

# YONGE CHARLOTTE MARY

THE PILLARS OF THE  
HOUSE; OR, UNDER  
WODE, UNDER RODE,  
VOL. 1 (OF 2)

Charlotte Yonge

**The Pillars of the House; Or, Under  
Wode, Under Rode, Vol. 1 (of 2)**

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**Yonge C.**

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# Charlotte M. Yonge

## The Pillars of the House; Or, Under Wode, Under Rode, Vol. 1 (of 2)

### CHAPTER I

#### THE BIRTH-DAY GIFT

*'O I've got a plum-cake, and a feast let us make,  
Come, school-fellows, come at my call;  
I assure you 'tis nice, and we'll all have a slice,  
Here's more than enough for us all.'*

*Jane Taylor.*

'It is come! Felix, it is come!'

So cried, shouted, shrieked a chorus, as a street door was torn open to admit four boys, with their leathern straps of books over their shoulders. They set up a responsive yell of 'Jolly! Jolly!' which being caught up and re-echoed by at least five voices within, caused a considerable volume of sound in the narrow entry and narrower staircase, up which might be seen a sort of pyramid of children.

'Where is it?' asked the tallest of the four arrivals, as he soberly hung up his hat.

'Mamma has got it in the drawing-room, and Papa has been in ever since dinner,' was the universal cry from two fine complexioned, handsome girls, from a much smaller girl and boy, and from a creature rolling on the stairs, whose sex and speech seemed as yet uncertain.

'And where's Cherry?' was the further question; 'is she there too?'

'Yes, but—' as he laid his hand on the door—'don't open the letter there. Get Cherry, and we'll settle what to do with it.'

'O Felix, I've a stunning notion!'

'Felix, promise to do what I want!'

'Felix, do pray buy me some Turkish delight!'

'Felix, I do want the big spotty horse.'

Such shouts and insinuations, all deserving the epithet of the first, pursued Felix as he entered a room, small, and with all the contents faded and worn, but with an air of having been once tasteful, and still made the best of. Contents we say advisedly, meaning not merely the furniture but the inmates, namely, the pale wan fragile mother, working, but with the baby on her knee, and looking as if care and toil had brought her to skin and bone, though still with sweet eyes and a lovely smile; the father, tall and picturesque, with straight handsome features, but with a hectic colour, wasted cheek, and lustrous eye, that were sad earnest of the future. He was still under forty, his wife some years less; and elder than either in its expression of wasted suffering was the countenance of the little girl of thirteen years old who lay on the sofa, with pencil, paper, and book, her face with her mother's features exaggerated into a look at once keen and patient, all three forming a sad contrast to the solid exuberant health on the other side the door.

Truly the boy who entered was a picture of sturdy English vigour, stout-limbed, rosy faced, clear eyed, open, and straightforward looking, perhaps a little clumsy with the clumsiness of sixteen, especially when conscience required tearing spirits to be subdued to the endurance of the feeble. It was, however, a bright congratulating look that met him from the trio. The little girl started up: 'Your sovereign's come, Felix!'

The father showed his transparent-looking white teeth in a merry laugh. 'Here are the galleons, you boy named in a lucky hour! How many times have you spent them in fancy?'

The mother held up the letter, addressed to Master Felix Chester Underwood, No. 8, St. Oswald's Buildings, Bexley, and smiled as she said, 'Is it all right, my boy?'

'They want me to open it outside, Mamma!—Come, White-heart, we want you at the council.'

And putting his arm round his little sister Geraldine's waist, while she took up her small crutch, Felix disappeared with her, the mother looking wistfully after them, the father giving something between a laugh and a sigh.

'Then you decide against speaking to him,' said Mrs. Underwood.

'Poor children, yes. A little happiness will do them a great deal more good than the pound would do to us. The drops that will fill their little cup will but be lost in our sea.'

'Yes, I like what comes from Vale Leston to be still a festive matter,' said Mrs. Underwood; 'and at least we are sure the dear boy will never spend it selfishly. It only struck me whether he would not enjoy finding himself able to throw something into the common stock.'

'He would, honest lad,' said Mr. Underwood; 'but, Mamma, you are very hard-hearted towards the rabble. Even if this one pound would provide all the shoes and port wine that are pressing on the maternal mind, the stimulus of a day's treat would be much more wholesome.'

'But not for you,' said his wife.

'Yes, for me. If the boy includes us old folks in his festivity, it will be as good as a week's port wine. You doubt, my sweet Enid. Has not our long honeymoon at Vale Leston helped us all this time?' Her name was Mary, but having once declared her to be a woman made of the same stuff as Enid, he had made it his pet title for her.

Mrs. Underwood's thoughts went far away into the long ago of Vale Leston. She could hardly believe that nine years only had passed since that seven-years' honeymoon. She was a woman of the fewest possible words, and her husband generally answered her face instead of her voice.

Vale Leston had promised to be an ample provision when Edward Underwood had resigned his fellowship to marry the Rector's niece and adopted daughter, his own distant cousin, with the assurance of being presented to the living hereafter, and acting in the meantime as curate. It was a family living, always held conjointly with a tolerably good estate, enough to qualify the owner for the dangerous position of 'squarson,' as no doubt many a clerical Underwood had been ever since their branch had grown out from the stem of the elder line, which had now disappeared. These comfortable quarters had seemed a matter of certainty, until the uncle died suddenly and with a flaw in his will, so that the undesirable nephew and heir-at-law whom he had desired to exclude, a rich dissipated man, son to a brother older than the father of the favourite niece, had stepped in, and differing *in toto* from Edward Underwood, had made his own son take orders for the sake of the living, and it had been the effort of the young wife ever since not to disobey her husband by showing that it had been to her the being driven out of paradise.

ASSISTANT CURACY.—A Priest of Catholic opinions is needed at a town parish. Resident Rector and three Curates. Daily Prayers. Choral Service on Sundays and Holy-days. Weekly Communion.—Apply to P.C.B., St. Oswald's Rectory, Bexley.

Every one knows the sort of advertisement which had brought Mr. Underwood to Bexley, as a place which would accord with the doctrines and practices dear to him. Indeed, apart from the advertisement, Bexley had a fame. A great rubrical war had there been fought out by the Rector of St. Oswald's, and when he had become a colonial Bishop, his successor was reported to have carried on his work; and the beauty of the restored church, and the exquisite services, were so generally talked of, that Mr. Underwood thought himself fortunate in obtaining the appointment. Mr. Bevan too, the Rector, was an exceedingly courteous, kindly-mannered man, talking in a soft low voice in the most

affectionate and considerate manner, and with good taste and judgment that exceedingly struck and pleased the new curate. It was the more surprise to him to find the congregations thin, and a general languor and indifference about the people who attended the church. There was also a good deal of opposition in the parish, some old sullen seceders who went to a neighbouring proprietary chapel, many more of erratic tastes haunted the places of worship of the numerous sects, who swarmed in the town, and many more were living in a state of town heathenism.

It was not long before the perception of the cause began to grow upon Mr. Underwood. The machinery was perfect, but the spring was failing; the salt was there, but where was the savour? The discourses he heard from his rector were in one point of view faultless, but the old Scottish word 'fashionless' would rise into his thoughts whenever they ended, and something of effect and point was sure to fail; they were bodies without souls, and might well satisfy a certain excellent solicitor, who always praised them as 'just the right medium, sober, moderate, and unexciting.'

In the first pleasure of a strong, active, and enterprising man, at finding his plans unopposed by authority, Mr. Underwood had been delighted with his rector's ready consent to whatever he undertook, and was the last person to perceive that Mr. Bevan, though objecting to nothing, let all the rough and tough work lapse upon his curates, and took nothing but the graceful representative part. Even then, Mr. Underwood had something to say in his defence; Mr. Bevan was valetudinarian in his habits, and besides—he was in the midst of a courtship—after his marriage he would give his mind to his parish.

For Mr. Bevan, hitherto a confirmed and rather precise and luxurious bachelor, to the general surprise, married a certain Lady Price, the young widow of an old admiral, and with her began a new *régime*.

My Lady, as every one called her, since she retained her title and name, was by no means desirous of altering the ornamental arrangements in church, which she regarded with pride; but she was doubly anxious to guard her husband's health; and she also had the sharpest eye to the main chance. Hitherto, whatever had been the disappointments and shortcomings at the Rectory, there had been free-handed expenditure, and no stint either in charity or the expenses connected with the service; but Lady Price had no notion of taking on her uncalled-for outlay. The parish must do its part, and it was called on to do so in modes that did not add to the Rector's popularity. Moreover, the arrangements were on the principle of getting as much as possible out of everybody, and no official failed to feel the pinch. The Rector was as bland, gentle, and obliging as ever; but he seldom transacted any affairs that he could help; and in the six years that had elapsed since the marriage, every person connected with the church had changed, except Mr. Underwood.

Yet, perhaps, as senior curate, he had felt the alteration most heavily. He had to be, or to refuse to be, my Lady's instrument in her various appeals; he came in for her indignation at wastefulness, and at the unauthorised demands on the Rector; he had to feel what it was to have no longer unlimited resources of broth and wine to fall back upon at the Rectory; he had to supply the shortcomings of the new staff brought in on lower terms—and all this, moreover, when his own health and vigour were beginning to fail.

Lady Price did not like him or his family. They were poor, and she distrusted the poor; and what was worse, she knew they were better born and better bred than herself, and had higher aims. Gentle Mrs. Underwood, absorbed in household cares, no more thought of rivalry with her than with the Queen; but the soft movement, the low voice, the quiet sweep of the worn garments, were a constant vexation to my Lady, who having once pronounced the curate's wife affected, held to her opinion. With Mr. Underwood she had had a fight or two, and had not conquered, and now they were on terms of perfect respect and civility on his side, and of distance and politeness on hers. She might talk of him half contemptuously but she never durst show herself otherwise than civil, though she was always longing to bring in some more deferential person in his place; and, whenever illness



interfered with his duties, she spoke largely to her friends of the impropriety of a man's undertaking what he could not perform.

One of her reductions had been the economising the third curate, while making the second be always a neophyte, who received his title for Orders, and remained his two years upon a small stipend.

The change last Easter, which had substituted a deacon for a priest, had fallen heavily on Mr. Underwood, and would have been heavier still, but that the new comer, Charles Audley, had attached himself warmly to him. The young man was the son of a family of rank and connection, and Lady Price's vanity was flattered by obtaining his assistance; but her vexation was proportionably excited by his preference for the Underwood household, where, in truth—with all its poverty—he found the only atmosphere thoroughly congenial to him in all the parish of St. Oswald's.

Speedily comprehending the state of things, he put his vigorous young shoulder to the wheel, and, full of affectionate love and admiration for Mr. Underwood, spared himself nothing in the hope of saving him fatigue or exertion, quietly gave up his own holidays, was always at his post, and had hitherto so far lightened Mr. Underwood's toil, that he was undoubtedly getting through this summer better than the last, for his bodily frame had long been affected by the increased amount of toil in an ungenial atmosphere, and every access of cold weather had told on him in throat and chest attacks, which, with characteristic buoyancy, he would not believe serious. He never deemed himself aught but 'better,' and the invalid habits that crept on him by stealth, always seemed to his brave spirit consequent on a day's extra fatigue, or the last attention to a departing cough. Alas! when every day's fatigue was extra, the cough always *departing*, never *departed*.

Yet, though it had become a standing order in the house, that for an hour after papa came in from his rounds, no one of the children should be in the drawing-room, except poor little lame Geraldine, who was permanently established there; and that afterwards, even on strong compulsion, they should only come in one by one, as quietly as possible, he never ceased to apologise to them for their banishment when he felt it needful, and when he was at ease, would renew the merriment that sometimes cost him dear.

The children had, for the most part, inherited that precious heirloom of contentment and elasticity, and were as happy in nooks and corners in bed-room, nursery, staircase or kitchen, as they could have been in extensive play-rooms and gardens.

See them in full council upon the expenditure of the annual gift that an old admiral at Vale Leston, who was godfather to Felix, was wont to send the boy on his birth-day—that third of July, which had seemed so bright, when birth-days had begun in the family, that no name save Felix could adequately express his parent's feelings.

Mr. and Mrs. Underwood had fancies as to nomenclature; and that staircase-full of children rejoiced in eccentric appellations. To begin at the bottom—here sat on a hassock, her back against the wall, her sharp old fairy's face uplifted, little Geraldine, otherwise Cherry, a title that had suited her round rosiness well, till after the first winter at Bexley, when the miseries of a diseased ankle-joint had set in, and paled her into the tender aliases of White-heart, or Sweet-heart. She was, as might be plainly seen in her grey eyes, a clever child; and teaching her was a great delight to her father, and often interested him when he was unequal to anything else. Her dark eyebrows frowned with anxiety as she lifted up her little pointed chin to watch sturdy frank-faced Felix, who with elaborate slowness dealt with the envelope, tasting slowly of the excitement it created, and edging away from the baluster, on which, causing it to contribute frightful creaks to the general Babel, were perched numbers 4, 6, 7, and 8, to wit, Edgar, Clement, Fulbert, and Lancelot, all three handsome, blue-eyed, fair-faced lads. Indeed Edgar was remarkable, even among this decidedly fine-looking family. He had a peculiarly delicate contour of feature and complexion, though perfectly healthy; and there was something of the same expression, half keen, half dreamy, as in Geraldine, his junior by one year; while the grace of all the attitudes of his slender lissome figure showed to advantage beside Felix's more sturdy form, and deliberate or downright movements; while Clement was paler, slighter, and with rather infantine



features, and shining wavy brown hair, that nothing ever seemed to ruffle, looked so much as if he ought to have been a girl, that Tina, short for Clementina, was his school name. Fulbert, stout, square, fat-cheeked, and permanently rough and dusty, looked as if he hardly belonged to the rest.

The four eldest were day-scholars at the city grammar-school; but Lancelot, a bright-faced little fellow in knickerbockers, was a pupil of whoever would or could teach him at home, as was the little girl who was clinging to his leg, and whose name of Robina seemed to have moulded her into some curious likeness to a robin-redbreast, with her brown soft hair, rosy cheeks, bright merry eyes, plump form, and quick loving audacity. Above her sat a girl of fifteen, with the family features in their prettiest development—the chiseled straight profile, the clear white roseately tinted skin, the large well-opened azure eyes, the profuse glossy hair, the long, slender, graceful limbs, and that pretty head leant against the knees of her own very counterpart; for these were Wilmet and Alda, the twin girls who had succeeded Felix, and whose beauty had been the marvel of Vale Leston, their shabby dress the scorn of the day school at Bexley. And forming the apex of the pyramid, perched astride on the very shoulders of much-enduring Wilmet, was three years old Angela—Baby Bernard being quiescent in a cradle near mamma. N.B. Mrs. Underwood, though her girls had such masculine names, had made so strong a protest against their being called by boyish abbreviations, that only in one case had nature been too strong for her, and Robina had turned into Bobbie. Wilmet's second name being Ursula, she was apt to be known as W. W.

'Make haste, Felix, you intolerable boy! don't be so slow!' cried Alda.

'Is there a letter?' inquired Wilmet.

'Yes, more's the pity!' said Felix. 'Now I shall have to answer it.'

'I'll do that, if you'll give me what's inside,' said Edgar.

'Is it there?' exclaimed Cherry, in a tone of doubt, that sent an electric thrill of dismay through the audience; Lance nearly toppling over, to the horror of the adjacent sisters, and the grave rebuke of Clement.

'If it should be a sell!' gasped Fulbert.

'Suppose it were,' said Felix gravely.

'Then,' said Edgar, 'you can disown the old rogue Chester.'

'What stuff!' interposed Clement.

'I'd cut him out of my will on the spot,' persisted Edgar.

'But it is all right,' said Cherry, looking with quiet certainty into her brother's face; and he nodded and coloured at the same time.

'But it is not a pretty one,' said little Robina. 'Last year it was green, and before that red; and this is nasty stupid black and white, and all thin crackling paper.'

Felix laughed, and held up the document.

'What!' cried Fulbert. 'Five! Why, 'tisn't only five shillings! the horrid old cheat!'

'It's a five-pound note!' screamed Cherry. 'I saw one when Papa went to the bank! O Felix, Felix!'

A five-pound note! It seemed to take away the breath of those who knew what it meant, and then an exulting shout broke forth.

'Well,' said Edgar solemnly, 'old Chester is a brick! Three cheers for him!'

Which cheers having been perpetrated with due vociferation, the cry began, 'O Felix, what will you do with it?'

'Buy a pony!' cried Fulbert.

'A rocking-horse,' chirped Robina.

'Punch every week,' shouted Lance.

'A knife apiece,' said Fulbert.

'How can you all be so selfish?' pronounced Clement. 'Now a harmonium would be good to us all.'

'Then get some cotton, for our ears into the bargain, if Tina is to play on it,' said Edgar.

'I shall take the note to mother,' said the owner.

'Oh!' screamed all but Wilmet and Cherry, 'that's as bad as not having it at all!'

Maybe Felix thought so, for it was with a certain gravity and solemnity of demeanour that he entered the drawing-room, causing his father to exclaim, 'How now? No slip between cup and lip? Not infelix, Felix?'

'No, papa, but it's *this*; and I thought I ought to bring it.'

The dew at once was in the mother's eyes, as she sprang up and kissed the boy's brow, saying, 'Felix, dear, don't show it to me. You were meant to be happy with it. Go and be so.'

'Stay,' said Mr. Underwood, 'Felix will really enjoy helping us to this extent more than any private expenditure. Is it not so, my boy? Well then, I propose that the sovereign of old prescriptive right should go to his *menus plaisirs*, and the rest to something needful; but he shall say to what. Said I well, old fellow?'

'Oh, thank you, thank you!' cried Felix ardently.

'Thank me for permission to do as you will with your own?' smiled Mr. Underwood.

'You will choose, then, Felix?' said his mother wistfully, her desires divided between port wine for Papa, and pale ale for Geraldine.

'Yes, mamma,' was the prompt answer. 'Then, please, let Wilmet and Alda be rigged out fresh for Sundays.'

'Wilmet and Alda!' exclaimed Mamma.

'Yes, I should like that better than anything, please,' said the boy. 'All our fellows say they would be the prettiest girls in all Bexley, if they were properly dressed; and those horrid girls at Miss Pearson's lead them a life about those old black hats.'

'Poor dears! I have found Alda crying when she was dressing for church,' mused Mrs. Underwood; 'and though I have scolded her, I could have cried too, to think how unlike their girlhood is to mine.'

'And if you went to fetch them home from school, you would know how bad it is, Mamma,' said Felix. 'Wilmet does not mind it, but Alda cries, and the sneaking girls do it the more; and they are girls, so one can't lick them; and they have not all got brothers.'

'To be licked instead!' said Mr. Underwood, unable to help being amused.

'Well, yes, Papa; and so you see it would be no end of a comfort to make them look like the rest.'

'By all means, Felix. The ladies can tell how far your benefaction will go; but as far as it can accomplish, the twins shall be resplendent. Now then, back to your anxious clients. Only tell me first how my kind old friend the Admiral is.'

'Here's his letter, Father; I quite forgot to read it.'

'Some day, I hope, you will know him enough to care for him personally. Now you may be off.—Nay, Enid, love, your daughters could not have lived much longer without clothes to their backs.'

'Oh, yes, it must have been done,' sighed the poor mother; 'but I fancied Felix would have thought of you first.'

'He thought of troubles much more felt than any of mine. Poor children! the hard apprenticeship will serve them all their lives.'

Meantime Felix returned with the words, 'Hurrah! we are to have the sovereign just as usual; and all the rest is to go to turn out Wilmet and Alda like respectable young females.—Hollo, now!'

For Alda had precipitated herself down-stairs, to throttle him with her embraces; while Cherry cried out, 'That's right! Oh, do get those dear white hats you told me about;' but the public, even there a many-headed monster thing, was less content.

'What, all in girls' trumpery?' 'That's the stupidest sell I ever heard of!' 'Oh, I did so want a pony!' were the cries of the boys.

Even Robina was so far infected as to cry, 'I wanted a ride.'

And Wilmet reproachfully exclaimed, 'O Felix, you should have got something for Papa. Don't you know, Mr. Rugg said he ought to have a respirator. It is a great shame.'

'I don't think he would have let me, Wilmet,' said Felix, looking up; 'and I never thought of it. Besides, I can't have those girls making asses of themselves at you.'

'Oh no, don't listen to Wilmet!' cried Alda. 'You are the very best brother in all the world! Now we shall be fit to be seen at the break up. I don't think I could have played my piece if I knew every one was looking at my horrid old alpaca.'

'And there'll be hats for Cherry and Bobbie too!' entreated Wilmet.

'Oh, don't put it into their heads!' gasped Alda.

'No, I'll have you two fit to be seen first,' said Felix.

'Well, it's a horrid shame,' grumbled Fulbert; 'we have always all gone shares in Felix's birthday tip.'

'So you do now,' said Felix; 'there's the pound all the same as usual.'

That pound was always being spent in imagination; and the voices broke out again.

'Oh, then Papa can have the respirator!'

'Felix, the rocking-horse!'

'Felix, do get us three little cannon to make a jolly row every birth-day!'

'Felix, do you know that Charlie Froggatt says he would sell that big Newfoundland for a pound? and that would be among us all.'

'Nonsense, Fulbert! a big dog is always eating; but there is a concertina at Lake's.'

'Tina—tina—concertina! But, I say, Fee, there's White-heart been wishing her heart out all the time for a real good paint-box.'

'Oh, never mind that, Ed; no one would care for one but you and me; and the little ones would spoil all the paints.'

'Yes, resumed Wilmet, from her throne, 'it would be the worry of one's life to keep the little ones off them; and baby would be poisoned to a dead certainty. Now the respirator—'

'Now the concertina—'

'Now Punch—'

'Now the dog—'

'Now the rocking-horse—'

'Now the cannon—'

'I'll tell you what,' said Felix, 'I've settled how it is to be. We'll get John Harper's van, and all go out to the Castle, with a jolly cold dinner—yes, you, Cherry, and all; Ed and I will carry you—and dine on the grass, and—'

A chorus of shouts interrupted him, all ecstatic, and rendered more emphatic by the stamping of feet.

'And Angela will go!' added Wilmet.

'And Papa,' entreated Cherry.

'And Mamma too, if she will,' said Felix.

'And Mr. Audley,' pronounced Robina, echoed by Clement and Angela. 'Mr. Audley must go!'

'Mr. Audley!' grunted Felix. 'I want nobody but ourselves.'

'Yes, and if he went we could not stay jolly late. My Lady would make no end of a row if both curates cut the evening prayers.'

'For shame, Edgar!' cried the three elder girls.

While Wilmet added, 'We could not stay late, because of Papa and the little ones. But I don't want Mr. Audley, either.'

'No, no! Papa and he will talk to each other, and be of no use,' said Geraldine. 'Oh, how delicious! Will the wild-roses be out? When shall it be, Felix?'

'Well, the first fine day after school breaks up, I should say.'

'Hurrah! hurrah!'

And there was another dance, in the midst of which Mr. Underwood opened the door, to ask what honourable member was receiving such deafening cheers.

'Here! here he is, Papa!' cried Alda. 'He is going to take us all out to a pic-nic in the Castle woods; and won't you come, Papa?'

'O Papa, you will come!' said Felix. And the whole staircase bawled in accordance.

'Come! to be sure I will!' said his father; 'and only too glad to be asked! I trust we shall prove to have found the way to get the maximum of pleasure out of Admiral Chester's gift.'

'If Mamma will go,' said Felix. 'I wonder what the van will cost, and what will be left for the dinner.'

'Oh, let us two cook the whole dinner,' entreated the twins.

'Wait now,' said Felix. 'I didn't know it was so late, Father.' And he carefully helped his father on with his coat; and as a church bell made itself heard, set forth with him.

When the service was musical, Felix and his two next brothers both formed part of the choir; and though this was not the case on this evening, Felix knew that his mother was easier when he or Wilmet could watch over Papa's wraps.

And Mamma herself, with one at least of the twins, was busy enough in giving the lesser ones their supper, and disposing of them in bed, so that the discreet alone might remain to the later tea-drinking.

And 'Sibby' must be made a sharer of the good news in her lower region, though she was sure to disbelieve in Alda and Wilmet's amateur cookery.

Sibby was Wilmet's foster-mother. Poor thing! Mr. Underwood had found her in dire need in the workhouse, a child herself of seventeen, with a new-born babe, fresh from the discovery that the soldier-husband, as she thought, and who had at least 'gone before the praste with her,' and brought her from her Kilkenny home, was previously husband to another woman. She was tenderly cared for by Mr. Underwood's mother, who was then alive, and keeping house for the whole party at the Rectory; and having come into the Vale Leston nursery, she never left it. Her own child died in teething, and she clung so passionately to her nursling, that Mrs. Underwood had no heart to separate them, Roman Catholic though she was, and difficult to dispose of. She was not the usual talking merry Irishwoman; if ever she had been such, her heart was broken; and she was always meek, quiet, subdued, and attentive; forgetful sometimes, but tender and trustworthy to the last degree with the children.

She had held fast to the family in their reverses, and no more thought of not sharing their lot than one of their children. Indeed, it would not have been much more possible to send her out to shift for herself in England; and her own people seemed to have vanished in the famine, for her letters, with her savings, came back from the dead-letter office. She put her shoulder to the burthen, and, with one small scrub under her, got through an amazing amount of work: and though her great deep liquid brown eyes looked as pathetic as ever, she certainly was in far better spirits than when she sat in the nursery. To be sure, she was a much better nurse than she was a cook; but as both could not be had, Mrs. Underwood was content and thankful to have a servant so entirely one with themselves in interests and affections; and who had the further perfection of never wanting any society but the children's; shrinking from English gossips, and never showing a weakness, save for Irish tramps. Moreover, she was a prodigious knitter; and it was her boast that not one of the six young gentlemen had yet worn stocking or sock, but what came from her needles, and had been re-footed by her to the last extremity of wear.

Meantime, Felix and Clement walked with their father to the church. There it was, that handsome church; the evening sun in slanting beams coming through the gorgeous west window to the illuminated walls, and the rich inlaid marble and alabaster of the chancel mellowed by the pure evening light. The east window, done before glass-painting had improved, was tame and ill-executed, and there was, even æsthetically, a strange unsatisfactory feeling in looking at the heavy, though

handsome, incrustations and arcades of dark marble that formed the reredos. It was all very correct; but it wanted life.

Mr. Bevan was not there, he had gone out to dinner, and the congregation consisted of some young ladies, old men, and three little children. Mr. Audley read all, save the Absolution and the Lessons; and the responses sounded low and feeble in the great church, though there was one voice among them glad and hearty in dedicating and entrusting the new year of his life with its unknown burthen.

Felix had heard sayings and seen looks which, boldly as his sanguine spirit resisted them, would hang in a heavy boding cloud over his mind, and were already casting a grave shadow there.

And if the thought of his fivefold gift swelled the fervour of his 'Amen' to the General Thanksgiving, there was another deep heartfelt Amen, which breathed forth earnest gratitude for the possession of such a first-born son.

'That is a very good boy,' the father could not help saying to Mr. Audley, as, on quitting the churchyard, Felix exclaiming, 'Papa, may I just get it changed and ask about the van?' darted across the street, with Clement, into a large grocer's shop nearly opposite, where a brisk evening traffic was going on in the long daylight of hot July; and he could not but tell of the birth-day gift, and how it was to be spent. '*Res angusta domi*,' he said, with a smile, 'is a thing to be thankful for, when it has such effects upon a lad.'

'You must add a small taste of example to the prescription,' said Mr. Audley. 'Is this all the birth-day present Felix has had?'

'Well, I believe Cherry gave him one of her original designs; but birth-days are too numerous for us to stand presents.'

The other curate half sighed. He was a great contrast—a much smaller man than his senior, slight, slim, and pale, but with no look of ill-health about him; brown eyed and haired, and with the indefinable look about all his appointments and dress, that showed he had lived in unconscious luxury and refinement all his days. His thoughts went back to a home, where the only perplexity was how to deal with an absolute glut of presents, and to his own actual doubts what to send that youngest sister, who would feel slighted if Charlie sent nothing, but really could not want anything; a book she would not read, a jewel could seldom get a turn of being worn, a trinket would only be fresh lumber for her room. Then he revolved the possibilities of making Felix a present, without silencing his father's confidences, and felt that it could not be done in any direct manner at present; nay, that it could hardly add to the radiant happiness of the boy, who rushed across the road, almost under the nose of the railway-omnibus horses, and exclaimed—

'He will let us have it for nothing, Father! He says it would be hiring it out, and he can't do that: but he would esteem it a great favour if we would go in it, and not pay anything, except just a shilling to Harris for a pint of beer. Won't it be jolly, Father?'

'Spicy would be more appropriate,' said Mr. Underwood, laughing, as the vehicle in question drew up at the shop door, with Mr. Harper's name and all his groceries inscribed in gold letters upon the awning.

'I'm so glad I thought of Harper's,' continued Felix. 'I asked him instead of Buff, because I knew Mamma would want it to be covered. Now there's lots of room; and we boys will walk up all the hills.'

'I hope there is room for me, Felix,' suggested Mr. Audley.

'Or,' suggested Mr. Underwood, 'you might, like John Gilpin, "ride on horseback after we."'

'Felix looks non-content,' said Mr. Audley. 'I am afraid I was not in his programme. Speak out—let us have it.'

'Why,' said Felix, looking down, 'our little ones all wanted to have you; but then we thought we should all be obliged to come home too soon, unless you took the service for Papa.'

'He certainly ought not to go to church after it,' said Mr. Audley; 'but I can settle that by riding home in good time. What's the day?'

'The day after the girls' break-up, if you please,' said Felix, still not perfectly happy, but unable to help himself; and manifesting quite enough reluctance to make his father ask, as soon as they had parted, what made him so ungracious.

'Only, Papa,' said Felix frankly, 'that we know that you and he will get into some Church talk, and then you'll be of no use; and we wanted to have it all to ourselves.'

'Take care, Felix,' said Mr. Underwood; 'large families are apt to get into a state of savage exclusiveness.'

Felix had to bear the drawback, and the groans it caused from Wilmet, Edgar, and Fulbert: the rest decidedly rejoiced. And Mr. Underwood privately confided the objection to his friend, observing merrily that they would bind themselves by a promise not to talk shop throughout the expedition.

It was a brilliantly happy week. Pretty hats, bound with dark blue velvet, and fresh black silk jackets, were squeezed out of the four pounds, with the help of a few shillings out of the intended hire of the van, and were the glory of the whole family, both of those who were to wear them and those who were not.

On Saturday evening, just as the four elder young people were about to sally forth to do the marketing for their pic-nic, a great hamper made its appearance in the passage, addressed to F. C. Underwood, Esq., and with nothing to pay. Only there was a note fastened to the side, saying, 'Dear Felix, pray let the spicy van find room for my contribution to your pic-nic. I told my mother to send me what was proper from home.—C. S. A.'

Mrs. Underwood was dragged out to superintend the unpacking, which she greatly advised should be merely a surface investigation. That was quite enough, however, to assure her that for Felix to lay in any provision, except the tea and the bread she had already promised, would be entirely superfluous. The girls were disappointed of their cookery; but derived consolation from the long walk with the brothers, in which a cake of good carmine and a lump of gamboge were purchased for Cherry, and two penny dolls for Robina and Angela. What would become of the rest of the pound?

On Sunday, the offertory was, as usual on ordinary occasions, rather scanty; but there was one half-sovereign; and Mr. Underwood was convinced that it had come from under the one white surplice that had still remained on the choir boys' bench.

He stayed in the vestry after the others to count and take care of the offerings, and as he took up the gold, he could not but look at his son, who was waiting for him, and who flushed all over as he met his eye. 'Yes, Papa, I wanted to tell you—I did grudge it at first,' he said hoarsely. 'I knew it was the tithe; but it seemed so much away from them all. I settled that two shillings was the tenth of my own share, and I would give that to-day; and then came Mr. Harper's kindness about the van; and next, when I was thinking how I could save the tenth part without stinting everybody, came all Mr. Audley's hamper. It is very strange and happy, Papa, and I have still something left.'

'I believe,' said Mr. Underwood, 'that you will find the considering the tithe as not your own, is the safest way of keeping poverty from grinding you, or wealth from spoiling you.'

And very affectionately he leant on his son's shoulder all the way home; while Mr. Audley was at luncheon at the Rectory with my Lady, and her twelve years old daughter.

'Mamma,' said Miss Price, 'did you see the Underwoods in new hats?'

'Of course I did, my dear. They were quite conspicuous enough; but when people make a great deal of their poverty, they always do break out in the most unexpected ways.'

'They are pretty girls,' said the Rector, rather dreamily, 'and I suppose they must have new clothes sometimes.'

'You will always find,' proceeded Lady Price without regard, 'that people of that sort have a wonderful eye to the becoming—nothing economical for them! I am sorry for Mr. Underwood, his wife is bringing up a set of fine ladies, who will trust to their pretty looks, and be quite above doing anything for themselves.'

'Do you think Wilmet and Alda Underwood so very pretty, Mr. Audley?' inquired Miss Price, turning her precocious eyes upon him.

'Remarkably so,' Mr. Audley replied, with a courteous setting-down tone that was the only thing that ever approached to subduing Miss Price, and which set her pouting without an answer.

'It is a great misfortune to girls in that station of life to have that painted-doll sort of beauty,' added my Lady; 'and what was it I heard about a pic-nic party?'

'No party, my dear,' replied the Rector, 'only a little fresh air for the family—a day in Centry Park. Felix spends his birth-day present from his godfather in taking them.'

'Ah! I always was sure they had rich friends, though they keep it so close. Never let me hear of their poverty after this.'

Answers only rendered it worse, so my Lady had it her own way, and not being known to the public in St. Oswald's Buildings, did not trouble them much. Yet there was a certain deference to public opinion there, when Alda was heard pouting, 'Felix, why did you go to that horrid Harper? Just fancy Miss Price seeing us!'

'Who cares for a stuck-up thing like Miss Price?' growled Felix.

'I don't care for her,' said Edgar; 'but it is just as well to have some notion of things, and Felix hasn't a grain. Why, all the fellows will be asking which of us is pepper, and which Souchong? I wouldn't have Froggatt or Bruce see me in it at no price.'

'Very well, stay at home, then,' said Felix.

'You could have had the waggonet from the Fortinbras Arms,' said Alda.

'Ay—for all my money, and not for love.'

'For shame, Alda,' said her twin sister; 'how can you be so ridiculous!'

'You know yourself, Wilmet, it is quite true; if any of the girls see us, we shall be labelled "The Groceries."'

'Get inside far enough, and they will not see you.'

'Ay, but there'll be that disgusting little Bobbie and Lance sitting in the front, making no end of row,' said Edgar; 'and the whole place will know that Mr. Underwood and his family are going out for a spree in old Harper's van! Pah! I shall walk.'

'So shall I,' said Alda, 'at least till we are out of the town; but that won't do any good if those children will make themselves so horridly conspicuous. Could not we have the thing to meet us somewhere out of town, Felix?'

'And how would you get Cherry there, or Mamma? Or Baby?—No, no, if you are too genteel for the van, you may walk.'



## CHAPTER II THE PIC-NIC

*'There, on a slope of orchard, Francis laid  
A damask napkin, wrought with horse and hound;  
Brought out a dusky loaf that smelt of home,  
And, half-cut down, a pasty costly made,  
Where quail and pigeon, lark and leveret lay,  
Like fossils of the rock, with golden yolks  
Imbedded and injellied; last, with these  
A flask of cider from his father's vats,  
Prime which I knew;—and so we sat and ate.'*

*Tennyson.*

No. 8, St. Oswald's Buildings was a roomy house, which owed its cheapness to its situation, this being neither in the genteel nor the busy part of Bexley. It was tall and red, and possessed a good many rooms, and it looked out into a narrow street, the opposite side of which consisted of the long wall of a brewery, which was joined farther on to that of the stable-yard of the Fortinbras Arms, the principal hotel, which had been much frequented in old posting days, and therefore had offices on a large scale. Only their side, however, was presented to St. Oswald's Buildings, the front, with its arched 'porte cochère,' being in the High Street, as it was still called, though it was a good deal outshone by the newer part of the town.

The next-door neighbours of No. 8 were on the one hand a carpenter's yard, the view of which was charming to the children, and the noises not *too* obnoxious to their parents; and on the other the Rectory garden, which separated them from the churchyard, now of course disused. It had no entrance towards their lane; and to reach the church, it was necessary to turn the corner of the wall, and go in through the south porch, which opened close upon the High Street.

In this old street lay the two buildings that chiefly concerned the young Underwoods, *i.e.* the two schools. That for boys was an old foundation, which had fallen into decay, and had been reformed and revived in nineteenth-century fashion, to suit the requirements of the town. The place, though in the south of England, had become noted as a pottery, owing partly to the possession of large fields of a peculiar clay, which was so bad for vegetable growth, as to proclaim its destiny to become pots and pans, partly to its convenient neighbourhood to the rising seaport of Dearport, which was only an hour from it by railway. The old St. Oswald's school had been moulded under the influence of new comers, who had upset the rules of the founder, and arranged the terms on the broadest principles of liberality, bringing, instead of the drowsy old clerical master, a very brisk and lively young layman, who had a knack of conveying instruction of multifarious kinds such as had never occurred to his predecessor.

Mr. Underwood had a certain liking for the man, and when tolerably well, enjoyed the breaking a lance with him over his many crude heterodoxies; but he did not love the school, and as long as he was able had taught his boys himself, and likewise taken a few day-pupils of the upper ranks, who were preparing for public schools. But when his failure of health rendered this impracticable, the positive evil of idleness was, he felt, greater than any possible ones that might arise from either the teaching or the associations of the town school, and he trusted to home influence to counteract any such dangers. Or perhaps more truly he dreaded lest his own reluctance might partly come from prejudice in favour of gentlemen and public schools; and he believed that where a course seemed of absolute necessity, Providence became a guard in its seeming perils. Indeed, that which he disapproved in Mr. Ryder's

school was more of omission than commission. It was that secularity was the system, rather than the substance of that secularity.

So Felix and Edgar went to school, and were in due time followed by Clement and Fulbert; and their bright wits, and the educated atmosphere of their home, made their career brilliant and successful. Mr. Ryder was greatly pleased to have got the sons of a man whom he could not but admire and respect, and was anxious that the boys should be the means of conquering the antiquated prejudices in favour of exclusiveness at school.

Felix and Edgar were neck and neck, carrying off all the prizes of the highest form but one—Felix, those that depended on industry and accuracy; Edgar, those that could be gained by readiness and dexterity. Both were to be promoted to the upper form; and Mr. Ryder called upon their father in great enjoyment of their triumph, and likewise to communicate his confident certainty that they would do him and Bexley credit by obtaining the most notable scholarships of the University. Mr. Underwood was not a little delighted, grateful for the cordial sympathy, and he fully agreed that his own lads had benefited by the clear vigorous teaching they had received; but though he smiled and allowed that they had taken no harm, he said good-humouredly that 'Of course, he must consider *that* as the proof of his own powers of counteraction.'

'Exactly so,' said the schoolmaster. 'All we wish is, that each home should exercise its powers of counteraction. We do the teaching, you form the opinions.'

'Oh! are we parents still to be allowed to form the opinions?'

'If you *will*. Your house is your castle, and the dungeons there may be what you will.'

'Well, I cannot have a quarrel with you to-day, Ryder! As long as I can show up my boys as tokens of God's blessing on their home, you are welcome to them as instances of wits well sharpened by thorough good instruction.'

Mrs. Underwood had likewise had a congratulatory visit that was very gratifying. The girls' school, a big old red house, standing back from the road at the quietest end of the town, was kept by two daughters of a former clergyman, well educated and conscientious women, whom she esteemed highly, and who gave a real good grounding to all who came under their hands, going on the opposite principle to Mr. Ryder's, and trying to supply that which the homes lacked.

And they did often succeed in supplying it, though their scholars came from a class where there was much to subdue; and just at present their difficulties had been much increased by their having been honoured by the education of Miss Price. Seven governesses in succession had proved incapable of bearing with Lady Price; and the young lady had in consequence been sent to Miss Pearson's, not without an endeavour on her mother's part to obtain an abatement in terms in honour of the *éclat* of her rank.

There her airs proved so infectious, that, as Miss Pearson said, the only assistance she had in lessening their evil influence was the perfect lady-likeness of the Underwood twins, and the warm affection that Wilmet inspired. Alda headed a sort of counter party against Caroline Price, which went on the principle of requiting scorn with scorn; but Wilmet's motherly nature made her the centre of attraction to all the weak and young, and her uprightness bore many besides herself through the temptation to little arts. Both sisters had prizes, Alda's the first and best; and Miss Pearson further offered to let Wilmet pay for her own studies and those of a sister, by becoming teacher to the youngest class, and supervisor during the mid-day recreation, herself and her sister dining at school.

It was a handsome offer for such a young beginner, and the mother's eyes filled with tears of pleasure; and yet there was a but—

'Not come home to dinner!' cried the children. 'Can't it be Alda instead of Wilmet? We do always want Wilmet so, and Alda would do just as well at school.'

Alda too was surprised; for was not she more regular and more forward than her twin sister, who was always the one to be kept at home when any little emergency made Mamma want the aid of an elder daughter? And the mother would almost have asked that Alda might be the chosen governess

pupil, if Mr. Underwood had not said, 'No, my dear, Miss Pearson must have her own choice. It is a great kindness, and must be accepted as such. I suppose Robina must be the new scholar. My little pupil will not leave me.'

Geraldine only heard of the alternative, to say, 'I'll be nobody's pupil but yours, Papa.'

While Robina was proportionably exalted by her preferment, and took to teasing every one in the house to hear her spelling and her tables, that she might not fulfil Edgar's prediction by going down to the bottom of the baby-class; and up and down the stairs she ran, chanting in a sing-song measure—

'Twenty pence are one and eightpence,  
Thirty pence are two and sixpence,'

and so on, till her father said, smiling, 'Compensations again, Mother: the less you teach them the more they are willing to learn.' The mother shook her head, and said the theory was more comfortable than safe, and that she did not find Lancelot an instance of it.

But there was a general sense of having earned the holiday, when the grocery van came to the door, on a morning of glorious sunshine. Edgar and Alda, true to their promise, had walked on so far ahead as to avoid being seen in the town in connection with it; and Fulbert had started with them to exhale his impatience, but then had turned back half-way, that he might not lose the delicious spectacle of the packing of the vehicle. A grand pack it was: first, the precious hamper; then a long sofa-cushion, laid along the bottom; then Geraldine lifted in by Sibby and Felix, and folded up with shawls, and propped with cushions by Mamma, whose imagination foresaw more shaking than did the more youthful anticipation; then Mamma herself, not with 'little baby,' but with Angela on her lap, and Angela's feet in all manner of unexpected places; then a roll of umbrellas and wraps; then Wilmet, Fulbert, Lance, and Robina—nowhere in particular; and lastly Papa, making room for Clement between himself and the good-humoured lad of a driver, who had not long ago been a member of the choir; while Felix, whom nothing could tire on that day, dived rapidly down a complication of alleys, declaring he should be up with the walkers long before they were overtaken by the van.

Next appeared Mr. Audley, with his pretty chestnut horse, offering in the plenitude of his good-nature to give Lance a ride, whereupon vociferous '*me toos*' resounded from within the curtains; and the matter was compounded on ride and tie principles, in which the Underwood juniors got all the ride, and Mr. Audley all the *tie*—if that consisted in walking and holding the bridle.

By the time the very long and dull suburbs of Bexley were passed, with their interminable villas and rows of little ten-pound houses—the children's daily *country* walk, poor things!—the two elder boys and their sister were overtaken, the latter now very glad to condescend to the van.

'Oh, how nice to get beyond our tiresome old tether!' she said, arranging herself a peep-hole between the curtains. 'I am so sick of all those dusty black beeches, and formal evergreens. How can you stare at them so, Cherry?'

But Geraldine was in a quiet trance of delight; she had never spoken a word since she had first found a chink in the awning, but had watched with avid eyes the moving panorama of houses, gardens, trees, flowers, carriages, horses, passengers, nursemaids, perambulators, and children. It was all a perfect feast to the long-imprisoned eyes, and the more charming from the dreamy silence in which she gazed. When Felix came up to the slit through which the bright eyes gleamed, and asked whether she were comfortable and liked it, her answer was a long-drawn gasp from the wells of infinite satisfaction, such as set him calculating how many drives in a Bath-chair the remnant of his birth-day gift would yet produce.

But there were greater delights; corn-fields touched with amber, woods sloping up hills, deep lanes edged with luxuriant ferns, greenery that drove the young folk half mad with delight, and made

them scream to be let out and gather—gather to their hearts' content. Only Mamma recommended not tiring themselves, but trusting that Centry Park would afford even superior flowers to those they passed.

They reached the lodge-gate at last. They were known, for the Castle had been long untenanted, and they, like other inhabitants of Bexley, had from time to time enjoyed themselves in the Park; but to-day there was a shadow of demur. The gentleman who was going to buy the place was looking over it—but surely—

Horror began to spread over the inmates of the van.

'But did you come by appointment, sir?' added the gatekeeper's wife, coming out; 'the gentleman's name is Mr. Underwood.'

Mr. Underwood was obliged to disclaim any appointment; but he looked round at the children's blank faces, and saw lips quivering, and eyes gazing wistfully into the paradise of green shade, and added, 'If the gentleman has not actually bought it, he could not object. We do not wish to go near the house.'

Maybe Mr. Audley, who was standing near the gate, added another more substantial argument, for 'Oh, certainly, sir,' at once followed; and the van was allowed to turn down a gravelled road, which skirted an extensive plantation.

Every one now left it, except Mrs. Underwood, Cherry, and Angela; and the children began to rush and roll in wild delight on the grassy slope, and to fill their hands with the heather and ling, shrieking with delight. Wilmet had enough to do to watch over Angela in her toddling, tumbling felicity; while Felix, weighted with Robina on his back, Edgar, Fulbert, Clement, and Lance, ran in and out among the turf; and Alda, demurely walking by her papa, opined that it was 'very odd that the gentleman's name should be Underwood.'

'Less odd than if it was Upperwood,' said her father, as if to throw aside the subject; and then, after a few moments' thought, and an odd little smile, as if at some thought within himself, he began to hand in flowers to Cherry, and to play with little Angela. Mr. Audley had gone to put up his horse at the village inn, and did not join the party again till they had reached what the children called Pic-nic Hollow—a spot where a bank suddenly rose above a bright dimpling stream with a bed of rock, the wood opening an exquisite vista under its beech trees beyond, and a keeper's lodge standing conveniently for the boiling of kettles.

Here the van was disposed of, the horses taken out and provided with food, Cherry carried to a mossy throne under a glorious beech-tree, and the hampers unpacked by Mamma and Wilmet, among much capering and dancing of the rest of the family, and numerous rejected volunteers of assistance. Felix and Alda were allowed to spread the table-cloth and place the dishes, but Edgar was only entreated to keep the rest out of the way.

Meanwhile, Geraldine sat under the silvery bole of her beech-tree, looking up through its delicate light green leaves to the blue sky, not even wanting to speak, lest anything should break that perfection of enjoyment. Her father watched the little pale absorbed countenance, and as Mr. Audley came up, touched him to direct his attention to the child's expression; but the outcry of welcome with which the rest greeted the new-comer was too much for even Cherry's trance, and she was a merry child at once, hungry with unwonted appetite, and so relishing her share of the magnificent standing-pie, that Mrs. Underwood reproved herself for thinking what the poor child would be if she had such fare and such air daily, instead of ill-dressed mutton in the oppressive smoke-laden atmosphere.

And meantime, Lance was crowing like a cock, and the other boys were laughing at Robina for her utter ignorance of the white-fleshed biped she was eating.

'No, Clem, chickens have got feathers and wings, and their long necks hang down! This can't be one of them.'

'Perhaps it is a robin-redbreast,' said Felix.

'No, nobody kills robin-redbreasts, because they covered the poor little children with leaves.'

'Will you cover me with leaves, if I am lost, Bobbie?' said Mr. Audley; but as soon as she found that his attention was gained, she returned to the charge.

'Please, did it come from your own home? and what is it, really?'

'Why, Bobbie, I am hardly prepared to say whether it is a Hamburg or a Houdan, or a more unambitious Dorking. Cannot you eat in comfort without being certified?'

'The species will be enough for her without the varieties,' said her father. 'You have given us a new experience, you see, Audley, and we may make a curious study of contrasts—not of Audley and myself, Mother dear, but of the two Underwoods who seem to be in this place together to-day.'

'Who is it?' was of course the cry; and the inquiry was in Mrs. Underwood's eyes, though it did not pass her quiet lips. It was to her that he answered, 'Yes, my dear—Tom; I have little doubt that it is he. He was a very rich man when last I heard of him.'

'Is that the man at Vale Leston?' whispered Alda to Felix. 'Oh, I hope he is not coming here to insult us.'

'Bosh!' said Felix; 'that man's name is Fulbert. Listen, if you want to hear.'

'Twenty years ago,' continued Mr. Underwood, 'I thought myself a prodigiously fine fellow—with my arms full of prizes at Harrow, and my Trinity scholarship—and could just, in the plenitude of my presumption, extend a little conceited patronage to that unlucky dunce, Tom Underwood, the lag of every form, and thankful for a high stool at old Kedge's. And now my children view a cold fowl as an unprecedented monster, while his might, I imagine, revel in *pâtés de foie gras*.'

'O Papa, but we like you so much better as you are!' cried Geraldine.

'Eh, Cherry!' said Mr. Underwood, 'what say you? Shouldn't you like me better if I were buying that king beech-tree, and all the rest of it?'

Cherry edged nearer, mastered his hand, and looked up in his face with a whole soul of negation in her wistful eyes. 'No, no, no—just as you are,' she whispered.

Some mood of curiosity had come over him, and he turned an interrogative look elsewhere.

Alda spoke. 'Of course, it would be horrid not to be a clergyman; but it is a great shame.'

'No,' said Wilmet, 'it can't be a shame for this cousin Tom to have earned a fortune fairly—if he has; but'—and she pressed her hands tightly together as she looked at the thin worn faces of her parents—'one can't help wishing. Why do things always go hard and wrong?' and the tears dimmed her bright eyes.

'Because—they *don't*,' said her father, with a half-serious quaintness that vexed her, and forced her to turn away to let the tear drop.

Clement said, in his calm voice, 'How can you be all so repining and foolish!'

And Mr. Underwood, almost in lazy mischief, pursued his experiment. 'Eh, Felix, you are the party most concerned—what say you?'

'Most concerned?' Felix looked up surprised, then recollected himself. 'I don't care,' he said, with an appearance of gruff sullenness; but his father could not content himself without continuing in a semi-teasing tone, 'Don't care—eh? Why, this Centry Underwood once belonged to our family—that's the reason Tom is after it. If I had not scouted old Kedge, you would be prancing about here, a Harrovian, counting the partridges.'

'Don't!' broke in Felix, with a growl.

'Never fear, Fee,' cried Edgar, with his hand on his brother's shoulder; 'if one man got on in life, another may. If one only was grown up, and had the start—' and his blue eyes sparkled.

'I did not know Care's clutch had been so tight,' sighed Mr. Underwood, half to himself, half to his wife. 'It is not safe, my gentle Enid, to try such experiments. Eh!' rousing himself, 'what's that? Have the mob there a right to any sentiments?'

'Only,' cried Clement, shouting with laughter, 'Lance thought you were wanted to hold a high stool for Jack Ketch.'

'For a green goose!' shouted Lance, indignantly.

'Oh!' cried Robina, in the tone of one who had made a scientific discovery, 'did the goose have a high stool to lay the golden eggs?'

'A most pertinent question, Bobbie, and much more reasonable than mine,' said Mr. Underwood; while his colleague gravely answered, 'Yes, Bobbie, golden eggs are almost always laid by geese on high stools.'

'I've got a picture of one! It has got a long neck and long legs,' quoth Bobbie.

'It is only a flamingo, you little goose yourself,' cried Clement.

'Here is the golden egg of the present,' said Mr. Underwood, replenishing the boy's plate with that delicious pie. 'What's that beverage, Wilmet? Any horrible brew of your own?'

'No; it is out of Mr. Audley's hamper.'

'The universal hamper. It is like the fairy gifts that produced unlimited eatables. I dreaded cowslip wine or periwinkle broth.'

'No, no, Papa,' sighed Alda, 'we only once made cowslip tea at Vale Leston.'

'Vale Leston is prohibited for the day.—Master Felix Chester Underwood, your good health; and the same to the new Underwood of Centry Underwood.'

'Shall we see him, Papa?' asked Alda.

'If either party desires the gratification, no doubt it will come about.'

'Shall not you call on him, Papa?'

'Certainly not before he comes. Mother, some of the wonderful bottle—ay, you covetous miser of a woman, or I'll make a libation of it all. Audley, it must have wrung your father's butler's heart to have thrown away this port on a pic-nic. What did you tell him to delude him?'

'Only what was true—that I was to meet a gentleman who was a judge of the article.'

'For shame!' he answered, laughing. 'What right had you to know that I knew the taste of Cape from Roriz?'

But his evident enjoyment of the 'good creature' was no small pleasure to the provider, though it was almost choking to meet the glistening glance of Mrs. Underwood's grateful eyes, knowing, as she did, that there were three more such bottles in the straw at the bottom of the hamper. And when baby Angela had clasped her fat hands, and, as 'youngest at the board,' 'inclined the head and pronounced the solemn word,' her father added, '*Gratias Deo*, and *Grazie a lei*. We must renew our childhood's training, dear Mary—make our bow and curtesy, and say "Thank you for our good dinner."'

'Thank Felix for our pleasant day,' said Mr. Audley. 'Come, boys, have a swing! there's a branch too good not to be used; and Ful has already hung himself up like a two-toed sloth.'

Then began the real festivity—the swinging, the flower and fern hunting, the drawing, the racing and shouting, the merry calls and exchange of gay foolish talk and raillery.

Mr. Underwood lay back on a slope of moss, with a plaid beneath him, and a cushion under his head, and said that the Elysian fields must have been a prevision of this beech-wood. Mrs. Underwood, with Felix and Wilmet, tied up the plates, knives, and forks; and then the mother, taking Angela with her, went to negotiate kettle-boiling at the cottage. Geraldine would fain have sketched, but the glory and the beauty, and the very lassitude of delight and novelty, made her eyes swim with a delicious mist; and Edgar, who had begun when she did, threw down his pencil as soon as he saw Felix at liberty, and the two boys rushed away into the wood for a good tearing scramble and climb, like creatures intoxicated with the freedom of the greenwood.

After a time they came back, dropping armfuls of loose-strife, meadow-sweet, blue vetch, and honey-suckle over delighted Cherry; and falling down by her side, coats off, all gasp and laughter, and breathless narrative of exploits and adventures, which somehow died away into the sleepiness due to their previous five-mile walk. Felix went quite off, lying flat on his back, with his head on Cherry's little spreading lilac cotton frock, and his mouth wide open, much tempting Edgar to pop in a pebble; and this being prevented by tender Cherry in vehement dumb show, Edgar consoled himself

by a decidedly uncomplimentary caricature of him as Giant Blunderbore (a name derived from Fee, Fa, Fum) gaping for hasty pudding.

'That's a horrid shame!' remonstrated Geraldine. 'Dear old Fee, when the whole treat is owing to him!'

'It is a tidy little lark for a Blunderbore to have thought of,' said Edgar. 'Tis a good sort of giant after all, poor fellow!'

'Poor!' said Cherry indignantly. 'Oh, you mean what Papa said—that he is the greatest loser of us all. I wonder what made him talk in that way? He never did before.'

'I am sorry for *him*,' said Edgar, indicating his brother. 'He is famous stuff for a landlord and member of parliament—plenty of wits and brains—only he wants to be put on a shelf to be got at. Wherever he is, he'll go on there! Now, a start is all I want! Give me my one step—and then—O Gerald, some day I'll lift you all up!'

'What's that?' said Felix, waking as the enthusiastic voice was raised. 'Edgar lifting us all! What a bounce we should all come down with!'

'We were talking of what Papa said at dinner,' explained Cherry. 'What did you think about it, Fee?'

'I didn't think at all, I wished he hadn't,' said Felix, stretching himself.

'Why not?' said Cherry, a little ruffled at even Felix wishing Papa had not.

'There's no use having things put into one's head.'

'O Felix, you don't want to change?' cried Cherry.

'No,' he said; but it was a 'no' in a tone she did not understand. The change he saw that hardship was working was that from which he recoiled.

'That's like you, Blunderbore,' said Edgar. 'Now, the very reason I am glad not to be born a great swell, but only a poor gentleman, is that so much is open to one; and if one does anything great, it is all the greater and more credit.'

'Yes,' said Felix, sitting up; 'when you have once got a scholarship, there will be the whole world before you.'

'Papa got a scholarship,' said Cherry.

'Oh yes!' said Edgar; 'but every one knows what happens to a man that takes Orders and marries young; and he had the most extraordinary ill-luck besides! Now, as Ryder says, any man with brains can shine. And I am only doubting whether to take to scholarship or art! I love art more than anything, and it is the speediest.'

The conversation was broken, for just then Wilmet was seen peering about with an anxious, careful eye.

'What is it, my deputy Partlet?' asked her father. 'Which of your brood are you looking for?'

'I can't see Robina,' said Wilmet anxiously. 'She was swinging just now, but neither she nor Lance is with the big boys.'

'Flown up higher,' said Mr. Underwood, pretending to spy among the branches. 'Flapsy, come down! Bobbie, where are you?'

A voice answered him; and in another moment Robina and Lance stood in the glade, and with them a girl newly come to her teens, whom they pulled forward, crying, 'She says she's our cousin!'

'Indeed,' said Mr. Underwood: 'I am sure you are very much obliged to her.'

'I am Mary Alda Underwood,' said the girl abruptly; 'and I'm sure there must be a very naughty boy here. He had put these poor little things up a tree, and run away.'

'No, no! He only put us up because Tina bothered about it!' screamed Lance and Robina at once; 'he wasn't naughty. We were being monkeys.'

'Black spider-monkeys,' added Robina.

'And I swung about like a real one, Father,' said Lance, 'and was trying to get Bobbie down, only she grew afraid.'



'It was ten feet from the ground,' said Mary Alda, impressively, 'and they had lost their way; but they told me who they were. I'm come down with my father to see the place.'

Mr. Underwood heartily shook hands with her, thanked her, and asked where her father was.

'Gone out with the man to see a farm two miles off,' she said. 'He told me I might stay in the house, or roam where I liked, and I saw you all looking so happy; I've been watching you this long time.'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Underwood, 'till you captured two of us! Well, we are obliged for the introduction, especially if you are to be our neighbour.'

'And my cousins will be friends with me,' continued Mary Alda. 'I'm all alone, you know.'

'No, I did not know,' said Mr. Underwood. 'Are you the only child?'

'Yes,' she said, looking wistfully at the groups around her; 'and it is very horrid—oh dear! who is that pretty one? No, there's another of them!'

Mr. Underwood laughed heartily. 'I suppose you mean Wilmet and Alda,' he said. 'Come, girls, and see your new cousin—Mary, did you say?—Your name backward, Alda Mary.'

'Mary,' she repeated. 'Papa calls me Mary, but Mamma wants it to be Marilda all in one word, because she says it is more distinguished; but I like a sensible name like other people.'

Mr. Underwood was much amused. He felt he had found a character in his newly-discovered cousin. She was Underwood all over in his eyes, used to the characteristic family features, although entirely devoid of that delicacy and refinement of form and complexion that was so remarkable in himself and in most of his children, who were all, except poor little Cherry, a good deal alike, and most of them handsome. There was a sort of clumsiness in the shape of every outline, and a coarseness in the colouring, that made her like a bad drawing of one of his own girls; the eyes were larger, the red of the cheeks was redder, the lips were thicker, the teeth were irregular; the figure, instead of being what the French call *élancé*, was short, high-shouldered, and thick-set, and the head looked too large. She was over-dressed, too, with a smart hat and spangled feather, a womanly silk mantle and much-trimmed skirt, from which a heavy quilling had detached itself, and was trailing on the ground; her hands were ungloved, and showed red stumpy fingers, but her face had a bright open honest heartiness of expression, and a sort of resolute straightforwardness, that attracted and pleased him; and, moreover, there was something in the family likeness, grotesque as it was, that could not but arouse a fellow-feeling in his warm and open heart, which neither neglect nor misfortune had ever chilled.

'I think I should have known you,' he said, smiling. 'Here! let me introduce you; here is our little lame white-hearted Cherry, and the twins, as like as two peas. Wilmet, Alda—here!'

'Shall I mend your frock?' was Wilmet's first greeting, as she put her hand in her pocket, and produced a little housewife.

'Oh, thank you! You've got a needle and thread! What fun!'

'The little ones are very apt to tear themselves, so I like to have it ready.'

'How delicious! And you mend for them? I wish I had any one to mend for. Please show me, and let me do it. I tried to tear the nasty thing off, but it would not come. I wish Mamma would let me wear sensible print like yours.'

'Are you laughing at us?' said Wilmet rather bluntly.

'No, indeed, not a bit,' said Marilda, or Mary Alda, eagerly. 'If you only knew how tiresome it all is.'

'What is?'

'Why, being fine—having a governess, and talking French, and learning to dance, and coming down into the drawing-room. Then Grandmamma Kedge tells me how she used to run about in pattens, and feed the chickens, and scrub the floor, and I do so wish I was her. Can you scrub, and do those nice things?'

'Not a floor,' said Wilmet; 'and we live in the town.'

'So have we done till now; but Papa is going to get this place, because he says it is family property; and I hope he will, for they will never be able to screw me up here as they do at home. I say, which is Fulbert? Won't your father punish him?'

'Oh, no! You should not have told, Marilda. We never tell Papa of little tricks of the boys.'

'But the little darling might have broken her neck.'

'Oh! life in a large family is made up of *might haves*,' said Alda.

'Why, I do declare there's a smaller still! What a little duck!' and she pounced upon Angela.

'We have a smaller than that,' said Wilmet—'Bernard, only we left him at home.'

'Tell me all your names!' cried Marilda, delighted.

She was perfectly happy, and chattered on in great delight in her downright voice, as much at ease as if she had known them all her life. She shared their tea, and wanted Mr. Underwood to come and see her father at the house; but as she could not promise his early return, and it was necessary to get the van under weigh before five, this could not be.

However, she would not leave them till they were all packed into the van, and then only parted with repeated kisses and auguries of many future meetings; so that the children looked down a vista of unlimited enjoyment of Centry Park. Edgar, little gentleman as he was, saw her as far back on the way as he could venture.

## CHAPTER III

### FORTUNATUS' PURSE

*'Out, base mechanical churl!'—*  
*Shakespeare.*

Weeks went on, and nothing more was heard of 'Marilda' except the wishes and wonderings of the children. Alda decided that she was one of the heartless fine ladies one heard of in books—and no wonder, when her father was in trade, and she looked so vulgar; while Wilmet contended against her finery, and Cherry transferred the heartlessness to her cruel father and mother, and Robina never ceased to watch for her from the window, even when Felix and Edgar for very weariness had prohibited the subject from being ever mentioned, and further checked it by declaring that Marilda looked like a cow.

There was plenty besides to think of; and the late summer and early autumn rolled cheerily away. The wonderful remnant of Felix's birth-day gift was partly applied to the hire of a chair for Geraldine upon every favourable evening; and as the boys themselves were always ready to act as horses, they obtained it on moderate terms, which made the sum hold out in a marvellous manner. And not only were these drives delight unimaginable to the little maid, but the frequent breaths of pure air seemed to give her vigour; she ate more, smiled more, and moved with less pain and difficulty, so that the thought of a partial recovery began to seem far less impossible.

The children trooping about her, she used to be drawn to the nearest bit of greensward, tree, or copse, and there would occupy herself with the attempt to sketch, often in company with Edgar; and with a few hints from her father, would be busied for days after with the finishing them, or sometimes the idealizing them, and filling them with the personages she had read of in books of history or fiction. She was a sensitive little body, who found it hard not to be fretful, when told that it was very ill-natured to object to having her paints daubed over her drawings by Lance, Robina, and Angel—an accusation often brought against her by rough, kindly Sibby, and sometimes even by Wilmet in an extremity; while Mamma's subdued entreaty, that she would do something to please the little ones, if it could be without mischief to herself, always humiliated her more than anything else, and made her ready to leave all to their mercy, save for deference to Edgar, and gratitude to Felix. Robina would look on soberly enough in admiration; but Lance's notions of art were comic, and Fulbert's were arbitrary, and both were imperiously carried out with due contempt for the inferior sex, and were sure to infect both the little sisters.

Then, of course, so many holiday boys were hard to keep in order. Clement had a strong propensity in that direction; he was a grave, quiet boy, without much sense of the absurd, and was generally the victim of Edgar's wit; but, on the other hand, he was much in the habit of objecting to anything Edgar or Fulbert proposed, and thereby giving forbidden or doubtful amusements double zest. He was never *in* mischief, and yet he was never an element of peace.

All this, however, was mitigated when the holidays ended, and Lance was allowed to follow his brothers to school, while Bobbie importantly trotted in the wake of her sisters. Mamma and Cherry felt it no small comfort to have no one at home who did not sleep away two or three of the morning hours; and the lessons that the little girl delighted to prepare for her father went on in peace—the arithmetic, the French, the Latin, and even the verses of Greek Testament, that he always said rested him.

And he was 'quite well,' he said himself; and though his wife never confirmed this reply, he was everywhere as usual—in church, in schools of all kinds, in parish meetings, by sick-beds, or in cottages, as bright and as popular as ever, perhaps the more so that he was more transparently thin,

and every stranger started at the sound of his cough; though the Bexley people had grown weary of repeating the same augury for four or five years, and began, like 'my Lady,' to call it 'constitutional.'

So came the autumn Ember Week; and Mr. Audley had to go to receive Priests' Orders, and afterwards to spend the next fortnight with his parents, who complained that they had not seen him once since he had settled at Bexley. The last week was the break-up of summer weather, and Mr. Bevan caught cold, and was rheumatic; there were two funerals on wet and windy days, and when Mr. Audley, on Lady Price's entreating summons, wrenched himself from a murmuring home, and, starting by an early train, arrived half through the St. Michael's Day Service, it was to see Mr. Underwood looking indeed like some ethereal ascetic saint, with his bright eyes and wasted features, and to hear him preach in extempore—as was his custom—a sermon on the blessedness of angel helps, which in its intense fervour, almost rapture, was to many as if it came from a white-winged angel himself. Mr. Audley glided into his own place, and met Felix's look of relief. The sermon was finished, and the blessing given; but before he could descend the steps, the cough had come on, and with it severe hæmorrhage. They had to send one startled boy for Mrs. Underwood, and another for the doctor, and it was an hour before he could be taken home in a chair. No one ever forgot that sermon, for it was the last he ever preached. He was very ill indeed for several days, but still hopeful and cheerful; and as the weather mended, and the calm brightness of October set in, he rallied, and came downstairs again, not looking many degrees more wan and hectic than before, with a mind as alert as usual, and his kind heart much gratified by the many attentions of his parishioners during his illness.

During the worst, Mrs. Underwood had been obliged to keep one of the elder girls at home—Wilmet at first, both by her own desire and that of Alda; but it was soon made a special matter of entreaty by Miss Pearson, that the substitution might not take place; the little class was always naughty under Alda, and something the same effect seemed to be produced on Angela and Bernard. They made so much less disturbance when entrusted to Cherry, that the mother often sent Alda to sit by papa, even though she knew he liked nothing so well as to have his little pupil's soft voice repeating to him the Latin hymns she loved to learn on purpose. Alda read or sang to him very prettily, and they were very happy together; but then Wilmet could do that as well, and also mind the babies, or do invalid cookery, and supplement Sibby's defects, and set the mother free for the one occupation she cared for most—the constant watching of that wasted countenance.

But all was better. He had been able to collect his children for their evening's Bible lesson and Sunday Catechism, and to resume the preparation of Edgar and Geraldine for their Confirmation, though it was at least a year distant, and even had spoken of sending for others of his catechumens. Wilmet and Alda were both at school, the two babies out with Sibby, Mamma at work, Papa dreaming over a Comment on the Epistle to the Philippians, which was very near his heart, and he always called his holiday work, and Geraldine reading on her little couch when there was a sharp ring at the bell, and after an interval, the girl who daily came in to help, announced 'Lady Price.'

Even my Lady had been startled and softened by the reality of Mr. Underwood's illness, and remorseful for having coddled her husband at his expense; she had sent many enquiries, some dainties, and a good many recipes; and she had made no objection to Mr. Bevan's frequent and affectionate visits, nor even to his making it obvious that however little his senior curate might do that winter, he would not accept his resignation for the present.

It was enough to make Mr. Underwood feel absolutely warm and grateful to his old tormentor, as he rose, not without some effort, held out his hand to her, and cheerily answered her inquiries for his cough. She even discussed the berries in the hedges, and the prospects of a mild winter, in a friendly, hesitating tone; and actually commended Mr. Underwood's last pupil-teacher, before she began—'I am afraid I am come upon a disagreeable business.'

Mr. Underwood expected to hear of his own inefficiency; or perhaps that Mr. Audley had adopted some habit my Lady disapproved, or that the schoolmaster was misbehaving, or that some

Christmas dole was to be curtailed, and that he would have to announce it because Mr. Bevan would not. He was not prepared to hear, 'Are you aware that—in short—perhaps you can explain it, but has not your son Felix been spending a good deal of money—for him, I mean—lately?'

'Felix had a present from his godfather,' said Mr. Underwood, not at all moved, so secure was he that this must be an exaggeration.

'Last summer, I heard of that. It was laid out on a pic-nic,' said Lady Price, severely.

'It was intended to be so spent,' said the curate; 'but people were so good-natured, that very little actually went that way, and the remainder was left in his own hands.'

'Yes, Mr. Underwood, but I am afraid that remainder has been made to cover a good deal of which you do not know!'

Mrs. Underwood flushed, and would have started forward. Her husband looked at her with a reassuring smile. My Lady, evidently angered at their blindness, went on, 'It is a painful duty, Mr. Underwood, especially in your present state; but I think it due to you, as the father of a family, to state what I have learned.'

'Thank you. What is it?'

'Have you reckoned the number of times the chair has been hired?' and as he shook his head, 'That alone would amount to more than a pound. Besides which, your daughters have been provided with books and music—fruit has been bought—all amiable ways of spending money, no doubt; but the question is, how was it procured?'

'Indeed,' said Mr. Underwood, still pausing.

'And,' added the lady, 'the means can, I am afraid, be hardly doubted, though possibly the boy may have done it in ignorance. Indeed, one of his sisters allowed as much.'

'What did she allow, Lady Price?'

'That—that it was won at play, Mr. Underwood. You know Mr. Froggatt gives his boy an absurd amount of pocket-money, and when she was taxed with this, your daughter—Alda is her name, I believe—allowed that—'

'Papa, Papa!' breathlessly broke out Cherry, who had been forgotten on her little sofa all this time, but now dashed forward, stumping impetuously with her crutch—'Papa, it's all Alda, how can she be so horrid?'

'What is it, my dear?' said Mr. Underwood. 'You can explain it, I see. Tell Lady Price what you mean, Geraldine,' he added gravely, to compose the child, who was sobbing with excitement and indignation.

'O Lady Price!' she cried, facing about with her hair over her face, 'he earned it—he earned every bit of it! How could any one think he did not?'

'Earned it? What does that mean, little girl?' said Lady Price, still severely. 'If he did the boy's exercises for him—'

'No, no, no,' interrupted Geraldine, 'it was old Mr. Froggatt. He asked Felix to look over the papers he had to print for the boys' work at the Grammar School, because it is all Latin and Greek, and Charles Froggatt is so careless and inaccurate, that he can't be trusted.'

The faces of the father and mother had entirely cleared; but Lady Price coughed drily, saying, 'And you did not know of this arrangement?'

Geraldine's eyes began to twinkle with tears. 'I don't know what Felix will say to me for telling now,' she said.

'It must have come to light some time, though concealment is always a proof of shame,' began Lady Price in a consoling tone that filled the little lame girl with a fresh passion, drawing up her head.

'Shame! Nobody's ashamed! Only Mamma and Felix and Wilmet never will bear that Papa should know how terribly we do want things sometimes.'

And Geraldine, overpowered by her own unguarded words, ran into her mother's arms, and hid her face on her shoulder.

'Thank you, Lady Price,' said Mr. Underwood gravely. 'I am glad my little girl has been able to satisfy you that Felix has honestly earned whatever he may have spent.'

'If you are satisfied,' returned the lady, 'it is not my affair; but I must say I should like to know of such transactions among my children.'

'Sometimes one is glad to have a boy to be perfectly trusted,' said Mr. Underwood.

'But you will speak to him?'

'Certainly I shall.'

Lady Price felt that she must go, and rose up with an endeavour to retract. 'Well, it is a relief to Mr. Bevan and me to find your son not consciously in fault, for it would have been a most serious thing. And in such a matter as this, of course you can do as *you* please.'

To this Mr. Underwood made no reply, as none was necessary, but only saw her out to the door in that extremely polite manner that always made her feel smallest; and then he dropped into his chair again, with a curl of the lip, and the murmur, 'Not consciously!'

'O Papa, Papa!' cried Cherry.

'Dear Felix!' said the mother, with tears in her eyes; 'but what can Alda have been saying?'

Cherry was about to speak again, but her father gently put her aside. 'A little quietness now, if you please, my dear; and send Felix to me when he comes in. Let me have him alone, but don't say anything to him.'

There was no need to send Felix to his father, for he came in of his own accord, radiant, with a paper containing a report of a public meeting on Church matters that his father had been wishing to see.

'Thanks, my boy,' said Mr. Underwood; 'where does this come from?'

'From Froggatt's, father. It was only fourpence.'

'But, Felix, repeated fourpences must exhaust even that Fortunatus' purse of Admiral Chester's.'

Felix coloured. 'Yes, Papa, I wanted to tell you; but I waited till you were better.'

'You will hardly find a better time than the present,' said Mr Underwood.

'It is only this,' said Felix, with a little hesitation. 'You know there's a good deal of printing to be done for the school sometimes—the questions in Latin and Greek and Algebra, and even when Mr. Ryder does have the proofs, it wants some one who really understands to see that the corrections are properly done. Old Smith used to do it, by real force of Chinese accuracy, but he has been ill for some time, and Mr. Froggatt can't see to do it himself, and Charlie won't, and can't be trusted either. So one day, when I was reading in the shop, Mr. Froggatt asked me to see if a thing was right; and it went on: he asked me after a time to take anything I liked, and I did get some school books we all wanted; but after that, just when you were ill, I could not help telling him I had rather have the money. O Father!' cried the boy, struck by a certain look of distress, 'did I do wrong?'

'Not in the least, my boy. Go on; what does he give you?'

'Exactly at the rate he gave Smith for doing the same work,' said Felix: 'it always was an extra for being so troublesome. It was seven shillings last week—generally it comes to three or four and sixpence.'

'And when do you do it?'

'I run in after I come out of school for half an hour. Last Saturday I corrected a sheet of the Pursuivant, because Mr. Froggatt had to go out, and that made it more. And, Father, Mr. Froggatt says that poor old Smith will never be fit for work again.'

'Then I suppose these welcome earnings of yours will end when he has a successor?'

Felix came nearer. 'Papa,' he said, 'Mr. Froggatt told me that if Charlie would only have taken to the work, he would have done without another man in Smith's place, and got him gradually into editing the paper too. He said he wished I was not a gentleman's son, for if I had not been so I should have suited him exactly, and should be worth a guinea a week even now. And, Father, do not you really think I had better take it?'

'You, Felix!' Mr. Underwood was exceedingly startled for the moment.

'You see,' said Felix rather grimly, leaning his head on the mantelshelf, and looking into the fire, 'any other way I can only be an expense for years upon years, even if I did get a scholarship.'

His face was crimson, and his teeth set. Mr. Underwood lay back in his chair for some seconds; then said in a low voice, 'I see you know all about it, Felix; and that I am going to leave you as heavy a burthen as ever lad took on willing shoulders.'

Felix knew well enough, but his father had never uttered a word of despondency to him before, and he could only go on gazing steadfastly into the fire with an inarticulate moan.

Mr. Underwood opened the first leaf of a volume of St. Augustine, beside him, a relic of former days, the family shield and motto within—namely, a cross potent, or crutch-shaped, and the old English motto, 'Under Wode, Under Rode.'

'Under wood, under rood,' he repeated. 'It was once but sing-song to me. Now what a sermon! The load is the Cross. Bear thy cross, and thy cross will bear thee, like little Geraldine's cross potent—Rod and Rood, Cross and Crutch—all the same etymologically and veritably.'

'Don't call them a burthen, pray!' said Felix, with a sense both of deprecation and of being unable to turn to the point.

'My boy, I am afraid I was thinking more of myself than of you. I am an ungrateful fool; and when a crutch is offered to me, I take hold of it as a log instead of a rood. I did not know how much pride there was left in me till I found what a bitter pill this is!'

Felix was more crimson than ever. 'Ought I not—' he began.

'The *ought* is not on your side, Felix. It is not all folly, I hope; but I had thought you would have been a better parson than your father.'

There were tears in the boy's eyes now. 'There are the others; I may be able to help them.'

'And,' added Mr. Underwood, 'I know that to be a really poor priest, there should be no one dependent on one, or it becomes, "Put me into one of the priest's offices, that I may eat a piece of bread." It is lowering! Yes, you are right. Even suppose you could be educated, by the time you were ordained, you would still have half these poor children on your hands, and it would only be my own story over again, and beginning younger. You are right, Felix; but I never saw the impossibility so fully before. I am glad some inward doubt held me back from the impulse to dedicate my first-born.'

'It shall be one of the others instead,' said Felix in his throat.

Mr. Underwood smiled a little, and put his finger on the verse in his beloved Epistle—'Look not every man on his own things but every man also on the things of others.'

'You really wish this. Do you consider what it involves?' he said.

'I think I do,' said Felix in a stifled voice.

'This is not as if it were a great publisher,' continued Mr. Underwood, 'with whom there would be no loss of position or real society; but a little bookseller in a country town is a mere tradesman, and though a man like Audley may take you up from time to time, it will never be on an absolute equality; and it will be more and more forgotten who you were. You will have to live in yourself and your home, *depending* on no one else.'

'I can stand that,' said Felix, smiling. 'Father, indeed I thought of all that. Of course I don't like it, but I don't see how it is to be helped.'

'Sit down, Felix: let us go over it again. I suppose you don't know what our subsistence is at present.'

'I know you have £250 a year from Mr. Bevan.'

'Yes, I had £200 at first, and he added the £50 when the third curate was given up. That goes with me, of course, if not before. On the other hand, my poor good uncle, the wisest thing he ever did, made me insure my life for £5000, so there will be £150 a year to depend on, besides what we had of our own, only £2,350 left of it now. I have had to break into it for the doctor's bills, but at least there are no debts. Thank God, we have been saved from debt! I think,' he continued, 'that probably



it will have to be brought down to twenty-two hundred before you have done with me. On the whole, then, there will be about £180 a year for you all to live upon. Are you understanding, Felix?'

For the boy's anxious look had gone out of his face, and given place to a stunned expression which was only dispelled with a sudden start by his father's inquiry. 'Yes, yes,' he said recalling himself.

'I have left it all absolutely to your mother,' said Mr. Underwood. 'She will depend more and more on you, Felix; and I have made up my mind to expect that no help will come to you but from yourselves. Except that I hope some of you may be educated by clergy orphan schools, but you are too old for that now. Felix, I believe it may be right, but it is very sore to break off your education.'

'I shall try to keep it up,' said Felix, 'in case anything should ever turn up.'

'A guinea a week!' said Mr. Underwood, thoughtfully. 'It would make you all not much worse off than you are now, when I am out of the way. And yet—' A violent cough came on. 'We must wait, Felix,' he said, when he had recovered himself. 'I must have time to think; I will speak to you to-morrow.'

Felix left him, very grave and subdued. He buried himself in his tasks for the next day, hardly looked up or smiled at little Bernard's most earnest attempts at a game of play, and had not a word for even Cherry, only when Wilmet begged anxiously to know if he thought Papa worse, he answered that he believed not particularly so.

Alda was sent to carry some tea to her father that evening. As she set it down on the table before him, he said gently, 'My dear, I want to know what has been passing among you and your school-fellows about Felix.'

'Oh, nothing, Papa,' said Alda rather hastily. 'Some nonsense or other is always going on.'

'Very true, no doubt; nor do I wish to be informed of general nonsense, but of that which concerns you. What have you been saying or hearing said about Felix?'

'Oh, it's nonsense, Papa. Some of the girls will say anything disagreeable.'

'You need not have any scruples on Felix's account, Alda; I know exactly what he has done. I want you to tell me what is being said—or you have allowed to be said—about it.'

'That horrible Miss Price!' was all the answer he got.

He sat upright—laid on Alda's wrist a long bony burning hand, whose clasp she did not forget for weeks, and forcing her to look at him, said, 'Did you allow it to be believed that your brother Felix was a gambler?'

'Papa! I never said so!' cried Alda, beginning to sob.

'Command yourself, Alda; I am not fit for a scene, and I may not be able to speak to you many times again.'

These words—far more new and startling to Alda than to her brother—appalled her into quietness.

'What did you say, Alda? or was it the deceit of silence?'

She hung her head, but spoke at last.

'I only said boys had ways and means! They did tease and plague so. I do believe Carry Price counts every grape that goes into this house—and they would know how I got my new music—and little Robina would tell—and then came something about Mr. Froggatt; and if they knew—'

'If they knew what?'

'Papa, you have no idea how nasty some of them are.'

'My poor child, I am afraid I have some idea by seeing how nasty they are making you! Gambling more creditable than honest labour!'

Alda had it on the tip of her tongue to say winning things was not gambling, but she knew that argument would be choked down; and she also knew that though she had spoken truth as to her words, she had allowed remarks to pass without protest, on the luck and licence that the model boy allowed himself, and she was bitterly displeased with the treachery of Miss Price.

'These old rags of folly don't look pretty on other folk,' he sighed pleasantly. 'Alda, listen to me. What I have heard to-day gives me more fears for you than for any one of my children. Did you ever hear that false shame leads to true shame? Never shuffle again! Remember, nothing is mean that is not sin, and an acted falsehood like this is sin and shame both—while your brother's deed is an honour.'

Alda was obliged to go away murmuring within herself, 'That's all true: it is very good of Felix, and I should not have equivocated, I know; but those stupid girls, how is one to live with them?'

Felix was not quite dressed the next morning when his mother came to the door of the attic that he shared with Edgar and Fulbert.

'He wants to speak to you before church, Felix. It has been a very bad night, and the sooner this is settled the better.'

'O Mother, I am very sorry—'

'It can't be helped, my dear boy. I think it will really be a great relief to him.'

'And you, Mother, do you mind?'

'Dear Felix, all *mind*ing, except to have you all well, and fed and clothed, was worn out of me years ago. I can't feel anything in it but that it will keep you by me, my dear good helpful boy.'

Felix's heart leapt up, as it had not done for many a long day; but it soon sank again. The children had never been admitted to their father's room in the early morning, and Felix thought he must be suddenly worse when he saw him in bed propped by pillows, pale and wearied; but the usual bright smile made him like himself.

'All right, old fellow,' he said brightly. 'Don't come up to me. I'm *incog.* till I'm up and dressed. Are you in the same mind?'

'Yes, Father.'

'Then ask Mr. Froggatt to do me the favour of coming to speak to me any time after eleven o'clock that may suit him. I must understand what he offers you. The nonsense is conquered, Felix; more shame for me that it has followed me so far; but the sense remains. I must try to be sure that this sacrifice of yours is a right one to be accepted. Any way, my boy, I thank and bless you for it, and God will bless such a beginning. There's the bell, be off,' he concluded.

And, Papa,' blurted out Felix suddenly, 'would you *please* be photographed. I have the money for it. *Pray—*'

Mr. Underwood smiled. 'Very well, Felix; that is, if I am ever capable of getting up all the stairs to Coleman's sky-parlour.'

'Oh, thank you!' and Felix ran away.

Mr. Froggatt came in due time. He was an elderly portly man, well shaven and smooth-faced, intensely respectable, having been brought up to inherit an old hereditary business as bookseller, stationer, and publisher of a weekly local paper, long before Bexley had broken out into its present burning fever of furnaces. He was a very good religious man, as Mr. Underwood well knew, having been his great comforter through several family troubles, which had left him and his wife alone with one surviving and woefully spoilt son, who hated the trade, and had set his heart upon being a farmer—chiefly with a view to hunting. Mr. Froggatt was conscious of having been too indulgent, but the mother and son were against him; and the superior tone of education that the son had received at the reformed grammar school had only set him above the business, instead of, as had been intended, rendering him more useful in it.

Good Mr. Froggatt, an old-fashioned tradesman, with a profound feeling for a real gentleman, was a good deal shocked at receiving Mr. Underwood's message. He kept a reading-room, and was on terms of a certain intimacy with its frequenters, such as had quite warranted his first requests for Felix's good-natured help; and it had been really as a sort of jesting compliment that he had told the young gentleman that he wished he would take Smith's place, little expecting to see how earnestly the words were caught up, how the boy asked whether he really meant it; and when, on

further consideration, he allowed that it might be possible, begging him to wait till his father could be spoken to.

Poor as he was, Mr. Underwood had never lost general respect. Something there was in his fine presence and gentlemanly demeanour, and still more in his showing no false shame, making no pretensions, and never having a debt. Doctors' bills had pressed him heavily, but he had sacrificed part of his small capital rather than not pay his way; and thus no one guessed at the straits of the household. Mr. Froggatt had never supposed he would entertain for a moment the idea of letting his eldest son, a fine clever and studious lad, undertake a little country business, and yet the old bookseller had come to wish it very much on his own account. As he explained to Mr. Underwood, he loved his old business, and knew that with more education he should have been able to make more of it. His elder son had died just as intelligence and energy were opening up plans that would have made both the shop and the newspaper valuable and beneficial; while Charles's desertion left them to decline with his father's declining years, and in danger of being supplanted by some brisk new light. Felix Underwood was indeed very young, but he had already proved his power of usefulness, and a very few years would make him capable of being a right hand to the old man, and he might in time make a position for himself. Mr. Froggatt would otherwise ere long be forced by his own infirmity, to dispose of the business at a disadvantage, and this would, he confessed, go to his heart. Mr. Underwood felt greatly reconciled to the project. There was real usefulness in the work, great means of influencing men for good, and though there would be much of mechanical employment, for which it was a pity to give up the boy's education, yet it was a stepping-stone to something better, and it gave present and increasing means of maintenance. There was less temptation in this way of life than in almost any that could be devised, and it would give Mrs. Underwood the comfort of a home with him. The great difficulty for the future was, that Felix was never likely to have capital enough to purchase, or become partner in, the business; but Mr. Froggatt explained that if he gained experience in the editing of the Pursuivant, he would be always able to obtain profitable employment, and that it was possible that he might eventually take the business, and pay an annual sum out of the profits to the Froggatt family, unless, indeed, something should turn up which would keep him in his natural station. Such was the hope lurking in the father's heart, even while he thankfully closed with the offer; and Felix was put in the way of studying book-keeping till the New Year, when he was to enter upon his duties and his salary.

Mr. Audley was greatly troubled. It was with incredulous vivacity that he inquired of Mr. Underwood if it were indeed true that Felix had accepted such prospects.

'Quite true,' said Mr. Underwood. 'You need not argue it with me, Audley; my own mind has said all you could say seven times over.'

'I should not venture on interference; but could you not let me try to do—something?'

'And welcome, my dear fellow: there are so many to be done for, that it is well one can do for himself.'

'But Felix—Felix out of them all!'

'As the voice I want to silence has said a thousand times! No; Felix seems capable of this, and it is not right to withhold him, and throw his education upon the kind friends who might be helping the other boys—boys whom I could not trust to fend for themselves and others, as I can that dear lad.'

'What he might be—'

'Who knows whether he may not be a greater blessing in this work than in that which we should have chosen for him? He may be a leaven for good—among the men we have never been able to reach! My dear Audley, don't be a greater ass about it than I was at first!'

For the young curate really could not speak at first for a rush of emotion.

'It is not only for Felix's sake,' said he, smiling at last, 'but the way you take it.'

'And now, I am going to ask you to do something for me,' added Mr. Underwood. 'I have left this magnificent estate of mine entirely to my wife, appointing her sole guardian to my children. But

I have begun to think how much has been taken out of her by that shock of leaving Vale Leston, and by that wonderful resolute patience that—that I shall never be able to thank her for. I scarcely dare to let her know that I see it. And when I look on to the winter that is before her,' he added, much less calmly, 'I think she may not be long after me. I must add a guardian. Once we had many good friends. We have them still, I hope, but I cannot lay this on them. Our cousin Tom Underwood does not seem disposed to notice us, and his care might not be of the right kind. Our only other relation is Fulbert Underwood.'

'Who drove you from Vale Leston?'

'Who did what he had every right to do with his own,' said Mr. Underwood. 'But he is not the style of man to be asked, even if I could saddle him with the charge. Probably twelve children to bring up on seven thousand pounds—a problem never put before us at Cambridge.'

'Do you honour me by—' asked the younger man, much agitated.

'Not by asking you to solve that problem! But let me add your name. What I want is a guardian, who will not violently break up the home and disperse the children. I believe Felix will be a competent young head if he is allowed, and I want you to be an elder brother to him, and let him act.'

'You cannot give me greater comfort.'

'Only, Audley, this must be on one condition. Never let this guardianship interfere with any higher work that you may be called to. If I thought it would bind you down to Bexley, or even to England, I should refrain from this request as a temptation. Mind, you are only asked to act in case the children should lose their mother, and then only to enable Felix to be what I believe he can and will be. Or, as it may be right to add, if he should fail them, you will know what to do.'

'I do not think he will.'

'Nor I. But there are ways of failing besides the worst. However, I do not greatly fear this illness of mine taking root in them. It has not been in the family before; and I am nearly sure that I know when I took the infection, four or five years ago, from a poor man in Smoke-jack Alley, who would let no one lift him but me. They are healthy young things, all but dear little Cherry, and I hope they have spirits to keep care from making them otherwise. You will say a kind word to my little Cherry sometimes, Audley. Poor little woman, I am afraid it may fall sorely on her, she is of rather too highly strung a composition, and perhaps I have not acted so much for her good as my own pleasure, in the companionship we have had together.'

So the will was altered, though without the knowledge of anyone but Mrs. Underwood and the witnesses; and Mr. Audley felt himself bound to remonstrate no further against Felix's fate, however much he might deplore it.

Nobody was so unhappy about it as Edgar. The boy was incredulous at first, then hotly indignant. Then he got a burnt stick, and after shutting himself up in his attic for an hour, was found lying on the floor, before an awful outline on the whitewash.

'What is it, old fellow?' asked Felix. 'What a horrid mess!'

'I see,' said Lance. 'It is Friday grinning at the savages.'

'Or a scarecrow on the back of a ditch,' said Felix. 'Come, Ed, tell us what it is meant for.'

Edgar was impenetrable; but having watched the others out of the house, he dragged Geraldine up to see—something—

'Oh!' she cried. 'You've done it!'

'To be sure! You know it?'

'It is Achilles on the rampart, shouting at the Trojans! O Edgar—how brave he looks—how his hair flies! Some day you will get him in his god-like beauty!'

'Do you think he has not got any of it, Cherry?' said Edgar, gazing wistfully. 'I did see it all, but it didn't come out—and now—'

'I see what you mean,' said Cherry, screwing up her eyes; 'it is in him to be glorious—a kind of lightning look.'

'Yes, yes; that's what I meant. All majesty and wrath, but no strain. O Cherry—to have such things in my head, and not get them out! Don't you know what it is?' as he rolled and flung himself about.

'Oh, yes!' said Cherry from her heart. 'Oh! I should so like to do one touch to his face, but he's so big! You did him on a chair, and I could not stand on one.'

'I'll lift you up. I'll hold you,' cried Edgar.

The passion for drawing must have been very strong in the two children; for Geraldine was most perilously, and not without pain, raised to a chair, where, with Edgar's arms round her waist, she actually worked for ten minutes at Achilles' face, but his arm she declined. 'It is not right, Eddy! look—that muscle in his elbow can never be so!'

'I can't see the back of mine, but you can,' said Edgar, lifting her down, and proceeding to take off his coat and roll up his shirt-sleeve.

'That's the way. Oh! but it is not such an angle as that.'

'Achilles' muscles must have stood out more than mine, you know. I'll get a look at Blunderbore's. O Cherry, if I were but older—I know I could—I'd save Felix from this horrible thing! I feel to want to roar at old Froggy, like this fellow at the Trojans.'

'Perhaps some day you will save him.'

'Yes; but then he will have done it. Just fancy, Gerald, if *that* picture was as it ought to be—as you and I see it!'

'It would be as grand as the world ever saw,' said the little girl, gazing through her eye-lashes at the dim strokes in the twilight. 'O Edgar, many a great man has begun in a garret!'

'If it would not be so long hence! Oh! must you go down?'

'I heard some one calling. You will be a great artist, I know, Edgar!'

It was pleasanter than the other criticism, at bed-time.

'Hollo! Man Friday does not look quite so frightful!' said Felix.

'I'm sure I won't have him over my bed,' said Fulbert, proceeding to rub him out; and though, for the moment, Achilles was saved by violent measures of Edgar's, yet before the end of the next day, Fulbert and Lance had made him black from head to foot, all but the whites of his eyes and his teeth; Robina and Angela had peeped in, and emulated the terror of the Trojans, or the savages; and Sibby had fallen on the young gentleman for being 'so bold' as to draw a frightful phooka upon their walls, just to frighten the darlints. Indeed, it was long before Angela could be got past the door at night without shuddering, although Achilles had been obliterated by every possible method that Felix, Clement, or Sibby could devise, and some silent tears of Cherry had bewailed the conclusion of this effort of high art, the outline of which, in more moderate proportions, was cherished in that portfolio of hers.

Another work of art—the photograph—was safely accomplished. The photographer caught at the idea, declaring that he had been so often asked for Mr. Underwood's carte, that he had often thought of begging to take it gratis. And he not only insisted on so doing, but he came down from his studio, and took Mr. Underwood in his own chair, under his own window—producing a likeness which, at first sight, shocked every one by its faithful record of the ravages of disease, unlightened by the fair colouring and lustrous beaming eyes, but which, by-and-by, grew upon the gazer, as full of a certain majesty of unearthly beauty of countenance.

The autumn was mild, and Mr. Underwood rallied in some measure, so as sometimes even to get to church at mid-day services on warm days.

It was on St. Andrew's Day that he was slowly walking home, leaning on Felix's arm, with the two elder girls close behind him, when Alda suddenly touched Wilmet's arm, exclaiming, 'There's Marilda Underwood!'

There indeed was the apparition of Centry Park, riding a pretty pony, beside a large and heavily-bearded personage. The recognition was instantaneous; Marilda was speaking to her companion, and

at the same moment he drew up, and exclaiming, 'Edward! bless me!' was off his horse in a moment, and was wringing those unsubstantial fingers in a crushing grasp. There was not much to be seen of Mr. Underwood, for he was muffled up in a scarf to the very eyes, but they looked out of their hollow caves, clear, blue, and bright, and smiling as ever, and something like an answer came out of the middle of the folds.

'These yours? How d'ye do!—How d'ye do!—Mary, you don't get off till we come to the door!—Yes, I'll come in with you! Bless me! bless me! Mary has been at me ever so many times about you, but we've been had abroad for masters and trash, and I left it till we were settled here.'

It was not many steps to the door, and there Wilmet flew on to prepare her mother and the room, while Alda stood by as her cousin was assisted from her horse by the groom, and the new-comer followed in silence, while Felix helped his father up the steps, and unwound his wraps, after which he turned round, and with his own sunny look held out his hand, saying, 'How are you, Tom? I'm glad to see you—How d'ye do, Mary Alda? we are old friends.—Call your mother, one of you.'

The mother was at hand, and they entered the drawing-room, where, as the clergyman sank back into his arm-chair, the merchant gazed with increasing consternation at his wasted figure and features.

'How long has this been going on?' he asked, pointing to him and turning to Mrs. Underwood, but as usual her husband answered for her.

'How long have I been on the sick list? Only since the end of September, and I am better now than a month ago.'

'Better! Have you had advice?'

'Enough to know how useless it is.'

'Some trumpery Union doctor. I'll have Williams down before you are a day older.'

'Stay, Tom. Thank you, most warmly, but you see yourself the best advice in the world could tell us no more than we know already. Are you really master of old Centry Underwood? I congratulate you.'

'Ay. I'm glad the place should come back to the old name. Mrs. Underwood and myself both felt it a kind of duty, otherwise it went against the grain with her, and I'm afraid she'll never take to the place. 'Twas that kept us abroad so long, though not from want of wishes from Mary and myself. The girl fell in love with yours at first sight.'

'To be sure I did,' said the young lady. 'Do let me see the little ones, and your baby.'

'Take your cousin to see them in the dining-room, Alda,' said the mother; the order that Alda had been apprehending, for the dining-room was by many degrees more shabby than the drawing-room; however, she could only obey, explaining by the way that little Bernard, being nearly two years old, was hardly regarded as a baby now.

Wilmet was in effect making him and Angela presentable as to the hands, face, hair, and pinafore, and appeared carrying the one and leading the other, who never having closely inspected any one in a riding-habit before, hung back, whispering to know whether 'that man was a woman.'

Marilda was in raptures, loving nothing so well as small children, and very seldom enjoying such an opportunity as the present; and the two babies had almost the whole of the conversation adapted to them, till Alda made an effort.

'So you have been on the Continent?'

'Oh yes; it was such a horrid bore. Mamma would go. She said I must have French masters, and more polish, but I don't like French polish. I hope I'm just as English as I was before.'

'That is undeniable,' said Felix, laughing.

'Didn't you care for it? Oh! I should like it so much!' cried Alda.

'Like it? What, to hear French people chattering and gabbling all round one, and be always scolded for not being like them! There was a poor dog at the hotel that had been left behind by some

English people, and could not bear the French voices, always snarled at them. I was just like him, and I got Papa to buy him and bring him home, and I always call him John Bull.'

'But wasn't it nice seeing places, and churches, and pictures?' asked Geraldine.

'That was the most disgusting of all, to be bothered with staring at the stupid things. Mamma with her Murray standing still at them all, and making me read it out just like a lesson, and write it after, which was worse! And then the great bare shiny rooms with nothing to do. The only thing I liked was looking at a jolly little old woman that sold hot chestnuts out in the street below. Such dear little children in round caps came to her! Just like that,'—endeavouring to convert her pocket-handkerchief into the like head-gear for Robina.

'I have always so wanted to come here,' she continued, 'only I am afraid Mamma won't like the place. She says it's dull, and there's no good society. Is there?'

'I am sure we don't know,' said Wilmet.

'Lots of people are coming to stay with us for Christmas,' added Marilda, 'and you must all of you come and have all the fun with us.'

'Oh, thank you! how charming!' cried Alda. 'If Papa will but be well enough; he is so much better now.'

'He must come for change of air,' said Marilda. 'You can't think how pleased my father was to hear I had met you. He talked all the way home of how clever your father was, and how wickedly Cousin Fulbert at Vale Leston had served him, and he promised me when I came here I should have you with me very often. I would have written to tell you, only I do so hate writing. This is much better.'

Marilda seemed to have perfectly established herself among them before the summons came to her; and as the children herded to the door, her father turned round and looked at the boys inquiringly. 'There,' said Mr. Underwood, 'this is Felix, and this is Edgar, sixteen and fourteen.'

'Bless me, what a number, and as much alike as a flock of sheep,' again exclaimed the cousin. 'One or two more or less would not make much odds—eh, Edward?—Mary, what kissing all round?—D'ye know them all?—I'll look in to-morrow or next day, and you'll give me your answer, Edward.'

They were off, and at Mr. Underwood's sign Felix followed him into the sitting-room, to the great excitement of the exterior population, who unanimously accepted Alda's view, that one of them was going to be adopted. Their notion was not so much out as such speculations generally are, for Mr. Underwood was no sooner alone with Felix and his mother, than he said, 'You are in request, Felix; here's another offer for one of you—the very thing I once missed. What say you to a clerkship at Kedge Brothers?'

'For one of us, did you say, Father?'

'Yes; the answer I am to give to-morrow is as to which. You have the first choice.'

'Do you wish me to take it, Father?'

'I wish you to think. Perhaps this is the last time I shall have any decision to make for you, and I had rather you should make your own choice; nor, indeed, am I sure of my own wishes.'

'Then,' said Felix decidedly, 'I am sure I had better not. Edgar would not, and must not, go to my work; there would be nothing coming in for ever so long, and it would be a shame to throw old Froggy over.'

'I rather expected this, Felix. I told Tom you were in a manner provided for, but when he found you had a turn for business, he was the more anxious to get you.'

'I've got no turn that I know of,' said Felix, rather gloomily; 'but we can't all of us set up for gentlemen, and Edgar is the one of us all that ought to have the very best! Such a fellow as he is! He is sure of the prize this time, you know! I only don't think this good enough for him! He ought to go to the University. And maybe when Mr. Underwood sees—'

'Not impossible,' said the sanguine father, smiling; 'and, at any rate, to get put in the way of prosperity early may make his talents available. It is odd that his first name should be Thomas. Besides, I do not think your mother could get on without you. And, Felix,' he lowered his voice, 'I



believe that this is providential. Not only as securing his maintenance, but as taking him from Ryder. Some things have turned up lately when he has been reading with me, that have dismayed me. Do you know what I mean?"

'A little,' said Felix gravely.

'I know Ryder would be too honourable consciously to meddle with a boy's faith; but the worst of it is, he does not know what is meddling, and he likes Edgar, and talks eagerly to him. And the boy enjoys it.'

'He does,' said Felix, 'but he knows enough to be on his guard. There can't be any harm done.'

'Not yet! Not but what can be counteracted, if—Felix, you cannot guess how much easier it makes it to me to go, that Edgar will not be left in Ryder's hands. As to the younger ones, such things do not come down to the lower forms. And they will be eligible for clergy orphans. Audley spoke of a choristership for Clement in the clergy-house at Whittingtonia. Was there ever such a raising up of friends and helpers? I am glad to have seen Tom Underwood, hearty, kindly—sure to be always a good friend to you all. What did you think of the girl, Felix?"

'She is a jolly sort of girl,' said Felix; 'not like ours, you know, Father, but not half a bad fellow.'

Mr. Underwood smiled thoughtfully, and asked, 'Have you seen enough of her to judge how she is brought up?"

It was treating his son so much more as a friend than as a boy, that Felix looked up surprised. 'I should think her mother wanted to make her no end of a swell,' he said, 'and that it would not take.'

Mr. Underwood lent back thoughtfully. In truth, his cousin had, in his outburst of affection and remorse at long unconscious neglect, declared his intention of taking home one of the girls to be as a sister to his Mary, and then, evidently bethinking himself of some influence at home, had half taken back his words, and talked of doing something, bringing his wife to see about it, &c.

And when Mr. and Mrs. Underwood were again alone, they discussed the probabilities, and considered whether if the offer were made they would accept it. Mr. Underwood had only seen his cousin's wife once, in his prosperous days, when he had been at the wedding, and his impression was not that of perfect refinement. There was reason to think from the words of her husband and daughter that there was a good deal of the *nouveau riche* about her, and Mrs. Underwood did not know how to think of trusting a daughter in a worldly, perhaps irreligious, household. But Mr. Underwood was a good deal touched by his cousin's warmth and regret; he believed that the family kept up religious habits; he thought that Providence had brought him friends in this last hour, and his affectionate sanguine spirit would not hesitate in accepting the kindness that provided for another of the children he was leaving. She trusted him as sure to know best; and, after her usual mode, said no more, except 'Wilmet would be safest there.'

'You could spare her least.'

'Yes, indeed, it would be losing my right hand; but poor Alda—'

'Poor Alda! but consider if there is not worse evil in keeping her among girls who hurt her, if they do not Wilmet. Beauty and wounded vanity are dangerous in a place like this.'

'Dangerous anywhere!'

'Less so in a great house, with that good honest Mary Alda, and Tom, who will look after her in the main, than here, or as a governess, with an inferior education.'

'It may be so. I know I can spare her better than her sister.'

'Wilmet is doing something for herself too—as Alda cannot, it seems. Justice settles the point, dearest, as it did between the boys—that is, if we have the offer.'

Perhaps the mother still had a lurking hope that the offer would not be made. Her instinct was to keep all her brood round her; but, silent and deferential woman that she was, she said nothing, and resolved to be thankful for what so eased her husband's mind.

The handsome carriage tore up to the door, and violet velvet and feathers descended, Mary Alda sprang after, and then came her father, and hampers on hampers of game, wine, and fruits

ensued; while Marilda seized on Alda, and turned of herself into the dining-room, bearing a box of sweets. 'Where are the little ones? Little Bobbie, here; and all the rest.'

Not many calls were needful to bring a flock to share the feast, with cries of joy; but Marilda was not yet satisfied.

'Where's the other of you?' she said to Alda. 'I don't know you well apart yet.'

'Wilmet's in the kitchen,' thrust in Lancelot, 'ironing the collars for Sunday.'

'Lance!' uttered Alda indignantly.

'Oh! what fun! do let me go down and see! I should so like to iron.'

'But, Marilda—your Mamma—'

'Oh nonsense, come along, show me the way. That's right, Robins, only your hands are so sticky. What, down here!—Oh, Wilmet, how d'y'e do? what delicious work! do you always do it?'

'Generally, if Sibby is busy.'

'Do let me try.'

And she did try for ten minutes, at the end of which the mother's voice was heard calling for Edgar, who, turning crimson, went upstairs, leaving the others standing about the tidy kitchen, fresh sanded for Saturday.

'What, not you!' said Marilda, pausing in her smoothing operations, and looking at Felix.

'No,' said he. 'I have got my work.'

'Oh! don't talk of it,' said Alda. 'I can't bear it. I didn't think he was in earnest, or that Papa would let him.'

Marilda turned full round. 'What, you won't go and be my father's clerk, and be one of Kedge and Underwood, and make a fortune?'

Felix shook his head.

'And what is your work instead?'

'Printing,' said Felix stoutly. 'It gives present payment, and we can't do without it.'

Both Marilda's hands seized on his. 'I like you!' she said. 'I wish I were you.'

They all laughed, and Felix coloured, more abashed than pleased. Lance—to make up for his ignominious rescue at their last meeting—performed a wonderful progress, holding on by his fingers and toes along the ledge of the dresser; and Marilda, setting her back (a broad one) against the ironing-board, went on talking.

'And do you know what besides?' looking round, and seeing they did not. 'One of you girls is to come and live with me, and be my sister. I wanted to have this little darling Angela to pet, but Mamma wouldn't have her, and I did so beg for Geraldine, to let her have a sofa and a pony-carriage! I do want something to nurse! But Mamma won't hear of anybody but one of you two great ones, to learn and do everything with me; and that's not half the use.'

'But is it really?' cried Alda.

'Yes, indeed! You'll be had up for her to choose from—that is, if she can. How exactly alike you are!'

'She won't choose me,' said Wilmet. 'Hark, there's Edgar coming down.'

Edgar ran in, with orders to the twins to go into the drawing-room. Wilmet hung back. 'I will not be the one,' she said resolutely. 'Let Alda go alone.'

'No,' said Felix, 'it is what you are told that you've got to do now. Never mind about the rest! Let us all come out of this place.' And it was he who took off his sister's ironing apron as they went up to the dining-room together, while Marilda cried eagerly, 'Well, Edgar?'

'Well,' said Edgar, not in the enchanted voice she expected; 'it is very good of your father, and what must be must.'

'Don't you like it?' said Marilda, half hurt; and Edgar, always a boy of ready courtesy, answered, 'Yes, yes, I'm no end of grateful. I'll get rich, and go abroad, and buy pictures. Only I did hope to paint them.'

'Paint pictures!' cried Marilda. 'What, rather than be a merchant! Do such stupid useless things, only to bother people with having to stare at them, when you could be making money?'

'There's no reason one should not make money with pictures,' said Edgar; 'but I'd rather make delight! But it can't be helped, and I am very glad to have done with this horrid place.'

Meantime Wilmet and Alda found themselves before a large, florid, much-dressed lady, with a most good-natured face, who greeted them with 'Good morning, my dears! Just as Marilda told me, so much alike as to be quite romantic. Well, no doubt it is a pity to separate between you, but my Marilda will be a true sister. She has spoken of nothing else. Are you willing, either of you, my dears?'

'Ay!' chimed in Mr. Thomas Underwood; 'we'll make you happy whichever it is! You shall be in all respects like our own child; Mary would see to that, if we didn't.'

'As to choice,' said the lady, 'there's none that I can see—pretty genteel girls both, that will do us credit, unless it is their own fault. Excellent governess, London masters—you may be assured everything shall be done for her.'

'Shall we toss up which it shall be?' laughed her husband.

'No,' said Mr. Underwood gently. 'We think that this one,' laying his hand on Alda's arm, 'will value these advantages, and is not quite such a home-bird as her sister. I hope you will find a grateful good child in Alda Mary, and a kind sister to Mary Alda.'

The tears came into Alda's eyes, as her father seemed thus making her over; a great rush of affection for all at home, and contempt for Mary Alda in comparison with her own twin, seemed to take away any elation, as Mr. and Mrs. Tom Underwood kissed her, and welcomed her, and declared they should like to take her home at once.

'You shall have her soon,' said Mr. Underwood. 'Let me keep her for Christmas Day.'

And for Christmas Day he did keep her, though at the bottom of Alda's heart there were strong hopes of invitations to join the festivities at Centry Underwood. Indeed, such a party was insisted on by Marilda, one that was to include all the little ones, and make them happier than ever they had been in their lives. It was to be on Twelfth Day, but Mrs. Underwood hinted to the twins that they had better not talk to the younger ones about it, for she scarcely believed they would go. She had never before spoken out that conviction which had long crushed her down, and Wilmet's whole soul seemed for the moment scared away by this fresh intimation of the condition in which their father stood; while Alda vehemently repeated the old declaration that he was better. He said he was better. Alas! such a better as it always was.

'How well you ought to be!' said Mr. Audley one day at the reiteration, 'better every day!'

'Yes, and best of all at last!' was the reply, with a sweet smile.

For he was very happy. The partial provision for the four eldest children, two by their own exertions, two through friends, had evidently been received by him as an earnest of protection and aid for the rest, even to the babe whom he scarcely expected ever to see in this world. He said it would be ungrateful not to trust, and he did trust with all his heart, cheered as it was by the tardy cordiality of his cousin, and the indefinable love of kindred that was thus gratified. Thomas Underwood poured in good things of all kinds on the invalid and his house, fulfilled his promise of calling in further advice, and would have franked half the family to Torquay—Nice—Madeira—if the doctors had given the slightest encouragement. It could be of little ultimate avail; but the wine and soup did give support and refreshment bodily, and produced much gratitude and thankfulness mentally, besides lightening some of Mrs. Underwood's present cares.

No one was more anxious to help than Mr. Ryder; he had been assiduous in his inquiries and offers of service ever since the attack at Michaelmas; and it was evident that he really venerated the Curate, while he was a severe and contemptuous judge of the Rector. But when, after a brilliant examination, he became aware that he was to lose both the elder Underwoods at once, his mortification was great; he came to call, and Mr. Underwood had again to undergo an expostulation on Felix's prospects, and an offer of keeping him free of expense. The school-fee was a mere trifle,

but Mr. Ryder would willingly have boarded and lodged the boy himself—for the benefit of his authority, as he said, over younger boarders.

'I am afraid,' said Mr. Underwood, kind and grateful as usual, 'that there are too many younger boarders here for Felix to be spared. No, thank you; I am sincerely obliged to you, but the hard cash is a necessary consideration.'

'And you can sacrifice such a boy's prospects—'

'Bread and cheese *must* be earned, even at the cost of prospects. He cannot afford to wait to make his labour skilled.'

'Forgive me, Mr. Underwood, but I cannot think it is right to throw away his abilities.'

'You can allow that it is a less wrong than to leave the rest to debt or starvation.'

'You should trust—'

'I do trust; but I can do so better when I humble what is nothing but pride and vanity in me, after all. I was foolish enough about it at first, but I am quite content now that my boy should do his duty, without being curious as to where it is to be done.'

'You will tell me a schoolmaster's vanity is concerned; and I allow it is, for I looked to your sons to raise the reputation of the school; but perhaps it is only put off a little longer. Will you let me have Clement or Fulbert, on the terms I proposed for Felix?'

'No, Ryder; with many, many thanks, much feeling of your generous kindness—it cannot be.'

'You do not trust me.' This was said with as much indignation as could be shown to a man in Mr. Underwood's condition.

'No. Your very kindness would make the tone I regret in you more perilous. Do not think Felix ungrateful, Ryder; the desire is mine—and remember, it is that of a man who is dying, and who really loves and values you greatly. It is that the younger boys should, as soon as may be, go to schools where older systems prevail.'

Mr. Ryder was exceedingly mortified, and though he tried hard to conceal the full extent of his annoyance, he could not help saying, 'You know how I respect your motives; but let me say that I doubt your finding any place where the ideas you deprecate are not to be found. And—pardon me—may not the finding their progress obstructed by your scruples, the more indispose your sons to them?'

'I hope not,' said Mr. Underwood, calmly. 'I hope it may show them how strong the approach of death makes that faith—nay, rather assurance—with which your party are tampering.'

'You are not doing me justice, Mr. Underwood. You know that my faith and hope are at the core the same as your own. All our question is what outworks are untenable.' Again he spoke hotly, but Mr. Underwood's gentleness seemed to silence him.

'And that there should be any such question proves—alas!—the utter difference between our belief. Ryder, you are a young man, and as I believe and trust verily in earnest; and some day, I think, you will understand what faith is. Meantime, your uncertainties are doing more mischief than you understand—they pervade all your teaching more than you know. I dread what they may do to such as have not your moral sense to restrain them and bring them back, as I pray—I hope ever to pray—it may be with you. Thank you for all your kindness, actual and intended, to my boys.'

Then rising from his chair, while Mr. Ryder remained uncertain how to speak, he signed to him to remain still while he sought in his book-case and returned with a small old copy of Jeremy Taylor's 'Holy Living and Dying;' then sitting down again, wrote the schoolmaster's name in it, above his own 'Under-wode, Under-rode' stamp. 'Keep it, Ryder! I do not say that you will care for it now, but some day I think you will, and if I am allowed to know of it, it will be joy.'

Mr. Ryder could only wring the hand that held it out to him, and with a great effort say, 'Thank you.' He saw that Mr. Underwood was too much tired to prolong the conversation; but he wrote a note of warm thanks that evening, promising to do whatever lay in his power for the boys, that their father would not think dangerous for them; and he added, that whatever he should for the future think

or say, such an example as he had now seen was a strong weight on its own side. It was warmly and tenderly put, and like everything that befell him, gratified Mr. Underwood.

A very happy man he had been, as he sincerely told those who would have grieved over him, and not without some remorse.

'Yes,' as he said to Mr. Audley, who watched him like a son, 'it is indeed the Lord who hath led me all my life through. I never had a want or a care unfulfilled till nine years ago. Then, just as I had become sluggish and mechanical in fixed habits of easy country work, came this thorough change, break, and rousing. I tell you, I can never be thankful enough for the mercy. Not to leave them all provided for, as the saying is, would I go back to be such a priest as I was becoming. Happy—yes, I have been much happier here, since no choice was left me but working up to my strength.'

'And beyond it,' said Mr. Audley, sadly.

'If so—well; so much the better!' he said. 'It is a blessing to be allowed to be spent in that service. And for the children, I wish only for work and goodness for them—and for that I may well trust my good Master.'

## CHAPTER IV

### TWILIGHT AND DAWN

*'Two Angels, one of Life and one of Death,  
Passed o'er the village as the morning broke;  
The dawn was on their faces; and beneath  
The sombre houses capped with plumes of smoke.'*  
*Longfellow.*

'Don't, Ful!'

'That's nothing to you, Clem.'

'I say, this won't do. I must have some light.'

'Indeed, Ed, we must not light a candle before five o'clock.'

'Pish!'

'Oh please, Edgar, don't stir the fire. If you knew how few coals there are!'

'Stuff!'

'No, I won't have it done if Wilmet says not;' and Felix reared up in the gloom, and struggled with his brother.

'Felix—Edgar—Oh, don't.'

'Hsh—sh— Now you girls are worse than all, screaming in that way.' A few moments' silence of shame. It had been a weary, long, wet day, a trial under any circumstances to eleven people under seventeen, on the 4th of January, and the more oppressive in St. Oswald's Buildings, because not only had their father been in a much more suffering state for some days past, but their mother, who had hoped to keep up for some weeks longer, had for the last two days been quite unlike herself. In the sick-room she was as tender and vigilant as ever in her silent way, but towards her children a strange fretful impatience had set in, almost a jealousy of their coming near their father, and an intolerance of the least interruption from them even for the most necessary cause. Moreover, the one friend and helper who had never failed them before, Mr. Audley, had not been seen since he had looked in before early service; and altogether the wretchedness and perplexity of that day had been such, that it was no wonder that even Felix and Wilmet had scarcely spirits or temper for the only task that seemed at present left them, the hindering their juniors from making themselves obnoxious.

'Wilmet, do you think we shall go to the party at Centry Park?' reiterated Fulbert.

'Do hold your tongue about that. I don't believe there's the least chance,' said Alda fretfully.

'And I don't know how you can think of such a thing,' added Cherry.

'I want to see Cousin Marilda's Christmas tree,' whined Robina.

'Do ask Mamma again,' entreated another voice.

'I shall do no such thing,' said Wilmet, with absolute crossness in her tone.

Robina began to cry.

'Come here, Bobbie,' said Cherry's voice in the dark end of the room; 'I'll tell you a story.'

'I know all Cherry's stories, and they're rubbish,' said Fulbert.

'This is quite a new one. There was once a little match-girl—'

'Bosh! I know that little brute, and I hate her,' broke in Fulbert.

'Hold your tongue,' said Clement; 'but—'

'Oh no, don't let us have the match-girl,' cried several voices.

'Why can't you be good? There was once an old giant that lived in a cave—'

'I hate old giants,' said Cherry's critical public; and her voice grew melancholy.

'But this one had but one eye. Come, *do* listen; papa told me. He was in an island—' but the voice grew mournful, and was broken by a cry.

'Oh! Fulbert hurt me!'

'Fulbert, for shame! What is it, Angel dear?'

'I only laid hold of her pudding arm,' growled Fulbert. 'Oh! I say, Felix, that's too bad!'

'Hold your row, I say,' said Felix, after his application of fist law. 'Hollo! what's that?' and he sprang to his feet with Angela in his arms, as the door was opened by a hand groping, and Mr. Audley's voice said, 'Darkness visible.'

There was a general scrambling up all over the floor, and Edgar rushed across to light a candle. Wilmet alone had not stirred, as Bernard lay asleep across her lap. The flash of the match revealed a mass of light disordered heads, and likewise a black figure in the door-way.

'Here is a kind helper for you, Wilmet,' said Mr. Audley, 'from St. Faith's, at Dearport. You must call her Sister Constance.'

Wilmet did rise now, in some consternation, lifting her little brother, whose hand was still in the locks, the tangling of which had been his solace. There was a sweet warm kiss on her brow, and her lost net was picked up, her hair coiled into it by a pair of ready tender hands, but she faltered, 'Oh, thank you. Does Mamma know?'

'She was there when I got a sort of consent from your father,' said Mr. Audley.

'She has not said a word,' said Alda, half resentfully. 'We have hardly been in all day except just to fetch and carry.'

'Never mind,' said the Sister, 'it is much better that she did not think about it. Now, my dear, don't! I won't have anything done for me. You don't know how we Sisters sleep on nothing when we do sleep.'

'But you'll have some tea,' said Alda, the only smooth-haired one of the party.

'When you do, perhaps, thank you. Will you come to me, my dear?' relieving Felix from Angela. 'What is your name?' and the child, though ordinarily very shy, clung to her at once; while she, moving over to Cherry, found her in tears, shook up her cushion, arranged her rug, and made her comfortable in a moment. A sense came over them all that they had among them a head on whom they might rest their cares; and as the black bonnet and veil were taken off, and they saw a sweet fair motherly face beaming on them from the white plain-bordered cap, they gathered round with an outpouring of confidence, small and great, while Mr. Audley went upstairs to announce what he had done. He presently returned, saying, 'All right! Perhaps you had better come up at once.'

There they sat, on either side of the hearth, he pillowed up and in a dressing-gown, more entirely the sick man than he had ever before given up himself to be. Mrs. Underwood rose, and with tears in her eyes, mutely held out her hand, while her husband at once recognised Sister Constance as Lady Herbert Somerville, the wife of the late rector of Dearport. He had last met her when, some six or seven years before, he had been invited to preach at festivals at Dearport, and had seen her the sunbeam of her house. He knew that her husband, who was a connection of Mr. Audley's, had since died of the same malady as his own, and had left her, a childless widow, together with all else he had to leave, to the Sisterhood they had already founded in the seaport town. But his greeting was, 'This is *very* good in you; but surely it must be too painful for you.'

'The Superior saw how much I wished it,' she said.

'You are like Alexandrine de la Ferronays,' he said, remembering her love for tending a consumptive priest for her husband's sake.

'I am always wishing that I were!' she said.

So they perfectly understood each other; and poor Mrs. Underwood, who had, in her new and extraordinary petulance, fiercely resisted the doctor's recommendation of a nurse, found herself implicitly relying on and trusting Sister Constance with a wonderful sense of relief—a relief perhaps still greater to the patient himself, who had silently endured more discomforts, and made more exertions than she knew, rather than tire her or vex her by employing even son or daughter, and who was besides set free from some amount of anxiety.

Indeed the widow had too perfect a sympathy to interfere with the wife's only comfort. When it could safely be done, she left the two alone together, and applied herself to winning the hearts and soothing the spirits of the poor children downstairs, and suggesting and compounding new nourishing delicacies.

She even persuaded Mrs. Underwood to go to the next room for a night's rest while she sat up, and learnt—what the silent wife had never told any one—how trying the nights were even to that spirit! At first the patient liked to talk, and drew out much of the hidden treasure of her spirit respecting her husband, who, though ailing for years, had finally passed away with only the immediate warning of a week—the final cause being harass from the difficulties from those above and below him that beset an earnest clergyman of his way of thinking.

What struck her, as it did all, was Mr. Underwood's perfect absence of all care, and conviction that all the burthen was taken off his hands. Her own husband had, as she could not help telling him, found it hard to resign himself to leaving his plans half carried out to instruments which he had but half formed. He had wished with all his might to live, and though he had resigned himself dutifully, it had been with a real struggle, and a longing for continued service rather than rest, a hope that he should more efficiently serve, and much difficulty in refraining from laying all about him under injunctions for the future.

Mr. Underwood half smiled. 'I am neither head nor principal,' he said. 'Plans have been over long ago. I am only tired out, too tired to think about what is to follow. If I live three days longer I shall have just had my forty years in the wilderness, and though it has blossomed like a rose, I am glad to be near the rest.'

And then he asked for the Midnight Office; and afterwards came fitful sleep, half dreamy, half broken by the wanderings of slight feverishness and great weakness; but she thought her attendance would not be very brief, and agreed mentally with what Mr. Audley had told her, that the doctor said that the end might yet be many weeks away. When in the dark winter's morning the wife crept back again to her post, and all that could be done in those early hours had been effected, Sister Constance went to the half-past seven o'clock service with Felix and Clement, imparting to them on the road that the Superior of St. Faith's was expecting to receive some of the least of the children in the course of the day, to remain there for the present.

Both boys declared it would be an infinite relief, but they doubted exceedingly whether either father or mother would consent to lose sight of them, since the former never failed to see each child, and give it a smile and kiss, if no more. If they were to be sent, Felix supposed there was no one but himself to take them; nobody with whom they would be happy could be spared, nor did he show any repugnance to the notion of acting *père de famille* to three babies on the railway.

It was quickly settled. Mr. Underwood at once confessed the exceeding kindness, and declared it to be much better for everybody. 'Do you not feel it so, Mother?'

She bent her head in assent, as she did to all he said.

'Having them back will be good for you,' he added persuasively; and again she tried to give a look of response. So they were brought—Robina, Angela, and Bernard—and each stood for a moment on a chair at his bed-side. The two little ones he merely kissed and blessed; but to Robina he said a few more words about being good, and minding Mamma and Felix.

'Oh yes, papa! And they'll have a Christmas tree! and I'll save all my bon-bons to make your cough well.'

He watched wistfully as the bright heads passed out of sight, and the long struggling cough and gasping that followed had all the pangs of parting to add to their burthen. Half the family escorted Felix and his charge to the station; and in the quiet that followed, Sister Constance had a good sleep on Wilmet's bed, as much, she said, as she ever required; and she came from it all freshness and brightness, making the dinner-time very charming to all the diminished party, though Wilmet felt greatly lost without the little ones; and afterwards she earned the warmest gratitude from Edgar and



Geraldine by looking over their drawings and giving them some valuable hints—nay, she even devised the new and delightful occupation of ship-building for those three inconvenient subjects, Clement, Fulbert, and Lancelot. Upstairs or down, all was gentle cheerfulness and patience wherever she went.

Felix came home about five o'clock, and his mother was persuaded to go to lie down while he amused his father with the account of the children's exemplary behaviour, and of their kind welcome at St. Faith's, where he had been kept to dine, feeling, as he said, 'uncommonly queer' at first, but at last deciding, to the great diversion of his father, that the sisters were a set of jolly old girls, but not one equal to '*our* Sister Constance.' Then he had seen the church, and was almost bewildered with the beauty of the decorations; and Mr. Underwood, though saying little, evidently much enjoyed his boy's refreshment and pleasure. He certainly seemed no worse, and Mr. Audley was allowed, what he had often asked before, to sit up with him.

But there was much to render it a long, anxious, restless night of a sort of semi-consciousness, and murmuring talk, as if he fancied himself at Vale Leston again. However, when Felix crept in, about four o'clock in the morning, anxious at the sounds he heard, he found him asleep, and this lasted for two or three hours; he woke refreshed, and presently said, 'Epiphany! put back the curtain, that I may see the bright and morning star.'

The morning star was shining in the delicate dawn full in view, and he looked at it with quiet pleasure. 'Mother,' he said, then recollecting himself; 'ah, she is resting! Thank you, Audley.'

At that moment a little cry through the thin wall made him start and flush.

'Is it so?' he murmured; 'thank God! That is well!' But his chest heaved grievously as he panted with anxiety, and his two watchers hesitated what to do, until the door was slightly opened, and before the intended sign could be made to Felix, the breathless exclamation, 'How? what?' brought Sibby's half-scared mournful countenance forward.

'How is she, Sibby? don't fear to say,' he said, more collectedly.

'Nicely, sir, as well as can be expected; but—'

'The baby? Alive—I heard—'

'Yes, sir; that is—O Sir, it is two; and it would be a mere mercy if they are taken, as they look like to be—twins, and coming like this!' Perhaps Sibby was a little more lamentable, because, instead of looking shocked, he clasped his hands in eager thanksgiving, as he looked upwards.

Sister Constance followed at the same moment, saying in a far more encouraging voice, 'She is doing very well.'

'It is another great mercy,' he said. 'Much better than longer waiting on me. Will these Twelfth-day gifts live? Or do I take them with me? At least, let me baptize them—now at once,' he spoke earnestly. 'My full twelve, and one over, and on Twelfth-day.'

Sister Constance had better hopes of the babes than Sibby, but this wish of his was one not to be withstood for a moment; and she went to make ready, while Mr. Audley went down for the little Parian font, and Felix and Sibby arranged the pillows and coverings. Mr. Underwood looked very bright and thankful. 'Birth-day gifts,' he said, 'what are they? You have not told me, Sibby.'

'Boy and girl, sir,' she said, 'poor little dears!'

'Jealous for your old twins, Sibby?' he said, smiling.

'Ah! sir, they came in a better time.'

'Better for them, no doubt; but this is the best for these,' he answered brightly. 'See, Sibby, can't you be thankful, like me, that your mistress is sheltered from what would try her? I can bear it all better without her to see.'

Sibby's only reply was a gush of tears, and presently all was made ready; Geraldine was quietly helped into the room by Edgar, and placed in her usual station by the pillow, and the boys stood against the wall, while the two babes, tiny and scarcely animate things, were carried, each by one of the elder pair; and the father, as whitely robed as if he had been in his surplice, held out his hands, and smiled with his kindly lips and clear shining blue eyes full of welcome.

'Has your mother any wishes about names?' he asked. 'Wilmet—what—?'

'No, Papa, I think not;' but her eyes were brimming over with tears, and it was plain that something was suppressed.

'My dear, let me hear; I am not to be hurt by such things.'

'It is—it is only—she did say, when we came for them, that we were the children of joy—these are the children of sorrow,' murmured Wilmet, uttering the words with difficulty.

'I thought so,' he said; then after a brief pause, 'Now, Audley—'

For Mr. Audley said all the previous prayers, though with a voice as hard to control as Wilmet's had been. Then Wilmet held her charge close to her father, for, almost inappreciable as the weight was, he could only venture to lay one arm round that grasshopper burthen, as with his long thin fingers he dashed the water. 'Theodore Benjamin, I baptize thee.' Alda brought the other. 'Stella Eudora.' Then the two hands were folded over his face, and they all knelt round till he moved and smiled.

'Give them to me again,' he said.

It was for the father's kiss and blessing now.

'They look life-like,' he said. 'You will keep them. Now mind me. Charge *her* never to think of them as children of sorrow, but of joy. She will remember how nearly you were called Theodore, Felix. Take him as God's gift and mine—may he be a son of your right hand to you.'

The boy did take the babe, and with a deep resolve in his heart, that his duty to these helpless ones should be his first thought on earth. He did not speak it, but his father saw the steadfast wistful gaze, and it was enough.

Alda ventured to ask, 'Is Eudora a gift too, Papa?'

'Yes. A happy gift. For so she is! Let her be a little Epiphany Star to you all! Tell Mother that I call them a double joy, a double comfort! Poor little maid!' and he kissed her again, 'will no one welcome her, but the father who is leaving her?'

'O Papa! You know how we will love them,' sobbed Wilmet.

'I think I do, my dear;' and he smoothed the glossy hair; 'but with love comes joy, you know.'

'It is very hard now,' broke from the poor girl.

'Very,' he said tenderly; 'but it will if you make the burthen a blessing—the cross a crutch—eh, my Cherry? Now, a kiss each, and go, I am tired.'

He was tired, but not apparently worse.

Edgar and his three juniors started off directly after church in quest of ice where they might behold skating, and practise sliding; and Wilmet, with a view to quiet, actually ventured on the extravagance of providing them with a shilling, that they might forage for themselves, instead of coming home to dinner.

She regretted Edgar's absence, however, for when Mr. Bevan came in to hold the Epiphany Feast in the sick chamber, her father asked for Edgar and Geraldine, and looked disappointed that the boy was gone. But he murmured, 'Maybe it is best!' and when the little girl came in, flushed and awe-struck, he took her hand, and said, 'May not I have this little one—my last pupil—to share the feast with me? Willing and desirous,' he smiled as he held her, and she coloured intensely, with tears in her eyes.

There could be no denial, and his judgment at such a moment could only be accepted by the Rector; and the child herself durst not say one word of her alarm and awe. Papa knew. And never could she forget that he held her hand all the time that she leant—for she could not kneel—by his bed. Her elder brother and sisters were there too, and he kissed and blessed each tenderly afterwards, and Sister Constance too knelt and asked his blessing. Then he thanked Mr. Bevan warmly, and called it a most true day of brightness. They heard him whispering to himself, 'Arise, shine, for thy Light is come;' and the peaceful enjoyment seemed so to soothe him, that he was not, as usual, eager to get up.

It was only towards the early dusk that a restlessness came on, and an increase of the distress and oppression of breath, which he thought might be more bearable in his chair; and Mr. Audley,

who had just come in, began with Felix to dress him, and prepare to move him. But just as they were helping him towards the chair, there was a sort of choke, a gasping struggle, his head fell on Felix's shoulder, the boy in terror managed to stretch out a hand and rang the bell; but in that second felt that there was a strange convulsive shudder, and—

'Felix!' Mr. Audley's low voice sounded strange and far away. 'I do believe—'

The figure was entirely prone as they lifted it back to the bed. They needed not the exclamation of Sibby to reveal the truth. It *was* only an exclamation, it would have been a shriek if Felix had not grasped her wrist with a peremptory grasp. But that bell had been enough; there had been a sound of dismay in the very tinkle, and Sister Constance was in the doorway.

'Felix,' she said, understanding all, 'you must go to her. She heard—she is calling you. You cannot conceal it; be as quick and quiet as you can,' she added, as the stunned boy went past her, only hearing, and that as through a tempest, the feeble voice calling his name. He stood by the bed-side; his mother looked into his white face, and held out her hands; then as he bent down, clasped both round his neck. 'He trusted you,' she said.

He sank on his knees as she relaxed her grasp, and hid her head beneath the clothes. A few holy words of commendation of the soul departed sounded from the other room; then at Sister Constance's touch of his hand, he quitted the room.

Presently after, Felix was sitting in the large arm-chair in the dining-room, with his sister Geraldine on his lap, his arms round her, her arms tightly clasped round his neck, her hair hanging loosely down over his shoulder, her head against him, his face over her, as he rocked himself backwards and forwards with her, each straining the other closer, as though the mechanical action and motion could allay the pain. The table was all over baby-things, which numerous neighbours had sent in on the first news of the twins that morning, and which the girls had been inspecting; but no one—nothing else was to be seen—when Mr. Thomas Underwood, on his way from the station, finding his knock unheard, and the door ajar, found his way to the room.

'What is this? How is your father?'

Felix raised his face, still deeply flushed, and rising, placed his sister in the chair.

'What, worse! You don't say so,' said Mr. Underwood, advancing.

'He is gone!' said Felix, steadily, but in an unnatural voice. 'Quite suddenly. Not very long ago,' he began, but he felt unable to guess for what space of time he had been rocking Cherry there.

'Dead! Edward Underwood! Bless me!' said Mr. Underwood, taking off his hat, passing his hand over his forehead, and standing horror-struck. 'I had no idea! You never sent over to say he was worse.'

'He was not; it came on just now,' said Felix, holding by the mantelpiece.

He groaned. 'Poor Edward! Well,' and he was forced to put his handkerchief to his eyes. He spoke more gently after that. 'Well, this is a sudden thing, but better than lingering on. Your poor mother, would she like to see me?'

'She was confined last night.'

'Bless me! bless me! What a state of things! Have you got any one to be with you?'

'Yes; a lady from Dearport,' said Felix.

'Humph. Which are you? not *my* boy?'

'No, I am Felix. Oh, poor Edgar!' he added, still bewildered.

And it was at this moment that trampling steps were heard, making Felix spring forward with an instinct to silence them; but at the threshold the sight of his face brought conviction to Edgar; and with a loud uncontrollable cry, tired and hungry as he was, he seemed to collapse into his brother's arms, and fainted away.

'My poor boy!' exclaimed his cousin, coming to Felix's help, and himself lifting Edgar to the sofa. Of the other boys, Clement ran for water, Fulbert rushed out of sight, and Lancelot laid his head on a chair choking with tears.

Felix and Clement were, poor children! used enough to illness to attend to their brother with a collectedness that amazed their cousin; and without calling for help, Edgar came shuddering and trembling to himself, and then burst into silent but agonising sobs, very painful to witness. He was always—boy as he was—the most easily and entirely overthrown by anything that affected him strongly; and Mr. Thomas Underwood was so much struck and touched by his exceeding grief, especially now that he looked on him as his own property, that after putting in some disjointed sentences of 'There—there—You'll always have a father in me—Don't, my boy—I tell you, you are my son now,'—which to Felix's mind made it more intolerable, he said, 'I'll take him home now—it will be all the better for him and for every one, poor lad! So many—'

'The three younger ones were sent to Dearport yesterday,' said Felix; 'but Edgar—'

'To Dearport! Eh! To whom?'

'The Sisters,' said Felix.

A gruff sound followed. 'Come, come, my dear lad, 'tis bad enough, but I'll do my best to make up to you. It will be much the best way for you to come out of this,' he added, glancing round the dreary fireless room, which his entrance had reminded Felix to darken.

'Thank you,' began Felix, not in the least supposing Edgar could go; 'but now—'

'It is not like a stranger,' added his relation. 'Be a sensible lad. One out of the way is something under the circumstances. Stay—whom can I see? I will give orders for you,' he added.

'Mr. Audley and Sister Constance are seeing about things, thank you,' said Felix. 'I'll fetch Mr. Audley,' he added, as another trying grunt at the other name fell on his ear, and he put his arm round Geraldine, and helped her away.

Mr. Audley came, having just parted with the doctor, who had explained the sudden termination as what he had of late not thought improbable, and further shown that it had been most merciful, since there might otherwise have been weeks, if not months, of much severer suffering. He had just looked in at the wife, but she had hardly noticed him, and he saw no dangerous symptoms about her, except an almost torpid calmness.

Mr. Thomas Underwood saw Mr. Bevan, and made it clearly understood that he made himself responsible for all expenses, including mourning for the whole family. He even offered to have the funeral at Vale Leston, 'if it were only to shame Fulbert Underwood;' but the wife was in no state to be asked, and the children shrank from the removal, so it was decided that Edward Underwood should sleep among those for whom he had spent his life, and where his children's lot for the present would be cast.

The cousin carried Edgar back to Centry with him; the boy seemed too unhappy not to be restless, and as if he were ready to do anything to leave his misery behind him.

The others remained with their preparations, and with such consolation as the exceeding sympathy and kindness of the whole town could afford them. Their mother remained in the same state, except when roused by an effort; and then there was an attention and presence of mind about her that gave anxiety lest excitement should be bringing feverishness; but she always fell back into her usual state of silence, such that it could be hardly told whether it were torpid or not.

They looked out that half-finished comment on the Epistle to the Philippians. It stopped at the words—'Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all.'

Mr. Audley took those words for his text on the Sunday, and, not without breaking down more than once, read as much of the comment as there was time for, as the happy-hearted message of the late pastor, for whom indeed there were many tears shed. It seemed to suit with that solemn peace and nobleness that seemed like the 'likeness of the Resurrection face,' bringing back all the beauty of his countenance as he lay robed in his surplice, with a thorny but bright-fruited cross of holly on his breast, when his children looked their last, ere parting with what remained of that loved and loving father.

Poor little Geraldine spent that worst hour of her life sitting by her mother's bed. She had been helped by Felix to that Feast which had been spread for the mourners in the church in early morning; but afterwards she was forced to remain at home, while the white-robed choir, the brother clergy of all the neighbourhood, and the greater part of the parish met their pastor for the last time in the church.

There the first part of the service took place; and then—Cherry could just fancy she could hear the dim echo of the *Dies Irae*, as it was sung on the way to the cemetery. It was a very aching heart, poor child! full of the dull agony of a longing that she knew could never be satisfied again, the intense craving for her father.

She missed him more really than any of them, she had been so much his companion; and she was the more solitary from the absence of Edgar, who had always been her chief partner in her pursuits. His departure had seemed like a defection; and yet she had reproached herself for so feeling it when he had run upstairs, on arriving with Mr. Underwood, looking paler, more scared and miserable, than any of them; and he was sobbing so much when he took his place in the procession, that Wilmet had made Felix take Alda, that she might support him. None of his mother's steady reserve and resolute stillness had descended to him, he was all sensibility and nervousness; and Geraldine, though without saying this to herself, felt as if 'poor Edgar' might really have been nearly killed by the last few days of sadness, he could bear depression so little. She could hardly have gone through them but for Sister Constance's kindness, and that rocking process from Felix, which she and he called 'being his great baby.' And now, when her mother looked up at her, held out a hand, and called her Papa's dear little Cherry, drawing her to lay her cheek by hers on the pillow, there was much soothing in it, though therewith the little girl felt a painful doubt and longing to know whether her mother knew what was passing; and even while perfectly aware that she must not be talked to nor disturbed, was half grieved, half angry, at her dropping off into a slumber, and awakening only upon little Stella's behalf. Those few words to Geraldine had been the only sign that day of perception of any existence in the world save that of the twins.

So the time went by, and the little bustle of return was heard; Sister Constance came in, kissed Geraldine, and helped her down that she might be with Edgar, who was to return with the cousin, whispering to her by the way that it had been very beautiful. It was a day of bright sunshine, high wind, and scant sparkling feathery stars of snow, that sat for a moment shining in their pure perfectness of regularity on the black, and then vanished. 'So like himself,' Sister Constance said.

Geraldine found her four elders and the three little boys all together in the dining-room; and while Wilmet anxiously asked after Mother, the others, in a sort of sad elation, told of the crowds present, the number of clergy—Mr. Ryder, too, came home from his holiday on purpose—the sobbing people, and the wreaths of camellias and of holly, that loving hands had made, and laid upon the coffin. And then the last hymn had been so sweet and beautiful, they all seemed refreshed and comforted except Edgar, who, coming fresh back to the desolation of the house, was in another paroxysm of grief.

'But, Edgar,' said Alda timidly, 'you like being there, don't you?'

'As if one could like anything now!'

'Well! but, Eddy dear, you know what I mean. It is not bad being there.'

'Not so bad as being at home. Oh!' and a terrible fit of sobbing came on, which made the other children stand round rather appalled; while Felix, hesitating, said,

'It is no good going on in this way, Edgar. Father would say it was not right; and you are upsetting poor little Cherry.'

'It is worse for him, because he has been away,' said Cherry, fondling him.

'Yes,' said Edgar between his sobs 'It did not seem *so* there.'

'And are they kind?'

'Oh, yes. Marilda let me sit in the school-room, and I had books, and things to copy; such an angel, Cherry, I'll bring it to you next time—my copy, I mean.'

Here there was a summons from the other room for Felix.

'Yes,' said Edgar, a good deal re-invigorated by having something to tell; 'I suppose they are going to tell him what is settled. Mr. Underwood wrote to the man at Vale Leston, and he won't do anything for us; but they are going to try for the Clergy Orphan for one of you two little boys.'

'Oh!' there was a great gasp.

'And about me?' asked Alda.

'You are to come when we all go to London—to meet us at the station. There's a new governess coming, and you will start both together with her; and I think you'll beat Marilda, for she knows nothing, and won't learn.'

'I hope she won't be jealous.'

'I don't think it is in her! She's very jolly.'

'But I can't go till Mamma is better.'

Wilmet felt they were falling into a gossiping kind of way that jarred on her, and was glad of a summons upstairs.

Mr. Thomas Underwood saw Alda before he returned home, told her she was his other daughter, and should join them on their way to London; and he further made arrangements about the christening, contingent, of course, on the mother's consent, and on the possibility of taking the very small delicate babies to the church. He made very extensive promises of patronage for the future, with a full and open heart, and looked as if he should like to adopt the whole family on the spot.

For the convenience of our readers we subjoin the first page of the family Bible.

**Edward Fulbert Underwood married August 1st, 1837--Mary Wilmet Underwood.**

Felix Chester . . .	born, July 3rd, 1838.
Wilmet Ursula )	
Alda Mary ) . . .	" Aug. 11th, 1839.
Thomas Edgar . . .	" Oct. 6th, 1840.
Geraldine . . .	" Oct. 25th, 1841.
Edward Clement . . .	" Nov. 23rd, 1842.
Fulbert James . . .	" Jan. 9th, 1844.
Lancelot Oswald . . .	" May 16th, 1846.
Robina Elizabeth . . .	" Feb. 20th, 1848.
Angela Margaret . . .	" Sept. 29th, 1851.
Bernard . . .	" Dec. 1st, 1852.
Stella Eudora )	
Theodore Benjamin) . . .	" Jan. 6th, 1854.

## CHAPTER V

### WORKING FOR BREAD

*'Parson's lass 'ant nowt, an' she weant 'a nowt when 'e's dead;  
Mun be a guvness, lad, or summut, an' addle her bread.'*

*Tennyson.*

'Tell, little one,' said Mr. Rugg, the doctor, as he found Geraldine on the landing-place outside her mother's room, and spoke to her in a voice that to her reluctant ears, as well as to those of Sister Constance, who followed him, sounded all the more vulgar because it was low, wheedling, and confidential; 'you are always about the house, you know everything—what accident has your mamma met with?'

Cherry's face grew set.

'She has, then,' said the doctor, looking at Sister Constance. 'I thought so. Now, be a good child, and tell us all about it.'

'I cannot,' she said.

'Come, don't be silly and sulk. No one will punish you; we know it was an accident; out with it.'

'My dear,' said Sister Constance, 'this is a pity. Much may depend on your speaking.'

Cherry began to cry very piteously, though still silently.

'Yes, yes, we see you are sorry,' said Mr. Rugg, 'but there's nothing for it now but to let us hear the truth.'

She shook her head violently, and brow and neck turned crimson.

Mr. Rugg grew angered, and tried a sharper tone. 'Miss Geraldine, this is regular naughtiness. Let me hear directly.'

The flush became purple, and something like 'I won't' came from behind the handkerchief.

'Leave her to me, if you please,' said Sister Constance gently; 'I think she will tell me what is right to be told.'

'As you please, Lady Somerville,' said Mr. Rugg, who, since he had discovered her title, was always barbarously misusing it; 'but the thing must be told. It is doing Mrs. Underwood a serious injury to let childish naughtiness conceal the truth.'

Constance put her arm round the little girl, a tiny weight for thirteen years old, and took her into the room where she had last seen her father. She was sobbing violently, not without passion, and the more distressingly because she carefully stifled every sound, and the poor little frame seemed as if it would be rent to pieces. 'Cherry, dear child, don't,' said Constance, sitting down and gathering her into her arms; 'do try and calm yourself, and think—'

'He—he—I won't tell him!' sobbed the child. 'He's a bad man—he tells stories. He said he would not hurt me—when he knew he should most terribly. Papa said it was very wrong. Papa was quite angry—he called it deceiving, he did! I won't tell him!'

'My dear child, is there anything to tell? Don't think about him, think about what is good for your mother.'

'She told me not,' sobbed Cherry, but not with the anger there had been before. 'No, no, don't ask me; she told me not.'

'Your mother? My dear little girl, whatever it is, you ought to say it. Your dear mother seems to be too ill and confused to recollect everything herself, and if it is not known whether she has been hurt, how can anything be done for her?'

Cherry sat upon her friend's lap, and with a very heaving chest said, 'If Felix says I ought—then I will. Papa said we should mind Felix—like him.'

'I will call Felix,' said Sister Constance.

Mr. Rugg looked very impatient of the delay; but Felix, who had just come in to dinner, was summoned. He came at once, and was soon standing by Geraldine's chair.

'Yes, Geraldine, I think you ought to tell,' he said, as the loyal little thing gazed up at her new monarch. 'What did happen?'

'It was on the day after New Year's Day,' said Geraldine, now speaking very fast. 'You were all at church, and she came out of—this room with Bernard in her arms—and called to me that I might come and sit with—him, because she was going down to the kitchen to make some beef-tea. And just then she put her foot into a loop of whip-cord, and fell. She could not save herself at all, because of Bernard; but she went backwards—against the steps.'

'Did she seem hurt at the time?'

'I did not think so. She pulled herself up by the baluster before I could get up to help her, and she never let Bernard go all the time—he did not even scream. She only said, "Now mind, Cherry, do not say one word of this to Papa or anybody else," and she told me she wasn't hurt. Oh! was she really?' as the Sister left the room.

'I wonder whose the string was,' said Felix vindictively.

'Oh, never mind! He'll be so sorry! Oh! I hope she won't be very much vexed at my telling!'

'She will not mind now!' said Felix; 'it was only not to frighten Papa.'

And Felix had his little sister in that one position where she felt a sort of comfort—like a baby in his arms to be rocked—when Sister Constance returned with the doctor. He spoke without either the anger or the persuasive tone now, and Cherry could bear it better, though she slipped off her brother's lap instantly, and stood up in dignity.

'So your Mamma told you to conceal this mishap. That is some excuse. Now, tell me, how far did she fall?'

'Not more than four steps, I am sure—I think three.'

'And backwards?'

'Yes.'

'Do you think she struck her head?'

'Yes, the back of it.'

'Ah! And she spoke and moved at once, not like one stunned?'

'Oh no, not at all. She got up and made the beef-tea.'

'The 2nd of January! That must have been about the time you began to observe that change of manner—the irritability your sister remarked,' said the doctor, turning to Felix.

He nodded, angry as he had been with Alda for remarking it.

All that the doctor further said was, that he must have another examination now that he knew a little more about the case; and he went away with Sister Constance, saying to her, 'Mrs. Underwood is a lady of wonderful fortitude and resolution, and really they are the worst kind of patients.'

It was now more than a fortnight since that 6th of January which saw the birth of the twins and the death of their father, and Mrs. Underwood still lay quiet and almost torpid in her bed, seldom speaking, hardly ever originating anything, and apparently taking no interest whatsoever in anything outside her room; and yet there was no symptom unfavourable to her recovery to be detected. Within the last day or two they had tried to rouse her; papers had been brought to her to sign, and she did so obediently, but she did not follow the subject: she did not refuse, but did not second, any proposal for her beginning to sit up; and this was the more remarkable, as, being a woman of much health and energy in her quiet way, she had always recovered rapidly, and filled her place in the family alarmingly soon. The nurse had begun to suspect that besides the torpor of mind there was some weakness of limb; and with the new lights acquired, Mr. Rugg had no difficulty in coming to the conclusion that there was a slight concussion of the spine, causing excitement at first, and now more serious consequences; and though he did not apprehend present danger, he thought complete recovery very doubtful.



'So they are almost worse than orphans,' said Sister Constance, when the Curate went down from reading to the invalid, and she could tell him the verdict.

'Do they know?'

'The fact? There is no need to lay the future on the shoulders of the present.'

'A very dark present. I feel as if a great bright sun, warming and invigorating, had gone out of my life. Yet I knew him but two years.'

'I can understand it, though I knew him but two days.'

'I hope he may have been the making of me,' sighed Mr. Audley. 'He ought to be.'

'I think he has been,' said she, smiling. 'There is some difference between you and the boyish young deacon that came here two years ago.'

'Who thought life without shooting barely endurable by the help of croquet! I trust so! He was very patient and tolerant—made holidays for me that first summer which it cuts me to recollect.'

'To live and share in a great sorrow does make a great step in life,' said Constance, thoughtfully looking at the much graver and more earnest brow of her husband's young cousin; 'and you were a comfort to them all as no one else could be.'

'Must you go?' he said. 'I wanted to consult you. I am thinking of giving up my present lodgings to this Mowbray Smith, who is coming as curate, and coming here.'

'Here! My dear Charles!'

'I thought I had heard legends of twelve foot square?'

'Not with thirteen children. Besides, we were seasoned!'

'Stay; you don't understand. There are three rooms on this floor. Poor Mrs. Underwood will hardly want to occupy these two just yet. I take them, and put in some furniture—live to myself, but let them board and lodge me. They may as well have what is to be made by it as any one else.'

'But can they? And, forgive me, Charles, are you prepared for the cookery here? Really, some of those children have appetites so small, that I can't bear to see them at dinner.'

'That's the very point. They all say the invaluable Sibby is as good a nurse as she is bad as a cook. Now, if they have no help, Wilmet *must* stay at home to look after her mother and the twins; and that is not fit for such a young girl. Now, my coming might enable them to get some one who knows the use of meat and fires, and would send upstairs the only woman who would undertake such a charge as that must be.'

'I don't like to say a word against it. It seems excellent for them.'

'I would not live with them, but I should be there to help. I could keep Felix up in his Latin, and—'

'Only one suggestion more, Charles. If you do not stay here long?'

'Well—if not, every week I am here is so much tided over; and just at this time the charge must be heaviest. Those boys may be disposed of after a time.'

'I wish we could keep those two little girls at St. Faith's, but there is no place yet for children of their class. I am wanted there this day week, and I cannot say but that I shall be glad to leave you here. Only, I recollect your mother's feelings.'

'Mothers must draw in the horns of their feelings when their sons are ordained,' he said, laughing. 'I shall consult that notable person, Wilmet.'

Wilmet started and blushed with pleasure. It would be so much less dreary; and, poor girl! she was feeling as if she were half rent asunder at the thought of Alda's going. So good for Felix, too. Only she must ask Mamma. And she did ask Mamma, and, to her great pleasure, Mrs. Underwood listened, and said, 'It is very kind.'

'And shall it be, Mamma?'

'I shall like for you to have some one in the house. Yes, my dear, I think—' then she paused. 'My dear, you and Sibby and Sister Constance had better talk it over. I do not seem able to consider it. But Sister Constance will tell you. My dear Wilmet, I am afraid you must have a great deal laid on you.'

'Oh, never mind, Mamma; I like doing things. Besides, you are so much better.'

'I'll try to help you more,' added Mrs. Underwood wistfully. 'Which room did you say?'

And she listened, and even made a few suggestions, as Wilmet explained how she thought of making a sitting-room upstairs, and giving the two downstairs front ones to Mr. Audley, using the back room for the boys and children; she was altogether so much more open to comprehension, and ready to speak, that Wilmet was full of hope and assurance that she was really mending.

When Sister Constance came in, the readiness to converse continued. She consulted her friend on the scheme, and its expedience for Mr. Audley, saying that she feared he would be uncomfortable; but she could not reject so great a help for her children. She had even thought of the advantage of keeping Sibby upstairs to attend on the babies and herself—work not fit to rest entirely on Wilmet, though the good girl had fully counted on giving up her work at school.

It was evident that the examination by the doctor and Wilmet's consultation had thoroughly roused her, and she was as clear-headed as ever. Indeed, it seemed to Sister Constance that she was a little excited, and in that mood in which the most silent and reserved people suddenly become the most unreserved.

She was asked at last what Mr. Rugg thought of her, and Sister Constance in reply asked whether she remembered her accident. She thought a little. 'Why—yes—I believe I did slip on the stairs; but it did not hurt me, and I forgot it. Does he think anything of it?'

'I think he fears you gave yourself a shock.'

'Not unlikely,' she said in an indifferent tone, and did not speak again for some minutes; then said, 'Yes, I see! I am thankful it did not tell on me sooner,' and her look brought the tears into Constance's eyes.

'It told more than you did,' said Constance, endeavouring at a smile.

'Not on the babies,' she said; 'and he never knew it, so there is no harm done! Thank God!'

She lay a little longer, and Constance thought her going into her usual state of torpor; but she roused herself to say, 'Would you kindly look into that desk? You will find a green book.'

'Yes.'

'Please tear out the leaves, and burn it for me. I would not have one of the children see it on any account.'

Constance began to obey, and saw that it was a diary. 'Are you sure it ought to be done?' she asked. 'Might it not be better to wait till you are better?'

'I cannot tell that I shall be much less helpless. I know how things like this go,' she said.

Constance was still reluctant, and Mrs. Underwood added, 'I will tell you. It is nothing good, I assure you. When we drove from the door at Vale Leston, the home of all our lives, *he* turned to me and said, "Now, Mary, that page is shut for ever. Let us never speak a word to make the children or ourselves feel turned out of paradise." And I never did; but, oh! I wrote it. There are pages on pages of repinings there—I could not let them see it!'

'Nay, but you were resigned.'

'Resigned! What of that? I held my tongue! It was all I could do! I never knew things could be worse till I saw it was killing him, and then all I could do was still to keep silence.'

There was an agony in her voice that Constance had never heard there before.

'Silence was, no doubt—as things were—an exceeding kindness to him,' said Constance, 'and one that must have cost you much.'

'Once—once, so tenderly, with tears in his eyes, he did beg me as a favour not to complain, or talk of Fulbert Underwood! I did not; but I never *could* be the companion I was before to him. He was always happy, he did believe me so; but I could often only smile. If I talked, it could only have been of his health and our cares.'

'You kept him happy by taking the weight so entirely to yourself.'

'Perhaps; if he had only known how miserable it made me, we might have moved to a healthier place; but after that one time, I never could vex him or trust myself. To hear him console me and grieve for me, was worst of all.'

Constance began to see how the whole woman, brought up to affluence, had been suddenly crushed by the change; and almost the more so for her husband's high and cheerful resolution, which had forced back her feelings into herself. Her powers had barely sufficed for the cares of her household and her numerous family, and her endurance had consisted in 'suffering, and being still.' No murmur had escaped, but only by force of silence. She had not weakened his energies by word or look of repining; but while his physical life was worn out by toil and hardship, her mental life had almost been extinguished in care, drudgery, and self-control; and all his sweetness, tenderness, and cheerfulness had not been able to do more than just to enable her to hold out, without manifesting her suffering. Enid had been a very suitable name for her; though without a Geraint in any respect to blame for what she underwent, she had borne all in the same silent and almost hopeless spirit, and with the same unfailing calm temper: but outside her own house, she had never loved nor taken real interest in anything since the day she drove from the door of Vale Leston; she had merely forced herself to seem to do so, rather than disappoint her eager husband and children.

And now, how much of her torpor had been collapse, how much the effect of the accident, could not be guessed. She herself was greatly roused for the present, dwelt on the necessity of trying to get up the next day, and was altogether in a state excitable enough to make the Sister anxious.

Other troubles too there were that evening, which made all feel that even though Mr. Audley was to live to himself, his presence in the house would be no small comfort.

Fulbert, never the most manageable of the party, had procured a piece of wood from the good-natured carpenter, and was making a sparrow-trap on an improved plan, when Wilmet, impatient to have the room clear for Mr. Audley to come for the final decision—as he was to do in the evening— anxious to clear away the intolerable litter, and with more anxiety for Fulbert's holiday task than for the sparrows, ordered him to bed—ten minutes too early, and in too peremptory a tone.

Fulbert did not stir.

'Fulbert, I say, clear up that litter, and go to bed.'

'Don't you hear, Fulbert?' said Felix, looking up from his book.

Fulbert gave a pull to the newspaper that was spread under his works on the table, and sent all his chips and saw-dust on the ground.

'O Fulbert! how naughty!' broke out Alda.

'Fulbert, are you going to mind?' asked Wilmet. 'Please remember.'

'I shall go in proper time,' growled Fulbert.

'That is not the way to speak to your sister,' interposed Felix, with authority.

Fulbert eyed him defiantly all over.

Felix rose up from his chair, full of wrath and indignation. There was quite difference enough in their size and strength to give him the complete mastery, for Fulbert was only ten years old; but Wilmet, dreading nothing so much as a scuffle and outcry, sprang up, imploring, 'O Felix! remember, Mamma is wide awake to-night. Let him alone—pray, let him alone.'

Felix was thoroughly angry, and kept his hands off with exceeding difficulty. 'Little sneak,' he said; 'he chooses to take advantage.'

'He always was a sneak; his nose is the shape of it,' said Edgar.

As Felix and Wilmet had the sense to let this amiable observation drop, Edgar contented himself with making some physiognomical outlines of sneaks' noses on a slate; and silence prevailed till the church clock struck the half-hour, when Clement got up, and taking the slate, where he had been solacing himself with imitating Edgar's caricatures, he was about to make it an impromptu dust-pan, and went down on his knees to sweep up Fulbert's malicious litter, but was rewarded with a vicious

kick on the cheek. It was under the table, out of sight; and Clement, like a true son of his mother, made no sign, but went off to bed like a Spartan.

'Fulbert,' said Lance, rising to follow his example, 'it is time now.'

He still sat on; and Felix, in intolerable wrath and vexation, found himself making such deep bites into a pencil, that he threw it from him with shame, just as Mr. Audley's bell sounded, and he ran down to let him in.

'Now, Ful,' said Wilmet coaxingly, 'please go—or Mr. Audley will see.'

'Let him.'

Mr. Audley was there in a moment, and the next, Alda, in all the ruffle of offended dignity, was telling him that Fulbert was in one of his tempers, and would attend to nobody. Fulbert's back looked it. It evidently intended to remain in that obstinate curve till midnight.

'I am sorry,' said Mr. Audley, 'I thought no one would have added to the distress of the house! What is it, Fulbert?' he added, laying his hand on his shoulder, and signing to Alda to hold her peace.

'They bother,' said Fulbert, in the sulky tone; but still, as he regarded the new-comer as less of an enemy than the rest—I'd have gone at half-past eight if they would let a fellow alone.'

'Then the fellow had better give them no right to bother,' said Mr. Audley. 'Come, Fulbert, no ship can sail unless the crew obey. No mutiny. Here's your captain ready to shake hands and wish you good-night.'

Fulbert could not face Mr. Audley's determined look, but he was not conquered. He took up his tools and his trap, gave a final puff to spread his sawdust farther, and marched off without a single good-night.

'He has the worst temper of us all,' cried Alda.

'You should be very cautious of provoking him,' said Mr. Audley.

'I am afraid it was my fault,' sighed Wilmet.

'Nonsense,' said Felix; 'he is an obstinate little dog. I wish I was licking him. I hope he is not pitching into Clem!'

'Clem is the biggest,' said Alda.

'Yes, but he is much the meekest,' added Wilmet.

'Tina's meek sauce is aggravation, itself,' observed Edgar. 'I should hope he was catching it!'

'He is certainly not slow to put in his oar,' said Mr. Audley; 'did you hear of his performance in the vestry the other day?'

'No. I hope he did not make an unusual ass of himself,' said Felix.

'He and Mowbray Smith had last Tuesday's Evensong nearly to themselves, when Master Clem not only assisted Smith in putting on his hood, but expressed his doubts as to the correctness of it (never, of course, having seen any bachelor's but Oxford or Cambridge), and further gave him some good advice as to his manner of intoning.'

'I hope he won't go on in that way at St. Matthew's!' exclaimed Wilmet.

'It is lucky he is going so soon,' said Mr. Audley. 'I doubt if Mowbray Smith will ever get over it!'

'Regular snob that he is,' said Edgar; 'just one of my Lady's sort! What did he do? Go crying to her?'

'O Edgar!' remonstrated Wilmet.

'Well, Mettie, if even our spiritual pastors will be snobs, one must have the relief of expressing one's opinion now and then.'

'I should say it was better to keep any such fact out of one's mind as much as might be,' said Mr. Audley, feeling himself unable to deny what had been so broadly expressed.

'And we, at any rate, had better drop talking of snobs,' said Felix.

'Hollo, Felix! I am sure you for one would not be a snob if you had turned chimney-sweeper, and let Tom Underwood nail me to his office; he'll never make one of me!'

'I trust so,' said Felix; 'but it is not the way to keep from it to throw about the word at other folks.'

'What's that?' cried Alda. 'Really, that boy must be falling upon some of them.'

It was Lance, in great deshabille, who, opening a crack of the door, called cautiously, 'Wilmet, please come here.'

Wilmet hastily obeyed, saying anxiously, as the door was shut, 'Never mind, dear Lance, he's in a horrid mood; but do bear it, and not make Felix more in a rage.'

'Bosh about Ful,' said Lance unceremoniously. 'It is Cherry; she is crying so upstairs, and Clem and I can't get a word out of her.'

Cherry, though older than the boys, had to precede them in vanishing for the night, as her undressing was a long operation dependent upon Sibby. Wilmet ran up in haste, and did indeed find poor little Geraldine with her face smothered under the clothes in an agony of weeping, very serious for so frail a little creature.

'Cherry! Cherry, dear, don't! Are you feeling solitary? Are you missing *him*? Oh, don't! Yes, dear, 'tis so sad; but we all do love you so.'

Wilmet would have kissed and fondled her, but the child almost thrust her away.

'Not that. Oh, not that! I wish it was.'

'My dear Cherry, you can't have been naughty!'

'Yes, yes! indeed I have. And now—'

'I can't think—O Cherry, if you would only tell me what you mean!' cried Wilmet, aghast.

And with agonised sobs, Cherry whispered, 'Mr. Rugg—O Mettie—such things as I said about him to Sister Constance—I made sure I had forgiven—long ago—and now—now, after *that*.'

If Wilmet had not known how deeply both Geraldine and her father had resented what Mr. Rugg had meant as a little friendly gloss to save terror before a painful operation, she would have been utterly at a loss. And now, she found herself incapable by any argument or caress of soothing her sister's sense of heinous offence; for that rite, of which she had partaken with her father, had required charity with all men, and now she found she had been deceitful—she hated Mr. Rugg all the time. Oh, what should she do! how could she be so wicked!

Wilmet tried to tell her that she had not known how it was at the time, but this seemed no comfort; and it was plain that that day's solemnity had lessened the inequality between the two girls so much, that for Wilmet to console her as a child was vain; and indeed, her invalid state and constant companionship with her father had rendered her religious feeling much more excitable, and more developed, than were as yet Wilmet's; and meantime, this piteous sobbing and weeping was doing great bodily harm.

Wilmet at last, hearing a door open as if the nurse were taking Sister Constance's place, ran down to take counsel with that kind friend on the way. She whispered her trouble on the stairs, and the Sister was soon kneeling over the little bed; but her comfort was not persuading the child to think less of the fault, but promising that she should tell all to Mr. Audley to-morrow.

Nay, seeing that even this was too long hence for the 'weary soul, and burdened sore,' to look forward to—indeed, that the preparation for the interview would be sleep-destroying—she said, 'Then you shall see him at once, my dear.'

Wilmet opened her eyes in dismay. That little attic, bare of all but beds, was her thought; but Sister Constance, ever an effective woman, had the little black frock, the shoes and stockings, on in no time, and throwing a shawl over all, actually gathered the small light frame up into her arms, and carried her down to the fire in the room now vacated by the nurses and babies. And there she fetched Mr. Audley to her. 'It will not do,' she whispered on the way to Wilmet, 'to treat her as a child *now*.'

'He always made so much of her,' sighed Wilmet.

'Yes; and now she is a Communicant.'

They left her to Mr. Audley, and presently, when the door opened again, it was he who was carrying her upstairs again; and when Sister Constance had taken possession of her, she whispered,

'Yes, thank you. He says I may come on Sunday, and I think it is forgiven. I shall say a prayer about charity always now!' And with a deep sigh, the worn-out little penitent lay down to her sleep.

'O Mr. Audley, it is plain we cannot do without you,' sighed Wilmet, as she came down, not without tears in her eyes.

And then came the conference upon ways and means, rooms and attendance. Mr. Audley had parted with his horse and groom in the autumn, observing that they ate their heads off; and the terms he now proposed for lodging, board, and attendance were what Felix and Wilmet would have known to be wondrously liberal but for their inexperience, especially as he meant to send in some, at least, of the furniture. He was to have his meals, at his own times, in his sitting-room; and Sister Constance had a person in her eye at Dearport, who was likely to do well in the kitchen, and not quarrel with Sibby.

Wilmet had made up her mind that she must remain at home all day, and had even told Miss Pearson so; but that good lady had refused to accept her resignation, and had come to Mr. Bevan about it; and now both the Sister and the Curate united in telling her that she ought not, as long as it was possible, to give up this means of improving herself, as well as lessening the family burthen. To give up her education now would be to sink into a housewifely drudge, who would hardly be able to maintain herself when the younger ones would be getting out into the world; and as Geraldine must stay at home to be a companion to her mother, there was no need for her being also always in attendance, while Sibby was equal to the charge. Indeed, Mrs. Underwood herself had said something that showed her to contemplate Wilmet's remaining at school.

'You must,' said Felix decidedly. 'Why, you might as well turn nursery-girl at once.'

'I should like it,' said Wilmet. 'I shall be miserable at school—always thinking something is going wrong. And Cherry can never bear with the babies! Oh! please don't tell me I must.'

'I tell you to begin,' said Sister Constance. 'You can always give it up if you feel that the need lies at home; but I think the few hours' change every day—for duty's sake, mind—will give you vigour not to be worn down by the home cares.'

'But Cherry will have them always! She who cares for books and drawing so much more than I!'

'Yes; but if you go on learning, you can teach her,' said Sister Constance.

'Oh!' cried Wilmet; 'Cherry knows more than I do.'

'Little Cherry is the cleverest of us all,' added Felix.

'Still,' said the Sister, 'the mere going over your work with you will give her change and interest. I do feel strongly convinced, dear Wilmet, that to shut yourself up with her, without gathering anything from elsewhere, would be very bad for both.'

'We must see how Mamma is, and how Cherry gets on,' was all that Wilmet would say, but the arrangement was made, and was to take effect in ten days' time, when Mr. Mowbray Smith was coming to be second curate, and Sister Constance must change places with the three absent children, and Alda would be gone to her adopted home.

Then Mr. Audley took leave; and as Felix went to the front door with him, he said, 'Forgive me, Felix; but I am a younger brother myself, and I do hope you do not mean to assert your authority by licking.'

Felix coloured a little; and though he spoke respectfully, it was with some little annoyance. 'There is nothing else that does with Fulbert.'

'Stay, Felix; I am not questioning that he may be the sort of boy for whom flogging may be good from some one.'

'He is!' said Felix. 'He never will behave himself till he has felt his master! It has been so at school; and once, even my father made himself quite ill for a week with having to flog Fulbert for disobedience. It settled him; but he is not like the others—Clem and Lance are not any trouble; but—I know it will come to it sooner or later; Ful will never mind me or Wilmet till I have done it once.'

'And when his strength is equal to yours?'

'Then I hope he will have more sense.'

'Yes, Felix; but what if by forcing him into dogged submission by your bodily strength you have lost his confidence, and have no moral power over him? Things that can be borne from a father come very differently from a brother.'

Felix was quite crimson now. 'But what shall I do, Mr. Audley, when he defies Wilmet, and teases Cherry and the little ones?'

'Try all you can with his better sense, but don't anger him by tones of authority. What you think needful rule may seem to him domineering. And if necessary, call me. My blows will not leave the after rankling that yours will, even if they are necessary.'

Felix sighed. He was not desirous of beating his brother in the main; but being unhappily master of the house, he was unwilling not to be so entirely. He wished Mr. Audley good-night, not in his most perfectly cordial tone.

However, the next morning he had brought himself to thank Mr. Audley.

'Thank you, Felix,' said the Curate; 'it is a great relief to me. I was afraid you thought you were going to bring a meddling fellow in upon you.'

Felix coloured, and with an effort—for which Mr. Audley liked him the better—said, 'I know I shall always deserve what advice you give me, and I hope another time I may take it better than the last.'

Soon after, one train carried away four of the young Underwoods to begin life elsewhere. The Thomas Underwoods had desired that Alda and Edgar should meet them at the station, and at Felix's entreaty had also undertaken to convoy Clement, who, thanks to Mr. Audley, was to be a chorister, and live in the clergy-house at St. Matthew's, Whittingtonia. It would have been Fulbert, only unluckily he had no ear, and so he was left at home, while Lady Price, Mrs. Thomas Underwood, and all the ladies they could enlist in their service, canvassed desperately, and made the cards of 'Fulbert James and Lancelot Oswald, sons of the Rev. Edward Fulbert Underwood, THIRTEEN children,' a weariness to every friend of a subscriber to clergy-orphan schools. Robina was not quite old enough to stand for the like election; but Sister Constance had negotiated with a lady who had devoted herself to educating children of better birth than means, and the little girl was to be dropped at the nearest station to her school at Catsacre. It had all been settled in a wonderfully short time, by Sister Constance and Mr. Audley, with full though helpless acquiescence from Mrs. Underwood. They felt it well to lessen the crowd of children in the house, and the responsibilities of the elder ones, and acted at once.

As to Alda, she was too miserable at home not to be ready to follow Edgar, though she had at first implored to stay and help Wilmet till their mother was about again; but the Thomas Underwoods were unwilling to consent to this—and after all, Alda was more apt to cry than to be of much real use. Sister Constance saw that she was only another weight on her sister's hands, and that, terrible as the wrench would be between the twins, Wilmet would be freer when it was once over. Poor Wilmet! she had felt as if she could hardly have lived over these weeks save for fondling the younger twins, and waiting on her mother. She was almost passive, and ran up and downstairs, or prepared the wardrobes of the departing children, just as she was bidden, all in one quiet maze of grief. The tears seemed to be always in her eyes, very often dropping, and yet they never hindered her, and she never uttered a word of deprecation or complaint; only she could not eat, and a kiss would bring down a whole shower; and at night, the two sisters would hold each other tight, and cry and kiss themselves to sleep.

So had come the last day—the last for all four. Robina, who had only just come back from St. Faith's, was grave, puzzled, and awestruck, clinging chiefly to Lancelot, and exchanging confidences in corners with him, in which they were probably much less childish than they showed themselves to the outer world. Clement was very grave and unhappy; but seemed to be most distressed at parting with Harry Lamb, a favourite school-fellow of his own quiet stamp, with whom he spent all available time. Alda and Wilmet were hand in hand at every possible moment, and if possible cheek to cheek—each felt as if herself was cut in two.

Then Edgar, who had only come home for that farewell Sunday, had another of his paroxysms of sorrow at the changes at home, which he contrived to forget when at Centry. All that was becoming in a manner usual to the others was a shock to him, and he was so very miserable the whole day, that he treated every attempt of the others to cheer him as a mere token of their hardness of heart. He went in to see his mother, and was so overcome at finding her no better, that he rushed away, and threw himself on a sofa as if he was going to faint; and when at church he saw his father's place filled up he fell into such a fit of sobbing, that half-a-dozen smelling-bottles were handed across the seats.

However, he had recovered himself on Monday morning, and made it his particular request that nobody would come bothering to the station, to make them look like Fulbert's canvassing-card of the thirteen children—and as the mention of it always affronted Fulbert deeply, it was plain that *he* would be no good company. However, Felix had been allowed an hour from his business for that very purpose, and he simply said, 'Nonsense, Edgar, I shall take Robin down.' Wilmet submitted, though with a great pang. She had no assurance that she should not break down, and a crying match at the station—oh no! It might make Bobbie roar all the way.

So Alda clung round her neck and Geraldine's in their own little parlour, and wished her mother good-bye, scarcely knowing whether it were with a full understanding how many were parted from the wing that now seemed unable to shelter them; and then Wilmet went up and quietly lay down by her mother on her bed, feeling as if there was nothing she cared for in all life, and as if youth, hope, and happiness were gone away from her for ever, and she were as much widowed as her mother. She was even past crying—she could do nothing but lie still. But then her mother's hand came out and stroked her; and presently one of the babies cried, and Wilmet was walking up and down the room with it, and all activity with her outward senses, though her heart felt dead. Meantime, the luggage went in the omnibus, the four children walked up together only escorted by Felix, and were passed on their way by the prancing and thundering carriage from Centry.

But the sense of usefulness that came gave strength and energy to Felix and Wilmet Underwood as the first excitement passed away, and they better understood their tasks.

Of the absent ones they heard good accounts. Alda was altogether one with her cousin's family, and seemed to be completely on an equality with Marilda; and Edgar had been sent by Thomas Underwood to acquire modern languages under the care of an Englishman who took private pupils at Louvaine, whence Edgar despatched most amusing letters and clever sketches. Clement was in great favour, both musically and morally, at St. Matthew's; and little Robina was reported to have bewailed her home with floods of nightly tears, but to have soon settled down into the bonnie little pet of the elder girls.

Except for the separation, the cloud had hardly fallen on these, but their departure had made a great hole in the hitherto unbroken family; and while Felix and Wilmet, by the loss of their contemporaries, seemed placed at a point far away from the others, Geraldine was conscious of much loneliness. The twins had always consorted together, and regarded her as a mere child, and her chief companions had been her father and Edgar, so that she seemed left at an equal distance both from the elder and younger party.

Then the world around her was so busy, and she could do so little. She slept in a little inner room beyond the large nursery, where Wilmet kept guard over Angela and Bernard; and long before six o'clock, she always heard the call pass between the eldest brother and sister; and knew that as soon as he was dressed, Felix—it must out—was cleaning the family boots, including those of the lodger, who probably supposed that nature did it, and never knew how much his young landlord had done before joining him in his early walk to St. Oswald's.

Meantime Wilmet conducted the toilette of the two little children, and gave the assistance that Cherry needed, as well as discharging some of the lighter tasks of the housemaid; leaving the heavier ones to Sibby and Martha, a stout, willing, strong young woman, whom Sister Constance had happily



found for them, and who was disqualified, by a loutish manner and horrible squint, from the places to which her capabilities might have raised her.

Then Wilmet helped her sister downstairs, and a visit was paid to the mother and the twins, who were Sibby's charge for the night. Mrs. Underwood was still in the same state. It was indeed possible to rouse her, but at the expense of much suffering and excitement; and in general, she was merely tender, placid, and content, mechanically busied about her babies, and responding to what was said, but entirely incapable of any exertion of body, and as inactive in mind as in limb. Wilmet attended to her while Sibby went to her breakfast, returning with that of her mistress in time to send Wilmet down to preside at the family meal, a genuine Irish dish of stir-about—for which all had inherited a taste from their father's Irish mother. Only Cherry was too delicate for such food, and was rather ashamed of her cup of tea and slice of bread.

However, this was one of the few times when she could hope she was useful; for when Felix was gone to the printing-office, the boys to the grammar-school, and Wilmet, first to the kitchen, and then to Miss Pearson's, she remained with bowl and cloth to wash up in her own peculiarly slow and dainty way, never breaking but always dreaming, while Angela carried them one by one, first to her, then to the kitchen.

'Now Cherry.'

Mr. Audley's door opened, he would step forward and take the well-worn books in one hand, and hold the doors open with the other as Cherry tardily hopped in, and perched herself by the table. Her confirmation studies had been left in his charge; and then followed a little Greek, some Latin, a page or two of French, the revision of an exercise, and some help in Euclid and fractions—all studies begun with her father, and both congenial and useful to her, as the occupation that (next to drawing) best prevented her from feeling the dreary loneliness of her days; for though he could seldom give her more than an hour, the preparation—after he had helped her upstairs—occupied her during the whole period of tranquillity while the younger children slept. Angela appeared first, and did some small lessons, cat-and-dog readings, and easy hymns, then was generally content to sit on the floor in Mamma's room, admiring or amusing the twins. Then Cherry, according to her sense of duty, drew or worked. There was a horrible never-ending still-beginning basket of mending in the family, which Wilmet replenished every Saturday; and though Mrs. Underwood's instinct for piecing and darning had revived as soon as she was taken out of bed, her work now always needed a certain revision to secure the boys from the catastrophe of which Wilmet often dreamt—appearing in public in ragged shirt-sleeves! Geraldine knew that every stitch she left undone would have to be put in by her sister in late evening or early morning, and therefore often wrenched herself from the pencil and paints that best beguiled her thoughts from the heart-ache for her father, and the craving for Edgar, or the mere craving for light, air, liberty, and usefulness. Her only excuse to her own conscience for allowing herself her chief pleasure was, that it was her way of helping an old woman who kept a stall of small wares on market days, and could sometimes dispose of little pictures on domestic and Scriptural subjects, if highly coloured, glazed with gum, and bound with bright paper—pickings and stealings, as Felix called them, gleaned from advertisements and packing-boxes at Mr. Froggatt's; but these did not allow much scope for the dreams of her fancy.

Nor had she much choice when Bernard once awoke and came down, in all the unreasoning tyranny of two years old, when it was an even chance whether he would peaceably look at the old scrap-book, play with Angela, or visit Mamma; or be uproarious, and either coalesce with Angela in daring mischief, fight a battle-royal with her, or be violent with and jealous of the twins. The urchin had found out that when once Cherry's crutch was out of her reach she could not get at him; and he had ridden off upon it so often, before committing any of his worst misdemeanours, that Cherry always lay down on it to secure it. After all, he was a fine, affectionate, impetuous little fellow, but with a very high, proud, unmanageable will; and she was very fond and proud of him; but never more so than when he slept till dinner-time.

That was the hour which brought Felix home to help Sibby to carry his mother into the sitting-room, pay a little court to the babies, and enliven Cherry with any chance scrap of news or occupation. Best of all were the proofs of that unfinished comment on the Epistle to Philippi, which was being printed by subscription of the congregation, and the clergy of the diocese. It always did Mrs. Underwood good to have these read aloud to her by her little daughter, and *she* could sometimes find a clue to the understanding of sentences that had puzzled even Mr. Audley.

The two school-boys never appeared till dinner was imminent; and then—one unuttered wish of poor Cherry was that Mr. Audley could have dined with them; but he kept to his own hours, and they were late.

Whereby dinners on five days of the week were apt to be something on this fashion. Bell-ringing—Felix helping Geraldine to her seat, Angela trotting after; a large dish of broth, with meat and rice, and another of mashed potato; no sign of the boys; Angela lisping Grace; Sibby waiting with a tray.

Felix filled a soup-plate for his mother, and a basin for Bernard. 'We must begin, I suppose,' and he helped his sisters and himself.

'Here, Angel, push over your plate; I'll cut that.—How did you get on to-day?'

'Very well; the only mistake I made I found out before Smith saw it. I know all the stationery and steel pens apart now, and haven't made a mistake for a week. Yesterday Bartlett junior came in, he stood like a post before Mr. Froggatt till he caught sight of me, and then he shouted out, "O Blunderbore, you know! What is it that Collis wants?"'

'And did you?'

'When he said it was a horrid sum-book all little a's and b's.—What have you been doing, Cherry?'

'I have begun an abstract of the first Punic—'

The door flew open with a bounce, and two hot, wild-locked boys, dust everywhere except in their merry blue eyes, burst in, and tumbled on their chairs. 'I say—isn't it a horrid sell? we ain't to have a holiday for Squire's wedding.—Come, Fee, give us some grub.'

'You have not said Grace,' said Cherry.

Lance, abashed, stood up and bowed; Fulbert looked grim, and mumbled something.

'You have not washed your hands,' added Felix.

'Bosh! What's the good?' said Fulbert.

'They'll be as jolly dirty again directly,' said Lance.

'But you would be more decent company in the meantime,' said Felix.

At that moment there was a splash in his plate, a skip-jack made of the breast-bone of a chicken had alighted there with a leap.

'There's Felix's master come after him,' cried Fulbert, and Lance went off into choking laughter.

'Boys, how can you?' broke out Cherry.

'Look at Blunderbore fishing out his master!' was Fulbert's answer.

'The frog is in the bog,  
And Felix is squeamish,'

chanted Lance.

'Bad rhyme, Lance,' said Felix, who could bear these things much better from the younger than the elder. Indeed, he scarcely durst notice them in Fulbert, lest he should be betrayed into violence by letting out his temper.

'I say!' cried Lance, struck by a new idea, 'what prime stuff it is for making a fort!' and he began to scrape the more solid parts of his plateful to one side.

'Oh, I say, isn't it?' echoed Fulbert: 'but I've eaten up the best part of my castle;' and he grasped at the ladle.

'No, I thank you,' said Felix, putting it on the other side. 'While I am here, you don't play tricks with that.'

Fulbert swallowed a spoonful in a passion, but a bright thought struck Lance, who always cared much more for fun than for food. '*I say*, we'll empty it all into one, and eat it down.'

'You horrid boys!' plaintively exclaimed Cherry, almost crying—for this return to savage life was perfect misery to her. 'I can't bear it.'

'I will not have Cherry tormented,' said Felix, beginning to be very irate.

'We ain't doing anything to Cherry,' said Lance, amazed.

'Don't you know it spoils Cherry's appetite to see you so disgusting?'

'Then she'll have the more next time,' said Fulbert. 'Get along, Captain—you've splashed my face!'

'Hurrah! the red-hot shot! The rice is the cannon-balls! Where's some bread?'

'O Lance!' entreated Cherry; 'no waste—think of Wilmet and the bills.'

'We'll eat it every bit up,' asseverated Lance; but Fulbert growled, 'If you bother any more, I shall crumble the whole lot out at window.'

'It is wicked to waste bread,' lisped Angela, and Martha at that moment appeared to fetch the tureen for the kitchen dinner.

'Can't you eat any more, Cherry?' asked Felix gloomily.

'Not a bit, thank you,' she said.

'We've not done!' shouted the boys, seizing on her scarcely-tasted and half-cold plate.

'You must finish after. Come, Cherry!' Then, as they left the room, and she laid her head on his shoulder—'Little ruffians!' he said under his breath.

'Oh, never mind, Felix. I don't—at least I ought not to mind—they don't mean it.'

'Lance does not, but I think Fulbert does. He'll make me thrash him within two inches of his life, before he has done. And then there's no one to take me in hand for it. It is horribly bad for them, too, to live just like young bears.'

But he smoothed his brow as he came into the room where his mother was, and amused her till his time was up.

Mr. Froggatt had explained to his father long ago, that Felix's work would not be that of a clerk in a great publishing house, but veritably that belonging to the country bookseller and printer, and that he must go through all the details, so as to be thoroughly conversant with them. The morning's work was at the printing-house, the afternoon's at the shop. The mechanical drudgery and intense accuracy needed in the first were wearisome enough; and moreover, he had to make his way with a crusty old foreman who was incredulous of any young gentleman's capabilities, and hard of being convinced that he would or could be useful; but old Smith's contempt was far less disagreeable to him than the subdued dislike he met with from Redstone, the assistant in the shop, a sharp, half-educated young man, who had aspired to the very post of confidence for which Felix was training—and being far less aware of his own utter unfitness for it than was Mr. Froggatt, regarded the lad as an interloper; and though he durst not treat him with incivility, was anxious to expose any deficiency or failure on his part. Having a good deal of quickness and dexterity, he could act as a reporter, draw up articles of a certain description for the newspaper, and had, since the death of Mr. Froggatt's eldest son, been absolutely necessary to him in carrying on the business; and now, it was a matter of delicate discretion on the master's part to avoid hurting the feelings of the assistant, whom a little more would have made his tyrant, and a dread of the appearance of favouritism made it needful to keep Felix thoroughly in a subordinate post, till real superiority of mind and education should assert itself over elder years and mere familiarity with detail. This reserved ill-will of Redstone's had much increased the natural discomfort of appearing behind the counter to former acquaintance, and had rendered the learning the duties there doubly troublesome and confusing; though, in recalling the day's doings, there was some amusement in contrasting the behaviour of different people, some—of whom Mr. Ryder was

the type—speaking to him freely in his own person, others leaving him as an unrecognized shop-boy; and a third favouring him with a horrid little furtive nod, which he liked least of all. But though awkward and embarrassed at first, use soon hardened him, and made the customers indifferent, so that by the spring he had begun to be useful, and to feel no particular excitement about it.

The worst of his business was that it kept him so late, that he had but a very short evening, and no time for exercise. He was on his feet most of the day, but indoors, and his recreation chiefly consisted in choir-practice twice a week. Not that he missed more positive amusement; the cares of life and Edgar's departure seemed to have taken the boyish element of frolic out of him; and left him gravely cheerful indeed, but with no greater desire of entertainment than could find vent in home conversation, or playing with the little ones.

Wilmet and the two boys were at liberty full two hours before him. The latter generally stayed out as long as light and hunger permitted. Mr. Audley continually stumbled on them playing at marbles, racing headlong in teams of pack-thread harness with their fellows, upsetting the nerves of quiet folk—staring contentedly at such shows as required no outlay, or discontentedly at the outside of those that demanded the pennies they never had. They were thorough little street-boys; and all that he could do for them was to enforce their coming in at reasonable hours, and, much to their sister's relief, cause their daily lessons to be prepared in his room. Otherwise their places in their classes would have been much less creditable.

Wilmet's return was always Geraldine's great relief, for the afternoon of trying to amuse her mother, and keep the peace between the children, was almost more than she was equal to; though, on fine days, Sibby always took out the two elder babies, with an alternate twin, for an hour's air, and Mr. Audley daily visited the invalid. Mr. Bevan did so twice a week, with a gentle sympathising tone and manner that was more beneficial than Lady Price's occasional endeavours to make her 'rouse herself.' Miss Pearson and a few humbler friends now and then looked in, but Mrs. Underwood had been little known. With so large a family, and such straitened means, the part of the active clergyman's wife was impossible to her; she had shrunk from society, and most people knew nothing more of her than that the faded lady-like figure they used to see among her little flock at church, was Mrs. Underwood.

Wilmet's coming home was always a comfort; and though to her it was running from toil to care, the change was life to her. To have been either only the teacher or only the housewife might have weighed over heavily on her; but the two tasks together seemed to lighten each other. She had a real taste and talent for teaching, and she and her little class were devoted to one another, while the elder girls loved her much better since Alda had been away. The being with them, and sharing their recreation in the middle of the day, was no doubt the best thing to hinder her from becoming worn by the depressing atmosphere around her mother. She always brought home spirits and vigour for whatever lay before her, brightening her mother's face, dispelling squabbles between Angela and Bernard, and taking a load of care from Geraldine.

There was sure to be some anecdote to enliven the home-keepers, or some question to ask Cherry, whose grammar and arithmetic stood on firmer foundations than any at Miss Pearson's, and who was always pleased to help Wilmet. The evening hours were the happiest of the day, only they always ended too soon for Cherry, who was ordered up by Sibby as soon as her mother was put to bed, and had, in consequence, a weary length of wakeful solitude and darkness—only enlivened by the reflection from the gas below—while Felix and Wilmet sat downstairs, she with her mending, and he either reading, or talking to her.

On Saturday, which she always spent at home, and in very active employment in the capacities of nurse, housemaid, or even a slight taste of the cook and laundress, the evening topic was always the accounts—the two young heads anxiously casting the balance—proud and pleased if there were even a shilling below the mark, but serious and sad under such a communication as, 'There's mutton gone up another half-penny;' or, 'Wilmet, I really am afraid those boots of mine cannot be mended

again;' or again, 'See what Lance has managed to do to this jacket. If one only could send boys to school in sacking!'

'Are not there a few pence to spare for the chair for Cherry? She will certainly get ill, if she never goes out now spring is coming on.'

'Indeed, Felix, I don't know how! If there is a penny over, it is wanted towards shoes for Bernard; and Cherry begs me, with tears in her eyes, not to let her be an expense!'

Poor Geraldine! the costing anything, and the sense of uselessness, were becoming, by the help of her nightly wakefulness, a most terrible oppression on her spirits. Her father was right. His room had been a hot-bed to a naturally sensitive and precocious character, and the change that had come over her as time carried her farther and farther away from him, affected her more and more.

Her brother and sister, busy all day, and scarcely ever at home, hardly knew what was becoming a sore perplexity to Mr. Audley.

A young tutor, not yet twenty-six, could not exactly tell what to do with a girl not fourteen, who fell into floods of tears on the smallest excuse.

'No, no, Cherry—that is not the nominative.'

The voice faltered, struggled to go on, and melted away behind the handkerchief. Then—'O Mr. Audley, I am so sorry—'

'That's exactly what I don't want you to be, Cherry.'

'Oh, but it was so careless,' and there was another flood.

Or, 'Don't you see, Cherry, you should not have put the negative sign to that equation. My dear Cherry, what have I said?'

'Oh, oh—nothing. Only I did think—'

'We shall have you a perfect Niobe, if you go on at this rate, Cherry. Really, we must not have these lessons, if they excite you so much.'

'Oh! that would be the worst punishment of all!' and the weeping became so piteously violent, that the Curate looked on in distressed helplessness.

'I know it is very tiresome of me; I would help it, if I could—indeed I would.' And she cried the more because she *had* cried.

Or, as he came in from the town, he would hear ominous sounds, that his kind heart would not let him neglect, and would find Cherry sitting on the landing-place in a paroxysm of weeping. She always crept out of her mother's room on these occasions, for the sight of tears distressed and excited Mrs. Underwood; and the poor child, quite unable, in her hysterical condition, to drag herself alone up that steep stair, had no alternative but to sit, on what Mr. Audley called her stool of repentance, outside the door, till she had sobbed herself into exhaustion and calm—or till either Sibby scolded her, or he heard her confession.

She had been 'so cross' to Bernard, or to Angel—or, once or twice, even to Mamma. She had made an impatient answer when interrupted in her lessons or in a dream over a drawing; she had been reluctant to exert herself when wanted. She had scolded fretfully—or snatched things away angrily, when the little ones were troublesome; and every offence of this sort was bewailed with an anguish of tears; that, by weakening her spirits and temper, really rendered the recurrence more frequent. 'The one thing they trust to me, I fail in!'

He was very kind to her. He did not yield to the mannish loathing for girlish tears that began to seize on him, after the first two or three occasions. He thought and studied—tried comfort, and fancied it relaxed her—tried rebuke, and that made it worse; tried the showing her François de Sales' admirable counsel to Philothée, to be '*doux envers soi*,' and saw she appreciated and admired it; but she was not an atom more *douce envers soi* when she had next spoken peevishly.

At last he fairly set off by the train, to lay the case before Sister Constance.

'What is to be done, when a child never does anything but cry?'

Sister Constance listened to the symptoms, and promptly answered, 'Give her a glass of port wine every day, before you let her out of your room.'

'If I can!'

'Tell her they are *my* orders. Does she eat?'

'I imagine not. I heard Felix reproaching her with a ghoul's dinner of a grain of rice.'

'Does she sleep?'

'She has told me a great deal of midnight meditation on her own deficiencies.'

'She must be taken out of doors somehow or other! It is of no use to reason with her; the tears are not temper, or anything else! Poor Charlie! it is an odd capacity for you to come out in, but I suppose no one else can attend to her.'

'No, poor child, she is rather worse than motherless! Well—I will find some excuse for taking her out for a drive now and then; I don't know how to speak to the others about having the chair for her, for they are barely scraping on.'

'Poor children! Well, this year is probably the worst. Either they will get their heads above water, or there will be a crisis. But they *do* scrape?'

'Yes. At Lady-day there was great jubilation, for the rent was paid, the taxes were ready, there was not a debt; and there was seven-pence over, with which Felix wanted to give Cherry a drive; but Wilmet, who is horribly prudent, insisted that it must go to mend Fulbert's broken window.'

'Well—poor Wilmet! one can't blame her. How does she treat Cherry's tears?'

'I don't think she has much pity for them. Felix does much better with Cherry; he rocks her and pets her; though, indeed, she hardly ever breaks down when he is there; but even his Sundays are a good deal taken up—and I always hunt him out for a walk on the Sunday afternoons.'

'Is he still in the choir and teaching at the Sunday school?'

'Yes—though it is not Mowbray Smith's fault.'

'What, is your colleague what you apprehended?'

'My Lady could not have found a curate more to her mind, or more imbued with her dislike to all that bears the name of Underwood. I own it is hard to have one's predecessor flung constantly in one's teeth, and by the very people who were the greatest thorns to dear Underwood himself. Then Clem, who *is* a born prig, though a very good boy, gave some of his little interfering bits of advice before he went away, and it has all been set down to Felix's account! One Sunday, Smith made a complaint of Felix having the biggest boys in the school. It was the consequence of his having taken them whenever his father could not, till it came to his having them entirely. He always took great pains with them, and there was a fellow-feeling between him and them that could hardly be with an older person. I said all this—too strongly, most likely—and the Rector put in a mild word, as to his goodness in coming at all. Smith thought there was nothing wonderful in liking what ministered to his conceit; and at last it came out that a baker's boy had met Felix and Smith consecutively in the street, and only touched his hat to one, and that the wrong one.'

'I should have been only thankful that he touched his hat to anybody.'

'That is the very remark by which I put my foot in it; but my Lady was horrified, and the consequence was, that it fell to me to advise Felix to resign the class. I never hated a piece of work so much in my life, for he had worked the lads well, and we both knew that there would be an end of them. Moreover, Felix has some of the true Briton about him, and he stood out—would give up the class if the Rector ordered him, but would relinquish Sunday-school altogether in that case; and the two girls were furious; but, after one Sunday, he came to me, said that he found hostility poisoned his teaching, gave up, and accepted the younger ones.'

'Of course the boys deserted.'

'Which has not softened Smith, though it has made him tolerate Felix in the choir. His voice is of very little use at present; but he is such an influence, that we should be glad of him if he could not sing a note, and he clings to it with all his heart. I believe music is about the only pleasure he has,

and it excites his mother too much to have any at home. We have little Lance in the choir now, with a voice like a thrush in a dewy morning.'

Mr. Audley acted on the port-wine prescription, to the horror and dismay of Cherry, who only submitted with any shadow of philosophy on being told that the more she cried the more necessary she rendered it; but on the Saturday, Sister Constance suddenly knocked at Mr. Audley's door. She had been talking the matter over with the Superior; and the result was, that she had set off on a mission to see for herself, and if she thought it expedient, to bring Geraldine back with her. She had chosen Saturday as the time for seeing Wilmet, and was prepared to overlook that the stairs were a Lodore of soap, this being Sibby's cleaning day, while Wilmet kept guard over the mother and the twins.

Geraldine was in the sitting-room, writing a Latin exercise, with a great pucker in her forehead whenever Angela looked up from her wooden bricks to speak to her. And though the sharp little pinched face was all one beam of joy as the visitor came in, Sister Constance saw at once that the child's health had deteriorated in these last months. She sat down, and with Angela on her lap, questioned anxiously. Cherry had no complaints—she always was like this in the spring. How was her foot? As usual, a falter. Was it *really*? Well, yes, she thought so. And then, as the motherly eyes looked into hers, there came a burst of the ready tears; and 'Oh, *please* don't talk about it—*please* don't ask.'

'I know what you are afraid of,' said Sister Constance, remembering her horror of the Bexley medical attendant, 'but is it right to conceal this, my dear child?'

'I don't think I do,' said Cherry pitifully. 'You know Sibby *does* it every night, and it only aches a little more now. And if they did find it out, then they would have *him*, and there would be a doctor's bill, and, oh! that would be dreadful!'

Sister Constance saw that the question of right or wrong would be infinitely too much for Geraldine, and drew off her mind from it to tell of the good accounts of Robina from Catsacre, and Clement from Whittingtonia; but when presently Wilmet was so far free as to come in with *only* the boy-baby in her arms, and take the guest up to take off her bonnet, it was the time for entering on the subject.

'Cherry? do you think her looking ill? She always is poorly in the spring, you know.'

'I do not like what I hear of her appetite, or her sleep, or her spirits.'

'Oh! but Cherry is always fanciful, you know. Please, please don't put things in her head.'

'What kind of things do you mean?'

'Fancying herself worse, I mean, or wanting things. You know we must be so careful, and Mamma and the babies—'

'My dear, I know you have many to care for, and it is hard to strike the balance; but somehow your voice sounds to me as if Geraldine were the one you most willingly set aside.'

Wilmet did not like this, and said, a little bit hastily, 'I am sure Geraldine has everything we can give her. If she complains, it is very wrong of her.'

'She has not said one word of complaint. Her grief and fear is only of being a burden on you. What brought me here was, that Mr. Audley was anxious about her.'

Wilmet was silent, a little abashed.

'Did you know that her ankle is painful again?'

'Sister Constance,' said Wilmet, 'I don't think you or Mr. Audley know how soon Cherry fancies all sorts of things. She does get into whiny states, and is regularly tiresome; and the more you notice her, the worse she is. I know Mamma thought so.'

'My dear, a mother can venture on wholesome neglect when a sister's neglect is not wholesome. I am not accusing you of neglect, mind; only you want experience and sympathy to judge of a thing with a frame like Cherry's. Now, I will tell you what I want to do. I am come to take her back with me, and get her treated by our kind doctor for a month or so, and the sea air and rest will send her back, most likely, in a much more cheery state.'

'Indeed!' cried Wilmet, startled; 'it is very good, but how could we do without her? Mamma and the children! If she could only wait till the holidays.'

'Let her only hear you say that, Wilmet, and it will do her more good than anything.'

'What—that she is of use? Poor little thing, she tries to be; but if Marilda could have had her way, and taken her instead of Alda, it would have been much better for her and all. Ah! there's Felix. May I call him in?'

Felix, dashing up to wash his hands, smooth his hair, and dress himself for the reading-room work instead of the printing-office, had much rather these operations had been performed before he was called to the consultation in the nursery; but he agreed instantly and solicitously, knowing much better than Wilmet what the dinners were to Cherry, and talking of her much more tenderly.

'Yes, poor little dear, she always breaks down more or less in the spring; but I thought she would mend when we could get her out more,' he said. 'Do you think her really so unwell, Sister Constance?'

'Oh, no, no!' cried Wilmet, fearfully.

'Not very unwell, but only so that I long to put her under our good doctor, who comes to any one in our house, and who is such a fatherly old gentleman, that she would not go through the misery the thought of Mr. Rugg seems to cause her.'

'Dr. Lee?' asked Felix. 'Tom Underwood sent him to see my father once. I remember my father liked him, but called it waste for himself, only longed for his opinion on Cherry. Thank you, I am sure it is the greatest kindness.'

'But, Felix, how can she before the holidays?' cried Wilmet.

'Well, Mamma does not want her before dinner; and as to the kids, why can't you take Angel to school with you? Oh, yes, Miss Pearson will let you. Then Mr. Audley, or Mr. Bevan, is always up in the afternoon, and you come home by four.'

'Perhaps I could earlier on days when the girls go out walking,' said Wilmet. 'If it is to do Cherry good, I don't like to prevent it.'

Wilmet had evidently got all her household into their niches, and the disarrangement puzzled her. A wonderful girl she was to contrive as she did, and carry out her rule; but Sister Constance feared that a little dryness might be growing on her in consequence, and that, like many maidens of fifteen or sixteen, while she was devoted to the little, she was impatient of the intermediate.

So when they went down, and Cherry heard of the scheme, and implored against it in nervous fear of leaving home and dread of new faces, Wilmet, having made up her practical mind that the going was necessary, only made light of that value at home which was Cherry's one comfort, and which made herself feel it so hard to part with her, that this very want of tact was all unselfishness.

Felix was much more comfortable to Cherry when he made playful faces at the bear-garden that the dining-room would become without her, and showed plainly that he at least would miss her dreadfully. Still she nourished a hope that Mamma would say she should not go; but Mamma always submitted to the decrees of authority, and Wilmet and Felix were her authorities now. Sister Constance felt no misgiving lest Wilmet were hardening, when she heard the sweet discretion and cheerful tenderness with which she propounded the arrangement to the sick mother, without giving her the worry of decision, yet still deferentially enough to keep her in her place as the head of the family.

Yet it was with unnecessarily bracing severity that Wilmet observed to Geraldine, 'Now, don't you go crying, and asking questions, and worrying Mamma.'

'I suppose no person can be everything at once, far less a girl of fifteen,' thought Sister Constance, as she drove up to the station in the omnibus with Cherry, who was too miserable and bewildered to cry now; not that she was afraid of either the Sister or the Sisterhood, but only because she had never left home in her life, and felt exactly like a callow nestling shoved out on the ground with a broken wing.



In two months more the omnibus was setting her down again, much nearer plumpness, with a brighter face and stronger spirits. She had been very full of enjoyment at St. Faith's. She had the visitor's room, with delightful sacred prints and photographs, and a window looking out on the sea—a sight enough to fascinate her for hours. She had been out every fine day on the shore; she had sat in the pleasant community-room with the kind Sisters, who talked to her as a woman, not a baby; she had plenty of books; one of the Sisters had given her daily drawing lessons, and another had read Tasso with her; she had been to the lovely oratory constantly, and to the beautiful church on Sunday, and had helped to make the wreaths for the great May holidays; she had made many new friends, and among them the doctor, who, if he had hurt her, had never deceived her, and had really made her more comfortable than she had ever been for the last five years, putting her in the way of such self-management as might very possibly avert some of that dreadful liability to be cross.

But with all this, and all her gratitude, Geraldine's longing had been for home. She was very happy, and it was doing her a great deal of good; but Mamma, and Felix, and Wilmet, and Sibby, and the babies, were tugging at her heart, and would not let it go out from them. She was always dreaming that Felix's heels were coming through his stockings, that Mamma was calling and nobody coming, or that Bernard was cutting off the heads of the twins with the blunt scissors. And when Dr. Lee's course of treatment was over, and Felix had a holiday to come and fetch her home, it is not easy to say which was happiest. For she was so glad to be at home amid the dear faces, troubling and troublous as they often were, and so comfortable in the old wheel-ruts of care and toil, that it really seemed as if a new epoch of joy had begun. Felix openly professed how sorely he had missed her, and she clung to his arm with exulting mutual delight; but it was almost more triumphant pleasure to be embraced by Wilmet with the words: 'Dear, dear Cherry, there you are at last. You can't think how we have all wanted you! I never knew how useful you are.'

'I suppose,' said Felix quaintly, 'the world would rather miss its axis, and yet that does not move.'

'Yes, it does,' said Cherry, 'it wobbles. I suppose Wilmet says rotates, just about as much as I am going to do now I have got back into my own dear sphere again.'

## CHAPTER VI THE CACIQUE

*'Devouring flames resistless glow,  
And blazing rafters downward go,  
And never halloo, "Heads below!"  
Nor notice give at all.'*

### ***Rejected Addresses.***

It was a warm night in September, and Wilmet had laid herself down in bed in her nursery with a careful, but not an oppressed heart. About many matters she was happier than before. Her mother had revived in some degree, could walk from her bed-room to the sitting-room, and took more interest in what was passing; and this the hopeful spirits of the children interpreted into signs of recovery. Geraldine's health and spirits had evidently taken a start for the better. Fulbert, too, was off her mind—safe gone to a clergy orphan foundation; and though Lancelot had not yet been elected, owing, Mr. Audley imagined, to Lady Price's talk about their fine friends, Wilmet could not be sorry, he was such a little fellow, and the house would be so dull without his unfailing merriment and oddities. And though there had been sore disappointment that Mrs. Thomas Underwood had chosen to go to Brighton instead of coming home, there was the promise of a visit from Alda before Christmas to feed upon. Little Robina had come home for the summer holidays, well, happy, and improved, and crying only in a satisfactory way on returning to school. Moreover, Wilmet's finances had been pleasantly increased by an unexpected present of five pounds at the end of the half year from Miss Pearson, and the promise of the like for the next; increasing as her usefulness increased; and she was also allowed to bring Angela to school with her. The balance of accounts at Midsummer had been satisfactory, and Felix had proudly pronounced her to be a brick of a housekeeper. And thus altogether Wilmet did not feel that the weight of care was so heavy and hopeless as when it first descended upon her; and she went to bed as usual, feeling how true her father's words of encouragement and hope had been, how kind friends were, how dear a brother Felix was, and above all, how there is verily a Father of the fatherless. And so she fell fast asleep, but was ere long waked by a voice from the inner room where Cherry slept with the door open.

'Wilmet, Wilmet, what is it?'

Then she saw that the room was aglow with red light from the window, and heard a loud distant hubbub. Hurrying out of bed, she flew to the window of Cherry's room, and drew up the blind. 'O Wilmet, is it fire?'

'Yes,' low and awe-struck, said Wilmet. 'Not here. No. There's nothing to be frightened at Cherry. It is out—out there. I think it must be the Fortinbras Arms. Oh, what a sight!'

'It is dreadful!' said Cherry, shrinking trembling to the foot of her little bed, whence she could see the window. 'How plain one can see everything in the room! Oh! the terrible red glow in the windows! I wonder if all the people are safe. Wilmet, do call Felix.'

'I will,' said Wilmet, proceeding in search of her clothes; but her hands shook so that she could hardly put them on. They longed for Felix as a protection, and yet Cherry could hardly bear to let her sister go out of sight.

'I only hope Mamma does not hear,' said Wilmet.

'How lucky her room looks out the other way! but, oh! Wilmet, don't fires spread?'

'Felix and Mr. Audley will see about us in time, if there is any fear of that,' said Wilmet, trembling a good deal as she wrapped a shawl round Cherry, who sat in a heap on her bed, gazing fascinated at the red sky and roofs. Felix slept at the back of the house; her knock did not waken him, but her entrance startled both him and Lance.

'Felix, the Fortinbras Arms is on fire.—Hush, Lance; take care; the little ones and Mamma! O Felix, do come to our room.'

They followed her there in a few seconds, but they had only glanced from the window before they simultaneously rushed away, to the increased dismay of their sisters, to whom their manly instinct of rushing into the fray had not occurred.

'I'll go down. I'll try to catch them,' said Wilmet; and she too was gone before Cherry could call to her. She found that Felix and Mr. Audley were in the act of undoing the front door, and this gave her just time to fly down with the entreaty that Felix would not leave them. It was a great deal more to ask of him than she knew.

'To the end of the street I must go, Wilmet,' he said.

'Oh! but Cherry is so frightened! and if Mamma wakes,' she said, gasping.

'It is all quiet in her room,' said Felix.

'Tell Cherry there is no danger at all here *now*,' said Mr. Audley; 'but if it makes her happier you may dress her. Don't disturb your mother. If needful, we will carry her out in her bed; but I do not think it will be.'

'We can only see out in the street,' added Felix, opening the door as he spoke; and that moment out flew Lance, before anybody had thought of stopping him, and the necessity of pursuing the little fellow into the throng, and keeping him out of danger, made both Felix and Mr. Audley dash after him; while Wilmet, abashed at the men hurrying by, could not even gaze from the door, but fled upstairs in terror lest the two little ones should be awake and crying at the appalling red light and the din, which seemed to her one continuous roar of 'Fire! fire!'

To her great relief, they were still asleep, but Cherry was in a chilled agony of trembling prayer for the 'poor people,' and the sisters crouched up together shivering in each other's arms as they watched the rush of flames streaming up into the sky over the brew-house opposite to them.

Presently Wilmet heard feet again downstairs. 'Cherry dear, I must go down, they may want me. Indeed, I don't think there is real danger as long as that brew-house is safe.'

There was a scuffle of feet that frightened her very much. She remembered it last Michaelmas when her father was brought home from church, and as she stood on the stairs—one choking petition in her heart, 'Let it not be Felix!' she saw that the figure, whatever it was, was carried by Mr. Audley and a strange man. And so great a horror came over her, that, regardless of her toilette, and the hair that had fallen over the jacket on her shoulders, she dropped at once among them as they were bearing the senseless form into Mr. Audley's bed-room, with a low but piteous cry, 'Felix! Felix! oh, what has happened?'

'It is not Felix, my dear,' said Mr. Audley; 'he is safe—he is gone for the doctor. This poor boy has fallen from a window. You can help us, Wilmet; call Martha, and get some water made hot. The fire is getting under.'

Wilmet needed no second hint. She was up, reassuring Cherry at one moment; then breaking into Martha's heavy slumbers, impressing upon her the necessity of not shrieking; then downstairs again, reviving the dying kitchen fire, and finding that, as usual, there was some water not yet cold. For, as she now saw, it was not yet one o'clock. She durst not go to her mother's room, where ready means of heating food were always to be found. As she brought the jug to the door, Felix came in with Mr. Rugg, who, living in a street out of sight, and having ears for no sound but his own night-bell, had been ready at once to obey the call. Felix told his sister the little he knew.

'It was a terrible sight. Just as we got to that one big window—a passage one, I believe, which looks out into this street—we saw this poor boy and a black man up on the sill, with all the glare of light behind them, screaming out for help.'

'But where was everybody?'

'In the High Street, round the corner. Crowds there; and here in our street only ourselves and a few men that hurried up after us. Mr. Audley shouted to them that we would get a ladder, but whether

they could not hold on any more, or they thought we were going quite away—O Wilmet! I didn't see; but there was the most horrible thump and crash on the pavement.'

'What! down from that window?'

'Yes,' said Felix, leaning against the wall, and looking very pale. 'And there was that good black man, he had got the boy in his arms, as if he had wound himself round to keep him from harm.'

'Oh! And he?'

'Killed—quite killed. Don't ask me about it, Wilmet. It is much too dreadful to hear of;' and he shuddered all over. 'But this boy's head was safe at least, and as there seemed no one to attend to anything, Mr. Audley said he would bring him here, and I went for Mr. Rugg.'

'And where's Lance? Did he go with you?'

'Lance! Is not he in? I never saw or thought of him, I must go and seek for him,' exclaimed Felix, darting off in haste and alarm at the thought of little nine-year-old Lance alone among the midnight crowd, just as Mr. Audley opened the door to try to find a messenger to Mr. Rugg's surgery. He paused to tell Wilmet that it was a lad about Felix's age, moaning some word that sounded like Diego, and with a broken leg and ribs; and then, as Martha was in attendance, she felt herself obliged to return to Cherry, whom indeed she could not leave again, for though the fire had sunk, and only thick clouds of smoke showed the play of the engines, the effects of the terror were not so quickly over in the tender little frame, which was in a quivering hysterical state, so deadly cold, that Wilmet was frightened, and went once more down to warm some flannel, and get some hot drink for her. She intended tea, but meeting Mr. Audley again, he sent up a glass of wine. Even with this in hot water, Cherry could hardly be warmed again, and Wilmet lay down, clasping her round, and not daring to let her know of her own continued anxiety about the two brothers. At last, however, when the red light had almost faded quite away, the cautious steps were heard coming up the stairs, and Felix called into the room in a low voice—

'All right, Wilmet.'

'Oh! come in,' the sisters called. 'Where did you find him, Fee? Is he safe?'

'O Cherry, you never saw such a lark!' cried Lance in a gusty whisper. 'Wouldn't Fulbert have given his ears to have seen it? To see the engines pouring down, and the great hose twining about like jolly old sea-serpents spouting.'

'Hush, Lance; how can you? How could you! Does Mr. Audley know he is safe?'

'Yes,' said Felix, 'he opened the door, and said he might have known Lance was too much of a *gamin* to come to grief.'

'What's a *gamin*?' said Lance.

'A street ragamuffin at Paris,' said Wilmet. 'But really, Lance, it was a terrible thing to do.'

'And where do you think I found him?' said Felix. 'In between little Jacky Brown and that big old coal-heaver who was so impudent about the blanket-club, hanging like a monkey upon the rails of the terrace, and hallooing as loud as they.'

'Twas the coal-heaver that helped me up,' said Lance. 'He's a jolly good fellow, I can tell you. He said, "You be one of Parson Underwood's little chaps, baint you? A rare honest gentleman of the right sort war he—he war!" and he pulled down another boy and put me up instead, and told me all about the great fire at Stubbs's factory. You can't think what fun it was. Roar, roar, up went the flame. Swish, wish, went the water—such a bellowing—such great clouds of smoke!'

'Was everybody saved?' whispered Cherry's tremulous murmur.

There was a silence; then Lance said, 'Weren't they?' and Cherry had another shuddering fit.

'Who?' Wilmet asked.

'Poor Mr. Jones's youngest child and his nursemaid were in an attic room where nobody could get at them,' said Felix in a hurried and awe-struck voice, causing Cherry to renew that agony of trembling and sobbing so convulsive and painful that her elder brother and sister could only devote themselves to soothing her, till at last she lay still again in Wilmet's arms, with only a few long gasps

coming quivering up through her frame. Then Wilmet implored Felix to go away and make Lance go to bed, and finding this the only means of reducing the little excited fellow to quiet, he went. And though all were sure they should not sleep, they overslept themselves far into Sunday morning, except Wilmet, who was wakened by the clamours of the undisturbed Angela and Bernard, and succeeded in dressing them without disturbing the other three.

Very tired and stiff, and very anxious she felt, but she was obliged to go down as soon as she was dressed, since she always took charge of her mother before breakfast on Sunday while Sibby went to mass. It was so late that she could only listen in vain at the top of the stairs before she went into the room, where she found Sibby very indignant at having missed all the excitement of the night past. 'As if she could not have been trusted not to have wakened the mistress. She believed they would have let her alone till they all were burnt in their beds!'

It was not till breakfast, which took place unusually late, that Wilmet heard much. Felix and Lance had just come downstairs, rather ashamed of having overslept themselves, and Mr. Audley came in and begged for a cup of tea.

He told them that the father and uncle of the boy had arrived. They were American merchants or speculators of some kind, he thought, named Travis, and they had gone on business to Dearport the day before, meaning to dine there, and return by the mail train in the night, and leaving the boy with the black servant in the unfortunate hotel.

On arriving, at about three o'clock, not long after Felix had brought Lance home, they had telegraphed to Dearport for a doctor and nurse, who were momentarily expected to arrive. The patient was only half conscious, and though he knew his father, continued to murmur for Diego. Martha was sitting with him whenever she could, for his father did not seem to understand nursing, and it would be a great relief when a properly-trained person arrived.

She came, and so did the doctor, but not till close upon church-time, and little but stray reports from the sick-room reached the population upstairs all that day, as Mr. Audley, whenever he was not at church, was obliged to be in attendance on his strange guests. All that reached the anxious and excited young people was the tidings of the patient being not unlikely to do well, though he was in great pain and high fever, and continually calling for the poor negro who had saved his life at the expense of his own.

This was the last bulletin when the household parted to go their several ways on Monday morning, not to be all collected again and free to speak till seven o'clock in the evening, when they met round the table for tea.

'Mamma looks cheery,' said Felix, coming into the little back room where Wilmet was spreading bread and butter.

'Yes,' said Wilmet, 'I think she has cared to hear about the fire. So many people have come in and talked, that it has enlivened her.'

'And how is the boy?'

'A little better, Martha heard; but he keeps on talking of Diego, and seems not to care about any one else.'

'No wonder. His father must be an unmitigated brute,' said Felix. 'He came to the inquest, and talked just as if it had been an old Newfoundland dog; I really think he cared rather less than if it had been.'

'Tell us about the inquest, Felix,' said Lance. 'I wish they'd have wanted me there.'

'I don't see why, Lance,' said Felix gravely; 'it was a terrible thing to see poor Mr. Jones hardly able to speak for grief, and the mother of that poor young nurse went on sobbing as if her heart was breaking.'

'Nobody knows the cause of the fire, do they?' asked Cherry. 'Lady Price said it was the gas.'

'No; no one knows. Way, the waiter, saw a glare under the door of the great assembly-room as he was going up very late to bed, and the instant he opened the door the flame seemed to rush out

at him. I suppose a draught was all it wanted. He saw this poor Diego safe downstairs once, but he must have gone back to save his young master, and got cut off in coming back. Poor fellow! he is a Mexican negro, belonging to an estate that came to Mr. Travis's wife, and he has always clung to her and her son just like a faithful dog.'

'But he could not be a slave in England,' said Cherry eagerly.

'No; but as this Travis said, his one instinct was the boy: he did not know how to get rid of him, he said, and I do believe he thinks it a lucky chance.'

'I wish it had been he!' said Lance.

'Sibby has asked leave to go to the burial,' added Wilmet.

'I hope you gave it,' said Felix. 'Mr. Macnamara came and asked if he were not a Roman Catholic, and those two Travises laughed a little offensively, and said they guessed he was so, as much as a nigger was anything; and the Papists were welcome to his black carcase, only they would not be charged for any flummery. "I won't be made a fool of about a nigger," one said. And then, I was so glad, Mr. Audley begged to know when the funeral would be, and said he would go anywhere to do honour to faithfulness unto death.'

'Well done, Mr. Audley!' cried Lance. 'Won't we go too, Fee?'

'It will be at nine to-morrow,' said Felix; at which Lance made a face, since of course he would be in school at the time.

'Maybe I shall have to go,' added Felix; 'for only think, as my good luck would have it, Redstone went on Saturday night to see his mother or somebody, and only came back this morning; and Mr. Froggatt himself was "out at his box," as he calls it, so he told me this morning to write the account of the fire for the paper, and he would pay me for it extra, as he does Redstone.'

'Well, and have you done it?'

'I was pretty much at sea at first, till I recollected the letter I began to Edgar yesterday night, and by following that, I made what I thought was a decent piece of business of it.'

'Oh, did you put in the way they threw the things out at window at Jessop's without looking what they were?' cried Lance; 'and the jolly smash the jugs and basins made, and when their house was never on fire at all: and how the coal-heaver said "Hold hard, frail trade there!"'

'Well,' said Felix quaintly, 'I put it in a different form, you see. I said the inhabitants of the adjacent houses hurled their furniture from the windows with more precipitation than attention to the fragility of the articles. And, after all, that intolerable ass, Redstone, has corrected fire every time into "the devouring element," and made "the faithful black" into "the African of sable integument, but heart of precious ore."'

'Now, Felix!'

'Bald, sir, bald,' he said, with such a face. '"Yes, Mr. Underwood," even good old Froggy said, when he saw me looking rather blue, "you and I may know what good taste and simplicity is, but if we sent out the Pursuivant with no mouth-filling words in it, we should be cut out with some low paper in no time among the farmers and mechanics."'

'Is he so led by Mr. Redstone?' asked Wilmet.

'Not exactly; but I believe there's nothing he dreads more than Redstone's getting offended and saying that I am no use, as he would any day if he could. O, Mr. Audley, are you coming to stay?'

'Will you have a cup of tea?' said Wilmet.

'Thank you, yes; I've got to dine with these fellows at the Railway Hotel at eight, but I wanted to speak to you first, Wilmet,' said Mr. Audley, sitting down as if he were weary of his day.

'How is the boy?'

'Better. He has been quite sensible ever since he woke at twelve o'clock to-day, only he was dreadfully upset about poor Diego—about whom his father told him very abruptly—without the least notion he would feel it so much.'

'I wish I had the kicking of that father,' observed Felix, driving the knife hard into the loaf.

'He is not altogether such a bad fellow,' said Mr. Audley thoughtfully.

'Not for an American, perhaps.'

'He is not an American at all. He was born and bred in my own country, and took me by surprise by calculating that I was one of the Audleys of Wrightstone Court, and wanting to know whether my father were Sir Robert or Sir Robert's son. Then he guessed that I might have heard of his father, if I was not too young, and by-and-by it dawned on me that whenever there is any complication about business matters, or any one is in bad circumstances, my father always vituperates one Travis, who, it seems, was a solicitor greatly trusted by all the country round, till he died, some twenty years ago, and it appeared that he had ruined everybody, himself included. These men are his sons. They went out to America, and got up in the world. They told me the whole story of how they had knocked about everywhere, last evening, but I was too sleepy to enter into it much, though I daresay it was curious enough; successful speculations and hair's-breadth escapes seemed to come very thick one upon another, but all I am clear about is that this poor boy, Fernando's mother was a Mexican heiress, they—one of them, I mean—managed to marry; her father English, but her mother old Spanish blood allied to the old Caciques, he says; whether it is a boast I don't know, but the boy looks like it—such a handsome fellow; delicate straight profile, slender limbs, beautifully made, inky-black hair and brows, pure olive skin—the two doctors were both in raptures. Well, they thought affairs in Mexico insecure, so they sold the poor woman's estate and carried her off to Texas. No; was it? I really can't remember where; but, at any rate, Diego stuck to her wherever she went, and when she died, to her child; nursed him like an old woman, and— In short, it was that touching negro love that one sometimes hears of. Now they seem to have grown very rich—the American Vice-Consul, who came over this morning from Dearport, knew all about them—and they came home partly on business, and partly to leave Fernando to be made into an English gentleman, who, Mr. Travis says, if he has money to spend, does whip creation. He's English enough for that still. Well, they have got a telegram that makes them both want to sail by the next steamer.'

'That's a blessing. But the boy?'

'He cannot be moved for weeks. It is not only the fractures, but the jar of the fall. He may get quite over it, but must lie quite still on his back. So here he is, a fixture, by your leave, my lady housekeeper.'

'It is your room, Mr. Audley,' said Wilmet. 'But can his father really mean to leave him alone so very ill, poor boy?'

'Well, as his father truly says, he is no good to him, but rather the reverse; and as the Travis mind seems rather impressed by finding an Audley here, I am to be left in charge of him now, and to find a tutor for him when he gets better. So we are in for that!'

'But what is to become of you?' asked Wilmet. 'The nurse has got the little back study.'

'I have got a room at Bolland's to sleep in, thank you,' he answered; 'and I have been representing the inconvenience to the house of this long illness, so that the Travises, who are liberal enough—'

'I thought them horrid misers,' said Felix.

'That was only the American conscience as to negroes. In other matters they are ready to throw money about with both hands; so I hope I have made a good bargain for you, Wilmet. You are to have five guineas a week, and provide for boy and nurse, all but wine and beer, ice and fruit.'

'Five guineas!' murmured Wilmet, quite overpowered at the munificent sum.

'I am afraid you will not find it go as far as you expect, for he will want a good deal of dainty catering.'

'And your room should be deducted,' said Wilmet.

'Not at all. Mrs. Bolland said she did not take lodgers, but should esteem it a favour if I would sleep there while her son is away. It is all safe, I think. He has given me orders on his London banker, and they say here at the bank that they are all right. It is a strange charge,' he added thoughtfully; 'we little thought what we were taking on ourselves when we picked up that poor fellow, Felix; and

I cannot help thinking it will turn out well, there was something so noble about the poor lad's face as he lay insensible.'

It was about three weeks later, that one Sunday evening, when Mr. Audley came in from church, Felix followed him to his sitting-room, and began with unusual formality. 'I think I ought to speak to you, sir.'

'What's the matter?'

'About Lance, and him in there. I have had such a queer talk with *him*!'

'As how?'

'Why he wanted us to stop from church, asked me to let off the poor little coon; and when I said we couldn't, because we were in the choir, wanted to know what we were paid, then why we did it at all; and so it turned out that he thinks churches only meant for women and psalm-singing niggers and Methodists, and has never been inside one in his life, never saw the sense of it, wanted to know why I went.'

'What did you tell him?'

'I don't know; I was so taken aback. I said something about our duty to God, and it's being all we had to get us through life; but I know I made a dreadful mess of it, and the bell rang, and I got away. But he seems a sheer heathen, and there's Lance in and out all day.'

'Yes, Felix, I am afraid it is true that the poor lad has been brought up with no religion at all—a blank sheet, as his father called him.'

'Wasn't his father English?'

'Yes; but he had lived a roving, godless life. I began, when I found the boy must stay here, by asking whether he were of his father's or his mother's communion, and in return heard a burst of exultation that he had never let a priest into his house. His father-in-law had warned him against it, and he had carried his wife out of their reach long before the child's birth; he has not even been baptized, but you see, Felix, I could not act like Abraham to the idolater in the Talmud.'

Felix did not speak, but knocked one foot against the other in vexation, feeling that it was his house after all, and that Mr. Audley should not have turned this young heathen loose into it to corrupt his brother, without consulting him.

'I told Travis,' continued the Curate, 'that if I undertook the charge as he wished, it must be as a priest myself, and I must try to put some religion into him. And, to my surprise, he said he left it to me. Fernando was old enough to judge, and if he were to be an English squire, he must conform to old-country ways; besides, I was another sort of parson from Yankee Methodists and Shakers or Popish priests—he knew the English clergy well enough, of the right sort.'

'So he is to learn religion to make him a squire?'

'I was thankful enough to find no obstruction.'

'And have you begun?' asked Felix moodily.

'Why—no. He has been too ill and too reserved. I have attempted nothing but daily saying a short prayer for him in his hearing, hoping he would remark on it. But you know the pain is still very absorbing at times, and it leaves him exhausted; and besides, I fancy he has a good deal of tropical languor about him, and does not notice much. Nothing but Lance has roused him at all.'

'I would never have let Lance in there by himself, if I had known,' said Felix. 'He is quite bewitched.'

'It would have been difficult to prevent it. Nor do I think that much harm can be done. I believe I ought to have told you, Felix; but I did not like denouncing my poor sick guest among the children, or its getting round all the town and to my Lady. After all, Lance is a very little fellow; it is not as if Edgar or Clem were at home.'

'I suppose it cannot be helped,' sighed Felix; 'but my father—' and as he recollected the desire to take his brothers away from Mr. Ryder, he felt as if his chosen guardian had been false to his trust, out of pity and enthusiasm.



'Your father would have known how to treat him,' sighed Mr. Audley. 'At any rate, Felix, we must not forget the duties of hospitality and kindness; and I hope you will not roughly forbid Lance to go near him, without seeing whether the poor fellow is not really inoffensive.'

'I'll see about it,' was all that Felix could get himself to say; for much as he loved Mr. Audley, he could not easily brook interference with his brothers, and little Lance, so loyal to himself, and so droll without a grain of malice, was very near to his heart. 'A young Pagan,' as he thought to himself, 'teaching him all the blackguard tricks and words he has learnt at all the low schools in north or south!' and all the most objectionable scenes he had met with in American stories, from 'Uncle Tom' onwards, began to rise before his eyes. 'A pretty thing to do in a fit of beneficence! I'll order Lance to keep away, and if he dares disobey, I'll lick him well to show him who is master.'

So he felt, as he swung himself upstairs, and halted with some intention of pouring out his vexed spirit to Wilmet, because Mr. Audley had no business to make it a secret; but Wilmet was putting her mother to bed, and he went on upstairs. There he found all the doors open, and heard a murmuring sound of voices in Geraldine's room. In a mood to be glad of any excuse for finding fault, he strode across the nursery, where Angela and Bernard slept, and saw that Lance, who ought to have gone at once to bed on coming in, was standing in his sister's window, trying to read in the ray of gas-light that came up from a lamp at the brewhouse door.

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