

YONGE CHARLOTTE MARY

THE STOKESLEY SECRET

Charlotte Yonge

The Stokesley Secret

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CHAPTER I

“How can a pig pay the rent?”

The question seemed to have been long under consideration, to judge by the manner in which it came out of the pouting lips of that sturdy young five-year-old gentleman, David Merrifield, as he sat on a volume of the great Latin Dictionary to raise him to a level with the tea-table.

Long, however, as it had been considered, it was unheeded on account of one more interesting to the general public assembled round the table.

“I say!” hallooed out a tall lad of twelve holding aloft a slice taken from the dish in the centre of the table, “I say! what do you call this, Mary?”

“Bread and butter, Master Sam,” replied rather pettishly the maid who had brought in the big black kettle.

“Bread and butter! I call it bread and scrape!” solemnly said Sam.

“It only has butter in the little holes of it, not at the top, Miss Fosbrook,” said, in an odd pleading kind of tone, a stout good-humoured girl of thirteen, with face, hair, and all, a good deal like a nice comfortable apricot in a sunny place, or a good respectable Alderney cow.

“I think it would be better not to grumble, Susan, my dear,” replied, in a low voice, a pleasant dark-eyed young lady who was making tea; but the boys at the bottom of the table neither heard nor heeded.

“Mary, Mary, quite contrary,” was Sam’s cry, in so funny a voice, that Miss Fosbrook could only laugh; “is this bread and scrape the fare for a rising young family of genteel birth?”

“Oh!” with a pathetic grimace, cried the pretty-faced though sandy-haired Henry, the next to him in age, “if our beloved parents knew how their poor deserted infants are treated—”

“A fine large infant you are, Hal!” exclaimed Susan.

“I’m an infant, you’re an infant, Miss Fosbrook is an infant—a babby.”

“For shame, Hal!” cried the more civilized Sam, clenching his fist.

“No, no, Sam,” interposed Miss Fosbrook, laughing, “your brother is quite right; I am as much an infant in the eye of the law as little George.”

“There, I said I would!” cried Henry; “didn’t I, Sam?”

“Didn’t you what?” asked Susan, not in the most elegant English.

“Why, Martin Greville twitted us with having a girl for a governess,” said Henry; “he said it was a shame we should be taken in to think her grown up, when she was not twenty; and I said I would find out, and now I have done it!” he cried triumphantly.

“Everybody is quite welcome to know my age,” said Miss Fosbrook, the colour rising in her cheek. “I was nineteen on the last of April; but I had rather you had asked me point blank, Henry, than tried to find out in a sidelong way.”

Henry looked a little surly; and Elizabeth, a nice-looking girl, who sat next to him and was nearest in age, said, “Oh! but that would have been so rude, Miss Fosbrook.”

“Rude, but honest,” said Miss Fosbrook; and Susan’s honest eyes twinkled, as much as to say, “I like that;” but she said, “I don’t believe Hal meant it.”

“I don’t care!” said Sam. “Come, Mary, this plate is done—more bread and butter; d’ye hear? not bread and gammon!” and he began the chant, in which six voices joined till it became a roar, pursuing Mary down to the lower regions:—

“Thick butter and thin bread,
Or it shall be thrown at Mary’s head;
Thick bread and thin butter,
Is only fit for the ducks in the gutter.”

Elizabeth looked appealingly at Miss Fosbrook; but Miss Fosbrook was leaning back in her chair, her handkerchief up to her mouth, in fits of laughing, seeing which, the children bawled louder and louder; and Elizabeth only abstained from stopping her ears because she knew that was the sure way to be held fast, and have it bellowed into them.

Little Annie blundered in her eagerness upon

“Thick bread and thin butter,”

whereupon there was a general outcry. “Nanny likes thick bread and thin butter, let her have it!” and Sam, Henry, and Johnnie directed a whole battery of their remaining crusts towards her cup, which would presently have been upset into her lap but for Miss Fosbrook, who recovered herself, and said gravely, “This must not be, Sam; I shall send you away from the table if you do.”

Sam wanted to see whether she would, and threw the crust.

“Sam,” she said very decidedly, though there was a quiver in her voice, as if she were frightened.

Sam looked up, and did not move.

“Oh, Miss Fosbrook!” cried Susan, “we were all just as bad. Don’t punish Sam!”

“It is time that Sam should show that he has the feelings of a manly boy,” said Miss Fosbrook, looking full at him. “He knows that I must keep my word, and that I have no strength to fight with him.—Sam, go and finish your tea on the window-seat.”

Her clear brown eyes looked full at him as she spoke, and all the young population watched to see what he would do. He hesitated a moment, then took up his cup and plate, and sat down in the window-seat.

Miss Fosbrook breathed freely, and she had almost said, “Thank you, Sam,” but she did not think this was the time; and collecting herself, she said, “Fun is all very well, and I hope we shall have plenty, but we ought not to let it grow riotous; and I don’t think it was of a good sort when it was complaining of the food provided for us.”

The children were all rather subdued by what she said; some felt a little cross, and some rather ashamed; and when Mary brought back the dish replenished with slices, no one said a word as to whether the butter were thick or thin. The silence seemed to David a favourable occasion for renewing the great question, “How does a pig pay the rent?”

There was a general giggle, and again Miss Fosbrook was as bad as any: while David, looking affronted, tapped the table with the handle of his spoon, and repeated, “I want to know.”

“I’ll tell you, Davy man,” began Henry, first recovering. “The pig is a very sagacious animal, especially in Hampshire, and so he smells out wherever the bags of money are sown underground, and digs them up with his nose. Then he swings them on his back, and gives a curl of his tail and a wink of his eye, and lays them down just before the landlord’s feet; and he’s so cunning, that not an inch will he budge till he’s got the receipt, with a stamp upon it, on his snout.”

“No; now is that a true story?” cried little Annie, who was the only person except David grave enough to speak; while Sam, exploding in the window, called out, “Why, don’t you know that’s why pigs have rings in their noses?”

“There was a lady loved a swine;
‘Honey,’ says she,
I’ll give you a silver trough.”

‘Hunks!’ says he,”

continued Hal; “that shows his disinterestedness. Oh, werry sagacious haminals is pigs!”

“For shame, Hal,” cried Elizabeth, “to confuse the children with such nonsense.”

“Why, don’t you think I know how the rent is paid? I’ve seen Papa on rent-day hundreds of times.”

“But the pigs, Hal; did you ever see the pigs?”

“Thousands of times.”

“Bringing bags of gold? O Hal! Hal!”

“I want to know,” continued David, who had been digesting the startling fact, “how the pig swings the bag on his back? I don’t think ours could do it.”

“It’s a sort made on purpose,” said Hal.

“Made on purpose by Mr. Henry Merrifield,” said Susan, at last able to speak. “Don’t believe one word, David dear; Hal is laughing at you.”

“But how does a pig do it?” asked David, returning to the charge.

“Why do you want to know, my dear?” asked Miss Fosbrook.

“Mary’s sister said so.”

“I know,” exclaimed Susan; “Davy went out with the nursery children to-day, and they went to see Mary’s sister. Her husband is drowned because he was a sailor; and the *Mermaid* went to South America; and there are five little tiny children.”

“Of the mermaid’s?” cried Harry.

“No, no; the *Mermaid* was the ship, and it was wrecked, and they have noticing to live upon; and she takes in washing, and is such a nice woman. Mamma said we might take them our old winter frocks, and so David went there.”

“And she said if she had a pig to pay the rent she should be quite happy,” said David. “How could he?”

“I suppose,” said Miss Fosbrook, “the pig would live on her garden-stuff, her cabbage-leaves and potato-skins; and that when he was fat she would sell him, and pay the rent with the money. Am I right, Sam? you know I am a Cockney.”

“You could not be more right if you were a Hampshire beg,” said Sam. “Jack Higgins was her husband’s name, and a famous fellow he was; he once rigged a little boat for me.”

“And he sailed with Papa once, long ago,” added Susan; to which Sam rejoined,

“More fool he to go into the merchant service and get drowned, with nothing for his widow to live upon.”

“I say,” cried Hal, “why shouldn’t we give her a pig?”

“Oh, do!” earnestly exclaimed David.

“I’ll catch one,” broke from John and Annie at once; “such lots as there are in the yard!”

“You would catch it, I believe,” said Sam disdainfully; while Susan explained,

“No; those are Papa’s pigs. Purday would not let you give them away.”

“Of course,” said Henry, “that was only those little geese. I meant to make a subscription among ourselves, and give her the pig; and won’t she be surprised!”

“Oh! yes, yes,” shouted the children; “let’s do it all ourselves!”

“I’ve got one-and-threepence, and sixpence next Saturday,” cried Hal.

“And I’ve eightpence,” quoth Annie.

“And I’ve a whole shilling,” said David.

“I’ve fourpence,” said Johnnie.

“I’ve not much, I’m afraid,” said Susan, feeling in her pocket, with rather black looks.

“Oh!” said Sam, “everybody knows simple Sukey never has a farthing in her pocket by any chance!”

“Yes, but I have, Sam;” and with an air of great triumph, Susan held up three-halfpence, whereat all the party screamed with laughter.

“Well, but Bessie always has lots! She’s as rich as a little Jew. Come, Bet, Elizabeth, Elspeth, Betsy, and Bess, what will you give?—what have you got?”—and one hand came on her shoulder, and another on her arm but she shook herself free, and answered rather crossly,

“Don’t—I can’t—I’ve got something else to do with my money.”

“Oh! you little stingy avaricious crab!” was the outcry beginning; but Miss Fosbrook stopped it before Elizabeth had time to make the angry answer that was rising on her lips.

“No, my dears, you must not tease her. Each of you has a full right to use your own money as you may think best; and it is not right to force gifts in this manner.”

“She’s a little affected pussy-cat,” said Hal, much annoyed; “I know what she wants it for—to buy herself a ridiculous parasol like Ida Greville, when she would see poor Hannah Higgins starving at her feet.”

Elizabeth bit her lip, and tossed up her head; the tears were in her eyes, but she made no answer.

“Come, never mind,” said Sam; “she’s as obstinate as a mule when she gets a thing into her head. Let’s see what we’ve got without her. I’ve only sevenpence: worse luck that I bought ball of string yesterday.”

The addition amounted to three shillings and elevenpence halfpenny: a sum which looked so mighty when spread out, chiefly in coppers, on the window-seat, that Annie and David looked on it as capable of buying any amount of swine; but Sam looked rather blank at it, and gazing up and down, said, “But what does a pig cost?”

“Miss Fosbrook, what does a pig cost?”

Miss Fosbrook shook her head and laughed, saying that she knew much less of pigs than they did; and Susan exclaiming, “There’s Purday in the court,” they all tumbled to the window, one upon the top of the other.

The window was a large heavily-framed sash, with a deep window-seat, and a narrow ledge within the sill—as if made on purpose, the first for the knees the second for the elbows of the gazers therefrom.

As to the view, it was into a walled kitchen court, some high chestnut and lime trees just looking over the grey roofs of the offices. On the ground lay a big black Newfoundland dog, and a couple of graceful greyhounds, one of them gnawing a bone, cunningly watched by a keen-looking raven, with his head on one side; while peeping out from the bars of the bottle-rack was the demure face of the sandy cat, on the watch for either bones or sparrows.

A stout, stumpy, shrewd-looking labourer, in a short round frock, high buskins, an old wide-awake, short curly hair, and a very large nose, stood in front of the dairy door, mixing a mess of warm milk for the young calves.

“Purday! Master Purday!” roared nearly the whole young population above; but he was so intent on his mixture, that he went on as if he were deaf, till a second explosion of “Purday! Purday! I say!” made him turn up his face in an odd half-awake kind of manner.

“Purday, what’s the price of a pig?” and, “What does a pig cost, Purday?”

“What d’ye all holler at once for? A body can’t hear a word,” was all the answer they got; whereupon they all started together again, and Purday went on with his mixture as if they had been so many hens cackling.

Then Sam got up his breath again and called alone, “Purday!” and Hal and Susan by pats and pinches strangled the like outcry from Annie and John, so as to leave the field clear for the great question, “Purday, what does a pig cost?”

“More than your voices up there, sir,” growled Purday, making some laugh; but Henry cried impatiently,

“Now, Purday, we really do want to know what is the price of pigs.”

“They was high last market,” began Purday.

“I don’t care if they were high or low,” said Hal; “I want to know what money they cost.”

“Different pigs cost different prices,” quoth the oracle, so sententiously, that Miss Fosbrook’s shoulders shook with laughing as she stood a little in the background of the eager heap in the window.

“A nice little pig, such as you’d give—”

“Hush, hush, Hal, it’s a secret,” cried Susan.

“A pretty sort of secret—known to eight already, and bawled out all over the yard,” said Sam.

“But don’t tell him what it’s for; you can ask him without that.”

“A nice little young pig,” said Sam, “such as you’d keep all the summer, and fat in the winter.”

“Mind, it ain’t for you, Purday,” cried Hal.

“Never fear my being disappointed, sir,” said the free-spoken Purday, with a twinkle of his eye, which Hal understood so well that he burst out,

“Ah! you think I can never do what I say I will; but you’ll see, Purday, if we don’t give a pig to—”

He was screamed at, and pulled into order and silence, ere the words, “Hannah Higgins” had quite come out; and Sam repeated his question.

“Well,” said Purday at last, “if pigs was reasonable, you might get a nice little one to fat, at Kattern Hill fair, somewhere about ten shillings, or maybe twelve—sometimes more, sometimes less.”

“Ten shillings!” The community stood round and looked at one another at the notion of such an awful sum; but Hal was the first to cast a ray of hope on the gloom. “Kattern Hill fair ain’t till Midsummer, and perhaps Grandmamma will send us some money before that. If anybody’s birthday was but coming!”

“Better save it out of our allowance,” said Sam. “How long is it to the fair?”

Miss Fosbrook’s pocket-book declared it to be four weeks.

“Well, then,” said Hal, “we three big ones have sixpence a week each, that’s six shillings, leaving out stingy Bess, and the little ones threepence, that’s three times three is nine, and three times nine is thirty-six, that’s three shillings, and six is nine, and very near four is fourteen. We shall do the pig yet.”

“Yes, Hal; but if pigs are reasonable, I am afraid three times nine never yet were so much so as to make thirty-six,” objected Miss Fosbrook.

Sam whistled.

“Twenty-seven—that’s three and twopence—it’s all the same,” said Hal; then at the scream of the rest, “at least two and threepence. Well, any way there’s plenty for piggy-wiggy, and it shall be a jolly secret to delight Hannah Higgins, and surprise Papa and Mamma: hurrah!”

“Yes,” said Sam; “but then nobody must have any fines.”

“Ay, and Sue must keep her money. That will be a wonder!” shouted Harry.

“Well, I’ll try,” said Susan. “I’ll try not to have a single fine, and I’ll not buy a single lump of sugar-candy, for I do want poor Hannah to have her pig.”

“And so will we!” cried the younger ones with one voice.

“Only,” added Susan, “I must buy Dicky’s canary seed.”

“And I must have a queen’s head to write to Mamma,” said Annie.

“Oh! never mind that, such trumpery as your letters are,” said Hal. “Mamma could say them by heart before she gets them. What does she care for them?”

Little Annie looked very deplorable.

“Never mind, my dear,” said Miss Fosbrook, “mammams always care for little girls’ letters, and you are quite right to keep a penny for your stamp for her.—You see, Hal, this scheme will never come to good if you sacrifice other duties to it.”

Henry twirled round impatiently.

“Now suppose,” said Miss Fosbrook, “that we set up a treasury, and put all in that we can properly afford, and then break it open on the day before the fair, and see how much we have.”

“Oh! yes, yes,” cried the children in raptures.

“Will you help, Miss Fosbrook?” said Susan, clasping her hands.

“I should like to do a very little, if you will take this silver threepenny; but I do not think it would be right for me to spare one penny more, for all I can afford is very much wanted at home.”

“What shall we have for treasury?” said Hal, looking round.

“I know!” cried Susan. “Here, in the baby-house; here’s the Toby, let’s put it inside him.”

The so-called baby-house was an old-fashioned cupboard with glass doors, where certain tender dolls, and other curiosities, playthings too frail to be played with and the like, were ranged in good order, and never taken out except when some one child was unwell, and had to stay in-doors alone.

Toby Fillpot was a present from Nurse Freeman. It was a large mug, representing a man with a red coat, black hat, and white waistcoat, very short legs, and top-boots. The opening of the cup was at the top of his head, and into this was dropped all the silver and pence at present mustered, and computed to be about four shillings.

“And, Miss Fosbrook, you’ll not be cross about fines?” said Johnnie, looking coaxing.

“I hope I shall not be cross,” she answered; “but I do not engage to let you off any. I think having so good a use to put your money to should make you more careful against forfeiting it.”

“Yes,” said Johnnie disconsolately.

“Well, I never get fined,” cried Hal joyfully.

“Except for running up stairs in dirty shoes,” said Sam.

“Oh! there’s no dirt now.”

“Let me see, what are the fines?” said Miss Fosbrook.

“Here’s the list,” said Susan; and sighing, she said, “I’m afraid I shall never do it! If Bessie only would help!”

The fines of the Stokesley schoolroom were these for delinquencies—each value a farthing—

For being dressed later than eight o’clock.

For hair not properly brushed.

For coming to lessons later than five minutes after ten.

For dirty hands.

For being turned back twice with any lesson.

For elbows on the table.

For foolish crying.

For unnecessary words in lesson-time.

For running up stairs in wet shoes.

For leaving things about.

Each of these bits of misbehaviour caused the forfeit of a farthing out of the weekly allowance.

Susan looked very gloomy over them; but Hal exclaimed, “Never mind, Susie; we’ll do it all without you, never fear!”

“And now,” said Sam, “I vote we have some fun in the garden.”

Some readers may be disposed to doubt, after this specimen, whether the young Merrifields could be really young ladies and gentlemen; but indeed their birth might make them so; for there had been Squire Merrifields at Stokesley as long as Stokesley had been a parish, and those qualities of honour and good breeding that mark the gentleman had not been wanting to the elder members of the family. The father of these children was a captain in the navy, and till within the last six years the children had lived near Plymouth; but when he inherited the estate they came thither, and David and the two little ones had been born at Stokesley. The property was not large; and as Captain Merrifield was far from rich, it took much management to give all this tribe of boys and girls a good education, as well as plenty of bread and butter, mutton, and apple-pudding. There was very little money left to be spent upon ornament, or upon pleasuring; so they were brought up to the most homely dress suited to their station, and were left entirely to the country enjoyments that spring up of themselves.

Company was seldom seen, for Papa and Mamma had little time or means for visiting; and a few

morning calls and a little dining out was all they did; which tended to make the young ones more shy and homely, more free and rude, more inclined to love their own ways and despise those of other people, than if they had seen more of the world. They were a happy, healthy set of children, not faulty in essentials, but, it must be confessed, a little wild, rough and uncivil, in spite of the code of fines.

CHAPTER II

Mrs. Merrifield had taught her children herself, till Samuel and Henry began going to the Curate for a couple of hours every day, to be prepared for school. Lessons were always rather a scramble; so many people coming to speak to her, and so many interruptions from the nursery; and then came a time when Mamma always was tired, and Papa used to come out and scold if the noises grew very loud indeed, and was vexed if the children gave Mamma any trouble of any kind. Next they were told they were to have a governess—a sort of piece of finery which the little savages had always despised—and thereupon came Miss Fosbrook; but before she had been a week in the house Mamma was quite ill and in her bed-room, and Papa looked graver than he had ever done before; and Mr. Braddon, the doctor, came very often: and at last Susan was called into Mamma's room, and it was explained to her that Mamma was thought so ill, that she must go to be under a London doctor, and would be away, she could not tell how long; so that meantime the children must all be left to Miss Fosbrook, with many many injunctions to be good and obedient, for hearing that they were going on well would be poor Mamma's only comfort.

It was three days since Captain and Mrs. Merrifield had gone; and Miss Fosbrook stood at the window, gazing at the bright young green of the horse-chestnut trees, and thinking many various thoughts in the lull that the children had left when they rushed out of doors.

She thought herself quite alone, and stood, sometimes smiling over the odd ways of her charges, and at what they put her in mind of, sometimes gravely thinking whether she had said or done the wisest things for them, or what their mother would have most approved. She was just going to move away from the window, when she saw a little figure curled up on the floor, with her head on the window-seat. "Bessie, my dear, what are you doing here? Why are not you gone out?"

"I don't want to go out."

"I thought they were to have a great game at whoop-hide."

"I don't like whoop-hide. Johnnie pulls the clothes off my back."

"My dear, I hope you are not staying in because they called you those foolish names. It was all in good humour."

"It was not kind," said Elizabeth, her throat swelling. "It was not true."

"Perhaps not; but you did not speak to give your reasons; and who could tell how good they might be?"

"I've a right to my secrets as well as they have," said the little maiden.

Miss Fosbrook looked kindly at her, and she turned wistful eyes on the young governess.

"Miss Fosbrook, will you keep a secret?"

"That I will."

"I want my money to buy some card-board—and some ribbon—and some real true paints. I've got some vermilion, but I want some real good blue. And then I want to make some beautiful bands with ties—like what Papa has for his letters—for all Mamma's letters in her desk. There's a bundle of Papa's when he was gone out to the Crimean War, and that's to have a frigate on it, because of the *Calliope*—his ship, you know; and there's one bundle of dear Aunt Sarah's—that's to have a rose, because I always think her memory is like the rose in my hymn, you know; and Grandmamma, she's to have—I think perhaps I could copy a bit of the tower of Westminster Abbey out of the print, because one sees it out of her window; and, oh! I thought of so many more, but you see I can't do it without a real good paint-box, and that costs three and sixpence. Now, Miss Fosbrook, is it stingy to wish to do that?"

"Not at all, my dear; but you could not expect the others to understand what they never were told."

"I'd have said something if they had not called me stingy," said Bessie.

“It certainly was rude and hasty; but if we bear such things good-naturedly, they become better; and they were very eager about their own plan.”

“Such a disagreeable thing as a pig!” continued Bessie. “If it had been anything nice, I should not have minded so much.”

“Yes; but, my dear, you must remember that the pig will be a more useful present than even your pretty contrivances. You cannot call them doing good, as the other will be.”

“Then you are like them! You think I ought to spend all my money on a great horrid pig, when Mamma—” and the tears were in the little girl’s eyes.

“No, indeed, my dear. I don’t think anyone is called on to give their all, and it is very nice and quite right for a little girl to try to make a pretty present to please her mamma. There is plenty of time before you, and I think you will manage to have some share in the very kind action your brothers and sisters are contriving.”

Elizabeth had not forgiven, as she should have done, the being called stingy; it rankled on her feelings far more than those who said the word understood; and she presently went on, “If they knew ever so much, they would only laugh at me, and call it all Bessie’s nonsense. Miss Fosbrook, please, what is affectation?”

“I believe it is pretending to seem what we are not by nature,” said Miss Fosbrook; “putting on manners or feelings that do not come to us of themselves.”

“Then I shall tell them they make me affected,” exclaimed she. “If I like to be quiet and do things prettily, they tease me for being affected, and I’m forced to be as plain and blunt as their are, and I don’t like it! I wish I was grown up. I wish I was Ida Greville!”

“And why, my dear?”

“Because then things might be pretty,” said Elizabeth. “Everything is so plain and ugly, and one gets so tired of it! Is it silly to like things to be pretty?”

“No, far from it; that is, if we do not sacrifice better things to prettiness.”

Elizabeth looked up with a light in her dark eyes, and said, “Miss Fosbrook, I like you!”

Miss Fosbrook was very much pleased, and kissed her.

She paused a moment, and then said, “Miss Fosbrook, may I ask one question? What is your name? Mamma said it must be Charlotte, because you signed your letter Ch. A. Fosbrook, but your little sister’s letter that you showed us began ‘My dear Bell.’ If it is a secret, indeed I will keep it.”

“It is no secret at all,” said Miss Fosbrook, laughing. “My name is Christabel Angela.”

Elizabeth opened her eyes, and said it by syllables. “Christabel Angela! that’s a prettier name than Ida. Does it make you very glad to have it?”

“I like it for some reasons,” said Miss Fosbrook, smiling.

“Oh, tell me!” cried Bessie. “Mamma always says we should not be a bit happier if our names were pretty ones; but I don’t know, I feel as if one would; only the others like to make things plainer and uglier than they are.”

“I never could call your name ugly; it is such a dignified, old, respectable name.”

“Yes; but they call me Betty!”

“And they call me Bell, and sometimes Jelly-bag and Currant-jelly,” said Miss Fosbrook, laughing and sighing, for she would have liked to have heard those funny names again.

“Then it is no good to you!” exclaimed Elizabeth.

“I don’t know that we talk of good in such a matter. I like my name because of the reason it was given to me.”

“Oh, why?” eagerly asked the little girl.

“When I was born, my papa was a very young man, and he was very fond of reading poetry.”

“Why, I thought your papa was a doctor.”

“Well!”

“I thought only ladies, and poets, and idle silly people, cared for poetry.”

“They can hardly be silly if they care rightly for real poetry, Bessie,” said Miss Fosbrook; “at least, so my papa would say. It has been one of his great helps. Well, in those days he was very fond of a poem about a lady called Christabel, who was so good and sweet, that when evil came near, it could not touch her so as to do her any harm; and so he gave his little daughter her name.”

“How very nice!” cried Elizabeth.

“You must not envy me, my dear, for I have been a good deal laughed at for my pretty name, and so has Papa; and I do not think he would have chosen anything so fanciful if he had been a little older.”

“Then isn’t he—what is it you call it—poetical now?”

“Indeed he is, in a good way;” and as the earnest eyes looked so warmly at her, Christabel Fosbrook could not help making a friend of the little maiden. “He has very little time to read it; for you know he is a parish surgeon in a great parish in London, full of poor people, worse off than you can imagine, and often very ill. He is obliged to be always hard at work in the narrow close streets there, and to see everything sad, and dismal, and disagreeable, that can be found; but, do you know, Bessie, he always looks for the good and beautiful side; he looks at one person’s patience, and another person’s kindness, and at some little child’s love for its mother or sister, that hinders it from being too painful for him.”

“But is that poetry? I thought poetry meant verses.”

“Verses are generally the best and most suitable way of expressing our feelings about what is good and beautiful; but they are not always poetry, any more than the verses they sang to-night about the bread and butter, because, you know, wanting thick butter was not exactly a beautiful feeling. I think the denying themselves their little indulgences for the sake of giving the poor woman a pig, is much more poetical, though nobody said a word in verse.”

They both laughed; and Elizabeth said, “That wasn’t what you meant about your papa. Susy cares for goodness.”

“No, it was not all I meant; but it was seeing high and noble thoughts expressed in beautiful verses that gives him pleasure; and when he has a little bit of leisure, it is his great treat to open a book of that sort, and read a little bit to us, and tell us why we like it. He says it makes him young again, and takes him out of the dingy streets, and from all his cares as to how the bills are to be paid.”

“Did you like coming here?” was Bessie’s home question; and Miss Fosbrook winked away a little moisture, as she said,

“I was glad to be growing a woman, and to be able to help about some of those bills; and then I was glad to come into the beautiful country that Papa has so often told us about.”

“I did not know there was anything beautiful here.”

“O Bessie, you never lived in London! You can’t think how many things are beautiful to me here! I want to be writing about them to Papa and Kate all day long.”

“Are they?” said Bessie. “Mamma has pretty things in the drawing-room, but she keeps them out of the way; and everything here is so dull and stupid!” and the little girl gave a yawn.

Miss Fosbrook understood her. The wainscoted room in which they were sitting had been painted of a uniform creamy brown; the chairs were worn; the table was blistered and cracked; the carpet only covered the middle of the room, and was so threadbare, that only a little red showed here and there. All that was needful was there, but of the plainest kind; and where the other children only felt ease and freedom, and were the more contented and happy for the homely good sense of all around them, this little girl felt a want that she scarcely understood, but which made her uncomfortable and discontented, even when she had so much to be thankful for.

Miss Fosbrook moved nearer to the window. Down below there was certainly not much to be seen; only Pierce cleaning the knives in the knife-house, and Martha washing out her pans before the dairy-door; but that was not where she looked. She turned the little half-fretful face upwards. “Look there!” she said; “and talk of seeing nothing pretty!”

“I see nothing—”

“Do you not see the pale clear green of those noble horse-chestnut leaves just sprung into their full summer dress—not in the least worn nor stained yet? And those fine spikes of white blossom, all tending up—up—while the masses of those leaves fall so gracefully down, as if lifting them up, and then falling back to do them honour.” Bessie smiled, and her eye lighted up. “And see the colour against the sky—look at the contrast of that bright light green with the blue, so very deep, of the sky—and oh! see that train of little clouds, red with soft sunny light, like a little soft flock of rosy lambs, if there were such things, lying across the sky. O Bessie! you can’t talk of wanting the sight of pretty things while you have that sky.”

Bessie was coming closer to her, when in burst Sam and Johnnie.

“Hello, Bess! moping here, I declare! I suppose you and Miss Fosbrook are telling each other all your secrets.”

“I was just coming out,” said Miss Fosbrook. “I want to make out something about those noble flowers of the horse-chestnut, and why they don’t look whiter. Could you gather one for me, Sam?”

Sam was only too glad of an excuse for climbing a tree, however cheaply he might hold one who cared for flowers; and by the time Bessie had put on her lilac-spotted sun-bonnet—a shapeless article it must be confessed, with a huge curtain serving for a tippet, very comfortable, and no trouble at all—he had scrambled into the fork, and brought down a beautiful spire of blossoms, with all the grand leaves hanging round in their magnificent fans.

“What will you do with it?” said the children, standing round.

“Do you think you could ask Mary to spare us a jug, Susan? If I might put it in water in the schoolroom fireplace, it would look fresh and cheerful for Sunday.”

“Oh, yes,” said Susan, pleased with the commission, “that I will;” and away she ran, while Miss Fosbrook examined the spike to her own great enjoyment. “I see,” she said, “the flowers are not really white, they each have a patch of pink or yellow on them, which gives them their softness. Yes; and do you see, Bessie, they are in clusters of three, and each three has one flower with a pink spot, and two with a yellow one.”

“That is very curious,” said Bessie: the fretfulness was very much gone out of her tone, and she stood looking at the beautiful flower, without a word, till Susan came back, when she began to show her what Miss Fosbrook had pointed out. Susan smiled with her really good nature, and said, “How funny!” but was more intent on telling Miss Fosbrook that she had brought the jug, and then on hauling Elizabeth away to a game at Tom Tittler’s ground.

Miss Fosbrook said she would put away the flower and come back again; and she settled the branch in the chimney, where it looked very graceful, and really did enliven the room, and then walked out towards the lawn.

There was a lawn in front of the house, part of which had been formerly levelled for a bowling-green, and was kept clear of shrubs or flower-beds. Beyond was a smooth, rather rapid slope towards a quiet river, beyond which there rose again a beautiful green field, crowned above by a thick wood, ending at the top in some scraggy pine-trees, with scanty dark foliage at the top of their rude russet arms. Fine trees stood out here and there upon the slope of the field; and Captain Merrifield’s fine sleeked cows were licking each other, or chewing the cud, under them.

There was a white Chinese bridge, the rails all zigzags, and patterns running this way and that, so that it must have been very ugly and glaring before the white paint had faded so much.

The house was a respectable old stone building, rather brown and grey, and the stone somewhat disposed to peel off in flakes; the windows large sashes, set in great projecting squared stones, the tallest and biggest at the top. It was a house of a very sober pleasant countenance, that looked as if it had always been used to have a large family in it; and there was a vine, with all its beauteous leaves, trained all across the garden front, making a pleasant green summer-blind over the higher half of the drawing-room windows, that now stood open, telling of the emptiness within.

Christabel stood for a few moments looking round, and thinking what a paradise of green rest this would be to her hard-worked father and anxious mother; and how she should like to see her little brothers and sisters have one free run and roll on that delicious greensward, instead of now and then walking to one of the parks as a great holiday. Yet hers was a very happy home, and, except her being absent from it, nothing had befallen her to sadden her merry young spirits; so when she heard the joyous cry behind her—

“I’m on Tommy Tittler’s ground,
Picking up gold and silver,”

she turned about, and laughed as she saw the gold-finders stooping and clawing at the grass, with eyes cast round about them for Hal, who was pursuing Susan in and out, up and down till, with screams of exultation, she was safely across the ridge of the bowling-green, that served as “home.”

When Hal turned back, Miss Fosbrook was as heedfully and warily picking up gold and silver as any of the rest of them. He was resolved on capturing her; but first David was such a tempting prize, with his back so very near, and so unconscious, that he must be made prisoner. A catch at the brown-holland blouse—a cry—a shout of laughter, and Davy is led up behind the standard maiden-blush rose, always serving as the prison. And now the tug of war rages round it, he darts here and there within his bounds, holding out his hand to any kind deliverer whose touch may set him free; and all the others run backwards and forwards, trying to circumvent the watchful jailor, Tom Tittler, who, in front of the rose-bush, flies instantly at whoever is only coming near his captive.

Ha! Susan had nearly—all but done it, while Hal was chasing away Annie. No, not she; Hal is back again, and with a shriek away she scours. Sam! oh, he is very near; if that stupid little Davy would only look round, he would be free in another moment; but he only gapes at the pursuit of Susan, and Sam will touch him without his being aware! No—here’s Hal back again. Sam’s off. What a scamper! Now’s the time—here’s Miss Fosbrook, lighter-footed than any of the children, softly stealing on tip-toe, while Hal is scaring Johnnie. Her fingers just touch Davy’s. “Freed! Freed!” is the cry; and off goes he, pounding for home! but Hal rushes across the path, he intercepts Miss Fosbrook, and, with a shout of triumph—There is the sound of a rent. Everybody stands a little aghast.

“It is only the gathers,” says Miss Fosbrook good-humouredly. “I’ll tuck them up and sew them in by and by; but really, Hal, you need not pull so furiously; I would have yielded to something short of that.”

“Gowns are such stuff!” said Hal, really meaning it for an apology, though it did not sound like one, for her good-natured face abashed him a little.

“Touch and take used to be our rule,” said Miss Fosbrook.

Bessie eagerly said that would be the best way, the boys were so rude; but all the rest with one voice cried out that it would be very stupid; and Miss Fosbrook did not press it, but only begged in a droll way that some one would take pity on her; and come to release her; and so alert was she in skipping towards her allies from behind the rose-bush, that Bessie presently succeeded in giving the rescuing touch, and she flew back quick as a bird to the safe territory, dragging Bessie with her, who otherwise would have assuredly been caught; and who, warm with the spirit of the game, felt as if she should have been quite glad to be made prisoner for her dear Christabel’s sake.

An hour after, and all the children were in bed. Susan and Annie agreeing that a governess was no such great bother after all; and Elizabeth lying awake to whisper over to herself, “Christabel Angela, Christabel Angela! That’s my secret!” in a sort of dream of pleasure that will make most people decide on her being a very silly little girl.

And Christabel Angela herself sat mending her gathers, and thinking over her first week of far greater difficulties than she had contemplated when she had left home with the understanding that she was to be entirely under Mrs. Merrifield’s direction. Poor Mrs. Merrifield had said much of

regret at leaving her to such a crew of little savages, and she had only tried to set the mother's mind at rest by being cheerful; and though she felt that it was a great undertaking to manage those great boys out of lesson-hours, she knew that when a thing cannot be helped, strength and aid is given to those who seek for it sincerely.

And on the whole, she felt thankful to the children for having behaved even as well as they had done.

CHAPTER III

“Grant to us, Thy humble servants, that by Thy holy inspiration we may think those things that be good, and by Thy merciful guiding may perform the same,” spelt out David with some trouble and difficulty, as he stood by Miss Fosbrook on Sunday morning.

“Miss Fosbrook?”

“Well, my dear.”

“Miss Fosbrook?”

Another “Well.”

“Is wanting to buy a pig one of the ‘things that be good’?”

“Anything kind and right is good, my dear,” said Miss Fosbrook, a little vexed at a sort of snorting she heard from the other end of the room.

“Davy thinks the pig is in his Collect,” said Sam.

He was one of those who were especially proud of being downright, and in him it often amounted to utter regardlessness of people’s feelings, yet not out of ill-nature; and when Susan responded, “Don’t tease Davy—he can’t bear it,” he was silent; but the mischief was done; and when Miss Fosbrook went on saying that the wish to help the poor woman was assuredly a good thought, which the little boy might well ask to be aided in fulfilling, David had grown ashamed, and would not listen. But the mention of the pig had set off Master Henry, who was sitting up in the window-seat with Annie, also learning the Collect, and he burst out into descriptions of the weight of money that would be found in Toby, and how he meant to go to the fair with Purday, and help him to choose the pig, and drive it home.

“More likely to hinder,” muttered Sam.

“Besides, Papa wouldn’t let you,” added Bessie; but Hal did not choose to hear, and went on as to how the pig should ran away with Purday, and jump into a stall full of parliament gingerbread (whereat Annie fell into convulsions of laughing), and Hal should be the first to stop it, and jump on its back, and ride out of the fair holding it by the ears; and then they should pop it into the sty unknown to Hannah Higgins, and all lie in wait to hear what would happen; and when it squealed, she would think it the baby crying; but there Susan burst out at the notion of any one thinking a child could scream like a pig, taking it as an affront to all babyhood; and Miss Fosbrook took the opportunity of saying,

“Hadn’t you better hatch your chickens before you count them, Henry? If you prevent everyone from learning the Collect, I fear there will be the less hope of Mr. Piggy.”

“Oh! we don’t have fines on Sundays,” said Henry.

“Mamma says that on Sundays naughtiness is not such a trifle that we can be fined for it,” said Susan.

“It is not naughtiness we are ever fined for,” added Elizabeth: “*that* we are punished and talked to for: but the fines are only for bad habits.”

“Oh! I hope I sha’n’t have any this week,” sighed Susan.

“You may hope,” said Sam. “You’re sure of them for everything possible except crying.”

“Yes, Bessie gets all the crying fines,” said Hal; “and I hope she’ll have lots, because she won’t help the pig.”

Bessie started up from her place and rushed out of the room; while Miss Fosbrook indignantly exclaimed,

“Really, boys, I can’t think how you can be so ill-natured!”

They looked up as though it were quite a new light to them; and Susan exclaimed,

“Oh, Miss Fosbrook! they don’t mean it: Sam and Hal never were ill-natured in their lives.”

"I don't know what you call ill-natured," said Miss Fosbrook, "unless it is saying the very things most likely to vex another."

"I don't mean to vex anybody," said Henry, "only we always go on so, and nobody is such a baby as to mind, except Bessie."

And Sam muttered, "One can't be always picking one's words."

"I am not going to argue about it," said Miss Fosbrook; "and it is time to get ready for church. Only I thought manliness was shown in kindness to the weak, and avoiding what can pain them."

She went away; and Susan was the first to exclaim,

"I didn't think she'd have been so cross!"

"Stuff, Sue!" said Sam; "it's not being cross. I like her for having a spirit; but one can't be finikin and mealy-mouthed to suit her London manners. I like the truth."

It would have been well if any one had been by to tell Mr. Samuel that truth of character does not consist in disagreeable and uncalled-for personalities.

Miss Fosbrook did not wonder at little Elizabeth for her discomfort under the rude homeliness of Stokesley, where the children made a bad copy of their father's sailor bluntness, and the difficulties of money matters kept down all indulgences. She knew that Captain Merrifield was as poor a man for an esquire as her father was for a surgeon, and that if he were to give his sons an education fit for their station, he must make his household live plainly in every way; but without thinking them right feelings, she had some pity for little Bessie's weariness and discontent in never seeing anything pretty. The three girls came in dressed for church, in the plainest brown hats, black capes, and drab alpaca frocks, rather long and not very full; not a coloured bow nor handkerchief, not a flounce nor fringe, to relieve them; even their books plain brown. Bessie looked wistfully at Miss Fosbrook's pretty Church-service, and said she and Susan both had beautiful Prayer-Books, but Mamma said they could not be trusted with them yet—Ida Greville had such a beauty.

Was it the effect of Miss Fosbrook's words, that Sam forbore to tease Bessie about Ida Greville?—whose name was a very dangerous subject in the schoolroom. Also, he let Bessie take hold of Miss Fosbrook's hand in peace, though in general the least token of affection was scouted by the whole party.

It was a pretty walk to church, over a paddock, where the cows were turned out, and then along a green lane; and the boys had been trained enough in Sunday habits to make them steady and quiet on the way, especially as Henry was romancing about the pig.

By and by Elizabeth gave Miss Fosbrook's hand a sudden pull; and she perceived, in the village street into which they were emerging, a party on the way to church. There were two ladies, one in stately handsome slight mourning, the other more quietly dressed, and two or three boys; but what Elizabeth wanted her to look at was a little girl of nine years old, who was walking beside the lady.

Her hat was black chip, edged and tied with rose-coloured ribbon, and adorned with a real bird, with glass eyes, black plumage, except the red crest and wings. She wore a neatly-fitting little fringed black polka, beneath which spread out in fan-like folds her flounced pink muslin, coming a little below her knees, and showing her worked drawers, which soon gave place to her neat stockings and dainty little boots. She held a small white parasol, bordered with pink, and deeply fringed, over her head, and held a gold-clasped Prayer-Book in her hand; and Miss Fosbrook heard a little sigh, which told her that this was the being whom Elizabeth Merrifield thought the happiest in the world. She hoped it was not all for the fine clothes; and Sam muttered,

"What a little figure of fun!"

Martin and Osmond Greville went daily to Mr. Carey's, like Sam and Hal, so the boys ran on to them; and Mrs. Greville, turning round, showed a very pleasant face as she bowed to Miss Fosbrook, and shaking hands with Susan and Elizabeth, asked with much solicitude after their mamma, and how lately they had heard of her.

Susan was too simple and straightforward to be shy, and answered readily, that they had had letters, and Mamma had been sadly tired by the journey, but was better the next day. The little girls shook hands; and Mrs. Greville made a kind of introduction by nodding towards her companion, and murmuring something about "Fräulein Munsterthal;" and Miss Fosbrook found herself walking beside a lady with the least of all bonnets, a profusion of fair hair, and a good-humoured, one-coloured face, no doubt Miss Ida's German governess. She said something about the fine day, and received an answer, but what it was she could not guess, whether German, French, or English, and her own knowledge of the two first languages was better for reading than for speaking; so after an awkward attempt or two, she held her peace and looked at her companions.

Susan and Mrs. Greville seemed to be getting on very well together; but Elizabeth's admiration of Ida seemed to be speechless, for they were walking side by side without a word, perhaps too close to their elders to talk.

Annie and David were going on steadily hand in hand a little way off; and Miss Fosbrook chiefly heard the talk of the boys, who had fallen behind; perhaps her ears were quickened by its personality, for though Sam was saying, "I'll tell you what, she's a famous fellow!" the rejoinder was, "What! do you mean to say that you mind her?"

"Doesn't he?" said Hal's voice; "why, she sent him away from tea last night, just for shying crusts."

"And did he go?" and there was a disagreeable sounding laugh, in which she was sorry that Hal joined.

"Catch the Fräulein serving me so!"

"She never tries!"

"She knows better!"

"I say, Sam, I thought you had more spirit. You'll be sitting up pricking holes in a frill by the time the Captain comes back."

"And Hal will be mincing along with his toes turned out like a dancing-master!" continued an affected voice.

"No such thing!" cried Hal angrily: "I'm not a fellow to be ordered about!"

The Grevilles laughed; and one of them said, "Well, then, why don't you show it? I'd soon send her to the right-about if she tried to interfere with me!"

Miss Fosbrook could bear it no longer; and facing suddenly round, looked the speaker full in the face, and said, "I am very much obliged to you—but you should not speak quite so loud."

The boys shrank back out of countenance; and Sam, who alone had not spoken, looked up into her face with a merry air, as if he were gratified by her spirited way of discomfiting them.

Osmond tried to recover, and muttered, "What a sell!" rather impudently; but they were now near the churchyard, and Mrs. Greville turning round, all was hushed.

Christabel felt much vexed that all this should have happened just before going into church; she felt a good deal ruffled herself, and feared that Bessie's head was filled with nonsense, if Hal's were not with something worse.

The church looked pretty outside, with the old weather-boarded wooden belfry rising above the tiled roof and western gable; and it was neatly kept but not pretty within, the walls all done over with pale buff wash, and the wood-work very clumsy. Sam and Susan behaved well and attentively; but Bessie fidgeted into her mamma's place, and would stand upon a hassock. Miss Fosbrook was much afraid it was to keep in sight of the beautiful bird. Hal yawned; and Johnnie not only fidgeted unbearably himself, but made his sister Annie do the same, till Miss Fosbrook scarcely felt as if she was at church, and made up her mind to tell Johnnie that she should leave him at home with the babies unless he changed his ways. Little David went on most steadily with his Prayer-Book, and scarcely looked off it till the sermon, when he fell asleep.

Miss Fosbrook had one pleasure as she was going home. The children had all gone on some steps before her, chattering eagerly among themselves, when Sam turned back and said abruptly, "Miss Fosbrook, you didn't mind *that*, I hope?"

"What those boys were saying? It depends on you whether you make me mind it."

"I don't mean to make any rows if I can help it," said Sam.

"I am sure I hope you will be able to help it! I don't know what I should do if you did!"

Sam gave an odd smile with his honest face. "Well, you've got a good spirit of your own. It would take something to cow you."

"Pray don't try!"

Sam laughed, and said, "I did promise Papa to be conformable."

"And I was very much obliged to you yesterday evening. The behaviour of the other boys depends so much on you."

"Yes, I know," said Sam; "and I don't mind it so much now I see you can stand up for yourself."

"Besides, what would it be if I had to write to your father that I could not manage such a bear-garden?"

"I'll take care that sha'n't happen," exclaimed Sam. "It would hinder all the good to Mamma! I'll tell you what," he added, after a confidential pause, "if we get beyond you, there's Mr. Carey."

"I thought you did not mean to get beyond me."

Sam looked a little disconcerted, and it struck her that, though he would not say so, he was doubtful whether the Greville influence might not render Henry unmanageable; but he quickly gave it another turn. "Only you must not plague us about London manners."

"I don't know what you mean by London manners. Do you mean not bawling at tea? for I mean to insist upon that, I assure you, and I want you to help me."

"Oh! not being finikin, and mincing, and nonsensical!"

"I hope I'm not so!" said Miss Fosbrook, laughing heartily; "but I'll tell you one thing, Sam, that I do wish you would leave off—and that is teasing. I don't know whether that is country manners, but I don't like to see a sensible kind fellow like you just go out of your way to say something mortifying to a younger one."

"You don't know," said Sam. "It is fun. They like it."

"If they really like it, there is no objection. I know I should like very much to have my brother here quizzing me; but you know very well there are two sorts of such fun, and one that is only sport to the stronger side."

"Bessie is so ridiculous."

"She is the very one I want to protect. I don't think that teasing her does any good; it only gives her cross feelings. And she really has more right on her side than you think. You might be just as honest and bold if you were less rude and bearish."

"I can't bear to see her so affected and perked up."

"It is not affectation. She is really more gentle and quiet than you are; you don't think it so in your Mamma, and she is like her."

"Mamma is not like Bessie."

"And then about Davy. How could you go and stop the poor little boy when he was trying to think and feel rightly?"

"He was so funny," repeated Sam.

"I hope you will think another time whether your fun is safe and kind."

"One can't be so particular," he said impatiently.

"I am sorry to hear it. I thought the only way to do right was to be particular."

He grunted, and flung away from her. She was vexed to have sent him off in such a mood; but, unmannerly as he was, she saw so much good in him, that she could not but hope he would be her friend and ally.

Dinner went off very peaceably, and then Susan fetched her two darlings from the nursery, George and Sarah, of three years and eighteen months old. Her great perfection was as a motherly elder sister; and even Sam was gentle to these little things, and played with them very nicely.

Miss Fosbrook reminded Hal of his Collect; but he observed that there was plenty of time, and continued to stand by the window, pursuing the flies with his finger, not killing them, but tormenting them and David very seriously, by making them think he would—not a very pretty business for the day when all things should be happy, more like that which is always found “for idle hands to do.”

Evening service-time put an end to this sport; but Miss Fosbrook could not set off till after a severe conflict with Johnnie. She had decreed that he should not go again that day, after his behaviour in the morning; and perhaps he would not have minded this punishment much if David had not been going, which made him think it a disgrace. So, in the most independent manner he put on his hat, and was marching off, when Miss Fosbrook stood in front of him, and ordered him back.

He repeated, “I’m going to church.” It was plain enough that he had heard what those boys had said about not submitting.

“Church is not the place to go to in a fit of wilfulness, Johnnie,” she said; and his sisters broke out, “O Johnnie!” but the naughty boy, fancying, perhaps, that want of time would lead to his getting his own way, marched on, sticking up his toes very high in the air.

Hal laughed.

“Johnnie, Johnnie dear,” entreated Susan, “what would Mamma say?”

John would not hear, and walked on.

“John,” said Miss Fosbrook, “if you do not come back directly, I must carry you.”

She had measured her strength with his: he was only eight years old, and she believed that she could carry him; but he heard the church-bells ringing, and thought he should have his way.

She laid hold of him, and he began fighting and kicking, in stout shoes, whose thumps were no joke. She held fast, but she felt frightened, and doubtful of the issue of the struggle; and again there was Hal laughing.

“For-shame, Henry!” burst out Sam; and the same moment those two feet were secured, and John was a prisoner. Miss Fosbrook called out to the rest to go on to church, and she and Sam dragged the boy up to the nursery, and shut him in there, roaring passionately.

Nurse Freeman, knowing nothing about it, could not believe but that the stranger lady had made her child naughty, and said something about their Mamma letting him go to church; and “when the child wished to go to church, it seemed strange he should not.”

Miss Fosbrook would not defend herself, for she was in great haste; but Sam exclaimed, “Stuff! he was as naughty as could be all this morning, and only wanted to go now because he was told not.”

Johnnie bellowed out something else, but Miss Fosbrook would not let Sam go on; she touched his arm, and drew him off with her, he exclaiming, “Foolish old Freeman! she will pet and spoil him all church-time, till he is worse than ever.”

It was lucky for her that she was too much hurried to dwell on this vexation; she almost ran to save herself from being late, and scarcely heard Sam’s mutterings about wishing to break Martin Greville’s head.

“You need not hurry so much,” he said; “there’s a shorter cut, only I suppose you can’t get through a gap.”

“Can’t I?” she laughed; and he led her on straight through the Short-horns. Some of them looked at her more than she fancied, but she knew she might give up all hopes of Sam if he detected her fears. Then came the gap, where a tree had been cut down in the hedge, and such a jump down from it! But she gathered up her muslin, and made her leap so gallantly, that the boy cried,

“Hurrah! well done!” and came and walked close to her, saying confidentially, “I say, do you think we shall ever do the pig?”

“I am sure it might be done. If you are likely to do it you must know better than I.”

“I don’t know that I much care about it. It will be rather a bother; only now we have said it, I shall hate it if we don’t do it.”

“I think the pleasure of giving it will be a delightful reward for a little self-command.”

“Only Hal and the girls will make such a work about it. I’m glad, after all, that Bessie has nothing to do with it, or she would want to dress it up in flowers and ribbons. Ha-ha! But what a little crab it is!”

“Don’t be too sure of that. People may have other designs.”

“Bessie’s can’t be anything but trumpery.”

“Sometimes present trumpery is a step to something better. ‘A was an Archer’ is not very wise, but it is the road to reading—and even if it were not so, Sam, it is not right to shame people into giving; for what is not bestowed for the true reasons, does no good to giver nor to receiver.”

Sam looked up with a frown of attention, as if he were trying to take in the new light; but he did take it in, and smacking his hands together with a noise like a pistol-shot, said, “Ay, that’s it! We don’t want what is grudged.”

Miss Fosbrook thought of words that would another time be more familiar to Sam. “Not grudgingly, nor of necessity, for God loveth a cheerful giver.”

What she said was, “You see, if you plague Bessie too much, to make her like ourselves, when she is really so different, you are driving her to the shamming you despise so much.”

“But ought not she to be cured of being silly?”

“When we have quite made up our minds upon what silliness is. There, the bell has stopped.”

CHAPTER IV

The most part of church-time Johnnie was eating Nurse Freeman's plum-cake. Perhaps this did not make him any easier in the conscience, but he had a very unlucky sentiment, that as he was already naughty and in disgrace, it was of no use to take the trouble of being good till he could make a fresh beginning; and after what the Grevilles had said, he did not think that would be till Papa and Mamma came home; he did not at all mean to give in to a girl that was not even twenty. So he would not turn to the only wise thing he could have done, the learning of his Collect, but he teased Nurse out of more cake and more, and got what play he could out of little George, and that was not much, for Johnnie was not in a temper to be pleasant with a little one.

Coming home from church, Collects were to be learnt and said before tea: but Hal, after glancing over his own, took up his cap and said, "Come along, Sam, Purday will be feeding the pigs; I want to choose the size of ours."

"I've not done," said Sam.

"Papa never said we were to say them to Miss Fosbrook."

"He meant it though," was all Sam's answer. "Don't hinder me."

"Well, I've no notion of being bound by what people mean," continued Hal; and no one could imagine the torment he made himself, neither going nor staying, arguing the matter with his elder brother, as if Sam's coming would justify him, and interrupting everyone; till at last Miss Fosbrook gathered all her spirit, and ordered him either to sit down and learn properly at once, or to go quite away. She was very much vexed, for Henry had been the most obliging and good-natured of all at first, and likely to be fond of her; but such a great talker could not fail to be weak, and his vanity had been set against her. He looked saucy at first, and much inclined to resist; if he had seen any sympathy for him in Sam he might have done so, but Miss Fosbrook's steady eye was too much for him, so he saved his dignity, as he thought, by exclaiming, "I'm sure I don't want to stay in this stuffy hole with such a set of owls; I shall go to Purday." And off he marched.

The others stayed, and said their Collects and Catechism very respectably, all but John, who had not learned the Collect at all, and was sent into another room to finish it, to which he made no resistance; he had had enough of actual fighting with Miss Fosbrook.

Then she offered to read a story to the others, but she found that this was distasteful even to her friend Sam; he thought it stupid to be read to, and said he should see after Hal; David trotted after him, and Susan and Anne repaired to the nursery to play with the little ones and the baby. She minded it the less, as they all had some purpose; but she had already been vexed to find that all but Davy preferred the most arrant vacant idleness to anything rational. To be sure, Susan sometimes, Bessie and Hal always, would read any book that made no pretensions to be instructive, but even a fact about a lion or an elephant made them detect wisdom in disguise, and throw it aside. She thought, however, she would make the most of Bessie, and asked whether she would like to hear reading, or read to herself.

"To myself," said Bessie; and there was a silence, while Miss Fosbrook, glad of the quiet, began reading her *Christian Year*. Presently she heard a voice so low that it seemed at a distance and it made her start, for it was saying "Christabel!" then she almost laughed, for it seemed to have been an audacious experiment, to judge by little Elizabeth's scared looks and the glow on her cheeks.

"May I say it sometimes when we are alone together?" she said timidly. "I do like it so much!"

"If it is such a pleasure to you, I would not deprive you of it," said Miss Fosbrook, laughing; "but don't do so, except when we are alone, for your Mamma would not like me to seem younger still."

"Oh, thank you! Isn't it a nice secret?" cried Bessie, clinging to her hand: "and will you let me hug you sometimes?"

A little love was pleasant to Miss Fosbrook, when she was feeling lonely, and she took Bessie in her lap, and they exchanged caresses, to the damage of the collar that Miss Fosbrook's sister had worked for her.

"And you don't call me silly?" cried Bessie.

"That depends," was the answer, with some arch fun; but Bessie had not much turn for fun, and presently went on—

"And you saw Ida Greville?"

"Yes."

"What did you think of her?"

"I had not much opportunity of learning what to think."

"But her parasol, and her bird! Did you think her mama very silly to give her pretty things?"

"No, certainly not, unless she wore them at unsuitable times, or thought too much about them."

"Ida has so many, she does not think of them at all. And she has shells, and such a lovely work-box, and picture-books; she has all she wants."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Oh, yes, quite sure! and they don't tease her for liking pretty things; her brothers keep quite away, and never bother about the schoolroom; but she learns Italian and German, and drawing and singing. Mr. Greville said something about our spending the day there. Oh! if we do but go! Won't you, Miss Fosbrook?"

"If I am asked, and if your Mamma would wish it."

"Oh, Mamma always lets us go, except once—when—when—"

"When what?"

"When I cried," said Elizabeth, hanging down her head; "I couldn't help it. It did seem so tiresome here, and she said I was learning to be discontented; but nobody can help wishing, can they?"

"There must be a way of not breaking the Tenth Commandment."

"I don't covet; I don't want to take things away from Ida, only to have the same."

"Yes; but what does the explanation at the end of the Duty to our Neighbour say, filling out that Commandment?"

"I think I'll go and see what Susie is doing," said Elizabeth.

Christabel sighed as the little girl walked off, displeased at having her repinings set before her in a graver light than that in which she had hitherto chosen to regard them.

She saw no more of her charges till tea-time, when the bell brought them from different quarters, Johnnie with such a grimy collar and dirty hands, that he was a very un-Sunday-like figure, and she would have sent him away to make himself decent, but that she was desirous of not over-tormenting him.

Sunday was always celebrated by having treacle with the bread, so the butter riot was happily escaped; and Bessie was not in a gracious mood, and the corners of her mouth provoked the boys to begin on what they knew would make her afford them sport. Hal first: "I say, Bet, didn't Purday want his gun to-day at church?"

Elizabeth put out her lip in expectation that something unpleasant was intended, and other voices were not slow to ask an explanation.

"Shooting the cocky-olly birds!"

A general explosion of laughter.

"I say (always the preface to the boy's wit), shall I get a jay down off the barn to stick into your hat, Betty?"

"Don't, Hal," said such a deplorable offended voice, that Sam, who had really held his tongue at first, could not help chiming in,

"No, no; a cock-sparrow, for her London manners."

“No, that’s for me, Sam,” said Christabel good-humouredly. “A London-bred sparrow; a pert forward chit.”

She really had found a safety-valve; the boys were entertained, and diverted from their attack on their favourite victim, by finding everyone an appropriate bird; and when they came to “Tomtits” and “Dishwashers,” were so astonished at Miss Fosbrook’s never having seen either, that they instantly fell into the greatest haste to finish their tea, and conduct her into the garden, and through a course of birds, eggs, and nests, about which, as soon as she was assured that there was to be no bird’s-nesting, she was very eager.

Bessie ought to have been thankful that her persecutors were called off, but she was in a dismal mood, and was taken with a fit of displeasure that her own Christabel Angela was following the rabble rout into the garden, instead of staying in the school-room at her service.

The reason of her gloom was, that Miss Fosbrook had spoken a word that she did not choose to take home, and yet which she could not shake off. So she would neither stay in nor go out cheerfully, and sauntered along looking so piteous, that Johnnie could not help making her worse by plucking at her dress, by suddenly twisting her cape round till the back was in front, and pushing her hat over her eyes, till “Don’t Johnnie,” in a dismal whine, alternated with “I’ll tell Miss Fosbrook.”

Christabel did not see nor hear. She had gone forward with a boy on either side of her, and Susan walking backwards in front, all telling the story of a cuckoo,—or gowk, as Sara called it in Purday’s language,—which they had found in a water-wagtail’s nest in a heap of stones; how it sat up, constantly gaping with its huge mouth, while the poor little foster-parents toiled to their utmost to keep it supplied with caterpillars, and the last time it was seen, when full-fledged, were trying to lure it to come out of the nest by holding up green palmers at some little distance before it. This was in the evening; by morning it was gone, having probably taken flight at sunrise.

Miss Fosbrook listened with all the pleasure the boys could desire. She had read natural history, and looked at birds stuffed in the British Museum, or alive at the Zoological Gardens, on the rare days when her father had time to give himself and his children a treat; and her fresh value and interest in all these country things were delightful to the boys.

It was a lovely summer evening. The sun was low enough to make the shadows long and refreshing, as they lay upon the blooming grass of the wilderness, softly swaying in the breeze, all pale with its numerous chaffy blossoms, and varied by the tall buttercups that raised up their shining yellow heads, or by white clouds of bold-faced ox-eye daisies.

The pear-trees were like white garlands; the apple-trees covered with white blossoms and rosy buds; the climbing roses on the wall were bursting into blossom; the sky was one blue vault without a cloud.

Surely Elizabeth had no lack here of what was pretty. Then why did she lag behind, unseeing, unheeding of all, but peevishly pushing off John and Anne, thinking that they always teased her worst on Sundays, and very much discomfited that Miss Fosbrook was not attending to her? Surely the fault was not altogether in what was outside her.

“See!” cry the boys. Miss Fosbrook must first look up there, high upon the side of the house, niched behind that thick stem of the vine. What, can’t she see those round black eyes and little beak? They see her plain enough. Ah! now she has them. That’s a fly-catcher. By and by they shall be able to show her the old birds flying round, catching flies on the wing, and feeding the young ones, all perched in a row.

Now, can she scramble up the laurels? Yes, she hopes so; though she wished she had known what was coming, for she would have changed her Sunday muslin. But a look of anxiety came on Sam’s face as he peeped into the clump of laurels; he signed back the others, sprang upon the dark scraggy bough of the tree, and Hal called out,

“Gone! has Ralph been there?”

“Ay, the black rascal; at least, I suppose so. Not an egg left, and they would have hatched this week!”

“Well, Purday calls him his best friend,” said Harry. “He says we should not get a currant or a gooseberry if it wasn’t for that there raven, as Papa won’t have the small birds shot.”

“Bring down the nest, Sam,” cried Susan; “Georgy will like to have it.”

The children behind, who never could hear of anything to be had without laying a claim to it, shouted that they wanted the nest; but Sam said Sue had spoken first, and they fell back discontented, and more bent on their unkind sport. Miss Fosbrook was rather shocked at the tearing out the nest, and asked if the old bird would not have another brood there; but it was explained that a thrush would never return to a forsaken nest; and when Sam came down with it in his hand, she was delighted with the wonderful cup that formed the lining, so smooth and firm a bason formed of dried mud set within the grassy wall. She had thought that swallows alone built with mud, and had to learn that the swallows used their clay for their outer walls, and down for their lining, whereas the thrush is a regular plasterer.

Sam promised her another thrush to make up for her disappointment, and meantime conducted her to a very untidy old summer-house, the moss of whose roof hung down loose and rough over a wild collection of headless wooden horses, little ships with torn sails, long sticks, battered watering-pots, and old garden tools. She was desired to look up to one of the openings in the ragged moss, and believe that it housed a kitty wren’s family of sixteen or eighteen; but she had to take this on trust, for to lay a finger near would lead to desertion; in fact, Sam was rather sorry to be able to point out to her, on coming out, the tiny, dark, nutmeg, cock-tailed father kitty, popping in and out of the thorn hedge, spying at the party.

Now then for a wonder as they came out. Sam waved everybody away—nay, waved is a small word for what he did—shouted, pushed, ordered, would be more like it. He was going to give Miss Fosbrook such a proof of his esteem as hardly any one enjoyed, not even Hal, twice in the summer.

Everybody submitted to his violent demonstrations, and Christabel followed him to the back of the summer-house. There stood a large red flower-pot upside down.

“Now, Miss Fosbrook!”

Sam’s finger hooked into the hole at the top. Off came the flower-pot, and disclosed something flying off with rushing wings, and something confused remaining,—a cluster of grey wings all quill, with gaping yellow mouths here and there opening, a huddling movement always going on in the forlorn heap, as if each were cold, and wanted to be undermost.

“Tits, my tits!” said Sam triumphantly; “they’ve built their nest here three years following.”

“But how do they get in and out?”

“Through the hole. Take care, I’ll show you one.”

“Won’t you frighten away the bird?”

“Oh dear no! Ox-eyes aren’t like wrens; I go to them every day. See!” and he took up in his hand a creature that could just be seen to be intended for a bird, though the long skinny neck was bare, and the tiny quills of the young wings only showed a little grey sprouting feather, as did the breast some primrose-coloured down. Miss Fosbrook had to part with some favourite cockney notions of the beauty of infant birds, and on the other hand to gain a vivid idea of what is meant by “callow young.”

Sam quickly put his nestling back, and showed her the parent. She could hardly believe that the handsome bird in the smooth grey coat and bright straw-coloured waistcoat, with the broad jet-black line down the centre, the great white cheeks edged with black, and the bold knowing look, could be like what the little bits of deformity in the nest would soon become.

“Ay, that’s an ox-eye,” said Sam. “You’ll hear them going on peter—peter—peter—all the spring.”

But Sam was cut short by a loud and lamentable burst of roaring where they had left the party.

Miss Fosbrook hurried back, hearing Hal's rude laugh as she came nearer, it was Elizabeth, sobbing in the passionate way in which it is not good to see a child cry, and violently shaking off Susan, who was begging her to stop herself before Miss Fosbrook should come.

What *was* the matter?

"Oh! Betty's nonsense."

"Johnnie *did*—"

"Johnnie only—"

"Now, Hal!"

"Tell-tale!" "Cry-baby!"

"She only cried that Miss Fosbrook might hear."

So shouted the little Babel, Bessie sobbing resentfully between her words, till Miss Fosbrook, insisting that everybody should be quiet, desired her to tell what had happened.

"Johnnie—Johnnie called me a toad."

The others all burst out laughing, and Miss Fosbrook, trying to silence them with a frown, said it was very rude of John, but she saw no reason why a girl of Bessie's age should act so childish a part.

"He's been teasing me, and so has Anne, all this time!" cried Bessie. "They've been at me ever since I came out, pulling me and plaguing me, and—"

"Well," said Susan, "I told you to walk in front of Miss Fosbrook, where they could not."

"I didn't do anything to her," said John.

"Now, Johnnie!"

"He only pulled her frock and poked her ankles," said Anne pleadingly

"Only—and why did you do what she did not like?"

Johnnie looked sturdy and cross. Anne hung her head; and Elizabeth burst out again,

"They always do—they always are cross to me! I said I'd tell you, and now they said Ida was a conceited little toad, and stingy Bet was another;" and out burst her howls again.

"A very sad and improper way of spending a Sunday evening," said Miss Fosbrook, who had really grown quite angry. "Anne and John, I *will* put an end to this teasing. Go to bed this instant."

They did not dare to disobey, but went off slowly with sulky footsteps, muttering to one another that Miss Fosbrook always took pipy Betty's part; Nurse said so, and they wished Mamma was at home. And when they came up to the nursery, Nurse pitied them. She had never heard of a young lady doing such a thing as ordering off two poor dear children to bed for only just saying a word; but it seemed there were to be favourites now. No, she could not put them to bed; they must wait till Mary came in from her walk; she wasn't going to put herself out of the way for any fine London governess.

So Johnnie had another conquest over Miss Fosbrook; but Anne was uncomfortable, and went and sat in a corner, wishing she had had her punishment properly over, and kicking her brother away when he wanted to play with her.

As for Bessie, she only cried the more for Miss Fosbrook's trying to talk to her. It was a way of hers, perhaps from being less strong than the others, if once she started in a cry she could not leave off.

Susan told Miss Fosbrook so; and the boys tried to drag her on with a promise of a blackbird's nest; but she thought them unfeeling to such woeful distress, and first tried to reason with Bessie, then to soothe her, till at last, finding all in vain, she thought bed the only place for the child, and led her into the house, helped her, still shaking with sobs, to undress, and was going to see her lie down in the bed which she shared with Susan. Elizabeth was still young enough to say her prayers aloud.

The words came out in the middle of choking sobs, not as if she were much attending to them. Miss Fosbrook knelt down by her as she was going to rise, and said in her own words,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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