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I – A HANDFUL OF ROSES

"Hev a bunch o' roses, mem? Fresh wild roses with the dew on 'em. Jes' picked. On'y ten cents."

They dropped in at the open window, and landed on Virginia Deering's lap. Her first impulse was to throw them out again, as she half said to herself, "I hate wild roses, I always shall!" But she glanced down into such a forlorn, wistful face, that her heart was touched, a not unkindly heart, though it had been bitter and obdurate with the unreason of youth.

"Oh, please buy 'em, mem. Mammy's sick and can't do nothin', an' Ben's got a fever. On'y ten cents."

The poor child, in her ragged dress, was clean enough. Her face had a starved, eager look, and the earnest pleading in the eyes bespoke necessity seldom counterfeited. Miss Deering opened her pretty silver-clasped purse and handed out a quarter.

"All of it?" hesitatingly. "Oh, thanky, thanky! We'd sold the chickens, and everything we could, and Ben said city folks was fond of wild-flowers."

The whistle blew. There was a groan and quiver as the train began to move, that drowned the child's gratitude. Miss Deering

laid the roses on the seat beside her with a curious touch, as if she shrank from them. An hour or two ago she had started on her journey, leaving behind her a sweet dream of youth and love and roses. In twenty-four hours the brightness of her life had been swept away. The summer day wore a dulness she had never seen before.

She was a handsome young girl, with a fine complexion, light, silken soft hair, and very dark gray eyes. A modern, stylish girl, who had not yet reached the period when one begins to assert her right supreme over the world and all that therein is.

She peered at the newcomers at the next station. No one wanted the seat, however. The sweet wild roses, in all their shell-like transparency, lay unheeded, drinking up the dewy crystal drops that had been showered by mortal hands, as well as dusky-fingered night. You would have said she had a tender side, that could be keenly moved by beauty. Perhaps that was why she glanced out of the window on the whirling sights. She might have vaguely wondered if she had been so utterly right yesterday – was it yesterday, or a month ago?

She took up her book, but it had lost its interest. The delicate fragrance of the roses disturbed her – stirred a gust of feeling that she had fancied securely laid. If *he* had cared, he would have come last night; he would have seen her this morning at the station. She had felt so strong, so justified in her own sight, and such a simple thing as a beggar with wild roses had disturbed it all.

There were not many people coming in town. She glanced about – one and another had bunches of flowers, flaunting scarlet geraniums and modern things. Very few people cared for wild roses, unless they were worked in table-scarfs or painted on china. Ah, how the tender little buds crept closer to each other! The pink, shell-like leaves of the mothers drooped tiredly, the soft green huddled about with a kind of frightened tenderness, as if they might be going out in a strange, unfriendly world. She turned her eyes away with a betraying mistiness in them.

They came into the great station, but this was not the hour for crowds. She picked up her satchel, her book – should she leave the roses to the mercy of the sweeper? Something throbbed up in her throat, she gathered them with a desperate grasp, threaded her way through the great enclosure, and passed out into the street amid a babel of voices.

A group of ragged urchins stood eager for a chance to seize a valise or parcel, to the relief or disgust of its owner.

"Who wants some flowers?" bethinking herself suddenly of the flower charities.

They thronged round her. She threw the bunch with a light effort just beyond the first noisy ring. A shock-headed lad with a broad, freckled face and laughing blue eyes caught it. Another snatched at it. Thereupon ensued a scrimmage. Blows and tearing of hair were the courtesies exchanged, until a policeman loomed in sight. The first lad was at this moment the victor, and he plunged down the side street with a fleetness known only to the

street arab. The majesty of the law distributed cuffs liberally among the vanquished, and the rabble dispersed.

Miss Deering smiled with a touch of sad scorn, nodded to a cabman, and, as she seated herself, watched the fleet but dirty feet vanishing in the distance, recalling the face.

"It's curious they, too, should quarrel about wild roses," she said, just under her breath, sighing softly.

Meanwhile Patsey Muldoon ran some ten or twelve squares, then paused for a bit of breath, mopping his face with his ragged shirt sleeve.

"My, ain't they queer? not stunners exactly, but splendid, if they ain't red. I d'know as Dil ever see sich a swad in her life. An' Bess's blue eyes'll be like saucers. Oh, golly! how sweet!" burying his face in them. "Sich as these ain't layin' loose round Barker's Court offen. I've lost a job mebbe, an' Casey'll crow if he gits one; but that ere left-hander wos science, that wos!" and the boy chuckled as he ran on again.

From the Grand Central over to the East Side tenements was no mean stretch, but Patsey would have gone twice as far to give Dilsey Quinn a pleasure.

The street was built up compactly, and swarmed with children. There was an open way between a row of houses, a flagged space called Barker's Court; a deep strip of ground that had been a puzzle to its owner, until he hit upon a plan for his model tenement row. The four-story houses faced each other, with pulley-lines between, the clothes shutting out air and light.

They were planned for the greatest number, if the greatest good had been omitted. One narrow hall and stairway did for two houses, so not much space was lost. But the sights and sounds, the piles of garbage, the vile air emanating from rooms where dirt reigned supreme, and the steam of the wet clothes, were something terrible on a hot summer day. The poor creatures crowded into it were used to it.

Patsey ran down to the middle of the Court, and then scudded up one flight.

The room was clean, rather cheery looking, with one window, water and drain in the corner, a room at the back, and a very small one at the side over the hall, with a window half the width of the other. A stove stood in the chimney recess, there was an old lounge, a rug of crazy-work carpet in which Dilsey Quinn had sewed together the bits given to her mother.

"Hello, Dil! Ain't them the daisies? Did ye ever have sich a lot before in yer life? I don't mean they're reg'lar daisies – they're roses of some kind, but blam'd if I ever seen any like 'em afore."

He tossed them into a baby-wagon, where sat the frailest and whitest wraith one could ever imagine alive. How she lived puzzled everybody. They never took into account Dil's passionate and inexhaustible love that fought off death with eager, watchful care.

"O Patsey!" Such a joyful cry of surprise. "Was there a flower mission?"

"Flower mission be blowed! Did ye ever see any sich in a

mission by the time it gits round here?"

His stubby nose wrinkled disdainfully, and he gave his head an important toss.

"But, oh, where *did* you get thim?" There was the least bit of a brogue in Dil's voice, and she always said "thim" in an odd, precise fashion. "There must be a thousand; they're packed so tight they've almost hurted each other. And, oh, how sweet!"

The breath of fragrance seemed to penetrate every pulse in Dil's sturdy frame.

"I guess ther ain't mor'n a hundred; but it's a jolly lot, and they looked so strange and queer like – weakly, like Bess here, an' I thought of her. A young lady throwed 'em out to me. I s'pose she'd had so many flowers they didn't count. My, wasn't she a high-stepper, purty as they make 'em; but her hair couldn't shine along o' Bess's here. None o' yer horse-car folks, nuther; she went off in a cab. An' Jim Casey went fer 'em. I knowed she meant 'em fer me; ye kin tell by a person's eye an' the nod o' ther head. But Casey went fer 'em, an' I give him a punch jes' back o' the ear – clear science, an' the boys made a row. While the cop was a-mendin' of their bangs I shinned it off good, I tell ye! I've run every step from Gran' Cent'al, an now I must shin off fer my papers. An' you kids kin have a picnic wid de flowers."

Patsey stopped for a breath, redder than ever in the face.

"O Patsey, you're so good!" cried the little wraith. Dil smiled through her tears, and squeezed his hand.

"Hi! good!" with a snort of merry disdain. "I jes' wisht I had

the boodle to git a kerrige an' take ye both out'n the country where things grow reel in the ground, an' ye can snivy on 'em with no cop nosin' round. If Bess could walk we'd take a tower. But, tra la," and his bare feet went pattering down the stairs.

The two children looked at each other and the roses in wordless amaze. Bess ventured to touch one with her thin little fingers. Then the wail of a baby broke into their speechless delight.

There were five babies sprawling on the floor and the lounge, too near of an age to suggest their belonging to one household. Since Dil had to be kept at home with a poor sickly child who wouldn't die, Mrs. Quinn had found a way of making her profitable besides keeping the house tidy and looking after the meals. But it was not down in the lists as a day nursery.

Dilsey Quinn was fourteen. You would not have supposed her that; but hard work, bad air, and perhaps the lack of the natural joys of childhood, had played havoc with her growth and the graces of youth. She had rarely known what it was to run and shout and play as even the street arabs did. There had always been a big baby for her to tend; for the Quinns came into the world lusty and strong. Next to Dil had been a boy, now safely landed in the reform-school after a series of adventures such as are glorified in the literature of the slums. Then Bess, and two more boys, who bade fair to emulate their brother.

Mrs. Quinn was a fine, large Scotch-Irish woman; Mr. Quinn a pure son of Erin, much given to his cups, and able to pick a

quarrel out of the eye of a needle. One night, four years agone, he had indulged in a glorious "shindy," smashed things in general, and little Bess in particular, beat his wife nearly to a jelly, then rushed to the nearest gin-mill, and half murdered the proprietor. He was now doing the State service behind prison-bars.

Mrs. Quinn was an excellent laundress, and managed better without him. But she, too, had a weakness for a "sup o' gin," which she always took after her day's work and before she went to bed. But woe betide the household when she began too early in the day.

The baby that set up such a howl was a fat, yellowish-white, small-eyed creature, looking like a great, soggy, overboiled potato.

"There, Jamsie, there," began the little mother soothingly; "would he like a turn in the baby-jumper? He's tired sitting on the floor, ain't he, Jamsie?"

The cooing voice and the tender clasp comforted the poor baby. She placed him in the jumper, and gave him an iron spoon, with which he made desperate lunges at the baby nearest him. But Dil fenced him off with a chair. She gave another one a crust to munch on. The two on the lounge were asleep; the other was playing with the spokes of Bess's wheel.

Dil always had a "way" with babies. It might have been better for her if she had proved less beguiling. Sometimes the number swelled to ten, but it was oftener five or six. If it fell below five there were hard lines for poor Dil, unless she had a reserve fund.

She early learned the beneficent use of strategy in the way of "knock-downs."

"O Dil!" and Bess gave a long, rapturous sigh, "did you ever see so many? And they're real roses, but fine and tender and strange, somehow. The buds are like babies, – no, they're prettier than babies," glancing disdainfully at those around her; "but rose babies would be prettier and sweeter, wouldn't they?" with a wan little smile. "O my darlings, I must kiss you! Thank you a thousand, thousand times. Did the pritty lady guess you were coming to me?" She buried her face down deep in their sweetness, and every faint, feeble pulse thrilled with wordless delight.

"It was awful good of Patsey, wasn't it?" she continued, when she looked up again.

"Patsey's always good," answered Dil sententiously. She was wondering what they would do if he should get "nabbed" by any untoward accident; for every little while some boy did get "nabbed."

Patsey Muldoon smoked cigar stumps, fought like a tiger, and swore as only a street-gamin can. But he was not a thief. And to these two girls he was as loyal a knight, and brave, as any around King Arthur's Table.

"Let me untie thim. They must be hurted with the string round so tight."

Dil cut the cord, and began to unwind it. A great shower fell over Bess, who laughed softly, and uttered exclamations in

every key of delight. If Virginia Deering could have witnessed the rapture of these poor things over her despised wild roses!

"O Dil, we never had so many flowers all to once!" she cried in tremulous joy. "There was the daisies from the Mission; but though they're pritty, you can't make 'em smell sweet. Do you s'pose it was over in that country you heard tell of where the beautiful lady found them? O Dil, if you could go to the Mission School again! I'd like to know some more, – oh, what will we do with them?"

Dil looked round in dismay.

"I daren't use the pitcher, and there ain't nothin' big enough. They're wilty, and they just want to be laid out straight in water. But if they're in anything, and mammy wants it, she'll just chuck thim away. Oh, dear!" and Dil glanced round in perplexity.

"Mammy promised to buy me another bowl, but she never does," was Bess's plaint.

Some one had given them a white earthen wash-bowl long before. The boys had broken it in a "tussle." They were thrashed, but Bess had not had her loss made good.

"O Bess! would you mind if I ran down to Misses Finnigan's? She might have something – cheap."

"No; run quick," was the eager response.

Dil gave a glance at the babies and was off. Around the corner in a basement was a small store of odds and ends. Mrs. Finnigan was a short, shrewd-looking woman with very red hair, a much turned-up nose, and one squint eye.

Dil studied the shelves as they were passing the time of day.

"What will wan of thim little wash-bowls cost?" she asked hesitatingly. "Bess had wan a lady sent to her, but Owny broke it. I've been looking to get her another, but it's so hard to save up a bit o' money."

"Ah, yis; so it is." Mrs. Finnigan gave the shelf a severe scrutiny. "Thim, is it now? Well, there's wan ye kin hev' fer sivin cints, dirt chape at that. It's got a bit of scale knocked off, and the dust has settled in, but it'll hould wather ivery blissid time," and she laughed with a funny twinkle in her squint eye. "Or will ye be wantin' somethin' foiner?"

"Oh, no, and I've only five cents. If you will trust me a bit" – eagerly.

"Sure I'd trust ye to Christmas an' the day afther, Dilsey Quinn. If iverybody was as honest, I'd be puttin' money in the bank where I'm bewailin' me bad debts now! Take it along wid ye."

"O Misses Finnigan, if mother should be awful about it, might I just say ye gev it to me? Mother do be moighty queer sometimes, and other whiles she don't notice."

"That I will, an' the blissid Virgin'll count it no sin. It's a long head ye've got, Dil, an' its wisdom that gets through the world widout havin' it broken. It'll be all right" – with another wink. "An' here's a bit of bananny for the poor colleen."

Dil ran off home with the bowl wrapped up in her apron to prevent incautious gossip. One of the babies was crying, but she

hushed it with the end of the banana. It was rather "off," and the middle had to be amputated, but the baby enjoyed the unwonted luxury.

Then she washed her bowl and filled it with clean water.

"They'll freshen up, and the buds be comin' out every day. I'll set thim on the window-sill, and all night they'll be sweet to you between whiles, when you can't sleep. O Bess dear, do you mind the old lady who came in with her trax, I think she called thim, and sung in her trembly voice 'bout everlastin' spring an' never with'rin' flowers? I've always wisht I could remember more of it. Never with'rin' flowers! Think how lovely 'twould be!"

"An' – heaven! That's what it is, Dil. I wisht some one else could know. O Dil, think of flowers always stayin' fresh an' sweet!"

Dil snipped off the faded leaves, and gave them a fresh water bath. One branch had seven buds and five roses. The delight that stirred these starved souls was quite indescribable. Never had they possessed such a wealth of pleasure.

Now and then Dil had to leave off and comfort the fractious babies. They were getting tired, and wanted their own mothers. But for the poor little girl playing at motherhood there was no one to come in and infold her in restful arms, and comfort her when the long, warm day ended.

At last she had the bowl filled with flowers, a great mound of delicious pink and tenderest green. Bess and Dilsey knew little about artistic methods; but the sight was a joy that the

finest knowledge could not have described – that full, wordless satisfaction.

A passionate pulsation throbbed in Bess's throat as if it would strangle her.

"Now," said Dil, "I'm going to set thim in your room. I'll push you in there, and you can make believe you are in a truly garden. For whin the folks come in, they'll be beggin' thim, an' they'll give thim to the babies to tear up. I couldn't abear to have thim hurted. An' babies don't care!"

"They can go out every day and see things." Bess clasped her arms about Dil's neck, and kissed her fervently.

The room was very, very small. Dil's cot stood along the wall; and there were two or three grocery boxes piled up to make a sort of closet, with a faded curtain across it. There was just room to push in the carriage by the window. It was Bess's sofa by day and bed by night. The bowl was placed on the window-sill. Now and then a breath of air found its way in.

Mrs. Finn and Mrs. Brady came in for their babies. Dil stirred the fire and put on the kettle, then washed the potatoes and set them to cook. Now and then she ran in to smile at Bess.

"It's just like heaven!" cried the little wraith.

Alas, if this was a foretaste of heaven! This close, fetid air, and the wet clothes, for they were put up at all hours. Pure air was one of the luxuries Barker's Court could not indulge in, though we talk of it being God's gift to rich and poor alike.

When the two rough, begrimed boys rushed in there was only

Jamsie left; and he was in an uneasy sleep, with his thumb in his mouth, so Dil held up her hand to entreat silence. The boys lived so generally in the street, and did so much shrewd foraging, that they looked well and hearty, if they had the air of prospective toughs.

"I've put the last bit of bread in the milk for Bess's supper, and you must wait until mother comes," said Dil, with her small air of authority.

The boys grumbled. Little Dan was quick to follow Owen's lead, who said roughly, —

"O yes, de kid must have everything! An' she'll never be good fer nothin' wid dem legs. No use tryin' to fatten her up wid de luxuries o' life!" and the boy's swagger would have done credit to his father.

"She's no good," put in Dan; "'n' I'm norful hungry."

The tears came to Dil's eyes, though she was quite used to hearing such remarks on the little sister she loved better than her own life. Everybody seemed to consider her such a useless burthen.

"Ain't them praties done? I could jes' eat 'em raw," whined Dan.

"Shet yer mug, er I'll gev ye a swipe," said Owen. "Ye don't look's if ye wos goin' to faint this minnit."

"You jes' mind yer own biz, Owen Quinn;" and the little fellow swelled up with an air.

Owen made a dive, but Dan was like an eel. They were on the

verge of a scrimmage when their mother entered. A tall, brawny woman, with an abundance of black hair, blue eyes, and a color that, in her girlhood, had made her the belle of her native hamlet, less than twenty years ago. A hard, weather-beaten look had settled in the lines of her face, her cheeks had an unwholesome redness, her skin had the sodden aspect that hot steam brings about, and her eyes were a little bleared by her frequent potations. Her voice was loud, and carried a covert threat in it. She cuffed the boys, produced a loaf of bread, and some roast beef bones Mrs. Collins had given her.

"It just needs a stir in the kettle, Dil, for it's gone a bit sour; but it'll freshen up with salt an' some onion. How many babies?"

"Five," answered Dil.

Just then Mrs. Gillen came flying up the stairs. She was not much beyond twenty, and still comely with youth and health and hope.

"O me darlint!" snatching up her baby with rapture, "did he want his own mammy, sure?" laughing gleefully between the kisses. "Has he fretted any, Dil?"

"He's been very good." Dil was too wise to tell bad tales.

"He always is, the darlint! An' I'm late. I was ironin' away for dear life, whin Mrs. Welford comes down wid a lasht summer's gown, an' sez she, 'Mrs. Gillen, you stop an' iron it, an' I'll give ye a quarther, for ye've had a big day's work,' sez she. So what cud I do, faix, when she shpoke so cliver loike, an' the money ready to hand?"

"They're not often so free wid their tin, though heaven knows they're free enough wid their work," commented Mrs. Quinn, with a touch of contempt.

"Mrs. Welford is a rale lady, ivery inch of her. Jamsie grumbles that I go to her, but a bit o' tin comes in moighty handy. An' many's the cast-offs I do be getten, an' it all helps. Here's five cints, and here's a nickel for yourself, Dil. Whatever in the world should we be doin' widout ye?"

"Thank you, ma'am," and Dil courtesied.

Mrs. Gillen bundled up her baby in her apron and wished them good-night, skipping home with a light heart to get her husband's supper, and hear him scold a little because she worked so late.

Mrs. Quinn held out her hand to her daughter.

"Gev me that nickel," she said.

The ready obedience was inspired more by the fear of a blow than love.

The potatoes were done, and they sat down to supper. Certainly the boys *were* hungry.

"I'm goin' to step down to Mrs. MacBride's an' sit on the stoop for a bit of fresh air," she announced. "I've worked that hard to-day there's no life left in me. Don't ye dare to stir out, ye spalpeens, or I'll break ivery blessed bone in your body," and Mrs. Gillen shook her fist by way of a parting injunction.

II – SATURDAY AFTERNOON

The boys waited until they were sure their mother was having her evening treat. Mrs. MacBride's was a very fascinating place, a sort of woman's club-house, with a sprinkling of men to make things merry. Decent, too, as drinking-places go. No dancing girls, but now and then a rather broad joke, and a song that would not appeal to a highly cultivated taste. There was plenty of gossip, but the hours were not long.

Dil washed up the dishes, dumped the stove-grate, and took the ashes out to the box. Then she swept up the room and set the table, and her day's work was done.

Patsey Muldoon came in with his heartsome laugh.

"O Patsey, they're the loveliest things, all coming up so fresh an' elegant, as if they grew in the water. Bess is wild about thim;" and Dil's tone was brimful of joy.

They went in and sat on the cot.

"They do seem alive," declared Bess, with her thin, quivering note of satisfaction. "I do be talkin' to thim all the time, as if they were folks."

Patsey laughed down into the large, eager, faded eyes.

"Sure, it's fine as a queen in her garden ye are! We'll say thanky to my lady for not kapin' them herself. An' I had a streak of luck this avenin', an' I bought the weeny thing two of the purtiest apples I could find. I was goin' to git a norange, but the

cheek of 'em, wantin' five cents for wan!"

"I like the apples best, Patsey," replied the plaintive little voice. "You're so good!"

"I had one mesilf, an' it's first-rate. Casey's goin' ter lick me – don't yer wish him luck?"

Patsey laughed again. He seemed much amused over the fact.

"No, I don't," said Dil stoutly. "Was it 'bout the flowers?" and Dil began to peel the soft harvest apple, looking up with eager interest.

"The cop gev him a clip, an' he was mad all through." Patsey nodded humorously.

"What would he have done with the roses?" Dil asked, with pity in her voice.

"Taken 'em to his best gal!" This seemed an immense joke to the boy.

"An' I'm your best girl, Patsey," said Bess, laying her little hand on his, so brown.

"That you jest are, an' don't yer forgit it," he replied heartily.

Dil fed her with slices of the apple. It was so refreshing to her parched mouth and throat. Patsey had so many amusing incidents to relate; but he always slipped away early, before the boys came home. He wanted no one telling tales.

Then Dil gave Bess her evening bath, and rubbed the shrunken legs that would never even hold up the wasted body. Ah, how softly Dil took them in her hands, how tender and loving were her ministrations. All her soul went out in this one passionate

affection.

"Your poor flannils is all in rags," she said pityingly. "Whatever we are to do unless some one gives mammy a lot of old stuff. O Bess! And there are such lovely ones in the stores, soft as a pussy cat."

"Mine are cool for summer." Bess gave a pitiful little laugh. Buying clothes for her was a sheer waste, in her mother's estimation.

Then Dil held the thin hands and fanned her while she crooned, in a sort of monotone, bits of beautiful sentences she had gathered in her infrequent inspection of windows where Christmas or Easter cards were displayed. She could not carry the simplest tune, to her passionate regret, but she might have improvised chanting sentences and measures that would have delighted a composer. She had transformed Bess's pillowed couch into a bed, and these hot nights she fanned her until she drowsed away herself. She used to get so tired, poor hard-worked Dilsey.

But the pathetic minor key of her untrained and as yet unfound voice Bess thought the sweetest music in the world. She was not fond of the gay, blatant street songs; her nerves were too sensitive, her ear too finely attuned to unconscious harmonies.

The tired voice faltered, the weary head drooped, the soft voice ceased.

Bess roused her.

"Dil, dear, you must go to bed. I am all nice and cooled off

now, and you are so tired. Kiss me once more."

Not once but many times. Then she dropped on her own little bed and was asleep in a moment. Did God, with all his millions to care for, care also for these heathens in a great enlightened city?

It was Bess who heard the boys scuffling in and just saving themselves when their mother's heavy tread sounded in the room. It was the poor child, racked by pain, whose nerves were rasped by the brawls and the crying babies, the oaths and foul language, and sometimes a fight that seemed in her very window.

Yet she lay there with her bowl of roses beside her, now and then touching them caressingly with her slight fingers, and inhaling the delicate fragrance. She was in a little realm of her own, unknowingly the bit of the kingdom of heaven within one.

But Bessy Quinn did not even know that she had a soul. There was a great hungry longing for some clean and quiet comfort, a mother she was not always afraid of, and Dil, who was never to tend babies any more. And if there could be flowers, and the "everlasting spring," and one could live out in the green fields.

They talked it over sometimes – this wonderful place they would like to find.

Morning always came too soon for Dilsey Quinn. Her mother wanted a cup of coffee, and ordered what Dil was to cook for the boys. It was a relief to see her go; but the babies began to come in at seven, and sometimes they were cross and cried after their mothers.

But on Saturday there was a great change. Mrs. Quinn washed

at home; Dilsey scrubbed the floors, ironed, was maid of all work, for there was not often any babies; Mrs. Quinn did not enjoy having them around.

This afternoon she was going to "Cunny Island" with a party of choice spirits. She felt she needed an outing once a week, and five days' steady washing and ironing was surely enough. Dil helped her mother off with alacrity. This time she was unusually good-natured, and gave the children a penny all round.

Then Dil arrayed herself and Bess in their best. Dil was quite well off this summer; her mother often brought home clothes she could wear. But poor Bess had not been so fortunate. The little white cap was daintily done up, though Dil knew it would never stand another ironing. So with the dress, and the faded blue ribbon tied about her baby waist. They were scrupulously clean; one would have wondered how anything so neat could have come out of Barker's Court.

It was a feat of ingenuity for Dil's short arms to get the carriage down the narrow, winding stairs. Sometimes the boys would help, or Patsey would be there. Then she took the pillows and the faded rug, and when they were settled she carried down Bess. That was not a heavy burthen. She arranged her in a wonderful manner, pulling out the soft golden curls that were like spun silk. Bess would have been lovely in health and prosperity. Her blue eyes had black pupils and dark outside rims. Between was a light, translucent blue, changing like a sea wave blown about. The brows and lashes were dark. But the face had a wan, worn

look, and the pleading baby mouth had lost its color, the features were sharpened.

One and another gave them good-day with a pleasant smile.

"It would be the Lord's mercy if the poor thing could drop off quiet like," they said to each other. It was a mystery to them how she managed to live.

They went out of the slums into heaven almost; over to Madison Square. Dil liked the broad out-look, the beautiful houses, the stores, the perspective of diverging streets, the throngs of people, the fountain, the flowers. There was an intangible influence for which her knowledge was too limited; but her inmost being felt, if it could not understand. Occasionally, like poor Joe, she was ordered to move on, but one policeman never molested her. Something in the pathetic baby face recalled one he had held in his arms, and who had gone out of them to her little grave.

Dil found a shady place and a vacant seat. She drew the wagon up close, resting her feet on the wheel. The last of the wild roses had been taken along for an airing. Poor, shrunken little buds, lacking strength to come out fully, akin to the fingers that held them so tenderly. Bess laughed at Dil's shrewd, amusing comments, and they were very happy.

Two or three long, delicious hours in this fresh, inspiriting air, with the blue sky over their heads, the patches of velvety grass, the waving trees, the elusive tints caught by the spray of the fountain, and the flowers, made a paradise for them. They

drank in eagerly the divine draught that was to last them a week, perhaps longer.

A young fellow came sauntering along, – a tall, supple, jaunty-looking man, with a refined and kindly, rather than a handsome face. His hair was cropped close, there was a line of sunny brown moustache on his short upper lip, and his chin was broad and cleft. It gave him a mirthful expression, as if he might smile easily; but there was a shadow of firmness in the blue-gray eye, and now the lips were set resolutely.

He stopped and studied them. They were like a picture in their unconventional grace. He was quite in the habit of picking up odd, rustic ideas.

"Hillo!" coming nearer with a bright smile. "Where did you youngsters find wild roses? They seem not to have thriven on city air."

"*Are* they *wild* roses?" asked Dil. "What makes thim so?"

He laughed, a soft, alluring sound. Something in the quaint voice attracted him. It was too old, too intense, for a child.

"I don't know, except that they *are* wild around country places, and do not take kindly to civilization. Where I have been staying, there are hundreds of them. You can't tell much about beauty by those withered-up buds."

"O mister, we had thim when they were lovely. On Chuesday it was – Patsey Muldoon brought thim to us. And they just seemed to make Bess all alive again with joy."

The pretty suggestion of brogue, the frankness, so far removed

from any aspect of boldness, interested him curiously.

"And had Patsey Muldoon been in the country?" he asked with interest.

"Oh, no. He was up to Gran' Cent'l, an' a lady who come on the train had thim. Patsey said she was beautiful and elegant, an' she gev thim to him. An' Jim Casey tried to get 'em, an' they had a scrimmage; but Patsey ain't no chump! An' he brought thim down to Bess," nodding to the pale little wraith. "Patsey's so good to us! An', oh, they was so lovely an' sweet, with leaves like beautiful pink satin, and eyes that looked at you like humans, – prittier than most humans. An' it was like a garden to us – a great bowlful. Wasn't it, Bess?"

The child smiled, and raised her eyes in exaltation. Preternaturally bright they were, with the breathless look that betrays the ebbing shore of life, yet full of eager desire to remain. For there would have been no martyrdom equal to being separated from Dil.

"O mister!" she cried beseechingly, "couldn't you tell us about them – how they live in their own homes? An' how they get that soft, satiny color? Mammy brought us home a piece of ribbon once, – some one gev it to her, – an' Dil made a bow for my cap. Last summer, wasn't it, Dil? An' the roses were just like that when we freshened them up. They was so lovely!"

He seated himself beside Dil. A curious impression came over him, and he was touched to the heart by the fondness and tender care of the roses. Was there some strange link —

"Was it Tuesday afternoon, did you say?" hesitating, with a sudden rush at his heart. "And a tall, slim girl with light hair?"

Dil shook her head with vague uncertainty. "Patsey said she was a stunner! An' she went in a kerrige. She wasn't no car folks."

He laughed softly at this idea of superiority. "Of course *you* didn't see her," he commented reflectively, with a pleasant nod. How absurd to catch at such a straw. No, he couldn't fancy *her* with a great bunch of wild roses in her slim hand, when she had so haughtily taken off his ring and dropped it at his feet.

"Oh, you wanted to know about wild roses when they were at home," coming out of his dream. What a dainty conceit it was! And he could see the pretty rose nook now; yes, it was a summer parlor. "Well, they grow about country ways. I've found them in the woods, by the streams, by the roadsides, sometimes in great clumps. And where I have been staying, – in the village of Chester, – a long distance from here, they grew in abundance. At the edge of a wood there was a rose thicket. The great, tall ones that meet over your head, and the low-growing bushy ones. Why, you could gather them by the hundreds! Have you ever been to the country?" he asked suddenly.

"We've been to Cent'l Park," answered Dil proudly.

"Well, that's the country in its Sunday clothes, dressed up for a company reception. The real country lives in every-day clothes, and gets weedy and dusty, with roads full of ruts. But you can walk on the grass; it grows all along the roadsides. Then there are flowers, – or weeds in bloom; it amounts to the same thing, –

and no one scolds if you pick them. You can lie out under the trees, and the birds come and sing to you, and the squirrels run about. The air is sweet as if it rained cologne every night. Underbrush and wild blackberries reach out and shake hands with you; butterflies go floating in the sunshine; crickets sit on the stones and chirp; bees go droning by, laden with honey; and a great robin will stop and wink at you."

The children's faces were not only a study, but a revelation. John Travis thought he had never seen anything so wonderful. If a man could put such life in every feature, such exquisite bewilderment!

"What *is* a robin?" asked Bess, her face all alight with eagerness.

"A great saucy bird with black eyes and a red breast. And there is a bobolink, who flies around announcing his own name, and a tiny bird that says, 'Phebe, Phebe;' for in the country the birds can talk."

Both children sighed; their hearts were full to overflowing. What heavenly content!

"This particular spot," and John Travis's eyes seemed to look way off and soften mysteriously, "is at the edge of a wood. The road runs so," marking it out on his trousers with his finger, "way up over a sloping hill, and this one goes down to a little stream. In this angle – "

Neither of them had the slightest idea of an angle, but it did not disturb their delight.

"In this angle there are some alders and stuff, and a curious little entrance to the rose thicket. Every kind seems in a riotous tangle. The low ones that begin to bloom in June, palest pink, rose-pink, and their dainty slim buds the most delicious color imaginable. There's a small cleared space; that's the parlor, with a velvety green carpet. The bushes meet overhead, and shower their soft leaves down over you. Every day hundreds of them bloom. It looks like a fairy cave. And lying down on the grass you can look up to one patch of blue sky. And I think the roses must have souls that go up to heaven – they are so sweet."

He paused in his random talk, with his eyes fixed on Dil. The rapt expression of her face transfigured her. Any one could imagine Bess being beautiful under certain healthful conditions, but Dil gave no promise to the casual glance. John Travis discerned at that moment the gift and charm higher than mere beauty, born of the soul, and visible only when the soul is deeply moved.

Her hat was pushed a little back. There was a fringe of red-brown hair with a peculiar glint, softened by the summer heat into rings. A low, broad forehead, a straight line of bronze brown, shading off in a delicate curve and fineness at the temple. But her eyes were like the gems in brown quartz, that have a prisoned gleam of sunshine in them, visible only in certain lights. Ordinarily they were rather dull; at times full of obstinate repression. Now they were illuminated with the sunrise glow. A small Irish nose, that had an amusing fashion of wrinkling up,

and over which went a tiny procession of freckles. A wide mouth, redeemed by a beautifully curved upper lip, and a rather square chin that destroyed the oval.

"Hillo!" as if coming out of a dream. "See here, I'd like to sketch you – would you mind?"

He had dreamed over a picture he was to paint of that enchanted spot, a picture of happy youth and love and hope, "In Wild-Rose Time." But the dream was dead, the inspiration ended. He could never paint *that* picture, and yet so much of his best efforts had gone to the making of it! What if he arose from the ruin, and put this child in it, with her marvellous eyes, her ignorant, innocent trust, her apron full of wild roses, emerging from the shadowy hollow, and one branch caught in her hair, half crowning her.

For why should a man wreck his life on the shallows and quicksands of a woman's love? Two days ago he had said he could not paint again in years, if ever, that all his genius had been the soft glamour of a woman's smile. And here was a fresh inspiration.

Dil stared, yet the happy light did not go out of her face as she tried to grasp the mystery.

"Yes; would you mind my sketching you for a picture?"

There were not many people around. Saturday afternoons they went off on excursions. A few drowsy old fellows of the better class, two women resting and reading, waiting for some one perhaps, others sauntering.

"Oh, if you'd make a picture of Bess! She's so much prettier, an' her hair's like gold. Oh, do!" and Dil's breath came with an entreating gasp, while her face was beseeching love.

"Yes; I'll make a picture of Bess too, if you can stay long enough," he answered good humoredly.

"We can stay till dark, 'f we like. Summer nights ain't never lonesome. An' Sat'day's full of folks."

Travis laughed. "All right. Push your hat up higher – so. No, let your hair stay tumbled."

"It isn't pritty hair. They used to call me red-top, an' names. 'Tain't so red as it was."

She ran her fingers through it, and gave her head a shake.

"Capital." He had just drawn out his sketch-book, when the policeman came down with a solemn tread and authoritative countenance. But Travis nodded, and gave him an assuring smile that all was right.

"Let me see; I think I'll tell you about an old apple orchard I know. You never saw one in bloom?"

"Oh, do apples have flowers?" cried Bess. "There's never any such in the stores. What a wonderful thing country must be!"

"The blossom comes first, then the fruit." Then he began with the fascinating preface: "When I was a little boy I had been ill a long while with scarlet fever. It was the middle of May when I was taken to the country."

What a wonderful romance he made of bloom and bird music, of chickens and cows, of lambs, of the little colt that ran in the

orchard, so very shy at first, and then growing so tame that the little lad took him for a playfellow. Very simple indeed, but he held his small audience entranced. The delight in Bess's face seemed to bring fine and tender expressions to that of Dil. Her nose wrinkled piquantly, her lips fell into beguiling curves. Travis found himself speculating upon the capacity of the face under the influence of cultivation, education, and happiness. He really hated to leave off, there were so many inspiring possibilities.

Now and then some one gave them a sidelong glance of wonder; but Travis went on in a steady, business-like manner; and the guardian of the square shielded them from undue curiosity.

"Bess isn't well," he said presently. "She looks like a little ghost."

"She was hurted a long while ago and she can't walk. Her little legs is just like a baby's, an' they never grow any more. But she won't grow either, and I don't so much mind so long as I can carry her."

"Will she never walk again?" he asked in surprise. "How old is she?"

"She's ten; but she's littler than the boys now, so she's the baby – the sweetest baby of thim all."

Ah, what a wealth of love spoke in the tone, in the simple words.

"I think you may take off Bess's cap," he said, with an unconsciously tender manner. Poor little girl! And yet it could not be for very long. He noted the lines made by suffering, and

his heart went out in sympathy.

"Now, if there is anything you would like to ask me – anything that puzzles you" – and he reflected that most things might seem mysteries to their untrained brains.

They glanced at each other and drew long breaths, as if this was the golden opportunity they had long waited for. Then an irresistibly shy, sweet, beseeching expression crossed Bess's face, as her eyes wandered from him to her sister.

"O Dil – you might ast him 'bout – you know" – hesitating with pitiful eagerness in her large eyes – "'bout goin' to heaven, an' how far it is."

"Do you know where heaven is, mister?"

The question was asked with the good faith of utter ignorance; but there was an intense and puzzled anxiety in every line of the child's countenance.

"Heaven!" He was struck with a strange mental helplessness. "Heaven!" he repeated.

"Don't anybody know for true?" A despair quenched the sunshine in the brown eyes and made outer darkness.

"An' how they get there?" continued Bess breathlessly. "That's what we wanter know, 'cause Dil wants to go an' take me. Is it very, very far?"

Travis glanced at Dil. Never in his life had he been more at loss. There was a line between her brows, and the wrinkled nose added to the weight of thoughtfulness. Never had he seen a few wrinkles express so much.

She felt as if he was questioning her.

"I went to the Mission School, you see," she began to explain. "The teacher read about a woman who took her children an' a girl who lived with her, an' started for heaven. Then Owny took my shoes, 'cause 'twas wet an' slushy 'n' I couldn't go, an' so I didn't hear if they got there. 'N' when I went again, that teacher had gone away. I didn't like the new wan. When I ast her she said it was a gory somethin', an' you didn't go that way to heaven now."

"An allegory, yes."

"Then, what's that?"

"A story of something that *may* happen, like every-day events." Ah, how could he meet the comprehension of these innocent children?

"Well, did she get there?" with eager haste.

The sparrows went on with their cheerful, rather aggressive chirp. The fountain played, people passed to and fro, and wagons rumbled; but it seemed to John Travis as if there were only themselves in the wide world – and God. He did not understand God, but he knew then there was some supreme power above man.

"Yes," with reverent gentleness, "yes, she found heaven."

"Then, what's to hinder us, Dil? 'Twouldn't be any use to ast mother – she'd rather go to Cunny Island or Mis' MacBride's. If you only would tell us the way – "

"Yes; if you *could* tell us the way," said Dil wistfully, raising her entreating eyes.

Could he direct any one on the road to heaven? And then he admitted to himself that he had cast away the faint clew of years agone, and would not know what step to take first.

"You see," explained Dil hurriedly, "I thought when we'd found just how to go, I'd take Bess some Sunday mornin', an' we'd go up by Cent'l Park and over by the river, 'cause they useter sing 'One more river to cross.' Then we'd get on a ferry-boat. Mother wouldn't care much. She don't care for Bess since she's hurted, and won't never be no good. But I could take care of her; an' when we struck the right way, 'twould be just goin' straight along. I could scrub an' 'tend babies an' sweep an' earn some money. People was good to the woman in the story, an' mebbe they'd be good to us when we were on the road an' no mistake. If we could just get started."

Oh, the eager, appealing desire in her face, the faith and fervor in her voice! A poor little pilgrim, not even knowing what the City of Destruction meant, longing with all her soul to set out for that better country, and take her poor little crippled sister. It moved him beyond anything he had ever known, and blurred the sunshine with a tremulous mistiness.

Dil was watching the varying expressions.

"O mister, ain't there any heaven? Will we have to go on living in Barker's Court forever 'n' ever?"

The despair in Dil's voice was heartrending. John Travis thought he had passed one hour of crucial anguish; but it was as nothing to this, inasmuch as the pang of the soul must exceed the

purely physical pain. He drew a long, quivering breath.

"Oh, there ain't any!"

He was on the witness stand. To destroy their hope would be a crueler murder than that of the innocents. No, he dared not deny God.

III – THE WAY TO HEAVEN

John Travis was like a good many young men in the tide of respectable church-going. His grandmother was an old-fashioned Christian, rather antiquated now; but he still enjoyed the old cottage and the orchard of long ago. His mother was a modern church member. They never confessed their experiences one to another in the fervent spiritual manner, but had clubs and guilds and societies to train the working-people. She was interested in charitable institutions, in homes, and the like; that is, she subscribed liberally and supervised them. Personally she was rather disgusted with the inmates and their woes, whose lives and duties were mapped out by rule, whether they fitted or not.

Then, he had two sisters who were nice, wholesome, attractive girls, who danced all winter in silks and laces, kept Lent rigorously with early services, sewing-classes, and historical lectures, and took their turns in visiting the slums. All summer there was pleasuring. The young women in their "set" were much alike, and he wondered who of them all could show these little waifs the way to heaven.

For himself, he had gone through college honorably. He was a moral young man, because a certain fine, clean instinct and artistic sense forbade any excesses. To be sure, he had read Strauss and Renan after his Darwin and Spencer, he had even dipped into the bitter fountains of Schopenhauer. He had

a jaunty idea that the myths and miracles of the Bible were the fables and legends of the nations in the earlier stages of their development, quite outgrown in these later days of exact philosophical reasoning.

But as he sat there, with these children's eyes fixed upon him with an intent life-and-death expression, uttering a strong, inward soul cry that reached his ears and would not be shut out, a certain assurance came to him. These tender little souls were waiting for the word that was to lead them in the way of life everlasting. "Whoso offendeth one of these little ones" – it was there in letters of fire.

What but heaven could compensate them for their dreary lives here! What but the love of God infold them when father and mother had failed. For surely they had not demanded any part in the struggle of life. Ah, if the dead rose not again – what refinement of cruelty to send human beings into the world to suffer like brutes, having a higher consciousness to intensify it ten-fold, and then be thrust into the terrible darkness of nothingness. Even *he* was not willing to come to a blank, purposeless end.

He had been sketching rapidly, but he saw the little faces changing with an uncomprehended dread. Dil's sunshine was going out in sullen despair. Yes, he *must* bear witness – for to-day, for all time, for all human souls. In that moment he believed. A rejoicing, reverent consciousness was awakened within him; and the new man had been born, the man who desired to learn

the way to heaven, even as these little children.

"Yes, there *is* a heaven." He could feel the tremulousness in his voice, yet the assurance touched him with inexpressible sweetness, so new and strange was it. "There is a God who cares for us all, loves us all, and who has prepared a beautiful land of rest where there is no pain nor sorrow, where no one is sick or lonely or in any want, where the Lord Jesus gathers the sorrowing into his arms, and wipes away their tears, soothes them with his own great love, which is sweeter and tenderer than the best human love."

"Oh," cried Dil, as he paused, "are you jest certain sure? There was a little old lady who came and sang once 'bout a beautiful country, everlastin' spring, an' never with'rin' flowers. I didn't get the hang of it all, but it left a sort of sweetness in the air that you could almost feel, you know. Don't you b'lieve she knew 'bout the truly heaven?"

Dil's brown eyes were illumined again.

"Yes – that was heaven." His grandmother sang that old hymn. He would go up there and learn it some day, and tell her that in the midst of the great city he had borne witness to the faith. The knowledge was so new and strange that it filled him with great humility, made him a little child like one of these.

"Oh," cried Dil, with a long, restful sigh of satisfaction, while every line of her face was transfigured, "you must know, 'cause, you see, you've had chances. You can read books and all. And now I am quite sure – Bess an' me," placing her hand lovingly

over the little white one. “An’ mebbe you c’n tell us just how to go. And when you come to the place, there’s a bridge or something that people get over, and go up beyond the sky – jest back of the blue sky,” with a certain confident, happy emphasis in the narrow, but rapt, vision.

“Couldn’t we start right away?” cried Bess with eager hopefulness, her wan little face in a glow of excitement. “What’s the good o’ goin’ back home? Me an’ Dil have talked it over an’ over. An’ there must be crowds an’ crowds goin’, – people who are strong and well, an’ can run. Why, I sh’d think they’d be in an awful hurry to get there. An’ you said no one would be sick. My head aches so when the babies cry, an’ my poor back is so tired an’ sore. Oh, if I had two good legs, so Dil wouldn’t have to push me an’ lift me out an’ in! O Dil, do let’s go!”

She was trembling with excitement, and her eyes were a luminous glow.

What could John Travis say to these eager pilgrims? He did not remember that he had ever known any one in a hurry to get to heaven. How strange it was! And how could he explain this great mystery of which he knew so little, – the walk that was by faith, not sight?

“You said you had been to the Mission School,” catching at that straw eagerly. “Did they not tell you – teach you” – and he paused in confusion.

“I ain’t been much. Mammy don’t b’lieve in thim. An’ I think they don’t know. One tells you one thing, an’ the nex’ one another.

One woman said the sky was all stars through an' through, an' heaven was jest round you, an' where you lived. Well, if it's Barker's Court," and she made a strange, impressive pause, "'tain't much like the place the woman set out for."

"She left the City of Destruction. Her name was Christiana."

"Oh, yes!" kindling anew with awakened memory. "Well, that's Barker's Court. There's fightin', an' swearin', an' gettin' drunk, an' bein' 'rested. Poor Bess hears 'em in the night when she can't sleep. An' the woman went away, an' took her children. But mammy wouldn't go, an' we'll have to start by our two selves. O mister! do you know anything 'bout prayin'? The teacher told me how, an' I prayed 'bout Bess's poor legs, an' that mother'd let rum alone, an' not go off into tantrums the way pop uster. An' it didn't do a bit o' good."

She looked up so perplexed. This was not scientific or philosophical ignorance, – he could find arguments to combat that; it was not unwillingness to try, but the utter innocent ignorance, with the boundary of certain literal experiences. But how could he explain? From the depths of his heart he cried for wisdom.

"It is a long journey, and the summer is almost gone," he said, after some consideration. "The cold weather will be here presently, and you are both so little; suppose you wait until next spring? I will find you that book about Christiana, and you can learn a good many things – and be getting ready – "

He knew he was paltering with a miserable subterfuge;

but, oh! what could he say? Surely, ere violets bloomed again and buttercups were golden, Bess would have solved the great mystery. Ah, to think of her as well and rejoicing in heaven! It moved all one's heart in gratitude.

Both children looked pitifully disappointed. Bess was first to recover. The tears shone in her eyes as she said, —

"Well, le's wait. My clo'es is most worn out, an' the cold pinches me up so, Dil, you know. An' it'll be nice to find how Christiana went. How'll we get the book?"

"I will bring it to you," he promised.

"An' will there be wild roses in heaven?" Bess fingered the poor faded buds as if her conscience suddenly smote her.

"All beautiful things; and they will not wither in that divine air."

She pressed them against her cheek with a touch so tender he could have blessed her for it. And there came the other vision of the soft white fingers that had torn them so ruthlessly in her anger; of the hot, passionate words! Would she forgive if he went to her, or would she tread his olive branch in the dust?

"Tell me something about yourselves;" and he roused from his dream abruptly. "Where is your father?"

"'Twas him that hurted Bess's legs, an' he got jugged for it. He beat mammy dreadful – he uster when he had the drink in him. An' now mammy's goin' the same way. That's why I'd like to take Bess somewhere – "

"Are there just you two?"

"There's Owen an' Dan. They're little chaps, but they'd get along. Boys soon get big enough to strike back. An' some one else 'ud have to look out for the babies."

"Babies! How many?" in amaze.

"I keep thim when their mothers go to work. Sometimes they're cross, and it's dreadful for poor Bess."

"And your mother allows you to do that?"

"She's got ter!" cried Bess, her smouldering indignation breaking out. "An' keep the house. An' when there's only two or three mother swears she'll send Dil to the shop to work. So we'd rather have thim, for it would be dreadful for me to be without Dil, don't you see?"

Yes, he saw, and his heart ached. He had a vague idea of some of the comfortable homes, but to be without Dil! "Did his mother and sisters ever meet with any such lives, and such tender devotion?" he wondered. It was enough to break one's heart. It almost broke his to think he could not rescue them. The picturesque aspects of poverty had appealed to him in the street-gamins and ragged old men who besieged him for "tin cints fer a night's lodgin'," that he knew would be spent for whiskey in the nearest saloon; but of the actual lives of the very poor he had but the vaguest idea.

"And your mother?" he ventured, dreading the reply.

"She goes out washin'. 'Tisn't so very bad, you see," returned Dil, with a certain something akin to pride. "Beggin's worse."

He had finished the sketches, – there were several of them, –

and he began to gather up his pencils.

"Now that the work is done, we must have a picnic," he said cheerfully. "I'll find a fruit-stand somewhere. Keep right here until I return."

The children gazed at each other in a sort of speechless wonder. There were no words to express the strange joy that filled each heart. Their eyes followed him in and out, and even when he was lost to sight their faith remained perfect. Then they looked at each other, still in amazement.

"It's better'n Cunny Island," said Bess. "I've wisht we could go sometime when mother's startin' out. But if she'd been good an' tooken us, we wouldn't a' seen *him*. But I'm kinder sorry not to start right away, after all. Only there's the cold, an' I ain't got no clo'es. Mebbe he knows best. An' he's so nice."

"It's curis," Dil said after a long pause. "I wisht I could read quick an' had some learnin'. There's so many things to know. There's so many people in the world, an' some of thim have such nice things, an' can go to places – "

"Their folks don't drink rum, mebbe," returned the little one sententiously.

"I don't s'pose you can get out of it 'cept by goin' to heaven. But then, why – mebbe the others what's havin' good times don't care to go. Mebbe he won't," drearily.

He soon returned with a bag of fruit. Such pears, such peaches, and bananas! And when he took out his silver fruit-knife, pared them, and made little plates out of paper, their wonder was

beyond any words.

Dil eyed hers askance. She was so used to saving the best.

"Oh, do eat it," cried Bess. "You never tasted anything like it! O mister, please tell her to. She's alwers keepin' things for me."

"There will be plenty for you to take home. I must find you some flowers too. And this evening I am going to start on a journey – to be away several weeks. I'm sorry to lose sight of you, and I want to know how to find Barker's Court. When I come back – would your mother mind your posing for me, do you think?"

"Posing?" Dil looked frightened.

"Just what you did this afternoon. Being put in a picture."

It had suddenly come into his mind that he could lighten Dil's burthen that way. He wanted to keep track of them.

"And what do you do with the pictures?"

"Sell them" – and he smiled.

"You couldn't sell me; I'm not pritty enough," she said, with the utter absence of all personal vanity, and a latent sense of amusement.

"When I come back we will talk about it. And I will bring you the book. You will learn more than I can tell you. I used to read it when I was a boy. And then we will talk about – going to heaven."

He colored a little, and his heart beat with a new and unwonted emotion.

"You're quite sure we can go nex' spring?" queried Bess. "Do many people live there?"

"The Lord Jesus Christ and all his angels," he answered reverently. "And the saints who have been redeemed, little children, and a multitude no man can number."

A perplexing frown settled between Dil's eyes.

"Seems as if I couldn't never get the thing straight 'bout – 'bout Jesus Christ," and a flush wavered over her face. "When the people in the court get drunk and fight, they swear 'bout him. If he jest gives people strength to beat and bang each other, how can he help 'em to be good? Maybe there's more than one. An' why don't the one who lives in the beautiful heaven have a different name. I ast the Mission teacher once, an' she said I was a wicked girl. Mammy said there wasn't any God at all. How do *you* know?"

There was a brave, eager innocence in her eyes, and a curious urgency as well.

"'Cause," she subjoined, "if God lives in heaven and keeps it for people, if there wasn't any God, there couldn't be any heaven. Some folks in the court have the Virgin Mary, but I never see God."

There was no irreverence in her tone, but a perplexed wonder. And John Travis was helpless before it. How did the missionaries who went to the heathen ever make them understand? They had their idols of wood and stone, and had prayed to them; but this child had no God, not even an idol, though she loved Bess with every fibre of her being.

And he had almost said in his heart, "There is no God." A

first great cause, an atom rushing blindly about the darkness for another atom, a protoplasm, a long series of evolutions – how complacent he had been about it all! Could he teach these children science? He had heard the talk of the slums occasionally, blood-curdling oaths, threats, wishes, curses hurled at one another. These two little girls lived in it. Could any one enlighten them, unless they were taken to a new, clean world? Yet their souls seemed scarcely soiled by the contact, their faces bore the impress of purity.

Was it thus when the Lord came in the flesh, when the wickedness of the world was very great, its hopelessness well nigh fatal? He found many ignorant souls; but they learned of him and believed, and went forth to convert the world. Was it so much more wicked now?

"Let me tell you about the true Jesus," he said in a soft, low tone, almost afraid to bear witness, he was so ignorant himself. "Long ago, when people were full of sorrow and suffering, and had forgotten how to be good to each other, God, who lived in this beautiful heaven, sent his Son down to teach them. He came and lived among them and helped them. Why, my little Dil, it's just like your caring for Bess. She can never do anything to pay you back. She cannot sweep the house, nor tend the babies, nor sew, nor earn money. But you do it because you love her, and you only want love in return. She gives it to you."

Dil stared stupidly. "I don't want her to do nothin'," she said, with a quivering lip.

"But you want her to love you."

"How could I help it?" cried Bess.

"No, you couldn't. And when the Lord found people ill and lame and blind, he cured them – "

"O mister!" interrupted Bess, with her face in a glow of wonderful light, "do you s'pose he could have cured my poor hurted little legs so's I could walk on 'em agen?"

"Yes, my child. He would have taken you in his arms and laid his hand on you, and you would have been strong and well."

"And where is he now?" she asked eagerly.

"He went back to heaven – to his Father." Ah, how could he explain to their limited understanding the sacrifice that had redeemed the world. He began to realize that faith for one's self was easier than giving a reason for one's faith. "He told people how to be kind and tender and loving, and to care for those in pain and sickness. He begged them to do it because he had loved them. That was all he wanted back. But there were ungrateful people, and those who were eager to fight and destroy each other, and they would not listen to him. But when he went away he left others, teachers, and they go on telling people – "

How could he make it simple enough for their comprehension? He was in despair.

"Then he called those together who loved him and were willing to be good and kind, and said to them, 'In my Father's house are many mansions – I go to prepare a place that you may be with me' – "

"And that's heaven," interrupted Bess, her eyes shining and her lips pink and quivering. "O Dil! that's where we are to go. I can't hardly wait till spring. An' soon's we get there, I'll ast him to cure my poor little legs poppy hurted when he threw me 'gainst the wall. Oh, are you sure, sure he will, so I can run about agen? Seems jes' too good to happen."

"Yes, I am sure. He took little children in his arms and blessed them when they crowded around him so that people would have driven them away. And he said, 'I have a heaven for all those who suffer, all those whose parents beat or maim or starve them. I will take them to my beautiful home, and they shall never suffer any more. They shall roam in lovely gardens and gather flowers, and sing and love and obey me, and be happy.'"

"O Dil, *will* you mind if I love this Lord Jesus? For he is so good I can't help it. I shall always love *you* best. I will tell him how it was – that you loved me when there wasn't any one else, and mammy wanted me to die 'cause I was so much trouble. An', Dil, don't you b'lieve he will say that was jest the kind of love he preached about, and 'cause you did it you must have a place right by me?"

The tears came to John Travis's eyes. He wondered if the Master had ever been rewarded with a more exquisite joy.

Dil squeezed her hand.

"Oh," cried Bess, "when we start to go to heaven in the spring, won't you go along? We'd like to have you so. Don't they have grown-up men in heaven? You're so nice an' clean an' different

from most folks, I sh'd think you'd like to go."

"Yes, I will," in the tone of one who gives a sacred promise. When he came to think of it, very few people had asked him to go to heaven.

"Seems too good to be true," said Dil sententiously. "Good things mos'ly ain't true. An' it all seems so strange – "

"We'll talk it over while we are going to heaven," he said with grave sweetness, glancing at his watch and amazed at the lateness. "I will bring you Christiana, and when you have read that I can explain many things to you. I shall have to go now. Tell me how to find Barker's Court when I come back."

"You won't like it," Dil exclaimed sharply. "It's dirty an' horrid, full of women washing clo'es, an' drunken people, an' swearin'. Oh, let me bring Bess over here. And the picture – "

"You shall have that. But I can't tell just when I shall be able to come. Never fear but I'll find you. Here is something because you and Bess posed."

It was a five-dollar note. Dil drew back in dismay.

"O mister, I couldn't take it. I'm afeard some one'd think I stole it – so much money!"

He changed the bill into smaller ones. Then he slipped it into the bag of fruit.

"This is Bess's bank," he said, with a friendly, trusty smile. "When she wants any delicacies, you must spend the money for them. It is Bess's secret, and you must not tell any one."

He thrust the bag at the foot of the shabby carriage, and then

pressed both hands.

"You're so lovely, so splendid," sighed Bess.

He picked up three withered buds – had some hands very dear to him held them?

"Good-by. I shall find Barker's Court and you, never fear." Then he plunged into the crowd, not daring to look back. What a week it had been, beginning with sorrow and loss, and – had he found the Master? Had these strange, brave little heathens, who knew not God, opened his eyes and his heart to that better way?

IV – THE DELIGHTS OF WEALTH

The children sat there in a maze of bewilderment. They knew nothing of fairy godmothers, or Santa Claus, or the dainty myths of childhood. Four years Bess had been in prison, twice four years Dilsey Quinn had been a bound slave. Not that Mrs. Quinn had been hard above all mothers. In the next house there were two little girls who sat and sewed from daylight to dark, and had no Saturday even, the age of Owen and Bess. Barker's Court was an industrious place for children, at least. If they could have played when the men were sleeping off orgies, or the women gossiping, they would have had many a respite from toil.

This wonderful thing that had befallen Bess and Dil was so beyond any event that had ever happened before, and their imaginations were so limited, they could never have dreamed such a romance. John Travis had disappeared in the throng. But there was the bag of fruit, and the sweet knowledge that nothing could take away.

The roar of vehicles had grown less. Pedestrians were thinning out, for supper-time was drawing nigh. The shadows were lengthening; the wind had a certain grateful coolness. Still they sat as in a trance. The "cop" had received a "tip" to keep a kindly watch over them, but he would have done it without any reward.

"Dil!" The soft voice broke the hush, for it was as if they two were alone in the crowd.

The little fingers closed over the firm brown ones. They looked at each other for some moments with grave, wondering eyes. Then Dil rose soberly, settled Bess anew, and pushed the wagon along. The paper bag lay in plain sight, but no one molested it.

Dil began to come back to her narrow, practical world. Heaven, as John Travis had put it, was something for Bess rather than herself. It was too great a feast to sit down to all at once. And Dil was not much used to feasting, even playing at it with bits of broken crockery and make-believes, as so many children do. They left the enchanted country behind them, and returned to more familiar sights and sounds. Still, the delicious fragrance of the pears, the flavor of the peaches, the sweetness of the candy, was so much beyond the treats over on the East Side.

"Bess," she said, stopping at a show window on the avenue, "jes' look at the caps an' things. Do you s'pose it's real money in the bag? For it's yours, an' you do need a new cap. That old one'll hardly hold together. If some one doesn't give mammy a pile of things pritty soon, you'll have to go naked."

They both laughed. "O Dil! wasn't it splendid?" and Bess turned her head around, as if she might still see their beneficent friend.

"Let me feel in my bank," she said.

Dil handed her the bag, full of fruity fragrance. She drew out a bill with a fearful little gesture.

"They're good, all of 'em," she said reassuringly. "He wouldn't

give us bad money to get us into trouble. An' we never have any real money to spend."

Still Dil eyed the bill doubtfully.

"An' flannils, an' O Dil, couldn't you buy *one* new dress? I'd like to have a spandy new one for onct."

"I s'pose mother wouldn't know when onct it was washed. An' I might crumple down the bows on the cap. O Bess, you'd look so sweet! I wisht you'd had a new cap to-day. He said 'twas your money. An' I was most afear'd it was like thim things Patsey told about, when you raised the han'kercher they wasn't there!"

"But they're here." She laughed with soft exultation. "Le's go in, Dil. I never went shoppin' in my life! You could hide the things away from mammy. There'd be no use givin' it to her. She's got enough for gin an' to go to Cunny Island an' MacBride's. But jinky! wouldn't she crack our skulls if she *did* know it. O Dil, let's never, *never* tell."

"She couldn't make me tell if she killed me."

"Le's go in. Can you carry me?"

She drew the wagon up by the corner of the show-window, and, taking Bess in her arms, entered the store and seated her on a stool, standing so she could brace the weak little back. Of the few dreams that had found lodgment in Dil's prosaic brain, was this of indulging her motherly, womanly instinct, shopping for Bess. She felt dazed to have it come true. Her face flushed, her breath came irregularly, her heart beat with a delicious, half-guilty pleasure.

There was no one else in the store. A pale, tired, but kindly-looking woman came to wait on her. Dil tried on caps with laces and ribbons, and Bess looked so angelic it broke her heart to take them off. But the plain ones were less likely to betray them. Then they looked at dresses and the coveted "flannils," and one nice soft petticoat, and oh, some new stockings.

A shrewd little shopper was Dil. She counted up every purchase, and laid aside the sum, really surprised at her bargains and the amount she had left. The attendant was very sympathetic, and inquired what had befallen Bess. Dil said she had been hurted by a bad fall, that her mother was 'most always out to work, and that they hadn't any father. She was afraid her mother might be washing somewhere, and hear the story, if she was too explicit.

"Le's buy a han'kercher for Patsey," suggested Bess, her pale face in a glow.

They chose one with a pink border, thinking of the wild roses that had brought such great good luck.

"And here is a blue belt ribbon for the little girl," said the lady. "It's been in the window, and has two faded places, but you can tie them in the bow."

Dil had been struggling between economy and a belt ribbon. She raised her brown eyes so full of delight that words were hardly needed.

They packed up their goods and departed. Bess wore her cap, and held up her head like a real lady. I doubt if there were two happier children in the whole city.

Dusk was beginning to fall; but all the stores were in a glow, and now people were coming out again after supper. They seldom stayed this late, but to-night they were quite safe. And oh, how splendid it all was! the happiness of a lifetime.

Bess kept turning partly round and talking out her delight. Pain and weariness were forgotten. They laughed in sheer gladness. If John Travis could have seen them, he would have said he had never in his life made such an investment of five dollars.

"And we've only spent a little over two. Oh, what a lot of things you can buy when you have some money! An', Dil, we'll put away a good bit, so's when there ain't many babies mother won't bang you. Oh, she'd kill us both dead an' take the money if she knew, wouldn't she?"

"She would that," subjoined Dil grimly.

Poor Dil had been banged pretty severely in her short day. Last spring Mrs. Quinn had been complained of, as the "banging" had been so severe that Dil had fainted, and had to keep her bed several days.

"Oh, I wisht we wasn't ever going home," sighed Bess. "If I had two good legs we'd run away like that Mullin girl. An' now that I've got some clo'es, I'm sorry we can't go right off. Nex' spring – how many months, Dil?"

August was almost ended. Seven long, weary months at the best.

"There's Thanksgivin' an' Christmas, an' – an' St. Patrick's;

that's in March, I know. An' after that it gen'ally comes warm. Oh, it seems as if I couldn't wait! But the man will come with Christiana, an' then we'll find how to go without gettin' lost or makin' a mistake. Ain't it queer? I should think everybody'd want to go."

The big eyes were full of wonder.

"Well, you see the people who have money an' things an' flowers an' journeys an' live in grand houses don't need to be in a hurry. 'Tain't of so much account to them. An' I guess people haven't got the straight of it, someway."

Poor Dil! She wasn't very straight in her own mind. If God could give people so much, why didn't he do it now? Or if they had to go to heaven for it, why wasn't it made plain, and you could be let to start whenever you desired?

Bess's confidence gave her a curiously apprehensive feeling. Suppose there wasn't any heaven? The mystery was incomprehensible.

It was late when they reached home. Oh, the sickening heat and smells! But at this hour on Saturday night the court was comparatively quiet. The revelry began later.

Dan sat on the stoop crying. He had been in a fight, and the under dog at that, and had one black eye, and his jacket torn to ribbons.

"An' mother'll wollop me for the jacket," he whimpered.

"Come an' have yer eye tied up with cold water. I did a bit of work this afternoon, an' got some goodies, an' you shall have

some. Oh, it's pritty bad, Dan. Take my penny an' go buy an oyster, – that'll help get the black out."

Dan was mightily tempted to spend the penny otherwise, but the thought of the goodies restrained him. Dil took Bess and the "treasures" up-stairs, and laid her gently on the old lounge. She had everything put away when Dan returned, so she washed his face and bound up his eye.

He ceased sniffling, and cried, "O golly!" at the sight of two luscious bananas. "Dil, ye wor in luck! I didn't even see a chance to snivy on an apple. Store folks is mighty s'picious, watchin' out."

"O Dan! It's wicked to steal!"

"None o' yer gals' gaff!" said Dan with his mouth full. "Snivyin' somethin' ter eat ain't no stealin'. An' I'm hungry as an elefunt."

Dil fixed him some supper, and he devoured it with the apparent capacity of the elephant. Then, as he was very tired and used up, he tumbled on his straw pallet in his mother's room, and in five minutes was asleep.

Now the young conspirators had to consider about a hiding-place for their unaccustomed treasures.

"I'll tell you," and Bess laughed shrewdly, "we'll make a bank under the cushion of the wagon." At the risk of smothering Dan, they had shut his door. "Mother wouldn't dast to tumble me out, and no one *knows*. An' we'll call it somethin' else. We'll never say m – "

"Yes." Dil put it in the paper bag, and then she made the night bed on top of it. What a fortune it was! They glanced furtively at each other, as if questioning their right to it.

"Mammy seldom *does* look round," said Dil; "an' I'll clear the room up on Fridays, I sometimes do. An' I'll tell her I made the dress, if she spies it out. No, that would be a lie, an' tellin' lies roughs you up inside, though sometimes it's better than bein' banged. Bess, dear, I wish it was all true 'bout heaven."

"It is true, I feel it all over me."

Poor Dil sighed softly. She wasn't so sure.

Then she bathed Bess, and threw away the ragged garments. Bess was tired, but bright and happy. They stowed away their purchases, and were all settled when Owen came in. No one would have guessed the rare holiday.

Barker's Court was beginning its weekly orgy – singing, swearing, dancing, fighting, and fortunate if there was not an arrest or two. But Dil was so tired that she slept through it all, forgetting about the money, and not even haunted by dreams.

It was past midnight when Mrs. Quinn returned, to find everything still within. She tumbled across her bed, and slept the sleep of a drunken woman until Sunday noon.

Dil looked after the breakfast. Dan's eye was much improved. Out of an old bundle she found a jacket a size or two beyond him, but the children of the slums are not critical. The boys went out to roam the streets. Patsey sidled in with a knowing wink towards Mrs. Quinn's chamber door. It was nearly always safe on Sunday

morning. He had a handful of flowers.

They gave him his "hankercher." But somehow they couldn't tell him of their adventure.

"But yous oughtn't 'er spend yer tin on me," he said with awkward gratefulness. "Yous don't have much look fer scrapin' it up."

"But you're alwers so good to us," returned Bess, in her sweet, plaintive tone.

"An' when yous want a nickel or two, let me know," he said with manly tenderness.

Dil made her mother a cup of strong coffee, and brushed out her long black hair, still handsome enough for a woman of fashion to envy. She had made a big Irish stew for dinner, and when the house was cleared up, she had leave to take Bess out. But they did not go to the square to-day. They rambled up and down some of the nicer streets, where the houses were closed and the people away, and speculated about the journey to heaven in the spring. Alas! There were hundreds more who did not even know there was a heaven, or for what the church bells rang, or why Sunday came.

The week was melting hot. One of the babies had a very sick day, and died that night. Several others in the court died, but the summer was always hard on babies. Mrs. Quinn had a day off, and went up to Glen Island. Children and babies were taken away for a day or a week; but Dil was too busy, and it would have been no pleasure for Bess to go without her. But some way they were

overlooked.

The heat kept up well in September. People came home from the country, and Mrs. Quinn's business was brisk enough. The boys were sent to school; but Owen often played "hookey," and was getting quite unmanageable, in fact, a neighborhood terror.

It seemed strange indeed that Bess could live under such circumstances. But Dil's love and care were marvellous. She kept the child exquisitely clean; she even indulged in a bottle of refreshing cologne, and some luxuries, for which they blessed John Travis. Three times they had been over to the square. They counted up the weeks; they believed with all possible faith at first, then Dil weakened unconsciously. She used to get so tired herself in these days. Her mother was very captious, and the babies fell off. Some days Dil put in two nickels out of her precious fund. Bess insisted upon it.

Dilsey Quinn ran out of an errand now and then. She was too busy ever to loiter, and every moment away from Bess was torture. So, although they lived in a crowd, they might as well have been on a desert island, as far as companionship went.

And now they saw less of Patsey, to their sorrow. He had saved up a little money, and borrowed some from a good friend, and bought a chair, and set himself up in business. Not a mere common little "kit," mind you. But it was way down town, and he had new lodgings to be "handy."

The last of September the weather, that had been lovely, changed. There was a long, cold storm, and blustering winds that

would have done credit to March. The "flannils," that had been such a luxury, were too thin, and Dil spent almost her last penny for some others. No one had ever found out.

How often they looked wistfully at each other, and asked a wordless question. But John Travis had not found them, had not come. Six weeks since that blissful Saturday!

It had been a very hard day for Dil; and heaven seemed far off, as it does to many of us in times of trouble. The morning was lowering and chilly. Dil had overslept, and her mother's morning cup of coffee was not to her taste. She had given her a box on the ear, I was about to say; but her mother's hand covered the whole side of her head, and filled it with a rush as of many waters, blinding her eyes so that all looked dark about her. Then Mrs. Kenny's little Mamie cried for her mother, and would not be pacified. Mrs. Kenny was a young and deserted wife who worked in a coat-shop, and Mamie was a Saturday boarder as well. Dil made the boys' breakfast with the baby in her arms, and managed to get Bess's bread and milk, but had hardly a moment to devote to her. Only one more baby came in.

Mrs. Quinn suddenly reappeared. Mrs. Watson had been called away by the illness of her mother, and the washing was to go over to the next week.

"An' she'll want two days' work done in one, an' no more pay. An' they don't mind about *your* lost day! How's a woman to live with a great raft of young ones to support, I'd like to know? An' it's hard times we hear about a'ready. Goodness knows what I'll

do. An' you lazy trollop! you haven't your dishes washed yet! An' only two babies! Yer' not worth yer salt!"

"Mamie has cried all the time – "

"Shet yer head! Not a word of impidence out of you, or I'll crack yer skull! An' I know – yer've been foolin' over that wretched little brat in there! I'm a fool fer not sindin' her up to th' Island hospital. Fine work they'd have with her! She'd get nussed."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.