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by Catharine Shaw**

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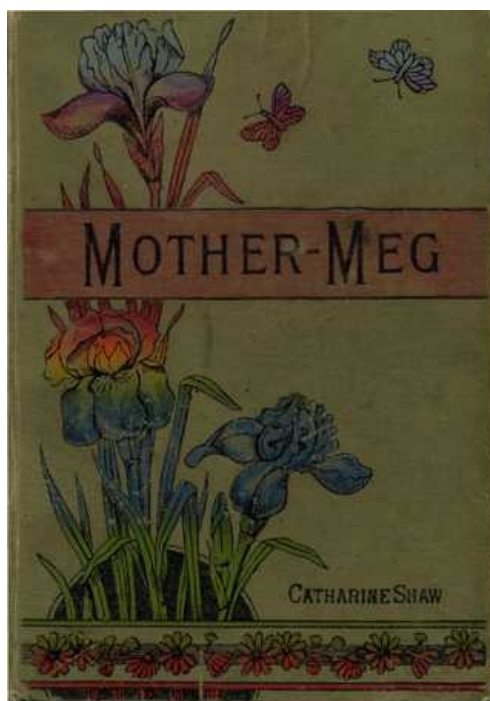
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DICKIE'S ATTIC ***

Transcriber's note

Obvious typographical errors have been corrected.



MOTHER-MEG

OR,

THE STORY OF DICKIE'S ATTIC

BY

CATHARINE SHAW

AUTHOR OF "ONLY A COUSIN," "ALICK'S HERO," "NELLIE ARUNDEL," "THE GALLED FARM,"
ETC., ETC.

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"Well, yer can 'ave him: the worst on't is the gal; she'll take on if I say yes, awful."--p. 109.



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MOTHER-MEG:

THE STORY OF DICKIE'S ATTIC.

CHAPTER I.

[Pg 7]

PITLESS.



UT 'im down, 'e can walk as well as anythink."

It was a cold day in May, when the sun was hidden behind leaden clouds, and the wind swept along the streets as if determined to clear them of every loiterer who should venture to assure himself that it was not March, and could not be so cold.

The few people who had ventured out in spring clothing bid fair to "repent it many a day," and those who were happy enough to have winter wraps drew them closer, and hurried along, the sooner to get into some shelter. The omnibus men dashed their arms across their breasts for warmth, and everybody, gentle or simple, looked nipped up with the strong east wind.

"Put 'im down," said a hard-featured woman, who was walking slowly along by the side of the road; "it won't matter 'is walkin' now."

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The man thus addressed was a thin, brow-beaten looking individual, who was carrying a child of some three years old in his arms. His clothes were threadbare, his knees peeped through his worn trousers, and his whole appearance was most deplorable. The woman by his side was as poorly clad as himself, outwardly at least, but seemed to suffer less from it. She was not thin, and if looked at closely, appeared to be well fed, and perhaps to have no lack of drink either. She carried a small infant in her arms, wrapped in a large dirty shawl.

The three-year-old child had a pale, suffering little face, which looked as if tears were often very near. His eyes were terribly weak, and when he was set down by the man he looked as if he would have fallen. But the woman disengaged one of her hands, and said impatiently, dragging him towards her, "Come along, Dickie, none o' yer nonsense; walk on like a good boy."

The child gave one glance at her stern face, and then tottered on silently, occasionally rubbing his poor little eyes with the back of his tiny hand.

The wind met them round the corners; it seemed to be everywhere, and at every gust the miserable-looking party looked more miserable still.

"How much 'ave yer took?" asked the man, as if he could turn and run home.

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The woman felt for her pocket, and after some fumbling she said in a low voice, "Two-and-eight, I should think."

"Won't that do?" said the man, shivering. Then glancing sideways at the child, he went on, "'E'll not walk many more steps, and if you don't take care 'e'll not be hout to-morrer, nor next day neither; 'e's most done, 'e is."

The woman turned round and was going to speak, when a respectable couple, dressed in warm cloth, silks, and furs, came in sight.

In a moment her manner changed. "Take 'im up," she said in a wheedling tone, "'e's tired, 'e is, and cold; carry 'im a bit, George."

The child, too cold and weary to care, was taken resistlessly into the man's arms, and laid his head on his shoulder, and the party paused, looking expectantly at the lady and gentleman who were fast approaching.

"My good woman, this is a bitter day for such little ones to be out," said the gentleman kindly; "have you far to go?"

"Over London Bridge, sir, down that way."

"That's a long distance," he exclaimed; "and you all look perished with the cold."

"That we are, sir," answered the woman, sniffing, "and my good man, sir, just now was a-saying that though we hadn't took a ha'penny, sir, this day, we must give it up. But it's hard to see 'em suffer, sir, and have no bread nor firing to give 'em."

[Pg 10]

The man shook his head dolorously at each sentence, and the weak little child shut his eyes, as a fresh gust of wind seemed ready to blind him altogether.

"That child ought not to be out on such a day as this at all," said the lady almost severely.

"What is poor folk to do, my lady?" asked the woman, "there's no work, and there's no food; and surely we'd be better to get a bit of broken victuals or a copper from some Christian gentleman than to starve at home, like rats in a hole!"

"Well, well," said the gentleman with a ponderous sigh, "it makes one's heart ache, Clarissa. Here, my good woman, go home now and buy some food and coals, and get that poor child warm."

He gave her a shilling and passed on, and the woman, catching sight of a policeman whom she recognized bearing down upon them, they hastily turned the other way and set off in the direction of London Bridge as fast as they could go.

The man knew it was useless to put Dickie down to walk, for he had seen all day that the child was very ill. His light weight, however, was not a great trouble, for he was very small for his age, and now was so thin and emaciated with hardship that the man doubted if he should ever carry him again.

"I wish yer'd git some one else," he exclaimed at last, for some remnants of humanity were left in his heart, and he had not carried that tender little mite for six months without some feeling as near akin to love as he was capable of.

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His wife turned on him sharply. "Yer know we can't! There's lots o' reasons why 'e is the best one as we can git. Look at them soft brown curls of 'is, what allers takes the ladies, and 'is small size for carryin'; and then yer know as well as I do as 'is mother's dead, and 'is father ain't of no account, and is glad to git a pint or two in return for our havin' 'im. I wish you wouldn't be such a simpleton, George."

The man sighed. Long ago he had given up contending with his imperious wife, but sometimes as now, he walked along morosely, and his thoughts were best known to himself.

"I'd save 'im from it if I could," he muttered to himself, "but I've thought that 'afore, and it ain't no use. Still I shan't forgit—though I ain't no good at anythink now."

They had now reached London Bridge, and soon after turned down one of the narrow streets leading from the main thoroughfare, and again under a long low archway running beneath the first floor rooms of one of the houses, and so emerged into a court squalid and forlorn, which contained the house they called home.

Just as they were turning in at the door a crippled child of some thirteen or fourteen years came down the stairs to meet them. She silently held out her arms for little Dickie, and without vouchsafing more than one dark look at the woman's face, and then another hopeless one at her little brother's, she slowly ascended again, step by step, till weary and panting she laid him down on an old mattress in the corner of the crowded room where she lived.

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"Dickie," she moaned, burying her face in his neck, where the soft waves of his golden-brown hair felt like silk against it, "Dickie, are they goin' to kill you right out? Dickie——!"



[Pg 13]

CHAPTER II.

THE WEDDING-DAY.

MEAN to take care of you, my girl; leastways I'll do my best."



The words were spoken by a man of about twenty-five, in a workman's dress, as he led his bride in at the door of her future home.

"I know that," she answered, looking up almost wistfully, for there had been a different tone in the ending of his sentence to that in which it had begun.

"It's not such a place as I should like to ha' brought you to, Meg; but work's been slack, and—there, you know all that!"

Meg stepped in and looked around; her glance was shy and somewhat fearful. Should she be afraid to see what her young husband had prepared for her?

She clasped his hand tightly, and the firm pressure in return reassured her. Whatever it might be, love had done it from beginning to end.

[Pg 14]

For Meg had come out of the sweet country with its sunny meadows, and cowslips and buttercups. She had left, fifty miles away, the dear fragrant garden, where only this morning her mother had gathered such a posie as had never been seen before; she had left the cottage where every china mug and shepherdess was like a bit of her life; she had left the situation in the grand house at the end of her mother's garden, where she had lived for four years in the midst of every luxury. And this is what she had come to: two small rooms in a high London house, in one of the streets turning out of a wide but gone-down thoroughfare near London Bridge.

The rooms were on the second floor, and looked out front and back, and as her husband ushered her in and closed the door, she knew she had come home.

He led her to the fire, where already a kettle was singing blithely, placed there in readiness by some one as yet unknown to Meg, and then he put his arm round her and whispered,

"Does it all seem very different to what you thought, my dear?"

"Oh, no," said Meg, leaning against his shoulder and looking round; "it's ever so nice. And how could you think of all these things by yourself, Jem?"

He laughed nervously, and her glance continued to take in all the things one by one. The little chiffonier which he had bought at a second-hand shop with such pride, because Meg's mother had one just like it; the bright-burning grate, with its little oven and boiler; the two American arm-chairs, looking so inviting by it; the large rag hearthrug, the strips of clean carpet on each side of the table, the red table-cloth, the freshly-scrubbed shelves, on which quite an array of pretty new crockery was set out.

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Yes, it was home. Meg looked up in her husband's face with a satisfied glance.

"It is beautiful," she said, taking possession of it all with her heart. Hers and his, their home, for as long as God willed it.

Perhaps something of that thought shone in the man's eyes as he stooped to kiss her upturned face.

So Meg put down her bunch of home flowers, and looked round for something to put them in.

"They are too many for a vase," she said, "or a jug either. I wonder if there's a basin?"

Jem went to a cupboard in the corner and produced a nice-sized one, neither too large nor too small.

"Oh!" said Meg, gratified; "what a lot of basins and things, Jem; I shall make you some puddings in those."

"I reckon you will," he answered smiling.

She bent over her flowers, touching them with soft tender touch, for she loved each one, and he stood looking on.

Could this sweet girl really belong to him? Then a thought came over him with a pang, of what the women grew into around them—the toiling, hard-working, ill-fed, sometimes ill-used women.

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"But Meg will never grow like that," he thought; "not while I love her, and God loves her; and His love is a never-ending love."

"Ain't you going in t'other room to take off yer bonnet, my dear?" he asked; "or are the flowers too precious?"

"Don't you see," she answered, smiling, "my bonnet won't fade, and these will; so I thought I would do them first."

"I told mother to come and take a cup o' tea with us at five o'clock; it must be near that now."

He drew out a clumsy, old-fashioned watch from his pocket and glanced at it.

"It wants nigh on twenty minutes to, my girl, so if we mean to get out our things we must be quick."

"These are done now," she answered, gathering up the bits and putting them into the fire, where they crackled up into a blaze and made the kettle boil up in good earnest.

So she took off her bonnet, and when she came back Jem had put a small square hamper on the table ready for her to open.

"Do you think mother would like to see what my mistress has given me?" she asked a little timidly; for "mother" was a new word to her lips; hitherto it had always been "your mother."

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"I dare say she would, Meg; and tea don't matter for a few minutes."

So Meg left the hamper untouched and went to the cupboard where she had seen the cups, and began to set three on a small tray she found there.

"Here is some milk, Jem!" she exclaimed; "how kind your mother is; and some bread and butter too all ready."

"Mother's in general very thoughtful," he answered, going over to her and lifting the tray to the chiffonier. "It will be handy there, against we have cleared the table."

At this moment there was a knock at the door, which Jem hastened to answer by opening it wide.

"I've brought her," he said, by way of introduction.

And then Mrs. Seymour saw her new daughter-in-law for the first time. That slim graceful figure, clothed in a simple, plainly-made dress of some mixture of grey and brown, which Meg had decided on for her wedding dress, because it would wear well in London, and then the blushing gentle face above it. Jem had not said a word too much in her praise, as far as she could judge by the first glance.

"Welcome, my dear," she said, advancing and kissing her; "I'm glad as my Jem is made happy at last."

"We waited for you, mother," said Jem, when he had placed her in the arm-chair, "because Meg thought as you'd like to see the things unpacked; they was put in by Mrs. MacDonald's own hands."

[Pg 18]

"That I should," answered Mrs. Seymour heartily, drawing nearer to the table; "what is it?"

"I don't know," answered Meg; "she called me in this morning and she said, 'Archer,'—you know it was only mother called me Meg at home; at mistress's I was always called Archer, so she said, 'Archer, I've put you in a few things to begin on, and so that you will not have to begin cooking at once. Remember, however, that a workman's wages will not buy these sort of things. It is only as a little wedding treat.'"

"That's very true," said Mrs. Seymour, referring to the wages.

"Ah, we know that," answered Meg cheerfully, with a bright glance at Jem; "but it's very kind of her all the same."

By this time Jem had undone the strings, and the hamper lay open before them. First there were a couple of fine chickens all ready cooked, done up in a clean cloth; then there were some sausages; after that a blancmange in a basin; then a bottle of cream; and lastly, some fresh butter and a box of new-laid eggs.

Underneath everything else was a flat parcel tied up in pieces of thin board.

"A wedding present to Margaret Archer, as a mark of Mrs. MacDonald's esteem, wishing her and her husband every happiness."

[Pg 19]

"Oh!" exclaimed Meg; "she said I should find her present at home! Jem, whatever can it be?"

"I guess," said Jem, trying to get his fingers underneath it to lift it up. But he had to find another way, for the package resisted his efforts by sticking close to the bottom of the hamper as if it were glued.

"It's mighty heavy," he said. And then they found that the strings had been so placed as to allow of its being easily lifted out by them.

"A clock!" said Mrs. Seymour, delighted. "Oh, Jem, how I did want to get you a clock, but I could not manage it anyhow."

He put his broad hand on hers gratefully.

"I know, mother," he answered. "Don't ye think as I've eyes to see as all these things wasn't here when I left here last evening?"

A sweet smile came over the worn face, and with almost an arch look she answered,

"There's a certain bag in my drawer that used to be pretty heavy once, that I kept to buy things for 'Jem's wife.' It's empty now though."

"For me?" asked Meg; and then she blushed so much that she had to help Jem very industriously to undo the knots in the strings.

"For you," answered her mother-in-law.

And when Jem lifted out the present, they found it was a very nice clock, which would strike the hours. [Pg 20]

"Shall I move this on one side?" asked Meg, touching the vase in the centre of the mantel-shelf.

"Put it on the chiffonier," said Jem, placing the clock where she had made room for it. "Don't it look handsome?"

After they had all admired it till they had no more words at their command, Meg turned to the basket again.

"Jem, we must have one of these fowls to-night for tea, because mother is here."

"You're very kind, my dear," said Mrs. Seymour, "but I don't wish to eat up your good things."

"Who should enjoy them if not you?" asked Meg heartily, quickly clearing away the papers and things, and placing the hamper tidily in a corner. She spread the cloth and set out the fowl on one of the dishes, putting the sausages round as a garnish; then she poured out some cream, and found a plate for the country butter, which quite ornamented the table, with its pretty cow resting on the circle of grass.

"My mother put us in a loaf of her home-made bread," she exclaimed, turning to Jem; "can you get it out of my basket?"

Jem laughed. It already stood on a plate at her elbow.

"We are ready then, mother," said Meg, preparing to sit down at the tray. "Will you come to the table?" [Pg 21]

"I don't think you've made the tea yet, my dear," answered Mrs. Seymour smiling, as she glanced at the still steaming kettle.

Meg looked disconcerted, but Jem only patted her cheek, and said tenderly,

"We can't expect little wives to remember everything the first day, can we?"

Meg had to ask where the tea was kept, and then they gathered round the table.

Jem bent his head and asked their God to bless them now and always, and Mrs. Seymour added a gentle and solemn Amen.



[Pg 22]

CHAPTER III.

THE LOST BROOCH.



JEM had been brought up as a painter, and had served his time in that trade. But painters are often slack, as he knew to his cost; and when he had nothing much to do he used to employ his fingers in another way. Besides, there were long evenings and half holidays when he could pursue the avocation which he liked much better than even painting.

During the years in which he had been learning his trade he had been thrown with carpenters and builders of every class, and he soon had made up his mind that he would learn all he could, so that, should the opportunity ever come, he should know how to be a builder himself.

But times had not as yet been propitious, and at twenty-five he found himself still only a painter, with a very fair knowledge of carpentering into the bargain.

About a year ago he had been taken on as a permanent hand at a large decorating-house, who undertook work in the country; and Jem, valued for his trustworthiness and general ability, was often sent as one of those who knew his own trade well, and also could turn his hand to several others. [Pg 23]

Thus it came to pass in the early spring of this same year he had been sent to help in repairing Mrs. MacDonald's handsome house, and had stayed there for two months.

He had soon met with Meg, and had been struck with her gentle modesty of demeanour.

Hitherto the girls he had met had been dressed to the very utmost of their means, and had behaved in a flighty, loud manner which grated on his feelings.

"No such wife for me," he had said to his mother one evening, when they had just met one of their acquaintances in gaudy finery, which could not hide her slovenly boots or pinned-together dress.

His mother quite agreed. Hard-worked and poor as she was, no one had seen her anything but neat.

But Meg was different. As now and then he met her flitting up the stairs at the hall, or passing to and from her mother's cottage, he knew he had to do with quite a different woman from those with whom he was accustomed to meet.

He was sauntering along a lane one afternoon in March when his work was over, thinking of all this, and enjoying the quiet twilight, when he saw a stooping figure in front of him eagerly looking for something. [Pg 24]

"Have you lost anything?" he asked, coming up to the figure. "Can I help you?"

He found with a start that the subject of his thoughts was close to him.

Hitherto she had only nodded civilly in return for his passing greeting, and now in the dusk hardly recognized him, though she knew he was a stranger to their village.

"Oh, thank you!" she answered.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It is my mother's little brooch. I can't think how I came to drop it. I should not mind so much only that it has my father's hair in it. She values it very much."

"I dare say we shall manage to find it. When did you miss it?" he asked.

"Just now—not two minutes ago. I know I had it at that stile, because I turned there to look at the new moon, and I had it in my hand then."

They searched in silence for some minutes, but the twilight had deepened quickly, and the dewy grass seemed all one mist under their feet.

"This is damp for you, ain't it?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes; that was how I came to drop it. I gathered up my dress, and it must have slipped then. Whatever shall I do?—we cannot see any longer." [Pg 25]

"I dare say they have a lantern at the stables; I will go and ask."

"I will wait here," she answered.

"Don't do that. You go home; I'll come back and look till it's found."

"I cannot trouble you with that," said Meg. "Mother and I will come early to-morrow. No one passes this lane before seven. We could see soon after six now."

"It will be no trouble," Jem answered earnestly; "and if it can be found to-night it is far better nor waitin'. There is some things gets better for waitin', but others——"

Meg listened: surely there was a serious tone in this man's talk, such as her mother loved.

They were rapidly nearing the light in her mother's window.

"That is your home, ain't it?" asked Jem, pointing.

"Yes; how did you know?"

"I heard you lived there. May I come up to the door with you?"

Meg assented. She was rather surprised, but not sorry that he wished it.

When, however, he got to the door, he bade her an abrupt good-bye, and hastened back along the path.

She saw his form disappear in the direction of the stables, and then she opened the door and told her mother all about it. [Pg 26]

"He's been working at the Hall for this month, mother; but I've never spoken to him before."

Mrs. Archer went to the door and looked anxiously down the lane, as if with her old eyes she could see the lost brooch herself.

"Dear, dear," she said, "to think I could have let you take it to be mended, and not have gone myself!"

Poor Meg stood beside her in silence. She wished it too; but how could she know she would lose it?

Just then a light twinkled down the lane, and passed rapidly onwards.

Meg bethought herself.

"Mother, I *must* go back," she exclaimed. "What will they say to me? I told them I should be home early. I'll try to send George over to know if—if he has found it."

So when after a quarter of an hour's search Jem came back with it to the cottage, the little bird whom he had hoped to see there was flown.

"I'm naught but a workman," he said to her, when after another month of seeking the little bird he caught her at last; "and I haven't anything nice to offer you, Meg. I can't give you such a home as you've been used to, not even as good as you might ha' had at yer mother's."

Meg was going to speak, but he went on as if he must say all that was in his heart.

"And I know I'm not so—so—refined, Meg, as you are. You have lived amongst gentlefolks, I've lived amongst the poor, and I know now what I didn't perhaps enough understand when I set my heart on you, that my speech and my bringin' up is not so good as yours. Meg, if I've done you a wrong in lovin' you, I'll go back home, and never come again—"

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He paused: could he say any more? What would he do if she accepted that last alternative of his?

But Meg put her hand into his.

"It's the heart, that is the thing, Jem," she whispered, "and that's above fine words and ways."

"If you can be satisfied with that, Meg, we shall be very happy!" he answered, clasping her hand tightly; "for my whole heart is yours, which has never loved another."

"And I'm not afraid," Meg went on earnestly, "since you told me all that happened two years ago. Any one who has felt like that is safe to trust."

For Jem had told her one Sunday, when, with her mother's permission, he had walked home from the evening service with her, what a different man he had been since one particular day.

"I was going down a street near home," he had said, "when some people came along singin' somethin' which I thought sounded very swinging and pretty, and I stopped to listen. They marched along slowly, half-a-dozen of 'em carryin' a banner in front of them, with the words in large letters on it, 'Come to the hall at 7 o'clock and hear the good news.' Still they went on with the singin', and I got curious to know what their good news was."

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"Ye must be born again, again,
Ye must be born again, again;
I verily, verily, say unto you,
Ye must be born again!"

"On it went with a swingin' sort of roll, and I wondered, and followed on in spite of myself. 'Seven o'clock; hear the good news!' What good news was there in being told to be born again? Nonsense! this warn't any good news as I could see. I'd a deal sooner they'd have told me where I could ha' got a bit more work. That's what would ha' been good news to me, I thought. But I went with 'em, for all that; and the end of it all was, that I *was* born again! That very night I got into a new sort o' man. I left all the old things far away behind—'as far as the east is from the west,' the man who preached said, and I got instead such a white robe to cover me over, as made me feel whiter than the snow they sang about. And that's how I came to be different—just washed in the Blood of the Lamb!"

"I know what that means too," Meg had answered softly.

"I knew you did," he had said. And then they did not speak again till they parted at the Hall gates.

"So, though I'm naught but a workman, you can put up with me, Meg?" he asked, the day before he was going away, and the repairs were finished.

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"Dickie," she whispered, as Jem paused, "don't yer like to hear about Jesus? That's the Good Shepherd what I've told you about, as loves the little lambs."—p.38.

And she answered by putting her hand into his.

"One thing I can promise you," he said: "that as long as God gives me strength I'll work for you, Meg!"

"And after that I'll work for *you*!" she answered, while two tears glittered in her eyes.

In three months' time Meg left the sweet country and the great Hall, and her mother and young sister, and went to London to make Jem happy.

Mrs. MacDonald gave her a nice wedding breakfast, and much good advice, and Meg entered on her new life as we have seen, full of hope and peace.



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CHAPTER IV.

ROYAL CHILDREN.



YOU didn't think as I was near you this afternoon, did you?" asked Jem, when he came in to his tea, a few days after their marriage.

"No, indeed," answered Meg, looking up; "were you?"

"Yes; you know the court what runs up under these houses, first turnin' on the right?"

"I think I do."

"Well, one of them houses. My master has the job to repair them a bit; they're goin' to change hands, I believe, and so I shall be about here a good while before they're done."

"I wish I'd known; then I'd have watched for you," said Meg.

"Would you? Well, my dear, I don't know as it will make much difference, only for knowing as we're near each other, because I never do use myself to leave my work, for nothing."

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"Ah! no," answered Meg.

He sat down to the table, and after he had asked a blessing they began their meal; but Jem was unusually preoccupied.

Meg was not an old enough wife to understand all her husband's moods, and supposed he was tired with his day's work.

"Meg," he said suddenly, "I suppose we haven't such a thing as an old blanket?"

Meg looked rather astonished.

"Why, you know, Jem, as everything nearly is new what you got ready for our home."

"Yes," said Jem, "yes, I know. I wonder how we could do?"

"What is it for?" asked Meg.

"Why, my girl, my heart's just achin' at a little feller I saw there in a attic. He's been lyin', his sister told me, ever since the first week in May, and he's like a skeleton. She don't seem to have much to give him, nor to live on herself neither, and he's got nothing on him but an old shawl, and the girl says as he's awful cold of nights. It's a frightful draughty place."

Meg's happy eyes filled with tears.

"Oh, Jem," she exclaimed, "can we give them one of ours?"

"Well, ye see, Meg, it won't do for us to be giving away our things one by one; for if we began in this poor neighbourhood, we should not have a rag to our backs, as the sayin' is. But yet this little chap—"

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"Oh, yes, Jem, we ought not to 'pass by on the other side,' as the Bible says. Do let us give one of ours."

"I was thinkin'," said Jem; "you know, Meg, you and me made up our minds when we was married to put by somethin' to give to our God out of every shillin' we earned—"

"Yes, we did," answered Meg eagerly.

"Now, though we haven't earned much yet," he went on, "yet we've had a deal give us; and 'sposin' I was to get a blanket for the poor little chap: how would that be?"

"Oh, Jem, do! Will you take me out with you to get it?"

Jem smiled; then turning grave again, he added:

"But, sweetheart, I'm loth to sadden you with such tales when your dear heart's a bit sore at leavin' home. Eh, Meg?"

Meg's tears were very near, but she answered as steadily as she could—

"It would be poor thanks to Him who's given me so much, Jem, to say as I was too happy to be made sorrowful by helping any one in need."

Jem said no more, but went into the other room and fetched Meg's hat and jacket; but when they got outside in the brilliant light of the declining June sun, he said to himself, that he had never before seen his Meg look so beautiful.

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The blanket was bought, a very ordinary one—"all wool" as Jem had said, remembering his mother's bringing-up, but not so good as to be immediately noticed and perhaps stolen in the large lodging-house in which the children lived.

Then they retraced their steps, and when they came to the court Jem stopped.

"I'll soon be home, my girl; you go on without me."

"Shan't I come too?" asked Meg.

"If you'd like to, my dear; but it ain't a nice place."

It was by this time getting dusk between the high houses, and Meg followed her husband in silence. It was the first time she had ever been into any crowded abode. A country cottage was the only experience she had had.

Jem led the way up the dark and rickety stairs to the very top, and then stooped his head under a low doorway.

The room was close under the roof, open to the tiles, and was very bare, but neat and orderly. On

a mattress in the corner lay the little sufferer, while by him sat his crippled sister, nearly as pale and thin as he.

"My child," said Jem in a kind voice, addressing her, "do you think if I brought you a blanket you could keep it from being stolen?" [Pg 36]

The child looked up suddenly. A face, with all its want and suffering, on which something indescribable was written. Jem did not analyze it, but he felt it.

"I think so," she answered. "I know a place outside up under the roof where I could hide it away if I go out. That's what I have to do with most things as it is."

Meg seated herself on the box by the child's side and looked down on his little face. She put his wavy hair back from his forehead and said tenderly—

"Poor little dear, you have a bad cough!"

"Yes," said the child; "me cough all de time."

"Yes," pursued his sister. "Dickie's been bad this five weeks, and if it hadn't been for father having a bit of work, and bringin' home a little for once, he'd ha' died."

Dickie did not seem to mind being thus spoken of, but he turned his head wearily away, as if it were too much trouble to think.

"I like bein' ill," he whispered, as Meg bent over him.

"Like it, dear?" she questioned, thinking she had not heard aright.

He nodded ever so slightly, and then added in a little determined voice—

"'Cause then they don't *hurt* me no more."

Meg would have asked for an explanation, but Jem was unfolding the blanket, and the girl was absorbed in wonder at its comfort and whiteness. [Pg 37]

"Dickie, look!" she exclaimed in a low joyful tone.

But the child was too ill to be interested. He did not turn his head again, and Cherry said, with all the life gone out of her eyes, which had so quickly lighted up at sight of the blanket—

"That's how he is most times. Sometimes I wish he was safely in heaven with mother."

Jem put his hand gently on the girl's arm.

"Ah, my dear, that's how we feel when we're sad; but if we understand that God loves us, we'll be willing to wait, so as we may do His will."

Her wide-open, sad blue eyes filled slowly, and she turned in silence to cover over her little brother. She took up the old shawl and spread the blanket next him, then unfolding the shawl, which had been doubled for warmth, she carefully covered every bit of the blanket with it, even seeking a bit of rag from somewhere to stop up a hole through which the whiteness peeped.

"He might guess it else," she explained, and her hearers had to draw their own conclusions.

"Wouldn't he like him to have it?" questioned Jem.

"He'd like drink better," answered Cherry, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Since poor father's taken to that so much, he don't have the heart he used to have, He wouldn't have took this attic for us, so comfortable, only the landlady let us have it cheap 'cause the other folks wouldn't have Dickie no longer." [Pg 38]

"Why, dear?" asked Meg pitifully.

"'Cause he cried and coughed so. The attic was empty, and I told father I didn't mind the holes in the roof so long as they wouldn't worry Dickie. So he was in a good humour, and let us come, and we've been here a month."

Cherry spoke in a congratulating tone, but soon grew sober again when she looked towards the little brown head that moved so restlessly.

"Jem," whispered Meg, "might I make him some bread and milk, and bring it round to him at once?"

Jem willingly agreed, and Meg hurried away. While she was gone, he sat down and drew from his pocket a little Testament, and with Cherry's eyes curiously watching him, he turned over the leaves till he came to the tenth chapter of John. Then in a clear, low tone, that soothed while it wooed them to listen, he read about the Good Shepherd giving His life for the sheep.

Cherry sat down on the bottom of the mattress and listened, evidently not as if it were a new tale, but yet as a thirsty man will stretch out his hand for water which he has not tasted for so long.

"Dickie," she whispered, as Jem paused, "don't yer like to hear about Jesus? That's the Good Shepherd what I've told you about, as loves the little lambs." [Pg 39]

Dickie opened his eyes just enough to give her the shadow of a smile of assent; but he was too

weak to care to speak.

"Here, dear," said Meg, coming in and leaning over him; "do you like a little nice hot bread and milk?"

The child could not remember the time when such a name had been mentioned to him; but when Meg put a spoonful to his lips the smell of it brought back vividly the remembrance of his mother.

"Yes," he said, answering Meg's question now; "I 'ike it very much."

When he had eaten about half he put his little hand out, and gently pushed the basin away. "No more," he whispered, and sank into sleep such as he had not had since that terrible May day, when he had been brought home nearly dying.

Then Meg turned to Cherry.

"Eat the rest of it, dear," she said.

"Oh, no," answered the child, drawing back; "it 'ull do him such a deal o' good. He never gets nothing nice."

"Jem will let me bring him some more another day," answered Meg; "but if you would rather keep this till he wakes, see, I have brought something for you."

She unfolded a piece of paper with two thick slices of bread-and-butter, which Cherry took in her hands with a look of gratitude which went to Meg's heart.

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"Oh, you *are* good!" the girl exclaimed, throwing her arms round Meg; "nobody was ever so good to us before—since mother went. He's always callin' for mother."

Meg gazed in the upturned face, and then after an instant's hesitation she stooped and kissed it—the soiled little face, upon which Meg was certain was written the name of the King of kings.



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CHAPTER V.

A FEW SHIRTS.



YOU look tired, mother," said Meg, drawing forward the arm-chair the first time her mother-in-law came to see her after her wedding-day.

"I am," answered Mrs. Seymour, sinking into the seat with a weary sigh.

"I was going to set out to call on you this morning, but, stupid-like, I never asked Jem where you lived before he went to his work. So I couldn't come."

"And Jem never told you where I lived?" asked Mrs. Seymour, astonished.

"I asked him," answered Meg, "and he smiled at me, and said he should tell me nothing about it, but take me to see."

"Why, I live in the very same house, my dear."

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Meg looked too surprised to speak. When at last she could find any words, she said anxiously—

"How very unkind you must have thought me, mother, in not coming to see after you. Times I have meant to ask Jem, but then he was out; and these few days have passed so quickly, I have been so busy getting out all my little treasures."

Mrs. Seymour looked round.

"Your things have made a lot o' difference, my dear. You have smartened it up a deal."

"Oh, it did not want smartening up," said Meg; "but the young ladies at the Hall did give me such pretty things. Look at this workbox, and this tea-caddy, and that pretty vase. Those were the

young ladies' gifts, and those glass dishes from the other servants."

Mrs. Seymour said they were very kind, and then sat looking somewhat abstractedly into the little fire.

"And he never told you what a job he had to get these rooms for you?" she asked at last.

"No," said Meg; "did he have a job?"

"Oh, that he had. For the party that was in them didn't want to move out. You must know, Meg, that I and Jem lived in two rooms in this house ever since I buried his poor father. But when he got to earn enough, he took the front room on this floor for himself, and used to come and have his meals with me. I've lived in this house twenty years come Michaelmas. I'm a laundress, you know, and wash for poor folks."

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"A laundress!" exclaimed Meg, looking at her pale, thin face; "then that's what makes you so tired?"

"No, my dear," briefly answered her mother, "not if I had got my usual help. But she's took a day's holiday, as she does whenever it suits her, and I and my work may go then, for aught she cares."

The old woman's face had begun to assume a hard look, but it was only for a moment.

"Well, well," she said hastily, "it's not for me to be coming down hard on others; I'm not so good myself to my Master. But there was a day, Meg, when I couldn't have felt like that; and it ain't so long ago, neither. It was my Jem as brought me the good news, and since I've been forgiven myself, I'm learnin' to forgive. It makes all the difference."

"It does indeed," answered Meg gently, seating herself in a low chair close to the old woman, and putting her hand in hers.

The caress was unexpected, and her mother looked down upon her with quick watering eyes.

"I might help you to-day," said Meg, hesitating a little.

Not that she grudged offering her help, but she knew so little of her mother-in-law's life. Should she have to go and wash and iron among a lot of other women?

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Mrs. Seymour paused a moment before answering, and then said cheerfully—

"Well, my dear, if you would help me for an hour or so, till Jem comes home to dinner, I should be very much obliged, and then we can ask him. What worries me is, that I promised a man who is going away to get his shirts done by one o'clock; but I was that beat, that I could not stand another moment."

"I wish you had asked me," said Meg, looking grieved. "You must try to think of me as a real daughter."

Mrs. Seymour was much touched, but it was not her way to show feeling, and she only answered—

"Thank you, my dear. I shall take your kindness as it was meant; but if you help me at any little pinch like this, you must not be hurt at my giving you what I should have given Jenny."

Meg looked mystified, and then coloured painfully.

"Oh, I don't think I could," she began; but her mother-in-law stopped her.

"Talk it over with Jem, my dear; this is a hard world, and if you could put by a little for a rainy day you would not be sorry. I must pay some one; why not you?"

"We will talk to Jem," said Meg, recovering herself, and speaking with cheerful alacrity. "I am quite ready, mother; so if you are, we will come and begin, because one o'clock will be soon here."

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"They're all starched and damped down," said Mrs. Seymour, "and the irons is heating beautiful."

They turned from the door, and Meg prepared to run down-stairs.

"Not there!" exclaimed Mrs. Seymour. "Why, Meg, I live at the top."

"Oh," said Meg, laughing, "you must scold Jem for not telling me."

"Yes, I live at the top," Mrs. Seymour went on as they reached the landing, "because, you see, no one don't interfere with me up here. I hang my things across here, or I hoist them along this pole out o' window, and I can manage finely."

"Capital," said Meg heartily. "And have you both these rooms?"

"Yes, I rent both; but I have a lodger in one."

Meg made no answer, but followed Mrs. Seymour into the front room, where hung numerous lines close to the ceiling, with clean clothes airing away as fast as they could.

The fire was bright, and so were the irons; so were the tins on the shelf, and one or two covers on

the wall. In the middle of the room stood a spotlessly white deal table, and across the window an ironing-board covered with a blanket and cloth, all ready for use.

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"What a nice room!" said Meg. "Shall I begin now, mother?"

Mrs. Seymour assented, standing by and watching critically, while Meg looked round for the iron-holder, saw that the stand was ready, and bent over the fire to lift off the iron. Her mother had placed a collar in readiness for her to begin on, and waited while she dusted her iron and put her first pressure upon it, after which she turned back to the arm-chair and sat down with a satisfied sigh.

Meg's cheeks were hot under the gaze of those observant eyes, but she went on without looking up till the collar was done and another spread out. Then she said—

"What will be the next thing, mother?"

"You've learnt from a good ironer, my dear."

"Yes, that was mother," answered Meg brightly; "they used to say so at the Hall."

"I don't doubt it. There are the shirts rolled up in that cloth. When you've done one hang it here to air; I always air everything. Poor people haven't fires, you know, and there's plenty of rheumatics caught by damp clothes."

Meg ironed away, and the weary old woman caught herself dropping into a doze. It was all very well being up early and late, and washing and drying and folding, but worry quite knocked her up; and to know that she had a certain time in which those shirts must be done, and being deprived of her strong helper, she had felt as if her usual energy had failed her.

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A gentle voice roused her.

"They are finished, mother. Have you anything else you want done, or may I go down and see if it is time for Jem?"

"To be sure," answered Mrs. Seymour, opening her eyes. "Have you done a'ready? Thank you kindly, my dear."

Her quick glance scanned the shirts hanging neatly folded on the large horse in front of the fire.

"Are they right?" asked Meg. "I had to guess a little, because I have not ironed any of these sort of shirts ever."

"They will do quite well, thank you, my dear. I don't fold 'em just so, but I don't see that it matters much for once. He won't know no difference."

Just then a step was heard on the wooden stairs, and Meg started and turned round.

"Is my little woman here?" asked a voice that made her heart bound.

"Just ain't she?" answered her mother-in-law with animation. "Here have I been sleepin' like any top, and Meg's come and done my work for me."

Jem looked well pleased. He knew his upright old mother far too well to fear that Meg would be called on too often to help.

"Oh, it's nothing," said Meg; "but now, Jem, you must come to dinner, or you'll not be back in your hour."

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They left the old woman, and as they went down, up came the man to fetch his shirts.

"All right," said Mrs. Seymour, handing them to him; "and I've put on the buttons. No thanks to Jenny, though, I can tell you. It's my new daughter as has helped me."



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CHAPTER VI.

A LODGER.



"WHAT do you think I'm going to try my hand at to-day?" said Meg the next morning at breakfast.

"I'm sure I can't tell, dear."

"I'm going to make some bread!"

"Oh, that's it, is it?" asked Jem; "if I didn't guess as much when I saw you carryin' home that little red pan."

"But if it's heavy," said Meg dubiously, not referring to the pan, but to the bread, "shall you ever trust me with your flour again?"

He only smiled at that, and said,

"But you used to make it at home, for I'm sure as you told me so once."

"So I used, but not for a long time now; and you know there are a great many things that have to be right, or your bread won't be right."

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"Well," said Jem, "let's get 'em all right, and then we shan't have no mishaps."

Meg laughed merrily.

"Jem, I must have some German yeast, and some nice good flour."

"I'll buy those for you as I pass along to my work, and tell them to send 'em in."

"But they'll have to come early," said Meg, "or it will not be a bit of use."

Jem promised to see to that; and then Meg propounded the question which had been burning on her lips all yesterday, only she could not get courage to bring it out.

"Jem," she began.

"Well, little woman?"

"Jem—should you very much mind if I were to earn something?"

Jem looked astonished, and then a cloud came over the brightness of his face. Did his little woman already begin to miss some of the things she had been accustomed to at the Hall?

"Why, dear?" he asked soberly.

"Because—at least—Jem—your mother said—if I helped her she should pay me!"

"And you did not like that?" asked Jem, looking relieved, but puzzled.

"I suppose I did not. I think I should like to help her for nothing—out of love to you, Jem, and by-and-by out of love to her."

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"Yes, dear, so should I; but I see what mother feels. If she has more work than she can do alone, she would have to pay some one else, and would a deal rather the money went into your pocket. She would not be right to earn money at your expense."

"Not if we gave my time willingly?"

"No; but, Meg, you needn't do it unless you like it, my dear."

"I thought you would be sure to tell me to help your mother all I can," said Meg, almost ready to cry.

"An' so I should, sweetheart, while we had breath in our bodies, if she were ill or needed it. But it's different as it is. Jenny don't serve her well, that she don't."

"Who is 'Jenny'?" asked Meg.

"Jenny lives on our first floor. She has an old blind father, but she's out a deal. I fancy they have some sort of little income, for she don't work steady enough to keep him, and pay rent for those two rooms."

"And does she iron for mother?"

"Yes; and wash too sometimes. But mother has a knack or two with the washing, and likes to do most of that herself; she says folks don't get the things clean."

"Then you would like me to earn something if I could, Jem?" she asked.

"Well, dear," he answered very kindly, "if you was to ask me what I'd like, I'd say as I should *like* you never to have a need to work all your life! But, Meg, I've looked at things a long time, and I've laid awake at night too thinkin' of them, and I've come to learn this. That our God don't mean us to be idle—none of us—and that it's *whatsoever* our hands find to do, that we are to do with our might."

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Meg's eyes lost their troubled look, and brightened up into their own serene sweetness under his

earnest gaze.

"And so," he pursued, "the matter seems to me to stand like this: 'Is this what your dear little hand finds to do, or ain't it?'"

Meg sat thoughtfully silent for a few moments, and Jem got his hat. Then he came over to bid her good-bye.

"I won't forget the flour, little woman."

"And I won't forget what you've said, Jem. I think my hand does find it to do."

He kissed her tenderly.

"If we bring everythin' as we're doubtful of to whether He would like it——"

Meg nodded; and then he was gone, and she stood alone.

But in a moment his step was heard coming up, and his bright face peeped in.

"How much yeast did you say?"

"Oh, a halfpenny worth—if they would sell it—half an ounce, Jem; that will make up five pounds of flour well."

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"All right."

This time she heard his step go to the bottom, and then she turned round and began to think of her day's work.

"I'll run up and ask mother first," she said; and locking her door, which they were obliged to do in a house with so many lodgers, she ran up-stairs.

In answer to her knock a rather far-off voice called "Come in."

She pushed open the door and entered, but Mrs. Seymour was nowhere to be seen. The bed-room door adjoining was ajar, but Meg hesitated to knock there, as she was sure her mother had said she had a lodger.

But in another moment a voice from within said, "Come in here, please; I can't bear to speak loud."

To Meg's great surprise the speaker's voice came from the further of two beds, and a wan pale face, belonging to an elderly woman, raised itself a little from the pillow.

"Did you want me to come in?" asked Meg, hesitating with a fluttering heart.

"Yes. Mrs. Seymour's run down to find Jenny; she promised to be up early, and she ain't come. You're young Mrs. Seymour, I suppose?"

Meg blushed as she answered, "Yes." She had hardly ever heard herself called by her new name.

"She won't be but a minute. Sit down, will yer. You didn't 'spect to find some one here, by your looks?"

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"No," answered Meg.

The invalid shook her head.

"Ah, to think now I should see you before I've been made straight for the day, after all!"

Meg did not reply; but thinking it might be unkind to go back, she sat down on the edge of a chair, and tried to think of something to say.

"I've heard of you before to-day," said her mother-in-law's lodger, with an attempt at a smile.

"Have you?" asked Meg.

"And what's more, I've done for you what I wouldn't ha' believed any one would ha' persuaded me to do. But it was all along of Jem's kindness, and Mrs. Seymour's kindness."

"For me?" echoed Meg.

"For you. When Jem told me he wanted me to move up here, out of my back room—yours, as is now—I flatly refused, that I did."

"Oh," said Meg, "was it you who did that for me?"

"Yes, I did, and I don't repent it. In fact, I'm mighty glad I did, for I'm a deal more comfortable up here than I was down there. Of course there's the smell of the washing, but if it's bad I holler out to them to shut the door; and most times I don't mind it, and where I lie I can see 'em in there, going about and ironing, and fussing; and it ain't half so quiet and dull as it was. And then of nights, when I want anything, I can just give a call, and Mrs. Seymour's up in a minute! Jem said as it would be so, but I wouldn't credit it before."

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"And what made you decide?" asked Meg, wondering in this mixture of self-interest and helplessness what had been the reason that influenced her at the bottom.

"It was one night," said the invalid with a softened look, "I was took awful bad. I don't know what it was made me so bad; but I had told Jem that evening, flat, that nothing on earth should move me out of the room where I'd lain for ten years, and it was no use his asking me.

"Well, as I said, I was took awful bad in my chest, and I laid there groaning for a long time. At last I managed to knock the wall, and got Jem to come to the door.

"'Oh, I'm dying,' says I; 'come in and see what you can do for me, Jem.'

"He'd put on his things when he heard me first; and in he came and raised me up, and then he goes up-stairs and calls his mother. But as luck would have it, the neighbour on the ground floor was ill too, and Mrs. Seymour couldn't leave her for a moment just then.

"When Jem come up and told me that, I thought I should ha' died straight away. But he comes over to me as quiet and kind as any woman, and he says, 'Miss Hobson, don't you take on; I'll do all as I can for you, if you'll tell me what to do.'

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"So I told him to prop me up, for I couldn't fetch my breath, you see; and he goes and gets some hot water from his mother's boiler, and puts a shawl over my head, and makes me breathe the steam; and when I was a little easier he gets me a cup of tea, as did me a world of good.

"Once or twice while he was bending over me when I was so very bad, he says to me sort of soft-like, 'Look to Jesus, Miss Hobson—there's nought but Jesus can save a dying soul.'

"But I heard him without taking much notice.

"When I was a bit better, and had done gasping so bad, he sits down by my side as kind as any nurse, and he says to me, 'Miss Hobson, I'm a deal more anxious for you to get the Breath of Life than ever I am for you to be able to breathe easy. I wish you would think of that!' he says.

"And I says to him, 'What do you mean by the Breath of Life?'

"And he says, 'It's coming to Jesus, and getting forgiveness of all our sins from Him. That's the Breath of Life!'

"'I don't know how to come,' says I.

"'Ask Him to draw you!' says he. 'He tells you, "Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out." If you'll come to Jesus, you'll have new life.'

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"Well, I don't know how it was, but I thought as it 'ud be a fine thing to get new life. So I laid myself back on my pillow and thought it over. But before long I says to him, 'Jem, do you ever pray?'

"'Ever?' says he; 'you know I do.'

"'Then pray for me,' says I, closing my eyes.

"When the grey dawn of morning crept into my room there he was, sitting by me and watching me still.

"'Jem,' says I, 'I've come to Jesus. I'm awful bad, but He's said as He'll not cast me out. I've come.'

"At that he looked as glad as if I'd left him a fortune. And then he gets up and lights my fire, and warms some gruel his mother had brought for me, and while I was eating it, I says to him, 'Jem,' says I, 'you may have it!'

"'Have what?' says he.

"'My room,' says I. And that's how it was as I moved up here to make room for you!"

Meg had sat spell-bound, listening to the woman's words, her interest in her Jem swallowed up in her greater interest in this soul's struggle from death to life.

"Oh, thank you for telling me," she exclaimed at last.

But the invalid spoke again.

"I've been a selfish woman all my life, and now I've come near the end of it, I'm a selfish old woman still; but my Jesus is going to cure me of that. I tell Him about it every day, and He helps me every day to get the better of it, a little bit."

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"Oh, Miss Hobson," said Meg, coming close to her, "I do want to get like Jesus too. Will you help me?"

"Me, my dear?"

"Yes; I'm sure if you want to so much, you can show me how."

"*He* teaches," she answered, "teaches every day."

Just as she said these words Mrs. Seymour pushed open the door, and not seeing Meg, said anxiously,

"There! Jenny's been and played truant again. Her old father says as her uncle has come and fetched her to spend the day over at Brixton."

Then she caught sight of Meg, who hastened to explain why she was there, and her mother-in-law said,

"Why, my dear, you've come in my time of need. Do you mean you will work for me as I proposed?"

"Yes," answered Meg, "if it would be a comfort to you."

Mrs. Seymour looked exceedingly relieved.

"Can you come at once?" she asked.

"When I have made some bread," answered Meg, "and tidied up a bit."

"Bread?" said Mrs. Seymour.

Meg smiled.

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"I'm going to try; and if I succeed I'll bring you a loaf, mother! Please don't think I'm a new broom!"

"You're a *nice* broom!" said her mother-in-law, with rare enthusiasm, "and I'll come down to see you make it one of these days. Dear, dear, can you make bread, to be sure? I've often wished to see it done!"



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CHAPTER VII.

THE EMPTY PAN.



It was Saturday, and Meg had plenty to do, so that her mother-in-law's wish to have her at once was a little confusing.

When she got down to her own room again her fire was low, her breakfast table untidy, and things less bright and orderly than they had been once since her marriage.

She felt inclined to go up to her mother-in-law and excuse herself for to-day; but the remembrance of Jenny's breach of faith made her pause.

"No," she said to herself, "even if my bread has to be given up for to-day I must not disappoint mother."

She ran up again and tapped at Mrs. Seymour's door.

"Mother, I want to arrange my work; how long will your ironing take me?"

"Why," answered Mrs. Seymour, "I've got behind this week, else I do say if they won't bring it to me before Friday, I can't do it! But you see, my dear, I've to take it pretty much as I find it. Poor folks haven't many clothes, and when they spare them, they want them done up quick. These came in yesterday, and if Jenny had come to her time, they'd have been half done by now."

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**She sat holding it, the mother
looking on at Meg's swift gentle
ways.—p. 75.**

"And they will take——?" began Meg.

"Three hours at least," answered Mrs. Seymour.

"All right," answered Meg, "I'll be up in about an hour. I must set Jem's dinner on."

She hastened away, and Mrs. Seymour turned into the bed-room to see after her invalid lodger.

"I like her," said Miss Hobson. "Jem's got a good 'un."

"Yes," answered Mrs. Seymour, a little shortly.

The invalid noticed the tone, and answered,

"Now don't you 'spose I've known Jem long enough to be free to pass a remark on his wife?"

"As you like," answered Mrs. Seymour.

"But *you* don't like, I can see that," answered Miss Hobson.

Mrs. Seymour did not reply, for she and her charge were apt to get into a little wrangle unless she could be very forbearing. The thought of how hard it must be to be in bed for years generally came to her aid, added to another thought, deeper and sweeter: "I forgave *thee* all that debt."

Miss Hobson was reminded by her silence that she too had some one else to please, and she proceeded with her morning toilet with a softer feeling in her heart.

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Meanwhile Meg quickly washed up her breakfast cups, and spread the things ready for making a meat pie. There were the remains of the chickens, and a little fresh meat which she and Jem had gone out last night to buy. It was the middle of June, and very warm, and Meg had fried it that it should keep the night.

So she made her pie and set it ready to bake at the right time; she peeled her potatoes, and left them in a basin of clear water; she made up her fire so that it should burn as little coal as possible till she needed it for cooking, and then, after a glance to see if all were right, she went to the door.

Here she nearly stumbled over the boy with her flour and yeast. She took it from his hand, and putting it in her cupboard, once more set out for her mother-in-law's room.

"You've come within the hour!" remarked Mrs. Seymour contentedly. "Now, my dear, while I starch these few things, will you iron those pinafores? They belong to the family on the ground floor, where there's such a lot of 'em."

"Are there?"

"Such mites; there's six of them, I think, and one above another like so many steps. Poor thing, you've seen her, haven't you, standing at the door with her young baby? It ain't two months old yet."

"I've seen her," answered Meg, leaning on her iron and pressing very hard. She remembered the glimpse she had had of the full room—the fretting babies, the general air of untidiness which only a half-open door had revealed.

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"She's no hand at washing,—leastways not to make anything respectable,—so I take a few of her things cheap. She was a tidy enough woman when she came; but poor living and many cares have beaten the life out of her."

Meg sighed, and wondered if there might be anything *she* might do to lighten the burden; perhaps some day she might hold the baby or something.

Mrs. Seymour did not sit down to doze in her chair this morning. She kept Meg well supplied with things to iron, and Meg satisfied her as much as on the previous day.

"You do it just right," she said, approvingly. "You don't fiddle over it, and you don't hurry over it. Now, Jenny slights some of it, and puts so much work into the rest, that I tell her it's a wonder if there's a bit of profit left."

"I'm glad I do it right," said Meg, smiling. And then she thought of Jem's dinner, and ran down-stairs to put her pie in the little oven.

"How's your bread getting on?" asked Mrs. Seymour, when she came back.

"Oh, I left it for to-day. It does not matter," said Meg, rather hurriedly, for she did not want her mother to know what a disappointment it had been to have to give it up after all Jem's care and trouble.

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Mrs. Seymour made no remark, but she drew her own conclusions; and when Meg had finished the ironing and had gone down-stairs, she went into the back room, and said to Miss Hobson—

"Did you hear that about the bread?"

"Yes, I did. I don't know as I could 'a done it; only married hardly a week. That's what I call thinking of others afore yerself."

Mrs. Seymour nodded and went back to clear her table for dinner, Miss Hobson's eyes watching her with interest meanwhile. On the whole, she did not feel sorry that she had given up her room to Meg.

When Jem came in at dinner-time and went to peep into the red pan, clean emptiness reigned there, and Meg sat quietly working by the window. As he understood nothing about bread-making, he concluded it must be in the oven. But when Meg went to that to lift out the pie, and he saw no bread there, he was fairly puzzled.

"Where's the baker's shop?" he asked playfully.

"Oh, Jem, I'm so sorry; but Jenny went out, and mother wanted the ironing done. I could not manage the bread too—so it's not done."

Meg looked so concerned that Jem had to get up and kiss her.

"Never mind," he said, "We must try again on Monday."

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"Yes; but I'm afraid the yeast may not be good this hot weather. Still, we can see. Jem, I did think it was what my hand found to do—"

"I haven't a bit of doubt about that, little woman," he answered. "How did you find time to make this nice pie, or did a fairy come in?"

Meg shook her head, while she was delighted with his praise.

"This is for to-morrow as well," she said, "because you know we agreed we'd only cook potatoes on Sunday."

"So we did; it could not be a better dinner."

"How nicely this oven will bake our potatoes while we are at service, Jem!"

"Everything's nice," answered Jem, smiling. "Meg, I shall not be home till four o'clock this afternoon; but if you'll be ready we'll take a penny boat, and have a turn up the river. This is our honeymoon, you know."

Meg blushed and smiled.

"Oh, Jem," she said, leaning her head on his shoulder, "I hope I shall be all you wish!"

He looked down at her with eyes that said a great deal, but he only answered—

"Mind you're ready, little woman."

So Meg set to and made her rooms as clean and beautiful for Sunday as she could devise. It was true, they were already nearly as clean as they could be; but London smoke penetrates everywhere, and Meg knew that a little sweeping and scrubbing would do no harm. When it was nearly four, she went up to ask a favour of her mother-in-law.

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"Jem's going to take me up the river," she said, smilingly; "but I'm afraid the fire will go out, and there'll be no hot water for tea. Would you think it a trouble to look to it for me, mother?"

"Not a bit, my dear. But if Jem and you are going out, let out your fire this hot day, and come up and have tea with me when you come in. I was thinking I'd come and ask you."

Meg promised to do so if Jem were agreeable, and hastened away to take off what little fire she had, and to lay it again to be ready whenever it might be needed. And then she stood looking out of the window watching for Jem.

The look-out was not as cheering as the look-in. Tall sombre houses across the narrow street, with dirty tattered blinds, bedsteads half across windows, dirty children leaning out and risking their necks, here and there a few sickly plants. Such was her outlook in front. Behind it was still worse. A double row of forlorn little courts, where stunted fowls were kept, where badly-washed clothes were hung from Saturday to Saturday all the week round, where rubbish was thrown, where children made mud-pies, where old boxes and firewood were heaped, and every imaginable untidiness congregated to depress the spirits and health of the crowded houses abutting on it.

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Meg never looked out if she could help it. People must live in London, she supposed, and Jem had asked her to come and make London bright for him, and she meant to do it if she could. And then her eyes went up above the narrow street, and looked into the clear June sky, and she whispered: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength: they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."



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CHAPTER VIII.

GONE.



AND so time went on happily and swiftly. The summer days came and went, while Meg and her young husband worked cheerily at their allotted tasks.

Many a time did Meg visit the forlorn attic, carrying not only dainties for poor suffering Dickie, but cheer and sunshine for his devoted little sister. If Meg had discovered in Cherry traces of "a disciple," she did not fail to do her part in giving her many "a cup of cold water."

This she did in various ways, so tenderly and unobtrusively, as to be almost unnoticed by Cherry at the time. She brought her some soap and an old towel, and coaxed Dickie "to feel how nice the warm water was," and when his ablutions were done, to their joy he had a long sound sleep. Cherry made up her mind she would try it again another day.

Then Meg begged a bowl without a handle, which her mother-in-law had done with as useless for washing; this she carried round to Cherry and taught her to wash over her floor, so that if the old boards might not look white, they would at least be fresh. And once Meg put on her oldest dress and scrubbed the room from end to end. She also took home the old shawl one hot August day and returned it in the evening clean and sweet.

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She was rewarded, if reward she needed, by Cherry's brightened face, and by Dickie's creeping off his mattress and up into her arms, where he would lie peacefully while she told him story after story of the little lamb who was lost on the mountains, and was sought by the Good Shepherd, until He carried it home rejoicing.

By-and-by Dickie began to run about the bare room with fresh energy; but as he began to revive, so Cherry seemed to get despondent. There was a look of alarm on her face which puzzled Meg; but the child would never give any explanation. She resolutely kept Dickie up-stairs, hushing him from making any extra noise, and Meg heard her once whisper to him in a warning voice—

"Dickie, they'll know yer well again if yer don't mind; and then—I hope they've forgot you, Dickie,

for a bit."

He seemed to comprehend, and turned to the bits of toys and broken crockery which he called tea-things as contentedly as before.

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"Is he ever naughty?" asked Meg softly.

Cherry nodded.

"What do you do then?"

"I talk to 'im, and tell 'im how sorry mother'd ha' been, and how sorry *He* is," reverently; "and then he soon gets right again, and says he's 'good now.'"

One day when Meg went she found Cherry with an old hat on, and Dickie also with some apology for walking things.

"Are you going out, dear?" she asked, surprised, for Cherry's aversion to leave her room had been so great.

"We're goin' hopping," answered the child. "Father's goin' to take us; and I think it 'ull be the best thing for Dickie. He'll be able to run out in the air, and so—"

She placed in Meg's hand a pawn-ticket, as if she would perfectly understand.

"What is this, dear?"

"That's the blanket. I don't know no one as would keep it for us, and so I put it there. Here's the money, and you can get it out for me, if you will, when we come back. I'd ha' come to you about it, only I didn't rightly know where you lived."

It did not occur to Meg to explain where her home was at the moment, though afterwards it cost her many a pang that she had not done so. She was busy thinking about the blanket; and just as she had promised to do as Cherry wished about the pawn-ticket, Cherry's father came up the stairs and entered the room.

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It was the first time Meg had met him, and he stared in surprise at such a sweet vision in that desolate place.

"This is a friend what came to see Dickie when he was ill, father," said Cherry in a deprecating tone.

"Eh! Oh, well, Dickie's all right now; and the train 'ull be gone if you don't come at once. We shan't be back again for many a long day."

He looked askance at Meg, and evidently waited for her to go. She bade a hasty good-bye to the children, and went down-stairs with a sad heart.

So Meg lost sight of her little friends, and though in a month or two's time she went several times to their attic, she could hear nothing of them. The attic had other occupants, and the child and his crippled sister seemed forgotten.

Meanwhile, the winter came and was passing away, while Meg was busy from morning till night. If she were not rendering efficient help to her mother-in-law, she had some work of her own, over which she bent with a happy look in her face which made it like sunshine.

One morning as she was returning from fetching some yeast for her bread-making, for Meg had set up a regular practice of supplying her husband with her own baking, she entered the doorway just as the toddling girl belonging to the woman on the ground floor did the same.

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The little one was running at full speed, and before Meg could put out her hand to save her, she tripped over a bit of brick which was lying in her path, and down she came with her head against the stone doorstep.

Meg quickly picked her up, and recognizing her, knocked at the door just as the child's mother ran to see what the screams were about.

"I'm afraid she's hurt," she said, entering; "her head came right against the corner."

"Dear, dear, dear!" exclaimed the mother, with an inward feeling that here was another misfortune; "I never did *see* such children! There, child, leave off screaming and I'll see to yer."

Though the words were rough, the face of the woman was not unkindly. Somehow Meg had never come across her before, and had been too shy to make any advances without being asked, though she had often pitied the poor woman as she passed and heard the crying babies and general hubbub.

"Thank you, Mrs. Seymour," said the woman, taking the child from Meg's arms. "My! ain't it bleeding! Whatever shall I do?"

"I should lay a wet rag on it," said Meg; "and then we can see how big the place is. Perhaps it isn't so much as it looks."

"Dear, dear, dear!" said the mother again; "I haven't one bit of rag handy; I have had to use all mine up for my boy's leg what was bad so long."

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Meg ran up-stairs, and soon returned with a nice clean piece from a store of old linen which had been given her at the Hall. She looked round for a basin, and soon had a little lukewarm water in it, and the rag put on the child's forehead. She sat holding it, the mother looking on at Meg's swift gentle ways with evident surprise and pleasure.

When the crying grew less, and the little thing, pale and miserable, was laid on the little bed in the corner, Meg bethought herself of her bread, and took up her basket to go.

"Thank you *kindly*," said the woman gratefully; "you've quite cheered me up a bit. This is a hard life for us poor mothers."

Her eyes, which had once perhaps been as bright as Meg's, were sunken and tired. She glanced at the deserted breakfast-table, and said wearily—

"Work as me and him do, you may say, night and day, we can't satisfy their mouths. I can't tell you how I long for somethin' different from bread, Mrs. Seymour!"

Meg's eyes had followed hers, and she could see that there had been nothing on that table that morning but milkless tea and dry bread. Nothing remained but a few small crumbs.

"My 'usband says as it's hard to work and bring 'ome all he've earned, and then not to have enough after all. But what can I do? They've eaten a loaf and a half this mornin', and not one of 'em but could ha' eaten double!" [Pg 76]

"You have six children, haven't you?" said Meg, sympathizing truly, but feeling powerless to help.

"Eight," answered the woman, "and all under twelve year old. Here's the baby."

She led the way into the back room, where in a good-sized bed a baby still slept soundly.

"You must have your hands full," said Meg kindly; "I wish I could think of anything to help you. Where are they all?"

"Gone to school. They take even my biggest girl away from me, her as might be some 'elp, and I'm sure she don't want schooling as bad as she wants food."

"It comes very hard on you. And so you have to stay at home with the babies?"

"That's just it. I might put 'em out to be 'minded,' but I'm not going to have 'em starved under my eyes, and burnt and neglected and slapped! Not but what I slap 'em myself sometimes," she added with compunction, "when I'm that tired—but not so often considering; and I'm not going to put 'em out for nobody."

She seemed glad to have some one to pour out her griefs to, and Meg hardly liked to hurry away.

"I thought when I see you first as you'd soon get untidy like the rest of the girls, but you ain't yet!" remarked the woman, as they went back to the other room. [Pg 77]

Meg smiled.

"I hope not," she said gently; "but you know I have not got a lot of children to feed and see to. I should have no excuse now."

Just as she was turning to the door she thought of something.

"I wonder if you ever make oatmeal porridge for your children?" she asked.

The woman made a wry face.

"Law, my dear, they wouldn't touch it!"

"I think they would if it were made nicely."

"I'm sure you've been so kind and clever, that I ought to think of what you say," apologized the woman; "but I'm afraid—"

"What have you for dinner to-day, if I may ask?" said Meg, hesitating, in her shy way.

"Bread," answered the mother emphatically; "and I meant to pour some boiling water on it, and put some salt, and make believe it was soup. It's so bitter cold to-day."

"I wonder if you'd be offended if I offered to make some porridge for you?"

"I shan't be *offended*; but I know they won't touch it!"

Meg laughed.

"You see!" she said brightly. "Tell them a friend brought them some, and you give them their choice of that or bread, and I expect—" [Pg 78]

"I haven't any oatmeal," said the woman.

"But I have; I'll go and fetch some. My husband has it every day for breakfast."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the woman.

"But I must make my bread first, for if I don't it will not have time to rise. When I have done that I'll bring the oatmeal down with me, and make it for them. Will you let me?"

The woman thanked her; but before Meg went up to her bread she requested that a saucepan of water might be put over the fire instead of the kettle, which the woman had already put on for the early dinner.

"Will you mind measuring the water into it?" asked Meg; "eight half-pints is what I want, and a good teaspoonful of salt."

Mrs. Blunt said she would, and Meg went away to her bread.

That did not take her half-an-hour, but when she came down the woman had done her best to smarten up her room. The little hurt child had had its hands washed, and was now fast asleep, and the woman herself looked three degrees fresher than when Meg left her.

"I have brought half-a-pound of oatmeal if you will accept it," she said, entering, with her clean cooking apron still on, and her neat hair uncovered by her hat.

"It's very kind, I'm sure," said the woman. "Now you must show me the right way, and then I shall know." [Pg 79]

"Is the water boiling yet?" asked Meg, seating herself near the fire and peeping into the steaming saucepan.

"That it is! Don't it look like it?"

"Because it must boil," explained Meg, "or the oatmeal would sink to the bottom and burn."

"Oh, that's the reason?"

"Yes; and I've brought down my wooden spoon in case you had not got one. The iron ones get so hot."

"Must it be stirred all the time?"

"Oh no, every now and then. See, I'm going to sprinkle in the oatmeal with my hand. If I put it in all at once it would fall into lumps, and children hate lumps! At least *I* did when I was a child."

Mrs. Blunt stood by watching.

"And how much do ye pay a pound for it, Mrs. Seymour?"

"Twopence-halfpenny where Jem gets it."

"What do ye eat it with? I've heard tell of treacle, but I'm no hand at sweet things myself."

"No, more am I," said Meg. "Of course the best thing is a little milk; I dare say half a pint would do; but you might give them their choice of sugar."

Mrs. Blunt sighed. She had spent nearly all she had left on the baker's loaves which went so fast, and she hardly knew where the milk and sugar were to come from. [Pg 80]

Meg guessed that, from the change in the woman's face from bright interest to despondency.

She thought for a moment, and then she said with some little hesitation—

"I wonder if the children would think me interfering if I were to bring them a little milk and sugar as a present?"

The woman turned away to the other room, nominally to fetch the baby, who was stirring, but really to get rid of a few tears. It was the way it was done, she told herself, that was so nice. She couldn't have let every one do her such a kindness.

"Mind you stir it while I am gone," said Meg, "because they won't take to *burnt* porridge, for certain! You see it doesn't need much fire after once the saucepan boils."

When she came back with the pound of sugar and a pint of milk, the porridge had had its full half-hour, and was done.

"Now stand it on the hob, and if it simmers a little it will not hurt at all. Pour it out the last thing, and see if they do not like it better than bread, and feel more satisfied too. I've heard that it is the best thing you can have to make children grow."

"May I bring back your spoon and tell you how I got on with it?" asked Mrs. Blunt, already longing to taste what looked and smelt so good.

"Do; I shall be glad to see you," answered Meg. Then pausing with a sudden remembrance, she said, blushing, "Do you remember those loving words of our Saviour to all who are weary and troubled, 'Cast thy burden upon the *Lord*, and He shall sustain thee'?" [Pg 81]

"I've heard 'em before," answered the woman, "but I don't know much about it."

"We all can, just by taking Him at His word," said Meg gently, "and I don't know a burden that any one can have that will be too hard for Him to help in."

The woman looked in Meg's face to see if she really meant it, and the clear eyes she met were too earnest to be mistaken.

The woman wrung her hand and went back to the porridge without speaking.

When Meg had finished dinner, and was sitting down to her needle, there was a tap at the door, and on saying "Come in," Mrs. Blunt with her two babies appeared in the doorway.

"Well?" asked Meg, smiling.

"Well," said the woman, sinking into the seat Meg pushed forward, "when they came in they sniffed and looked about, and asked where the loaf was, and peeped into the milk-jug, and then they spied the saucepan, and came over as curious as anything to see what it was. I told 'em as it was a present to 'em, but they had no call to eat it unless they liked; and with that I poured out a little into the basins. Some of 'em was that hungry that they didn't think twice about it, and after a mouthful or two that they wasn't sure about, they finished what I gave 'em, and asked for more! That they did—all but one of 'em, and she turned up her nose at it and stuck to the bread."

[Pg 82]

"Did they finish it?" asked Meg.

"All but a bit I put by for their father. And they told me to say as they was much obliged, and hadn't had such a nice hot dinner I don't know when."

Meg was delighted. She got up to look into her little bread-pan, and the woman's eyes followed her curiously.

"I wish I could see ye do it," she said, "'cause I've heard as it's a deal cheaper."

"Of course it is," said Meg; "and if you have to stay at home to mind your babies, you could not use some of your time better. Mother used to say it went quite twice as far as baker's bread. I'll show you how to do it next time I bake. I don't do it every day, because we don't need it."

"Will you?" asked Mrs. Blunt earnestly.

"That I will. I'll let you know when to come."

The woman rose, and called her little girl from the window, where she had been absorbed in looking out from such an unusual height.

"She's better then?" asked Meg.

"Yes," answered her mother, undoing the bandage; "see, it ain't such a great place. How it did bleed to be sure!"

[Pg 83]

"I should keep it wet for the present," said Meg; "water softens things so."

"That's true," said the woman. Then hesitating, she added, "Mrs. Seymour, you and your mother-in-law has been the only creatures since I came to London who has ever done me a kindness—I don't forgit it. The neighbours come in at times, and they mean to be kind; but one and another 'ull say a little word as 'ull make ye discontented with yer lot; and it ain't a bit of good. We've got to bear it, and makin' the worst of it don't mend it."

"No," answered Meg softly, "that's why——"

"Yes," interrupted the woman. "*You* say I've got a burden, but you say there's the Lord as can lighten it, and I shan't forgit. For one thing, I can see as you let Him carry *yours*."

She turned abruptly and left the room, and Meg's eyes filled with tears to think how little, after all, she loved and trusted that dear Lord who loved her and gave Himself for her.



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CHAPTER IX.

MEG'S TEA-PARTY.



THE next time Meg set about making some bread, she told Jem to stop at their neighbour's door, and tell her to come up as soon as she could.

Accordingly Mrs. Blunt soon appeared, carrying her baby in her arms, a roll of mending in one hand and her toddling child in the other.

Meg greeted her with a bright smile.

"Here you are!" she said. "I am so glad you came early, because the earlier I get to it the better. I often make it before breakfast."

"And can you bake it in your oven?"

"Yes, it is such a good little stove. I'm so glad it is not a kitchener, because they burn so much, whether you want it or not."

"I could never bake enough in my oven to make it worth while," said Mrs. Blunt.

"I've been thinking of that," answered Meg, "and my husband says that the baker would bake it for you, he thinks, for nothing, if you made the arrangement to buy your flour there. You could make inquiries. Jem says he knew one woman who did regularly." [Pg 85]

"I should want some large tins," said Mrs. Blunt.

"I dare say you could pick some up cheap somewhere," said Meg; "but anyway in a week you would save the price of a large tin."

"Should I?" asked Mrs. Blunt.

"Yes; Jem has been reckoning it up, and he says you would save eighteenpence or two shillings a week."

"I should like to save that," exclaimed Mrs. Blunt; "it would buy us a deal of things we have to do without now."

"That it would," said Meg, busily pouring her flour into the pan, and measuring some crushed salt into it. "See, Mrs. Blunt, to my five pounds of flour I put five half teaspoonfuls of salt and five half-pints of lukewarm water. It is very simple."

"But you haven't put the water in yet," said Mrs. Blunt.

"No, because part of that has to melt my yeast. Here it is, feel it—just as warm as new milk. There! now I pour this on the yeast and mix it well; now I make a hole in my flour and pour in my yeast and the rest of my water, and stir it round—so—round and round till it is as thick as a batter and as smooth."

Mrs. Blunt was watching intently. It looked very interesting to see Meg's clean hand going round and round, each time drawing a little flour into the yellow cream in the middle. [Pg 86]

"It takes a long time," she remarked.

"Not a bit too long. If you are patient over this part the next will take less time, and your bread will not be lumpy."

While she spoke she plunged her two hands into the middle of the batter and began to knead in the rest of the flour, which stood up round the sides as a sort of wall; and as she kneaded she pushed the middle out and drew the sides in, to Mrs. Blunt's great astonishment.

"You see, I want to work it all smooth, and when it is in a round cushion it is done."

"Does it go into the oven at once?" asked Mrs. Blunt.

Meg laughed merrily. "No; I set it near the fire to rise, and it has to get to more than twice as high as it is now before it is ready. You will have to come up again to see it 'made up' if you want to learn the whole process."

"I'm afraid I should be a long time getting it right," said Mrs. Blunt, sighing.

"It wants experience," answered Meg; "but you would soon know; and if you like to try it, I will look in on you and give you some hints."

"Then I may come up again?" asked Mrs. Blunt, as she saw Meg turn her dough over as a final act, and cover the pan with a clean cloth. "I 'spose it's done for the present?" [Pg 87]

"Yes," said Meg, going to the bowl to wash off the flour which clung to her hands, "and when you come up again Pattie shall have a bit of dough all to herself to make into a little loaf."

Pattie, who had stood all the while with her chin over the edge of the pan, absorbed in watching, now clapped her hands gleefully.

"You are *very* kind, I'm sure," said Mrs. Blunt heartily. "Then you will let me know?"

"I shall not forget, and if it is good bread you shall have a loaf for the children."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mrs. Blunt, in a very gratified tone.

"Look here," said Meg, considering for a minute or two. "It is half-past ten now, and if I do not put it quite so near the fire it will not be ready till my husband has gone back to work this afternoon. I can keep it back a little. Will you come up directly your children are gone to school, and sit with me for an hour or so while I bake it? That is the best way to learn."

"Oh, thank you!" said Mrs. Blunt; "then I will."

"As I do not want my bread to be late, perhaps you would not mind coming up before you wash up your dinner-plates, then you can run down for that when the bread goes into the oven, and I'll mind the babies."

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The mother was only too pleased. Somehow Meg's society was so restful; she chatted about such pleasant things; above all, she seemed to be able to look at everything as coming from a Father's hand above, who allowed even the disagreeable things to happen in truest love.

So Mrs. Blunt went down with fresh heart, and tried her hand at a saucepan of porridge herself, and succeeded as well as Meg had done, to her own great delight.

At two o'clock she once more set out to see the bread made up.

Meg had already cleared away all traces of her dinner; the kettle was on the hob, the fire had been made up, and on the table stood a clean pastry-board, a basin of flour, and a knife.

"The first thing I do when I have got out my things and washed my hands, is to butter my tins—dripping will do. See, here are two that exactly fit into my oven. I take a clean bit of paper and put a little knob of dripping or butter on it, and rub them all over, not missing any place, or the bread will stick. Now I put the tins on the fender to warm; next I cut my dough in half,—look how full of little holes it is! that's what mother at home calls her 'lace,'—and I lift it out on to my board. Here, Pattie, this is a little bit for you. How nice and clean mother has made your hands! Now you'll be able to eat it when it's baked. Now I work and roll this with a little flour which I have sprinkled on the board first, till it feels quite dry again and has left off sticking; this will make the bread white and keep the holes small. Hark how the bubbles break as I pinch it and roll it! There, that will do. Now I must make it into the right shape and put it into the tin."

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"Here 'tis," she said, in a satisfied tone. "I knew as 'twas somewheres. Supposin' you and me was to read a bit every night?" p. 105.

She did the same with the other half of the dough, then plunged the knife several times to the bottom of the tin, cut it across the top, and put it back on the fender.

"Now, Mrs. Blunt," said Meg, "I judge by my oven whether to leave it there for a quarter of an hour, or whether to put it into the *bottom* shelf of the oven. If the bottom is not too hot, that's the best place. Yes, mine is just right; feel what a different heat it is from the top."

"Why do you do that?" asked Mrs. Blunt.

"Because if I put it into the hot part at once it would set the crust of the loaf before it had time to rise, and then the rest would be heavy. I leave it in the bottom just so long as will allow it to begin to rise, about ten minutes or a quarter of an hour, and then put it into the top, and my baking begins. You had better wait to see that before you go down again."

"I made some porridge, Mrs. Seymour; and what's more they've eat it, and said it's as good as yours."

"Oh, I *am* glad!" said Meg, heartily. "When they get used to it, you see if they don't say it's *better* than mine." [Pg 92]

Mrs. Blunt laughed at that, but she knew enough of children by this time to guess that Meg was right.

When she was gone down to wash her dishes, Meg sat down on her low chair with the baby, and drew little Pattie to her knee to hear a story. She told them about the Good Shepherd who loves little lambs, and how He gave His life to save the little lambs from being lost.

Pattie's eyes were very wide open, and she listened as long as there was any "story" in Meg's words. Then when she began to grow fidgety Meg got her to learn the one word "Jesus," and after that she sang to them till their mother came back.

"Now I'm going to fetch my mother-in-law," said Meg; "she's coming to have a cup of early tea with us, while the bread is baking. I do not look at it yet, because I want the oven to keep hot, and I know it will not burn yet."

"If the baker bakes my bread for me, I shall be saved all that," said Mrs. Blunt.

"Yes, so you will; and as your loaves will be large it would be a great help, because a baker's oven is such a nice even heat. Still it is nice to know how to do it."

"Oh yes," said Mrs. Blunt. "I did not mean that."

Meg went upstairs.

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"Come, mother," she said, "Mrs. Blunt's there, and I'm going to make the tea. It's early to be sure, but you won't mind."

"I must finish these couple of shirts, my dear."

"Then I'll do that," said Meg, "while you make up your fire. I couldn't venture to do *that* for you, mother; I shouldn't do it right."

Meg laughed as she said that, and Mrs. Seymour laughed too.

Miss Hobson from the inner room called out cheerily: "Well, it's the only thing as she thinks you can't do to her mind anyway."

"Young folks can't have the experience of us old ones," said Mrs. Seymour. "We can't expect it."

Meg finished the shirts, and then went into the back room to say, "How d'ye do" to her mother-in-law's lodger, while Mrs. Seymour took off her ironing apron, settled her cap aright, and went downstairs.

"I shall bring you a cup of our tea presently," said Meg, "and a bit of bread and butter, so don't settle to sleep yet, Miss Hobson."

"Very well, my dear, I'm glad you told me. Are you going to have a party?"

Meg smiled. "Miss Hobson, I've got a pot of sunshine that won't hold it all, so I'm going to give a little away."

Miss Hobson looked at her curiously, but Meg only nodded and ran off.

Presently Meg allowed Mrs. Blunt to look for a moment with her into the little oven. There were the two loaves brown and crusty, with beautiful white ridges peeping out where the crust had broken, looking the picture of what home-made loaves should be.

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"Are they done?" asked Mrs. Blunt.

"Not quite. They are not 'soaked,' as mother would say. If we took them out now they would be wet in the middle."

She quickly shut the oven, looked at her fire, but did not touch it, as she had made it up before the bread went in; and then she turned to her kettle.

"Now boil as soon as you like," she said to it. She spread a cloth, set some teacups, cut some bread and butter, and took out of her cupboard a tin of sardines. "Jem heard what I was going to do, and he brought these home of his own idea; don't you think that was kind of him?" asked Meg.

"That it was," said Mrs. Blunt. "Why, I haven't been out to tea since—not for years."

"Here is the kettle boiling, and here is Pattie's little loaf, just cool enough for her to touch. Come, Pattie, sit on this hassock on the chair by mother, you'll be high enough then."

They gathered round the table while Meg invited her mother to ask the blessing; then they all began. But before Meg tasted hers she took up a couple of thin slices of bread and butter and a sardine on a little tray, with a nice hot cup of tea.

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"Brought up some of the sunshine to me?" said Miss Hobson, smiling.

"Oh, I didn't mean that! But if you saw how thin and, careworn and poor she is——"

"I know it—I've seen her often enough. Meg, wasn't it Jem as said that you did with your might 'whatsoever your hand found to do'?"

"No, he said we ought to."

"It's the same thing with you, I'm thinking."

Meg went back to her tea-party, and by-and-by the bread was done, and came out of the oven looking a picture.

"How do you judge?" asked Mrs. Blunt.

But she need not have spoken, for Meg was tapping it with her knuckles, and when she heard it sound clear and bright on every side, she knew it was baked through.

"There, Mrs. Blunt, one of those is for you; see I will stand it on its top on this shelf to let the steam off, and when you go you shall take it with you. Whenever you like, I'll come down and watch you make one or two batches; that is, if mother does not want me."

So the tea-party ended. Mrs. Blunt had not had such a quiet meal for years. Her face looked brighter and happier as she prepared to go back again. Mrs. Seymour had already returned to her ironing, and Meg was putting the loaf on a plate.

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"Would you mind saying that text over again?" asked Mrs. Blunt wistfully.

"That about our burdens?" said Meg.

"She's teached me one," said Pattie. "I 'tan say it—'Jesus,'—that's what she teached me."

"So I did," said Meg, kissing her, "and mother's text means just the same, only longer, because she's big. 'Cast thy burden on the *Lord*, and He shall sustain thee.'"



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CHAPTER X.

TURNING A NEW LEAF.



AND so Mrs. Blunt began a new life.

That afternoon when she went down with softened heart to her crowded and somewhat dirty rooms, she looked round upon them with new eyes—eyes that had been lightened by a ray from above. She scarcely knew it, and yet, instead of gloomy half-patient, half-hopeless despondency, she began to think even her poor little things might be able to be made better.

The rest of her children were all at school, but they would soon be home now. They must not find home more desolate than usual because mother had had a rare treat.

She put the new loaf carefully away, it must not be touched till to-morrow, and then she set on her kettle for tea and swept up the room. How different it looked even with that little bit of care! Next, deciding that she should just have time to clean the hearth, she set about it with all speed, and was just putting away her pail when there came a rush in the passage, and four or five children burst into the room.

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It was on her lips to say, "What a row you do make!" but another word was already hovering there—Pattie's new word, "Jesus,"—and somehow that word would not let the others pass it.

"Ain't tea ready? we're awful hungry, mother."

"Very soon, Jim. Just take Pattie and baby outside, will yer, while I turn round a bit. It 'ull come all the sooner for letting me get it without them hangin' on my skirts."

Jim saw the force of this argument, and with pretty good grace took the little ones under his charge on the doorstep, while the mother turned to the eldest girl with an unusually kind welcome.

"Come, Kittie," she said, "and help tidy up for father. I've been out to tea, Kittie, and I've heard words as has made me wish to have a happier home, and I want you to 'elp me do it."

Kittie, a well-grown but backward girl of twelve, rather stared at her mother, but she recognized that the tone was different, and concluding that her mother was in a good humour, as she called it, she hastened to do as she was bid.

Tea was a favourite meal. Sometimes a little treacle or dripping was added to the bread, and though the tea was nearly as colourless as it was tasteless, still it was hot and occasionally sweet, and that was something.

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To-night a large stale loaf and some treacle was the fare, and as Kittie bustled about to spread the cloth, Mrs. Blunt said again—

"Kittie, I've often grumbled at things bein' so terrible hard for us, and about bein' so short of food and all, but instead o' that I'm goin' to turn over a new leaf."

"A new leaf?" questioned the girl, pausing on her way to the cupboard. "What do yer mean, mother?"

"I don't rightly know yet—if I did I'd tell yer. But one thing I do know, Kittie. Young Mrs. Seymour, what's been so kind to me, says the Saviour don't mean us to go worritin' all our days, but likes us best to ask Him to 'elp us bear our troubles; and she says as He lightens hers and He will mine. Well, if that's true, I'd like to try it, and somehow, Kittie—I don't hardly like to so much as say it—but I feel a deal happier and better, and as if I'd got some one to love as will never fail me."

Mrs. Blunt's eyes were tearful by the time she had said all this, and Kittie's watered in sympathy, though she did not fully understand her mother.

"There's the kettle boilin'! Make the tea and call the little 'uns in. What a mercy as we've got some treacle! That's 'cause the porridge cost less nor the bread would ha' done. We saved a penny or more for dinner, and every one had enough; and that's more'n we can say every day, ain't it, Kittie?"

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Kittie nodded. She was intent on filling the tea-pot. Then she went to the door and began to call; but there was no need. Jim caught up the baby, and there was a general rush to the table.

The father did not come home till six, so some bread was set aside for him first of all, and then the mother divided what there was as equally as she could, giving larger shares to the bigger children. Soon there was nothing but empty plates, and then the elder children went into different corners, or wherever they could be quietest, to learn their home-lessons. Then mother quickly cleared away, and set the table straight for the father. A meagre meal for a working man. She felt it bitterly as she spread the few slices of bread on a plate, and put a small bit of dripping in front of them. But as she looked she remembered that there was the Lord who was to carry her burdens, and not herself, and so she took courage again, though she could not at the moment see any way out of the difficulty.

"It 'ull be better when I can make 'em the bread," she thought. "Fancy saving two shillings a week!"

At this moment a knock came at the door, and on going to open it, she found old Mrs. Seymour standing there with something in her hand.

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"Mrs. Blunt," she said, "I guess you're wishin' as your husband had been with us this afternoon to have such a nice tea, now weren't you?"

Mrs. Blunt's colour rose, and she could have cried, she thought. At last she said, "Why, how could you know that, Mrs. Seymour?"

"I've had a husband myself, my dear, and a steady one too, like yours, and so I've brought this bloater if you'll excuse it, just to make a little relish for his tea. He isn't in, is he?"

"No," said Mrs. Blunt, "but——"

"No 'buts,' my dear. Just you cook it for him and tell him to ask no questions about it, but enjoy it as much as we did our tea up yonder."

She was gone before Mr. Blunt could say another word, and when she turned to the fire with her treasure, she thought she had never been so happy.

But were these tears that were coursing each other down her cheeks? How was that?

When her husband opened the door, expecting an untidy home and some dry bread, what was his astonishment to be greeted by an unusually cheerful-looking room, and a fragrant smell of frying fish.

His wife turned round with a smile.

"Here's a treat!" she said, "and you're to ask no questions, but enjoy it. It ain't come out of our to-morrer's breakfast neither, so don't you think it; and I didn't buy it neither; so here it is smoking hot, and mind ye don't burn yerself."

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The man sat down in great wonder, first at the nice supper provided for him, and secondly at his wife's tone.

She, however, took no more notice, but shut herself in the next room with the little ones, where she quickly undressed them and put them to bed. When she returned again, the other children had gone out to play in the street, and Kittie was clearing away her father's tea.

The father sat by the fire smoking, and turned round on his wife's entrance to look in her face, as if to see if there were a change there. But he saw nothing particular that he could fix upon, and he resumed his pipe in silence.

"Come, Kit," said Mrs. Blunt, "you and me 'ull get to that mending. Jim's wearin' his best trousers 'cause we ain't done it."

"But I don't know how," said Kittie, none too willingly.

"Then I'll show yer. Come, Kit, be a good girl and do yer best. You've been taught yer needle, that's one good thing."

"I wish I could leave school," grumbled Kit, as she fumbled in her pocket for her thimble; "there's lots o' girls as young as me has left."

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"Of course they 'ave! Them as is quick at their learning can leave sooner. I've telled you that a hundred times, but ye see ye haven't taken what I said."

"I can't do no better," answered Kittie, "the lessons is so terrible hard."

"Well, well," answered the mother, more patiently than usual, "perhaps the Lord can help you in your troubles as well as me. We'll see about it. You and me has a deal to learn, Kittie."

Kittie knew that. She was always being told "she had a deal to learn." The daily pressure on her mother, that would have been so lightened could she have left school, made the subject return again and again to worry her. Inattentive and careless, she thought she could do no better, and hopelessly gave the whole matter up as a bad job.

But when the mending was done, and she laid herself down in her little bed in the corner of her mother's room, behind the screen of a large towel-horse, which served as her bedroom, she began to think the matter over in rather a new light.

What had her mother meant when she said, "perhaps the Lord would help her to do better in her lessons"?

Was there any help in such a thing as that? And who was this "Lord" of whom her mother spoke?

Kittie had perceived that things had been brighter for the last day or two, and if this had anything to do with this "Lord," of whom her mother seemed to expect something, she too would like to understand the whole matter.

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Long she lay awake, thinking. Sleep seemed to have left her eyelids. Her brothers came in from the street, and she watched through the open door her mother helping them to their rough little beds in the front room. By-and-by the hubbub was over, and quiet sank down upon the whole of them.

Her father must be dozing, she supposed, as he said not a word, and her mother was unusually silent too. The click of her needle and the sharp rap of her scissors on the bare table were the only sounds inside the room. Outside the noisy roar went on as usual: the crying children, the scolding mothers, the cries of the fish and fruit sellers, the organ-grinders—everything just as usual.

Presently her mother spoke. "Husband, I've been a thinkin' there must be something in them Seymours as is different from most folks."

"Like enough," he answered.

"There's a big print Bible or somethin' stuck up over old Mrs. Seymour's ironing-board. What should ye think that might be for, now?"

"I don't know, I'm sure; you'd a deal better ask her if y'er so curious."

Mrs. Blunt was busy on her own thoughts, and pursued, without noticing her husband's implied rebuke—

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"'Cause if that's what makes 'em different, I'd like to be different too."

"Bide as ye are. Don't you be taking up fine notions. Ye've enough to do to mind us all, without doin' as other folks does."

"I wonder where our Bible's been put to," his wife went on, without regarding him.

Her husband did not answer. He was half inclined to be vexed at his wife's persistency, but he

remembered the brightened room this evening, the absence of scolding, and the nicely-cooked fish, so he took refuge in silence.

Mrs. Blunt got up, put away her work, and began searching on the top shelf of a cupboard which filled one corner.

At last she got down from the chair on which she had been standing, and Kittie could hear her blowing the dust from something.

"Here 'tis," she said, in a satisfied tone. "I knew as 'twas somewheres. Supposin' you and me was to read a bit every night?"

"Not I," said the man. "If you've took up with new notions, keep 'em to yerself. I'm goin' to step out a bit. This 'ere room's stiflin'."

His wife's countenance fell, and when the door banged behind him, she opened the book with a sigh.

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Kittie from her corner could just see her mother's face—such a weary, thin face. She was thinking so, when, after turning over a good many pages, her mother began to read out in a subdued voice. Kittie was so surprised that she listened, and these were the words she heard—

"Behold, there came a leper and worshipped Him, saying, Lord, if Thou wilt Thou canst make me clean. And Jesus put forth His hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed."

Kittie lost the next few sentences while she said to herself, "Then the 'Lord' as mother spoke on means Jesus! I didn't know that. And people is asking Him to do something for 'em, and He seems quite willin'. I wonder if He'd be willin' to help poor little Kittie a bit? Well, what comes next?"

"Lord, my servant lieth at home sick of the palsy, grievously tormented. And Jesus saith unto him, I will come and heal him."

Her mother ceased reading, and leant her head on her hand, while Kittie, strange thoughts running in her mind, began to wish she could go to this Lord to obtain help as these people had. She must get that book and see what more it said. At any rate of this she was certain, that the Lord Jesus answered to both those applicants, "*I will*." He did not say "no" to either, and if she could only find out how to speak to Him, she too might get what she needed. With this comforting thought, and with the light of a new hope dawning in her heart, little Kittie fell asleep.

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She did not yet know that He was close to her all the time, and that His ear was ever ready to hear if she spoke to Him.



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CHAPTER XI.

A MIDNIGHT BARGAIN.



LOOK 'ere," said a low voice, "be a good boy, and don't cry, and then I'll see if I can't get yer somethin' or other to eat."

"But I'm 'ungry, Cherry," whispered the little one in answer, frightened by former experiences into keeping his woe within bounds, "and it's all cold and dark 'ere. I wish you'd take me to mother."

A sharp pang shot across Cherry's heart, and she answered in a voice that held a sob only just restrained from breaking forth, "I can't, Dickie, you know as I can't. I would in a minute if I could; mother's gone a long way off."

"In a train?" whispered Dickie.

Cherry nodded. What did it matter, so that Dickie was pacified? she thought.

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"She promised as she'd take me," he said again, "and she never has. She never went a long way

from Dickie 'afore."

"No," whispered Cherry again, "no more she did from Cherry; but she couldn't help herself—mother couldn't. She was took."

Dickie turned round wearily, and his little sister smoothed his hair and cheek, till by-and-by his gentle breathing told her that he was at last asleep.

Then she raised herself a little and looked round stealthily.

The room in which she lay was a good-sized one, and in each of the four corners, heaped together for warmth, the different members of four different families were huddled. Tattered rugs, shawls, and rags covered them from the biting February cold, and a flickering nightlight on a box in the middle of the room was the only gleam that revealed the shadowy misery congregated there.

Though the poor little brother was asleep, and Cherry herself sorely needed repose, she still kept her wearied eyes open, watching the door fearfully. At last, overcome by fatigue, she forgot everything, till a slight moan from Dickie brought her back to the present, and she heard a voice close at her elbow say thickly—

"Well, yer can 'ave him: the worst on't is the gal; she'll take on if I say yes, awful."

The words were spoken in a rough sort of undertone by a man who seemed by the sound of his voice to have been drinking heavily. [Pg 110]

The answer, from a woman who was already settling herself to sleep in her corner near, came in a hard distinct whisper—

"Never mind *her*! She'll fret a bit, but that'll be the end on it. She can't do nothing. Anybody 'ud know as 'tis better for 'im to be fed and clothed than left 'ere to starve."

The man addressed was sensible of a sort of flash of memory, and a picture came up before his eyes.

A neat, quiet home; an invalid wife sitting in a chair by the fire, tenderly holding a little frail boy; a crippled girl standing with her hand in the child's; a low hoarse voice pleading, "You'll take care of 'em, Tom! You'll let that dreadful drink alone, and feed them as are so helpless instead!"

That was the picture, and as Tom heard the woman say what she proposed "was better than starving," he knew in his heart how cruelly he had broken the promise he had made to his dying wife.

"I'll take 'im right away up to the attic if ye like," the woman went on, "and then," indicating Cherry by a movement of her hand, "she won't hear nor see nothink."

The man shook his head.

"One thing, she do keep 'im quiet when we don't want 'im. And if she makes a fuss I'll find a way to shut 'er mouth; that I will, don't yer fear." [Pg 111]

Cherry lay and quaked. Well she knew all that was implied in this low-toned conversation, both towards her little brother and herself. But she too had seen, as by a flash, another scene. A woman on a dying bed, whispering with an earnestness which impressed every word on her child's memory, "Cherry, if you're in any trouble, tell Jesus—ask Him to help you. Oh, Cherry, if I did not know you love Him, my heart would break. Jesus, will help you. Tell Dickie that I always said that."

Cherry thought of it now, at first with a hopeless feeling that things had been so bad for so long that she feared Jesus did not hear; and then with a rebound she determined never to give up what her beloved and dying mother had bequeathed to her. "She always spoke true," she thought, with a sudden lightening of her terrible burden, and her head nestled against Dickie's with a certain dim belief that rescue of some sort would come some day.

The crowded inhabitants of the room had one by one sunk into slumber; even her father had ceased tossing about and swearing at all around him. Still Cherry lay broad awake, thinking over all the events of the last year, and remembering now with a sort of awe how she *had* called upon her Lord Jesus last May, when things had been so dreadfully bad with little Dickie, and how He had heard her, and had sent Dickie a long and dangerous illness, which had made him quite unable to be taken out on hire with old Sairy as heretofore. [Pg 112]

She remembered now with thankfulness, though she had not looked upon it as the answer at the time, that somehow the kind carpenter who had been repairing their wretched room had taken notice of Dickie, and had given him a blanket and some grapes, and how his wife had brought him many a nice meal from their table.

Cherry's life was so hard that she had taken all that happened, both bad and good, with a sort of apathy; but to-night it all came over her afresh, and she realized that this had perhaps been the way her Lord Jesus had answered her despairing prayer for little Dickie.

Then she would pray again; and this time instead of asking only for him to be taken away from the cruel woman everybody called "old Sairy," she would pray that he might have a nice home, and love and care.

Cherry did not say those words, but in her simple language she asked what she wanted, and after that, with a strange sense of the burden lifted on to shoulders which were very strong, she closed her eyes and at last fell asleep.

And even the next day, when Dickie woke, and old Sairy handed him a piece of bread, Cherry took the matter with equanimity, saying to herself over and over again, "I've told Jesus, and He's goin' to see to it." [Pg 113]

But when Dickie had eaten the bread ravenously, he turned his little face back again to Cherry's shoulder, and said with a shudder, "Don't yer let me go 'long o' them, Cherry, don't yer!" Then Cherry's heart misgave her, and she looked at her still sleeping father, and then at old Sairy, as if to measure her possibility of resistance.

But Sairy gave her a glance which withered her up, like the raw February air which was rushing in at the open door, and hissed out in an undertone which made her shiver, "If yer don't mind what yer about, it 'ull be the worse for 'im, and that I tell yer."

An hour after, when she saw them set off as of old, the man with Dickie, and old Sairy with somebody's wailing baby, her heart died within her.

The room had almost cleared. Only a weakly young mother with her babe were left, and two sleeping drunken men.

As Cherry lifted her heavy sorrowful eyes they met those of the woman.

"Come 'ere, dear," she said gently; "don't you take on about the little 'un. It won't 'urt 'im to be out o' doors, and if you 'aven't food to give 'im, ain't it a deal better as they should feed 'im? I 'eard what them two said last night, and it's true as he's pretty nigh starvin'." [Pg 114]

"Yes, but you don't know," whispered Cherry, looking round fearfully; "if it was only taking him out I shouldn't care; but—"

At this moment her father roused up and shook himself.

"Eh, gal, so they're gone?" with a coarse laugh; "and to-night we'll get a bit of supper, and some'ut to drink."



**"Then the woman seizes Dickie again, and begins to tie somethin' on his eyes, and he fights and screams with all his little might."—
p. 136.**



CHAPTER XII.

"INASMUCH."



ARCH was nearly over, when one night Jem woke to see Meg standing at the window. It was moonlight, and he could see her outline distinctly against the bright sky.

"Is anything the matter, Meg?" he asked anxiously.

"Hush!" exclaimed Meg earnestly. "Jem, night after night I hear the same. I thought it must be my fancy, but I'm certain it's not. There! can't you hear those screams?"

Jem got up and came to the window, more with the intention of soothing Meg than of listening to his neighbours. He had too long been used to London sights and sounds to be alarmed at a little crying in the night.

Meg held her breath, and on the night air were certainly borne unmistakable cries of some child, either in great fear or pain. [Pg 118]

"Jem!" said Meg again in a frightened whisper, "which house did you say Dickie used to live in?"

"D'ye mean Dickie's attic?"

"Yes; where we went," said Meg, with her teeth chattering.

"Get into bed!" he implored. "Meg, you'll catch your death o' cold, my dear. I'll stay and listen here, if it 'ull do any good."

Meg retreated, and Jem gazed out into the dimness. Still he could hear what had so affected Meg, and as he looked, and his eyes became accustomed to the moonlight, which could not shine down into the depths of the courtyard below, but still shed a hazy light on it all, he began to see which-were-which of the houses behind; and could trace—there the back windows of a certain public-house—there the blank darkness of an empty building—and there the twinkling lights in houses which he knew to be general lodgings.

It was from one of these he fancied, up the next court, that the cries came; and as he stood reckoning it up, he turned to Meg and said,

"It *is* Dickie's attic, I believe! There's a light there, and people movin' back and forwards. Perhaps some one's ill."

"No," said Meg, sitting up, "it's nobody ill. It's some child being beaten or hurt. Oh, Jem, *could* you go and see—could you get in there, do you think?" [Pg 119]

"Not to-night, my girl. But to-morrow I'll see if I can hear anything of it. It's the house where I worked, so they'll know me most like, and not think I'm intrudin' on 'em."

"Jem! that blanket weighs on me," said Meg with a sob. "Those children ought to have had it all this time; but whenever I've been up to the attic to see, the people have been so rough to me, and the other rooms were all let out to several families in each."

"I know," said Jem, coming away from the window, "and very likely he'd have took the children elsewhere, especially if he didn't want you to interfere with 'em, Meg."

Poor Meg, with a weary sigh she lay down on her pillow and tried to sleep. The house where they fancied the sound came from was so near theirs at right angles, that a conversation could be carried on from the back windows if any one had chosen.

As Meg lay wakeful and sad, she fancied she could still hear the cries, growing fainter and fainter, till either they ceased, or Meg ceased to be able to catch them.

The next morning Jem and she consulted as to what could be done; Jem averring, very truly, that "folks wouldn't stand people coming to make inquiries after crying children." [Pg 120]

"I should not so much mind if it were not for Cherry's hints," said Meg; "but, Jem, I could make something, or you could buy a few oranges to take in your hand, and say you had brought them for Dickie if you could find him. Would that do?"

Jem promised to do his best, and went to his work revolving the matter in his mind. He bade a tender adieu to his wife, looked in her pale face, and told her she must not worry, but remember

what she had tried to teach Mrs. Blunt—to cast her burden on the Lord, and find anew that He would sustain her.

He hastened away, and Meg cleared her table, and went up-stairs to speak to her mother-in-law.

It could not have been more than half-an-hour afterwards that she and Mrs. Seymour were coming down together, and Meg had just reached the bottom step at her own landing, when a man's voice was heard asking in a loud voice as he came up—

"Does any one live here belonging to a man of the name of Seymour?"

"Yes," answered Meg and her mother both together.

"Because he's been run over near the Monument, and they've taken him to 'Guy's.'"

Meg gave one wild look at her mother, held out her arms to catch something, and fell fainting on the floor.

[Pg 121]

Towards afternoon Meg opened her eyes at the sound of a beloved voice.

"My girl," he said, "don't ye know me? Look up, sweetheart! Here's Jem. And look what we've got sent us from our God! Meg, my girl, it was not your Jem as was hurt."

Meg gave a faint smile, and then she saw her mother-in-law bending over her, and putting into Jem's hand a spoon with something to give her.

She allowed him to feed her, and when the cup was empty she whispered—

"Jem, I thought——"

"You must not talk, my little woman; but now you're a bit better, would you like to see our little child? He was sent to us while you were so ill."

Meg tried to hold out her arms, but failed, and her mother-in-law laid a little babe in them. Meg said not a word, but pressed a kiss upon Jem's hand, and endeavoured to reach the downy little head. But she had no strength, and Mrs. Seymour, seeing her wish, and knowing too something else which neither of them guessed, raised the babe a little, that its mother's lips might touch its tiny face.

Meg was satisfied, and closed her eyes to sleep. "Husband and child," she thought, "who could be richer?" And then another thought came to rest her with its sweetness—"Who for your sakes became poor, that ye, through His poverty, might be rich."

Meg's lips moved, and Jem bent over her to hear.

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"We'll teach him about Jesus first of all, Jem," she murmured; and as Jem assented, she slept.

But the little one was to be taken into the Shepherd's care at once. Meg was never to have her desire of herself teaching him the name she loved beyond all others.

Mrs. Seymour stood by and watched, unwilling to break the slumber which was like life to Meg, and knowing that nothing could be done for the babe better than lying in its mother's bosom.

And Jem sat watching too, realizing in a dim sort of way that he was indeed a father.

By-and-by his mother touched him on the shoulder.

"Jem," she whispered, cautioning him by a warning glance, "God is taking the little one to Himself; but I think Meg will do well if we can but keep her quiet."

Jem gave one look at her to take in the meaning of her words, and then he sat still, trying to realize and submit to what his God was sending.

When, after two long hours of watching on their part, and deep refreshing sleep on Meg's, she again opened her eyes and turned to her babe, the little spirit had already taken flight to the land where "their angels do alway behold the face of the Father which is in heaven."

"Meg, my girl," said Jem's voice, oh, so tenderly, "you'd be willin' to give him up into our Saviour's care if He was to ask it?"

[Pg 123]

"I think I would," she answered in a wondering tone, but looking up quite collectedly.

"Because I think the Good Shepherd has been callin' him, my dear."

Meg could turn her head now; she raised herself on her elbow, and gazed at the little face.

"Jem," she said helplessly, and laid her head back on her pillow with a sob.

Her mother-in-law bent over her.

"Let me take him for a little while, my child; it will be better so."

Meg made no objection, and her mother lifted the tiny form to her lap, and crossed its wee hands on its breast.

"May it go in my cradle, just for once?" asked Meg beseechingly.

And so he was laid in the little cot that Meg had prepared with such loving hands, and Jem put it on a chair by her side; and then he sat down again by her, and they both wept together.

After a long time Meg wiped away her tears.

"Jem," she said softly, "I can say it now: 'The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away, *blessed* be the name of the Lord.'"

Jem and his mother watched by her side till the clock in the other room struck twelve, and then Mrs. Seymour signed to him to go and take some rest.

But though not a word had been spoken nor a movement made, Meg started up.

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"There it is again!"

"What, my dear?" asked Mrs. Seymour soothingly. "Lie down, and I'll see to it."

But Meg could not be silenced so.

"Jem," she urged, doing, however, as her mother wished, "Jem, you said you'd go and see about it. Oh, Jem dear, my heart will break!"

"I will, Meg," he answered at once. "You're bein' so ill put it out of my head. I'll go at once."

He rose, and his mother followed him out of the room.

"I think she's a bit light-headed, Jem; don't go out, my dear. What does she mean?"

"I know," answered Jem hurriedly. "Let me go, mother; I ought to have been there ever so long ago."

He went, and Meg lay wide awake listening. She took the gruel her mother brought her, and pronounced herself much better. Often her eyes rested on the little cot, but she did not cry, nor did she say anything about it.

Once she asked hesitatingly—

"Mother, did I dream it, or did some one say that Jem was dead?"

"It was a mistake," answered Mrs. Seymour, "a cruel carelessness. It was a man of the name of Seymour, who lives, we find, in the second house up the court, and people sent them here. 'Twas a cruel thing to say it out like that!"

Meg asked no more, and before long she heard Jem's step coming up the stairs and entering the room.

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He came softly to her bedside, and then, as if he could no longer bear it, he threw himself on his knees and wept bitterly.

Meg put out her hand and touched his head.

"Jem dear?" she questioned; while Mrs. Seymour laid a firm hand on his arm, and said gravely—

"Don't give way so, my son, or you'll worry her."

But Jem was wholly overcome.

"It might ha' been ours, it might ha' been ours!" he said, over and over again, till Mrs. Seymour was quite beside herself.

"Tell me, Jem," said Meg gently. "Have you found Dickie?"

He nodded.

"Was he being hurt?" she asked again.

He nodded again.

"How?"

Jem shivered.

"*How* I shall never tell to mortal being!" he exclaimed; "but it was something they are doing to his eyes."

"His eyes?" said Meg, leaning up. "Oh, Jem, do tell me quick!"

"To make them bad, to get more money by begging," said Jem, as if the words were forced from him; "and his father's dying in the hospital, and he'll be left to their mercy!"

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"Can't you fetch him here?" asked Meg.

Jem looked up.

"Meg! could we—now? You and me was talkin' of it this mornin'. They'll be orphans to-morrow."

Meg smiled a weak sweet smile as she looked towards the cot.

"Bring him if you can," she answered, "and Cherry too."

Mrs. Seymour could hardly follow the course of their thoughts, for she knew so little of what had gone before, and when Jem rose up and left the house for the second time, she was too astonished to protest.

This time he was gone longer than before, and Meg ate what her mother brought, and dozed quietly.

After some time his step was again heard, and he came quickly up.

Meg's eyes opened, and she listened intently. Yes, that was his step, and after it surely, surely, there was the halting one of poor little Cherry.

Jem opened the door and came softly in.

"Meg," he said, in a smothered voice, "God has sent us two little children instead of the one He's took to Himself. Here is Dickie for you to comfort."

Meg opened her arms, and Jem laid Dickie in them.

"No one shan't hurt you any more, Dickie, while we live," he said; "don't you have any more fear." [Pg 127]

The child had given one rapid glance at Meg's face, and the moment he recognized her he nestled down confidently in her arms, while Cherry stood by with happy tears running down her cheeks.

"It's a solemn charge, Jem," said his mother.

"Cherry says she's been askin' Jesus to find a home for him for ever so long, and now it's come," answered Jem.

"Cherry, child," said Mrs. Seymour, "you come up with me, and I'll put you to bed, and to-morrow we'll talk it all over."

"Yes, to-morrow I must go and see their father at the hospital. I trust he'll live till then."

"You won't be 'fraid for 'Cherry' to go to bed, Dickie?" asked the little girl, looking down on him as he lay.

Dickie shook his head.

"I'll stay along of mo'ver-Meg," he said.

Jem sat down, quite overcome, and drew the trembling little Cherry within his kind arm.

Her eyes were wandering round the cosy bedroom, which reminded her so forcibly of her mother's; and when she saw the cot, she thought how lovely it would be to have a baby to hold. But when Jem saw her glance resting there he whispered softly, so as not to disturb Meg,

"The little 'un's gone to be with God, Cherry; you and Dickie is come to us instead."

Cherry's eyes filled with tears, and she laid her head on Jem's kind shoulder, repressing her sobs by a great effort. [Pg 128]

"Cherry," said Mrs. Seymour, "there's my bed up-stairs, you shall have a good sleep on that; come along, child, or it will be morning."

Cherry looked towards Dickie, as if even now loth to let him out of her sight.

"Stay," added Mrs. Seymour; "let's have a cup of tea first, and some bread and milk for Dickie. I dare say you haven't had much? I had just made some before you came."

Cherry shook her head.

Mrs. Seymour soon put a steaming cup into Jem's hand, and another into Cherry's. Then she cut some bread for them, and placed some in Meg's little saucepan for the child. After which she went to the bed and took him out, telling Meg she should soon have him again if she wished, but that he was hungry.

Meg was too tired and peaceful to say a word. "He does all things well," she thought, and lay quietly sleeping, not noticing the hushed noises which were going on around her.

She had no idea that Jem left her to lie down on the sofa in the next room; nor that her mother-in-law took little Dickie on her knee and fed him tenderly; nor that she bathed his eyes with warm water; nor that she refilled the baby's bath, and with Cherry's help undressed and bathed him. [Pg 129]

"It is nice," said the poor little fellow, as the kind old woman sat with him on her lap before the fire, and slipped over his head a clean warm little nightgown brought down from her airing-horse up-stairs.

"It's Mrs. Blunt's," she explained to Cherry; "but I'm not a bit afraid but what she'll lend it to him

for a night or two. Wasn't it fortunate that she happened to send it in amongst the sheets I do for her? She don't ever send me these sort of things, but this one came for the purpose, I do believe! Don't he look different?"

"He do indeed," answered poor little yawning Cherry. "I never see him look so nice since mother used to undress him. I did the best I could, ma'am, but it was so dreadful hard to keep 'im clean."

Mrs. Seymour shook her head kindly.

"I know it was, child," she said.

She was going to add that she did not know how her Jem was going to support two children; but a glance at Cherry's happy face stopped her, and she only added softly—

"You can wash your face and hands too, child, and then you shall go to bed."

"Are you goin' to bed?" whispered Cherry.

"Not to-night, my dear," glancing towards Meg, "but I'll doze a bit in this chair. Now, Dickie, shall I put you back in the nice warm bed with Meg, as I promised?"

Dickie nodded.

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She rose, and opening the clothes as gently as she could, she put the clean warm little boy close to Meg's side.

Meg instantly felt him, and understood enough, without rousing herself, to say in a soft little tone of endearment—

"Come along, Dickie; you won't mind staying with me?"

"No; I'll stay along of mo'ver-Meg," said Dickie; and as he said it, he put his thin little arms about her neck and kissed her. Then without another word they both sank into dreamless slumber.



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CHAPTER XIII.

DICKIE'S ATTIC.



WHEN Mrs. Seymour had placed the tired little Cherry in her own nice bed, and had made Miss Hobson understand in a few words who it was who would be found in the morning sharing her room, she returned to the next floor and looked round.

In the bedroom Meg and Dickie slept the sleep of the utterly weary, and leaving them for a moment she went to look after her son Jem.

He too slept soundly, though he had not undressed, but lay covered by a blanket on the sofa.

The clock on the mantel-piece pointed to two, the fire was out, and the room desolate.

Making her own determination, but leaving it for the present for fear of disturbing Jem, she went back to Meg. She stood by the side of the little cot and gazed long and earnestly at the face of her grandchild.

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Her grandchild! How she had longed to welcome it! how she had counted on hearing its little feet patter about in her room! how she had yearned to see her Jem with his child on his knee!

Instead of that, a dead baby lay in the cradle; and in Meg's embrace slept a little stranger child, taken, as it were, out of the very gutter; and in Jem's arms had stood a little cripple, who might be a care to him all his days.

Mrs. Seymour could hardly believe that all this had happened in one day—that it could be only yesterday when she had felt that everything was going so well with the pair whom she loved better than herself.

She sat down in Meg's low chair, and looked into the fire with a troubled face. She argued to herself that Jem and Meg little knew the burden they were taking up; and even if they dimly understood it, they were not able to look into the future, and could not know what the years might bring.

While these thoughts were passing through her mind, she seemed to see something written across the fire as she gazed into it.

The words were familiar, and yet she could not make them out in their order. She shut her eyes, but still they came again, haunting her with a rebuke as thorough as it was gentle. Was it the Holy Spirit, who teaches all those who are wanting to do their Father's will?

[Pg 133]

"I was an hungered, and ye gave Me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took Me in. Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me."

"My Lord, have I grudged Thee?" she said, her old eyes dimmed with rare tears. "Oh, forgive me, and let me do my part towards taking Thee in!"

When the clock struck six she rose and softly went into the front room. With as little sound as possible she set Jem's breakfast, and lighted his fire; putting on the kettle and preparing his room against he should awake.

After that she made some gruel for her daughter, on the clear little fire she had noiselessly kept up all night, and when all was done, she decided it was time to wake Jem.

But when she entered his room again he was already up, all traces of fatigue gone from his face, and her own cheerful Jem stood before her.

She signed to him that Meg was still asleep, and closing the door behind her, she set about making the tea, Jem asking her in a low tone what sort of a night his wife had passed.

"Beautiful," said Mrs. Seymour; "she hasn't waked once since I put Dickie back; and while they're all asleep I want to talk to you, Jem. Shall we sit down and have a bit of breakfast, so as to be ready when we are wanted?"

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Jem willingly complied, and began at once on the subject that was uppermost in his mother's thoughts.

"I dare say, mother, that you think as Meg and me must ha' gone crazy last night?"

"I *did* think so, but——"

"It wasn't so bad as that," Jem went on, smiling slightly, "for Meg and me has often talked about Dickie and Cherry; and Meg had said if she got through this, she should do her best to find 'em, and try to teach Cherry somethin' or 'nother to get her livin'."

Mrs. Seymour listened. She had intended to give her son a lecture on caution and rash haste, but since those words had shone out upon her, she could hear nothing but the tender "Inasmuch—ye have done it unto Me." How could she say anything after that?

"Of course we neither of us thought on it comin' all of a heap like this, mother; and we didn't guess as our Lord was goin' to take away with one hand while He gave with t'other! But it's His doin', and we ain't goin' to grumble. Meg said, 'Blessed be the name of the Lord,' and if she could say it, I won't be behind her."

Mrs. Seymour got up to poke the fire, and as she passed her son's chair, she bent and kissed his forehead in silence.

"Dear mother!" he said affectionately, "I knew as it 'ud be a sore trial to you; but——"

"Don't say a word more, Jem," she said; "I'll help you all I can, and after a bit we shall see how things turns out. If you decide to keep Cherry with you, and she is a good girl, I'll promise you as I'll let her share my bed; and there'll often be a bit of breakfast for her too. I 'ain't given so much to my Lord as that I can't spare a little more. I feel to-day as if I'd never done nothing for Him. 'Inasmuch'——!"

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"That's right down kind o' you, mother. If you'd seen all as I saw last night, you'd find it easier to understand what I felt."

"Was it so bad, Jem? I never saw you take on like that before."

"*Bad?*" echoed Jem. "Why, mother, if any one'd 'a told me about it I wouldn't ha' given it credit."

"I went out last night more to pacify Meg than because I thought as I could do any good. The streets was mighty dark, 'cause ye know it was wet, and when I got to the door, I thought I'd got the right 'un, but I couldn't be sure. But when I pushed it open and listened, I could hear the crying, and up I went to the very top, as quiet as I could, wondering what on earth I could give as an excuse for bein' there if any one interfered with me."

"Nobody did. They was all settled in to bed, that is, those as had 'em. Leastways they was settled to sleep. As I got near the top there was a bit of light out of the door, and when I got to the landin' I just paused and took a look in.

"There was a man sittin' over a bit of fire, sulky like; and there was a woman bustlin' about gettin' somethin'; and there was Cherry holdin' Dickie, and cryin' as if her heart would break. And while I looks the woman comes to her, and drags Dickie away, and when Cherry tries to hold her off from him, she lays it on to her with a stick till poor little Cherry lets go at last. Then the woman seizes Dickie again, and begins to tie somethin' on his eyes, and he fights and screams with all his little might.

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"Take it away,' he moans, 'I s'an't have it. Take me away from 'em, Cherry! Cherry, take it off!'

"Oh, how his screams rings in my ears now. I could ha' rushed in and knocked her down, that I could; but I'm glad I didn't interfere then, for I should ha' lost the little 'un if I had. They'd ha' made off with him fast enough.

"So I was just turnin' away on the dark stairs when the woman came towards the door. I stood back behind it as flat as I could, and she brushed past without seein' me.

"The moment she was gone I could see Cherry creep towards her little brother and lift the bandage. 'You'll get hit agin,' said the sulky man in a low voice; 'there's nothing but the p'lice, Cherry. I wish some 'un would give 'em a wink. I'm goin' down to bed.'

"He shuffled off to one of the lower rooms, and passed me as the woman had done without seeing me. Fearin' I should be questioned, and not makin' up my mind whether to let the poor little things know as I was there, I came out to collect my thoughts. The man had given me a hint. What if I should go in and rescue the children with the knowledge of the p'lice?

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"I hastened down-stairs and reached the air without meetin' any one. Then I came home to you and Meg; but when I saw our own little 'un lyin' there so still and sweet, and knew that he, anyways, could never know those cruel blows, it wholly overcame me. And you know the rest, mother."

"I don't know how you got 'em, Jem, at last?"

"No more you do. Well, when Meg said as they was to come home here, I rushed out; and the first p'liceman I found I tells him the story.

"He didn't half believe me, but I says to him, 'You come up and stand outside the door, and if I can't persuade 'em, I'll call you. I don't want to have a row if I can get the children peaceable.'

"Ain't they got no one belongin' to 'em?' he says, as we got to the door.

"Their mother's dead and their father drinks; he might be anywhere,' I says to him.

"I'll tell you where *he* is, then,' he says, 'if this is the house. He's dyin' in the hospital, he is. He was run over this mornin'.'

"Is *that* their father?' says I; and, mother, if you'll believe me, I felt all at once as if they ought to belong to me, since I'd been saved, and this man of my name had been took.

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"So we went up, and when we come to the door she'd begun beatin' of Cherry again.

"Stop that!' I says, goin' in quick, and she looked as if she'd been shot. 'And now I've come to fetch these 'ere little 'uns away. I've seen yer cruelty to 'em, and if you make a fuss I'll expose you, as sure as my name's Jem Seymour.'

"With that she stares at me hard, and I go to Dickie and untie his eyes once more. They was terrible bad by this time, and he only cried more than ever at the light, and ran to Cherry.

"Come, Cherry,' I says to her, 'there's them outside as will see justice done this time. Come along with me; put that shawl round Dickie, and never you fear, my dear.'

"Then I turned to her as they call old Sairy—'As for you,' says I, 'if you're ever seen with such another little 'un as this, I'll give you in charge that instant!'

"Cherry lifted Dickie up, but she was too sore to carry him. So I took him in my arms, and he clung round my neck, and so we come away. The woman was too scared to say a word, but I think as she caught sight of the p'liceman's helmet as we went down."

Mrs. Seymour sat with her breakfast almost untasted.

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"Oh, God be thanked as they are safe," she said at last. "Jem, you did quite right."

"I think as I did," he answered; "but it's a cruel world, mother."

"And that child, Cherry, said as she was praying for a home?" asked Mrs. Seymour presently.

"Yes; she told me so as we come along. Her little heart was near breakin'."

Mrs. Seymour said no more, but went into the back room to see if Meg had waked. Still she and Dickie slept; so leaving the door ajar, she ascended to her own rooms, taking a cup of tea in her hand for her lodger.

She found her awake, and very glad of the tea and the latest news. While they were talking Cherry raised her head from her pillow and looked round startled. Then she saw Mrs. Seymour's kind face, and understood it all.

"Have you slept long enough, my dear?" she asked.

"I think so; when I opened my eyes at first I thought it was two years ago, and that this was our home before father took to drink so bad."

"Did your mother die since then?"

"Yes," said Cherry; "I forget exactly, but one thing I know, she was dreadfully ill on Christmas Day—not this last one, nor the one before that, but two years ago—and she died in a few days. Soon after that father got bad; he used to drink afore, but not so much; and then our things went one by one, and at last—" Cherry shuddered.

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"At last?" questioned Mrs. Seymour.

"He got tired of me askin' for food for me and Dickie, and we'd been a long time livin' in that big room where's there's such a lot of 'em, and then he agrees with old Sairy to take Dickie out with her, and let him share the profits; and he was out with 'em for I should say nigh on six months. At last Dickie was took so ill that he couldn't walk another step, and for a long time I thought he'd 'a died; I wished he had."

"And was that when you began to know my Meg?"

"Yes. Oh, she was awful kind to us. And then we went hoppin', and father and me earned a lot; but he hadn't been home but a little while afore he'd drunk up every bit of it, and then he thinks of sendin' Dickie out ag'in; and then they was that cruel to us both. Look here!"

She undid some of her poor little dress, and bared her thin, deformed shoulders. They were scarred with red seams and black and blue lines.

"Why did they beat you?" asked Mrs. Seymour, her face turning white at the sight.

"'Cause I wouldn't let 'em hurt Dickie, not while I could hold 'em back; but it weren't of no use, they always got the best of me at the end."

"Poor little girl," said Mrs. Seymour, stroking Cherry's head tenderly; "poor little motherless girl!"

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Cherry's eyes looked up gratefully.

"Oh, ma'am," she exclaimed earnestly, "if they'll keep Dickie safe from old Sairy I'll do anything for 'em—anything in the world that I can. I can learn things pretty quick—mother used to say so. Do you think as you could teach me anything?"

"I think we can, Cherry, if you're a good girl."

"I will try to be," she said humbly. "And please don't think, ma'am, as I've took to bad ways, 'cause—"

Cherry's voice was choked, and she could say no more.

Had the child guessed a certain holding back in Mrs. Seymour's manner.

"Why?" she asked gravely.

"'Cause," answered Cherry in a low voice, "I've never forgot what mother taught me. She said as I belonged to Jesus. When I thought of that—"

"Well?" asked Mrs. Seymour gently.

"I tried to please Him," said Cherry, hiding her face in the pillow.

Mrs. Seymour bent over her.

"Forgive me, little Cherry; I was so afraid—but now I'm not. Look up, dear, and give me a kiss."

Cherry put her arms round her neck without a word; and then Mrs. Seymour asked her if she would not like some breakfast soon?

Cherry's eyes brightened. "Oh, ma'am," she said, "I've not had anything but a crust for so long that I gave up callin' it breakfast."

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"Well, child, when you have made yourself a bit tidy you come down as quiet as you can, and see what I'm about. There's Jem's teapot on the hob for you, and some nice bread and butter. Dickie's fast asleep now, and I must go back to them."

She went to seek Jem, who was not in the front room. She came to the open door, and saw him standing looking intently into the cradle. He turned hastily when he saw his mother, and signed to her to go into the other room, whither he followed quickly.

"Mother," he said, in a low tone, "what must I do about the little babe?"

He spoke in a smothered voice, and his mother knew the pang he must feel, now the excitement

of all that had happened on the previous day was passing off.

She gave him a few brief instructions, and after saying he understood, he presently added, "Mother, I shall go to my master's, and ask him to let me off for a few hours. There ain't nothin' particular doin', so I dare say he'll make no objections. You see I've got to go about this—; and then when I come back Cherry and me must go to the hospital. I've been told as he's not expected to live the day. D'ye think my Meg'll be awake when I come back?"

"Very likely she will. And, Jem, tell Mrs. Blunt as you pass, as I want her to step up for a few minutes. I've done by her clothes as I've never done by no one's, all these twenty years that I've washed for people. I've let some one belongin' to me wear one! What do you think of your old mother now, Jem?" [Pg 143]

"It's what she'll think," answered Jem with a slight smile. "I'll tell her to step up anyway."



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CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE HOSPITAL.



JEM came back within the hour. He found his Meg awake and calm. She had had some breakfast, and was now lying with her hand clasped in little Dickie's with a serene smile on her face.

As for the child, he lay on the soft white pillow with his eyes closed from the light, dozing occasionally and then rousing just enough to understand the tender care that surrounded him, and to realize that he need have no fear now.

"Cherry," he said, without moving, hearing Jem's entrance and believing it to be his sister, "is this what ye asked Jesus to send me?"

"Yes," answered Cherry, who was standing on the other side of the bed, "only I didn't know as the Lord Jesus would send anything so very nice as this."

Dickie assented, adding with a little sigh of satisfaction, "I never want to get up no more."

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"You shall lie here as long as you like," said Meg assuringly. "Now, Dickie, open your eyes and look at Jem."

"I can't open my eyes," answered Dickie, "'cause they hurt so; but I'm glad fa'ver-Jem has come back."

"Am I to be 'father-Jem'?" asked the man, bending down to look closer into the little face.

"Yes," said Dickie; "if it's 'mo'ver-Meg,' it must be 'fa'ver-Jem.'"

Jem smiled and then sighed. He had hoped for something different from this; but what if His Father's will had arranged it so?

"You do not mind, Jem?" came in Meg's soft voice. "His feeling so has made me very happy."

"So it shall me, sweetheart," he answered, taking the child henceforward right into his big heart.

Then he turned to Cherry.

"Make haste and put on your hat, Cherry," he said to her; "for I want to get your poor father to give you to us to take care of. D'ye think he will?"

Cherry looked doubtful. It was on her lips to say, "Father would do anything for drink," but she felt it would be cruel to even think such a thing now, and she hastily dismissed the thought. And

as it went another came—"I'll ask Jesus to help." So when she put on her shabby little hat, and turned down-stairs with Jem, the uppermost thought in her heart came to be, "Oh, if only poor father could love Jesus; I shouldn't mind about being happy myself."

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Perhaps Jem's mind was running on the same subject, for he walked along very silently by her side. Once he turned to her to take her little thin hand, and to ask her if he were walking too fast, but after that he scarcely spoke till they stood inside the hospital.

He felt Cherry's hand trembling so much then, that he stooped to her, and spoke in a whisper.

"There's naught to be afraid of, dear," he said; "and if you're thinkin' of your poor father, the best plan as I know on is to tell God about that."

Cherry looked up. Did he guess from her eyes that she had already done so?

They soon found themselves in the accident ward, and in a moment were standing by a bed in which Cherry could recognize her father's form.

"I don't suppose it'll be much use," said the nurse in a low tone; "he hasn't taken a bit of notice since he was brought in; the only word he says is 'Dickie,' and you don't either of you seem to be him."

Jem shook his head.

"May I speak to him?"

"Oh, yes; but you mustn't be disappointed if he don't notice."

She made a gesture which implied that he had not long to live, and then stood off at a little distance; while Cherry, at a sign from Jem, bent towards the bed and whispered, "Father!"

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Jem took the child out of the chair and wrapped his arms round him pacing up and down the room with him on his breast.—p. 176.

The suffering man moved uneasily and groaned.

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"Father, I'm so sorry as you're hurt. Don't you know your little Cherry?"

"Dickie, Dickie!" said the man despairingly.

"Do you want Dickie?" asked Cherry, trembling.

"No, no, no; only I wish he hadn't been hurt. Dickie, Dickie!"

"Father," said Cherry, gathering courage from Jem's eyes, "father, you know as I and Dickie pray to the Lord Jesus?"

The miserable man seemed to be listening.

"Well, father, we asked Him to find some one to take care of Dickie, and—"

"They'll have him again," broke in the man. "I said as I'd give 'im over to 'em, and they'll hold to

'im. It ain't a bit o' use. Oh, I can't talk to yer. Oh, my dreadful pain! To think Dickie should ever suffer like this; and I took no heed of it when I might."

"But, father," said Cherry, restraining her tears by a violent effort, "there's stronger than them as has Dickie in hand. Don't ye see that Jesus is stronger than them?"

The man only groaned afresh.

"And Jesus has heard me and Dickie askin' Him, and He's found us such a nice home. Father, 'ull you be willin' to give us to those as is so good to us?"

"Who?" asked the man, for the first time opening his eyes.

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"To me," said Jem, coming close. "I've taken 'em from old Sairy, and they shan't ever go back, if you'll say as you will let me and Meg be their guardians."

The poor dying eyes were eagerly scanning Jem's face; they returned to Cherry's as if satisfied.

"Their mother was a good woman," he said.

"So Cherry tells me. We'll do our best to teach them to be good too."

The man turned his head away as if he had done with the subject, and indeed with all earthly things. Then, just as Cherry and Jem were looking at each other in dismay, he roused himself once more.

"You may 'ave 'em," he said.

Jem signed to the nurse to draw near.

"Tom Seymour," he said solemnly, "do you make my wife and me guardians of your two children, Cherry and Dickie?"

"Yes," said the man distinctly; "and God grant as you may keep the charge better'n I've done."

"God will help us," said Jem, taking the hand which lay outside the counterpane; "and, my friend, God will help *you*. If you turn to him now He will receive you."

The man drew away his hand with impatient pain.

"That's past for me," he said between his teeth.

"No, it isn't, father," exclaimed Cherry. "If Jesus 'as been so good to you as to take Dickie away from old Sairy, don't ye think as He can be kind enough as to take you from Satan?"

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"I'm too bad, Cherry; it ain't no use talkin'. You've tried, my girl, a score o' times. And so did yer mother; it ain't a bit o' good. Leave me to die now. If Dickie's all right, I can't 'elp the rest."

Cherry's eyes looked despairingly at Jem, but he encouraged her to try again, himself only praying silently that some word, winged by the power of the Mighty Spirit, might enter that hard heart.

"Ain't you goin' to *thank* Jesus, then?" asked poor little Cherry. "He's been awful kind to Dickie, father."

The man was silent; but Cherry thought he heard her nevertheless.

"You did love Dickie, father?"

"And I *do*," flashed the man angrily; "howsoever cruel I've been, I do love the little 'un."

"And Dickie loves Jesus," pursued Cherry, soothingly; "and if you was to ask Dickie which he'd rather you'd love, he'd say as he'd like you to love *Jesus*. I know he would."

"It ain't no good now," said her father hopelessly.

"Why ain't it, dear father?"

"'Cause I've sinned till—it ain't no good now."

"But Jesus is sorry, and He'll forgive if you'll ask Him. Father—I *know* He will. He says somethin' about 'Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.'"

"Ah! that's them as can be washed."

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And then Jem said earnestly—

"'Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.'"

"It's because Jesus died instead of us, father," added Cherry, weeping. "Oh, father, why don't ye come to Him?"

The man did not answer her. Wearied out with pain and emotion, he lay exhausted; nor would the nurse allow any more talking.

"You can come again this evening," she said, looking into Cherry's woe-begone face. "He may live

till then."

With this they were forced to be satisfied, and Cherry turned away with a sad heart.

Slowly they made their way home again, while Cherry's halting steps seemed to drag more wearily than they had done while hope beat in her bosom. Tear after tear coursed down her cheeks, and it was with difficulty that she could guide herself in the crowded thoroughfare.

At last Jem, seeing this, took her hand again, and sought for words of comfort.

"You mustn't doubt God, child," he said kindly; "we're all apt to think as He can't do nothin' without us. But 'tis oftentimes when we have done all as is in our power, and yet have failed, that He can work best. Me and Meg was readin' yesterday—why, it was only yesterday!" he exclaimed, stopping to interrupt himself,—"we was readin' afore I went to my work some such words as these: 'Not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord.' And, Cherry, it seems to me as it ain't when we can do most, but when we'll let *Him* do most, as He can work best."

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Cherry listened and took courage, and though she did not say a word, she thanked Jem from the bottom of her little heart.

When they presented themselves at the hospital again that evening, and asked to be allowed to see Tom Seymour, the answer came like a knell to them both:

"He died at three o'clock."

"Dead?" asked Cherry; and no one knew the depths of that crippled orphan's heart at that moment. No one but God; but He knew, and pitied.

Dead! and no messages of God's love, no assurances of forgiveness, no pardoning grace could reach him now. He had sunk into the grave, in spite of all her efforts, all her prayers, unsaved!

A hand touched her arm. It was the nurse's who had stood by them that morning.

"Come in here," she said, leading the way to a little comfortless room where people waited. It was empty now, and the nurse closed the door. She held out to Jem the piece of paper he had left with her that morning, containing his address in case of his being wanted.

Under his name was written, in the doctor's hand, "I, Tom Seymour, leave my children to his care," and then there was a weak straggling cross, and the doctor's signature as witness.

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"When you were gone," explained the nurse, "he never spoke for an hour or so, and we didn't disturb him, because we knew he couldn't recover. You see the accident went hard with him, because he drank so. Well, after an hour or two he woke up, and he called as before, 'Dickie!'

"I went to him to quiet him, and he asked 'if the carpenter (meaning you, I suppose, Mr. Seymour) was there, and Cherry?'

"I told him that you were coming again, and asked if he wanted you to be fetched.

"I don't know where he lives,' he said; 'but it don't matter. Ask the doctor to write it down.'

"The doctor was going his rounds, and when he had done with his patient I asked him to come, and he wrote at the poor fellow's request those words on that paper, to which he managed to put his cross. After that he was terribly bad for ever so long; it had hurt him so to move. I knew he wouldn't last long, and I offered to send for the little girl, but he only shook his head.

"She wouldn't be here in time,' he said; 'but when she comes, tell her as the last word as her poor father said was, 'Wash me, and I shall be——'

"He couldn't finish it; so I said the end of it to him, 'whiter than snow.'

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"Yes, "whiter than snow," sins like crimson, "wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.""

"He didn't speak again, but after a bit I looked at him, and he tried to reach my hand. Though I don't understand that sort of talk myself, thinking to please him, I took his in mine, and said again, 'Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow,' and he gave one look at me, and then one long look up, and so passed away."

Cherry took the nurse's kind hand and covered it with kisses and tears; she tried to utter her thanks, but was choked.

And when she and Jem turned homewards once more, though her tears were pouring, they were far more grateful than sad, as the words seemed to ring in her ears:

"Not by might, but by My Spirit, saith the Lord of Hosts."





CHAPTER XV.

THE EMPTY CRADLE.



MHEN Cherry and Jem had really set forth to the hospital, Meg, who had been lying very quiet for some time, opened her eyes and spoke to her mother-in-law.

"Are you very busy, dear mother?" she asked.

"No, my dear, I have nothing to do now but to wait on you. Do you want anything?"

Meg was silent for a moment, and Mrs. Seymour saw traces of tears on her face, which, however, Meg was evidently anxious should not be noticed.

"You feel a little low, my dear," observed Mrs. Seymour kindly; "but you will be better soon, I hope."

"No," said Meg; "I don't exactly feel low, mother; but should you think it very wrong in me to ask you to let me hold him once more?"

"Will it upset you, my child?"

"I think not—I will try not; but, mother, I had so looked forward to it, and I should like to hold him once more." [Pg 157]

Mrs. Seymour made no further objection, but went into the other room, whither the little cradle had been carried, and lifted the tiny baby out carefully. She brought it to Meg's side, placed it in her arms, and then went back to clear away Jem's tea, leaving the young mother alone with her grief.

Dickie slept quietly, and Meg could cry over her babe unseen. She could lay her cheek against its little head, she could wrap her arms round it, she could press her lips upon its lifeless ones. But after all it was lifeless, and Meg shed some bitter tears over the thought that it could never know her love; but by-and-by these were wiped away. The remembrance stole over her that her little child was only parted from her for a short time, and was meanwhile in such safe keeping as she could never hope, at the best, to give it here. "The Lord gave, and the *Lord* hath taken away," she murmured half aloud. "He has got him safe waiting for me."

Whether her soft words woke Dickie, or whether her slight movements had done so, she did not know; but at this moment he turned over and flung his arms about her neck.

"Are you awake, dear?" she asked, hoping he would not notice the little form lying at the other side of her.

"Yes, mo'ver-Meg. Are you cryin'?" [Pg 158]

"I was crying, Dickie, but I'm better now."

"What for?" asked the child.

"Because I had a little baby-boy, and the Lord Jesus has taken him to His Home."

Dickie pondered.

"Did that make yer *cry*, mo'ver-Meg?"

"Yes, dear; but I shan't cry any more," at which words Meg burst into such weeping that Dickie was frightened, and Mrs. Seymour came in from the other room.

She was going to take the babe, but Meg put out her hand beseechingly. "One moment, dear mother," she said.

Mrs. Seymour waited while Meg pressed one long kiss on the little face, and then she allowed her mother to bear her child away from her sight.

Meanwhile Dickie with clinging arms was trying to comfort her in his tender little way, and Meg turned round and yielded herself to his caresses.

"Is the home Jesus 'as taken him to better than this?" he asked in his gentlest tones.

"Oh, yes!" said Meg, drying her eyes, and trying to stop her tears.

"Then why do yer mind, mo'ver-Meg?"

"Because he's gone away from *me*, Dickie. But I shan't be sorry soon."

"And fa'ver-Jem said as He'd sent me *instead*," said Dickie comfortably, "and so that's nice for ev'wybody."

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Meg smiled, though she almost cried again.

"Yes, Dickie," she answered, "and I'm not sorry for that part of it. I'm sure our Father in heaven knows best, and will make me glad in time that He has taken my little baby."

Dickie laid his soft cheek against her face, and then Meg saw her mother-in-law coming in with a little tray in her hand.

"Look, Dickie," she said; "here is a kind mother with some gruel or something for us. Why, here are two basins! How kind she is. Can you open your eyes now, Dickie?"

He tried, but quickly put up his hand to shield them from the light.

"How bad they are!" remarked Mrs. Seymour. "Meg, did Jem say what they did to him?"

"No," answered Meg, shuddering. "He said it was so dreadful, yet so easy that he should never tell it, lest any one else should be so cruel."

"How strange!" said Mrs. Seymour.

"Did the doctor say this morning that they should be tied up?" asked Meg.

"No; only bathed often. He said while he kept them shut of his own accord it was better not to harass him with a bandage. He looked very serious over it, Meg."

Meg did not answer. She was stroking the little face tenderly, and smoothing the soft brown curls.

"Poor little man," she whispered at length.

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Mrs. Seymour fed the child with a spoon, and just as she had finished a knock came at the sitting-room door, which she went to answer.

Meg guessed what it was, but she lay quiet, her thoughts dwelling on what Dickie had suggested—that the Home above was better than this.

Mrs. Seymour did not return for some time, nor indeed till the steps of Jem and Cherry were heard coming back from the hospital. She went outside to meet them, telling Cherry to go up-stairs, and preparing Jem by a low word for what he would find in his room when he entered.

Though he knew it would be so, the little coffin having been promised at seven o'clock, yet it was a shock to him after all; and he was glad that his kind mother had let him go alone into the room, that he might have time to get over his feelings.

Mrs. Seymour, finding that Meg was quiet, and even cheerful, went up-stairs to look after Cherry, and to see if her invalid lodger should want anything. She found the poor child sitting near the fire, looking very mournful; and guessing at once that she had lost her father, she went up to her and kissed her kindly, saying—

"You must tell me all about it presently, dear child. Just now I want you to help me as nicely as you did this morning."

Cherry looked up, greatly relieved to be set to work at something.

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"What can I do?" she asked.

"Let us get the bath ready for Dickie again, and then you go down and fetch him, Cherry. Wrap this about him. He is awake; but I shall bathe him up here, for I think Meg has had enough excitement."

Cherry quickly understood, and in a few minutes all was ready, and she was standing by Meg's side asking Dickie if he would not like another warm bath.

"I'd rather stay 'ere," said Dickie; "but you'll let me come back, Cherry?"

"Oh, yes; only Mrs. Seymour has got such a lovely fire for yer, Dickie; and I'm goin' to try to carry yer up."

Meg added her word that it would be very nice; so Dickie allowed himself to be lifted out of bed.

"I 'tom back soon," he nodded, as he was borne towards the door.

"Yes, dear."

Then as Cherry went out, Jem came in from the other room, and sat down by his wife's side.

"Let me carry him, dear," said Mrs. Blunt's voice outside. "He's too heavy for you, and I was just a-goin' up."

"Oh, thank you; but I often do carry him," said Cherry.

"My! ain't he light? Well, dear," to the child, "you're not afraid as I am old Sairy?"

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For Mrs. Blunt had heard the whole story from Miss Hobson that morning.

"No," said Dickie; but the very name made him tremble, and Mrs. Blunt, perceiving it, knew she should not have said that.

When he was placed on Mrs. Seymour's lap, Mrs. Blunt produced something which she had carried on her arm.

"There!" she said, with evident delight; "don't you think as we've been quick? This little nightgown was calico in the shop at nine o'clock this mornin', and here it is ready for him to put on now."

"You've made it for him?" asked Mrs. Seymour, too astonished to find words.

"That we have! When you sent for me this mornin' to tell me about borrowin' mine—bless 'im, he was welcome to it!—and to ask me to 'elp you with your laundry work, as 'as been put so behind this week, I ran down to Jenny to see if she would mind my children. (She's a kind girl at a pinch.) And then thinks I, 'Mrs. Seymour won't be ready with her irons and things for a few minutes;' and I pops on my bonnet, and takes the little 'uns round to the shop to get the calico. We was back in no time, and there was Jenny smiling at the door waitin' for me.

"'Jenny,' says I to her, 'I know as you're good at your needle, and I want to surprise Mrs. Seymour. I haven't made a present to any one these many years, but if you'll help me, I will to-day!'"

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"Jenny, she takes it in as kind as anythink.

"'All right,' she says. 'And I'll mind those precious babies of yours, and do the work as well; for I'm right down sorry for 'em up-stairs, that I am.'

"So we cut it out, and she was set-to with her needle afore I come up to you. When I got down again at twelve o'clock, after you'd finished with me, she'd done more than half of it, that she had!"

Mrs. Blunt was out of breath, so Cherry unfolded the little nightgown and showed it to Dickie, who, however, only smiled gratefully, but did not venture more than a peep with his poor little inflamed eyes.

Mrs. Seymour was so pleased at the thoughtful kindness that she could not say much.

"Don't think as I grudged him the *other!*" said Mrs. Blunt; "but I thought as you'd feel it nicer for him to have one of his own."

"I'm sure Meg will take it very kind of you," said Mrs. Seymour, gratefully.

"Kind!" echoed Mrs. Blunt. "Nothin' as I could do for her would be kind, after all she has done for me. Why, my dear, I'm a new woman!"

Mrs. Seymour was too surprised to answer, and Mrs. Blunt went on earnestly:

"'Tisn't only as I have a tidy dress now, and a clean room, and better food, but 'tis the inside of me as is different. Instead of frettin' over the little money I've got, she's taught me to make the most of it; and instead of being cross, and tired, and miserable, she's taught me as there is One above as cares for me, and will bear my burdens and lighten 'em, and comfort and cheer me into the bargain. There! if ye don't think that's enough to make a body grateful, I don't know what is."

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"Is that mo'ver-Meg," asked Dickie, "as you're talkin' on?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Seymour, softly. "She's a dear mother-Meg, isn't she?"

"Cherry and me's goin' to stay 'long of her," he said, addressing himself to Mrs. Blunt.

"I know you are. You're happy children."

Cherry smiled brightly; and then Mrs. Blunt, having said her say, bethought herself of her children and hurried away, only pausing at the door to say, "T'other one's cut out, and we'll make it as soon as we can; only to-morrer's Sunday."

Yes, to-morrow was Sunday; and in the afternoon the little coffin was carried away and laid in the cold ground; while Meg, shedding no more tears, but full of peace, listened to Cherry's musical voice. Though she was very small for her age, she was a good scholar, and read fluently. Meg had chosen the account, in the eleventh chapter of John, of the Lord's sympathy: how He waited, that He might bless the more abundantly; how He wept, showing Himself the comforter of all who mourn; how He raised the dead, and gave precious promises of everlasting life to all who believe in Him.

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Cherry and Meg, both mourning, and both needing the Heavenly food which should sustain their souls, found in that chapter, and above all in that beloved Saviour of whom the chapter treats, the rest and comfort that they needed.

When Jem came back from seeing the earth laid over his child, he met the glance of Meg's serene eyes and wondered.

She held out her hand and clasped his.

"Jem," she said, "come and read this over again to us, and then you'll get comforted, as we have been."

So Jem sat down and read it all through again, and got lifted, as they had been, from the dark grave to the bright sky, where He dwells "who liveth, and was dead," and is "alive for evermore."



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CHAPTER XVI.

"THEY SHALL SEE HIS FACE."



AS long as Meg was not well enough to get up, Dickie kept his resolve of staying in bed too.

Whether he had an undefined feeling that he was safer there, no one could guess; but whenever Mrs. Seymour or Cherry tried to coax him to be dressed, he always shook his head and answered,

"I 'ike to stay 'long of mo'ver—Meg."

One day Meg, thinking of all this, said to him, "Dickie, I'm going into the other room to-day. Cherry has made it all ready for me, and I'm going to have tea with Jem."

Dickie was silent, but his lip trembled. So Meg quickly went on,

"Shall I ask Cherry to dress you, dearie, so as to be up to tea with father-Jem too?"

"I can't wun about," said Dickie despondently.

"But you can sit by me," returned Meg; "and father-Jem has a secret for you."

"Has he?" asked Dickie, looking interested.

"Did you not hear him hammering and planeing in the other room?"

Dickie nodded. "Were that the secret?"

"I think so; would you not like to be dressed and see?"

Cherry stood looking on, and now added her persuasions; and Dickie, in hopes of finding out "the secret," allowed himself to be arrayed in his clothes, which, under Mrs. Seymour's soap and water and skilful fingers, could hardly be recognized for the same old garments which he had left off.

Cherry too had been busy, and with Mrs. Seymour's direction had made him two brown holland pinafores which covered patches with clean neatness.

"Oh, Dickie!" exclaimed his sister, kissing him impulsively, "I never did see you look so nice since before mother was ill."

"That he does," said Meg, smiling. "Now brush his hair, dear, and then he can sit on your lap till I am ready."

It was a mild, sunshiny day in April when Meg first walked into her sitting-room.

Cherry had been busy making everything as cosy as she could devise, and Meg looked round with satisfaction.

"You have been clever, Cherry," she said.

"Mrs. Seymour says I shall be very useful if I take pains," answered Cherry, "and I have been trying very hard to, mother-Meg, because I do eat so much."

Cherry said this with compunction, and Meg laughed a little.

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"Never mind that, dear. While I have been lying still I've been thinking of a lot of things you might do to get a little living."

"Have you?" asked Cherry, sitting down by the fire with Dickie on her knee.

"Yes; you might help mother with her washing sometimes; or you could learn to do nice needle-work. I mean to write to Mrs. MacDonald and ask her if she wants any done."

"I did learn to work when I was at school," said Cherry.

"You see, Cherry," pursued Meg, "it is not that we would not keep you altogether if you needed it, or it were right; but it will be much better and happier for you to have something to do; and then if you could earn enough to get some neat clothes and put a little by, how nice that would be."

Dickie grew tired of this talk, and asked if his secret was going to be told.

Meg took him on her lap, and as he nestled his soft curls against her, she explained to him that they must wait till father-Jem came home. [Pg 169]

Just as she was saying this the doctor's quick rap was heard at their door, and he entered at once.

"I am late, Mrs. Seymour," he said; "but I waited till the pressure of my work was over, because I want to have a good look at this little fellow's eyes. Does he never try to use them?"

"No," answered Meg; "he seems to dread the light so much."

"I'm afraid—" said the doctor, glancing up at her and stopping short.

Meg looked yearningly into the little face.

"I think I was told he is not your own child?"

"No," answered Meg; "they are our adopted children."

"What puzzled me was that his sister said his name was Dickie Seymour."

"So it is," said Meg, as if this were a new thought to her. "How strange I did not think of that; but he is no relation."

"The best thing for him would be to go into the country," said the doctor, considering; "but I suppose that is out of the question. Even then I doubt if he will ever—"

Meg looked at him startled.

"Do you mean that I am going to lose him?" she asked, not knowing how to put it so that Dickie should not understand and be troubled.

"No, no," said the doctor quickly, putting his hand in explanation to his own eyes. "But it would be a great thing to improve his health." [Pg 170]

"I will think it over," said Meg, her thoughts instantly flying to her own dear mother and the little rose-covered cottage at home.

"Now, my little man, let me have a look into your eyes. Don't be afraid; I'm not going to hurt you much."

He proceeded to open the lids, in spite of Dickie's wail of pain; while Cherry stood by trembling, having well understood the tenor of the foregoing conversation.

"It *does* hurt me," said Dickie, trying to draw away.

"Ah, well," said the doctor, letting him go; "time will show. Can you see me now, or your sister?"

But Dickie only buried his head in Meg's bosom, and would not be persuaded to try.

Just as the doctor was going out at the door he turned back and addressed Cherry.

"My little girl, are you old enough to have left school?"

"Yes, sir; I passed all the Standards just before mother died."

"Indeed?—and what are you thinking of turning your hand to?"

"Anything I can get," answered Cherry, blushing.

"Because the girl who used to clean my steps every morning has gone to a regular place, and I want some one else. Would you like to do it?" [Pg 171]



**Cherry went up-stairs to see if Mrs. Seymour should want her to do anything before she went to bed.—
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"Very much, sir," she answered, smiling.

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"My servants are busy just then, and I do not like my steps to be cleaned after eight o'clock. You see, my house being a doctor's, people begin to come early."

"I could be there as early as you like, sir," said Cherry, looking towards Meg for confirmation.

"Yes," answered Meg, "and I'm much obliged to you for thinking of her, sir."

"Oh, as to that, she may as well have it as any one else. It is two shillings a week, and not very hard work."

After arranging that Cherry should begin the next morning, he bade them good day, and went off to finish his rounds.

"Oh, mother-Meg, did you ever think I could have anything so nice?" asked Cherry, kneeling down by her side, and laying her head on Dickie's lap.

"No, indeed," answered Meg, "we must not forget to thank Him who has sent it to us, Cherry. How kind God is to us!"

Cherry did not answer in words, but she was very quiet for a long while, looking soberly into the fire.

Presently Dickie, concluding that the doctor was gone, and that he need have no further fear of molestation, put up his little hand to stroke Meg's face.

"Well, dear?" she said inquiringly, for there was a question on his lips.

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"Mo'ver-Meg, did the doctor say as you was goin' to *lose* me?"

"No, dearie, he did not think I should," said Meg, soothingly.

"'Cause he *said* so," persisted Dickie.

"He didn't mean that," answered Meg softly; "and even if he had, Dickie, those who love Jesus can never be really lost."

"I 'ove Jesus," said Dickie, considering, "and so do Cherry."

"I'm sure you do; and to those who love Him He says, 'No man is able to pluck them out of My hand.' When once we are in the care of Jesus, nothing shall ever drag us away from that."

"Is that why Jesus has sent me to you, mo'ver-Meg?"

"I expect it is, Dickie; He's been very good to you."

Dickie smiled happily, then started up expectantly.

"There's fa'ver-Jem!" he exclaimed.

"So it is," cried Meg.

Even then he did not attempt to look, but sat in an attitude of suppressed excitement, till Jem really came in and shut the door.

"Where's my secret?" asked Dickie eagerly.

"Let me speak to Meg first," answered Jem, coming to his wife's side and kissing her.

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"Well, sweetheart, the room don't look like the same with you out of it, that's certain!"

"No," said Cherry, "I never saw her in it afore, but I couldn't think it 'ud look so much better."

Meg smiled at their love and praise, and then Cherry made the tea.

Meanwhile Jem went to the corner and uncovered something which stood there, bringing it forward to Dickie, and telling him to look at what it was.

Dickie leaned forward, opened his eyes, gave a cry of pain, and then looked pitifully up in Meg's face.

"I can't see, mo'ver-Meg; where is it? It's all dark 'ere. Do light the lamp for me."

But no lamp could be of any avail, as Meg saw when he felt about with his tiny hands in the broad daylight to find his way to the secret.

"Here, darling," said Meg, struggling with her tears, and commanding her voice by a great effort, "here is the secret; put your little hands and feel it."

Dickie, believing that the lamp had not yet been lighted, and not guessing or being capable of understanding the calamity which had fallen upon him, let her guide his hands to the arms of a little chair, high enough to reach the table.

"For me?" asked Dickie; "a chair for my werry own?"

"Yes," answered Jem, taking him from Meg and placing him in it. "See, Dickie, you can play by the table or sit by the fire. I have made it for your very own."

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"Kind fa'ver-Jem," said Dickie, contentedly. "Now Cherry, light the lamp, so as I can see it."

Meg looked at Jem as if seeking strength from his pitying eyes; then she bent and laid her cheek against Dickie's head as she said tenderly—

"It's because your eyes have been so bad, dear."

"Will they get better?" he asked.

"I am not sure, dear."

"I want to see my hooful chair, and mo'ver-Meg!"

Jem took the child out of the chair and wrapped his arms round him, pacing up and down the room with him on his breast.

"Kind fa'ver-Jem," said Dickie, settling himself in those strong arms.

They went up and down for some minutes, while Meg and Cherry wept, and wiped away their tears in turn.

By-and-by they heard Dickie ask in a whisper—

"Shall I ever get better, and be able to see my mo'ver-Meg?" And Jem answered, in that low husky voice which betokened strong emotion—

"I can't say as you will for certain, Dickie, not here; but there's one thing as I do know on. In heaven we are promised, all of us who love Him, to see His face; and that'll be better than even mother-Meg's."

Dickie listened silently.

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"That 'a be *nice*," he said at last with a little sob.

"Yes, Dickie," Jem went on, still walking to and fro with soft even tread, "there is no sorrow nor sufferin' there, no cryin', nor pains, nor achin'; but He says they shall see His face, and His name shall be in their foreheads. Don't ye think, Dickie, as, if His holy name is in our foreheads, He'll take care of them as bears it?"

Dickie assented, but he was thinking of other things.

"Did ye say as my eyes 'ud be all right there, fa'ver-Jem?" he asked at length.

"Yes; all right there. 'They shall see His face,'" answered Jem.

Dickie was satisfied.

"Put me in my chair close to mo'ver-Meg, fa'ver-Jem, and she'll tell me all 'bout it. She allays does tell me such nice fings."



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CHAPTER XVII.

CHERRY'S APOLOGY.



THAT night, when Cherry had gone up to bed in Mrs. Seymour's room, and Dickie was fast asleep, Meg and Jem found themselves alone by their own fireside.

"My girl," he said, when she turned her face towards him after a long look in the fire, "this is a funny change as has come across our life."

"I hope it isn't a disappointment to you, Jem," she said. "I mean about Cherry and Dickie."

"No, my dear, no," he answered heartily. "If I had the choice over again I'd do the same."

"So would I," said Meg, "a hundred times over. I did not know all the joy it would bring. I never thought of it at first as anything but a care, that we did for our Lord's sake. I never guessed it would turn into a blessing."

"That's how the Lord's way mostly is," said Jem, thoughtfully; "but this about poor little Dickie is a sad thing, Meg, and will make him a great care. Not that I grudge it—but as far as we can look ahead, it 'ull be more difficult nor if he could see."

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Meg could not speak of it yet without tears, and she leant her head against Jem's shoulder in silence. Soon after this Mrs. Seymour came in, and Jem put her into her chair, saying—

"Mother, I was just thinking about you; for I want to ask your advice. I don't like to see this pale face. I want to send my Meg down to the country for a week or two."

Meg turned and was going to speak, but Jem put up his hand playfully, and went on—

"Mrs. MacDonald wants some more repairs done, and I'm to be sent there next week. Now what could be better'n Meg's goin' too?"

"Beautiful," said Mrs. Seymour. "Cherry will help me nicely, and we'll manage to take care of Dickie while she is away. Wouldn't you like it, my dear?"

"I was only going to say," said Meg, "that the doctor told me this afternoon that it would be the very best thing for Dickie. Jem, might I take him?"

Jem stroked her cheek, which had flushed with eagerness, and he said, turning to Mrs. Seymour and smiling a little sadly—

"Mother, she's like a hen with one chick; nobody can't take care of Dickie but her."

"Oh, Jem!" exclaimed Meg.

"No, more they can't, half as well," he went on. "Nobody who has seen my Meg for the last few weeks, but knows as she has the true motherly heart. I'd thought as our Father above was goin' to give her one of her own to see after, but He's seen as it 'ud be nice for her to have two instead o' one. Ah! Meg, my girl, I've seen the meanin' of those words, 'as one whom his mother comforteth' since I've watched you."

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Meg did not answer; she was thinking of the tiny white-robed form that had lain unresponsively in her arms. For a moment she felt very desolate.

"But it would be very nice indeed for Dickie to go with her," remarked Mrs. Seymour; "I am glad it's been proposed."

Then they explained as well as they could what had happened that evening, with the sad certainty which had come upon them, that the cruelty which had been practised on Dickie had made him quite blind.

"Now I can understand what made Cherry so dumpy," said Mrs. Seymour. "She came up-stairs as quiet as anything, and crept into bed with hardly a word. I've heard her sniffin' and that, for ever so long; indeed, that was partly why I came down to ask you if anythin' was the matter."

"Poor child," said Jem, "I could see as she felt it very much. There, mother, we've had mercies and trials both mixed up, as you may say. Here's my Meg about again, as is the greatest joy I've had for a long time, and here's this trouble about poor little Dickie. Then Cherry's got a nice beginnin' of somethin' to do, and she too has got to hear, as her little brother, what she's loved so tenderly, is blind."

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"Well, my dear," answered Mrs. Seymour, "I'm gettin' to learn, a step at a time, as God leads His people along in the *best* way. He knows just how to send the sunshine and cloud so as to make the fruits of the earth come to ripen; and it's so with us: if we was to have all sunshine we'd be dried up, and should not bear fruit for Him, and if we was to have all cloud and rain, we'd be so damp and mildewy that I doubt if we should do much good. So He sends both, just as He sees best, to make us what He would have us be."

"Yes, mother," answered Jem, thoughtfully; "I dare say as you're quite right."

"You see, Jem," she added, as she rose to go back to her own room, "I have a lot o' time to think, as I stand washin' and ironin', and where I used to think of other folks and a hundred things, now says I to myself, 'What can I do better than think on the Lord, and all His ways?' So I put up a large-print Bible I've got, where my eyes can light upon a word here and there, without stoppin' in my work, and you'd be surprised what a deal o' comfort I get."

Jem kissed her for good night very tenderly.

"Ah, mother!" he said, "I see another way of gettin' to bear fruit; and that is to spread your roots deep in the soil as the great Gardener has got ready for us; I see that now, and I'll remember it."

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She bade Meg good-bye, and went up-stairs again.

"Cherry, child," she began, coming close to the bed, "give grannie a kiss, and let's tell the Lord all about it."

Poor Cherry broke into sobs, as she raised her face to meet that of her friend.

"Child, there are many things to comfort you. He'll not be unhappy, my dear, even if he is blind. People will be kind to him, and he'll not miss it as much as you fear. But, whether or not, the best thing we can do is to come to the bottom at once. The Lord knows, and the Lord *loves*. Cherry, He loves Dickie more than you and Meg do, and that's saying a great deal."

Then she knelt down, and taking Cherry's hand in hers, she prayed that they might all be able to trust Him who loved them, both when He sent cloud and when He sent sunshine. And then Cherry, yielding herself to submit to the cloud, suddenly remembered the flash of sunshine which had been sent her that day, and cheered up and took courage.

When Mrs. Seymour rose, she put up her face once more.

"Oh, grannie!—may I call you grannie?—how good you are to me. Indeed, I will try to be a good girl to you and mother-Meg."

"I'm sure you will, child."

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"And I'll not fret about Dickie anymore. I felt so sorry, so—angry—but I've asked Jesus to forgive me. Good night, grannie dear."

So Mrs. Seymour, though she only kissed the little girl in silence, had her bit of comfort too that evening.

"Grannie," she thought; "I believe the child will be a true grandchild to me in time, and cheer up my old age when I can't so well help myself."

Early the next morning Cherry was up betimes. She dressed herself as neatly as her poor little mended clothes would allow, and, without being asked, proceeded to light Mrs. Seymour's fire before she went out.

She had often watched the thrifty woman take two or three pieces of coal, which she placed along the back of her stove, so as to form an arch for her sticks from the front bar. Then she would lay eight or ten sticks evenly from back to front across this, and eight or ten more from side to side, putting her paper lightly under the arch, and her cinders lightly over it.

"There, my dear," the old woman would say, "if you lay it like that, and your sticks are dry, you never need fear that if you turn your back your fire will be out. Those cinders will burn up hot before you have washed your hands."

All this Cherry remembered, and followed as implicitly as she could. When she had done she stood spell-bound, watching the effect. Mrs. Seymour, roused by the crackling of the sticks, opened her eyes, and startled her by calling out—

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"Halloa! my dear, are you up already, and the fire lighted too?"

"Yes," said Cherry, coming forward; "I thought as you'd be glad to have it done, grannie."

"So I should, child. But look here, I've found a small apron of mine as 'ull do nicely for you to go to the doctor's with. Mind, Cherry, you never take it dirty, my dear. There it is on that chair."

Cherry found a clean, neatly-folded apron ready for her, and to her thinking it added to her appearance just the one thing she wanted.

She thanked Mrs. Seymour very gratefully, and ran down-stairs.

Many had been Meg's instructions the evening before as to how she was to clean the steps of the doctor's house, and Jem's hearth had been cleaned three times over, in order that Cherry should know properly how to do it.

As she hurried along the two or three streets which intervened between their house and the doctor's, she thought over all Meg had said, and hoped she should do it right.

It was a very nervous little girl who rang at the area bell, as the church clock near struck seven.

"Who are you?" asked the cook. "Ah, I know. Well, my dear, here's the pail and things; do it from outside, and I'll open the front door for you to begin on the top step. Here's the mat to kneel on. Don't you leave it out there, nor the broom, or they'll be walked off with." [Pg 185]

Cherry promised, and waited while the cook went up-stairs to unfasten the door.

"Please," said Cherry, looking up with her candid eyes, "I'm not very used to making stones white, but mother-Meg says I shall do it much better in a day or two."

"All right; and if you don't quite know anythink, you just come to me, and I'll tell you."

Cherry began sweeping, and the cook went back to prepare her master's breakfast.

"Poor little thing," she said compassionately, when the housemaid came down to put away her brushes, "she don't look strong. I wonder master chose such a child."

"How old is she, then?"

"She looks fifteen, but she's that small and thin. She limps, and one of her shoulders is all crooked, but I never see a prettier face in my life. Her eyes is soft and large, and altogether——"

But Jane could not stay to hear, for the busy doctor must have everything punctual, so cook finished her sentence to herself.

When Cherry came back with the pail and broom, cook went to inspect her work in a very kindly spirit.

"It don't look quite *clear*, my dear, but as your mother says, you'll improve if you take pains. You've done it very well considering. Hasn't she, Jane? Come and see." [Pg 186]

This was to give Jane, who was passing through the hall at the moment, an opportunity of agreeing with cook's verdict on Cherry's eyes.

"I haven't a mother, please," answered Cherry, timidly.

"Oh, I thought you said mother, my dear; I beg your pardon."

Cherry turned homewards, and the two comfortable servants went down-stairs again.

"It 'ud be a charity to alter one of my dresses for her, that it would," said Jane; "no wonder, if she ain't got no mother. But how her poor things was patched and mended; and how white her apron was. They're clean people who belong to her, if they are poor."

And so it came to pass, when Cherry had done her steps the next morning, the cook asked her to step into the kitchen with a very pleased look.

Cherry entered wondering, and then Jane ran down-stairs in a great bustle, and said she couldn't stay, but did nevertheless, while they produced her print dress, which cook explained had shrunk in the wash, and which they had together altered to Cherry's size.

"There!" said Jane, "we were up till I don't know what time doing it, and I believe it 'ull fit splendid."

Cherry, for thanks, burst into tears, at which both the kind-hearted girls looked very concerned. But when she could look up again, she said gently— [Pg 187]

"Please, you mustn't think as those belongin' to me wouldn't give me clothes; but there's been illness and death in the house, and they took me and my little brother when we was in the greatest want. They're *ever* so kind to us, only mother-Meg has not been strong enough to see about anything yet."

The pathetic eyes of the child, begging for indulgence, lest her best friends should be blamed for her poverty, quite struck the two well-to-do young women, and the cook answered quickly—

"I quite believe it, my dear; don't have any fear of us. Take your dress home, and tell—who is it, dear?"

"Mother-Meg——"

"Tell her that you've been a very good girl, and have done your steps very nicely to-day. I'll come and see her one of these days."



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CHAPTER XVIII.

MEG'S SAVINGS.



URING the week which elapsed before Jem's work took him into the country, Meg and Cherry were busy from morning till night.

Dickie must have a new frock, and, indeed, so must Cherry, though the doctor's servants had been so kind as to provide her with a print one.

"Cherry," said Meg one morning, "you know we'd take you with us if we could; but you see, dear, my mother hasn't but one room to spare, and I'm afraid, besides, we should be too large a party for her. But I shan't forget; and you must go another time."

Cherry looked up brightly.

"Oh, yes, mother-Meg; of course I *should* like to see the green fields, but I couldn't leave the doctor's anyhow; so if you could take me ever so, I couldn't go."

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"No," said Meg; "but I should not wish you to think I'd forgot you, dear."

Just then Mrs. Blunt tapped at the door, and came in with her pleasant face.

"Here I am, Mrs. Seymour; did ye expect me afore?"

"I was so busy that I hardly knew the time," answered Meg; "but I hope it isn't inconvenient to you to come?"

"Not a bit of it! Why, I'm pleased, I'm sure, as you want me. It's nice to be wanted, ye know, sometimes."

"I expect you're often wanted," smiled Meg.

She shook her head, smiling too.

"More of late than I used to be," she said. "But now what is it you want me to do?"

"Well," said Meg, "I want you to stay with Dickie while Cherry and I go to buy something, for he's too heavy for either of us to carry, and he has not got courage to walk yet. The noise in the street frightens him now he can't see it all."

"Poor little dear," said Mrs. Blunt, kissing him.

"We shan't be gone long," explained Meg; "and you can't think how glad I am mother advised me to save what I earned with her. Here's quite a little store—enough to buy some things for my two children, and to pay for making them."

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"I should like to 'elp you for nothing," said Mrs. Blunt, understanding what Meg meant by those last words; for she had sent Jem down to explain to her, that she wanted to find some one to make Cherry's dress, and that she would ten times rather she should do it than put it out.

"But that would not be right," answered Meg; "and, like me, now you've begun to have a little saving-bag, the money can go into that."

Mrs. Blunt laughed.

"I always feel rich when I look into that bag, even if there's ever so little in it."

Meanwhile Meg was putting on her bonnet, and now stooped to kiss Dickie, who was sitting in his own little chair.

"Is this the chair as I've heard on?" asked Mrs. Blunt. "What a rare nice one! Why, it takes in half, I do declare, and makes into a little table too, like they do in the shops."

Dickie looked very pleased, and Mrs. Blunt's own babies toddled round to look and admire. They regarded the little blind boy with awe, having been drilled by their mother as to how they were to behave to him. But his gentle little face won them at once, and when they found that he looked very much like themselves, and wore frocks and pinafores, they ceased to be afraid, and began to prattle about the little bits of toys they had brought up with them.

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Meg glanced at the three crowded round the little table, and left them with a happy heart.

Mrs. Blunt busied herself with some work Meg had left for her, and it did not seem long before she came back, accompanied by Cherry carrying a long-shaped parcel.

"Look!" she exclaimed, spreading it out on the table, "just look what mother-Meg has bought for me! Here's some dark blue serge for my best frock, and stuff for two aprons, and a new hat. I never saw such a lot o' things in my life."

Then Meg unrolled her parcel, and there was a ready-made jacket for Dickie, and stuff like Cherry's for a neat little frock, and a hat, which Meg put down on his table in front of him, guiding his soft hands to feel its shape and newness.

"For me?" asked Dickie. "What a nice lickle hat!"

"See if it fits you," said Meg, placing it on his head.

Cherry was delighted; and then Meg turned to the table to begin cutting out, so that no time might be wasted.

"Does he never run about?" whispered Mrs. Blunt, glancing towards Dickie.

"Not yet," answered Meg, in the same tone.

But the children's society was very attractive, and before long they noticed that Dickie stood up of his own accord, and even went so far as to feel his way round to the other side of his table.

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"He will get on by-and-by," said Mrs. Blunt. "It's all new to him, poor little chap."

Cherry sat by, watching the children, and working at the seams of her skirt; and if ever her heart felt thankful it was this morning, as she saw Dickie, sheltered from all danger, playing so peacefully there. Her own new dress was only a part of her happiness, and when she thought of all the love which had been showered upon her, she felt as if she could sing for joy.

"Mother-Meg," she said softly, when she was next standing by her to have something fitted, "I don't know how to tell you how grateful I am to you and father-Jem."

Meg smiled kindly. "Tell Jesus," she answered, stroking her wavy hair, "for when we tell Him, it does not make us less glad, but more."

So Cherry went back to her work, and Meg and Mrs. Blunt were left to theirs.

"Do you think as we shall get this done to-night?" asked Mrs. Blunt.

"I hope we shall—I think we may. You see, to-morrow is Sunday, and I did want for us all to go to the Mission Room together. I don't know that Cherry *could* go in that old thing, though I am not sure, now I say so, that shabby clothes ought to keep us away."

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"No," answered Mrs. Blunt; "but one don't like to be looked down on."

"I suppose we ought to think about pleasing God more than about pleasing our neighbours."

"That's very true, I'm sure."

"And if we wear what *He* has given us, we ought to be satisfied that it is right."

"Only some of us didn't always make the best of what He did give us," remarked Mrs. Blunt, with a little smile.

"We learn, don't we," asked Meg, "when He teaches us? Mrs. Blunt, I wish you'd get your husband to go with us to-morrow."

"What, in his working-clothes? He ain't got no others, my dear."

"Jem goes in his," said Meg.

"Yes; but a carpenter's different from a mason."

"It's cleaner work, of course; but I don't believe that our Father in Heaven minds a bit about clothes. He clothes us with the 'Best Robe,' and He looks at us in that."

"What do you mean by 'the best robe,' Mrs. Seymour?" asked the woman, still plying her needle as fast as she could. She had found in talking to Meg, that there was often a hidden meaning under some quaint little sentence.

"Don't you remember in the parable of the prodigal son, how the father says, 'Bring forth the best robe and put it on him?' It seems to me that that is how God looks at us. He covers over all our

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rags and tatters with the Robe of His Son's righteousness, and He looks at that instead of at our poor doings."

"I see," said Mrs. Blunt; "and I'll ask Blunt to think of what you say. I'm sure I miss goin' out of a Sunday dreadful; but I haven't been, I do believe, since the first year I was married."

Meg did not exclaim, but she answered gently, "We must ask God to help you both to go; I'm sure you would feel different."

"I *do* feel different already; and Blunt says as I've grown young again. Think of that! It's all along of you, Mrs. Seymour, and what you've helped me to learn of our Saviour. But I want Blunt and the children to take the comfort of it too."

"Of course you do," answered Meg, sympathetically, "and you'll have it too, if you ask for it."

"Shall I?" asked Mrs. Blunt.

"It says, 'Ask, and ye shall *receive*,'" answered Meg.

A little before twelve o'clock Mrs. Blunt went down to prepare her husband's and children's dinner, and Meg rose to get ready for her Jem.

"Let me do it," said Cherry, "and then you can go on with the work; I've come to the end of all I can do now."

Meg willingly let her try, and so the dress progressed rapidly, and when Mrs. Blunt and her babies reappeared after dinner, she was surprised to see how much had been accomplished. [Pg 195]

About eight o'clock that night the last stitch was put in it, and the last button sewn on; and then Cherry went into the other room, and came back in it smiling and blushing, and looking so pretty that Mrs. Blunt, who was preparing to go, was obliged to stoop and kiss her.

"Thank you, Mrs. Blunt," said Cherry earnestly. "I know you've put out your own work for me, and I think it's very kind of you."

"You're welcome, my dear; and I've had one of the happiest days I ever spent—that I have."

When she was gone Cherry suddenly turned to Meg.

"Oh, how selfish I've been! I never thought about Dickie's frock; shall you be able to take him to-morrow in his old one?"

"Yes," answered Meg, "it was impossible to do both; and his jacket will cover up the dear little old frock."

"I wish I'd thought of it," said Cherry, sorrowfully.

But Meg assured her, that even if she had it would have made no difference.

"So be happy, dear," she said, "and enjoy the nice new frock which God has given you."

Cherry kissed her and wished her good night, and then went up-stairs to see if Mrs. Seymour should want her to do anything before she went to bed. [Pg 196]

"My!" exclaimed Miss Hobson, when she stood in the doorway, with her golden hair falling over her shoulders. "My! you do look nice so, Cherry."

Cherry laughed. "Mother-Meg wishes me to wear my hair like this," answered Cherry, "and mother used to like it when she were alive. Only I couldn't, ye know, when I'd got no soap, nor brush, nor nothing."

"Ain't that a nice dress!" said Miss Hobson, admiringly. "I shouldn't 'a known ye, Cherry. But why didn't young Mrs. Seymour get ye a black one for yer poor father?"

Cherry looked a little troubled, and Mrs. Seymour quickly interposed.

"She would ha' done, but I advised her not; it's better as it is. Cherry is as sorry for her poor father in this one as ever she would be in a black; and 'tain't as if Meg could get her another best one in a hurry."

"No," said Miss Hobson; "only some folks thinks a deal o' black."

"Very foolishly," answered Mrs. Seymour decidedly; "but that's not my Jem's Meg. She never even got a bit of new black for the little darling that's gone. She had one as she'd had at the Hall, and she says to me, 'Mother, you'll not think as I don't care because I don't spend Jem's money getting black things.'" [Pg 197]

"Well, you needn't be hot over it," said Miss Hobson; "I didn't know the reason, of course."

Cherry came to her bedside, and spoke gently, though there were tears in her large sweet eyes.

"Miss Hobson, *don't* tell any one as I haven't a black frock—no one but you knows; and it don't make a bit of difference so long as I think as *God* sent it."

Miss Hobson stroked the little hand which lay on her sheet, and called out to Mrs. Seymour, who had turned away,

"Mrs. Seymour, I'm sorry as I was cross; and I wouldn't ha' said a word if I'd remembered in time."

Then she drew Cherry towards her, and asked her to give her a kiss.

"You've been a kind little girl to me all this month past, that you have, my dear; and you can go to that drawer there—the bottom one. In the left-hand corner you'll find a work-box. Will you bring it to me?"

Cherry did as desired, and when it was placed on the bed, Miss Hobson raised herself on her elbow.

"Yes," she said, "that's it. That was give to me when I was a young woman, all fitted up as nice as anything, with scissors, and thimble, and cottons and all. It was give to me by my young man as was drowned at sea, and I've kept it hoarded up this thirty years. But now I'm going to give it to you, Cherry. Why should it lie there when there's one of my Lord's little ones as 'ud be glad of it for their work?"

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"Do you really mean for *me*, Miss Hobson?" asked Cherry, looking at the beautiful box as if she could not believe what she had heard.

"Yes; it will not make him as is gone seem more far off, for your havin' it. He was always generous, and he'd have liked you to have it, as these poor old rheumatic fingers of mine can't use it no longer."

She wept a little, while Cherry stood by, hardly liking to take her at her word.

"You see, Cherry," Miss Hobson went on, cheering up as she spoke, "I've been too apt to think of myself all my life, so the Lord has made it so as I've only myself left to think about. And then He begins to teach me to think about Him. And every day, as I think about *Him*, I care less about myself, and more about Him. And so it comes to pass as He brings me you to think of too. And by-and-by He'll let me do something for you, perhaps, more'n giving you my dear work-box."

"I can't begin to thank you," said Cherry, "but it *is* kind of you. I never saw such a nice one in my life. Are you sure as you won't be sorry as you've give it to me, Miss Hobson?"

"No—no, my dear; not so long as you take care on it."

She passed her crooked suffering fingers over it tenderly; then, as if she could not help it, she raised herself and pressed a kiss upon the lid. Then she bade Cherry take it away and keep it as her own.

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When Cherry showed her treasure to Mrs. Seymour she said—

"That's cost Miss Hobson a deal to give up, I can tell you. But when she thinks as her Lord would be pleased, she don't stick at it. It's for *His sake*, child!"



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CHAPTER XIX.

LISTENING.



"CHERRY, go down and ask Mrs. Blunt if any of them are going with us," said Meg, as they rose from breakfast the next morning. "Tell her we shall start at a quarter to eleven."

Cherry made her way to the ground floor, and knocked at Mrs. Blunt's door.

It was quickly opened by the eldest girl, with the baby in her arms. She did not ask Cherry to enter, but went back to her mother, who was busy in the other room.

Mrs. Blunt herself came forward, and spoke in a low tone.

"Ask 'em to be kind enough to knock as they come down, and if we're ready, we'll come."

Cherry nodded.

"How's little brother?"

"All right," answered Cherry, smiling; "he's so pleased as father-Jem is going to carry him; and he says as he'll sit as still as anythink." [Pg 201]

"So do my Pattie. I've promised as I'll take her, if Blunt will go." She lowered her voice and half came outside. "I think he will—but men is men, my dear."

Cherry understood, and went up-stairs again with her report.

How proudly, when the time came, did she dress Dickie in his new hat and jacket, and sit with him on her knee telling him stories till the time that Meg should be ready.

Presently she came out of her room, and Cherry fancied that her eyes looked rather tearful.

"Well, my girl," said Jem, starting up from his chair, "we're none too soon. It is nice to have you to go along with me once more."

"I'm very thankful," she answered gently, turning towards the door.

Jem took Dickie up in his strong arms, while Cherry followed Meg to the stairs. She linked her arm confidingly in hers, and her golden hair fell over Meg's shoulder as she whispered,

"I know as we don't make up for the little baby, even though we do love you very much indeed, mother-Meg; I wish as I could do anything for you."

"You do a great deal for me, Cherry," said Meg affectionately, "and I'm very thankful that we've got you both. Doesn't Dickie look happy?" [Pg 202]

He did indeed, his arms clasped round Jem's neck, his little face leaning on the broad shoulder.

Jem went out at the front door, while Meg tapped at Mrs. Blunt's.

"We're ready," announced the woman, "and it's mighty kind of you to wait for us."

She came out of her room, followed by her husband, who had brushed himself up as well as he was able.

Three or four of the children pressed out also, and Meg, seeing this, offered a hand to two of them, which gratified them very much.

Jem waited till Blunt came up, and they paced along together, while Mrs. Blunt joined Cherry, and so they came to the Mission Room where Jem and Meg generally attended.

Jem went in first with his little frail burden, and when he had found seats for his friends, he followed Meg to where they usually sat.

When the hymn began, Dickie raised his head from Jem's breast with a light in his face. Meg was afraid he would speak, but Jem warned him by a low word, and after another moment Meg saw tear after tear come from his little sightless eyes. The first he had shed since he had been their child, she thought; and she took his little hand in hers and kissed it.

But that hymn went to another heart besides Dickie's. [Pg 203]

Mrs. Blunt's husband sat as one in a dream. Where had he heard those words before?—

"There is a Fountain filled with Blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains."

He closed his eyes, and he saw a certain bare room with a lot of little children sitting round; a teacher sat close to them, who was leading them in a clear voice, while the little ones followed and joined in as they could.

"And sinners plunged beneath that flood!"

The hymn rose and fell to the end; and then there was a prayer, while his mind did not follow the speaker's words, but went back to that old country Sunday School, in which he had sat week after week, month after month, and even year after year.

"Lose all their guilty stains."

What had the years since then brought him but guilty stains?

He heard not a word of the prayer; but the first sentence that arrested his attention was, "May I not wash in *them*, and be clean?" and then he listened with an eagerness which surprised himself.

He heard about the proud man turning away in a rage; he heard about his servants trying to

persuade him—and mentally said that this was like his own wife; he heard how the man obeyed the prophet's words, and dipped seven times in the stream; he heard how he was cured from his loathsome disease; he heard how he went home rejoicing. [Pg 204]

And all through the preacher's words these lines kept running as a strain of sweet music—

"There is a Fountain filled with Blood,
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains."

Slow tears forced themselves from under his eyelids, which he hastily brushed away with his hand.

What passed in the man's mind during that hour was known to none but God; perhaps he was hardly conscious himself at the time what a great transaction had taken place; but from that day forth, first very slowly and fitfully, but afterwards growing stronger and firmer, came the knowledge that he had plunged in that crimson tide, and had been washed and was clean.

As they walked home very little was said; there had been many praying during that little service for the man who had hardly moved a finger, but had sat with bowed head during the whole time, and they believed that their prayers had been heard.

When they parted at the door of their home, Blunt looked up and wrung Jem's hand.

"Thankye kindly," he said. "If ye don't mind, I should like to come next Sunday."

Mrs. Blunt, like a wise woman, did not stop to speak, but followed her husband into their room, where their little daughter Kittie stood, clean and smiling, ready to meet them, with their frugal meal set out on the table. [Pg 205]



All day long the two sat out under the apple-trees basking in the sunshine.—p. 220.

That was a happy Sunday. How Dickie was praised for sitting so still, and what a soft little colour mantled in his face when he heard that they were pleased with him!

That evening Meg left Cherry to take care of Dickie, and went to the service with her husband.

When they came home, the sound of singing on the staircase made them pause. It came from the top of the house, and Jem and Meg went up to see who it could be.

Their mother's door was ajar, and through it they could see Cherry sitting by the fire, singing in a clear, bell-like voice, Dickie resting on her lap. Miss Hobson's door was open, and she lay propped up on her pillow listening with a peaceful look on her face.

"Whiter than the snow!

sang Cherry.

Whiter than the snow—
Wash me in the Blood of the Lamb,
And I shall be whiter than snow."

"Sing it again, Cherry," said Dickie, "'cause I do like it so. Did we sing that this mornin', Cherry?"

"Not this one," answered Cherry.

"I fought we did—sing it again, Cherry. Do you fink He'll wash *me* whiter than snow?"

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"Of course He will, Dickie, if you come to Him."

"What do it mean, Cherry, 'whiter than snow'?"

"I think it means being washed in the Blood of Jesus."

"But how, whiter than the snow?"

"Don't you remember, Dickie, when there was snow, afore mother-Meg took us away from old Sairy,—don't you remember how there weren't a spot on it when we got up one morning?"

"Yes—I 'member," said Dickie. "Shall we be like that?"

"I 'spose so. Them as is washed, He can't see no spot on us, more than we can on the snow."

"Mother-Meg says as there ain't no sin in *Heaven*," murmured Dickie. "Let's go to sleep now, Cherry."

So Meg and Jem came in at that, and Jem carried him down-stairs at once to his own little bed, too sleepy to say more than a very soft "It is nice!" as he laid his head on his pillow.

After that Cherry prepared the supper which she was allowed to stay up for, as it was Sunday night—a great treat, but Meg liked nice things to happen on Sundays.

"That child sings like the angels," said Miss Hobson, when Mrs. Seymour came in from her service. "She's been up here this hour, and I feel as if I'd been nigh the gate of heaven."

"How's she learnt them?" asked Mrs. Seymour.

"Before her mother died. She's got a book full of 'em. She says when she was alone up in that attic she used to sing 'em to Dickie pretty near all day; and what's more, I've heard it often through the window, but o' course I didn't know as it was her."

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"We didn't guess as we should ever come to know and love any one livin' in *that* house, did we, Miss Hobson? It shows us how some nice things can come out of bad things!"

Miss Hobson shook her head assentingly, but her mind was running on something else.

"Who do ye think has been up here a listenin' to her too?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," answered Mrs. Seymour, looking round quickly, for she disliked visitors in her little home, more especially on Sundays. Miss Hobson knew this, but she went on calmly:

"We was sittin' here, as you left us, me in my bed, and Cherry by your fire, when there comes a little rap at the door, and Kittie Blunt comes in.

"'Oh, Kittie,' says Cherry, half-startled, 'do you want Mrs. Seymour?'

"'No, I don't, I want you—may I come in and speak to yer?'

"'I suppose so,' says Cherry, as if she didn't rightly know. I think she'd forgotten as I was close by, and she could ha' asked me."

"Well?" questioned Mrs. Seymour, as Miss Hobson paused.

"Well—Kittie she comes in and stands just where I couldn't see her, but I could see Cherry and Dickie as I lay, and she says in a low voice, 'Cherry, was you at the Mission Room this mornin'?—but there, I know as you was—well, Cherry, mother said as I should have a turn to go to-night, and she'd put the little 'uns to bed. So I puts on my things and goes; leastways, I set out to go, but when I got a little way—Cherry! I met one o' my schoolfellers, and she said as it was nonsense what was talked there, and I should be a silly girl if I went. So I turned t'other way with her, and we went a walk instead. And after a bit I felt so wretched, and all at once I said good night all in a hurry, and ran home. But when I got to the door I couldn't make up my mind to go in and tell mother how bad I'd been, and she so kind in smartenin' me up and all, and I came up to ask you if you could ever have done such a thing?'

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"Cherry, she looked up from hugging of Dickie, and she says as gentle as anythink, 'I expect I could have, Kittie, only you see I don't want to do nothing bad just now, 'cause I'm so happy.'

"'Yes,' says Kittie, 'but if you wasn't happy, Cherry?'

"Cherry nodded, and she says, 'That's what I mean. When I used to be so miserable, and we was so hungry—Dickie and me—I used to tell dreadful stories to quiet him sometimes.'

"'Oh!' says Kittie.

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"I didn't *mean* to be so wicked,' says Cherry, 'and I didn't think much about it then; the words used just to slip out, anything as come first; but since I've come back here to this nice home, I'm awful sorry as I could ha' said such things, 'cause, ye know, I did love the Lord Jesus, even then!—and think o' telling lies and lovin' *Him* at the same time!"

"Cherry's eyes was droppin' tears all this time and then Kittie comes runnin' to her side, and throws her arms round her neck and begins to cry, and says, 'I thought as I loved Him, too, but I'm sure I don't, or I couldn't ha' turned my back on Him as I done to-night! You should 'a heard what Pollie says, against Him!"

"But you runned away from her,' says Cherry, 'and you're sorry now, and want Him to forgive you, don't ye, Kittie?"

"I don't know,' says Kittie sorrowfully; 'I don't see as how He can, for I can't go down and tell mother about it.'

"Why not?' says Cherry.

"Cause I *can't*; it ain't no use, Cherry.'

"Shall we ask Jesus to help you do it?' says Cherry, huggin' of her.

"They was quiet after that, and at last Kittie, she says, 'Ask Him then,' and Cherry she bends over her head and whispers somethin'. Then, Dickie, who'd been listenin' all the time, says to her, "Ous' go down now, Kittie, 'cause Jesus 'ull help 'ou, now.' [Pg 212]

"So Kittie got up without another word and left the room, but when she got to the door she ran back and kissed them both over and over again. 'I do love Him,' she says, 'and I *will* try to do as He likes!' And then she runs down in good earnest. After that Cherry begins to sing that one about the snow—'Wash me in the Blood of the Lamb, and I shall be whiter than snow.' That was just before you come in, Mrs. Seymour, and I was, as I says, sittin' nigh the gate of Heaven: for it seems to me, when we come to think o' His forgivin' love, as we mount up, and up, and up, till we are a'most lost in wonder!"

Mrs. Seymour did not answer beyond a gentle "Yes—yes—yes," as she busied herself in preparing her invalid's supper; but the story sank down into her heart, and many a time little Kittie got a kind smile or a word of encouragement, where before she would have passed her with a nod. And thus she gave "a cup of cold water" to another of His little disciples.

A day or two after this Jem and Meg bade Cherry good-bye, and left her under Mrs. Seymour's wing, proud to be of some use in the world. For Mrs. Seymour's last words as she placed her hand upon the girl's shoulder were—

"She's my grandchild, you know, Meg, and I couldn't spare her now for anything."



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CHAPTER XX.

EARTH'S SONG AND HEAVEN'S ECHO.



WHILE Cherry was busy all day long, from early morning, when she cleaned the doctor's step, till evening, when she read poor suffering Miss Hobson to sleep, little Kittie Blunt was learning her life-lessons too.

"Kittie," said Mrs. Blunt one day, as she and the little girl stood over their washing-tub, "I shouldn't like you to grow up like Pollie, and them girls, as is never satisfied unless they're at their doors gossipin'."

"Well, I don't, mother," answered Kittie, a little sulkily.

"No, you don't; but if you go so much with Pollie it won't be long afore you do."

"I don't go with Pollie now," said Kittie. "I should ha' thought as you'd seen that I didn't, mother, since—that Sunday."

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"I'm glad on it," said Mrs. Blunt heartily. "That's good news, Kittie. You'll grow up to be a comfort to me yet."

Kittie wrung out a towel very hard, but she half shook her head.

"Yes, you will, Kit. It may be a deal easier to you now to go out on the step, and see folks passin', and have a grumble with Pollie; but by-and-by, if you're steady, you'll find it a deal easier to sit down with mother to a bit o' work, and have a chat or a bit o' readin'."

"'Tain't that I care so much for *Pollie*," answered the girl rather dolefully; "but you don't know how dull it seems in 'ere, instead of outside, mother; leastways when you're used to goin' out."

Mrs. Blunt did not answer, for Kittie's words gave her a pang. If her child only would believe that she knew best!

But Mrs. Blunt had some one to consult now in all her difficulties. She raised her heart to Him with an earnest prayer, that Kittie might be kept from the first steps of danger. So it was with a quieted trust that she bent over her tub once more; she knew but little, but that little was so real, that it made her life a perfectly different thing.

Was she puzzled how to guide her boys?—she asked Jesus about it. Was she worried with Kittie?—she asked Jesus to make it right. Was she cast down at their small means and many wants?—she told Jesus about it. Was she afraid that the food would run short?—she told Jesus about it.

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And she found, as thousands have found before, that He could supply *all* her need.

Did she watch and see that the boys were quieter than she expected, after that telling Jesus? Did she notice that Kittie cheered up and was good? that some one sent a frock for the baby unexpectedly? that her husband brought home an extra shilling for an extra bit of work he had done?

Ah! they that ask, expecting an answer, from the faithful God, shall receive abundantly.

Her thoughts were broken in upon by Kittie's drawing a pinafore out of the water, and saying—

"My! ain't this dreadfully old, mother? It ain't worth gettin'-up, that it ain't."

Mrs. Blunt shook her head.

"It 'ull have to serve another turn, Kit."

"I was a-thinkin'—" said Kit, hesitating.

"Well, Kittie, what was you a-thinkin'?" answered her mother, kindly.

"Why, there's Cherry Seymour, she earns two shillings a week."

"So she does, but she ain't you, and she's left school."

"But she don't earn that in school-time, mother."

"Of course she don't."

"But I've been thinkin', that if she was to mention me to them servants at the doctor's, who is so kind to her, they might know of some little place or 'nother before breakfast for *me*."

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"So they might, Kit; you're a good girl to ha' thought of it."

"I *am* honest," Kittie went on, meditatively, washing away all the time as she talked, "and you could say as I'm not given to pickin' things, or takin' what ain't mine, now couldn't you, mother?"

Mrs. Blunt laughed a little, at which Kittie blushed crimson.

"Mother!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, Kit, my dear, I never meant as I couldn't! Bless your heart, I should hope so! But I was laughin' at you havin' thought it all over so grand!"

"Well—but—mother—we would be glad of two shillings more every week, wouldn't we?"

"Of course we should, Kittie." Mrs. Blunt raised herself, and wrung the soap-suds from her arms. "Why, yes, Kit, if you *could*, my dear, we shouldn't know ourselves!"

Kittie looked very pleased; and directly her mother had done with her, she ran up-stairs to ask Cherry to put her into communication with the doctor's servants.

She knocked at Meg's door, but could get no answer, and remembering that they were away, she went up to the top to Mrs. Seymour's rooms.

Here on the landing, swaying about in the air that came in freely from the window, were sheets and clothes drying finely; she bobbed her head under them, and as she did so she heard Cherry's clear voice saying—

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"I've a'most done, Miss Hobson; will it do then?"

Kittie gained admittance, and found Cherry starching some things on the centre table.

"My! you do know how to do it fine!" she exclaimed; and then she explained her errand.

Cherry took her compliments very calmly, ironing and starching were such every-day things to

her; but when she heard what Kittie wanted she looked very serious.

"I can ask 'em and welcome, but I don't know as they would. But they are mighty kind."

As she spoke she went into the back room to give Miss Hobson a book which she had dropped on the floor, and the invalid called to Kittie to come too.

"Look 'ere," she said to her, "I've got a friend as I'll name ye to, if ye like to go and see her. She's the curate's wife, what comes to see me sometimes, and I know as she've got a heap of children and not much to do with. Would ye like to go?"

Kittie said she should, and the day being Saturday, and a half-holiday, she ran down to ask her mother's permission to go at once.

Mrs. Blunt said it could do no harm to try, and made Kittie as neat as her very spare wardrobe would allow, and saw her set forth on her errand with a strange feeling that she was going out into the world.

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Kittie traversed the two or three streets that brought her to the one where the good man, who spent his life among the poor, had his home.

She rang timidly, and stood for some minutes much concerned that the door was not opened, though she heard feet running up and down, and children's voices many and shrill.

At last another step came nearer and nearer, and the door was opened by a lady, pale and careworn, the curate's wife herself, who led the way without asking any questions into the front room, where a baby was crawling on the hearth-rug, and two or three little ones were standing about watching Kittie with curiosity.

The curate's wife took up the baby, and bade Kittie be seated. She supposed she had come on account of some sick relative, and patiently waited to hear the story. But when Kittie had explained why she came the lady looked surprised and pleased.

"And you think you could help me at odd times?" she asked at last, "and would not get tired of the children? because, you know, I could not have them slapped even if they were tiresome."

Kittie promised that this should never happen, privately remembering that it was a thing her mother never allowed, though she recalled with compunction, that now and then—but still she felt different now from what she used to do, and she must ask for help from the Lord Jesus.

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All that passed through her mind as she made the promise, but the curate's wife could not tell that. She only thought that this little girl seemed very straightforward.

"So you would be able to come before breakfast, and light the kitchen fire?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, ma'am."

"But does not your mother want you, as you have such a large family at home?"

"No, ma'am, 'cause mother's obliged to stay at home with the little 'uns, and she says as we didn't ought both of us to be at home."

"But I am afraid I shall not be able to pay you as much as I should like, Kittie; I have very little to spend; and yet—" She sighed. "I *am* so tired, and it would be such a comfort to have you if you were a good girl."

"I'd try to be, ma'am," answered Kittie; "but—mother says I'm very tiresome sometimes."

The curate's wife smiled kindly.

"We all are," she said gently; "but if we know it, and try to be better, so as to please our Lord and Master, we are sure to improve."

Kittie's eyes gave a flash; nobody talked to her quite like that. She should like to serve this pretty lady very much.

"Then you will come in the evenings too, and wash up our dishes for us, and help me put the children to bed, or anything I may want?"

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Kitty promised, and went home, about the happiest little girl in London. Of course her difficulties were yet to come.

Two whole shillings a week! It seemed a fortune to her.

Cherry and Miss Hobson were as pleased as she could wish, and then she ran down and burst in with her news to her mother.

"Oh, Kittie!" exclaimed Mrs. Blunt, "won't you just have to be good to them dear little children! and to the lady too. I never did see such a wonderful thing, never. But it's like my Lord, that it is!"

When, after a fortnight's work at the Hall, Jem went back to London, he left Meg and Dickie to get two more weeks of fresh air and country milk.

Perhaps to Dickie that month in the country seemed to him afterwards as but one brief day filled with the birds' song.

All day long the two sat out under the apple-trees basking in the sunshine, and listening to the melodious sounds from the Hall farm.

Dickie, in Meg's old little wooden chair, was learning to catch the song of the different birds, and would listen intently and patiently while Meg tried to teach him how to distinguish them.

One day, seeing the lark soaring above their heads, she raised his hand, and pointed with his little finger as far as he could reach.

"It is up in the sky, Dickie, oh, so high! singing God's praise," she said.

And Dickie answered as he caught the sound—

"*God's* hymn-book."

"What did the child mean?" thought Meg, as she gathered him into her arms and kissed him again and again. "Was he thinking how Cherry sang out of her hymn-book at home? And what could the lark sing out of, but God's hymn-book?" She did not know; but she looked with awe into the little face, which already, to her mind, seemed to reflect the light of heaven.

"Mother-Meg," said Dickie, all unconscious of her thoughts, "I should like to stay here always, 'cause the birds do sing so nice."

"Yes, Dickie, so they do, but we couldn't stay here always, because of father-Jem and Cherry. They'll want us back again."

"Yes, we can't stay away from Cherry, 'cause she takes care o' Dickie when you're not there; and I love father-Jem too."

"We are going back to-morrow, Dickie; but some day I hope you and Cherry will both come and see my mother again."

"She's very *kind*," nodded Dickie. "I'll come some day."

Mrs. Archer, who was sitting by, quite appreciated the compliment. She smiled a little tearfully, however.

"This has been a happy, peaceful month, Meg; I've enjoyed it as I never expected to enjoy anything on this earth again."

So Meg and Dickie went back to smoky London; and when Cherry saw her little brother, she was fain to burst into tears of joy, so altered and improved was he. And Jem was equally pleased with Meg, and said she looked like the country girl he had brought away a year ago.

As Dickie sat telling all his little news on Cherry's lap, he whispered earnestly—

"Cherry, I've heard 'em all day long. They sang Halleluia, like you!"

When Cherry noticed that Meg was sufficiently at liberty to attend to her, while still holding Dickie tightly in her arms as if she could not part with him, she produced something mysteriously out of her pocket, and handed it to Meg.

It was a little shabby purse, and when at her entreaty Meg opened it, it was found to contain ten whole shillings and a bright half-crown.

"Those are my first earnings, mother-Meg," said Cherry, smiling and colouring, "and they are for you."

"Not for me, dear; I shall put them away for you."

"No," answered Cherry stoutly; "I'm your child now—you know you said so, yourself—and so all I get is yours. Don't give it back, mother-Meg—don't—but let it go into the savings-bag."

"Shall I, Jem?" asked Meg, doubtfully.

"Yes," said Jem, "the child's quite right; we're all one family now, for good or ill. May God bless us all."

So Meg unlocked her savings-bag, and Cherry dropped her money into it with great satisfaction.

"Would you not like a *little* for yourself, dear?" she asked.

"Not a farthing," answered Cherry, "not till you have to get me some boots. But I wore these old things all the time, 'cause I told grannie as I wanted to have every bit of it ready for you. That half-crown's what I got from her, for helping her with the washing."

"*I've* got some savings too," said Jem, smiling. "I've kept it a great secret, even from Meg, because I wanted to surprise her. I was goin' to give it to her on our weddin' day, but as Cherry's so clever, I won't be left behind. There, Meg! this is what a pint a day would ha' cost me ever

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since last June; see, it's nigh on three pounds!"

Meg was too astonished to speak for a moment.

"It's to go into the Savings-Bank," pursued Jem, "and it's to buy a cottage with by-and-by; if it's God's will as we should."

"Oh, Jem!" exclaimed Meg, "I knew before we were married that you never took any of the drink, but I never guessed this."

"It's the only secret as I've kept from you, and now it's out," he answered. "Why, sweetheart, there's them as works with me, as drinks quarts instead of pints, and see what that mounts up to in a year, let alone the damage as they do to their health. They think it comforts 'em, but I'll tell ye one thing, they feel a deal worse afterwards." [Pg 224]

Meg knew that from what she had heard, and Cherry knew it by sorrowful experience.

She bent her head and kissed Dickie. Oh, how thankful she was that they were taken away from all that! She told him for the hundredth time how glad she was to have him back.

But even Cherry's love, pleased as he was to be with her again, could not satisfy him. He soon slid down from her knee and began to feel his way round the room.

"Where are you going, darling?" asked Cherry, watching his renewed powers with delight. "What do you want?"

And Dickie answered in a yearning little tone, brimful of love—

"Only mo'ver-Meg!"

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