

FINLEY MARTHA

MILDRED'S
NEW
DAUGHTER

Martha Finley

Mildred's New Daughter

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CHAPTER I

The clock on the mantel, striking six, woke Ethel and Blanche Eldon, two little sisters lying side by side in their pretty bed.

"Ah, it is morning, Blanche, and time for you and me to be up," said Ethel, smiling pleasantly into her younger sister's eyes.

"Yes; in a minute, Ethel," replied Blanche, turning toward her sister and patting her cheek affectionately.

At the same moment the door into the hall opened softly and the mother came in, her dark eyes shining, her thin, pale face wreathed in smiles.

"Good-morning, my darlings," she said, speaking softly, for fear of waking the two younger children in the nursery beyond. "Have you slept well?" she asked, bending over to kiss first one, then the other.

"Yes, mamma, dear," they answered, speaking together. "And so have Harry and Nannette," added Ethel, "and they are sound asleep yet, I think."

"And we will not wake them," responded the mother.

"Did you sleep well, mamma? and is dear papa better?" asked the little girls with eager, anxious looks up into her face, Ethel adding, "Oh, I am sure of it, because you look so happy!"

"Yes, dears, I am very glad and happy, very thankful to our kind Heavenly Father, that your papa slept unusually well and seems easier and brighter this morning than I have seen him for weeks," Mrs. Eldon replied, with tears of joy shining in her eyes. "He has asked to see his children, and when you are dressed and have eaten your breakfast, you shall come to him for a few minutes."

"Oh, we are so glad we may see him, mamma," they cried in a breath, Ethel adding, "I hope papa will soon be so well that we can go back to our own dear home again and see our own dear grandma and grandpa."

"Yes, I hope so, darling. And now you two may get up and when dressed help Harry and Nannette with their toilet."

"Then have our breakfast and after that go in to see papa?" exclaimed Blanche joyously. "And may we kiss him, mamma?"

"I think he will be able to kiss his children all around," the mother answered the little questioner, with a loving smile. "But I must go back to him now, dears," she added; and with another tender kiss she turned and went quickly from the room.

The two little girls were already out of bed and dressing as fast as they could; but that was not so very rapidly, for Ethel, the eldest, was only eight years old, Blanche nearly two years younger.

Their father had been ill for a long while, and it was now some days since they had seen him; their mother was his devoted nurse, with him almost constantly, so that of late the children had been left very much to themselves and the companionship of the young girl, Myra, who combined in her person the calling of both child's-nurse and housemaid. Ethel was scarcely dressed when the little brother and sister woke and were heard demanding assistance with their dressing.

"Oh, hush, hush! do hush, children!" cried Ethel, running to them, "don't make such a noise. You forget that our dear papa is very sick and your noise may make him worse. I don't know where Myra is, but you may get up and I will help you to dress; then we will have breakfast, and after that we will go into dear papa's room; for mamma says we may."

“Oh! oh! can we, Ethel?” they asked in delight. “We’re so glad! ’cause we haven’t seen our dear papa for ever so long.”

“And Nanny wants mamma to tum and dress her,” whimpered Nannette.

“Oh, no, Nan, dear; mamma is too busy taking care of our poor sick papa, so I’ll dress you and we’ll have our breakfast, and then we are to go in to see him,” returned Ethel. “Now be a dear, good girl and don’t cry,” she added coaxingly; “because if dear papa should hear you it might make him worse. Now let me wash you and put on your clothes and brush your hair and then we’ll have our breakfast.”

The little maid worked away while she talked, dressing the baby sister, and little Blanche helped Harry with his toilet.

Before they had finished Myra came to their assistance.

“Your papa is better this morning, Miss Ethel,” she said, “and your breakfast’s ready now. Your mamma says you may go in to see the captain when you are done eatin’, and then you are to have your morning walk.”

“Oh, yes, we know,” said Blanche; “mamma told us papa was better, and we’re just as glad as can be.”

“We hope he’ll soon be quite, quite well,” added Ethel, taking the hand of Nannette and leading the way to the breakfast room.

The four were quite merry over their porridge, feeling in excellent spirits because of the good news about their father, whom they dearly loved.

When all had finished their meal and been made tidy again, they were taken to him. He greeted them with a loving smile and a few low spoken words of endearment. Alas! he was still so ill as to be scarce able to lift his head from the pillow, and when each had had a few loving words and a tender kiss of fatherly affection, mamma bade them run away to their play, promising that they should come in again for a few minutes when papa felt able to see them.

She led them to the door and kissed each in turn, saying low and tenderly, “Mamma’s own dear, dear children! no words can tell how mamma loves you all.” The baby she kissed several times, holding her close as if loth to let her go. Setting her down at last with a heavy sigh, “Go, my darlings,” she said, “and try to be quiet while you are in the house lest you disturb poor, dear papa.”

With that she stepped back into the room again and softly closed the door.

Nannette was beginning to cry, “Nanny wants to go back to dear mamma and stay wis her,” but Ethel put her arms about her, saying cheerily, “There, there, little sister, don’t cry; we are going to take a nice walk out in the green fields and gather flowers under the hedge-rows for our dear papa and mamma. Won’t that be pleasant?”

“Oh yes, yes! I so glad!” cried the little one with sudden change of look and tone. “Put Nan’s hat on dus now; dis minute.”

“Yes, darling, we’ll go and get it at once; and Blanche and Harry and I will put our hats on too, and oh, such a good time as we shall have!”

At that Nannette dried her eyes and began prattling delightedly about the flowers she hoped to gather, and the birds that would be singing in the tree-tops, or flying to and fro building their nests.

Harry and Blanche were scarcely less elated, and even staid little Ethel grew blithe and gay as they passed down the village street and turned aside into the green lanes and meadows.

The house grew very quiet when the children had gone. Captain Eldon had fallen into a doze and his devoted wife sat close by his side, one thin hand fast clasped in hers, while she almost held her breath lest she should rouse him from that slumber which might prove the turning point in the long illness that had brought him to the very borders of the grave.

Mrs. Eldon was a West Indian from the island of Jamaica; and the captain, belonging to an English regiment stationed there, had won her heart, courted and married her. She was the only living

child of a worthy couple, a wealthy planter and his wife, who had made no objection to their daughter's acceptance of the gallant British officer who had made himself agreeable to them as well as to her.

He proved a kind and indulgent husband. They were a devotedly attached couple and very happy during the first eight years of their married life; then Captain Eldon's health began to fail, the climate was pronounced most unfavorable by his medical adviser, and obtaining a furlough, he returned to his native land, taking wife and children with him; but the change had little effect; he rallied somewhat for a time, then he grew weaker and now had scarcely left his bed for weeks.

He had no near relatives living except two brothers, who had, years before, emigrated to America; he was too ill to seek old friends and acquaintances, and taking possession of a cottage advertised for rent, on the outskirts of a village and near the seashore, he, with his wife and little ones, had passed a secluded life there, seeing few visitors besides the physician who was in attendance.

Mrs. Eldon insisted on being her husband's sole nurse and determinedly persisted in believing in his final recovery, often talking hopefully of the time when they might return to her island home on the other side of the ocean, and the fond parents who were wearying of the prolonged absence of their only child and her little ones. But to-day as she sat with her eyes riveted upon his sleeping face and noted its haggard look – so thin, wan and marked with lines of suffering – her heart misgave her as never before. Was he – the light and joy of her life – about to pass away to that bourn whence no traveller returns? Oh, the anguish of that thought! how could life ever be endured without him? Her heart almost stood still with terror and despair.

"Oh, my darling!" she moaned, as suddenly the sunken eyes opened and gazed mournfully into hers, "do not leave me! I cannot live without you," and as she spoke she pressed her hand upon her heart and gasped for breath.

His lips moved but no sound came from them, the fingers of the hand she held closed convulsively over hers, he drew a long sighing breath, and was gone.

The sound of a heavy fall brought the cook and housemaid running from the kitchen to find the captain dead and the new-made widow lying prone upon the floor by his bedside, apparently as lifeless as he.

"Dear, dear!" cried the cook, stooping over the prostrate form, "there don't seem to be a bit more life in her than in him. Take hold here with me, Myra, and we'll lift her to the couch yonder. Poor thing, poor thing! between nursin' and frettin' she's just about killed, and I shouldn't wonder if she wouldn't be long a-following o' him, if she hasn't done it already."

"Betty, I'm afraid she has!" sobbed the girl, "and what will the poor children do? She was just the sweetest lady I ever saw, so she was."

"There now, Myra, don't go on so, but run and bring somethin' to bring her to. Oh, there's the doctor's gig at the gate! Run and let him in, quick as you can go."

In another minute the doctor entered the room, followed by the sobbing Myra. He glanced first at the still form on the bed. "Yes, the poor gentleman has gone!" he said, sighing as he spoke; "but it is only what was to be expected."

He turned quickly to the couch where lay the still form of Mrs. Eldon, the face as pale and deathlike as that of the husband, laid his finger on her wrist, turned hastily, caught up a hand-glass lying on the bureau and held it to her lips for a moment, then laying it down with a sigh:

"She too is gone," he said in a low, moved tone, "and I am hardly surprised."

"Oh, sir, what ailed her?" sobbed Myra, "She scarce ever complained of being ill."

"No, but I knew she had heart trouble likely to carry her off should she be subjected to any great or sudden shock."

"And he's been took that suddent! and she so fond o' him," groaned Betty. "Well, well, well! we've all got to die, but when my time comes I 'ope I'll go a bit slower; that I do!"

The doctor was looking at his watch. "I must be going," he said, "for I have other patients needing attention; but I'll drive to the vicarage and ask Mrs. Rogers to come and oversee matters here. By the way, can either of you tell me where any relatives are to be found?"

"No, sir, that we can't," replied the cook, sighing heavily. "Leastways I don't remember so much as oncet hearing the captin nor Mrs. Eldon mention no relations 'cept it might be some o' her folks 'way acrost the sea somewheres."

"Too far away to be of any use in this extremity," muttered the physician meditatively. Then a little louder, "Well," he said, "I'll go for the vicar's wife, and she'll see to all the necessary arrangements. Where are the children?"

"Out walkin' in the fields, sir," answered Myra. "Oh, dear, the poor little things! Whatever will they do? What's to become o' them without no father nor no mother?"

"I dare say there are relations somewhere," returned the doctor, then hurried out to his gig, and in another minute was driving rapidly in the direction of the parsonage.

Not far from the house he came upon the little group of children returning from their walk.

"Oh, doctor," cried Ethel, and perceiving that she wanted to speak to him, he reined in his horse for a moment, "have you been to our house? and did you find papa better? Oh, I hope – I think he is very much better, and will soon be well."

"Yes, my dear," returned the kind-hearted physician after a moment's pause, as if considering the question and the best reply to make. "I found him entirely free from the pain from which he has been so long suffering; and I am sure you and your little brother and sisters will be glad of it."

"Oh, yes, indeed, sir! just as glad as we can be; as I am sure dear mamma must be."

The doctor drove on, sighing to himself, "Poor little orphans! I wonder what is to become of them. If I were only a rich man instead of a poor one with a family of my own to support – ah, well! I hope there are relatives somewhere who will see that they are clothed, fed, and educated."

CHAPTER II

“Oh, papa is better, dear, dear papa!” cried Ethel, jumping and dancing in delight.

“Oh, I’m so glad! I’m so glad!” cried Blanche and Harry in chorus.

“I so glad! I so glad!” echoed Nannette. “But I don’t want to doe home, Ethel; I’s’e tired.”

“Then we’ll go and sit down a while under the trees by the little brook over yonder,” returned Ethel in soothing tones. “You will like that, Blanche and Harry, won’t you?”

A ready assent was given, and all three turned aside and spent an hour or more in the pleasant spot, rolling on the grass, picking flowers, throwing them into the water, and watching them sail away out of sight.

At length Nannette began fretting. “I so tired, so s’eeepy. Me wants to doe home see papa and mamma.”

“So you shall, Nan. I want to see them, too,” returned Ethel, rising and taking her little sister’s hand as she spoke. “Come, Blanche and Harry.”

“Yes, I’m ready,” said Harry, flinging the last pebble into the water. “I want to see papa and mamma; ’sides I’m hungry for my lunch.”

“So am I,” said Blanche, and they followed on behind Ethel and the baby sister, laughing and chatting merrily as they went.

Myra met the little party at the gate, her eyes red with weeping.

“O Myra, what’s the matter?” asked Ethel in alarm.

“Never mind,” returned the little maid evasively. “Your lunch is ready, and you’d best come and eat first thing, ’cause I know you must be hungry.”

So saying she led the way into the house and on to the dining room.

They had come in with appetites sharpened by exercise in the open air, and were too busy satisfying them to indulge in much chatter. Nannette at length fell asleep in her chair and was carried to her bed by Myra, whither Harry presently followed her.

“Has mamma had her lunch yet, Myra?” asked Ethel.

Myra seemed not to have heard, and the question was repeated.

“No, miss,” she replied, and Ethel noticed a suspicious tremble in her voice.

“O Myra, I hope mamma isn’t sick,” exclaimed the little girl. “She has been looking so pale of late!”

“She – she’s lying down – asleep,” Miss Ethel, Myra returned with difficulty, swallowing a lump in her throat and hurrying from the room.

“How oddly Myra acts! and she looks as if she’d been crying ever so long and hard,” remarked Ethel, half to herself, half to Blanche.

But Blanche had thrown herself on the bed beside the two little ones, and was so nearly asleep that she scarcely heard or heeded.

Ethel seated herself in a large easy-chair by the window with a book in her hand; but all being so quiet within and without the house, she too, rather weary with the walk and sports of the morning, was presently wandering in the land of dreams.

She was roused from her slumber by someone bending over her and softly pressing a kiss upon her forehead. Her eyes opened and looked up into the kind face of Mrs. Rogers, the vicar’s wife.

“Oh, I thought it was mamma!” exclaimed the little girl in a tone of keen disappointment.

“No, dear, but I kissed you for her – your dear mother,” returned the lady with emotion.

“But why didn’t mamma come herself?” asked Ethel, growing frightened though she could scarcely have told why. “You are very kind, Mrs. Rogers, but oh, I do want mamma! Can I go to her now?” She sprang to her feet as she spoke.

“My poor child, my poor dear little girl,” the lady said tremulously, seating herself and drawing Ethel into her arms.

“Oh, ma’am, why do you say that?” queried Ethel in terror. “Is anything the matter with mamma? is papa worse? Oh, what shall I do? Can’t I go to them now? I’ll be very quiet and good.”

“Oh, my child, my poor dear child, how shall I tell you!” cried the lady, folding the little girl close in her arms, while great tears chased each other down her cheeks. “Your dear father has gone to his heavenly home, Ethel, and to the dear Saviour whom he loved and served while here upon earth.”

“Do you mean that papa is dead?” almost shrieked Ethel. “Oh, oh, my papa, my dear papa!” and hiding her face in her hands she sobbed violently for a moment.

“But I must go to mamma!” she cried, dashing away her tears; “she will be wanting me to comfort her, for there’s nobody else to do it now. Oh, let me go! I must!” as Mrs. Rogers held her fast.

“No, dear child,” she said with emotion, “your mamma does not need you or any other earthly comforter now, for God Himself has wiped away all tears from her eyes and she will never know sin or sorrow or suffering any more.”

A dazed look up into the lady’s face was Ethel’s only rejoinder for a moment, then she stammered, “I – I don’t know what you mean, ma’am. I – I – mamma has taught me that it is only in heaven there is no sin or sorrow or pain.”

“Yes, darling, and it is there she is now with the dear husband – your father – whom she so dearly loved!”

“Oh, you can’t mean it! it can’t be that both are gone, and nobody left to love us or take care of us – Blanche and Harry, and Nan and me! Oh, no, no, it can’t be possible!” cried the little girl, covering her face with her hands and bursting into an agony of sobs and tears. “Mamma, mamma, oh, I can never, never, never do without you!”

Mrs. Rogers drew her closer and spoke in low, comforting tones, her own tears falling fast the while, “Dear child, God will take care of you and your little brother and sisters. He calls Himself the father of the fatherless. He pities and loves you and will raise up friends and helpers for you. Can you not trust Him for that, dear child, and be glad for papa and mamma, that they are safe with Him and will never again be sick or in pain? and that if you love and serve Him while on earth He will one day take you to be with Him and them?”

“I don’t want to die, and I cannot, I cannot do without my dear papa and mamma!” wailed the well-nigh heartbroken child.

Her cry waked the three younger ones; a trying scene ensued.

CHAPTER III

To Ethel and Blanche the memories of the next few days seemed, through the rest of their lives, ever like a dreadful dream. Then they were taken on board an ocean steamer bound for the city of Philadelphia in the United States of America, where two brothers of their father had settled years before. They were merchants doing a large wholesale and retail business, and were known to be abundantly able to provide for the orphan children of their deceased brother.

The address of the parents of Mrs. Eldon was not known to those who made the arrangements, so that they were not even advised of their daughter's death.

There were no relatives to take charge of the forlorn little ones on their voyage, but they were given into the care of the wife of a soldier who was going out to join her husband in Canada, a Mrs. McDougal, a warm-hearted earnest Christian, childless herself, but with a heart full of love and tenderest sympathy for the sadly bereaved little ones committed to her care. She petted, soothed, comforted them, attended faithfully to all their physical needs, and spent many an hour amusing them with quaint stories of Scottish life and manners, of brownies, elves, and fairies; tales that would interest and amuse, yet teach no harmful lesson.

Before the good and gallant vessel had reached her destination the mutual love between the kind caretaker and her young charges had grown very strong, and it was with a heavy heart that Mrs. McDougal looked forward to the coming separation.

The announcement of the deaths of their brother and his wife, and that the children would be sent directly to them, had reached the firm of the Eldon Brothers only a few hours before the arrival of the vessel bringing them.

It was a great and not altogether welcome surprise, yet their hearts were moved with pity for the forlorn little ones, and together they repaired at once to the dock and boarded the newly arrived vessel in search of them.

They found them on the deck with their kind caretaker, Nannette on her lap, the others grouped about her.

"Ah, here they are! I'd know that little lad anywhere as poor Harry's boy!" exclaimed Mr. Albert Eldon, the younger of the two, with emotion, and laying a hand tenderly upon the child's head, as he spoke.

"That's my name, sir; and it was my papa's name too. Mamma called him that, but most folks said captain when they talked to him," volunteered the little fellow in return.

"Ah? then I'm your uncle Albert; and this gentleman," indicating his brother, "is your uncle George."

"Oh I thought so for you resemble papa; at least as he was before he was taken so ill," Ethel said, lifting tearful eyes to the face of Mr. George Eldon.

"Do I, my dear? I believe there is said to be a strong family resemblance among us all," he returned. "At all events we are your father's brothers, and therefore own uncles to all of you little ones," he added, stooping to caress them in turn, as his brother was doing.

Then the gentlemen held a conversation with Mrs. McDougal in which – perceiving how loth the children were to be separated from her, clinging to her with tears and entreaties that she would not leave them – they proposed that she should remain in charge of them for a few days or weeks while they were becoming familiar with their new surroundings.

She replied that she could do so for only a day or two, as she must embrace the first opportunity to rejoin her husband.

"I am sorry to hear that," returned Mr. Albert Eldon, "but do us the favor to stay while you can; and let it be at my house; for we will not try separating these little folks while you are with them, whatever arrangement we may decide upon later. Will not that be the better plan, brother?"

“For the present – till we have time to talk the matter over with our wives? Yes, I think so.”

A carriage was waiting on the wharf, in which Mrs. McDougal and the children were presently bestowed, Mr. Albert Eldon following, after a moment's low-toned chat with his brother and an order to the driver. He seated himself and took Harry on his knee.

“Where are we doin' now?” asked Nannette, peering out of the window as the vehicle moved on.

“To my house – Uncle Albert's house, little one,” replied Mr. Eldon in pleasant tones. “You will find some little cousins, a girl and a boy, and I hope have nice times playing with them.”

“What's the boy's name, Uncle Albert?” queried Harry.

“Charles Augustus; the little girl is Leonora; but they are usually called Gus and Lena, or Nora, for short.”

“Are they all the children you have, uncle?” asked Ethel with shy look and tone.

“Oh, no,” he replied; “there are Albert and Arabella, nearly grown up, and Olive and Minnie; Minnie is twelve and Olive fourteen.”

“Has dey dot a papa and mamma?” asked Nannette.

“Yes; your Aunt Augusta is their mamma and I am their papa.”

“And we haven't any; our papa and mamma both went away to heaven,” sighed Blanche.

“Where they are very, very happy, dear child,” returned her uncle, laying a hand tenderly on her head as she sat by his side.

Then he called their attention to something passing in the street, and exerted himself to amuse them in various ways till the carriage drew up in front of a spacious dwelling.

“Ah, here we are,” he said, throwing open the door, alighting and handing them out one after the other.

“Why, who in the world can they be? And what is papa bringing them here for?” exclaimed a little girl, leaning out from an upper window and scanning with eager curiosity the new arrivals whom her father was marshalling up the front door steps, and at once admitted to the hall with his dead-latch key.

“What's that? More company coming, Min?” queried another voice, and Olive's head appeared beside that of her sister, just as the hack in which the little party had arrived turned and drove away. “Pooh! nobody of any consequence; they came in a hired hack.”

“But they were children – except one woman – their nurse, I suppose; and papa with them! There, I hear them coming up the stairs now, and I mean to find out all about it,” and with the words Minnie threw down her books and ran from the room, Olive following close at her heels.

They heard their father's voice coming from the nursery, and rushed in there, asking breathlessly:

“Papa, whom have you got here? And what did you bring them for?”

“These children are your little cousins,” he answered pleasantly. “Come and speak to them, all of you. They are the children of your Uncle Henry, of whom you have often heard me speak. Ethel, here, Charles Augustus, is just about your age, and Blanche might be Lena's twin; Harry is two years younger, and Nannette, a baby girl, the youngest of all.”

The greetings over:

“But, papa, where are Uncle Harry and – and their mother?” asked Minnie, more than half regretting her query as she saw the tears gathering in Ethel's eyes.

“In heaven, I trust,” her father replied in low and not unmoved tones. “There, my dears, do what you can to make your cousins comfortable and happy, I must go and speak to your mamma.” So saying he left the room.

Mrs. Eldon, lying on the sofa in her dressing room, looked up in mild surprise as her husband entered.

"Why, Albert," she said, closing her book with a yawn, "what fortunate circumstance brings you home at this unusual hour?" Then as he drew nearer: "What is it, my dear? Why, actually, there are tears in your eyes. Oh," half starting up, "is there anything wrong with Albert or –"

"No," he said huskily, "but bad news from England reached us this morning. My brother Henry is no more; he and his wife died within a few minutes of each other. She had heart disease, we are told, was strongly attached to him, worn out with long and arduous nursing, and the shock of his decease was more than her enfeebled frame could bear."

"How very sad! I am really sorry for you, my dear. And they left some children, did they not?"

"Yes, four little ones – a boy and three girls, the eldest only about eight years of age. They have grandparents, probably very well to do, somewhere in the West Indies, but no one knows their name or address. So the little orphans have been sent to us. The steamship came in this morning, only a few hours after the letter was received telling us all this, and which was forwarded by a vessel bound to a Canadian port but delayed somewhat in her voyage, so that, starting some days before the other, she reached port only a day or two ahead of her."

"And you are going down to the vessel to get the children?"

"No; we went down – George and I – at once on learning that she was in, found the little folks there all right, and I have just brought them home with me."

"But surely we are not to be expected to keep the whole four? Surely George and his wife will take two, as they have the same right as we to be at the expense and trouble."

"I think so, eventually; but just at present, while the poor little things feel themselves strangers in a strange place, it would be hard for them to be separated; so I have engaged to keep the whole for a few days," he replied; then seeing that she looked ill-pleased with the arrangement:

"But, I do not intend they shall be any trouble to you, my dear," he added hastily. "The woman who had charge of them on the voyage will remain with them for a few days, and except when they are taken out for air and exercise, they can be kept in the nursery and adjoining rooms."

"Well," she sighed, returning to her book, "I suppose I may as well resign myself to the inevitable."

"Do you think it more than their nearest relatives should do for our children, were they so sorely bereaved?" he asked.

"No, I suppose not; but I have given my consent and what more would you ask?"

"Nothing more, Augusta, except that you will encourage our children to be kind and considerate toward their orphan cousins."

"Really I know of no one but their father who would expect them to be anything else," she returned in a not particularly pleasant tone.

"I do not expect it," he said; "yet think it might be as well to call their attention to the fact that the little orphans are entitled to their kindly sympathy. But I am needed at my place of business and must return at once. Good-by till dinner time, my dear;" and with the last word he left the room.

"Dear me! as if we hadn't children enough of our own!" exclaimed Mrs. Eldon in a petulant tone, and impatiently tossing aside her book as the sound of her husband's footsteps died away in the distance. "Albert needn't talk as if they were to be no trouble to me. Who else is to do the shopping for their clothes, decide how they are to be made and find somebody to do the work? for of course if they don't look all right, people will talk and say we don't treat them as well as we do our own."

At that moment the patter of little feet was heard in the hall without, the door opened and her youngest two came rushing in.

"Oh, mamma," they exclaimed half breathlessly, "papa has brought us some cousins, nice little things, and we like 'em and want you to see them too. Mayn't we bring 'em in here?"

"Oh, yes, if you will only be quiet. Will you never learn not to be so noisy?"

“Maybe some day when we’re growed up like you and papa,” said Nora. “Come, Gus, let’s go and bring ’em,” and away they ran, to return in a few moments leading Blanche and Harry and followed by the nurse carrying Nannette; Ethel keeping close at her side.

They were pretty, winsome looking children, and Mrs. Eldon was roused to something like interest. She sat up and took Nannette on her lap for a few minutes, spoke kindly to the others, and asked some questions in regard to their former homes and the voyage across the ocean.

Most of the replies came from Ethel, and her timid, retiring, yet ladylike manner found favor with her interrogator.

“You are a nice little girl,” she said at length, smoothing her hair caressingly and giving her a kiss, “and so are your sisters. I am pleased with Harry, also, for he seems a manly little fellow, and I hope you and my little folks will get along happily together while you stay. There, run back to the nursery now, all of you, for it is time for me to dress.”

They all started to obey, but as they reached the door, “Oh, mamma,” cried Charles Augustus, turning toward her again, “mayn’t we go down to the yard? ’cause I want to show cousins the pups and rabbits.”

“Yes, yes! anything if you will go and leave me in peace,” she replied with some impatience.

“Come along then, Ethel and the rest of you,” cried Charlie, leading the way.

CHAPTER IV

The Eldon brothers lived in adjoining houses, large, handsome, and with more extensive grounds than are usually connected with a city residence; a low hedge separated those of the one from the other, and a gate in that gave to each household free access to both, which, by the way, was a convenience more esteemed by the brothers and their children than by the wives and mothers, who had few interests in common – Mrs. George Eldon occupying herself almost exclusively with home cares and economies and outside charities, while her sister-in-law was a butterfly of fashion, considering herself a martyr to social duties and leaving the care of house, children, and her husband's comfort to those who could be hired to attend to them. As a natural consequence each secretly despised and avoided the other.

When the brothers parted at the wharf that day, the elder one went immediately to his place of business, where he found his wife waiting to speak with him in his private counting room.

"Ah," she said as he entered, "I am glad you have come at last; for I have been waiting here for at least a full hour. Where on earth have you been?"

"Out seeing to some very important business; a matter demanding immediate attention," he replied somewhat coldly.

"Something which your wife is not to know about, I presume?"

"I have not said so, nor have I the least intention to keep it secret from you. Let me read you this" – unfolding a letter as he spoke.

It was the one he had just received from England, telling of the decease of Captain and Mrs. Eldon, and the sending of their children to America. She listened in almost breathless surprise.

"You have hardly mentioned that brother for years, and I had almost forgotten his existence," she remarked as he refolded the letter and laid it aside.

"Too true," he responded with a heavy sigh, "and my heart reproaches me for my neglect. Poor Harry! if he had left that climate sooner he might perhaps have lived to be an old man; lived to support and bring up his children himself; but now all that I can do is to help in that work."

"As if you hadn't family enough of your own!" she exclaimed indignantly.

"I have two, my brother Albert six; and I have quite as large an income as he."

"And a wife that doesn't spend the half that his does," she added drawing herself up with dignity.

"Quite true, and, therefore, I should take certainly not less than half the burden of providing for Harry's helpless little ones."

"No doubt you will do your full share," she said coldly, "and your wife will be expected to do more than hers in the way of seeing that the children are trained and taught, fed and clothed; things that such a butterfly of fashion as Mrs. Albert does not trouble her head about for her own offspring, and certainly would not for others."

"Well, my dear, fortunately for us we will not be called upon to give an account for her sins of omission or commission; but I have heard you say, certainly more than once or twice, that you consider it a duty to care for the poor with purse, time, and effort; and surely relationship to your husband should not be looked upon as a bar to such ministrations on the part of his wife. My brother, I am happy to say, is more than willing to do his full share, and I certainly do not want him to do more."

He was magnanimous enough not to mention her orphan niece whom he was supporting and educating, and she had the grace to feel somewhat ashamed of her display of unwillingness to do a little for his fatherless and motherless nephew and nieces. But she did not condescend to say so much in words.

"Well, how soon are we to expect them?" she asked.

"They are already here," he replied, "and the errand from which I have just returned was to the vessel that brought them. Albert proposes to keep the whole four for a few days, till they have

had time to become somewhat acquainted with us, and parted with the good woman – the wife of a soldier in Canada – who had charge of them on the voyage.”

“And after that?”

“We propose to make a division – each taking two; our wives, of course, having a vote as to which two each of them may prefer to take.”

“And they have been already sent up to your brother’s, I suppose? I wonder how Augusta likes it.”

“Surely she can hardly be without some feeling of compassion for the sorely bereaved little ones,” he returned with emotion.

“They are to be pitied,” she said, her voice softening somewhat. “Well, I came for a little money to spend in doing good – helping some of the unfortunates in our midst. Can you spare it?”

“Certainly,” he replied, opening his his purse and handing her a small roll of banknotes.

“Thank you,” she said; “I’ll see to it that your bounty is not wasted.”

“I’m sure of it, Sarah; I never knew you to be wasteful.”

She smiled at that, understanding it as a well deserved compliment; then took a hasty leave, as she perceived that someone was at the door seeking an interview with Mr. Eldon.

“Well, it’s a bad business,” she sighed to herself as she hurried along the street; “as if it was not enough to be plagued with my own brother’s child, I must have his too. And really there’s no necessity for it; it would be a charity to pay somebody to take charge of the four, saving them the trial of being separated and helping the caretaker to make a living; decidedly I think it is a brilliant idea and that I shall have no difficulty in persuading Augusta to join me in insisting upon having it carried out.”

Mrs. Augusta was in her dressing room, just completing her dinner toilet, when to her intense surprise a tap at her door was followed by the entrance of her sister-in-law.

“Ah, you had no idea it was I coming upon you so unceremoniously,” remarked the caller with a grim smile, and seating herself without waiting to be invited; “but I came to have a bit of chat with you about this invasion of our homes by uninvited young guests. I for one see no reason why we should be expected to take charge of them, our husbands being amply able to pay someone else to do so, someone who may be glad to add in that way to a meagre income.”

“Why, Sarah, that’s a brilliant idea! If only such a person – one whom George and Albert would be willing to trust – can be found,” exclaimed Mrs. Augusta, her eyes sparkling with pleasure. “Have you anyone in mind?”

“Yes, I have thought of that poor Irish curate, Coote, who is so continually applying for help. Wasteful creatures he and his wife must be to need it so often, with never a chick or child of their own to support.”

“I should think so; and I can’t bear him – red-headed, pompous, dictatorial, domineering creature that he is! He should never have charge of a child of mine.”

“Well, don’t, I beg of you, be silly enough to say that to your husband or mine.”

“Of course not; if they can’t see for themselves, why should you or I enlighten them? Still I do feel a little sorry at the thought of giving him a chance to domineer over those poor little orphans.”

“Let them behave themselves and they will do fairly well, I have no doubt,” returned Mrs. Sarah with a frown. “They must be taught to expect to support themselves from the time they can be made capable of doing so, and lessons in self-control and the endurance of some hardship will be a decided benefit to them.”

“So we will endeavor to believe, at all events,” laughed Mrs. Augusta.

Then they consulted together as to the best plan for approaching their husbands on the subject; and decided that their wisest course would be to say nothing at present, but wait till some trouble between the newcomers and their own children should so annoy the gentlemen that they would be ready to purchase peace at almost any price.

CHAPTER V

Things went pretty smoothly with the little orphans while their friend Mrs. McDougal stayed. She managed to keep the peace between them and their cousins by soothing and petting her young charges and interesting all the occupants of the nursery with her fairy tales, her stories of Wallace, the Bruce, and Robin Hood and his merry men.

But all too soon came the day when she must leave Philadelphia and go to the husband who was wearying for his good wife; a sad, sad day to the poor little fatherless and motherless children! They clung to her until the last moment, and she had to tear herself away leaving the whole four weeping bitterly.

Their uncles were kind, but because of business cares seldom seen; the aunts took little notice of the young strangers, each being absorbed in her usual round of occupation, while the treatment of the cousins, older and younger, varied with their varying moods – sometimes they were kind, disposed to pet and humor their forlorn little relatives, and again – without any apparent reason for a change – treated them with coldness and indifference.

That was hard to bear, and caused many a fit of home-sickness and bitter weeping for the loss of the dear father and mother whom they would never see more upon earth.

Ethel, who was, in spite of her tender years, a very womanly little girl, earnestly strove to act a mother's part to her younger sisters and little brother – soothing and comforting them in their griefs and seldom giving vent to her own except in the darkness and silence of night when none but God, her Heavenly Father, could see and know it. Her pillow was often wet with tears as she sobbed herself to sleep while pouring all her sorrows into His sympathizing ear, as both her mother and Mrs. McDougal had taught her to do, repeating to her again and again that command and precious promise, "Call upon Me in the day of trouble; I will deliver thee and thou shalt glorify Me."

"Oh, if I could only find our dear grandpa and grandma," she sometimes said to herself; "they would love us as dear mamma and papa did, and take us home to live with them, and we would be, oh, so happy!"

Then she would comfort herself with the hope that perhaps some day they would be found, and she and her brother and sisters be taken to the sweet and lovely home she could remember as a half forgotten dream, where no one would think them in the way; but they would be loved and petted and made much of, instead of being barely tolerated as those of whose presence their entertainers would gladly be relieved.

But scarcely a week had elapsed after the departure of their beloved caretaker, Mrs. McDougal, when the little orphans were subjected to yet another trial in the removal of Blanche and Harry to the house of their uncle George and the custody of his cold-mannered, unsympathetic wife.

The enforced separation was a bitter thing to both themselves and the other two. But tears and cries brought only reproof and punishment; especially to Harry, who proved, under the tyrannical rule of his uncle's wife, a very determined little rebel, bringing upon himself punishments so many and severe that to hear of them, as she did in one way and another, almost broke Ethel's heart.

She sorrowed for Blanche too, and for Nannette and herself; for their situation was only slightly better than that of their brother and sister.

Things grew worse and worse with all four until at length their uncles, wearied out with complaints from their wives and feeling that it was sad to have the children separated, began to talk of trying to find a good home for them elsewhere.

Then Mrs. George Eldon broached her idea that it would be a help to poor Mr. Coote if he and his wife were paid to take charge of the little orphans, and at the same time a pleasant change for the children, as the whole four could be together.

She did not add the information that she had already written privately to Coote, telling of her plan and advising him to casually call in upon her husband and his brother, speak of his cramped circumstances and remark that he was thinking of trying to get a few boarding pupils to help himself and wife eke out their small income.

The uncles hesitated over Mrs. George's suggestion, but finally consented to let the experiment be tried, provided Coote and his wife might like to try it; or if not they, someone else likely to prove a suitable person could be found.

It seemed to them quite a providence when a day or two later Coote called at their place of business and made known his desire for just such an opportunity for increasing his meagre means, asking if they could recommend him to someone who had the guardianship of children in need of a good home where they would receive parental care and training.

The brothers exchanged glances of relief and pleasure.

"Yes, Mr. Coote," replied the elder Mr. Eldon, "we ourselves are wanting just such a home and caretaking for the orphan children of a deceased brother; four little ones – the eldest eight, the youngest about three years of age."

"Possible?" cried Coote, simulating delighted surprise, laughing in a gleeful way and rubbing his hands together with a look of great satisfaction. "Well, sirs, you may rest assured that if committed to my care and that of my estimable wife they will not long miss their departed parents, and will be trained up in so godly a manner that they will no doubt be reunited to them in a better world."

"Not too soon, I hope," observed Mr. Albert dryly. "I desire them to live to years of maturity, becoming happy, honorable, and useful citizens of this free land which we have adopted as our own."

"Oh, certainly, sir," responded Coote, "and I'm thinking they'll be more likely to live and thrive in the wholesome air of the country town in which I am located than here in the city."

"I hope so indeed," said the elder Mr. Eldon; "but if we trust them to you and Mrs. Coote it must be with the distinct understanding that they are to be well fed and clothed, and to receive truly parental care and affection."

"Oh, certainly, certainly, sir," again responded Coote; "my wife and I will look upon and treat the poor little orphans quite as if they were our own."

"Better, I trust, than some people treat their own," returned Mr. Eldon. "Well, sir, if my brother approves, we will, I think, give you an opportunity to show yourself a kind and wise guardian to these little ones who, as the offspring of our deceased brother, are very near and dear to us."

In reply Mr. Coote gave renewed assurances that he felt a great interest in the little orphans, and that he and his wife would be as father and mother to them, doing for them all that the best of parents could do.

The uncles then consented to put them in his care for an indefinite period, reserving the right to remove them if at any time they saw reason to be dissatisfied with the treatment they received.

"I certainly shall give you no occasion for it," remarked Coote suavely; "as I have said, my wife and I will be as tender and careful of the little darlings as though, they were our own flesh and blood."

"How soon will you be ready for them?" asked Mr. George Eldon.

"At once, sir, at once. And if you please I should greatly prefer to take them with me on my return this afternoon. It would save me another trip to the city, and in my circumstances that expense would count."

"And since the change has to be made it would perhaps be as well to make it at once," remarked Mr. Eldon thoughtfully, adding, "I hope the poor little creatures may be happier with you, Mr. Coote, than they have been with us, if only for the simple reason that the whole four will be together; for I never saw children fonder of each other than they are."

"Nor I," assented his brother; "and Ethel, young as she is, seems very like a mother to Harry and Nannette, poor child! I am really sorry to part with her. I'll go up with you, Coote, explain matters to her, bid good-by to the whole four, and see them off."

Things had gone very wrong that morning with Blanche and Harry, and Ethel was nearly heartbroken over the sore punishment meted out to them by Mrs. George. That made the news her Uncle Albert brought her much less distressing than it would otherwise have been; for how, she asked herself, was it possible things could go worse anywhere than here? And it seemed a blessing indeed that she and all three of the younger ones would be together again.

She loved Uncle Albert, clung tearfully to him for a moment when he had told her of the new arrangement, then almost cheerfully gathered together the few small possessions of herself, brother, and sisters.

By direction of the aunts the children's trunk had been already packed with the most of their clothing, so that it was the work of but a few minutes to get everything in readiness for their hasty departure.

The little ones were almost dazed by the suddenness of the thing, and scarcely realized what had happened till they found themselves in the cars alone with their new and unknown guardian. Their Uncle Albert had gone with them to the train, and in bidding them good-by he laid a box of candies in Ethel's lap, saying, "That is for you and your brother and sisters to eat on the way;" and bestowed a large, luscious orange on each, of the four.

Ethel threw her arms about his neck and held him tight for a moment, while her sobs came thick and fast.

"Oh, Uncle, dear Uncle Albert," she cried chokingly, "won't I ever see you any more?"

"Yes, yes, dear child," he said soothingly, "I shall run up to look at you and the others one of these days, when business grows slack; and perhaps – who knows but you'll be back with us again some day? But there, I must go now. Be good children, all of you, and Uncle Albert won't forget you at Christmas time."

And with a hasty caress bestowed on each of the others he hurried from the car.

Ethel dried her eyes, opened the box, gave a bit of the candy to each of the other three, then seeing that Mr. Coote was eying them as though he too would like a share, she held out her box to him, asking timidly, "Will you have a piece too, sir?"

His only reply was to seize the box, help himself to half its contents, then hand it back with a gruff, "Candy isn't at all good for children, and if your uncle had consulted me he wouldn't have wasted his money buying it for you."

"Oh, dear, that man's got most all of our candy; and Uncle Albert said it was for us," wailed Harry, taking a peep into the half-emptied box.

"Be quiet, sir!" commanded Coote, turning a flushed and angry face upon the little boy.

"Give back that candy and I'll be quiet enough," returned Harry sturdily.

"What a hog of a man to be robbing those poor little children of their candy!" exclaimed a motherly-looking country woman in the next seat, apparently addressing her remark to a young girl at her side, but speaking loud enough for Coote and other near-by passengers to hear.

The train was just starting. Coote leaned over the back of the seat, bringing his mouth near to Harry's ear.

"You keep quiet, you young dog," he said savagely, "or I'll pitch you out the window and let the train run over you and kill you."

"Oh, you wicked, wicked man!" cried Ethel, with a burst of tears, putting her arm round Harry and holding him close; "if you do you'll get hung for murder."

"Take care, miss; it wouldn't take long to send you after him," was the threatening rejoinder, and Coote leaned back in his seat again, took a newspaper from his pocket, and sat looking over it while devouring with evident enjoyment the candy of which he had robbed the children.

CHAPTER VI

It was a lovely day early in October, and the children enjoyed gazing out upon the landscape, so new to them, the gorgeous coloring of the forest trees particularly attracting their attention. They were close together, having possession of a corner near the door of the car, where two seats at right angles gave them abundance of room to move about and gaze their fill, now on the outer world, now at the occupants of the seats near at hand. They were pretty quiet, and disturbed no one but each other with their prattle and fidgeting.

The sun was near its setting when they arrived at their destination. They were bundled very unceremoniously out of the car and hurried along the street by Mr. Coote, who seemed in hot haste to reach his parsonage, some two or three squares distant. Poor little Nannette found it very hard – indeed quite impossible – to keep up with him in his rapid strides, though Ethel on one side and Blanche on the other were doing their utmost to help her along. And even they, without that hindrance, could not possibly have kept pace with their conductor. Nor could Harry, and he too fell behind with them, and all four were crying more or less when they reached the gate where Coote stood awaiting their coming, with a scowl of impatience upon his ugly features.

“I thought you were close behind me. You’ll have to learn to walk faster. Dawdling along is something I’ll not put up with,” he growled, snatching Nannette up roughly and carrying her into the house, the others following in obedience to the gruff order, “Come along in, all o’ you.”

A middle-aged woman – tall, rawboned, of scowling countenance and stiffly starched in manner, stood waiting in the hall.

“So you’ve brought ’em,” she said in icy tones. “Well, they’ll make trouble and work enough, but the pay will help to eke out that starvation salary of yours.”

“Take care, Sarah,” he muttered, setting down the sobbing Nannette, none too gently, upon the floor, “little pitchers have big ears, and there’s no knowing when or where they might blab.”

“Just let me catch ’em at it and they’ll not be apt to do it a second time,” she said, turning upon the trembling little ones a look so angry and threatening that they clung together in affright, tears coursing down their cheeks and their young bosoms heaving with sobs.

“Stop your crying, every one of you!” she commanded. “Come right in here and eat your suppers,” opening a door near where she stood, “and then you shall go to bed. But no. Pull off your hats and coats first and hang them here on the rack in the hall. You must learn to wait on yourselves, and that there’s a place for everything and everything must be in its place, and the sooner you learn it the better it’ll be for you; for dirt and disorder are never allowed in the house where I’m at the head of affairs. I’ll help you this time, but you’ve got to help yourselves after this.”

She had seized Nannette as she spoke, and was jerking off her coat. “Well, I declare if you aint all sticky with candy!” she exclaimed, in a tone of disgust. “What on earth did you let her have it for, Coote?”

“’Twas none o’ my doing,” he replied; “their uncle gave it to ’em, but I can tell you it’ll be one while before they get any more.”

At that Nannette looked up piteously, and with quivering lip, into Ethel’s face, but did not dare to so much as whimper. It was a very faint and watery smile Ethel gave her in reply.

They were hurried into the dining room, a barely furnished apartment with whitewashed walls, green paper window blinds, and rag carpet; exquisitely neat and clean, but wearing like its mistress a cold and cheerless aspect in striking contrast with the beautiful homes of their uncles, which the children had left but a few hours before.

The table was covered with a very white and smoothly ironed but coarse cloth, and on it stood a pitcher of milk, a plate of bread, and four bowls of heavy ironstone china, each with a silver-plated spoon beside it. The children were quickly seated, told to fold their hands and shut their eyes while

repeating a short grace after Mrs. Coote. Then milk was poured into each bowl, a piece of bread laid beside it, and they were ordered to break the bread into the milk, take up their spoons and eat, which they did, Mrs. Coote seating herself opposite them and watching with eagle eyes every movement they made.

No one of the four ventured a word, much less to refuse obedience to the order given. Both bread and milk were sweet and good, and after the first taste the little folks ate with appetite, Mrs. Coote refilling the bowls and supplying the bread without stint.

“Eat all you want,” she said in a slightly softened tone; “I was never one to starve man or beast; you’ll not be fed on dainties here, but shall have all you can eat of good, wholesome victuals.”

Presently the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall was followed by the opening of the door of the dining room, and Mr. Coote put in his head, saying: “Here’s the trunk, Sarah; what’ll you have done with it?”

“They’ll sleep in the room over the kitchen; have it carried up there,” she replied.

When the children had finished their meal, “Now,” she said, “you shall go up to your room and beds,” and they followed submissively as she led the way through the hall and up a back staircase.

The room into which she presently ushered them looked as scrupulously clean and orderly, and also as bare and desolate, as the dining room. There was a double bed which she told the little girls they were to occupy, and in another corner a cot bed which she said was for Harry. The remaining pieces of furniture were a washstand with bowl and pitcher, a chest of drawers with a small mirror over it, two wooden chairs of ordinary height and two little ones.

“Sit down on those chairs, every one of you, and keep still while I take out your night clothes from this trunk,” said Mrs. Coote. “Where’s the key?” looking at Ethel.

“In my pocket, ma’am,” returned the little girl, producing it with all possible despatch. “The nurse told me she had put all our nightgowns right on top.”

“Yes, here they are; looking well rumpled too. Plenty o’ folks in this world that don’t care whether they do a thing right or wrong. I hope you’ll not make one of that sort, Ethel.”

“I’ll try not to, ma’am,” replied the little girl meekly.

“Well, help your sisters and brother to undress, hang their clothes up neatly on those pegs along the wall there – so they’ll get a good airing through the night – then undress yourself and do the same with your own clothes. Don’t forget your prayers either. I’m going downstairs now, but I’ll be in again presently to see that you are all snug and comfortable, and to finish unpacking your trunk.” With these concluding words she hurried out, closing the door after her.

“Oh, me don’t ’ike dis place; me wants to go home,” sobbed Nannette.

“So do I,” said Harry, tears rolling down his cheeks. Blanche too was crying, though softly, and Ethel’s eyes were full of tears. But she tried to be cheerful and brave.

“We’ll make haste to bed and to sleep, and in the morning we’ll all feel better,” she said, trying to speak cheerfully. “Blanche and I will undress you little ones, then get undressed ourselves, and soon we’ll all be in bed.”

And so they were, Ethel last of all; the other three were asleep when at last her weary little head was laid upon its pillow. Her young heart was sad and sore, for it seemed a cheerless sort of home they had come to – oh, so different from that which had been theirs but a few short months before, with the dear parents whom she would see never again upon earth. With that thought in her mind she wept herself to sleep.

CHAPTER VII

In the meantime Mr. and Mrs. Coote were in the dining room, partaking of a much more elaborate meal than had been given to their young charges.

“Well, what do you think of them?” queried Coote, stirring and tasting his tea, then reaching for the sugar bowl and helping himself to another spoonful of its contents.

“I can tell more about that when I’ve had time to make their acquaintance,” she answered dryly.

“The boy’s an impudent little rascal,” remarked her husband, reddening with anger as he spoke; then, in reply to her enquiring look, he went on to tell the story of the candy.

She listened in silence and with a look of growing contempt.

“Well, have you nothing to say?” he at length demanded in an irate tone.

“Nothing, except that if I was a man – or called myself one – I’d be a little above robbing such a mite of a child of his sweets.”

“No; in your great kindness of heart you’d prefer to let him make himself sick eating them,” he retorted in a sarcastic tone.

“I think I’d as lief risk it for him as for myself,” she returned significantly; “specially as the stuff had been given by the uncle to them, not to me.”

“Young children haven’t the same digestive powers that a hearty grown person has,” he said rather angrily, “and I maintain that it was neither more nor less than an act of kindness to make away with some of the dangerous stuff by eating it myself.” A slight, scornful laugh was the wife’s only reply; then she began questioning him with regard to the amount to be paid them for the board, care, and education of the children. She was well pleased with his reply, for the terms offered by the uncles were liberal.

“They being so young, of course most of the care and labor will fall to your share, my dear,” remarked Coote suavely.

“Oh, of course! when was it otherwise with any of your undertakings?” she asked with withering sarcasm.

“Well, that’s exactly what you should do. What was Eve made for but to be Adam’s helpmeet?” he returned with an unpleasant laugh.

“Yes, a helpmeet, and that implies that he was to do his share. However, I expect and intend to do more than mine for these little orphans. They shall not be neglected if I can help it, and I’ll keep them out of your way as much as I can; for their sakes as well as yours. They shall have their meals and be out of the way before we take ours. I’ll not pamper them, but they shall have abundance of good, wholesome victuals. They shall be kept clean and neat too, comfortably dressed according to the weather, though I shall not pay much attention to finery and fashion. I don’t expect to pet and fondle them – I haven’t any of that motherly instinct – and I intend to bring them up to be neat and orderly, but they shall have their plays and fun too, for children need it; they can have their games in the garden in pleasant weather and in their own room when it storms.”

“Very well; you may do as you like,” he returned graciously. “I’m particularly pleased to hear that they are to be kept out of my way. Children are troublesome animals in my estimation; so the less I’m obliged to see of them the better.”

“It’s something to be thankful for that we’ve never had any of our own,” she returned dryly. “Better for them and better for us.”

Mrs. Coote had several domestic duties to attend to after the conclusion of the meal, and the children had been in bed fully an hour before she re-entered their room. She was careful to make no noise as she opened the door, came softly in, and lighted the gas.

Harry's breathing told that he was sleeping soundly. So were Blanche and Nannette. Ethel too slumbered, but with tears upon her pillow and her cheek, while at intervals her young bosom heaved with a long-drawn, sobbing sigh.

An emotion of pity stirred in the heart of the stern, cold-mannered woman as she looked and listened.

"Poor little thing! I dare say she misses her dead father and mother," she sighed to herself as she turned away, "and she seems to try her prettiest to supply a mother's place to the younger ones. I don't believe I'll have any trouble with her, unless on account of the rest; but I'll do my duty by them all."

The unpacking of the children's trunk and re-arranging its contents in closet and drawers took but a few minutes, for Mrs. Coote was a rapid and energetic worker, a quiet one also, and the children slept on while she finished what she had come to do, then turned off the gas and went out, softly closing the door after her.

It was broad daylight when Ethel woke amid her new and strange surroundings, for a moment forgetting where she was. But only for a moment, then memory recalled the events of yesterday, and she knew that she and her little sisters and brother were strangers in a strange place.

Her little heart grew heavy with the thought; then recalling the teachings of her departed mother and Mrs. McDougal, that God, her Heavenly Father, was everywhere present, as near to her in one place as in another, and ever ready to hear the cry for help, even from a little child, she slipped from the bed to the floor and, kneeling there, poured into His ear all her sorrows, fears, and desires; asking for help to be good, to do right always, and to know how to comfort and care for Nannette, Harry, and Blanche.

Having thus rolled her burden on the Lord she felt stronger and happier, and rising from her knees made haste with the duties of the toilet, then helped the others, who were now awake also, with theirs. She had just finished when the door opened and Mrs. Coote looked in.

"Ah, so you are all up, washed and dressed, I see," she remarked in a pleased tone. "That is right; and now you may come down to your breakfast."

With that she led the way, the children following.

They found hot baked potatoes, bread, butter, and milk awaiting them; all excellent of their kind, and they ate with relish.

"Don't you eat breakfast, ma'am?" asked Harry innocently.

"Of course," replied Mrs. Coote. "I had my breakfast along with my husband half an hour ago or more. Grown folks should always be served first, children afterward."

"Mamma and papa didn't do that way," remarked Harry, "cept when papa was too sick to come to the table."

"But I like it best," said Blanche, with a timid glance at the stern face of Mrs. Coote.

"It's all the same to me whether you do or not," she returned in an icy tone. "I'm the one to decide what is best, and it's not my way to consult children's fancies. Now be quiet, all of you; don't waste time in talk or you'll not be ready for prayers when Mr. Coote comes in."

After prayers Ethel was directed to put their outdoor garments upon her little brother and sisters and take them out to play in the yard, while she put in order the room they had occupied and made the beds. She obeyed promptly.

"Oh, children, don't for the world do any mischief," she said anxiously, when she had led them out and taken a hasty survey of their surroundings, "for you'd be sure to get punished for it, and that would 'most break my heart. Don't go on the grass either till the sun dries up the dew, or you'll be sick, and oh, dear! what could I do for you then? And there's nobody here to be good to any of us."

"Don't be afraid, Ethel, we'll be good," said Blanche, "we won't get our feet wet and we won't meddle with the flowers or anything."

The other two made the same promise, and Ethel hurried back to the house, for Mrs. Coote's sharp voice was calling her in impatient tones.

"You'll have to learn to be quicker in your movements," she said as the little girl reached her side. "Come right upstairs now, and I'll show you how to make the beds properly and put the room to rights."

"Yes, ma'am," replied Ethel meekly, and at once set to work, doing her best to follow directions.

"Now notice and remember exactly how I want you to do everything, so that after this you can do it all without instruction or help," said Mrs. Coote, adding: "you're none too young to learn to make yourself useful, and just as like as not you'll have to earn your own living all your days."

"Yes, ma'am, I mean to learn all I can," returned the little girl meekly, then sighed to herself: "Oh, if we could find our dear, kind grandma and grandpa, they would take care of us all, and have me learning lessons, 'stead of doing house-work while I'm such a little girl."

Mrs. Coote was very neat and particular and required everything done exactly in what she deemed the best manner, but when all was finished – the floor carefully swept, the beds made, the furniture dusted, she spoke a few words of praise which sounded very pleasant in Ethel's ears.

"Now," she added, "you can go out and play with the others. I approve of play for children when work's done, for – as the saying is – 'all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.' I don't mean to be hard on you or the younger ones, and we won't begin lessons till next week."

"Thank you, ma'am; you're very kind, and I'll try not to give you any trouble," returned Ethel gratefully. "I think I can make the bed and tidy the room by myself another time."

"I daresay, for you seem a bright, capable child," was the not ungracious rejoinder.

The ice of Mrs. Coote's manner seemed to be thawing under the influence of Ethel's patient efforts to please and to make herself useful.

Ethel hastened out into the grounds in search of her brother and sisters, for she had been feeling anxious about them, lest, without her care and oversight, they should get into mischief, or in some way incur the displeasure of Mrs. Coote.

They were all three at the dividing fence between the parsonage yard and that of the next neighbor. A prettily dressed and attractive looking little girl, about the age of Nannette, stood near by on the other side of the fence, and the four seemed to be making acquaintance.

"What oo name, little girl?" Nannette was asking as Ethel drew near.

"I'se Mary Keith. What all of you names?"

"I'se Nan, an' dis is Blanche nex' to me," was the reply.

"And I'm Harry, and here comes Ethel, our big sister," announced the little boy. "What made you stay away so long, Ethel?"

"I had to do some work. I've just finished," she answered; "but now I have leave to stay with you till we're called to our dinner."

Two ladies seated on the porch overlooking that part of the grounds were watching the little ones with interest.

"Who are they? I never saw any children there before; did you, Flora?" asked the elder one.

"No, mother, but Mrs. Coote's girl told ours that they are some orphan little ones whom the Cootes have taken to bring up. Poor little dears, they are very young to be both fatherless and motherless!"

"Yes, indeed! and they are very attractive looking children, too."

"So they are, and my heart aches for them, for there is nothing motherly in Mrs. Coote's looks or ways – nothing the least fatherly about him."

"Indeed, no! though he might perhaps have been different if they had been blessed with children of their own."

"Ah, Hannah is baking ginger snaps! How good they smell! Mary and her little new friends must have some;" and with the words Mrs. Keith rose and went into the house.

She returned presently with a heaping plateful, which she handed first to her mother Mrs. Weston, then carried out to the garden where she bestowed a liberal supply upon little Mary and her new friends. Mary introduced them.

“Mamma, dis little dirl is Nan; de boy is named Harry; he is Nan’s bruver, and dose big dirls is Ethel and Blanche; dey’s Nan’s and Harry’s big sisters.”

“Not so very big, I think,” said Mrs. Keith, smiling kindly upon them. “Where are you from, my dear?” addressing Ethel. “And have you come to stay here with Mr. and Mrs. Coote?”

“Yes, ma’am,” answered Ethel as clearly as she could speak, in spite of the lump rising in her throat; “our uncles in Philadelphia sent us here to be taught. They didn’t say for how long, but Mr. Coote told me we are to stay till we grow big enough to take care of ourselves.”

“Well, dear, I hope you will be happy and prove pleasant playfellows for my little Mary,” returned the lady kindly. “If you are the good children I take you for, I should be glad to have you with her a good deal, because it will be pleasant for her, and you, too, I hope.”

“Yes, ma’am,” replied Ethel, dropping a little courtesy, “thank you. It will be very pleasant for us, I’m sure, for she seems a dear little girl; so we will come sometimes, if Mrs. Coote will let us.”

“Mayn’t dey tum in now, mamma?” pleaded little Mary.

“Certainly, if Mrs. Coote says they may,” replied her mother; then seeing Mrs. Coote near at hand she called to her and preferred the request.

“It’s no matter to me if you like to be bothered with them,” was the almost surly rejoinder. “To my way of thinking children are little else than a torment and pest, and I’m willing enough to have them out of my way if I know they’re safe.”

“As I think you may be pretty sure they will be with us,” returned Mrs. Keith in a slightly indignant tone, and with a glance of pity directed toward the young strangers. “Poor little orphans!” she added in a lower tone, “it will be really a pleasure to me if I can put some brightness into their lives.”

The next two hours passed very delightfully to the little Eldons, playing with their young hostess about the garden and in the porch of her father’s house, and making acquaintances with her mother, grandmother, and baby sister, her dollies and other toys, of which she possessed a goodly number.

In a kindly, sympathizing way Mrs. Weston questioned Ethel about her parents and her former home, and she was both greatly interested and much moved by the pathetic story told with the artless simplicity of a young and trustful child.

“My dear little girl,” she said, softly stroking Ethel’s hair when the tale had all been told, “truly I feel for you. It was a sad thing, indeed, to part so early from your dear parents, but God our Heavenly Father knows what is best for us, and loves His children more than any earthly parents can. The Bible tells us that He is a Father of the fatherless, and He can never die, will never leave nor forsake those who put their trust in Him. Go to Him with all your sorrows, all your troubles and trials, and He will be sure to hear and help you.”

Ethel listened with tears in her eyes. “I will, ma’am,” she said; “I do tell Him all my troubles and my little brother’s and sisters’ troubles, too, and ask Him to help us, and I’m sure He does. But oh, ma’am, why did He take away our dear father and mother while we are so little and need them so badly?”

“Perhaps to teach you to keep very near to Him, loving and trusting Him instead of any earthly creature,” the lady answered tenderly. “It is a grand lesson to learn; one that will make you better and happier all the days of your life. Jesus said to Peter, ‘What I do thou knowest not now, but shalt know hereafter’; and I think he is saying the same to you, dear child. When we get home to heaven we shall see and know just why all our trials were sent us – just how necessary they were and that our kind, wise Heavenly Father sent each one for our good.”

“Yes, ma’am,” returned the little girl thoughtfully, “I will try to remember it all and to be very patient and good.”

CHAPTER VIII

Mrs. Weston had hardly finished what she was saying to Ethel when Mrs. Coote's harsh voice was heard summoning her young charges to their dinner. They hastened to obey, quite as much for fear that any delay would anger the woman and bring dire consequences upon themselves, as from a desire to satisfy their appetites.

The meal, like those that had preceded it, was plain but palatable, and the healthy little folks found it enjoyable.

"Now go out to your plays again," was Mrs. Coote's order when they had finished; "this is Saturday and I'm very busy, a great deal too busy to be tormented with a pack of children; so don't venture to come in again till you're called."

"Let's go back to that other house," proposed Harry, when they had obeyed the order and were out upon the gravel walk leading to the front gate.

"Oh, no!" said Ethel, "don't you remember that our mamma used to tell us not to go too often to any of our neighbors' houses, because we would make them tired of us? There was a Bible text she used to repeat about it: 'Withdraw thy foot from thy neighbor's house lest he be weary of thee, and so hate thee.' We want them to love us and feel glad to see us when we go there; so we won't go very often when we're not invited. The grass is dry now on this side of the yard and we can have a nice time playing here together."

"Oh, yes," said Blanche, "we can play 'Pussy wants a corner.' That's good fun and we'll be careful not to run too hard and do mischief."

"And not to make too much noise," added Ethel; "we mustn't shout or laugh too loud, lest we vex Mrs. Coote."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Harry, "I do like to make a noise. I guess all boys do, and I do wish we didn't have to live where the folks want us to be quiet all the time."

"But we can't help it, Harry," sighed Ethel, "we will just have to try to be quiet and good all the time."

"Me will," assented Nannette; "I is doin' to be very dood."

"So'll I," said Harry, "but I don't like it a single bit."

They played several games; then Nannette began to cry. She was tired and sleepy. Mrs. Coote heard her, came to the door, and understanding what was the matter, bade Ethel take her little sister up to their own room and lay her on the bed.

"And when she wakes up," added Mrs. Coote, "it will be time for you all to have your Saturday bath; for everybody must be particularly clean for Sunday."

"Yes, ma'am," returned Ethel, "our own mamma always had us bathed on Saturday."

"In which she showed her sense," said Mrs. Coote. "Now hurry up to your room every one of you, and see if you can keep quiet there. You may as well all take a nap, for you have nothing better to do."

"There, there, don't cry, Nan dear; we'll soon get up to the top of these stairs and into our room," Ethel said in soothing tones, doing her utmost to help her baby sister in the weary task of climbing the rather steep flight of stairs that led to that desired haven.

"I so tired," sobbed Nan.

"Yes, dear; and these stairs are high for your poor little legs. But never mind; we're most up now. Ah, here we are, and you shall lie down and have oh! such a good sleep, with Blanche on one side and me on the other and Harry on his own bed over there in the corner."

Nothing loth, the baby girl cuddled down on the bed; the others climbed into their places, and tired with their play the whole four were presently sleeping soundly.

The nap was followed by the promised bath, that by their supper, and directly upon leaving the table they were sent to bed.

They were taken to Sunday-school the next morning, then brought back to the house and ordered to stay within doors until the return of Mr. and Mrs. Coote from church, the latter remarking that she had no intention of being bothered with other people's children, and directing Ethel to teach some Bible texts to the younger ones and commit to memory several verses herself, all to be recited to Mr. Coote in the afternoon.

Ethel felt dismayed, for it would be a new thing for Harry and especially so for baby Nan, of whom nothing in the form of lessons had ever yet been required.

"I'll try, ma'am," she said, "but please don't be hard with them if they can't say a verse perfectly, for they've never had to learn lessons before, except to say their A B Cs."

"High time for them to begin then," was the curt rejoinder. "Now mind what I say and do exactly as you're told, or you'll wish you had when Mr. Coote gets hold of you." With that she walked away, Ethel looking after her with frightened eyes.

"O Blanche, whatever shall we do?" she exclaimed tearfully. "I'm afraid Nan can't learn a verse."

"Oh, yes, Ethel, she can; so don't you cry," returned Blanche, putting her arms round Ethel's neck and giving her a kiss. "Don't you remember that little one that's just two words? 'Jesus wept.' Nan can learn that I'm sure; so can Harry."

"Course I can," said Harry, straightening himself proudly. "I'm not a baby, I know that verse now: 'Jesus wept.' But, say, why did He do that, Ethel? what was He so sorry about?"

"Because Lazarus, the man He loved, was dead and his sisters, Mary and Martha, were so full of grief. He loved them, too, and was sorry for them."

"Tell us the story 'bout it, Ethel," requested the little fellow.

Ethel complied, and then he and Nan repeated over and over the short verse, "Jesus wept."

"Now we must learn ours, Blanche," said Ethel.

"I've thought of one that mamma used to teach us," returned Blanche: "I love them that love me; and those that seek me early shall find me."

"Yes, I remember that mamma taught us that, and that she said they were God's own words. Let's all love Him and He will love us and care for us even if nobody in all this world does. I've thought of a verse too: 'Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not; for of such is the kingdom of heaven.' Mamma said they were Jesus' own words and they meant that I might pray to Him, telling Him all my joys and all my troubles, and He would listen even more lovingly than she did when I told them to her, and would give me strength to bear them or help me out of them. Oh, I have often been so glad, since dear mamma and papa went away to heaven, so glad to know that; and I have told my troubles to Jesus and I'm sure He has heard me and helped me to bear them, and that He will help me, and everybody that tries it, to bear every trouble and trial He sends."

"But what for does He send troubles and trials?" asked Blanche. "I should think if He loves us so much He wouldn't let us have any at all."

"I remember I asked mamma that once," replied Ethel thoughtfully, "and she said it was to make us good and to keep us from loving this world too well; just as she sometimes punished us to make us good, because to be good is the only way to be happy; and she taught me this verse, 'As many as I love I rebuke and chasten; be zealous therefore and repent.' Oh," added the little girl, with a burst of tears, "if we only had mamma now to help us to be good!"

"She and papa have gone to be with God, you know, Ethel, and don't you believe they ask Him to help us to be good?" asked Blanche, tears shining in her eyes also.

"Yes, yes, indeed!" returned Ethel, "and it makes me so glad to think of that."

"O Ethel, you have to say more than one verse, haven't you?" asked Blanche.

"Oh, yes, so I have. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved,' is another one that mamma taught me. I'll say it. Such a sweet verse, isn't it?"

“Yes, indeed,” returned Blanche.

“Saved from what, Ethel?” asked Harry. “I don’t want to live here with these horrid folks. I wish He’d saved us from that.”

“But it would be a great deal worse to live in that dreadful place where the devil and his angels are,” said Ethel with grave earnestness; “and that’s what mamma said Jesus would save us from; that and the love of sin. Oh, now I remember some verses she taught me about heaven: ‘And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain; for the former things are passed away.’ Oh, just think, children! never a headache, or backache, or heartache, or hurt feelings, or any sort of pain or ache, but always to feel bright and happy and well. And that’s where papa and mamma are – well and glad all the time.”

“O Ethel, how delightful!” exclaimed Blanche. “And then oughtn’t we to be glad for them?”

“Yes, indeed! though we can’t help being sorry for ourselves and each other, because we must do without them till we get there too.”

Jane, the servant girl, opened the door and looked in at that moment. “Come, you young uns, and eat your dinners,” she said. “You’s to eat fust this time ’fore de folks gits home from church.”

The children obeyed right willingly, but were disappointed to find only the usual plain fare.

“I ’spected a nice dinner to-day,” grumbled Harry; “chicken or birds, and mashed potatoes and cranberries and good pie and cake.”

“O Harry, dear, hush, hush!” Ethel said warningly, but half under her breath. “I’m afraid you’ll get beaten or starved if – if they should find out that you talked so.”

“Oh, it’s too hard!” sighed Blanche. “I didn’t want to stay with that hateful, cross old Aunt Sarah though.”

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