

GASKELL CATHERINE MILNES

SPRING IN A SHROPSHIRE
ABBNEY

Catherine Gaskell

Spring in a Shropshire Abbey

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Lady Catherine Henrietta Wallop Milnes Gaskell Spring in a Shropshire Abbey

CHAPTER I JANUARY

Here, winter holds his unrejoicing court,
And through his airy hall the loud misrule
Of driving tempest is for ever heard.

Thomson's Seasons.

It was a dark, dismal day. Thick black clouds hung across the sky. There was a faint chirping of sparrows amongst the lifeless creepers, and that was all. A roaring fire burnt in my grate; before which my dog, a great tawny creature of the boarhound breed, lay sleeping at her ease. It was cold, very cold; in all nature there seemed no life. A white, thick covering rested upon the ground. Snow had fallen heavily the last week of the old year, and much, I feared, must fall again, judging by the yellowish grey, leaden pall I saw overhead.

I lay in bed; the doctor had just been, and had prescribed for me a day of rest, and a day in the house, on account of a chill caught the week before.

How immortal we should feel, I reflected, if it were not for influenza, colds, and rheumatism, and such like small deer amongst diseases. What a glory life would be in their absence! Alas! we poor mortals, we spend much time in trivial illness; not maladies of the heroic and grand mediæval school, such as the Black Death or the sweating sickness, but in weary, long episodes of chills, and colds, which make us feel ill, and low, and produce irritability and heart-searchings. It is sad also to think how many days slip by for all of us in the English winter – unloved and dreary days of twilight, and of little pleasure unless taken rightly and softened by letters to, and from old friends, and by hours spent with favourite books.

Yet each cloud has its silver lining, if we have but eyes to see; and as an old cottager once said to me, “Yer might do worse than be in bed when Mother Shipton plucks her geese.” Yes, I reflected, I might be worse, and I looked round my Norman-windowed chamber – for to-day should be spent with my books.

Life to a woman, as has been justly said, is a series of interrupted sentences; and in these days of hurry and scurry, life seems almost more interrupted than it did to our mothers twenty years ago, and leisure, of all delightful things, is the most delightful, the rarest and the most difficult to obtain. Leisure with thought is a necessity for mental development, and yet in these days of motor-driving, flying-machines, and radium we only think of getting on – getting on – but where?

I lay back comfortably and looked with pleasure at the pile of books by my bedside. They were all dear, tried, and trusted friends. There was Malory. How I love his pictures of forest and castle, and his battles, while his last scenes of Launcelot and Arthur, are almost the greatest, and grandest that I know.

FLOWERS FROM THE SOUTH

How pathetic they are! and yet how simple, instinct with living poetry, and noble passion! Then I saw my much-worn Shakespeare, and I looked forward to a dip in *The Tempest*, and later on meant to refresh my mind with the story of the ill-fated Duke of Buckingham, who was betrayed near here by his treacherous steward, Banister. I looked round and saw other friends close to hand. Amiel's beautiful story of a noble life, teeming with highest thought; "Gerontius' Dream," by England's great poet and ecclesiastic; Tennyson's "Idylls of the King;" and a few of Montaigne's admirable essays, "that charming old man" of whom, Madame de Sévigné wrote, "it was impossible to weary, for, old friend as he was, he seemed always so fresh and new." I shall never be dull, I said with a laugh, and I shall live in fairy-land with my dogs and my poets. "You might do worse than lie in bed, as my old friend said," I repeated to myself; and I realized that even for days spent in bed there were compensations. Just as I was preparing to stretch out my arm and take a volume of Amiel, there came a loud knock at the door, and my daughter, a child of seven, ran in with the news —

"Oh, mama, here is a box of flowers for you, and they have come all the way from France; I know it, for Célestine said so."

"Flowers," I cried; "how delightful!" On hearing me speak, the big dog jumped up with a friendly growl, and insisted upon standing up with her forepaws on the bed and inspecting the flowers.

"See!" cried Bess, "carnations and roses. Now, why can't we always have carnations and roses? Miss Weldon says there is a time for everything; but I'm sure there's never half time enough for flowers and play."

"Perhaps not, Bess," I said. "But the snow and the frost make us long for and love the flowers all the more, and if you did no lessons you wouldn't enjoy your playtime half as much as you do now."

Bess laughed contemptuously; she is a somewhat modern child, and has no time to look "ahead," as she calls it, nor any belief in the glories of adversity. Gravely she seated herself on my bed and enunciated the following sentences —

"Mama," she said in her clear bird-like voice, "I worry a little about something every day."

"No, not really, dear," I answered, rather horrified at this unusual display of gravity on her part. And I began to fear that there had been too many lessons of late, and had a terrible vision of over-pressure and undue precocity, as I took the little thing's hand and said, "Tell me, what is it?" Whereupon Bess replied solemnly, her eyes looking into space —

"I worry about something every day, and that is, wasting so much good time on lessons, when I might be quite happy, and do nothing but play."

"But, my dear," I began, "if it was all play, how would you ever learn to read or to write? And when you grew up and got quite big, you wouldn't like to be quite ignorant and to know nothing, would you?"

"I should know as much as I ought," replied Bess, sturdily.

"No, dear, you wouldn't," I said. "You couldn't talk as a lady, you wouldn't know any history or geography, or know how to speak French or German, or be able to read nice books, or do any of the things which are going to be very nice, but which perhaps are not very nice just at the beginning."

"I should know what Burbidge knows," replied Bess, stoutly; "besides which," she added, "dogs don't know French, and no dates, and yet papa doesn't call them ignorant." And then my little maid turned with a scarlet face, and feeling perhaps a little worsted in the argument said, "Mama, let me scurry off for your maid."

BESS ON EDUCATION

A moment later Bess returned in company with Célestine, my French maid. Célestine entered like a whirlwind; she was sure that “*Madame se fatigue.*” “With one cold in de head un repos absolu is necessary,” she declared. However, when she saw the flowers, and I explained that they came from “*la belle France,*” she affirmed “*que tout allait bien,*” and was mollified. She brought me water and some vases, and Bess and I proceeded to sort out the beautiful Neapolitan violets and snip the ends of the rose and carnation stalks. “I like cutting,” cried Bess, eagerly. “It’s doing something, Burbidge says,” and just now the gardener is my little daughter’s hero, and Burbidge’s reasons for everything in her eyes rule the universe. I like to think of the poor stalks in water, I said; they are so thirsty, like poor tired men who have travelled over sandy deserts. Then I asked Célestine to hand me some water, and begged her to let it be tepid and to add a few drops of eau-de-Cologne in each glass.

“Madame will spoil the rose and the carnation, his own smell is all that is needed,” answered my waiting-woman severely. But I begged her to comply with my request, for I wanted my dear friend’s gifts to live in water as long as possible, and to revive quickly.

“Ah, they are charming,” I said, as Célestine and Bess triumphantly arranged the vases around my bed. They placed a bowl of roses on Oliver Cromwell’s cabinet, at least it was said to be his, a cabinet of rose and walnut wood which has innumerable secret drawers. What papers, I wondered, have lain there? Perhaps State papers from Master Secretary Milton, poet and minister; ambitious, aspiring letters from his wife; tear-stained appeals from Royalists; pretty notes from his best beloved daughter, gentle Mistress Claypole. Who knows? And that day it held my little pieces of jewelry, my fans, odds and ends of ribbon, shoes, bows, and collars, and on it, filling the air with sweet perfume, rested a bowl of January roses. How fragrant they were, carrying with them all the breath of summer. Roses are the sweetest of all flowers – the triumph of summer suns, and summer rains, at least so they seemed to me. Those that I gazed on were a selection of exquisite teas: pink, fawn, copper, and creamy white, all the various tints of dying suns were represented, as they stood in an old Caughley bowl; and then I looked at the carnations and buried my nose in their sweet aromatic scent – some of these were of absolute pearl grey, and make me think of the doves of St. Mark when they circle or alight in the Piazza of the City of Lagoons.

“That’s a beauty,” said Bess, authoritatively. “Why it’s the colour of Smokey.” Smokey is the nursery Persian cat. “I did not know, mama,” continued Bess, “that flowers was grey – I thought they was always red, white, or blue. Burbidge would call that a dust-bin blow.”

“Flowers are all colours – at least gardeners make them so,” I answered.

“Ah, madame forgets,” interrupted Célestine, who with Gallic vivacity always likes her share of the conversation, “there are no blue roses.”

“You are right,” I answered, “there are no blue roses; they are only the flowers of our imaginations, but they never fade,” and I laughed. I spoke in French, and this irritated Bess. Bess has a Shropshire nurse, Winifrede Milner, who has unfortunately an invincible objection to Célestine, in fact to foreigners of all kinds. It is a religion of hatred and objections, and creates continual disagreements in the household. Bess, owing to the nursery feud, sternly sets her face against everything foreign, and, above all, against speaking another tongue.

BESS DISLIKES FOREIGNERS

“I won’t jabber like Célestine when she talks,” she cried, “it sounds like shaking up a money-box, only no money comes out. Burbidge says ‘foreigners are like sparrows when a cat’s about. They talk when they’ve nothing to say, and go on when they’ve done.’”

“Oh, Bess, you must not be rude. If you were in France, you wouldn’t like to hear rude things said about England, or English people.”

“I shouldn’t mind,” replied Bess, sturdily, “because they wouldn’t be true. When things aren’t true, Miss Weldon says, you should rise above such considerations, and take no notice.”

To divert the child I asked her abruptly what she was going to do. “You must go out, Bess,” I said, “if the sun shines, and take poor Mouse.” Mouse looked at me reproachfully as I spoke – she understood my reference to outdoor exercise, but hated the idea of wetting her feet, besides which she considered going out with any one except me beneath her dignity. Of all boarhounds that I have ever known, mine is the most self-indulgent and the most self-satisfied of my acquaintance. Besides which, secretly I felt convinced she was hopeful of sharing my meals, and lying later on the bed when no one was looking.

“Old Mouse is no good,” retorted Bess, disdainfully. “She only follows grown-up people. If I lived in heaven,” she added dreamily, “I should have a real, live dog, that would walk with me, although I was only a child cherubim.”

“Well,” I pursued, “but what are you going to do?”

“Me?” inquired Bess, with small attention to grammatical niceties. “When I’ve done my lessons I shall go out with Burbidge. We are going to put up cocoa-nuts for tom-tits, and hang up some pieces of fat bacon for the starlings, besides which we are going to sweep round the sundial for the rooks. Papa said they were to be fed, and we are going to do it – Burbidge and me.”

“What will Miss Weldon do?” I asked.

“Oh, she will read,” with great contempt said Bess; “she reads, and never sees anything. Burbidge says that there are many who would know more if they read less.”

“See after my canaries,” I cried, as Bess flew off to finish her lessons, buoyed up with the hope later of going out with our old gardener. Outside I heard him, our faithful old retainer of some seventy years, tramping heavily on the red Ercal gravel. He was about to sweep a place by the sundial on which to feed my birds.

FEEDING THE BIRDS

Birds of all kinds come to this outside dining-hall – tom-tits, the beautiful little blue and green variety, perky and no larger than a wren; wrens with deep guttural bell-like notes and brown tails up-tilted; robins with flaming breasts; ill-bred, iridescent, chattering starlings; a few salmon-breasted chaffinches, the tamest of all wild birds; spotted thrushes, and raven-hued blackbirds; besides an army of grey sparrows, very tame, very cheeky, and very quarrelsome. Added to all these were the rooks, and a flight of grey-pated hungry jackdaws who uttered short sharp cries when they saw the corn and scraps of bread, but who dared not approach as near as the other and smaller birds.

Across my latticed windows dark shadows passed and repassed; they were caused by the jackdaws and the rooks who swept down at intervals, and carried off a big piece of bread when nobody was at hand. The old gardener fed this strange feathered crew, and then stood aside to see the fun. How the starlings jabbered and screamed, and what an ill-bred, ill-conditioned lot they were, as they all talked at once, screamed, scolded – vulgar, loud, noisy, common, and essentially of low origin.

A few of the Watch Tower pigeons swept down with a flutter of musical wings, and were about to fall upon the food, when crowds of jackdaws left the old stone tiled roof and dashed in for their share, uttering as they went their weird ghostly cry. For a moment the noise was chaotic – the pigeons cooed and strutted, the starlings screamed, and the jackdaws pressed greedily forward to seize and carry off all they could get. Suddenly there was a noise, hungry, passionate, furious, like an angry motor pressing forward in a race and bent on dealing death on all sides; and I saw the peacock dash forward, his tail up, and his neck outstretched. He fell upon the food and would allow none to partake of any, till he had had his fill. Behind him followed his three wives, but at a respectful distance; he

was not gallant like a barndoor cock, in fact he was much too fine a fellow to think of any one but himself. His tail feathers were not yet quite perfect, and they seemed swathed in places in silver paper, but his neck was glorious, of a brilliant blue with shimmers of golden reflections, and of a colour that has no equal. He had a viperish head, and was gloriously beautiful, and morally, a collection of all the vices – greedy, spiteful, and furiously ill-tempered. He slew, last spring, a whole clutch of young “widdies,” as the country people call ducklings, and killed, in a fit of anger, two of his own chicks. Burbidge dislikes him on account of the damage he does in a garden, but respects him for his beauty.

“He is like an army of ‘blows’” (blossoms), he says, “and creates more damage than a tempest at harvest time, does old Adam.”

Mouse, whilst I was watching the scene outside through the long lancet window, seized upon her opportunity and leapt up upon the bed.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” I said feebly. “I am sure the fire was nice enough, even for a dog.” But Mouse thought differently; she turned round in a distracting, disagreeable way, some three or four times, as wild dogs are said to do in the prairies, on the bed – my bed, and then flumped down heavily across my feet. I wriggled uneasily, but Mouse had gained her point and had no feelings for my discomfort; she rested upon the bed, which to every well-constituted dog-mind is a great achievement, almost an acknowledgment of sovereignty. There she would lie, I knew, until some divertisement could be suggested that would appeal to her palate, or some suggestion of danger outside. For Mouse is greedy and lazy, but faithful as most dogs are, and few human beings. I dared not slap or speak rudely, for great Danes are gifted with acute sensibilities; and if I were to be so ill-judged as to express displeasure by an unpleasant gesture, she would remain broken-hearted and aggrieved for the rest of the day.

Alas! for the liberty of the subject. I groaned for folks who indulge their dogs in caprice and greed, but I had not the courage to fight for myself and so had to suffer. There is really much to be urged in favour of the fortunate people who are dog-less.

A GARDEN OF EDEN

I turned my head and looked with delight at my flowers. While I gazed, my mind flew back, and away to the land of sunshine from whence they came. I thought of sunny Mentone with its blue sky, and glittering groves of oranges and lemons that hung in the sunlight like balls of fire and light; of Cap St. Martin stretching seaward, and, above all, of the beautiful garden of La Mortola that I visited several times when I stayed at the Bellevue. How wonderfully exquisite that garden was, running down to the turquoise sea, a perfect fairy-land of delight – the old villa, once a mediæval palace, in the centre, with its well, with its marble floors, its cypress groves and fir pines, its sheets of brilliant anemones, its agaves and aloes, and its cacti.

It made me think of the garden of Eden before the Fall, that garden of La Mortola – it seemed hardly a real place, so beautiful was it; and its thirty maidens that weeded the paths and watered the blossoms, seemed scarcely more real.

How well I remembered walking round the garden, with the kind and courteous owner of this land of enchantment; how he showed us all his rare and strange plants, plants from all parts of the world, old and new. There were many varieties of oranges and lemons, and the air, as we walked in the golden light of a March day, was laden with the entrancing sweetness of the *Pittosporum*. But above all, what interested me most in the Enchanted Land was the old Roman road, which runs just above the kitchen garden, and below the flower garden. Here, it is recorded on a tablet let into the wall, is the place where Napoleon and his victorious army passed into Italy. It is a narrow little path on which the whole of the French army passed, with scarcely room for two men to ride abreast. Below lay the sea like a lake, of that wonderful delicate blue that is only to be seen in Mediterranean waters, tideless and brilliant, and beyond were the purple coasts of Corsica.

I remembered at the end of my first visit my kind host asking me amongst his rare and beautiful flowers, what I had most admired? I replied, the sheets of violets, but violets as it is impossible to imagine in chilly England, sheets of purple, unhidden by leaves, and gorgeous in their amethystine glory – violets growing in great beds many yards long in the middle of the garden, like mantles of purple. They were a glorious vision, a sight of beauty that I shall never forget, a revelation of colour. As I looked at the bunches that my friend had sent, I thought of those exquisite perfumed *parterres*, of the song of the blackcaps amongst the olives, of the golden sunlight, and of the radiant beauty of sea and sky. Yes, the garden of La Mortola was wonderfully, marvellously beautiful, and it even then seemed to me doubly beautiful, seeing it as I did in my mental vision, across sheets of snow and in the grim atmosphere of an English winter.

What a true joy beautiful memories are! the real jewels of the soul that no robber can steal, and that no moth or rust can corrupt, the great education of sense and heart. Then I took my books and enjoyed a browse. What a good thing leisure is, leisure to read and think. Nobody interrupted me, only the chimes of the old parish church told me the hour from time to time.

With measured cadence, drowsily and melodiously they sounded across the snow-bound earth. “Time to dream, time to dream,” they seemed to say.

Later on came my luncheon, cutlets with onion chips and jelly. Mouse got the bones. She was polite enough to leap off the bed and to crack them on the floor – and I was grateful for small mercies. A minute afterwards, and I rang my hand-bell, and Célestine scurried down.

“Madame a froid, madame est malade,” and in her impetuous Gallic way, waited for no reply. However, when I could make myself heard, I told her that I meant to get up, as my friend was coming down from the Red House to embroider with me.

THE GREAT CURTAINS

When my toilet was completed, I begged Célestine to bring my big basket from the chapel hall below, and the curtain that I was engaged in embroidering for my oratory. The background is of yellow linen and is thickly covered with fourteenth and fifteenth century birds, beasts, and flowers, and in the centre of each there is an angel.

Each curtain is three yards four inches, by two yards four inches. The birds, beasts, and flowers are all finely shaded and are worked in crewels, tapestry wools divided, in darning and fine Berlin wools, and all these various sorts seem to harmonize and mingle wonderfully well together.

The picture, for it really is a picture, was drawn out for me by a very skilful draughtsman. The birds, beasts, and angels have been taken from old Italian work, from mediæval stained-glass windows, and from old missals, and then drawn out to scale. There are Tudor roses, Italian carnations, sprays of shadowy love-in-the-mist, dusky wallflowers, and delightful half-heraldic birds and beasts, running up and hanging down the stems. It is a great work. Constance, who is good enough to admire it, says that she is sure that the Water-poet would have said, if he could have seen it —

“Flowers, plants and fishes, beasts, birds, flies and bees,
Hills, dales, plains, pastures, skies, seas, rivers, trees:
There’s nothing near at hand or farthest sought
But with the needle may be shaped and wrought.
Moreover, posies rare and anagrams,
Art’s life included, within Nature’s bounds.”

There are four curtains to do, and alas, I have only one pair of hands!

I keep all carefully covered up with old damask napkins as I go along, so that neither ground nor work can get rubbed or soiled, and embroider, myself, in what my old housekeeper calls pie-crust sleeves, to save the slightest friction from my dress on the yellow linen.

As to the cherubim's and seraphim's wings, they have been my great and constant delight. I dreamt of a wild glory of colour which I hardly dared to realize, but of which I found wonderful examples one sunny day in the macaw grove at the Zoo. I went up and down and inspected the marvellous birds for an hour, drinking in with rapture the extraordinary richness of their plumage. How marvellous they were! Red, blue, mauve, green, scarlet, rose, and yellow, all pure unsullied colours, and like flashes of light. They seemed to me like a triumphant tune set to pealing chords. There seemed in those glorious creatures to be no drawbacks, no shadows, no trivialities of daily life. In their resplendent feathers they appeared to gather light and to reproduce the majesty of the sun itself.

THE JOY OF COLOUR

I went home, my eyes almost dazzled with their radiancy, and a week after attempted to work into my curtain something of what I had seen – a feeble reflection, I fear, but still a reflection. In my angels and cherubim I have allowed no greys or browns, no twilight shades. Everywhere I have introduced a pure warm note of intense joyous colour, and if I have not always succeeded, at least the wings of my celestial beings have been a great source of delight to imagine, and to execute. In my colouring it has been always morning. Bess was charmed to run and fetch me the different wools needed – “Summer suns,” she called them.

I have often noticed that to a young child, pure brilliant colours are an intense joy and a source of gaiety. It is only as the shades of the prison-house draw near, and press upon us, that the lack of appreciation creeps in for what to children and to primitive man is a great and constant glory. That day I was going to embroider some anemones, such as I remembered in the old market-place of Mentone, and a sprig of stocks, such as I recollected once having seen on a drive to Brigg. The eye of the mind can be a great pleasure if properly cultivated. It may not be actually correct, but it can give the soul and the life of things remembered, even through the mist of years.

And now one word, dear sister-devotees of the needle, about embroidery. Do not imagine that shading in five or six shades of the same colour, which is the way that nine people out of ten work, is the true and natural one. This only produces a sad and wooden flower, without life or gladness, and conceived and worked amongst the shades of twilight. Take any flower and place it in the sunlight, and you will see in any purple flower, for instance, that there are not only different shades, but different colours – red, mauve, blue, lavender, and violet. I realized as I gazed at my anemone, that it must be embroidered in greyish lavenders, with here and there pure notes of violet with heather tints, in red purples, in greyish whites, and with a vivid apple-green centre. All these were strikingly different colours, but were necessary in the shading to make my blossom look as if it had grown amidst sunlight and shower.

I stood my bunch of real flowers in water in as strong a light as possible; as to the sunshine, alas! of that there was but a scanty supply, and I had to imagine that mostly, as also the scent of the orange groves and the thrilling song of the blackcaps overhead, for in our northern world, let it be written with sorrow, many and long are the dull leaden months between each summer. Still light did something, and imagination did the rest. I imagined myself back under the brilliant sky of southern France, and I thought I saw the bowls of brilliant flowers as I had known them, whilst I threaded my needle.

Suddenly Mouse slipped off the bed, and whined at the door. I understood her anxiety to run out, for I, too, had heard a tramp on the gravel path outside, and had seen the keeper Gregson go off towards the back-door laden with a string of rabbits, a plover or two, and a brace of partridges neatly fastened to a stick, as is the way of keepers.

MOUSE, POUR LE SPORT

The black retriever that was following Gregson is a dear friend of Mouse's. Once my dog went out shooting. In the cells of her brain that day has always remained a red letter day; I believe on this celebrated occasion she ran in, and did all that a sporting dog should not do, knocked down a beater who was endeavouring to lead "the great beast," fought a yellow retriever, but did find and successfully bring back, puffing and panting like a grampus, a wounded bird that had escaped keepers, beaters, and trained dogs.

"Her's like a great colt in the plough, but her has a beautiful nose," Gregson always declared, "and if so be her had been brought up proper, would have been an ornament to her profession."

The memory of this "jour de gloire," as Célestine called it, had never left my canine friend, and my gigantic watch-dog had ever since retained a devouring passion for field sports. To humour my dog, I opened the door, and Mouse disappeared, and swept by like a hurricane, ponderous and terrible, down the newel staircase heaving and whining with impatience. A second later and I saw her below greeting Gregson effusively.

Our old keeper was pleased at her welcome. "Good Mouse," I heard him call. And then I heard him cry out to our French cook, Auguste, "Mouse, she seems like a bobby off duty when she finds me. There's nature in the dog for all her lives in the drawing-room, lies on sofas and feeds on kickshaws." Auguste agreed, and then seeing the game, gesticulated and exclaimed, "Quelle chasse! C'est splendide, et vous –" A moment later I heard the door close, and Gregson disappeared into the old Abbey kitchen to smoke, doubtless, the pipe of peace, after partaking liberally of a certain game pie, that we had the day before at luncheon.

The voices grew faint, and I returned to my work. I threaded several needles with different colours, pricked them handy for use in a pincushion, and then began to copy my flowers on the table as deftly as I could, and awaited my friend.

It was very peaceful outside. All looked grey and cold, the snow lay white and pure, and the only note of colour was the glistening ivy. There was no sound, the starlings had vanished. Far away I saw a flock of rooks, dim specks against the leaden sky. I sat and embroidered in silence, when suddenly the calm of the winter afternoon was broken by the gay laughter of a child, and I discerned my Bess, chattering below with our old gardener Burbidge.

In one hand he carried a pole, whilst Bess had tightly clutched hold of the other. I opened my lattice window and inquired what they were about to do?

The reply came back from Burbidge that he and the gardeners were going to shake off the snow from the great yew hedge by the bowling-green. "The snow be like lead to my balls," said the old man, "and as to the peacock's tail, I fear it will damage the poor bird unless it be knocked off dangswang" – which is Burbidge's Shropshire way of saying "at once."

Burbidge always speaks of the yew peacock as the real bird, and of Adam, our blue-necked pet, as "him that plagues us in the garden."

Bess laughed with joy at the thought of so congenial an occupation.

"I shall help too," she cried, as she waved her hand to me, "for Ben" (the odd man) "has cut me a stick, and I am going to knock as well as anybody. I have done all my lessons, mamsie," she bawled. "I know enough for one day, and now I'm going to work, really work."

I kissed my hand, and Bess passed off the scene accompanied by a train of gardeners.

A COUNTRY BRINGING UP

Just before Bess was quite out of sight Célestine poked out her head from a top window above, and I heard her raise her voice to scold angrily but ineffectually. Célestine has an unfortunate habit

of giving unasked, her advice freely. Like a cat, she has a horror of getting wet, and has a rooted belief that *une petite fille bien élevée* should remain in, in bad weather, nurse her doll by the fire, or learn to make her dolly's clothes. I did not catch all that my maid said, but some of her stray words of indignation reached me. I heard that something was not *gentil*, and something else was *infâme*, and Bess in particular “*une petite fille impolie*.” In answer to this I caught a defiant laugh from Bess, and then Célestine banged down her window above.

I sat down and worked in silence. Bess is an only child – and will come to no harm under old Burbidge's care, I said to myself. In fact, she will learn under his tutorship many of the delightful things that make life worth having afterwards. She will so acquire the knowledge of the things that are seen, and not learnt by book; she will get to know the different notes of the birds, and to distinguish their eggs. She will hear from him the names of the hedge-row flowers, and learn where to find the rare ones, and know by country names all the sweet natural things that enable us to appreciate a long walk in the country, or a turn round our gardens. She will thus unconsciously learn to love simple wild things, and homely pleasures, and these will be for her stepping-stones to the higher education in the future.

Why is the society of old servants so delightful to children? I asked myself this question, as I asked it also of my little maid, a few weeks before, when she gave me her definition of a happy day – a day to be spent, if I remember rightly, in the company of Burbidge with Ben the odd boy, and in driving with Crawley, the Yorkshire coachman.

“I should like to be swung by Ben from the old walnut tree, to garden, and catch tadpoles with Burbidge, and to drive the old grey mare all by myself with Crawley.” And Bess added: “Then, mamsie, I should be quite happy; and mummie, do let it come true on my first holiday, or on my next birthday.” “If there could be no ‘don'ts,’” another time Bess told me, “I should be always good; and if I had no nurse, or governess, I should never be naughty.” I try to implant in Bess's mind that nurse and governess are her duties in life. She agrees but sadly, and like most modern people, poor child, wishes to get rid of life's duties as quickly as possible. “I never mean to be naughty,” Bess asserts, “but naughtiness comes to me like spoiling a frock, when I least expect it.” And she once added, “I know, mummy, if people didn't think me naughty I never should be.”

I pondered over these nursery problems as the work grew under my hands. How delicate and exquisite were all the shades of grey and lavender in the real flowers. I inspected my threaded needles, but I could not find amongst my crewels the necessary tints. I took a thread of tapestry wool, divided it carefully, and then turning to a box of Scotch fingering on cards, found exactly what was needed, a warm shade of heather. Embroidery is so much to me. It is part of my life, and flowers and birds when done recall thoughts and joys and pains, as scents are said to bring back the past to most people. A story is told of a French lady who, when they told her that her daughter-in-law did not like needlework, replied, “She is very young – she has never known real sorrow.”

A PLAYMATE FOR BESS

All of a sudden I dropped my work and started up, for all the dogs had begun to bark in chorus. I ran to the window. I heard the crunch of the gravel, and a minute later I saw a carriage drawn by a pair of greys stop before our old front door.

Out of the brougham there emerged the little figure of Harry, Colonel Stanley's only little boy and Bess's playmate. He was accompanied by his German governess, a fat, phlegmatic personage, *Fräulein Schliemann* by name. As she got out, I heard her say, “I have one letter to leave, most important,” and she stood waiting on the doorstep for Fremantle to show her into the house. In the selfsame moment, Harry, hearing voices in the rose garden, without a word, and nimble as a rabbit, darted through the wrought-iron gates and waved his hand to Bess. In a second Bess appeared, a

shower of snow upon her cap and amongst her locks, but redolent of health, and full of gaiety. “Is that you, Hals?” she cried, and the children dashed off to the end of the garden together.

Fräulein in the mean time discoursed with Fremantle and gave up her letter. All this I noticed from my room. Through my window I heard peals of laughter, and I saw Hals on the back of an under-gardener, pursued by Bess, who was engaged in throwing handfuls of snow at him.

Happily this spectacle was not witnessed by Fräulein Schliemann, for water and snow are always repellent to her, and incomprehensible as sources of pleasure or amusement. She heaved a big sigh and then, preceded by the butler, went into the old chapel hall and plumped her fat self down on an old oak chair. A quick knock at my door, and Fremantle brought me the letter. The note contained an invitation for Bess to go over and spend the following Saturday afternoon at Hawkmoor, Colonel Stanley’s country house, some six miles away. It would be little Harry’s birthday, I was told, and the diversions and amusements in his honour, were to be great, and varied.

Punch and Judy in the front hall, a conjuror, a magic-lantern, and later on a birthday cake, with lighted candles, as many as the years that little Hals (as Bess calls him) would have attained to.

“Do,” wrote my cousin, Venetia Stanley, “let little Bess be at Harry’s eighth birthday. I often feel my little lad is very lonely, and Bess’s presence would make his birthday a double joy.”

In a moment I had scribbled back an answer. Of course Bess must go, I wrote. Harry was a dear little boy, and being entertained and the art of entertaining are parts of the higher and necessary education of children. I carried down my note myself, and assured Fräulein of my delight in accepting so charming an invitation for my little girl.

Fräulein simpered, and I called for tea. At the Abbey there are no bells on the ground floor. Then I remembered the children, and turned to Fräulein and asked her if she knew where they were.

“Heinrich is with Bess,” I was told. About a quarter of an hour later, when a hissing urn was brought in, I begged Fremantle to ring my hand-bell, as a signal to the loiterers that tea was ready.

For some time this summons received no answer, but at last, breathless but blissful, the children appeared. But in what a plight! Heinrich’s deep red velvet suit was soaked and sadly soiled, and his cap and long flaxen curls dripped with moisture, whilst Bess’s garments were running with mud and wet, and as they both stood in the chapel hall, little pools of water guttered down beside them.

FRÄULEIN IS FURIOUS

Fräulein started up and screamed hysterically, and I darted forward. “My dears, how wet you are,” I cried. “You must go and change at once.” And without another word I hurried off both children to the nursery. It was an easy matter to put Bess into a fresh dry frock and into a clean white pinafore, but what could be done with Harry? I asked myself. He is a delicate child, and must not remain in damp clothes, so I turned to him resolutely, and asked, “Which will you do, Harry: get into one of Bess’ dresses, or go to bed?”

“Oh, auntie,” he answered, blushing furiously, for he always calls me “auntie,” although I am not his real aunt, “I would much rather go to bed than wear a girl’s dress.”

So we were about to put him into bed when a sudden brilliant idea flashed through my brain. “My husband’s dressing-gown,” I murmured. In a moment, kindly Fremantle, who heard me, had fetched it. It was yards too long, but it was turned up with an army of safety-pins, and so Hals’ vanity was not humiliated. At least he was clothed in male attire! And we must always remember that self-respect in a little lad is even more easily wounded than love.

Five minutes later both children were dry, and clad in other costumes. “I don’t think that they will be any the worse,” I said to my old nurse, Milner. But as I entered the chapel hall I noticed that Fräulein looked as black as thunder. In her eyes the episode was a most disagreeable, even a disgraceful occurrence.

Hals paused on the threshold for a moment and looked at me beseechingly out of his pretty, round, short-sighted eyes.

"I am so sorry," I said apologetically, and felt really for a second a transitory shame, Fräulein looked so fierce and injured. "How did it happen?" I asked of Bess, by way of lifting the leaden pall of silence.

"Only a rat hunt," answered that young lady, jauntily, with her mouth full of buttered toast, for she had not waited for grace, but had slipped into her seat at the head of the tea-table. "There was a rat," she continued to explain, "in the potting-shed, and Trump and Tartar smelt him out and ran after him, and Hals joined in and tumbled over. He shouldn't wear smart clothes when he comes here. Nobody wants him to. Gregson says, 'By gum, give me the varminty sort,'" and Bess laughed rather rudely, after which there was an awkward and prolonged pause.

"Hals is your guest," at last I said severely; upon which Bess turned scarlet, and a second later plied Hals with seed and sponge cake at once.

I had the velvet suit taken to the kitchen fire to dry, but I must honestly confess that its magnificence was, I feared, a thing of the past. While we sat on, Fremantle entered, and in his most irreproachable voice informed us that Mrs. Langdale (the housekeeper) was of opinion that Master Harry's suit would not be fit for him to wear again that day. At this Fräulein wrung her hands and broke out into ejaculations. "Mein Gott! mein Gott!" she cried, and began to scold Harry furiously.

At this, Bess could keep down her wrath no longer. With flashing eyes she confronted Hals' governess. "It was my fault, all my fault," she said. "I told Hals to run like mad, and not to miss the fun."

Fräulein did not deign to answer Bess' justification of her pupil, but glared at Hals; and we all remained on in silence, and I noted that poor little Hals had a white face, and that both slices of cake on his plate remained untouched.

FRIENDSHIP'S OFFER

"I will write and explain all to Mrs. Stanley," I said at last; "only," and here I turned to Harry, "you must go back in the dressing-gown, dear, and be wrapped up warmly in a rug. No colds must be caught, and the suit shall be sent back to-morrow."

Hals nodded his head. Whatever happened he was not going to cry; only girls and muffs cried, but he knew that there was a bad time coming, when he would have to face the music.

Bess watched his face. She was up in arms. Directly after grace was said, and this time by her in a jiffy, she flung herself off her chair, flew upstairs defiant, and breathless. A minute later she reappeared, her face crimson, but her mouth set.

"How much?" she asked of Fräulein, in a hostile spirit. "How much? I say, if I *pay*, you mayn't punish."

But here Hals dashed forward, and would not let Bess put her purse into his governess's hand. "Don't," he said; "boys can't take money from girls." And Bess was left stammering and confused, with her own sky-blue purse left in her little fat paw. I pretended not to see what had happened as I sat down and wrote a note to my friend, Venetia Stanley, to explain all, and to beg forgiveness for the little culprit. I pleaded that tumbles, like accidents, would happen in the best regulated nurseries. I addressed my letter, and stuck down the envelope. This done, we all sat on in sombre silence round the fire. All conversation died upon our lips, Fräulein looked so sour and forbidding.

At last our gloomy interview was broken up by Fremantle entering the room and announcing the fact that Colonel Stanley's carriage was at the door, and a message from the coachman to the effect that he hoped the greys would not be kept waiting.

Then without more ado, Fremantle lifted Hals in his arms, for the dressing-gown was too long to permit the little boy to walk, and Tom, the footman, followed with a thick fur rug to wrap round him. "Give Master Hals my note," I called, as the little party vanished through the outside door.

Fräulein went last, an evil glare on her fat face, and "as dark as tempest," Burbidge would have said if he had seen her, and I noted that she would not take my hand at parting. She evidently thought the disaster that had befallen the red suit was due to me. I was *wae* for the little man, as he vanished from my sight; that stupid German woman had no more sympathy with the young life that throbbed and beat in him, than if she were a table or a chair, and he would certainly have what the French call a bad quarter of an hour with her before she had done.

Bess stood for a minute or two after they were gone, and we looked blankly at each other. Bess cried, "Beast, beast!" and then burst into floods of tears. "She will punish him," she moaned, "she will punish him," and she buried her face amongst the sofa cushions of the great settee.

At first I felt powerless to soothe her, or to induce her to take a less gloomy view of the situation. "It is unfair and mean of the old Fräulein," she kept on calling out, "for I did offer to pay on the nail" (Bess has acquired a considerable amount of slang); "and I offered her all the money I had. Five shillings that came at Christmas, half a crown from Uncle St. John, and sixpence which I won in good marks from Miss Weldon." Bess was of opinion that so magnificent a sum was enough for a king's ransom, and ought to have bought all, or any attires, and to have silenced all voices of reproof.

I did not deceive my little maid. After all, it was all her earthly wealth, and all that she possessed she had offered to save her little friend from punishment. Later on darkness fell, Fremantle appeared with a lamp, and Bess fetched her work, a kettle on a vermilion ground of cross-stitch, which I have often been told "will be so useful to papa on his birthday;" and I started reading aloud, for Bess's edification, one of Hans Andersen's beautiful stories.

"BETTER THAN TRUE"

As I closed the book, Bess exclaimed, "It is not true, but it is better than true – beautiful stories always are – and there, at least, is no horrid German governess. If I chose," my little girl said, "I should only have a Yorkshire, or a Shropshire governess. Burbidge says there's many wise folks as cannot understand foreigners; and Crawley says, 'Give me plain Yorkshire, and I'll knock sense into any one's head.'" Then we discussed the story. I had read the tale of the Ugly Duckling, perhaps the most beautiful story of all fairy-land. Bess listened open-mouthed, and her eyes glistened like stars with joy at the end. "I shall always think a swan is a fairy prince," she murmured. "Why don't beautiful things happen much oftener? Only lessons, nursery tea, stains, and mistakes come every day." As she spoke, the old church clock struck seven, and Bess put away her work in a little crimson bag.

I sat before the great open fireplace and listened to my little girl's talk. Through the latticed windows of the oratory shone a soft mist of stars.

"Sometimes beautiful things really happen," I said; and then through the open door I saw old Nana standing. A hurried kiss from Bess, and the child was gone.

Later on, in the evening, after dinner, I mounted the old newel staircase and made my way to the old nursery up in the roof with its latticed dormer windows. There, to my surprise, I found Bess wide awake.

"I have told Miss Bess not to talk no more," said Nana, rather sourly; "but she will run on about Master Harry and his German punishments."

My old body's sympathy for once was with Fräulein, for spoiling a vest and a velvet suit can never be otherwise than a crime in any nurse's eyes.

I went and sat by my little maid's white dimity hung cot.

"I think he will be forgiven," I said.

“P’raps he’ll turn into a fairy prince,” said Bess, and she took my hand, “and then it will all come right.” In a few moments I saw that she was getting drowsy, for she looked at me with half-closed eyes – one eye tinnin’ and the other carrin’ trout, as Shropshire folks say when you are overcome with sleep. Then Bess went on in the sing-song voice that so often immediately precedes sleep with children, “Hals was an ugly duck to-day, but he’ll turn into a swan or something nice some day.”

“Some day,” I nodded.

“Yes, when Hals’ birthday comes.” And Bess’s eyes closed gently, and she slipped away into the blessed land of dreams.

When I went downstairs I found a letter from my friend Constance of the Red House, to tell me that at the last moment she was detained by a visit from a poor old body whose son was ill, and so couldn’t come down to tea; but that she trusted on the morrow to find me, what Bess calls, “quite better.”

BILLY FIRE-DEW COMES

The following day fresh snow fell. All nature lay covered up with what Burbidge calls “a fine hoodin’.” Before my eyes a pure white dazzling plain of snow extended, and even the old stone roof and the ruined church glistened white and wonderful. As soon as I was called, I opened my window and saw my tame robin, who one summer was hatched in a yew hedge, appear on my window-sill. Billy Fire-Dew, Bess has christened him, and Billy Buttons he is known as, by Burbidge and the gardeners. He has a brilliant flame-coloured breast, soft rich brown wings, and large round liquid eyes. For a minute he rested upon the window, then with a joyous chirp he spread his wings and hopped upon a great Spanish chestnut sixteenth-century chest, which stands in the centre of my bedroom. On the chest are figures of gods and goddesses, burnt in by an iron.

Happily I was not unprovided with suitable refreshment to offer my little guest. A scrap of sponge cake in a wine glass, saved from last night’s dinner, met with his entire approval. It had been intended for Mouse, but as at the last moment she could not be found, so Bill was in luck. I sprinkled some crumbs about the chest, and on my writing-table, and he hopped about puffing himself out, quite unabashed, and partook freely of the breakfast I offered him. I did not move as I watched him, but remained standing stock-still. I have always found one of the great secrets of bird taming is to keep immovable, till all sense of fear is lost by constant familiarity.

How beautiful he was, with his great hazel eyes, and his scarlet waistcoat beneath his sober hood.

He chirped loudly as he ate, and then flew joyfully from table to bed, and from bed to table, and so at last back to the window-sill, uttering at moments his clear bell-like cry. Whilst I was engaged in watching my little feathered friend, I heard the click of the latch of my door, and Bess entered bearing in her arms the nursery cat Grey Smokey.

“Oh, beware!” I cried alarmed. “Billy Fire-Dew is here.” In an instant Bess had opened the door again and evicted her favourite, but not without noise; and Bill had caught fright, and with a loud shrill cry, had flown into the garden.

Then, outside the door, Smokey began to mew piteously. “Let her in,” I said, “she can do no harm now. Bill is quite safe.” So the puss entered, and although habitually the gentlest of creatures, I saw that the instinct of an animal of prey was strong within her.

For Smokey paced up and down my room; her eyes shone like topazes in the sunlight, and as she walked, she lashed her tail like a lioness at the Zoo.

“She’d kill poor Bill if she could get him,” I said.

“Yes,” answered Bess, “and eat him up, without pepper and salt. Cats are never really kind, not right through, for all their purring.”

Then Bess asked me what I meant to do, now that I was well again. "Papa," she said, "told me that I might go sledging some day; but this morning you must take me and show me where St. Milburgha was buried, and tell me also about the old monks. Do you know, mama, I often think of the monks in bed. Last night – I don't remember all, but there was something that happened with a man in a black gown, and Hals did something as a swan – I rather disremember," continued my little maid, with *naïveté*, "for I fell asleep before I could rightly recollect. But Burbidge perhaps will tell me; he knows a lot about monks. It is fine, as Nana says, to be such a scholar."

"Ah! now I remember," said Bess, after a pause. "Burbidge declares that they walled up Christians, the monks, and drank out of golden cups, and hunted the deer."

I was amused at Burbidge's views – they were obviously those of the very primitive Protestant.

"Come into the garden this morning, child, and I will tell you a little about the monks."

A few hours later I called "Bess!" from the gravel below. "Are you ready?" Then I heard a buzz of excited voices from the nursery, and a great fight, going on over the winding round of a comforter, and Bess leapt down two stairs at a time and joined me in the garden.

A WALK IN THE CLOISTERS

I had my snowshoes on, so I had no sense of cold, and round my shoulders heavy furs. Mouse sported before us rather like a benevolent luggage train, whilst the two terriers, Tramp and Tartar, cut capers, barked, and sniffed and frisked. These hunted in the bushes, darted in and out, and sought for rabbits under every stone and tree. They yelped and put their noses frantically into holes and corners. Whether the rabbits were real or imaginary it was impossible to say.

Bright sunshine fell upon the old red sandstone of which the later part of the old Abbey Farmery is built, and cast an opalescent glare on the snow-covered roof. The old yew hedges stood forth like banks of verdant statuary, in places where the snow had melted, and on the top of a stone ball stood the blue-necked peacock.

The day was deliciously crisp, clear, and invigorating, and Bess, as she ran along, laughed and snowballed me and the dogs, and so we wandered away into the cloisters.

"Tell me about it all," said Bess at last, confidentially, after a time of breathless frolicking with the dogs. "Miss Weldon talks so much that I can never understand her."

Then I told Bess in a few simple words about the cloisters. "There was, first of all, dear," I said, "a party of Saxon ladies who lived at the abbey, and the most beautiful was Milburgha, their abbess. She came here to avoid a wicked Welsh prince, and she rode a beautiful milk-white steed. And she was very holy."

"I should be holy, if I rode a milk-white steed," said Bess, impulsively, "I am sure I should."

And then I added rather irrelevantly, "St. Milburgha kept geese."

"Saints and princesses always do," answered Bess, authoritatively. "I know what they did, they combed their hair with golden combs, and talked to emperors in back gardens. Then they always had flocks of goats or geese. I don't think they could get on without that, mama," said my little maid, with a gasp. "It must be very amusing," she continued, "to be a saint or a princess and have a crown. They have them in Bible picture-books. Anyway, they never have any lessons or governesses, hardly mamas, and they only talk to the animals."

"But, my little girl," I urged, "saints have to be *very* good; and then you must remember, Bess, that princesses in all the stories have to accomplish terrible tasks, and saints to endure terrible pains."

"Worse," asked Bess, "than taking horrible, nasty, filthy medicines, worse than going to have teeth taken out by the dentist?"

"Worse than that," I answered.

THE CROWN OF MARTYRDOM

“Then I think I’ll wait a little,” replied Bess, with composure, “before I change; for I should not like a crown after losing my teeth, or worse, or even jam-rolly, if I had to take tumblers of horrid physic first. And I have heard Burbidge say that, ‘them as wins a crown must walk on hot ploughshares first.’ Still,” she added, “I should sometimes like to be good.”

“How about doing disagreeable things, Bess? For I fear, at first, that is what has to be done.”

“Well, mama,” answered Bess, “not too good; not good enough to die, but just good enough to get a little more money for good marks than I have ever got before.”

And I saw by Bess’s saucy smile that the day was a long, long way off when she would ever be what she calls very, very good, *i. e.*—

Never dirty her hands;
Never ruffle her hair; and
Never answer back those in authority.

For a moment we ceased talking, and looked at the old carved stone basin in which the successors of Roger de Montgomery’s Clugniac monks bathed in the twelfth century. On the broken shaft which supported the basin are three carved panels; one represents the miraculous draught of fishes and the other two St. Paul and St. Peter.

Bess shook her head and repeated sadly, “Of course I should like to be a saint, but there must not be too much pain. It isn’t fair of God to want *too much*.”

Then we wandered round to the east side of the old house, and I looked up and pointed out to Bess the old stone gargoyles. And Bess looked too.

“Those,” she said, “are Christian devils. Nana says we never could get on here without a Devil, and the monks had theirs too.”

There are many times in life, I find, when it is wiser not to answer a child, and this was just one. Strong light often dazzles, and, after all, are we not all children groping in the dark?

We peeped into the kitchen from outside, and saw the coppers glimmering like red gold on the shelves of the old oak dresser. Auguste, the cook, was chopping some meat, and the blows he gave resounded merrily through the crisp frosty air. I called through the mullion window and asked if the little soiled suit of yesterday was dry, as Fred the groom was to ride over to Hawkmoor and take it there in the afternoon.

“Oui, madame la comtesse,” cried Auguste, for by that title he always addressed me; not that I have a title, but that Auguste thinks it kind and polite so to address me. Besides, he has a confused belief that every English woman has a title of some kind, and that its exact nature is immaterial. As he spoke he opened the little oak door that communicates with the garden and exclaimed joyously —

AUGUSTE’S SECRET

“Voyez, madame, le jeune comte will still be a joli garçon in it. See, he will still rejoice the heart of his father and mother in grenat foncé.” So saying good-natured Auguste passed into the garden displaying in his arms the red suit. A miracle seemed to have been performed. There it was, spotless and dry, and as good as it was when made by Messrs. Tags and Buttons of New Bond Street. Auguste laughed and talked excitedly, gesticulated wildly, and assured me that he had saved the costume by un secret – mais un secret suprême known alone to him and to his family. “See, madame,” he cried superbly, “le bon Dieu ne pourrait pas mieux faire.” Then he told me in confidence that it was not in

vain that his mother had been over thirty years gouvernante in the household of Madame la Princesse de P – . She knew everything, he asserted, “mais tous les secrets de ménage.”

I bowed my head, and happily had the tact not to press for an explanation, for I knew Auguste’s recipes were real secrets, and as jealously guarded as those of any War Office in Europe.

Bess clapped her hands. “Hals will be pleased,” she said. “Because now old Fräulein need not be cross, and there will be no punishments.”

Auguste bowed solemnly. “Madame is satisfied,” he said, and retired like a beneficent fairy god-mother into the depth of his culinary kingdom.

The difference between our people and the Latin races is great. I have often noticed that Frenchmen or Italians are delighted to know any housewifely trick or wile – and that ignorance of all other departments but their own does not, in their eyes, constitute intrinsic merit. Foreigners seldom say, “That was not my business, sir,” or “not my department.” Whereas, in every well-constituted English domestic mind, “not my business,” or “not my work” is a creed to be cherished firmly, whatever else dissolves or changes, and is treated as the bulwark of English domestic life.

Before I left the kitchen door I asked for a saucer of chopped egg, a slice of sponge cake, a roast potato, and half an apple for the inhabitants of my aviary. Tramp and Tartar started barking furiously, in a noisy inconsequent way; and off Bess and I went armed with dainties. Mouse followed gravely, but not without misgivings, for she took no interest in birds, and felt, I am sure, that they enjoyed far too much consideration from me. Bess and I descended the steps which led down from the garden to the field, but held on tightly to the rails, for it was slippery.

“Mummie,” cried out Bess, “mind, for it is slippery all over, like walking over a glass door.” However, we neither of us fell, and reached the aviary door in safety. Then we saw rather a wonderful sight: some forty canaries of all colours – green, cinnamon, jonquil, clear and mealy, yellow, spotted and flaked, were all to be found there. Poor little dears! They were making the most of the wintry gleams of sunshine, and some of them looked rather hunched up and puffy from the cold. They have a thatched shed, and in front, facing due south, a long flight of some twenty feet for exercise, beneath fine wire netting. But their playground was cold, as Bess said. As we entered the cage, they flew round us with cries of joy. Canaries are very easily tamed, and they perched on the saucer containing the food. They ate greedily the chopped egg, and pecked at the sponge cake and apple. Bess ran into their “bedroom” as she calls it, and squeezed on “their dressing table” the “heart” of a big potato cooked “in his jacket.” One cock was singing sweetly. Burbidge must have given them water only a few minutes before, for it was still tepid in the dish, and some were drinking with avidity. We dropped a few drops of sherry into the water to act as a cordial, from a flask that Burbidge had got stowed away in a little box of what he calls “extras,” and I added a couple of rusty nails from the same store. I noted that my dear old cock canary, “Bourton Boy,” that I have had some ten years and known from an egg, looked a little mopish – what Bess calls “fat and fluffy.” I watched him in silence, and tried to discover what it was he lacked. There was an ample supply of egg, apple, and of potato, not to speak of canary, rape, and hemp seed, but he fluttered round and at last pecked violently at a crystal button on my coat; then I knew what he was after, and called out “sugar.” Bess echoed the cry, and darted off like a little fairy for some, finely pounded, in a scrap of paper from kind Auguste, who adores “toutes les bêtes de madame.” We had discovered rightly what it was that the Bourton Boy was in need of. He uttered a note of joy, and fell upon the sugar with a right good will directly we had placed it in the cage, whilst Bess watched him.

BOURTON BOY’S REQUEST

“Why don’t you give him lettuce, too? Auguste offered me some salad,” she asked.

“It is not good for canaries till the spring,” I replied. Then I went to the end of the shed to see if there was plenty of fat bacon hanging up – the birds’ cod liver oil, as old Nana calls it. I inspected

a piece some three inches long and two wide. It was pecked all over by voracious little beaks, and was quite thin in places. Fat bacon is an excellent adjunct to an aviary, and is one of the best means of keeping birds in health, and of special value to hens during the nesting season. In winter, also, it seems to be very nourishing, and to give great gloss and lustre to their plumage. After seeing that their larder was well supplied, I turned to their baking-tin, full of red sand and very fine oyster grit. It is really astonishing, what an amount of grit all birds require to keep them in health. I poked up the contents of the tin with my walking-stick. It was amusing to watch the birds. In a moment all had left the seed, egg, or potato, and were engaged in picking up the freshly turned sand. A few months ago I was obliged to have the floor of the aviary firmly cemented down, as otherwise I found that mice burrowed from underneath and effected an entrance, and then attacked my pets. The cement in a few days hardened, and now is like a rock, and I am glad to say inroads from the furry little barbarians have become impossible.

“My children of light,” as I call them, having been visited, I turned away and escaped with Bess out of the aviary, but not without great care, and having resource to some stratagems, for my little feathered friends all followed me closely, curious, and always hoping for fresh delights. At a given signal, Bess slipped under my arm, and we closed the door like lightning behind us.

As we mounted the stairs, we saw the old gardener Burbidge waiting for us at the top. He looked like a picture of Old Time, with his grey hair, his worn brown overcoat, his long grey beard, and behind all, the background of snow.

“They are all well,” I called out to him, “in spite of the cold.”

“They was matted up yesterday,” answered the old man, pointing downwards to my pets. Then he went on to say how he and the gardeners strengthened the artificial hedge on the east side, by adding fir branches and some mats, “for it was fit to blow their feathers out, that mortal sharp was the eastwinder;” and Burbidge looked at my pets with indulgent pity, and added, “They be nesh folks, be canaries, for all they write about them.” Then he suspected Bess of giving them forbidden food. “They mustn’t have no green food. It be as bad for ’em as spring showers be for sucking gulleys” (goslings), he added, “and that be certain death.”

“But I haven’t given them anything not allowed,” stammered out Bess, indignantly; “mama and I have only given them what we always do.”

“Ah!” said Burbidge, softening, “that won’t be no hurt then; and as to potato and apple, they be the best quill revivers out, come winter. But what sort of apple was it?”

I replied that the apple was a “Blenheim Orange” and no American.

“NO NEED OF FOREIGN STUFF”

“No need of foreign stuff in Shropshire,” answered Burbidge, proudly. “Our late apples are as sound as if they were only fruited yesterday.”

Then I told him that the potato was one of the same sort that I had last night at dinner – floury, sweet and mealy.

“Then I’ll be bound,” he replied, “you had an Up-to-Dater, or may be a Sutton’s Abundance; they be both sound as a sovereign, real gold all through. No blotches or specks in they. We had four roods of both on the farm. Fresh land, no manure and a dusty summer, and tatters will take care of theirselves; but come a wet year, a field potato is worth two in a garden, although I says it as shouldn’t, but truth is truth, although you have to look up a black chimney to find it, as folks say.”

Then old Burbidge went on to tell me how “Potatoes be right house wenches in a garden, or same as clouts to floors; but don’t you go to takin’ ’em from their nature too early, for when the tops bleed the tubers will never be fit for squire’s food, only fit for a petty tradesman’s table,” and this with Burbidge is always a dark, and outer land of disgrace.

Bess, Burbidge and I paced along the neat swept paths. At last I got my word in. “No damage done by the snow?” I asked.

“I don’t allow no damage,” was our old retainer’s stern reply; “leastways, not after daylight. I and lads were out again with poles this morning.”

We wandered round the close-clipped yews, and peeped over into the borders beyond, while Burbidge talked of “how all had been put to bed” with pride. “Them as wants next year must mind this,” he exclaimed.

All my tea-roses, Chinese peonies, and tender plants had been duly covered up with fern; and branches of spruce and Austrian fir had been carefully placed in front of my clematises *Flammula*, *Montana*, and *Jackmanni*, and round the posts on which my *Crimson Rambler*, *jessamine*, and vine ramped in summer.

“They are just resting comfortable,” said Burbidge, complacently. “We all want sleep – plants and men – but let the plants have it suitable, same as childer in their beds.”

We had come to the end of the red-walled garden, and as he said this, Burbidge opened the wrought-iron gate, and I passed down the flight of stairs which leads to the front drive.

“To-morrow we must talk about the list of flowers,” I cried, before he was out of sight and hearing; “we must not forget the butter-beans, and the foreign golden lettuces.”

Burbidge nodded, but not enthusiastically. He doesn’t what he calls “hold to foreign things.” England is his country, and, above all, Shropshire his county, but being very faithful, he is indulgent to my foibles. As Bess and I walked along the pathway, we lingered in the cloisters, and for a moment looked away at the far distance.

We saw nothing but white fields which lay glittering in the sunshine, and the spire of the parish church to the west, which shone like a lance under the clear sky.

“Some day,” Bess said, “take me right away, mamsie, far away with the dogs,” and she pointed to the snow-clad meadows that stretched round the old Abbey precincts. “I like fields,” she added, “better than gardens to walk in, for there are no ‘don’ts’ there for the dogs.”

A RUINED HEDGE

This remark from Bess alluded to my dislike of broken hedges, for, as Burbidge says, “A yew hedge broken, is a kingdom ruined.” I remember this scathing remark was made on a terrible occasion when the great Mouse dashed through a yew hedge in hot pursuit of a very young rabbit, and indeed training down and replacing the broken limb of the yew was no slight matter. It was, in Burbidge’s phraseology, “a long and break-back job, bad as sorting sheep on the Long-Mynd in a snow-storm;” for, as our old gardener expressed it, “Nature be often full of quirks, and sometimes disobliging as a maiden aunt that’s got long in the tooth, and that walks snip-snappy, with an empty purse.”

Ever since this mishap my great hound’s sporting habits have been, therefore, somewhat restricted in the Pleasaunce. But if things have gone wrong by evil chance, and large, very large, paw-marks can be detected on the beds, Burbidge is not without his passing sarcasm. “I prefer a bullock,” or “Big dogs be made for kennels,” he will say. I recalled these reminiscences of spring and summer days, but felt sure, for all he said, that Burbidge would never hurt a hair of my dog’s tail. Gradually the sunlight failed, and Bess and I went indoors. I found my friend Constance, of the Red House, awaiting my return.

Her eye fell on my garden catalogues. “One wants in life many good ways of using common things,” she said; “a variety in fact, without the expense of change.” And then Constance agreed with me that vegetables in England were often only a waste material. “Many of us,” I held, “only know sodden potatoes and cabbage, or salad with an abominable, heavy cream sauce that reminds one of a furniture polish.”

“Vegetables our side of the Channel,” laughed Constance, “are a serious difficulty, partly on account of the cook, and partly on account of the gardener.”

We agreed that the gardener would hardly ever pick them young or tender enough, and that this applies to beans, carrots, peas and artichokes. This set me thinking, and I mentioned a visit I once paid to Chartres some years ago. It was in early June, and I saw several waiters all shelling peas in the courtyard of the principal hotel. I was surprised to note that each man had three little baskets in front of him into which he threw his peas. I was astonished to see so many little baskets, and asked why all the peas could not be put into one basket. “Oh, madame,” said the man in authority, “at Chartres we acknowledge three qualities of peas, and then there are the pods, for the pea-soup.” In what English household would it be possible to get the same amount of trouble taken?

“The methods adopted in England are different,” said Constance dryly. “As regards peas – generally the gardener leaves them till they have attained the hardness of bullets, and then the cook cooks them solely with water, and so a very good vegetable is made as nasty as it is possible to make it.”

Then we both came to the conclusion that peas, “as a fine art,” should be picked very young, or else they were very unwholesome, and that they should have mixed with them a little gravy, cream, or fresh butter. After this Constance asked me about my butter-beans, which, she told me, she thought excellent one day when she lunched with us last September. I told her that the variety that I grew chiefly was Wax Flageolet, and that my seed came from the foreign seedsman, Oskar Knopff, but that now all sorts of butter-beans can be got from English nurserymen, and that Messrs. Barr and Veitch have those and many other excellent sorts.

“They are also as easy to grow, Burbidge says, as the old-fashioned French kinds,” I remarked, “but more juicy and mellow, although they do not look quite so nice on the table. Auguste likes to give them a few minutes longer in boiling, and invariably adds, as is the French and Italian habit, some haricot beans of last year of the old scarlet runner sort boiled quite soft.” Then I praised the foreign habit of serving all vegetables in cream, oil, or a little gravy, and added it is setting the vegetable picture in a good frame. Then from beans we turned to potatoes, and we discussed the best kinds to grow in a moderate-sized garden.

From vegetables we wandered off to embroidery.

A “WROUGHT SHEET” PLANNED

“I want,” Constance told me, “to design a quilt for a big ‘four-poster.’ What they would in the seventeenth century have called a ‘great wrought sheet.’ I am thinking of doing,” she said, “a great border of old-world flowers all round my ‘bed-spread,’ as it is now called in the art shops.”

“What more enchanting,” I cried enthusiastically, and recalled to her mind the beautiful woodcuts that illustrate “Gerard’s Herbal.” “There are there, all the flowers and herbs,” I said, “that you could possibly wish for, and they are all exquisitely drawn and well adapted for such a purpose. The Great Holland, the single Velvet, the Cinnamon, the Provence and the Damask roses, the very names are full of poetry; then of wild flowers, you must think of the Wolfe’s Bane, the Mede Safron, Ladies’ Smock, and Golden Mouseear. In the garden, there is the Guinny Hen, and, above all, the gilly-flowers of sorts, and May pinks; and round you might work scrolls of words from poets and philosophers about the joys of sleep.” Then we talked the matter over, and I got quite keen about the colour of the background, and suggested a particular tint of jonquil canary. But Constance would not hear of this, declared she preferred white, and meant to use the hand-made “homespun,” as Shropshire folks call the sheets of the country that were made formerly at Westwood and round Wenlock up to the second half of the last century. “I bought,” she told me, “several old pairs of large hand-made linen sheets at a sale two years ago, and I feel sure they will be delightful to work on. They are not unlike the Langdale linen, only not so fine.” Then Constance went on to say how, in the eighteenth

century, every farmhouse in Shropshire had its spinning wheels, and every cottager her love spinning, when her neighbours would come and spin with her out of love and good-fellowship. Besides the good wife's spinning, many a maiden's wedding garments were thus made for her by her own playmates, while it was with her own hands that the lass's wedding sheets were always spun.

Was it a better world, I have often asked myself, when women loved their spinning-wheels and tambour-frames?

Anyway it was a simpler world we both agreed, and probably a more contented one, for all ladies then took delight in superintending, and in the perfection of household work; and the world, high and low, did not commonly feel wasted as it so often does now; and our tongues ran on, on the servant problem.

THE SERVANT PROBLEM DISCUSSED

"A little more education," argued Constance, "and perhaps the world will move more smoothly. If all the girls could play a tune or two and knew a little more French, the world would not be so proud of one-finger melodies, or isolated syllables of Gallic, that we can vouch are incomprehensible to the native understanding. 'Tis not to be expected, as old Betty in the Dingle says, 'as the sun can find all the crannies at once.' Education is slow because gentility is great, and real love or desire for knowledge rare. What we want is not, as Montaigne said, 'more education, but better education.'"

Then we wandered on to what is knowledge and what are the things worth knowing, and no doubt the hour till tea would have passed all too quickly, if we had not been interrupted by Bess, who dashed downstairs breathless, and bubbling over with excitement.

"A letter," she cried, "and a letter all for me. Nana," she explained, "said I must not say 'yes' without your leave. But why should papa only have dogs as a matter of course? Here is the note."

I took the little crumpled paper from Bess's hands. It was from Maimie Armstrong and written to Bess by a friend's little girl. I read that "there are several little pups. Mamma," continued Maimie, "says you are to have one when it is old enough to leave old Nick-nack. They are all blind now and cannot see, but suck all day. One shall be sent in a basket.

"P.S. – I didn't write all this myself, because ink often goes wrong with me and I can't spell, but James, the footman, has done it for me." And then in a very large round child's hand. "Your loving friend, Maimie Armstrong."

I straightened out the little sheet and then looked round at Bess. She was literally trembling with excitement and she could hardly speak, but somehow she managed to gasp out, "Mama, I cannot live without a pug-pup." For the moment I believed she was speaking the truth, so I answered, "Yes, dear, we must have even a pug-pup if it is a necessity."

"Yes, yes," cried Bess, with rapture; "and then I shall be quite, quite happy ever afterwards."

"What a good thing it is to be a child," said Constance, softly. "One wants everything so badly."

At my acceding to Bess's request, Bess ran to me and hugged me rapturously, and called out to old Nana, who had just appeared at the head of the stairs, "I told you so; and the pug-pup is to live in the nursery."

Nana did not greet this news with the pleasure expected of her, and as the two mounted the stairs, I heard my old female retainer grumble something to herself. But give her time, as Bess always says, "and Nana will always come round, and find you a sweet out of some cupboard before she's done."

My old Nana keeps her chamber spotless, tells my little maid long old stories of Shropshire, and wages ceaseless war against fringes and furbelows in her nursery maid. "God made me a good servant," she always says, with austere pride. And I add reverently, "The Lord only knows the extent of her long devotion." It has weathered many storms, and has bid defiance to the blasts of misfortune, and to the frosts of adversity. Like the gnarled oak of one of her native forests, Nan has sheltered many

young generations of saplings, and in her master's family have centred her interests, her pleasures: to their well-being she has given her life.

In the evening, after dinner, I went up the old stone staircase that leads to the nursery. Bess was sleeping peacefully, but she was not hugging, as is her wont, her favourite old doll "Sambo."

THE PUG PRINCE

"Her wouldn't to-night," explained Nana, "my little lamb; her thinks of nothing but the pug-pup. I holds to dolls for little ladies, but Miss Bess, she holds to dogs for herself. 'Oh, Nana,' her said, when I was bathing her, 'I could not live without dogs. God makes them into brothers for me.'"

"Then I said, 'Why do you like 'em like that?' 'Tis almost a sin.' She answered, 'God never makes them answer back; and then we can do with different toys.'"

"Well," concluded Nan, pensively, as she took up her sewing, "my old aunt said God Almighty made caterpillars for something, and I suppose even dogs b'aint made for nought, leastways, they be pleasures to some."

I laughed, for behind me, padding up the stairs reluctantly, but faithfully, I saw through the open door my great Dane.

"I should miss Mouse dreadfully. Bess is right," I cried, "one's dog never answers back, and is loving and sympathetic at all times, in and out of season." I passed gently out of the room and went downstairs. I left the dimity-hung chamber, and as I did so I had a vision of a little bright, happy face. At seven, a pug-pup may seem almost a fairy prince, or possess all the gifts of the philosopher's stone. "Oh, happy childhood," I said, "which asks so little and wants it so badly."

Great logs of wood blazed gaily on the great open hearth of the chapel hall, between delicate bronze Italian dogs. The moon was shining down from a sky of placid splendour, and the little oratory looked in the evening light wonderful, and mystic. Through the old irregular lattice windows I felt as if a message of peace was being brought to me. No sound of bird or cry of beast greeted my ears. A copy of Thomas à Kempis' immortal book lay near me on the table. I took it up and read.

"In the Cross is Salvation, in the Cross is life. In the Cross is the perfection of sanctity." I read the beautiful words over, and over again. How exquisite the language is. What hope and radiance beam through every syllable. "Yes," I said, in the stillness of this wonderful place, "I too can hear His message, for this once also was a holy and austere place, where men poured out their lives in the ecstasies of prayer." Then I thought of the monk of St. Agnes as I saw him in imagination across the long centuries, denying himself all that makes life sweet, and welcome to most men, and devoting himself heart and soul to holy meditation, and still holier penmanship. Idleness he abhorred; labour, as he said, was his companion, silence his friend, prayer his auxiliary. There seemed almost an overpowering sense of holiness in the serene calm of the Abbey, and I strove against it as if the air were unduly burdened with an incense too strong to bear. I rose and went to the door and let in the night air. I saw the dim outline of the trees and the dimmer outline of garden-bed and bush. As I looked, in strange contrast, the glory of the summer days returned to me. In the cold of January my mind floated back to the joy of faintly budding woods, to deep red roses, to the rich perfume of bee-haunted limes, and to pure lines of blossoming lilies. All these I saw in my soul as I stood and gazed into the chill darkness. The flowers seemed to laugh at me, and were accompanied by fair visions of Joy, Love, and Life; but grim forlorn winter, the symbol of the lonely soul in the mountain heights, has also its own beauties. I looked round again, and the mystic sides of Renunciation held me fast. The peace and devotion of the past seemed to hold and chain me with irresistible force. I shut the door and stood again in the place where saints had stood.

THE HOLY PLACE

Beside me was the great stone altar with its seven holy crosses, before which kneeling kings had received the sacrament, and where saint and sinner had received alike absolution. Outside alone the stars were witnesses of my presence. They shone as they had shone a thousand years ago, as they will shine a thousand years to come. Pale, mystic, and eternal, a holy dew of wonder seemed to fall upon my shoulders, the Peace of God is not of this world, nor can it be culled from the joys of life.

It is the Christian's revelation of glory, but those that serve can hear at times the still calm voice of benediction in such silent places as this, or in the supreme moment of duty, "for in the cross is the invincible sanctuary of the humble, in the cross of Christ is the key of Paradise."

The next morning I rose early. There was much to do, for life can be as busy in the country as in town. I wrote my letters, and according to my constant custom – much laughed at, be it said, by many friends – jotted down my engagements, duties, and pleasurable excitements for the day. There were —

Some blankets to send to the poor. My list of flower seeds. And then Bess and I were to go sledging in the lanes.

To English people sledging never seems a quite real amusement, and always to belong a little to the region of a fairy-story.

Punctual to the moment, Burbidge appeared with long sheets of foolscap, and we made out the list of seeds.

"Burbidge," I said grandly, as he handed to me the sheets of paper, "I leave the vegetables to you, save just my foreign pets."

Burbidge bowed graciously and we were about to begin, when he could not resist his usual speech about disliking foreign men, foreign flowers, and foreign seeds.

"Yes," I rejoined slyly; "but you must remember how many people liked the Mont D'Or beans and praised your Berlin lettuces."

"Well, so long as you and the squire were pleased, I know my duty," replied Burbidge, mollified.

"Which is?" I could not refrain from asking, for the old man has always his old-fashioned formula at the tip of his tongue.

"Which is," repeated old Burbidge, rehearsing his old-fashioned catechism solemnly, "watering in droughts, weeding all weathers, and keeping a garden throughout peart and bobbish as if it war the Lord's parlour."

"It is a very good duty," I said.

"Yes," answered Burbidge, complacently; "new fangled scholars haven't got far beyond that, not even when they puts Latin names to the job. They have County Councils now, and new tricks of all sorts, but 'tis a pity as so many get up so early to misinform themselves, but there be some as allus will live underground and call it light, and there be none so ignorant as they as only reads books. They be born bats for all the garnish of their words."

After which there followed a long pause – then Burbidge handed me his list of vegetables.

"I haven't forgotten the foreigneers," he said indulgently, "carrots, potatoes, peas, onions, celery, and greens, sprouts, and curls – enough even for a kitchen man, and the Lord Almighty would have a job to know what a Froggy cannot chop up or slip into a sauce. One might stock a county with extras, if one listened to they."

LOVE IN THE MIST

Then we turned to the flower list. Burbidge pointed with a big brown finger to my entry of "Love in the Mist," as I wrote, for I proposed having great patches of it in front of my lines of Madonna lilies, varied by patches of carnations, stocks, and zinnias in turns.

"I don't hold," he said severely, "to so much bluary greenery before my lilies. There won't be no colour in my borders." Then when I protested, he added, "You like it, mam, 'cause it has a pretty name. There's a deal in a name, but 't isn't all that call it 'Love in the Mist.' 'Devil in the Bush' was what my mother used to call it, and other folks 'Laddie in a Hole.' But there's a deal too much talked about such nonsense. Leave the maids alone, and eat your vittals, is what I tell my boys, and then there'd be a lot of cakey nonsense left out of the world."

Then Burbidge, knowing my heart was, what he terms, "set on blows," bowed slowly, and vanished.

Left to myself, I looked down the catalogue of flower seeds and ordered to my heart's content; packets of shadowy Love in the Mist, and Eckford's delightful sweet peas in exquisite shades of red, mauve, lavender, rose, pink, scarlet, and pale yellow. Then I thought of the sweetness of Centaury, the brilliant yellow of the Coreopsis, the perfume of the mulberry-tinted Scabious, and the azure glory of the Convolvulus Minor. I recalled the beauty of the godetias and the opal splendour of the larkspurs, while the gorgeous shades of the Malopes seemed to make an imaginary background of magnificence in my borders, and in my mind's eye the diaphanous beauty of the Shirley poppies seemed to add to the gorgeous sunlight of even sovereign summer itself. And lastly, as the latest annuals of the year, I did not forget to add some single moon-faced sunflowers, such as I once saw at Linley in the old garden there – worn, white, shadowy creatures with the tears of autumn in their veins.

It is a great delight to order your own flower list. It means a true wealth of beauty in the future, brilliant colours and sweet odours, and the promise of so much in the present. Promise is often like the petals of last year's roses, and yet full of delights is the garden of imagination. I sat on and dreamt of my future borders, in which no frost nor hail, nor any evil thing would fall, and sat on drawing little squares and rounds on white paper borders when my leisure was suddenly disturbed. Too much leisure is not given to any mother of the twentieth century. And Bess entered like a thunder clap.

"Mama," she called, "Mama, Crawley declares that you are going out sledging. May I come – I want to, I want to?"

"Yes," I answered; "but you must do just as I tell you, get out if I tell you, and not do anything foolish."

Bess agreed to all my stipulations. What would she not have agreed to, to gain her point? And conditions, before they happen, do not sit heavily on a child's soul.

At last even luncheon was over, and Bess awaited the sledge, expectant and triumphant on the mounting-block.

Just as Bess was sure for the hundredth time that it must be almost tea time, and that something must have happened to Bluebell, the sound of the bells rang out across the frosty air.

"It comes, it comes," cried Bess, rapturously, "and oh, mama, isn't it fun. It's better than walnuts on Sundays, or damming up a stream with Burbidge, or even helping to wash Mouse with Fred," and my little maid, in a flame-coloured serge mantle trimmed with grey Chinchilla fur, leapt about with excitement.

WE JOURNEY IN A SLEDGE

A minute later, and Fremantle and the footman ran out with blankets, which they carried in their arms in great brown-paper parcels. Each parcel bore the name of one of the seven old women who were that afternoon to receive a pair of blankets. We got in, and then somehow all the parcels were piled up and round us – how I cannot really say, but like a conjuring trick somehow it was done. At last, when all was put in and Bess screamed out "safe," I shook the reins, old Bluebell looked round demurely, and then trotted off. Mouse gave a deep bay of exultation, Tramp and Tartar yelped frantically, and away we went.

The dogs barked, the bells jingled, and a keen, crisp wind played upon us, packages and pony.

We drove along the old town. We passed the old Town Hall with its whipping-post, and so up High Street past the beautiful old house known as Ashfield Hall, once the old town house of the Lawleys, where Charles I. is said to have slept during his wars, and where Prince Rupert another time dined and rested with some of the gentlemen of his guard. Ashfield Hall is a striking old house, with a gateway, mullion and latticed windows, and beyond extends the old street, known since the days of the pilgrims as Hospital Street.

Overhead stretched a laughing blue sky, and all round was what Bess was pleased to term the Snow Queen's Kingdom. First of all, we went to Newtown. We passed the red vicarage with its great dark green ilex, and then up by the picturesque forge, where the blacksmith was hammering on a shoe, away by the strange old cottages on the Causeway, with a fall below them into the road of some seven or eight feet, on we went as quickly as fat Bluebell could be persuaded to trot. Then we mounted the hill, and I got out and led the old pony to ease its burden, for a sledge is always a heavy weight when it has to be dragged up hill. At last old Jenny James's cottage was reached, and her parcel duly handed out.

"I like giving things," said Bess, superbly. "It seems to make you happier."

"Yes," I answered; "but gifts are best when we give something that we want ourselves."

"Don't you want the blankets, mama?" asked Bess, abruptly.

"Well, not exactly, dear," I answered. "Giving them didn't mean that I had to go without my dinner, or even had to give up ordering my seed list this morning."

"Must one really do that," asked Bess sadly, "before one can give anything?"

"Perhaps, little one," I said, "to taste the very best happiness." Then there was a little pause, which was at last broken by Bess turning crimson and saying —

"Mamsie, I think it must be very, very difficult to be quite, quite happy."

GIFTS TO THE POOR

I did not explain, but saw from Bess's expression that I had sown a grain of a seed, and wondered when it would blossom. Then we turned round and slipped down the hill at a brisk rattle, all the dogs following hotly behind, to an old dame who had long had a promise of a blanket. The old body came out joyfully and stood by her wicket gate, beaming with pleasure. It is an awful thing, sometimes, the joy of the poor over some little gift. It brings home to us at times our own unworthiness more than anything else.

Old Sukey, as she is called by her neighbours, took her blankets from Bess with delight. "I shall sleep now," she said, "like a cat by the hearth, come summer come winter," and her old wrinkled face began to twitch, and tears to rise in her poor old rheumy eyes. "Pretty dear," she said to Bess, "'tis most like a blow itself. I wish I had a bloom to offer, but 'tis only a blessing now that I can give thee."

Again we turned, and pattered back post-haste up the Barrow Road to a distant cottage.

"Is it a good thing to get a blessing?" asked Bess, suddenly.

"A very good thing, for it makes even the richest richer."

"Then," answered Bess, "when I grow up I mean to get a great many blessings."

"How, little one, will you do that?"

"Why," answered Bess, "I shall give to everybody everything they want, and buy for all the children all the toys that I can find."

"But supposing that you are not rich, that you haven't money in your purse, or a cheque-book from the bank like papa?"

"Then I shall have to pray — and that will do it, for I'm sure the good Lord wouldn't like to disoblige me."

At last all our visits were paid, and we had left seven happy old souls, whom it was a comfort to think would all sleep the sounder for our visit of that day.

As we drove home, Bess suddenly turned round and said —

“Mamsie, why can’t they buy blankets?”

It is very hard for the child-mind to grasp that the necessities of life – bread, blankets, and beds – do not come, in a child’s language, “all by themselves.”

Puppies, pets, and chocolates, children can understand have to be paid for; but the dull things, they consider, surely ought to grow quite naturally, like the trees outside the nursery windows, all by themselves, and of their own accord, as they would say.

I tried to explain to Bess what poverty really was, and told her what it would mean to have no money, but to buy the absolute bare necessities of life. Bess listened open-mouthed, and at the end exclaimed —

“Why has God given me so much, and to poor children, then, so little?”

“I wonder,” I replied; “but, anyway, as you have got so much, you must do what you can to make other little boys and girls happier. For God, when he gives much, will also ask much some day.”

Bess did not answer, and we drove back in silence. It was very still along the country lanes, save for the tinkling of the joyous bells. Behind us followed our pack, Mouse panting somewhat, for she had fed at luncheon time, not wisely, but too well; but Tramp and Tartar scampered gaily after us. The whole country seemed enveloped in a white winding-sheet, and the sunlight was dying out of the west. A soft white mist was stealing up over all, but the voice of death was gentle, calm, almost sweet, across the silent world. Cottages looked out by their windows, blinking, and appeared almost as white as the snow beneath them.

Old Bluebell seemed to know that her trot to the Abbey was her last journey, and went with a good will. We passed the new hospital, dashed down Sheinton Street, and so into the Italian gates by the old Watch Tower of the abbot’s, beyond the old Bull Ring where, through many centuries, bulls were baited by dogs.

“I WANT TO BE HAPPY”

As we drew up before the door, Bess exclaimed, regretfully —

“Oh, mama, why has it all stopped? I should like driving in a sledge to go on for ever and ever.”

I kissed the little maid, and we went into tea. Bess hardly spoke, and I thought her wearied by the excitement of the drive, but that night, when I went up to see her in bed, she called out —

“Mamsie, mamsie, come quite close. A secret.” So I sat down on the little bed, and the little arms went round my neck. “Mama, I have looked out a heap – a heap of toys – to send off to poor children. My new doll Sabrina, my blue pig, my little box of tea things, the new Noah’s Ark, but Nana will not pack them up. She says they’re too good for poor children. Isn’t she wicked, for I want to give them all, and to be happy – happy as you mean me to be.”

CHAPTER II

FEBRUARY

“The Hag is astride
This night for to ride,
The devil and she together,
Through thick and through thin,
Now out, and now in,
Though ne’er so foule be the weather.”

Herrick’s Hesperides.

Some weeks had passed, and I had been away from home. Rain had fallen, and the snow had vanished like a dream – the first dawn of spring had come. Not spring as we know her in the South of France or in Southern Italy – gorgeous, gay, debonair – but shy, coy, and timid. The spring of the North is like a maiden of the hills, timid and reserved, yet infinitely attractive, what our French friends would call “une sensitive.”

There was, as yet, very little appearance that winter “brear Winter,” as Spenser calls him, was routed and obliged with his legions of frost and snow, to fly before the arrival of youth and life, and the breath of triumphant zephyrs. A spring in the North is chiefly proclaimed by the voice of the stormcock in some apple tree, by the green peering noses of snowdrops, and here and there a crimson tassel on the hazel tree and larch; but, above all, by the splendour of golden and purple lights which come and go across the hillsides and athwart wood and coppice. The turf, as I walked along, I noticed was moist and soft, and oozed up under my feet. February fill-dyke, as she is called, had come in due order, and in appointed form. Little puddles glistened on the drive, and for all the patches here and there of blue, there were leaden shadows and grey clouds, and it was wise, if you wandered abroad, to have at hand the protecting influence of an umbrella. I walked up the back drive, till I stood before the well of our patron saint.

THE “HOLY ONE OF WENLOCK”

Long centuries ago the holy and beautiful daughter of Merewald, King of Hereford, according to old tradition, came here and founded a nunnery. The story runs that St. Milburgha, pursued by the importunities of a Welsh prince, found a refuge at Wenlock, and gathered round her a community of devoted women.

Tradition tells the story of how the saint fled on one occasion to Stoke, a hamlet in the Clee Hills. The legend says that she fell fainting from her milk-white steed as she neared a spring there. As she did so she struck her head against a stone, causing blood to flow freely from the wound. At that time, about the middle of February, some countrymen were occupied in sowing barley in a field which was called the Placks, and seeing the lovely lady in so sad a plight, they ran to her assistance.

“Water,” she wailed, but none seemed at hand. Then St. Milburgha bade her steed strike his hoof against the rock, and, believed the hagiologists, water, clear, wonderful and blessed, leapt forth at her command. As it flowed, the lady is reported to have said: “Holy water, flow now, and from all time.” Then she stretched forth her hands and blessed the fields where the barley had been sown, and immediately, before the astonished eyes of all beholders, the grain burst forth into tender blades of grass. Then St. Milburgha turned to the countrymen.

“The wicked prince,” she said, “and his pack of bloodhounds are close upon me, therefore I must fly.” And she bade them adieu, but not till she had told them to sharpen their scythes, for the reaping of the barley should take place that night.

All came to pass as the Blessed One had foretold, for as the countrymen were busy reaping their grain, the heathen prince and his followers arrived on the scene.

But the labourers were true and faithful hearts, and neither threats nor promises could extract from them in what direction the Lady Milburgha had fled.

When the prince saw that the peasants had begun to reap the grain that had been sown the self-same day, a great awe fell upon him and his lords, and he vowed that it was a vain and foolish thing to fight against the Lord, and his anointed.

Other old writers tell how the river Corve, at the voice of God, saved Lady Milburgha; and how, as soon as she had passed over its waters, from an insignificant little brooklet it swelled into a mighty flood which effectually barred the prince’s progress. Amongst other incidents mentioned by Saxon chroniclers, we hear that St. Milburgha drove away the wild geese from the plots of the poor. Many are the legends of the beautiful Shropshire saint that are still cherished in the wild country between the Severn and the Clee. She was as fair as she was good, it was said, and old writers told how, when a veil once fell from her head in the early morning sunshine, it remained suspended in the air until replaced by her own hand, and how she wrought a miracle by prayer and brought back to life the son of a poor widow; while all the while, a mystic and sacred flame burnt beside her, a visible manifestation of her sanctity, for all to see.

THE SAINT’S WELL

I thought of all these beautiful old legends, fairy-stories of grace, they seemed to me, as I wandered up the back lane and paused before the saint’s well at Wenlock, which is still said to cure sore eyes.

As I stopped to gaze down upon the deep well below, I noticed that the little wicket gate was open, and that a child with a little jug was about to descend the stairs to fetch what she termed in the Shropshire tongue, “a spot o’ water.”

“Have you no water at home, my child, that you come here?” I asked.

“Oh yes,” replied the little maiden, Fanny Milner by name, “there be a hougry drop in our well after the rains; but grandam says I must get some from here, or she’ll never be able to read her chapter come Sunday afternoon, with glasses or no glasses. Grandam says as it have a greater power of healin’ than ever lies in doctor’s messes, or than in bought stuffs neither. It be a *blessed* water, grandam says, and was washed in by a saint – and when saints meddle with water, they makes, grandam says, a better job of it than any doctor, let him be fit to burst with learning.”

I smiled at the apple-cheeked little lass’s quaint talk, and helped her to fill her jar. The belief in the healing powers of the old well lingers on, and many of the inhabitants of Much Wenlock are still of opinion that water fetched from St. Milburgha’s well can cure many diseases, and particularly all malign affections of the eyes.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the holy wells of many Welsh and Shropshire wells degenerated into Wishing wells. They then lost their sacred character, and became centres of rural festivities.

It is said that at Much Wenlock on “Holy Thursday,” high revels were held formerly at St. Milburgha’s well; that the young men after service in the church bore green branches round the town, and that they stopped at last before St. Milburgha’s well. There, it is alleged, the young maidens threw in crooked pins and “wished” for sweethearts. Round the well, young men drank toasts in beer brewed from water collected from the church roof, whilst the women sipped sugar and water, and ate cakes. After many songs and much merriment, the day ended with games such as “Pop the Green Man

down,” “Sally Water,” and “The Bull in the Ring,” which games were followed by country dances, such as “The Merry Millers of Ludlow,” “John, come and kiss me,” “Tom Tizler,” “Put on your smock o’ Monday,” and “Sellingens all.”

Such was the custom at Chirbury, at Churchstoke, and at many of the Hill wakes, and from lonely cottage and village hamlets the boys and girls gathered together, and danced and played in village and town.

After shopping in the town, I entered the little old red-walled garden where my annuals blossom in the lovely long June days. All looked sad and brown, and “packed by” for rest, as Burbidge calls it. I noticed, however, a few signs of returning life. The snowdrops had little green noses, which peered above the ground, and here and there the winter aconites had bubbled up into blossom. What funny little prim things they were with their bonnets of gold, and their frills of emerald green. I noted, also, that the “Mezeron-tree,” as Bacon calls it, was budding. How sweet would be its fragrance a few weeks later, I thought, under the glow of a warm March sun.

I passed along, and looked at a line of yellow crocuses. The most beautiful of all crocuses, veritable lamps of fire in a garden, are those known as the Cloth of Gold. The golden thread was full of promise, but as yet no blossom was expanded. How glorious they would be when they opened to the sunshine. There is indeed almost heat in their colour, it is so warm and splendid.

MANY-COLOURED STARLINGS FLIT

As I stood before these signs of dawning life, two starlings flitted across the garden. How gay they were in their brilliant iridescent plumage! The sun, as they passed me, struck the sheen of their backs, and they seemed to shine a hundred colours, all at once. I tried to count the colours that the sun brought forth in them, gold, red, green, blue, gray and black with silver lights; but as I named the colours, words seemed bald and inadequate to describe the beauty and mutability of their hundred tints, for, as they moved, each colour changed, dissolved, reappeared and vanished, to grow afresh in some more wonderful and even more exquisite tint. And then suddenly the sun was obscured behind a cloud, and my starlings, that seemed a minute ago to hold in their plumage the beauty of the sun and the moon and of the stars, became in a twinkling poor brown, everyday, common little creatures. Like Ashputtel when the charm was gone, they looked common little vulgar creatures, and as they flew over the wall into the depths of the ivy on the ruined church, I wondered why I had ever admired them.

Starlings, some fifty years ago, were often kept as pets. Burbidge has told me that they are the cleverest mimics that breathe, being “born apes,” so to speak. Now, however, my old friend declares, “none will do with them, for nobody cares for nought but popinjays, and then they must have the colours of a gladiolus married to the voice of a piano.” So the English starling is no longer a village pet. A few minutes later, and Burbidge told me that a spray of *Chionodoxa Luciliæ* was out.

I peered round and I saw some little hard china like buttons, folded tight in a sheath, and beyond, a cluster of bronze noses, about a quarter of an inch above the ground. How lovely they will be, I thought, all these delicate spring flowers. All blue, and all wonderfully beautiful from the deep sapphire blue of the *Chionodoxa Sardensis*, to the pale lavender of the dainty and exquisite *Alleni*.

Yes, the world is alive, I said, and laughed; for I knew that spring must come in spite of snows and frosts, that the breath of life had gone forth, mysterious, wonderful, the miracle of all the miracles, and that the joy of spring and the glory of summer must come, as inevitably as death and winter.

I turned and inspected a large bed of Chinese Peonies. I moved a little of the protecting bracken placed there by the loving hand of Burbidge, and peeped into the litter. Yes, they too, had heard the call of spring. A few shoots had pierced through the soil, and they were of the richest blood-red colour, like the shoots of the tea-roses on the verandah of our hotel at Mentone. They were of the deepest crimson, with a light in them that recalled the splendour of a dying sun. Then I covered up the shoots quickly for fear of night frosts, but with hope in my heart, for everywhere I knew the earth

must burst into bud and blossom; and as I listened to the storm-cock in the plantation, I rejoiced with him in the lengthening days, and in the growing sunshine.

A JOYOUS CHAFFINCH

I passed out of the garden, and walked down the stone stairs, through the old wrought-iron gate, that is said to have belonged to the house where the Rye House Plot was hatched. Just outside, and perched on a silver holly, I saw a lovely cock chaffinch. A second later, he was strutting gaily up and down on the grass! What a grand fellow he was, with his lavender head, his greenish-grey back, his salmon breast, and the brilliant white bars on his wings! What a cheery, light-hearted little creature! “Joyeux comme un pinson,” the French say, and he is certainly the most light-hearted of English birds. The Twink, or Bachelor bird he is often nicknamed, for when winter comes, many of the cocks stretch their wings and fly off to foreign parts and leave the hens behind. The pied-finch is his name in the village. By nature a most joyous bird, the pied-finch is the last of the summer singers, singing gaily into July, when the thrush and blackbird are mute. I stood and watched him as he hopped about the sward. He took no notice that I was near, for the Bachelor bird is very fearless and curiously little apprehensive, or timid. All of a sudden, I turned round and saw my great hound Mouse behind me. “Mouse!” I cried, and with a bound she was beside me. For the first twenty-four hours after my return, Mouse is miserable out of my sight. She always gives me a boisterous welcome, and will not leave me for a moment. She sniffs at my boxes, watches me out of the corner of her eye, and wanders round me, trying often in a foolish, dumb way to block my passage, if she thinks I wish to leave the room.

Panting, and running behind my dog, followed Bess.

“Mums,” she said, “we couldn’t think where you was gone. We hunted everywhere. ‘Like enough,’ Burbidge said, ‘you was hunting for flowers.’ But don’t bother about little spikes and green things, for Mouse and I want you badly.”

“Hals is coming,” continued Bess, “and this time without his crab-tree governess. Burbidge says, ‘Give me a Fräulein to turn the cream sour;’ and declares that ‘You could make vinegar out of her!’”

“Well, then, my dear,” I said, “you and Hals can thoroughly enjoy yourselves, for you will be alone.”

“Yes,” answered Bess, “for when I saw Hals I said, ‘Nothing but old, old clothes – clothes that will nearly want gum to stick them on, and that won’t mind any mud.’”

“Did you enjoy yourself at Hals’ birthday?” I asked, for on that eventful day I was away.

“I should think I did, mamsie,” and Bess’s eyes glistened at the recollection. “There was no conjurer, but the dearest little white dog in the world, that did tricks, and he knew more tricks than a pig at a fair, Nana said; and after that Cousin Alice, Miss Jordan, read us some stories and poetry. First of all, she sang us such nice old songs about ‘Mary, Mary, quite contrary,’ ‘Little Boy Blue,’ and ‘I saw Three Ships come Sailing,’ and then she went on reading poetry. She read us the ‘Ancient Mariner,’ and ‘Sister Helen,’ and I sat on her knee; but Hals wouldn’t sit on his mother’s, because he said people were looking, and boys had better sit on their own chairs. And ‘Sister Helen’ was quite real, and made me feel creepy, creepy. It was all about two sisters – they hated some one, and made an image, and they dug pins into it, and then they repeated bad words, and the person for whom it was meant got iller and iller and died; and Hals and me we liked it.” So, chattering all the way, Bess and I regained the house.

“Will there be cake – my favourite cake?” inquired Bess, “the one that Hals likes best of all, with apricot jam and chocolate on the top?”

“Yes,” I answered, “and Auguste has promised to make it himself. But only one helping. You must try and be wise, little girl.”

“I must try,” said Bess, but not very hopefully.

Half an hour later and Hals arrived, without Fräulein Schliemann. We all felt relieved; the two children embraced hurriedly, as if life was all too short to get in all the fun of an afternoon spent in each other's company; and then Bess said, "You can go now," sharply to the little maid who had brought him over. "We don't want to be unkind, but we want to be quite, quite alone, please;" then, thinking that she had not been quite courteous, Bess ran impetuously out of the room. "Poor thing!" she explained to me a minute after, "she must read, because she cannot play; she cannot help it;" and Bess gave Jane a story-book.

"You will find that very amusing," I heard her say through the open door. "It is all about a naughty girl, but she couldn't help being naughty, 'cause it was her nature."

Then Jane went up to the nursery, and a minute later Bess and Harry bounced off together. Before leaving me she whispered something into his ear.

An hour later and Fremantle rang the bell for tea.

A GREAT, GREAT SECRET

After a few moments of waiting Bess and Hals reappeared. They whispered loudly, but I pretended not to hear what they said, for Bess told me with flashing eyes that they had a great, great secret.

"The greatest secret, Mum Mum, that we ever had in our lives."

Their faces looked scarlet, and as to their hands, it is hard to say of what colour they were originally. It was, however, Bess's special *fête*, so I said nothing tactless about cleanliness, nor did I allude to whispering being against the canons of good manners; for there are moments when a mother should have eyes not to see, and ears not to hear, and as a wise friend once said to me, "half the wisdom of life is knowing when to be indulgent."

I need not have feared any excess on the part of the children as regarded the cake and the jam, for they hardly ate any, and Auguste's *chef d'œuvre* had only two small slices cut out of it.

Bess, I saw, was under the influence of some great excitement. She could hardly sit still a moment, and fidgeted on her chair repeatedly, till I feared she would topple backwards, chair and all.

At last tea was over, and grace was said, and the two children, breathless, and absorbed, begged leave to go off.

"Yes," I answered, "but not out of doors; for, see, it is raining, and I promised your mother, Hals, that you should not get wet."

"Oh no, it's nothing to do with puddles," cried Bess. "But, mum, may I take some pins from your pincushion? Nurse won't let me have as many as I want. And then will you say that nobody – nobody is to go near us?"

"Very well," I answered, "only don't do anything that is really wrong."

Bess avoided my gaze, and did not answer, and a minute later I heard the two children scuttle up the newel staircase, and shortly after heard the muffled sound of voices in the old tower of the Abbey that a Lawley is said to have erected in the middle of the seventeenth century.

THE FAIRY-STORY

About half an hour after, the children returned to me in the chapel hall. Bess, I noticed, looked white and fagged, and both children seemed exhausted by their play, whatever it was, so I made them sit quiet, fetched my embroidery, and began to tell them a fairy-story. I meandered along the paths of fiction. I fear my story had but little plot, but it had fiery dragons, wild beasts, a fairy prince, and a beautiful fairy princess, and, in the background, a wicked ogre. And as I talked, the children sat entranced.

“You see,” I said, as I heard the front-door bell ring, and heard the tramp of horses outside, “the prince was to have everything, all that his heart could wish – dogs, the golden bow and arrows, the azure ball, and the deathless crimson rose – as long as he restrained his temper, and never gave way to fits of violent passion. But if he swore at his old nurse, Ancoretta, or struck the goat-herd, Fritz, or even pinched the goose-girl, Mopsa, palace, dogs, bow, ball and rose were all to disappear like a flash of lightning, and he was to become again the poor little bare-legged village lad. Then the princess was to be carried off by fiery dragons, and never return till he, Florizel, had been able to grow good and pitiful again, and to do some lowly, humble service to some poor old dame that everybody else despised, and was unkind to.”

At this point of my story, Fremantle entered and announced the carriage.

“Go on, go on,” cried the children in one breath. “We want to hear what happened!”

But I answered, shaking my head, “How Prince Florizel was rude to his tutor, ungrateful to his old nurse, and beat his faithful foster-brother, Fritz, is another story, as Mr. Kipling would say; and all this you must wait to hear in the second volume of my mind, which will appear on Easter Monday, when Hals shall come over, if his mother can spare him, and we three will all sail off in fairy barks with silken sails to the far and happy land of Fancy.”

So Harry departed, attended by Jane, and Bess sat on in silence looking hard into the fire, and then early, and of her own accord, pleaded fatigue and slipped off to bed.

Just as I was finishing dinner I saw old Nurse Milner standing in the doorway.

“Nothing wrong, nurse?” I asked, starting up.

“Nothing very wrong,” answered old Nana, cautiously; “leastways, Miss Bess is not ill, but she seems out of sorts and won’t say her prayers to-night, and will keep throwing herself about, till I think she’s bound to fall out of bed. I have asked her what’s the matter, but she’s as secret as a state door. She and Master Harry have been up to some tricks, I’ll be bound, for I don’t hold to children playin’ by themselves, as if they were nothing but lambkins in a meadow. You can’t tell what they won’t be up to, but this you may be sure of, to childers left by themselves, mischief is natural sport.” And old Nana glared, and made me feel very small.

“No great harm done this time,” I said, and went upstairs.

“What’s the matter, little girl?” I asked. I took a little hot, feverish hand and pressed her to tell me why she would not say her prayers.

At first Bess was sullen – turned her head away, and would not speak; but she could not resist my kiss, and at last confession bubbled up to her lips.

A LITTLE MAID’S CONFESSION

“Mama,” she exclaimed vehemently, “I have been wicked, very wicked – wicked as an ogre or a she-dragon. Can you love me really and truly when you know what I’ve done – really love me again?”

“I am sure I can,” I answered, “only tell me. When I know, I can help you.”

Bess buried her head against my shoulder, and then rambled on rather incoherently —

“Do you remember what I told you about Hals’ birthday – how there wasn’t a conjurer but a white dog, and how, after the tricks were done, Miss Jordan read us stories and told us poems? Well, there was one bit of poetry that I wish I had never heard, nor Hals either, and that was Sister Helen, because it has made me very wicked. It has made me think of how I could pay out Fräulein. We both hate her, she does nothing but punish; not punish you to make you good, but to make you horrid. Hals catches it for not washing his hands, for not brushing his hair, for not putting on his coat, for losing his blotting-paper, for dropping his pencil. Everything means a punishment with Fräulein. She pounces on him like a cat, and she has him everywhere.” Then, after a pause, Bess began again. “Hals and I thought we would punish her, too – once and for all.”

“Yes, Bess,” I inquired; “but what did you do?”

“Mum, I was very naughty,” replied my little girl, tearfully. “To-day, Hals and I went upstairs, up to the tower, and I got a dustpan and two candle-ends, and we lighted some sticks and some paper in the dustpan – I stole some matches out of papa’s room – and then we melted up the wax.”

“And then, Bess?”

“Then, when the wax was sticky and horrid, we stuck pins into it, and I said, ‘Please, God, let Fräulein die.’ And Hals did not want to say it, but I made him, for I said I wouldn’t have God angry with only me.

“And then I called out, ‘Let her die, God, in horrid pain, like the snake last year that Burbidge killed and that wouldn’t die straight off; and then, dear Lord, let her go to hell and be kept there ever afterwards.’ But Hals wouldn’t say that, because he had heard Parsons, their stud groom, say you must give every beggar a chance, so he bargained that she should come out one day and have some chocolates. To which I said, if the Lord lets her out of hell, it shall be only common chocolates, not like those that Uncle Paul brought me back from Paris. Then Hals agreed, Mum Mum; only he said, for all she was a German woman, the chock was not to be too nasty, seeing that she would only have some once a year.

“Then Hals wanted to go away; but I said he shouldn’t till we had done the whole job.

“Then he and I blew out the fire and stamped upon the wax, and it was quite soft and squashy and I pricked my foot; but nurse does not know, for Eliza bathed me to-night, and Eliza did not notice.”

“And after that?” I asked.

“Oh,” sobbed Bess, “you will be very angry.”

“Never mind, go on,” I said.

“Then,” said Bess, steeled to the point, in a penetrating broken chirp, “after that I told Hals we must say bad words, for I knew that bad words can do a great deal. But Hals couldn’t think of any, so I called him a muff and a milksop, and I told him to repeat after me all that I said.”

HOW COULD I BE SO NAUGHTY?

“What did you say?”

“Mama, I called out ‘damn’ three times.”

“My dear, what a dreadful word! How did you know it?”

“Oh, once I heard Uncle Paul say it when he ran a nail in his boot; and once I remembered that Crawley said it when he got his foot caught in a gate-post out riding, and I have never forgotten it. And worse,” continued Bess, “I called out, ‘hell! hell! hell!’ and then I was frightened; but I didn’t let Hals see it, or he would have said girls were only funks after all.”

“Well, little girl, you have done wrong, and you know it; for it is always wicked to curse anybody, and mean to pray that some evil may befall them. But,” I added, as I saw Bess’s tear-stained little face, “I am sure you’re sorry; for think what a terrible thing it would be if anything dreadful happened to Fräulein, and if you thought your wicked words had brought it about.”

Bess’s composure by this time had quite broken down, she broke out into a passionate fit of tears.

“Why don’t you beat me, why don’t you shake me, or do something?” she cried.

“My poor little girl,” I answered, and I took her in my arms and prayed God that He would purify my little girl’s heart, and give her a pure white soul.

At last Bess’s sobs grew less violent, and she lay quiet.

“Do you feel better now?” I asked.

“Yes,” came back from Bess; “for the curses, Mum Mum, seem to have gone out of the room and to be dying away. Before you came, the whole place seemed full of them, and eyes, great horrid eyes, seemed to be looking at me everywhere, and I couldn’t rest, do what I would.”

“Now you can sleep,” I said with a smile, “and I will sit by you till all the evil spirits are gone, and guard you.”

So I sat on without speaking, and held Bess’s hands till the dustman of children’s fancy came with his sandbags and threw the sand of kindly oblivion into my little maiden’s eyes, and she fell asleep. Then softly and as delicately as I could, I untwined the little network of fingers that had twined themselves so cunningly around mine, and gave little Bess a parting kiss as I glided out of the room.

When I returned to the chapel hall I found a letter from Constance. In a postscript she told me that the idea of the quilt was taking form.

“From ‘Gerard’s Herbal’ I have chosen,” she wrote, “the King’s Chalice, or Serins’ Cade; the Dalmatian Cap; the Guinny Hen; the Broad-leaved Saffron; Goat’s Rue, or the Herb of Grace; Ladies’ Smock; Golden Mouse-ear; Solomon’s Seal; Star of Bethlehem; Sops in Wine; Ales-hoof; Wolf’s Bane and Golden Rod. I give you all the old names. On a scroll I propose round the quilt or ‘bed hoddin,’ as Shropshire folks would call it, to work wise and beautiful words about sleep;” and her letter ended with an appeal to me, to help her, by finding some apt saws and quotations for this purpose. Of course I will; what a delightful excuse for looking through the poets, I said to myself.

I looked at the old Dutch clock. Ten minutes, I said, before going to bed. Ten minutes, ten golden minutes, when it is not a duty to do anything, or a matter of reproach to be idle. The fire was dying softly down. I saw all faintly by the dim light of the lamp – the dark panelling, the two Turners, the old Bohemian bench, the stern outline of the altar, and outside the still night.

THE COMPANY OF SAINTS

“Are you not afraid to sit by yourself?” a somewhat foolish friend once asked me. “I should be terribly alarmed of ghosts.”

“Afraid of holy spirits?” I remember answering. “No crime is associated with Wenlock. There is only an atmosphere of prayer and saintliness there, a fragrance from holy lives rising up to God in perpetual intercession; surely such thoughts should make nobody uneasy or unhappy.”

“I don’t know,” my friend had replied. “But lancet windows, I know, always make me creepy – and living in a church,” she added inconsequently, “would be almost as bad as having a house with a curse. I am sure I should always be dreaming of finding a walled-up skeleton, or something mediæval and uncomfortable.”

At which we had both laughed, and I confessed that I liked being left to my angels and my prayers, and that it was good to believe that one had a soul, and that all the forces of God’s world were not comprised in steam, the Press, and electricity.

Then, as I sat on, my mind reverted to the little child, sleeping, I hoped, peacefully upstairs. “Poor little impetuous Bess,” I said to myself, “I trust some day she will not break her heart against the bars of earth. She wills, and wants, so strongly when the fit is on her, and then afterwards, remorse, sorrow, and despair.”

The child is the father of the man, and in my mind’s eye I saw my little maiden as she would be in womanhood – dark, passionate, devoted, generous, impulsive, with a golden heart, but self-willed and not easy to guide. Heaven grant her pathway may not lie across many briars, and that I may be able to protect, and water the flowers, in the garden of her soul.

All education is a hard matter, and we parents are often like children groping in the dark. It takes all that mother and father can do, friends and contemporaries, and, after all, in Burbidge’s homely language, is often “a parlous and weedy job.” We so often give the wrong thing to our children, and, what is worse, the wrong thing out of love and affection. We so often, as Montaigne wrote, “stuff the memory and leave the conscience and the understanding unfurnished and void.” We are too often knowing only in what makes present knowledge, “and not at all in what is past, no more than which is to come.” We do not think sufficiently of the development and growth of character. Above all,

few fathers and mothers try simply to make their children good men and women, without which all is lost; for, as the great essayist said, “all other knowledge is hurtful to him or her who has not the science of goodness.”

We must not be afraid of emotion, at least, not of right emotion; nor must we be shy of offering our highest tributes of admiration to honour, virtue, and real greatness. We must not be ashamed to mention honourable deeds, and we must teach our children that honourable failure is better than dishonourable success.

Life is not all an armchair for youth to rest in, or a country of roast larks even for the youngest, and there are higher and better things even than having “a good time.” Such were the thoughts that flashed through my brain as I lighted my yellow Broseley-ware candlestick and went up the oak stairs to bed.

The next day, as soon as I had finished breakfast, I got a message from our old gardener, Burbidge, to the effect that he wished to speak to me, and that at once.

BROTHER BEN IS “OVERLOOKED”

I found the old man in the long lower passage of the monks.

“What is it?” I asked. “Nothing wrong in the garden?”

“Not so bad as that; but ’tis about my brother as I’ve come.”

“Your brother, Burbidge?” I repeated. “I did not even know that you had one.”

“Well,” replied Burbidge, “tisn’t often as I speak of him, and ’tis twenty year ago since I’ve seen ’im, for when folks be hearty yer needn’t trot round the country like a setter to see ’em; but now as Benjamin is old and in danger, I think as I’d better have a day off, and go and see him.”

“Where does he live?” I asked.

“At Clun, just outside the town,” was Burbidge’s reply. “He’s been there these seventy year, and more. When he were quite a lad he lived at Bridgnorth, but over seventy year he have a-lived with Farmers Benson – first with Farmer James, then with his son Joshua, and lastly with his grandson, Farmer Caleb. Benjamin he have a-buried two wives and thirteen childer, and the berrial of the lot have a-come upon him like tempest in summer. But he have allus kept hale and hearty – till this year.”

“Has Benjamin been able to work all these years?” I inquired.

“Of course he ’ave,” replied Burbidge, scornfully. “Of course he did, till he war *overlooked*.”

“Overlooked?” I said, and turned to Burbidge puzzled.

After a pause, Burbidge, seeing that I did not realize the full importance of his statement, repeated, “Overlooked, and by a *black* witch too.” And then he lowered his voice and added, “For all their education, parsons, newspapers and what not, there be black witches, and some of ’em has hearts as black as hell, and can suck the very life out of a fellow.”

“But surely your brother doesn’t believe that *now*?”

“Doesn’t he,” answered Burbidge. “My brother knows better than to disbelieve in devils and witches. You don’t catch him going against the Word of God like that. Yer might as well try to stir a puddin’ with an awl, or to repeat a verse of Hebrew under a moonless sky, as tear up the old belief in the old Shropshire folk. The devil he won’t go out of Shropshire for all the papers daily, and weekly, as ever town people read or write; no, not even to make place for trains, and motors. He ’ave his place here, and he’ll keep his wenches, the witches, near him.”

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