YONGE CHARLOTTE MARY

FRIARSWOOD POST OFFICE

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I—THE STRANGE LAD

'Goodness! If ever I did see such a pig!' said Ellen King, as she mounted the stairs. 'I wouldn't touch him with a pair of tongs!'

'Who?' said a voice from the bedroom.

'Why, that tramper who has just been in to buy a loaf! He is a perfect pig, I declare! I only wonder you did not find of him up here! The police ought to hinder such folk from coming into decent people's shops! There, you may see him now!'

'Is that he upon the bridge—that chap about the size of our Harold?'

'Yes. Did you ever see such a figure? His clothes aren't good enough for a scare-crow—and the dirt, you can't see that from here, but you might sow radishes in it!'

'Oh, he's swinging on the rail, just as I used to do. Put me down, Nelly; I don't want to see any more.' And the eyes filled with tears; there was a working about the thin cheeks and the white lips, and a long sigh came out at last, 'Oh, if I was but like him!'

'Like him! I'd wish something else before I wished that,' said Ellen. 'Don't think about it, Alfred dear; here are Miss Jane's

pictures.'

'I don't want the pictures,' said Alfred wearily, as he laid his head down on his white pillow, and shut his eyes because they were hot with tears.

Ellen looked at him very sadly, and the feeling in her own mind was, that he was right, and nothing could make up for the health and strength that she knew her mother feared would never return to him.

There he lay, the fair hair hanging round the white brow with the furrows of pain in it, the purple-veined lids closed over the great bright blue eyes, the long fingers hanging limp and delicate as a lady's, the limbs stretched helplessly on the couch, whither it cost him so much pain to be daily moved. Who would have thought, that not six months ago that poor cripple was the merriest and most active boy in the parish?

The room was not a sad-looking one. There were spotless white dimity curtains round the lattice window; and the little bed, and the walnut of the great chest, and of the doors of the press-bed on which Alfred lay, shone with dark and pale grainings. There was a carpet on the floor, and the chairs had chintz cushions; the walls were as white as snow, and there were pretty china ornaments on the mantel-piece, many little pictures hanging upon the walls, and quite a shelf of books upon the white cloth, laid so carefully on the top of the drawers. A little table beside Alfred held a glass with a few flowers, a cup with some toast and water, a volume of the 'Swiss Family Robinson;' and

a large book of prints of animals was on a chair where he could reach it.

A larger table was covered with needle-work, shreds of lining, scissors, tapes, and Ellen's red work-box; and she herself sat beside it, a very nice-looking girl of about seventeen, tall and slim, her lilac dress and white collar fitting beautifully, her black apron sitting nicely to her trim waist, and her light hair shining, like the newly-wound silk of the silk-worm, round her pleasant face; where the large, clear, well-opened blue eyes, and the contrast of white and red on the cheek, were a good deal like poor Alfred's, and gave an air of delicacy.

Their father had been, as their mother said, 'the handsomest coachman who ever drove to St. James's;' but he had driven thither once too often; he had caught his death of cold one bitter day when Lady Jane Selby was obliged to go to a drawing-room, and had gone off in a deep decline fourteen years ago, when the youngest of his five children was not six weeks old.

The Selby family were very kind to Mrs. King, who, besides her husband's claims on them, had been once in service there; and moreover, had nursed Miss Jane, the little heiress, Ellen's foster-sister. By their help she had been able to use her husband's savings in setting up a small shop, where she sold tea, tobacco and snuff, tape, cottons, and such little matters, besides capital bread of her own baking, and various sweet-meats, the best to the taste of her own cooking, the prettiest to the eye brought from Elbury. Oranges too, and apples, shewed their yellow or rosy

cheeks at her window in their season; and there was sometimes a side of bacon, displaying under the brown coat the delicate pink stripes bordering the white fat. Of late years one pane of her window had been fitted up with a wooden box, with a slit in it on the outside, and a whole region round it taken up with printed sheets of paper about 'Mails to Gothenburg,—Weekly Post to Vancouver's Island'—and all sorts of places to which the Friarswood people never thought of writing.

Altogether, she throve very well; and she was a good woman, whom every one respected for the pains she took to bring up her children well. The eldest, Charles, had died of consumption soon after his father, and there had been much fear for his sister Matilda; but Lady Jane had contrived to have her taken as maid to a lady who usually spent the winter abroad, and the warm climate had strengthened her health. She was not often at Friarswood; but when she came she looked and spoke like a lady—all the more so as she gave herself no airs, but was quite simple and humble, for she was a very good right-minded young woman, and exceedingly fond of her home and her good mother.

Ellen would have liked to copy Matilda in everything; and as a first step, she went for a year to a dress-maker; but just as this was over, Alfred's illness had begun; and as he wanted constant care and attendance, it was thought better that she should take in work at home. Indeed Alfred was such a darling of hers, that she could not have endured to go away and leave him so ill.

Alfred had been a most lively, joyous boy, with higher spirits

than he quite knew what to do with, all fun and good-humour, and yet very troublesome and provoking. He and his brother Harold were the monkeys of the school, and really seemed sometimes as if they *could not* sit still, nor hinder themselves from making faces, and playing tricks; but that was the worst of them—they never told untruths, never did anything mean or unfair, and could always be made sorry when they had been in fault. Their old school-mistress liked them in spite of all the plague they gave her; and they liked her too, though she had tried upon them every punishment she could devise.

Little Miss Jane, the orphan whom the Colonel and Mrs. Selby had left to be brought up by her grandmother, had a great fancy that Alfred should be a page; and as she generally had her own way, he went up to the Grange when he was about thirteen years old, and put on a suit thickly sown with buttons. But ere the gloss of his new jacket had begun to wear off, he had broken four wine-glasses, three cups, and a decanter, all from not knowing where he was going; he had put sugar instead of salt into the salt-cellars at the housekeeper's dining-table, that he might see what she would say; and he had been caught dressing up Miss Jane's Skye terrier in one of the butler's clean cravats; so, though Puck, the aforesaid terrier, liked him better than any other person, Miss Jane not excepted, a regular complaint went up of him to my Lady, and he was sent home. He was abashed, and sorry to have vexed mother and disappointed Miss Jane; but somehow he could not be unhappy when he had Harold to play with him again, and

he could halloo as loud as they pleased, and stamp about in the garden, instead of being always in mind to walk softly.

There was the pony too! A new arrangement had just been made, that the Friarswood letters should be fetched from Elbury every morning, and then left at the various houses of the large straggling district that depended on that post-office. All letters from thence must be in the post before five o'clock, at which time they were to be sent in to Elbury. The post-master at Elbury asked if Mrs. King's sons could undertake this; and accordingly she made a great effort, and bought a small shaggy forest pony, whom the boys called 'Peggy,' and loved not much less than their sisters.

It was all very well in the summer to take those two rides in the cool of the morning and evening; but when winter came on, and Alfred had to start for Elbury in the tardy dawn of a frosty morning, or still worse, in the gloom of a wet one, he did not like it at all. He used to ride in looking blue and purple with the chill; and though he went as close to the fire as possible, and steamed like the tea-kettle while he ate his breakfast and his mother sorted the letters, he had not time to warm himself thoroughly before he had to ride off to leave them—two miles further altogether; for besides the bag for the Grange, and all the letters for the Rectory, and for the farmers, there was a young gentlemen's school at a great old lonely house, called Ragglesford, at the end of a very long dreary lane; and many a day Alfred would have given something if those boys' relations would only have been so

good as, with one consent, to leave them without letters.

It would not have mattered if Alfred had been a stouter boy; but his mother had always thought he had his poor father's constitution, and therefore wished him to be more in the house; but his idleness had prevented his keeping any such place. It might have been the cold and wet, or, as Alfred thought, it might have been the strain he gave himself one day when he was sliding on the ice and had a fall; but one morning he came in from Elbury very pale, and hobbling, as he said his hip hurt him so much, that Harold must take the letters round for him.

Harold took them that morning, and for many another morning and evening besides; while poor Alfred came from sitting by the fire to being a prisoner up-stairs, only moved now and then from his own bed to lie outside that of his mother, when he could bear it. The doctor came, and did his best; but the disease had thrown itself into the hip joint, and it was but too plain that Alfred must be a great sufferer for a long time, and perhaps a cripple for life. But how long might this life be? His mother dared not think. Alfred himself, poor boy, was always trying with his whole might to believe himself getting better; and Ellen and Harold always fancied him so, when he was not very bad indeed; but for the last fortnight he had been decidedly worse, and his heart and hopes were sinking, though he would not own it to himself, and that and the pain made his spirits fail so, that he had been more inclined to be fretful than any time since his illness had begun.

His view from the window was a pleasant one; and when he was pretty well, afforded him much amusement. The house stood in a neat garden, with green railings between it and the road, over which Alfred could see every one who came and went towards Elbury, and all who had business at the post-office, or at Farmer Shepherd's. Opposite was the farm-yard; and if nothing else was going on, there were always cocks and hens, ducks and turkeys, pigs, cows, or horses, to be seen there; and the cow-milking, or the taking the horses down to the water, the pig-feeding, and the like, were a daily amusement. Sloping down from the farm-yard, the ground led to the river, a smooth clear stream, where the white ducks looked very pretty, swimming, diving, and 'standing tail upwards;' and there was a high-arched bridge over it, where Alfred could get a good view of the carriages that chanced to come by, and had lately seen all the young gentlemen of Ragglesford going home for the summer holidays, making such a whooping and hurrahing, that the place rang again; and beyond, there were beautiful green meadows, with a straight path through them, leading to a stile; and beyond that, woods rose up, and there was a little glimpse of a stately white house peeping through them. Hay-making was going on merrily in the field, under the bright summer sun, and the air was full of the sweet smell of the grass, but there was something sultry and oppressive to the poor boy's feelings; and when he remembered how Farmer Shepherd had called him to lend a hand last year, and how happy he had been tossing the hay, and loading

the waggon, a sad sick feeling crept over him; and so it was that the tears rose in his eyes, and he made his sister lay him back on the pillow, for he did not wish to see any more.

Ellen worked and thought, and wanted to entertain him, but could not think how. Presently she burst out, however, 'Oh, Alfred! there's Harold coming running back! There he is, jumping over that hay-cock—not touched the ground once—another—oh! there's Farmer Shepherd coming after him!'

'Hold your tongue,' muttered Alfred moodily, as if each of her words gave him unbearable pain; and he hid his face in the pillow.

Ellen kept silence for ten minutes, and then broke forth again, 'Now then, Alfred, you *will* be glad! There's Miss Jane getting over the stile.'

'I don't want Miss Jane,' grumbled Alfred; and as Ellen sprang up and began smoothing his coverings, collecting her scraps, and tidying the room, already so neat, he growled again, 'What a racket you keep!'

'There, won't you be raised up to see her? She does look so pretty in her new pink muslin, with a double skirt, and her little hat and feather, that came from London; and there's Puck poking in the hay—he's looking for a mouse! And she's showering the hay over him with her parasol! Oh, look, Alfred!' and she was going to lift him up, but he only murmured a cross 'Can't you be quiet?' and she let him alone, but went on talking: 'Ah, there's Puck's little tail wriggling out—hinder-end foremost—here he comes—they are touching their hats to her now, the farmer and

all, and she nods just like a little queen! She's got her basket, Alfred. I wonder what she has for you in it! Oh dear, there's that strange boy on the bridge! She won't like that.'

'Why, what would he do to her? He won't bite her,' said Alfred.

'Oh, if he spoke to her, or begged of her, she'd be so frightened! There, he looked at her, and she gave such a start. You little vagabond! I'd like to—'

'Stuff! what could he do to her, with all the hay-field and Farmer Shepherd there to take care of her? What a fuss you do make!' said poor Alfred, who was far too miserable just then to agree with any one, though at almost any other time he would have longed to knock down any strange boy who did but dare to pass Miss Selby without touching his cap; and her visits were in general the very light of his life.

They were considered a great favour; for though old Lady Jane Selby was a good, kind-hearted person, still she had her fancies, and she kept her young grand-daughter like some small jewel, as a thing to be folded up in a case, and never trusted in common. She was afraid to allow her to go about the village, or into the school and cottages, always fancying she might be made ill, or meet with some harm; but Mrs. King being an old servant, whom she knew so well, and the way lying across only two meadows beyond Friarswood Park, the little pet was allowed to go so far to visit her foster-mother, and bring whatever she could devise to cheer the poor sick boy.

Miss Jane, though of the same age as Ellen, and of course with a great deal more learning and accomplishment, had been so little used to help herself, or to manage anything, that she was like one much younger. The sight of the rough stranger on the bridge was really startling to her, and she came across the road and garden as fast as she could without a run; and the first thing the brother and sister heard, was her voice saying rather out of breath and fluttered, 'Oh, what a horrid-looking boy!'

Seeing that Mrs. King was serving some one in the shop, she only nodded to her, and came straight up-stairs. Alfred raised up his head, and beheld the little fairy through the open door, first the head, and the smiling little face and slight figure in the fresh summer dress.

Miss Jane was not thought very pretty by strangers; but that dainty little person, and sweet sunny eyes and merry smile, and shy, kind, gracious ways, were perfect in the eyes of her grandmamma and of Mrs. King and her children, if of nobody else. Alfred, in his present dismal state, only felt vexed at a fresh person coming up to worry him, and make a talking; especially one whose presence was a restraint, so that he could not turn about and make cross answers at his will.

'Well, Alfred, how are you to-day?' said the sweet gay voice, a little subdued.

'Better, Ma'am, thank you,' said Alfred, who always called himself better, whatever he felt; but his voice told the truth better than his words.

'He's had a very bad night, Miss Jane,' said his sister; 'no sleep at all since two o'clock, and he is so low to-day, that I don't know what to do with him.'

Alfred hated nothing so much as to hear that he was low, for it meant that he was cross.

'Poor Alfred!' said the young lady kindly. 'Was it pain that kept you awake?'

'No, Ma'am—not so much—' said the boy.

Miss Jane saw he looked very sad, and hoped to cheer him by opening her basket. 'I've brought you a new book, Alfred. It is "The Cherry-stones." Have you finished the last?'

'No, Ma'am.'

'Did you like it?'

'Yes, Ma'am.'

But it was a very matter-of-course sort of Yes, and disappointed Miss Jane, who thought he would have been charmed with the 'Swiss Family Robinson.'

Ellen spoke: 'Oh yes, Alfred, you know you did like it. I heard you laughing to yourself at Ernest and the shell of soup. And Harold reads that; and 'tis so seldom he will look at a book.'

Jane did not like this quite as well as if Alfred had spoken up more; but she dived into her basket again, and brought out a neat little packet of green leaves, with some strawberries done up in it, and giving a little smile, she made sure that it would be acceptable.

Ellen thanked vehemently, and Alfred gave feeble thanks; but,

unluckily, he had so set his mind upon raspberries, that he could not enjoy the thought of anything else. It was a sickly distaste for everything, and Miss Selby saw that he was not as much pleased as she meant him to be; she looked at him wistfully, and, half grieved, half impatient, she longed to know what he would really like, or if he were positively ungrateful. She was very young, and did not know whether it was by his fault or her mistake that she had failed to satisfy him.

Puck had raced up after her, and had come poking and snuffling round Alfred. She would have called him away lest he should be too much for one so weak, but she saw Alfred really did enjoy this: his hand was in the long rough coat, and he was whispering, 'Poor Puck,' and 'Good little doggie;' and the little hairy rummaging creature, with the bright black beads of eyes gleaming out from under his shaggy hair, was doing him more good than her sense and kindness, or Ellen's either.

She turned to the window, and said to Ellen, 'What a wild-looking lad that is on the bridge!'

'Yes, Miss Jane,' said Ellen; 'I was quite afraid he would frighten you.'

'Well, I was surprised,' said Jane; 'I was afraid he might speak to me; but then I knew I was too near friends for harm to come to me;' and she laughed at her own fears. 'How ragged and wretched he looks! Has he been begging?'

'No, Miss Jane; he came into the shop, and bought some bread. He paid for it honestly; but I never did see any one so dirty.

And there's Alfred wishing to be like him. I knew you would tell him it is quite wicked, Miss Jane.'

It is not right, I suppose, to wish to be anything but what we are,' said Jane, rather puzzled by the appeal; 'and perhaps that poor beggar-boy would only like to have a nice room, and kind mother and sister, like you, Alfred.'

'I don't say anything against them!' cried the boy vehemently; 'but—but—I'd give anything—anything in the world—to be able to run about again in the hay-field! No, don't talk to me, Ellen, I say—I hate them all when I see them there, and I forced to lie here! I wish the sun would never shine!'

He hid his eyes and ears in the pillow, as if he never wished to see the light again, and would hear nothing. The two girls both stood trembling. Ellen looked at Miss Selby, and she felt that she must say something. But what could she say?

With tears in her eyes she laid hold of Alfred's thin hand and tried to speak, choked by tears. 'Dear Alfred, don't say such dreadful things. You know we are all so sorry for you; but God sent it.'

Alfred gave a groan of utter distress, as if it were no consolation.

'And—and things come to do us good,' continued Miss Jane, the tears starting to her cheeks.

'I don't know what good it can do me to lie here!' cried Alfred.

'Oh, but, Alfred, it must.'

'I tell you,' exclaimed the poor boy, forgetting his manners, so

that Ellen stood dismayed, 'it does not do me good! I didn't use to hate Harold, nor to hate everybody.'

'To hate Harold!' said Jane faintly.

'Ay,' said Alfred, 'when I hear him whooping about like mad, and jumping and leaping, and going on like I used to do, and never shall again.'

The tears came thick and fast, and perhaps they did him good.

'But, Alfred,' said Jane, trying to puzzle into the right thing, 'sometimes things are sent to punish us, and then we ought to submit quietly.'

'I don't know what I've done, then,' he cried angrily. 'There have been many worse than I any day, that are well enough now.'

'Oh, Alfred, it is not who is worse, but what one is oneself,' said Jane.

Alfred grunted.

'I wish I knew how to help you,' she said earnestly; 'it is so very sad and hard; and I dare say I should be just as bad myself if I were as ill; but do, pray, Alfred, try to think that nobody sent it but God, and that He must know best.'

Alfred did not seem to take in much comfort, and Jane did not believe she was putting it rightly; but it was time for her to go home, so she said anxiously, 'Good-bye, Alfred; I hope you'll be better next time—and—and—' She bent down and spoke in a very frightened whisper, 'You know when we go to church, we pray you may have patience under your sufferings.'

Then she sprang away, as if ashamed of the sound of her own

words; but as she was taking up her basket and wishing Ellen good-bye, she saw that the strange lad had moved nearer the house, and timid little thing as she was, she took out a sixpence, and said, 'Do give him that, and ask him to go away.'

Ellen had no very great fancy for facing the enemy herself, but she made no objection; and looking down-stairs, she saw her brother Harold waiting while his mother stamped the letters, and she called to him, and sent him out to the boy.

He came back in a few moments so much amazed, that she could see the whites all round his eyes.

'He won't have it! He's a rum one that! He says he's no beggar, and that if the young lady would give him work, he'd thank her; but he wants none of her money, and he'll stand where he chooses!'

'Why didn't you lick him?' hallooed out Alfred's voice from his bed. 'Oh! if I—'

'Nonsense, Alfred!' cried Miss Jane, frightened into spirit; 'stand still, Harold! I don't mind him.'

And she put up her parasol, and walked straight out at the house door as bold as a little lioness, going on without looking to the right or left.

'*If*—' began Harold, clenching his fists—and Alfred raised himself upon his bed with flashing eyes to watch, as the boy had moved nearer, and looked for a moment as if he were going to grin, or say something impudent; but the quiet childish form stepping on so simply and steadily seemed to disarm him, and

he shrunk back, left her to trip across the road unmolested, and stood leaning over the rail of the bridge, gazing after her as she crossed the hay-field.

Harold rode off with the letters; and Alfred lay gazing, and wondering what that stranger could be, counting the holes in his garments, and trying to guess at his history.

One good thing was, that Alfred was so much carried out of himself, that he was cheerful all the evening.

CHAPTER II—HAY-MAKING

There was again a sultry night, which brought on so much discomfort and restlessness, that poor Alfred could not sleep. He tried to bear in mind how much he had disturbed his mother the night before, and he checked himself several times when he felt as if he could not bear it any longer without waking her, and to remember his old experience, that do what she would for him, it would be no real relief, and he should only be sorry the next day when he saw her going about her work with a worn face and a head-ache.

Then every now and then Miss Selby's words about being patient came back to him. Sometimes he thought them hard, coming from a being who had never known sickness or sorrow, and wondered how she would feel if laid low as he was; but they would not be put away in that manner, for he knew they were true, and were said by others than Miss Jane, though he had begun to think no phrase so tiresome, hopeless, or provoking. People always told him to be patient when they had no comfort to give him, and did not know what he was suffering. He would not have minded it so much if only he could have got it out of his head. Somehow it would not let him call to his mother, if it was only because very likely all he should get by so doing would be to be again told to be patient. And then came Miss Jane's telling him his illness might be good for him, as if she thought he deserved to

be punished. Really that was hard! Who could think he deserved this wearing pain and helplessness, only because he had played tricks on the butler and housekeeper, and now and then laughed at church?

'It is just like Job and his friends,' thought Alfred. 'I don't want her to come and see me any more!'

Poor Alfred! There was a little twinge here. His conscience could not give quite such an account as did that of Job! But he did not like recollecting his own errors better than any of us do, and liked much more to feel himself very hardly used, and greatly to be pitied. Thereupon he opened his lips to call to his mother, but that old thought about patience returned on him; he had mercy on her regular breathing, though it made him quite envious to hear it, and he said to himself that he would let her alone, at least till the next time the clock struck. It would be three o'clock next time. Oh dear, would the night never be over? How often such a round of weary thoughts came again and again can hardly be counted; but, at any rate, poor Alfred was exercising one act of forbearance, and that was so much gain. At last he found, by the increasing light shewing him the shapes of all the pictures, that he must have had a short sleep which had made him miss the clock, and he felt a good deal injured thereby.

However, Mrs. King was too good a nurse not to be awakened by his first movement, and she came to him, gave him some cold tea, and settled his pillow so as to make him more comfortable; and when he begged her to let in a little more air, she went to open

the window wider, and relieve the closeness of the little room. She had learnt while living with Lady Jane that night air is not so dangerous as some people fancy; and it was an infinite relief to Alfred when the lattice was thrown back, and the cool breeze came softly in, with the freshness of the dew, and the delicious scent of the hay-field.

Mrs. King stood a moment to look out at the beautiful stillness of early dawn, the trees and meads so gravely calmly quiet, and the silver dew lying white over everything; the tanned hay-cocks rising up all over the field, the morning star and waning moon glowing pale as light of morning spread over the sky. Then a cock crew somewhere at a distance, and Mrs. Shepherd's cock answered him more shrilly close by, and the swallows began to twitter under the eaves.

'It *will* be a fine day, to be sure!' she said. 'The farmer will get in his hay!' and then she stood looking as if something had caught her attention.

'What do you see, Mother?' asked Alfred.

'I was looking what that was under yon hay-cock,' said Mrs. King; 'and I do believe it is some one sleeping there.'

'Ha!' cried Alfred. 'I dare say it is the boy that would not have Miss Jane's sixpence.'

'I'm sure I hope he's after no harm,' said Mrs. King; 'I don't like to have tramps about so near. I hope he means no mischief by the farmer's poultry.'

'He can't be one of that sort, or he wouldn't have refused the

money,' said Alfred. 'How nice and cool it must be sleeping in the hay! I'll warrant he doesn't lie awake. I wish I was there!'

'You'll know what to be thankful for one of these days, my poor lad,' said his mother, sighing; then yawning, she said, 'I must go back to bed. Mind you call out, Alfred, if you hear anything like a noise in the farm-yard.'

This notion rather interested Alfred; he began to build up a fine scheme of shouting out and sending Harold to the rescue of the cocks and hens, and how well he would have done it himself a year ago, and pinned the thief, and fastened the door on him. Not that he thought this individual lad at all likely to be a thief, nor did he care much for Farmer Shepherd, who was a hard man and no favourite; but to catch a thief would be a grand feat. And while settling his clever plan, and making some compliments for the magistrate to pay him, Alfred, fanned by the cool breeze, fell into a sound sleep, and did not wake till the sun was high, and all the rest of the house were up and dressed.

That good sleep made him much more able to bear the burden of the day. First, his mother came with the towel and basin, and washed his face and hands; and then he had his little book, and said his prayers; and somehow to-day he felt so much less fractious than usual, that he asked to be taught patience, and not *only* to be made well, as he had hitherto done.

That over, he lay smiling as he waited for his breakfast, and when Ellen brought it to him, he had not one complaint to make, but ate it almost with a relish. 'Is that boy gone?' he asked Ellen,

as she tidied the room while he was eating.

'What, the dirty boy? No, there he is, speaking to the farmer. Will he beg of him?'

'Asking for work, more likely.'

'I'd sooner give work to a pig at once,' said Ellen; 'but I do believe he's getting it. I fancy they are short of hands for the hay. Yes, he's pointing into the field. Ay, and he's sending him into the yard.'

'I hope he'll give him some breakfast,' said Alfred. 'Do you know he slept all night on a hay-cock?'

'Yes, so Mother said, just like a dog; and he got up like a dog this morning,—never so much as washed himself at the river. Why, he's coming here! Whatever does he want?'

'The lad?'

'No, the farmer.'

Mr. Shepherd's heavy tread was heard below, and, as Alfred said, Ellen had only to hold her tongue for them be able to hear his loud tones telling Mrs. King that the glass was falling, and his hay in capital order, and his hands short, and asking whether her boy Harold would come and help in the hay-field between the post times. Mrs. King gave a ready answer that the boy would be well pleased, and the farmer promised him his victuals and sixpence for the day. 'Your lass wouldn't like to come too, I suppose, eh?'

Ellen flushed with indignation. She go a hay-making! Her mother was civilly making answer that her daughter was engaged

with her sick brother, and besides—had her work for Mrs. Price, which must be finished off. The farmer, saying he had not much expected her, but thought she might like a change from moping over her needle, went off.

Ellen did not feel ready to forgive him for wanting to set her to field-work. There is some difference between being fine and being refined, and in Ellen's station of life it is very difficult to hit the right point. To be refined is to be free from all that is rough, coarse, or ungentle; to be fine, is to affect to be above such things.

Now Ellen was really refined in her quietness and maidenly modesty, and there was no need for her to undertake any of those kinds of tasks which, by removing young girls from home shelter, do sometimes help to make them rude and indecorous; but she was *fine*, when she gave herself a little mincing air of contempt, as if she despised the work and those who did it. Lydia Grant, who worked so steadily and kept to herself so modestly, that no one ventured a bold word to her as she tossed her hay, was just as refined as Ellen King behind her white blinds, ay, or as Jane Selby herself in her terraced garden. Refinement is in the mind that loves whatsoever is pure, lovely, and of good report; finery is in disdaining what is homely or humble.

Boys of all degrees are usually, when they are good for anything, the greatest enemies of the finery tending to affectation; and Alfred at once began to make a little fun of his sister, and tell her it would be a famous thing for her, he believed she had quite forgotten how to run, and did not know a rake from

a fork when she saw it. He knew she was longing for a ride in the waggon, if she would but own it.

Ellen used to be teased by this kind of joking; but she was too glad to see Alfred well enough so to entertain himself, to think of anything but pleasing him, so she answered good-humouredly that Harold must make hay for them all three to-day, no doubt but he would be pleased enough.

He was heard trotting home at this moment, and whistling as he hitched up the pony at the gate, and ran in with the letter-bag, to snap up his breakfast while the letters were sorted.

'Here, let me have them,' called Alfred, and they were glad he should do it, for he was the quickest of the family at reading handwriting; but he was often too ill to attend to it, and more often the weary fretfulness and languor of his state made him dislike to exert himself, so it was apt to depend on his will or caprice.

'Look sharp, Alf!' hallooed out Harold, rushing up-stairs with the bags in one hand, and his bread-and-butter in the other. 'If you find a letter for that there Ragglesford, I don't know what I shall do to you! I must be back in no time for the hay!'

And he had bounced down-stairs again before Ellen had time to scold him for making riot enough to shake Alfred to pieces.

He was a fine tall stout boy, with the same large fully open blue eyes, high colour, white teeth, and light curly hair, as his brother and sister, but he was much more sunburnt. If you saw him with his coat off, he looked as if he had red gloves and a

red mask on, so much whiter was his skin where it was covered; and he was very strong for his age, and never had known what illness was. The brothers were very fond of each other, but since Alfred had been laid up, they had often been a great trial to each other—the one seemed as little able to live without making a noise, as the other to endure the noise he made; and the sight of Harold's activity and the sound of his feet and voice, vexed the poor helpless sufferer more than they ought to have done, or than they would had the healthy brother been less thoughtless in the joy of his strength.

To-day, however, all was smooth. Alfred did not feel every tread of those bounding limbs like a shock to his poor diseased frame; and he only laughed as he unlocked the leathern bag, and dealt out the letters, putting all those for the Lady Jane Selby, Miss Selby, and the servants, into their own neat little leathern case with the padlock, and sorting out the rest, with some hope there might be one from Matilda, who was a very good one to write home. There was none from her, but then there was none for Ragglesford, and that was unexpected good luck. If the old housekeeper left in charge had been wicked enough to get her newspaper that day, Alfred felt that in Harold's place he should be sorely tempted to chuck it over the hedge. Ellen looked as if he had talked of murdering her, and truly such a breach of trust would have been a very grievous fault.

'The Reverend—what's his name? the Reverend Marcus Cope, Friarswood, near Elbury,' read Alfred; 'one, two, three

letters, and a newspaper. Yes, and this long printed-looking thing. Who is he, Ellen?'

'What did you say?' said Ellen, who was busy shaking her mother's bed, and had not heard at the first moment, but now turned eagerly; 'what did you say his name was?'

'The Reverend Marcus Cope,' repeated Alfred. 'Is that another new parson?'

'Why, did not we tell you what a real beautiful sermon the new clergyman preached on Sunday? Mr. Cope, so that's his name. I wonder if he is come to stay.—Mother,' she ran to the head of the stairs, 'the new clergyman's name is the Reverend Mr. Marcus Cope.'

'He don't live at Ragglesford, I hope!' cried Harold, who regarded any one at the end of that long lane as his natural enemy.

'No, it only says Friarswood,' said Ellen. 'You'll have to find out where he lives, Harold.'

'Pish! it will take me an hour going asking about!' said Harold impatiently. 'He must have his letters left here till he chooses to come for them, if he doesn't know where he lives.'

'No, no, Harold, that won't do,' said Mrs. King. 'You must take the gentleman his letters, and they'll be sure to know at the Park, or at the Rectory, or at the Tankard, where he lodges. Well, it will be a real comfort if he is come to stop.'

So Harold went off with the letters and the pony, and Ellen and her mother exchanged a few words about the gentleman and his last Sunday's sermon, and then Ellen went to dust the shop, and

put out the bread, while her mother attended to Alfred's wound, the most painful part of the day to both of them.

It was over, however, and Alfred was resting afterwards when Harold cantered home as hard as the pony could or would go, and came racing up to say, 'I've seen him! He's famous! He stood out in the road and met me, and asked for his letters, and he's to be at the Parsonage, and he asked my name, and then he laughed and said, "Oh! I perceive it is the royal mail!" I didn't know what he was at, but he looked as good-humoured as anything. Halloo! give me my old hat, Nell—that's it! Hurrah! for the hay-waggon! I saw the horses coming out!'

And off he went again full drive; and Alfred did nothing worse than give a little groan.

Ellen had enough to do in wondering about Mr. Cope. News seemed to belong of right to the post-office, and it was odd that he should have preached on Sunday, and now it should be Tuesday, without anything having been heard of him, not even from Miss Jane; but then the young lady had been fluttered by the strange boy, and Alfred had been so fretful, that it might have put everything out of her head.

Friarswood was used to uncertainty about the clergyman. The Rector had fallen into such bad health, that he had long been unable to do anything, and always hoping to get better, he had sent different gentlemen to take the services, first one and then another, or had asked the masters at Ragglesford to help him; but it was all very irregular, and no one had settled down long enough

to know the people or do much good in visiting them. My Lady, as they all called Lady Jane, was as sorry as any one could be, and she tried what she could do by paying a very good schoolmaster and mistress, and giving plenty of rewards; but nothing could be like the constant care of a real good clergyman, and the people were all the worse for the want. They had the church to go to, but it was not brought home to them. The Rector had been obliged at last to go abroad, one of the Ragglesford gentlemen had performed the service for the ensuing Sundays, until now there seemed to be a chance that this new clergyman was coming to stay.

This interested Alfred less than his sister. His curiosity was chiefly about the strange lad; and when he was moved to his place by the window he turned his eyes anxiously to make him out in the line of hay-makers, two fields off, as they shook out the grass to give it the day's sunshine. He knew them all, the ten women, with their old straw bonnets poked down over their faces, and deep curtains sewn on behind to guard their necks; the farm men come in from their other work to lend a hand, three or four boys, among whom he could see Harold's white shirt sleeves, and sometimes hear his merry laugh, and he was working next to the figure in brown faded-looking tattered array, which Alfred suspected to belong to the strange boy. So did Ellen. 'Ah!' she said, 'Harold ye scraped acquaintance with that vagabond-looking boy; I wish I had warned him against it, but I suppose he would only have done it all the more.'

'You want to make friends with him yourself, Ellen! We shall have you nodding to him next! You are as curious about him as can be!' said Alfred slyly.

'Me! I never was curious about nothing so insignificant,' said Ellen. 'All I wish is, that that boy may not be running into bad company.'

The hay-fields were like an entertainment on purpose for Alfred all day; he watched the shaking of the brown grass all over the meadows in the morning, and the farmer walking over it, and smelling it, and spying up to guess what would come of the great rolling towers of grey clouds edged with pearly white, soft but dazzling, which varied the intense blue of the sky.

Then he watched all the company sit or lie down on the shady side of the hedge, under the pollard-willows, and Tom Boldre the shuffler and one or two more go into the farm-house, and come out with great yellow-ware with pies in them, and the little sturdy-looking kegs of beer, and two mugs to go round among them all. There was Harold lying down, quite at his ease, close to the strange boy; Alfred knew how much better that dinner would taste to him than the best with the table-cloth neatly spread in his mother's kitchen; and well did Alfred remember how much more enjoyment there was in such a meal as that, than in any one of the dainties that my Lady sent down to tempt his sickly appetite.

And what must pies and beer be to the wanderer who had eaten the crust so greedily the day before! Then, after the hour's rest, the hay-makers rose up to rake the hay into beds ready for the

waggons. Harold and the stranger were raking opposite to each other, and Alfred could see them talking; and when they came into the nearer hay-field, he saw Harold put up his hand, and point to the open window, as if he were telling the other lad about the sick boy who was lying there.

He was so much absorbed in thus watching, that he did not pay much heed to what interested his mother and sister—the reports which came by every customer about the new clergyman, who, it appeared, had been staying in the next parish till yesterday, when he had moved into the Rectory; and Mrs. Bonham, the butcher's wife, reported that the Rectory servants said he was come to stay till their master came back. All this and much more Mrs. King heard and rehearsed to Ellen, while Alfred lay, sometimes reading the 'Swiss Robinson,' sometimes watching the loading of the wains, as they creaked slowly through the fields, the horses seeming to enjoy the work, among their fragrant provender, as much as the human kind. When five o'clock struck, Harold gave no signs of quitting the scene of action; and Mrs. King, in much anxiety lest the letters should be late, sent Helen to get the pony ready, while she herself went into the field to call the boy.

Very unwilling he was to come—he shook his shoulders, and growled and grumbled, and said he should be in plenty of time, and he wished the post was at the bottom of the sea. Nothing but his mother's orders and the necessity of the case could have made him go at all. At last he walked off, as if he had lead in his feet, muttering that he wished he had not some one to be

always after him. Mrs. King looked at the grimy face of his disreputable-looking companion, and wondered whether he had put such things into his head.

Very cross was Harold as he twitched the bridle out of Ellen's hand, threw the strap of the letter-bag round his neck, and gave such a re-echoing switch to the poor pony, that Alfred heard it up-stairs, and started up to call out, 'For shame, Harold!'

Harold was ashamed: he settled himself in the saddle and rode off, but Alfred had not the comfort of knowing that his ill-humour was not being vented upon the poor beast all the way to Elbury. Alfred had given a great deal of his heart to that pony, and it made him feel helpless and indignant to think that it was ill-used. Those tears of which he was ashamed came welling up into his eyes as he lay back on his pillow; but they were better tears than yesterday's—they were not selfish.

'Never mind, Alfy,' said Ellen, 'Harold's not a cruel lad; he'll not go on, if he was cross for a bit. It is all that he's mad after that boy there! I wish mother had never let him go into the hay-field to meet bad company! Depend upon it, that boy has run away out of a Reformatory! Sleeping out at night! I can't think how Farmer Shepherd could encourage him among honest folk!'

'Well, now I think of it, I should not wonder if he had,' said Mrs. King. 'He is the dirtiest boy that ever I did see! Most likely; I wish he may do no mischief to-night!'

Harold came home in better humour, but a fresh vexation awaited him. Mrs. King would not let him go to the hay-home

supper in the barn. The men were apt to drink too much and grow riotous; and with her suspicions about his new friend, she thought it better to keep him apart. She was a spirited woman, who would be minded, and Harold knew he must submit, and that he had behaved very ill. Ellen told him too how much Alfred had been distressed about the pony, and though he would not shew her that he cared, it made him go straight up-stairs, and with a somewhat sheepish face, say, 'I say, Alf, the pony's all right. I only gave him one cut to get him off. He'd never go at all if he didn't know his master.'

'He'd go fast enough for my voice,' said Alfred.

'You know I'd never go for to beat him,' continued Harold; 'but it was enough to vex a chap—wasn't it?—to have Mother coming and lugging one off from the carrying, and away from the supper and all. Women always grudge one a bit of fun!'

'Mother never grudged us cricket, nor nothing in reason,' said Alfred. 'Lucky you that could make hay at all! And what made you so taken up with that new boy that Ellen runs on against, and will have it he's a convict?'

'A convict! if Ellen says that again!' cried Harold; 'no more a convict than she is.'

'What is he, then? Where does he come from?'

'His name is Paul Blackthorn,' said Harold; 'and he's the queerest chap I ever came across. Why, he knew no more what to do with a prong than the farmer's old sow till I shewed him.'

'But where did he come from?' repeated Alfred.

'He walked all the way from Piggot's turnpike yesterday,' said Harold. 'He's looking for work.'

'And before that?'

'He'd been in the Union out—oh! somewhere, I forgot where, but it's a name in the Postal Guide.'

'Well, but you've not said who he is,' said Ellen.

'Who? why, I tell you, he's Paul Blackthorn.'

'But I suppose he had a father and mother,' said Ellen.

'No,' said Harold.

'No!' Ellen and Alfred cried out together.

'Not as ever he heard tell of,' said Harold composedly, as if this were quite natural and common.

'And you could go and be raking with him like born brothers there!' said Ellen, in horror.

'D'ye think I'd care for stuff like that?' said Harold. 'Why, he sings—he sings better than Jack Lyte! He's learnt to sing, you know. And he's such a comical fellow! he said Mr. Shepherd was like a big pig on his hind legs; and when Mrs. Shepherd came out to count the scraps after we had done, what does he do but whisper to me to know how long our withered cyder apples had come to life!'

Such talents for amusing others evidently far out-weighed in Harold's consideration such trifling points as fathers, mothers, and respectability. Alfred laughed; but Ellen thought it no laughing matter, and reproved Harold for being wicked enough to hear his betters made game of.

'My betters!' said Harold—'an old skinflint like Farmer Shepherd's old woman?'

'Hush, Harold! I'll tell Mother of you, that I will!' cried Ellen.

'Do then,' said Harold, who knew his sister would do no such thing. She had made the threat too often, and then not kept her word.

She contented herself with saying, 'Well, all I know is, that I'm sure now he has run away out of prison, and is no better than a thief; and if our place isn't broken into before to-morrow morning, and Mother's silver sugar-tongs gone, it will be a mercy. I'm sure I shan't sleep a wink all night.'

Both boys laughed, and Alfred asked why he had not done it last night.

'How should I know?' said Ellen. 'Most likely he wanted to see the way about the place, before he calls the rest of the gang.'

'Take care, Harold! it's a gang coming now,' said Alfred, laughing again. 'All coming on purpose to steal the sugar-tongs!'

'No, I'll tell you what they are come to steal,' said Harold mischievously; 'it's all for Ellen's fine green ivy-leaf brooch that Matilda sent her!'

'I dare say Harold has been and told him everything valuable in the house!' said Ellen.

'I think,' said Alfred gravely, 'it would be a very odd sort of thief to come here, when the farmer's ploughing cup is just by.'

'Yes,' said Harold, 'I'd better have told him of that when I was about it; don't you think so, Nelly?'

'If you go on at this rate,' said Ellen, teased into anger, 'you'll be robbing the post-office yourself some day.'

'Ay! and I'll get Paul Blackthorn to help me,' said the boy. 'Come, Ellen, don't be so foolish; I tell you he's every bit as honest as I am, I'd go bail for him.'

'And I *know* he'll lead you to ruin!' cried Ellen, half crying: 'a boy that comes from nowhere and nobody knows, and sleeps on a hay-cock all night, no better than a mere tramp!'

'What, quarrelling here? 'said Mrs. King, coming up-stairs. 'The lad, I wish him no ill, I'm sure, but he'll be gone by to-morrow, so you may hold your tongues about him, and we'll read our chapter and go to bed.'

Harold's confidence and Ellen's distrust were not much wiser the one than the other. Which was nearest being right?

CHAPTER III—A NEW FRIEND

The post-office was not robbed that night, neither did the silver sugar-tongs disappear, though Paul Blackthorn was no farther off than the hay-loft at Farmer Shepherd's, where he had obtained leave to sleep.

But he did not go away with morning, though the hay-making was over. Ellen saw him sitting perched on the empty waggon, munching his breakfast, and to her great vexation, exchanging nods and grins when Harold rode by for the morning's letters; and afterwards, there was a talk between him and the farmer, which ended in his having a hoe put into his hand, and being next seen in the turnip-field behind the farm.

To make up for the good day, this one was a very bad one with poor Alfred. There was thunder in the air, and if the sultry heat weighed heavily even on the healthy, no wonder it made him faint and exhausted, disposed to self-pity, and terribly impatient and fretful. He was provoked by Ellen's moving about the room, and more provoked by Harold's whistling as he cleaned out the stable; and on the other hand, Harold was petulant at being checked, and vowed there was no living in the house with Alfred making such a work. Moreover, Alfred was restless, and wanted something done for him every moment, interrupting Ellen's work, and calling his mother up from her baking so often for trifles, that she hardly knew how to get through it.

The doctor, Mr. Blunt, came, and he too felt the heat, having spent hours in going his rounds in the closeness and dust. He was a rough man, and his temper did not always hold out; he told Alfred sharply that he would have no whining, and when the boy moaned and winced more than he would have done on a good day, he punished him by not trying to be tender-handed. When Mrs. King said, perhaps a little lengthily, how much the boy had suffered that morning, the doctor, wearied out, no doubt, with people's complaints, cut her short rather rudely, 'Ay, ay, my good woman, I know all that.'

'And can nothing be done, Sir, when he feels so sinking and weak?'

'Sinking—he must feel sinking—nothing to do but to bear it,' said Mr. Blunt gruffly, as he prepared to go. 'Don't keep me now;' and as Alfred held up his hand, and made some complaint of the tightness of the bandage, he answered impatiently, 'I've no time for that, my lad; keep still, and be glad you've nothing worse to complain of.'

'Then you don't think he is getting any better, Sir?' said Mrs. King, keeping close to him. 'I thought he was yesterday, and I wanted to speak to you. My oldest daughter thought if we could get him away to the sea, and—'

'That's all nonsense,' said the hurried doctor; 'don't you spend your money in that way; I tell you nothing ever will do him any good.'

This was at the bottom of the stairs; and Mr. Blunt was off.

He was the cleverest doctor for a good way round, and it was not easy to Mrs. King to secure his attendance. Her savings and Matilda's were likely to melt away sadly in paying him, since she was just too well off to be doctored at the parish expense, and he was really a good and upright man, though wanting in softness of manner when he was hurried and teased. If Mrs. King had known that he was in haste to get to a child with a bad burn, she might have thought him less unkind in the short ungentle way in which he dashed her hopes. Alas! there had never been much hope; but she feared that Alfred might have heard, and have been shocked.

Ellen heard plainly enough, and her heart sank. She tried to look at her brother's face, but he had put it out of sight, and spoke not a word; and she only could sit wondering what was the real drift of the cruel words, and whether the doctor meant to give no hope of recovery, or only to dissuade her mother from vainly trying change of air. Her once bright brother always thus! It was a sad thought, and yet she would have been glad to know he would be no worse; and Ellen's heart was praying with all her might that he might have his health and happiness restored to him, and that her mother might be spared this bitter sorrow.

Alfred said nothing about the doctor's visit, but he could eat no dinner, and did not think this so much the fault of his sickly taste, as of his mother's potato-pie; he could not think why she should be so cross as to make that thing, when she knew he hated it; and as to poor Harold, Alfred would hardly let him speak or

stir, without ordering Ellen down to tell him not to make such a row.

Ellen was thankful when Harold was fairly hunted out of the house and garden, even though he betook himself to the meadow, where Paul Blackthorn was lying on the grass with his feet kicking in the air, and shewing the skin through his torn shoes. The two lads squatted down on the grass with their heads together. Who could tell what mischief that runaway might be putting into Harold's head, and all because Alfred could not bear with him enough for him to be happy at home?

They were so much engrossed, that it needed a rough call from the farmer to send Paul back to his work when the dinner-hour was over; whereupon Harold came slowly to his digging again.

Hotter and hotter did it grow, and the grey dull clouds began to gain a yellow lurid light in the distance; there were low growlings of thunder far away, and Ellen left her work unfinished, and forgot how hot she was herself in toiling to fan Alfred, so as to keep him in some little degree cooler, while the more he strove with the heat, the more oppressed and miserable he grew.

Poor fellow! his wretchedness was not so much the heat, as the dim perception of Mr. Blunt's hasty words; he had not heard them fully—he dared not inquire what they had been, and he could not endure to face them—yet the echo of 'nothing will ever do him good,' seemed to ring like a knell in his ears every time he turned his weary head. Nothing do him good! Nothing! Always these four walls, that little bed, this wasting weary lassitude, this

gnawing, throbbing pain, no pony, no running, no shouting, no sense of vigour and health ever again, and perhaps—that terrible perhaps, which made Alfred's very flesh quail, he would not think of; and to drive it away, he found some fresh toil to require of the sister who could not content him, toil as she would.

Slowly the afternoon hours rolled on, one after the other, and Alfred had just been in a pet with the clock for striking four when he wanted it to be five, when the sky grew darker, and one or two heavy drops of rain came plashing down on the thirsty earth.

'The storm is coming at last, and now it will be cooler,' said Ellen, looking out from the window. 'Dear me!' she added, there stopping short.

'What?' asked Alfred. 'What are you gaping at?'

'I declare!' cried Ellen, 'it's the new clergyman! It is Mr. Cope, and he is coming up to the wicket!'

Alfred turned his head with a peevish sound; he was in the dreary mood to resent whatever took off attention from him for a moment.

'A very pleasant-looking gentleman,' commented Ellen, 'and so young! He does not look older than Charles Lawrence! I wonder whether he is coming in, or if it is only to post a letter. Oh! there he is, talking to Mother! There!'

A vivid flash of lightning came over the room at that moment and made them all pause till it was followed up by the deep rumble of the thunder, and then down rushed the rain, plashing and leaping up again, bringing out the delicious scent from the

earth, and seeming in one moment to breathe refreshment and relief on the sick boy. His brow was already clearing, as he listened to his mother's tones of welcome, as she was evidently asking the stranger to sit down and wait for the storm to be over, and the cheerful voice that replied to her. He did not scold Ellen for, as usual, making things neat; and whereas, five minutes sooner, he would have hated the notion of any one coming near him, he now only hoped that his mother would bring Mr. Cope up; and presently he heard the well-known creak of the stairs under a manly foot, and his mother's voice saying something about 'a great sufferer, Sir.'

Then came in sight his mother's white cap, and behind her one of the most cheerful lively faces that Alfred had ever beheld. The new Curate looked very little more than a boy, with a nice round fresh rosy face, and curly brown hair, and a quick joyous eye, and regular white teeth when he smiled that merry good-humoured smile. Indeed, he was as young as a deacon could be, and he looked younger. He knocked his tall head against the top of the low doorway as he came into the room, and answered Mrs. King's apologies with a pleasant laugh. Ellen knew her mother would like him the better for his height, for no one since the handsome coachman himself had had to bend his head to get into the room.

Alfred liked the looks of him the first moment, and by way of salutation put up one of his weary, white, blue-veined hands to pull his damp forelock; but Mr. Cope, nodding in answer to Ellen's curtsey, took hold of his hand at once, and softening the

cheery voice that was so pleasant to hear, said, 'Well, my boy, I hope we shall be good friends. And what's your name?'

'Alfred King, Sir,' was the answer. It really was quite a pleasure not to begin with the old weary subject of being pitied for his illness.

'King Alfred!' said Mr. Cope. 'I met King Harold yesterday. I've got into royal company, it seems!'

Alfred smiled, it was said so drolly; but his mother, who felt a little as if she were being laughed at, said, 'Why, Sir, my brother's name was Alfred; and as to Harold, it was to please Miss Jane's little sister that died—she was quite a little girl then, Sir, but so clever, and she would have him named out of her History of England.'

'Did Miss Selby give you those flowers?' said Mr. Cope, admiring the rose and geranium in the cup on the table.

'Yes, Sir;' and Mrs. King launched out in the praises of Miss Jane and of my Lady, an inexhaustible subject which did not leave Alfred much time to speak, till Mrs. King, seeing the groom from the Park coming with the letter-bag through the rain, asked Mr. Cope to excuse her, and went down-stairs.

'Well, Alfred, I think you are a lucky boy,' he said. 'I was comparing you with a lad I once knew of, who got his spine injured, and is laid up in a little narrow garret, in a back street, with no one to speak to all day. I don't know what he would not give for a sister, and a window like this, and a Miss Jane.'

Alfred smiled, and said, 'Please, Sir, how old is he?'

'About sixteen; a nice stout lad he was, as ever I knew, till his accident; I often used to meet him going about with his master, and thought it was a pleasure to meet such a good-humoured face.'

Alfred ventured to ask his trade, and was told he was being brought up to wait on his father, who was a bricklayer, but that a ladder had fallen with him as he was going up with a heavy load, and he had been taken at once to the hospital. The house on which he was employed belonged to a friend of Mr. Cope, and all in the power of this gentleman had been done for him, but that was not much, for it was one of the families that no one can serve; the father drank, and the mother was forced to be out charing all day, and was so rough a woman, that she could hardly be much comfort to poor Jem when she was at home.

Alfred was quite taken up with the history by this time, and kept looking at Mr. Cope, as if he would eat it up with his eager eyes. Ellen asked compassionately who did for the poor boy all day.

'His mother runs in at dinner-time, if she is not at work too far off, and he has a jug of water and a bit of bread where he can reach them; the door is open generally, so that he can call to some of the other lodgers, but though the house is as full as a bee-hive, often nobody hears him. I believe his great friend is a little school-girl, who comes and sits by him, and reads to him if she can; but she is generally at school, or else minding the children.'

'It must be very lonely,' said Alfred, perceiving for the first

time that there could be people worse off than himself; 'but has he no books to read?'

'He was so irregularly sent to school, that he could not read to himself, even if his corner were not so dark, and the window so dingy. My friend gave him a Bible, but he could not get on with it; and his mother, I am sorry to say, pawned it.'

Ellen and Alfred both cried out as if they had never heard of anything so shocking.

'It was grievous,' said Mr. Cope; 'but the poor things did not know the value, and when there was scarcely a morsel of bread in the house, there was cause enough for not judging them hardly, but I don't think Jem would allow it now. He got some of his little friend's easy Scripture lessons and the like, in large print, which he croons over as he lies there alone, till one feels sure that they are working into his heart. The people in the house say that though he has been ill these three years, he has never spoken an ill-tempered word; and if any one pities him, he answers, "It is the Lord," and seems to wish for no change. He lies there between dozing and dreaming and praying, and always seems content.'

'Does he think he shall get well?' said Alfred, who had been listening earnestly.

'Oh no; there is no chance of that; it is an injury past cure. But I suppose that while he bears the Will of God so patiently here, his Heavenly Father makes it up to him in peacefulness of heart now, and the hope of what is to come hereafter.'

Alfred made no answer, but his eyes shewed that he was

thinking; and Mr. Cope rose, and looked out of window, as a gleam of sunshine, while the dark cloud lifted up from the north-west, made the trees and fields glow with intense green against the deep grey of the sky, darker than ever from the contrast.

Ellen stood up, and Alfred exclaimed, 'Oh Sir, please come again soon!'

'Very soon,' said Mr. Cope good-humouredly; 'but you've not got rid of me yet, the rain is pretty hard still, and I see the beggarmen dancing all down the garden-walk.'

Alfred and Ellen smiled to hear their mother's old word for the drops splashing up again; and Mr. Cope went on:

'The garden looks very much refreshed by this beautiful shower. It is in fine order. Is it the other monarch's charge?'

'Harold's, Sir,' said Ellen. 'Yes, he takes a great pride in it, and so did Alfred when he was well.'

'Ah, I dare say; and it must be pleasant to you to see your brother working in it now. I see him under that shed, and who is that lad with him? They seem to have some good joke together.'

'Oh,' said Ellen, 'Harold likes company, you see, Sir, and will take up with anybody. I wish you could be so good as to speak to him, Sir, for lads of that age don't mind women folk, you see, Sir.'

'What? I hope his majesty does not like bad company?' said Mr. Cope, not at all that he thought lightly of such an evil, but it was his way to speak in that droll manner, especially as Ellen's voice was a little bit peevish.

'Nobody knows no harm of the chap,' said Alfred, provoked

at Ellen for what he thought unkindness in setting the clergyman at once on his brother; but Ellen was the more displeased, and exclaimed:

'Nor nobody knows no good. He's a young tramper that hired with Farmer Shepherd yesterday, a regular runaway and reprobate, just out of prison, most likely.'

'Well, I hope not so bad as that,' said Mr. Cope, 'he's not a bad-looking boy; but I dare say you are anxious about your brother. It must be dull for him, to have his companion laid up;—and by the looks of him, I dare say his spirits are sometimes too much for you,' he added, turning to Alfred.

'He does make a terrible racket sometimes,' said Alfred.

'Ay, and I dare say you will try to bear with it, and not drive him out to seek dangerous company,' said Mr. Cope; at which Alfred blushed a little, as he remembered the morning, and that he had never thought of this danger.

Mr. Cope added, 'I think I shall go and talk to those two merry fellows; I must not tire you, my lad, but I will soon come here again;' and he took leave.

Heartily did Ellen exclaim, 'Well, that is a nice gentleman!' and as heartily did Alfred reply. He felt as if a new light had come in on his life, and Mr. Cope had not said one word about patience.

Ellen expected Mr. Cope to come back and warn her mother against Paul Blackthorn, but she only saw him stand talking to the two lads till he made them both grin again, and then as the

rain was over, he walked away; Paul went back to his turnips, and Harold came thundering up-stairs in his great shoes. Alfred was cheerful, and did not mind him now; but Ellen did, and scolded him for the quantity of dirt he was bringing up with him from the moist garden, which was all one steam of sweet smells, as the sun drew up the vapour after the rain.

'If you were coming in, you'd better have come out of the rain, not stood idling there with that good-for-nothing lad. The new minister said he would be after you if you were taking up with bad company.'

'Who told you I was with bad company?' said Harold.

'Why, I could see it! I hope he rebuked you both.'

'He asked us if we could play at cricket—and he asked the pony's name,' said Harold, 'if that's what you call rebuking us!'

'And what did he say to that boy?'

'Oh! he told him he heard he was a stranger here, like himself, and asked how long he'd been here, and where he came from.'

'And what did he say?'

'He said he was from Upperscote Union—come out because he was big enough to keep himself, and come to look for work,' said Harold. 'He's a right good chap, I'll tell you, and I'll bring him up to see Alfy one of these days!'

'Bring up that dirty boy! I should like to see you!' cried Ellen, making *such* a face. 'I don't believe a word of his coming out of the Union. I'm sure he's run away out of gaol, by the look of him!'

'Ellen—Harold—come down to your tea!' called Mrs. King.

So they went down; and presently, while Mrs. King was gone up to give Alfred his tea, there came Mrs. Shepherd bustling across, with her black silk apron thrown over her cap with the crimson gauze ribbons. She wanted a bit of tape, and if there were none in the shop, Harold must match it in Elbury when he took the letters.

Ellen was rather familiar with Mrs. Shepherd, because she made her gowns, and they had some talk about the new clergyman. Mrs. Shepherd did not care for clergymen much; if she had done so, she might not have been so hard with her labourers. She was always afraid of their asking her to subscribe to something or other, so she gave it as her opinion, that she should never think it worth while to listen to such a very young man as that, and she hoped he would not stay; and then she said, 'So your brother was taking up with that come-by-chance lad, I saw. Did he make anything out of him?'

'He fancies him more than I like, or Mother either,' said Ellen. 'He says he's out of Upperscote Union; but he's a thorough impudent one, and owns he's no father nor mother, nor nothing belonging to him. I think it is a deal more likely that he is run away from some reformatory, or prison.'

'That's just what I said to the farmer!' said Mrs. Shepherd. 'I said he was out of some place of that sort. I'm sure it's a sin for the gentlemen to be setting up such places, raising the county rates, and pampering up a set of young rogues to let loose on

us. Ay! ay! I'll warrant he's a runaway thief! I told the farmer he'd take him to his sorrow, but you see he is short of hands just now, and the men are so set up and grabbing, I don't know how farmers is to live.'

So Mrs. Shepherd went away grumbling, instead of being thankful for the beautiful crop of hay, safely housed, before the thunder shower which had saved the turnips from the fly.

Ellen might have doubted whether she had done right in helping to give the boy a bad name, but just then in came the ostler from the Tankard with some letters.

'Here!' he said, 'here's one from one of the gentlemen lodging here fishing, to Cayenne. You'll please to see how much there is to pay.'

Ellen looked at her Postal Guide, but she was quite at a fault, and she called up-stairs to Alfred to ask if he knew where she should look for Cayenne. He was rather fond of maps, and knew a good deal of geography for a boy of his age, but he knew nothing about this place, and she was just thinking of sending back the letter, to ask the gentleman where it was, when a voice said:

'Try Guiana, or else South America.'

She looked up, and there were Paul's dirty face and dirtier elbows, leaning over the half-door of the shop.

'Why, how do you know?' she said, starting back.

'I learnt at school, Cayenne, capital of French Guiana.' Sure enough Cayenne had Guiana to it in her list, and the price was

found out.

But when this learned geographer advanced into the shop, and asked for a loaf, what a hand and what a sleeve did he stretch out! Ellen scarcely liked to touch his money, and felt all her disgust revive. But, for all that, and for all her fear of Harold's running into mischief, what business had she to set it about that the stranger was an escaped convict?

Meanwhile, Alfred had plenty of food for dreaming over his fellow sufferer. It really seemed to quiet him to think of another in the same case, and how many questions he longed to have asked Mr. Cope! He wanted to know whether it came easier to Jem to be patient than to himself; whether he suffered as much wearing pain; whether he grieved over the last hope of using his limbs; and above all, the question he knew he never could bear to ask, whether Jem had the dread of death to scare his thoughts, though never confessed to himself.

He longed for Mr. Cope's next visit, and felt strongly drawn towards that thought of Jem, yet ashamed to think of himself as so much less patient and submissive; so little able to take comfort in what seemed to soothe Jem, that it was the Lord's doing. Could Jem think he had been a wicked boy, and take it as punishment?

CHAPTER IV—
PAUL BLACKTHORN

'I say,' cried Harold, running up into his brother's room, as soon as he had put away the pony, 'do you know whether Paul is gone?'

'It is always Paul, Paul!' exclaimed Ellen; 'I'm sure I hope he is.'

'But why do you think he would be?' asked Alfred.

'Oh, didn't you hear? He knows no more than a baby about anything, and so he turned the cows into Darnel meadow, and never put the hurdle to stop the gap—never thinking they could get down the bank; so the farmer found them in the barley, and if he did not run out against him downright shameful—though Paul up and told him the truth, that 'twas nobody else that did it.'

'What, and turned him off?'

'Well, that's what I want to know,' said Harold, going on with his tea. 'Paul said to me he didn't know how he could stand the like of that—and yet he didn't like to be off—he'd taken a fancy to the place, you see, and there's me, and there's old Cæsar—and so he said he wouldn't go unless the farmer sent him off when he came to be paid this evening—and old Skinflint has got him so cheap, I don't think he will.'

'For shame, Harold; don't call names!'

'Well, there he is,' said Alfred, pointing into the farm-yard, towards the hay-loft door. This was over the cow-house in the gable end; and in the dark opening sat Paul, his feet on the top step of the ladder, and Cæsar, the yard-dog, lying by his side, his white paws hanging down over the edge, his sharp white muzzle and grey prick ears turned towards his friend, and his eyes casting such appealing looks, that he was getting more of the hunch of bread than probably Paul could well spare.

'How has he ever got the dog up the ladder?' cried Harold.

'Well!' said Mrs. King, 'I declare he looks like a picture I have seen—'

'Well, to be sure! who would go for to draw a picture of the like of that!' exclaimed Ellen, pausing as she put on her things to carry home some work.

'It was a picture of a Spanish beggar-boy,' said Mrs. King; 'and the housekeeper at Castlefort used to say that the old lord—that's Lady Jane's brother—had given six hundred pounds for it.'

Ellen set out on her walk with a sound of wonder quite beyond words. Six hundred pounds for a picture like Paul Blackthorn! She did not know that so poor and feeble are man's attempts to imitate the daily forms and colourings fresh from the Divine Hand, that a likeness of the very commonest sight, if represented with something of its true spirit and life, wins a strange value, especially if the work of the great master-artists of many years ago.

And even the painter Murillo himself, though he might

pleasantly recall on his canvas the notion of the bright-eyed, olive-tinted lad, resting after the toil of the day, could never have rendered the free lazy smile on his face, nor the gleam of the dog's wistful eyes and quiver of its eager ears, far less the glow of setting sunlight that shed over all that warm, clear, ruddy light, so full of rest and cheerfulness, beautifying, as it hid, so many common things: the thatched roof of the barn, the crested hayrick close beside it; the waggons, all red and blue, that had brought it home, and were led to rest, the horses drooping their meek heads as they cooled their feet among the weed in the dark pond;—the ducks moving, with low contented quacks and quickly-wagging tails, in one long single file to their evening foraging in the dewy meadows; the spruce younger poultry pecking over the yard, staying up a little later than their elders to enjoy a few leavings in peace, free from the persecutions of the cross old king of the dung-hill;—all this left in shade, while the ruddy light had mounted to the roofs, gave brilliance to every round tuft of moss, and gleamed on the sober foliage of the old spreading walnut tree.

'Poor lad,' said Mrs. King, 'it seems a pity he should come to such a rough life, when he seems to have got such an education! I hope he is not run away from anywhere.'

'You're as bad as Ellen, mother,' cried Harold, 'who will have it that he's out of prison.'

'No, not that,' said Mrs. King; 'but it did cross me whether he could have run away from school, and if his friends were in

trouble for him.'

'He never had any friends,' said Harold, 'nor he never ran away. He's nothing but a foundling. They picked him up under a blackthorn bush when he was a baby, with nothing but a bit of an old plaid shawl round him.'

'Did they ever know who he belonged to?' asked Alfred.

'Never; nor he doesn't care if they don't, for sure they could be no credit to him; but they that found him put him into the Union, and there an old woman, that they called Granny Moll, took to him. She had but one eye, he says; but, Mother, I do believe he never had another friend like her, for he got to pulling up the bits of grass, and was near crying when he said she was dead and gone, and then he didn't care for nothing.'

'But who taught him about Cayenne?' asked Alfred.

'Oh, that was the Union School. All the children went to school, and they had a terrible sharp master, who used to cut them over the head quite cruel, and was sent away at last for being such a savage; but Paul being always there, and having nothing else to do, you see, got on ever so far, and can work sums in his head downright wonderful. There came an inspector once who praised him up, and said he'd recommend him to a place where he'd be taught to be a school-master, if any one would pay the cost; but the guardians wouldn't hear of it at no price, and were quite spiteful to find he was a good scholar, for fear, I suppose, that he'd know more than they.'

'Hush, hush, Harold,' said his mother; 'wait till you have to pay

the rates before you run out against the guardians.'

'What do you mean, Mother?'

'Why, don't you see, the guardians have their duties to those who pay the rates, as well as those that have parish pay. What they have to do, is to mind that nobody starves, or the like; and their means comes out of the rates, out of my pocket, and the like of me, as well as my Lady's and all the rich. Well, whatever they might like to do, it would not be serving us fairly to take more than was a bare necessity from us, to send your Master Paul and the like of him to a fine school. 'Tis for them to be just, and other folk to be generous with what's their own.'

'Mother talks as if she was a guardian herself!' said Alfred in his funny way.

'Ah, the collector's going his rounds,' responded Harold; and Mrs. King laughed good-humouredly, always glad to see her sick boy able to enjoy himself; but she sighed, saying, 'Ay, and ill can I spare it, though thanks be to God that I've been as yet of them that pay, and not of them that receive.'

'Go on the parish! Mother, what are you thinking of?' cried both sons indignantly.

Poor Mrs. King was thinking of the long winter, and the heavy doctor's bill, and feeling that, after all, suffering and humbling might not be so very far off; but she was too cheerful and full of trust to dwell on the thought, so she smiled and said, 'I only said I was thankful, boys, for the mercy that has kept us up. Go on now, Harold; what about the boy?'

'Why, I don't know that he'd have gone if they had paid his expenses ever so much,' said Harold, 'for he's got a great spirit of his own, and wouldn't be beholden to any one, he said, now he could keep himself—he'd had quite enough of the parish and its keep; so he said he'd go on the tramp till he got work; and they let him out of the Union with just the clothes to his back, and a shilling in his pocket. 'Twas the first time he had ever been let out of bounds since he was picked up under the tree; and he said no one ever would guess the pleasure it was to have nobody to order him here and there, and no bounds round him; and he quite hated the notion of getting inside walls again, as if it was a prison.'

'Oh, I know! I can fancy that!' cried Alfred, raising himself and panting; 'and where did he go first?'

'First, he only wanted to get as far from Upperscote as ever he could, so he walked on; I can't say how he lived, but he didn't beg; he got a job here and a job there; but there are not so many things he knows the knack of, having been at school all his life. Once he took up with a man that sold salt, to draw his cart for him, but the man swore at him so awfully he could not bear it, and beat him too, so he left him, and he had lived terrible hard for about a month before he came here! So you see, Mother, there's not one bit of harm in him; he's a right good scholar, and never says a bad word, nor has no love for drink; so you won't be like Ellen, and be always at me for going near him?'

'You're getting a big boy, Harold, and it is lonely for you,' said

Mrs. King reluctantly; 'and if the lad is a good lad I'd not cast up his misfortune against him; but I must say, I should think better of him if he would keep himself a little bit cleaner and more decent, so as he could go to church.'

Harold made a very queer face, and said, 'How is he to do it up in the hay-loft, Mother? and he ha'n't got enough to pay for lodgings, nor for washing, nor to change.'

'The river is cheap enough,' said Alfred. 'Do you remember when we used to bathe together, Harold, and go after the minnows?'

'Ay, but he don't know how; and then they did plague him so in the Union, that he's got to hate the very name of washing—scrubbing them over and cutting their hair as if they were in gaol.'

'Poor boy! he is terribly forsaken,' said Mrs. King compassionately.

'You may say that!' returned Harold; 'why, he's never so much as seen how folks live at home, and wanted to know if you were most like old Moll or the master of the Union!'

Alfred went into such a fit of laughter as almost hurt him; but Mrs. King felt the more pitiful and tender towards the poor deserted orphan, who could not even understand what a mother was like, and the tears came into her eyes, as she said, 'Well, I'm glad he's not a bad boy. I hope he thinks of the Father and the Home that he has above. I say, Harold, against next Sunday I'll look out Alfred's oldest shirt for him to put on, and you might bring me his to wash, only mind you soak it well in the river first.'

Harold quite flushed with gratitude for his mother's kindness, for he knew it was no small effort in one so scrupulously and delicately clean, and with so much work on her hands; but Mrs. King was one who did her alms by her trouble when she had nothing else to give. Alfred smiled and said he wondered what Ellen would say; and almost at the same moment Harold shot down-stairs, and was presently seen standing upon Paul's ladder talking to him; then Paul rose up as though to come down, and there was much fun going on, as to how Cæsar was to be got down; for, as every one knows, a dog can mount a ladder far better than he can descend; and poor Cæsar stretched out his white paw, looked down, seemed to turn giddy, whined, and looked earnestly at his friends till they took pity on him and lifted him down between them, stretching out his legs to their full length, like a live hand-barrow.

A few seconds more, and there was a great trampling of feet, and then in walked Harold, exclaiming, 'Here he is!' And there he stood, shy and sheepish, with rusty black shag by way of hair, keen dark beads of eyes, and very white teeth; but all the rest, face, hands, jacket, trousers, shoes, and all, of darker or lighter shades of olive-brown; and as to the rents, one would be sorry to have to count them; mending them would have been a thing impossible. What a difference from the pure whiteness of everything around Alfred! the soft pink of the flush of surprise on his delicate cheek, and the wavy shine on his light hair.

A few months ago, Alfred would have been as ready as his

brother to take that sturdy hand, marbled as it was with dirt, and would have heeded all drawbacks quite as little; but sickness had changed him much, and Paul was hardly beside his couch before the colour fleeted away from his cheek, and his eye turned to his mother in such distress, that she was obliged to make a sign to Harold in such haste that it looked like anger, and to mutter something about his being taken worse. And while she was holding the smelling salts to him, and sprinkling vinegar over his couch, they heard the two boys' voices loud under the window, Paul saying he should never come there again, and Harold something about people being squeamish and fine.

It hurt Alfred, and he burst out, almost crying, 'Mother! Mother, now isn't that too bad!'

'It is very thoughtless,' said Mrs. King sorrowfully; 'but you know everybody has their feelings, Alfred, and I am sorry it happened so.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.