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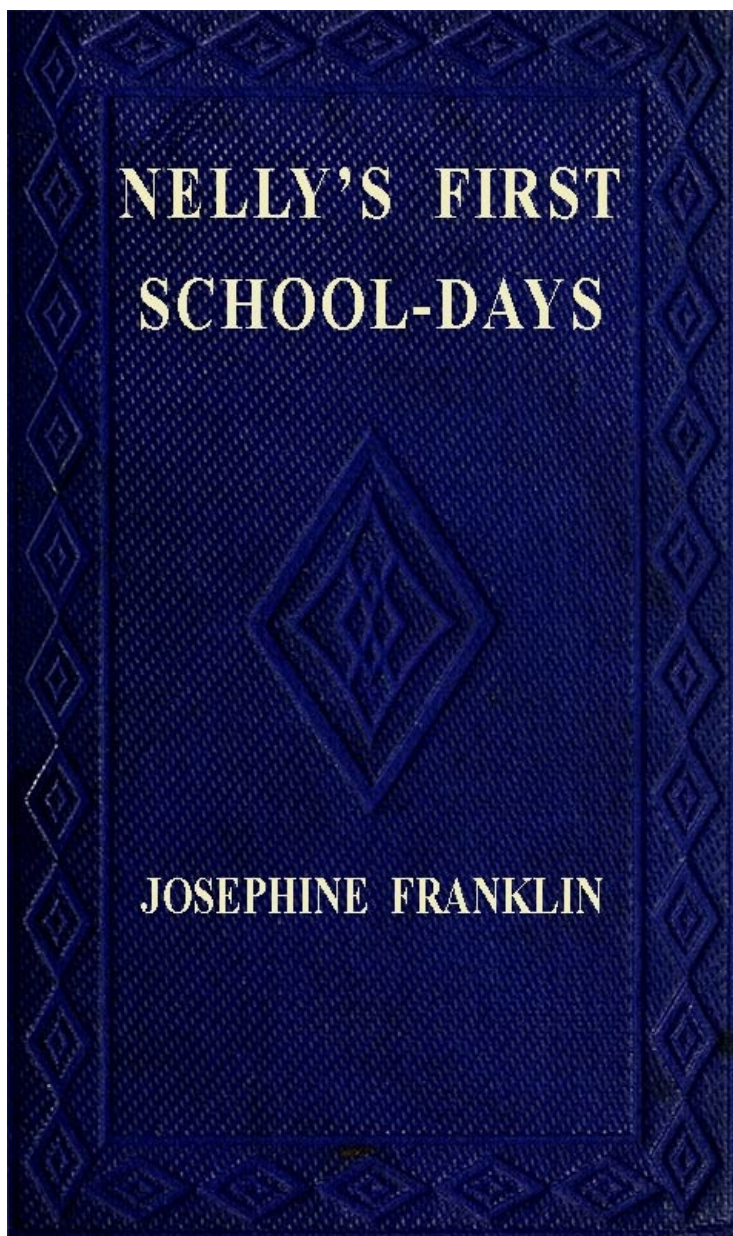
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NELLY'S FIRST SCHOOL-DAYS



CHICKENS AND "POETRY." Page [111](#).

THE MARTIN AND NELLY STORIES.

NELLY'S FIRST SCHOOLDAYS.

BY

JOSEPHINE FRANKLIN.
AUTHOR OF "NELLY AND HER FRIENDS."

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LIST OF THE
"MARTIN AND NELLY STORIES."



- I. NELLY AND HER FRIENDS.
- II. NELLY'S FIRST SCHOOLDAYS.
- III. NELLY AND HER BOAT.
- IV. LITTLE BESSIE.
- V. NELLY'S VISIT.
- VI. ZELMA.
- VII. MARTIN.
- VIII. COUSIN REGULUS.
- IX. MARTIN AND NELLY.
- X. MARTIN ON THE MOUNTAIN.
- XI. MARTIN AND THE MILLER.
- XII. TROUTING, OR GYPSYING IN THE WOODS.

CONTENTS.



	PAGE
MILLY	7
"MELINDY"	25
COMFORT'S NEFFY	51
"LET'S MAKE FRIENDS!"	72
CHAPTER V.	

CHAPTER VI.

NELLY'S FIRST SCHOOL-DAYS.

[7]


CHAPTER I.**MILLY.**

NOT very far from Nelly's home, stood a small, time-worn, wooden house.

It was not a pleasant object at which to look. A few vines that had been trained over one of the front windows, and a stunted currant-bush which stood by the door, were the only green things within the broken fence. In summer, the cottage looked bald and hot, from its complete exposure to the sun (no trees grew near to shade it), and in winter, the rough winds rattled freely around its unprotected walls.

[8]

In this house lived a family by the name of Harrow. It consisted of the widowed mother, a woman who had once moved in a far higher sphere of life, and her two daughters, Milly and Elinor. There was a son, too, people said, but he did not live at home, having had the ingratitude, some time before the Harrows moved to the village, to desert his home and run away to sea.

Mrs. Harrow and her children were very poor. No one knew but themselves how hard they found it to get work enough to earn their daily bread. The neighbors, among whom they were much respected, had long supposed from many outward signs that the family had no means to spare, but they were far from conjecturing that often, the mild, patient-looking Mrs. Harrow, and her two gentle girls, were losing their strength from actual famine. The little money they had, came to them through their own exertions; their needle-work was celebrated far and near for its delicacy and exquisite finish. In that small neighborhood, however, the sewing which was brought to them to undertake, did not amount to much, and the prices, too, were low, and provision-rates very high.

[9]

At last, just as despair was dawning on the household, Elinor, the eldest daughter, heard of a situation as domestic in the family of a farmer, who lived over the mountains, near Nancy's old home. The poor girl's pride was dreadfully wounded at the thought of applying for such a place, she a lady born and bred, but necessity knew no law, and a few days only elapsed before pretty Miss Elinor was located at the farm as a servant. It was a hard trial; mournful tears forced themselves from her eyes whenever she gave herself time to think about such a state of affairs.

[10]

The farmer was a poor, hard-working, painstaking man, and his wife was quite as thrifty and industrious, so that between them they managed to lay by a little money, every year, in the Savings Bank.

When Elinor came to them, the bustling farmer's wife could not realize that the tall, pale, elegant-looking creature was not quite as able to rub and scrub from morning to night as she was herself. She did not take into consideration that the girl was unaccustomed to much hard labor, and that her frame was not equal to the burdens that were put upon it.

[11]

The consequence was that when Elinor went to her room at night, she was too completely worn out to sleep, and in the mornings, rose feeling sick and weary. She did not complain, however, but went about her duties day after day, growing gradually more pale and feeble, and storing in her system the seeds of future disease.

When the farmer's wife saw her moving slowly around her tidy, spotless kitchen, she thought her a lazy girl, and often told her so in a loud, sharp tone, that was a very great trial to hear patiently, which Elinor always did, and then set about working more steadily than ever.

[12]

So the weeks went on, till, one morning, the maid of all work was missing from her place. She had been seized with a sickness, that had long been secretly hanging over her, and now she could not rise from her bed.

Martin, a boy who lived at Mr. Brooks', told Nelly that Miss Elinor fell at her post like a sentinel wounded on duty.

When the doctor came, he informed the farmer and his wife that their servant had lost the use of her limbs, through an affection of the spine, which had been brought on by lifting too heavy burdens, and she was indeed as unable to move hand or foot to help herself as a baby could be. Her mind, however, was not impaired. The farmer thought it would have been fortunate if it had been, for she seemed to suffer such terrible mental anguish about her misfortune, and the new

[13]

care and misery she was bringing on her mother and sister.

The farmer took her home in his wagon, a confirmed cripple. Her mother and Milly helped him to carry her up to her old bedroom, and there she lay, suffering but little pain, it is true, but at the time of our story, having no hope of recovery.

The days were very long to Elinor now. She despised herself for ever having repined at fate before. What was all she had endured previously, to this trial? There was no light work of any kind, not even sewing, which she could do, as she lay on her bed, and this made the time seem longer. She was forced to be idle from daylight till dark. She could have read, it is true, but she had no books, and to buy any was an extravagance, of which, with the scanty means of the family, she did not allow herself to dream. [14]

The neighbors were shocked to hear of Elinor's misfortune. They visited her, and at first, sent her little delicacies to tempt her appetite, but by and by, although they pitied her as much as ever, they forgot her in the events of their own domestic circles.

One very cold winter night Milly came into Mrs. Brooks's kitchen, and asked Comfort, a colored woman who worked for the family, where her mistress was. Comfort promptly led the way to the sitting-room, where grouped coseily around the centre-table were the different members of the farmer's family. A bright fire blazed on the hearth, and the woolen curtains were tightly drawn to keep out the winds that whistled around the farm-house. [15]

At the sight of this picture of comfort, Milly's pretty lips quivered. She took kind-hearted Mrs. Brooks aside.

"Dear Mrs. Brooks," said Milly, "I *must* say it; we are starving! Elinor lies dying with cold and hunger, in her bed. Mother has not tasted a mouthful since yesterday, and she is so proud she would not let me beg. What *are* we to do? I have run over here to ask your sympathy and aid, for we have not one friend to whom we feel as though we might apply." [16]

Tears gathered in Milly's eyes.

"And pray," said the farmer's wife, "what do you consider *me*, Milly, if not a friend? You ought not to have delayed so long in this matter. I feel really hurt. Why did you not come to me before?"

She led the way into the kitchen that the young girl's sad tale might not draw upon her too close attention from the children.

Milly Harrow sank upon a seat, before the fire on the hearth, and wept such bitter, heart-breaking tears as it is to be hoped no one who reads her story has ever known. She was a gentle, refined, well-educated girl of twenty, and had met much more sorrow than happiness.

"Milly," said the farmer's wife kindly, and advancing as she spoke, from the open door of the pantry, "come here to the table and see how a bit of this roast fowl tastes. And try this glass of currant wine,—you need not be afraid of it, it is home-made. While you are busy with it, I'll get a little basket ready, and put on my cloak to run over with you when you go back." [17]

Milly blushed crimson. It was difficult to her to learn the hard lessons of poverty. Nevertheless, she ate some bread and cold chicken, and was quite ready to praise the delicate wine for the grateful warmth it sent thrilling throughout her frame.

When she had finished, Mrs. Brooks was ready to accompany her, and Comfort too, having received private instructions, stood with her shawl over her head, and a large basket of wood in her hand. [18]

So they set out together, Milly leading the way, the snow crunching under their feet, along the path.

In a short time, a bright fire was burning in patient Elinor's room, while the remains of a little feast on a table in the centre, showed that the family suffered no longer from the pangs of actual starvation.

Elinor was bolstered up in bed, looking like a wan, despairing woman of fifty, instead of a girl of twenty-two. Care and sickness had aged her before her time. A faint, sweet flush was dawning on her cheeks to-night, however, for she was not now enduring hunger, and Mrs. Brooks sat there by the cheerfully blazing hearth with her mother and sister, and talked hope into all their hearts. [19]

"I tell you what it is, Mrs. Harrow," said the farmer's wife, in a pleasant, hearty tone, "we must set this Milly of yours to work. Things ought not to go on this way with your family any longer."

"Work!" echoed Milly, a little bitterly. "I've seen the time, dear Mrs. Brooks, when I would have given anything for a month's work. Only tell me something to do, and see how grateful I shall be."

"Well," said the farmer's wife, "the darkest hour is just before day, Milly; who knows but that yours is now over, and dawn is coming. I have been thinking about your opening a school."

Mrs. Harrow clasped her hands eagerly.

"Oh, if she could! oh, if she could!" she cried. "But who would think of sending their children to us, when there are already two or three other schools in the village?" [20]

"Miss Felix is just giving hers up, and is going to the city," said Mrs. Brooks. "I know it to be a fact, because I went to see her about taking Nelly last week. That will be quite an opening. I can go to her to-morrow, get a list of her pupils, and call on the parents to secure their good-will, if you say so, Milly."

Milly could scarcely answer for sobbing. At last she said in a broken voice, "dear, dear Mrs. Brooks, this is more than I have any reason to hope. How can I ever repay you for your kindness?" [21]

"By taking good care of Nelly when I send her to you as your first pupil," was the cheerful reply. "And now let me see what are your accommodations. You must have our Martin for a day or two, to knock you together some long benches with backs, and Comfort can help you cover and cushion them with some old green baize that I have in the garret. What room can you give to the use of the schoolmistress, Mrs. Harrow?"

"Well," said the old lady, smiling for the first time in a month, "the front room, down-stairs, is best, I think, because it opens directly on the road. I can take the furniture out, (what there is of it!) and clean it up like a June pink, in a day or two."

"The carpet is rather shabby and threadbare," suggested Milly. "And little pegged shoes will soon spoil it completely," added Mrs. Brooks. "I should say a better plan will be to take it up entirely. A clean board floor, nicely swept and sanded every morning, is plenty good enough. What books have you, Milly?" [22]

"All my old school-books, and brother's, and Elinor's too," said the young girl. "That will do to begin on till the pupils purchase their own."

"I could teach French," put forth Elinor's voice from the bed,— "that is, if it would answer for the class to come up here. You know, mother, I used to speak it fluently when I was at Madame Thibault's. Don't you think I might try? My voice and my patience are strong, if I am not;" and she smiled, oh, such a smile! It brought tears into the eyes of all in that poor, little, desolate apartment. [23]

"Try!" said the farmer's wife; "why, Elinor, that is just the thing for you! You may count *me* as one in your class. It was only yesterday I was regretting having no opportunity to practise what little of the language I know already. We must arrange your room a little, Ellie, and have everything looking spruce, and Frenchified, eh?"

At this Elinor herself began to cry.

"You are so, s-o-o g-o-o-o-d," she exclaimed.

"Good! Not at all!" said Mrs. Brooks; and by way of proving how far from good she was really, she hopped up like a bird, and was at the bedside in a minute, smoothing out the pillows and kissing Elinor's pale forehead. [24]

"I'll take my first lesson to-morrow afternoon," she said, "if you have no objections; and your kind mother here, can begin to profit herself at once by your labor, and send over to our meal-bag and dairy as often as she pleases." [25]

CHAPTER II.

"MELINDY."

MRS. BROOKS fulfilled her promise, and so faithfully did she work in the good cause, that a dozen little pupils were engaged for Miss Milly's school before preparations were fairly made to open it. These did not take long, however, as Miss Felix, the teacher, who was going away, sent to Mrs. Harrow's house two long forms of desks and benches, with her compliments and best wishes to Milly for her future success.

Milly fairly began to dance around the room, in the new joy of her heart, on receiving this, to her, valuable present.

"Everybody," she said, "must not be so kind to us, or I shall have a sickness brought on by too much happiness." [26]

Poor Milly! she had so long had a "sorrow-sickness," that the present good fortune was almost too much to endure.

For a week she went about cleaning, and sweeping, and dusting, and making ready generally, for the great event, the opening of her school. Singing as gayly as a lark, she moved furniture up-stairs and down, and debated over and over again upon the best arrangement for effect. The front room was to be especially devoted to the use of her class. The carpet was removed, and thoughtful Miss Felix's desks and benches placed in it, along the walls. Mrs. Brooks sent an old white muslin dress to be made into window-curtains, and Martin spent a whole day in forming a little platform out of boards, on which, when covered with green baize, the teacher's table and chair were to rest. [27]

Even Elinor's sick-chamber assumed a different aspect. One day, when Mr. Brooks was in the village on business, he stepped into a paper-hanger's, and chose a cheap, but pretty paper for the lime-washed wall. It was very cheerful-looking, being formed of alternate stripes of white and rose-color; "for," said the farmer, when he reached home, "I warrant Miss Elinor grows tired of [28]

seeing the same cracks in the plaster, year in and year out. She must have something new and gay, like this, that will help to keep her spirits up!"

Mrs. Harrow and the farmer's wife pasted this paper on the walls themselves, with a little assistance from Nelly, who stood ready to lift benches, hand the scissors back and forth, and give any other slight aid of which she was capable.

The house was only one-story high, with a garret, so Elinor's room had a slanting roof and a dormer window. Mrs. Brooks said it would be a great improvement, if the striped paper were pasted on the ceiling too, and joined in the peak with a wood-colored border resembling a heavy cord or rope. This made the place look, when it was done, like a pink canvas tent. The change was wonderful. An imitation of a pair of tassels of the same color and style as the rope border, which the paper-hanger, hearing of the design, sent to the house as a present to Miss Elinor, when pasted carefully at each end of the peak, against the wall, made the illusion perfect.

Elinor said she lived in the Tent of Kindness.

The neighbors who came in to inspect all these preparations, said Elinor's was the very prettiest dormer-room they had ever seen. There was enough left of the old dress to curtain the single window, which being done, everything was at last pronounced to be in a state of readiness.

And now we must go back to Nelly, who, I suppose, some of my readers remember, is the adopted daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Brooks. Nelly had known much sorrow in her short life, as will be seen on reference to the little story called "NELLY AND HER FRIENDS." She had never experienced what it was to be loved by father and mother till now; and when the farmer and his wife began to teach her to call them by those sacred titles, she felt herself a very happy little girl. She was delighted at the prospect of attending school. She had never been to one, and, therefore, perhaps, the novelty of the thing was half the attraction.

When the important day arrived, and the child found herself seated in the class-room with twelve or fourteen other little folks, she was filled with awe and dismay, so much so, that she scarcely dared turn around to take a good look at her next neighbor, a girl of twelve, in the shy dread that she might be caught in the act, which circumstance would, doubtless, have occasioned her much confusion.

Miss Harrow did not give her pupils any lessons to learn this first morning. She said, as no one had books, it should be a day of pleasure and not of work, and on the morrow they would begin to study in earnest.

So, during the whole morning, the children drew funny little pictures on slips of paper, which were handed them for the purpose of amusing them; and in the afternoon, the teacher made them pull their benches close to the fire, in cosy rows, while she told them stories.

As, with the deepest interest, Nelly gravely listened, she came to the conclusion that this was just the best school of which she had ever heard, everything was *so* pleasant.

There was a little dark-haired boy in a blue jacket, who sat near, and who whittled her pencil, oh *so* sharp, every time she blunted it! She told Comfort, in confidence, when she went home, that this little boy's pictures were quite as good as any Martin could make. He drew ships under full sail, oh, beautiful! and as for those men, squaring off to fight, up in the corner of the paper, they made you think at once of Uz and Buz the two roosters, that quarrelled every morning in the barnyard, about which should have the most corn.

In a week or two, however, Nelly's rapture abated somewhat; and one day she came home with her books in her hands, and threw herself on one of the chairs in the kitchen, crying heartily.

"Heyday," cried Comfort, looking up from the fire, over which she was broiling a fish. "Heyday, what ar's the matter now?"

"O Comfort," cried Nelly, "she struck me, she struck me, before them all!"

"What!" cried Comfort, standing erect with surprise. "Miss Nelly's been for whippin' a'ready? Why, Nelly, shame, shame! Dis yer conduct is oncommon bad of yer."

"It wasn't Miss Harrow, at all," said Nelly, reddening; "it was that horrid, old thing, Melindy."

"Oh, Melindy," echoed Comfort, in a tone of relief.

"Yes," continued Nelly, "she tries to get me to laugh in school, every day. She makes eyes at me, big, round ones, *so*, Comfort."

Comfort chuckled.

"I don't wonder yer laugh, if she does that way, chile."

"But that isn't all," added Nelly indignantly. "She chews paper-balls, and sends them over the room, right at the tip of my nose. Sometimes they stick there a second or so, till I can put up my hand; and then the scholars giggle-like. Oh, you've no idea, Comfort, what an awful girl Melindy is. She punches me, too."

"Punches, Nelly?"

"Yes, and to-day, when school was out, she gave me *such* a whack,—right in my ribs; shall I show you how, Comfort?"

"No, thank yer," answered the old woman, laughing. She had a cause for being good-humored that day. "But why whack such a little critter as you be, Nell?"

"Oh," said Nelly, hesitating, "*she* knows."

Something in her manner made Comfort suspicious. She sat down and called Nelly to her. Taking hold of both her hands, she looked her full in the eyes.

"Speak the truff," she said; "didn't yer whack Melindy *fust*?"

"Yes," said Nell, with a curious mixture of honesty and triumph, "I did, Comfort; I gave her a *good* one, *I tell you!* I didn't stop to think about what I was doin' till I felt her whackin' o' *me* back again."

"Then she sarved yer right," said the old colored woman, going back to her fish, "and I hope she'll treat yer so every time yer begin the aggrawation." [36]

"But she snowballed *me* first, and called out that I was nobody's child, and was taken out of the streets, and such like. I couldn't stand *that*, anyhow. I *had* to whack her, Comfort."

"No you hadn't," said Comfort, sternly, and at the same time gesticulating earnestly with the fish-fork. "It wasn't your part to do any punishin', whatsomever. Leastways, no punishment but one."

"And what's that?" demanded Nelly, making large A's and O's in the steam that had settled on the windows. Here Martin suddenly put down a big newspaper he had been reading in a corner, and which had hidden him entirely from view.

"Have you so soon forgotten your old rule of good for evil, Nell?" he asked. "Don't you know that is what Comfort means?" [37]

Comfort nodded at him approvingly.

"But Melindy is ugly, *powerful* ugly, Martin," said Nell, coloring, "and anyway she *will* knock all us little girls. It's born in her. I think she must have been meant for an Indian, that pulls the hair off your head, like mother told us about. Doing good to Melindy is just of no account at all."

"Did you ever try it?" asked Martin.

"Well, no-o. You see I could tell it was of no use. And Miss Harrow, she stands Melindy on a chair with a paper cap on her head, every day, at dinner-time."

"Poor girl," said Martin, "I am sorry for her." [38]

"I'm not," said Nell, promptly, "it keeps her from mischief, you know."

Martin was silent.

Comfort began to sing a tune over her fish, interrupting herself at times with a low, quaint laugh, as though particularly well pleased with some thought.

"What's the matter, Comfort?" asked Nelly.

"Oh, nuthin'," was the answer; "I guess I'm not very miserable to-day, that's all;" and off she went in a chuckle again.

"Nelly," said Martin, after another grave pause, "you used to be a better girl than you are now. Last summer, about the time Marm Lizy died, you tried ever so hard to be good, and you improved very much indeed."

"I know it," said Nell, a little sadly, "and I would be good now, if it wasn't for Melindy Porter. Ever since I've been to school I've felt hard and wicked. She torments and worries me so, that I think sometimes there's no use in tryin' to be good at all. I do and say wrong things, just when I don't mean to, all along o' Melindy." [39]

"If you and Melindy were friends, you wouldn't feel so, would you?"

"I s'pose not, but who wants to be friends with anybody like *that*?" was the ready retort.

"Still, you would rather be friends than enemies, Nell, wouldn't you? You would prefer that this little girl"—

"Big one, ever so big," interrupted Nelly, quickly.

"You would prefer that this big girl, then, should bear you no malice, even if you didn't like her, and she didn't like you. Isn't it so?" [40]

"Well, yes. I would like to have her stop pinchin' and pullin' the hairs of all o' us little ones. That's what I'd like, Martin."

"That's easy done, Nelly," said Martin in a confident tone.

"Easy, Martin? How easy?"

"*Be kind to her.* Show her that you bear her no ill feeling."

"But I *do* bear her *ill feeling*, Martin! What's the good of fibbing about it to her? I can't go to her and say, 'Melindy, I like you ever so much,' when all the time I despise her like poison, can I? I am sure that wouldn't be right."

"No," broke in Comfort, "that ar wouldn't be right, Martin, for sartain."

Martin looked a little puzzled.

"But, Comfort," he said at length, "I don't want her to speak pleasantly to Melindy till she *feels* pleasantly. *That's* the thing. I wouldn't have Nell *act* an untruth, a bit more than I'd have her tell [41]

one. But I *do* want her to try to *feel* like givin' Melindy a little good for her evil."

Martin said this with such a pleading, earnest look, smiling coaxingly on Nelly as he spoke, that, for the moment, the heart of the little girl was softened.

"Well, Martin," she said, "you are *always* preachin' ar'n't you? But it's nice preachin' and I don't hate it a bit. Some day, when I get real, *awful* good, you'll leave off, won't you? I'll think about Melindy, and may-be I can screw my courage up to not mind bein' cracked at by her."

"Pray for them that uses yer spitefully," said Comfort with solemnity.

Nelly seemed struck by this.

"What, pray for Melindy?" she asked meditatively.

"Chil'en," said the old woman, "don't never forget that ar mighty sayin'. Yer may be kind and such like to yer enemys, but if yer don't take time to *pray* for his poor ole soul's salvation, you might as well not do nuthin'. That's the truff, the Gospil truff."

"Well," said Nell with a deep sigh, "I'll pray for Melindy then, and for that bad, little Johnny Williams, too, to-night when I go to bed; but I shall have, oh, Comfort, *such* hard work to *mean* it, *here!*" and her hands were pressed for an instant over her breast.

The next morning, just as Nelly was starting for school, Martin drew her, mysteriously, aside.

"Which hand will you have, Nell?" he asked, holding both behind him.

"This one," she said, eagerly, touching the right hand, in which she had caught a side glimpse of something glittering like burnished gold.

Martin smilingly extended towards her a small, oval box, covered with a beautiful golden paper.

"How very, very lovely," cried Nell, opening it.

"It is yours," said Martin, "but only yours to give away. I want you to do something with it."

"Can't I keep it? Who must I give it to?"

"Melindy!"

"Oh, Martin, I can't, I just can't,—there!"

"Then you don't wish to make her good, Nell! You want her to be cruel and wicked and hard as long as she lives!"

"Oh no, no, I don't wish that *now*. I *prayed* for her last night." The last sentence was added in a very low tone.

"You refuse then?"

She looked at him, sighed, and turned away.

Martin put his box in his pocket, and walked off in the direction of the barn.

At dinner-time, Nelly came home quite radiant. Lessons had gone smoothly. Miss Harrow had praised her for industry at her books, "and, would you believe it, Martin," she added in an accent of high satisfaction, "Melinda didn't make but two faces at me all the whole morning! Wasn't that nice? They were pretty bad ones, though,—bad enough to last! She screwed her nose all up, this way! Well, if you'll give me the box now, I'll take it to her this afternoon. I don't feel hard against Melindy at all, now."

Martin brought it to her after dinner, with great alacrity; and Nell walked very slowly to school with it in her hands, opening and shutting the lid a dozen times along the road, and eyeing it in an admiring, fascinated way, as though she would have no objection in the world to retain possession of it herself.

It was a hard effort to offer it to Melinda. So pretty a box she had never seen before.

"I mean to ask Martin," she thought, "if he cannot find me another just like it."

Near the door of Mrs. Harrow's little house, Nelly encountered her tormentor, quite unexpectedly. She was standing outside, talking in a loud, boisterous way to two or three of the other children. Melinda was a tall, rather good-looking girl, of about fourteen years of age. She was attired in a great deal of gaudy finery, but was far from being neat or clean in appearance. At the present time, a large, freshly-torn hole in her dress, showed that in the interval between schools, she had been exercising her warlike propensities, and had come off, whether victor or not, a little the worse for wear. Her quilted red silk hood was now cocked fiercely over her eyes, in a very prophetic way. Nelly knew from that, as soon as she saw her, that she was in a bad frame of mind.

Not daring to speak to her then, Nelly was quietly proceeding towards the door of the school, when with one or two tremendous strides, Melinda met her face to face.

"How did you like the big thumping I gave you yesterday?" she asked, with a grim smile.

Nelly walked on very fast, trying to keep from saying anything at all, in the fear that her indignation might express itself too plainly.

"Why don't you speak up?" cried Melinda.

Still Nelly went on in silence. Melinda walked mockingly side by side with her, burlesquing her walk and serious face. At last, irritated beyond control, Melinda put out suddenly one of her feet,

and deliberately tripped up her little schoolmate, who, before she could even cry out, found herself lying flat on her nose, on the snow.

The attack was made so abruptly, that Nelly had no time to see what was coming. Confused, stunned, angry, and hurt, she raised herself slowly to her knees and looked around her. There was at first, a dull, bruised feeling, about her head, but this passed away. Something in the deadly whiteness of her face made Melinda look a little alarmed, as she stood leaning against the wall, ready to continue the battle, if occasion required any efforts of the kind; but knowing well, in the depths of her cowardly heart, that, as the largest and strongest child at school, her victims could not, personally, revenge themselves upon her, to any very great extent. Looking her companion in the eyes, like a hunter keeping a wild animal at bay, Nelly staggered to her feet. She had meant to be so good that day! And this was the encouragement she received! Truly, the influence of Melinda on Nelly's character was most pernicious. All the evil in her nature seemed aroused by the association. Tears, not resulting from physical pain, but from the great effort she still made to control her temper, rose to her eyes, as she saw a sneering smile on Melinda's countenance. Till now she had striven to bear Martin's advice in mind; but as this sneering smile broke into an ill-natured laugh, Nelly's self-control gave way. Her face burned. She tossed the little golden gift, with disdainful roughness, at her persecutor's feet, and said, in a gruff, and by no means conciliating voice,—

"There's a box for you, Melindy. And Martin says I mustn't hate you any more. But I do, worse than ever! There!"

Melinda gave a contemptuous snort. She walked up to the little gilt box, set her coarse, pegged shoe upon it, and quietly ground it to pieces. Then, without another word, she pushed open the school-room door, entered, and banged it to again, in poor Nelly's red and angry face. The child leaned against the house and cried quietly, but almost despairingly.

"I wanted to be good," she sobbed; "I wanted to be good so much, but she will not let me!"

CHAPTER III.

COMFORT'S NEFFY.

"COMFORT," said Nell, that night, leaning her head on her hand, and looking at the old woman sideways out of one eye, as she had seen the snowbirds do when they picked up the crumbs every morning around the kitchen door, "Comfort, can't you tell me what you were laughing about yesterday afternoon, when you were br'iling of the fish for tea?"

"Yes," said Comfort, "I think I can."

Nelly sat waiting to hear the expected revelation, yet none came. Comfort was busy with her pipe. She paused every now and then to puff out great misty wreaths of bluish-gray smoke, but she didn't condescend to utter one word.

"Comfort," said Nelly, getting impatient, "why don't you tell me, then, Comfort?"

"Tell yer what, chile?"

"What you said you would."

"I never said I *would*; I said I *could*. Be more petik'lar with yer 'spressions, Nelly. And 'sides that, yer hadn't oughter say '*br'iling* fish.' Missus don't. Leave such words to cullu'd passons, like me."

"Well, but tell me," persisted Nelly, smilingly, brimming with the curiosity she could not restrain. "I know it was something good, because you don't often laugh, Comfort."

"No," said Comfort, "that ar's a fact. I don't 'prove of little bits o' stingy laughs, every now and then. I likes one good guffaw and done with it."

"Well," said Nelly, "go on. Tell me about it."

"Yer see," said Comfort, taking her pipe from between her lips, and giving a sudden whirl to the smoke issuing from them, "Yer see, Nelly, I was laughin' 'bout my neffy."

"Your neffy, Comfort? What's that?"

"Lor! do tell! Don't yer know what a neffy is *yet*? I didn't 'spect yer to know much when yer was Marm Lizy's gal, but now, when Mrs. Brooks has adopted of yer, and sent yer to school to be edicated, we look for better things. Don't know what a neffy is, eh?"

"No," said Nelly, looking somewhat disturbed. "Tell me, Comfort. Is it something that grows?"

"Grows!" screamed Comfort, bursting into a laugh that certainly was not a stingy one; "Grows! Goodness! hear this yere chile! Ho, ho, ho! I—b'lieve—I shall—crack my poor ole sides! Grows! Oh my!"

"You mustn't laugh so, Comfort," said Nelly, with dignity, "you make me feel,—well, leastways, you make me feel real bad."

"Oh dear, dear," mumbled the old woman in a faint voice. "That does beat all! Why, see here, Nelly,—s'pose now, I had a sister once, and that ar sister got married and had a little boy, what ought he to call *me*, eh?"

"Why, his Aunt Comfort, to be sure," was the reply.

"And I ought to call him neffy John, or Johnny, for short, oughtn't I? Well, it was 'bout my neffy Johnny I was laughin' yesterday. Now I'll tell yer how it was, sence I've done laughin' 'bout him to-day,—oh my! You see, Johnny is a slave down South, ever so far off, on a rice plantation."

"*Slave?*" repeated Nelly, with growing interest; "*what's slave, Comfort?*"

"Oh, somethin' that grows," answered Comfort, chuckling. "A slave is a black man, woman, or chile that has a marster. This *marse*, as we call him, can sell the slave to anybody for a lot o' money, and the poor slave, as has been a t'ilin', strivin' soul all his days, can say nuthin' ag'in' it. It's the *law*, yer see."

"Comfort," said Nelly, "stop a minute. Do you think that is a right law?"

"No," said Comfort, "I can't say as I does. Some marsters are good, and some, on the contrary, are oncommon bad. Now my little neffy has a good 'un. Ever sence his poor mammy's death, I've been savin' and savin', and t'ilin' and t'ilin', to buy Johnny and bring him North, 'cause I set a good deal on him. This ere good marse of his agreed to let me buy him, when he was nuffin' but a baby; and he's been keepin' of him for me all this yere long time."

"I'm glad I'm not Johnny," said Nell, earnestly; "If bein' a slave is getting bought and sold like a cow or a dog, a slave is just what I don't want to be. Hasn't Johnny any relations down there, Comfort?"

The old woman shook her head.

"I'm the only one of his kin in the 'varsel world."

"Poor little fellow!" said Nelly meditating; "I don't wonder you want to buy him. How old is he?"

"Twelve year."

"And you've got enough money, Comfort?"

A bright smile beamed suddenly all over that dark face.

"Ho!" she cried, "that ar's just what I was laughin' at yesterday. I want only a leetle more, and 'deed, my neffy will have no marse ag'in,—only a missus, and that'll be *me*, thank the Lord!"

The old colored woman tossed her apron over her head, and from the odd puffing noises that immediately began to sound from behind it, Nelly supposed she was weeping. She thought she must have been mistaken, however, the next moment, for Comfort pulled down the apron a little savagely, as though ashamed of having indulged in such a luxury as a private groan or two, and in a stern voice bade Nelly go up in her (Comfort's) room, feel under the bolster, on the side nearest the wall, and bring down to her the foot of a stocking which she would find there.

"And don't let the grass grow under yer feet, neither," said Comfort, by way of a parting benediction, as the child softly closed the door. It was reopened almost immediately, and Nelly's smiling face appeared.

"I say, Comfort."

"Well chile, what now?"

"I'm real, *real* sorry for that little neffy of yours you've been tellin' me about. And, Comfort, when he comes I'll be as good to him as I can. I was thinkin' I would knit a pair of gray, woollen stockings to have ready for him, shall I? How big is he?"

"'Bout your size," replied Comfort. "The notion of them stockings is quite nice. I'm much obleeged to yer, Nelly."

Nelly looked delighted, and started to go up-stairs once more. In about a minute and a half, her face was peering into the kitchen again.

"Comfort, I guess I'll knit a red binding at the top of the stockings, to look handsome, shall I?"

"Why, yes," said Comfort, mightily pleased; "that will make 'em smart, won't it?"

"A red yarn binding," continued the little girl, "knit on after the stocking is toed off,—a binding full of little scallops and such like!"

"Laws, chile," said Comfort, benignantly, "I sorter think yer might stop short of them scallops. Neffy won't be anxious about scallops, I reckon, seein' as how he has only wored nater's stockings so far, with no petik'lar bindin' at all, that I knows on. Come, now, mind yerself and run up-stairs. I can't be wastin' all my time, a-waitin'."

Nelly shut the door, and went singing up-stairs, two at once, while the old woman employed her valuable time in smoking her pipe.

In a short time eager, young footsteps were heard dancing along the entry, and into the room came Nelly, looking as happy as though for her there existed no ill-natured schoolmate in all the world.

"Here it is!" she said, holding triumphantly up the foot of an old stocking, ragged at the edges, but scrupulously clean,—the same in fact, from which Comfort had once given her a small gift of

money; "here it is, Comfort; but didn't I have a powerful hunt for it! I dived under the bolster and under the mattress,—at the foot,—at the head,—at the sides,—and then I found it on the sacking. Hear how it jingles! What fun it must be to earn money, Comfort! Do look at my hair,—if I haven't got it full of feathers, poking among your pillows!" Sure enough, starting up all over her curls were gray and white downy particles.

"Laws sakes," exclaimed Comfort, helping her to pick them off, "that ar hole must a broke loose ag'in in my bolster! I can sew it up every Saturday night, and sure as I'm livin', it bursts ag'in Monday mornin'."

"That's 'cause your brain is too heavy; you've got too many thoughts in it, perhaps," laughed Martin, who entered at that moment, and began to stamp the snow from his feet on the kitchen doormat.

"O Martin," cried Nell, "see how rich Comfort is! She has saved that fat stocking full of money, to buy her neffy."

"Buy her neffy!" repeated Martin, unbuttoning his overcoat.

"Yes, he's a slave, you know."

"No," said the boy, "I don't know, Nelly; I never even heard of neffy before."

"Oh, his *name* isn't neffy, Martin. Oh, no, not at all," said the little girl, with an air of importance. "He is called John, and Comfort is going to buy him, and I am to begin a pair of stockings for him to-morrow."

Comfort held up her bag half full.

"This yere is my money-box," she said, overflowing with satisfaction.

"*Box!*" repeated Nell. "Why, it is not a *box* at all, Comfort. It's the foot of a worn-out stocking."

The old woman turned upon her a little grimly, "Stockin' or no stockin' I *calls* it my money-box, and that's enough. Box it is."

"That's funny," said Nelly; "I don't see much good in calling a stocking a box as long as it is a stocking."

"Well, I does," said Comfort, sharply; and with some of the old ill-temper she once used to vent so largely on Nell, she snatched up the bag, and giving it a toss upon a pantry shelf, slammed the door with a mighty noise.

For a little while silence descended on the group. It was an uncomfortable silence. No one in the room felt happy or at ease. Of such power is a single ill-natured expression!

Comfort was restless, because her conscience reproached her, while at the same time Nelly was experiencing secret remorse for having irritated her by thoughtless words. Perhaps Martin Wray was more distressed than either of his companions, at what had taken place. His was naturally a peaceable disposition, and he could not bear to witness scenes of discord. The sight of his pleasant face saddened, did not tend to make little Nell feel happier. She longed to have him reprove her, or exhort her, as he so often did, to better behavior; but Martin sat in his chair by the fire, sorrowful and mute.

Nothing was heard but the hissing of the burning wood on the wide hearth, and the whistling sounds and muffled roars of the wind without.

It was too much to bear this any longer. Nelly got up with a long, penitent face, and hovered rather wistfully around the chair where Comfort sat, still smoking her pipe. The old domestic had taken advantage of the fact of her eyes being half closed, to pretend that she did not see the little figure standing at her side, on account of just going off into a most delightful doze. She even went so far as to get up a gentle, extempore fit of snoring, but Nelly was not to be deceived.

"Comfort," she said, in a mild, quiet voice.

No answer, excepting three exceedingly distinct snores.

"*Comfort,*" was repeated, in a louder tone.

"WHAT!!" growled the old woman, opening her eyes so suddenly that the child started back. Comfort began to laugh, however, so Nell felt no fear of having disturbed her in reality.

"I am sorry I said that wasn't your money-box, Comfort. I didn't mean to contradict, or such like. It was all along o' my contrary temper, and if you'll forgive me, I'll try not to act so again."

The old colored woman appeared a little confused.

"'Deed, honey," she said, "yer haven't done nuthin' wrong; it's all *me*. I dunno what gits into me sometimes. Well, now, hand me that ar plaguey stocking, and I'll let you and Martin count my money."

Nelly smiled, looked delighted at being restored to favor, and flew to the pantry.

The bag was on too high a shelf for her to reach, however, and she had got the poker and was in the act of violently punching and hooking it down, as she best could, her eyes and cheeks bright with the exertion, when Martin—the sadness quite gone from his face—advanced to help her. Comfort took the bag from him, and with a grand flourish, emptied it on the vacant table. The flourish was a little *too* grand, however, and much more effective than Comfort had intended. The shining silver dollars, with which the stocking was partially filled, fell helter-skelter on the

table, and many of them rolled jingling and glittering over the floor.

Nelly laughed and scrambled after them, Martin shouted and tumbled down on hands and knees to help find them, while the owner, quite dismayed, stood still and did nothing.

"'Deed, 'deed!" she said; "how could I be so keerness? But there's thirty of 'em, and thirty I'll find."

Before the children knew what she was about, she seized the broom and began to sweep the rag-carpet with great nervous dashes, that had no other effect than to raise a tremendous dust.



"Comfort relinquished the broom at this, and began to count." Page [69](#)

"Stop!" cried Martin; "don't sweep, please, Comfort; Nelly and I will find them for you. That dust just goes into our eyes and blinds us. If you are sure there were thirty, it is easy enough to search till we make up the number."

[69]

Comfort relinquished the broom at this, and began to count; as fast as the children found any of the coins they dropped them into her lap.

"Twenty-six, twenty-seven," she said, at length; "three more, and we've got all the little shiners back."

"Here's two," cried Martin, "behind the dust-pan."

"And here's the thirtieth," exclaimed Nelly, "sticking out from under your shoe, Comfort! How funny!"

[70]

And so, laughing, the children saw Comfort's money-box bulge again to its original size.

"That ar's only my last five months' wages. Mrs. Brooks paid me yesterday," said the old woman, proudly, as she tied the stocking together with a piece of yellow, time-stained tape. "I've got three hundred jes' like 'em in a bank in the city; and when with a little extry t'ilin' and savin', I git in all, three hundred and fifty, my neffy will never be a slave no more!"

Here the kind voice of Mrs. Brooks was heard calling the children into the sitting-room.

"Good-night, Comfort," said Martin; "I wish *I* had thirty dollars; yet I do not envy you yours, one bit,—no, not one bit!"

[71]

"Yes," added Nell, rising to go, "and *I* don't envy either, but I wouldn't mind owning another stocking just like that. And, Comfort, I am going to ask mother to let me set all the eggs of my white bantam hen, early in the spring; and I'll *sell* the chickens and give you the money to help buy your neffy."

[72]

CHAPTER IV.

"LET'S MAKE FRIENDS!"

THE beams of the afternoon sun streamed gayly through the windows of Miss Harrow's school-room, and fell, like a crown of light, on the head of the young teacher, as she sat at her desk making copies for her pupils. It was writing afternoon, and on this particular occasion, that which was considered a high reward was to be given to the most diligent child.

Whoever showed the greatest interest, neatness and industry, was to be allowed to remain for a few hours after the closing of the school, in order to make a wreath of evergreen to decorate a certain picture in Miss Elinor's apartment. The Christmas holidays were near, and the little school-room had already received, at the willing hands of the children, a thorough dressing with laurel, pine, and hemlock-boughs. It had been for a week past the great delight of the pupils to weave, after school-hours, festoons for the whitewashed walls, and garlands for Miss Milly's desk.

Many were the regrets that the work was now almost over.

Miss Elinor's gentle ways had, from the first, made her a great favorite. There were never any rebellions, any doubtful conduct, in the few classes she undertook to hear recite in her sick-room. Her very infirmity endeared her to the hearts of her scholars.

This wreath for an engraving that hung at the foot of her bed, was the only Christmas-green Elinor desired to have placed in her apartment, and on that account, as well as from devotion to her personally, many pairs of little hands were eager to achieve the honor of the task. Very patient, therefore, were their youthful owners with their writing, this afternoon,—very exact were they to cross the t's, dot the i's, and avoid pens, as Melinda expressed it, "that scratched like sixty."

Miss Milly had done very wisely in holding out this reward, for never before had such attention and such care been visible in the class. Nelly sat at her high desk, as busy and as excited to win as any child there. Her copy-book lay before her, and though she had not as yet reached beyond "pot-hooks and trammels," she was quite as likely to come off victor as those who wrote with ease and accuracy, because it was not a question of penmanship, but of neatness and industry, as I have already said; for the first quality, the books themselves were to speak; and Miss Milly's watchful eyes were the judges of the latter, as, from time to time, she raised them from her own writing and scanned the little group.

Scratch, scratch, scratch went the pens, and papers rustled, and fingers flew about their work till the hour being up, Miss Milly rang her bell as a signal for perfect silence.

"It is time to put away your pens, children," she said, in a clear voice; and at once they were laid aside.

Nelly was just placing her blotting paper between the leaves of her writing-book, when a sorrowful exclamation near her made her turn her head. This exclamation came from Melinda, who sat a few benches off. Her eyes were fixed with a look of most profound distress on a large blot which a drop of ink from her pen had just left in the centre of the day's copy. Her sleeve had accidentally swept over it too,—and there it was, a great, black disfigurement! And on this afternoon of all others! Melinda wrote a very pretty hand. She was an ambitious girl, and had done her very best, that she might win the prize. Nelly saw the tears rise in her eyes, and her cheeks flush with the bitterness of her disappointment.

"Oh, dear!" cried Lucy Rook, a little girl, who sat next; "Oh, dear! there's a blot, Melindy!"

"Yes," was the answer; "I wonder if I could scratch it out, so that the page will look neatly again. Lucy, lend me your knife, will you?"

Mistress Lucy looked straight at Melinda, and laughed a little cruel, mocking laugh. In the rattle of papers and temporary confusion of the room, she thought herself unheard by the teacher.

"Who wouldn't play tag, yesterday, eh?" asked Lucy. "Who spoiled the game; did you hear anybody say?"

"Why, I did, I s'pose," spoke Melinda roughly; "and what of it?"

"I guess I want my knife, myself, that's all," was Lucy's reply. "I don't think I could conclude to lend it to-day," and she laughed again.

Nelly involuntarily put her hand in her pocket, where lay a little penknife Nancy had given her, as a keepsake, a few weeks before. The thought flashed through her mind, "Shall I, or shall I not?" and the next moment she reached over, and the little knife was glittering on Melinda's blotted copy. She did not speak; she only blushed, and smiled, and nodded pleasantly, to show her good-will. Melinda looked at her with a frowning brow. Then a better impulse seemed to prevail; she glanced gratefully back at Nelly, and taking up the penknife began to give some doleful scratches over the blot.

Presently, however, Miss Milly's command was heard from the desk:

"All arms to be folded!" Melinda, with a sigh, folded hers, and sat like a picture of despair. The books were then collected, and examined carefully, while the scholars began to prepare to go

home. Nelly was quite ready, when she was started by hearing Miss Milly pronounce her name to the school as the winner of the prize.

"I find," said Miss Harrow, "that almost every child has taken unusual pains to-day, in writing; and I am pleased to see it, I can assure you. Where all have been so careful, it is very difficult to find one who stands highest; Nelly Box, however, I think deserves the reward. Never, before, has she evinced such diligence and patience; hoping that she will always do as well in future, I give her permission to go up to Miss Elinor's room to begin the wreath, at once. Elinor will give you instructions, Nelly, and perhaps tell you some little story while you are busy with your task."

[80]

At first Nelly's face shone with delighted triumph, at the news of her success. But in a little while she began to realize that many of the pupils were sorely disappointed at this award not falling on themselves, and the thought dampened her ardor. She had reached the door to leave the room, when Miss Milly added:

"Melinda, I am glad to see that you, too, have been attentive and anxious to do well. If it were not for this huge blot, I should have given the palm to you."

"I couldn't help it," said Melinda, eagerly. "I was just folding it up, when it happened. I am as sorry as can be."

[81]

"Are you?" said Miss Milly, kindly.

"Yes," broke in Nelly, with honest warmth; "and it was an—an *accident*, as I think they call it, Miss Milly. The girls who saw it, say so. The ink just dropped right down, *ker-splash*."

Melinda held down her head and looked conscious.

"Well, then," said the good teacher, smiling at the "*ker-splash*," "if it was an accident, I think we will have *two* wreath-makers, instead of one. Melinda may go up-stairs with Nelly, if she wishes, and both are to be very quiet and orderly, for Miss Elinor is not quite as well as usual, to-day."

Melinda glanced towards Nelly, and was silent. She did not like to go, under such circumstances as these. She wished the honor of making the wreath, it is true, but she did not desire that distinction to be bestowed upon her as a *favor*. She felt galled too, that this very favor was accorded to her through Nelly Box's means,—little Nelly, whom, every day, she had been in the habit of cuffing about as though she were an animal of totally inferior condition. She happened to raise her eyes, however, and they fell on the glad, beaming face of this same Nelly Box, who stood waiting for her. It was so evident that Nelly's good-will towards her was sincere, it was so plain that this little schoolmate of hers desired to be friends with her, and to forget and forgive all the unpleasantness of the past, that Melinda could not resist the good impulse which impelled her onward. A feeling of shame and awkwardness was all that hindered her from accompanying Nelly up-stairs at once. She stood looking very foolish, her glance on the floor, and her fingers twitching at the upturned corner of her apron.

[82]

[83]

"Come, Melinda," said Miss Milly, in a gentle, but brisk tone; "don't keep Nelly waiting."

The young girl could resist no longer. She smiled, in spite of herself, a great, ear-to-ear, bashful, happy, half-ashamed smile, and followed Nelly slowly up-stairs to Miss Elinor's room, where they found her bolstered up in bed, as usual, and quite ready to give them instructions how to form her wreath. A sheet was already spread in the middle of the floor, and on this was a pile of evergreens.

"What, *two*!" said Miss Elinor, smiling, as they entered. "I am glad to see you both, although I expected but one. How is your mother, Melinda?"

[84]

"Better, ma'am," said Melinda; "she is coming to see you next week, if she is well enough. What shall we do first, Miss Elinor?"

The sick girl told the children how to begin, and, half sitting up in bed as she was, showed them how to tie together the fragments of evergreen with strings, so as to form the wreath. At first, the girls thought it hard work enough. The little sprays of hemlock would stand up, as Nelly termed it, "seven ways for Sunday," and all they could do did not bring them into shape.

Miss Elinor could not help them much more than to give directions. She lay looking at them from her bed, half amused, and entirely interested in the proceedings.

"Dear, dear!" said Melinda, after she had endeavored several times, quite patiently for her, to force a sprig to keep its place; "dear me, I don't think we can ever make this 'ere wreath look like anything but father's stump fences. Just see how that hemlock sticks out!"

[85]

"Well," said Miss Elinor, "I like to see stump fences, very much indeed, Melinda. I think they are beautiful. The great roots look like the hands of giants, with the fingers stretched out to grasp something. So you see, I don't mind if you make my wreath look like them."

"Father says stump fences are the very best kind," remarked Melinda, knowingly.

"I guess not the *very best*, Melindy," Nell ventured to say.

"Yes, they are," persisted Melinda, with a toss of her head; "father says they last *forever*,—and he *knows*, for he has tried 'em!"

[86]

The young teacher smiled, and turned away her head.

"Did you ever see a church dressed with evergreens, Miss Elinor?" asked one of the children.

"Often," said the sick girl; "not here, in the village, but in the city. I have not been able to

attend church much since we have been here. They entwine garlands around the high pillars, and put wreaths of laurel over the arched windows. The reading-desk and pulpit have their share too, and above the altar is placed a beautiful cross. Sometimes the font is filled with delicate white flowers, that are renewed each Sabbath as long as the evergreens are permitted to remain."

[87]

"I wish I could see a church looking like that," remarked Nelly, stopping in her work, and looking meditatively about her.

"Miss Elinor," said Melinda, "what do they mean when they say 'as poor as a church-mouse?' Why are *church*-mice poorer than *house*-mice?"

"Because," was the reply, "in churches there are no nice pantries, filled with bread and meat, for the little plagues to feed upon. No stray crumbs lie on the floor,—no pans of milk are to be found at which to sip. So, you see, church-mice *have* a right to be considered poor."

"Well," said Melinda, "how funny! I never thought of that before."

[88]

"Once," continued her teacher, "I saw an odd scene with a church-mouse. I'll tell you about it. I was visiting in the country, a great many miles from here; such a kind of country as you can have but a faint idea of, unless you should see it yourself. It was out West. The houses there are not like those you have always been accustomed to see, but are built of the trunks of trees. They are called log cabins. The gaps, or holes, between these logs are filled with mud and moss, which keep out the rain in summer, and the wind and snow in winter."

"What do they do for windows?" asked Nell.

"Some of them have none,—others make an opening in the logs; a small shutter, hinged with stout leather, is its only protection in time of storms. Glass is too expensive to be used, for the people are very poor. Well, I was visiting once a family who lived in one of these log huts. It was somewhat better than its neighbors, certainly, and much larger, but it was not half as comfortable as the little house we are in. It was in October, and I remember as I lay awake in bed, at night, I felt the autumn wind whistle over me. It makes my nose cold to think of it," laughed Elinor. "When Sunday came, I was surprised to find that, although the church was five miles distant, no one thought of staying at home."

[89]

'What!' said my uncle, 'do you think, Elinor, we are short-walk Christians? No indeed,—five miles through the woods is nothing to us when a good, sound sermon, and a couple of beautiful hymns are at the end of it!'"

[90]

"It was your uncle, then, you were visiting?" questioned Melinda.

"Yes; he had moved out West some years before, bought a farm, and built himself a log cabin. He lives there now, and is fast making a fortune."

"Is he?" said Nell. "Did you go to the church, Miss Elinor, in the woods?"

"Yes; no one stayed at home. We had the dinner-table set before we started, which was early, on account of the distance. I think it was about half past eight o'clock in the morning (for we did not want to hurry), when uncle shut the cabin door, and saw that everything was right."

"Didn't you lock it?" asked Melinda.

"Lock what?"

[91]

"The door."

"No. Not a man, woman, or child thinks of locking doors, out in that wild country. Thieves don't seem to be found there, and everybody trusts his neighbor. If a trumper comes along, he is welcome to go in and help himself to whatever he wants. It is not an unusual thing on reaching home, after an absence of an hour or so, to find a poor, tired traveller, asleep in his chair, before the fire. Besides," said Miss Elinor, with a twinkle in her eyes, "there is another excellent reason why the farmers out there never think of locking their doors."

"Oh, I know!" cried Melinda; "I know!"

"Well, why is it?"

[92]

"They have no locks!" And the two children began to laugh as if they had never heard anything so funny in all their lives.

"I like that," said Nell; "I want to live in just such an honest country, and where they are good to poor travellers, too. That's the splendid part. I feel as if I wanted to settle there, this very minute. Well, Miss Elinor, don't forget about going to church."

"We got off the track so, I had nearly forgotten what my story is about," said Miss Elinor. "We started very early to go to church. Uncle had no wagon, so driving was out of the question; but he had a beautiful mare called 'Lady Lightfoot,' and an old side-saddle, which my aunt had owned ever since she was a girl. It was settled that my aunt and I were to take turns riding on Lady Lightfoot, so that neither should get too fatigued. Uncle and cousin Robert were to walk, and Lightfoot's pretty little long-legged colt ambled in the rear. My aunt took the first ride, and I was talking quietly to uncle and Robert, when I saw, bounding along a rail fence at the side of the road, the old fat cat, Wildfire. Her name just suited her, for she was one of the most restless, proud, affectionate, daring cats I had ever seen."

[93]

"Why! I exclaimed; 'see Wildfire on the fence! she will get lost,—we must send her home.'

"Lost, eh?" said Cousin Robert; 'I reckon not. If any one can lose Wildfire, I'll give him a treat in the strawberry patch next summer, and no mistake.'

"But what shall we do?" I asked; 'we don't want her to go to church with us. Make her go home, Robert, do.'

[94]

"Not a bit of it,' said Robert, laughing; 'did you never see a cat go to meeting before? Wildfire has attended regularly, every summer, for the last three years. She always follows us. The minister would not know how to preach without her.'

"But,' said I, 'how it must look! a cat in church! A dog would not be so bad. But a cat! Go home, Wildfire!' and I took off my red shawl and shook it at her, and stamped my foot.

"Robert laughed again, and told me it was no use; that they had often tried to send her back, and sometimes had fastened her up, but that she almost always broke loose, and would come bounding after them, kicking her heels in the air, as though to show her utter defiance of any will but her own. When I shook my shawl at her, she just rose quietly up on her hind legs, and while her green eyes darted flames of anger, she ruffled her fur as cats do when attacked by dogs, indicating as plainly as possible that go she would; and go, indeed, she did. Robert saw I was mortified at the thought of walking to meeting in company with a cat, and he told me I needn't be ashamed, because the churches out there were vastly different from those I had been in the habit of attending. 'Women,' said he, 'who can't afford them, come without hats, and men, on hot days, walk up to their seats in their shirt-sleeves, with their house-dogs tagging after them. I counted ten dogs in meeting once. The animals seem to understand the necessity for good behavior, for they are as quiet as their masters; perhaps more so, sometimes. They lie down under the seats of their friends, and go to sleep, only opening their eyes and mouths now and then to snap at some flies, buzzing around their noses. Wildfire does the same. Our bench is near the door, and we could easily put her out if she did not behave as becomes a good, well-reared cat. If people didn't *know* that she followed us each Sunday, they would never find it out from her behavior in meeting-time.'

[95]

[96]

"Seeing there was no help for it, and understanding there was no fear of mortification, I dismissed the thought of Wildfire from my mind. Shortly afterwards, my aunt dismounted to give me my turn. Cousin Robert helped me on, handed me the lines, and gently touching Lady Lightfoot with my twig-whip, I began to trot a little away from the party. The road was magnificent. None, my dear children, in our village can compare with it. The earth was smooth and hard, and but very little broken by wheels. Something in the character of the soil kept it generally in this condition. We had just entered the woods. Overhead the stately branches of old trees met and laced themselves together. It was like one long arbor. Scarcely any sunshine came through on the road, and when it did, the little wavy streaks looked like threads of gold. The morning was mild and cool, almost too cool for the few autumn birds that twittered their cheerful songs far and near. I was enjoying myself very much, when, suddenly, I heard a snorting noise just beside me. I could not imagine what it was. I looked down, and there—what do you think I saw?"

[97]
[98]

"Wildfire!" cried the two children.

"Yes, it was Wildfire, on the full trot, snorting at me her delight in the race. I slackened my pace, and the cat and I walked peaceably all the rest of the way to the meeting-house.

"When we arrived there, I was as much surprised as amused at the scene which presented itself. The church was a nice, neatly-painted building, in the midst of a small clearing."

"Clearing?" said Nell.

"A clearing is a piece of ground from which the trees have been removed. One or two young oaks, however, were left in this instance, to serve as hitching posts, if any should be required, which was very seldom the case.

[99]

"Many of the farmers of the vicinity had arrived when we got there. They had unharnessed their animals and left them to graze around the meeting-house, a young colt accompanying almost every turn-out. At the first glance I thought the spot was full of colts, such a frisking and whisking was going on around the entrance. One impertinent little thing even went so far as to poke its head in the door-way and take a survey of the congregation.

"Some of the families who attended there, came from ten to fifteen miles,—for the country was by no means thickly settled. A large dinner-basket, nicely packed under the wagon-seat, showed which these families were.

[100]

"All the people were more or less roughly dressed; none were attired in a way that looked like absolute poverty.

"Cousin Robert aided me to dismount, left Lady Lightfoot and her colt free to graze with the other animals, and with aunt and uncle we went in the church. The walls were plaster, with no lime or wood-work to improve their appearance. Behind a pine desk at one end of the room sat the minister. A bunch of white pond-lilies, which some one had just given him, rested beside the Bible lying before him."

"And Wildfire,—where was Wildfire?" asked Nelly, with great eagerness.

"She followed us in, very demurely, and the moment that her favorite, Robert, sat down, she curled herself in a round, soft ball at his feet, and went to sleep. I was soon so interested in the sermon that I forgot all about her. The minister's text seemed to have been suggested by his flowers. It was 'Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; and yet, I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to-day is, and to-morrow is cast into the

[101]

oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith?' The sermon was not well delivered, because of the lack of knowledge in the preacher, but it was pure and sound, and full of a true, tender, and loving regard for the welfare of that people in the wilderness. The heartiness with which all present joined in the closing hymn, proved that the effect of the discourse was a good one on the congregation. Just as the last note died away, my attention was suddenly attracted to a little moving object near the door. I looked twice before I could realize that it was a mouse. It peered about with its pretty, bright eyes, as if it were too frightened and bewildered to know what to do next. It was a little thing, and must have strayed unknowingly away from its companions.

[102]

"From a slow, stealthy sound, that came all at once from Cousin Robert's feet, I knew that Wildfire had seen it too, and was preparing an attack. The minister was pronouncing the final benediction, however, and I did not dare to look around, for fear of attracting attention. Scarcely was the closing word uttered, when there was a sudden spring from the cat, and a shrill squeak on mousey's part. Proudly lashing her tail, like a panther, Wildfire laid her victim, in an instant, dead at her young master's feet, (we sat very near the door, I believe I told you,) gazing in his face with such an air of triumph, and such an anxious request for praise in her glittering eyes, that cousin Robert, very thoughtlessly, as it seemed to me, stooped and patted her head."

[103]

"Did she eat it?" asked Melinda.

"No," replied the sick girl; "she left it lying there, on the floor, and followed us unconcernedly out, as if there were not such a thing as a mouse in the world. She had no desire to be left behind."

[104]

"Perhaps," said Melinda, "as it was a church-mouse, she thought it too poor to eat. I wish I had such a cat as Wildfire, Miss Elinor."

"And so do I," cried Nelly. "I'll teach my cat, Nancy, to be knowing, just like her. Look at the wreath, Miss Elinor! Hasn't it grown handsome while you were telling about Wildfire? It don't seem a bit like a stump fence now, does it?"

It was, indeed, very beautiful. Miss Elinor raised herself on her elbow and said so, as she looked at it. All that it wanted now, she told them, was a few scissors clips on the ends of the longest sprays, to make them even with the others.

Melinda leaned it against the wall, and clipped away with great care and precision. Nelly stood gazing at it lovingly and admiringly.

[105]

Before the children were quite ready to go home, Miss Milly came in and hung the precious wreath on a couple of nails which she drove for that purpose, over the picture, for which it was intended. It represented a little bare-footed gypsy-girl dancing a wild, fantastic dance, with her brown arms flung gracefully out, and mischief and innocent fun gleaming in her black eyes.

"Of all the engravings I have ever seen," said Miss Elinor, "this one is the best calculated for an evergreen frame. Thank you, dears, for making it. I hope each of you will pass a merry Christmas and a happy New Year."

[106]

As the two children went down the stairs together, Nelly said,

"Isn't she good, Melindy?"

Melinda was not accustomed to behave herself for so great a length of time; her stock of good conduct was now pretty nearly exhausted, so she answered rather sharply,

"Of course she is. I know that as well as you, without bein' told."

Nelly felt something choking her in her throat.

"*I will not*," she said firmly to herself, "I will not answer back. I'll do as Martin says, and make a friend of Melindy, if I can. She isn't so very bad, after all. Why, I do believe I rather like her."

They gathered their books together in the school-room. Melinda opened the door first, to go.

"Well, good-bye," she said, gruffly, looking back at Nell.

[107]

"Good-bye," replied Nelly; and then she added, bravely, "Oh, Melindy, we needn't quarrel any more, need we? *I* don't wish to, do you? Let us be friends; come, shake hands."

Melinda turned very red, indeed.

"I am not going to be forced to make friends with any one," she said, in a most forbidding voice. She gave the school-door a terrific bang as she spoke, and darted off homeward.

But in that last rough action the final trace of the ill-will she bore Nelly disappeared forever.

The next morning, as the family were sitting at breakfast, there came a knock at the door. Comfort, hastily setting her dress to rights, went to answer it. There stood Melinda, her school-books in one hand, and in the other, two of the biggest and roundest and reddest apples she had been able to find in all her father's bins.

[108]

"Give them to Nelly, if you please," she said.

"And I declar'," added Comfort, when she came in and told the family, "the minit she spoke that ar' she ran off frightened like, and in a mos' drefful hurry."

From that day Melinda and Nelly were friends.

CHAPTER V.

[109]

CHICKENS AND "POETRY."

SPRING came again, and deepened slowly towards the summer. Leaves budded on the trees, herbs sprouted from the warm earth, and birds sang in all the hedges.

"I am *so* glad!" said Nelly; "for I love the spring sunshine, and all the pleasant things that come with it."

When the weather grew mild, Nelly was as good as her word about raising chickens for the benefit of Comfort's nephew, the little slave. The eggs of the favorite hen were carefully put aside to accumulate, and as soon as she had done laying, and went about the barnyard clucking, with her feathers ruffled and her wings drooping, Nelly knew, with joy, that it was time to set her. So she filled the same nest in which the eggs had been laid, with clean, fresh straw, and placed them in it, ready for the bantam when Martin could catch her to put her on. They found that the hen needed no coaxing, but settled herself at once in the well-filled nest, giving at the same time an occasional cluck of high satisfaction. In three weeks from that time she came off with eleven chicks,—all safe and well. When she was put in her coop, under the big apple-tree by the fence, Nelly fed her with moistened Indian meal, every day. She thought it a pretty sight, when bidy minced up the food for her babies, and taught them how to drink out of the flower-pot saucer of water that stood within her reach.

[110]

[111]

Nelly seemed never to get tired of looking at her little snow-white pets. She felt that they were her own, and therefore she took a double interest in them.

When she was home from school, and lessons were studied for the next morning, she would go out to the apple-tree, and sit on the clean grass an hour or two, to watch every movement of the brood, and the solicitude of the caged mother when her offspring wandered too far away. One day in particular, as she sat there, the child's thoughts were busy with the future; her imagination pictured the time when full-grown, and more beautiful than any others, as she thought they were sure to become, her eleven chickens were to be sent to market.

[112]

"I hope," she said half aloud; "I hope they will bring a good price, for Comfort's sake; I should not like to offer her anything less than five dollars. That is very little, I think, compared to all the trouble I have had night and morning to feed and take care of them."

She stopped a moment, and heaved a deep sigh, as she saw the little yellow dots flit back and forth through the long grass, some of them running now and then to nestle lovingly under the wings of the mother.

"Oh dear!" she went on; "I do believe I am getting to love my hen and chickens too much to part with them; every day I think more and more of them, and all the while they grow prettier and sweeter and tamer. I wish I could keep them and have the money too! Dear little chickies! Oh, Comfort, Comfort!"

[113]

She pronounced the last two words so ruefully, that her mother, who was passing along the garden-path, near the apple-tree, called out,—

"Well, Nelly dear, what is the matter with your precious Comfort, eh? Has she met any great misfortune?"

"No, ma'am," said Nelly; "I was only talking to myself about how hard it would be to sell the little chickens, even for dear Comfort's sake, when I love them so."

Mrs. Brooks drew near.

"Well, my child, that is a dilemma I have not thought of before. Perhaps, who knows, something will turn up to keep your darlings nearer home. When autumn comes, if I feel desperately in want of bantams, I may purchase your brood myself,—but I will not promise about it. In the meantime, don't get to loving them too much; and remember, that if you told Comfort you would give her the money, you must keep your word."

[114]

"Yes," said Nell, with another sigh; "there is just my trouble; I want to be honorable to Comfort, and kind to myself too."

Mrs. Brooks passed on. She went into a little vegetable garden beyond, found what she wanted, and came back.

She paused again, and with the little girl, looked at the chickens.

"Nelly," she said, "it has just struck me that you have been a great deal in the kitchen with Comfort, lately, of evenings. Now, though I respect and love Comfort for many things, I want you to stay more with your father, and Martin, and myself, in the sitting-room."

[115]

"What?" Nelly cried, in innocent wonder; "isn't Comfort good any longer?"

Mrs. Brooks smiled.

"Yes, dear, Comfort's as good as ever. She tries to do her duty, and is a faithful old creature. She has many excellent qualities, but she is not educated nor refined, as I hope one day *you* will

be. You are too young to be exposed to her influence constantly, proper as it may be in most respects. I want you to fill a different rank in life from Comfort's, Nelly."

Tears were in Nelly's eyes as she answered gravely,

"Yes, ma'am."

"Comfort is a servant, and you are my little daughter. I want you to be diligent, and cultivate a love of books. If you grow up in ignorance, you can never be esteemed a lady, even if you were as rich as an empress. I will give you the credit to say that you have improved very much since you have been with me, both in your conduct and in the language you use."

"Comfort told me I mustn't say 'br'iling fish,' as she did, because *you* did not! *That* was kind of her, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Brooks felt her eyes moisten at this unexpected remark, more, perhaps, at the tone than at the words themselves. She saw that Nelly was deeply attached to Comfort, and she felt almost that she was wrong in seeking to withdraw the child from the grotesque attraction she had lately seemed to feel for her society. But duty was duty, and she was firm.

She stooped and imprinted a light kiss on Nelly's cheek.

"Yes," she said, "Comfort is very kind to you. But I do not wish you to spend more time with her when you are out of school than you do with the rest of the family. Remember not to hurt her feelings by repeating to her this conversation."

"Yes, ma'am," said Nelly; and then she added, "Comfort was going to show me how to write poetry, to-night, when she got through with her work. Couldn't I go in the kitchen for this one evening?"

"Comfort—teach—poetry?" echoed Mrs. Brooks, with some dismay and amusement.

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well,—yes,—you may stay in the kitchen, if you like, for this once. Certainly, I have no objection to your learning to write poetry," and she walked away, laughing quietly.

Surely enough, when night fell, and Comfort, radiant in a showy, new, red cotton turban, sat down to her knitting,—her day's work over, everything in its place, and the kitchen-floor white with extreme cleanliness,—Nelly came skipping into the room, pencil and paper in hand.

"You see," she said, as she arranged her writing materials on the table, and drew the solitary tallow candle towards her; "you see, Comfort, school breaks up next week, and the spring vacation begins. It lasts a month, only think of it! Will not I have good times, eh? Johnny Bixby,—you know Johnny Bixby, Comfort? well, he goes to his home in the city as soon as vacation commences, and as we may not see him again, he wants each of the little girls to write him some poetry so that he can remember us by it; and that's the way I come to want to learn how."

"Oh," said Comfort, "I understand now. Johnny boards with those ar Harrowses, eh?"

"Yes," said Nelly; "and he's such a very quiet boy, you've no idea, Comfort."

"He's the fust *quiet* boy ever I heard on, then," said Comfort. "Weel, what do you want to say to Johnny in your poetry? That's the first and important p'int; don't begin to write till you finds what you are a goin' to say."

"Oh, I want to tell him good-bye, and all that sort of thing, Comfort, and how I hope we will meet again. I've got the first line all written; that's some help isn't it? Melindy's and my first lines are just alike, 'cause we made it up between us."

"How does it go?" asked Comfort, puffing at her pipe.

"This way," said Nelly, taking up her paper and reading:

"Our days of youth will soon be o'er."

"Well," said Comfort, after a moment's reflection, "I think that's very good. Now you must find something to rhyme with that ar word 'o'er.'"

Nelly bent over her papers, and seemed to be considering very hard indeed. Once she put forth her hand as if she were going to write, but drew it back again. Evidently she found writing poetry very difficult work. Comfort was looking at her, too, and that made her nervous, and even the solemn stare of the cat, Nancy, from the hearth, where she sat purring, added to her embarrassment.

"Oh, Comfort," she said, at last, with a deep sigh; "I can't! I wonder if Johnny Bixby would take as much trouble as this for me. Do tell me what rhymes with 'o'er,' Comfort!"

"'O'er,' 'o'er,'" repeated Comfort, slowly; "why, tore, gnaw, boar, roar, and such like. Roar is very good."

"But I don't want 'roar' in poetry, Comfort," said Nelly, considerably ruffled. "I don't see how you can bring 'roar' in. I wonder if 'more' would not do."

She took up her pencil, and in a little while, with beaming eyes, read to her listener these lines:

"Our days of youth will soon be o'er,
In Harrows' school we'll meet no more."

"That's pretty fair, isn't it, Comfort?"

"Pears like," was the answer that came from a cloud of smoke on the other side of the room. "I'm sorry the 'roar' couldn't come in, though. Don't disremember to say something nice about his writin' to tell yer if he gits safe home, and so, and so."

"No," said Nell; "I'll not"—"forget" she meant to have added, but just then came a heavy knock on the kitchen-door that made both of them start.

Comfort opened it, and there stood a boy, nearly a man, in the dress of a sailor. His hair was long and shaggy, his face was brown, and over his shoulder swung a small bundle on a stick. [123]

He was not, however, as rough as he looked, for he took off his hat and said in a pleasant voice,

"Can you tell me where a widow by the name of Harrow lives in this neighborhood? I was directed this way, I think."

"Over yonder is the house," said Comfort, pointing out into the night. "And the next time yer come, be keerful not to thump so hard. We are not used to it in this 'ere part of the country."

Nelly heard the young man laugh as he walked down the path from the house; and something in the sound brought Miss Milly to her mind. The more she thought of it, the more certain she became that the young man's voice was like her teacher's. She sat still a little while, thinking, and idly scratching her pencil back and forth. At length she said, quite forgetful of her writing, [124]

"Comfort, didn't Mrs. Harrow's son run away to sea, ever so long ago?"

This question, simple as it was, seemed to fill Comfort with sudden knowledge. She clapped her hands together joyfully.

"My stars! ef that don't beat all! I do b'lieve Sidney Harrow is come back again!"

She went to the door to look after him, but his figure had long since vanished down the path. The gloom of night reigned, undisturbed, without. There was no sailor-boy to be seen.

"My stars!" said Comfort, again and again; "ef that was only Miss Milly's brother come back to help keer for the family, instead of runnin' off like a bad ongrateful feller, as he was, I'll be glad for one." [125]

"And I'll be glad too," cried Nelly; "and then dear Miss Elinor need not teach, but can read books all day, if she likes, and be happy. Oh, kitty, kitty! will not that be nice?" and in the delight of her heart, the little girl caught up the cat from the hearth, and began to caress her in a joyful manner, that the sober puss must have considered rather indecorous, for she sat still in her lap, looking as grave as a judge, and never winked or purred once at her young mistress.

Here the clock struck nine.

"Dear, dear!" said Nelly; "and I haven't finished my poetry yet! and very soon I must go to bed." Back she went with renewed vigor. "What were you saying, Comfort, when that young man knocked? Oh, I know,—to tell Johnny to write to me; I remember now. Don't you think it will seem strange to Johnny to be with his mother all the time, instead of sending her letters from school? eh, Comfort?" [126]

But the old woman was lost in her thoughts and her smoking, and did not reply. Nelly bent over her paper, read, and re-read the two lines already accomplished, and after musing in some perplexity what should come next, asked,

"Comfort, what rhymes with B?"

"Stingin' bee, Nell?"

"No, the *letter* B." [127]

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, let me think. I haven't made poetry this ever so long. There's 'ragin' sea,—how's that?" said Comfort, beginning to show symptoms of getting deeply interested. "Now take to 'flectin' on that ar, Nell."

Nell did reflect some time, but to no purpose. Some way she could not fit in Comfort's "ragin' sea." It was no use, it would not go! She wrote and erased, and erased and wrote, for a full quarter of an hour. After much anxious labor, she produced finally this verse, and bidding Comfort listen, read it aloud, in a very happy, triumphant way. Then she copied it neatly on a piece of paper, in a large, uneven, childish handwriting, which she had only lately acquired. It was now ready to be presented on the morrow. [128]

TO JOHNNY BIXBY.

Our days of youth will soon be o'er,
In Harrow's school we'll meet no more;
You'll write no more to Mrs. B.,
Oh then, dear Johnny, write to me!

"And now," said Nelly, as she folded up the precious paper, after having duly received Comfort's congratulations and praise,—“and now I'm going straight to tell mother about Sidney Harrow.” [129]

CHAPTER VI.

GETTING LOST.

THE next day, when Nelly went to school with her verse-paper in her hand, all ready for presentation, she found the children talking together in little groups, in tones of great surprise and delighted satisfaction.

Melinda, now grown kind and loving to Nelly, as a consequence of that little girl's own patience and affectionate effort, came forward at once to tell the news.

"Only think!" she said; "Mrs. Harrow's son, Sidney, has come home, and oh, Miss Milly and Miss Elinor are *so* glad!" [130]

"And so am I," cried Nelly; "if ever there was good luck, that is."

"I am not so sure about that," said Melinda, with a sage, grown-up air; for she liked to seem like a woman, and often told her companions, "dear knows, if *she* wasn't big enough to be thought one, she would like to know who *was!*"

"Why, isn't Mr. Sidney a nice young man, Melindy?" asked Nelly, in bewilderment.

"Hush!" said Melinda, drawing her into a corner; "don't talk so loud. You see, he's come home as poor as he went, and folks are afraid that he will go on just as he did before,—that is, spend all his own earnings and plenty of his mother's, too."

"Dear, dear!" said Nelly; "that will be hard for Miss Milly." [131]

"Anyway," continued Melinda, wisely, "we can hope for the best, you know. Miss Milly is so glad to have him back, that she came into this 'ere school-room, this very morning, and told the scholars she was going to take them all on a picnic, to-morrow, up yonder, on Mr. Bradish's mountain. We are to ask our mothers if we can go, and then come here with our dinners in our baskets, and set off together as soon as the grass dries. Fun, isn't it?"

Nelly's eyes danced.

"A picnic! well, if that isn't nice! I hope Comfort will put something real good in my basket, to-morrow." Then she added, thoughtfully, "I wonder if Martin might not go, too?"

"I'll ask," said Melinda; and up she went to Miss Milly, who at that moment entered.

Little Johnny Bixby, a boy of ten, now came up to wish Nell good-morning, and talk about the picnic. Nelly gave him her poetry, and he read it, and said, [132]

"It's splendid, Nelly; I'll show it to mother as soon as I get home."

The next day came. The skies were clear, but the wind was high, and swayed the branches of the trees around the farm-house, and swept the long, wet grass to and fro.

"Is it going to storm?" asked Nelly, anxiously, of Martin, as immediately after breakfast they stood together in the door-way and looked forth.

"No," said Martin; "I think it will not storm, but the breeze will be a pretty stiff one all day. Perhaps Miss Milly will postpone the picnic." [133]

"Oh, dear!" cried Nelly; "I hope not. What! put it off after Comfort has baked us that great, bouncing sponge-cake, Martin?"

Martin was going too, for Miss Milly had sent him an invitation, and Mr. Brooks had granted him, very willingly, a holiday. He had only to help milk the cows early in the morning, and then he was free to follow his pleasure till sundown. He was dressed now in his Sunday suit; his hair was combed smoothly over his forehead, and his best cloth cap was in his hands. Altogether he looked so tidy, so good, so happy, that when Mr. Brooks came in the room, he asked Comfort, with a smile, if she didn't think a lad of about the age of Martin ought to have at least a dime of spending money, when he went to picnics. On Comfort's saying heartily, without taking one single instant for reflection, "Yes, Sir," the farmer put his hand in his pocket, drew out a new and bright quarter of a dollar, and dropped it in Martin's cap. Martin tried to return it, but Mr. Brooks would not hear to any such thing, but shouldered his hoe and went off, whistling, into the garden. [134]

"I'll tell you what to do with it," said Nelly, in a confidential whisper; "buy round hearts; they're four for a penny. Only think of four times twenty-five round hearts! How much is that, Martin?"

Martin laughed, and said he guessed he would not invest in round hearts, for Comfort's cake was so large.

"So *monstrous* large," put in Nelly, dividing a glance of affection between Comfort and the cake. [135]

"Yes," continued Martin; "it is so *monstrous* that it ought to last, at least, two whole days."

The farmer's wife came in just then, and told them she would pack the dinner-basket herself, to see that everything was right, and that it was full enough, for she said she had heard somebody remark that good appetites were sure to go along on picnics. Nelly and Martin stood by and looked at her as she unfolded a clean white towel, and outspread it in the basket, so that the ends hung over the sides. After this she took some thin pieces of cold beef and put them between

slices of bread and butter, and these she packed away first. Now came Comfort's sponge-cake, cut in quarters, and as many little lady-apples as remained from the winter's store,—for it was late in the spring. A cup to drink out of the mountain streams was also added, and the towel-ends were nicely folded over the whole and pinned together. [136]

A happy pair they were, when they set out,—Martin carrying the provisions, and Nelly singing and making flying skips beside him. When they reached the school-house, nearly all the children were assembled. Miss Milly was there, and her brother too, a handsome young lad, of about eighteen, with a very brown, sunburnt face. Nelly knew him, the moment she saw him, to be the same person she had seen before. They were not to start for an hour yet, for, high as the wind had been, and was, the grass was still glittering with dew. The little road-side brooks were furrowed into white-crested waves, and the school-house creaked and moaned with the gusts that blew against it. [137]

"I am almost afraid to venture taking the children out," said Miss Milly; but upon hearing this, such a clamor of good-humored expostulation arose, and so many sorrowful "oh's," and "oh dear me's," resounded through the room, that Sidney Harrow, as any other boy would have done, begged his sister to have mercy and never mind the wind.

In a little while the party started. Mr. Bradish's mountain, the proposed scene of the picnic, was distant about one mile from the school-house. The route to it lay through a long, shady lane that gradually wound towards the woods, and lost itself at last amid the huge, gray rocks and dense shade of the hill-top itself. It was spring-time, and the grass was very green, and delicate wild flowers starred all the road-side. Here and there, in the crevice of a mossy stone, grew a tuft of wild pinks, nodding against a group of scarlet columbines, while, wherever the ground afforded unusual moisture, blue violets thrust up their graceful heads in thick masses. [138]

"Hurrah!" cried Johnny Bixby, as they reached the summit of the mountain; "Hurrah! here we are at last. The picnic's begun!"

Miss Milly said the children might stray around together for some time before it would be the dinner-hour, and they might gather as many wild flowers as they wished, to decorate the picnic grounds. All the girls set to work, and such a crowd of violets, anemones, wild buckwheat, and pinks as was soon piled around Miss Milly's feet, was a sight to behold. While Sidney Harrow with Martin and the rest of the boys were fishing in a little stream that ran over the mountain, about one quarter of a mile distant, Miss Milly's party tied bouquets to the branches of the trees, and hung garlands on the bushes, around the spot where they were to dine. The wind died away, the birds sung out merrily, and the air grew soft and warm, so that, after all, there was no fear of little folks taking cold. The brook where Sidney and Martin led the boys was not a very deep one, and therefore it was not dangerous, but it was celebrated for miles around for its fish. A large, overhanging rock, under the shade of a tree, served, as Martin said, for a "roosting-place," and from it they found the bites so frequent that quite a little string of fish was made, and hung on some dead roots that projected from the bank. [139]

"What a wild place this is," said Martin, looking around him, as he drew in his line for the fourth time.

"Yes," said Sidney; "it is. That is the best of it. I wouldn't give a fig for it if it wasn't. Look at that cow coming to drink. I wonder where she hails from! How she looks at us!"

The cow did indeed regard them with a long stare of astonishment, and then, scarcely tasting the water, she plunged, bellowing, into the woods again.

"She is frightened," said Martin; "that's old Duchess, one of Mr. Bradish's cows. He turns them out with their calves every summer, to take care of themselves till fall." [140]

"Why, is the pasture good enough for that, up here on this mountain?" asked Sidney, baiting his hook.

"Yes," replied Martin; "I think so; it's rather rough, but cows are mighty knowin', and pick out the best. Besides, they have their freedom, and they thrive on that as much as anything. Then the calves are so well grown in the fall by these means, that when farmers, who put them out, go to drive them home to winter-quarters, they hardly know their own again."

"There, she's coming back!" cried a little boy; "and a whole lot with her!"

Martin looked where the crashing of boughs told of the approach, and saw about a dozen cows, headed by Duchess, making for that part of the stream where they were fishing. Some half-grown calves scampered at their heels, in a frightened way, that showed they were not much accustomed to the sight of human beings. [141]

"Poor Duchess! Good Duchess!" said Martin, in a kind tone; but Duchess tossed up her nice, brown nose, and snorted at him.

"She don't like the looks of us, that's flat," said Sidney, with a little alarm that made Martin smile; "I'm sure I don't like *her* appearance one bit. Suppose she should horn us!" And he jumped hastily up from the rock.

"What!" said Martin; "you, a sailor, who know what it is to face death on the ocean, every day of your life, and yet afraid of a cow! Besides, she hasn't a horn to her head! Just look at her. She has nothing but two little, miserable stumps!" [142]

Sidney came back again, for he had retreated a step or two, under the trees, and looked somewhat ashamed.

"What's the use of jumpin'?" said Johnny Bixby, in a big, pompous tone, that he meant to be very courageous and manly; "Duchess is only frightened at seeing us. This is her drinking-place, may be."

"Oh!" said Sidney; "of course *I* am not afraid;" but his lips turned blue as Duchess made a sudden move, half-way across the stream, and then stood still, and roared again.

"She's a little scared at us, that's all," said Martin; "she'll get used to the sight of us pretty soon."

[144]

"After she's made the water muddy and spoiled the fishing," said Sidney, in an ill-natured tone.

Martin took off his shoes and stockings, rolled up his trousers, and waded slowly across the brook towards the herd of cattle, holding out his hand and speaking to one or two of the animals by name, in a coaxing, petting way:

"Come here, Spotty,—come here, good little White Sue,—come here, my poor old Duchess!"

The cows stood and looked at him, very quietly. The one he called Sue, was small, and entirely white, with the exception of a bright red star on her forehead; she was a very pretty creature. She seemed to remember having seen Martin before, for presently she marched slowly up to him and sniffed his hand, while staring at him from head to foot. The boy scratched her ears, as he had often done before upon passing Mr. Bradish's barnyard; she appeared to be pleased, and rubbed her head against his shoulder.

[145]

"Softly, there, Susie," said Martin; "I don't like that. That's my Sunday go-to-meeting coat."

He stepped back as he spoke, and the abrupt movement alarmed the whole troop. White Sue gave a loud bellow, and dashed abruptly across the stream into the woods on the other side,—her companions hurriedly following, splashing the water over themselves and their calves as they did so.

Sidney Harrow dropped his pole, and with a half-shriek, ran in the opposite direction, towards the picnic ground.

[146]

As the fishing at that place was now over, on account of the disturbance of the water, Martin told the boys they had better join the rest of the party; so they gathered up the fish and bait, and left the spot, Martin carrying the rod of the brave sailor in addition to his own.

They found Miss Milly building a fire in a small clearing, where it would not scorch the trees. Sidney was with her. As he saw the boys approach he got down on his knees and began to blow the flame into a blaze, and puffed and panted so hard at his work, that he could not even get his breath to say "thank you," when Martin remarked, "Here is your rod, Sidney. You left it on the rock. I'll lean it against this maple, till you are ready to take charge of it."

[147]

"I am glad you have come," said Miss Milly to the group of boys; "for we are getting magnificent appetites, and I wanted Sidney and Martin to roast the clams."

"Clams!" cried Martin; "that was what made Sidney's load so heavy, then, coming up the hill. How I like roasted clams!"

Miss Milly showed him Sidney's empty basket, and told him that she and Melinda had prepared a compact bed of the clams on the ground, and that they had then placed over them a quantity of dry branches, ready to kindle when Sidney should come with the matches, which he carried in his pocket, and had brought for the purpose.

The tablecloth was already spread on a flat rock near at hand, and the little girls were still busy arranging the contents of their baskets upon it, for, by general consent, they were to dine together that day, and share with each other the eatables that had been provided for the excursion.

[148]

Martin reached down his and Nelly's basket, from a high limb where he had hung it for safety, and Comfort's big cake, which Mrs. Brooks had cut in quarters, was fitted together and placed in the centre of the cloth for the chief ornament.

"Will not Comfort feel proud when she hears it?" whispered Nelly to Martin, as she passed him with her hands full of knives and forks.

The fire was soon blazing and sputtering over the clams, and in a short time Sidney pronounced them cooked. With branches of trees, the boys then drew the burning fragments away, and scattered the red coals till the bed of baked clams presented itself. Miss Milly tried one and found it was just in a fine state to eat, and then the children were told that all was ready.

[149]

Armed with plates, pieces of bread and butter, and knives and forks, they drew near, and the talking and laughing that ensued, as each opened the hot shells, for his or herself, made a merry scene of it.

There were enough for all, and to spare; and when they left the clam-bed, still smoking and smouldering, to assemble around "table-rock," as Melinda called it, where the daintier part of the feast was spread, Martin said he had never tasted such finely roasted clams in his life.

[150]

"I expect," said Miss Milly, "that the charm lies in our appetites."

"Yes," said Johnny Bixby, taking an enormous bite of cake, and, to Nelly's great horror, speaking with his mouth full—"yes, I think goin' on picnics and such like, is real hungry work."

This speech was received with a shout of approbation; and, on Sidney remarking that he thought that Johnny should be made the orator of the occasion, the children laughed again, and

quite as heartily as though they fully understood what *orator* meant.

When the dinner was over, and the larger girls began to gather up the fragments, and restore plates and spoons to their owners, the rest prepared for a ramble. Miss Milly said they must not go far, nor stay long, and, promising to obey, the children set out together. [151]

As soon as they were separated from the others, which happened insensibly, Johnny Bixby gave Nelly, with whom he was walking, a very animated account of Sidney Harrow's behavior at the fishing-ground.

"Afraid of cows!" said Nell; "well, that beats all I ever heard. I am afraid that Sidney will not help Miss Milly along much. Come, show me where you fished, Johnny, will you?"

Johnny led the way, and in a little while he and Nelly stood on the very rock from which the boys had dropped their lines in the morning. The moss upon it was trodden under foot, and it was quite wet where the fish had been hauled in. [152]

"I wonder if this is a creek," said Nell, looking up and down the brook with an admiring gaze; "Marm Lizy used often to tell me of a creek where she rowed a boat, when she was young."

"Marm Lizy?" asked Johnny; "who's that, Nell?"

Nelly turned very red, and was silent. She remembered, like a flash of lightning, that John was a stranger in the village, his home being in the adjacent city, and that therefore he had, perhaps, never heard the story of her degraded childhood. Pride rose up and made her deceitful.

"Marm Lizy!" she repeated, carelessly; "oh, I don't know; somebody or other who used to live in the village. What's that, Johnny, flopping about in the grass?" [153]

She pointed to the rock-side, where, as Johnny soon saw, a decided "flopping" was indeed going on.

"A fish! a fish!" cried the boy, catching it and holding it up in both hands, so that Nell could look at it; "I'll take it to Martin to put on the string with the rest. It must have floundered off."

"Oh, let us put it back," cried Nelly; "poor Mr. Fish! I think you would really like to try your hand at swimming again."

"Fin, you mean," laughed John; "fishes don't have hands that ever I heard tell. Shall I let it go?"

"Oh, yes!" cried Nell; "but wait till I get down from the rock so that I can see it swim away." She clambered down, and soon stood by Johnny's side on the long grass that grew close to the brook's edge, and mingled with the little white bubbles on its surface. Johnny stooped, and, holding the fish, put his hands under the water. The moment the poor, tortured thing felt the touch of its native element, it gave a start and would have darted away. [154]

"Oh, Johnny!" exclaimed Nell; "don't tease it so cruelly. Please let it go."

Johnny lifted up his hands, and instantly the fish swam off so swiftly that they could scarcely see which way it went. At last Nelly espied it under the shadow of the rock, puffing its little sides in and out, and looking at them with its keen, bright eyes, in a very frightened way.



“Poor fish!” said Johnny; “swim away, and remember not to nibble at boy’s hooks again. A worm is a very good thing for you when it isn’t at the end of a piece of string.” [155]

The fish gazed at him a little longer, then seeming to take his advice, darted from the rock to where the water was deeper and darker, and was soon lost to sight.

“That’s the place Sidney’s cows came from,” said Johnny, pointing to the opposite side of the stream, where the bushes were torn and trodden, and marks of hoofs were in the mud and grass.

“Let us take off our shoes and stockings and wade over and follow their track, to see where it leads,” cried Nelly; and, suiting the action to the word, the two children soon found themselves bare-footed,—Nell tying her boots to dangle one from each of her apron-strings, and Johnny carrying his in his hands. Nell got her feet in first, but drew back, saying it was cold; so Johnny dashed over, splashing his little bare legs, and leaving a muddy track all across the brook. [156]

“There,” said he, somewhat boastfully, “that’s the way! I am glad I’m not afraid like girls.”

Nelly did not like this treatment, and she was about giving a hasty and angry answer, when, sobered by the recollection of the deep fault she had already committed, by her late untruth, she only said,—

“Sidney was afraid of *cows!*” and waded slowly and silently through the water.

They found the path to be quite a well-worn one. It was evidently that by which the cows were in the habit of coming to drink. It was pretty, too, and very wild. In a little while, as they left the brook farther and farther behind them, the walking became dry and very good, so that they resumed their shoes, but not their stockings,—Johnny stating that he hated the latter, and would rather “scratch himself to pieces” on the blackberry thorns than put them on again. The shade was very pleasant. Once or twice they paused to rest on the large stones which were scattered here and there through the path, but this was not for any great length of time; they wandered on and on, taking no note of time, nor of their prolonged absence from their companions, but enjoying every thing they saw, and wishing all the days in the year were like this one. [157]

The openings in the trees were very few; they were penetrating, although they did not know it, into the very heart of the wood. Once, and once only, they caught a glimpse, through the branches, of a small clearing. Half-burned stumps still showed themselves amid the rank grass. On the top of an elevation, at one side of this clearing, a horse was quietly grazing. As he moved, Johnny saw he was lame, and from this the children judged that, like the cows, he was turned out to pasture for the summer. As Nelly parted the bushes to look at him, he gave a frightened start, and began to paw the grass. He still stood on the little hill, in beautiful relief against the soft blue of the sky, the rising breeze of the coming sunset blowing his long, black mane and tail gracefully in the air as the children turned away to pursue their journey. The cow-path soon branched into others more winding and narrow than the one they had just quitted. The time since dinner had passed so rapidly and happily, that they did not dream night was coming, or that they had strayed too far away from their companions. The wild flowers grew so thickly, and the mosses were of such surprising softness and length, that it was scarcely any wonder they forgot their teacher’s parting injunction. [158]

When night at last really began to approach, and Nelly looked anxiously around at the gathering twilight in the woods, Johnny said it was nothing but the natural shadows of the trees, and so they concluded to go on a little farther to gather a few of the laurel blossoms they saw growing amid their shining green leaves, a short distance beyond. When they had reached this spot, and captured the desired treasures, Nelly saw with dismay, that the path ended abruptly against the side of an immense rock, quite as large, she thought, as the whole of the farm-house at home. [159]

“Nell!” said Johnny, suddenly; “I believe we are lost! How to find our way back again over these long paths we have been walking through all the afternoon, I am sure I do not know.” [160]

“And I am so tired now, I can hardly stir,” said Nelly, in a complaining tone; “and night is near, as I told you before.” [161]

Johnny looked around without answering. He saw that there was no help for it; they must return the way they came, long as it was, or stay in the woods all night.

“Come, Nelly,” he said, “we must go back on the same path, if we can.”

It was getting quite dusky. They took each other by the hand and trudged along. One by one the flowers dropped from Nelly’s full apron, to the ground, and at length her weary fingers unclasped, and the apron itself resumed its proper position. Everybody knows how easy it is to lose one’s way, and what a difficult thing it is to find it again. Our wanderers discovered it to be so. They got upon a wrong path that led them into soft, wet ground, where, the first thing they knew, they were up to their ankles in mud; and when they had extricated themselves as well as they could, and struck out boldly for home, confident that they were now making a direct short-cut for it, they found themselves, in a little while, on the same path, at the foot of the same large rock where they were before. [162]

This was a little too much for the patience of the two picnickers. Johnny looked at Nell gravely.

"Don't!" he said, "don't, Nelly dear!"

"Don't what?" asked Nelly, dropping down where she stood, so completely exhausted as to be glad of a moment's rest.

"Don't cry. You look just like it. All girls cry, you know."



"They saw then, that this huge rock was on the very summit of the mountain." Page [163](#).

"Do they?" asked Nell, absently looking about her. Then she asked, with energy, "Johnny, do you know what I think we ought to do? We must climb this big mountain of a rock, some way, and see what there is on the other side of it. Maybe we are near home." [163]

"I guess not," said Johnny; "but I can climb it if you can."

After thinking the case over, they clasped hands once more, and began the ascent. They had to sit down several times, to rest, on the way. The sharp points of the rock and the narrow crevices which they mounted, hurt their tired feet.

At last they reached the top, and found themselves in comparative daylight, because they were now out of the woods. They saw then, that this huge rock was on the very summit of the mountain on which the picnic had taken place. They beheld from it, distinctly, their homes in the valley beneath. The rock was entirely free from foliage, and nothing obscured the splendor of the landscape below. The sun had just set red and misty in the west, shedding his parting glow over the peaceful village and the scattered farm-houses, on its outskirts. [164]

No wonder the two children were overcome by fatigue,—they had been gradually, but unconsciously ascending the hill the whole afternoon.

They stood there now, hand in hand, looking down upon their far-off homes.

"Are you afraid, Nell?" asked her companion, in a low voice.

"No," said Nell; "not now, that we are out of those dark woods; besides, I have thought of a plan to make them see us from below. Look here." [165]

She put her hand in her pocket and drew forth a match.

"Sidney Harrow dropped this when he was kindling the fire, and I thought of Comfort's savin' ways and picked it up. Can you guess what I am going to do? We must get together some brush-wood, and make a fine blaze that they will see in the village."

"And even if they don't come to bring us home," said Johnny, "it will keep us warm till morning, and then we can find our own way. But we must go down the rock to get the wood. Oh dear! I don't think much of picnics, do you, Nell?"

Very soon a fire burned on the top of the rock, and notwithstanding their fatigue, the children kept it in a broad blaze. As the last bright cloud of sunset faded away, the flames spread boldly into the night air, a signal of distress to those who were safely housed in the farm-houses [166]

beneath.

Having got the fire well going, and a large stock of wood on hand to feed it, the weary, dispirited children sat down to rest, beside it.

Neither spoke for a long time. They listened intently for the expected aid, yet nothing but the dreary hoot of the owls met their ears, mingled with the moan of the wind, which now being steadily increasing, blew the flames high in the air.

Nelly got up to poke the coals with a branch she kept for that purpose, and when she had done so, she stood leaning upon it and looking sorrowfully into the valley, where she saw lights twinkling from windows. [167]

"Johnny," she said, softly, "do you believe anybody can be *perfectly* good in this world?"

"Yes," said Johnny, carelessly, "I s'pose so, if a fellow tries hard enough. I guess it's pretty tough work though, don't you?"

"The more *I* try, the worse I seem to be; at least,—well, you see, the worse I *feel* myself to be." [168]

"We've neither of us been very good to-day, Nell. Miss Milly told us not to go far, nor to stay long, and I believe we've gone as far as we could, and I'm sure we've stayed a deal longer than we want to,—*I* have. Are you afraid *now*, Nell?"

"God takes care of us, always," said little Nell, solemnly, still leaning on her branch and crossing her feet. "Comfort tells me that, and mother reminds me of it when she hears me say my prayers on going to bed."

"Do you believe it? Does He see us *now*?" questioned her companion, raising himself on his elbow and gazing at her as she stood between him and the bright fire.

"I believe it," was the reverent answer. "Dear Johnny, let us not forget our prayers to-night, if we stay up here."

There was another long, long pause.

"Johnny?"

"Well, Nell." [169]

"I was wicked to you to-day. I was proud, and told you I didn't know who Marm Lizy was, when you asked me. That wasn't true, and now I'm sorry."

"Well, who was she, Nell?"

Tears of repentance for her own sin, and likewise of sorrow at the recollection of poor Marm Lizy's misspent life, rose to Nelly's eyes, and glittered on her cheeks in the red firelight, like rubies. Johnny looked at her with redoubled interest.

"Marm Lizy," said Nell, getting through her self-imposed confession with a little difficulty, "Marm Lizy was a—a—a sort of mother to me. She wasn't good to me, and I wasn't good to her. She beat me sometimes, and—and I didn't know any better than to hate her. I wouldn't do so *now*, I think. I should be sorry for her." [170]

"Where is Marm Lizy now, Nelly?"

The boy did not know what remembrances that simple question awoke.

Nelly did not answer, but crouched down by the fire, and buried her face in her hands.

After a long interval she started up again.

She heard shouts, faint at first, but gradually growing nearer.

She and Johnny set up a long, loud, eager cry in return, that woke a dozen mountain echoes. Then dogs barked, lanterns gleamed through the dark woods, the shouts burst forth again, and many voices were heard calling them by name!

The fire had done its work. The LOST were FOUND at last, for in a short time Nelly was clasped in her father's arms. [171]

So terminated the picnic.

THE END.

Transcriber's Note:

Spelling, punctuation and hyphenation have been retained as in the original publication except as follows:

Page 36
fish-fork. It wasn't your *changed to*
fish-fork. "It wasn't your

Page 54
I—'blieve—I shall—crack *changed to*

I—[b'lieve](#)—I shall—crack

Page 54

Nelly,—'spose now, I had *changed to*

Nelly,—[s'pose](#) now, I had

Page 55

growing interest; what's *slave changed to*

growing interest; ["what's slave](#)

Page 63

little grimly, "stockin' or no stockin' *changed to*

little grimly, ["Stockin'](#) or no stockin'

Page 87

evergreens are permitted to remain. *changed to*

evergreens are permitted to [remain."](#)

Page 89

'What!' said my uncle *changed to*

["What!'](#) said my uncle

Page 100

All the people were more *changed to*

["All](#) the people were more

Page 104

It do'n't seem a bit *changed to*

It [don't?](#) seem a bit

Page 162

patience of the two picnickers *changed to*

patience of the two [picnickers](#)

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK NELLY'S FIRST SCHOOLDAYS ***

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