

The Pillars of the House, V1

Charlotte M. Yonge

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THE PILLARS OF THE HOUSE
OR
UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE
BY
CHARLOTTE M. YONGE
VOL. I
ILLUSTRATED BY HERBERT GANDY

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THE PILLARS OF THE HOUSE

OR

UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE

CHAPTER I
THE BIRTHDAY GIFT

'O I've got a plum-cake, and a feast let us make,
Come, school-fellows, come at my call;
I assure you 'tis nice, and we'll all have a slice,
Here's more than enough for us all.'

JANE TAYLOR.

'It is come! Felix, it is come!'

So cried, shouted, shrieked a chorus, as a street door was torn open to admit four boys, with their leathern straps of books over their shoulders. They set up a responsive yell of 'Jolly! Jolly!' which being caught up and re-echoed by at least five voices within, caused a considerable volume of sound in the narrow entry and narrower staircase, up which might be seen a sort of pyramid of children.

'Where is it?' asked the tallest of the four arrivals, as he soberly hung up his hat.

'Mamma has got it in the drawing-room, and Papa has been in ever since dinner,' was the universal cry from two fine-complexioned, handsome girls, from a much smaller girl and boy, and from a creature rolling on the stairs, whose sex and speech seemed as yet uncertain.

'And where's Cherry?' was the further question; 'is she there too?'

'Yes, but--' as he laid his hand on the door-- 'don't open the letter there. Get Cherry, and we'll settle what to do with it.'

'O Felix, I've a stunning notion!'

'Felix, promise to do what I want!'

'Felix, do pray buy me some Turkish delight!'

'Felix, I do want the big spotty horse.'

Such shouts and insinuations, all deserving the epithet of the first, pursued Felix as he entered a room, small, and with all the contents faded and worn, but with an air of having been once tasteful, and still made the best of. Contents we say advisedly, meaning not merely the furniture but the inmates, namely, the pale wan fragile mother, working, but with the baby on her knee, and looking as if care and toil had brought her to skin and bone, though still with sweet eyes and a lovely smile; the father, tall and picturesque, with straight handsome features, but with a hectic colour, wasted cheek, and lustrous eye, that were sad earnest of the future. He was still under forty, his wife some years less; and elder than either in its expression of wasted suffering was the countenance of the little girl of thirteen years old who lay on the sofa, with pencil, paper, and book, her face with her mother's features exaggerated into a look at once keen and patient, all three forming a sad contrast to the solid exuberant health on the other side the door.

Truly the boy who entered was a picture of sturdy English vigour, stout-limbed, rosy-faced, clear eyed, open, and straight-forward looking, perhaps a little clumsy with the clumsiness of sixteen, especially when conscience required tearing spirits to be subdued to the endurance of the feeble. It was, however, a bright congratulating look that met him from the trio. The little girl started up, 'Your sovereign's come, Felix!'

The father showed his transparent-looking white teeth in a merry laugh. 'Here are the galleons, you boy named in a lucky hour! How many times have you spent them in fancy?'

The mother held up the letter, addressed to Master Felix Chester Underwood, No. 8 St. Oswald's Buildings, Bexley, and smiled as she said, 'Is it all right, my boy?'

'They want me to open it outside, Mamma!--Come, Whiteheart, we want you at the council.'

And putting his arm round his little sister Geraldine's waist, while she took up her small crutch, Felix disappeared with her, the mother looking wistfully after them, the father giving something between a laugh and a sigh.

'Then you decide against speaking to him,' said Mrs. Underwood.

'Poor children, yes. A little happiness will do them a great deal more good than the pound would do to us. The drops that will fill their little cup will but be lost in our sea.'

'Yes, I like what comes from Vale Leston to be still a festive matter,' said Mrs. Underwood; 'and at least we are sure the dear boy will never spend it selfishly. It only struck me whether he would not enjoy finding himself able to throw something into the common stock.'

'He would, honest lad,' said Mr. Underwood; 'but, Mamma, you are very hard-hearted towards the rabble. Even if this one pound would provide all the shoes and port wine that are pressing on the maternal mind, the stimulus of a day's treat would be much more wholesome.'

'But not for you,' said his wife.

'Yes for me. If the boy includes us old folks in his festivity, it will be as good as a week's port wine. You doubt, my sweet Enid. Has not our long honeymoon at Vale Leston helped us all this time?' Her name was Mary, but having once declared her to be a woman made of the same stuff as Enid, he had made it his pet title for her.

Mrs. Underwood's thoughts went far away into the long ago of Vale Leston. She could hardly believe that nine years only had passed since that seven-years' honeymoon. She was a woman of the fewest possible words, and her husband generally answered her face instead of her voice.

Vale Leston had promised to be an ample provision when Edward Underwood had resigned his fellowship to marry the Rector's niece and adopted daughter, his own distant cousin, with the assurance of being presented to the living hereafter, and acting in the meantime as curate. It was a family living, always held conjointly with a tolerably good estate, enough to qualify the owner for the dangerous position of 'squarson,' as no doubt many a clerical Underwood had been ever since their branch had grown out from the stem of the elder line, which had now disappeared. These comfortable quarters had seemed a matter of certainty, until the uncle died suddenly and with a flaw in his will, so that the undesirable nephew and heir-at-law whom he had desired to exclude, a rich dissipated man, son to a brother older than the father of the favourite niece, had stepped in, and differing in toto from Edward Underwood, had made his own son take orders for the sake of the living, and it had been the effort of the young wife ever since not to disobey her husband by showing that it had been to her the being driven out of paradise.

ASSISTANT CURACY.--A Priest of Catholic opinions is needed at a town parish. Resident Rector and three Curates. Daily Prayers. Choral Service on Sundays and Holy-days. Weekly Communion.--Apply to P. C. B., St. Oswald's Rectory, Bexley.

Every one knows the sort of advertisement which had brought Mr. Underwood to Bexley, as a place which would accord with the doctrines and practices dear to him. Indeed, apart from the advertisement, Bexley had a fame. A great rubrical war had there been fought out by the Rector of St. Oswald's, and when he had become a colonial Bishop, his successor was reported to have carried on his work; and the beauty of the restored church, and the exquisite services, were so generally talked of, that Mr. Underwood thought himself fortunate in obtaining the appointment. Mr. Bevan too, the Rector, was an exceedingly courteous, kindly-mannered man, talking in a soft low voice in the most affectionate and considerate manner, and with good taste and judgment that exceedingly struck and pleased the new curate. It was the more surprise to him to find the congregations thin, and a general languor and indifference about the people who

attended the church. There was also a good deal of opposition in the parish, some old sullen seceders who went to a neighbouring proprietary chapel, many more of erratic tastes haunted the places of worship of the numerous sects, who swarmed in the town, and many more were living in a state of town heathenism.

It was not long before the perception of the cause began to grow upon Mr. Underwood. The machinery was perfect, but the spring was failing; the salt was there, but where was the savour? The discourses he heard from his rector were in one point of view faultless, but the old Scottish word 'fashionless' would rise into his thoughts whenever they ended, and something of effect and point was sure to fail; they were bodies without souls, and might well satisfy a certain excellent solicitor, who always praised them as 'just the right medium, sober, moderate, and unexciting.'

In the first pleasure of a strong, active, and enterprising man, at finding his plans unopposed by authority, Mr. Underwood had been delighted with his rectory ready consent to whatever he undertook, and was the last person to perceive that Mr. Bevan, though objecting to nothing, let all the rough and tough work lapse upon his curates, and took nothing but the graceful representative part. Even then, Mr. Underwood had something to say in his defence; Mr. Bevan was valetudinarian in his habits, and besides--he was in the midst of a courtship--after his marriage he would give his mind to his parish.

For Mr. Bevan, hitherto a confirmed and rather precise and luxurious bachelor, to the general surprise, married a certain Lady Price, the young widow of an old admiral, and with her began a new regime.

My Lady, as every one called her, since she retained her title and name, was by no means desirous of altering the ornamental arrangements in church, which she regarded with pride; but she was doubly anxious to guard her husband's health, and she also had the sharpest eye to the main chance. Hitherto, whatever had been the disappointments and shortcomings at the Rectory, there had been free-handed expenditure, and no stint either in charity or the expenses connected with the service; but Lady Price had no notion of taking on her uncalled-for outlay. The parish must do its part, and it was called on to do so in modes that did not add to the Rector's popularity. Moreover, the arrangements were on the principle of getting as much as possible out of everybody, and no official failed to feel the pinch. The Rector was as bland, gentle, and obliging as ever; but he seldom transacted any affairs that he could help; and in the six years that had elapsed since the marriage, every person connected with the church had changed, except Mr. Underwood.

Yet perhaps as senior curate, he had felt the alteration most heavily. He had to be, or to refuse to be, my Lady's instrument in her various appeals; he came in for her indignation at wastefulness, and at the unauthorised demands on the Rector; he had to feel what it was to have no longer unlimited resources of broth and wine to fall back upon at the Rectory; he had to supply the shortcomings of the new staff brought in on lower terms--and all this, moreover, when his own health and vigour were beginning to fail.

Lady Price did not like him or his family. They were poor, and she distrusted the poor; and what was worse, she knew they were better born and better bred than herself, and had higher aims. Gentle Mrs.

Underwood, absorbed in household cares, no more thought of rivalry with her than with the Queen; but the soft movement, the low voice, the quiet sweep of the worn garments, were a constant vexation to my Lady, who having once pronounced the curate's wife affected, held to her opinion. With Mr. Underwood she had had a fight or two, and had not conquered, and now they were on terms of perfect respect and civility on his side, and of distance and politeness on hers. She might talk of him half contemptuously, but she never durst show herself otherwise than civil, though she was always longing to bring in some more deferential person in his place, and, whenever illness interfered with his duties, she spoke largely to her friends of the impropriety of a man's undertaking what he could not perform.

One of her reductions had been the economising the third curate, while making the second be always a neophyte, who received his title for Orders, and remained his two years upon a small stipend.

The change last Easter, which had substituted a deacon for a priest, had fallen heavily on Mr. Underwood, and would have been heavier still, but that the new comer, Charles Audley, had attached himself warmly to him. The young man was the son of a family of rank and connection, and Lady Price's vanity was flattered by obtaining his assistance; but her vexation was proportionably excited by his preference for the Underwood household, where, in truth--with all its poverty--he found the only atmosphere thoroughly congenial to him in all the parish of St. Oswald's.

Speedily comprehending the state of things, he put his vigorous young shoulder to the wheel, and, full of affectionate love and admiration for Mr. Underwood, spared himself nothing in the hope of saving him fatigue or exertion, quietly gave up his own holidays, was always at his post, and had hitherto so far lightened Mr. Underwood's toil, that he was undoubtedly getting through this summer better than the last, for his bodily frame had long been affected by the increased amount of toil in an ungenial atmosphere, and every access of cold weather had told on him in throat and chest attacks, which, with characteristic buoyancy, he would not believe serious. He never deemed himself aught but 'better,' and the invalid habits that crept on him by stealth, always seemed to his brave spirit consequent on a day's extra fatigue, or the last attention to a departing cough. Alas! when every day's fatigue was extra, the cough always depart_ing_, never depart_ed_.

Yet, though it had become a standing order in the house, that for an hour after papa came in from his rounds, no one of the children should be in the drawing-room, except poor little lame Geraldine, who was permanently established there; and that afterwards, even on strong compulsion, they should only come in one by one, as quietly as possible, he never ceased to apologise to them for their banishment when he felt it needful, and when he was at ease, would renew the merriment that sometimes cost him dear.

The children had, for the most part, inherited that precious heirloom of contentment and elasticity, and were as happy in nooks and corners in bedroom, nursery, staircase or kitchen, as they could have been in extensive play-rooms and gardens.

See them in full council upon the expenditure of the annual gift that an old admiral at Vale Leston, who was godfather to Felix, was wont

to send the boy on his birthday--that third of July, which had seemed so bright, when birthdays had begun in the family, that no name save Felix could adequately express his parent's feelings.

Mr. and Mrs. Underwood had fancies as to nomenclature; and that staircaseful of children rejoiced in eccentric appellations. To begin at the bottom--here sat on a hassock, her back against the wall, her sharp old fairy's face uplifted, little Geraldine, otherwise Cherry, a title that had suited her round rosiness well, till after the first winter at Bexley, when the miseries of a diseased ankle-joint had set in, and paled her into the tender aliases of White-heart, or Sweet-heart. She was, as might be plainly seen in her grey eyes, a clever child; and teaching her was a great delight to her father, and often interested him when he was unequal to anything else. Her dark eyebrows frowned with anxiety as she lifted up her little pointed chin to watch sturdy frank-faced Felix, who with elaborate slowness dealt with the envelope, tasting slowly of the excitement it created, and edging away from the baluster, on which, causing it to contribute frightful creaks to the general Babel, were perched numbers 4, 6, 7, and 8, to wit, Edgar, Clement, Fulbert, and Lancelot, all three handsome, blue-eyed, fair-faced lads. Indeed Edgar was remarkable, even among this decidedly fine-looking family. He had a peculiarly delicate contour of feature and complexion, though perfectly healthy; and there was something of the same expression, half keen, half dreamy, as in Geraldine, his junior by one year; while the grace of all the attitudes of his slender lissome figure showed to advantage beside Felix's more sturdy form, and deliberate or downright movements; while Clement was paler, slighter, and with rather infantine features, and shining wavy brown hair, that nothing ever seemed to ruffle, looked so much as if he ought to have been a girl, that Tina, short for Clementina, was his school name. Fulbert, stout, square, fat-cheeked, and permanently rough and dusty, looked as if he hardly belonged to the rest.

The four eldest were day-scholars at the city grammar-school; but Lancelot, a bright-faced little fellow in knickerbockers, was a pupil of whoever would or could teach him at home, as was the little girl who was clinging to his leg, and whose name of Robina seemed to have moulded her into some curious likeness to a robin-redbreast, with her brown soft hair, rosy cheeks, bright merry eyes, plump form, and quick loving audacity. Above her sat a girl of fifteen, with the family features in their prettiest development--the chiseled straight profile, the clear white roseately tinted skin, the large well-opened azure eyes, the profuse glossy hair, the long, slender, graceful limbs, and that pretty head leant against the knees of her own very counterpart; for these were Wilmet and Alda, the twin girls who had succeeded Felix, and whose beauty had been the marvel of Vale Leston, their shabby dress the scorn of the day school at Bexley. And forming the apex of the pyramid, perched astride on the very shoulders of much-enduring Wilmet, was three years old Angela--Baby Bernard being quiescent in a cradle near mamma. N.B.--Mrs. Underwood, though her girls had such masculine names, had made so strong a protest against their being called by boyish abbreviations, that only in one case had nature been too strong for her, and Robina had turned into Bobbie. Wilmet's second name being Ursula, she was apt to be known as 'W.'W.

'Make haste, Felix, you intolerable boy! don't be so slow!' cried Alda.

'Is there a letter?' inquired Wilmet.

Yes, more's the pity!' said Felix. 'Now I shall have to answer it.'

'I'll do that, if you'll give me what's inside,' said Edgar.

'Is it there?' exclaimed Cherry, in a tone of doubt, that sent an electric thrill of dismay through the audience; Lance nearly toppling over, to the horror of the adjacent sisters, and the grave rebuke of Clement.

'If it should be a sell!' gasped Fulbert.

'Suppose it were,' said Felix gravely.

'Then, said Edgar, 'you can disown the old rogue Chester.'

'What stuff!' interposed Clement.

'I'd cut him out of my will on the spot,' persisted Edgar.

'But it is all right,' said Cherry, looking with quiet certainty into her brother's face; and he nodded and coloured at the same time.

'But it is not a pretty one,' said little Robina. 'Last year it was green, and before that red; and this is nasty stupid black and white, and all thin crackling paper.'

Felix laughed, and held up the document.

'What!' cried Fulbert. 'Five! Why, 'tisn't only five shillings! the horrid old cheat!'

'It's a five-pound note!' screamed Cherry. 'I saw one when Papa went to the bank! O Felix, Felix!'

A five-pound note! It seemed to take away the breath of those who knew what it meant, and then an exulting shout broke forth.

'Well,' said Edgar solemnly, 'old Chester is a brick! Three cheers for him!'

Which cheers having been perpetrated with due vociferation, the cry began, 'O Felix, what will you do with it?'

'Buy a pony!' cried Fulbert.

'A rocking-horse,' chirped Robina.

'Punch every week,' shouted Lance.

'A knife apiece,' said Fulbert.

'How can you all be so selfish?' pronounced Clement. 'Now a harmonium would be good to us all.'

'Then get some cotton, for our ears into the bargain, if Tina is to play on it,' said Edgar.

'I shall take the note to mother,' said the owner.

'Oh!' screamed all but Wilmet and Cherry, 'that's as bad as not having it at all!'

Maybe Felix thought so, for it was with a certain gravity and solemnity of demeanour that he entered the drawing-room, causing his father to exclaim, 'How now? No slip between cup and lip? Not infelix, Felix?'

'No, papa, but it's this and I thought I ought to bring it.'

The dew at once was in the mother's eyes, as she sprang up and kissed the boy's brow, saying, 'Felix, dear, don't show it to me. You were meant to be happy with it. Go and be so.'

'Stay,' said Mr. Underwood, Felix will really enjoy helping us to this extent more than any private expenditure. Is it not so, my boy? Well then, I propose that the sovereign of old prescriptive right should go to his menus plaisirs, and the rest to something needful; but he shall say to what. Said I well, old fellow?'

'Oh, thank you, thank you!' cried Felix ardently.

'Thank me for permission to do as you will with your own?' smiled Mr. Underwood.

'You will choose, then, Felix?' said his mother wistfully, her desires divided between port wine for papa and pale ale for Geraldine.

'Yes, mamma,' was the prompt answer. 'Then, please, let Wilmet and Alda be rigged out fresh for Sundays.'

'Wilmet and Alda!' exclaimed Mamma.

'Yes, I should like that better than anything, please,' said the boy. 'All our fellows say they would be the prettiest girls in all Bexley, if they were properly dressed; and those horrid girls at Miss Pearson's lead them a life about those old black hats.'

'Poor dears! I have found Alda crying when she was dressing for church,' mused Mrs. Underwood; 'and though I have scolded her, I could have cried too, to think how unlike their girlhood is to mine.'

'And if you went to fetch them home from school, you would know how bad it is, Mamma,' said Felix. 'Wilmet does not mind it, but Alda cries, and the sneaking girls do it the more; and they are girls; so one can't lick them; and they have not all got brothers.'

'To be licked instead!' said Mr. Underwood, unable to help being amused.

'Well, yes, Papa; and so you see it would be no end of a comfort to make them look like the rest.'

'By all means, Felix. The ladies can tell how far your benefaction will go; but as far as it can accomplish, the twins shall be resplendent. Now then, back to your anxious clients. Only tell me

first how my kind old friend the Admiral is.'

'Here's his letter, Father; I quite forgot to read it.'

'Some day, I hope, you will know him enough to care for him personally. Now you may be off.--Nay, Enid, love, your daughters could not have lived much longer without clothes to their backs.'

'Oh, yes, it must have been done,' sighed the poor mother; 'but I fancied Felix would have thought of you first.'

'He thought of troubles much more felt than any of mine. Poor children! the hard apprenticeship will serve them all their lives.'

Meantime Felix returned with the words, 'Hurrah! we are to have the sovereign just as usual; and all the rest is to go to turn out Wilmet and Alda like respectable young females.--Hollo, now!'

For Alda had precipitated herself downstairs, to throttle him with her embraces; while Cherry cried out, 'That's right! Oh, do get those dear white hats you told me about;' but the public, even there a many-headed monster thing, was less content.

'What, all in girls' trumpery?' 'That's the stupidest sell I ever heard of!' 'Oh, I did so want a pony!' were the cries of the boys.

Even Robina was so far infected as to cry, 'I wanted a ride.'

And Wilmet reproachfully exclaimed, 'O Felix, you should have got something for Papa. Don't you know, Mr. Rugg said he ought to have a respirator. It is a great shame.'

'I don't think he would have let me, Wilmet,' said Felix, looking up; 'and I never thought of it. Besides, I can't have those girls making asses of themselves at you.'

'Oh no, don't listen to Wilmet!' cried Alda. 'You are the very best brother in all the world! Now we shall be fit to be seen at the break up. I don't think I could have played my piece if I knew every one was looking at my horrid old alpaca.'

'And there'll be hats for Cherry and Bobbie too!' entreated Wilmet.

'Oh, don't put it into their heads!' gasped Alda.

'No, I'll have you two fit to be seen first, said Felix.

'Well, it's a horrid shame,' grumbled Fulbert; 'we have always all gone shares in Felix's Birthday tip.'

'So you do now,' said Felix; 'there's the pound all the same as usual.'

That pound was always being spent in imagination; and the voices broke out again.

'Oh, then Papa can have the respirator!'

'Felix, the rocking-horse!'

'Felix, do get us three little cannon to make a jolly row every birthday!'

'Felix, do you know that Charlie Froggatt says he would sell that big Newfoundland for a pound? and that would be among us all.'

'Nonsense, Fulbert! a big dog is always eating; but there is a concertina at Lake's.'

'Tina--tina--concertina! But, I say, Fee, there's Whiteheart been wishing her heart out all the time for a real good paint-box.'

'Oh, never mind that, Ed; no one would care for one but you and me, and the little ones would spoil all the paints.'

'Yes, resumed Wilmet, from her throne,--'it would be the worry of one's life to keep the little ones off them; and baby would be poisoned to a dead certainty. Now the respirator--'

'Now the concertina--'

'Now Punch--'

'Now the dog--'

'Now the rocking-horse--'

'Now the cannon--'

'I'll tell you what,' said Felix, 'I've settled how it is to be. We'll get John Harper's van, and all go out to the Castle, with a jolly cold dinner--yes, you, Cherry, and all; Ed and I will carry you--and dine on the grass, and--'

A chorus of shouts interrupted him, all ecstatic, and rendered more emphatic by the stamping of feet.

'And Angela will go!' added. Wilmet.

'And Papa,' entreated Cherry.

'And Mamma too, if she will,' said Felix.

'And Mr. Audley,' pronounced Robina, echoed by Clement and Angela. 'Mr. Audley must go!'

'Mr. Audley!' grunted Felix. 'I want nobody but ourselves.'

'Yes, and if he went we could not stay jolly late. My Lady would make no end of a row if both curates cut the evening prayers.'

'For shame, Edgar!' cried the three elder girls.

While Wilmet added, 'We could not stay late, because of Papa and the little ones. But I don't want Mr. Audley, either.'

'No, no! Papa and he will talk to each other, and be of no use,' said Geraldine. 'Oh, how delicious! Will the wild-roses be out? When shall

it be, Felix?'

'Well, the first fine day after school breaks up, I should say.'

'Hurrah! hurrah!'

And there was another dance, in the midst of which Mr. Underwood opened the door, to ask what honourable member was receiving such deafening cheers.

'Here! here he is, Papa!' cried Alda. 'He is going to take us all out to a picnic in the Castle woods; and won't you come, Papa?'

'O Papa, you will come!' said Felix. And the whole staircase bawled in accordance.

'Come! to be sure I will!' said his father; 'and only too glad to be asked! I trust we shall prove to have found the way to get the maximum of pleasure out of Admiral Chester's gift.'

'If Mamma will go,' said Felix. 'I wonder what the van will cost, and what will be left for the dinner.'

'Oh, let us two cook the whole dinner,' entreated the twins.

'Wait now,' said Felix. 'I didn't know it was so late, Father.' And he carefully helped his father on with his coat; and as a church bell made itself heard, set forth with him.

When the service was musical, Felix and his two next brothers both formed part of the choir; and though this was not the case on this evening, Felix knew that his mother was easier when he or Wilmet could watch over Papa's wraps.

And Mamma herself, with one at least of the twins, was busy enough in giving the lesser ones their supper, and disposing of them in bed, so that the discreet alone might remain to the later tea-drinking.

And 'Sibby' must be made a sharer of the good news in her lower region, though she was sure to disbelieve in Alda and Wilmet's amateur cookery.

Sibby was Wilmet's foster-mother. Poor thing! Mr. Underwood had found her in dire need in the workhouse, a child herself of seventeen with a new-born babe, fresh from the discovery that the soldier-husband, as she thought, and who had at least gone before the praste with her,' and brought her from her Kilkenny home, was previously husband to another woman. She was tenderly cared for by Mr. Underwood's mother, who was then alive, and keeping house for the whole party at the Rectory; and having come into the Vale Leston nursery, she never left it. Her own child died in teething, and she clung so passionately to her nursling, that Mrs. Underwood had no heart to separate them, Roman Catholic though she was, and difficult to dispose of. She was not the usual talking merry Irishwoman; if ever she had been such, her heart was broken; and she was always meek, quiet, subdued, and attentive; forgetful sometimes, but tender and trustworthy to the last degree with the children.

She had held fast to the family in their reverses, and no more

thought of not sharing their lot than one of their children. Indeed, it would not have been much more possible to send her out to shift for herself in England; and her own people seemed to have vanished in the famine, for her letters, with her savings, came back from the dead-letter office. She put her shoulder to the burthen, and, with one small scrub under her, got through an amazing amount of work: and though her great deep liquid brown eyes looked as pathetic as ever, she certainly was in far better spirits than when she sat in the nursery. To be sure, she was a much better nurse than she was a cook; but as both could not be had, Mrs. Underwood was content and thankful to have a servant so entirely one with themselves in interests and affections; and who had the further perfection of never wanting any society but the children's; shrinking from English gossips, and never showing a weakness, save for Irish tramps. Moreover, she was a prodigious knitter; and it was her boast that not one of the six young gentlemen had yet worn stocking or sock, but what came from her needles, and had been re-footed by her to the last extremity of wear.

Meantime, Felix and Clement walked with their father to the church. There it was, that handsome church; the evening sun in slanting beams coming through the gorgeous west window to the illuminated walls, and the rich inlaid marble and alabaster of the chancel mellowed by the pure evening light. The east window, done before glass-painting had improved, was tame and ill-executed, and there was, even aesthetically, a strange unsatisfactory feeling in looking at the heavy, though handsome, incrustations and arcades of dark marble that formed the reredos. It was all very correct; but it wanted life.

Mr. Bevan was not there, he had gone out to dinner, and the congregation consisted of some young ladies, old men, and three little children. Mr. Audley read all, save the Absolution and the Lessons; and the responses sounded low and feeble in the great church, though there was one voice among them glad and hearty in dedicating and entrusting the new year of his life with its unknown burthen.

Felix had heard sayings and seen looks which, boldly as his sanguine spirit resisted them, would hang in a heavy boding cloud over his mind, and were already casting a grave shadow there.

And if the thought of his fivefold gift swelled the fervour of his 'Amen' to the General Thanksgiving, there was another deep heartfelt Amen, which breathed forth earnest gratitude for the possession of such a first-born son.

'That is a very good boy,' the father could not help saying to Mr. Audley, as, on quitting the churchyard, Felix exclaiming, 'Papa, may I just get it changed and ask about the van?' darted across the street, with Clement, into a large grocer's shop nearly opposite, where a brisk evening traffic was going on in the long daylight of hot July; and he could not but tell of the birthday-gift, and how it was to be spent. 'Res angusta domi,' he said, with a smile, 'is a thing to be thankful for, when it has such effects upon a lad.'

'You must add a small taste of example to the prescription,' said Mr. Audley. 'Is this all the birthday present Felix has had?'

'Well, I believe Cherry gave him one of her original designs; but birthdays are too numerous for us to stand presents.'

The other curate half-sighed. He was a great contrast--a much smaller man than his senior, slight, slim, and pale, but with no look of ill-health about him, brown eyed and haired, and with the indefinable look about all his appointments and dress, that showed he had lived in unconscious luxury and refinement all his days. His thoughts went back to a home, where the only perplexity was how to deal with an absolute glut of presents, and to his own actual doubts what to send that youngest sister, who would feel slighted if Charlie sent nothing, but really could not want anything; a book she would not read, a jewel could seldom get a turn of being worn, a trinket would only be fresh lumber for her room. Then he revolved the possibilities of making Felix a present, without silencing his father's confidences, and felt that it could not be done in any direct manner at present; nay, that it could hardly add to the radiant happiness of the boy, who rushed across the road, almost under the nose of the railway-omnibus horses, and exclaimed--

'He will let us have it for nothing, Father! He says it would be hiring it out, and he can't do that: but he would esteem it a great favour if we would go in it, and not pay anything, except just a shilling to Harris for a pint of beer. Won't it be jolly, Father?'

'Spicy would be more appropriate,' said Mr. Underwood, laughing, as the vehicle in question drew up at the shop door, with Mr. Harper's name and all his groceries inscribed in gold letters upon the awning.

'I'm so glad I thought of Harper's,' continued Felix. 'I asked him instead of Buff, because I knew Mamma would want it to be covered. Now there's lots of room; and we boys will walk up all the hills.'

'I hope there is room for me, Felix,' suggested Mr. Audley.

'Or,' suggested Mr. Underwood, 'you might, like John Gilpin, "ride on horseback after we."'

'Felix looks non-content,' said Mr. Audley. 'I am afraid I was not in his programme. Speak out--let us have it.'

'Why,' said Felix, looking down, 'our little ones all wanted to have you; but then we thought we should all be obliged to come home too soon, unless you took the service for Papa.'

'He certainly ought not to go to church after it,' said Mr. Audley; 'but I can settle that by riding home in good time. What's the day?'

'The day after the girls' break-up, if you please,' said Felix, still not perfectly happy, but unable to help himself; and manifesting quite enough reluctance to make his father ask, as soon as they had parted, what made him so ungracious.

'Only, Papa,' said Felix frankly, 'that we know that you and he will get into some Church talk, and then you'll be of no use; and we wanted to have it all to ourselves.'

'Take care, Felix,' said Mr. Underwood; 'large families are apt to get into a state of savage exclusiveness.'

Felix had to bear the drawback, and the groans it caused from Wilmet,

Edgar, and Fulbert: the rest decidedly rejoiced. And Mr. Underwood privately confided the objection to his friend, observing merrily that they would bind themselves by a promise not to talk shop throughout the expedition.

It was a brilliantly, happy week. Pretty hats, bound with dark blue velvet, and fresh black silk jackets, were squeezed out of the four pounds, with the help of a few shillings out of the intended hire of the van, and were the glory of the whole family, both of those who were to wear them and those who were not.

On Saturday evening, just as the four elder young people were about to sally forth to do the marketing for their picnic, a great hamper made its appearance in the passage, addressed to F. C. Underwood, Esq., and with nothing to pay. Only there was a note fastened to the side, saying, 'Dear Felix, pray let the spicy van find room for my contribution to your picnic. I told my mother to send me what was proper from home.--C. S. A.'

Mrs. Underwood was dragged out to superintend the unpacking, which she greatly advised should be merely a surface investigation. That was quite enough, however, to assure her that for Felix to lay in any provision, except the tea and the bread she had already promised, would be entirely superfluous. The girls were disappointed of their cookery; but derived consolation from the long walk with the brothers, in which a cake of good carmine and a lump of gamboge were purchased for Cherry, and two penny dolls for Robina and Angela. What would become of the rest of the pound?

On Sunday, the offertory was, as usual on ordinary occasions, rather scanty; but there was one half-sovereign; and Mr. Underwood was convinced that it had come from under the one white surplice that had still remained on the choir boys' bench.

He stayed in the vestry after the others to count and take care of the offerings, and as he took up the gold, he could not but look at his son, who was waiting for him, and who flushed all over as he met his eye. 'Yes, Papa, I wanted to tell you--I did grudge it at first,' he said hoarsely. 'I knew it was the tithe; but it seemed so much away from them all. I settled that two shillings was the tenth of my own share, and I would give that to-day; and then came Mr. Harper's kindness about the van; and next, when I was thinking how I could save the tenth part without stinting everybody, came all Mr. Audley's hamper. It is very strange and happy, Papa, and I have still something left.'

'I believe,' said Mr. Underwood, 'that you will find the considering the tithe as not your own, is the safest way of keeping poverty from grinding you, or wealth from spoiling you.'

And very affectionately he leant on his son's shoulder all the way home; while Mr. Audley was at luncheon at the Rectory with my Lady, and her twelve years old daughter.

'Mamma,' said Miss Price, 'did you see the Underwoods in new hats?'

'Of course I did, my dear. They were quite conspicuous enough; but when people make a great deal of their poverty, they always do break out in the most unexpected ways.'

'They are pretty girls' said the Rector, rather dreamily, 'and I suppose they must have new clothes sometimes.'

'You will always find,' proceeded Lady Price without regard, 'that people of that sort have a wonderful eye to the becoming--nothing economical for them! I am sorry for Mr. Underwood, his wife is bringing up a set of fine ladies, who will trust to their pretty looks, and be quite above doing anything for themselves.'

'Do you think Wilmet and Alda Underwood so very pretty, Mr. Audley?' inquired Miss Price, turning her precocious eyes upon him.

'Remarkably so,' Mr. Audley replied, with a courteous setting-down tone that was the only thing that ever approached to subduing Miss Price, and which set her pouting without an answer.

'It is a great misfortune to girls in that station of life to have that painted-doll sort of beauty,' added my Lady; 'and what was it I heard about a picnic party?'

'No party, my dear,' replied the Rector, 'only a little fresh air for the family--a day in Centry Park. Felix spends his birthday present from his godfather in taking them.'

Ah! I always was sure they had rich friends, though they keep it so close. Never let me hear of their poverty after this.'

Answers only rendered it worse, so my Lady had it her own way, and not being known to the public in St. Oswald's Buildings, did not trouble them much. Yet there was a certain deference to public opinion there, when Alda was heard pouting, 'Felix, why did you go to that horrid Harper? Just fancy Miss Price seeing us!'

'Who cares for a stuck-up thing like Miss Price!' growled Felix.

'I don't care for her,' said Edgar; 'but it is just as well to have some notion of things, and Felix hasn't a grain. Why, all the fellows will be asking which of us is pepper, and which Souchong! I wouldn't have Froggatt or Bruce see me in it at no price.'

'Very well, stay at home, then,' said Felix.

'You could have had the waggonet from the Fortinbras Arms,' said Alda.

'Ay--for all my money, and not for love.'

'For shame, Alda,' said her twin sister; 'how can you be so ridiculous!'

'You know yourself, Wilmet, it is quite true; if any of the girls see us, we shall be labelled "The Groceries."''

'Get inside far enough, and they will not see you.'

'Ay, but there'll be that disgusting little Bobbie and Lance sitting in the front, making no end of row,' said Edgar; 'and the whole place will know that Mr. Underwood and his family are going out for a spree'

in old Harper's van! Pah! I shall walk.'

'So shall I,' said Alda, 'at least till we are out of the town; but that won't do any good if those children will make themselves so horridly conspicuous. Could not we have the thing to meet us somewhere out of town, Felix?'

'And how would you get Cherry there, or Mamma! Or Baby!--No, no, if you are too genteel for the van, you may walk.'

CHAPTER II

THE PICNIC

'There, on a slope of orchard, Francis laid
A damask napkin, wrought with horse and hound;
Brought out a dusky loaf that smelt of home,
And, half-cut down, a pasty costly made,
Where quail and pigeon, lark and leveret lay,
Like fossils of the rock, with golden yolks
Imbedded and injellied; last, with these
A flask of cider from his father's vats,
Prime which I knew;--and so we sat and ate.'

TENNYSON.

No. 8 St. Oswald's Buildings was a roomy house, which owed its cheapness to its situation, this being neither in the genteel nor the busy part of Bexley. It was tall and red, and possessed a good many rooms, and it looked out into a narrow street, the opposite side of which consisted of the long wall of a brewery, which was joined farther on to that of the stable-yard of the Fortinbras Arms, the principal hotel, which had been much frequented in old posting days, and therefore had offices on a large scale. Only their side, however, was presented to St. Oswald's Buildings, the front, with its arched 'porte cochere,' being in the High Street, as it was still called, though it was a good deal outshone by the newer part of the town.

The next-door neighbours of No. 8 were on the one hand a carpenter's yard, the view of which was charming to the children, and the noises not too obnoxious to their parents, and on the other the rectory garden, which separated them from the churchyard, now of course disused. It had no entrance towards their lane, and to reach the church, it was necessary to turn the corner of the wall, and go in through the south porch, which opened close upon the High Street.

In this old street lay the two buildings that chiefly concerned the young Underwoods, i.e. the two schools. That for boys was an old foundation, which had fallen into decay, and had been reformed and revived in nineteenth-century fashion, to suit the requirements of the town. The place, though in the south of England, had become noted as a pottery, owing partly to the possession of large fields of a peculiar clay, which was so bad for vegetable growth as to proclaim its destiny to become pots and pans, partly to its convenient

neighbourhood to the rising seaport of Dearport, which was only an hour from it by railway. The old St. Oswald's school had been moulded under the influence of newcomers, who had upset the rules of the founder, and arranged the terms on the broadest principles of liberality, bringing, instead of the drowsy old clerical master, a very brisk and lively young layman, who had a knack of conveying instruction of multifarious kinds such as had never occurred to his predecessor.

Mr. Underwood had a certain liking for the man, and when tolerably well, enjoyed the breaking a lance with him over his many crude heterodoxies; but he did not love the school, and as long as he was able had taught his boys himself, and likewise taken a few day-pupils of the upper ranks, who were preparing for public schools. But when his failure of health rendered this impracticable, the positive evil of idleness was, he felt greater than any possible ones that might arise from either the teaching or the associations of the town school, and he trusted to home influence to counteract any such dangers. Or perhaps more truly he dreaded lest his own reluctance might partly come from prejudice in favour of gentlemen and public schools: and that where a course seemed of absolute necessity, Providence became a guard in its seeming perils. Indeed, that which he disapproved in Mr. Ryder's school was more of omission than commission. It was that secularity was the system, rather than the substance of that secularity.

So Felix and Edgar went to school, and were in due time followed by Clement and Fulbert; and their bright wits, and the educated atmosphere of their home, made their career brilliant and successful. Mr. Ryder was greatly pleased to have got the sons of a man whom he could not but admire and respect, and was anxious that the boys should be the means of conquering the antiquated prejudices in favour of exclusiveness at school.

Felix and Edgar were neck and neck, carrying off all the prizes of the highest form but one--Felix, those that depended on industry and accuracy; Edgar, those that could be gained by readiness and dexterity. Both were to be promoted to the upper form; and Mr. Ryder called upon their father in great enjoyment of their triumph, and likewise to communicate his confident certainty that they would do him and Bexley credit by obtaining the most notable scholarships of the University. Mr. Underwood was not a little delighted, grateful for the cordial sympathy, and he fully agreed that his own lads had benefited by the clear vigorous teaching they had received; but though he smiled and allowed that they had taken no harm, he said good-humouredly that 'Of course, he must consider that as the proof of his own powers of counteraction.'

'Exactly so,' said the schoolmaster. 'All we wish is, that each home should exercise its powers of counteraction. We do the teaching, you form the opinions.'

'Oh! are we parents still to be allowed to form the opinions?'

'If you will. Your house is your castle, and the dungeons there may be what you will.'

'Well, I cannot have a quarrel with you to-day, Ryder! As long as I can show up my boys as tokens of God's blessing on their home, you

are welcome to them as instances of wits well sharpened by thorough good instruction.'

Mrs. Underwood had likewise had a congratulatory visit that was very gratifying. The girls' school, a big old red house, standing back from the road at the quietest end of the town, was kept by two daughters of a former clergyman, well educated and conscientious women, whom she esteemed highly, and who gave a real good grounding to all who came under their hands, going on the opposite principle to Mr. Ryder's and trying to supply that which the homes lacked.

And they did often succeed in supplying it, though their scholars came from a class where there was much to subdue, and just at present their difficulties had been much increased by their having been honoured by the education of Miss Price. Seven governesses in succession had proved incapable of bearing with Lady Price; and the young lady had in consequence been sent to Miss Pearson's, not without an endeavour on her mother's part to obtain an abatement in terms in honour of the eclat of her rank.

There her airs proved so infectious, that, as Miss Pearson said, the only assistance she had in lessening their evil influence was the perfect lady-likeness of the Underwood twins, and the warm affection that Wilmet inspired. Alda headed a sort of counter party against Caroline Price, which went on the principle of requiting scorn with scorn, but Wilmet's motherly nature made her the centre of attraction to all the weak and young, and her uprightness bore many besides herself through the temptation to little arts. Both sisters had prizes, Alda's the first and best, and Miss Pearson further offered to let Wilmet pay for her own studies and those of a sister, by becoming teacher to the youngest class, and supervisor during the mid-day recreation, herself and her sister dining at school.

It was a handsome offer for such a young beginner, and the mother's eyes filled with tears of pleasure; and yet there was a but--

'Not come home to dinner!' cried the children. 'Can't it be Alda instead of Wilmet? We do always want Wilmet so, and Alda would do just as well at school.'

Alda too was surprised; for was not she more regular and more forward than her twin sister, who was always the one to be kept at home when any little emergency made Mamma want the aid of an elder daughter? And the mother would almost have asked that Alda might be the chosen governess pupil, if Mr. Underwood had not said, 'No, my dear, Miss Pearson must have her own choice. It is a great kindness, and must be accepted as such. I suppose Robina must be the new scholar. My little pupil will not leave me.'

Geraldine only heard of the alternative, to say, 'I'll be nobody's pupil but yours, Papa.'

While Robina was proportionably exalted by her preferment, and took to teasing every one in the house to hear her spelling and her tables, that she might not fulfil Edgar's prediction by going down to the bottom of the baby-class; and up and down the stairs she ran, chanting in a sing-song measure--

'Twenty pence are one and eightpence,
Thirty pence are two and sixpence,'

and so on, till her father said, smiling, 'Compensations again,
Mother: the less you teach them the more they are willing to learn.
The mother shook her head, and said the theory was more comfortable
than safe, and that she did not find Lancelot an instance of it.

But there was a general sense of having earned the holiday, when the
grocery van came to the door, on a morning of glorious sunshine.
Edgar and Alda, true to their promise, had walked on so far ahead as
to avoid being seen in the town in connection with it; and Fulbert
had started with them to exhale his impatience, but then had turned
back half-way, that he might not lose the delicious spectacle of the
packing of the vehicle. A grand pack it was: first, the precious
hamper; then a long sofa cushion, laid along the bottom; then
Geraldine lifted in by Sibby and Felix, and folded up with shawls,
and propped with cushions by Mamma, whose imagination foresaw more
shaking than did the more youthful anticipation; then Mamma herself,
not with 'little baby,' but with Angela on her lap, and Angela's feet
in all manner of unexpected places; then a roll of umbrellas and
wraps; then Wilmet, Fulbert, Lance, and Robina--nowhere in
particular, and lastly Papa, making room for Clement between himself
and the good-humoured lad of a driver, who had not long ago been a
member of the choir, while Felix, whom nothing could tire on that
day, dived rapidly down a complication of alleys, declaring he should
be up with the walkers long before they were overtaken by the van.

Next appeared Mr. Audley, with his pretty chestnut horse, offering in
the plenitude of his good-nature to give Lance a ride, whereupon
vociferous '_me toos_' resounded from within the curtains; and the
matter was compounded on ride and tie principles, in which the
Underwood juniors got all the ride, and Mr. Audley all the _tie_--if
that consisted in walking and holding the bridle.

By the time the very long and dull suburbs of Bexley were passed,
with their interminable villas and rows of little ten-pound houses--
the children's daily country walk, poor things! the two elder boys
and their sister were overtaken, the latter now very glad to
condescend to the van.

'Oh, how nice to get beyond our tiresome old tether!' she said,
arranging herself a peep-hole between the curtains. 'I am so sick of
all those dusty black beeches, and formal evergreens. How can you
stare at them so, Cherry?'

But Geraldine was in a quiet trance of delight; she had never spoken
a word since she had first found a chink in the awning, but had
watched with avid eyes the moving panorama of houses, gardens, trees,
flowers, carriages, horses, passengers, nursemaids, perambulators,
and children. It was all a perfect feast to the long-imprisoned eyes,
and the more charming from the dreamy silence in which she gazed.
When Felix came up to the slit through which the bright eyes gleamed,
and asked whether she were comfortable and liked it, her answer was a
long-drawn gasp from the wells of infinite satisfaction, such as set
him calculating how many drives in a bathchair the remnant of his
birthday gift would yet produce.

But there were greater delights, corn-fields touched with amber, woods sloping up hills, deep lanes edged with luxuriant ferns, greenery that drove the young folk half mad with delight, and made them scream to be let out and gather--gather to their hearts' content. Only Mamma recommended not tiring themselves, but trusting that Centry Park would afford even superior flowers to those they passed.

They reached the lodge gate at last. They were known, for the Castle had been long untenanted, and they, like other inhabitants of Bexley, had from time to time enjoyed themselves in the Park, but to-day there was a shadow of demur. The gentleman who was going to buy the place was looking over it--but surely--

Horror began to spread over the inmates of the van.

'But did you come by appointment, sir?' added the gatekeeper's wife, coming out; 'the gentleman's name is Mr. Underwood.'

Mr. Underwood was obliged to disclaim any appointment; but he looked round at the children's blank faces, and saw lips quivering, and eyes gazing wistfully into the paradise of green shade, and added, 'If the gentleman has not actually bought it, he could not object. We do not wish to go near the house.'

'Maybe Mr. Audley, who was standing near the gate, added another more substantial argument, for 'Oh, certainly, sir,' at once followed; and the van was allowed to turn down a gravelled road, which skirted an extensive plantation.

Every one now left it, except Mrs. Underwood, Cherry, and Angela; and the children began to rush and roll in wild delight on the grassy slope, and to fill their hands with the heather and ling, shrieking with delight. Wilmet had enough to do to watch over Angela in her toddling, tumbling felicity; while Felix, weighted with Robina on his back, Edgar, Fulbert, Clement, and Lance, ran in and out among the turf; and Alda, demurely walking by her papa, opined that it was 'very odd that the gentleman's name should be Underwood.'

'Less odd than if it was Upperwood,' said her father, as if to throw aside the subject; and then, after a few moments' thought, and an odd little smile, as if at some thought within himself, he began to hand in flowers to Cherry, and to play with little Angela. Mr. Audley had gone to put up his horse at the village inn, and did not join the party again till they had reached what the children called Picnic Hollow--a spot where a bank suddenly rose above a bright dimpling stream with a bed of rock, the wood opening an exquisite vista under its beech trees beyond, and a keeper's lodge standing conveniently for the boiling of kettles.

Here the van was disposed of, the horses taken out and provided with food, Cherry carried to a mossy throne under a glorious beech tree, and the hampers unpacked by Mamma and Wilmet, among much capering and dancing of the rest of the family and numerous rejected volunteers of assistance. Felix and Alda were allowed to spread the table-cloth and place the dishes, but Edgar was only entreated to keep the rest out of the way.

Meanwhile, Geraldine sat under the silvery bole of her beech tree,

looking up through its delicate light green leaves to the blue sky, not even wanting to speak, lest anything should break that perfection of enjoyment. Her father watched the little pale absorbed countenance, and as Mr. Audley came up, touched him to direct his attention to the child's expression; but the outcry of welcome with which the rest greeted the newcomer was too much for even Cherry's trance, and she was a merry child at once, hungry with unwonted appetite, and so relishing her share of the magnificent standing-pie, that Mrs. Underwood reproved herself for thinking what the poor child would be if she had such fare and such air daily, instead of ill-dressed mutton in the oppressive smoke-laden atmosphere.

And meantime, Lance was crowing like a cock, and the other boys were laughing at Robina for her utter ignorance of the white-fleshed biped she was eating.

'No, Clem, chickens have got feathers and wings, and their long necks hang down! This can't be one of them.'

'Perhaps it is a robin-redbreast,' said Felix.

'No, nobody kills robin-redbreasts, because they covered the poor little children with leaves.'

'Will you cover me with leaves, if I am lost, Bobbie?' said Mr. Audley; but as soon as she found that his attention was gained, she returned to the charge.

'Please, did it come from your own home? and what is it, really?'

'Why, Bobbie, I am hardly prepared to say whether it is a Hamburg or a Houdan, or a more unambitious Dorking. Cannot you eat in comfort without being certified?'

'The species will be enough for her without the varieties,' said her father. 'You have given us a new experience, you see, Audley, and we may make a curious study of contrasts--not of Audley and myself Mother dear, but of the two Underwoods who seem to be in this place together to-day.'

'Who is it?' was of course the cry, and the inquiry was in Mrs. Underwood's eyes, though it did not pass her quiet lips. It was to her that he answered, 'Yes, my dear--Tom; I have little doubt that it is he. He was a very rich man when last I heard of him.'

'Is that the man at Vale Leston?' whispered Alda to Felix.

'Oh, I hope he is not coming here to insult us.'

'Bosh!' said Felix; 'that man's name is Fulbert. Listen, if you want to hear.'

'Twenty years ago,' continued Mr. Underwood, 'I thought myself a prodigiously fine fellow--with my arms full of prizes at Harrow, and my Trinity scholarship--and could just, in the plenitude of my presumption, extend a little conceited patronage to that unlucky dunce, Tom Underwood, the lag of every form, and thankful for a high stool at old Kedge's. And now my children view a cold fowl as an unprecedented monster, while his might, I imagine, revel in 'pates

de foie gras.'

'O Papa, but we like you so much better as you are!' cried Geraldine.

'Eh, Cherry!' said Mr. Underwood, 'what say you? Shouldn't you like me better if I were buying that king beech tree, and all the rest of it?'

Cherry edged nearer, mastered his hand, and looked up in his face with a whole soul of negation in her wistful eyes. 'No, no, no--just as you are,' she whispered.

Some mood of curiosity had come over him, and he turned an interrogative look elsewhere.

Alda spoke. 'Of course, it would be horrid not to be a clergyman; but it is a great shame.'

'No,' said Wilmet, 'it can't be a shame for this cousin Tom to have earned a fortune fairly--if he has; but'--and she pressed her hands tightly together as she looked at the thin worn faces of her parents--'one can't help wishing. Why do things always go hard and wrong?' and the tears dimmed her bright eyes.

'Because--they _don't_, ' said her father, with a half-serious quaintness that vexed her, and forced her to turn away to let the tear drop.

Clement said, in his calm voice, 'How can you be all so repining and foolish!'

And Mr. Underwood, almost in lazy mischief, pursued his experiment. 'Eh, Felix, you are the party most concerned--what say you?'

'Most concerned?' Felix looked up surprised, then recollected himself. 'I don't care,' he said, with an appearance of gruff sullenness; but his father could not content himself without continuing in a semi-teasing tone, 'Don't care--eh? 'Why this Centry Underwood once belonged to our family--that's the reason Tom is after it. If I had not scouted old Kedge, you would be prancing about here, a Harrovian, counting the partridges.'

'Don't!' broke in Felix, with a growl.

'Never fear, Fee" cried Edgar, with his hand on his brother's shoulder; if one man got on in life, another may. If one only was grown up and had the start----' and his blue eyes sparkled.

'I did not know Care's clutch had been so tight,' sighed Mr. Underwood, half to himself, half to his wife. It is not safe, my gentle Enid, to try such experiments. Eh!' rousing himself, what's that? Have the mob there a right to any sentiments?'

'Only,' cried Clement, shouting with laughter, Lance thought you were wanted to hold a high stool for Jack Ketch.'

'For a green goose!' shouted Lance, indignantly.

'Oh! cried Robina, in the tone of one who had made a scientific

discovery, 'did the goose have a high stool to lay the golden eggs?'

'A most pertinent question, Bobbie, and much more reasonable than mine,' said Mr Underwood; while his colleague gravely answered, 'Yes, Bobbie, golden eggs are almost always laid by geese on high stools.'

'I've got a picture of one! It has got a long neck and long legs, quoth Bobbie.

'It is only a flamingo, you little goose yourself,' cried Clement.

'Here is the golden egg of the present,' said Mr. Underwood, replenishing the boy's plate with that delicious pie. 'What's that beverage, Wilmet? Any horrible brew of your own?'

'No, it is out of Mr. Audley's hamper.'

'The universal hamper. It is like the fairy gifts that produced unlimited eatables. I dreaded cowslip wine or periwinkle broth.'

'No, no, Papa,' sighed Alda, 'we only once made cowslip tea at Vale Leston.'

'Vale Leston is prohibited for the day.--Master Felix Chester Underwood, your good health; and the same to the new Underwood of Centry Underwood.'

'Shall we see him, Papa?' asked Alda.

'If either party desires the gratification, no doubt it will come about.'

'Shall not you call on him, Papa?'

'Certainly not before he comes. Mother, some of the wonderful bottle--ay, you covetous miser of a woman, or I'll make a libation of it all. Audley, it must have wrung your father's butler's heart to have thrown away this port on a picnic. What did you tell him to delude him?'

'Only what was true--that I was to meet a gentleman who was a judge of the article.'

'For shame!' he answered, laughing. 'What right had you to know that I knew the taste of Cape from Roriz?'

But his evident enjoyment of the 'good creature' was no small pleasure to the provider, though it was almost choking to meet the glistening glance of Mrs. Underwood's grateful eyes, knowing, as she did, that there were three more such bottles in the straw at the bottom of the hamper. And when baby Angela had clasped her fat hands, and, as 'youngest at the board,' 'inclined the head and pronounced the solemn word,' her father added, 'Gratias Deo, and Grazie a lei. We must renew our childhood's training, dear Mary--make our bow and curtesy, and say "Thank you for our good dinner."'

'Thank Felix for our pleasant day,' said Mr. Audley. 'Come, boys, have a swing! there's a branch too good not to be used; and Ful has already hung himself up like a two-toed sloth.'

Then began the real festivity--the swinging, the flower and fern hunting, the drawing, the racing and shouting, the merry calls and exchange of gay foolish talk and raillery.

Mr. Underwood lay back on a slope of moss, with a plaid beneath him, and a cushion under his head, and said that the Elysian fields must have been a prevision of this beech-wood. Mrs. Underwood, with Felix and Wilmet, tied up the plates, knives, and forks, and then the mother, taking Angela with her, went to negotiate kettle-boiling at the cottage. Geraldine would fain have sketched, but the glory and the beauty, and the very lassitude of delight and novelty, made her eyes swim with a delicious mist; and Edgar, who had begun when she did, threw down his pencil as soon as he saw Felix at liberty, and the two boys rushed away into the wood for a good tearing scramble and climb, like creatures intoxicated with the freedom of the greenwood.

After a time they came back, dropping armfuls of loose-strife, meadow-sweet, blue vetch, and honey-suckle over delighted Cherry; and falling down by her side, coats off, all gasp and laughter, and breathless narrative of exploits and adventures, which somehow died away into the sleepiness due to their previous five-mile walk. Felix went quite off, lying flat on his back, with his head on Cherry's little spreading lilac cotton frock, and his mouth wide open, much tempting Edgar to pop in a pebble; and this being prevented by tender Cherry in vehement dumb show, Edgar consoled himself by a decidedly uncomplimentary caricature of him as Giant Blunderbore (a name derived from Fee, Fa, Fum) gaping for hasty pudding.

'That's a horrid shame!' remonstrated Geraldine. 'Dear old Fee, when the whole treat is owing to him!'

'It is a tidy little lark for a Blunderbore to have thought of,' said Edgar. 'Tis a good sort of giant after all, poor fellow!'

'Poor!' said Cherry indignantly. 'Oh, you mean what Papa said--that he is the greatest loser of us all. I wonder what made him talk in that way? He never did before.'

'I am sorry for him,' said Edgar, indicating his brother. 'He is famous stuff for a landlord and member of parliament--plenty of wits and brains--only he wants to be put on a shelf to be got at. Wherever he is, he'll go on there! Now, a start is all I want! Give me my one step--and then--O Gerald, some day I'll lift you all up!'

'What's that?' said Felix, waking as the enthusiastic voice was raised. 'Edgar lifting us all! What a bounce we should an come down with!'

We were talking of what Papa said at dinner,' explained Cherry. 'What did you think about it, Fee?'

'I didn't think at all, I wished he hadn't,' said Felix, stretching himself.

'Why not?' said Cherry, a little ruffled at even Felix wishing Papa had not.

'There's no use having things put into one's head.'

'O Felix, you don't want to change?' cried Cherry.

'No,' he said; but it was a 'no' in a tone she did not understand. The change he saw that hardship was working was that from which he recoiled.

'That's like you, Blunderbore,' said Edgar. 'Now, the very reason I am glad not to be born a great swell, but only a poor gentleman, is that so much is open to one; and if one does anything great, it is all the greater and more credit.'

'Yes,' said Felix, sitting up; 'when you have once got a scholarship, there will be the whole world before you.'

'Papa got a scholarship,' said Cherry.

'Oh yes!' said Edgar; 'but every one knows what happens to a man that takes Orders and marries young; and he had the most extraordinary ill-luck besides! Now, as Ryder says, any man with brains can shine. And I am only doubting whether to take to scholarship or art! I love art more than anything, and it is the speediest.'

The conversation was broken, for just then Wilmet was seen peering about with an anxious, careful eye.

'What is it, my deputy Partlet?' asked her father. 'Which of your brood are you looking for!'

'I can't see Robina,' said Wilmet anxiously. 'She was swinging just now, but neither she nor Lance is with the big boys.'

'Flown up higher,' said Mr. Underwood, pretending to spy among the branches. 'Flapsy, come down! Bobbie, where are you!'

A voice answered him; and in another moment Robina and Lance stood in the glade, and with them a girl newly come to her teens, whom they pulled forward, crying, 'She says she's our cousin!'

'Indeed,' said Mr. Underwood: 'I am sure you are very much obliged to her.'

'I am Mary Alda Underwood,' said the girl abruptly; 'and I'm sure there must be a very naughty boy here. He had put these poor little things up a tree, and run away.'

'No, no! He only put us up because Tina bothered about it!' screamed Lance and Robina at once; 'he wasn't naughty. We were being monkeys.'

'Black spider-monkeys,' added Robina.

'And I swung about like a real one, Father,' said Lance, 'and was trying to get Bobbie down, only she grew afraid.'

'It was ten feet from the ground,' said Mary Alda, impressively, 'and they had lost their way; but they told me who they were. I'm come down with my father to see the place.'

Mr. Underwood heartily shook hands with her, thanked her, and asked where her father was.

'Gone out with the man to see a farm two miles off,' she said. 'He told me I might stay in the house, or roam where I liked, and I saw you all looking so happy; I've been watching you this long time.'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Underwood, 'till you captured two of us! Well, we are obliged for the introduction, especially if you are to be our neighbour.'

'And my cousins will be friends with me,' continued Mary Alda. 'I'm all alone, you know.'

'No, I did not know,' said Mr. Underwood. 'Are you the only child?'

'Yes,' she said, looking wistfully at the groups around her; 'and it is very horrid--oh dear! who is that pretty one? No, there's another of them!'

Mr. Underwood laughed heartily. 'I suppose you mean Wilmet and Alda,' he said. 'Come, girls, and see your new cousin--Mary, did you say!--Your name backward, Alda Mary.'

'Mary,' she repeated. 'Papa calls me Mary, but Mamma wants it to be Marilda all in one word, because she says it is more distinguished; but I like a sensible name like other people.'

Mr. Underwood was much amused. He felt he had found a character in his newly-discovered cousin. She was Underwood all over in his eyes, used to the characteristic family features, although entirely devoid of that delicacy and refinement of form and complexion that was so remarkable in himself and in most of his children, who were all, except poor little Cherry, a good deal alike, and most of them handsome. There was a sort of clumsiness in the shape of every outline, and a coarseness in the colouring, that made her like a bad drawing of one of his own girls; the eyes were larger, the red of the cheeks was redder, the lips were thicker, the teeth were irregular; the figure, instead of being what the French call *elance*, was short, high-shouldered, and thick-set, and the head looked too large. She was over-dressed, too, with a smart hat and spangled feather, a womanly silk mantle and much-trimmed skirt, from which a heavy quilling had detached itself, and was trailing on the ground; her hands were ungloved, and showed red stumpy fingers, but her face had a bright open honest heartiness of expression, and a sort of resolute straightforwardness, that attracted and pleased him; and, moreover, there was something in the family likeness, grotesque as it was, that could not but arouse a fellow-feeling in his warm and open heart, which neither neglect nor misfortune had ever chilled.

'I think I should have known you,' he said, smiling. 'Here! let me introduce you; here is our little lame white-hearted Cherry, and the twins, as like as two peas. Wilmet, Alda--here!'

'Shall I mend your frock!' was Wilmet's first greeting, as she put her hand in her pocket, and produced a little housewife.

'Oh, thank you! You've got a needle and thread! What fun!'

'The little ones are very apt to tear themselves, so I like to have it ready.'

'How delicious! And you mend for them? I wish I had any one to mend for. Please show me, and let me do it. I tried to tear the nasty thing off, but it would not come. I wish Mamma would let me wear sensible print like yours.'

'Are you laughing at us?' said Wilmet rather bluntly.

'No, indeed, not a bit,' said Marilda, or Mary Alda, eagerly. 'If you only knew how tiresome it all is.'

'What is?'

'Why, being fine--having a governess, and talking French, and learning to dance, and coming down into the drawing-room. Then Grandmamma Kedge tells me how she used to run about in pattens, and feed the chickens, and scrub the floor, and I do so wish I was her. Can you scrub, and do those nice things?'

'Not a floor,' said Wilmet; 'and we live in the town.'

'So have we done till now; but Papa is going to get this place, because he says it is family property; and I hope he will, for they will never be able to screw me up here as they do at home. I say, which is Fulbert! Won't your father punish him?'

'Oh, no! You should not have told, Marilda. We never tell Papa of little tricks of the boys.'

But the little darling might have broken her neck.'

'Oh! life in a large family is made up of _might haves_, ' said Alda.

'Why, I do declare there's a smaller still! What a little duck!' and she pounced upon Angela.

'We have a smaller than that, said Wilmet--'Bernard, only we left him at home.'

'Tell me all your names!' cried Marilda, delighted.

She was perfectly happy, and chattered on in great delight in her downright voice, as much at ease as if she had known them all her life. She shared their tea, and wanted Mr. Underwood to come and see her father at the house; but as she could not promise his early return, and it was necessary to get the van under weigh before five, this could not be.

However, she would not leave them till they were all packed into the van, and then only parted with repeated kisses and auguries of many future meetings; so that the children looked down a vista of unlimited enjoyment of Gentry Park. Edgar, little gentleman as he was, saw her as far back on the way as he could venture.

CHAPTER III

FORTUNATUS' PURSE

'Out, base mechanical churl!'--SHAKESPEARE.

Weeks went on, and nothing more was heard of 'Marilda' except the wishes and wonderings of the children. Alda decided that she was one of the heartless fine ladies one heard of in books--and no wonder, when her father was in trade, and she looked so vulgar; while Wilmet contended against her finery, and Cherry transferred the heartlessness to her cruel father and mother, and Robina never ceased to watch for her from the window, even when Felix and Edgar for very weariness had prohibited the subject from being ever mentioned, and further checked it by declaring that Marilda looked like a cow.

There was plenty besides to think of; and the late summer and early autumn rolled cheerily away. The wonderful remnant of Felix's birthday gift was partly applied to the hire of a chair for Geraldine upon every favourable evening; and as the boys themselves were always ready to act as horses, they obtained it on moderate terms, which made the sum hold out in a marvellous manner. And not only were these drives delight unimaginable to the little maid, but the frequent breaths of pure air seemed to give her vigour; she ate more, smiled more, and moved with less pain and difficulty, so that the thought of a partial recovery began to seem far less impossible.

The children trooping about her, she used to be drawn to the nearest bit of greensward, tree, or copse, and there would occupy herself with the attempt to sketch, often in company with Edgar; and with a few hints from her father, would be busied for days after with the finishing them, or sometimes the idealising them, and filling them with the personages she had read of in books of history or fiction. She was a sensitive little body, who found it hard not to be fretful, when told that it was very ill-natured to object to having her paints daubed over her drawings by Lance, Robina, and Angel--an accusation often brought against her by rough, kindly Sibby, and sometimes even by Wilmet in an extremity: while Mamma's subdued entreaty, that she would do something to please the little ones, if it could be without mischief to herself, always humiliated her more than anything else, and made her ready to leave all to their mercy, save for deference to Edgar, and gratitude to Felix. Robina would look on soberly enough in admiration; but Lance's notions of art were comic, and Fulbert's were arbitrary, and both were imperiously carried out with due contempt for the inferior sex, and were sure to infect both the little sisters.

Then, of course, so many holiday boys were hard to keep in order. Clement had a strong propensity in that direction; he was a grave, quiet boy, without much sense of the absurd, and was generally the victim of Edgar's wit; but, on the other hand, he was much in the habit of objecting to anything Edgar or Fulbert proposed, and thereby giving forbidden or doubtful amusements double zest. He was never in mischief, and yet he was never an element of peace.

All this, however, was mitigated when the holidays ended, and Lance

was allowed to follow his brothers to school, while Bobbie importantly trotted in the wake of her sisters. Mamma and Cherry felt it no small comfort to have no one at home who did not sleep away two or three of the morning hours; and the lessons that the little girl delighted to prepare for her father went on in peace--the arithmetic, the French, the Latin, and even the verses of Greek Testament, that he always said rested him.

And he was 'quite well,' he said himself; and though his wife never confirmed this reply, he was everywhere as usual--in church, in schools of all kinds, in parish meetings, by sick-beds, or in cottages, as bright and as popular as ever, perhaps the more so that he was more transparently thin, and every stranger started at the sound of his cough, though the Bexley people had grown weary of repeating the same augury for four or five years, and began, like 'my Lady,' to call it 'constitutional.'

So came the autumn Ember Week; and Mr. Audley had to go to receive Priests' Orders, and afterwards to spend the next fortnight with his parents, who complained that they had not seen him once since he had settled at Bexley. The last week was the break-up of summer weather, and Mr. Bevan caught cold, and was rheumatic, there were two funerals on wet and windy days, and when Mr. Audley, on Lady Price's entreating summons, wrenched himself from a murmuring home, and, starting by an early train, arrived half through the St. Michael's Day Service, it was to see Mr. Underwood looking indeed like some ethereal ascetic saint, with his bright eyes and wasted features, and to hear him preach in extempore--as was his custom--a sermon on the blessedness of angel helps, which in its intense fervour, almost rapture, was to many as if it came from a white-winged angel himself. Mr. Audley glided into his own place, and met Felix's look of relief. The sermon was finished, and the blessing given; but before he could descend the steps, the cough had come on, and with it severe haemorrhage. They had to send one startled boy for Mrs. Underwood, and another for the doctor, and it was an hour before he could be taken home in a chair. No one ever forgot that sermon, for it was the last he ever preached. He was very ill indeed for several days, but still hopeful and cheerful; and as the weather mended, and the calm brightness of October set in, he rallied, and came downstairs again, not looking many degrees more wan and hectic than before, with a mind as alert as usual, and his kind heart much gratified by the many attentions of his parishioners during his illness.

During the worst, Mrs. Underwood had been obliged to keep one of the elder girls at home--Wilmet at first, both by her own desire and that of Alda; but it was soon made a special matter of entreaty by Miss Pearson, that the substitution might not take place; the little class was always naughty under Alda, and something the same effect seemed to be produced on Angela and Bernard. They made so much less disturbance when entrusted to Cherry, that the mother often sent Alda to sit by papa, even though she knew he liked nothing so well as to have his little pupil's soft voice repeating to him the Latin hymns she loved to learn on purpose. Alda read or sang to him very prettily, and they were very happy together; but then Wilmet could do that as well, and also mind the babies, or do invalid cookery, and supplement Sibby's defects, and set the mother free for the one occupation she cared for most--the constant watching of that wasted countenance.

But all was better. He had been able to collect his children for their evening's Bible lesson and Sunday Catechism, and to resume the preparation of Edgar and Geraldine for their Confirmation, though it was at least a year distant, and even had spoken of sending for others of his catechumens. Wilmet and Alda were both at school, the two babies out with Sibby, Mamma at work, Papa dreaming over a Comment on the Epistle to the Philippians, which was very near his heart, and he always called his holiday work, and Geraldine reading on her little couch when there was a sharp ring at the bell, and after an interval, the girl who daily came in to help, announced 'Lady Price.'

Even my Lady had been startled and softened by the reality of Mr. Underwood's illness, and remorseful for having coddled her husband at his expense; she had sent many enquiries, some dainties, and a good many recipes; and she had made no objection to Mr. Bevan's frequent and affectionate visits, nor even to his making it obvious that however little his senior curate might do that winter, he would not accept his resignation for the present.

It was enough to make Mr. Underwood feel absolutely warm and grateful to his old tormentor, as he rose, not without some effort, held out his hand to her, and cheerily answered her inquiries for his cough. She even discussed the berries in the hedges, and the prospects of a mild winter, in a friendly, hesitating tone; and actually commended Mr. Underwood's last pupil-teacher, before she began--'I am afraid I am come upon a disagreeable business.'

Mr. Underwood expected to hear of his own inefficiency; or perhaps that Mr. Audley had adopted some habit my Lady disapproved, or that the schoolmaster was misbehaving, or that some Christmas dole was to be curtailed, and that he would have to announce it because Mr. Bevan would not. He was not prepared to hear, 'Are you aware that--in short--perhaps you can explain it, but has not your son Felix been spending a good deal of money--for him, I mean--lately?'

'Felix had a present from his godfather,' said Mr. Underwood, not at all moved, so secure was he that this must be an exaggeration.

'Last summer, I heard of that. It was laid out on a picnic,' said Lady Price, severely.

'It was intended to be so spent,' said the curate; 'but people were so good-natured, that very little actually went that way, and the remainder was left in his own hands.'

'Yes, Mr. Underwood, but I am afraid that remainder has been made to cover a good deal of which you do not know!'

Mrs. Underwood flushed, and would have started forward. Her husband looked at her with a reassuring smile. My Lady, evidently angered at their blindness, went on, 'It is a painful duty, Mr. Underwood, especially in your present state; but I think it due to you, as the father of a family, to state what I have learned.'

'Thank you. What is it?'

'Have you reckoned the number of times the chair has been hired?' and as he shook his head, 'That alone would amount to more than a pound.'

Besides which, your daughters have been provided with books and music--fruit has been bought--all amiable ways of spending money, no doubt; but the question is, how was it procured?

'Indeed,' said Mr. Underwood, still pausing.

'And,' added the lady, 'the means can, I am afraid, be hardly doubted, though possibly the boy may have done it in ignorance. Indeed, one of his sisters allowed as much.'

'What did she allow, Lady Price?'

'That--that it was won at play, Mr. Underwood. You know Mr. Froggatt gives his boy an absurd amount of pocket-money, and when she was taxed with this, your daughter--Alda is her name, I believe--allowed that--'

'Papa, Papa!' breathlessly broke out Cherry, who had been forgotten on her little sofa all this time, but now dashed forward, stumping impetuously with her crutch--'Papa, it's all Alda, how can she be so horrid?'

'What is it, my dear?' said Mr. Underwood. 'You can explain it, I see. Tell Lady Price what you mean, Geraldine,' he added gravely, to compose the child, who was sobbing with excitement and indignation.

'O Lady Price!' she cried, facing about with her hair over her face, 'he earned it--he earned every bit of it! How could any one think he did not?'

'Earned it? What does that mean, little girl!' said Lady Price, still severely. 'If he did the boy's exercises for him--'

'No, no, no,' interrupted Geraldine, 'it was old Mr. Froggatt. He asked Felix to look over the papers he had to print for the boys' work at the Grammar School, because it is all Latin and Greek, and Charles Froggatt is so careless and inaccurate, that he can't be trusted.'

The faces of the father and mother had entirely cleared; but Lady Price coughed drily, saying, 'And you did not know of this arrangement?'

Geraldine's eyes began to twinkle with tears. 'I don't know what Felix will say to me for telling now,' she said.

'It must have come to light some time, though concealment is always a proof of shame,' began Lady Price in a consoling tone that filled the little lame girl with a fresh passion, drawing up her head.

'Shame! Nobody's ashamed! Only Mamma and Felix and Wilmet never will bear that Papa should know how terribly we do want things sometimes.'

And Geraldine, overpowered by her own unguarded words, ran into her mother's arms, and hid her face on her shoulder.

'Thank you, Lady Price,' said Mr. Underwood gravely. 'I am glad my little girl has been able to satisfy you that Felix has honestly earned whatever he may have spent.'

'If you are satisfied,' returned the lady, 'it is not my affair; but I must say I should like to know of such transactions among my children.'

'Sometimes one is glad to have a boy to be perfectly trusted,' said Mr. Underwood.

'But you will speak to him!'

'Certainly I shall.'

Lady Price felt that she must go, and rose up with an endeavour to retract. 'Well, it is a relief to Mr. Bevan and me to find your son not consciously in fault, for it would have been a most serious thing. And in such a matter as this, of course you can do as you please.'

To this Mr. Underwood made no reply, as none was necessary, but only saw her out to the door in that extremely polite manner that always made her feel smallest, and then he dropped into his chair again, with a curl of the lip, and the murmur, 'not consciously!'

'O Papa, Papa!' cried Cherry.

'Dear Felix!' said the mother, with tears in her eyes; 'but what can Alda have been saying?'

Cherry was about to speak again, but her father gently put her aside. 'A little quietness now, if you please, my dear; and send Felix to me when he comes in. Let me have him alone, but don't say anything to him.'

There was no need to send Felix to his father, for he came in of his own accord, radiant, with a paper containing a report of a public meeting on Church matters that his father had been wishing to see.

'Thanks, my boy,' said Mr. Underwood; 'where does this come from?'

'From Froggatt's father. It was only fourpence.'

'But, Felix, repeated fourpences must exhaust even that Fortunatus' purse of Admiral Chester's.'

Felix coloured. 'Yes, Papa, I wanted to tell you; but I waited till you were better.'

'You will hardly find a better time than the present,' said Mr Underwood.

'It is only this,' said Felix, with a little hesitation. 'You know there's a good deal of printing to be done for the school sometimes-- the questions in Latin and Greek and Algebra, and even when Mr. Ryder does have the proofs, it wants some one who really understands to see that the corrections are properly done. Old Smith used to do it, by real force of Chinese accuracy, but he has been ill for some time, and Mr. Froggatt can't see to do it himself, and Charlie won't, and can't be trusted either. So one day, when I was reading in the shop, Mr. Froggatt asked me to see if a thing was right; and it went on: he

asked me after a time to take anything I liked, and I did get some school books we all wanted; but after that, just when you were ill, I could not help telling him I had rather have the money. O Father!' cried the boy, struck by a certain look of distress, 'did I do wrong?'

'Not in the least, my boy. Go on; what does he give you?'

'Exactly at the rate he gave Smith for doing the same work,' said Felix: 'it always was an extra for being so troublesome. It was seven shillings last week--generally it comes to three or four and sixpence.'

'And when do you do it?'

'I run in after I come out of school for half an hour. Last Saturday I corrected a sheet of the Pursuivant, because Mr. Froggatt had to go out, and that made it more. And, Father, Mr. Froggatt says that poor old Smith will never be fit for work again.'

'Then I suppose these welcome earnings of yours will end when he has a successor?'

Felix came nearer. 'Papa,' he said, 'Mr. Froggatt told me that if Charlie would only have taken to the work, he would have done without another man in Smith's place, and got him gradually into editing the paper too. He said he wished I was not a gentleman's son, for if I had not been so I should have suited him exactly, and should be worth a guinea a week even now. And, Father, do not you really think I had better take it?'

'You, Felix!' Mr. Underwood was exceedingly startled for the moment.

'You see,' said Felix rather grimly, leaning his head on the mantelshelf, and looking into the fire, 'any other way I can only be an expense for years upon years, even if I did get a scholarship.'

His face was crimson, and his teeth set. Mr. Underwood lay back in his chair for some seconds; then said in a low voice, 'I see you know all about it, Felix; and that I am going to leave you as heavy a burthen as ever lad took on willing shoulders.'

Felix knew well enough, but his father had never uttered a word of despondency to him before, and he could only go on gazing steadfastly into the fire with an inarticulate moan.

Mr. Underwood opened the first leaf of a volume of St. Augustine, beside him, a relic of former days, the family shield and motto within--namely, a cross potent, or crutch-shaped, and the old English motto, 'UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE.'

'Under wood, under rood,' he repeated. 'It was once but sing-song to me. Now what a sermon! The load is the Cross. Bear thy cross, and thy cross will bear thee, like little Geraldine's cross potent--Rod and Rood, Cross and Crutch--all the same etymologically and veritably.'

'Don't call them a burthen, pray!' said Felix, with a sense both of deprecation and of being unable to turn to the point.

'My boy, I am afraid I was thinking more of myself than of you. I am an ungrateful fool; and when a crutch is offered to me, I take hold of it as a log instead of a rood. I did not know how much pride there was left in me till I found what a bitter pill this is!'

Felix was more crimson than ever. 'Ought I not--' he began.

'The ought is not on your side, Felix. It is not all folly, I hope; but I had thought you would have been a better parson than your father.'

There were tears in the boy's eyes now. 'There are the others; I may be able to help them.'

'And,' added Mr. Underwood, 'I know that to be a really poor priest, there should be no one dependent on one, or it becomes "Put me into one of the priest's offices, that I may eat a piece of bread." It is lowering! Yes, you are right. Even suppose you could be educated, by the time you were ordained, you would still have half these poor children on your hands, and it would only be my own story over again, and beginning younger. You are right, Felix, but I never saw the possibility so fully before. I am glad some inward doubt held me back from the impulse to dedicate my first-born.'

'It shall be one of the others instead,' said Felix in his throat.

Mr. Underwood smiled a little, and put his finger on the verse in his beloved Epistle--'Look not every man on his own things but every man also on the things of others.'

'You really wish this. Do you consider what it involves?' he said.

'I think I do,' said Felix in a stifled voice.

'This is not as if it were a great publisher,' continued Mr. Underwood, 'with whom there would be no loss of position or real society; but a little bookseller in a country town is a mere tradesman, and though a man like Audley may take you up from time to time, it will never be on an absolute equality; and it will be more and more forgotten who you were. You will have to live in yourself and your home, depending on no one else.'

'I can stand that,' said Felix, smiling. 'Father, indeed I thought of all that. Of course I don't like it, but I don't see how it is to be helped.'

'Sit down, Felix: let us go over it again. I suppose you don't know what our subsistence is at present.'

'I know you have 250 pounds a year from Mr. Bevan.'

'Yes, I had 200 pounds at first, and he added the 50 pounds when the third curate was given up. That goes with me, of course, if not before. On the other hand, my poor good uncle, the wisest thing he ever did, made me insure my life for 5000, pounds so there will be 150 pounds a year to depend on, besides what we had of our own, only 2350 pounds left of it now. I have had to break into it for the doctor's bills, but at least there are no debts. Thank God, we have been saved from debt! I think,' he continued, 'that probably it will have to be

brought down to twenty-two hundred before you have done with me. On the whole, then, there will be about 180 pounds a year for you all to live upon. Are you understanding, Felix?'

For the boy's anxious look had gone out of his face, and given place to a stunned expression which was only dispelled with a sudden start by his father's inquiry. 'Yes, yes,' he said recalling himself.

'I have left it all absolutely to your mother,' said Mr. Underwood. 'She will depend more and more on you, Felix; and I have made up my mind to expect that no help will come to you but from yourselves. Except that I hope some of you may be educated by clergy orphan schools, but you are too old for that now. Felix, I believe it may be right, but it is very sore to break off your education.'

'I shall try to keep it up,' said Felix, 'in case anything should ever turn up'

'A guinea a week!' said Mr. Underwood, thoughtfully. 'It would make you all not much worse off than you are now, when I am out of the way. And yet--' A violent cough came on. 'We must wait, Felix,' he said, when he had recovered himself. 'I must have time to think; I will speak to you to-morrow.'

Felix left him, very grave and subdued. He buried himself in his tasks for the next day, hardly looked up or smiled at little Bernard's most earnest attempts at a game of play, and had not a word for even Cherry, only when Wilmet begged anxiously to know if he thought Papa worse, he answered that he believed not particularly so.

Alda was sent to carry some tea to her father that evening. As she set it down on the table before him, he said gently, 'My dear, I want to know what has been passing among you and your school-fellows about Felix.'

'Oh, nothing, Papa,' said Alda rather hastily. 'Some nonsense or other is always going on.'

'Very true, no doubt; nor do I wish to be informed of general nonsense, but of that which concerns you. What have you been saying or hearing said about Felix?'

'Oh, it's nonsense, Papa. Some of the girls will say anything disagreeable.'

'You need not have any scruples on Felix's account, Alda; I know exactly what he has done.' I want you to tell me what is being said--or you have allowed to be said--about it.'

'That horrible Miss Price!' was all the answer he got.

He sat upright--laid on Alda's wrist a long bony burning hand, whose clasp she did not forget for weeks, and forcing her to look at him, said, 'Did you allow it to be believed that your brother Felix was a gambler?'

'Papa! I never said so!' cried Alda, beginning to sob.

'Command yourself, Alda; I am not fit for a scene, and I may not be

able to speak to you many times again.'

These words--far more new and startling to Alda than to her brother--appalled her into quietness.

'What did you say, Alda? or was it the deceit of silence?'

She hung her head, but spoke at last.

'I only said boys had ways and means! They did tease and plague so. I do believe Carry Price counts every grape that goes into this house--and they would know how I got my new music--and little Robina would tell--and then came something about Mr. Froggatt; and if they knew--'

'If they knew what?'

'Papa, you have no idea how nasty some of them are.'

'My poor child, I am afraid I have some idea by seeing how nasty they are making you! Gambling more creditable than honest labour!'

Alda had it on the tip of her tongue to say winning things was not gambling, but she knew that argument would be choked down; and she also knew that though she had spoken truth as to her words, she had allowed remarks to pass without protest on the luck and licence that the model boy allowed himself, and she was bitterly displeased with the treachery of Miss Price.

'These old rags of folly don't look pretty on other folk,' he sighed pleasantly. 'Alda, listen to me. What I have heard today gives me more fears for you than for any one of my children. Did you ever hear that false shame leads to true shame? Never shuffle again! Remember, nothing is mean that is not sin, and an acted falsehood like this is sin and shame both--while your brother's deed is an honour.'

Alda was obliged to go away murmuring within herself, 'That's all true: it is very good of Felix, and I should not have equivocated, I know; but those stupid girls, how is one to live with them?'

Felix was not quite dressed the next morning when his mother came to the door of the attic that he shared with Edgar and Fulbert.

'He wants to speak to you before church, Felix. It has been a very bad night, and the sooner this is settled the better.'

'O Mother, I am very sorry--'

'It can't be helped, my dear boy. I think it will really be a great relief to him.'

'And you, Mother, do you mind?'

'Dear Felix, all minding, except to have you all well, and fed and clothed, was worn out of me years ago. I can't feel anything in it but that it will keep you by me, my dear good helpful boy.'

Felix's heart leapt up, as it had not done for many a long day; but it soon sank again. The children had never been admitted to their

father's room in the early morning, and Felix thought he must be suddenly worse when he saw him in bed propped by pillows, pale and wearied; but the usual bright smile made him like himself.

'All right, old fellow,' he said brightly. 'Don't come up to me. I'm incog. till I'm up and dressed. Are you in the same mind?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Then ask Mr. Froggatt to do me the favour of coming to speak to me any time after eleven o'clock that may suit him. I must understand what he offers you. The nonsense is conquered, Felix; more shame for me that it has followed me so far: but the sense remains. I must try to be sure that this sacrifice of yours is a right one to be accepted. Any way, my boy, I thank and bless you for it, and God will bless such a beginning. There's the bell, be off,' he concluded.

And, Papa,' blurted out Felix suddenly, 'would you _please_ be photographed. I have the money for it. _Pray--_'

Mr. Underwood smiled. 'Very well, Felix; that is, if I am ever capable of getting up all the stairs to Coleman's sky-parlour.

'Oh, thank you!' and Felix ran away.

Mr. Froggatt came in due time. He was an elderly portly man, well shaven and smooth-faced, intensely respectable, having been brought up to inherit an old hereditary business as bookseller, stationer, and publisher of a weekly local paper, long before Bexley had broken out into its present burning fever of furnaces. He was a very good religious man, as Mr. Underwood well knew, having been his great comforter through several family troubles, which had left him and his wife alone with one surviving and woefully spoilt son, who hated the trade, and had set his heart upon being a farmer--chiefly with a view to hunting. Mr. Froggatt was conscious of having been too indulgent, but the mother and son were against him; and the superior tone of education that the son had received at the reformed grammar school had only set him above the business, instead of, as had been intended, rendering him more useful in it.

Good Mr. Froggatt, an old-fashioned tradesman, with a profound feeling for a real gentleman, was a good deal shocked at receiving Mr. Underwood's message. He kept a reading-room, and was on terms of a certain intimacy with its frequenters, such as had quite warranted his first requests for Felix's good-natured help, and it had been really as a sort of jesting compliment that he had told the young gentleman that he wished he would take Smith's place, little expecting to see how earnestly the words were caught up, how the boy asked whether he really meant it, and when, on further consideration, he allowed that it might be possible, begging him to wait till his father could be spoken to.

Poor as he was, Mr. Underwood had never lost general respect. Something there was in his fine presence and gentlemanly demeanour, and still more in his showing no false shame, making no pretensions, and never having a debt. Doctors' bills had pressed him heavily, but he had sacrificed part of his small capital rather than not pay his way; and thus no one guessed at the straits of the household. Mr. Froggatt had never supposed he would entertain for a moment the idea

of letting his eldest son, a fine clever and studious lad, undertake a little country business, and yet the old bookseller had come to wish it very much on his own account. As he explained to Mr. Underwood, he loved his old business, and knew that with more education he should have been able to make more of it. His elder son had died just as intelligence and energy were opening up plans that would have made both the shop and the newspaper valuable and beneficial; while Charles's desertion left them decline with his father's declining years, and in danger of being supplanted by some brisk new light. Felix Underwood was indeed very young, but he had already proved his power of usefulness, and a very few years would make him capable of being a right hand to the old man, and he might in time make a position for himself. Mr. Froggatt would otherwise ere long be forced by his own infirmity, to dispose of the business at a disadvantage, and this would, he confessed, go to his heart. Mr. Underwood felt greatly reconciled to the project. There was real usefulness in the work, great means of influencing men for good, and though there would be much of mechanical employment, for which it was a pity to give up the boy's education, yet it was a stepping stone to something better, and it gave present and increasing means of maintenance. There was less temptation in this way of life than in almost any that could be devised, and it would give Mrs. Underwood the comfort of a home with him. The great difficulty for the future was, that Felix was never likely to have capital enough to purchase, or become partner in the business; but Mr. Froggatt explained that if he gained experience in the editing of the Pursuivant, he would be always able to obtain profitable employment, and that it was possible that he might eventually take the business, and pay an annual sum out of the profits to the Froggatt family, unless, indeed, something should turn up which would keep him in his natural station. Such was the hope lurking in the father's heart, even while he thankfully closed with the offer; and Felix was put in the way of studying book-keeping till the New Year, when he was to enter upon his duties and his salary.

Mr. Audley was greatly troubled. It was with incredulous vivacity that he inquired of Mr. Underwood if it were indeed true that Felix had accepted such prospects.

'Quite true.' said Mr. Underwood. 'You need not argue it with me, Audley; my own mind has said all you could say seven times over.'

'I should not venture on interference; but could you not let me try to do--something?'

'And welcome, my dear fellow: there are so many to be done for, that it is well one can do for himself.'

'But Felix--Felix out of them all!'

'As the voice I want to silence has said a thousand times! No; Felix seems capable of this, and it is not right to withhold him, and throw his education upon the kind friends who might be helping the other boys--boys whom I could not trust to fend for themselves and others, as I can that dear lad.'

'What he might be--'

'Who knows whether he may not be a greater blessing in this work than

in that which we should have chosen for him? He may be a leaven for good--among the men we have never been able to reach! My dear Audley, don't be a greater ass about it than I was at first!

For the young curate really could not speak at first for a rush of emotion.

'It is not only for Felix's sake,' said he, smiling at last, 'but the way you take it.'

'And now, I am going to ask you to do something for me,' added Mr. Underwood. 'I have left this magnificent estate of mine entirely to my wife, appointing her sole guardian to my children. But I have begun to think how much has been taken out of her by that shock of leaving Vale Leston, and by that wonderful resolute patience that--that I shall never be able to thank her for. I scarcely dare to let her know that I see it. And when I look on to the winter that is before her,' he added, much less calmly, 'I think she may not be long after me. I must add a guardian. Once we had many good friends. We have them still, I hope, but I cannot lay this on them. Our cousin Tom Underwood does not seem disposed to notice us, and his care might not be of the right kind. Our only other relation is Fulbert Underwood.'

'Who drove you from Vale Leston?'

'Who did what he had every right to do with his own,' said Mr. Underwood. 'But he is not the style of man to be asked, even if I could saddle him with the charge. Probably twelve children to bring up on seven thousand pounds--a problem never put before us at Cambridge.'

'Do you honour me by--' asked the younger man, much agitated.

'Not by asking you to solve that problem! But let me add your name. What I want is a guardian, who will not violently break up the home and disperse the children. I believe Felix will be a competent young head if he is allowed, and I want you to be an elder brother to him, and let him act.'

'You cannot give me greater comfort.'

'Only, Audley, this must be on one condition. Never let this guardianship interfere with any higher work that you may be called to. If I thought it would bind you down to Bexley, or even to England, I should refrain from this request as a temptation. Mind, you are only asked to act in case the children should lose their mother, and then only to enable Felix to be what I believe he can and will be. Or, as it may be right to add, if he should fail them, you will know what to do.'

'I do not think he will.'

'Nor I. But there are ways of failing besides the worst. However, I do not greatly fear this illness of mine taking root in them. It has not been in the family before; and I am nearly sure that I know when I took the infection, four or five years ago, from a poor man in Smoke-jack Alley, who would let no one lift him but me. They are healthy young things, all but dear little Cherry, and I hope they

have spirits to keep care from making them otherwise. You will say a kind word to my little Cherry sometimes, Audley. Poor little woman, I am afraid it may fall sorely on her, she is of rather too highly strung a composition, and perhaps I have not acted so much for her good as my own pleasure, in the companionship we have had together.'

So the will was altered, though without the knowledge of anyone but Mrs. Underwood and the witnesses; and Mr. Audley felt himself bound to remonstrate no further against Felix's fate, however much he might deplore it.

Nobody was so unhappy about it as Edgar. The boy was incredulous at first, then hotly indignant. Then he got a burnt stick, and after shutting himself up in his attic for an hour, was found lying on the floor, before an awful outline on the whitewash.

'What is it, old fellow?' asked Felix. 'What a horrid mess!'

'I see, said Lance. 'It is Friday grinning at the savages.'

'Or a scarecrow on the back of a ditch,' said Felix. 'Come, Ed, tell us what it is meant for.'

Edgar was impenetrable; but having watched the others out of the house, he dragged Geraldine up to see--something--

'Oh!' she cried. 'You've done it!'

'To be sure! You know it?'

'It is Achilles on the rampart, shouting at the Trojans! O Edgar--how brave he looks--how his hair flies! Some day you will get him in his god-like beauty!'

'Do you think he has not got any of it, Cherry?' said Edgar, gazing wistfully. 'I did see it all, but it didn't come out--and now--'

'I see what you mean,' said Cherry, screwing up her eyes; 'it is in him to be glorious--a kind of lightning look.'

'Yes, yes; that's what I meant. All majesty and wrath, but no strain. O Cherry--to have such things in my head, and not get them out! Don't you know what it is?' as he rolled and flung himself about.

'Oh, yes!' said Cherry from her heart. 'Oh! I should so like to do one touch to his face, but he's so big! You did him on a chair, and I could not stand on one.'

'I'll lift you up. I'll hold you,' cried Edgar.

The passion for drawing must have been very strong in the two children; for Geraldine was most perilously, and not without pain, raised to a chair, where, with Edgar's arms round her waist, she actually worked for ten minutes at Achilles' face, but his arm she declined. 'It is not right, Eddy! look--that muscle in his elbow can never be so!'

'I can't see the back of mine, but you can,' said Edgar, lifting her down, and proceeding to take off his coat and roll up his shirt-

sleeve.

'That's the way. Oh! but it is not such an angle as that.'

'Achilles' muscles must have stood out more than mine, you know. I'll get a look at Blunderbore's. O Cherry, if I were but older--I know I could--I'd save Felix from this horrible thing! I feel to want to roar at old Froggy, like this fellow at the Trojans.'

'Perhaps some day you will save him.'

'Yes; but then he will have done it. Just fancy, Gerald, if that picture was as it ought to be--as you and I see it!'

'It would be as grand as the world ever saw,' said the little girl, gazing through her eye-lashes at the dim strokes in the twilight. O Edgar, many a great man has begun in a garret!'

'If it would not be so long hence! Oh! must you go down!'

'I heard some one calling. You will be a great artist, I know, Edgar!'

It was pleasanter than the other criticism, at bed-time.

'Hollo! Man Friday does not look quite so frightful!' said Felix.

'I'm sure I won't have him over my bed,' said Fulbert, proceeding to rub him out; and though, for the moment, Achilles was saved by violent measures of Edgar's, yet before the end of the next day, Fulbert and Lance had made him black from head to foot, all but the whites of his eyes and his teeth; Robina and Angela had peeped in, and emulated the terror of the Trojans, or the savages; and Sibby had fallen on the young gentleman for being 'so bold' as to draw a frightful phooka upon their walls just to frighten the darlints. Indeed, it was long before Angela could be got past the door at night without shuddering, although Achilles had been obliterated by every possible method that Felix, Clement, or Sibby could devise, and some silent tears of Cherry had bewailed the conclusion of this effort of high art, the outline of which, in more moderate proportions, was cherished in that portfolio of hers.

Another work of art--the photograph--was safely accomplished. The photographer caught at the idea, declaring that he had been so often asked for Mr. Underwood's carte, that he had often thought of begging to take it gratis. And he not only insisted on so doing, but he came down from his studio, and took Mr. Underwood in his own chair, under his own window--producing a likeness which, at first sight, shocked every one by its faithful record of the ravages of disease, unlightened by the fair colouring and lustrous beaming eyes, but which, by-and-by, grew upon the gazer, as full of a certain majesty of unearthly beauty of countenance.

The autumn was mild, and Mr. Underwood rallied in some measure, so as sometimes even to get to church at mid-day services on warm days.

It was on St. Andrew's Day that he was slowly walking home, leaning on Felix's arm, with the two elder girls close behind him, when Alda suddenly touched Wilmet's arm, exclaiming, 'There's Marilda

Underwood!

There indeed was the apparition of Centry Park, riding a pretty pony, beside a large and heavily-bearded personage. The recognition was instantaneous; Marilda was speaking to her companion, and at the same moment he drew up, and exclaiming, 'Edward! bless me!' was off his horse in a moment, and was wringing those unsubstantial fingers in a crushing grasp. There was not much to be seen of Mr. Underwood, for he was muffled up in a scarf to the very eyes, but they looked out of their hollow caves, clear, blue, and bright, and smiling as ever, and something like an answer came out of the middle of the folds.

'These yours? How d'ye do'--How d'ye do'--Mary, you don't get off till we come to the door!--Yes, I'll come in with you! Bless me! bless me! Mary has been at me ever so many times about you, but we've been had abroad for masters and trash, and I left it till we were settled here.'

It was not many steps to the door, and there Wilmet flew on prepare her mother and the room, while Alda stood by as her cousin was assisted from her horse by the groom, and the newcomer followed in silence, while Felix helped his father up the steps, and unwound his wraps, after which he turned round, and with his own sunny look held out his hand, saying, 'How are you, Tom? I'm glad to see you--How d'ye do, Mary Alda? we are old friends.--Call your mother, one of you.'

The mother was at hand, and they entered the drawing-room, where, as the clergyman sank back into his arm-chair, the merchant gazed with increasing consternation at his wasted figure and features.

'How long has this been going on?' he asked, pointing to him and turning to Mrs. Underwood, but as usual her husband answered for her.

'How long have I been on the sick list? Only since the end of September, and I am better now than a month ago.'

'Better! Have you had advice?'

'Enough to know how useless it is.'

'Some trumpery Union doctor. I'll have Williams down before you are a day older.'

'Stay, Tom. Thank you, most warmly, but you see yourself the best advice in the world could tell us no more than we know already. Are you really master of old Centry Underwood? I congratulate you.'

'Ay. I'm glad the place should come back to the old name. Mrs. Underwood and myself both felt it a kind of duty, otherwise it went against the grain with her, and I'm afraid she'll never take to the place. 'Twas that kept us abroad so long, though not from want of wishes from Mary and myself. The girl fell in love with yours at first sight.'

'To be sure I did,' said the young lady. 'Do let me see the little ones, and your baby.'

'Take your cousin to see them in the dining-room, Alda,' said the

mother; the order that Alda had been apprehending, for the dining-room was by many degrees more shabby than the drawing-room; however, she could only obey, explaining by the way that little Bernard, being nearly two years old, was hardly regarded as a baby now.

Wilmet was in effect making him and Angela presentable as to the hands, face, hair, and pinafore, and appeared carrying the one and leading the other, who never having closely inspected any one in a riding-habit before, hung back, whispering to know whether 'that man was a woman.'

Marilda was in raptures, loving nothing so well as small children, and very seldom enjoying such an opportunity as the present; and the two babies had almost the whole of the conversation adapted to them, till Alda made an effort.

'So you have been on the Continent?'

'Oh yes; it was such a horrid bore. Mamma would go. She said I must have French masters, and more polish, but I don't like French polish. I hope I'm just as English as I was before.'

'That is undeniable' said Felix, laughing.

'Didn't you care for it? Oh! I should like it so much!' cried Alda.

'Like it? What, to hear French people chattering and gabbling all round one, and be always scolded for not being like them! There was a poor dog at the hotel that had been left behind by some English people, and could not bear the French voices, always snarled at them. I was just like him, and I got Papa to buy him and bring him home, and I always call him John Bull.'

'But wasn't it nice seeing places, and churches, and pictures?' asked Geraldine.

'That was the most disgusting of all, to be bothered with staring at the stupid things. Mamma with her Murray standing still at them all, and making me read it out just like a lesson, and write it after, which was worse! And then the great bare shiny rooms with nothing to do. The only thing I liked was looking at a jolly little old woman that sold hot chestnuts out in the street below. Such dear little children in round caps came to her! Just like that,'--endeavouring to convert her pocket-handkerchief into the like head-gear for Robina.

'I have always so wanted to come here,' she continued, 'only I am afraid Mamma won't like the place. She says it's dull, and there's no good society. Is there?'

'I am sure we don't know,' said Wilmet.

'Lots of people are coming to stay with us for Christmas,' added Marilda, and you must all of you come and have all the fun with us.'

'Oh, thank you! how charming!' cried Alda. 'If Papa will but be well enough; he is so much better now.'

'He must come for change of air,' said Marilda. 'You can't think how pleased my father was to hear I had met you. He talked all the way

home of how clever your father was, and how wickedly Cousin Fulbert at Vale Leston had served him, and he promised me when I came here I should have you with me very often. I would have written to tell you, only I do so hate writing. This is much better.'

Marilda seemed to have perfectly established herself among them before the summons came to her; and as the children herded to the door, her father turned round and looked at the boys inquiringly. 'There,' said Mr. Underwood, 'this is Felix, and this is Edgar, sixteen and fourteen.'

Bless me, what a number, and as much alike as a flock of sheep,' again exclaimed the cousin. 'One or two more or less would not make much odds--eh, Edward?--Mary, what kissing all round?--D'ye know them all?--I'll look in to-morrow or next day, and you'll give me your answer, Edward.'

They were off, and at Mr. Underwood's sign Felix followed him into the sitting-room, to the great excitement of the exterior population, who unanimously accepted Alda's view, that one of them was going to be adopted. Their notion was not so much out as such speculations generally are, for Mr. Underwood was no sooner alone with Felix and his mother, than he said, 'You are in request, Felix; here's another offer for one of you--the very thing I once missed. What say you to a clerkship at Kedge Brothers?'

'For one of us, did you say, Father?'

'Yes; the answer I am to give to-morrow is as to which. You have the first choice.'

'Do you wish me to take it, Father?'

'I wish you to think. Perhaps this is the last time I shall have any decision to make for you, and I had rather you should make your own choice; nor, indeed, am I sure of my own wishes.'

'Then,' said Felix decidedly, 'I am sure I had better not. Edgar would not, and must not, go to my work, there would be nothing coming in for ever so long, and it would be a shame to throw old Froggy over.'

'I rather expected this, Felix. I told Tom you were in a manner provided for, but when he found you had a turn for business, he was the more anxious to get you.'

'I've got no turn that I know of,' said Felix rather gloomily; 'but we can't all of us set up for gentlemen, and Edgar is the one of us all that ought to have the very best! Such a fellow as he is! He is sure of the prize this time, you know! I only don't think this good enough for him! He ought to go to the University. And maybe when Mr. Underwood sees--'

'Not impossible,' said the sanguine father, smiling; 'and, at any rate, to get put in the way of prosperity early may make his talents available. It is odd that his first name should be Thomas. Besides, I do not think your mother could get on without you. And, Felix,' he lowered his voice, 'I believe that this is providential. Not only as securing his maintenance, but as taking him from Ryder. Some things

have turned up lately when he has been reading with me, that have dismayed me. Do you know what I mean?'

'A little,' said Felix gravely.

'I know Ryder would be too honourable consciously to meddle with a boy's faith; but the worst of it is, he does not know what is meddling, and he likes Edgar, and talks eagerly to him. And the boy enjoys it.'

'He does,' said Felix, 'but he knows enough to be on his guard. There can't be any harm done.'

'Not yet! Not but what can be counteracted, if--Felix, you cannot guess how much easier it makes it to me to go, that Edgar will not be left in Ryder's hands. As to the younger ones, such things do not come down to the lower forms. And they will be eligible for clergy orphans. Audley spoke of a choristership for Clement in the clergy-house at Whittingtonia. Was there ever such a raising up of friends and helpers? I am glad to have seen Tom Underwood, hearty, kindly--sure to be always a good friend to you all. What did you think of the girl, Felix?'

'She is a jolly sort of girl,' said Felix; 'not like ours, you know, Father, but not half a bad fellow.'

Mr. Underwood smiled thoughtfully, and asked, 'Have you seen enough of her to judge how she is brought up?'

It was treating his son so much more as a friend than as a boy, that Felix looked up surprised. 'I should think her mother wanted to make her no end of a swell,' he said, 'and that it would not take.'

Mr. Underwood lent back thoughtfully. In truth, his cousin had, in his outburst of affection and remorse at long unconscious neglect, declared his intention of taking home one of the girls to be as a sister to his Mary, and then, evidently bethinking himself of some influence at home, had half taken back his words, and talked of doing something, bringing his wife to see about it, etc.

And when Mr. and Mrs. Underwood were again alone, they discussed the probabilities, and considered whether if the offer were made they would accept it. Mr. Underwood had only seen his cousin's wife once, in his prosperous days, when he had been at the wedding, and his impression was not that of perfect refinement. There was reason to think from the words of her husband and daughter that there was a good deal of the nouveau riche about her, and Mrs. Underwood did not know how to think of trusting a daughter in a worldly, perhaps irreligious household. But Mr. Underwood was a good deal touched by his cousin's warmth and regret; he believed that the family kept up religious habits; he thought that Providence had brought him friends in this last hour, and his affectionate sanguine spirit would not hesitate in accepting the kindness that provided for another of the children he was leaving. She trusted him as sure to know best; and, after her usual mode, said no more, except 'Wilmet would be safest there.'

'You could spare her least.'

'Yes, indeed, it would be losing my right hand; but poor Alda--'

Poor Alda! but consider if there is not worse evil in keeping her among girls who hurt her, if they do not Wilmet. Beauty and wounded vanity are dangerous in a place like this.'

'Dangerous anywhere!'

'Less so in a great house, with that good honest Mary Alda, and Tom, who will look after her in the main, than here, or as a governess, with an inferior education.'

'It may be so. I know I can spare her better than her sister.'

'Wilmet is doing something for herself too--as Alda cannot, it seems. Justice settles the point, dearest, as it did between the boys--that is, if we have the offer.'

Perhaps the mother still had a lurking hope that the offer would not be made. Her instinct was to keep all her brood round her; but, silent and deferential woman that she was, she said nothing and resolved to be thankful for what so eased her husband's mind.

The handsome carriage tore up to the door, and violet velvet and feathers descended, Mary Alda sprang after, and then came her father, and hampers on hampers of game, wine, and fruits ensued; while Marilda seized on Alda, and turned of herself into the dining-room, bearing a box of sweets. 'Where are the little ones? Little Bobbie, here; and all the rest.'

Not many calls were needful to bring a flock to share the feast, with cries of joy; but Marilda was not yet satisfied.

'Where's the other of you?' she said to Alda. 'I don't know you well apart yet.'

'Wilmet's in the kitchen,' thrust in Lancelot, 'ironing the collars for Sunday.'

'Lance!' uttered Alda indignantly.

'Oh! what fun I do let me go down and see! I should so like to iron.'

'But, Marilda--your Mamma--'

'Oh nonsense, come along, show me the way. That's right, Robins, only your hands are so sticky. What, down here!--Oh, Wilmet, how d'ye do? what delicious work! do you always do it?'

'Generally, if Sibby is busy.'

'Do let me try.'

And she did try for ten minutes, at the end of which the mother's voice was heard calling for Edgar, who, turning crimson, went upstairs, leaving the others standing about the tidy kitchen, fresh sanded for Saturday.

What, not you!' said Marilda, pausing in her smoothing operations,

and looking at Felix.

'No,' said he. 'I have got my work.'

'Oh? don't talk of it,' said Alda. 'I can't bear it. I didn't think he was in earnest, or that Papa would let him.'

Marilda turned full round. 'What, you won't go and be my father's clerk, and be one of Kedge and Underwood, and make a fortune?'

Felix shook his head.

'And what is your work instead?'

'Printing,' said Felix stoutly. 'It gives present payment, and we can't do without it.'

Both Marilda's hands seized on his. 'I like you!' she said. 'I wish I were you.'

They all laughed, and Felix coloured, more abashed than pleased. Lance--to make up for his ignominious rescue at their last meeting--performed a wonderful progress, holding on by his fingers and toes along the ledge of the dresser; and Marilda, setting her back (a broad one) against the ironing-board, went on talking.

'And do you know what besides?' looking round, and seeing they did not. 'One of you girls is to come and live with me, and be my sister. I wanted to have this little darling Angela to pet, but Mamma wouldn't have her, and I did so beg for Geraldine, to let her have a sofa and a pony carriage! I do want something to nurse! But Mamma won't hear of anybody but one of you two great ones, to learn and do everything with me; and that's not half the use.'

'But is it really?' cried Alda.

'Yes, indeed! You'll be had up for her to choose from--that is, if she can. How exactly alike you are!'

'She won't choose me,' said Wilmet. 'Hark, there's Edgar coming down.'

Edgar ran in, with orders to the twins to go into the drawing-room. Wilmet hung back. 'I will not be the one,' she said resolutely. 'Let Alda go alone.'

'No,' said Felix, 'it is what you are told that you've got to do now. Never mind about the rest! Let us all come out of this place.' And it was he who took off his sister's ironing apron as they went up to the dining-room together, while Marilda cried eagerly, 'Well, Edgar?'

'Well,' said Edgar, not in the enchanted voice she expected; 'it is very good of your father, and what must be must.'

'Don't you like it!' said Marilda, half hurt; and Edgar, always a boy of ready courtesy, answered, 'Yes, yes, I'm no end of grateful. I'll get rich, and go abroad, and buy pictures. Only I did hope to paint them.'

'Paint pictures!' cried Marilda. What, rather than be a merchant! do such stupid useless things, only to bother people with having to stare at them, when you could be making money?'

'There's no reason one should not make money with pictures,' said Edgar; 'but I'd rather make delight! But it can't be helped, and I am very glad to have done with this stupid place.'

Meantime Wilmet and Alda found themselves before a large, florid, much-dressed lady, with a most good-natured face, who greeted them with 'Good morning, my dears! Just as Marilda told me, so much alike as to be quite romantic. Well, no doubt it is a pity to separate between you, but my Marilda will be a true sister. She has spoken of nothing else. Are you willing, either of you, my dears?'

'Ay!' chimed in Mr. Thomas Underwood; 'we'll make you happy whichever it is! You shall be in all respects like our own child; Mary would see to that, if we didn't.'

As to choice,' said the lady, 'there's none that I can see--pretty genteel girls both, that will do us credit, unless it is their own fault. Excellent governess, London masters--you may be assured everything shall be done for her.'

'Shall we toss up which it shall be?' laughed her husband.

'No,' said Mr. Underwood gently. 'We think that this one,' laying his hand on Alda's arm, 'will value these advantages, and is not quite such a home-bird as her sister. I hope you will find a grateful good child in Alda Mary, and a kind sister to Mary Alda.'

The tears came into Alda's eyes, as her father seemed thus making her over; a great rush of affection for all at home, and contempt for Mary Alda in comparison with her own twin, seemed to take away any elation, as Mr. and Mrs. Tom Underwood kissed her, and welcomed her, and declared they should like to take her home at once.

'You shall have her soon,' said Mr. Underwood. 'Let me keep her for Christmas Day.'

And for Christmas Day he did keep her, though at the bottom of Alda's heart there were strong hopes of invitations to join the festivities at Centry Underwood. Indeed, such a party was insisted on by Marilda, one that was to include all the little ones, and make them happier than ever they had been in their lives. It was to be on Twelfth Day, but Mrs. Underwood hinted to the twins that they had better not talk to the younger ones about it, for she scarcely believed they would go. She had never before spoken out that conviction which had long crushed her down, and Wilmet's whole soul seemed for the moment scared away by this fresh intimation of the condition in which their father stood; while Alda vehemently repeated the old declaration that he was better. He said he was better. Alas! such a better as it always was.

'How well you ought to be!' said Mr. Audley one day at the reiteration, 'better every day!'

'Yes, and best of all at last!' was the reply, with a sweet smile.

For he was very happy. The partial provision for the four eldest children, two by their own exertions, two through friends, had evidently been received by him as an earnest of protection and aid for the rest, even to the babe whom he scarcely expected ever to see in this world. He said it would be ungrateful not to trust, and he did trust with all his heart, cheered as it was by the tardy cordiality of his cousin, and the indefinable love of kindred that was thus gratified. Thomas Underwood poured in good things of all kinds on the invalid and his house, fulfilled his promise of calling in further advice, and would have franked half the family to Torquay --Nice--Madeira--if the doctors had given the slightest encouragement. It could be of little ultimate avail; but the wine and soup did give support and refreshment bodily, and produced much gratitude and thankfulness mentally, besides lightening some of Mrs. Underwood's present cares.

No one was more anxious to help than Mr. Ryder; he had been assiduous in his inquiries and offers of service ever since the attack at Michaelmas; and it was evident that he really venerated the Curate, while he was a severe and contemptuous judge of the Rector. But when, after a brilliant examination, he became aware that he was to lose both the elder Underwoods at once, his mortification was great, he came to call, and Mr. Underwood had again to undergo an expostulation on Felix's prospects, and an offer of keeping him free of expense. The school-fee was a mere trifle, but Mr. Ryder would willingly have boarded and lodged the boy himself--for the benefit of his authority, as he said, over younger boarders.

'I am afraid,' said Mr. Underwood, kind and grateful as usual, 'that there are too many younger boarders here for Felix to be spared. No, thank you; I am sincerely obliged to you, but the hard cash is a necessary consideration.'

'And you can sacrifice such a boy's prospects--'

'Bread and cheese must be earned, even at the cost of prospects. He cannot afford to wait to make his labour skilled.'

'Forgive me, Mr. Underwood, but I cannot think it is right to throw away his abilities.'

'You can allow that it is a less wrong than to leave the rest to debt or starvation.'

'You should trust--'

'I do trust; but I can do so better when I humble what is nothing but pride and vanity in me, after all. I was foolish enough about it at first, but I am quite content now that my boy should do his duty, without being curious as to where it is to be done.'

'You will tell me a schoolmaster's vanity is concerned; and I allow it is, for I looked to your sons to raise the reputation of the school; but perhaps it is only put off a little longer. Will you let me have Clement or Fulbert, on the terms I proposed for Felix?'

'No, Ryder; with many, many thanks, much feeling of your generous kindness--it cannot be.'

'You do not trust me.' This was said with as much indignation as could be shown to a man in Mr. Underwood's condition.

No. Your very kindness would make the tone I regret in you more perilous. Do not think Felix ungrateful, Ryder; the desire is mine--and remember, it is that of a man who is dying, and who really loves and values you greatly. It is that the younger boys should, as soon as may be, go to schools where older systems prevail.'

Mr. Ryder was exceedingly mortified, and though he tried hard to conceal the full extent of his annoyance, he could not help saying, 'You know how I respect your motives; but let me say that I doubt your finding any place where the ideas you deprecate are not to be found. And--pardon me--may not the finding their progress obstructed by your scruples, the more indispose your sons to them?'

'I hope not,' said Mr. Underwood, calmly. 'I hope it may show them how strong the approach of death makes that faith--nay, rather assurance--with which your party are tampering.'

'You are not doing me justice, Mr. Underwood. You know that my faith and hope are at the core the same as your own. All our question is what outworks are untenable.' Again he spoke hotly, but Mr. Underwood's gentleness seemed to silence him.

'And that there should be any such question proves--alas!--the utter difference between our belief. Ryder, you are a young man, and as I believe and trust verily in earnest; and some day, I think, you will understand what faith is. Meantime, your uncertainties are doing more mischief than you understand--they pervade all your teaching more than you know. I dread what they may do to such as have not your moral sense to restrain them and bring them back, as I pray--I hope ever to pray--it may be with you. Thank you for all your kindness, actual and intended, to my boys.'

Then rising from his chair, while Mr. Ryder remained uncertain how to speak, he signed to him to remain still while he sought in his bookcase and returned with a small old copy of Jeremy Taylor's Holy Living and Dying; then sitting down again, wrote the schoolmaster's name in it, above his own 'Under-wode, Under-rode' stamp. 'Keep it, Ryder! I do not say that you will care for it now, but some day I think you will, and if I am allowed to know of it, it will be joy.'

Mr. Ryder could only wring the hand that held it out to him, and with a great effort say, 'Thank you.' He saw that Mr. Underwood was too much tired to prolong the conversation; but he wrote a note of warm thanks that evening, promising to do whatever lay in his power for the boys, that their father would not think dangerous for them; and he added, that whatever he should for the future think or say, such an example as he had now seen was a strong weight on its own side. It was warmly and tenderly put, and like everything that befell him, gratified Mr. Underwood.

A very happy man he had been, as he sincerely told those who would have grieved over him, and not without some remorse.

'Yes,' as he said to Mr. Audley, who watched him like a son, 'it is indeed the LORD who hath led me all my life through. I never had a want or a care unfulfilled till nine years ago. Then, just as I had

become sluggish and mechanical in fixed habits of easy country work, came this thorough change, break, and rousing. I tell you, I can never be thankful enough for the mercy. Not to leave them all provided for, as the saying is, would I go back to be such a priest as I was becoming. Happy--yes, I have been much happier here, since no choice was left me but working up to my strength.'

'And beyond it,' said Mr. Audley, sadly.

'If so--well; so much the better!' he said. 'It is a blessing to be allowed to be spent in that service. And for the children, I wish only for work and goodness for them--and for that I may well trust my good Master.'

CHAPTER IV

TWILIGHT AND DAWN

'Two Angels, one of Life and one of Death,
Passed o'er the village as the morning broke;
The dawn was on their faces; and beneath
The sombre houses capped with plumes of smoke.
LONGFELLOW.

'Don't, Ful!'

'That's nothing to you, Clem.'

'I say, this won't do. I must have some light.'

'Indeed, Ed, we must not light a candle before five o'clock.'

'Pish!'

'Oh please, Edgar, don't stir the fire. If you knew how few coals there are!'

'Stuff'

'No, I won't have it done if Wilmet says not;' and Felix reared up in the gloom, and struggled with his brother.

Felix--Edgar--Oh, don't.'

'Hsh--sh-- Now, you girls are worse than all, screaming in that way.' A few moments' silence of shame. It had been a weary, long, wet day, a trial under any circumstances to eleven people under seventeen, on the 4th of January, and the more oppressive in St. Oswald's Buildings, because not only had their father been in a much more suffering state for some days past, but their mother, who had hoped to keep up for some weeks longer, had for the last two days been quite unlike herself. In the sick-room she was as tender and vigilant as ever in her silent way, but towards her children a strange fretful

impatience, a jealousy of their coming near their father, and an intolerance of the least interruption from them even for the most necessary cause. Moreover, the one friend and helper who had never failed them before, Mr. Audley, had not been seen since he had looked in before early service; and altogether the wretchedness and perplexity of that day had been such, that it was no wonder that even Felix and Wilmet had scarcely spirits or temper for the only task that seemed at present left them, the hindering their juniors from making themselves obnoxious.

'Wilmet, do you think we shall go to the party at Centry Park?' reiterated Fulbert.

'Do hold your tongue about that. I don't believe there's the least chance,' said Alda fretfully.

'And I don't know how you can think of such a thing,' added Cherry.

'I want to see Cousin Marilda's Christmas tree,' whined Robina.

'Do ask Mamma again,' entreated another voice.

'I shall do no such thing,' said Wilmet, with absolute crossness in her tone.

Robina began to cry.

'Come here, Bobbie,' said Cherry's voice in the dark end of the room; 'I'll tell you a story.'

'I know all Cherry's stories, and they're rubbish,' said Fulbert.

'This is quite a new one. There was once a little match-girl--'

'Bosh! I know that little brute, and I hate her,' broke in Fulbert.

'Hold your tongue,' said Clement; 'but--'

'Oh no, don't let us have the match-girl,' cried several voices.

'Why can't you be good? There was once an old giant that lived in a cave--'

'I hate old giants,' said Cherry's critical public; and her voice grew melancholy.

'But this one had but one eye. Come, do listen; papa told me. He was in an island--' but the voice grew mournful, and was broken by a cry.

'Oh! Fulbert hurt me!'

'Fulbert, for shame! What is it, Angel dear?'

'I only laid hold of her pudding arm,' growled Fulbert. 'Oh! I say, Felix, that's too bad!'

'Hold your row, I say,' said Felix, after his application of fist

law. 'Hollo! what's that?' and he sprang to his feet with Angela in his arms, as the door was opened by a hand groping, and Mr. Audley's voice said, 'Darkness visible.'

There was a general scrambling up all over the floor, and Edgar rushed across to light a candle. Wilmet alone had not stirred, as Bernard lay asleep across her lap. The flash of the match revealed a mass of light disordered heads, and likewise a black figure in the doorway.

'Here is a kind helper for you, Wilmet,' said Mr. Audley, 'from St. Faith's, at Dearport. You must call her Sister Constance.'

Wilmet did rise now, in some consternation, lifting her little brother, whose hand was still in the locks, the tangling of which had been his solace. There was a sweet warm kiss on her brow, and her lost net was picked up, her hair coiled into it by a pair of ready tender hands, but she faltered, 'Oh, thank you. Does Mamma know?'

'She was there when I got a sort of consent from your father,' said Mr. Audley.

'She has not said a word,' said Alda, half resentfully. 'We have hardly been in all day except just to fetch and carry.'

'Never mind,' said the Sister, 'it is much better that she did not think about it. Now, my dear, don't! I won't have anything done for me. You don't know how we Sisters sleep on nothing when we do sleep.'

'But you'll have some tea,' said Alda, the only smooth-haired one of the party.

'When you do, perhaps, thank you. Will you come to me, my dear!' relieving Felix from Angela. 'What is your name?' and the child, though ordinarily very shy, clung to her at once; while she, moving over to Cherry, found her in tears, shook up her cushion, arranged her rug, and made her comfortable in a moment. A sense came over them all that they had among them a head on whom they might rest their cares; and as the black bonnet and veil were taken off, and they saw a sweet fair, motherly face beaming on them from the white plain-bordered cap, they gathered round with an outpouring of confidence, small and great, while Mr. Audley went upstairs to announce what he had done. He presently returned, saying, 'All right! Perhaps you had better come up at once.'

There they sat, on either side of the hearth, he pillowed up and in a dressing-gown, more entirely the sick man than he had ever before given up himself to be. Mrs. Underwood rose, and with tears in her eyes, mutely held out her hand, while her husband at once recognised Sister Constance as Lady Herbert Somerville, the wife of the late rector of Dearport. He had last met her when, some six or seven years before he had been invited to preach at festivals at Dearport, and had seen her the sunbeam of her house. He knew that her husband, who was a connection of Mr. Audley's, had since died of the same malady as his own, and had left her, a childless widow, together with all else he had to leave, to the Sisterhood they had already founded in the seaport town. But his greeting was, 'This is very good in you; but surely it must be too painful for you.'

'The Superior saw how much I wished it,' she said.

'You are like Alexandrine de la Ferronays,' he said, remembering her love for tending a consumptive priest for her husband's sake.

'I am always wishing that I were!' she said.

So they perfectly understood each other, and poor Mrs. Underwood, who had, in her new and extraordinary petulance, fiercely resisted the doctor's recommendation of a nurse, found herself implicitly relying on and trusting Sister Constance with a wonderful sense of relief--a relief perhaps still greater to the patient himself, who had silently endured more discomforts and made more exertions than she knew, rather than tire her or vex her by employing even son or daughter, and who was besides set free from some amount of anxiety.

Indeed the widow had too perfect a sympathy to interfere with the wife's only comfort. When it could safely be done, she left the two alone together, and applied herself to winning the hearts and soothing the spirits of the poor children downstairs, and suggesting and compounding new nourishing delicacies.

She even persuaded Mrs. Underwood to go to the next room for a night's rest while she sat up, and learnt--what the silent wife had never told any one--how trying the nights were even to that spirit! At first the patient liked to talk, and drew out much of the hidden treasure of her spirit respecting her husband, who, though ailing for years, had finally passed away with only the immediate warning of a week--the final cause being harass from the difficulties from those above and below him that beset an earnest clergyman of his way of thinking.

What struck her, as it did all, was Mr. Underwood's perfect absence of all care, and conviction that all the burthen was taken off his hands. Her own husband had, as she could not help telling him, found it hard to resign himself to leaving his plans half carried out to instruments which he had but half formed. He had wished with all his might to live, and though he had resigned himself dutifully, it had been with a real struggle, and a longing for continued service rather than rest, a hope that he should more efficiently serve, and much difficulty in refraining from laying all about him under injunctions for the future.

Mr. Underwood half smiled. 'I am neither head nor principal,' he said. 'Plans have been over long ago. I am only tired out, too tired to think about what is to follow. If I live three days longer I shall have just had my forty years in the wilderness, and though it has blossomed like a rose, I am glad to be near the rest.'

And then he asked for the Midnight Office; and afterwards came fitful sleep, half dreamy, half broken by the wanderings of slight feverishness and great weakness; but she thought her attendance would not be very brief, and agreed mentally with what Mr. Audley had told her, that the doctor said that the end might yet be many weeks away. When in the dark winter's mornings the wife crept back again to her post, and all that could be done in those early hours had been effected, Sister Constance went to the half-past seven o'clock service with Felix and Clement, imparting to them on the road that the Superior of St. Faith's was expecting to receive some of the

least of the children in the course of the day, to remain there for the present.

Both boys declared it would be an infinite relief, but they doubted exceedingly whether either father or mother would consent to lose sight of them, since the former never failed to see each child, and give it a smile and kiss, if no more. If they were to be sent, Felix supposed there was no one but himself to take them; nobody with whom they would be happy could be spared, nor did he show any repugnance to the notion of acting *pere de famille* to three babies on the railway.

It was quickly settled. Mr. Underwood at once confessed the exceeding kindness, and declared it to be much better for everybody. 'Do you not feel it so, Mother?'

She bent her head in assent, as she did to all he said.

'Having them back will be good for you,' he added persuasively; and again she tried to give a look of response. So they were brought--Robina, Angela, and Bernard--and each stood for a moment on a chair at his bedside. The two little ones he merely kissed and blessed, but to Robina he said a few more words about being good, and minding Mamma and Felix.

'Oh yes, papa! And they'll have a Christmas tree! and I'll save all my bon-bons to make your cough well.'

He watched wistfully as the bright heads passed out of sight, and the long struggling cough and gasping that followed had all the pangs of parting to add to their burthen. Half the family escorted Felix and his charge to the station, and in the quiet that followed, Sister Constance had a good sleep on Wilmet's bed, as much, she said, as she ever required; and she came from it all freshness and brightness, making the dinner-time very charming to all the diminished party, though Wilmet felt greatly lost without the little ones; and afterwards she earned the warmest gratitude from Edgar and Geraldine by looking over their drawings and giving them some valuable hints--nay, she even devised the new and delightful occupation of ship-building for those three inconvenient subjects, Clement, Fulbert, and Lancelot. Upstairs or down, all was gentle cheerfulness and patience wherever she went.

Felix came home about five o'clock, and his mother was persuaded to go to lie down while he amused his father with the account of the children's exemplary behaviour, and of their kind welcome at St. Faith's, where he had been kept to dine, feeling, as he said, 'uncommonly queer' at first, but at last deciding, to the great diversion of his father, that the sisters were a set of jolly old girls, but not one equal to '_our_' Sister Constance.' Then he had seen the church, and was almost bewildered with the beauty of the decorations; and Mr. Underwood, though saying little, evidently much enjoyed his boy's refreshment and pleasure. He certainly seemed no worse, and Mr. Audley was allowed, what he had often asked before, to sit up with him.

But there was much to render it a long, anxious, restless night of a sort of semi-consciousness, and murmuring talk, as if he fancied himself at Vale Leston again. However, when Felix crept in, about

four o'clock in the morning, anxious at the sounds he heard, he found him asleep, and this lasted for two or three hours; he woke refreshed, and presently said, 'Epiphany! put back the curtain, that I may see the bright and morning star.'

The morning star was shining in the delicate dawn full in view, and he looked at it with quiet pleasure. 'Mother,' he said, then recollecting himself; 'ah, she is resting! Thank you, Audley.'

At that moment a little cry through the thin wall made him start and flush.

'Is it so?' he murmured; 'thank God! That is well!' But his chest heaved grievously as he panted with anxiety, and his two watchers hesitated what to do, until the door was slightly opened, and before the intended sign could be made to Felix, the breathless exclamation, 'How? what?' brought Sibby's half-scared mournful countenance forward.

'How is she, Sibby? don't fear to say,' he said, more collectedly.

'Nicely, sir, as well as can be expected; but--'

'The baby? Alive--I heard--'

'Yes, sir; that is--O Sir, it is two; and it would be a mere mercy if they are taken, as they look like to be--twins, and coming like this!' Perhaps Sibby was a little more lamentable, because, instead of looking shocked, he clasped his hands in eager thanksgiving, as he looked upwards.

Sister Constance followed at the same moment, saying in a far more encouraging voice, 'She is doing very well.'

'It is another great mercy,' he said. 'Much better than longer waiting on me. Will these Twelfth-day gifts live? Or do I take them with me? At least, let me baptize them--now, at once,' he spoke earnestly. 'My full twelve, and one over, and on Twelfth-day.'

Sister Constance had better hopes of the babes than Sibby, but this wish of his was one not to be withstood for a moment; and she went to make ready, while Mr. Audley went down for the little Parian font, and Felix and Sibby arranged the pillows and coverings. Mr. Underwood looked very bright and thankful. 'Birthday gifts,' he said, 'what are they? You have not told me, Sibby.'

'Boy and girl, sir,' she said, 'poor little dears!'

'Jealous for your old twins, Sibby?' he said, smiling.

'Ah! sir, they came in a better time.'

'Better for them, no doubt, but this is the best for these,' he answered brightly. 'See, Sibby, can't you be thankful, like me, that your mistress is sheltered from what would try her? I can bear it all better without her to see.'

Sibby's only reply was a gush of tears, and presently all was made

ready; Geraldine was quietly helped into the room by Edgar, and placed in her usual station by the pillow, and the boys stood against the wall, while the two babes, tiny and scarcely animate things, were carried, each by one of the elder pair and the father, as whitely robed as if he had been in his surplice, held out his hands, and smiled with his kindly lips and clear shining blue eyes full of welcome.

'Has your mother any wishes about names?' he asked. 'Wilmet--what--?'

'No, Papa, I think not;' but her eyes were brimming over with tears, and it was plain that something was suppressed.

'My dear, let me hear, I am not to be hurt by such things.'

'It is--it is only--she did say, when we came for them, that we were the children of joy--these are the children of sorrow,' murmured Wilmet, uttering the words with difficulty.

'I thought so,' he said; then after a brief pause, 'Now, Audley--'

For Mr. Audley said all the previous prayers, though with a voice as hard to control as Wilmet's had been. Then Wilmet held her charge close to her father, for, almost inappreciable as the weight was, he could only venture to lay one arm round that grasshopper burthen, as with his long thin fingers he dashed the water. 'Theodore Benjamin, I baptize thee.' Alda brought the other. 'Stella Eudora.' Then the two hands were folded over his face, and they all knelt round till he moved and smiled.

'Give them to me again,' he said.

It was for the father's kiss and blessing now.

'They look life-like,' he said. 'You will keep them. Now mind me. Charge her never to think of them as children of sorrow, but of joy. She will remember how nearly you were called Theodore, Felix. Take him as God's gift and mine--may he be a son of your right hand to you.'

The boy did take the babe, and with a deep resolve in his heart, that his duty to these helpless ones should be his first thought on earth. He did not speak it, but his father saw the steadfast wistful gaze, and it was enough.

Alda ventured to ask, 'Is Eudora a gift too, Papa?'

'Yes. A happy gift. For so she is! Let her be a little Epiphany Star to you all! Tell Mother that I call them a double joy, a double comfort! Poor little maid!' and he kissed her again, 'will no one welcome her, but the father who is leaving her?'

'O Papa! You know how we will love them,' sobbed Wilmet.

'I think I do, my dear;' and he smoothed the glossy hair; but with love comes joy, you know.'

'It is very hard now,' broke from the poor girl.

'Very, he said tenderly; 'but it will if you make the burthen a blessing--the cross a crutch--eh, my Cherry? Now, a kiss and go, I am tired.'

He was tired, but not apparently worse.

Edgar and his three juniors started off directly after church in quest of ice where they might behold skating, and practise sliding; and Wilmet, with a view to quiet, actually ventured on the extravagance of providing them with a shilling, that they might forage for themselves, instead of coming home to dinner.

She regretted Edgar's absence, however, for when Mr. Bevan came in to hold the Epiphany Feast in the sick chamber, her father asked for Edgar and Geraldine, and looked disappointed that the boy was gone. But he murmured, 'Maybe it is best!' and when the little girl came in, flushed and awe-struck, he took her hand, and said, 'May not I have this little one--my last pupil--to share the feast with me? Willing and desirous,' he smiled as he held her, and she coloured intensely, with tears in her eyes.

There could be no denial, and his judgment at such a moment could only be accepted by the Rector; and the child herself durst not say one word of her alarm and awe. Papa knew. And never could she forget that he held her hand all the time that she leant--for she could not kneel--by his bed. Her elder brother and sisters were there too, and he kissed and blessed each tenderly afterwards, and Sister Constance too knelt and asked his blessing. Then he thanked Mr. Bevan warmly, and called it a most true day of brightness. They heard him whispering to himself, 'Arise, shine, for thy Light is come;' and the peaceful enjoyment seemed so to soothe him, that he was not, as usual, eager to get up.

It was only towards the early dusk that a restlessness came on, and an increase of the distress and oppression of breath, which he thought might be more bearable in his chair; and Mr. Audley, who had just come in, began with Felix to dress him, and prepare to move him. But just as they were helping him towards the chair, there was a sort of choke, a gasping struggle, his head fell on Felix's shoulder, the boy in terror managed to stretch out a hand and rang the bell; but in that second felt that there was a strange convulsive shudder, and--

'Felix!' Mr. Audley's low voice sounded strange and far, away. 'I do believe--'

The figure was entirely prone as they lifted it back to the bed. They needed not the exclamation of Sibby to reveal the truth. It was only an exclamation, it would have been a shriek if Felix had not grasped her wrist with a peremptory grasp. But that bell had been enough; there had been a sound of dismay in the very tinkle, and Sister Constance was in the doorway.

'Felix,' she said, understanding all, 'you must go to her. She heard--she is calling you. You cannot conceal it; be as quick and quiet as you can,' she added, as the stunned boy went past her, only hearing, and that as through a tempest, the feeble voice calling his name. He stood by the bedside; his mother looked into his white face, and held out her hands; then as he bent down, clasped both round his neck. 'He trusted you,' she said.

He sank on his knees as she relaxed her grasp, and hid her head beneath the clothes. A few holy words of commendation of the soul departed sounded from the other room; then at Sister Constance's touch of his hand, he quitted the room.

Presently after, Felix was sitting in the large arm-chair in the dining-room, with his sister Geraldine on his lap, his arms round her, her arms tightly clasped round his neck, her hair hanging loosely down over his shoulder, her head against him, his face over her, as he rocked himself backwards and forwards with her, each straining the other closer, as though the mechanical action and motion could allay the pain. The table was all over baby-things, which numerous neighbours had sent in on the first news of the twins that morning, and which the girls had been inspecting; but no one--nothing else was to be seen when Mr. Thomas Underwood, on his way from the station, finding his knock unheard, and the door ajar, found his way to the room.

'What is this? How is your father?'

Felix raised his face, still deeply flushed, and rising, placed his sister in the chair.

'What, worse! You don't say so,' said Mr. Underwood, advancing.

'He is gone!' said Felix, steadily, but in an unnatural voice. 'Quite suddenly. Not very long ago,' he began, but he felt unable to guess for what space of time he had been rocking Cherry there.

'Dead! Edward Underwood! Bless me!' said Mr. Underwood, taking off his hat, passing his hand over his forehead, and standing horror-struck. 'I had no idea! You never sent over to say he was worse.'

'He was not; it came on just now,' said Felix, holding by the mantelpiece.

He groaned. 'Poor Edward! Well,' and he was forced to put his handkerchief to his eyes. He spoke more gently after that. 'Well, this is a sudden thing, but better than lingering on. Your poor mother, would she like to see me?'

'She was confined last night.'

Bless me! bless me! What a state of things! Have you got any one to be with you?'

'Yes; a lady from Dearport,' said Felix.

'Humph? Which are you? not my boy?'

'No, I am Felix. O poor Edgar!' he added, still bewildered.

It was at this moment that trampling steps were heard, making Felix spring forward with an instinct to silence them; but the threshold the sight of his face brought conviction to Edgar, and with a loud uncontrollable cry, tired and hungry as he was, he seemed to collapse into his brother's arms, and fainted away.

'_My_ poor boy!' exclaimed his cousin, coming to Felix's help, and himself lifting Edgar to the sofa. Of the other boys, Clement ran for water, Fulbert rushed out of sight, and Lancelot laid his head on a chair choking with tears.

Felix and Clement were, poor children! used enough to illness to attend to their brother with a collectedness that amazed their cousin; and without calling for help, Edgar came shuddering and trembling to himself, and then burst into silent but agonising sobs, very painful to witness. He was always--boy as he was--the most easily and entirely overthrown by anything that affected him strongly; and Mr. Thomas Underwood was so much struck and touched by his exceeding grief, especially now that he looked on him as his own property, that after putting in some disjointed sentences of 'There--there--You'll always have a father in me--Don't, my boy--I tell you, you are my son now,'--which to Felix's mind made it more intolerable, he said, 'I'll take him home now--it will be all the better for him and for every one, poor lad! So many--'

'The three younger ones were sent to Dearport yesterday,' said Felix; 'but Edgar--'

'To Dearport! Eh! To whom?'

'The Sisters,' said Felix.

A gruff sound followed. 'Come, come, my dear lad, 'tis bad enough, but I'll do my best to make up to you. It will be much the best way for you to come out of this,' he added, glancing round the dreary fireless room, which his entrance had reminded Felix to darken.

'Thank you,' began Felix, not in the least supposing Edgar could go; 'but now--'

'It is not like a stranger,' added his relation. 'Be a sensible lad. One out of the way is something under the circumstances. Stay--whom can I see? I will give orders for you,' he added.

'Mr. Audley and Sister Constance are seeing about things, thank you,' said Felix. 'I'll fetch Mr. Audley,' he added, as another trying grunt at the other name fell on his ear, and he put his arm round Geraldine, and helped her away.

Mr. Audley came, having just parted with the doctor, who had explained the sudden termination as what he had of late not thought improbable, and further shown that it had been most merciful, since there might otherwise have been weeks, if not months, of much severer suffering. He had just looked in at the wife, but she had hardly noticed him, and he saw no dangerous symptoms about her, except an almost torpid calmness.

Mr. Thomas Underwood saw Mr. Bevan, and made it clearly understood that he made himself responsible for all expenses, including mourning for the whole family. He even offered to have the funeral at Vale Leston, 'if it were only to shame Fulbert Underwood;' but the wife was in no state to be asked, and the children shrank from the removal, so it was decided that Edward Underwood should sleep among those for whom he had spent his life, and where his children's lot for the present would be cast.

The cousin carried Edgar back to Centry with him; the boy seemed too unhappy not to be restless, and as if he were ready to do anything to leave his misery behind him.

The others remained with their preparations, and with such consolation as the exceeding sympathy and kindness of the whole town could afford them. Their mother remained in the same state, except when roused by an effort; and then there was an attention and presence of mind about her that gave anxiety lest excitement should be bringing feverishness, but she always fell back into her usual state of silence, such that it could be hardly told whether it were torpid or not.

They looked out that half-finished comment on the Epistle to the Philippians. It stopped at the words--'Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all.'

Mr. Audley took those words for his text on the Sunday, and, not without breaking down more than once, read as much of the comment as there was time for, as the happy-hearted message of the late pastor, for whom indeed there were many tears shed. It seemed to suit with that solemn peace and nobleness that seemed like the 'likeness of the Resurrection face,' bringing back all the beauty of his countenance as he lay robed in his surplice, with a thorny but bright-fruited cross of holly on his breast, when his children looked their last, ere parting with what remained of that loved and loving father.

Poor little Geraldine spent that worst hour of her life sitting by her mother's bed. She had been helped by Felix to that Feast which had been spread for the mourners in the church in early morning; but afterwards she was forced to remain at home, while the white-robed choir, the brother clergy of all the neighbourhood, and the greater part of the parish met their pastor for the last time in the church.

There the first part of the service took place; and then--Cherry could just fancy she could hear the dim echo of the Dies Irae, as it was sung on the way to the cemetery. It was a very aching heart, poor child! full of the dull agony of a longing that she knew could never be satisfied again, the intense craving for her father.

She missed him more really than any of them, she had been so much his companion; and she was the more solitary from the absence of Edgar, who had always been her chief partner in her pursuits. His departure had seemed like a defection; and yet she had reproached herself for so feeling it when he had run upstairs, on arriving with Mr. Underwood, looking paler, more scared and miserable, than any of them; and he was sobbing so much when he took his place in the procession, that Wilmet had made Felix take Alda, that she might support him. None of his mother's steady reserve and resolute stillness had descended to him, he was all sensibility and nervousness; and Geraldine, though without saying this to herself, felt as if 'poor Edgar' might really have been nearly killed by the last few days of sadness, he could bear depression so little. She could hardly have gone through them but for Sister Constance's kindness, and that rocking process from Felix, which she and he called 'being his great baby.' And now, when her mother looked up at her, held out a hand, and called her Papa's dear little Cherry,

drawing her to lay her cheek by hers on the pillow, there was much soothing in it, though therewith the little girl felt a painful doubt and longing to know whether her mother knew what was passing; and even while perfectly aware that she must not be talked to nor disturbed, was half grieved, half angry, at her dropping off into a slumber, and awakening only upon little Stella's behalf. Those few words to Geraldine had been the only sign that day of perception of any existence in the world save that of the twins.

So the time went by, and the little bustle of return was heard; Sister Constance came in, kissed Geraldine, and helped her down that she might be with Edgar, who was to return with the cousin, whispering to her by the way that it had been very beautiful. It was a day of bright sunshine, high wind, and scant sparkling feathery stars of snow, that sat for a moment shining in their pure perfectness of regularity on the black, and then vanished. 'So like himself,' Sister Constance said.

Geraldine found her four elders and the three little boys all together in the dining-room; and while Wilmet anxiously asked after Mother, the others, in a sort of sad elation, told of the crowds present, the number of clergy--Mr. Ryder, too, came home from his holiday on purpose--the sobbing people, and the wreaths of camellias and of holly, that loving hands had made, and laid upon the coffin. And then the last hymn had been so sweet and beautiful, they all seemed refreshed and comforted except Edgar, who, coming fresh back to the desolation of the house, was in another paroxysm of grief.

'But, Edgar,' said Alda timidly, 'you like being there, don't you?'

'As if one could like anything now!'

'Well! but, Eddy dear, you know what I mean. It is not bad being there.'

'Not so bad as being at home. Oh!' and a terrible fit of sobbing came on, which made the other children stand round rather appalled; while Felix, hesitating, said,

'It is no good going on in this way, Edgar. Father would say it was not right; and you are upsetting poor little Cherry.'

'It is worse for him, because he has been away, said Cherry fondling him.

'Yes,' said Edgar between his sobs 'It did not seem _so_ there.'

'And are they kind?'

'Oh, yes. Marilda let me sit in the school-room, and I had books, and things to copy; such an angel, Cherry, I'll bring it to you next time--my copy, I mean.'

Here there was a summons from the other room for Felix.

'Yes,' said Edgar, a good deal reinvigorated by having something to tell; 'I suppose they are going to tell him what is settled. Mr. Underwood wrote to the man at Vale Leston, and he won't do anything for us; but they are going to try for the Clergy Orphan for one of

you two little boys.'

'Oh!' there was a great gasp.

'And about me?' asked Alda.

'You are to come when we all go to London--to meet us at the station. There's a new governess coming, and you will start both together with her; and I think you'll beat Marilda, for she knows nothing, and won't learn.'

'I hope she won't be jealous.'

'I don't think it is in her! She's very jolly.'

'But I can't go till Mamma is better.'

Wilmet felt they were falling into a gossiping kind of way that jarred on her, and was glad of a summons upstairs.

Mr. Thomas Underwood saw Alda before he returned home, told her she was his other daughter, and should join them on their way to London; and he further made arrangements about the christening, contingent, of course, on the mother's consent, and on the possibility of taking the very small delicate babies to the church. He made very extensive promises of patronage for the future, with a full and open heart, and looked as if he should like to adopt the whole family on the spot.

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For the convenience of our readers we subjoin the first page of the family Bible.

Edward Fulbert Underwood married August 1st, 1837--Mary Wilmet Underwood.

Felix Chester . . . born, July 3d, 1838.
Wilmet Ursula)
Alda Mary). . . " Aug. 11th, 1839.
Thomas Edgar. . . . " Oct. 6th, 1840.
Geraldine. " Oct. 25th, 1841.
Edward Clement . . . " Nov. 23d, 1842.
Fulbert James " Jan. 9th, 1844.
Lancelot Oswald. . . . " May 16th, 1846.
Robina Elizabeth . . . " Feb. 20th, 1848.
Angela Margaret. . . . " Sept. 29th, 1851.
Bernard " Dec. 1st, 1852.
Stella Eudora)
Theodore Benjamin). . . " Jan. 6th, 1854.

CHAPTER V

WORKING FOR BREAD

'Parson's lass 'ant nowt, an' she weant 'a nowt when 'e's dead;
Mun be a guvness, lad, or summut, an' addle her bread.'

TENNYSON.

'Tell, little one,' said Mr. Rugg, the doctor, as he found Geraldine on the landing-place outside her mother's room, and spoke to her in a voice that to her reluctant ears, as well as to those of Sister Constance, who followed him, sounded all the more vulgar because it was low, wheedling, and confidential; 'you are always about the house, you know everything--what accident has your mamma met with?'

Cherry's face grew set.

'She has, then,' said the doctor, looking at Sister Constance. 'I thought so. Now, be a good child, and tell us all about it.'

'I cannot,' she said.

'Come, don't be silly and sulk. No one will punish you: we know it was an accident; out with it.'

'My dear,' said Sister Constance, 'this is a pity. Much may depend on your speaking.'

Cherry began to cry very piteously, though still silently.

'Yes, yes, we see you are sorry,' said Mr. Rugg, 'but there's nothing for it now but to let us hear the truth.'

She shook her head violently, and brow and neck turned crimson.

Mr. Rugg grew angered, and tried a sharper tone. 'Miss Geraldine, this is regular naughtiness. Let me hear directly.'

The flush became purple, and something like 'I won't' came from behind the handkerchief.

'Leave her to me, if you please,' said Sister Constance gently; 'I think she will tell me what is right to be told.'

'As you please, Lady Somerville,' said Mr. Rugg, who, since he had discovered her title, was always barbarously misusing it; 'but the thing must be told. It is doing Mrs. Underwood a serious injury to let childish naughtiness conceal the truth.'

Constance put her arm round the little girl, a tiny weight for thirteen years old, and took her into the room where she had last seen her father. She was sobbing violently, not without passion, and the more distressingly because she carefully stifled every sound, and the poor little frame seemed as if it would be rent to pieces.

'Cherry, dear child, don't,' said Constance, sitting down and gathering her into her arms; 'do try and calm yourself, and think--'

'He--he--I won't tell him!' sobbed the child. 'He's a bad man--he tells stories. He said he would not hurt me--when he knew he should most terribly. Papa said it was very wrong. Papa was quite angry--he called it deceiving, he did! I won't tell him!'

'My dear child, is there anything to tell? Don't think about him, think about what is good for your mother.'

'She told me not,' sobbed Cherry, but not with the anger there had been before. 'No, no, don't ask me; she told me not.'

'Your mother? My dear little girl, whatever it is, you ought to say it. Your dear mother seems to be too ill and confused to recollect everything herself, and if it is not known whether she has been hurt, how can anything be done for her?'

Cherry sat upon her friend's lap, and with a very heaving chest said, 'If Felix says I ought--then I will. Papa said we should mind Felix--like him.'

'I will call Felix,' said Sister Constance.

Mr. Rugg looked very impatient of the delay; but Felix, who had just come in to dinner, was summoned. He came at once, and was soon standing by Geraldine's chair.

'Yes, Geraldine, I think you ought to tell,' he said as the loyal little thing gazed up at her new monarch. 'What did happen?'

'It was on the day after New Year's Day,' said Geraldine, now speaking very fast. 'You were all at church, and she came out of--this room with Bernard in her arms--and called to me that I might come and sit with--him, because she was going down to the kitchen to make some beef-tea. And just then she put her foot into a loop of whip-cord, and fell. She could not save herself at all, because of Bernard; but she went backwards--against the steps.'

'Did she seem hurt at the time?'

'I did not think so. She pulled herself up by the baluster before I could get up to help her, and she never let Bernard go all the time--he did not even scream. She only said, "Now mind, Cherry, do not say one word of this to Papa or anybody else," and she told me she wasn't hurt. Oh! was she really?' as the Sister left the room.

'I wonder whose the string was,' said Felix vindictively.

'Oh, never mind! He'll be so sorry! Oh! I hope she won't be very much vexed at my telling!'

'She will not mind now!' said Felix; 'it was only not to frighten Papa.'

And Felix had his little sister in that one position where she felt a sort of comfort--like a baby in his arms to be rocked--when Sister Constance returned with the doctor. He spoke without either the anger or the persuasive tone now, and Cherry could bear it better, though she slipped off her brother's lap instantly, and stood up in dignity.

'So your Mamma told you to conceal this mishap. That is some excuse. Now, tell me, how far did she fall?'

'Not more than four steps, I am sure--I think three.'

'And backwards?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think she struck her head?'

'Yes, the back of it.'

'Ah! And she spoke and moved at once, not like one stunned?'

'Oh no, not at all. She got up and made the beef-tea.'

'The 2d of January? That must have been about the time you began to observe that change of manner--the irritability your sister remarked,' said the doctor, turning to Felix. He nodded, angry as he had been with Alda for remarking it. All that the doctor further said was, that he must have another examination now that he knew a little more about the case; and he went away with Sister Constance, saying to her, 'Mrs. Underwood is a lady of wonderful fortitude and resolution, and really they are the worst kind of patients.'

It was now more than a fortnight since that 6th of January which saw the birth of the twins and the death of their father, and Mrs. Underwood still lay quiet and almost torpid in her bed, seldom speaking, hardly ever originating anything, and apparently taking no interest whatsoever in anything outside her room; and yet there was no symptom unfavourable to her recovery to be detected. Within the last day or two they had tried to rouse her; papers had been brought to her to sign, and she did so obediently, but she did not follow the subject: she did not refuse, but did not second, any proposal for her beginning to sit up; and this was the more remarkable, as, being a woman of much health and energy in her quiet way, she had always recovered rapidly, and filled her place in the family alarmingly soon. The nurse had begun to suspect that besides the torpor of mind there was some weakness of limb; and with the new lights acquired, Mr. Rugg had no difficulty in coming to the conclusion that there was a slight concussion of the spine, causing excitement at first, and now more serious consequences; and though he did not apprehend present danger, he thought complete recovery very doubtful.

'So they are almost worse than orphans,' said Sister Constance, when the Curate went down from reading to the invalid, and she could tell him the verdict.

'Do they know?'

'The fact? There is no need to lay the future on the shoulders of the present.'

'A very dark present. I feel as if a great bright sun, warming and invigorating, had gone out of my life. Yet I knew him but two years.'

'I can understand it, though I knew him but two days.'

'I hope he may have been the making of me,' sighed Mr. Audley. 'He ought to be.'

'I think he has been,' said she, smiling. 'There is some difference

between you and the boyish young deacon that came here two years ago.'

'Who thought life without shooting barely endurable by the help of croquet! I trust so! He was very patient and tolerant--made holidays for me that first summer which it cuts me to recollect.'

'To live and share in a great sorrow does make a great step in life,' said Constance, thoughtfully looking at the much graver and more earnest brow of her husband's young cousin; 'and you were a comfort to them all as no one else could be.'

'Must you go?' he said. 'I wanted to consult you. I am thinking of giving up my present lodgings to this Mowbray Smith, who is coming as curate, and coming here.'

'Here! My dear Charles!'

'I thought I had heard legends of twelve foot square?'

'Not with thirteen children. Besides, we were seasoned!'

'Stay; you don't understand. There are three rooms on this floor. Poor Mrs. Underwood will hardly want to occupy these two just yet. I take them, and put in some furniture--live to myself, but let them board and lodge me. They may as well have what is to be made by it as any one else.'

'But can they? And, forgive me, Charles, are you prepared for the cookery here? Really, some of those children have appetites so small, that I can't bear to see them at dinner.'

'That's the very point. They all say the invaluable Sibby is as good a nurse as she is bad as a cook. Now, if they have no help, Wilmet must stay at home to look after her mother and the twins; and that is not fit for such a young girl. Now, my coming might enable them to get some one who knows the use of meat and fires, and would send upstairs the only woman who would undertake such a charge as that must be.'

'I don't like to say a word against it. It seems excellent for them.'

'I would not live with them, but I should be there to help. I could keep Felix up in his Latin, and--'

Only one suggestion more, Charles. If you do not stay here long?'

Well--if not, every week I am here is so much tided over; and just at this time the charge must be heaviest. Those boys may be disposed of after a time.'

'I wish we could keep those two little girls at St. Faith's, but there is no place yet for children of their class. I am wanted there this day week, and I cannot say but that I shall be glad to leave you here. Only I recollect your mother's feelings.'

'Mothers must draw in the horns of their feelings when their sons are ordained,' he said, laughing. 'I shall consult that notable person, Wilmet.'

'Wilmet started and blushed with pleasure. It would be so much less dreary; and, poor girl! she was feeling as if she were half rent asunder at the thought of Alda's going. So good for Felix, too. Only she must ask Mamma. And she did ask Mamma, and, to her great pleasure, Mrs. Underwood listened, and said, 'It is very kind.'

'And shall it be, Mamma?'

'I shall like for you to have some one in the house. Yes, my dear, I think--' then she paused. 'My dear, you and Sibby and Sister Constance had better talk it over. I do not seem able to consider it. But Sister Constance will tell you. My dear Wilmet, I am afraid you must have a great deal laid on you.'

'Oh, never mind, Mamma; I like doing things. Besides, you are so much better.'

'I'll try to help you more,' added Mrs. Underwood wistfully. 'Which room did you say?'

And she listened, and even made a few suggestions, as Wilmet explained how she thought of making a sitting-room upstairs, and giving the two downstairs front ones to Mr. Audley, using the back room for the boys and children; she was altogether so much more open to comprehension, and ready to speak, that Wilmet was full of hope and assurance that she was really mending.

When Sister Constance came in, the readiness to converse continued. She consulted her friend on the scheme, and its expedience for Mr. Audley, saying that she feared he would be uncomfortable; but she could not reject so great a help for her children. She had even thought of the advantage of keeping Sibby upstairs to attend on the babies and herself--work not fit to rest entirely on Wilmet, though the good girl had fully counted on giving up her work at school.

It was evident that the examination by the doctor and Wilmet's consultation had thoroughly roused her, and she was as clear-headed as ever. Indeed, it seemed to Sister Constance that she was a little excited, and in that mood in which the most silent and reserved people suddenly become the most unreserved.

She was asked at last what Mr. Rugg thought of her, and Sister Constance in reply asked whether she remembered her accident. She thought a little. 'Why--yes--I believe I did slip on the stairs; but it did not hurt me, and I forgot it. Does he think anything of it?'

'I think he fears you gave yourself a shock.'

'Not unlikely,' she said in an indifferent tone, and did not speak again for some minutes; then said, 'Yes, I see! I am thankful it did not tell on me sooner,' and her look brought the tears into Constance's eyes.

'It told more than you did,' said Constance, endeavouring at a smile.

'Not on the babies,' she said; 'and he never knew it, so there is no harm done! Thank God!'

She lay a little longer, and Constance thought her going into her usual state of torpor; but she roused herself to say, 'Would you kindly look into that desk? You will find a green book.'

'Yes.'

'Please tear out the leaves, and burn it for me. I would not have one of the children see it on any account.'

Constance began to obey, and saw that it was a diary. 'Are you sure it ought to be done?' she asked. 'Might it not be better to wait till you are better?'

'I cannot tell that I shall be much less helpless. I know how things like this go,' she said.

Constance was still reluctant, and Mrs. Underwood added, 'I will tell you. It is nothing good, I assure you. When we drove from the door at Vale Leston, the home of all our lives, he turned to me and said, "Now, Mary, that page is shut for ever. Let us never speak a word to make the children or ourselves feel turned out of paradise." And I never did; but, oh! I wrote it. There are pages on pages of repinings there--I could not let them see it!'

'Nay, but you were resigned.'

'Resigned! What of that? I held my tongue! It was all I could do! I never knew things could be worse till I saw it was killing him, and then all I could do was still to keep silence.'

There was an agony in her voice that Constance had never heard there before.

Silence was, no doubt--as things were--an exceeding kindness to him,' said Constance, 'and one that must have cost you much.'

'Once--once, so tenderly, with tears in his eyes, he did beg me as a favour not to complain, or talk of Fulbert Underwood! I did not; but I never could be the companion I was before to him. He was always happy, he did believe me so; but I could often only smile. If I talked, it could only have been of his health and our cares.'

'You kept him happy by taking the weight so entirely to yourself.'

Perhaps; if he had only known how miserable it made me, we might have moved to a healthier place; but after that one time, I never could vex him or trust myself. To hear him console me and grieve for me, was worst of all.'

Constance began to see how the whole woman, brought up to affluence, had been suddenly crushed by the change; and almost the more so for her husband's high and cheerful resolution, which had forced back her feelings into herself. Her powers had barely sufficed for the cares of her household and her numerous family, and her endurance had consisted in 'suffering, and being still.' No murmur had escaped, but only by force of silence. She had not weakened his energies by word or look of repining; but while his physical life was worn out by toil and hardship, her mental life had almost been extinguished in care, drudgery, and self-control; and all his sweetness, tenderness, and

cheerfulness had not been able to do more than just to enable her to hold out, without manifesting her suffering. Enid had been a very suitable name for her; though without a Geraint in any respect to blame for what she underwent, she had borne all in the same silent and almost hopeless spirit, and with the same unflinching calm temper: but outside her own house, she had never loved nor taken real interest in anything since the day she drove from the door of Vale Leston; she had merely forced herself to seem to do so, rather than disappoint her eager husband and children.

And now, how much of her torpor had been collapse, how much the effect of the accident, could not be guessed. She herself was greatly roused for the present, dwelt on the necessity of trying to get up the next day, and was altogether in a state excitable enough to make the Sister anxious.

Other troubles too there were that evening, which made all feel that even though Mr. Audley was to live to himself, his presence in the house would be no small comfort.

Fulbert, never the most manageable of the party, had procured a piece of wood from the good-natured carpenter, and was making a sparrow-trap on an improved plan, when Wilmet, impatient to have the room clear for Mr. Audley to come for the final decision--as he was to do in the evening--anxious to clear away the intolerable litter, and with more anxiety for Fulbert's holiday task than for the sparrows, ordered him to bed ten minutes too early, and in too peremptory a tone.

Fulbert did not stir.

'Fulbert, I say, clear up that litter, and go to bed.'

'Don't you hear, Fulbert?' said Felix, looking up from his book.

Fulbert gave a pull to the newspaper that was spread under his works on the table, and sent all his chips and sawdust on the ground.

'O Fulbert! how naughty!' broke out Alda.

'Fulbert, are you going to mind?' asked Wilmet. 'Please remember.'

'I shall go in proper time,' growled Fulbert.

'That is not the way to speak to your sister,' interposed Felix, with authority.

Fulbert eyed him defiantly all over.

Felix rose up from his chair, full of wrath and indignation. There was quite difference enough in their size and strength to give him the complete mastery, for Fulbert was only ten years old; but Wilmet, dreading nothing so much as a scuffle and outcry, sprang up, imploring, 'O Felix! remember, Mamma is wide awake to-night. Let him alone--pray, let him alone.'

Felix was thoroughly angry, and kept his hands off with exceeding difficulty. 'Little sneak,' he said; 'he chooses to take advantage.'

'He always was a sneak; his nose is the shape of it,' said Edgar.

As Felix and Wilmet had the sense to let this amiable observation drop, Edgar contented himself with making some physiognomical outlines of sneaks' noses on a slate; and silence prevailed till the church clock struck the half-hour, when Clement got up, and taking the slate, where he had been solacing himself with imitating Edgar's caricatures, he was about to make it an impromptu dust-pan, and went down on his knees to sweep up Fulbert's malicious litter, but was rewarded with a vicious kick on the cheek. It was under the table, out of sight; and Clement, like a true son of his mother, made no sign, but went off to bed like a Spartan.

'Fulbert,' said Lance, rising to follow his example, 'it is time now.'

He still sat on; and Felix, in intolerable wrath and vexation, found himself making such deep bites into a pencil, that he threw it from him with shame, just as Mr. Audley's bell sounded, and he ran down to let him in.

'Now, Ful,' said Wilmet coaxingly, 'please go--or Mr. Audley will see.'

'Let him.'

Mr. Audley was there in a moment, and the next, Alda, in all the ruffle of offended dignity, was telling him that Fulbert was in one of his tempers, and would attend to nobody. Fulbert's back looked it. It evidently intended to remain in that obstinate curve till midnight.

'I am sorry,' said Mr. Audley, 'I thought no one would have added to the distress of the house! What is it, Fulbert?' he added, laying his hand on his shoulder, and signing to Alda to hold her peace.

'They bother,' said Fulbert, in the sulky tone; but still, as he regarded the newcomer as less of an enemy than the rest--'I'd have gone at half-past eight if they would let a fellow alone.'

'Then the fellow had better give them no right to bother,' said Mr. Audley. 'Come, Fulbert, no ship can sail unless the crew obey. No mutiny. Here's your captain ready to shake hands and wish you good-night.'

Fulbert could not face Mr. Audley's determined look, but he was not conquered. He took up his tools and his trap, gave a final puff to spread his sawdust farther, and marched off without a single good-night.

'He has the worst temper of us all,' cried Alda.

'You should be very cautious of provoking him, said Mr. Audley.

'I am afraid it was my fault,' sighed Wilmet.

'Nonsense,' said Felix; 'he is an obstinate little dog. I wish I was licking him. I hope he is not pitching into Clem!'

'Clem is the biggest,' said Alda.

'Yes, but he is much the meekest,' added Wilmet.

'Tina's meek sauce is aggravation, itself,' observed Edgar. 'I should hope he was catching it!'

'He is certainly not slow to put in his oar,' said Mr. Audley; 'did you hear of his performance in the vestry the other day?'

'No. I hope he did not make an unusual ass of himself,' said Felix.

'He and Mowbray Smith had last Tuesday's Evensong nearly to themselves, when Master Clem not only assisted Smith in putting on his hood, but expressed his doubts as to the correctness of it (never, of course, having seen any bachelor's but Oxford or Cambridge), and further gave him some good advice as to his manner of intoning.'

'I hope he won't go on in that way at St. Matthew's!' exclaimed Wilmet.

'It is lucky he is going so soon,' said Mr. Audley. 'I doubt if Mowbray Smith will ever get over it!'

'Regular snob that he is,' said Edgar; 'just one of my Lady's sort! What did he do? Go crying to her?'

'O Edgar!' remonstrated Wilmet.

'Well, Mettie, if even our spiritual pastors will be snobs, one must have the relief of expressing one's opinion now and then.'

'I should say it was better to keep any such fact out of one's mind as much as might be,' said Mr. Audley, feeling himself unable to deny what had been so broadly expressed.

'And we, at any rate, had better drop talking of snobs,' said Felix.

'Hollo, Felix! I am sure you for one would not be a snob if you had turned chimney-sweeper, and let Tom Underwood nail me to his office; he'll never make one of me!'

'I trust so,' said Felix; 'but it is not the way to keep from it to throw about the word at other folks.'

'What's that?' cried Alda. 'Really, that boy must be falling upon some of them.'

It was Lance, in great deshabelle, who, opening a crack of the door, called cautiously, 'Wilmet, please come here.'

Wilmet hastily obeyed, saying anxiously, as the door was shut, 'Never mind, dear Lance, he's in a horrid mood; but do bear it, and not make Felix more in a rage.'

'Bosh about Ful,' said Lance unceremoniously. 'It is Cherry; she is crying so upstairs, and Clem and I can't get a word out of her.'

Cherry, though older than the boys, had to precede them in vanishing for the night, as her undressing was a long operation dependent upon Sibby. Wilmet ran up in haste, and did indeed find poor little Geraldine with her face smothered under the clothes in an agony of weeping, very serious for so frail a little creature.

'Cherry! Cherry, dear, don't! Are you feeling solitary? Are you missing him? Oh, don't! Yes, dear, 'tis so sad; but we all do love you so.'

Wilmet would have kissed and fondled her, but the child almost thrust her away.

'Not that. Oh, not that! I wish it was.'

'My dear Cherry, you can't have been naughty!'

'Yes, yes! indeed I have. And now--'

'I can't think--O Cherry, if you would only tell me what you mean!' cried Wilmet, aghast.

And with agonised sobs. Cherry whispered, 'Mr. Rugg--O Mettie--such things as I said about him to Sister Constance--I made sure I had forgiven--long ago--and now--now, after _that_.'

If Wilmet had not known how deeply both Geraldine and her father had resented what Mr. Rugg had meant as a little friendly gloss to save terror before a painful operation, she would have been utterly at a loss. And now she found herself incapable by any argument or caress of soothing her sister's sense of heinous offence; for that rite, of which she had partaken with her father, had required charity with all men, and now she found she had been deceitful--she hated Mr. Rugg all the time. Oh, what should she do! how could she be so wicked!

Wilmet tried to tell her that she had not known how it was at the time, but this seemed no comfort; and it was plain that that day's solemnity had lessened the inequality between the two girls so much, that for Wilmet to console her as a child was vain; and indeed, her invalid state and constant companionship with her father had rendered her religious feeling much more excitable, and more developed, than were as yet Wilmet's; and meantime, this piteous sobbing and weeping was doing great bodily harm.

Wilmet at last, hearing a door open as if the nurse were taking Sister Constance's place, ran down to take counsel with that kind friend on the way. She whispered her trouble on the stairs, and the Sister was soon kneeling over the little bed; but her comfort was not persuading the child to think less of the fault, but promising that she should tell all to Mr. Audley to-morrow.

Nay, seeing that even this was too long hence for the 'weary soul, and burdened sore,' to look forward to--indeed, that the preparation for the interview would be sleep-destroying--she said, 'Then you shall see him at once, my dear.'

Wilmet opened her eyes in dismay. That little attic, bare of all but beds, was her thought; but Sister Constance, ever an effective woman, had the little black frock, the shoes and stockings, on in no time,

and throwing a shawl over all, actually gathered the small light frame up into her arms, and carried her down to the fire in the room now vacated by the nurses and babies. And there she fetched Mr. Audley to her. 'It will not do,' she whispered on the way to Wilmet, 'to treat her as a child _now_.'

'He always made so much of her,' sighed Wilmet.

'Yes; and now she is a Communicant.'

They left her to Mr. Audley, and presently, when the door opened again, it was he who was carrying her upstairs again; and when Sister Constance had taken possession of her, she whispered, 'Yes, thank you. He says I may come on Sunday, and I think it is forgiven. I shall say a prayer about charity always now!' And with a deep sigh, the worn-out little penitent lay down to her sleep.

'O Mr. Audley, it is plain we cannot do without you,' sighed Wilmet, as she came down, not without tears in her eyes.

And then came the conference upon ways and means, rooms and attendance. Mr. Audley had parted with his horse and groom in the autumn, observing that they ate their heads off; and the terms he now proposed for lodging, board, and attendance were what Felix and Wilmet would have known to be wondrously liberal but for their inexperience, especially as he meant to send in some, at least, of the furniture. He was to have his meals, at his own times, in his sitting-room; and Sister Constance had a person in her eye at Dearport, who was likely to do well in the kitchen, and not quarrel with Sibby.

Wilmet had made up her mind that she must remain at home all day, and had even told Miss Pearson so; but that good lady had refused to accept her resignation, and had come to Mr. Bevan about it: and now both the Sister and the Curate united in telling her that she ought not, as long as it was possible, to give up this means of improving herself, as well as lessening the family burthen. To give up her education now would be to sink into a housewifely drudge, who would hardly be able to maintain herself when the younger ones would be getting out into the world; and as Geraldine must stay at home to be a companion to her mother, there was no need for her being also always in attendance, while Sibby was equal to the charge. Indeed, Mrs. Underwood herself had said something that showed her to contemplate Wilmet's remaining at school.

'You must,' said Felix decidedly. 'Why, you might as well turn nursery-girl at once.'

'I should like it,' said Wilmet. 'I shall be miserable at school--always thinking something is going wrong. And Cherry can never bear with the babies! Oh! please don't tell me I must.'

'I tell you to begin,' said Sister Constance. 'You can always give it up if you feel that the need lies at home; but I think the few hours' change every day--for duty's sake, mind--will give you vigour not to be worn down by the home cares.'

'But Cherry will have them always! She who cares for books and drawing so much more than I!'

'Yes; but if you go on learning, you can teach her,' said Sister Constance.

'Oh!' cried Wilmet; 'Cherry knows more than I do.'

'Little Cherry is the cleverest of us all,' added Felix.

'Still,' said the Sister, 'the mere going over your work with you will give her change and interest. I do feel strongly convinced; dear Wilmet, that to shut yourself up with her, without gathering anything from elsewhere, would be very bad for both.'

'We must see how Mamma is, and how Cherry gets on,' was all that Wilmet would say, but the arrangement was made, and was to take effect in ten days' time, when Mr. Mowbray Smith was coming to be second curate, and Sister Constance must change places with the three absent children, and Alda would be gone to her adopted home.

Then Mr. Audley took leave; and as Felix went to the front door with him, he said, 'Forgive me, Felix; but I am a younger brother myself, and I do hope you do not mean to assert your authority by licking.'

Felix coloured a little; and though he spoke respectfully, it was with some little annoyance. 'There is nothing else that does with Fulbert.'

'Stay, Felix; I am not questioning that he may be the sort of boy for whom flogging may be good from some one.'

'He is!' said Felix. 'He never will behave himself till he has felt his master! It has been so at school; and once, even my father made himself quite ill for a week with having to flog Fulbert for disobedience. It settled him; but he is not like the others--Clem and Lance are not any trouble; but--I know it will come to it sooner or later; Ful will never mind me or Wilmet till I have done it once.'

'And when his strength is equal to yours?'

'Then I hope he will have more sense.'

'Yes, Felix; but what if by forcing him into dogged submission by your bodily strength you have lost his confidence, and have no moral power over him? Things that can be borne from a father come very differently from a brother.'

Felix was quite crimson now. 'But what shall I do, Mr. Audley, when he defies Wilmet, and teases Cherry and the little ones?'

'Try all you can with his better sense, but don't anger him by tones of authority. What you think needful rule may seem to him domineering. And if necessary, call me. My blows will not leave the after rankling that yours will, even if they are necessary.'

Felix sighed. He was not desirous of beating his brother in the main; but being unhappily master of the house, he was unwilling not to be so entirely. He wished Mr. Audley good-night, not in his most perfectly cordial tone.

However, the next morning he had brought himself to thank Mr. Audley.

'Thank you, Felix,' said the Curate; 'it is a great relief to me. I was afraid you thought you were going to bring a meddling fellow in upon you.'

Felix coloured, and with an effort--for which Mr. Audley liked him the better--said, 'I know I shall always deserve what advice you give me, and I hope another time I may take it better than the last.'

Soon after, one train carried away four of the young Underwoods to begin life elsewhere. The Thomas Underwoods had desired that Alda and Edgar should meet them at the station, and at Felix's entreaty had also undertaken to convoy Clement, who, thanks to Mr. Audley, was to be a chorister, and live in the clergy-house at St. Matthew's, Whittingtonia. It would have been Fulbert, only unluckily he had no ear, and so he was left at home, while Lady Price, Mrs. Thomas Underwood, and all the ladies they could enlist in their service, canvassed desperately, and made the cards of 'Fulbert James and Lancelot Oswald, sons of the Rev. Edward Fulbert Underwood, THIRTEEN children,' a weariness to every friend of a subscriber to clergy orphan schools. Robina was not quite old enough to stand for the like election; but Sister Constance had negotiated with a lady who had devoted herself to educating children of better birth than means, and the little girl was to be dropped at the nearest station to her school at Catsacre. It had all been settled in a wonderfully short time, by Sister Constance and Mr. Audley, with full though helpless acquiescence from Mrs. Underwood. They felt it well to lessen the crowd of children in the house, and the responsibilities of the elder ones, and acted at once.

As to Alda, she was too miserable at home not to be ready to follow Edgar, though she had at first implored to stay and help Wilmet till their mother was about again; but the Thomas Underwoods were unwilling to consent to this--and after all, Alda was more apt to cry than to be of much real use. Sister Constance saw that she was only another weight on her sister's hands, and that, terrible as the wrench would be between the twins, Wilmet would be freer when it was once over. Poor Wilmet! she had felt as if she could hardly have lived over these weeks save for fondling the younger twins, and waiting on her mother. She was almost passive, and ran up and downstairs, or prepared the wardrobes of the departing children, just as she was bidden, all in one quiet maze of grief. The tears seemed to be always in her eyes, very often dropping, and yet they never hindered her, and she never uttered a word of deprecation or complaint; only she could not eat, and a kiss would bring down a whole shower; and at night, the two sisters would hold each other tight, and cry and kiss themselves to sleep.

So had come the last day--the last for all four. Robina, who had only just come back from St. Faith's, was grave, puzzled, and awestruck, clinging chiefly to Lancelot, and exchanging confidences in corners with him, in which they were probably much less childish than they showed themselves to the outer world. Clement was very grave and unhappy; but seemed to be most distressed at parting with Harry Lamb, a favourite school-fellow of his own quiet stamp, with whom he spent all available time. Alda and Wilmet were hand in hand at every possible moment, and if possible cheek to cheek--each felt as if herself was cut in two.

Then Edgar, who had only come home for that farewell Sunday, had another of his paroxysms of sorrow at the changes at home, which he contrived to forget when at Centry. All that was becoming in a manner usual to the others was a shock to him, and he was so very miserable the whole day, that he treated every attempt of the others to cheer him as a mere token of their hardness of heart. He went in to see his mother, and was so overcome at finding her no better, that he rushed away, and threw himself on a sofa as if he was going to faint; and when at church he saw his father's place filled up he fell into such a fit of sobbing, that half a dozen smelling-bottles were handed across the seats.

However, he had recovered himself on Monday morning, and made it his particular request that nobody would come bothering to the station, to make them look like Fulbert's canvassing-card of the thirteen children--and as the mention of it always affronted Fulbert deeply, it was plain that he would be no good company. However, Felix had been allowed an hour from his business for that very purpose, and he simply said, 'Nonsense, Edgar, I shall take Robin down.' Wilmet submitted, though with a great pang. She had no assurance that she should not break down, and a crying match at the station--oh no! It might make Bobbie roar all the way.

So Alda clung round her neck and Geraldine's in their own little parlour, and wished her mother good-bye, scarcely knowing whether it were with a full understanding how many were parted from the wing that now seemed unable to shelter them; and then Wilmet went up and quietly lay down by her mother on her bed, feeling as if there was nothing she cared for in all life, and as if youth, hope, and happiness were gone away from her for ever, and she were as much widowed as her mother. She was even past crying--she could do nothing but lie still. But then her mother's hand came out and stroked her; and presently one of the babies cried, and Wilmet was walking up and down the room with it, and all activity with her outward senses, though her heart felt dead. Meantime, the luggage went in the omnibus, the four children walked up together only escorted by Felix, and were passed on their way by the prancing and thundering carriage from Centry.

But the sense of usefulness that came gave strength and energy to Felix and Wilmet Underwood as the first excitement passed away, and they better understood their tasks.

Of the absent ones they heard good accounts. Alda was altogether one with her cousin's family, and seemed to be completely on an equality with Marilda; and Edgar had been sent by Thomas Underwood to acquire modern languages under the care of an Englishman who took private pupils at Louvaine, whence Edgar despatched most amusing letters and clever sketches. Clement was in great favour, both musically and morally, at St. Matthew's; and little Robina was reported to have bewailed her home with floods of nightly tears, but to have soon settled down into the bonnie little pet of the elder girls.

Except for the separation, the cloud had hardly fallen on these, but their departure had made a great hole in the hitherto unbroken family; and while Felix and Wilmet, by the loss of their contemporaries, seemed placed at a point far away from the others, Geraldine was conscious of much loneliness. The twins had always

consorted together, and regarded her as a mere child, and her chief companions had been her father and Edgar, so that she seemed left at an equal distance both from the elder and younger party.

Then the world around her was so busy, and she could do so little. She slept in a little inner room beyond the large nursery, where Wilmet kept guard over Angela and Bernard; and long before six o'clock, she always heard the call pass between the eldest brother and sister; and knew that as soon as he was dressed, Felix--it must out--was cleaning the family boots, including those of the lodger, who probably supposed that nature did it, and never knew how much his young landlord had done before joining him in his early walk to St. Oswald's.

Meantime Wilmet conducted the toilette of the two little children, and gave the assistance that Cherry needed, as well as discharging some of the lighter tasks of the housemaid; leaving the heavier ones to Sibby and Martha, a stout, willing, strong young woman, whom Sister Constance had happily found for them, and who was disqualified, by a loutish manner and horrible squint, from the places to which her capabilities might have raised her.

Then Wilmet helped her sister downstairs, and a visit was paid to the mother and the twins, who were Sibby's charge for the night. Mrs. Underwood was still in the same state. It was indeed possible to rouse her, but at the expense of much suffering and excitement; and in general, she was merely tender, placid, and content, mechanically busied about her babies, and responding to what was said, but entirely incapable of any exertion of body, and as inactive in mind as in limb. Wilmet attended to her while Sibby went to her breakfast, returning with that of her mistress in time to send Wilmet down to preside at the family meal, a genuine Irish dish of stir-about--for which all had inherited a taste from their father's Irish mother. Only Cherry was too delicate for such food, and was rather ashamed of her cup of tea and slice of bread.

However, this was one of the few times when she could hope she was useful; for when Felix was gone to the printing-office, the boys to the grammar-school, and Wilmet, first to the kitchen, and then to Miss Pearson's, she remained with bowl and cloth to wash up, in her own peculiarly slow and dainty way, never breaking but always dreaming, while Angela carried them one by one, first to her, then to the kitchen.

'Now, Cherry.'

Mr. Audley's door opened, he would step forward and take the well-worn books in one hand, and hold the doors open with the other as Cherry tardily hopped in, and perched herself by the table. Her confirmation studies had been left in his charge, and then followed a little Greek, some Latin, a page or two of French, the revision of an exercise, and some help in Euclid and fractions--all studies begun with her father, and both congenial and useful to her, as the occupation that (next to drawing) best prevented her from feeling the dreary loneliness of her days; for though he could seldom give her more than an hour, the preparation--after he had helped her upstairs--occupied her during the whole period of tranquillity while the younger children slept. Angela appeared first, and did some small lessons, cat-and-dog readings, and easy hymns, then was generally

content to sit on the floor in Mamma's room, admiring or amusing the twins. Then Cherry, according to her sense of duty, drew or worked. There was a horrible never-ending still-beginning basket of mending in the family, which Wilmet replenished every Saturday; and though Mrs. Underwood's instinct for piecing and darning had revived as soon as she was taken out of bed, her work now always needed a certain revision to secure the boys from the catastrophe of which Wilmet often dreamt--appearing in public in ragged shirt-sleeves! Geraldine knew that every stitch she left undone would have to be put in by her sister in late evening or early morning, and therefore often wrenched herself from the pencil and paints that best beguiled her thoughts from the heartache for her father, and the craving for Edgar, or the mere craving for light, air, liberty, and usefulness. Her only excuse to her own conscience for allowing herself her chief pleasure was, that it was her way of helping an old woman who kept a stall of small wares on market days, and could sometimes dispose of little pictures on domestic and Scriptural subjects, if highly coloured, glazed with gum, and bound with bright paper--pickings and stealings, as Felix called them, gleaned from advertisements and packing-boxes at Mr. Froggatt's; but these did not allow much scope for the dreams of her fancy.

Nor had she much choice when Bernard once awoke and came down, in all the unreasoning tyranny of two years old, when it was an even chance whether he would peaceably look at the old scrap-book, play with Angela, or visit Mamma; or be uproarious, and either coalesce with Angela in daring mischief, fight a battle-royal with her, or be violent with and jealous of the twins.

The urchin had found out that when once Cherry's crutch was out of her reach she could not get at him; and he had ridden off upon it so often, before committing any of his worst misdemeanours, that Cherry always lay down on it to secure it. After all, he was a fine, affectionate, impetuous little fellow, but with a very high, proud, unmanageable will; and she was very fond and proud of him; but never more so than when he slept till dinner-time.

That was the hour which brought Felix home to help Sibby to carry his mother into the sitting-room, pay a little court to the babies, and enliven Cherry with any chance scrap of news or occupation. Best of all were the proofs of that unfinished comment on the Epistle to Philippi, which was being printed by subscription of the congregation, and the clergy of the diocese. It always did Mrs. Underwood good to have these read aloud to her by her little daughter, and she could sometimes find a clue to the understanding of sentences that had puzzled even Mr. Audley.

The two school-boys never appeared till dinner was imminent; and then--one unuttered wish of poor Cherry was that Mr. Audley could have dined with them; but he kept to his own hours, and they were late.

Whereby dinners on five days of the week were apt to be something on this fashion. Bell-ringing--Felix helping Geraldine to her seat, Angela trotting after: a large dish of broth, with meat and rice, and another of mashed potato; no sign of the boys; Angela lisping grace; Sibby waiting with a tray.

Felix filled a soup-plate for his mother, and a basin for Bernard.

'We must begin, I suppose,' and he helped his sisters and himself.

'Here, Angel, push over your plate; I'll cut that.--How did you get on to-day?'

'Very well; the only mistake I made I found out before Smith saw it. I know all the stationery and steel pens apart now, and haven't made a mistake for a week. Yesterday Bartlett junior came in. he stood like a post before Mr. Froggatt till he caught sight of me, and then he shouted out, "O Blunderbore, you know! What is it that Collis wants?"'

'And did you?'

'When he said it was a horrid sum-book all little a's and b's.--What have you been doing, Cherry?'

'I have begun an abstract of the first Punic--'

The door flew open with a bounce, and two hot, wild-locked boys, dust everywhere except in their merry blue eyes, burst in, and tumbled on their chairs. 'I say--isn't it a horrid sell? we ain't to have a holiday for Squire's wedding.--Come, Fee, give us some grub.'

'You have not said grace,' said Cherry.

Lance, abashed, stood up and bowed; Fulbert looked grim, and mumbled something.

'You have not washed your hands,' added Felix.

'What's the good?' said Fulbert.

'They'll be as jolly dirty again directly,' said Lance.

'But you would be more decent company in the meantime,' said Felix.

At that moment there was a splash in his plate, a skip-jack made of the breast-bone of a chicken had alighted there with a leap.

'There's Felix's master come after him,' cried Fulbert, and Lance went off into choking laughter.

'Boys, how can you?' broke out Cherry.

'Look at Blunderbore fishing out his master!' was Fulbert's answer.

'The frog is in the bog,
And Felix is squeamish,'

chanted Lance.

'Bad rhyme, Lance,' said Felix, who could bear these things much better from the younger than the elder. Indeed, he scarcely durst notice them in Fulbert, lest he should be betrayed into violence by letting out his temper.

'I say!' cried Lance, struck by a new idea, 'what prime stuff it is

for making a fort!' and he began to scrape the more solid parts of his plateful to one side.

'Oh, I say, isn't it?' echoed Fulbert: 'but I've eaten up the best part of my castle;' and he grasped at the ladle.

'No, I thank you,' said Felix, putting it on the other side. 'While I am here, you don't play tricks with that.'

Fulbert swallowed a spoonful in a passion, but a bright thought struck Lance, who always cared much more for fun than for food. 'I _say_, we'll empty it all into one, and eat it down.'

'You horrid boys!' plaintively exclaimed Cherry, almost crying--for this return to savage life was perfect misery to her. 'I can't bear it.'

'I will not have Cherry tormented,' said Felix, beginning to be very irate.

'We ain't doing anything to Cherry,' said Lance, amazed.

'Don't you know it spoils Cherry's appetite to see you so disgusting?'

'Then she'll have the more next time,' said Fulbert. 'Get along, Captain--you've splashed my face!'

'Hurrah! the red-hot shot! The rice is the cannon-balls! Where's some bread?'

'O Lance!' entreated Cherry; 'no waste--think of Wilmet and the bills.'

'We'll eat it every bit up,' asseverated Lance; but Fulbert growled, 'If you bother any more, I shall crumble the whole lot out at window.'

'It is wicked to waste bread,' lisped Angela, and Martha at that moment appeared to fetch the tureen for the kitchen dinner.

'Can't you eat any more, Cherry ?' asked Felix gloomily.

'Not a bit, thank you,' she said.

'We've not done!' shouted the boys, seizing on her scarcely-tasted and half-cold plate.

'You must finish after. Come, Cherry!' Then, as they left the room, and she laid her head on his shoulder--'Little ruffians!' he said under his breath.

'Oh, never mind, Felix. I don't--at least I ought not to mind--they don't mean it.'

'Lance does not, but I think Fulbert does. He'll make me thrash him within two inches of his life before he has done. And then there's no one to take me in hand for it. It is horridly bad for them, too, to live just like young bears.'

But he smoothed his brow as he came into the room where his mother was, and amused her till his time was up.

Mr. Froggatt had explained to his father long ago that Felix's work would not be that of a clerk in a great publishing house, but veritably that belonging to the country bookseller and printer, and that he must go through all the details, so as to be thoroughly conversant with them. The morning's work was at the printing-house, the afternoon's at the shop. The mechanical drudgery and intense accuracy needed in the first were wearisome enough; and moreover, he had to make his way with a crusty old foreman who was incredulous of any young gentleman's capabilities, and hard of being convinced that he would or could be useful, but old Smith's contempt was far less disagreeable to him than the subdued dislike he met with from Redstone, the assistant in the shop, a sharp, half-educated young man, who had aspired to the very post of confidence for which Felix was training--and being far less aware of his own utter unfitness for it than was Mr. Froggatt, regarded the lad as an interloper; and though he durst not treat him with incivility, was anxious to expose any deficiency or failure on his part. Having a good deal of quickness and dexterity, he could act as a reporter, draw up articles of a certain description for the newspaper, and had, since the death of Mr. Froggatt's eldest son, been absolutely necessary to him in carrying on the business; and now, it was a matter of delicate discretion on the master's part to avoid hurting the feelings of the assistant, whom a little more would have made his tyrant, and a dread of the appearance of favouritism made it needful to keep Felix thoroughly in a subordinate post, till real superiority of mind and education should assert itself over elder years and mere familiarity with detail. This reserved ill-will of Redstone's had much increased the natural discomfort of appearing behind the counter to former acquaintance, and had rendered the learning the duties there doubly troublesome and confusing; though, in recalling the day's doings, there was some amusement in contrasting the behaviour of different people, some--of whom Mr. Ryder was the type--speaking to him freely in his own person, others leaving him as an unrecognised shop-boy; and a third favouring him with a horrid little furtive nod, which he liked least of all. But though awkward and embarrassed at first, use soon hardened him, and made the customers indifferent, so that by the spring he had begun to be useful, and to feel no particular excitement about it.

The worst of his business was that it kept him so late, that he had but a very short evening, and no time for exercise. He was on his feet most of the day, but indoors, and his recreation chiefly consisted in choir-practice twice a week. Not that he missed more positive amusement; the cares of life and Edgar's departure seemed to have taken the boyish element of frolic out of him; and left him gravely cheerful indeed, but with no greater desire of entertainment than could find vent in home conversation, or playing with the little ones.

Wilmet and the two boys were at liberty full two hours before him. The latter generally stayed out as long as light and hunger permitted. Mr. Audley continually stumbled on them playing at marbles, racing headlong in teams of pack-thread harness with their fellows, upsetting the nerves of quiet folk--staring contentedly at such shows as required no outlay, or discontentedly at the outside of

those that demanded the pennies they never had. They were thorough little street-boys; and all that he could do for them was to enforce their coming in at reasonable hours, and, much to their sister's relief, cause their daily lessons to be prepared in his room. Otherwise their places in their classes would have been much less creditable.

Wilmet's return was always Geraldine's great relief, for the afternoon of trying to amuse her mother, and keep the peace between the children, was almost more than she was equal to; though, on fine days, Sibby always took out the two elder babies, with an alternate twin, for an hour's air, and Mr. Audley daily visited the invalid. Mr. Bevan did so twice a week, with a gentle sympathising tone and manner that was more beneficial than Lady Price's occasional endeavours to make her 'rouse herself.' Miss Pearson and a few humbler friends now and then looked in, but Mrs. Underwood had been little known. With so large a family, and such straitened means, the part of the active clergyman's wife was impossible to her; she had shrunk from society, and most people knew nothing more of her than that the faded lady-like figure they used to see among her little flock at church, was Mrs. Underwood.

Wilmet's coming home was always a comfort; and though to her it was running from toil to care, the change was life to her. To have been either only the teacher or only the house-wife might have weighed over-heavily on her, but the two tasks together seemed to lighten each other. She had a real taste and talent for teaching, and she and her little class were devoted to one another, while the elder girls loved her much better since Alda had been away. The being with them, and sharing their recreation in the middle of the day, was no doubt the best thing to hinder her from becoming worn by the depressing atmosphere around her mother. She always brought home spirits and vigour for whatever lay before her, brightening her mother's face, dispelling squabbles between Angela and Bernard, and taking a load of care from Geraldine.

There was sure to be some anecdote to enliven the home-keepers, or some question to ask Cherry, whose grammar and arithmetic stood on firmer foundations than any at Miss Pearson's, and who was always pleased to help Wilmet. The evening hours were the happiest of the day, only they always ended too soon for Cherry, who was ordered up by Sibby as soon as her mother was put to bed, and had, in consequence, a weary length of wakeful solitude and darkness--only enlivened by the reflection from the gas below--while Felix and Wilmet sat downstairs, she with her mending, and he either reading, or talking to her.

On Saturday, which she always spent at home, and in very active employment in the capacities of nurse, housemaid, or even a slight taste of the cook and laundress, the evening topic was always the accounts--the two young heads anxiously casting the balance--proud and pleased if there were even a shilling below the mark, but serious and sad under such a communication as, 'There's mutton gone up another halfpenny;' or, 'Wilmet, I really am afraid those boots of mine cannot be mended again;' or again, 'See what Lance has managed to do to this jacket. If one only could send boys to school in sacking!'

'Are not there a few pence to spare for the chair for Cherry? She

will certainly get ill, if she never goes out now spring is coming on.'

'Indeed, Felix, I don't know how! If there is a penny over, it is wanted towards shoes for Bernard; and Cherry begs me, with tears in her eyes, not to let her be an expense!'

Poor Geraldine! the costing anything, and the sense of uselessness, were becoming, by the help of her nightly wakefulness, a most terrible oppression on her spirits. Her father was right. His room had been a hot-bed to a naturally sensitive and precocious character, and the change that had come over her as time carried her farther and farther away from him, affected her more and more.

Her brother and sister, busy all day, and scarcely ever at home, hardly knew what was becoming a sore perplexity to Mr. Audley.

A young tutor, not yet twenty-six, could not exactly tell what to do with a girl not fourteen, who fell into floods of tears on the smallest excuse.

'No, no, Cherry--that is not the nominative.'

The voice faltered, struggled to go on, and melted away behind the handkerchief. Then--'O Mr. Audley, I am so sorry--'

'That's exactly what I don't want you to be, Cherry.'

'Oh, but it was so careless,' and there was another flood.

Or, 'Don't you see, Cherry, you should not have put the negative sign to that equation. My dear Cherry, what have I said?'

'Oh, oh--nothing. Only I did think--'

'We shall have you a perfect Niobe, if you go on at this rate, Cherry. Really, we must not have these lessons, if they excite you so much.'

'Oh! that would be the worst punishment of all!' and the weeping became so piteously violent, that the Curate looked on in distressed helplessness.

'I know it is very tiresome of me; I would help it, if I could--indeed I would.' And she cried the more because she had cried.

Or, as he came in from the town, he would hear ominous sounds, that his kind heart would not let him neglect, and would find Cherry sitting on the landing-place in a paroxysm of weeping. She always crept out of her mother's room on these occasions, for the sight of tears distressed and excited Mrs. Underwood; and the poor child, quite unable, in her hysterical condition, to drag herself alone up that steep stair, had no alternative but to sit, on what Mr. Audley called her stool of repentance, outside the door, till she had sobbed herself into exhaustion and calm--or till either Sibby scolded her, or he heard her confession.

She had been 'so cross' to Bernard, or to Angel--or, once or twice, even to Mamma. She had made an impatient answer when interrupted in

her lessons or in a dream over a drawing, she had been reluctant to exert herself when wanted. She had scolded fretfully--or snatched things away angrily, when the little ones were troublesome; and every offence of this sort was bewailed with an anguish of tears, that, by weakening her spirits and temper, really rendered the recurrence more frequent. 'The one thing they trust to me, I fail in!'

He was very kind to her. He did not yield to the mannish loathing for girlish tears that began to seize on him, after the first two or three occasions. He thought and studied--tried comfort, and fancied it relaxed her--tried rebuke, and that made it worse; tried the showing her Francois de Sales' admirable counsel to Philothee, to be 'doux envers soi,' and saw she appreciated and admired it; but she was not an atom more douce envers soi when she had next spoken peevishly.

At last he fairly set off by the train, to lay the case before Sister Constance.

'What is to be done, when a child never does anything but cry?'

Sister Constance listened to the symptoms, and promptly answered, 'Give her a glass of port wine every day, before you let her out of your room.'

'If I can!'

'Tell her they are my orders. Does she eat?'

'I imagine not. I heard Felix reproaching her with a ghoulish dinner of a grain of rice.'

'Does she sleep?'

'She has told me a great deal of midnight meditation on her own deficiencies.'

'She must be taken out of doors somehow or other! It is of no use to reason with her; the tears are not temper, or anything else! Poor Charlie! it is an odd capacity for you to come out in, but I suppose no one else can attend to her.'

'No, poor child, she is rather worse than motherless! Well--I will find some excuse for taking her out for a drive now and then; I don't know how to speak to the others about having the chair for her, for they are barely scraping on.'

'Poor children! Well, this year is probably the worst. Either they will get their heads above water, or there will be a crisis. But they do scrape?'

'Yes. At Lady-day there was great jubilation, for the rent was paid, the taxes were ready, there was not a debt; and there was sevenpence over, with which Felix wanted to give Cherry a drive; but Wilmet, who is horribly prudent, insisted that it must go to mend Fulbert's broken window.'

'Well--poor Wilmet! one can't blame her. How does she treat Cherry's tears?'

'I don't think she has much pity for them. Felix does much better with Cherry; he rocks her and pets her; though, indeed, she hardly ever breaks down when he is there; but even his Sundays are a good deal taken up--and I always hunt him out for a walk on the Sunday afternoons.'

'Is he still in the choir and teaching at the Sunday school?'

'Yes--though it is not Mowbray Smith's fault.'

'What, is your colleague what you apprehended?'

'My Lady could not have found a curate more to her mind, or more imbued with her dislike to all that bears the name of Underwood. I own it is hard to have one's predecessor flung constantly in one's teeth, and by the very people who were the greatest thorns to dear Underwood himself. Then Clem, who was a born prig, though a very good boy, gave some of his little interfering bits of advice before he went away, and it has all been set down to Felix's account! One Sunday, Smith made a complaint of Felix having the biggest boys in the school. It was the consequence of his having taken them whenever his father could not, till it came to his having them entirely. He always took great pains with them, and there was a fellow-feeling between him and them that could hardly be with an older person. I said all this--too strongly, most likely--and the Rector put in a mild word, as to his goodness in coming at all. Smith thought there was nothing wonderful in liking what ministered to his conceit; and at last it came out that a baker's boy had met Felix and Smith consecutively in the street, and only touched his hat to one, and that the wrong one.'

'I should have been only thankful that he touched his hat to anybody.'

'That is the very remark by which I put my foot in it, but my Lady was horrified, and the consequence was, that it fell to me to advise Felix to resign the class. I never hated a piece of work so much in my life, for he had worked the lads well, and we both knew that there would be an end of them. Moreover, Felix has some of the true Briton about him, and he stood out--would give up the class if the Rector ordered him, but would relinquish Sunday-school altogether in that case; and the two girls were furious; but, after one Sunday, he came to me, said that he found hostility poisoned his teaching, gave up, and accepted the younger ones.'

'Of course the boys deserted.'

'Which has not softened Smith, though it has made him tolerate Felix in the choir. His voice is of very little use at present; but he is such an influence, that we should be glad of him if he could not sing a note, and he clings to it with all his heart. I believe music is about the only pleasure he has, and it excites his mother too much to have any at home. We have little Lance in the choir now, with a voice like a thrush in a dewy morning.'

Mr. Audley acted on the port-wine prescription, to the horror and dismay of Cherry, who only submitted with any shadow of philosophy on being told that the more she cried the more necessary she rendered

it; but on the Saturday, Sister Constance suddenly knocked at Mr. Audley's door. She had been talking the matter over with the Superior; and the result was, that she had set off on a mission to see for herself, and if she thought it expedient, to bring Geraldine back with her. She had chosen Saturday as the time for seeing Wilmet, and was prepared to overlook that the stairs were a Lodore of soap, this being Sibby's cleaning day, while Wilmet kept guard over the mother and the twins.

Geraldine was in the sitting-room, writing a Latin exercise, with a great pucker in her forehead whenever Angela looked up from her wooden bricks to speak to her. And though the sharp little pinched face was all one beam of joy as the visitor came in, Sister Constance saw at once that the child's health had deteriorated in these last months. She sat down, and with Angela on her lap, questioned anxiously. Cherry had no complaints--she always was like this in the spring. How was her foot? As usual, a falter. Was it really? Well, yes, she thought so. And then, as the motherly eyes looked into hers, there came a burst of the ready tears; and 'Oh, please don't talk about it-- please don't ask.'

'I know what you are afraid of,' said Sister Constance, remembering her horror of the Bexley medical attendant, 'but is it right to conceal this, my dear child?'

'I don't think I do,' said Cherry pitifully. 'You know Sibby does it every night, and it only aches a little more now. And if they did find it out, then they would have him, and there would be a doctor's bill, and, oh! that would be dreadful!'

Sister Constance saw that the question of right or wrong would be infinitely too much for Geraldine, and drew off her mind from it to tell of the good accounts of Robina from Catsacre, and Clement from Whittingtonia; but when presently Wilmet was so far free as to come in with only the boy-baby in her arms, and take the guest up to take off her bonnet, it was the time for entering on the subject.

'Cherry? do you think her looking ill? She always is poorly in the spring, you know.'

'I do not like what I hear of her appetite, or her sleep, or her spirits.'

'Oh! but Cherry is always fanciful, you know. Please, please don't put things in her head.'

'What kind of things do you mean?'

'Fancying herself worse, I mean, or wanting things. You know we must be so careful, and Mamma and the babies--'

'My dear, I know you have many to care for, and it is hard to strike the balance; but somehow your voice sounds to me as if Geraldine were the one you most willingly set aside.'

Wilmet did not like this, and said a little bit hastily, 'I am sure Geraldine has everything we can give her. If she complains, it is very wrong of her.'

'She has not said one word of complaint. Her grief and fear is only of being a burden on you. What brought me here was, that Mr. Audley was anxious about her.'

Wilmet was silent, a little abashed.

'Did you know that her ankle is painful again?'

'Sister Constance,' said Wilmet, 'I don't think you or Mr. Audley know how soon Cherry fancies all sorts of things. She does get into whiny states, and is regularly tiresome; and the more you notice her, the worse she is. I know Mamma thought so.'

'My dear, a mother can venture on wholesome neglect when a sister's neglect is not wholesome. I am not accusing you of neglect, mind; only you want experience and sympathy to judge of a thing with a frame like Cherry's. Now, I will tell you what I want to do. I am come to take her back with me, and get her treated by her kind doctor for a month or so, and the sea air and rest will send her back, most likely, in a much more cheery state.'

'Indeed!' cried Wilmet, startled; 'it is very good, but how could we do without her? Mamma and the children! If she could only wait till the holidays.'

'Let her only hear you say that, Wilmet, and it will do her more good than anything.'

'What--that she is of use? Poor little thing, she tries to be; but if Marilda could have had her way, and taken her instead of Alda, it would have been much better for her and all. Ah! there's Felix. May I call him in?'

Felix, dashing up to wash his hands, smooth his hair, and dress himself for the reading-room work instead of the printing-office, had much rather these operations had been performed before he was called to the consultation in the nursery; but he agreed instantly and solicitously, knowing much better than Wilmet what the dinners were to Cherry, and talking of her much more tenderly.

'Yes, poor little dear, she always breaks down more or less in the spring; but I thought she would mend when we could get her out more,' he said. 'Do you think her really so unwell, Sister Constance?'

'Oh, no, no!' cried Wilmet, fearfully.

'Not very unwell, but only so that I long to put her under our good doctor, who comes to any one in our house, and who is such a fatherly old gentleman, that she would not go through the misery the thought of Mr. Rugg seems to cause her.'

'Dr. Lee?' asked Felix. 'Tom Underwood sent him to see my father once. I remember my father liked him, but called it waste for himself, only longed for his opinion on Cherry. Thank you, I am sure it is the greatest kindness.'

'But, Felix, how can she before the holidays?' cried Wilmet.

'Well, Mamma does not want her before dinner; and as to the kids, why

can't you take Angel to school with you? Oh, yes, Miss Pearson will let you. Then Mr. Audley, or Mr. Bevan, is always up in the afternoon, and you come home by four.'

'Perhaps I could earlier on days when the girls go out walking,' said Wilmet. 'If it is to do Cherry good, I don't like to prevent it.'

Wilmet had evidently got all her household into their niches, and the disarrangement puzzled her. A wonderful girl she was to contrive as she did, and carry out her rule; but Sister Constance feared that a little dryness might be growing on her in consequence, and that, like many maidens of fifteen or sixteen, while she was devoted to the little, she was impatient of the intermediate.

So when they went down, and Cherry heard of the scheme, and implored against it in nervous fear of leaving home and dread of new faces, Wilmet, having made up her practical mind that the going was necessary, only made light of that value at home which was Cherry's one comfort, and which made herself feel it so hard to part with her, that this very want of tact was all unselfishness.

Felix was much more comfortable to Cherry when he made playful faces at the bear-garden that the dining-room would become without her, and showed plainly that he at least would miss her dreadfully. Still she nourished a hope that Mamma would say she should not go; but Mamma always submitted to the decrees of authority, and Wilmet and Felix were her authorities now. Sister Constance felt no misgiving lest Wilmet were hardening, when she heard the sweet discretion and cheerful tenderness with which she propounded the arrangement to the sick mother, without giving her the worry of decision, yet still deferentially enough to keep her in her place as the head of the family.

Yet it was with unnecessarily bracing severity that Wilmet observed to Geraldine, 'Now, don't you go crying, and asking questions, and worrying Mamma.'

'I suppose no person can be everything at once, far less a girl of fifteen,' thought Sister Constance, as she drove up to the station in the omnibus with Cherry, who was too miserable and bewildered to cry now; not that she was afraid of either the Sister or the Sisterhood, but only because she had never left home in her life, and felt exactly like a callow nestling shoved out on the ground with a broken wing.

In two months more the omnibus was setting her down again, much nearer plumpness, with a brighter face and stronger spirits. She had been very full of enjoyment at St. Faith's. She had the visitor's room, with delightful sacred prints and photographs, and a window looking out on the sea--a sight enough to fascinate her for hours. She had been out every fine day on the shore; she had sat in the pleasant community-room with the kind Sisters, who talked to her as a woman, not a baby; she had plenty of books; one of the Sisters had given her daily drawing lessons, and another had read Tasso with her; she had been to the lovely oratory constantly, and to the beautiful church on Sunday, and had helped to make the wreaths for the great May holidays; she had made many new friends, and among them the doctor, who, if he had hurt her, had never deceived her, and had really made her more comfortable than she had ever been for the last

five years, putting her in the way of such self-management as might very possibly avert some of that dreadful liability to be cross.

But with all this, and all her gratitude, Geraldine's longing had been for home. She was very happy, and it was doing her a great deal of good; but Mamma, and Felix, and Wilmet, and Sibby, and the babies, were tugging at her heart, and would not let it go out from them. She was always dreaming that Felix's heels were coming through his stockings, that Mamma was calling and nobody coming, or that Bernard was cutting off the heads of the twins with the blunt scissors. And when Dr. Lee's course of treatment was over, and Felix had a holiday to come and fetch her home, it is not easy to say which was happiest. For she was so glad to be at home amid the dear faces, troubling and troublous as they often were, and so comfortable in the old wheel-ruts of care and toil, that it really seemed as if a new epoch of joy had begun. Felix openly professed how sorely he had missed her, and she clung to his arm with exulting mutual delight; but it was almost more triumphant pleasure to be embraced by Wilmet with the words: 'Dear, dear Cherry, there you are at last. You can't think how we have all wanted you! I never knew how useful you are.'

'I suppose,' said Felix quaintly, 'the world would rather miss its axis, and yet that does not move.'

'Yes, it does,' said Cherry, 'it wobbles. I suppose Wilmet says rotates, just about as much as I am going to do now I have got back into my own dear sphere again.'

CHAPTER VI

THE CACIQUE

'Devouring flames resistless glow,
And blazing rafters downward go,
And never halloo, "Heads below!"
Nor notice give at all.'

Rejected Addresses.

It was a warm night in September, and Wilmet had laid herself down in bed in her nursery with a careful, but not an oppressed heart. About many matters she was happier than before. Her mother had revived in some degree, could walk from her bed-room to the sitting-room, and took more interest in what was passing; and this the hopeful spirits of the children interpreted into signs of recovery. Geraldine's health and spirits had evidently taken a start for the better. Fulbert, too, was off her mind--safe gone to a clergy-orphan foundation; and though Lancelot had not yet been elected, owing, Mr. Audley imagined, to Lady Price's talk about their fine friends, Wilmet could not be sorry, he was such a little fellow, and the house would be so dull without his unfailing merriment and oddities. And though there had been sore disappointment that Mrs. Thomas Underwood had chosen to go to Brighton instead of coming home, there was the promise of a visit from Alda before Christmas to feed upon. Little

Robina had come home for the summer holidays, well, happy, and improved, and crying only in a satisfactory way on returning to school. Moreover, Wilmet's finances had been pleasantly increased by an unexpected present of five pounds at the end of the half year from Miss Pearson, and the promise of the like for the next; increasing as her usefulness increased; and she was also allowed to bring Angela to school with her. The balance of accounts at Midsummer had been satisfactory, and Felix had proudly pronounced her to be a brick of a housekeeper. And thus altogether Wilmet did not feel that the weight of care was so heavy and hopeless as when it first descended upon her; and she went to bed as usual, feeling how true her father's words of encouragement and hope had been, how kind friends were, how dear a brother Felix was, and above all, how there is verily a Father of the fatherless. And so she fell fast asleep, but was ere long waked by a voice from the inner room where Cherry slept with the door open.

'Wilmet, Wilmet, what is it?'

Then she saw that the room was aglow with red light from the window, and heard a loud distant hubbub. Hurrying out of bed, she flew to the window of Cherry's room, and drew up the blind. 'O Wilmet, is it fire?'

'Yes,' low and awe-struck, said Wilmet. 'Not here. No. There's nothing to be frightened at Cherry. It is out--out there. I think it must be the Fortinbras Arms. Oh, what a sight!'

'It is dreadful!' said Cherry, shrinking trembling to the foot of her little bed, whence she could see the window. 'How plain one can see everything in the room! Oh! the terrible red glow in the windows! I wonder if all the people are safe. Wilmet, do call Felix.'

'I will,' said Wilmet, proceeding in search of her clothes; but her hands shook so that she could hardly put them on. They longed for Felix as a protection, and yet Cherry could hardly bear to let her sister go out of sight!

'I only hope Mamma does not hear,' said Wilmet.

'How lucky her room looks out the other way! but, oh! Wilmet, don't fires spread?'

'Felix, and Mr. Audley will see about us in time, if there is any fear of that,' said Wilmet trembling a good deal as she wrapped a shawl round Cherry, who sat in a heap on her bed, gazing fascinated at the red sky and roofs. Felix slept at the back of the house; her knock did not waken him, but her entrance startled both him and Lance.

'Felix, the Fortinbras Arms is on fire.--Hush, Lance; take care; the little ones and Mamma! O Felix, do come to our room.'

They followed her there in a few seconds, but they had only glanced from the window before they simultaneously rushed away, to the increased dismay of their sisters, to whom their manly instinct of rushing into the fray had not occurred.

'I'll go down. I'll try to catch them,' said Wilmet; and she too was

gone before Cherry could call to her. She found that Felix and Mr. Audley were in the act of undoing the front door, and this gave her just time to fly down with the entreaty that Felix would not leave them. It was a great deal more to ask of him than she knew.

'To the end of the street I must go, Wilmet,' he said.

'Oh! but Cherry is so frightened! and if Mamma wakes,' she said, gasping.

'It is all quiet in her room,' said Felix.

'Tell Cherry there is no danger at all here now,' said Mr. Audley; 'but if it makes her happier you may dress her. Don't disturb your mother. If needful, we will carry her out in her bed; but I do not think it will be.'

'We can only see out in the street,' added Felix, opening the door as he spoke; and that moment out flew Lance, before anybody had thought of stopping him, and the necessity of pursuing the little fellow into the throng, and keeping him out of danger, made both Felix and Mr. Audley dash after him; while Wilmet, abashed at the men hurrying by, could not even gaze from the door, but fled upstairs in terror lest the two little ones should be awake and crying at the appalling red light and the din, which seemed to her one continuous roar of 'Fire! fire!'

To her great relief, they were still asleep, but Cherry was in a chilled agony of trembling prayer for the 'poor people,' and the sisters crouched up together shivering in each other's arms as they watched the rush of flames streaming up into the sky over the brew-house opposite to them.

Presently Wilmet heard feet again downstairs. 'Cherry dear, I must go down, they may want me. Indeed, I don't think there is real danger as long as that brew-house is safe.'

There was a scuffle of feet that frightened her very much. She remembered it last Michaelmas when her father was brought home from church, and as she stood on the stairs--one choking petition in her heart, 'Let it not be Felix!' she saw that the figure, whatever it was, was carried by Mr. Audley and a strange man. And so great a horror came over her, that, regardless of her toilette, and the hair that had fallen over the jacket on her shoulders, she dropped at once among them as they were bearing the senseless form into Mr. Audley's bed-room, with a low but piteous cry, 'Felix! Felix! oh, what has happened?'

'It is not Felix, my dear,' said Mr. Audley; 'he is safe--he is gone for the doctor. This poor boy has fallen from a window. You can help us, Wilmet; call Martha, and get some water made hot. The fire is getting under.'

Wilmet needed no second hint. She was up, reassuring Cherry at one moment; then breaking into Martha's heavy slumbers, impressing upon her the necessity of not shrieking, then downstairs again, reviving the dying kitchen fire, and finding that, as usual, there was some water not yet cold. For, as she now saw, it was not yet one o'clock. She durst not go to her mother's room, where ready means of heating

food were always to be found. As she brought the jug to the door, Felix came in with Mr. Rugg, who, living in a street out of sight, and having ears for no sound but his own night-bell, had been ready at once to obey the call. Felix told his sister the little he knew.

'It was a terrible sight. Just as we got to that one big window--a passage one, I believe, which looks out into this street--we saw this poor boy and a black man up on the sill, with all the glare of light behind them, screaming out for help.'

'But where was everybody?'

'In the High Street, round the corner. Crowds there; and here in our street only ourselves and a few men that hurried up after us. Mr. Audley shouted to them that we would get a ladder, but whether they could not hold on any more, or they thought we were going quite away-- O Wilmet! I didn't see; but there was the most horrible thump and crash on the pavement.'

'What! down from that window?'

'Yes,' said Felix, leaning against the wall, and looking very pale. 'And there was that good black man, he had got the boy in his arms, as if he had wound himself round to keep him from harm.'

'Oh! And he?'

'Killed--quite killed. Don't ask me about it, Wilmet. It is much too dreadful to hear of;' and he shuddered all over.

'But this boy's head was safe at least, and as there seemed no one to attend to anything, Mr. Audley said he would bring him here, and I went for Mr. Rugg.'

'And where's Lance? Did he go with you?'

'Lance! Is not he in? I never saw or thought of him, I must go and seek for him,' exclaimed Felix, darting off in haste and alarm at the thought of little nine-year-old Lance alone among the midnight crowd, just as Mr. Audley opened the door to try to find a messenger to Mr. Rugg's surgery. He paused to tell Wilmet that it was a lad about Felix's age, moaning some word that sounded like Diego, and with a broken leg and ribs, and then, as Martha was in attendance, she felt herself obliged to return to Cherry, whom indeed she could not leave again, for though the fire had sunk, and only thick clouds of smoke showed the play of the engines, the effects of the terror were not so quickly over in the tender little frame, which was in a quivering hysterical state, so deadly cold, that Wilmet was frightened, and went once more down to warm some flannel; and get some hot drink for her. She intended tea, but meeting Mr. Audley again, he sent up a glass of wine. Even with this in hot water, Cherry could hardly be warmed again, and Wilmet lay down, clasping her round, and not daring to let her know of her own continued anxiety about the two brothers. At last, however, when the red light had almost faded quite away, the cautious steps were heard coming up the stairs, and Felix called into the room in a low voice--

'All right, Wilmet.'

'Oh! come in,' the sisters called. 'Where did you find him, Fee? Is he safe?'

'O Cherry, you never saw such a lark!' cried Lance in a gusty whisper. 'Wouldn't Fulbert have given his ears to have seen it? To see the engines pouring down, and the great hose twining about like jolly old sea-serpents spouting.'

'Hush, Lance; how can you? How could you! Does Mr. Audley know he is safe?'

'Yes,' said Felix, 'he opened the door, and said he might have known Lance was too much of a gamin to come to grief.'

'What's a gamin?' said Lance.

'A street ragamuffin at Paris,' said Wilmet. 'But really, Lance, it was a terrible thing to do.'

'And where do you think I found him?' said Felix. 'In between little Jacky Brown and that big old coal-heaver who was so impudent about the blanket-club, hanging like a monkey upon the rails of the terrace, and hallooing as loud as they.'

'Twas the coal-heaver that helped me up,' said Lance. 'He's a jolly good fellow, I can tell you. He said, "You be one of Parson Underwood's little chaps, baint you? A rare honest gentleman of the right sort war he--he war!" and he pulled down another boy and put me up instead, and told me all about the great fire at Stubbs's factory. You can't think what fun it was. Roar, roar, up went the flame. Swish, wish, went the water--such a bellowing--such great clouds of smoke!'

'Was everybody saved?' whispered Cherry's tremulous murmur.

There was a silence, then Lance said, 'Weren't they?' and Cherry had another shuddering fit.

'Who?' Wilmet asked.

'Poor Mr. Jones's youngest child and his nursemaid were in an attic room where nobody could get at them,' said Felix in a hurried and awe-struck voice, causing Cherry to renew that agony of trembling and sobbing so convulsive and painful that her elder brother and sister could only devote themselves to soothing her, till at last she lay still again in Wilmet's arms, with only a few long gasps coming quivering up through her frame. Then Wilmet implored Felix to go away and make Lance go to bed, and finding this the only means of reducing the little excited fellow to quiet, he went. And though all were sure they should not sleep, they overslept themselves far into Sunday morning, except Wilmet, who was wakened by the clamours of the undisturbed Angela and Bernard, and succeeded in dressing them without disturbing the other three.

Very tired and stiff, and very anxious she felt, but she was obliged to go down as soon as she was dressed, since she always took charge of her mother before breakfast on Sunday while Sibby went to mass. It was so late that she could only listen in vain at the top of the stairs before she went into the room, where she found Sibby very

indignant at having missed all the excitement of the night past. 'As if she could not have been trusted not to have wakened the mistress. She believed they would have let her alone till they all were burnt in their beds!'

It was not till breakfast, which took place unusually late, that Wilmet heard much. Felix and Lance had just come downstairs, rather ashamed of having overslept themselves, and Mr. Audley came in and begged for a cup of tea.

He told them that the father and uncle of the boy had arrived. They were American merchants or speculators of some kind, he thought, named Travis, and they had gone on business to Dearport the day before, meaning to dine there, and return by the mail train in the night, and leaving the boy with the black servant in the unfortunate hotel.

On arriving, at about three o'clock, not long after Felix had brought Lance home, they had telegraphed to Dearport for a doctor and nurse, who were momentarily expected to arrive. The patient was only half conscious, and though he knew his father, continued to murmur for Diego. Martha was sitting with him whenever she could, for his father did not seem to understand nursing, and it would be a great relief when a properly-trained person arrived.

She came, and so did the doctor, but not till close upon church-time, and little but stray reports from the sick-room reached the population upstairs all that day, as Mr. Audley, whenever he was not at church, was obliged to be in attendance on his strange guests. All that reached the anxious and excited young people was the tidings of the patient being not unlikely to do well, though he was in great pain and high fever, and continually calling for the poor negro who had saved his life at the expense of his own.

This was the last bulletin when the household parted to go their several ways on Monday morning, not to be all collected again and free to speak till seven o'clock in the evening, when they met round the table for tea.

'Mamma looks cheery,' said Felix, coming into the little back room where Wilmet was spreading bread and butter.

'Yes,' said Wilmet, 'I think she has cared to hear about the fire. So many people have come in and talked, that it has enlivened her.'

'And how is the boy?'

'A little better, Martha heard; but he keeps on talking of Diego, and seems not to care about any one else.'

'No wonder. His father must be an unmitigated brute,' said Felix. 'He came to the inquest, and talked just as if it had been an old Newfoundland dog; I really think he cared rather less than if it had been.'

Tell us about the inquest, Felix,' said Lance. 'I wish they'd have wanted me there.'

'I don't see why, Lance,' said Felix gravely; 'it was a terrible

thing to see poor Mr. Jones hardly able to speak for grief, and the mother of that poor young nurse went on sobbing as if her heart was breaking.'

'Nobody knows the cause of the fire, do they?' asked Cherry.

'Lady Price said it was the gas.'

'No; no one knows. Way, the waiter, saw a glare under the door of the great assembly-room as he was going up very late to bed, and the instant he opened the door the flame seemed to rush out at him. I suppose a draught was all it wanted. He saw this poor Diego safe downstairs once, but he must have gone back to save his young master, and got cut off in coming back. Poor fellow! he is a Mexican negro, belonging to an estate that came to Mr. Travis's wife, and he has always clung to her and her son just like a faithful dog.'

'But he could not be a slave in England,' said Cherry eagerly.

'No; but as this Travis said, his one instinct was the boy: he did not know how to get rid of him, he said, and I do believe he thinks it a lucky chance.'

'I wish it had been he!' said Lance.

'Sibby has asked leave to go to the burial,' added Wilmet.

'I hope you gave it,' said Felix. 'Mr. Macnamara came and asked if he were not a Roman Catholic, and those two Travises laughed a little offensively, and said they guessed he was so, as much as a nigger was anything; and the Papists were welcome to his black carcass, only they would not be charged for any flummery. "I won't be made a fool of about a nigger," one said. And then, I was so glad, Mr. Audley begged to know when the funeral would be, and said he would go anywhere to do honour to faithfulness unto death.'

'Well done, Mr. Audley!' cried Lance. 'Won't we go too, Fee!'

'It will be at nine to-morrow,' said Felix; at which Lance made a face, since of course he would be in school at the time.

'Maybe I shall have to go,' added Felix; 'for only think, as my good luck would have it, Redstone went on Saturday night to see his mother or somebody, and only came back this morning; and Mr. Froggatt himself was "out at his box," as he calls it, so he told me this morning to write the account of the fire for the paper, and he would pay me for it extra, as he does Redstone.'

'Well, and have you done it?'

'I was pretty much at sea at first, till I recollected the letter I began to Edgar yesterday night, and by following that, I made what I thought was a decent piece of business of it.'

'Oh, did you put in the way they threw the things out at window at Jessop's without looking what they were!' cried Lance; 'and the jolly smash the jugs and basins made, and when their house was never on fire at all: and how the coal-heaver said "Hold hard, frail trade there!"'

'Well,' said Felix quaintly, 'I put it in a different form, you see. I said the inhabitants of the adjacent houses hurled their furniture from the windows with more precipitation than attention to the fragility of the articles. And, after all, that intolerable ass, Redstone, has corrected fire every time into "the devouring element," and made "the faithful black" into "the African of sable integument, but heart of precious ore."'

'Now, Felix!'

'Bald, sir, bald,' he said, with such a face. "'Yes, Mr. Underwood," even good old Froggy said, when he saw me looking rather blue, "you and I may know what good taste and simplicity is; but if we sent out the Pursuivant with no mouth-filling words in it, we should be cut out with some low paper in no time among the farmers and mechanics.'"

'Is he so led by Mr. Redstone?' asked Wilmet.

'Not exactly; but I believe there's nothing he dreads more than Redstone's getting offended and saying that I am no use, as he would any day if he could. O, Mr. Audley, are you coming to stay?'

'Will you have a cup of tea?' said Wilmet.

'Thank you, yes; I've got to dine with these fellows at the Railway Hotel at eight, but I wanted to speak to you first, Wilmet,' said Mr. Audley, sitting down as if he were weary of his day.

'How is the boy?'

'Better. He has been quite sensible ever since he woke at twelve o'clock to-day, only he was dreadfully upset about poor Diego--about whom his father told him very abruptly--without the least notion he would feel it so much.'

'I wish I had the kicking of that father,' observed Felix, driving the knife hard into the loaf.

'He is not altogether such a bad fellow,' said Mr. Audley thoughtfully.

'Not for an American, perhaps.'

'He is not an American at all. He was born and bred in my own country, and took me by surprise by calculating that I was one of the Audleys of Wrightstone Court, and wanting to know whether my father were Sir Robert or Sir Robert's son. Then he guessed that I might have heard of his father, if I was not too young, and by-and-by it dawned on me that whenever there is any complication about business matters, or any one is in bad circumstances, my father always vituperates one Travis, who, it seems, was a solicitor greatly trusted by all the country round, till he died, some twenty years ago, and it appeared that he had ruined everybody, himself included. These men are his sons. They went out to America, and got up in the world. They told me the whole story of how they had knocked about everywhere, last evening, but I was too sleepy to enter into it much, though I daresay it was curious enough; successful speculations and hair's-breadth escapes seemed to come very thick one upon another,

but all I am clear about is that this poor boy, Fernando's mother was a Mexican heiress, they--one of them, I mean--managed to marry, her father English, but her mother old Spanish blood allied to the old Caciques, he says; whether it is a boast I don't know, but the boy looks like it--such a handsome fellow; delicate straight profile, slender limbs, beautifully made, inky-black hair and brows, pure olive skin--the two doctors were both in raptures. Well, they thought affairs in Mexico insecure, so they sold the poor woman's estate and carried her off to Texas. No; was it? I really can't remember where; but, at any rate, Diego stuck to her wherever she went, and when she died, to her child; nursed him like an old woman, and-- In short, it was that touching negro love that one sometimes hears of. Now they seem to have grown very rich--the American Vice-Consul, who came over this morning from Dearport, knew all about them--and they came home partly on business, and partly to leave Fernando to be made into an English gentleman, who, Mr. Travis says, if he has money to spend, does whip creation. He's English enough for that still. Well, they have got a telegram that makes them both want to sail by the next steamer.'

'That's a blessing. But the boy?

'He cannot be moved for weeks. It is not only the fractures, but the jar of the fall. He may get quite over it, but must lie quite still on his back. So here he is, a fixture, by your leave, my lady housekeeper.'

'It is your room, Mr. Audley,' said Wilmet. 'But can his father really mean to leave him alone so very ill, poor boy?'

'Well, as his father truly says, he is no good to him, but rather the reverse; and as the Travis mind seems rather impressed by finding an Audley here, I am to be left in charge of him now, and to find a tutor for him when he gets better. So we are in for that!'

'But what is to become of you?' asked Wilmet. 'The nurse has got the little back study.'

'I have got a room at Bolland's to sleep in, thank you,' he answered; 'and I have been representing the inconvenience to the house of this long illness, so that the Travises, who are liberal enough--'

'I thought them horrid misers,' said Felix.

'That was only the American conscience as to negroes. In other matters they are ready to throw money about with both hands; so I hope I have made a good bargain for you, Wilmet. You are to have five guineas a week, and provide for boy and nurse, all but wine and beer, ice and fruit.'

'Five guineas!' murmured Wilmet, quite overpowered at the munificent sum.

'I am afraid you will not find it go as far as you expect, for he will want a good deal of dainty catering.'

'And your room should be deducted,' said Wilmet.

'Not at all. Mrs. Bolland said she did not take lodgers, but should

esteem it a favour if I would sleep there while her son is away. It is all safe, I think. He has given me orders on his London banker, and they say here at the bank that they are all right. It is a strange charge,' he added thoughtfully; 'we little thought what we were taking on ourselves when we picked up that poor fellow, Felix; and I cannot help thinking it will turn out well, there was something so noble about the poor lad's face as he lay insensible.'

It was about three weeks later, that one Sunday evening, when Mr. Audley came in from church, Felix followed him to his sitting-room, and began with unusual formality. 'I think I ought to speak to you, sir.'

'What's the matter?'

'About Lance, and him in there. I have had such a queer talk with _him_!'

'As how?'

'Why he wanted us to stop from church, asked me to let off the poor little coon; and when I said we couldn't, because we were in the choir, wanted to know what we were paid, then why we did it at all; and so it turned out that he thinks churches only meant for women and psalm-singing niggers and Methodists, and has never been inside one in his life, never saw the sense of it, wanted to know why I went.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I don't know; I was so taken aback. I said something about our duty to God, and it's being all we had to get us through life; but I know I made a dreadful mess of it, and the bell rang, and I got away. But he seems a sheer heathen, and there's Lance in and out all day.'

'Yes, Felix, I am afraid it is true that the poor lad has been brought up with no religion at all--a blank sheet, as his father called him.'

'Wasn't his father English?'

'Yes; but he had lived a roving, godless life. I began, when I found the boy must stay here, by asking whether he were of his father's or his mother's communion, and in return heard a burst of exultation that he had never let a priest into his house. His father-in-law had warned him against it, and he had carried his wife out of their reach long before the child's birth; he has not even been baptized, but you see, Felix, I could not act like Abraham to the idolater in the Talmud.'

Felix did not speak, but knocked one foot against the other in vexation, feeling that it was his house after all, and that Mr. Audley should not have turned this young heathen loose into it to corrupt his brother, without consulting him.

'I told Travis,' continued the Curate, 'that if I undertook the charge as he wished, it must be as a priest myself, and I must try to put some religion into him. And, to my surprise, he said he left it to me. Fernando was old enough to judge, and if he were to be an English squire, he must conform to old-country ways; besides, I was

another sort of parson from Yankee Methodists and Shakers or Popish priests--he knew the English clergy well enough, of the right sort.'

'So he is to learn religion to make him a squire?'

'I was thankful enough to find no obstruction.'

'And have you begun?' asked Felix moodily.

'Why--no. He has been too ill and too reserved. I have attempted nothing but daily saying a short prayer for him in his hearing, hoping he would remark on it. But you know the pain is still very absorbing at times, and it leaves him exhausted; and besides, I fancy he has a good deal of tropical languor about him, and does not notice much. Nothing but Lance has roused him at all.'

'I would never have let Lance in there by himself, if I had known,' said Felix. 'He is quite bewitched.'

'It would have been difficult to prevent it. Nor do I think that much harm can be done. I believe I ought to have told you, Felix; but I did not like denouncing my poor sick guest among the children, or its getting round all the town and to my Lady. After all, Lance is a very little fellow; it is not as if Edgar or Clem were at home.'

'I suppose it cannot be helped,' sighed Felix; 'but my father--' and as he recollected the desire to take his brothers away from Mr. Ryder, he felt as if his chosen guardian had been false to his trust, out of pity and enthusiasm.

'Your father would have known how to treat him,' sighed Mr. Audley. 'At any rate, Felix, we must not forget the duties of hospitality and kindness; and I hope you will not roughly forbid Lance to go near him, without seeing whether the poor fellow is not really inoffensive.'

'I'll see about it,' was all that Felix could get himself to say; for much as he loved Mr. Audley, he could not easily brook interference with his brothers, and little Lance, so loyal to himself, and so droll without a grain of malice, was very near to his heart. 'A young pagan,' as he thought to himself, 'teaching him all the blackguard tricks and words he has learnt at all the low schools in north or south!' and all the most objectionable scenes he had met with in American stories, from Uncle Tom onwards, began to rise before his eyes. 'A pretty thing to do in a fit of beneficence! I'll order Lance to keep away, and if he dares disobey, I'll lick him well to show him who is master.'

So he felt, as he swung himself upstairs, and halted with some intention of pouring out his vexed spirit to Wilmet, because Mr. Audley had no business to make it a secret; but Wilmet was putting her mother to bed, and he went on upstairs. There he found all the doors open, and heard a murmuring sound of voices in Geraldine's room. In a mood to be glad of any excuse for finding fault, he strode across the nursery, where Angela and Bernard slept, and saw that Lance, who ought to have gone at once to bed on coming in, was standing in his sister's window, trying to read in the ray of gas-light that came up from a lamp at the brew-house door.

'Go to bed, Lance,' he said; 'if you have not learnt your lessons in proper time, you must wake early, or take the consequences. I won't have it done on Sunday night.'

Lance started round angrily, and Cherry cried, 'O Felix, it is no such thing! Only would you tell us where to find about the king and his priests that defeated the enemy by singing the "mercy endureth for ever" psalm?'

'In the Bible!' said Felix, as if sure it was a blunder. 'There's no such story.'

'Indeed there is,' cried Lance, 'for Papa (the word low and reverently) took out his blue poly-something Bible and read it out in the sermon. Don't you remember, Fee, a hot day in the summer, when he preached all about those wild robbers--horrid fellows with long spears--coming up in the desert to make a regular smash of the Jews?'

'Lance!' cried Cherry.

'Well, he did not say that, of course, but they wanted to; and how the king sent out the priests without a fighting man, only all in white, praising God in the beauty of holiness, and singing, "His mercy endureth for ever." I saw him read that, though he told us all the rest without book; how all the enemy began to quarrel, and all killed one another, and the Jews had nothing to do but to pick up the spoil, and sing another psalm coming back.'

'I remember now,' said Felix, in a very different tone. 'It was Jehoshaphat, Lancey boy. I'll find it for you in the book of Chronicles. Did you want it for anything?'

Lance made an uneasy movement.

'It was to show poor Fernando Travis, wasn't it?' said Cherry; and as Lance wriggled again, she added, 'He seems to have been taught nothing good.'

'Now, Cherry,' broke out Lance, 'I told you to say not a word.'

'I know a little about it, Lance,' said Felix, sitting down on the window-seat and lifting Lance on his knee, as he said, in a tone very unlike his intended expostulation, 'You must not let him do you harm, Lance.'

'He wouldn't; but he does not know anything about anything,' said the little boy. 'They never taught him to say his prayers, nor sing hymns, nor chant, and he thinks it is only good for niggers. So I told him that singing psalms once beat an army, and he laughed; and I thought Cherry was sure to know where it was--but girls will always tell.'

'Indeed you never told me not,' said Cherry, humbly.

'She has done no harm,' said Felix. 'Mr. Audley has just been talking to me about that poor boy. He really is as untaught as that little scamp at the potteries that we tried to teach.'

'He's a stunning good fellow,' broke in Lance; 'he has seen an

alligator, and ridden mustangs.'

'Never mind that now, Lance; I dare say he is very amusing, but--'

'Don't hinder me from going to him,' broke in the younger boy vehemently.

'If,' said Felix gravely, 'you can be quite sure my Father would not mind it.'

Lance was nestling close up to him in the dark, and he was surprised to find that round face wet with tears. 'Papa would not let him lie dull and moped all day long,' he said. 'O Fee, I can't keep away; I am so sorry for him. When that terrible cramp comes, it is of no use to say those sort of things to him.'

'What sort of things?'

'Oh, you know; verses such as Papa used to have said to him. They weren't a bit of good. No, not though I did get the book Papa marked for Cherry.'

'You did!' gasped Cherry, who little thought that sacred possession of hers was even known to Master Lance.

'You'd have done it yourself, Cherry,' said the little boy, 'if you had only seen how bad he was; he got quite white, and had great drops on his forehead, and panted so, and would not let out a bit of a cry, only now and then a groan; and so I ran to get the verse Papa used to say over and over to you when your foot was bad. And I'm sure it was the right one, but--but--it did him no good, for, oh! he didn't know who our Saviour is;' and the little fellow clung to his brother in a passion of tears, while Felix felt a pang at the contrast.

'Have you been telling him, Lancey?' he asked.

'I wanted him to ask Mr. Audley, but he said he was a parson, and his father said that there would be no parsons if men were not fools. Now, Fee, I've told you, but don't keep me away.'

'It would be hard on a poor sick fellow,' said Felix, thoroughly softened. 'Only, Lance, you know I can't be with you; will you promise to go away if ever you think Papa would wish it?'

'Oh yes, one has to do that, you know, when our own fellows get blackguardly,' said little Lance, freely; whereat Cherry shuddered somewhat. 'And, Fee,' he added, 'if you would only come and make him understand about things.'

'Mr. Audley must do that,' said Felix; 'I can't.'

'You teach the boys in the Sunday-school,' said Lance. 'And he'd mind you, Blunderbore. He says you are the grandest and most splendiferous fellow he ever did set eyes on, and that he feels something like, when you've just looked in and spoken to him.'

'You little ass, he was chaffing you.'

'No, no, _indeed_ he wasn't. I told him all about it, because he

liked your face so much. And he does care so very much when you look in. Oh! _do, do_, Fee; he is so jolly, and it is so lonely and horrid for him, and I do so want Papa for him;' and the child cried silently, but Felix felt the long deep sobs, and as Geraldine, much moved, said, 'Dear little Lancey,' he carried him over to her as she sat up in bed, and she kissed and fondled him, and murmured in his ear, 'Dear Lance, I'm sure he'll get good. We will get Mr. Audley to talk to him, you know, and we will say a prayer every day for him.'

Lance, beginning to recover, put his arms round Cherry's neck, gave her a tremendous hug, released himself from his brother's arms, and ran off to bed. Felix remained a few moments, while Cherry exclaimed, 'Oh! the dear good little fellow!'

'Better than any of us,' said Felix. 'I was quite savage with Mr. Audley when I found out about it. I must go down and tell him. I never thought all that was in the little chap! I'm glad he came to you, Cherry. Good-night.'

'And you will try to teach this poor boy, Felix?'

'I don't say that. I don't in the least know how; but I shall not dare to hinder Lance, now I see how he goes on.'

On his way down he heard voices in the sitting-room, where, in fact, Mr. Audley had joined Wilmet, to explain to her how vexed he was to have so much annoyed Felix, and perhaps also something of his own annoyance at the manner in which Felix took it. Wilmet, partly from her 'growing on the sunny side of the wall,' partly from her early authority, was in some ways older than her brother, and could see that there was in him a shade of boyish jealousy of his prerogative; and as she sat, in her pretty modest gravity, with her fair hair and her Sunday frock, she was softly but earnestly telling Mr. Audley that she was sure Felix would not mind long, and that he was very sorry for the poor boy really, only he was so anxious about Lance, and he did like to be consulted. Both looked up, startled, as Felix opened the door, and they saw that his eyes were full of tears. He came up to Mr. Audley, and said, 'I beg your pardon, sir; I'd no business to grumble, and that little fellow has been--'

'Beforehand with us?' asked Mr. Audley, as Felix broke down. 'The nurse has been just telling me how he sat on his bed saying bits of psalms and verses to him when he had that bad fit of cramp, "so pretty," she said; but I was afraid it must have been rather like a spell.'

Felix told his story, feeling it too much not to make it lame, and with the tearfulness trembling in his voice and eyes all the time.

'Our little gamin has the most of the good Samaritan in him,' said Mr. Audley. 'Tis not quite the end I should have begun at, but perhaps it may work the better.'

'Dear little boy, that he should have remembered that sermon!' exclaimed Wilmet.

'I am afraid it is more than I do,' said Felix; 'all last summer the more I tried to listen, the more I saw how he was changing. Do you remember it, Wilmet?'

'Yes; the text was, "The joy of the Lord is your strength," and he said how praising God, and going on thinking about His goodness and thankfulness, was the way to make our adversaries dissolve before us, and never trouble us at all, just like the bands of the Moabites and Ammonites before Jehoshaphat.'

'I recollect it well, and how I thought it such a likeness of himself,' said Mr. Audley; 'he was walking over his troubles, scarcely seeing them, as if they could not dim the shine of his armour while he went on looking up and being thankful. I fancy little Lance has a good deal of that kind of bright fearless way.'

'He has,' said Felix in a grave thoughtful tone that made the Curate look at him and sigh to think how early care and grief had come to make that joyous buoyancy scarce possible to the elder boy, little more than seventeen though he was.

'He is very idle, though,' added Wilmet; 'such caricatures as there are all over his books! Edgar's were bad enough, but Lance puts pig-tails and cocked hats to all Edgar's.'

So Lance's visits to the sick stranger remained unobstructed. He had no notion of teaching him; but the foreign boy in his languor and helplessness curiously fascinated him, perhaps from the very contrast of the passive, indolent, tropical nature with his own mercurial temperament. The Spaniard, or perhaps the old Mexican, seemed to predominate in Fernando, as far as could be guessed in one so weak and helpless. He seemed very quiet and inanimate, seldom wanting or seeking diversion, but content to lie still, with half-closed eyes; his manner was reserved, and with something of courteous dignity, especially when Lady Price came to visit him; and the Yankeeisms that sometimes dropped from his tongue did not agree with the polish of the tone, and still less with the imperious manner in which he sometimes addressed the nurse. He seemed, though not clever, to be tolerably well cultivated; he had been at the schools of whatever cities his father had resided in, and his knowledge of languages was of course extensive.

However, he never talked freely to Mr. Audley. He had bitterly resented that gentleman's interference, one day when he was peremptorily commanding the nurse to place him in a position that had been forbidden, and the endeavour to control him had made him fearfully angry. There was a stormy outbreak of violent language, only checked by a severe rebuke, for which he did not forgive the Curate; he was coldly civil, and accepted the attentions he could not dispense with in a grave formal manner that would have been sulky in an English lad, but had something of the dreary grandeur of the Spanish Don from that dark lordly visage, and made Mr. Audley half provoked, half pitying, speak of him always as his Cacique. He only expanded a little even to Lance, though the little boy waited on him assiduously, chattering about school doings, illustrating them on a slate, singing to him, acting Blondin, exhibiting whatever he could lay his hands on, including the twins, whom he bore down one after the other, to the great wrath of Sibby, not to say of little Stella herself, while Theodore took the exhibition with perfect serenity.

As to Felix, he was, as Lance said, the subject of the sick lad's fervent admiration. Perhaps the open, fair, cheerful, though grave

countenance, fresh complexion, and strong, steadfast, upright bearing had something to do with the strange adoration that in his silent way Fernando paid to the youth, who looked in from time to time, bringing a sort of air of refreshment with his good-natured shy smile, even when he least knew what to say. Or else it was little Lance's fervent affection for Felix which had conduced to the erection of the elder brother into the idol of Fernando's fancy; and his briefest visit was the event of the long autumnal days spent in the uncurtained iron bed in the corner of the low room. The worship, silent though it was, was manifest enough to become embarrassing and ridiculous to the subject of it, whose sense of duty and compassion was always at war with his reluctance to expose himself to it. Not another word passed on any religious subject. Mr. Audley was not forgiven enough to venture on the attempt; the Rector was shy and frightened about it, and could make no beginning; and Mr. Mowbray Smith, who found great fault with them for their neglect, had been fairly stared down by the great black eyes, which, when the heavy lids were uplifted, proved to be of an immense size and force; and Felix was so sure that it could not be his business while three clergymen were going in and out that he had never done more than describe the weather, or retail any fresh bit of London news that had come down to the office.

At last, however, one November day, he found Fernando sitting up in bed, and Lance, perched on the table, talking so earnestly as not to perceive his entrance, until Fernando broke upon his words: 'There! it's no use!'

'Yes, it is,' cried Lance, jumping down. 'O Fee, I am glad you are come; I want you to tell him the rights of it.'

'The rights of what, Lance?'

'Tell him that it is all the devil's doing, and the men he has got on his side; and that it was the very thing our Saviour came for to set us free, only everybody won't,' said Lance clinging to his brother's hand and looking up in his face.

'That's about right, Lance,' said Felix, 'but I don't quite know what you are talking about.'

'Just this,' said Fernando. 'Lance goes on about God being merciful and good and powerful--Almighty, as he says; but whatever women may tell a little chap like that, nobody can think so that has seen the things I have, down in the West, with my own eyes.'

'Felix!' cried Lance, 'say it. You know and believe just as I do, as everybody good does, men and all.'

'Yes, indeed!' said Felix with all his heart.

'Then tell me how it can be,' said Fernando.

Felix stood startled and perplexed, feeling the awful magnitude and importance of the question, but also feeling his own incompetence to deal with it; and likewise that Wilmet was keeping the tea waiting for him. He much wished to say, 'Keep it for Mr. Audley,' but he feared to choke the dawning of faith, and he likewise feared the appearance of hesitation.

'Nobody can really explain it,' he said, 'but that's no wonder. One cannot explain a thunderstorm, but one knows that it is.'

'That's electricity,' said Fernando.

'And what's electricity?'

'A fluid that--'

'Yes; that's another word. But you can't get any farther. God made electricity, or whatever it is, and when you talk about explaining it, you only get to something that is. You know it is, and you can't get any farther,' he repeated.

'Well, that's true; though science goes beyond you in America.'

'But no searching finds out all about God!' said Felix reverently. 'All we know is that He is so infinitely great and wise, that of course we cannot understand why all He does is right, any more than a private soldier understands his general's orders.'

'And you--you,' said Fernando, 'are content to say you don't understand.'

'Why not?' said Felix.

There was a silence. Fernando seemed to be thinking; Lance gazed from one to the other, as if disappointed that his brother was not more explicit.

'And how do you know it is true?' added Fernando. 'I mean, what Lance has been telling me! What makes you sure of it, if you are?'

'If I am!' cried Felix, startled into indignation. 'To be sure I am!'

'But how?'

'I know it!' said Felix.

'How?'

'The Bible!' gasped Lance impatiently.

'Ay; so you have said for ever,' broke in Fernando; 'but what authenticates that?'

'The whole course of history,' said Felix. 'There is a great chain of evidence, I know, but I never got it up. I can't tell it you, Fernando, I never wanted it, never even tried to think about the proofs. It is all too sure.'

'But wouldn't a Mahometan say that?' said Fernando.

'If he did, look at the Life of our Lord and of Mahomet together, and see which must be the true prophet--the Way, the Life, the Truth.'

'That one could do,' said Fernando thoughtfully. 'I say' as Felix made a movement as if he thought the subject concluded, 'I want to

know one thing more. Lance says it is believing all this that makes you--any one I mean--good.'

'I don't know what else should,' said Felix, smiling a little; the question seemed to him so absurd.

'Is it really what makes you go and slave away at that old boss's of yours?'

'Why, that's necessity and my duty,' said Felix.

'And is it what makes this little coon come and spend all his play-hours on a poor fellow with a broken leg? I've been at many schools, and never saw the fellow who would do that.'

'Oh! you are such fun!' cried Lance.

'All that is right comes from God first and last,' said Felix gravely.

'And you--you that are no child--you believe all that Lance tells me you do, and think it makes you what you are!'

'I believe it; yes, of course. And believing it should make me much better than I am! I hope it will in time.'

'Ah!' sighed Fernando. 'I never heard anything like it since my father said he'd take the cow-hide to poor old Diego, if he caught him teaching me nigger-cant.'

They left him.

'Poor fellow!' sighed Felix; 'what have you been telling him, Lance?'

'Oh, I don't know; only why things were good and bad,' was Lance's lucid answer; and he was then intent on detailing the stories he had heard from Fernando. He had been in the worst days of Southern slavery ere its extinction, on the skirts of the deadly warfare with the Red Indians; and the poor lad had really known of horrors that curdled the blood of Wilmet and Geraldine, and made the latter lie awake or dream dreadful dreams all night.

But the next day Mr. Audley was startled to hear the two friends in the midst of an altercation. When Lance had come in for his mid-day recreation, Fernando had produced five shillings, desiring him to go and purchase a Bible for him; but Lance, who had conceived the idea that the Scriptures ought not to be touched by an unchristened hand, flatly refused, offering, however, to read from his own. Now Lance's reading was at that peculiar school-boy stage which seems calculated to combine the utmost possible noise with the least possible distinctness; and though he had good gifts of ear and voice, and his reciting and singing were both above the average, the moment a book was before him, he roared his sentences between his teeth in horrible monotony. And as he began with the first chapter of St. Matthew, and was not perfectly able to cope with all the names, Fernando could bear it no longer, and insisted on having the book itself. Lance shook his head and refused; and matters were in this stage when Mr. Audley, not liking the echoes of the voices, opened the door. 'What is it?' he asked anxiously.

'Nothing,' replied Fernando, proudly trying to swallow his vexation.

'Lance!' said Mr. Audley rather severely; but just then, seeing what book the child was holding tight under his arm, he decided to follow him out of the room and interrogate.

'What was it, Lance?'

'He ought not to touch a Bible--he sha'n't have mine,' said Lance resentfully.

'Was he doing anything wrong with it?'

'Oh no! But he ought not to have it before he is christened, and I would have read to him.'

Mr. Audley knew what Lance's reading was, and smiled.

'Was that all, Lance? I like your guardianship of the Bible, my boy; but it was not given only to those who are Christians already, or how could any one learn?'

'He sha'n't touch mine, though,' said Lance, with an odd sturdiness; stumping upstairs with his treasure, a little brown sixpenny S. P. C. K. book, but in which his father had written his name on his last birthday but one.

Mr. Audley only waited to take down a New Testament, and present himself at Fernando's bedside, observing gladly that there was much more wistfulness than offence about his expression.

'It was a scruple on the young man's part,' said Mr. Audley, smiling, though full of anxiety; 'he meant no unkindness.'

'I know he did not,' said Fernando quietly, but gazing at the purple book in the clergyman's hands.

'Did you want this?' said Mr. Audley; 'or can I find anything in it for you?'

'Thank you;' and there was a pause. The offended manner towards Mr. Audley had been subsiding of late into friendliness under his constant attentions, and Fernando's desire for an answer prevailed at last. 'Felix told me to read the Life of Christ,' he said, not irreverently, 'and that it would show me He must be True.'

'I hope and trust that so it may be,' said Mr. Audley, more moved than he could bear to show, but with fervour in his voice far beyond his words.

'Felix,' said Fernando, resting on the name, 'Felix does seem as if he must be right, Mr. Audley; can it be really as he says--and Lance--that their belief makes them like what they are?'

'Most assuredly.'

'And you don't say so only because you are a minister?' asked the boy distrustfully.

'I say so because I know it. I knew that it is the Christian faith that makes all goodness, long before I was a minister.'

'But I have seen plenty of Christians that were not in the least like Felix Underwood.'

'So have I; but in proportion as they live up to their faith, they have what is best in him.'

'I should like to be like him,' mused Fernando; 'I never saw such a fellow. He, and little Lance too, seem to belong to something bright and strong, that seems inside and outside, and I can't lay hold of what it is.'

'One day you will, my dear boy,' said Mr. Audley. 'Let me try to help you.'

Fernando scarcely answered, save by half a smile, and a long sigh of relief: but when Mr. Audley put his hand over the long brown fingers, they closed upon it.

CHAPTER VII

THE CHESS-PLAYER'S BATTLE

'Dost thou believe, he said, that Grace
Itself can reach this grief?
With a feeble voice and a woeful eye--
"Lord, I believe," was the sinner's reply,
"Help Thou mine unbelief."'

SOUTHEY.

By the beginning of the Christmas holidays, Fernando Travis was able to lie on a couch in Mr. Audley's sitting-room. His recovery was even tardier than had been expected, partly from the shock, and partly from the want of vigour of the tropical constitution: and he still seemed to be a great way from walking, though there was no reason to fear that the power would not return. His father wrote, preparing for a journey to Oregon, and seemed perfectly satisfied, and he was becoming very much at home with his host.

He was much interested in that which he was learning from Mr. Audley, and imbibing from the young Underwoods. The wandering life he had hitherto led, without any tenderness save from the poor old negro, without time to make friends, and often exposed to the perception of some of the darkest sides of human life, in the terrible lawlessness of the Mexican frontier, had hitherto made him dull, dreary, and indifferent, with little perception that there could be anything better; but first the kindness and then the faith he saw at Bexley, had awakened new perceptions and sensations. His whole soul was opening to perceive what the love of God and man might be; and the sense of a great void, and longing to have it satisfied, seemed to

fill him with a constant craving for the revelation of that inner world, whose existence had just dawned upon him.

After a little hesitation, Mr. Audley decided on reading with Geraldine in his presence after he had come into the sitting-room, explaining to her how he thought it might be helpful. She did not much like it, but acquiesced: she used to hop in with her sweet smile, shy greeting, and hand extended to the invalid, who used to lie looking at her through his long eyelashes, and listening to her low voice reading or answering, as if she were no earthly creature; but the two were far too much in awe of one another to go any farther; and he got on much better with Wilmet, when she looked in on him now and then with cheery voice and good-natured care.

Then Fulbert and Robina came home; and the former was half suspicious, half jealous, of Lance's preoccupation with what he chose to denominate 'a black Yankee nigger.' He avoided the room himself, and kept Lance from it as much as was in his power; and one day Lance appeared with a black eye, of which he concealed the cause so entirely, that Felix, always afraid of his gamin tendencies, entreated Fulbert, as a friend, to ease his mind by telling him it was not given in a street row.

'I did it,' said Fulbert; 'he was so cocky about his Yankee that I could not stand it.'

'Why shouldn't he be kind to a poor sick fellow?'

'He has no business to be always bothering about Fernando here-- Fernando there--Fernando for ever. I shall have him coming up to school a regular spoon, and just not know what to do with him.'

'Well, Fulbert, I think if you had a broken leg you'd wish some one to speak to you. At any rate, I can't have Lance bullied for his good nature; I was very near doing it myself once, but I was shamed out of it.'

'Were you--were you, indeed?' cried Fulbert, delighted at this confession of human nature; and Felix could not help laughing. And that laugh did much to bring him down from the don to the brother. At any rate, Fulbert ceased his persecution in aught but word.

Robina, always Lance's companion, followed him devotedly, and only hung about the stairs forlorn when he went to Fernando without her; or if admitted, she was quite content to sit serenely happy in her beloved Lance's presence, expecting neither notice nor amusement, only watching their occupation of playing at draughts. Sometimes, however, Lance would fall to playing with her, and they would roll on the floor, a tumbling mass of legs, arms, and laughter, to the intense diversion of Fernando, to whom little girls were beings of an unknown order.

So came on Christmas, with the anniversaries so sweet and so sad, and the eve of holly-dressing, when a bundle of bright sprays was left by some kind friend at No. 8, and Lance and Bobbie were vehement to introduce Fernando to English holly and English decking.

Geraldine suggested that they had better wait for either Mr. Audley or Wilmet to come in, but for this they had no patience, and ran down

with their arms full of the branches, and their tongues going with the description of the night's carols, singing them with their sweet young voices as they moved about the room. Fernando knew now what Christmas meant, but the joy and exhilaration of the two children, seemed to him strange for such a bygone event. He asked them if they would have any treat.

'Oh no! except, perhaps, Mr. Audley said he should drink tea one day,' said Robina. And then she broke out again, 'Hark! the herald angels,' like a little silver bell.

Suddenly there was a cry of dismay. She had been standing on a chair over the mantelpiece, sticking holly into the ornaments, behind and under which, in true man's fashion, a good many papers and letters had accumulated. One of these papers--by some unlucky movement--fell, and by a sudden waft of air floated irrevocably into the hottest place in the fire.

'O dear! oh dear!' wailed Robina.

'That's a pretty go,' cried Lancelot.

'That comes of your open fires,' observed Fernando.

'What was it?' asked Lance.

'I don't know. I think it was a list of names! Oh! how vexed he'll be, and Wilmet; for she told me never to get on a chair over the fender, and I forgot.' Bobbie's round face was puckering for a cry.

'No, no, don't cry, Bob; I told you to get up, and I'll say so,' said Lance, smothering her in his arms after the wont of consoling brothers.

'I dare say he'll not miss it,' said Fernando good-naturedly; 'he very seldom meddles with those things.'

Bobbie's great round gray eyes came out over Lance's shoulder, and flashed amazement and wrath at him. 'I'm not going to tell stories,' she said stoutly.

'No,' said Lance, equally scandalised; 'I thought you had learnt better, Fernando.'

Robina, be it observed, was ignorant of Fernando's untaught state.

'I only said you could hold your tongue,' was of course Fernando's rejoinder.

'That's just as bad,' was the little girl's response.

'But, Lance, you held your tongue about your black eye.'

'That's my affair, and _nobody else's_,' said Lance, flushing up and looking cross at the allusion.

'And Fulbert told!' added Robina.

'Will they punish you?' asked Fernando.

'I think Wilmet will, because it was disobedience! I don't think she'll let me have any butter at tea,' Bobbie nearly sobbed. 'Mr. Audley won't punish! But he'll look--' and she quite cried now.

'And do you like that better than not telling?' said Fernando, still curious.

She looked up, amazed again. 'I must! I don't like it! But I couldn't ever have a happy Christmas if I didn't tell! I wish they would come that I might have it over.'

The street door opened at the moment, and Mr. Audley and Wilmet came in together from Lady Price's convocation of the parish staff. Fernando heard the sobbing confession in the passage, and Lance's assurance that he had been art and part in the disobedience, and Wilmet gravely blaming the child, and Mr. Audley telling her not to think so much about the loss as the transgression; and then the door was shut, and he heard no more, till Mr. Audley came in, examined the chimney-piece, and performed the elegy of the list in a long low whistle.

'Is much harm done?' Fernando asked.

'Not much; only I must go and get another list made out, and I am afraid I shall not be able to come in again before church.'

'I hope they have not punished her?'

'Wilmet recommended not taking the prize prayer-book to church, and she acquiesced with tears in her eyes. A good child's repentance is a beautiful thing--'

"'O happy in repentance' school
So early taught and tried."

These last words were said to himself as he picked up his various goods, and added, 'I must get some tea at the Rectory. I am sorry to leave you, but I hope one of them will come down.'

They did not, except that they peeped in for a moment to wish him good-night, and regretted that they had not known him to be alone.

As Felix was going out to begin the Christmas Feast in the darkness of morning, he looked in as he usually did, since Mr. Audley, sleeping out of the house, never came in till after early church. The nurse, who still slept in the room, was gone to dress; there was only a flickering night-light, and the room looked very desolate and forlorn, still more so the voice that called out to him, 'Felix! oh, Felix! is that you?'

'Yes. A happy Christmas to you,' said Felix.

'Happy--! there was a sort of groan.

'Why, what's the matter? have you had a bad night? Aren't you so well?'

'I don't know. Come here, I must speak to you.'

Felix was, as usual, in a great haste, but the tone startled him.

'Felix, I can't stand this any longer. I must let you know what a frightful, intolerable wretch I've been. I tried to teach Lance to bet.'

'Fernando!' He was so choked with indignation, he could not say more.

'He wouldn't do it. Not after he understood it. It seems he tried it with another little boy at school, and one of the bigger ones boxed his ears and rowed him.'

'Ay; Bruce promised me to look after him.'

'So he refused. He told me he was on his honour to you not to stay if I did anything your father would have disapproved. He did leave me once, when I would not leave off.'

'But how could you?'

'I was so bored--so intolerably dull--and it is the only thing on earth that one cares to do.'

'But Lance had nothing to stake.'

'I could lend him! Ah! you don't know what betting is; why, we all do it--women, boys and all!' His voice became excited, and Felix in consternation broke in--'When did you do this?'

'Oh! weeks ago. Before I was out of bed. When I found my dice in my purse; but I have not tried it since, with him!'

'With whom, then?'

'Why--don't fall on him--with Fulbert. He knew what it meant. Now, Felix, don't come on him for it. Come on me as much as you please. I've been a traitor to you. I see it now.'

'Anything but that!' sighed Felix, too much appalled for immediate forgiving, dejected as was the voice that spoke to him.

'Yes, yes, I know! I see. The worst thing I could do,' said Fernando, turning his face in on the pillow, in so broken-hearted a manner that Felix's kindness and generosity were roused.

'Stay, don't be so downcast,' he said. 'There's no harm done with Lance, and you being so sorry will undo it with Fulbert! I do thank you for telling me, really, only it upset me at first.'

'Upset! Yes, you'll be more so when you hear the rest,' said Fernando, raising his head again. 'Do you know who set that inn on fire?'

'Nobody does.'

'Well, I did.'

'Nonsense! You've had a bad night! You don't know what you are talking about,' said Felix, anxiously laying hold of one of the hot hands--perceiving that his own Christmas Day must begin with mercy, not sacrifice, and beginning to hope the first self-accusation was also delirious.

'Tell me. Didn't the fire begin in the ball-room? Somebody told me so.'

'Yes, the waiter saw it there.'

'Then I did it; I threw the end of a cigar among the flummery in the grate,' cried Fernando, falling back from the attitude into which he had raised himself, with a gesture of despair.

'Nobody can blame you.'

'Stay. It was after father and uncle had gone! I was smoking at the window of our room, and the landlord came in and ordered me not, because some ladies in the next room objected. He told me I might come down to the coffee-room; but I had never heard of such meddling, and I jawed him well; but he made me give in somehow. Only when I saw that big ball-room all along the side of the building, I just took a turn in it with my cigar to spite him. Poor Diego came up and begged me not, but you know the way one does with a nigger. Oh!'

Felix did not know; but the voice broke down in such misery and horror, that his soul seemed to sink within him. 'Have you had this on your mind all this time?' he asked kindly.

'No, no. It didn't come to me. I think I've been a block or a stone. The dear faithful fellow, that loved me as no one ever did. I've been feeling the kiss he gave me at the window all to-night. And then I've been falling--falling--falling in his black arms--down--down to hell itself. Not that he is there; but I murdered him, you know--and some one else besides, wasn't there?'

'This is like delirium, really, Fernando,' said Felix, putting his arms round him to lay him down, as he raised himself on his elbow. 'I must call some one if you seem so ill.'

'I wish it was illness,' said Fernando with a shudder. 'Oh! don't go--don't let me go--if you can bear to touch me--when you know all!'

'There can't be any worse to know. You had better not talk.'

'I must! I must tell you all I really am, though you will never let your brothers come near me, or the little angels--your sisters. I'd not have dared look at them myself if I had known it, but things never seemed so to me before.'

Felix shivered at the thought of what he was to hear, but he gave himself up to listen kindly, and to his relief he gathered from the incoherent words that there was no great stain of crime, as he had feared; but that the boy had come to open his eyes to the evils of the life in which he had shared according to his age, and saw them in their foulness, and with an agonised sense of shame and pollution. Felix could not help asking whether this had long dwelt on his

thoughts.

'No,' he said, 'that's the wonder! I thought myself a nice, gentlemanly, honourable fellow. Oh!' with a groan. 'Fancy that! I never thought of recollecting these things, or what they have made me. Only, somehow, when those children seemed so shocked at my advising them to hold their tongues about their bit of mischief--I thought first what fools you all were to be so scrupulous, and then I recollected the lots of things I have concealed, till I began to think, Is this honour--would it seem so to Lance--or Felix? And then came down on me the thought of what you believe, of God seeing it all, and laying it up against one for judgment; and I know--I know it is true!' and there came another heavy groan, and the great eyes shone in the twilight in terror.

'If you know that is true,' said Felix, steadfastly and tenderly, 'you know something else too. You know Whom He sent into the world for our pardon for these things.'

There was a tightening of the grasp as if in acquiescence and comfort; but the nurse came back to tidy the room, and still Fernando clung to Felix, and would not let him go. She opened the shutters, and then both she and Felix were dismayed to see how ill and spent her patient looked; for she had slept soundly through his night of silent anguish and remorse--misery that, as Felix saw by his face, was pressing on him still with intolerable weight.

By the time the woman had finished Mr. Audley came in, and seeing at once that Felix's absence was accounted for by Fernando's appearance, he stepped up at once to the bed, full of solicitude. Felix hardly knew whether to reply or escape; but Fernando's heart was too full for his words not to come at once.

'No, I am not worse, but I see it all now.--Tell him, Felix; I cannot say it again.'

'Fernando thinks--' Felix found he could hardly speak the words either--'Fernando is afraid that it was an accident of his own--'

'Don't say an accident. It was passion and spite,' broke in Fernando.

'That caused the fire at the Fortinbras Arms,' Felix was obliged to finish.

'Not on purpose!' exclaimed Mr. Audley.

'Almost as much as if it had been,' said Fernando. 'I smoked to spite the landlord for interfering, and threw away the end too angry to heed where. There!' he added grimly; 'Felix won't tell me how many I murdered besides my poor old black. How many?'

'Do not speak in that way, my poor boy,' said Mr. Audley. At least, this is better than the weight you have had on your mind so long.'

'How many?' repeated Fernando.

'Two more lives were lost,' said Mr. Audley gently, 'Mr. Jones's baby and its nurse. But you must not use harder words than are just, Fernando. It was a terrible result, but consequences do not make the

evil.'

He made a kind of murmur, then turning round, uneasily said, 'That is not all; I have seen myself, Mr. Audley.'

Mr. Audley looked at Felix, who spoke with some difficulty and perplexity. 'He has been very unhappy all night. He thinks things wrong that he never thought about before.'

Mr. Audley felt exceedingly hopeful at those words; but he was alarmed at the physical effect on his patient, and felt that the present excitement was mischievous. 'I understand in part,' he said. 'But it seems to me that he is too restless and uncomfortable to think or understand now. It may be that he may yet see the joy of to-day; but no more talk now. Have you had your breakfast?'

He shook his head, but Felix had to go away, and breakfast and dressing restored Fernando to a more tranquil state. He slept, too, wearied out, when he was placed on his couch, while Felix was at Christmas service, singing, as he had never sung before,--

'Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled.'

Oh! was the poor young stranger seeing the way to that reconciliation? and when Lancelot's sweet clear young notes rose up in all their purity, and the rosy honest face looked upwards with an expression elevated by the music, Felix could not help thinking that the boy had verily sung those words of truth and hope into the poor dark lonely heart. Kindness, steadfastness, truth, in that merry-hearted child had been doing their work, and when Lance marched away with the other lesser choristers, the elder brother felt as if the younger had been the more worthy to 'draw near in faith.'

Fernando was more like himself when Felix came in, but he was a good deal shaken, and listened to the conventional Christmas greeting like mockery, shrinking from the sisters, when they looked in on him, with what they thought a fresh access of shyness, but which was a feeling of terrible shame beside the innocence he ascribed to them.

'I wish I could help that poor boy,' sighed Wilmet. 'He does look so very miserable!'

And Geraldine's eyes swam in tears as she thought of the loneliness of his Christmas, and without that Christmas joy that even her mother's dulled spirit could feel--the joy that bore them through the recollections of this time last year.

Lance's desire to cheer took the more material form of acting as Fernando's special waiter at the consumption of the turkey, which Mr. Audley had insisted on having from home, and eating in company with the rest, to whom it was a 'new experience,' being only a faint remembrance even to Felix and Wilmet; but Fernando had no appetite, and even the sight of his little friend gave him a pang.

'Do you want any one to stay with you!' asked Lance. 'If Cherry _would_ do--for Felix said he would take Fulbert and me out for a

jolly long walk, to see the icicles at Bold's Hatch.'

'No, I want no one. You are better without me.'

'I'll stay if you do want it,' said Lance, very reluctantly. 'I don't like your not having one bit of Christmas. Shall I sing you one Christmas hymn before I go?' And Lance broke into the 'Herald Angels' again.

'Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth.'

Fernando's face was bathed in tears; he held out his arms, and to little Lance's great amazement, somewhat to his vexation, he held him fast and kissed him.

'What did you do that for?' he asked in a gruff astonished voice.

'Never mind!' said Fernando. 'Only I think I see what this day can be! Now go.'

Presently Mr. Audley came softly in. The lad's face was turned in to his cushion, his handkerchief over it; and as the young priest stood watching him, what could be done but pray for the poor struggling soul? At last he turned round, and looked up.

'I saw it again,' he said with a sigh.

'Saw what!'

'What you all mean. It touched me, and seemed true and real when Lance was singing. What was it--"Born to save the sons of earth"? Oh! but such as I am, and at my age, too!'

And with a few words from Mr. Audley, there came such a disburthening of self-accusation as before to Felix. It seemed as if the terrible effects of his wilfulness at the inn--horrified as he was at them--were less oppressive to his conscience than his treachery to his host in his endeavour to gamble with the little boys. He had found a pair of dice in his purse when looking for the price of a Bible, and the sight had awakened the vehement hereditary Mexican passion for betting, the bane of his mother's race. His father, as a clever man of the world, hated and prohibited the practice; but Fernando had what could easily become a frenzy for that excitement of the lazy south, and even while he had seen it in its consequences, the intense craving for the amusement had mastered him more than once, when loathing the dulness and weariness of his confinement, and shrinking from the doctrines he feared to accept. He knew it was dishonourable--yet he had given way; and he felt like one utterly stained, unpardonable, hopeless: but there was less exaggeration in his state of mind than in the early morning, and when Mr. Audley dwelt on the Hope of sinners, his eyes glistened and brightened; and at the further words that held out to him the assurance that all these sins might be washed away, and he himself enabled to begin a new life, his looks shone responsively; but he shook his head soon--'It went away

from him,' he said; poor boy! 'it was too great and good to be true.'

Then Mr. Audley put prayer before him as a means of clinging even blindly to the Cross that he was barely beginning to grasp, and the boy promised. He would do anything they would, could he but hope to be freed from the horrible weight of sense of hopeless pollution that had come upon him.

For some days he did not seem able to read anything but the Gospels and the Baptismal Service; and at length, after a long silence, he said, 'Mr. Audley, if your sermon is finished, can you listen to me? May I be baptized?'

Then indeed the Curate's heart bounded, but he had to keep himself restrained. The father's consent he had secured beforehand, but he thought Fernando ought to write to him; and it was also needful to consult the Rector as to the length of actual preparation and probation.

Then, when the question came, 'Can I indeed be like Felix and Lancelot' the reply had to be cautious. 'You will be as entirely pardoned, as entirely belonging to the holiness within and without, as they; but how far you will have the consciousness, I cannot tell; and it is very probable that your temptations may be harder. Guilt may be forgiven, while habits retain their power; and they have been guarded, taught self-restraint, and had an example before them in their father, such as very few have been blessed with.'

Fernando sighed long and sadly, and said, 'Then you do not think it will make much difference.'

'The difference between life and death! But you must expect to have to believe rather than feel. But go on, and it will all be clear.'

The Rector was at first anxious to wait for definite sanction from the father; but as Mr. Audley was sure of the permission he had received, and no letter could be had for several months, he agreed to examine the lad, and write to the Bishop--a new Bishop, who had been appointed within the last year, and who was coming in the spring for a Confirmation.

Mr. Bevan was really delighted with the catechumen, and wrote warmly of him. The reply was, that if the Baptism could take place the day before the Confirmation, which was to be in a month's time, the Bishop himself would like to be present, and the youth could be confirmed the next day. There was much that was convenient in this, for it gave time for Fernando to make progress in moving about. He had made a start within the last week or two, was trying to use crutches, and had been out on fine days in a chair; and once or twice Lady Price had taken him for a drive, though she had never thought of doing so by Geraldine. The doctor said that change of air would probably quite restore his health; and he had only to wait to be a little less dependent before he was to go to a tutor, an old friend of the Audley family.

Everything promised well; but one wet afternoon, in the interim between the end of Lance's and that of Fulbert's holidays, Mr. Audley, while coming down from a visit to Mrs. Underwood, fancied he heard an ominous rattle, and opening the door suddenly, found

Fernando and Fulbert eagerly throwing the dice and with several shillings before them.

Both started violently as he entered, and Fulbert put his arm and hand round as if to hide the whole affair; while Fernando tried to look composed.

All that the Curate said in his surprise was one sharp sentence. 'Fernando Travis, if you are to renounce the devil, you will have to begin by throwing those dice into the fire.'

Fernando's eyes looked furious, and he swept the dice and the money into his pocket--all but three shillings. Fulbert stole out of the room quietly. No doubt these were his winnings, which he did not dare to touch.

Mr. Audley took up a book and waited, fully expecting that sorrow would follow; but Fernando did not speak; and when at length he did on some indifferent matter, it was in his ordinary tone. Well, there must be patience. No doubt repentance would come at night! No; the evening passed on, and Fernando was ready for all their usual occupations. Perhaps it would come with Felix, or in the dawn after a troubled night. Alas! no. And moreover, Felix, to whom it was necessary to speak, was exceedingly angry and vexed, and utterly incredulous of there being any good in the character that could be so fickle, if not deceitful and hypocritical. His own resolute temper had no power of comprehending the unmanliness of erring against the better will; he was absolutely incapable of understanding the horrible lassitude and craving for excitement that must have tempted Fernando, and he was hard and even ashamed of himself for having ever believed in the lad's sincerity.

This anger, too, made him speak with such a threatening tone to Fulbert as to rouse the doggedness of the boy's nature. All that could be got out of Fulbert was that 'his going there was all Felix's doing,' and he would not manifest any sign of regret, such as would be any security against his introducing the practice among the clergy orphans, or continuing it all his life. He was not a boy given to confidences, and neither Wilmet nor Cherry could get him beyond his glum declaration that it was Felix's fault, he only wanted to keep out of the fellow's way. They could only take comfort in believing that he was really ashamed, and that he suffered enough within to be a warning against the vice itself.

As to Fernando, he made no sign, he went on as if nothing had happened; and nothing was observable about him, but that he showed himself intensely weary of his present mode of life, put on at times the manners that were either those of the Spanish Don or of the Indian Cacique, and seemed to shrink from the prospect of the English tutor. Yet he continued his preparation for baptism, and Mr. Bevan was satisfied with him; but Mr. Audley was perplexed and unhappy over the reserve that had sprung up between them, and could not decide whether to make another attempt or leave the lad to himself.

One afternoon, only ten days from the time fixed for the Bishop's visit, Mr. Audley returned from a clerical meeting to find an unexpected visitor in the room--namely, Alfred Travis, Fernando's uncle, a more Americanised and rougher person than his brother. He rose as he entered. 'Good morning, Mr. Audley; you have taken good

care of your charge. He is fit to start with me to-morrow. See a surgeon in town--then to Liverpool--'

'Indeed!' Mr. Audley caught a deprecating look from Fernando. 'Do you come from his father?'

'Well--yes and no. His father is still in the Oregon; but he and I have always been one--and opening the boy's letters, and finding him ready to move, I thought, as I had business in England, I'd come and fetch him, and just settle any claim the fellow at yonder hotel may have cheek enough to set up, since Fernan was green enough to let it out.'

'May I ask if you have any authority from his father?'

'Authority! Bless you! William will be glad to see his boy; we don't go by authority between brothers.'

'Because,' continued Mr. Audley, 'I heard from your brother that he wished Fernando to remain with me to receive an English education.'

'All sentiment and stuff! He knew better before we had sailed! An English squire in this wretched old country, forsooth! when the new republic is before him! No, no, Mr. Audley, I'll be open with you. I saw what you were up to when I got your letter, and Fernan--Got his lesson very well, he had. And when I came down, a friend in London gave me another hint. It won't do, I can assure you. That style of thing is all very well for you spruce parsons of good family, as you call it in the old country; but we are not going to have a rising young fellow like this, with a prospect of what would buy out all your squires and baronets in the old country, beslobbered and befooled with a lot of Puseyite cant. You've had your turn of him; it is time he should come and be a man again.'

Mr. Audley was dizzy with consternation. Fernando was no child. He was full sixteen, and he was so far recovered that his health formed no reason for detaining him. If he chose to go with his uncle, he must. If not--what then? He looked at Fernando, who sat uneasily.

'You hear what your uncle says?' he asked.

'I told him,' said Fernando, 'I must wait for a fortnight.' He spoke with eyes cast down, but not irresolutely.

His uncle broke out--He knew what that meant; it was only that he might be flattered by the Bishop and all the ladies, and made a greater fool of than ever. No, no, he must be out again by May, and he should just have time to take Fernan to one of the gay boarding-houses at Saratoga, and leave him there to enjoy himself.

'I have letters from my father,' said Fernando, looking up to Mr. Audley, 'before he went to Oregon. He said nothing.'

'Do you wish to stay?' said Mr. Audley, feeling that all depended on that, and trying to hide the whirl of anxiety and disappointment he felt.

The answer was not what he expected. Fernando sat upright in his chair, looked up to him and then at his uncle, and said low but

resolutely, 'I will stay.'

'Then you shall stay,' said Mr. Audley.

'You have worked upon him, I see, sir, with your old-world prejudiced superstition,' said Alfred Travis, evidently under the delusion that he was keeping his temper. 'A proper fool my brother was to leave him to you. But you do it at your peril. I shall see if there's power even in this old country to keep a boy from his own relations. You'll see me again, Fernan. You had better make ready.'

The words were not unaccompanied with expletives such as had never been personally uttered to Charles Audley before, and that brought the hot colour to his cheek. When he looked round, Fernando's face was covered with his hands. 'Oh! Mr. Audley,' he cried, as his uncle hastily shut the door, 'is he going to send for the police?'

'I do not believe he can do any such thing,' said Mr. Audley, seeing that Fernando was in great nervous agitation. 'I have authority from your father, he has none; and you are old enough to make your own decision. You really mean and wish to stay?' he added.

'I told him so from the first,' said Fernando.

'Then he has no power to force you away.'

Fernando was silent. Then he said, 'If I could have gone after my Baptism.'

'Would you have wished that?' said Mr. Audley, somewhat disappointed.

The tears were now on the long black lashes.

'Oh, don't think me ungrateful, or-- But this English life does come over me as intolerably dull and slow. No life nor go in it. Sometimes I feel sick of it; and going back to books and all, after what I have been used to. If my uncle could wait for my Baptism, or,' more hesitating, 'if I could be baptized at once. Men do lead Christian lives out there. I would try to keep from evil, Mr. Audley. I see your face! Is this another temptation of the devil?'

'I think it is an attempt of his,' said Mr. Audley, sadly. 'Even here you have not been able to abstain entirely from giving way to your old passion, when you had little temptation, and felt your honour bound. What will it be when you have comparatively no restraint?'

'I am resolved not to go unbaptized,' said Fernando. 'I said so from the first, but he will not wait! Yet if my father sends for me, I must go.'

'Then it will be your duty, and you will have more right to look for help. Besides, a summons from your father could not come for three or four months, and in that time you would have had time to gain something in Christian practice and training.'

'Oh, there is the bell! Must you go, Mr. Audley? He will come back!'

'I wish I could stay, but Smith is gone to Dearport, and I do not know whether the Rector is in. Besides, this must be your own doing,

Fernan, not mine. I shall pray for you, that you well know. Pray for yourself, for this is a real crisis of life. God bless you, my dear boy.' He laid his hand on the head, and Fernando looked up gratefully, then said, 'You never did that before. May Lance come to me, if he has not gone?'

'I will call him,' said Mr. Audley, seeing that he really dreaded being alone. The little boy was on the stairs with something in his hand. 'Go in to Fernan,' he was told, 'he wants you. What have you got there?'

'This queer drawing. Cherry found it in an old portfolio, and has been copying it.'

It was Ketzsch's outline of the chess-player, and it almost startled Mr. Audley by its appropriateness. He went out to Evensong, and never was more glad to get back to reinforce the feeble garrison.

Lance opened the front door to him. 'I'm so glad you are come!' he said. 'Mr. Bruce is there.'

'Not the uncle?'

'No, only Mr. Bruce.'

Mr. Bruce was a lawyer, and a very respectable man, in whom Mr. Audley felt confidence. He rose at the clergyman's entrance, and asked to speak to him in another room, so he was taken into the little back dining-room, and began--'This is a very unpleasant business, Mr. Audley; this gentleman is very much annoyed, and persuaded that he has a right to carry off his nephew; but as I told him, it all turns upon the father's expressions. Have you any written authority from him?'

Mr. Audley had more than one letter, thanking him, and expressing full satisfaction in the proposed arrangements for Fernando; and this Mr. Bruce thought was full justification, together with the youth's own decided wishes. The words were likewise clear, by which William Travis had given consent to his son's Baptism, but there was no witness of them. Mr. Bruce explained that Alfred Travis, who seemed to regard Fernando as the common property of the brothers, had come to him in what he gently termed 'a great state of excitement,' complaining of a Puseyite plot. He had evidently taken umbrage at the tone of the letters he had opened for his brother, and had been further prejudiced by some Dearport timber merchant he had met at Liverpool, who had told him how the parson had got hold of his nephew, and related a farrago of gossip about St. Oswald's. He was furious at the opposition, and could not understand that law in the old country was powerless in this case, because he was neither father nor guardian. In fact he seemed to be master of his brother; and Mr. Bruce told Mr. Audley that it was quite to be considered whether though law was on his side now, the father might not be brought over to the brother's side, be very angry at the detention of the boy, and refuse the payment, which, while he was in America, could not be forced from him. Of that Mr. Audley could happily afford to run the risk; and Mr. Bruce said he had also set before the young gentleman that he might have to suffer much displeasure from his father for his present refusal, although his right to make it was incontestable. To this Fernando had likewise made up his mind; and Mr. Bruce, who had

never seen him before, thought he looked utterly unfit for a long journey and sea voyage, so that the uncle had taken nothing by his application to the law.

Fernando was flushed and panting, but more resolute, for resentment at the attempt at force had come to back him up, and rouse the spirit of resistance. Not half an hour had elapsed before there was another ring at the door. The uncle and lawyer were come together now. It was to make a last offer to Fernando; Mr. Alfred Travis offered to take him up to London the next day, and there to have advice as to the safety of the voyage, in the meantime letting him be baptized, if nothing else would satisfy him, but by some London clergyman--not one of the Bexley set whom the uncle regarded with such aversion.

Fernando drew himself up, and stood, leaning on the end of the sofa. 'Thank you, uncle,' he said, 'I cannot. I am obeying my father now, and I will not leave those to whom he trusted me.'

There followed a volley of abuse of his English obstinacy and Spanish pride and canting conceit, which made Mr. Bruce stand aghast, and Fernando look up with burning cheeks and eyes glowing like hot coals; but with the Indian impassibility he did not speak till Alfred Travis had threatened him not only with his father's displeasure, but with being cast off by both, and left to his English friends' charity.

'My father will not!' said Fernando. 'If he sends for me I will come.' But there his strength suddenly collapsed, and he was forced to sit down and lean back.

'Well, Fernan,' said his uncle, suddenly withdrawing his attempt when he found it vain, 'you seem hardly in marching order, so I'm off by the night train; but if you change your mind in the next week, write to me at Peter Brown's--you know--and I'll run down. I will save you the coming out by yourself. Good-bye.'

Mr. Bruce tarried one moment to aver that he was unprepared for his client's violence, and that he thought the nephew had done quite right.

The door was shut, and Mr. Audley came back holding out his hand, but Fernando did not take it. He was occupied in supporting himself by the furniture from the sofa to the fireplace, where, holding by the mantelpiece with one hand, he took his dice from his pocket with the other, and threw them into the reddest depth. Then he held the hand to Mr. Audley, who wrung it, and said, 'It has been a hard fight, my boy.'

Fernando laid his weary head on his shoulder, and said, 'If my father is not poisoned against me!'

'Do not fear that, Fernando. You are where he left you. You have given up something for the sake of your new Lord and Master; you will have his armour another time.'

Fernando let himself be helped to sit down, and sighed. He was thoroughly worn out, and his victory was not such as to enliven his spirits. He took up the drawing that lay on the table, and gazed on it in a sort of dreamy fascination.

'You have checked him this time,' said Mr. Audley.

'Here or there, I will never bet again,' said Fernan solemnly.

'God help me to keep the resolution! It is the one thing that I care for, and I know I should have begun the first day I was away from you.'

'I think that with those tastes you cannot make too strong a resolution against it,' said Mr. Audley.

Their dinner was brought in, but Fernando had no appetite. He soon returned to his chess player, and seemed to be playing over the game, but he was too much tired for talk, and soon went to bed; where after a short sleep feverishness set in, bringing something approaching to delirium. The nurse had gone a fortnight previously; but as he was still too helpless to have no one within call, Felix slept on the bed in the corner of the room.

When he came down the opening of the door was greeted by 'Don't let him come! Is Mr. Audley there!'

'Yes, he is not gone.'

Then he knew Felix, but soon began again to talk of the game at chess, evidently mixing up his uncle with the personage with the long feather.

'He has been checked once. I've taken one piece of his. He is gone now. Will he come back after my Baptism? No; I shall go to him.'

This lasted till past midnight, when, as they were deliberating whether to send for Mr. Rugg, he fell soundly asleep, and awoke in the morning depressed, but composed and peaceful; and this state of things continued. The encounter with his uncle, and the deliberate choice, had apparently given some shock to his nerves; and whenever night recurred, there came two or three hours of misery, and apparently of temptation and terror. It took different forms. Sometimes it was half in sleep--the acting over again of one or two horrible scenes that he had partly witnessed in the Southern States, when an emancipator had been hunted down, and the slaves who had listened to him savagely punished. In spite of his Spanish blood, the horror had been ineffaceable; and his imagination connected it with the crowd of terrors that had revealed themselves to his awakened conscience. He seemed to think that if he lost in the awful game of life, he should be handed over to that terrible slave-master; and there were times when Diego's fate, and his own lapses, so fastened on his mind, as to make him despair of ever being allowed to quit that slave-master's dominions; and that again joined with alarm lest his uncle should return and claim him.

Sometimes, likewise, the old wandering life, with the flashes of rollicking mirth and excitement, rather glimpsed at and looked forward to than really tasted, would become so alluring a contrast to the flat and tasteless--nay, as it seemed to him, tedious and toilsome--future sketched out for him, and the restraints and constant watchfulness of a Christian's life appeared so distressing a bondage, that his soul seemed to revolt against it, and he would talk

of following his uncle at once to London while yet it was time, and writing to him the next morning. This state was sure to be followed by a passion of remorse, and sheer delirious terror lest he should be given up to the enemy, who seemed now to assume to his fancy the form of his uncle. A great deal was no doubt delirious, and this betrayed the struggles which he had been for weeks fighting out in silence and apparent impassiveness; but it was impossible not to feel that therewith was manifested the wrestling with the Prince of Darkness, ere his subject should escape from his territory, and claim the ransom of his manumission. Mr. Audley--after the second night--would not let Felix remain, but took the watch entirely on himself, and fought the battle with the foe by prayer and psalm. Sleep used to come before morning; and by day Fernando was himself again, very subdued and quiet, and, in fact, having lost a good deal of ground as to health.

Strange to say, the greatest pleasure he had at this time was sitting in the upstairs parlour. The custom had begun in consequence of his nervous shuddering at being left alone lest his uncle should return, and Felix and Geraldine had then proposed taking him to their mother, who was rather interested than annoyed by his presence, and indeed all her gentle motherly instinct was drawn out by his feebleness and lameness; she talked to him kindly and quite rationally, and he was wonderfully impressed and soothed by her tenderness. It was so utterly unlike anything he had ever even seen, that he watched her with a sort of awe; while Cherry worked, read aloud, or drew, and felt proud of being able to fetch what was beyond the capacity of her little errand boy, Bernard.

The children, too, entertained him; he was a little afraid of Bernard's roughness, but delighted in watching him, and he and little Stella were intensely admiring friends. She always knew him, cooed at him, and preferred the gold of his watch-chain to all things in nature or art. Then when Wilmet, Angela, and Lance came home, and family chatter began, the weary anxious brain rested; and even in that room, so sad to most eyes, Fernando began to realise what Christian peace and cheerfulness could be.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HOME

'Within those walls each fluttering guest
Is gently lured to one safe nest;
Without, 'tis moaning and unrest.'
KEBLE.

A great delight came to Wilmet and Geraldine the day of the Bishop's visit, no other than Alda's being able to spend a week with them. Miss Pearson spared Wilmet that whole afternoon, that she might go up to meet her at the station, whither she was escorted by a maid going down to Centry.

There she was, in her pretty black silk, with violet trimmings, looking thoroughly the grown young lady, but clinging tight to her twin in an overflow of confused happiness, even while they stood together to get their first glance of the Bishop, who came down by the same train, and was met by Mr. Bevan with the carriage.

'I'm glad it is so nice and warm; it is better for Fernan, and Cherry can go!' said Wilmet, ready for joy about everything.

'Nice and warm! 'Tis much colder than in London,' said Alda, with a shiver. 'Has Cherry kept well this winter?'

'Quite well. She walks much better. And Marilda?'

'Oh, Marilda is always well. Rude health, her mother calls it. What do you think she has sent you, Wilmet? A darling little watch! just like this one of mine!'

'O Alda, you should not have let her. It is too much. Fernan wanted to give Lance a watch, but Felix would not let him.'

'Yes, but he is not like Uncle Thomas, and it makes you like me.'

'That we shall never be quite again,' sighed Wilmet.

'Oh! a little setting off, and trimming up! I've brought down lots of things. Aunt Mary said I might. What is this youth like, Wilmet--is he a boy or a young man?'

'I don't know,' said Wilmet; 'he is younger than Felix, if that helps you.'

'Well, Americans are old of their age. I have met some at Mr. Roper's. Oh, and do you know, Mrs. Roper told Aunt Mary that these Traveses are quite millionaires, and that this youth's mother was a prodigious Mexican heiress. Aunt Mary wants to ask him to Kensington Palace Gardens, when he comes up to town! I'm glad I am in time for the christening. Doesn't he have godfathers and godmothers?'

'Yes; he would have nobody but Felix and Mr. Audley, and Lady Price chose to be his godmother; indeed, there was nobody else.'

'You could not well be, certainly,' laughed Alda. 'Oh! and I've brought a dress down. I thought some of us might be asked to the Rectory in the evening.'

'My dear Alda, as if such a thing ever happened!'

'Ah! you see I have been so long away as to forget my Lady's manners.'

'Mr. Audley is going, and Fernan was asked, but he is not anything like well enough. So when Mamma and the little ones go to bed, we are to come down and spend the evening with him.'

'Fancy, Wilmet, I have quite been preparing Marilda for her Confirmation. She had hardly been taught anything, and never could have answered the questions if she had not come to me. She is always asking me what Papa said about this and that; and it is quite

awkward, she will carry out everything so literally, poor dear girl.'

'She must be very good.'

'Oh! to be sure she is! But just fancy, she keeps a tithe of her pocket-money to give to the Offertory so scrupulously; she would really not buy something she wanted because it would have been just a shilling into her tenth. I'm so glad she is confirmed. I never knew what to do at church before. I couldn't go home by myself, and now a servant always waits for us. Oh! how fast the poor hotel is building again! It will brighten our street a little! Dear me, I did not know how dingy it was!'

Nothing could look dingy where two such fair bright faces were; but Alda's became awe-struck and anxious as she went up to her mother's room. Indeed Mrs. Underwood looked up at her rather confused, and scarcely knowing the fashionable young lady, and it was only when the plumed hat was laid aside, and the two heads laid together, their fair locks mingling, that she knew she had her elder twins again, and stroked their faces with quiet delight.

There was scarcely more than time to kiss the little ones, and contend with Stella's shyness, before first Lance hurried in and then Felix, excused from his work two hours earlier. He could only just run up and dress before he convoyed Geraldine to church, she having the first turn of the chair, helped her to her seat near the Font, and then came back for Fernando, who was under his special charge.

Fernando sat looking very pale, and with the set expression of the mouth that always made Cherry think of Indians at the stake. His little new prayer-book was in his hand, and he was grasping it nervously, but he said nothing, as Felix helped him up and Lance held his crutch for him. It was his first entrance into a place of worship. They had intended to have accustomed him a little to the sights and sounds, but the weather and his ailment had prevented them. He was drawn to the porch, and there Felix partly lifted him out and up the step, while Lance took his hat for him, and as they were both wanted for the choir procession that was to usher the Bishop into church, they had to leave him in his place under Geraldine's protection.

He had not in the least realised the effect of the interior of a church. St. Oswald's was a very grand old building, with a deep chancel a good deal raised, seen along a vista of heavy columns and arched vaults, lighted from the clerestory, and with a magnificent chancel-arch. The season was Lent, and the colouring of the decorations was therefore grave, but all the richer, and the light coming strongly in from the west window immediately over the children's heads, made the contrast of the bright sunlight and of the soft depths of mystery more striking, and, to an eye to which everything ecclesiastical was absolutely new, the effect was almost overwhelming. That solemnity and sanctity of long centuries, the peaceful hush, the grave beauty and grandeur, almost made him afraid to breathe, and Cherry sat by his side with her expressive face composed into the serious but happy look that accorded with the whole scene.

He durst not move or speak. His was a silent passive nature, except when under strong stimulus, and Cherry respected his silence a great

deal too much to break upon it by any information. She was half sorry when the noise of steps showed that the congregation were beginning to drop in, chiefly of the other young Confirmation candidates. Then presently Alda came, and whispered to her that Wilmet could not leave Mamma; and presently after, Lady Price bustled in with her daughter, looked severely at Alda under the impression that she was Wilmet very improperly tricked out, and pressed Fernando's hand before going on to her own place. Then came the low swell of the organ, another new sensation to one who had only heard opera music; then the approaching sound of the voices. Geraldine gave him the book open at the processional psalm, and the white-clad choir passed by, one of the first pair of choristers being Lance, singing with all his might, and that merry monkey-face full of a child's beautiful happy reverence. And again could be recognised Felix, Mr. Audley, Mr. Bevan, all whom the poor sick stranger had come to love best, all to his present perception glorified and beautiful. They had told him it would be all faith and no sight, but he seemed to find himself absolutely within that brighter better sphere to which they belonged, to see them walking in it in their white robes, to hear their songs of praise, and to know whence came that atmosphere that they carried about with them, and that he had felt when it was a riddle to him.

And so the early parts of the service passed by him, not so much attended to or understood as filling him with a kind of dreamy rapturous trance, as the echoes of the new home, to which he, with all his heavy sense of past stain and present evil propensity, was gaining admission and adoption. For the first time he was really sensible of the _happiness_ of his choice, and felt the compensation for what he gave up.

When the Second Lesson was ended, and the clergy and the choir, in their surplices, moved down to encircle the Font, it was as if they came to gather him in among them. Felix came and helped him up. He could stand now with one support, and this was his young godfather's right arm, to which he held tightly, but without any nervous convulsiveness--he was too happy for that now--during the prayers that entreated for his being safely gathered into the Ark, and the Gospel of admission into the Kingdom. He had an impulse to loose his clasp and stand alone at the beginning of the vows, but he could not; he had not withdrawn his hand before he was forced again to lean his weight upon the steady arm beside him.

Nothing had been able to persuade Lady Price that she was not to make all the vows as for an infant, but luckily nobody heard her except her husband and the other sponsors, for it was a full, clear, steadfast voice that made reply, 'I renounce them all!' and as the dark deep eyes gazed far away into the west window, and Felix felt the shudder through the whole frame, he knew the force of that renunciation; and how it gave up that one excitement that the lad really cared for. And when that final and carefully-guarded vow of obedience was uttered, the pressure on his arm seemed to show that the moral was felt of that moment's endeavour to stand alone.

The sound of prayer, save in his own chamber, was so entirely new, that no doubt the force of the petitions was infinitely enhanced, and the entreaty for the death of the old Adam had a definite application to those old habits and tastes that at times exerted their force. The right hand was ready and untrembling when the Rector took it; the stream of water glittered as it fell on the awe-struck brow and jetty

hair, and the eyes shone out with a deep resolute lustre as 'Ferdinand Audley' was baptized into the Holy Name, and sworn a faithful soldier and servant.

He had begged to be baptized by the English version of his name; the Spanish one had grown up by a sort of accident, and had always been regretted by his father. He had wished much to take the name of Felix, but they were so certain that this would not be approved, that they had persuaded him out of it. He was soon set down again by Geraldine's side, and she put out her hand and squeezed his hand, looking up into his face with tearful eyes of welcome.

When the last sounds of the voluntary had died away, and the congregation had gone, she ventured again to look up at him and say, 'I am so glad!'

'Why did you never tell me it was like this?' he said. 'I should never have hung back one moment. Now nothing can touch me, since I belong to _this_.'

'Nothing can _really_,' said Geraldine softly. 'Above all, when it is sealed to us to-morrow.'

Then there came a movement from the vestry, and the Rector and Mr. Audley were seen following the Bishop, who came down to where the two lame children still sat together, and putting his hand upon Ferdinand's head with the hair still wet, gave him his blessing before he spoke further. It was only a word or two of congratulation, but such as to go very deep; and then, seeing that the boy looked not excited, but worn and wearied, he added, 'You are going home to rest. I shall see you to-morrow after the Confirmation;' and then he shook hands with him and with Geraldine, asking if she were the little girl of whom he had been told.

'She is very young,' said Mr. Bevan, strongly impressed with the littleness of the figure; 'but she has been a Communicant for more than a year, and she is--a very good child.'

'I can believe so,' said the Bishop, smiling to her. 'I have heard of your father, my dear, and of your brother.'

Cherry coloured rosy red, but was much too shy to speak; and the Rector and Bishop went away, leaving only Mr. Audley.

'Are you very much tired, Fernan?'

'I don't know,' he half smiled.

'I think he is; he is too happy to know it,' said Geraldine.

'Please let him go home first.'

So Mr. Audley helped him out to the chair, where Felix, Alda, and Lance were waiting; and he said, 'Thank you,' and held out his hand, while Lance eagerly shook it, saying, 'Now it is right at last; and here's Alda--isn't she a stunner?'

'I thought it was Wilmet,' said Fernan; and Alda went into church to keep Cherry company, thinking how curiously blind the male sex were

not to distinguish between her dress and poor dear Wilmet's.

Mr. Audley was more than satisfied, he was surprised and comforted. He had prepared to meet either disappointment or excitement in his charge; he found neither--only a perfect placid content, as of one who had found his home and was at rest. The boy was too much tired, after his many bad nights and the day's exertion, to say or think much; all he did say was, 'I shall mind nothing now that I know what it is to be one of you.'

Mr. Audley tried to remember that there must be a reaction, but he could not bring himself to fear or to warn, or do anything but enjoy the happiest day of his three years' ministry.

He had to go to the Rectory dinner-party, and leave his neophyte to the tendance of the Underwoods. Felix sat with his friend in a great calm silence, while the rest were taken up by the counter-attraction upstairs, where Alda was unpacking an unrivalled store of presents from herself and Marilda, useful and ornamental, such as seemed a perfect embarras de richesses to the homely, scantily-endowed children. That little gold watch was the prize and wonder of all. It was the first in the family, except that Felix wore his father's, and Alda knew how an elder girl was scorned at school if she had none; but Wilmet, though very happy with hers, smiled, and would not agree to having met with disrespect for want of it. Then there were drawing-books for Cherry, and a knife of endless blades for Lance, and toys for the little ones; and dresses--a suit for Wilmet like Alda's plainest Sunday one, and Alda's last year's silk for Geraldine, and some charming little cashmere pelisses--Aunt Mary's special present to the two babies--things that would lengthen Wilmet's purse for many a day to come; and a writing-case for Felix; and all the absent remembered, too. Uncle Thomas had given Alda a five-pound note to buy presents, and Marilda had sent every one something besides, mostly of such a matter-of-fact useful type that Alda stood and laughed at them. And Mrs. Underwood was pleased with the exhibition, and smiled and admired, only her attention was tired out at last, and she was taken early to her own room.

The elder ones went down to sit round the fire in Mr. Audley's room, where Ferdinand insisted on leaving his sofa to Geraldine, and betaking himself to the easy-chair, where he leant back, content and happy to watch the others through his eye-lashes. Alda was a little on her company manners at the first, but all the others were at perfect ease, as they sat in the dim light. Felix on the floor by Cherry, who delighted in a chance of playing fondling tricks with his hair and fingers; the twins in Mr. Audley's big chair, where they could lean against each other; and Lance cross-legged on the hearth-rug roasting chestnuts, of which a fellow chorister had given him a pocketful, and feeding every one in turn.

Geraldine gave a sigh to the wish that poor dear Edgar were there.

'He is very happy!' said Alda.

'Oh yes, but I wish he had not missed being here to-morrow. I wonder when he will come home.'

'I cannot guess; Aunt Mary wants to go down the Rhine next summer (only she is not quite sure it is not the Rhone), and if so, I

suppose he would join us there.'

'It is a whole year since we have set eyes on him,' said Felix.

'But I believe he writes more to Cherry than anybody, does not he?'

'Oh yes, and sends me lovely photographs to copy. Such a beauty of himself! Have you seen it?'

'I should think I had! They have set it up in a little gold frame on the drawing-room table, and everybody stands and says how handsome it is; and Aunt Mary explains all about him till I am tired of hearing it.'

'And Clem?'

'Oh, Clem came to luncheon yesterday. He is very much grown, and looks uncommonly demure, and as much disposed to set everybody to rights as ever.'

But Alda did not enter much more into particulars; she led away the conversation to the sights she had seen in their summer tour; and as she had a good deal of descriptive power, she made her narratives so interesting that time slipped quickly past, and the young company was as much surprised as Mr. Audley was when he came home and found them all there, not yet gone to bed. They were greatly ashamed, and afraid they had done Ferdinand harm, and all were secretly very anxious about the night; but, though the wakeful habit and night feverishness were not at once to be broken through, yet the last impression was the strongest, and the long-drawn aisle, the 'dim religious light,' and the white procession, were now the recurring images, all joyful, all restful, truly as if the bird had escaped out of the snare of the fowler. Real sleep came sooner than usual, and Fernan rose quite equal to the fatigue of the coming day, the Confirmation day, when again Geraldine had to sit beside him--this newly admitted to the universal brotherhood, instead of being beside that dear Edgar of her own, for whom her whole heart craved, as she thought how their preparation had begun together beside her father's chair.

Their place was now as near the choir as possible, and they were brought in as before, very early, so that Fernan gazed with the same eager, unsated eyes into the chancel and at the altar, admitted as he was farther into his true home.

The church was filled with candidates from the villages round as well as from the town, and the Litany preceded the rite which was to seal the young champions ere the strife. The Bishop came down to the two lame children, and laid his hands on the two bent heads, ere he gave his final brief address, exhorting the young people to guard precious, and preserve by many a faithful Eucharist, that mark which had sealed them to the Day of Redemption, through all this world's long hot trial and conflict.

There was holiday at both schools, and Felix had been spared to take his place in the choir, but Mr. Froggatt could not do without him afterwards, as the presence of so many of the country clergy in the town was sure to fill the reading-room and shop; and he was obliged to hurry off as soon as he came out of church. Now, the Bishop had the evening before asked Lady Price 'whether that son of poor Mr.

Underwood's' were present among the numerous smart folk who thronged her drawing-room, to which my lady had replied, 'No; he was a nice, gentlemanly youth certainly, but, considering all things, and how sadly he had lowered himself, she thought it better not. In fact, some might not be so well pleased to meet him.'

The Bishop took the opportunity of trying to learn from the next person he fell in with, namely, Mr. Ryder, how Felix had lowered himself; and received an answer that showed a good deal of the schoolmaster's disappointment, but certainly did not show any sense of Felix's degradation. And what he said was afterwards amplified by Mr. Audley, whom the Bishop took apart, and questioned him with much interest upon both Ferdinand Travis and the Underwood family, of whom he had only heard, when, immediately after his appointment, his vote for the orphan school had been solicited for the two boys, and he had been asked to subscribe to the Comment on the Philippians. Mr Audley felt that he had a sympathising listener, and was not slow to tell the whole story of the family--what the father had been, what Felix now was, and how his influence and that of little Lancelot had told upon their young inmate. The Bishop listened with emotion, and said, 'I must see that boy! Is the mother in a state in which she would like a call from me?' but there an interruption had come; and when the country clergy came in the morning, Mr. Audley had thought it fittest not to swell the numbers unnecessarily, and had kept himself out of the way, and tried to keep his fellow-curate.

So he had seen no more of the Bishop, until, some little time after he and Fernan had lunched, and were, it must be confessed, making up for their unrestful nights by having both dropped asleep, one on his chair, the other on the sofa, there came a ring to the door, and Lance, who had a strong turn for opening it, found himself face to face with the same tall gray-haired gentleman at whom he had gazed in the rochet and lawn-sleeves. He stood gazing up open-mouthed.

'I think I have seen you in the choir, and heard you too,' said the Bishop, kindly taking Lance's paw, which might have been cleaner, had he known what awaited it. 'Mr. Audley lives here, I think.'

Lance was for once without a word to say for himself, though his mouth remained open. All he did was unceremoniously to throw wide Mr. Audley's door, and bolt upstairs, leaving his Lordship to usher himself in, while Mr. Audley started up, and Ferdinand would have done the same, had he been able, before he was forbidden.

There was a kindly talk upon his health and plans, how he was to remain at Bexley till after Easter and his first Communion, and then Mr. Audley would take him up to London to be inspected by a first-rate surgeon before going down to the tutor's. The tutor proved to be an old school-fellow and great friend of the Bishop; and what Fernan heard of him from both the friend and pupil would have much diminished his dread, even if he had not been in full force of the feeling that whatever served to bind him more closely to the new world of blessing within the Church must be good and comfortable.

This visit over the Bishop asked whether Mrs. Underwood would like to be visited, and Mr. Audley went up to ascertain. She was a woman who never was happy or at rest in an untidy room, or in disordered garments, and all was in as fair order as it could be with the old furniture, that all Wilmet's mending could not preserve from the

verge of rags. Her widow's cap and soft shawl were as neat as possible, and so were the little ones in their brown-holland, Theodore sitting at her feet, and Stella on Wilmet's lap, where she was being kept out of the way of the more advanced amusement of a feast of wooden tea-things, carried on in a corner between Angela and Bernard, under Lance's somewhat embarrassing patronage.

Alda sprang up, stared about in consternation at the utter unlikeness to the drawing-room in Kensington Palace Gardens, and exclaimed, 'Oh! if Sibby had only come to take the children out! Take them away, Lance.'

'Sibby will come presently, or I will take them to her,' whispered Wilmet. 'I should like them just to have his blessing.'

'So many,' sighed Alda, but meantime Mr. Audley had seen that all was right at the first coup d'oeil, had bent over Mrs. Underwood, told her that the Bishop wished to call upon her, and asked her leave to bring him up; and she smiled, looked pleased, and said, 'He is very kind. That is for your Papa, my dears. You must talk to him, you know.'

The Bishop came up almost immediately, and the perfect tranquillity and absence of flutter fully showed poor Mrs. Underwood's old high-bred instinct. She was really gratified when he sat down by her, after greeting the three girls, and held out his hands to make friends with the lesser ones, whom their sisters led up, Angela submissive and pretty behaved, Bernard trying to hide his face, and Stella in Wilmet's arms staring to the widest extent of eyes. The sisters had their wish--the fatherless babes received the pastoral blessing; and the Bishop said a few kind words of real sympathy that made Mrs. Underwood look up at him affectionately and say, 'Indeed I have much to be thankful for. My children are very good to me.'

'I am sure they are,' said the Bishop. 'I cannot tell you how much I respect your eldest son.'

The colour rose in the pale face. 'He is a very dear boy,' she said.

'I should like to see him before I go. Is he at home?'

'Lance shall run and call him,' said Alda; but the Bishop had asked where he was, and Wilmet had, not unblushingly, for she was red with pleasure, but shamelessly, answered that he was at Mr. Froggatt's, offering to send Lance in search of him.

'I had rather he would show me the way,' said the Bishop. 'Will you, my boy?'

The way to Mr. Froggatt's was not very long, but it was long enough to overcome Lance's never very large amount of bashfulness; and he had made reply that he went to the Grammar School, and was in the second form, that he liked singing in the choir better than--no, not than anything--anything except--except what? Oh a jolly good snow-balling, or a game at hockey. Did he like the school? Pretty well, on the whole; but he did not suppose he should stay there long, his brother at the Clergy Orphan said there was such a lot of cads, and that he was always grubbing his nose among them; but now, 'do you really think now that cads are always such bad fellows?'

His Lordship was too much diverted to be easily able to speak, but he observed that it depended on what was meant by a cad.

'That's just it!' exclaimed Lance. 'I'm sure some that he calls cads are as good fellows as any going.'

'And what does your eldest brother say?'

'Felix! Oh! he does not mind, as long as one does not get into a real scrape.'

'And then?'

'Oh, then he minds so much that one can't do it, you know.'

'What, does he punish you?'

'N--no--he never licks any of us now--but he is so horridly sorry--and it bothers him so,' said Lance. 'Here's old Froggatt's,' he concluded, stopping at the glass door. 'My eyes! what a sight of parsons!' (Lance had pretty well forgotten whom he was talking to.) 'There, that's Felix--no, no, not that one serving Mr. Burrowes, that's Redstone; Felix is out there, getting out the sermon paper for that fat one, and that's old Froggy himself, bowing away. Shall I go and call Felix? I suppose he will not mind this time.'

'No, thank you, I will go in myself. Good-bye, my little guide, and thank you.'

And Lance, when his hand came out of the Bishop's, found something in it, which proved to be a tiny Prayer-book, and moreover a half-sovereign. He would have looked up and thanked, but the Bishop and that 'fat one' were absorbed in conversation on the step; and when he turned over the leaves of the little blue morocco book, with its inlaid red cross, he found full in his face, in the first page, the words, 'Lancelot Underwood, March 15th, 1855,' and then followed an initial, and a name that utterly defeated Lance's powers, so that perceiving the shop to be far too densely full of parsons for him to have a chance there, he galloped off at full speed to Cherry, who happily could interpret the contracted Latin by the name of the See, and was not quite so much astonished as Lance, though even more gratified.

Meantime, the Bishop had made his way to the bowing Mr. Froggatt and asked to speak with him in his private room, where he mentioned his kindness to young Underwood, and was answered by a gratified disclaimer of having done anything that was not of great advantage to himself. The good man seemed divided between desire to do justice to Felix and not to stand in his light, and alarm lest he should have to lose an assistant whom he had always known to be above his mark, and who was growing more valuable every month; and he was greatly relieved and delighted when the Bishop only rejoiced at his character of Felix, and complimented the Pursuivant by being glad that a paper of such good principles should be likely to have such a youth on its staff; it had been well for the lad to meet with so good a friend. Mr. Froggatt could not be denied an eulogium on the father, for whose sake he had first noticed the son; and when the Bishop had expressed his sorrow at never having known so bright a light as all

described the late Curate to have been, he courteously regretted the interruption on a busy day, but he begged just to see the young man. He had little time himself, but if he could be spared to walk up to the station--'

Mr. Froggatt bustled out with great alacrity, and taking the charge of the customer on himself, announced, for the benefit of all who might be within earshot, 'Mr. Underwood, his Lordship wishes to speak with you. He wishes you to walk up to the station with him. You had better go out by the private door.'

Felix was red up to the ears. His eight years' seniority to Lance were eight times eight more shyness and embarrassment, but he could only obey; and at his first greeting his hand was taken--'hoped to have seen you sooner,' the Bishop said; 'but you had always escaped me in the vestry.'

'I had to go to help my sister, my Lord,' said Felix.

'And your friend, said the Bishop. 'That is a good work that has been done in your house.'

Felix coloured more, not knowing what to say.

'I wish to see you,' continued the Bishop, 'partly to tell you how much I honour you for the step you have taken. I wish there were more who would understand the true uprightness and dutifulness of thinking no shame of an honest employment. I am afraid you do sometimes meet with what may be trying,' he added, no doubt remembering Lady Price's tone.

'I do not care now, not much. I did at first,' said Felix.

'No one whose approval is worth having can consider yours really a loss of position. You are in a profession every one respects, and you seem to have great means of influence likely to be open to you.'

'So my father said, when he consented,' said Felix.

'I shall always regret having just missed knowing your father. Some passages in that book of his struck me greatly. But what I wished to say was to ask whether there is any way in which I can be useful to you in the education of any of the younger ones, or--'

'Thank you, my Lord,' said Felix. 'I think you kindly voted for my brothers last year for the Clergy Orphan school. Only one got in, and if you would vote again for little Lancelot--'

'My droll little companion, who Mr. Audley tells me did so much for that poor young American.'

'Indeed he did,' said Felix. 'I doubt if any of us would have got at him but for Lance, who did not mean anything but good-nature all the time.'

'He is just the boy I want for our Cathedral school.' And then he went on to explain that a great reformation was going on. There was a foundation-school attached to the Cathedral, with exhibitions at the University, to which the Cathedral choristers had the first claim.

There had been, of course, a period of decay, but an excellent Precentor had been just appointed, who would act as head master; and the singing-boys would be kept on free of expense after their voices became unavailable, provided that by such time they had passed a certain examination. Such a voice as Lance's was sure to recommend him; and besides, the Bishop said with a smile, he wanted to raise the character of the school, and he thought there was the stuff here that would do so.

Felix could only be thankful and rejoiced; but it was a pang to think of Lance being as entirely separated from home as was Clement; with no regular holidays, and always most needed at his post at the great festivals. There was something in his tone that made the Bishop say, 'You do not like to part with him?'

'No, my Lord; but I am glad it should be so. My father was not happy about--things here, and charged me to get my brothers away when I could.'

'And as to holidays, you are near at hand, and most of the choir are of our own town. I think he may generally be spared for a good term at each holiday time. The organist is very considerate in giving leave of absence, even if he should turn out to have a dangerously good voice for solos. I will let you know when to send him up for examination, which he will pass easily. Good-bye. You must write to me if there is anything for me to do for you. One month more, and your father would have been one of my clergy, remember.'

Felix went back, flushed with gratification, and yet, to a certain degree, with confusion, and not exactly liking the prospect of being interrogated as to what the Bishop had said to him: indeed, he never told the whole of it to any one but Cherry. Somehow, though Wilmet was his counsellor and mainstay, Geraldine was the sharer of all those confidences that came spontaneously out of the full but reserved heart.

Besides, Wilmet was at present in such a trance of enjoyment of her twin sister, that she seemed scarcely able to enter into anything else. She went through her duties as usual, but with an effort to shake off her absorption in the thought of having Alda at home; and every moment she was not in sight of her darling seemed a cruel diminution of her one poor fortnight. Indeed it was tete-a-tetes that her exclusive tenderness craved above all; and she was often disappointed that Alda should be willing to go and visit Fernan Travis when they might have had a quarter of an hour together alone. How much more selfish she must have grown than Alda in this last half year!

Alda's talk was indeed full of interest, and gave a much better notion of her way of life than her letters did. She seemed to have been fully adopted as a daughter of the house, and to enjoy all the same privileges as Marilda; indeed, she had a good deal more credit with all varieties of teachers, since she learnt rapidly and eagerly; and Marilda, while encouraging her successes, without a shade of jealousy, made no attempt to conquer her own clumsiness and tardiness. Even 'Aunt Mary,' as Alda called Mrs. Thomas Underwood, often had recourse to Alda for sympathy in her endeavours to be tasteful, and continually held her up as an example to Marilda.

'And poor dear good woman,' said Alda, 'she has such a respect for Underwood breeding and our education, that I believe I could persuade her into anything by telling her it was what she calls "comifo." Even when she was going to get the boudoir done with apple-green picked out with mauve, enough to set one's teeth on edge, and Marilda would do nothing but laugh, she let me persuade her into a lovely pale sea-green.'

'Is not sea-green too delicate for her?' asked Cherry.

'Why, it was very wicked of Edgar, to be sure, but he said that it was to suit the nymph reining in the porpoises. He made a sketch, and Marilda was delighted with it; she really is the most good-natured creature in the world.'

'She must be!' ejaculated Wilmet; 'but surely she ought not to like laughing at her mother.'

'Oh, everybody laughs at Aunt Mary, and she hardly ever finds it out, and when she does, she does not mind! Even old Mrs. Kedge, her mother, does nothing but laugh at her for trying to be fine. Old Granny is not a bit by way of being a lady, you know; she lives in a little house in the city with one maid, and I believe she rubs her own tables. I am sure she goes about in omnibuses, though she has lots of money; and Marilda is so fond of her, and so like her, only not so clever and shrewd.'

'But why does she live in such a small way?'

'Because she never was used to anything else, and does not like it. She hates grand servants, and never will come to Kensington Palace Gardens; but she really is good-natured. She told Clement to drop in on her whenever he likes, and bring any of his friends; and she always gives them a superb piece of plum-cake, and once she took them to the Tower, and once to the Zoological Gardens, for she thinks that she cannot do enough to make up to them for being bred up to be little monks, with cords and sandals, and everything popish.'

'You don't let her think so?'

'Well, really when she has got a thing into her head nothing will uproot it; and, after all, they do carry things very far there, and Clement goes on so that I don't wonder.'

'Goes on how?'

'Why, just fancy, the other day when Uncle Thomas fetched him in his brougham because I was coming home, there he sat at luncheon and would not eat a scrap of meat.'

'Ah! it was a Wednesday in Lent,' said Cherry.

'Only a Wednesday, you know; and there, with four or five strange people, too. One of them asked if he was a Catholic, and of course Clement looked very wise, and greatly pleased, and said, "Yes, he was;" and that brought down Aunt Mary with her heavy artillery. "Bless me, Clement, you don't say so. Is Mr. Fulmort really gone over?" "Yes," said Clem. (I know he did it on purpose.) "He is gone over to preach at St. Peter's." And then one of the gentlemen asked

if Clem meant Mr. Fulmort of St. Matthew's, Whittingtonia, and when he said "Yes, he lived in the clergy house," he began regularly to play him off, asking the most absurd questions about fasts and feasts and vigils and decorations, and Clem answered them all in his prim little self-sufficient way, just as if he thought he was on the high-road to be St. Clement the Martyr, till I was ready to run away.'

'Couldn't you have given him a hint?' asked Wilmet.

'My dear, have you lived twelve years with Clem without knowing that hints are lost on him?'

'Dear Clem, he is a very good steady-hearted little fellow,' said Cherry. 'It was very nice of him.'

'Well, I only hope he'll never come to luncheon again in Lent. There are times and seasons for everything, and certainly not for display! And to make it worse, Marilda is the most literal-minded girl. Fasting was quite a new mind to her, for she never realises what she does not see; and she got Clem into a corner, where I heard him going on, nothing loth, about days of abstinence, out of Mr. Fulmort's last catechising, I should think; and ended by asking what Cousin Edward did, so that I fully expected that I should find her eating nothing, and that I should be called to account.'

'And what did you tell her then?'

'Oh, you know I could say quite truly that he did not.'

'I don't think that was quite fair,' said Wilmet gravely. 'You know it was only because he really could not.'

'You don't know how glad I was to have an answer that would hinder the horrid commotion we should have had if Marilda had taken to fasting. And, after all, you know, Papa would have said minding her mother was her first duty.'

'Why did not you tell her that?'

'I have, dozens of times; but you know there are mothers and mothers, and nobody can always mind Aunt Mary, good soul! Marilda has just made herself, with her own good rough plain sense. I wish she was a man; she would be a capital merchant like her father; but it is hard to be a great heiress, with nothing she really likes to do. She is always longing to come down to Centry, and tramp about the lanes among the cottages.'

'Oh! I wish they would!'

'I don't think Aunt Mary will ever let them, she hates the country; and though she likes to have a place for the name of the thing, she does not want to live there, especially where there are so many of us; and then, Felix's situation!'

'For shame, Alda!'

'Well, I did not say anything myself. It is only Aunt Mary--it is very foolish of people, but, you see, they will. As to Marilda, I believe she would like to stand behind the counter with him this

minute.'

'Marilda is the oddest and best girl I ever heard of!'

'You may say that. And so ignorant she was! She had a great velvet-and-gold Church Service, and hardly guessed there was any Bible or Prayer-Book besides. I am sure Felix cannot have had more work to teach that youth than I have had with Marilda. Such a jumble as she had picked up! She really had only little baby prayers to say, till she saw my book.'

'What a blessing you must be to her!' said Wilmet, fondly looking at her sister.

'Well, I do hope so. You must know she was regularly struck with dear Papa. I am sure he is the first saint in her calendar, and everything is--"What did Cousin Edward say?" And when once she has made up her mind that a thing is right, she will blunder on through fire and water, but she will do it.'

'Then,' said Cherry, 'she ought to try and learn, and not to be awkward because of obedience.'

Alda burst out laughing. 'People can only do what they can. Marilda trying to be graceful would be worse than Marilda floundering her own way. But she really is the best and kindest girl living, and she gets on much better for having me to keep her out of scrapes.'

Wilmet went to bed that night thankful to have Alda's head on the pillow beside her, and most thankful for the tokens that she watched among her brothers and sisters, which showed how much her father's influence was extending beyond his short life.

CHAPTER IX

THE THIRTEEN

'They closed around the fire,
And all in turn essayed to paint
The rival merits of their saint;
A theme that ne'er can tire
A holy maid, for be it known
That their saint's honour is their own.'

SCOTT.

The thirteen Underwoods did not meet again in the same house for many a long day, and when they did, it was on a grey misty morning in the Christmas week of the year following; and the blinds were down, and the notes of the knell clashing out overhead, as the door was opened to Edgar, Alda, and Clement, as they arrived together, having been summoned late on the previous night by a telegram with tidings that their mother had been struck by a paralysis. They knew what to expect when Felix, with one of the little ones on his arm, came quietly down

the stairs and admitted them. All they had to ask, was 'when,' and 'how,' and to hear, that the long living death had ended in peaceful insensibility at last. Then they followed him upstairs to the room where the others sat, hushed, over their pen or their books, where Wilmet, her eyes gushing with quiet tears, held Alda in her embrace, and Geraldine, after her first eager kiss, gazed wistfully at Edgar as though there must be comfort in the very sight of him, if she could only feel it; while the very little ones opened their puzzled eyes on the newcomers as strangers.

And so they were: Clement had indeed been at home in September, but Alda not for a year and three-quarters, nor Edgar since he first left it three years before. The absence of the two latter was not by their own choice, a doctor who had ordered Mrs. Thomas Underwood to spend the summer months, year after year, at Spa was partly the cause, and moreover, during the autumn and winter of 1856 Bexley had been a perfect field of epidemics. Measles and hooping-cough had run riot in the schools, and lingered in the streets and alleys of the potteries, fastening on many who thought themselves secured by former attacks, and there had been a good many deaths, in especial Clement's chief friend, Harry Lamb. Nobody, excepting the invalid mother, throughout the Underwood household, had escaped one or other disorder, and both fell to the lot of the four little ones, and likewise of Mr. Audley, who was infinitely disgusted at himself, and at the guarded childhood for which he thus paid the penalty pretty severely. When matters were at the worst, and Felix was laid up, and Wilmet found herself succumbing, she had written in desperation to Sister Constance, whose presence in the house had made the next three weeks a time of very pleasant recollections. Finally she had carried off Geraldine, Angela, and Bernard, to the convalescent rooms at St. Faith's, where their happiness had been such that the favourite sport of the little ones had ever since been the acting of Sisters of Mercy nursing sick dolls. The quarantine had been indefinitely prolonged for the proteges of Kensington Palace Gardens; for the three at school, though kept away till all infection was thought to be over, had perversely caught the maladies as soon as they came home for the summer holidays; and indeed the whole town and neighbouring villages were so full of contagion, that Mrs. Thomas Underwood had not far to seek for a plea for avoiding Centry.

All this time, from day to day, the poor mother had been growing more feeble, and it had been fully purposed that on Edgar's return at Christmas, on the completion of his studies at Louvaine, he and Alda should make some stay at home; but the brother and sister were both so useful and ornamental that their adopted home could not spare them until after a series of Christmas entertainments; and Clement had been in like manner detained until the festival services at St. Matthew's no longer required him. Indeed, when he had been at home in the autumn, he had been scarcely recognised.

For the last week, however, Mrs. Underwood had been much clearer in mind, had enjoyed the presence of her holiday children, and had for a short time even given hopes that her constitution might yet rally, and her dormant faculties revive. She had even talked to Mr. Audley and Geraldine at different times as though she had some such presentiment herself, and had made some exertions which proved much increased activity of brain. Alas! though their coming had thus been rendered very happy, the brightening had been but the symptom and precursor of a sudden attack of paralysis, whence there was no

symptom of recovery, and which in a few hours ended in death.

For the present, the hopes that had been entertained gave poignancy to the sudden disappointment and grief, and the home children could not acquiesce in the dispensation with the same quiet reasonableness as those who had been so long separated from them as not to miss the gentle countenance, or the 'sweet toils, sweet cares, for ever gone.' Indeed Wilmet was physically much exhausted by her long hours of anxiety, and went about pale-cheeked and tear-stained, quietly attending to all that was needful, but with the tears continually dropping, while Geraldine was fit for nothing but to lie still, unable to think, but feeling soothed as long as she could lay her hand upon Edgar and feel that he was near.

So the whole thirteen were together again; and in the hush of the orphaned house there was a certain wonder and curiosity in their mutual examination and comparison with one another and with the beings with whom they had parted three years ago, at the period of their first separation. All were at a time of life when such an interval could not fail to make a vast alteration in externals. Even Geraldine had gained in strength, and though still white, and with features too large for her face, startlingly searching grey eyes, and brows that looked strangely thick, dark, and straight, in contrast with the pencilled arches belonging to all the rest, she was less weird and elfin-like than when she had been three inches shorter, and dressed more childishly. As Edgar said, she was less Riquet with a tuft than the good fairy godmother, and her twin sisters might have been her princess-wards, so far did they tower above her--straight as fir-trees, oval faced, regular featured, fair skinned, blue eyed, and bright haired. During those long dreary hours, Edgar often beguiled the time with sketches of them, and the outlines--whether of chiselled profiles, shapely heads, or Cupid's-bow lips--were still almost exactly similar; yet it had become impossible to mistake one twin for the other, even when Alda had dressed the tresses on Wilmet's passive head in perfect conformity with her own. Looking at their figures, Alda's air of fashion made her appear the eldest, and Wilmet might have been a girl in the schoolroom; but comparing their faces, Wilmet's placid recollected countenance, and the soberness that sat so well on her white smooth forehead and steady blue eyes, might have befitted many more years than eighteen. There were not nearly so many lights and shades in her looks as in those of Alda and Geraldine. The one had both more smiles and more frowns, the other more gleams of joy and of pain; each was more animated and sensitive, but neither gave the same sense of confidence and repose.

As usually happens when the parents are of the same family, the inventory of the features of one of the progeny served for almost all the rest. The differences were only in degree, and the prime specimens were without doubt the two elder twins and Edgar, with like promise of little Bernard and Stella.

Edgar had grown very tall, and had inherited his father's advantages of grace and elegance of figure, to which was added a certain distinguished ease of carriage, and ready graciousness, too simple to be called either conceit or presumption, but which looked as if he were used to be admired and to confer favours. Athletics had been the fashion with him and his English companions, and his complexion was embrowned by sun and wind, his form upright and vigorous: and by force of contrast it was now perceived that Felix seemed to have

almost ceased growing for the last three years, and that his indoor occupations had given his broad square shoulders a kind of slouch, and kept his colouring as pink and white as that of his sisters. Like Wilmet, he had something staid and responsible about him, that, even more than his fringe of light brown whiskers, gave the appearance of full-grown manhood; so that the first impression of all the newcomers was how completely he had left the boy behind him, making it an effort of memory to believe him only nineteen and a half. But they all knew him for their head, and leant themselves against him. And in the meantime, Edgar's appearance was a perfect feast of enjoyment, not only to little loving Geraldine, but to sage Felix. They recreated themselves with gazing at him, and when left alone together would discuss his charms in low confidential murmurs, quite aware that Wilmet would think them very silly; but Edgar was the great romance of both.

Edgar observed that Clement had done all the growth for both himself and Felix, and was doing his best to be a light of the Church by resembling nothing but an altar-taper. When they all repaired to the back of the cupboard door in Mr. Audley's room to be measured, his head was found far above Edgar's mark at fourteen, and therewith he was lank and thin, not yet accustomed to the length of his own legs and arms, and seeming as if he was not meant to be seen undraped by his surplice. His features and face were of the family type, but a little smaller, and with much less of the bright rosy tinting; indeed, when not excited he was decidedly pale, and his eyes and hair were a little lighter than those of the rest. It was a refined, delicate, thoughtful face, pretty rather than handsome, and its only fault was a certain melancholy superciliousness or benignant pity for every one who did not belong to the flock of St. Matthew's.

Regular features are always what most easily lose individuality, and become those of the owner's class; and if Clement was all chorister, Fulbert and Lancelot were all schoolboy. The two little fellows were a long way apart in height, though there were only two years between them, for Lance was on a much smaller scale, but equally full of ruddy health and superabundant vigour; and while Fulbert was the more rough and independent, his countenance had not the fun and sweetness that rendered Lance's so winning. Their looks were repeated in Robina, who was much too square and sturdy for any attempt at beauty, and was comically like a boy and like her brothers, but with much frank honesty and determination in her big grey darkly-lashed eyes. Angela was one of the most altered of all; for her plump cherub cheeks had melted away under the glow of measles, and the hooping process had lengthened and narrowed her small person into a demure little thread-paper of six years old, omnivorous of books, a pet and pickle at school, and a romp at home--the sworn ally, offensive and defensive, of stout, rough-pated, unruly Bernard. Stella was the loveliest little bit of painted porcelain imaginable, quite capable of being his companion, and a perfect little fairy, for beauty, gracefulness, and quickness of all kinds. Alda was delighted with her pretty caressing ways and admiration of the wonderful new sister. She was of quieter, more docile mood than these two, though aspiring to their companionship; for it was startling to see how far she had left Theodore behind. He was still in arms, and speechless, a little pale inanimate creature, taking very little notice, and making no sound except a sort of low musical cooing of pleasure, and a sad whining moan of unhappiness, which always recurred when he was not in the arms of Sibby, Wilmet, or Felix. It was only when Felix held out his

arms to take him that the sound of pleasure was heard; and once on that firm knee, with his shining head against that kind heart, he was satisfied, and Felix had accustomed himself to all sorts of occupations with his little brother in his left arm. Even at night, there was no rest for Theodore, unless Felix took him into his room. So often did the little fretting moan summon him, that soon the crib took up his regular abode beside his bed. But Felix, though of course spared from the shop, could not be dispensed with from the printing-house, where he was sub-editor; and in his absence Theodore was always less contented; and his tearless moan went to his sister's heart, for the poor little fellow had been wont to lie day and night in his mother's bosom, and she had been as uneasy without him as he now was without her. All her other babes had grown past her helpless instinctive tenderness, and Theodore's continued passiveness had been hitherto an advantage, which had always been called his 'goodness and affection.'

Alda was the first to comment on the wonderful interval between the twins, when Wilmet accounted for it by Theodore's having been quite kept back for his mother's sake, and likewise by his having been more reduced by measles and hooping-cough than Stella had been; but to fresh observers it was impossible to think that all was thus explained, and Edgar and Alda discussed it in a low voice when they found themselves alone.

'The fact is plain,' said Edgar; 'but I suppose nothing can be done, and I see no use in forcing it on poor Wilmet.'

'I don't understand such blindness.'

'Not real blindness--certainly not on Felix's part. He knows that load is on his back for life. Heigh-ho! a stout old Atlas we have in Blunderbore; I wonder how long I shall be in plucking the golden apples, and taking a share.'

'I thought it was Atlas that gathered the apples.'

'Don't spoil a good simile with superfluous exactness, Alda! It is base enough to compare the gardens of the Hesperides to a merchant's office! I wonder how many years it will take to get out of the drudgery, and have some power of enjoying life and relieving Felix. One could tear one's hair to see him tied down by this large family till all his best days are gone.'

'Some of the others may get off his hands, and help.'

'Not they! Clem is too highly spiritualised to care for anything so material as his own flesh and blood; and it is not their fault if little Lance does not follow in his wake. Then if Ful has any brains, he is not come to the use of them; he is only less obnoxious than Tina in that he is a boy and not a church candle, but boys are certainly a mistake.'

If ever the mature age of seventeen could be excused for so regarding boyhood, it was under such circumstances. All were too old for any outbreaks, such as brought Angela and Bernard to disgrace, and disturbed the hush of those four sad days; but the actual loss had been so long previous, that the pressure of present grief was not so crushing as to prevent want of employment and confinement in that

small silent house from being other than most irksome and tedious.

Clement would have done very well alone; he went to church, read, told Angela stories, and discoursed to Cherry on the ways of St. Matthew's; but, unfortunately, there was something about him that always incited the other boys to sparring, nor was he always guiltless of being the aggressor, for there was no keeping him in mind that comparisons are odious.

Church music might seem a suitable subject, but the London chorister could not abstain from criticising St. Oswald's and contemning the old-fashioned practices of the Cathedral, which of course Lance considered himself bound to defend, till the very names of Gregorians and Anglicans became terrible to Cherry as the watchwords of a wrangling match. Fulbert, meantime, made no secret of his contempt for both brothers as mere choristers instead of schoolboys, and exalted himself whenever he detected their ignorance of any choice morceau of slang; while their superior knowledge on any other point was viewed as showing the new-fangled girlish nonsense of their education.

This Lance did not mind; but he was very sensitive as to the dignity of his Cathedral, and the perfections of his chosen friend, one Bill Harewood; and Fulbert was not slow to use the latter engine for 'getting a rise' out of him, while Clement as often, though with less design, offended by disparagement of his choir; nor could Edgar refuse himself the diversion of tormenting Clement by ironical questions and remarks on his standard of perfection, which mode of torture enchanted Fulbert, whenever he understood it. Thus these four brothers contrived to inflict a good amount of teasing on one another, all the more wearing and worrying because deprived of its only tolerable seasoning, mirth.

Clement had indeed a refuge in Mr. Audley's room, where he could find books, and willing ears for Mr. Fulmott's doings; but he availed himself of it less than might have been expected. Whether from inclination to his brothers' society, desire to do them good, or innate pugnacity, he was generally in the thick of the conflict; and before long he confided to Felix that he was seriously uneasy about Edgar's opinions.

'He is only chaffing you,' said Felix.

'Chaff, now!' said Clement.

'Well, Clem, you know you are enough to provoke a saint, you bore so intolerably about St. Matthew's.'

The much disgusted Clement retired into himself, but Felix was not satisfied at heart.

One was lacking on the cold misty New Year's morning, when even Geraldine could not be withheld from the Communion Feast of the living and departed. Each felt the disappointment when they found themselves only six instead of seven, but it was Clement who, as the boys were waiting for breakfast afterwards, began--

'Have not you been confirmed, Edgar?'

'How should I?'

'I am sure there are plenty of foreign Confirmations. I see them in the British Catholic.'

'Foreign parts isn't all one,' said Edgar; and the younger boys sniggled.

'If one took any trouble,' persisted Clement.

'Yes, but _one_, ' dwelling with emphasis on the awkward impersonal, 'one may have scruples about committing an act of schism by encouraging an intruding bishop performing episcopal functions in another man's diocese. Has not your spiritual father taught you that much, Tina?'

'I--I must find out about that,' said Clement thoughtfully; 'but, at any rate, the Lent Confirmations are coming on in London, and if I were to speak to the Vicar, I have no doubt he would gladly prepare you.'

'Nor I,' answered Edgar.

'Then shall I?' eagerly asked Clement.

'Not at present, thank you.'

Clement stood blank and open mouthed, and Fulbert laughed, secure that the joke, whatever it might be, was against him.

'Of course,' burst out Lance, 'Edgar does not want you to speak for him, Clem; he has got a tongue of his own, and a clergyman too, I suppose.'

Clement proceeded to a disquisition, topographical and censorial, upon the parish and district to which Edgar might be relegated, and finally exclaimed, 'Yes, he is not much amiss. He has some notions. He dines with us sometimes. You can go to him, Edgar, and I'll get the Vicar to speak to him.'

'Thank you, I had rather be excused.'

'You cannot miss another Confirmation.'

'I can't say I am fond of pledges, especially when no one can tell how much or how little they mean.'

Whether this were in earnest, or a mere thrust in return for Clement's pertinacity, was undecided, for Wilmet came in, looking so sad and depressed that the brothers felt rebuked for the tone in which they had been speaking.

Mr. Thomas Underwood soon arrived, having come to Centry the night before; and after a few words had passed between him and Edgar, the latter announced his intention of returning with him to London that evening.

'Very well,' said Felix, much disappointed at this repetition of Edgar's willingness to hurry from the house of mourning, 'but we have

had very little of you; Clement must go on the day after Twelfth Day, and we shall have more room. It will be a great blow to Cherry.'

'Poor little Cherry! I'll come when I can see her in greater peace, but I must buckle to with the beginning of the year, Fee.'

There was no further disputing the point, but Edgar was always a great loss. To every one except Clement he was so gentle and considerate that it was impossible not to think that the strange things reported of him were not first evoked and then exaggerated by the zeal of the model chorister: and indeed he led Geraldine to that inference when he went to her in the sitting-room, where, as before, she had to remain at home.

'My Cherry, I find I must go back with old Tom. Don't be vexed, my Whiteheart, I am not going back to Belgium, you know: I can often run down, but my work ought to begin with the year.'

'You cannot even stay over the Epiphany!'

'Well, I would have made an effort, but I am really wanted; and then if I am long with that light of the church, Tina, he will get me into everybody's black books. Never mind, old girl. I'll be for ever running down. Is any one going to stay with you?'

'Bernard is coming presently; I must try to make him recollect something about it.'

'You don't mean that child Angel is going.'

'She wishes it, and it seems right.'

'Right to leave a black spot in her memory! If children could but believe people were sublimated away!'

'Children can believe in the Resurrection of the body as well as we,' said Cherry reverently.

'Better, too, by a long chalk,' he muttered; then perceiving her dismayed expression, he added, 'No, no--I'm not talking to Tina, only he has put me in the humour in which there is nothing he could not make me dispute--even my Cherry being the sweetest morsel in the world. There, good-bye for the present, only don't afflict that poor little Bernard and yourself into too great wretchedness, out of a sense of duty.'

'No, I do not really grieve,' said Cherry. 'Tears come for thankfulness. The real sorrow came long ago; we grew up in it, and it is over now.'

'Right, little one. The mortal coil was very heavy and painful these last years, and no one can help being relieved that the end has come. It is the conventionalities that are needlessly distressing. What earthly purpose can it serve save the amusement of the maids and children of Bexley, that nine of us should present ourselves a pitiful spectacle all the way up to the cemetery in veils and hatbands?'

'Don't talk so, Edgar; you do not know how it jars, though I know you

mean no disrespect.'

'Well, it must be a blessed thing to end by drowning or blowing up, to save one's friends trouble.'

'Edgar, indeed I cannot bear this! Recollect what a treasure that dear shattered earthen vessel has held. What a wonderful life of patient silent resignation it was!'

'Indeed it was,' said Edgar, suddenly softened. 'No lips could tell what the resolution must have been that carried her through those years, never murmuring. What must she not have spared my father! Such devotion is the true woman's heritage.'

Cherry was soothed as she saw the dew on his eye-lashes, but just then Felix came in to fetch him, and, stooping down, kissed her, and said in his low and tender but strong voice, 'We leave her with him, dear child. Recollect--

"The heart may ache, but may not burst:
Heaven will not leave thee, nor forsake."

Much as Geraldine had longed for Edgar, his words brought vague yearning and distress, while Felix's very tone gave support. How could Edgar say patient, silent, self-devotion was not to be found except in woman?

So the worn-out body that once had been bright smiling Mary Underwood was borne to the church she had not entered since she had knelt there with her husband; and then she was laid beside him in the hillside cemetery, the graves marked by the simple cross, for which there had been long anxious saving, the last contribution having been a quarter of the Bishop's gift to Lancelot. The inscription was on the edges of the steps, from which the cross rose--

UNDER WODE, UNDER RODE.

EDWARD FULBERT UNDERWOOD,

NINE YEARS CURATE of THIS PARISH,

EPIPHANY, 1855,

AGED 40.

'Thy Rod and Thy Staff comfort me.'

There was room enough for the name of Mary Wilmet, his wife, to be added at the base of the Rood, that Cross which they had borne, the one so valiantly, the other so meekly, during their 'forty years in the wilderness.'

Many persons were present out of respect not only to the former Curate, but to his hard-working son and daughter, and not only the daughter's holly-wreath, but one of camellias sent by Sister

Constance, lay upon the pall. When the mourners had turned away, Mr. Audley saw a slender lad standing by, waiting till the grave was smoothed to lay on it a wreath of delicate white roses and ferns. There was no mistaking the clear olive face; and indeed Mr. Audley had kept up a regular correspondence with Ferdinand Travis, and knew that the vows made two years ago had been so far persevered in, and without molestation from father or uncle. He had written an account of Mrs. Underwood's death, but had received no answer.

'This is kind, Ferdinand,' he said, 'it will gratify them.'

'May I see any of them?' the youth asked.

'Felix and Lance will be most glad.'

'I only received your letter yesterday evening. Dr. White forwarded it to me in London, and I persuaded my father to let me come down.'

'You are with your father?'

'Yes; he came home about a fortnight ago. I was going to write to you. O Mr. Audley, if you are not in haste, can you tell me whether I can see my dear Diego's grave?'

'The Roman Catholic burial-ground is on the other side of the town. I think you will have to go to Mr. Macnamara for admittance. Come home with me first, Fernan.'

'Home!' he said warmly. 'Yes, it has always seemed so to me! I have dreamt so often of her gentle loving face and tender weak voice. She was very kind to me;' and he raised his hat reverently, as he placed the flowers upon the now completed grave. 'I saw that all were here except the little ones and Geraldine,' he added. 'How is she?'

'As well as usual. Wilmet is a good deal worn and downcast, but all are calm and cheerful. The loss cannot be like what that of their father was.'

'Will they go on as they are doing now?'

'I trust so. I am going down to the family consultation. The London cousin is there.'

'Then perhaps I had better not come in,' said Ferdinand, looking rather blank. 'Shall I go down to Mr. Macnamara first?'

'Had you rather go alone, or shall I send Lance to show you the way?'

'Dear little Lance, pray let me have him!'

'It is a longish walk. Is your lameness quite gone?'

'Oh yes, I can walk a couple of miles very well, and when I give out it is not my leg, but my back. They say it is the old jar to the spine, and that it will wear off when I have done growing, if I get plenty of air and riding. This will not be too much for me, but I must be in time for the 3.30 train, I promised my father.'

'Is he here alone?'

'Yes, my uncle is in Brazil. My father is here for a month, and is very kind; he seems very fairly satisfied with me; and he wants me to get prepared for the commission in the Life Guards.'

'The Life Guards!'

'You see he is bent on my being an English gentleman, but he has some dislike to the University, fancies it too old-world or something; and, honestly, I cannot wish it myself. I can't take much to books, and Dr. White says I have begun too late, and shall never make much of them.'

'If you went into the Guards, my brother might be a friend to you.'

'My back is not fit for the infantry,' said Ferdinand, 'but I can ride anything; I always could. I care for nothing so much as horses.'

'Then why not some other cavalry regiment?'

'Well, my father knows a man with a son in the Life Guards, who has persuaded him that it is the thing, and I don't greatly care.'

'Is he prepared for the expensiveness?'

'I fancy it is the recommendation,' said Ferdinand, smiling with a little shame; 'but if you really see reason for some other choice perhaps you would represent it to him. I think he would attend to you in person.'

'Have you positively no choice, Fernan?'

'I never like the bother of consideration,' said Ferdinand, 'and in London I might have more chance of seeing you and other friends sometimes. I do know that it is not all my father supposes, but he thinks it is all my ignorance, and I have not much right to be particular.'

'Only take care that horses do not become your temptation,' said Mr. Audley.

'I know,' gravely replied Ferdinand. 'The fact is,' he added, as they turned down the street, 'that I do not want to go counter to my father if I can help it. I have not been able to avoid vexing him, and this is of no great consequence. I can exchange, if it should not suit me.'

'I believe you are right,' said the Curate; 'but I will inquire and write to you before the application is made. Wait, and I will send out Lance. But ought you not to call at the Rectory?'

'I will do so as I return,' said Ferdinand; and as Mr. Audley entered the house, he thought that the making the Cacique into an English gentleman seemed to have been attained as far as accent, mind, and manner went, and the air and gesture had always been natural in him. His tone rather than his words were conclusive to the Curate that his heart had never swerved from the purpose with which he had stood at the Font; but the languor and indolence of the voice indicated that the tropical indifference was far from conquered, and it was an

anxious question whether the life destined for him might not be exceptionally perilous to his peculiar temperament of nonchalance and excitability.

Consideration was not possible just then, for when Mr. Audley opened the door, he found that he had been impatiently waited for, and barely time was allowed to him to send Lance to Ferdinand Travis, before he was summoned to immediate conference with Thomas Underwood, who, on coming in, had assumed the management of affairs, and on calling for the will, was rather displeased with Felix's protest against doing anything without Mr. Audley, whom he knew to have been named guardian by his father. The cousin seemed unable to credit the statement; and Wilmet had just found the long envelope with the black seal, exactly as it had lain in the desk, which had never been disturbed since the business on their father's death had been finished.

There was the old will made long before, leaving whatever there was to leave unconditionally to the wife, with the sole guardianship of the children; and there was the codicil dated the 16th of October 1854, appointing Charles Somerville Audley, clerk, to the guardianship in case of the death of the mother, while they should all, or any of them, be under twenty-one, and directing that in that contingency the property should be placed in his hands as trustee, the interest to be employed for their maintenance, and the capital to be divided equally among them, each receiving his or her share on coming of age. All this was in Edward Underwood's own handwriting, and his signature was attested by the Rector and the doctor.

Thomas Underwood was more 'put out,' than the management of such an insignificant sum seemed to warrant. He was no doubt disappointed of his cousin's confidence, as well as of some liberal (if domineering) intentions; and he was only half appeased when Edgar pointed to the date, and showed that the arrangement had been made before the renewal of intercourse. 'It was hardly fair to thrust a charge upon a stranger when there was a relation to act. Poor Edward, he ought to have trusted,' he said. There was genuine kindness of heart in the desire to confer benefits, though perhaps in rather an overbearing spirit, as well as disappointment and hurt feeling that his cousin had acquiesced in his neglect without an appeal. However, after asking whether Mr. Audley meant to act, and hearing of his decided intention of doing so, he proceeded to state his own plans for them. The present state of things could not continue, and he proposed that Wilmet and Geraldine should go as half boarders to some school, to be prepared for governesses. Felix--could he write shorthand? 'Oh yes; but--' Then he knew of a capital opening for him, a few years, and he would be on the way to prosperity: the little ones might be boarded with their old nurse till fit for some clergy orphan schools; if the means would not provide for all, there need be no difficulty made on that score.

Mr. Audley saw Felix's start of dismay and glance at him, but knowing as he did that the lad was always more himself when not interfered with, and allowed to act for himself, he only said, 'It is very kind in you, sir, but I think Felix should be consulted.'

'It is impossible!' began Felix hastily.

'Impossible! It is quite impossible, I would have you to understand,

that a lot of children like you should keep house together, and on such an income as that. Quite preposterous.'

'As for that,' said Felix, still unsubmitively, 'it is only what we have been doing, except for the name of the thing, for the last three years on the same means.'

'You don't mean to tell me that you have kept things going on such means without a debt?'

'Of course we have! We never let a bill run,' said Felix, slightly indignant.

'Now mind, I'm not insulting you, Felix, but I know what the women are and what they tell us. Are you sure of that? No debts--honour bright?'

'None at all!' said Felix, with an endeavour at calmness, but glowing hotly. 'I help my sister make up her books every Saturday night. We always pay ready money.'

'Humph,' said Mr. Underwood, still only half convinced. 'Living must be cheap at Bexley.'

'You had better explain a little, Felix,' said Mr. Audley.

Felix did bring himself to say, 'I am sub-editor now, and get 100 pounds a year, besides being paid for any article I write. Wilmet has 25 pounds a year and her dinner, and Angela's at school, so there are only five of us constantly dining at home, and with Mr. Audley's two guineas a week we can do very well.'

'What, you lodge here?'

'Did not you know that?' said Felix surprised.

Mr. Underwood gave a whistle, and the Curate felt his cheeks growing redder and redder, as he perceived that seven-and-twenty was not considered as so very much older than eighteen. Edgar understood and smiled, but Felix only thought he was suspected of making a good thing of his lodger, and was beginning something awkward about, 'It is all kindness,' when Mr. Audley broke in--

'Of course nothing is settled yet, but--but I believe I shall change my quarters. A smaller house would be better for them; but I think the children should keep together. Indeed, my dear friend said he chiefly appointed me that Felix might be kept at their head.'

Thereupon Mr. Underwood began to expostulate against the sacrifice of position and talent that Felix was making for the sake of bearing the burthen of a family that would have pressed heavily on a man double his age. It was what Felix already knew, much better than when at sixteen he had made his first venture. He had experienced the effects of change of station, as well as of exertion, drudgery, and of the home hardship that no one except Mr. Audley had tried to sweeten. He saw how Edgar had acquired the nameless air and style that he was losing, how even Clement viewed him as left behind; and, on the other hand, he knew that with his own trained and tested ability and application, and his kinsman's patronage, there was every reasonable

chance of his regaining a gentleman's position, away from that half-jealous, half-conceited foreman, who made every day a trial to him, and looked at him with an evil eye as a supplanter in the post of confidence. But therewith he thought of his father's words, that to him he left this heavy burthen, and he thought what it would be to have no central home, no place of holiday-meeting, no rallying-point for the boys and girls, and to cast off the little ones to hired service, this alternative never seriously occurred to him, for were they not all bound to him by the cords of love, and most closely the weakest and most helpless? Yet his first reply did not convey the weight of his determination. It was only 'Geraldine is too delicate.'

'Well, well, good advice and treatment might make a change. Or, if she be fit for nothing else, would not that Sisterhood at Dearport take her on reasonable terms? Not that I can away with such nonsense, but your father had his fancies.'

'My father wished us not to break up the home.'

'That was all very well when your poor mother was alive. You have been a good son to her, but it is impossible that you and your sister, mere children as you are, should set up housekeeping by yourselves. Mr. Audley must see it cannot be suffered; it is the bounden duty of your friends to interfere.'

Mr. Audley did not speak. He knew that Felix could reckon on his support; and, moreover, that the youth would show himself to greater advantage when not interfered with. So after pausing to see whether his guardian would speak, Felix said, 'Of course we are in Mr. Audley's power, but he knows that we have made some trial, and except in name we have really stood alone for these three years. Wilmet can quite manage the house, and it would be misery for ever to us all to have no home. In short--' and Felix's face burnt, his voice choked, and his eyes brimmed over with hot indignant tears, as he concluded, 'it shall never be done with my good will.'

'And under the circumstances,' said Mr. Audley, 'I think Felix is right.'

'Very well,' said Thomas Underwood, much displeased. 'I have no power here, and if you and that lad think he can take charge of a house and a dozen children, you must have it your own way. Only, when they have all gone to rack and ruin, and he is sick of being a little tradesman in a country town, he will remember what I said.'

Felix forced back his resentful feelings, and contrived to say, 'Yes, sir, I know it is a great disadvantage, and that you only wish for our good; but I do not think anything would be so bad for the children as to be all cast about the world, with no place to go to, and becoming strangers to one another; and since there is this way of keeping them together, it seems right.'

The steadiness of his manner struck Mr. Underwood, and the reply was not unkind.

'You are a good boy at bottom, Felix, and mean well, and I am only sorry not to be able to hinder you from throwing yourself away for life by trying to do what is morally impossible, in a foolish spirit of independence. Do not interrupt. I warn you that I am not to be

appealed to for getting you out of the difficulties you are plunging into; but of course your brother and sister will be mine as before; and as I promised myself to do the same by your mother as by your father--my near cousins both--here is to cover necessary expenses.'

It was a cheque for 150, pounds the same as he had given on the former occasion; and though Felix had rather not have taken it, he had little choice, and he brought himself to return cold but respectful thanks; and Mr. Underwood did not manifest any more displeasure, but showed himself very kind at the meal that was spread in Mr. Audley's sitting-room, and even invited Wilmet to accompany Alda, when she joined the family in a week's time at Brighton, so as to have sea air for the remainder of her holidays.

Nothing could be more reluctant than was Wilmet at first, but there was a chorus of persuasions and promises; and the thought of being a little longer in Alda's presence made her waver and almost consent.

Ferdinand Travis came in, but had only time for a greeting and a hasty meal, before Mr. Underwood's carriage came round; and, nothing loth, he gave a lift to the Mexican millionaire to the station with him and Edgar. So, for the last time, had all the thirteen been at home together.

CHAPTER X

THE FAMILY COBWEB ON THE MOVE

'Oh! the auld house, the auld house,
What though the rooms were wee;
Oh! kind hearts were dwelling there,
And bairnies full of glee.'
Lady Nairn.

Every one except Edgar would, it was hoped, stay at home till after the Epiphany, that most marked anniversary of birth and death.

Clement at first declared it impossible, for St. Matthew's could not dispense with him on the great day; and Fulbert grinned, and nudged Lance at his crest-fallen looks, when he received full leave of absence for the next three weeks.

But Lance was bursting with reverse troubles. The same post had brought him a note from his organist; and that 'stupid old Dean' as he irreverently called him, had maliciously demanded 'How beautiful are the feet,' with the chorus following, and nobody in the choir was available to execute the solo but Lance. He had sung it once or twice before; and if he had the music, and would practise at home, he need only come up by the earliest train on the Epiphany morning; if not, he must arrive in time for a practice on the 5th; he would be wanted at both the festival and Sunday services, but might return as early as he pleased on Monday the 9th.

Lance did not receive the summons in an exemplary spirit. It is not certain that he did not bite it. He rolled on the floor, and contorted himself in convulsions of vexation; he 'bothered' the Dean, he 'bothered' the Precentor, he 'bothered' the Organist, he 'bothered' Shapcote's sore throat, he 'bothered' Harewood's wool-gathering wits, he 'bothered' his own voice, and thereby caused Clement to rebuke him for foolish murmurs instead of joy in his gift.

'A fine gift to rejoice in, to make one be whipped off by an old fogey, when one most wants to be at home! I thank my stars I can't sing!' said Fulbert.

'I should thank mine if Bill Harewood had any sense,' said Lance, sitting up in a heap on the floor. 'He can go quite high enough when he pleases; only, unluckily, a goose of a jackdaw must needs get into the cathedral just as Bill had got to sing the solo in "As pants the hart;" and there he stood staring with his mouth wide open--and no wonder, for it was sitting on the old stone-king's head! Wasn't Miles in a rage; and didn't he vow he'd never trust a solo to Harewood again if he knew it! Oh, I say, Wilmet--Fee, I know! Do let me bring Bill back with me on Monday morning; and he could go by the six o'clock train. Oh, jolly!'

'But is he really a nice boy, Lance?' asked Wilmet, doubtfully.

'Oh, isn't he just? You'll see! His father is a Vicar-choral, you know, lives in our precincts; his private door just opposite ours, and 'tis the most delicious house you ever saw! You may make as much row as you please, and nobody minds!'

'I know who Mr. Harewood is. Librarian too, is he not?' said Felix. 'I have heard people laughing about his good-natured wife.'

'Aren't they the people who were so kind to you last year, Lance,' asked Cherry, 'when you could not come home because of the measles?'

'Of course. Do let me bring him, Fee,' entreated Lance; 'he is no end of a chap--captain of our form almost always--and such a brick at cricket! I told him I'd show him the potteries, and your press, and our organ, and everything--and it is such a chance when we are all at home! I shall get the fellows to believe now that my sisters beat all theirs to shivers.'

'Can you withstand that flattering compliment, Wilmet?' said Felix, laughing. 'I can't!'

'He is very welcome,' said Wilmet; 'only, Lance, he must not stay the night, for there really is not room for another mouse.'

The little girls had heard so much about Bill Harewood, that they were much excited; but their sympathy kindly compensated for the lack of that of the elder brothers. Fulbert pronounced that a cathedral chorister could never be any great shakes; and Clement could not forgive one who had been frivolous enough to be distracted by a jackdaw; but Lance, trusting to his friend's personal attractions to overcome all prejudice, trotted blithely off to the organist-schoolmaster, to beg the loan of the music, and received a promise of a practice in church in the evening. Meantime, he begged Clement to play the accompaniment for him on the old piano. Neither boy knew

that it had been scarcely opened since their father's hand had last lingered fondly upon it. Music had been found to excite their mother to tears; Geraldine resembled Fulbert in unmusicalness, and Wilmet had depended on school, the brothers on their choir-practice, so that the sound was like a new thing in the house; nor was any one prepared either for the superiority of Clement's playing, or for the exceeding beauty and sweetness of Lance's singing. No one who appreciated the rare quality of his high notes wondered that he was indispensable; Geraldine could hardly believe that the clear exquisite proclamation, that came floating as from an angel voice, could really come from the little, slight, grubby, dusty urchin, who stood with clasped hands and uplifted face; and Clement himself--though deferring the communication till Lance was absent, lest it should make him vain--confided to Wilmet that they had no such voice at St Matthew's, and it was a shame to waste him on Anglicans.

Wilmet hardly entered into this enormity. She had made a discovery which interested her infinitely more. Little Theodore, hitherto so inanimate, had sat up, listened, looked with a dawning of expression in the eyes that had hitherto been clear and meaningless as blue porcelain, and as the music ceased, his inarticulate hummings continued the same tune. Could it be that the key to the dormant senses was found? His eyes turned to the piano, and his finger pointed to it as soon as he found himself in the room with it, and the airs he heard were continually reproduced in his murmuring sounds; that 'How beautiful!' which had first awakened the gleam--his own birthday anthem--being sure to recur at sight of Lance; while a doleful Irish croon, Sibby's regular lullaby, always served for her, and the 'Hardy Norseman' for Felix, who had sometimes whistled it to him. Wilmet spent every available moment in awaking the smile on the little waxen face that had never responded before; it seemed to be just the cheering hope she needed to revive her spirits, only she was almost ready to renounce her journey with Alda for the sake of cultivating the new-found faculty.

No one would permit this; and indeed, so far from waiting to be exhibited to Lance's friend, the two sisters received their billet de route on the very day he was expected; and there was no appeal, since a housekeeper was to travel from Centry, who would take charge of them to London, whence they would go down with Mr. Underwood. Poor Wilmet was much dismayed at leaving Geraldine to what they both regarded as the unprecedented invasion of a strange boy; indeed, the whole charge made Cherry's heart quail, though she said little of her fears, knowing the importance of Wilmet's having and enjoying her holiday; and Mr. Audley promised extra aid in keeping order among the boys.

But as they came in that evening from the practice at the church, to which Clement had insisted on their coming to hear Lance, Mr. Audley beckoned Felix to his room with the words, 'There's a thing I want to talk over with you.'

Felix recollected those ominous words to Mr. Underwood, and stood warming his hands in dread of what might be coming. It was all he feared.

'I wanted to say--I wanted to tell you--' began Mr. Audley. 'I would not have chosen this time, but that I think it may save Wilmet something to be able to tell her friends that the present arrangement

is to cease.'

'Wilmet!' exclaimed Felix; then bethinking himself. 'Was that what Tom Underwood meant? But you will not trouble yourself about such rubbish.'

'Well, you see,' began the Curate, with heightening colour, 'it can't be denied that your sister has grown up, and that things are changed.'

'Mrs. Froggatt did ask me if you were going on here,' said Felix, still unconvinced; 'but can't we leave people to be stupid without interfering with us?'

'Felix, you ought to be a better protector to your sisters. You would not like to have my Lady remonstrating--nay, maybe writing to my mother: she is quite capable of it.'

Felix's cheeks were in a flame. 'If people would mind their own business,' he said; 'but if they will have it so--'

'They are right, Felix,' said the Curate quietly; 'appearances must be carefully heeded, and by you almost more than by any one. Your slowness to understand me makes me almost doubtful about my further design.'

'Not going away altogether!'

'Not immediately; but things stand thus--Dr. White, my old tutor, you know, and Fernan's, is nearly sure of the new Bishopric in Australia, and he wants me.'

Felix hardly repressed a groan.

'Any way I should not go immediately; but when your father spoke to me about the guardianship, he made me promise not to let it stand in the way of any other call. I fancied he had mission work in his mind, and it disposes me the more to think I ought not to hold back; but while your dear mother lived, I would not have gone.'

'Yes, you have been very good to us,' was all Felix could say. 'But when?'

'Not for some time; but I am not going this moment. Three months' notice Mr. Bevan must have, and if he requires it, six; I must spend some time at home, and very like shall not be off till you are of age--certainly not if I find there is any difficulty in handing the management of things over to you. How long I remain with you must depend on circumstances. How much notice must you give before leaving this house?'

'I do not know--half a year, I fancy. You think we ought to give it up? I suppose it is too large for us now.'

'And you could take no lodger but one of the old-lady type.'

'Horrid!' said Felix. 'Well, we will see; but it will be a great stroke on poor Cherry--she can remember nothing before this house.'

'It will be very good for her to have no old associations to sit brooding over.'

'My poor little Cherry! If I saw how to cheer up her life; but without your lessons it will be more dreary for her than ever!'

'Give her all you can to do, and do not be over-careful to keep your anxieties from her knowledge. She is very much of a woman, and if you leave her too much to herself, she will grow more introspective.'

'Wilmet and I have always wanted to shelter her; she never seems fit for trouble, and she is so young!'

'Compared with you two venerable people!' said Mr. Audley, smiling. 'But her mind is not young, and to treat her as a child is the way to make her prey upon herself. I wish her talent could be more cultivated; but meantime nothing is better for her than the care of Bernard and Stella. I hope you will not be in a hurry to promote them out of her hands.'

'Very well; but she will miss you sorely.'

'I hope to see her brightened before I am really gone, and I am not going to decamp from this house till some natural break comes. To do that would be absurd!'

There was a silence; and then Felix said with a sigh, 'Yes, a smaller house, and one servant. I will speak to Wilmet.'

'Perhaps you had better, so that she may have an answer in case she is attacked.'

Wilmet was aghast at first, but a hint from Alda made her acquiesce, not with blushing consciousness, but with the perception that the way of the world was against the retention of the lodger; and sorry as she was to lose Mr. Audley, her housewifely mind was not consoled, but distracted, by calculations on the difference of expenditure. Again she tried to beg herself off from her visit, in the dread that Felix would go and take some impracticable house in her absence--some place with thin walls, no cupboards, and no coal-hole; and she was only pacified by his solemn promise to decide on no house without her. She went away in an avalanche of kisses and tears, leaving Geraldine with a basketful of written instructions for every possible contingency, at which the anxious maiden sat gazing anxiously, trying to store her mind with its onerous directions.

'Shall I give you a piece of advice, Cherry?' said the Curate, as he saw the dark eyebrows drawn together.

'Oh, do!' she earnestly said.

'Put all that in the fire!'

'Mr. Audley!'

'And go by the light of nature! You have just as many senses as Wilmet, and almost as much experience; and as to oppressing yourself with the determination to do the very thing she would have done under all circumstances, it is a delusion. People must act according

to their own nature, not some one else's.'

'Certainly,' said Geraldine, smiling. 'I could never walk stately in and say, "Now, boys!"--and much they would care for it if I did.'

'It seems to be a case for "Now, boys!" at this moment,' said Mr. Audley; 'what can all that row be?'

'Oh, it must be that dreadful strange boy, Lance's friend,' sighed Geraldine, almost turning pale. Then, trying to cheer up, 'But it is only for the day, and Lance wished it so much.'

As she spoke, the shout of 'Cherry, here's Bill!' came nearer, and the whole of the younger half of the family tumbled promiscuously into the room, introducing the visitor in the midst of them. To the elders, 'no end of a chap' appeared, as Mr. Audley said, to mean all ends of shock hair, and freckles up to the eyes; but when Fulbert and Lance had whirled him out again to see the lions of Bexley, Robina and Angela were overheard respectfully pronouncing that he was nice and spotty like the dear little frogs in the strawberry-beds at Catsacre, and that his hair was just the colour Cherry painted that of all the very best people in her 'holy pictures.'

The object of their admiration was seen no more till the middle of dinner, when all three appeared, immoderately dusty; and no wonder, for the organist had employed them to climb, sweep fashion, into the biggest organ-pipe to investigate the cause of a bronchial affection of long standing,--which turned out to be a dead bat caught in a tenacious cobweb.

Shortly after, the guest was found assisting Angela in a tableau, where a pen-wiper doll in nun's costume was enacting the exorcism of the said bat, in a cave built of wooden bricks.

Clement was undecided whether to condemn or admire; and Geraldine, to whom Edgar had lent some volumes of Ruskin, meditated on the grotesque.

Before there had been time for the fanciful sport to become rough comedy, Lance had called off his friend to see the potteries; and to poor Cherry's horror, she found that Robina had been swept off in the torrent of boyhood. Clement, pitying her despair and self-reproach, magnanimously offered to follow, and either bring the little maid back, or keep her out of harm's way; and for some time Cherry reposed in the conviction that 'Tina was as good as a girl any day.'

But at about a quarter to six, a little tap came to Mr. Audley's door, and Angela stood there, saying, with a most serious face, 'Please, Mr. Audley, Cherry wants to know whether you don't think something must have happened.' And going upstairs, he found the poor young deputy in a nervous agony of despair at the non-return of any of the party, quite certain that some catastrophe had befallen them, and divided between self-reproach and dread of the consequences.

'The very first day Wilmet had gone!' as she said.

It was almost time for Harewood's train, which made it all the more strange. Mr. Audley tried to reassure her by the probability that the whole party were conveying him to the station, and would appear when

he was gone; but time confuted this pleasing hypothesis, and Cherry's misery was renewed. She even almost hinted a wish that Mr. Audley would go out and look for them.

'And then,' he said, smiling, 'in an hour's time you would be sending Felix to look for me. No, no, Cherry, these waiting times are often hard, no doubt; but, as I fear you are one of those destined to "abide by the tents" instead of going out to battle, you had better learn to do your watching composedly.'

'O Mr. Audley! how can I? I know it must be very wrong, but how can I not care?' And verily the nervous sensitive girl was quivering with suspense.

"He will not be afraid of any evil tidings, for his heart standeth fast and believeth in the Lord," answered Mr. Audley. 'I see that does not tell you how not to be afraid; but I imagine that a few trusting ejaculations in the heart, and then resolute attention to something else, may be found a help.'

Cherry would have sighed that attention was the most impossible thing in the world; but before she had time to do so, Mr. Audley had begun to expound to her his Australian scheme. It excited her extremely; and as a year and a half seemed an immense period of time to her imagination, the dread of losing him was not so immediate as to damp her enthusiasm. They had discussed his plans for nearly an hour before Cherry started at the sound of the door, and then it was only Felix who entered. He was irate, but not at all alarmed; and presently the welcome clatter of steps approached, and in dashed the whole crew, mired up to the eyes, but in as towering spirits as ever.

Their delay had, it appeared, been caused by a long walk that ensued upon the visit to the potteries, and a wild venture of Will Harewood upon impracticable ice, which had made him acquainted with the depths of a horse-pond. There was none of the dignity of danger, for the depths were shallows and the water only rose to his waist; but the mud was above his ankles, and he had floundered out with some difficulty. He wanted to walk back with no more ceremony than a water-dog; but the Underwoods had made common cause against him, and had dragged him to a cottage, where he had the pleasing alternative of an old woman's blankets and petticoats while his garments were drying. He was as nearly angry as a Harewood could be, Lance observed, declaring that they should never have got him into the cottage without fighting him, if Tina had not been so tall, and if Robin had not nearly cried; while he, throwing off all responsibility, ascribed all his lateness to his friend's 'maggots.' No more trains stopped at Bexley till after midnight, but as to his absence causing any uneasiness at home, he laughed at the notion, and was corroborated by Lance in averring that they had too much sense; listening with undisguised amazement to the elaborate explanations and apologies about Robina, which Clement was scrupulously pouring forth to his brother and sister, saying that he would have brought her home at once, but that he really did not like to trust those boys alone.

Whereat Lance held up his hands with a dumb show of amazement that convulsed Fulbert, Bill Harewood, and Robina herself, with agonies of half-suppressed merriment. The boy had come in, prepared to be grave and quiet, as knowing how lately affliction had come to the family, and having been warned by Lance, that 'as to going on as we do in the

precincts, why it would make Cherry jump out of her skin.'

But by some extraordinary influence--whether it were the oddity of William Harewood's face, or the novelty of his perfect insouciance in the household whither care had come only too early--some infection seized on the young Underwoods, and before the end of the evening meal, if the 'goings on' were not equal to those in the precincts, they were, at any rate, not far short of it.

Lance presently incited his friend to show 'how he had mesmerised Lucy.' Clement made a horrified protest; and Geraldine looked alarmed at her eldest brother, who began, 'Indeed, Lance, we can have nothing of that sort here.'

'But, Felix, I do assure you there is no harm.'

'Upon my word and honour, there's not a spice of anything the Archbishop of Canterbury could stick at,' added Will Harewood.

'It is impossible there should not be harm,' interposed Clement; but the boys, including Fulbert, were in such fits of laughter, that Felix began to suspect the seriousness of the performance; and when Lance sprang at him, exclaiming, 'I'll go to Mr. Audley! Fee--Cherry--will you be satisfied if Mr. Audley says we may?' Felix and Cherry both consented; and Lance rushed off to make the appeal, and returned not only with full sanction, but with Mr. Audley himself, come to see the operation. This perfectly satisfied Felix, who even consented, on the entreaty of his brothers, to become the first subject; and Cherry knew that where the Curate and Felix had no scruples, she need have none; but, for all that, she was more than half frightened and uncomfortable--above all, when Clement, amid shouts of mirth from the three schoolboys, indignantly marched away to shut himself up in his cold bedroom.

By and by, after some unseen preparation--all the more mystifying because carried on in the kitchen, where Sibby always used to keep Theodore in a cradle till Felix was ready for him--Will Harewood caused Felix to stand exactly opposite to him and to the spectators, with a dinner-plate in his hand, and under injunctions to imitate the operator exactly. Armed with another plate, William rubbed his own finger first on the under side of the plate, and then, after some passes and flourishes, on his own forehead, entirely without effect so far as he himself was concerned; but his victim, standing meekly good-natured and unconscious, was seen by the ecstatic audience to be, at each pass, painting his own face with the soot from a flame over which his plate had been previously held. The shrieks of amusement redoubled at the perplexity they occasioned him, till they penetrated the upper rooms: and suddenly a cry of horror made all turn to the door and see a little white bare-footed figure standing there, transfixed with fright, which increased tenfold when Felix hurried towards it, not yet aware of the condition of his visage, until a universal shout warned him of it; while Lance, darting in pursuit, picked up Bernard, and by his wonderful caressing arts, and partly by his special gift of coaxing, partly as the object of the little fellow's most fervent adoration, made the scattered senses take in that it was 'all play,' and even carried back the little white bundle, heart throbbing and eyes staring, but still secure in his arms, to admire Felix all black, and then to be further relieved by beholding the restoration of the natural hue at the pump below

stairs.

Then amid Sibby's scoldings and assurances that the child would catch his death of cold, Bernard was borne upstairs again by Felix, who found Clement in the nursery comforting the little girls, and preventing them from following the example of their valiant pioneer. Felix, now thoroughly entering into the spirit of the joke, entertained for a moment the hope of entrapping Clement; but of course Bernard could not be silenced from his bold and rather doubtful proclamation, that 'The funny boy made Felix black his own face, and I wasn't afraid.'

'Naughty boy!' commented Stella. 'Poor Fee!--and she reared up to kiss him, and stroke the cheeks that had suffered such an indignity.

'What! It was only a trick?' said Clement slowly, as if half mystified.

'Of course,' said Felix; 'could not you trust to that?'

'I don't know. Cathedrals are very lax, and it had a questionable name.'

'O Clem! if it had not been in you before, I should wish you had never gone to St. Matthew's. Come down now, don't let us disturb the little ones any longer. --Good-night, Angel; good-n

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