

FINLEY MARTHA

MILDRED AT HOME:
WITH SOMETHING
ABOUT HER RELATIVES
AND FRIENDS.

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Mildred at Home: With Something About Her Relatives and Friends

Chapter First

"A word spoken in due season, how good is it!" – Prov. 15:23.

"I'm to be dressed in white, mammy, with blue sash and ribbons, papa says, and to go back to him as soon as you are done with me."

"Is you, honey? but co'se you is; you mos' neber wears nuffin but white when de warm days comes; an' massa can't do widout his darlin' pet, now all de res' am gone."

"No; nor I without him," Elsie said, tears springing to her eyes. "Oh, don't these rooms seem lonely, mammy? Don't you miss Annis?"

"Co'se, honey, co'se I dose; but tank de Lord, I'se got my own darlin' chile lef'."

"And I have you and papa left," returned the little girl, smiling through her tears, "and that's a great deal; papa alone is more than half of all the world to me, and you know I could never do without you, mammy."

"Yo' ole mammy hopes you'll always tink like dat, honey," said Chloe, taking out the articles needed for the little girl's toilet. "Pears like ole times come back," she remarked presently, combing a glossy ringlet round her finger; "de ole times befo' we went up Norf and massa got married to Miss Rose."

"Yes; and oh, mammy, papa has said I may be with him all day long, from the time I'm up in the morning and dressed, till I have to go to bed at night. Isn't it nice?"

"Berry nice plan, honey; 'spect it keep bofe you and massa from feelin' mos' pow'ful lonesome."

"Yes," Elsie said; "and I like it ever so much for a little while, but I wouldn't for anything be without mamma and Horace all the time."

Aunt Chloe was still busy with the ringlets. She took almost as much pride and delight in their beauty and abundance as the fond father himself, and was apt to linger lovingly over her task. But Elsie, though wont to endure with exemplary patience and resignation the somewhat tedious and trying ordeal of combing and curling, never complaining, though now and then compelled to wince when the comb caught in a tangle and mammy gave a pull that was far from pleasant, would sometimes have been glad to have them cut off would papa only have given consent.

"Dar, honey, dat job am done," Aunt Chloe said at length, laying aside the comb and brush. "Now fo' de dress and ribbons, an' den you kin go back to massa."

"I want to just as soon as I can," said the little girl.

"What goin' be done 'bout pourin' de tea to-night?" asked Aunt Chloe presently, rather as if thinking aloud than speaking to Elsie.

"Why," queried the little girl, "won't Mrs. Murray do it as usual?"

"Dunno, chile, she hab pow'ful bad headache."

"Has she? How sorry I am! Oh, I wonder if papa would let me try!"

"'Spect so, honey, ef you axes him," said Aunt Chloe, giving a final adjustment to the bows of the sash and the folds of the dress.

"So I will," cried the little girl, skipping away. But the next instant, coming to a sudden standstill and turning toward her nurse a face full of concern, "Mammy," she asked, "do you think I can do anything to help poor Mrs. Murray's head?"

"No, chile, she ain't wantin' nuffin but to be let 'lone till de sickness am gone."

"I wish I could help her," sighed Elsie, in a tenderly pitying tone; "I'm very sorry for her, but hope she will be well again to-morrow."

Two gentlemen were sitting in the veranda. Each turned a smiling, affectionate look upon the little girl as she stepped from the open doorway, the one saying, "Well, daughter," the other, "How are you to-day, my little friend?"

"Quite well, thank you, Mr. Travilla. How are you, sir?" she said, putting her small white hand into the larger, browner one he held out to her.

He kept it for a minute or two while he chatted with her about the cousins who had just left for their Northern home, after spending the winter as guests at the Oaks, and of her mamma and baby brother, who were travelling to Philadelphia in their company.

"I dare say the house seems very quiet and rather lonely?" he remarked, inquiringly.

"Yes, sir; especially in my rooms," she said, glancing round at her father, who was silently listening to their talk; "but papa has promised to let me be with him all the time during the day. So I shall not mind it so much."

"Was not that a rather rash promise, Dinsmore?" asked Mr. Travilla, with mock gravity. "Well, if you tire of her company at any time, we of Ion shall be delighted to have her sent to us."

"Thank you," Mr. Dinsmore said, with a humorous look at his little girl; "I shall certainly send her to you directly I tire of her society."

Elsie glanced searchingly into his face; then with a happy laugh ran to him, and putting her arm about his neck, said, "I'm not the least bit frightened, papa; not at all afraid that you will want to be rid of me. I hope I'm not quite so silly as I was once when Mr. Travilla made me think you might give me away to him."

"But it was only a loan I was asking for this time, my little friend," was Mr. Travilla's pleasant rejoinder.

"Yes, sir; but if you borrow me you'll have to borrow papa too for the same length of time," Elsie said, with a merry laugh. "Won't he, papa?"

"I think he cannot have you on any easier terms," Mr. Dinsmore answered; "for I certainly cannot spare you from home while I stay here alone."

"A very satisfactory arrangement to me, provided we are allowed to keep you both as long as we wish," Mr. Travilla said, rising as if to take leave.

But an urgent invitation to stay to tea induced him to resume his seat.

Then Elsie preferred her request.

It was granted at once, her father saying, with a pleased look, "I should like to see how well you can fill your mamma's place; and if you show yourself capable, you may do so always in her absence, if you wish."

"Oh, thank you, papa," she cried in delight. "I'll do my very best. But I'm glad there are no strangers to tea to-night to see me make my first attempt. You are a guest, Mr. Travilla, but not a stranger," she added, with a bright, winsome look up at him.

"Thank you, my dear," he said; "it would be a grief of heart to me to be looked upon in that light by the little girl whose affection I value so highly."

"You are very kind to say so, sir," she returned, with a blush and a smile, "and I believe I'm every bit as fond of you as if you were my uncle. I have often heard papa say you and he were like brothers, and that would make you my uncle, wouldn't it?"

"Yes," her father said; "and so good and kind an uncle would be something to be thankful for, wouldn't it? Ah," rising and taking her hand, "there is the tea-bell. Now for your experiment. Will you walk out with us, Travilla?"

Both gentlemen watched the little girl with loving interest while she went through the duties of her new position with a quiet grace and dignity that filled her father with proud delight, and increased the admiration already felt for her by his friend.

On leaving the table they returned to the veranda, where the gentlemen sat conversing, with Elsie between them.

But presently Mr. Dinsmore, hearing that some one from the quarter wished to speak to him, left the other two alone for a while.

"Elsie," Mr. Travilla said softly, taking the little girl's hand in his, "I have something to tell you."

Her only reply was an inquiring look, and he went on: "Something which I am sure you will be glad to hear. But first let me ask if you remember a talk we had together one morning at Roselands, the first summer after your father and I returned from Europe?"

"You were so kind as to talk to me a good many times, sir," Elsie answered doubtfully.

"This was the morning after your fall from the piano-stool. I found you in the garden reading your Bible and crying over it," he said. "And in the talk that followed you expressed great concern at the discovery that I had no love for the Lord Jesus Christ. A text you quoted – 'If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema maranatha' – has since come very frequently to my recollection, and troubled my conscience not a little."

Elsie was now listening with intense interest. Mr. Travilla paused for a moment, his face expressing deep emotion; then resumed: "I think God's Holy Spirit has thoroughly convinced me of the exceeding sinfulness of unbelief; of refusing or neglecting His offered salvation through the atoning blood of His dear Son; refusing to give to the Lord Jesus the poor little return of the best love of my heart for all He has done and suffered in my stead. This is what I had to tell you, my dear little friend. I have found Jesus – have given myself unreservedly to Him, to be His for time and for eternity, and I have been led to do this mainly through your instrumentality."

Tears of joy filled the little girl's eyes. "I am so glad, Mr. Travilla, so very glad!" she exclaimed. "It is the best news I could possibly have heard."

"Thank you, my dear," he said, with feeling. "I can now understand your anxiety for my conversion, for I myself am conscious of a yearning desire for the salvation of souls, especially of those of my friends and acquaintances."

"And now you will join the church, won't you, sir?"

"I don't know, Elsie; that is a question of duty I have not yet decided. There are so many of its members who are a disgrace to their profession, that I fear I might prove so also. What do you think about it?"

"I'm only a little child, not half so wise as you are, sir," she answered, with unaffected modesty.

"Still, I should like to hear your opinion."

After a moment's hesitation and silent thought she lifted a very earnest face to his. "God tells us that He is able to keep us from falling. And don't you think, Mr. Travilla, that it's what the Bible says we should be guided by, and not what somebody else thinks?"

"Yes; that is quite true."

"To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them," she quoted.

"You have studied the Bible so much longer than I," he said, "can you tell me where to look for its directions in regard to this matter? Does it really give any?"

"Yes, sir; oh, yes! Is not joining the church confessing Christ before men, owning Him as our Master, our Lord, our God?"

He nodded assent.

Elsie called to a servant lounging near, and sent him for her Bible.

"Can you find the texts you want without a concordance?" Mr. Travilla asked, regarding her with interest as she took the book and opened it.

"I think I can," she answered, turning over the leaves; "I have read them so often. Yes, here – Matt. 10:32, 33 – is one: 'Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven.'"

She gave him a questioning, pleading look.

"Yes," he said, in a subdued tone, "I think that is to the point; at least, if we grant that joining the church is the only way of confessing Christ."

"Oh, don't you see? Don't you think, Mr. Travilla, that if we love Him with all our hearts we will want to confess Him everywhere and in every way that we can? Won't we want everybody to know that we belong to Him, and own Him as our Master, our Lord, our King?" she exclaimed with eager enthusiasm, her voice taking a tone of earnest entreaty.

"I believe you are right," he said; "that would be the natural effect of such love as we ought to feel – as I am sure you do feel for Him."

"I do love Him, but not half so much as I ought," she answered with a sigh, as again she turned over the leaves of her Bible. "I often wonder how it is that my love to Him is so cold compared to His for me. It is as though I gave Him but one little drop in return for a mighty ocean." A tear fell on the page as she spoke.

Then again she read: "'The gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' 'The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart' – that is, the word of faith which we preach; 'that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.'"

Looking up at him, "Oh, Mr. Travilla," she said, "shall we refuse to be soldiers at all because there are some traitors in the army? Isn't there all the more need of brave, true men for that very reason? plenty of them to fight the Lord's battles and conquer His enemies?"

"Yes; but cannot one do that without becoming a member of a church?"

"Wouldn't that be a queer kind of an army where there was no concert of action, but every man fought separately in the way that seemed best to himself?" she asked, with modest hesitation. "I've read about the armies and battles of our Revolution and other wars, and I don't remember that there was ever a great victory except where a good many men were joined under one leader."

"Very true," he replied, thoughtfully.

"And if you love Jesus, Mr. Travilla, how can you help wanting to obey His dying command, 'Do this in remembrance of me'? And that we cannot do unless we are members of some church."

"I should not hesitate, Elsie, if I were but sure of being able to hold out, and not disgrace my profession," he said.

Mr. Dinsmore returned to the veranda and sat down again by Elsie's side, just in time to hear his friend's last sentence.

"It is a profession of religion you are speaking of, I presume," he said, half inquiringly. "Well, Travilla, we must be content to take one step at a time as we follow our Leader; to put on the armor and go into battle trusting in the Captain of our salvation to lead us on to final victory. He bids us 'fear not; I will help thee.' 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be.' 'He keepeth the feet of His saints.' 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?.. We are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord,' for His chosen, His redeemed ones are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation. For 'He is able to keep you from falling.'"

Chapter Second

"This we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat." – 2 Thess. 3:10.

Mr. Travilla had gone, and Mr. Dinsmore and his little daughter sat alone upon the veranda; she upon his knee, his arm about her waist. Some moments had passed without a word spoken by either. Elsie's eyes were downcast, her face full of solemn joy.

"What is my little girl thinking of?" her father asked at length.

"Oh, papa, I am so glad, so happy, so thankful!" she said; and as she looked up into his face he saw that tears were glistening in her eyes.

"You are seldom other than happy, I think and hope," he responded, softly stroking her hair.

"Yes, very seldom, dear papa. How could anybody be unhappy with so many, many blessings to be thankful for, especially such a dear, kind father to love and take care of me? But I am happier than usual to-night because of the good news Mr. Travilla has told me."

"Ah, what was that?"

"That he has found the Saviour, papa, and that it was partly through my instrumentality. Isn't it strange that God should have so honored a child like me?"

"Ah, I don't know that it is. 'A little child shall lead them,' the Bible says. 'Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast perfected praise.' God often works by the feeblest instrumentality, that thus all may see that the glory is due to Him alone. I rejoice with you, my darling, for no greater blessing can be ours than that of being permitted to win souls to Christ."

"Yes, papa; but I am so far from being what I ought," she added, with unaffected humility, "that I wonder I have not proved a stumbling-block instead of a help."

"Give the glory to God," he said.

"Yes, papa, I know it all belongs to Him. Oh, don't you hope Mr. Travilla will be with us next Sabbath?"

"At the Lord's table? I do indeed. It is a precious privilege I have long wished to share with him; a means of grace no Christian ought ever to neglect; a command that as the last and dying one of our blessed Master we should joyfully obey whenever opportunity is afforded us, yet with the utmost endeavor to be in a proper frame of mind; for 'he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body.' It is a dreadful sin for any one to sit down to that table without having examined himself of his knowledge to discern the Lord's body, of his faith to feed upon Him, repentance, love, and new obedience. Let us both pray earnestly for grace and help to partake worthily, repenting of every sin, hating and forsaking it, and devoting ourselves anew and unreservedly to the Master's service."

"I will, papa," she said. "And should we not meditate on Jesus while at His table?"

"Yes, He should be the principal theme of our thoughts all through the exercises; we should remember Him – the loveliness of His character, the life He led, the death He died, and all that He has done and suffered for us."

They fell into silent thought again. Elsie was the first to speak. "I wonder where they are now, papa?"

"Who, our travellers? Well, we cannot tell precisely; but I hope it will not be very long before we shall hear of their safe arrival in Philadelphia."

"That will end the journey for mamma and Horace," she remarked; "but what a long one the others will still have before them! I should think Annis would feel as if she must hurry on as fast as possible till she gets home to her father and mother."

"Very possibly she may; but I know that Dr. Landreth and Mildred intend resting for some days in Philadelphia. So Annis will be obliged to curb her impatience, which the sights of the city will no doubt help her to do."

At that instant Elsie gave a sudden start, asking in an awed, tremulous whisper, "Papa, what is that?" nestling closer to him as she spoke.

It was growing dusk, and a shadowy figure, dimly seen by the waning light, had just emerged from the shadow of a large tree at some distance down the drive. It was now stealing cautiously in their direction.

"Don't be alarmed, dearest," Mr. Dinsmore said, tightening his clasp of Elsie's slight form; "I presume it is some runaway whom hunger has forced to show himself." Then calling to the figure which continued to advance with slow, faltering steps, "Halt! Who are you, and what is your business here?" he asked.

"I'se Zeke, massa," answered a trembling voice; "I'se come back to wuk, an' hopes you won't be hawd on a po' niggah wha's repentin' an' pow'ful sorry fo' takin' a holiday widout yo' leave, sah." Mr. Dinsmore made no reply, and the man drew nearer. "I'se pow'ful sorry, massa," he repeated, pausing at the foot of the veranda steps, and standing there in a cringing attitude, his rags fluttering in the evening breeze, the remnant of a straw hat in his hand; "hope you won't order me no floggin'."

"If you choose to go back where you came from, I shall not interfere with you, Zeke," returned Mr. Dinsmore, coolly.

"I'se done tired o' de swamp, sah; I'se like to starve to deff dar; hain't tasted not de fust mawsel o' victuals fo' de las' two days."

"Oh, poor fellow, how hungry he must be!" exclaimed Elsie. "Papa, won't you please give him something to eat?"

"He won't work, Elsie; since I have known him he has never earned his salt."

"But, papa," she pleaded, "wouldn't it be wrong and cruel to let him starve while we have plenty and to spare?"

"Would it? God's command is, 'Six days shalt thou labor and do all thy work.' And Paul says to the Thessalonians, 'Even when we were with you, this we commanded you, that if any would not work, neither should he eat.'"

Elsie turned to the suppliant. "Zeke, you hear what the Bible says, and you know we must all obey its teachings."

"Yes, Miss Elsie, dat's true nuff."

"Then will you promise papa that if he feeds you now you will go to work industriously to-morrow, if God spares your life?"

"Sho'n I will, Miss Elsie, 'cept I gets de misery in de back, or de head, or somewheres else."

"He can always find a hole to creep out at, Elsie," Mr. Dinsmore said, with a slight laugh; "those miseries never elude a determined search."

"But, Zeke," said Elsie, "you mustn't give up for a little misery; you mustn't try to feel one."

"Sho' not; but dey jes' comes dere-selves, little missy."

"And some people give them every encouragement, while others work on in spite of them," remarked his master, with some sternness of tone. "I assure you, Zeke, that I have myself done many an hour's work while enduring a racking headache."

"You, sah? T'ought you didn't never do no wuk."

"Just because you never saw me take hold of spade or hoe? One may toil far harder with the mind, Zeke. Well, I will give you one more trial. Go to the kitchen and tell Aunt Dinah, from me, that she is to give you something to eat; and to-morrow you must go to work with the rest in the field or – starve. And mind, if you have been without food as long as you say, you mustn't eat nearly so much as you want to-night, or you'll kill yourself."

"Tank you, sah, I 'cepts de conditions;" and with a low bow, first to Mr. Dinsmore, then to Elsie, he turned and shambled off in the direction of the kitchen.

"Papa, is he so very lazy?" asked Elsie.

"Very; he would do nothing but lie in the sun if allowed to follow his own pleasure, though he is young, strong, and healthy. He disappeared some days ago, but I permitted no search to be made for him, and should have been better pleased had I never seen him again."

"Papa, perhaps he might do better at some other work; in the garden or about the stables."

"Possibly. I think I shall try acting upon your suggestion."

"Oh, thank you, sir," she said. Then after a moment's thoughtful silence: "Papa, we are sitting here doing nothing at all; yet I know you must think it right, else you wouldn't do it, or let me."

"It is right: neither body nor mind was made capable of incessant exertion; we need intervals of rest, and can accomplish more in the end by taking them when needed. Jesus once said to His disciples, 'Come ye yourselves apart into a desert place, and rest a while.'"

"Oh, yes! I remember it now," she said. "How good and kind, how thoughtful for others, He always was! Papa, I do so want to be like Him."

"I think you are, my darling," he answered in moved tones, and pressing her closer to him; "like Him in sufficient measure for those who know you in your daily life to 'take knowledge of you that you have been with Jesus' and learned of Him."

"Papa, you couldn't say sweeter words to me," she whispered, with her arm about his neck; and he felt a tear fall on his cheek. "And you, papa; oh, I am sure no one could be long in your company without feeling sure you were one of Jesus' disciples."

"I hope that is so," he said with feeling; "for, like you, I most earnestly desire to honor Him by my daily walk and conversation, and to be always and everywhere recognized as His servant."

Elsie, who had the kindest of hearts, thought of Zeke while her mammy was preparing her for bed that night, and again while going through the duties of her morning toilet. That completed, she hastened to her father with a request that Zeke might be set to work in her own little garden.

"Weeding and watering it would be very pleasant, easy work, I am sure," she added. "I like to do it myself."

"I doubt if Zeke would know weeds from flowers," her father said, smiling down into the eager little face.

"But I will show him, papa, if I may."

"You may do just as you please about it," was the indulgent reply. "We will have our reading and prayer together, and then you may send for Zeke, and give him his instructions."

"Oh, thank you, papa!" she exclaimed, with as sincere joy and gratitude as though she had won some great favor for herself.

Mr. Dinsmore rang for a servant, and sent a message to Zeke. He was directed to make himself clean and decent, and come to the veranda for further orders.

He obeyed. Elsie found him waiting there, and taking him to her garden explained minutely what she wished him to do, calling his attention particularly to the difference between the leaves of the weeds that were to be uprooted and those of some annuals not yet in bloom.

He promised faithfully to attend to her directions and to be industrious.

"Don't you think it's nicer, easier work than what you would have had to do in the field?" she asked.

"Ya-as, Miss Elsie," he drawled, "but it's stoopin' all de same, and I'se got de misery in de back."

She gave him a searching look, then said reproachfully, "O Zeke, you don't look the least bit sick, and I can't help being afraid you are really lazy. Remember God knows all about it, and is very much displeased with you, if you are not speaking the truth."

"Sho I'se gwine to wuk anyhow, honey," he answered, with a sound between a sigh and a groan, as he bent down and pulled up a weed.

"That's right," she said pleasantly, as she turned and left him.

An hour later, coming out to see what progress he was making, she found nearly all her beloved annuals plucked up by the roots, and lying withering among the weeds in the scorching sun.

"Oh, how could you, Zeke!" she cried, her eyes filling with tears.

"Why, what's de mattah, Miss Elsie?" he asked, gaping at her in open-mouthed wonder, not unmixed with apprehension and dismay.

"Matter? You have been pulling up flowers as well as weeds. That is one you have in your fingers now."

Zeke dropped it as if it had been a hot coal, and stood staring at it where it lay wilting on the hot ground. "Sho, Miss Elsie, I didn't go fo' to do no sech t'ing," he said plaintively; "t'ought I was doin' 'bout right. Shall I plant 'em agin?"

"No; they wouldn't grow," she said.

"Dis niggah's mighty sorry, Miss Elsie. You ain't gwine to hab him sent back to de wuk in de field, is you?" he asked, with humble entreaty.

"I'm afraid that is all you are fit for, Zeke; but the decision rests with papa. I will go and speak to him about it. Don't try to do any more work here, lest you do more mischief," she said, turning toward the house.

He hurried after her. "Please now, Miss Elsie, don' go for to 'suade massa agin dis po' niggah."

"No, I shall not," she answered kindly; "perhaps there is something else you can be set at about the house or grounds. But, Zeke," turning to him and speaking very earnestly, "you will never succeed at anything unless you strive against your natural laziness, and try to do your best. That is what God bids us all do. He says, 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might.' 'Whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not unto men.'"

"S'pect dat's so, Miss Elsie," he drawled; "but de Lawd He ain't gwine to take no notice what a po' niggah's 'bout in de field or de garden."

"That's a great mistake, Zeke," she said. "His eye is always on you – on everybody; and He is pleased with us if He sees us trying to do faithfully the work He has given us, no matter how low the task may seem to us or other human creatures, and displeased if we are not trying to do it 'as to the Lord and not unto men.'"

"You ain't 'fended 'bout dose po' flowahs what dis po' niggah bin pull up in a mistake, is you now, Miss Elsie?" he asked.

Evidently her religious teachings had made no more impression than the idle whistling of the wind.

"No, Zeke, I only can't trust you again," she said, turning away with a slight sigh over her failure to win him from his inborn indolence.

She hastened to her father with the story of what had occurred.

"Ah! it is about what I had expected," he said. "I am sorry for your loss, but it can soon be repaired. Have you left Zeke there to finish the work of destruction?"

"No, sir; I told him to stop till he heard from you."

"He shall go back to the field at once; there is no propriety in giving him an opportunity to do further mischief," Mr. Dinsmore said, with a decision that left no room for remonstrance; and summoning a servant sent the order.

Elsie heard it with a sigh. "What now? You are not wasting pity on that incorrigibly lazy wretch?" her father asked, drawing her caressingly to his knee.

"I did hope to do him some good, papa," she sighed, "and I'm disappointed that I can't."

"There may be other opportunities in the future," he said. "And do not fret about the flowers. You are welcome to claim all in my gardens and conservatories."

"How good and generous you always are to me, you dear father!" she said, thanking him with a hug and kiss, while her face grew bright with love and happiness. "No, I won't fret; how wicked it

would be for one who has so many blessings! But, papa, I can't help feeling sorry for the little tender plants, plucked up so rudely by the roots and left to perish in the broiling sun. They were live things, and it seems as if they must have felt it all, and suffered almost as an insect or an animal would."

Her father smiled, and smoothed her hair with softly caressing hand. "My little girl has a very tender heart, and is full of loving sympathy for all living things," he said. "Ah, Travilla. Glad to see you!" as at that instant that gentleman galloped up and dismounted.

"So am I, sir," Elsie said, leaving her father's knee to run with outstretched hand to meet and welcome their guest.

He clasped the little hand in his, and held it for a moment, while he bent down and kissed the sweet lips of its owner. "What news?" Mr. Dinsmore asked, when he had given his friend a seat and resumed his own.

"None that I know of, except that I have come to your view (which is my mother's also) of the subject we were discussing yesterday, and have decided to act accordingly," Mr. Travilla answered, with a rarely sweet smile directed to little Elsie.

"Oh!" she cried, her face growing radiant, "I am so glad, so very glad!"

"And I, too," said her father. "I am sure you will never regret having come out boldly on the Lord's side."

"No; my only regret will be that I delayed so long enrolling myself among His professed followers. I now feel an ardent desire to be known and recognized as His servant, and am ready to go forward, trusting implicitly His many great and precious promises to help me all my journey through."

"Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ'?" quoted Mr. Dinsmore inquiringly.

"Yes," said Mr. Travilla, "for He is able to keep that which I have committed unto Him; able to keep even me from falling."

Chapter Third.

AUNT WEALTHY

Dr. Landreth and his party reached Philadelphia in due season, arriving in health and safety, having met with no accident or loss by the way.

Mrs. Dinsmore found her father and the family carriage waiting for her and her baby boy at the depot.

The others took a hack and drove to the Girard House, where Miss Stanhope, who had been visiting friends in the neighborhood of the city, had appointed to meet them, that they and she might journey westward in company. She was there waiting for them in a private parlor.

The meeting was a joyful one to the two ladies, who, though always warmly attached, had now been separated for a number of years. They clasped each other in a long, tender embrace; then Mildred introduced her husband, and exhibited her baby with much pride and delight; Annis, too, for she had quite grown out of Aunt Wealthy's recollection, and had scarce any remembrance of the old lady, except from hearing her spoken of by the other members of the family.

The travellers were weary with their journey, and there was much to hear and tell; so the remainder of that day was given up to rest and talk, a part of the latter being on the arrangement of their plans. Mildred proposed that they should take a week or more for rest and shopping, then turn their faces homeward.

"You must allow some time for sight-seeing, my dear," said her husband. "It would be a great shame to carry Annis all the way out to Indiana again without having shown her the lions of Philadelphia."

"Oh, certainly she must see them," said Mildred. "You can show them to her while Aunt Wealthy and I are shopping."

"You intend, then, to shut me out of that business? How shall I know that you will not be ruining me?"

"My dear," said Mildred, laughing, "you forget how rich you have made me. I shall have no occasion to ruin anybody but myself."

"And as for me," remarked Miss Stanhope drily, "I have my own purse."

"And father has sent money to buy Ada's things, mother's, and Fan's, too," added Annis. "But, Milly, I must have some share in the shopping, too. I expect to enjoy that as much as the sight-seeing."

Mildred assured her she should have as much as she wanted, adding, "But there will be a good deal which will not be likely to interest you – napery and other housekeeping goods, for instance."

"Your share of those things will interest me, and must be paid for from my purse," put in the doctor.

"Quite a mistake," said Miss Stanhope; "those are the very things a bride or her parents are expected to supply."

"But Mildred is no longer a bride. Milly, my dear, I want you to help me to select a dress for the bride that is to be."

Mildred looked up with a pleased smile. "Just like you, Charlie; always thoughtful and generous!"

Ada Keith was the coming bride. She and Frank Osborne had been engaged for some weeks, and expected to marry in the fall. This news had increased Annis's desire to get home. She wanted, she said, to see how Mr. Osborne and Ada acted, and whether they looked very happy.

"And just to think," she added, "when they're married Fan will be Miss Keith, and we two will be the young ladies of the family."

"Ah, indeed! How old may you be, my little maid?" laughed the doctor.

"Most thirteen," returned the little girl, drawing herself up with an air of importance.

"A very young young lady, most decidedly," he said with a humorous look, bending down to pinch her rosy cheek as he spoke.

"I'm growing older every day," she answered demurely, edging away from him. "Father told me a year ago that I'd soon be a woman."

"Quite soon enough, dear; don't try to hurry matters," said Aunt Wealthy. "You can never be a little girl again."

Mildred, having brought a competent nurse with her thus far on her journey, a colored woman who would serve her in the care of little Percy while they remained in Philadelphia, then return to the South with Mrs. Dinsmore, was able to give herself to the shopping without distraction.

As she had foreseen, the greater part of that work fell to her and Miss Stanhope, Dr. Landreth and Annis accompanying them constantly for a day or two only, after that for an hour or so when something was to be purchased in which they were specially interested.

But the two ladies were equal to the demand upon them; Mildred had had a good deal of experience in shopping in the last few years, and Miss Stanhope was a veteran at the business – an excellent judge of qualities and prices – yet by reason of her absent-mindedness needed to have her knowledge supplemented by the collected wits of her niece.

The old lady's odd ways and speeches often caused no little amusement to all within sight and hearing.

One day she, her two nieces, and Dr. Landreth were in a large, handsomely appointed dry-goods store, looking at silks and other costly dress fabrics.

They had made several selections, and while the doctor and Mildred paid for and saw the goods cut off and put up, Miss Stanhope moved on to the farther end of the room, where she saw, as she thought, an open doorway leading into another of similar dimensions and appearance.

As she attempted to pass through the doorway she found herself confronted by a little old lady rather plainly attired. Miss Stanhope nodded pleasantly, and stepped to the right. At the same instant her *vis-à-vis* nodded also, and stepped to her left, so that they were still in each other's way. Miss Stanhope moved quickly to the other side, but the stranger doing likewise, they did not succeed in passing. Miss Stanhope stood still, so did the other, and for an instant they gazed steadily into each other's eyes.

Then Miss Stanhope spoke in a gentle, ladylike, yet slightly impatient tone: "I should like to go on into that part of the store, if you will kindly permit me. Take whichever side you will; or, if you please, stand where you are and let me step past you."

She attempted to do so, but again the stranger moved directly in front of her.

"Madam," said Miss Stanhope, unconsciously raising her voice slightly, "I will stand still if you will be good enough to step out of my way."

There was neither reply nor movement, but Miss Stanhope's ear caught sounds of suppressed laughter coming from various directions in her rear, and a clerk, stepping to her side, said, with an unsuccessful attempt to preserve gravity of countenance and steadiness of tone, "Excuse me, madam, but you are standing before a mirror. There is no doorway there."

"Dear me! so I am! What an old simpleton not to recognize my own face!" she exclaimed, joining good-naturedly in the laugh her mistake had raised.

"Very good evidence that you are lacking in the vanity that leads some to a frequent contemplation of their own features," remarked the proprietor politely.

"Ah, sir, an old woman like me has small temptation to that," she returned.

"What was it, Aunt Wealthy? What are you all laughing at?" asked Annis, joining her.

"Just at a foolish mistake of your old auntie's, my dear, taking a mirror for an open doorway, and her own reflection for another woman who wouldn't get out of her way."

Annis could not help laughing a little, though she tried not to, lest she should hurt the dear old lady's feelings.

"I'm not much surprised, auntie," she said, gazing into the mirror, "for it does seem like looking into another store. I think I might have made that mistake myself; but I never could have taken you for anybody else, and it's odd you didn't know yourself."

"Ah, dearie, self-knowledge is said to be the most rare and difficult thing in the world," returned Miss Stanhope pleasantly. "But come, I see the doctor and Milly are waiting for us."

"We are going to some trimming stores now, Aunt Wealthy," said Mildred, "and you will be able to match your zephyrs, I hope."

"Yes; I'll have my samples out ready to show," the old lady answered, taking them from a small satchel which she carried upon her arm. "You and the doctor walk on. Annis and I will follow. Take tight hold of my arm, dearie," she added, holding it out as they stepped into the street, "lest you should get separated from me and lost in the crowd – the streets are so full, and everybody seems in the greatest hurry."

"Yes," said Annis, doing as she was bidden, "so different from Pleasant Plains; there one can hurry along or not as one likes without being jostled. There! Milly and Brother Charlie have gone into a store, and we must follow."

They hastened in, almost out of breath from their rapid walk. Miss Stanhope gently shook off Annis's hand, stepped to a counter, holding out her samples of zephyr, and addressing a clerk, remarked, "These are lovely colors!"

"Yes," said the girl, staring; "but what of it, ma'am?"

"My aunt wishes to match them," said Annis with dignity, resenting the half-insolent tone of the girl.

"Oh! go to the next counter."

They moved on, Miss Stanhope smiling to herself at her own mistake, Annis with cheeks burning with indignation at the girl's rude stare and supercilious tone.

"Don't forget what you want this time, auntie," she whispered, as they paused before the next counter.

"No, dearie, but you mustn't mind your old auntie's blunders."

This time they were waited upon by a sweet-faced, modest maiden, who showed herself both obliging and respectful.

Miss Stanhope found just what she wanted. But Mildred was not ready to go yet, and while waiting for her the old lady and the little girl amused themselves in examining the various contents of a showcase. Annis admired a necklace of amber beads, and Aunt Wealthy bought it for her; also another nearly like it for Fan.

"Anything else, ma' am?" asked the saleswoman, as she wrapped them up.

"Yes; one of those little purses," said Miss Stanhope; "it is just what I want for small change and the trunk of my key, which I always carry in my pocket when travelling."

With a slight smile the saleswoman handed out several.

Miss Stanhope made her selection, and the query, "Anything else?" was repeated.

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed the old lady, as with sudden recollection; "have you any remnants?"

"Remnants? of what?"

"Dress goods."

"Oh, no; we keep nothing but trimmings and notions."

Mildred had finished her purchases, and coming up at that moment, asked, "What is it, Aunt Wealthy?"

"Remnants."

"Oh, yes; of course you will want a supply of them," returned Mildred, with a good-humored, slightly amused smile; "and yet what use can you make of them now? Even Annis has grown too large for a remnant to make her a dress."

"But there's Percy, and Zillah's boy, too," was the prompt reply; "besides, they can be put to many uses about a house."

"Mightn't a remnant be big enough to make an apron for a lady even?" asked Annis.

"Yes," said Mildred; "and as I know auntie enjoys buying them, we will look for some."

They started at once on the quest, and Miss Stanhope was quite elated and triumphant on finding, in two different stores, two remnants of beautiful lawn, exactly alike, which together would make an ample dress pattern for Annis, besides others that could be utilized for aprons for her and Fan, dresses for the baby boys, or patchwork for quilts. Remnants were quite a hobby with the old lady, and she could never feel quite satisfied with the results of a shopping expedition that did not include some bargains in that line.

Returning to their hotel they found letters from the Oaks and from home awaiting them.

"Ah, Milly," remarked the doctor, with satisfaction, as he glanced over his, "here are our measures. Rupert sends them."

"Then they are sure to be right," she responded.

"Measures for what?" inquired Miss Stanhope.

"Wall paper and carpets for our new house; it is ready for them."

"Oh, how nice!" cried Annis, clapping her hands. "May I go with you to choose them, Brother Charlie?"

"We will be pleased to have your company and the benefit of your taste," was the gallant rejoinder, "Aunt Wealthy's also."

"Thank you," said Miss Stanhope, absently. "I'm glad you're so near being done with your house, and I think it's a good plan to buy your paper here; but I'm afraid you'll have to put it on yourselves; for though I remember there were some painterers in Pleasant Plains when I was there, I don't think there were any papers at all, and everybody's walls were whitewashed, as far as I can recollect."

"But you know that was some years ago, auntie," said Mildred, "and a good many luxuries have been introduced since then, paper-hangers among the rest."

"And the Keith family are so handy that they can easily do such work for themselves, if necessary," laughed Annis. "The boys really did paper our house, and paint it, too. Do you see, Milly," holding up a letter, "this is from Elsie. She says she is having a lovely time all alone with her papa, but misses us ever so much, and hopes we will come back to spend next winter at the Oaks."

"Tell her, when you write, that we are greatly obliged, but the journey is quite too long to take twice a year," returned Mildred gayly.

"And we couldn't spend every winter away from father and mother," added Annis. "Oh, how glad I shall be to get home to them, and Fan, and the rest! How soon can we start?"

"Time's up in another week," answered the doctor, "and I judge, by the rate at which we've been going through the shopping and sight-seeing, that we'll be ready by then."

Chapter Fourth

*"Gold! gold! gold!
Bright and yellow, hard and cold!"*

– Hood.

A beautiful spring day was drawing to a close as two persons – a young man and a maiden – seated themselves on a fallen tree on the western bank of the St. Joseph River. They had strolled a long distance from home, leaving the noise and bustle of the town far behind. They were a trifle weary with their walk, and it was pleasant to sit here and rest in the cool evening air, sweet with the scent of wildwood flowers, with the grass green about their feet, and no sound to break the stillness save the song of the cricket, the gentle murmur of the breeze in the tree-tops, and the soft ripple of the water flowing swiftly onward, so bright and clear that it reflected, as in a mirror, its own grassy wooded banks and the rich purple, gold, and amber of the sunset clouds, while the pebbly bottom, with fishes great and small darting hither and thither, could be distinctly seen.

For some time the two sat there silently, hand in hand, the girl's eyes gazing steadily down into the water, her companion's fixed upon her face with an expression of ardent admiration and intense, yearning affection. It was a noble countenance, at this moment thoughtful and grave, even to sadness.

"Ada, my love," he said at length, "it is a hard thing I am asking of you. I am ashamed of my selfishness."

"No, no! do not talk so. How could I bear to let you go alone, you who have no one in the wide world but me?" she answered, in a low, tremulous tone, her eyes still upon the water; then suddenly turning toward him, her face flushing with enthusiasm, her eyes shining through tears, "But it is not you that ask it of me, Frank; no, not you, but One who has every right; for has He not redeemed me with His own precious blood? Is He not my Creator, Preserver, and bountiful Benefactor, and have I not given myself to Him, soul and body, in an everlasting covenant? And shall I keep back any part of the price? Oh, no, no! Let me but make sure that it is His voice I hear saying, 'This is the way; walk ye in it,' and I am ready to leave all and follow Him, though it be to the ends of the earth."

"My darling," he said with emotion, tightening his clasp of the hand he held, "you have the right spirit; you view this matter in the right light. Yes, we are His, both of us, and may our only question of duty ever be, 'Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?' But if we see it our duty to go, the sacrifice I make will be as nothing to yours, my sweet girl."

"Yet it will not be small, Frank. To leave forever one's dear native land is no slight thing, especially when it is to live among heathen people – low, cruel, degraded idolators."

"That is true; and yet – oh, is there not joy in the thought of telling the old, old story of Jesus and His love to those who have never heard it, and who, if we do not carry it to them, may never hear it?"

"Yes, yes, indeed! and in the thought that we are literally obeying His command, 'Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.' And how very slight will be our suffering and self-denial compared to His!"

"But, Frank, how shall we determine this question? How know whether we are truly called to this great work? Ah, it does not seem possible that I should ever be deemed worthy of such honor!"

"We will continue to make it a subject of constant, earnest prayer," he said, "asking to be guided to a right decision; also we will open our hearts to your parents, and consult them. If they refuse consent to your going, we will see in that an indication that the Lord's will is not that we should go. Laborers are needed here also, and it may be that He will appoint us our work in this part of His vineyard."

"Yes," she said; "I could never feel it right to go if father and mother should oppose it. Yet I am sure they will not, if they see reason to believe we are called of the Master; for ever since I can remember their most ardent wish for their children has been that they might be entirely devoted to His service."

At that very moment the honored parents of whom she spoke, sitting side by side in the vine-covered porch of their home, resting after the labors of the day, were talking of their children, and rejoicing in the well-founded belief that most, if not all, of them had already given themselves to that blessed service.

They spoke of Mildred and Annis, the eldest and youngest, now on the way home after their winter at the Oaks; of Rupert, their eldest son, a prosperous and highly respected man of business; Cyril, absent at college; Zillah, with her husband and babe, living just across the street; of Ada and her betrothed; and, lastly, of the only two just then in sight – Don and Fan – down in the garden, seated on a bench under a spreading tree, the lad whittling, his sister watching him, with hands lying idly in her lap.

There was languor in the droop of her slender figure; the eyes that rested now upon Don's face, now on his work, were unnaturally large and bright, and though a rich color glowed in her cheeks, her features were thin and sharp.

"Stuart," said Mrs. Keith, in low, slightly tremulous tones, gazing fixedly at Fan as she spoke, "I am growing uneasy about that child; she is not well. She scarcely complains, but is losing flesh and strength very fast of late."

"Only because she is growing so rapidly, I think, Marcia," he said; "see what a brilliant color she has."

"Not the bloom of health, I fear," sighed the mother. "I am very glad Dr. Landreth will be here soon. I hope he may be able to do something for her."

"I hope so, indeed. Perhaps it is change of climate and scene she needs. Probably it would have been better had she gone with the others last fall."

"I don't know; it is too late to think of it now, but if Charlie recommends a trip, we must manage to give it to her."

"Certainly; and in that case you will have to go too, for I doubt if anything could induce Fan to leave her mother."

"No; what a dear, affectionate child she is! And how she and Don cling to each other."

In the pause that followed that last remark Fan's low, clear tones came distinctly to their ears.

"Ah, now I see what you are making, Don; a spoon, isn't it?"

"Yes; it'll be very useful in the journey across the plains."

"Whose journey?"

"Mine," he said; then sang gayly:

"O California! oh, that's the land for me!
I'm bound for Sacramento,
With the washbowl on my knee."

"That's the tune of 'O Susannah,'" she said, as he ceased; "but where did you get those words?"

"Haven't you heard it before?" he asked. "They've been singing it all over town; the gold fever's raging, and a lot of fellows are talking of going off across the plains to the California diggings. If they do, I'd like to make one of the party."

The parents, silently listening, exchanged glances of mingled surprise and concern, while Fan exclaimed, "O Don, you can't be in earnest?"

"You'd better believe I am," laughed the lad. "Why, it would be the greatest fun in the world, I think, to go and dig gold."

"Exceedingly hard work, my boy," Mr. Keith said, raising his voice that it might reach the lad. Don started and turned his head. He had not thought of any one but Fan hearing his talk.

"But we wouldn't mind working very hard indeed for a little while to make a fortune, father," he answered in a lively tone, springing up and advancing to the steps of the porch, Fan following, and seating herself upon them.

"Ah, but who can insure the making of the fortune?" asked Mr. Keith gravely. "Where one will succeed, Don, probably hundreds will fail and die of the great hardships to be encountered in the search for gold – the exhausting toil, scanty fare, and exposure to the inclemencies of the weather. It cannot fail to be a rough and toilsome life, full of danger and temptation, too; for the desperadoes and outlaws from all parts of the country, if not of the world, are always among the first to rush to such places; and even men who behaved respectably at home often throw off all restraint there, and act like savages."

"Think, too, of the dangers to be encountered by the way, Don," said his mother; "a trackless wilderness to cross, supplies of food and water perhaps giving out, to say nothing of perils from wild beasts and hostile Indians."

"Oh, mother," he said, "if you'd ever been a boy you'd know that danger has great attractions sometimes."

"But oh, Don," exclaimed Fan, "just think what mother, and I, and all of us would be suffering from anxiety on your account!"

"Ah, but you'd feel paid for it all when you saw me come home with my pockets full of gold!"

"Gold far too dearly bought, if you came back to us a rough, hardened man, instead of the dear boy you are now," said his mother.

"I've no notion of ever becoming a rough, mother mine," returned the lad in a half-playful tone; "and what is virtue worth that can't stand temptation?"

"Not much, my son," said his father gravely; "but what mockery to pray, 'Lead us not into temptation,' and then rush needlessly into it. But let the subject drop, for I am quite resolved never to give my consent to so wild a project."

The boy's face clouded, but, accustomed to obedience, he ventured no reply. "Here, Fan, I'll give this to you," he said, handing her the now finished spoon.

"Thank you; it is very pretty," she returned, regarding it admiringly.

"Fan, dear, I think the dew is beginning to fall," said Mrs. Keith, rising; "come in; come both of you. We will adjourn to the sitting-room."

They did so, and were there presently joined by Frank and Ada, who came in hand in hand, their faces full of a strange mixture of joy and sorrow. Mrs. Keith sat in a low rocking-chair, softly passing her hand over Fan's hair and cheek, the young girl having seated herself on a stool at her mother's side, and laid her head in her lap.

They, as well as Mr. Keith and Don, seemed to be silently musing as the other two entered. But all four looked up at the sound of their footsteps, and Mrs. Keith, noticing the unusual expression of their countenances, asked a little anxiously, "What is it, Ada, my child?"

Ada opened her lips to reply, but no sound came from them. Hastily withdrawing her hand from Frank's she sprang forward, and knelt beside her sister.

"Mother, oh, mother, how can I ever leave you!" she exclaimed, tears coursing down her cheeks.

Mrs. Keith was much surprised, knowing of no adequate cause for such emotion, especially in one usually so calm and undemonstrative as Ada.

"Dear child," she said, caressing her, "we will hope never to be too far apart for frequent intercourse. Frank's present charge is but a few miles distant."

"But, mother, he thinks he is called to foreign missions," Ada returned in trembling tones; "can you let me go? Can you give me to that work?"

The query, so sudden, so unexpected, sent a keen pang to the tender mother's heart. With a silent caress she drew her loved child closer, and they mingled their tears together.

"What – what is this I hear, Frank?" asked Mr. Keith huskily, starting up and drawing nearer the little group; for Frank had followed Ada, and stood looking down upon her, his features working with emotion.

With an effort he controlled it, and in a few words gave the desired information. "He had for some time felt an increasing interest in the foreign work, and desire to give himself to it should it be made plain that he was called of God to that part of the field."

"Oh no, no!" cried Fan, putting her arms about her sister's neck, "we can't spare you. Why mayn't Frank work for the Master here as well as there? Laborers are needed in both places."

"Very true," said Frank, "and I trust our earnest desire is to be guided to that part of the vineyard where the Master would have us."

"It shall be my prayer that you may," said the mother with emotion, drawing Ada's head to a resting-place on her breast as she spoke; "and dearly, dearly as I love my child, hard as it will be to part with her, I cannot hesitate for a moment if the Master calls her to go."

"No, nor can I," Mr. Keith said, sighing and bending down to stroke Ada's hair in tender, fatherly fashion.

Chapter Fifth

*"Home is the resort
Of love, of joy, of peace, and plenty, where,
Supporting and supported, polish'd friends
And dear relations mingle into bliss."*

– Thomson's Seasons.

The sweetest of May mornings; the sun shines brightly in a sky of heavenly blue, wherein float soft, fleecy clouds of snowy whiteness, casting faint shadows now here, now there, over the landscape. The forest trees have donned their spring robes of tender green, and at their feet the earth is carpeted with grass spangled with myriads of lovely wild flowers of varied hues; the air is redolent of their sweet breath and vocal with the songs of the birds in the tree-tops and all the pleasant sounds of rural life. Everything seems so bright, so fresh, and new that Annis, as the stage rolls rapidly onward, bringing her every moment nearer home, is almost wild with delight, while the older members of the party, if less demonstrative, are scarcely less happy.

They counted the miles, as those at home were counting the hours and the minutes. The journey from Philadelphia to Northern Indiana was far more tedious and wearisome in those days than it is now, and they were tired enough of travel to be glad to reach their journey's end; rest would be delightful; but it was the thought of home and dear ones that constituted their chief joy.

The stage was due in Pleasant Plains just at noon, and to-day, having no hinderance from bad weather or bad roads, arrived punctually to the minute. The mail was dropped at the post-office, a passenger at the hotel.

"To Lawyer Keith's next?" queried the driver, bending down from his high seat to bestow a roguish look and smile upon the impatient Annis.

"Yes," Dr. Landreth said, "we all belong there."

The stage was sweeping on again before he had half finished his sentence.

In another minute it drew up at the gate, and oh the greetings, the embraces that followed! the happy laughter, the looks of love, the tears of joy! for to the younger ones the separation had seemed very long, as, indeed, so far as Miss Stanhope was concerned, it really had been.

The mutual affection of herself and niece was like that of mother and daughter, and they had not seen each other's faces for more than ten years. All the family loved the old lady, and she came in for her full share of the joyous welcome. Zillah was there with her husband and babe, and Ada had her betrothed by her side.

They sat down to dinner together, a large and happy party, most of them more disposed for conversation, however, than for doing justice to the fare upon which Celestia Ann had expended much thought and skill.

She was still with Mrs. Keith, devotedly attached to her and the whole family, and no one had bestowed a heartier hug upon Annis, Mildred, or even Aunt Wealthy, than this somewhat forward but very warm-hearted maiden.

"You don't none o' ye eat half as much as you'd orter, considerin' what a sight o' trouble I took a-gettin' up this dinner," she grumbled, as she waited on the table. "I remembered all your likings – Miss Milly's, and Miss Stanhope's, and Annis's – and done my best to foller 'em all. I broiled the chickings, and smashed the 'taters, and took a sight o' pains with the pies and puddin's; but you don't none o' you seem to 'preciate it, 'thout it's Don there, for here I'm a-carryin' out yer plates half full every time."

"That's because we have been so bountifully helped," said Mildred. "Father has heaped my plate with enough for two or three meals. So you mustn't feel hurt, Celestia Ann, for I assure you I find your cookery delicious."

"So do I," said Annis. "I haven't tasted as good since we left the Oaks."

A chorus of complimentary remarks followed from the rest of the company, and Celestia Ann's wounded vanity was appeased.

"Fan," Dr. Landreth remarked, looking across the table at her, "I think you are the worst delinquent of all of us; you have eaten scarcely anything, and I suspect it is no new thing, for you have grown thin since I saw you last."

"Father says it's because I'm growing so fast," Fan said, blushing with embarrassment, as she felt that all eyes were turned upon her. "It's spring-time, too, and that is apt to make one lose appetite and strength."

"I dare say you need change," remarked Annis wisely. "You see how well and strong I am; don't you wish now you'd gone South with us?"

"No; I wouldn't have missed the nice time I've had with mother for anything," returned Fan, her eyes seeking her mother's face with a look of fond affection.

Mrs. Keith's answering smile was very sweet. "Yes," she said, "Fan and I have had a very pleasant, happy time together. And now, with all our dear ones restored," glancing fondly from Annis to Mildred and Aunt Wealthy, "we shall be happier than ever."

"Home's a good place," remarked Don, pushing away his plate, and settling himself back in his chair with the air of one whose appetite is fully satisfied, "but I, for one, would like to see something of the world."

"Time enough yet, my boy," remarked Dr. Landreth laughingly; "you may well feel thankful that you are not forced out into it now, before you are fully prepared for the battle of life."

Don looked slightly vexed and impatient. "Yes," he said, "that's the way you all talk; it's wait, wait, wait, instead of 'strike while the iron's hot.'"

"What iron?" inquired Mildred, with a look half of interest, half of amusement.

"I want to go to California and dig gold," blurted out the boy; "but father and mother won't hear of it, though there's a large party starting from here next week."

"Oh, Don, what an idea!" exclaimed Mildred. "I'm glad you can't win consent."

"I too," said the doctor. "Don, if you knew what the life is you would not want to try it. I have had experience of it, you remember."

"Who are going from here?" asked Mildred.

Quite a list of names was given in reply, including those of several of her familiar acquaintance.

"How will they go?" she asked, a look of grave concern coming over her face.

"Across the plains," answered Rupert, "in wagons drawn by ox-teams. It can't fail to be a slow and toilsome journey."

"And a dangerous one as well," added his mother, with a deprecating look at Don.

"Yes, I know," said the lad, "but I'm fairly spoiling for a taste of that, mother," he added, with a laugh.

She shook her head. "Ah, my boy, I wish you knew when you were well off."

They left the table, and flocked into the parlor; but Mrs. Keith drew Dr. Landreth aside, and whispered in his sympathizing ear her anxiety in regard to Fan. She described every symptom without reserve, then asked, with a look of deep solicitude, "What do you think of the case?"

"You must allow me a little time to study it, mother," he said; "but I trust it will prove nothing serious. She must have rest, a tonic, a daily walk of such length as she can take without undue fatigue, and frequent drives. Those I can give her as I visit my country patients."

"Thank you," she said. "I have been very impatient for your return on the dear child's account."

"What is that you are talking of, mother?" Mildred asked, joining them.

"Of Fan, Milly; she hasn't seemed well for some time, and I have been consulting the doctor about her."

Mildred's eyes filled. "My darling little sister!" she exclaimed. "I hope it is nothing serious?" She turned an eager, inquiring look upon her husband.

"We will hope not, Milly," he said cheerfully. "As your father says, she is growing fast, and, besides, this warm spring weather is apt to cause a feeling of languor. I trust that with tender care and watchfulness we may be able to help her to grow into strong, healthful womanhood."

Both mother and sister looked relieved, and presently they rejoined the others.

Frank Osborne was just taking leave. He must return to the duties of his charge, and might not see them again for several days.

Ada left the room with her betrothed for a few last words.

When she entered the parlor again Aunt Wealthy, making room for her on the sofa by her side, asked, "Are you to be settled near Pleasant Plains, dear?" adding, "I hope so, for it would be very hard for you to go far from father and mother, brothers and sisters, and for them to have you do so."

Ada could not answer for a moment, and when she found her voice it was tremulous with emotion.

"We do not know yet, Aunt Wealthy," she said. "It will be hard to leave home and dear ones, but we are ready and willing to go wherever the Lord may send us."

"Ada, what do you mean?" asked Mildred. "Surely, Frank has no thought of seeking a foreign field?"

"Can't you give me up if the Master calls me away, Milly?" asked Ada, taking her sister's hand and pressing it fondly in hers.

"In that case I would not dare hold you back if I could; His claim is far stronger than mine," Mildred said, with emotion.

Then the whole story came out, and the matter was discussed in a family council.

But they could go no farther than the expression of their opinions and wishes. Frank had already offered himself to the Board of Foreign Missions, and his going depended upon their acceptance or rejection.

"I hope they'll say, 'No, we think you can find enough to do where you are,'" said Annis playfully, but with eyes full of tears, putting her arms around Ada's neck and laying her cheek to hers as she spoke. "I'm sure I don't know what we should ever do without you!" she went on. "I don't like to have you go away even as far as the country church where Frank preaches now."

"Well, dear, we won't borrow trouble; 'sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,'" Ada said, holding her close, and fondly kissing the rosy cheek.

"And as thy days, so shall thy strength be," added Mrs. Keith. "Our blessed Master will never lay upon any of us a heavier burden than He gives us strength to bear."

"No," said Rupert. "And now – to turn to a pleasanter theme than the possibility of losing Ada – Mildred, don't you want to go and take a look at your new house, you, and the doctor, and anybody else that cares to see it?"

"Oh, is it done?" cried Annis, suddenly forgetting her grief and loosening her hold of Ada to clap her hands with delight.

"Yes, all but the papering and painting," replied Rupert.

"I move we all go in a body," said Mildred gayly.

"So many of us! People would stare," objected Fan, with her usual timidity.

"What matter if they should?" laughed Mildred. "But it is only a step, and there are very few neighbors near enough to watch our proceedings."

"And why shouldn't we be independent and do as we please?" remarked Don loftily. "I vote in the affirmative. Come, let's go."

"A dozen of us, without counting the babies," murmured Fan, with a little sigh. But she tried on the dainty white muslin sun-bonnet her mother handed her, took Don's offered arm, and went with the rest.

As they passed from room to room Mildred's eyes shone with pleasure.

The plan of the house was the joint work of herself and husband, embodying their ideas in regard to comfort and convenience. Rupert had been left in charge of the work during their absence, and had acquitted himself of the trust to their entire satisfaction.

Both returned him warm thanks, Mildred saying again and again, "I am delighted, Ru; you have not forgotten or neglected the least of our wishes."

"I am very glad it pleases you, Milly," he said, with a gratified look. "It has been a labor of love to attend to it for you."

"It is quite done except the work of the papers and painterers, is it not?" queried Aunt Wealthy.

"Yes," said the doctor; "and we will set the painters at work to-morrow; the paperers as soon as our boxes of goods arrive."

Chapter Sixth

"We all do fade as a leaf." – Isa. 64:6.

Dr. Landreth and Mildred gladly availed themselves of a pressing invitation to take up their old quarters at her father's until such time as their own house should be entirely ready for occupancy.

There was general rejoicing in the family that that time was not yet; they were so glad to have Mildred with them once more. Nor did she regret the necessity for continuing a little longer a member of her father's household, especially considering that this was Ada's last summer at home.

There was always a community of interests among them, a sharing of each other's joys and sorrows, a bearing of each other's burdens, and so all were very busy, now helping Mildred prepare bedding and napery, curtains, etc., and now Ada with her trousseau, and everything that could be thought of to add to her comfort in the foreign land to which she was going; for in due time Frank Osborne received word that he had been accepted by the Board.

Many tears were shed over that news, yet not one of those who loved her so dearly would have held Ada back from the service to which the Master had called her. She was His far more than theirs, and they were His, and would gladly give to Him of their best and dearest.

Others had given up their loved ones to go in search of gold – the wealth of this world, that perishes with the using – parting from them with almost breaking hearts; and should they shrink from a like sacrifice for Him who had bought them with His own precious blood? and to send the glad news of His salvation to those perishing for lack of knowledge?

The train of emigrants for California had left at the set time, their relatives and friends – in some cases wives and children – parting from them as from those who were going almost out of the world, and might never be seen again.

A journey to California is accounted no great thing in these days, when one may travel all the way by rail; but in those times, when it was by ox-teams and wagons, across thousands of miles of trackless wilderness, over which wild beasts and savage Indians ranged, it was a perilous undertaking.

So they who went and they who stayed behind parted as those who had but slight hope of ever meeting again in this lower world.

Nearly the whole town gathered to see the train of wagons set forth, and even Don Keith, as he witnessed the final leave-takings, the clinging embraces, the tearful, sobbing adieus, was not more than half sorry that he was not going along.

Fan drew the acknowledgment from him later in the day, when she overheard him softly singing to himself:

"I jumped aboard the old ox-team,
And cracked my whip so free;
And every time I thought of home,
I wished it wasn't me."

"Yes, that would have been the way with you, Don, I'm sure," Fan said; "so be wise in time, and don't try it, even if father should consent."

"I don't know," he said, turning toward her with a roguish twinkle in his eye; "I think another part of the song suits me better:

"We'll dig the mountains down,
We'll drain the rivers dry;
A million of the rocks bring home,

So, ladies, don't you cry."

"That's easier said than done, Don," Fan remarked, with a grave, half-sad look. "Oh, brother dear, don't let the love of gold get possession of you!"

"I don't love it for itself, Fan – I hope I never shall – but for what it can do, what it can buy."

"It cannot buy the best things," she said, looking at him with dewy eyes; "it cannot buy heaven, it cannot buy love, or health, or freedom from pain; no, nor a clear conscience or quiet mind. It will seem of small account when one comes to die."

"Don't talk of dying," he said a little uneasily; "we needn't think much about that yet – you and I, who are both so young."

"But a great many die young, Don, even younger than we are to-day."

She laid her hand upon his arm as she spoke, and looked into his eyes with tender sadness.

As he noted the words, the look, and the extreme attenuation of the little hand, a sharp pang shot through his heart. Could it be that Fan, his darling sister, was going to die? The thought had never struck him before. He knew that she was not strong, that the doctor was prescribing for her and taking her out driving every day, and he had perceived that the older members of the family, particularly his mother, were troubled about her, but had thought it was only permanent loss of health they feared.

But the idea of death was too painful to be encouraged, and he put it hastily from him. How could he ever do without Fan? There was less than two years between them, and they had always been inseparable. No, he would not allow himself to think of the possibility that she was about to pass away from him to "that bourne whence no traveller returns."

He was glad that Annis joined them at that moment in mirthful mood.

"What's so funny, Ann?" he asked, seeing a merry twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, just some of Aunt Wealthy's odd mistakes. She was talking about that first winter we spent here, when she was with us, you remember; she said, 'The weather was very cold; many's the time I've had hard work to get my hands up, my hair was so cold.' Then she was telling something her doctor in Lansdale told her about a very dirty family he was called to see. A child had the croup, and he made them put it into a hot bath; he was still there the next morning, and saw them getting breakfast; and telling about it Aunt Wealthy said, 'They used the water to make the coffee that the child was bathed in.'"

"The doctor stayed and took breakfast with them, I suppose?" said Don dryly.

"Not he," laughed Annis; "he said he was very hungry, and they were kindly urgent with him to stay and eat, but he preferred taking a long, cold ride before breaking his fast."

"I admire his self-denial," remarked Don, with gravity. "Anything else of interest from Aunt Wealthy?"

"Yes," said Annis; "she was speaking of some religious book she had been reading, and said she had bought it from a portcollier. And yesterday, when I complained that I hated to darn my stockings, she said, 'Oh, my dear, always attend to that; a stocking in a hole, or indeed a glove either, is a sure sign of a sloven.'"

"Then," said Don gravely, "I trust you will be careful never to drop yours into holes."

"Don't let us make game of dear, kind old Aunt Wealthy," Fan said, in a gentle, deprecating tone.

"Oh, no, not for the world!" cried Annis, "but one can't help laughing at her funny mistakes; and indeed she is as ready to do so as any one else."

"Yes; and it's very nice in her," said Don.

For a while after that Don watched Fan closely, but noticing that she was always cheerful, bright, and interested in all that was going on, he dismissed his fears with the consoling idea that there could not be anything serious amiss with her.

By midsummer Mildred was fairly settled in her own house, and work for Ada was being pushed forward with energy and dispatch.

The wedding – a very quiet affair – took place in September. A few days later the youthful pair bade a long farewell to relatives and friends, and started for New York, whence they were to sail, early in October, for China.

The parting was a sore trial to all, and no one seemed to feel it more than Fan.

"Ada! Ada!" she sobbed, clinging about her sister's neck, "I shall never, never see you again in this world!"

"Don't say that, darling," responded Ada in tones tremulous with emotion. "I am not going out of the world, and probably we may be back again in a few years on a visit."

"But I shall not be here," murmured Fan. "Something tells me I am going on a longer journey than yours."

"I hope not," Ada said, scarcely able to speak. "You are depressed now because you are not well, but I trust you will soon grow strong again, and live many years to be a comfort and help to father and mother. I used to plan to be the one to stay at home and take care of them in their old age, but now, I think, that is to be your sweet task."

"I'd love to do it," Fan said; "I'd rather do that than anything else, if it should please God to make me well and strong again."

"And if not, dear," Ada said, drawing her into a closer embrace, "He will give you strength for whatever He has in store for you, whether it be a life of invalidism, or an early call to that blessed land where 'the inhabitants shall not say, I am sick.'"

"Yes," was the whispered response; "and sometimes I feel that it is very sweet just to leave it all with Him, and have no choice of my own."

"Thank God for that, my darling little sister!" Ada exclaimed with emotion. "I have no fear for you now, for I am sure you are ready to go if it shall please the Master to call you to Himself."

This little talk took place early in the day of Ada's departure, she having stolen into Fan's room as soon as she was dressed, to ask how the invalid had passed the night.

They were interrupted by the mother's entrance on the same errand.

Embracing both as they stood together, "My two dear daughters," she said. Then to Fan, "You are up and dressed early for an ailing one, my child."

"Yes, mother, I couldn't lie in bed this morning, the last that we shall have Ada with us," Fan answered with a sob, and holding her sister in a tighter clasp.

"The last for a time," Mrs. Keith returned cheerfully, though the tears trembled in her eyes. "Missionaries come home sometimes on a visit, you know, and we will look forward to that."

"And besides that, we know that we shall meet in the Father's house on high; meet never to part again," whispered Ada, pressing her lips to her mother's cheek, then to Fan's.

"But to be forever with the Lord," added Mrs. Keith. "Now, Fan dear, sit down in your easy-chair till the call to breakfast, and after this try to follow your Brother Charlie's advice – taking a good rest in the morning, even if you have to breakfast in bed."

Unconsciously to herself as well as to others the excitement of the preparations for Ada's wedding and life in a foreign land had been giving Fan a fictitious strength, which immediately on her sister's departure deserted her, and left her prostrate upon her bed.

Mother and the remaining sisters nursed her with the tenderest care, and after a time she rallied so far as to be about the house again and drive out occasionally in pleasant weather; but the improvement was only temporary, and before the winter was over it became apparent to all that Fan was passing away to the better land.

To all but Don and Annis. He refused to believe it, and she, with the hopefulness of childhood, was always "sure dear darling Fan would soon be better."

For many weeks the mother shrank from having her fears confirmed; often, as she noted the gravity and sadness of the doctor's face, the question trembled upon her tongue, but she could not bring herself to speak it; but one day, seeing, as she thought, a deeper shade of anxiety upon his face than ever before, she followed him from the room.

"Charlie," she said, in faltering accents, "I must know the truth though my heart break. Tell me, must my child die?"

"Dear mother," he said, taking her hand in his and speaking with strong emotion, "I wish I could give you hope, but there is none; she may linger a month or two, but not longer."

"Oh, how shall I ever tell her!" sobbed the mother; "her, my timid little Fan, who has always been afraid to venture among strangers, always clung so tenaciously to home and mother!"

"I think she knows it," he said, deeply moved. "I have seen it again and again in the look she has given me. And I doubt not God is fulfilling to her the promise, 'As thy days, so shall thy strength be.'"

"May the Lord forgive my unbelief!" she said. "I know that He is ever faithful to His promises."

Returning to the sick-room she found Fan lying with closed eyes, a very sweet and peaceful expression on her face.

Bending over her she kissed the sweet lips, and a hot tear fell on the child's cheek.

Her blue eyes opened wide, and her arm crept round her mother's neck.

"Dearest mother, don't cry," she whispered. "I am glad to go and be with Jesus. You know it says, 'He shall gather the lambs with His arm and carry them in His bosom.' I shall never be afraid or timid lying there. Oh, He will love me and take care of me, and some day bring you there too, and father, and all my dear ones; and oh, *how* happy we shall be!"

"Yes, love," the mother said, "yours is a blessed lot – to be taken so soon from the sins and sorrows of earth. 'Thine eyes shall see the King in His beauty: they shall behold the land that is very far off... Thine eyes shall see Jerusalem a quiet habitation, a tabernacle that shall not be taken down; not one of the stakes thereof shall ever be removed, neither shall any of the cords thereof be broken. But there the glorious Lord will be unto us a place of broad rivers and streams... And the inhabitant shall not say, I am sick: the people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity.'"

"Such sweet words," said Fan. "Oh, I am glad Ada has gone to tell the poor heathen of this dear Saviour! How could I bear to die if I did not know of Him and His precious blood that cleanseth from all sin!"

"Dearest child, do you feel quite willing to go?" Mrs. Keith asked, softly stroking her hair and gazing upon her with tear-dimmed eyes.

"Yes, mother, I do now, though at first it seemed very sad, very hard to leave you all to go and lie down all alone in the dark grave. But I don't think of that now; I think of being with Christ in glory, near Him and like Him. Oh, mother, how happy I shall be!"

The door opened, and Mildred came softly in. She bent over Fan, her eyes full of tears, her features working with emotion. She had just learned from her husband what he had told her mother.

"Dear Milly," Fan said, putting an arm about her neck, her lips to her cheek, "has Brother Charlie told you?"

Mildred nodded, unable to speak.

"Don't fret," Fan said tenderly; "I am not sorry, though I was at first. What is dying but going home? Oh, don't you remember how John tells us in the Revelation about the great multitude that stood before the throne and before the Lamb clothed in white robes and with palms in their hands; and how the angel told him, 'These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple; and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them.'"

"They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes'?"

"Mother," turning to her with a glad, eager look, "may I not hope to be one of them if I trust in Jesus and bear with patience and resignation whatever He sends?"

"Surely, surely, my darling," Mrs. Keith answered, in tremulous tones. "They stand in the righteousness of Christ, and so will all who truly come to Him and trust only in His atoning sacrifice."

"Dear, dear Fan," whispered Mildred, caressing her with fast-falling tears, "I don't know how to give you up. And oh, darling – but I wish I had been a better sister to you!"

"Why, Milly, how could you have been?" Fan said, with a look and tone of great surprise. "I am sure you were always the best and kindest of sisters to me."

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