

GEORGE MACDONALD

GUTTA-PERCHA WILLIE

George MacDonald
Gutta-Percha Willie

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George MacDonald

Gutta-Percha Willie / The Working Genius

THE HISTORY OF GUTTA-PERCHA WILLIE

CHAPTER I.

WHO HE WAS AND WHERE HE WAS

When he had been at school for about three weeks, the boys called him Six-fingered Jack; but his real name was Willie, for his father and mother gave it him—not William, but Willie, after a brother of his father, who died young, and had always been called Willie. His name in full was Willie Macmichael. It was generally pronounced Macmickle, which was, by a learned anthropologist, for certain reasons about to appear in this history, supposed to have been the original form of the name, dignified in the course of time into Macmichael. It was his own father, however, who gave him the name of Gutta-Percha Willie, the reason of which will also show itself by and by.

Mr Macmichael was a country doctor, living in a small village in a thinly-peopled country; the first result of which was that he had very hard work, for he had often to ride many miles to see a patient, and that not unfrequently in the middle of the night; and the second that, for this hard work, he had very little pay, for a thinly-peopled country is generally a poor country, and those who live in it are poor also, and cannot spend much even upon their health. But the doctor not only preferred a country life, although he would have been glad to have richer patients, and within less distances of each other, but he would say to any one who expressed surprise that, with his reputation, he should remain where he was—"What's to become of my little flock if I go away, for there are very few doctors of my experience who would feel inclined to come and undertake my work. I know every man, woman, and child in the whole country-side, and that makes all the difference." You see, therefore, that he was a good kind-hearted man, and loved his work, for the sake of those whom he helped by it, better than the money he received for it.

Their home was necessarily a very humble one—a neat little cottage in the village of Priory Leas—almost the one pretty spot thereabout. It lay in a valley in the midst of hills, which did not look high, because they rose with a gentle slope, and had no bold elevations or grand-shaped peaks. But they rose to a good height notwithstanding, and the weather on the top of them in the wintertime was often bitter and fierce—bitter with keen frost, and fierce with as wild winds as ever blew. Of both frost and wind the village at their feet had its share too, but of course they were not so bad down below, for the hills were a shelter from the wind, and it is always colder the farther you go up and away from the heart of this warm ball of rock and earth upon which we live. When Willie's father was riding across the great moorland of those desolate hills, and the people in the village would be saying to each other how bitterly cold it was, he would be thinking how snug and warm it was down there, and how nice it would be to turn a certain corner on the road back, and slip at once out of the freezing wind that had it all its own way up among the withered gorse and heather of the wide expanse where he pursued his dreary journey.

For his part, Willie cared very little what the weather was, but took it as it came. In the hot summer, he would lie in the long grass and get cool; in the cold winter, he would scamper about and get warm. When his hands were as cold as icicles, his cheeks would be red as apples. When his mother took his hands in hers, and chafed them, full of pity for their suffering, as she thought it, Willie first knew that they were cold by the sweet warmth of the kind hands that chafed them:

he had not thought of it before. Climbing amongst the ruins of the Priory, or playing with Farmer Thomson's boys and girls about the ricks in his yard, in the thin clear saffron twilight which came so early after noon, when, to some people, every breath seemed full of needle-points, so sharp was the cold, he was as comfortable and happy as if he had been a creature of the winter only, and found himself quite at home in it.

For there were ruins, and pretty large ruins too, which they called the Priory. It was not often that monks chose such a poor country to settle in, but I suppose they had their reasons. And I dare say they were not monks at all, but begging friars, who founded it when they wanted to reprove the luxury and greed of the monks; and perhaps by the time they had grown as bad themselves, the place was nearly finished, and they could not well move it. They had, however, as I have indicated, chosen the one pretty spot, around which, for a short distance on every side, the land was tolerably good, and grew excellent oats if poor wheat, while the gardens were equal to apples and a few pears, besides abundance of gooseberries, currants, and strawberries.

The ruins of the Priory lay behind Mr Macmichael's cottage—indeed, in the very garden—of which, along with the house, he had purchased the fen—that is, the place was his own, so long as he paid a small sum—not more than fifteen shillings a year, I think—to his superior. How long it was since the Priory had come to be looked upon as the mere encumbrance of a cottage garden, nobody thereabouts knew; and although by this time I presume archaeologists have ferreted out everything concerning it, nobody except its owner had then taken the trouble to make the least inquiry into its history. To Willie it was just the Priory, as naturally in his father's garden as if every garden had similar ruins to adorn or encumber it, according as the owner might choose to regard its presence.

The ruins were of considerable extent, with remains of Gothic arches, and carvings about the doors—all open to the sky except a few places on the ground-level which were vaulted. These being still perfectly solid, were used by the family as outhouses to store wood and peats, to keep the garden tools in, and for such like purposes. In summer, golden flowers grew on the broken walls; in winter, grey frosts edged them against the sky.

I fancy the whole garden was but the space once occupied by the huge building, for its surface was the most irregular I ever saw in a garden. It was up and down, up and down, in whatever direction you went, mounded with heaps of ruins, over which the mould had gathered. For many years bushes and flowers had grown upon them, and you might dig a good way without coming to the stones, though come to them you must at last. The walks wound about between the heaps, and through the thick walls of the ruin, overgrown with lichens and mosses, now and then passing through an arched door or window of the ancient building. It was a generous garden in old-fashioned flowers and vegetables. There were a few apple and pear trees also on a wall that faced the south, which were regarded by Willie with mingled respect and desire, for he was not allowed to touch them, while of the gooseberries he was allowed to eat as many as he pleased when they were ripe, and of the currants too, after his mother had had as many as she wanted for preserves.

Some spots were much too shady to allow either fruit or flowers to grow in them, so high and close were the walls. But I need not say more about the garden now, for I shall have occasion to refer to it again and again, and I must not tell all I know at once, else how should I make a story of it?

CHAPTER II. WILLIE'S EDUCATION

Willie was a good deal more than nine years of age before he could read a single word. It was not that he was stupid, as we shall soon see, but that he had not learned the good of reading, and therefore had not begun to wish to read; and his father had unusual ideas about how he ought to be educated. He said he would no more think of making Willie learn to read before he wished to be taught than he would make him eat if he wasn't hungry. The gift of reading, he said, was too good a thing to give him before he wished to have it, or knew the value of it. "Would you give him a watch," he would say, "before he cares to know whether the sun rises in the east or the west, or at what hour dinner will be ready?"

Now I am not very sure how this would work with some boys and girls. I am afraid they might never learn to read until they had boys and girls of their own whom they wanted to be better off than, because of their ignorance, they had been themselves. But it worked well in Willie's case, who was neither lazy nor idle. And it must not be supposed that he was left without any education at all. For one thing, his father and mother used to talk very freely before him—much more so than most parents do in the presence of their children; and nothing serves better for teaching than the conversation of good and thoughtful people. While they talked, Willie would sit listening intently, trying to understand what he heard; and although it not unfrequently took very strange shapes in his little mind, because at times he understood neither the words nor the things the words represented, yet there was much that he did understand and make a good use of. For instance, he soon came to know that his father and mother had very little money to spare, and that his father had to work hard to get what money they had. He learned also that everything that came into the house, or was done for them, cost money; therefore, for one thing, he must not ill-use his clothes. He learned, too, that there was a great deal of suffering in the world, and that his father's business was to try to make it less, and help people who were ill to grow well again, and be able to do their work; and this made him see what a useful man his father was, and wish to be also of some good in the world. Then he looked about him and saw that there were a great many ways of getting money, that is, a great many things for doing which people would give money; and he saw that some of those ways were better than others, and he thought his father's way the very best of all. I give these as specimens of the lessons he learned by listening to his father and mother as they talked together. But he had another teacher.

Down the street of the village, which was very straggling, with nearly as many little gardens as houses in it, there was a house occupied by several poor people, in one end of which, consisting just of a room and a closet, an old woman lived who got her money by spinning flax into yarn for making linen. She was a kind-hearted old creature—widow, without any relation near to help her or look after her. She had had one child, who died before he was as old as Willie. That was forty years before, but she had never forgotten her little Willie, for that was his name too, and she fancied our Willie was like him. Nothing, therefore, pleased her better than to get him into her little room, and talk to him. She would take a little bit of sugar-candy or liquorice out of her cupboard for him, and tell him some strange old fairy tale or legend, while she sat spinning, until at last she had made him so fond of her that he would often go and stay for hours with her. Nor did it make much difference when his mother begged Mrs Wilson to give him something sweet only now and then, for she was afraid of his going to see the old woman merely for what she gave him, which would have been greedy. But the fact was, he liked her stories better than her sugar-candy and liquorice; while above all things he delighted in watching the wonderful wheel go round and round so fast that he could not find out whether her foot was making it spin, or it was making her foot dance up and down in that curious way. After she had explained it to him as well as she could, and he thought he understood it, it seemed to him only the more wonderful and mysterious; and ever as it went whirring round, it sung a song of its own, which

was also the song of the story, whatever it was, that the old woman was telling him, as he sat listening in her high soft chair, covered with long-faded chintz, and cushioned like a nest. For Mrs Wilson had had a better house to live in once, and this chair, as well as the chest of drawers of dark mahogany, with brass handles, that stood opposite the window, was part of the furniture she saved when she had to sell the rest; and well it was, she used to say, for her old rheumatic bones that she had saved the chair at least. In that chair, then, the little boy would sit coiled up as nearly into a ball as might be, like a young bird or a rabbit in its nest, staring at the wheel, and listening with two ears and one heart to its song and the old woman's tale both at once.

CANDY."]

One sultry summer afternoon, his mother not being very well and having gone to lie down, his father being out, as he so often was, upon Scramble the old horse, and Tibby, their only servant, being busy with the ironing, Willie ran off to Widow Wilson's, and was soon curled up in the chair, like a little Hindoo idol that had grown weary of sitting upright, and had tumbled itself into a corner.

Now, before he came, the old woman had been thinking about him, and wishing very much that he would come; turning over also in her mind, as she spun, all her stock of stories, in the hope of finding in some nook or other one she had not yet told him; for although he had not yet begun to grow tired even of those he knew best, it was a special treat to have a new one; for by this time Mrs Wilson's store was all but exhausted, and a new one turned up very rarely. This time, however, she was successful, and did call to mind one that she had not thought of before. It had not only grown very dusty, but was full of little holes, which she at once set about darning up with the needle and thread of her imagination, so that, by the time Willie arrived, she had a treat, as she thought, quite ready for him.

I am not going to tell you the story, which was about a poor boy who received from a fairy to whom he had shown some kindness the gift of a marvelous wand, in the shape of a common blackthorn walking-stick, which nobody could suspect of possessing such wonderful virtue. By means of it, he was able to do anything he wished, without the least trouble; and so, upon a trial of skill, appointed by a certain king, in order to find out which of the craftsmen of his realm was fittest to aid him in ruling it, he found it easy to surpass every one of them, each in his own trade. He produced a richer damask than any of the silk-weavers; a finer linen than any of the linen-weavers; a more complicated as well as ornate cabinet, with more drawers and quaint hiding-places, than any of the cabinet-makers; a sword-blade more cunningly damasked, and a hilt more gorgeously jewelled, than any of the sword-makers; a ring set with stones more precious, more brilliant in colour, and more beautifully combined, than any of the jewellers: in short, as I say, without knowing a single device of one of the arts in question, he surpassed every one of the competitors in his own craft, won the favour of the king and the office he wished to confer, and, if I remember rightly, gained at length the king's daughter to boot.

For a long time Willie had not uttered a single exclamation, and when the old woman looked up, fancying he must be asleep, she saw, to her disappointment, a cloud upon his face—amounting to a frown.

"What's the matter with you, Willie, my chick?" she asked. "Have you got a headache?"

"No, thank you, Mrs Wilson," answered Willie; "but I don't like that story at all."

"I'm sorry for that. I thought I should be sure to please you this time; it is one I never told you before, for I had quite forgotten it myself till this very afternoon. Why don't you like it?"

"Because he was a cheat. *He* couldn't do the things; it was only the fairy's wand that did them."

"But he was such a good lad, and had been so kind to the fairy."

"That makes no difference. He *wasn't* good. And the fairy wasn't good either, or she wouldn't have set him to do such wicked things."

"They weren't wicked things. They were all first-rate—everything that he made—better than any one else could make them."

"But he didn't make them. There wasn't one of those poor fellows he cheated that wasn't a better man than he. The worst of them could do something with his own hands, and I don't believe he could do anything, for if he had ever tried he would have hated to be such a sneak. He cheated the king, too, and the princess, and everybody. Oh! shouldn't I like to have been there, and to have beaten him wand and all! For somebody might have been able to make the things better still, if he had only known how."

Mrs Wilson was disappointed—perhaps a little ashamed that she had not thought of this before; anyhow she grew cross; and because she was cross, she grew unfair, and said to Willie—

"You think a great deal of yourself, Master Willie! Pray what could those idle little hands of yours do, if you were to try?"

"I don't know, for I haven't tried," answered Willie.

"It's a pity you shouldn't," she rejoined, "if you think they would turn out so very clever."

She didn't mean anything but crossness when she said this—for which probably a severe rheumatic twinge which just then passed through her shoulder was also partly to blame. But Willie took her up quite seriously, and asked in a tone that showed he wanted it accounted for—

"Why haven't I ever done anything, Mrs Wilson?"

"You ought to know that best yourself," she answered, still cross. "I suppose because you don't like work. Your good father and mother work very hard, I'm sure. It's a shame of you to be so idle."

This was rather hard on a boy of seven, for Willie was no more then. It made him look very grave indeed, if not unhappy, for a little while, as he sat turning over the thing in his mind.

"Is it wrong to play about, Mrs Wilson?" he asked, after a pause of considerable duration.

"No, indeed, my dear," she answered; for during the pause she had begun to be sorry for having spoken so roughly to her little darling.

"Does everybody work?"

"Everybody that's worth anything, and is old enough," she added.

"Does God work?" he asked, after another pause, in a low voice.

"No, child. What should He work for?"

"If everybody works that is good and old enough, then I think God must work," answered Willie. "But I will ask my papa. Am I old enough?"

"Well, you're not old enough to do much, but you might do something."

"What could I do? Could I spin, Mrs Wilson?"

"No, child; that's not an easy thing to do; but you could knit."

"Could I? What good would it do?"

"Why, you could knit your mother a pair of stockings."

"Could I though? Will you teach me, Mrs Wilson?"

Mrs Wilson very readily promised, foreseeing that so she might have a good deal more of the little man's company, if indeed he was in earnest; for she was very lonely, and was never so happy as when he was with her. She said she would get him some knitting-needles—wires she called them—that very evening; she had some wool, and if he came to-morrow, she would soon see whether he was old enough and clever enough to learn to knit. She advised him, however, to say nothing about it to his mother till she had made up her mind whether or not he could learn; for if he could, then he might surprise her by taking her something of his own knitting—at least a pair of muffetees to keep her wrists warm in the winter. Willie went home solemn with his secret.

The next day he began to learn, and although his fingers annoyed him a good deal at first by refusing to do exactly as he wanted them, they soon became more obedient; and before the new year arrived, he had actually knitted a pair of warm white lamb's-wool stockings for his mother. I am bound to confess that when first they were finished they were a good deal soiled by having been on the way so long, and perhaps partly by the little hands not always being so clean as they might have been when he turned from play to work; but Mrs Wilson washed them herself, and they looked, if not

as white as snow, at least as white as the whitest lamb you ever saw. I will not attempt to describe the delight of his mother, the triumph of Willie, or the gratification of his father, who saw in this good promise of his boy's capacity; for all that I have written hitherto is only introductory to my story, and I long to begin and tell it you in a regular straightforward fashion.

Before I begin, however, I must not forget to tell you that Willie did ask his father the question with Mrs Wilson's answer to which he had not been satisfied—I mean the question whether God worked; and his father's answer, after he had sat pondering for a while in his chair, was something to this effect:—

"Yes, Willie; it seems to me that God works more than anybody—for He works all night and all day, and, if I remember rightly, Jesus tells us somewhere that He works all Sunday too. If He were to stop working, everything would stop being. The sun would stop shining, and the moon and the stars; the corn would stop growing; there would be no more apples or gooseberries; your eyes would stop seeing; your ears would stop hearing; your fingers couldn't move an inch; and, worst of all, your little heart would stop loving."

"No, papa," cried Willie; "I shouldn't stop loving, I'm sure."

"Indeed you would, Willie."

"Not you and mamma."

"Yes; you wouldn't love us any more than if you were dead asleep without dreaming."

"That would be dreadful."

"Yes it would. So you see how good God is to us—to go on working, that we may be able to love each other."

"Then if God works like that all day long, it must be a fine thing to work," said Willie.

"You are right. It is a fine thing to work—the finest thing in the world, if it comes of love, as God's work does."

This conversation made Willie quite determined to learn to knit; for if God worked, he would work too. And although the work he undertook was a very small work, it was like all God's great works, for every loop he made had a little love looped up in it, like an invisible, softest, downiest lining to the stockings. And after those, he went on knitting a pair for his father; and indeed, although he learned to work with a needle as well, and to darn the stockings he had made, and even tried his hand at the spinning—of which, however, he could not make much for a long time—he had not left off knitting when we come to begin the story in the next chapter.

CHAPTER III.

HE IS TURNED INTO SOMETHING HE NEVER WAS BEFORE

Hitherto I have been mixing up summer and winter and everything all together, but now I am going to try to keep everything in its own place.

Willie was now nine years old. His mother had been poorly for some time—confined to her room, as she not unfrequently was in the long cold winters. It was winter now; and one morning, when all the air was dark with falling snow, he was standing by the parlour window, looking out on it, and wondering whether the angels made it up in the sky; for he thought it might be their sawdust, which, when they had too much, they shook down to get melted and put out of the way; when Tibby came into the room very softly, and looking, he thought, very strange.

"Willie, your mamma wants you," she said; and Willie hastened up-stairs to his mother's room. Dark as was the air outside, he was surprised to find how dark the room was. And what surprised him more was a curious noise which he heard the moment he entered it, like the noise of a hedgehog, or some other little creature of the fields or woods. But he crept gently up to his mother's bed, saying—

"Are you better this morning, mamma?"

And she answered in a feeble sweet voice—

"Yes, Willie, very much better. And, Willie, God has sent you a little sister."

"O-o-o-oh!" cried Willie. "A little sister! Did He make her Himself?"

"Yes; He made her Himself; and sent her to you last night."

"How busy He must have been lately!" said Willie. "Where is she? I *should* like to see her. Is she my very own sister?"

"Yes, your very own sister, Willie—to love and take care of always."

"Where is she?"

"Go and ask nurse to let you see her."

Then Willie saw that there was a strange woman in the room, with something lying on her lap. He went up to her, and she folded back the corner of a blanket, and revealed a face no bigger than that of the big doll at the clergyman's house, but alive, quite alive—such a pretty little face! He stood staring at it for a while.

"May I kiss her, nurse?"

"Yes—gently—quite gently."

He kissed her, half afraid, he did not know of what. Her cheek was softer and smoother than anything he had ever touched before. He sped back to his mother, too full of delight to speak. But she was not yet well enough to talk to him, and his father coming in, led him down-stairs again, where he began once more to watch the snow, wondering now if it had anything to do with baby's arrival.

In the afternoon, it was found that the lock of his mother's room not only would not catch easily, but made a noise that disturbed her. So his father got a screwdriver and removed it, making as little noise as he could. Next he contrived a way, with a piece of string, for keeping the door shut, and as that would not hold it close enough, hung a shawl over it to keep the draught out—all which proceeding Willie watched. As soon as he had finished, and the nurse had closed the door behind them, Mr Macmichael set out to take the lock to the smithy, and allowed Willie to go with him. By the time they reached it, the snow was an inch deep on their shoulders, on Willie's cap, and on his father's hat. How red the glow of the smith's fire looked! It was a great black cavern with a red heart to it in the midst of whiteness.

The smith was a great powerful man, with bare arms, and blackened face. When they entered, he and two other men were making the axle of a wheel. They had a great lump of red-hot iron on

the anvil, and were knocking a big hole through it—not boring it, but knocking it through with a big punch. One of the men, with a pair of tongs-like pincers, held the punch steady in the hole, while the other two struck the head of it with alternate blows of mighty hammers called sledges, each of which it took the strength of two brawny arms to heave high above the head with a great round swing over the shoulder, that it might come down with right good force, and drive the punch through the glowing iron, which was, I should judge, four inches thick. All this Willie thought he could understand, for he knew that fire made the hardest metal soft; but what he couldn't at all understand was this: every now and then they stopped heaving their mighty sledges, the third man took the punch out of the hole, and the smith himself, whose name was Willet (and *will it* he did with a vengeance, when he had anything on the anvil before him), caught up his tongs in his hand, then picked up a little bit of black coal with the tongs, and dropped it into the hole where the punch had been, where it took fire immediately and blazed up. Then in went the punch again, and again the huge hammering commenced, with such bangs and blows, that the smith was wise to have no floor to his smithy, for they would surely have knocked a hole in that, though they were not able to knock the anvil down halfway into the earth, as the giant smith in the story did.

While this was going on, Mr Macmichael, perceiving that the operation ought not to be interrupted any more than a surgical one, stood quite still waiting, and Willie stood also—absorbed in staring, and gradually creeping nearer and nearer to the anvil, for there were no sparks flying about to make it dangerous to the eyes, as there would have been if they had been striking the iron itself instead of the punch.

As soon as the punch was driven through, and the smith had dropped his sledge-hammer, and begun to wipe his forehead, Willie spoke.

"Mr Willet," he said, for he knew every man of any standing in the village by name and profession, "why did you put bits of coal into the hole you were making? I should have thought it would be in the way rather than help you."

"So it would, my little man," answered Willet, with no grim though grimy smile, "if it didn't take fire and keep getting out of the way all the time it kept up the heat. You see we depend on the heat for getting through, and it's much less trouble to drop a bit of coal or two into the hole, than to take up the big axle and lay it in the fire again, not to mention the time and the quantity of coal it would take to heat it up afresh."

"But such little bits of coal couldn't do much?" said Willie.

"They could do enough, and all that's less after that is saving," said the smith, who was one of those men who can not only do a thing right but give a reason for it. "You see I was able to put the little bits just in the right place."

"I see! I see!" cried Willie. "I understand! But, papa, do you think Mr Willet is the proper person to ask to set your lock right?"

"I haven't a doubt of it," said Mr Macmichael, taking it out of his greatcoat pocket, and unfolding the piece of paper in which he had wrapped it. "Why do you make a question of it?"

"Because look what great big huge things he does! How could those tremendous hammers set such a little thing as that right? They would knock it all to pieces. Don't you think you had better take it to the watchmaker?"

"If I did, Willie, do you know what you would say the moment you saw him at work?"

"No, papa. What should I say?"

"You would say, 'Don't you think, papa, you had better take it back to the smith?'"

"But why should I say that?"

"Because, when you saw his tools beside this lock, you would think the tools so small and the lock so huge, that nothing could be done between them. Yet I daresay the watchmaker could set the lock all right if he chose to try. Don't you think so, Mr Willet?"

"Not a doubt of it," answered the smith.

"Had we better go to him then?"

"Well," answered the smith, smiling, "I think perhaps he would ask you why you hadn't come to me. No doubt he could do it, but I've got better tools for the purpose. Let me look at the lock. I'm sure I shall be able to set it right."

"Not with that great big hammer, then," said Willie.

"No; I have smaller hammers than that. When do you want it, sir?"

"Could you manage to do it at once, and let me take it home, for there's a little baby there, just arrived?"

"You don't mean it!" said the smith, looking surprised. "I wish you joy, sir."

"And this is the lock of the room she's in," continued the doctor.

"And you're afraid of her getting out and flying off again!" said the smith. "I will do it at once. There isn't much wrong with it, I daresay. I hope Mrs Macmichael is doing well, sir."

He took the lock, drew several screws from it, and then forced it open.

"It's nothing but the spring gone," he said, as he took out something and threw it away.

Then he took out several more pieces, and cleaned them all. Then he searched in a box till he found another spring, which he put in instead of the broken one, after snipping off a little bit with a pair of pincers. Then he put all the pieces in, put on the cover of it, gave something a few taps with a tiny hammer, replaced the screws, and said—

"Shall I come and put it on for you, sir?"

"No, no; I am up to that much," said Mr Macmichael. "I can easily manage that. Come, Willie. I'm much obliged to you for doing it at once. Good-night."

Then out they went into the snowstorm again, Willie holding fast by his father's hand.

"This is good," said his father. "Your mother will have a better day all to-morrow, and perhaps a longer sleep to-night for it. You see how easy it is to be both useful and kind sometimes. The smith did more for your mother in those few minutes than ten doctors could have done. Think of his great black fingers making a little more sleep and rest and warmth for her—and all in those few minutes!"

"Suppose he couldn't have done it," said Willie. "Do you think the watchmaker could?"

"That I can't tell, but I don't think it likely. We should most probably have had to get a new one."

"Suppose you couldn't get a new one?"

"Then we should have had to set our wits to work, and contrive some other way of fastening the door, so that mamma shouldn't take cold by its being open, nor yet be disturbed by the noise of it."

"It would be so nice to be able to do everything!" said Willie.

"So it would; but nobody can; and it's just as well, for then we should not need so much help from each other, and would be too independent."

"Then shouldn't a body try to do as many things as he can?"

"Yes, for there's no fear of ever being able to do without other people, and you would be so often able to help them. Both the smith and the watch maker could mend a lock, but neither of them could do without the other for all that."

When Willie went to bed, he lay awake a long time, thinking how, if the lock could not have been mended, and there had been no other to be had, he could have contrived to keep the door shut properly. In the morning, however, he told his father that he had not thought of any way that would do, for though he could contrive to shut and open the door well enough, he could not think how a person outside might be able to do it; and he thought the best way, if such a difficulty should occur, would be to take the lock off his door, and put it on mamma's till a better one could be got. Of this suggestion his father, much to Willie's satisfaction, entirely approved.

CHAPTER IV. HE SERVES AN APPRENTICESHIP

Willie's mother grew better, and Willie's sister grew bigger; and the strange nurse went away, and Willie and his mother and Tibby, with a little occasional assistance from the doctor, managed the baby amongst them. Considering that she had been yet only a short time at school, she behaved wonderfully well. She never cried except she was in some trouble, and even then you could seldom have seen a tear on her face. She did all that was required of her, grew longer and broader and heavier, and was very fond of a lighted candle. The only fault she had was that she wouldn't give Willie quite so many smiles as he wanted. As to the view she took of affairs, she seemed for a long time to be on the whole very well satisfied with life and its gifts. But when at last its troubles began to overtake her, she did not approve of them at all. The first thing she objected to was being weaned, which she evidently considered a very cruel and unnecessary experience. But her father said it must be, and her mother, believing him to know best, carried out his decree. Little Agnes endured it tolerably well in the daytime, but in the night protested lustily—was indeed so outrageously indignant, that one evening the following conversation took place at the tea-table, where Willie sat and heard it.

"Really, my dear," said Mrs Macmichael, "I cannot have your rest disturbed in this way another night. You must go to Willie's room, and let me manage the little squalling thing myself."

"Why shouldn't I take my share of the trouble?" objected her husband.

"Because you may be called up any moment, and have no more sleep till next night; and it is not fair that what sleep your work does let you have should be so unnecessarily broken. It's not as if I couldn't manage without you."

"But Willie's bed is not big enough for both of us," he objected.

"Then Willie can come and sleep with me."

"But Willie wants his sleep as much as I do mine."

"There's no fear of him: he would sleep though all the babies in Priory Leas were crying in the room."

"Would I really?" thought Willie, feeling rather ashamed of himself.

"But who will get up and warm the milk-and-water for you?" pursued his father.

"Oh! I can manage that quite well."

"Couldn't I do that, mamma?" said Willie, very humbly, for he thought of what his mother had said about his sleeping powers.

"No, my pet," she answered; and he said no more.

"It seems to me," said his father, "a very clumsy necessity. I have been thinking over it. To keep a fire in all night only to warm such a tiny drop of water as she wants, I must say, seems like using a steam-engine to sweep up the crumbs. If you would just get a stone bottle, fill it with boiling water, wrap a piece of flannel about it, and lay it anywhere in the bed, it would be quite hot enough even in the morning to make the milk as warm as she ought to have it."

"If you will go to Willie's room, and let Willie come and sleep with me, I will try it," she said.

Mr Macmichael consented; and straightway Willie was filled with silent delight at the thought of sleeping with his mother and the baby. Nor because of that only; for he resolved within himself that he would try to get a share in the business of the night: why should his mother have too little sleep rather than himself? They might at least divide the too little between them! So he went to bed early, full of the thought of waking up as soon as Agnes should begin to cry, and finding out what he could do. Already he had begun to be useful in the daytime, and had twice put her to sleep when both his mother and Tibby had failed. And although he quite understood that in all probability he would not have succeeded if they hadn't tried first, yet it had been some relief to them, and they had confessed it.

But when he woke, there lay his mother and his sister both sound asleep; the sun was shining through the blind; he heard Tibby about the house; and, in short, it was time to get up.

At breakfast, his father said to him—

"Well, Willie, how did Agnes behave herself last night?"

"So well!" answered Willie; "she never cried once."

"O Willie!" said his mother, laughing, "she screamed for a whole hour, and was so hungry after it that she emptied her bottle without stopping once. You were sound asleep all the time, and never stirred."

Willie was so much ashamed of himself, although he wasn't in the least to blame, that he could hardly keep from crying. He did not say another word, except when he was spoken to, all through breakfast, and his father and mother were puzzled to think what could be the matter with him: He went about the greater part of the morning moodily thinking; then for advice betook himself to Mrs Wilson, who gave him her full attention, and suggested several things, none of which, however, seemed to him likely to succeed.

"If I could but go to bed after mamma was asleep," he said, "I could tie a string to my hair, and then slip a loop at the other end over mamma's wrist, so that when she sat up to attend to Agnes, she would pull my hair and wake me. Wouldn't she wonder what it was when she felt it pulling *her*?"

He had to go home without any help from Mrs Wilson. All the way he kept thinking with himself something after this fashion—

"Mamma won't wake me, and Agnes can't; and the worst of it is that everybody else will be just as fast asleep as I shall be. Let me see—who *is* there that's awake all night? There's the cat: I think she is, but then she wouldn't know when to wake me, and even if I could teach her to wake me the moment Agnes cried, I don't think she would be a nice one to do it; for if I didn't come awake with a pat of her velvety pin-cushions, she might turn out the points of the pins in them, and scratch me awake. There's the clock; it's always awake; but it can't tell you the time till you go and ask it. I think it might be made to wind up a string that should pull me when the right time came; but I don't think I could teach it. And when it came to the pull, the pull might stop the clock, and what would papa say then? They tell me the owls are up all night, but they're no good, I'm certain. I don't see what I *am* to do. I wonder if God would wake me if I were to ask Him?"

I don't know whether Willie did or did not ask God to wake him. I did not inquire, for what goes on of that kind, it is better not to talk much about. What I do know is, that he fell asleep with his head and heart full of desire to wake and help his mother; and that, in the middle of the night, he did wake up suddenly, and there was little Agnes screaming with all her might. He sat up in bed instantly.

"What's the matter, Willie?" said his mother. "Lie down and go to sleep."

"Baby's crying," said Willie.

"Never you mind. I'll manage her."

"Do you know, mamma, I think I was waked up just in time to help you.

I'll take her from you, and perhaps she will take her drink from me."

"Nonsense, Willie. Lie down, my pet."

"But I've been thinking about it, mamma. Do you remember, yesterday, Agnes would not take her bottle from you, and screamed and screamed; but when Tibby took her, she gave in and drank it all? Perhaps she would do the same with me."

As he spoke he slipped out of bed, and held out his arms to take the baby. The light was already coming in, just a little, through the blind, for it was summer. He heard a cow lowing in the fields at the back of the house, and he wondered whether her baby had woke her. The next moment he had little Agnes in his arms, for his mother thought he might as well try, seeing he was awake.

"Do take care and don't let her fall, Willie."

"That I will, mamma. I've got her tight. Now give me the bottle, please."

"I haven't got it ready yet; for you woke the minute she began to cry."

So Willie walked about the room with Agnes till his mother had got her bottle filled with nice warm milk-and-water and just a little sugar. When she gave it to him, he sat down with the baby on his knees, and, to his great delight, and the satisfaction of his mother as well, she stopped crying, and began to drink the milk-and-water.

"Why, you're a born nurse, Willie!" said his mother. But the moment the baby heard her mother's voice, she forsook the bottle, and began to scream, wanting to go to her.

"O mamma! you mustn't speak, please; for of course she likes you better than the bottle; and when you speak that reminds her of you. It was just the same with Tibby yesterday. Or if you must speak, speak with some other sound, and not in your own soft, sweet way."

A few moments after, Willie was so startled by a gruff voice in the room that he nearly dropped the bottle; but it was only his mother following his directions. The plan was quite successful, for the baby had not a suspicion that the voice was her mother's, paid no heed to it, and attended only to her bottle.

Mr Macmichael, who had been in the country, was creeping up the stair to his room, fearful of disturbing his wife, when what should he hear but a man's voice as he supposed! and what should he think but that robbers had broken in! Of course he went to his wife's room first. There he heard the voice plainly enough through the door, but when he opened it he could see no one except Willie feeding the baby on an ottoman at the foot of the bed. When his wife had explained what and why it was, they both laughed heartily over Willie's suggestion for leaving the imagination of little Agnes in repose; and henceforth he was installed as night-nurse, so long as the process of weaning should last; and very proud of his promotion he was. He slept as sound as ever, for he had no anxiety about waking; his mother always woke him the instant Agnes began to cry.

"Willie!" she would say, "Willie! here's your baby wanting you."

And up Willie would start, sometimes before he was able to open his eyes, for little boys' eyelids are occasionally obstinate. And once he jumped out of bed crying, "Where is she, mamma? I've lost her!" for he had been dreaming about her.

You may be sure his mamma let him have a long sleep in the morning always, to make up for being disturbed in the night.

Agnes throve well, notwithstanding the weaning. She soon got reconciled to the bottle, and then Willie slept in peace.

CHAPTER V. HE GOES TO LEARN A TRADE

Time passed, and Willie grew. Have my readers ever thought what is meant by growing? It is far from meaning only that you get bigger and stronger. It means that you become able both to understand and to wonder at more of the things about you. There are people who the more they understand, wonder the less; but such are not growing straight; they are growing crooked. There are two ways of growing. You may be growing up, or you may be growing down; and if you are doing both at once, then you are growing crooked. There are people who are growing up in understanding, but down in goodness. It is a beautiful fact, however, that you can't grow up in goodness and down in understanding; while the great probability is, that, if you are not growing better, you will by and by begin to grow stupid. Those who are growing the right way, the more they understand, the more they wonder; and the more they learn to do, the more they want to do. Willie was a boy of this kind. I don't care to write about boys and girls, or men and women, who are not growing the right way. They are not interesting enough to write about.

But he was not the only one to grow: Agnes grew as well; and the more Willie grew capable of helping her, the more he found Agnes required of him. It was a long time, however, before he knew how much he was obliged to Agnes for requiring so much of him.

She grew and grew until she was capable of a doll; when of course a doll was given her—not a new one just bought, but a most respectable old doll, a big one that had been her mother's when she was a little girl, and which she had been wise enough to put in her trunk before she left her mother's house to go home with Mr Macmichael. She made some new clothes for it now, and Tibby made a cloak and bonnet for her to wear when she went out of doors. But it struck Willie that her shoes, which were only of cloth, were very unfit for walking, and he thought that in a doctor's family it was something quite amazing that, while head and shoulders were properly looked after, the feet should remain utterly neglected. It was clear that must be his part in the affair; it could not be anybody else's, for in that case some one else would have attended to it. He must see about it.

I think I have said before that Willie knew almost everybody in the village, and I might have added that everybody without exception knew him. He was a favourite—first of all, because his father was much loved and trusted; next, because his mother spoke as kindly to her husband's poor patients as to the richer ones; and last, because he himself spoke to everybody with proper respect. Some of the people, however, he knew of course better than others. Of these Mrs Wilson we know was one. But I believe I also mentioned that in the house in which she lived there were other poor people. In the room opposite to hers, on the ground-floor, lived and worked a shoemaker—a man who had neither wife nor child, nor, so far as people knew, any near relative at all. He was far from being in good health, and although he worked from morning to night, had a constant pain in his back, which was rather crooked, having indeed a little hump on it. If his temper was not always of the best, I wonder what cleverest of watches or steam-engines would go as well as he did with such a twist in its back? To see him seated on his low stool—in which, by the way, as if it had not been low enough, he sat in a leather-covered hole, perhaps for the sake of the softness and spring of the leather—with his head and body bent forward over his lapstone or his last, and his right hand with the quick broad-headed hammer hammering up and down on a piece of sole-leather; or with both his hands now meeting as if for a little friendly chat about something small, and then suddenly starting asunder as if in astonished anger, with a portentous hiss, you might have taken him for an automaton moved by springs, and imitating human actions in a very wonderful manner—so regular and machine-like were his motions, and so little did he seem to think about what he was at. A little passing attention, a hint now and then from his head, was sufficient to keep his hands right, for they were so used to their work, and had been so well taught by his head, that they could pretty nearly have made a pair of shoes of themselves;

so that the shoemaking trade is one that admits of a great deal of thought going on in the head that hangs over the work, like a sun over the earth ripening its harvest. Shoemakers have distinguished themselves both in poetry and in prose; and if Hector Macallaster had done so in neither, he could yet think, and that is what some people who write both poetry and prose cannot do. But it is of infinitely more importance to be able to think well than merely to write ever so well; and, besides, to think well is what everybody ought to be or to become able to do.

Hector had odd ways of looking at things, but I need not say more about that, for it will soon be plain enough. Ever since the illness from which he had risen with a weak spine, and ever-working brain, and a quiet heart, he had shown himself not merely a good sort of man, for such he had always been, but a religious man; not by saying much, for he was modest even to shyness with grown people, but by the solemnity of his look when a great word was spoken, by his unblamable behaviour, and by the readiness with which he would lend or give of his small earnings to his poor neighbours. The only thing of which anybody could complain was his temper; but it showed itself only occasionally, and almost everybody made excuse for it on the ground of his bodily ailments. He gave it no quarter himself, however. He said once to the clergyman, to whom he had been lamenting the trouble he had with it, and who had sought to comfort him by saying that it was caused by the weakness of his health—

"No, sir—excuse me; nobody knows how much I am indebted to my crooked back. If it weren't for that I might have a bad temper and never know it. But that drives it out of its hole, and when I see the ugly head of it I know it's there, and try once more to starve it to death. But oh dear! it's such a creature to burrow! When I think I've built it in all round, out comes its head again at a place where I never looked to see it, and it's all to do over again!"

You will understand by this already that the shoemaker thought after his own fashion, which is the way everybody who can think does think. What he thought about his trade and some other things we shall see by and by.

When Willie entered his room, he greeted him with a very friendly nod; for not only was he fond of children, but he had a special favour for Willie, chiefly because he considered himself greatly indebted to him for something he had said to Mrs Wilson, and which had given him a good deal to think about. For Mrs Wilson often had a chat with Hector, and then she would not unfrequently talk about Willie, of whose friendship she was proud. She had told him of the strange question he had put to her as to whether God worked, and the shoemaker, thinking over it, had come to the same conclusion as Willie's father, and it had been a great comfort and help to him.

"What can I do for you to-day, Willie?" he said; for in that part of the country they do not say *Master* and *Miss*. "You look," he added, "if you wanted something."

"I want you to teach me, please," answered Willie.

"To teach you what?" asked Hector.

"To make shoes, please," answered Willie.

"Ah! but do you think that would be prudent of me? Don't you see, if I were to teach you to make shoes, people would be coming to you to make their shoes for them, and what would become of me then?"

"But I only want to make shoes for Aggy's doll. She oughtn't to go without shoes in this weather, you know."

"Certainly not. Well, if you will bring me the doll I will take her measure and make her a pair."

"But I don't think papa could afford to pay for shoes for a doll as well as for all of us. You see, though it would be better, it's not necessary that a doll should have strong shoes. She has shoes good enough for indoors, and she needn't walk in the wet. Don't you think so yourself, Hector?"

"But," returned Hector, "I shall be happy to make Agnes a present of a pair of shoes for her doll. I shouldn't think of charging your papa for that. He is far too good a man to be made to pay for everything."

"But," objected Willie, "to let you make them for nothing would be as bad as to make papa pay for them when they are not necessary. Please, you must let me make them for Aggy. Besides, she's not old enough yet even to say thank you for them."

"Then she won't be old enough to say thank you to you either," said Hector, who, all this time, had been losing no moment from his work, but was stitching away, with a bore, and a twiddle, and a hiss, at the sole of a huge boot.

"Ah! but you see, she's my own—so it doesn't matter!"

If I were writing a big book, instead of a little one, I should be tempted to say not only that this set Hector a thinking, but what it made him think as well. Instead of replying, however, he laid down his boot, rose, and first taking from a shelf a whole skin of calf-leather, and next a low chair from a corner of the room, he set the latter near his own seat opposite the window.

"Sit down there, then, Willie," he said; adding, as he handed him the calf-skin, "There's your leather, and my tools are at your service. Make your shoes, and welcome. I shall be glad of your company."

Having thus spoken, he sat down again, caught up his boot hurriedly, and began stitching away as if for bare life.

Willie took the calf-skin on his lap, somewhat bewildered. If he had been asked to cut out a pair of seven-leagued boots for the ogre, there would have seemed to his eyes enough of leather for them in that one skin. But how ever was he to find two pieces small enough for doll's shoes in such an ocean of leather? He began to turn it round and round, looking at it all along the edge, while Hector was casting sidelong glances at him in the midst of his busyness, with a curiosity on his face which his desire to conceal it caused to look grim instead of amused.

Willie, although he had never yet considered how shoes are made, had seen at once that nothing could be done until he had got the command of a manageable bit of leather; he found too much only a shade better than too little; and he saw that it wouldn't be wise to cut a piece out anywhere, for that might spoil what would serve for a large pair of shoes or even boots. Therefore he kept turning the skin round until he came to a small projecting piece. This he contemplated for some time, trying to recall the size of Dolly's feet, and to make up his mind whether it would not be large enough for one or even for both shoes. A smile passed over Hector's face—a smile of satisfaction.

"That's it!" he said at last. "I think you'll do. That's the first thing—to consider your stuff, and see how much you can make of it. Waste is a thing that no good shoemaker ever yet could endure. It's bad in itself, and so unworkmanlike! Yes, I think that corner will do. Shall I cut it off for you?"

"No, thank you—not yet, please. I think I must go and look at her feet, for I can't recollect *quite* how big they are. I'll just run home and look."

"Do you think you will be able to carry the exact size in your head, and bring it back with you?"

"Yes, I think I shall."

"I don't. I never could trust myself so far as that, nearly. You might be pretty nigh it one way and all wrong another, for you have to consider length and breadth and roundabout. I will tell you the best way for *you* to do. Set the doll standing on a bit of paper, and draw a pencil all round her foot with the point close to it on the paper. Both feet will be better, for it would be a mistake to suppose they must be of the same size. That will give you the size of the sole. Then take a strip of paper and see how long a piece it takes to go round the thickest part of the foot, and cut it off to that length. That will be sufficient measurement for a doll's shoe, for even if it should not fit exactly, she won't mind either being pinched a little or having to walk a little loose."

Willie got up at once to go and do as Hector had told him; but Hector was not willing to part with him so soon, for it was not often he had anybody to talk to while he went on with his work. Therefore he said—

"But don't you think, Willie, before you set about it, you had better see how I do? It would be a pity to spend your labour in finding out for yourself what shoemakers have known for hundreds of years, and which you could learn so easily by letting me show you."

"Thank you," said Willie, sitting down again.

"I should like that very much. I will sit and look at you. I know what you are doing. You are fastening on the sole of a boot."

"Yes. Do you see how it's done?"

"I'm not sure. I don't see yet quite. Of course I see you are sewing the one to the other. I've often wondered how you could manage with small shoes like mine to get in your hand to pull the needle through; but I see you don't use a needle, and I see that you are sewing it all on the outside of the boot, and don't put your hand inside at all. I can't get to understand it."

"You will in a minute. You see how, all round the edge of the upper, as we call it, I have sewn on a strong narrow strip, so that one edge of the strip sticks out all round, while the other is inside. To the edge that sticks out I sew on the sole, drawing my threads so tight that when I pare the edges off smooth, it will look like one piece, and puzzle anybody who did not know how it was done."

"I think I understand. But how do you get your thread so sharp and stiff as to go through the holes you make? I find it hard enough sometimes to get a thread through the eye of a needle; for though the thread is ever so much smaller than yours, I have to sharpen and sharpen it often before I can get it through. But yours, though it is so thick, keeps so sharp that it goes through the holes at once—two threads at once—one from each side!"

"Ah! but I don't sharpen my thread; I put a point upon it."

"Doesn't that mean the same thing?"

"Well, it may generally; but *I* don't mean the same thing by it. Look here."

"I see!" cried Willie; "there is a long bit of something else, not thread, upon it. What is it? It looks like a hair, only thicker, and it is so sharp at the point!"

"Can't you guess?"

"No; I can't."

"Then I will tell you. It is a bristle out of a hog's back. I don't know what a shoemaker would do without them. Look, here's a little bunch of them."

"That's a very clever use to put them to," said Willie.

"Do you go and pluck them out of the pigs?"

"No; we buy them at the shop. We want a good many, for they wear out. They get too soft, and though they don't break right off, they double up in places, so that they won't go through."

"How do you fasten them to the thread?"

"Look here," said Hector.

He took several strands of thread together, and drew them through and through a piece of cobbler's wax, then took a bristle and put it in at the end cunningly, in a way Willie couldn't quite follow; and then rolled and rolled threads and all over and over between his hand and his leather apron, till it seemed like a single dark-coloured cord.

"There, you see, is my needle and thread all in one."

"And what is the good of rubbing it so much with the cobbler's wax?"

"There are several good reasons for doing that. In the first place, it makes all the threads into one by sticking them together. Next it would be worn out before I had drawn it many times through but for the wax, which keeps the rubbing from wearing it. The wax also protects it afterwards, and keeps the wet from rotting it. The waxed thread fills the hole better too, and what is of as much consequence as anything, it sticks so that the last stitch doesn't slacken before the next comes, but holds so tight that, although the leather is very springy, it cannot make it slip. The two pieces are thus got so close together that they are like one piece, as you will see when I pare the joined edges."

I should tire my reader if I were to recount all the professional talk that followed; for although Willie found it most interesting, and began to feel as if he should soon be able to make a shoe himself, it is a very different thing merely to read about it—the man's voice not in your ears, and the work not going on before your eyes. But the shoemaker cared for other things besides shoemaking, and after a while he happened to make a remark which led to the following question from Willie:—

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