs. Carter seized on the question with some relief. It was one she could answer with some comfort for them. "No, he isn't dead. He is hurt very bad, but the doctor thinks he'll get over it—in time—with care. He's got to go to the hospital, though. Here, let me help you, dear." She took Bella's baskets from her, and putting her strong arm about the child's trembling body, helped her along.

"What happened?" gasped Bella through her poor white, quivering lips.

"A wall fell and crushed him."

"Will he get well again?"

"Yes, dear, oh yes, for certain. We must all hope for the best, you know, and we must be as brave and cheerful as we can. He's hurt a good bit, and some bones are broken, but they can't tell exactly what's wrong until they get him to hospital. Oh yes, dear, he'll get well again, and come home as right as ever he was,—only it'll be a long time first, perhaps."

She was a capital person to have been sent to break the bad news to them, for she herself was cheerful, and hopeful, and sympathetic, in spite of the real dread at her heart. "We were hoping you would have got home sooner," she added. "It seemed such a long time I had to wait for you. He wants to see you before he starts."

The fact of his being taken from them came home to Bella then with a rush. "Oh, they mustn't take him away!" she cried, almost hysterically. "Why can't they let him stay at home? We can nurse him. I know he'd rather——"

"Hush! hush!" said Mrs. Carter, "he'll hear you!" for they were nearly at their own gate by that time. "Bella, dear, you want to do what's best for your father, don't you, and you don't want to think about yourself? Well, he has to be where he can have good nursing, and doctors night and day, and lots of things he couldn't have at home; and if you want him to get well at all, you must bear with his being taken away from you for a bit. You mustn't mind it's being harder for you now, if it's going to be better for him later."

"But I want to help."

"Help! My dear, there'll be plenty of ways for you to help! More than you can reckon. I don't know, I'm sure, how,"—but Mrs. Carter broke off abruptly. She did not want to add to their trouble now.

Tom, who had been walking along silently all this time, guessed what she meant. "We shall have plenty to do," he said gravely, "there'll be all of us to keep while father is away, and you and me'll have to try to do it, Bella."

By this time they were inside the gate, and at the sight of the ambulance standing in the garden Bella nearly broke down again. Her father had already been brought out and laid in

it, so they were spared that ordeal, but at the sight of his grey-white face, and closed eyes, and bandaged form, Bella almost fainted, and Tom had to clench his hands tight, to try and stop their trembling.

"He wants to speak to you," said the nurse, beckoning to them to come forward; "he would not go until he had seen you."

Almost timidly they drew close to his side and leaned over him. For a moment he did not look or speak; then, very feebly, his eyelids fluttered and opened, and the pallid lips moved, but the words that came through them were so faint they could barely catch them.

"You'll look after them—till—I come back?"

"Oh yes, yes," sobbed Bella passionately.

"We'll take care of them, father," said Tom, speaking very slowly and distinctly, trying hard all the time to keep his lips steady and his eyes from growing misty. "Don't you worry, we can manage. They shan't want for anything, if we can help it. Shall they, Bella?"

"No, no! only make haste and come back, father!" wept Bella.

"God bless you both!" gasped the poor injured father. "Now kiss me, Bella; you'll look after the little one? Tom, boy, take care of them all."

They both promised again, as they bent down and kissed him.

"And you'll come and see me—in the hospital—Saturdays?"

"Where is it you are going?" asked Bella hurriedly; she had forgotten that in her excitement.

"To Norton," he gasped, his strength fast failing.

Then some one led them away, and the ambulance started on its slow journey.

## **CHAPTER VIII.**

### **ROCKET'S HELP IS REQUIRED.**

"There will be plenty of ways for you to help."

Mrs. Carter had never spoken more truly than when she said this, by way of consoling and bracing up Bella. When the first shock and excitement and grief had calmed down, the little family at 'Lane End' found themselves faced with a problem which gave them enough to do and to think about. This was, how were they all to be fed, and clothed, and warmed, and their rent paid during the weeks that lay ahead of them?

Fortunately, their poor father had received his week's wages just an hour or so before he met with his accident, and fortunately the money was found still safe in his pocket, when his clothes had to be cut off him. This was something, but they all realised that it was the last that he would earn for many a day, and that there were five of them to support, and that money must be earned by some one to support them week by week.

Miss Hender grew nearly crazy, and gave way to black despair. She was always one for looking on the black side of things, and adding trouble and depression where there was more than enough already.

"It is a terrible thing to be left without a minute's warning, with four children to support, and enough to do already, without having to earn a living for them. I had better ask for parish relief; I don't see what else I can do," she groaned.

"Oh, Aunt Emma, don't do that!" cried Bella, horrified.

"It's all very well to say 'don't do that,'" her aunt answered impatiently. "I must do

something. You wouldn't like to starve, I'm thinking, and if I let you, I'd be had up for neglect and sent to prison!" and she collapsed into tears and groans again.

"Aunt Emma, don't go on like that! We'll get on somehow, and nobody shall blame you. We can make enough out of the garden to keep us yet for a bit," said Tom gravely.

These last days had changed Tom from a child into a man. He had not said much, but he had thought a great deal, and done more. After the Sunday, that strange, quiet Sunday, when he had been into Norton with his aunt and Bella to see the poor sufferer in the hospital, he had quietly set to work in the garden with all the energy and determination he possessed, for he had realised that the garden was likely to prove their great 'stand-by,' and that to provide for the future, it must be cared for now.

Aunt Emma, instead of thinking and acting, only sobbed and moaned and despaired, and instead of comforting the children, left them to comfort her. Perhaps in the end it was best for them, for it is only by helping and comforting others that one grows strong oneself.

"We made nine shillings on Saturday," went on Tom hopefully, "and that wasn't one of our best days."

"And you think that five of us can live on nine shillings a week!"

"Couldn't we?" asked Tom disappointedly, "with the eggs and the apples and the stuff out of the garden?"

Aunt Emma sniffed scornfully. "With good management we might get along," she said shortly. "There is no knowing what you can do till you're brought to it."

Bella began to lose her temper. "Why couldn't Aunt Emma try and make the best of things?" she thought impatiently, "instead of making them all more miserable than they were already. It was very unkind of her, and, after all, it was harder for them than for her;—but it had never been Aunt Emma's way to try and make the best of things."

Yet in her inmost heart Miss Hender did not really think the outlook so very black. At any rate, she realised that it was very much brighter than it might have been, if there had been no garden, and the children had not made that little start of their own; and in her own mind she was planning how she would take in a little washing, to help them all along. But poor Aunt Emma's fault was that she would never let people know she saw any brightness in life at all. She was afraid they would not realise how much she suffered, and how much she had to bear.

With spirits greatly damped, Tom and Bella walked away out into the garden, and there the sweet fresh autumn air and the sunshine soon cheered them again.

"What will there be to take in next week?" asked Bella, glancing about her. "We must carry all we can, for Aunt Emma's sake."

"There'll be apples," said Tom, "plenty of them hoarding pears, and cabbages. I wish we had a hand-cart!" he broke out impetuously: "for there's heaps of stuff, potatoes, and turnips, and carrots, if only we could get them to Norton, but what we can carry hardly pays for the time and trouble."

"I shall have some early chrysanthemums," said Bella, looking lovingly at her flowers, "and asters, and a few late roses. Oh, I ought to have opened my hotbed," and away she darted, her face full of eagerness.

It was only a few days before the accident that she had bought a nice second-hand frame with her earnings, and her father had fixed it for her. It was already full of pots of mignonette seeds and fairy-roses, cyclamen and lilies of the valley, which she was hoping to bring on to sell through the winter, when flowers would be scarce.

For once Tom stood by, and paid no heed. He was absorbed in a new idea that had come to him. "Bella," he said at last, "do you know what I've a good mind to do?"

Bella could see from his face that, whatever it was, he was pleased and excited about it, so she was prepared to back him up. "What is it? Do tell!"

"I've a good mind to ask old Mrs. Wintle to let us have her donkey and cart on Saturday; then we could carry in potatoes and vegetables enough to make it worth while."

"Wouldn't she charge a lot?" asked Bella doubtfully. "Doesn't she ask half-a-crown a day and his food? That would be a lot out of what we make, and Aunt Emma would grumble like anything!"

"Of course it would cost something, but see what a lot more stuff we could take in to sell. I believe it would pay, and I've a good mind to chance it. I tell you what I'll do. I'll pay for the donkey for a week or two, out of what I've saved, and then we shall see if it's worth it or not, and if it isn't, well, Aunt Emma won't be any the worse off."

"But you will!"

"I am going to risk it; I'd rather spend my money on that than anything. I believe it'll answer. Anyway, we shan't know till we try. Think of the time we shall save too! We needn't start so early by an hour or two, and we shall get back in time to do a bit of work out here too."

"That would be fine," agreed Bella, "and we shouldn't be so dreadfully tired either." The long walk had begun to be rather a trial to her. "Will you tell Aunt Emma about it, Tom? She takes things better from you."

To the surprise of both of them, Miss Hender 'took the news' very well indeed, and fell in with the plan at once instead of opposing it. "You'll save ever so much in shoe leather," she said, "and any amount of time and trouble. And look here," holding out her apron, in which were a number of large brown eggs, "couldn't you carry in some of these and sell them? There's some to go to your father, but there's a-plenty more, and they're fine ones too."

Bella's face brightened. "Why, of course we could! However didn't we think of it before? It'll be fine, Aunt Emma," and she longed to skip for joy.

"If we'd had them, you couldn't have carried them, you'd got load enough already; but with the donkey-cart it'll be different."

When Saturday came, and they began to load up the cart, the wisdom of Tom's plan was only too plain. There were baskets of flowers and herbs, one of eggs, and one of pears, a large hamper of apples, a sack of potatoes, and hampers of turnips and carrots, beets, and onions, leeks, and parsnips; not to mention a box of celery and one of tomatoes.

Bella laughed delightedly. "We shall be taking fowls and ducks too, some day, perhaps!"

"And why not?" asked Tom.

"Yes, why not?" said Miss Hender quickly. "What a good thing! Why didn't you think of it before, Bella? I could see to all that, and I could make pretty nearly as much by them as all the fruit and flowers put together. If I'd only thought of it,"—growing more and more enthusiastic—"I might have got a pair of fowls ready to send in to-day. Never mind, I'll be ready another time!" And from that chance word of Bella's began what they later on laughingly called 'Aunt Emma's Poultry Farm.'

Charlie and Margery watched the proceedings that Saturday morning with eyes full of envy and longing. They wanted so much to go too, and it did seem hard to stay behind for the whole long, dull day.

"You must come to meet us," whispered Bella, "and you shall have a drive home. We shan't be any earlier, for we're going to the hospital to see father; then, if he's better, you and Charlie are to come in with us next week to see him; Aunt Emma says so."

Bella in her pink frock, and Tom in his holland coat, clambered up into the cart, and while Tom gathered up the reins Bella picked up the two most precious of the baskets, and away they started.

Once clear of the lane, and out on the level high road, Rocket broke into a smart little trot, and carried them along in fine style. To Bella it seemed the very height of luxury and enjoyment to be getting over the ground so quickly, and with no heavy load to carry. The first milestone seemed to be reached in no time, but when they came to it Bella had to turn away her head and blink hard, to keep the tears out of her eyes, so vividly did the sight of it bring back the happy meetings there, and the thought that not for weeks and weeks, if ever, would they all meet there again.

It was a good thing for them both that they were not walking that day, for the drive, the donkey, and the excitement of the new venture, helped to lift their thoughts off their trouble, and helped them through. Some of the people they met stared wonderingly at the little pair of market-gardeners in the gay green cart. Some smiled and nodded encouragingly, others called out cheerily, "Hello, young market-gardeners, you're getting on! That's good, stick to it, and you'll do yet!"

By this time the regular market-folk who arrived early in the day had come to know the two children who were so regular and so punctual.

They both felt very pleased with the attention they received, but they felt very self-conscious indeed when they drew up at the house by the church, where their first customer, Mrs. Watson, lived, and even more so when they went on to Mrs. Adamson, whose little invalid daughter Joan had bought flowers of them every week since that first meeting.

Joan grew quite excited when she saw the donkey and cart, but when she heard of the accident, and the trouble they were all in, she wept for sympathy.

"Oh, mummy," she cried, "we must do something to help!" and Mrs. Adamson, who had been listening intently to the tale of trouble, decided that one of the best ways of helping would be by buying as much as she could of what they brought in to sell each week. So of eggs and vegetables, fruit and flowers, she laid in quite a store, and the children went on their way in high spirits. Just before they left, Joan called her mother aside for a whispered consultation.

"Mummy, darling, do let me send the poor man one of my bottles of eau-de-Cologne. If his head aches, he will be so glad of it; shall I?"

"Certainly, darling, and when he is better we will send him some magazines. Shall we?"

In a state of great delight Joan handed over the eau-de-Cologne to Bella. "But we will have the cork drawn first, for he might be glad to use it at once, and I'll leave the dear little corkscrew in. He'll like to have that, won't he?"

"Oh yes, miss," said Bella gratefully; "he's never seen one like that before. Thank you, miss, I'll tell him you sent it."

Then Joan had to be carried to the window to look at Rocket and the cart, and see Tom and Bella start on again. "Do you think you will ever sell all you've got there?" she asked, with wondering eyes.

"Yes, I think so. I hope so, miss. I've got a good many regular customers now, and p'raps we shall get some more. We're going to try it for a week or two, anyway, just to see."

Tom's courage was certainly rewarded, for long before the hour when visiting-time at the hospital began, they had sold out all they had brought, and were able to take good, patient Rocket to the stable and his dinner. They had not counted up their takings yet, but Bella felt sure that there was close on a sovereign in her purse; and they had besides an order for half a sack of potatoes, a bushel of cooking apples, and a pair of fowls. They scarcely knew what to do, they were so delighted.

"Oh, Tom, won't father be glad!" Bella kept on saying; "and won't he be surprised when he hears about Rocket! He'll think we are getting on fine, and won't he be pleased about it!"

"It'll help to get him better, I reckon," said Tom, with quiet delight.

Tom both felt and acted as though he were ten years older than when he was in Norton, a week ago. The shock and the responsibility, acting on his thoughtful, steady nature, had changed him from a boy to a man. Not a sad or too serious man, yet one who felt that he had to act now, not to play; to think out what was for the best, and to do it, and not let things slide, or take their chance, and he took up his responsibilities with a brave and cheerful spirit. There was no self-pity about Tom; it never entered his head to think he was ill-used or hard-worked.

"'Tisn't any hardship, ma'am," he said brightly, when Mrs. Adamson consoled with them on all they had to do, now they were left alone. "I like work better than play. You feel then that you'm doing something. I get tired of play. I like a game of cricket or football, but I mean the other sort of play."

Bella, who remembered only too well the dull, miserable years when Aunt Emma did not like her to play, and would not let her work, agreed with Tom heartily. "Yes, I like work better than play too," she said emphatically. "I think it's fine to have a lot to do. There isn't anything makes you so miserable as doing nothing."

From two to four were the visitors' hours at the hospital, and long before that hour had struck Tom and Bella were waiting anxiously for the doors of the hospital to open. There was quite a little crowd of people besides themselves, and every one had some little luxury they were taking to the poor invalids inside. Tom and Bella had fresh eggs and flowers, and, best of all, the good news of their success that day. They had actually earned a whole sovereign and threepence!

To poor William Hender this was good news indeed, for it meant that his dear ones were not in want—at any rate for the present—and the knowledge lifted a heavy load from his mind. "Thank God for sending me such help in my trouble," he murmured gratefully. "I am blessed with good children, and no mistake!"

But Bella's happiness had almost vanished at the sight of the poor pale face on the pillow, and the weak hands that he could scarcely raise. She had, somehow, expected to see her father much better and more like himself, but he looked so dreadfully, dreadfully ill and altered that an awful fear swept over her and gripped her with an icy clutch. In her anxiety she forgot her shyness, and went boldly up to one of the nurses, who was standing a little way off. "Do you think father is really better, miss?" she asked timidly, while every nerve quivered with dread of the answer.

"He is getting on," the nurse answered cautiously. "It will be a long time before he will



be well, of course. You mustn't expect to see much difference for a good while yet."

"You do think he will get well? You don't think he is—is——" Bella could not finish her question, her lips quivered so. The nurse, who was not supposed to talk about the patients to their friends, could not refuse those frightened pleading eyes.

"Oh no, no! you mustn't be thinking of such a thing. He is going to get well presently, and you will have him home for Christmas. What you have to do is to keep his spirits up, and cheer him all you can, and the doctor will cure him, and we will take care of him and send him home in time to eat his Christmas dinner."

Bella smiled through her tears, and with the worst fear lifted from her heart she turned to her father again. Till four o'clock they sat by him and talked, and he listened contentedly. He was anxious to hear every little detail of all they had been doing at home. He was too weak to talk much, but he joined in now and then, and laughed a lot at the funny things they told him. He was very much pleased when he heard about Rocket.

"I'm thankful you thought of it, my boy. I've been troubling about Bella's having that long walk in all weathers, and the mornings and evenings getting darker and darker. Rocket's a good steady donkey too, I remember him; 'twas I advised poor old Mother Wintle to buy him," and he laughed at the recollection.

The laugh raised Bella's spirits again, and their tongues wagged so fast after that, that when the bell rang at four o'clock for the visitors to leave, they felt sure there must have been a mistake. "It can't be more than three!" said Bella, quite distressed. But all the clocks in the town were striking four, and all the other visitors in the ward were preparing to leave. Bella's spirits sank again, it seemed so dreadful to go away and leave her father there, and it took all her courage to keep from breaking down and weeping bitterly.

"Never mind," said Tom, trying to be cheerful, "one week has gone, and the worst one for father, I expect, and p'raps in two or three more he'll be home again."

"The nurse said he would be home for Christmas," said Bella dolefully; "but I think she must have made a mistake, and meant Michaelmas, for Christmas is more than three months off yet. He'll be sure to be back before the Fair, won't he, Tom?"

"Oh yes," said Tom decidedly, with never a doubt.

The nurse had said Christmas, and she meant Christmas, though, mercifully for the children, they continued for some time to feel sure she had made a mistake, and hope burnt brightly in their hearts week after week, and their spirits were never daunted.

## **CHAPTER IX.**

### **HOME AGAIN.**

The nurse had spoken truly enough. William Hender did not die, and he got back to his home in time for Christmas. All through September and October the children kept up their hopes, each week they felt sure the next would bring the news that he was well enough to return to them; but the weeks went by, September had slipped into October, and October into November, and still he did not come.

The heat had suddenly broken up at the end of September, and the weather turned wet and stormy and depressing. Bella and Tom found the work in the garden almost beyond their power, and they longed for their father's help and advice; but week after week went by, and still he could not come, and the work had to be done somehow, by somebody.

Then, in November, the blow that some had feared all along fell on them. The doctor told Miss Hender that her brother might return to his home in a few weeks' time, but that he would never again be fit for hard work. He would be able to walk about a little, but he would always be a cripple and an invalid, and quite unable to carry on his old occupation.

The news fell on them all with crushing force. Miss Hender fell into her gloomiest mood,

and drew the most miserable pictures of the future, with six to feed and clothe, rent to pay, an invalid man to keep, and only the children's earnings to do it all on.

Bella saw only her poor father's sad fate—a helpless cripple for the rest of his life, tied to the house, and with nothing to occupy his time, he who had always been so strong and active, who had never been able to stay patiently indoors for an hour, unless he had something to do. And she felt that her heart would break with her sorrow and love for him.

Little Margery realised only the joy of having him back, and instantly became full of preparations for his coming. She had a new rose to show him, and her Sunday-school prize, and she had five shillings in her money-box, about the spending of which she wanted his advice.

Tom, watching her plans to give their invalid a happy welcome, decided that Margery, after all, was the one to imitate, and he tried to throw off the sickening sense of misery which had overwhelmed him since he had heard the stunning news, and to follow her example.

"We've got to make the best of it for his sake," he said to Bella and Charlie, as they worked away together, turning over an empty strip of ground. "It is worst of all for him, and if he sees we are all miserable, he'll feel it is his fault, and it will make it harder than ever for him."

"I don't believe father'll be a cripple always," said Charlie sturdily; "he's sure to get better some day, and there's certain to be something he can do."

"But the doctors say he mustn't do anything," said Bella despondently.

"Doctors don't know everything! Everybody makes mistakes some time," he added quickly, for the doctor at the hospital was one of his special heroes.

It was a comfort to the others even to be unable to contradict him.

"Anyhow," said Tom, "we will go on as though we thought he was going to be better soon, and he'll be able to tell us what to do in the garden, and how to do it, and p'raps by degrees he'll find little things that he can do without hurting himself." And so by making plans to help the poor invalid to be happy and comfortable, they made themselves happier too.

"I don't think we can do better than go on as we are," said Bella. "If I was to go out to service, or Tom was to get work anywhere, it would be one less to feed, but we shouldn't be able to earn as much for the rest as we do now."

They all agreed on that point, and Aunt Maggie, who was called in to talk matters over, agreed with them. "I think you've got a good opening that it would be a sin to waste," she said heartily. "I think the best thing you can do is to try to increase your business all you can."

"If I could have a bit more of the garden for a run, and could get the money to put up a bigger house for my fowls," said Aunt Emma eagerly, "I believe I could do very well with them."

"I am sure you could," agreed Mrs. Langley warmly. She did not add that this was just what she had been wanting to suggest, but was afraid to, lest it should give offence.

Emma Hender's face quite lit up with pleasure. "If it isn't too damp for you, I wish you would come down the garden with me and see what I think would be a good place to have a house."

"I'd like to come," said Aunt Maggie warmly, only too glad to be friendly if Miss Hender would let her. "Shall we go now?"

Down the garden they all trooped, for, of course, Margery must be in everything, and Charlie was more interested in ducks and fowls, or any other live creature, than he was in flowers or fruit. They examined the present poky fowl-house and run, and then they surveyed the land, and each one gave an opinion on the matter.

"I think if we were to put the new house next to the old one it would be best, don't you?" said Aunt Emma.

Aunt Maggie looked about her for a minute thoughtfully. "Well, no," she said at last. "I think, if it was mine, I should have a new house close there by the orchard, and give them a run that would go right through the hedge, so that they could have the run of the orchard too. They would enjoy that, and it would keep them healthy, and they could pick up so much food you wouldn't need to feed them more than twice a day. What do you think about it?"

Miss Hender looked thoughtful for a minute. "Yes, I think it might be a good plan," she said. She did not speak very heartily, but it was a wonderful change for her to agree at all

with any suggestion made by Mrs. Langley. "But there," she sighed, dropping back into her usual melancholy manner, "what does it matter? I don't suppose it will ever be my lot to get it. I don't see where the money is to come from," and she returned to the house with all the air of a much injured woman.

That afternoon, as Tom and Bella went round shutting up the hot-beds, Tom confided a new plan he had formed. "I am going to learn carpentering this winter," he said eagerly, "just plain carpentering, you know. I want to see if we can't build Aunt Emma her fowl-house by the spring. I'm sure she'd make it pay, and I believe she'd be better-tempered if she'd got something of her own to look after, and earn a little by."

"I believe she would," said Bella soberly. "I know I was."

It was only a few days later than this that William Hender came back once more to the house he had been absent from for a quarter of a year. The day before Christmas Eve was fixed on for his return, and in the double joy of Christmas and of having their father back, the children forgot for the time the trouble that hung over them all. To them his return made the season seem a more than usually joyful one; but Aunt Emma felt that, because of the trouble, Christmas should be ignored by them that year, and not kept up in any way.

"I am sure your poor father won't feel up to eating any Christmas dinner, or having any fun, or anything," she said gloomily. "We'd better let Christmas go by just like any other time. I've worries enough on my mind to keep me from rejoicing, and your poor father the same."

Bella felt her temper rising. "As if the trouble isn't more to me than it is to her," she thought impatiently. "A fine thing it would be if all sat down and groaned and cried!"

Tom looked puzzled. He felt that they ought at any rate to try to seem bright and cheerful for their father's sake, but he didn't want to seem unfeeling; yet the trouble would not grow less by looking miserable about it, and making every one else miserable too.

"We shall have father back," he said quietly, "that'll be enough to be glad about. I think we ought to keep it up a bit this year, just to show how glad we are."

"Can't you say you're glad when you see him? Won't that be enough?"

Charlie put his own feelings quite plainly. "Oh, Aunt Emma, we've never let Christmas go by yet; do let's keep it up this year! Let's have a nice dinner and some fun! Aunt Emma, do. P'raps we shan't all be here by another one."

Charlie was Miss Hender's favourite, and, as a rule, got what he asked for, though not, perhaps, the first time. Miss Hender was impressed by his last words. "P'raps we shan't all be here by another, one."

He had only meant that perhaps one of them might be out in service, but to her mind came only the thought of a longer and a final parting, such as they had so narrowly escaped, and the thought touched and awed her.

"Very well," she said at last; "if you are all set on a Christmas dinner, I'll cook it for you. I can't undertake more, my hands'll be full 'tending on your father."

"I can 'tend on father," Bella was about to say, and sharply, but fortunately she checked herself in time, as she remembered that there were many hours and some whole days in each week when she could do nothing for him, and he must be left entirely to Aunt Emma's care, and depend on her for all his comfort. So she said nothing, and she and Tom went off to their work, feeling thankful to Charlie for having gained so much for them, and determined to think of some other way also in which to keep up the happy season.

This was on the Monday, and on the Wednesday the invalid was to return, so that already there were great bustle and excitement at the cottage, preparing and making ready, for there really was a great deal to do. The room which had always been used as a parlour was now to be turned out and whitewashed and papered, and turned into a bedroom for the invalid, that he might not have to go up and down the stairs. Indeed, the whole house was made sweet and bright inside and out, the garden rails and the front door were given a coat of paint, and the garden itself made as neat as a December garden could be, though it was robbed of some of Bella's finest chrysanthemums to decorate the house on the longed-for day.

Their father was to leave the hospital soon after the midday meal there, reaching home early in the afternoon before the light began to wane, but by one o'clock the four children had taken up their position at the top of the lane to watch for the coming carriage.

As the time drew near when it might be expected, Aunt Maggie came and joined them, and further along the road they saw Mrs. Carter waiting to wave a welcome to their invalid, and presently others came, until there was quite a little gathering, anxious to show their neighbour how glad they were to see him back.

When the long-looked-for carriage came in sight, and Tom and the children darted forward to meet it, Bella could not go with them. Such a lump rose in her throat, such blinding tears to her eyes, such a feeling of love and pity and sorrow welled up in her heart, she could scarcely restrain herself from sobbing aloud, and turning quickly she walked stumblingly back to the empty house.

Mrs. Langley saw her go, but she did not follow, something in Bella's face told her she would rather be alone; but when Tom and Margery, missing her, ran back after her, Aunt Maggie did not stop them. She thought it best to let them go.

Charlie, as usual, went his own way, and when the carriage drove slowly down the lane and drew up at the gate, he was riding triumphantly on the step, the door-handle in his hand, ready to open it.

Bella stood by, nervously dreading the alterations she might see. Tom looked on, very grave and silent, but Margery, forgetting everything but that her father was come back, rushed towards him with a glad cry of welcome, "Oh, daddy, daddy! I'm so glad you've come back," and, flinging her arms about him, drew his face down to be kissed.

In spite of the suffering inseparable from it, it was a very happy home-coming. The invalid was helped into the house and put in his chair by the fire; but before they could begin to tell or hear all there was to tell or hear, the carriage had to be unloaded and all his belongings brought in; so, to get it done quickly and come back to him, they all trooped out to help.

And what a cry of excitement went up at the sight of what the carriage contained! For, first and foremost, on the seat that had been facing him, they found a real little Christmas-tree.

"I saw it!" cried Charlie; "I saw it directly I got on the step."

But no one paid any heed to Charlie's shouts, for they were bringing in the tree in triumph. Tom flew off to get a big pot to stand it in, and when he had planted it and brought it in and stood it in the place of honour in the kitchen, how cheery it looked, and how fragrantly the scent of it filled the cosy, warm room, and how excitedly they all discussed what should be hung on its branches, until their father, sorting out one box from the rest of his luggage, opened it and displayed little glittering candlesticks and pretty glass ornaments which were for nothing in the world but to hang on a Christmas-tree, and make it look perfectly beautiful.

There was a bright blue peacock with a spun-glass tail, and a top-knot of the same on his head, a rosy apple and a yellow pear, a bunch of grapes, and two balls that flashed and glittered, and all were as pretty as pretty could be, as they caught the glow of the fire and flashed it back in dozens of different lights.

"The Sister gave them to me; they had a lot sent them for the hospital tree—more than they could use, and she thought you would like some."

"Oh!" sighed Margery, breathless with delight, "I wish it was to-morrow now, and that there wasn't any night, for I'm afraid if I go to sleep I shall wake up and find it is only a dream."

Night came, though, and the next day, when Tom and Bella had to go to Norton—for the market was to be held on the Thursday, Christmas Eve, rather than on the Bank Holiday—and never, since they began, had the two found it so hard to start off on their day's work. There was so much to talk over and to do at home, so much to show their father; things they had done in the garden, and things they meant to do. He consoled them a little, though, by promising that he would not look at anything until they were there to show him round; and then, to cheer them in their work, there was his interest in the donkey and cart, and the packing up of their load, and his astonishment at the number of different things they carried in it now.

To-day there were holly and ivy and mistletoe, as well as all the usual things.

The weather was ideal Christmas weather, and the drive in was so beautiful, no one's spirits could go on remaining low. In the town, too, all was bustle and excitement. Every one seemed to be pleased and full of pleasant mysteries and nice secrets. The shop windows were full of lovely things, and the shops full of people buying them.

"I don't suppose we shall find any one at home," said Bella ruefully, as she dismounted first, as usual, at Mrs. Watson's door, and, indeed, Mrs. Watson was out 'shopping,' the maid said, but she had left an order for some chrysanthemums, and two shillingworth of holly, if they had any.

Then, how glad Tom was that he and Charlie had spent that long day on Monday gathering Christmas decorations! It was Charlie's suggestion, and Charlie was to have half the profits.

Bella rejoiced doubly at every branch of holly that was sold, for, in the first place, it had been anything but pleasant as a travelling companion, and, in the second, the money it sold for helped to fill up her purse, and now, more than ever, were they anxious to earn every penny they could.

The next place they stopped at was Mrs. Adamson's. Here they found Joan and her mother both at home. Joan's face was full of excitement when Bella was shown into her own little private room; but Bella thought it was all on account of a pot of hyacinths that she was bringing her, to give to her mother as a Christmas present. Joan had ordered them weeks before, and Bella had taken special pains to bring them on nicely, and now they were to be handed over to the little owner, and hidden until the next day.

Bella soon found that it was not the hyacinths only that were causing Joan's excitement. "I've got something for you, too," she said eagerly, and she drew out from amongst her cushions and under her rug several interesting-looking parcels.

"They are secrets, and you mustn't look inside them until you get home," she said firmly. "That one is for your father, and that is for your aunt, and this is for you; that is for Tom, and that for Charlie, and this one is for Margery. I can't help your seeing it is a dolly, for I can't wrap it up any better, it is so big and bulgy."

Bella tried her hardest to thank the kind little invalid as warmly as she felt, but her surprise and delight nearly robbed her altogether of speech.

"Oh, and they shall all go on father's tree!" she gasped delightedly, as the idea suddenly came to her. Then, of course, Joan had to be told about the little tree that their father had brought home with him, and she grew almost as excited as Bella herself.

"Do put my parcels on it, and don't, please, tell them anything about them until the tree is lighted up. Have you got candles for it?"

Bella shook her head. She had not thought about lighting up the tree.

"Will you, please, pass me that box on the table?" asked Joan, and when Bella had done so, she opened it and took from it six little Christmas candles. "I have lots," she said; "do, please, have these."

"I do think Christmas is the most lovely time of all the year!" said Bella to Tom, as, with her parcels carefully hidden at the bottom of her big basket, they drove on again, and Tom agreed.

Inside the shops and outside the Christmas spirit reigned that day. Buyers and sellers all seemed possessed with it, and so busy was every one that there was no dawdling over the making of purchases, and the children, though they had an even larger supply than usual, had sold out their store quite early.

"We could start for home at once," said Bella, as the clock struck one, "but I would like to take home just one or two little things for the Christmas tree, and some oranges and nuts—and oh, I wish we could get some nice little present for father, and something for Aunt Emma. Do you think we might, Tom?"

"Yes," said Tom, without hesitation; "we'll spend the holly money—my share of it, I mean. You see, it won't be like wasting it; we will get them something useful."

"Let's go and look at the shops," cried Bella delightedly. "Oh, won't it be fine when they see the things on the tree! We won't let them know anything about it till then, will we?"

They went down the street, and up, and down again, looking in at every shop window most intently, but quite unable to decide on what to lay out their money. They wanted two things that must be cheap, and must be useful, and must suit their father and aunt.

At last Tom grew impatient. "Look here, we've got to make up our minds and settle on something, for it's time we were getting home."

They were standing outside a drapery store at that moment—the kind of store where they sell not only drapery, but all kinds of things—and almost as Tom spoke the shop and window burst into a blaze of light. Being Christmas Eve, they were going to spare no expense in making the place look attractive.

Tom and Bella drew near for another look, and almost at the same moment their eyes fell on the very thing they wanted, a pair of soft warm felt slippers. "Those will do for father, they'll be splendid!" they exclaimed in one breath; and the next moment Bella was in the shop, so afraid was she that some one else would be before her in securing them.

Having made sure of them, she was able to look about her, and, hanging over the counter, she caught sight of some little grey woollen turnovers. "One of those will be just the thing for Aunt Emma," she whispered to Tom, "to put over her shoulders when she goes

down to the fowls."

So a shawl was purchased, too, and, almost too excited and pleased to know what they were about, the children hurried off for Rocket and the cart, and started for home.

## CHAPTER X.

### CHRISTMAS.

With the thought of the warm stable awaiting him at the other end of his journey, little Rocket stepped out so briskly that they were home in good time after all. Bella's thoughts and Tom's were far more perplexing ones, for they had to decide how they were to get their mysterious parcels out of the cart and out of sight without any one seeing them.

"I can get them out of the cart easy enough," said Tom, "but to get them into the house is another matter. Would it do to leave them in the shed all night?"

"It'll have to, it's my belief," said Bella perplexedly. "I think it's the best we can do, and then I'll try to go down for them and hide them upstairs before Margery wakes in the morning."

So she put the precious parcels in one of the round hampers, and covered them over with some of the waste cabbage leaves they had saved and brought back for the fowls.

"Are those for me?" Miss Hender asked, when she saw the leaves.

"Yes," said Tom calmly. "I'll carry them down and put basket and all in the tool-house for the night;" and he was gone before any one could stop him, and Bella, with a deep breath of relief, was able to think of other things with an easy mind.

It was splendid, they both thought, to come back and find their father awaiting them once more, glad to welcome them, and eager to hear all their doings. By the time Rocket had been taken home to his supper and bed, the afternoon had gone and darkness fallen, and then they all had tea by the light of the blazing fire in the kitchen, which was sweet with the mingled scents of the little Christmas tree and one of Bella's pots of Roman hyacinths, which she had given to her father. There was something of a festive air, too, about the little gathering. Father was home, Christmas was at hand, and they had earned enough that day to keep them all in comfort for another week. They had got in a store of coal and wood, the rent was ready in the rent-box, and their minds were free from debt or pressing need.

There was much to tell and much to hear as they lingered over their meal, but Tom and Bella found it far from easy to talk of their day's doings without bringing in any reference to the 'surprises' now lying in the tool-shed, and more than once they were thankful that the light in the room was flickering and uneven, for it helped to hide embarrassed looks and quick blushes, which would certainly have roused suspicion if Charlie's or Margery's quick eyes had seen them.

Charlie was in a state of great delight with the three shillings, which was his share of the holly money. "What shall you do with yours, Tom?" he asked, but fortunately he did not wait for an answer. "Do you know what I am going to do with mine?—But no, I shan't tell you yet; you'll know soon, and then we shall have a fine time."

"I know," said Margery, who was full of curiosity, and wanted to surprise Charlie's secret from him, "Rabbits!"

"Rabbits!" scornfully, "I wouldn't be bothered with them!"

"Canaries?" asked Bella, "or bees, or pigeons?"

"Never you mind," said Charlie, somewhat hastily. "It isn't any good for you to go on guessing. You'll know when you see." And he pointedly turned the conversation, and actually managed to go to bed with his secret still kept.

So did Bella and Tom, but theirs weighed on Bella's mind far more heavily than did Charlie's on his, and she was never more glad to get up than she was on that Christmas morning.

It was still so dark that she could not see Margery in her little bed across the room, but she heard her breathing steadily and deeply, and as she did not speak when Bella moved about the room a little, Bella knew she must be fast asleep. She did not even move when Bella struck a match and lighted a candle, nor when she opened the bedroom door and crept downstairs.

It had become Bella's habit now to go down first and light the kitchen fire, so if they heard her no one would take any notice, and, once downstairs, it was easy enough to open the front door and slip out. It was not so easy to grope one's way to the tool-house and find the hamper and its contents. It was a bitterly cold morning, a keen wind swept along the garden path, and every now and then something soft and cold touched Bella's face, or rested on her hair.

"I believe it is snowing," she said, as she held out her hand to try to catch a flake. In the sky the stars were still twinkling, and suddenly from somewhere in the distance the bells rang out their glad peal.

To Bella out there alone with the stars and the snow and the bells, it all seemed wonderfully beautiful and impressive. Her thoughts flew to her mother, and the past Christmases when she had been with them, and, as she turned her face up to the sky and the stars, it seemed to Bella as though they must be looking straight into each other's eyes.

"We don't forget you, mother," she whispered. "Even when we are talking and laughing, we'll be thinking of you too, and wanting you;" and one little star flashed and gleamed as though it understood and answered her.

In the tool-house she found the hamper and its precious contents quite safe, and gathering all the parcels in her apron, she replaced the cabbage leaves, and scurried back to the house. How she got in and up the stairs she scarcely knew.

Margery stirred as she entered and spoke, "Is that you, Bella?"

"Yes," said Bella, "I'm going down now to light the fire and get father some tea. You go to sleep again; it is too early to wake up yet;" and sleepy Margery turned over in her snug bed and was asleep almost before Bella had ceased speaking.

It was not easy to stow away a dozen paper-covered parcels in a small space, and without making a sound. Bella found this the hardest part of the whole task, until it entered her head to lay them flat under her bed. "It's lucky I make my bed myself!" she thought, as she drew the bedclothes straight again. "It is a splendid place, nothing shows a bit!" and she hurried about her usual tasks full of excitement and relief.

There was a Christmasy look about the world out of doors, and a Christmasy feeling throughout the house indoors. The sun shone, and a few flakes of snow fell in a lazy, casual way—enough to convince Margery that Christmas had really come, but not enough to inconvenience anybody else. To Margery snow was a part of Christmas, which was not complete without it, and as soon as she stepped out of bed she ran to the window and looked out anxiously.

"Well," she said doubtfully, "there is snow, but very little. I hope it doesn't mean that it is going to be a very little Christmas."

Long before the day was over she admitted that, in spite of there being only a very little snow, it was one of the nicest Christmases she had ever known in all her life.

Almost as soon as their father was dressed and settled in his arm-chair by the fire, Aunt Maggie arrived with a big and heavy basket on her arm.

"Happy Christmas to you all!" she cried cheerfully. "Isn't it good to be together again? How are you feeling this morning, William?"

"Pretty well, thank you, Maggie, and glad enough to be home again! You are coming to dinner with us, of course?"

"No, I am not, thank you," said Aunt Maggie; "an old friend of mine is coming to dinner with me. She was alone, and I was alone, so I asked her. I've brought you your plum-pudding, if you'll accept it instead of me, and there's a little parcel for each of you."

"Maggie, you've got to come to us! You knew we should expect you! Whatever made you go and ask somebody in?"

"Well, I knew you'd be better alone, as you ain't very strong yet, and Miss Hender has got her hands full, I know. But if you'll let me come up to tea, I will, and be glad to."

"And bring your friend too," said Aunt Emma, quite genially.

"Thank you; I am sure it is very kind of you, and she'll be delighted to come, I know. I must run home now, for I've got my dinner to get ready."

Bella and the children, who had disappeared soon after Aunt Maggie's arrival, came running in again.

"Aunt Maggie," said Bella, almost breathless with haste, "we were coming down with these on our way to church, but—but we can't wait! That's with my love. I've been bringing them on on purpose for you!" and she put down before Aunt Maggie a pot of beautiful lily of the valley almost in full bloom. The fragrance of them filled the room.

"Lilies!" cried Mrs. Langley delightedly, "lilies? Why, however did you get them now, child? I never saw anything lovelier in my life? Old Mrs. Twining'll go crazy over them. I never knew anybody love flowers as she does. Thank you, Bella, dear," and she kissed the little flower-grower warmly.

"I've made you a besom, Aunt Maggie, but it isn't very good, I am afraid," said Tom shyly. "I ain't very clever at it yet."

Aunt Maggie's pleasant face beamed. "Bless the boy!" she cried heartily, "he always knows what I'm in want of. I shall find it ever so useful, Tom."

"And I've got an orange for you," broke in Margery, who could keep quiet no longer.

"And I've got some peppermints," said Charlie.

"Now fancy you two remembering what I like! Thank you, dears, ever so much. Well, I didn't expect to carry my basket back full, I can tell you. I am sorry I've got to hurry away now, but I'll be up again about four o'clock. I hope you'll have a comfortable day, William. If I can do anything to help, I shall be only too pleased. You will tell me, Miss Hender, won't you? Well, good-bye for the time, and a happy Christmas to you all!" and Aunt Maggie ran off as fast as she could go.

Then what excitement there was, as they all eagerly opened their parcels. There was a warm muffler for their father, an apron for Miss Hender, a pair of warm gloves for Bella and a thick pair for Tom for driving; for Charlie there was a book, and for Margery a silver thimble.

"Just the very things we want!" cried Bella delightedly, "I shall wear my gloves to church presently; I wanted some to keep my hands warm."

"I can't wear my fimble to church, I s'pose?" questioned Margery, looking at it longingly.

"Oh no!" said Bella, "and if you could it wouldn't show under your gloves."

"Could I carry it in my pocket?" pleaded Margery; she could not bear to be parted from her new treasure so soon.

"You would most likely drag it out with your handkerchief and lose it. What would you do then? You leave your thimble at home with father, and I will lend you my muff, to keep your hands warm—if you will promise to take great care of it."

"Oh, I'll be ever so careful," promised Margery eagerly, for one of the ambitions of her life was to have a muff to carry. Bella had a little old-fashioned black one that had belonged to her mother, and Margery yearned for the time when she too should have one.

They were all pleased with their presents, even Aunt Emma. "Well, I did want an apron," she said, as she turned it over and examined it. "It might have been a trifle longer, but it looks a nice one." This from Aunt Emma was wonderful praise. "I must go and see about the dinner now, and, Bella, it is time to get ready for church; you'll see that they are all clean and tidy, won't you?"

"Yes," promised Bella; and when presently they all started on their walk no one could have found fault with their appearance, not even Aunt Emma.

The snowflakes had ceased falling now, the sun was shining brilliantly, but a keen little breeze was rustling the dead leaves still clinging to the bushes, and nipping the noses and fingers of those who faced it. Across the fields sounded the peals of the church bells, and along the roads and lanes came little groups of people stepping out briskly in the frosty air. Every one had a greeting for every one, and almost every face bore a brighter, more friendly look than usual.

The service, with its hymns so heartily sung, was cheerful too, particularly the part that the children loved so much, when carols were sung in place of a sermon. This was a treat they would not have missed for a good deal. They all waited eagerly for their own especial favourites, and when the choir broke out with—



"Once in royal David's city  
Stood a lowly cattle shed."

Margery looked up at Bella triumphantly. She had her favourite, at any rate, so her anxiety was over.

Charlie's favourite was, 'God rest you, merry gentlemen,' but he was doomed to disappointment that day; and Tom did not get his—

"The holly and the ivy  
Now both were full well grown."

Bella had so many favourite carols, she was almost sure of hearing one or the other, and to-day her face lighted up with pleasure when the choir began—

"It came upon the midnight clear,  
That glorious song of old,  
From angels bending near the earth,  
With news of joy foretold.  
Peace on the earth, goodwill to men,  
From heaven's all-gracious King,  
The world in solemn silence lay  
To hear the angels sing."

As they walked home the air and the words still rang in her head:—

"And ye, beneath life's crushing load,  
Whose forms are bending low,  
Who toil along the arduous way,  
With painful steps and slow;  
Look now! for glad and joyous hours,  
God's messengers will bring.  
Oh, rest beside the weary road,  
And hear the angels sing."

As she sang them her thoughts flew first to her father, and then they travelled back over the past twelve months, and all the trials and changes it had brought to them, and all the good things too. God had been very, very good to them. He had given them their father back, they had wanted for nothing, and He had enabled them to keep a home for their father to come back to.

It rested with them still to keep a roof to shelter him, to find food and clothing, and everything that was needed, but Bella did not let herself feel afraid.

"I am not going to worry, God will help us," she thought, with childlike faith in Him. "He has taken care of us so far, and I am sure He will go on taking care of us."

"How quiet you are! What are you thinking of?" cried Margery, tugging at Bella's hand.

"Oh, rest beside the weary road,  
And hear the angels sing,"

Sang Bella, softly, as they turned into May Lane, and Tom took up the refrain.

"Look! look! look! There's father, standing at the gate! Oh, do look!" cried Margery excitedly, and, taking to her heels, she dashed to meet him, followed by the others.

Father had to hear all about the service, and the carols, of course, but before he had heard a half, and admired the new gloves, and shown off his own new muffler, Aunt Emma was out, to say he ought not to stand about in the cold, and that dinner would soon be ready, and the children had better come in and get their hats and coats off.

Such a dinner it was, too, and such appetites they all had. There were two roasted fowls, a piece of bacon, a suet pudding, and potatoes and Brussels sprouts of their own growing; and after that there was Aunt Maggie's Christmas pudding.

"I think it has been a lovely dinner!" said Margery, with a deep sigh of content; "and I s'pect presently I shan't feel as though I had eaten such a 'normous lot. I think I'll be comfor'abler when I don't," and she was surprised that the others all laughed.

They sat a long time over their dinner, talking and enjoying themselves, and the short December daylight was actually beginning to wane before they made a move.

"Now," said Aunt Emma, with a sigh, as she rose, "who is going to help me with the dishes?"

Bella looked at Tom, and Tom at Bella. "Well," said the latter, at last, "I want to help you, but—but Tom and I have a big secret that we want to—to arrange, and we want to be here

by ourselves,—except father, of course,—for a bit."

"Is it a nice secret? a real one?" asked Charlie, "a s'prise?"

"Yes, a very nice one."

"We'll help Aunt Emma; come along, Margy."

"I wish I knew what it was," said Margery, still lingering and looking anxiously at Bella. "Shall I know by an' by?"

"Yes, yes," said Bella impatiently; "if you run away you will. If you don't, you see, we shan't be able to attend to it——"

"Oh!" gasped Margery, and the next moment she had disappeared, and was in the scullery.

Then, for nearly an hour Tom and Bella found so much to do, they scarcely knew what to do first. Their father had to be told all about the secrets, all the treasures had to be brought down from upstairs, the candles fixed in the candlesticks, and the presents arranged on the tree or around it. They never could have been ready in time, had not their father helped them; and, as it was, darkness had fallen before they had done, and they had to light the lamp. At last everything was really fixed and ready, all but the lighting of the Christmas candles.

"Now," said Bella, "we will put out the lamp, and stir up the fire to make it blaze, for there mustn't be any other light but that and the candles. Tom, you go out, and see if Aunt Emma and the others are ready. If they are, they must wait till we call, and then we will light the candles at once."

"They are ready," said Tom, returning in a moment; "and you had better hurry, for they won't wait much longer."

One after another the yellow flames gleamed out against the green branches. "You can call them now, Tom," Bella gasped, breathless with excitement and haste.

Tom, only too ready, put his head round the door. "Ahoy there!" he began, at the top of his voice, and almost as if in answer came a knocking at the door.

"That's Aunt Maggie and Mrs. Twining," whispered Bella; "that's nice, now they'll be able to see the tree too!"

Tom ran out and opened the front door quickly, for it was not the weather in which to keep people waiting, and so it happened that the little group from the door and the little group from the scullery met in the passage, and entered the room together.

"Oh-h-h!" squealed Margery.

"I say!" cried Charlie.

"Well, I never! And to think that at my age I should see a Christmas-tree for the first time!" exclaimed old Mrs. Twining. "It makes me sad to think of what I've missed!"

"However did you manage it? and where did you get all the things?" cried Aunt Emma, amazed, for she had no suspicion of what was going on.

For a while all was chatter and admiration and excitement, the elder ones content to gaze and admire only, the younger ones eyeing the parcels with eager, inquisitive eyes.

"Whatever can be inside them all?" gasped Margery. "Oh, I don't know how to wait until I know!" and Margery was not the only one who felt like that. Indeed, to keep them waiting long was more than Bella or Tom could do, and very soon the parcels were being handed round.

That was a glorious moment for them all, but especially for Bella; she alone knew all the secrets the tree held, and to whom each parcel belonged, and she was pleased and proud, excited and nervous, but supremely happy, all at the same time. There was something for every one, even for old Mrs. Twining, for, when Bella realised that she would be there, and heard how much she loved flowers, she had brought in one of her precious pots of Roman hyacinths for her, and placed it under the boughs of the tree in readiness for the old lady.

"I s'pose I ought to keep it for market," she had sighed, as she picked out the nicest she could see. But no price that could have been paid for it could have been half as precious as the overwhelming delight of the poor lonely old woman, and her joyful thanks.

For Aunt Maggie there was a little vase that they had bought in Norton for her; for their father the slippers, and for Aunt Emma the shawl, and they all seemed quite overcome to think there were such nice presents lurking in those branches for them.

Then came what were surprises even to Bella,—Joan Adamson's presents, which she had not even felt through the wrappings. The little lady must have thought the matter out very carefully, for she had sent to each exactly what they wanted. For Margery there was a doll, fully dressed, even to the little laced boots that could be taken off and laced on again. For Tom there was a fine big book with pictures of shipwrecks and fights and wonderful adventures. For Charlie there was a strong clasp-knife, which made him, for the first time, cease to envy his father. While for Bella there was the prettiest little brooch she had ever seen. It was only a little frosted silver daisy with a yellow eye, but to Bella, who had never possessed but one brooch, and that an old one of her mother's, which she was afraid to wear, it was perfect, and filled her with rapture. For Aunt Emma there was a nice jet hat-pin, and for their father two white handkerchiefs.

No little Christmas-tree that ever existed could have given more pleasure than that one did, and even after it was relieved of its burden of presents, the children could not tear themselves away from gazing at it, until the candles had burnt right down in their sockets, and there was no light left to gaze by.

With a sigh of regret that the joy of it was over, they all turned away, but only to gather round the fire, as happy a little party as one could find that Christmas Day. The mingled scent of the flowers and the fir-tree made the kitchen sweet, the pretty glass toys on the little tree caught the light of the fire and flashed back its glow. Father put on his warm slippers, and Aunt Emma her apron and little shawl, Charlie dropped on the rug before the fire to examine his knife again by its light, and Margery sat at her father's feet hugging her doll in an ecstasy of delight.

"Let us have some carols, children, shall we?" said their father presently. "Aunt Emma and I haven't heard any yet, and Christmas doesn't seem perfect without a few carols."

So on they sat in the firelight and sang all they could remember, one after the other, until at last the fire died down, and the room grew dark.

"I think it is time now to light the lamp and see about having some tea," said Aunt Emma, rising from her chair. "What does every one say to that?"

"I don't know that I want any tea, but I should like the lamp to be lighted," said Margery, with a deep sigh of pleasure; "for, though I know what my doll feels like, I can't say I have seen her properly yet. But I've been busy all the time, I've been thinking about a name for her, and I've made up my mind that I'm going to call her 'Christmas.'"

## CHAPTER XI.

### A STEP FORWARD.

"Aunt Maggie," said Bella, "what does that line in the Carol mean, 'And hear the angels sing'?"

It was the day after Christmas, and Bella was having tea with Mrs. Langley. For a moment Aunt Maggie sat gazing thoughtfully into the fire. "I ain't very clever at putting things into words," she said at last, "but I think what it means is, that we must stop every now and then from thinking only of the worries and troubles of life, and the hard work, and the squabbles and disappointments, and let our thoughts dwell instead on what is beautiful and good—on God, Who has done so much for us, and Jesus, Who died for us. We must think of the beautiful things that God gives us every day, the birds and the flowers, and the children, and our homes and friends. If we do that, we shall be strong and hopeful, and there will be many glad hours for us, when we shall hear the angels' voices in our hearts."

"I think I understand," said Bella gravely. "We have had lots of trouble, but we have had lots of nice things too. I like to stop and think about it all; don't you, Aunt Maggie? It makes one feel happy and glad."

"Yes, dear, and it is always wonderful, when looking back over the past, to see the way God has led us, and all the experiences we have been through. If we could look ahead, we should be frightened and daunted, probably, but if we put our hands in God's hand and let

Him lead us, and if we take each day as it comes, and each duty, content to do our best, and to do without grumbling the work that He sets us, we shall come through without fear or alarm, and find our way smoother for us than ever we had dared to hope for."

"I suppose every one has some work to do," said Bella; "but it seems as if some people only play."

"Most people have something to do, and a good many find their play harder than work; but it doesn't matter to you or to me or to any one what others have or haven't. God has given us certain work to do for Him and His people. He can't give the same work to everybody. One has to fill one post, and another another post. It doesn't make it any harder for us that some have very little to do. We aren't any the worse off, are we?"

"No," said Bella.

"In fact, we are better off. If everybody worked, there would be nothing left for those who want to live by their work. If everybody grew flowers, nobody would want to buy yours. If you had to make your own boots and clothes, you couldn't make your garden pay as you do. But I see the kettle is boiling, and we'll have some tea, and we won't grumble because we've got to get it ourselves, will we?"

"I'd rather make it myself," said Bella, laughing. "Aunt Maggie, do you know what is going to happen?"

"No. Something nice, I hope, dear?"

"Yes. Father says we'll have a large fowl-house put up, there by the orchard, and we'll keep a whole lot of fowls. Aunt Emma has done so well with them this year. He says he will be able to help with them, chop up their food and feed them, and collect the eggs and wash them and date them."

"Oh, that will be splendid! I know it will be a comfort to him to be doing something, and it will be good for him too. Why, Bella, child, you will be having a stall in the market soon."

Bella coloured, and laughed shyly. "That is one of the things I wanted to manage this year if we could, but perhaps we'll have to wait now. The fowl-house will cost a good bit, and we must pay for that first."

"Never mind, child. It will soon repay you again, and perhaps by the next Christmas market you will have your stall."

Bella's face was radiant. "Aunt Maggie, I wanted to ask you about something else I want to do. Can't I bottle some of my herbs to sell? I've got ever so much parsley and mint and sage, and it is only wasting."

"Of course you could! Why ever didn't we think of it sooner?" cried Mrs. Langley, vexed with herself. "It is the wrong time now; you must gather it before it flowers, but we will take care we don't forget another season, and in the meantime we must collect some nice bottles and corks."

"A stall in the market," said Aunt Maggie to herself, when Bella had run home. "It strikes me that before very long they'll be opening a shop of their own, and right well they deserve to succeed too. It isn't many children of their age could or would support a whole family, and be so happy in their work too."

Though the days were short now, and the hours few when they could work out of doors, the fowl-house was built and tarred and roofed, and fitted with perches before a couple of weeks were past, for the man they called in to help them with the job had little else to do at that time of the year, and there was so little to be done in the garden, the boys were able to help a great deal; and never in their lives had they seen Aunt Emma so pleased as she was with the new fowl-house and run. 'My poultry farm,' she called it, and she was full of plans as to where the chickens were to be kept, and how they were to be fed, and the different kinds she was going to keep; but it is only fair to say that her greatest pleasure lay in the interest her brother took in it all.

The hens were soon installed in their new quarters, and every day the poor invalid collected the scraps of the house and chopped them up, and every night he put the pans of food in the oven to warm, and every day, unless the weather was very bad, he managed to creep out to give the fowls their food and drink, and to collect the eggs. He always washed and marked them and arranged them for market, so that they should look most tempting, putting all the dark brown ones together, and the light brown ones, and the creamy white ones.

"I don't see that there's any call to take all that trouble," Aunt Emma remarked, rather scornfully. "If people want eggs they'll buy them, no matter if they're clean or dirty, brown or white."

"But very often they don't feel that they want them until they see them looking clean and tempting," answered her brother quietly. "A dirty-looking egg will take away some folks' appetites, whereas a clean one will make them feel hungry. There was never anything but good done yet by taking a little trouble over things."

Aunt Emma looked unconvinced, but of one thing she could not help being convinced, and that was the good that the work and the interest of it were doing her brother. He no longer worried so cruelly at having to be idle; he felt less depressed, and, as he grew more cheerful, so he grew stronger, and by and by the pain he suffered lessened, and he was able to walk better and do more.

So the months wore away, and March came on them all too quickly, and with each week the work in the garden grew heavier.

"I do believe we shall have to have in a man to help us another year," sighed Bella, pausing in her digging, and seating herself on an upturned flower-pot for a rest.

Tom groaned. "And he'll cost more than he earns, most likely," he said soberly.

"Not if——" began Bella; but what she was going on to say was never said, and will never be known now, for at that moment Charlie burst through the gate and along the path in a great state of excitement.

"Guess what I've done! Guess what I've bought! Quick, quick, quick!"

"Rabbits," said Bella; "and if you have, you must keep them shut up or they'll eat everything."

"Tisn't rabbits. Guess again."

"Pigeons?" guessed Tom.

"A pair of shears?" said Bella.

"A pig?" cried Tom.

But Charlie only shook his head more and more emphatically.

"Why, a swarm of bees," he burst out, unable to keep his secret any longer, "bee-skip and all; and the man is bringing them almost at once."

"Bees?" cried Tom. "What do you know about bees?"

"Nothing; but I s'pose I can learn. Come and choose a place for the bee-skip to stand. Where shall they go?"

"Oh, not anywhere near me!" cried Bella; "I don't like bees."

"P'raps you'll like the honey. The man says he had pounds and pounds of honey last year. Come on, Bella. Come and help me choose a spot."

Bella went, but not very joyfully, and Tom followed. "You won't expect me to help you look after them, will you?" she asked nervously, "for I tell you I am afraid of them."

"Oh no," said Charlie seriously; "and when the honey is ready for market, I'll walk behind the cart with it, for fear it should sting you."

Bella laughed. "Tom," she called back, "can you paint a sign-board? I'm sure we ought to have one over the gate to say 'Fruit, flowers, vegetables, honey, eggs, fowls, porkers, and dried herbs sold here.'"

The idea pleased the boys immensely. "Can't we sell anything else?" cried Charlie. "Do try and think of something."

"Perhaps Aunt Emma will sell cakes and apple-pasties, and provide tea and coffee for twopence a cup."

"And a penny more to watch Charlie's bees," laughed Bella. "Oh, here comes Margery. Perhaps she has come to say she has bought a cow! Wouldn't it be fun!"

Charlie burst into a peal of laughter. "Hullo, Margery!" he shouted; "what have you got? A cow?"

Margery stood still in the path and stared at him, her blue eyes full of puzzled surprise.

"A cow?" she repeated, as though she could hardly believe her ears. "How should I have a cow? What do you mean?" looking questioningly from one to the other.

"Do you mean to say you haven't brought home anything new?"

"Why, yes, I've got two of the dearest darling little white ducks you ever saw in all your life. Bella, do come and see them! Mrs. Carter gave them to me, and I've brought them home in a basket, but I've been a long time, because I let them paddle in all the nice big puddles we came to, and oh, they loved it. Do come, all of you. Oh, they are so pretty, and I think they know me already. I've called one Snowdrop, and the other Daisy. Hark!" she cried, as they hurried after her, "don't you hear them calling to me?"

"I should think I did," laughed Tom. "They were shouting, 'Mag, Mag, Mag,' as plain as could be. I hope Charlie's bees won't begin shouting to him, too, or we shan't be able to hear ourselves speak. I shouldn't be surprised if we grew to love them best of all, because they are nice and quiet."

"You wait till they are angry," said Charlie knowingly, "or are swarming——"

"That's just what I shan't wait for," said Bella.

"Oh!" cried Margery, as though her patience was exhausted, "don't keep on talking so, please. I do want to hear my ducks. There!" as they suddenly came on the little yellow, waddling, screaming creatures, "ain't they lovely?"

"Lovely?" cried Charlie. "Why, you said they were white."

"Well, they will be," she explained eagerly. "Of course they are yellow to begin with. All the best ones are. Look at their feathers beginning to come already. Hush, hush, dears, don't cry so! I expect they were frightened 'cause I went away," she explained, as she knelt down and took them both in her arms.

"Where are they going to sleep to-night?" asked Bella.

Margery looked up with a troubled face. "I s'pose Aunt Emma wouldn't let them sleep in my room, in a basket? They would be very good, I'm sure. I wish she would." But Bella assured her there was no hope of that, and that it would be better for the little ducks to be out of doors in the sun and fresh air. So Snowdrop and Daisy were, to their great delight, turned loose in the orchard, and at night a nice roomy chicken-coop was provided for them, and there they grew plump and white, and were as happy as the days were long.

"Tom, you really must put up that sign," said Bella, laughing, as they all trooped back to the house to get ready for dinner.

"Well, if I don't do it soon," said Tom, "I shall have to have too, that's certain."

But there was no time for sign-painting for the next few months, for already the work was almost more than they could get through. All of them, even Aunt Emma, lent a hand with the digging and raking and planting out; but, there was no doubt about it, they did seriously miss their father's help. All the weariness, the aching backs and bones, and galled hands were forgotten, though, when the hardest of the work was over, and they began to see the results of all their toil.

The long stretch of grey-green bushes in Bella's lavender-bed was a sight that year, and her flower-beds were a picture. Charlie's bees soon discovered them, and Bella often declared that except for the time when the beans were in flower and drew the bees away, she had no peace or pleasure with her flowers from the time they began to bloom until after they were gathered and sold.

"I am sure I ought to have half the profits from the honey," she laughed, "for I nearly keep the bees!"

That summer Rocket's loads grew so large that a pony had to be hired to take his place sometimes, for Aunt Emma's fowls and eggs added considerably to the weight and to the number of baskets they had to get into the cart. So soon did they repay themselves for the cost of the fowl-house, that before autumn was past Bella had begun once more to hope that her dream of a stall in the market might yet be realised, and shortly too.

They had so much to sell now, and such a variety of things, that it took them a very long time to find customers for all, and it was very, very, tiring work, they found, to go round from house to house, all over the hilly little town. It meant long, weary hours of tramping, and often they could not get home till quite late. Then, quite suddenly, one day, when they had got home late, and more than usually tired, the next and long-hoped-for step was decided upon. They would rent a stall in the market for the winter months, at any rate, and they would begin on the very next Saturday as ever was.

When once this great step was decided upon, preparations had to begin at once, and in earnest, for long white cloths to cover the shelves had to be bought and made, to make them look clean and dainty. In a state of great excitement they all practised on the kitchen table how they would arrange the things, and how they should be laid out to look their best and be most attractive.

Margery looked on with the keenest interest. "Oh, Aunt Emma, do let me go with them on Saturday. Just this once," she pleaded eagerly. "I don't weigh very heavy, and I'm sure the pony wouldn't mind me, and I'd be ever so good. I wouldn't be a bit of trouble, not the very least little bit. May I? Daddy, do say yes! Tom and Bella will take care of me."

Aunt Emma looked at her doubtfully, but there was a smile at the corner of her mouth. "Well, take care you don't get sold too," she said; "if you do, I shan't buy you back, I promise you. I've a good mind to walk in myself in the afternoon," she added, turning to her brother. "I haven't seen Norton Market for years, and I've often felt I'd like to. I little thought I should ever be helping to have a stall there. I really think I must go in, William."

"You could drive home," said Tom readily. "Bella can manage the pony, and I'll walk."

Bella was looking at her father, all her thoughts centred on him. The only shadow on their day, the day when they would reach the height of their ambition, was that he would not be there to see it. She knew that he was feeling it too. It would have been such a pleasure to him, such a grand break in the monotony of his life, if he could have gone too.

"Oh, it must be managed somehow; some way must be found," she thought desperately—and then inspiration came to her.

"Father, you must come too," she cried, "or—or it won't be a bit right. Aunt Emma, can't we manage like this, just for once? Suppose you drive in with Tom and all the things in the morning,"—and she choked back her disappointment that, after all her dreams and hopes and longings, she would not be there herself to arrange her first market-stall,—"then I will drive father in later in Mrs. Wintle's donkey-cart. Do you think you could bear the drive, father?" she asked anxiously, her eyes alight with excitement.

"I believe it would do me good," he answered eagerly. His face had been growing brighter and brighter all the time Bella had been speaking, and his poor tired eyes were as full of a wistful longing, as were Margery's a few moments before. "I've thought many a time how nice a little outing would be, and I do want to see the children make their new venture," he added, turning to his sister. "It's one I've been wanting for them ever since the beginning."

So it was all settled, and in her joy and pride at taking her father for his first outing, she quite forgot her desire to arrange their first stall.

To Margery there was nothing wanting in her pleasure. To be allowed to go to Norton and sit like a real market-woman behind a real stall with scales and paper bags and measures; to see the people come up and buy, and open their purses and hand money to Tom or Aunt Emma, and then to see Tom or Aunt Emma go to the cash-box and put in the money and take out the change, was all wonderful and lovely enough, but to have her father there too made everything quite perfect; and her only trouble was that so many hours had to be lived through, somehow, before these wonderful things could happen.

After all, it was not so very long to wait. To the others the time was all too short for all they had to do. There were fowls and ducks to pluck and truss, and pack in the snow-white cloths in the big shallow baskets; and eggs to pack; flowers to gather and tie up in tastefully arranged bunches; vegetables to scrub and trim, and baskets of honey, bottles of herbs, and home-made jams to pack. There was a great deal to do, but their hearts were in the work, and all felt proud enough of their little show when it was ready.

To Margery's relief the great day came at last, and, as though it knew what was expected of it, it dawned as bright and beautiful as any one could desire. All were up early, but Charlie was the first to start, as he was going to walk the whole distance. Tom and Aunt Emma and Margery started an hour later, but Bella and her father did not leave until eleven, when the day was at its warmest and brightest, and as they drove along the sunny road with the beautiful fresh breeze blowing gently on their faces, Bella thought she had never, never in her life before felt so glad and proud.

Whenever they passed a cottage the neighbours came out to tell the invalid how good it was to see him as far as that again; indeed, every one they met had a warm greeting of some kind for him. Then, when they had passed all the people and the houses, and had the road to themselves, their minds went back to the past.

When they came to the old milestone where her father used to wait for them, Bella almost stopped the donkey, and, for the first time since that dreadful day when they had waited there in vain for him, she could bear to look at the old grey stone. "I wonder when ——" she began, but stopped for fear of hurting him. He guessed what she had been going to say.

"I b'lieve I shall walk again that far to meet you," he said cheerfully. "You will find me standing there some day when you ain't expecting it;" and if Bella could have been happier than she was before, she was then.

When they reached Norton the town was already full, and the market in full swing. Bella

had never before arrived at this time, and to her it all seemed new and strange, and most intensely interesting. But of course the market-house was the goal they were making for, and they could not loiter on the way. She was to put her father down there, and then drive on and leave Rocket at the stable, so that she, the beginner of it all, the founder of the market garden, would be the last to see this, the great climax to their toil.

For just a moment she did feel a sense of disappointment. Here was the day half gone already, and she had not set eyes on their stall yet. But the thought was soon followed by one of shame for her ingratitude, and when she reached the market at last she felt she would not for all the world have had things other than they were, or have come at any other time. For there, behind the stall—now showing large empty spaces made by many purchasers—sat her father, looking more perfectly happy and content than she had ever remembered seeing him. And there, beside him, stood Margery, looking on at everything with an intensely interested face. Aunt Emma was hovering between the poultry and the flowers, trying hard to serve two customers at once, while even Tom, though so much more accustomed to it, seemed puzzled to know which customer to serve first, so many were coming to him for fruit or vegetables, or to leave orders for things to be delivered through the week, or to be brought there on the following Saturday. Charlie was bustling around, lending every one a hand.

And then Bella noticed that her father was taking charge of the till, and her eyes grew blurred with tears when she saw the pleasure on his face as one after the other they went to him for change. He was helping them again, he too was taking part, and at their first stall too, and his evident joy in it was so pathetic that she had to turn away to recover herself before she could go up and let them know that she had come.

## CHAPTER XII.

### SUCCESS.

Two years have passed away since William Hender drove in to see his children open their first stall in Norton Market, and now, to-day, he is waiting for them once more by the old milestone.

Many a weary mile of life has he trodden painfully since last he stood there, a strong, hale man. Many a Hill of Despair has he faced, and Valley of Despondency; many a time has he wondered if he could ever reach the top of the hill which rose before him, the hill of disappointed hopes. It had seemed to him at times that as soon as he reached the top of one another had sprung up beyond, sometimes whole ranges of hills of pain, helplessness, weakness.

There had been many pleasant miles too, when he had paused by the sunny wayside 'To hear the angels sing,' and had gone on his way again refreshed and thankful for all God's goodness to him. And now he had, for the first time, walked to the old milestone again, to await his children's return—walked it without help or pain; and as he stood there waiting his heart was very full of gratitude to his Father above, who had cared for him so tenderly, and led him back to health again, and had given him such good children and friends.

He had brought a little camp-stool with him to rest on till they came, for he still had to save his strength and walk through life carefully. A flush of excitement was on his thin cheeks, and his eyes were bright and eager as they looked along the road; for this was a surprise he had planned for them.

"I always looked for you as we came round the last bend of the road," Bella had told him, "and I always shall, I think. I never seem able to give up expecting you."

And to-day her expectation was not to be in vain, and the father knew something of what their delight and excitement would be.

At last, round the bend of the road came the cart, drawn by a sturdy horse now—their own—and as he caught sight of them William Hender rose to his feet, for he wanted them to see him, and to see him standing upright and strong as of old. He had to rest his hand on the old granite stone, for the excitement of the moment had left him trembling a little, and



though stronger than any one had ever thought possible, he would never again be the strong man he used to be.

On they came, jogging along comfortably enough. He could see their two heads together, evidently discussing something very earnestly; he saw Bella raise hers suddenly—he could almost hear her exclamation of incredulity, of surprise; he saw her spring to her feet and throw out her arms in delight. Then the horse's pace was quickened, and they were beside him—and "Oh, father!" was all they could say, but Bella's eyes were full of tears, and both their faces were radiant.

"And I ain't tired," he said proudly, "though I think I will ask for a lift home," he added, with a happy laugh.

Scarcely knowing what they were doing from excitement, they helped him up into the cart, and on they jogged again, with Tom on one side of him and Bella on the other, but Bella turned more than once and glanced back affectionately at the old milestone, for to her now it seemed an old friend, so connected was it with the joys and sorrows, the struggles and successes of their lives.

"I am sure it understands," she was thinking to herself; "it really looks as though it does," when her father's voice brought her thoughts back to him.

"Well, what about the shop?" he asked anxiously.

"Oh, father! we've taken it!" and Bella gasped, as though alarmed at the desperateness of the plunge they had taken. "I forgot everything else when I saw you, but oh, there's such a lot to tell. Tom, where shall we begin? You tell it all, will you?"

"I—I seem to have so much in my head I can't get anything out," laughed Tom.

"We'll wait till we get home, then, p'raps it wouldn't be fair to hear it all before Aunt Emma can. Charlie will be home, too, by the time we are. He's been with the donkey-cart to take one of his pigs to Mr. Davis, and he has taken a message about renting the little field. The rent is low, and we could keep the horse there, and the pigs, too, sometimes. It would be fine!"

Bella laughed. "If we've got a field we shan't rest till one of us has a cow to put in it, that's certain!"

"Well, I don't know but what 'twould be a good investment," her father answered, thoughtfully; "there's no getting milk enough anywhere hereabouts."

Bella laughed again. "I can see that cow already," she cried, "a nice little Guernsey, and Aunt Emma milking it. Why, there is Aunt Emma herself! Whatever is she doing? Nursing a chick?"

They had reached their own gate by that time. "I wonder what she'll say when she sees me?" chuckled their father.

"Doesn't she know?" cried Bella. "Oh, Aunt Emma, Aunt Emma!" she called.

"Aunt Emma!" shouted Tom, at the top of his voice. "Quick, come here!"

Miss Hender hurried to the gate with the chicken in her arms still. "He's hurt his foot ——" she began, but the rest of her remark was lost in her astonishment. "Why, William!" she cried, "where have you been? I thought you were in the orchard!" and she stared at him as though she did not trust her own eyes.

"Orchard?" laughed Bella; "why, we picked him up by the first milestone, and if we hadn't stopped him there's no knowing where he'd have been by now. I believe he was so anxious to see his new shop he couldn't wait!"

She was standing with her arm round her father's shoulder, looking from one to the other with eyes full of love and gladness. They were all of them, indeed, so excited and pleased they scarcely knew what they were doing.

"Oh yes, the shop!" cried Aunt Emma. "I'd forgotten that for the minute. There are more surprises nowadays than I seem able to take in. Well, what about it?"

"We've taken it!" cried Tom and Bella in one breath; "we've actually taken it. What do you think of that? Isn't it enough to frighten one to think of? We are actually full-blown tradesmen, Aunt Emma. 'Hender and Co., Florists and Market-Gardeners. Fresh eggs and poultry daily. Moderate prices.' That is what is to be painted over the shop window. Oh, Aunt Emma, can you believe it? I can't. It doesn't seem real a bit," and she threw her arms round Aunt Emma too, and hugged her in her excitement.

"Well!" gasped Miss Hender, really overcome. "Well!" and for a time she could not find another word to say.

"I can't believe it," she said later, as they sat around the tea-table. "P'raps when I've seen the place and the name painted up I shall be able to."

"And when you see the brass scales——"

"And have the cleaning of them," put in Aunt Emma, with a knowing nod. "If you are all given up to growing things and selling them, somebody must do the housework and the cleaning, and that'll be my part, I reckon."

"Mine too, Aunt Emma; I'll keep the shop tidy."

"You can help at any rate," said Aunt Emma, for Margery, strangely enough, had, as she grew, shown a greater liking for housework than for gardening.

"I would clean the shop, and polish the scales and things," said Bella meekly.

"Oh no, you couldn't," interrupted Aunt Emma, feeling that she had perhaps been a little severe. "You can't do everything. If you help earn our living for us all, it is our work to look after the house. You haven't got time and strength for both. Don't you be trying to do too much, Bella. You're barely seventeen yet, you know." Aunt Emma's voice trembled a little, for she still found it hard to let any one see the kindly feeling that was in her heart.

"Will you have to live in Norton altogether?" asked Margery dolefully, for she did not like the thought of losing Tom and Bella.

Bella, who read her feelings, hastened to comfort her. "Oh no," she cried; "we've only taken the shop and a room behind it. Such a nice little room, Aunt Emma. You will have to come in and have tea there sometimes. The top part of the house is let to some one else. We shall drive in every day with the fresh things to sell, and come home at night. I think florists and greengrocers—doesn't it sound grand, daddy?—don't do much after the morning, and I should think we could shut the shop at four or five in the afternoon every day but Saturdays. Don't you, father?"

"May I come in sometimes and serve the customers?" asked Maggie eagerly.

"Of course you shall."

"When I've got a pig to sell will you carry it in too and sell it for me?" asked Charlie quite gravely. "You would put it in the window for me, wouldn't you, so that people could see it?"

"Of course," answered Tom, with equal gravity, "if you would sit there and make it behave. We don't want the window broken, for we haven't insured it yet, and we don't want all our things spoilt."

"It would be a wonderful attraction," went on Charlie thoughtfully, as though he had not heard his brother; "it would draw crowds, and give you such a start-off. I think you'd have to pay me so much an hour, it would be such a fine advertisement."

"It would draw people to the window, but I don't know that it would bring them inside," laughed Bella.

"Of course people would think you were for sale too," said Margery; "it would be awkward if they wouldn't buy the pig unless you went with it——" But her sentence was never finished, for Charlie chased her out of the kitchen, and they finished their dispute in the garden.

"We'll begin tea; we won't wait for those harum-scarums," said Aunt Emma, lifting a tart out of the oven; and the four drew cosily round the table.

Bella always loved those evening meals at the end of the long day in market, when they sat and enjoyed at their leisure the good things Aunt Emma provided, while they talked over all that had happened at home and abroad.

To-day seemed a day set apart, a special day, for had not their father walked to the milestone to meet them? This, in Bella's eyes, was a more important event than the taking of the shop. From the garden came sounds of laughter and screaming, the sober clucking of the hens, and the louder calling of Margery's ducks.

"We shall be very lonely, Emma, when these two are away all day, shan't we? I don't know what we shall do, do you?"

Their father spoke half-jestingly, yet there was something in his tone which was far removed from jesting. Tom looked from Bella to his father and back again. With his eyebrows he seemed to be asking her a question, and evidently she understood and signalled her answer.

"Father," said Tom nervously, for he was always rather shy of speaking before others, "we've thought out a plan, and we wondered if you'd fall in with it, or—be able to, or——"

"Well, my boy, I will if I can, if—well, if it isn't one to benefit me only. It seems to me you're all thinking always what'll be best and pleasantest for me, and I ain't going to have it; I ain't a poor invalid any longer."

"Well, it isn't to benefit you only, father," chimed in Bella eagerly; "we think it will be best for all of us, and I think you'll think so too. Go on, Tom."

"Well," said Tom, "it's this,—that you go in to the shop every day with Bella; you can keep accounts and do that sort of thing better than I can, and—" he broke off suddenly, almost startled by the look of pleasure which broke over his father's face, the sudden lightening of the sadness which, unconsciously, always showed now in his eyes. To be at work again! to be able to give real help, to be a working partner! To the man who had for so long borne an enforced idleness, who had had to sit by and see others work beyond their strength because he could do nothing to help—it seemed too good to be true, a happiness almost too great. "Do the work?" Of course he could do it. It would put new life into him to be a man again and worker.

"But what about you, Tom? It would be a bitter disappointment to give it up, wouldn't it?"

"Disappointment?" cried Tom; "why, there's nothing I'd like better. You see, if you can be in the shop, I can stay at home and give all my time to the garden, instead of having only the evenings after I get back. Then Aunt Emma and Charlie and I can look after things here; and, if we run this place, and you and Bella run the other, we ought to get on A1. Don't you agree, everybody?"

Tom gained courage as he went on, and, indeed, his father's undisguised pleasure in the plan was enough to encourage any one. But Tom was cautious too. He put all the arguments before his father, as though he had shown reluctance, and had to be won over; for what they wanted, above all things, was to make him feel that his help was really needed. He succeeded in his aim, too, and without any help from Bella, for the pathos of her father's joy brought a lump into her throat and a mist before her eyes that prevented her speaking a word.

"I think I'll go for a little stroll," she said quietly, when she rose from the table, and something in her voice and face prevented any one from hindering her. Out through the garden she went, and along the quiet road, where the soft mist of evening was creeping up and the birds were calling their last good-nights. On she went, and on, until she reached the old grey church, standing so protectingly in the midst of the green graves, which seemed to nestle about its sides as about a mother.

Bella opened the churchyard gate and walked along the path to a far corner, where a white headstone gleamed out distinctly from the dark holly hedge behind it.

"In loving memory of Isabella, wife of William Hender. Aged 29," ran the inscription.

Bella sat down on the curb which outlined the long, narrow grave, and leaned her head against the stone. "Oh, mother, mother, if only you had been here too, everything would have been just right!" She put her arm around the little cross caressingly, and leaned her cheek against it, but the coldness of it brought back to her memory the coldness of her mother's brow when last she had kissed it, and she drew back quickly again. It seemed so hard and unresponsive. "She knows, though she isn't here. I am sure she knows," and she turned her face up to the darkening sky, where already the stars were beginning to shine.

"Like silver lamps in a distant shrine,  
The stars are all shining bright,  
The bells of the City of God ring out,  
For the son of Mary is born to-night,  
The gloom is past, and the morn at last  
Is coming with Orient Light."

The lines and the haunting air of the old carol came pouring into Bella's mind. "It isn't Christmas, but all the rest fits to-night and—and every time," and there in the gathering darkness she sang softly to herself—

"Faith sees no longer the stable floor,  
The pavement of sapphire is there,  
The clear light of heaven streams out to the world,  
And the angels of God are crowding the air,  
And heaven and earth, through the Spotless Birth,  
Are at peace on this night so fair."

All the way home along the quiet road the lines still haunted her—

"And heaven and earth, through the Spotless Birth,  
Are at peace on this night so fair."

She was singing softly as she reached her own gate. She did not see her father standing inside and looking over it.

"Lassie, that's what I was feeling, but didn't know how to put it into words," he said, with an unusual gentleness in his tone.

"Oh, father, are you here? Isn't it damp for you to be out?" she asked anxiously, for Bella was always nervous for him.

"I couldn't go in, child, till you were home. It seemed to me you weren't happy about something."

Bella, as she tucked her hand through his arm, reassured him. "Why, father, I was too happy, that was all! I was so happy I had to go away by myself for a bit, so that I—shouldn't make myself silly, and I've come back happier than ever. There's Aunt Emma at the door calling to us. There's such a lot to talk about, that if we don't go in and begin we shan't have finished till morning;" and she led him back between the neat flower-beds to the open door, where, in a glow of warm light from within, Aunt Emma stood awaiting them.

## **THE END.**

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