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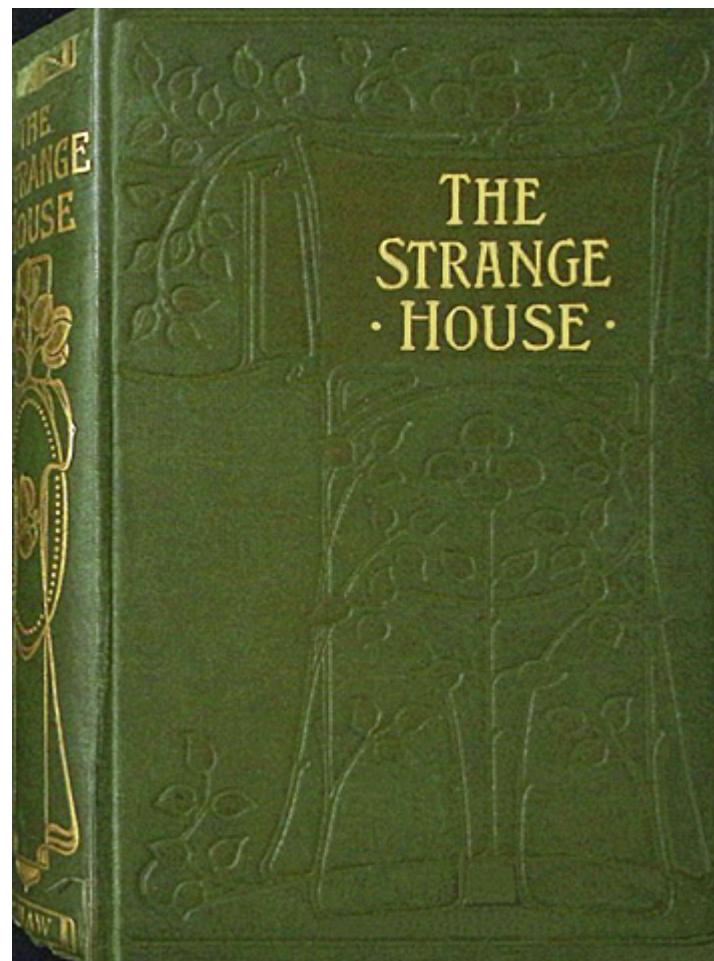
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"Whatever is the matter?" — p. 8.

**"Whatever is the matter?"**

# THE STRANGE HOUSE;

**OR,**

# **A MOMENT'S MISTAKE.**

BY

**CATHARINE SHAW**

AUTHOR OF "DICKIE'S SECRET," "THE GABLED FARM," "ALICK'S HERO,"  
"NOBODY'S NEIGHBOUR," "SOMEBODY'S DARLING," ETC.

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## THE STRANGE HOUSE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### NEXT DOOR.

"HARK! What's that, Ned?"

"Nothing!"

"It isn't nothing! Do hush, Ned; there is something wrong outside!"

It was a still night at the end of September, unusually mild for the time of year, and the boys were just in bed, having left their window thrown wide-open, so that every noise in the road came up distinctly.

Conway, having just laid his head on his pillow, heard some one say in a clear, abrupt undertone—

"I've got you!" followed by a scuffle, in which, now that Ned was quiet, holding his breath too, there were words exchanged of angry expostulation.

The boys were out of bed in a trice, and were leaning out of the window breathlessly.

"Let go, I say," said the second voice angrily.

"Not I! I've got you, now! I've been watching you for this half-hour."

"Let go, I say! What do you want with me? I'm in my own garden, I tell you."

"A likely story," answered the gruffer voice, which the boys took to be a policeman's. "And if you stir till I can get help, you'll feel my truncheon."

"I say," said Conway, "don't you think we ought to go down, Ned?"

He was getting into his garments in breathless haste, followed by Ned. And just as they rushed down-stairs, two or three heads were put out at various doors, and their mother asked—

"Whatever is the matter?"

The boys did not wait to explain much, but called out, "There's something going on in the next garden; tell father to come," and rushed off.

"What is it, mother?" asked Mollie, peeping from her room.

Mrs. Shaddock shivered, her teeth chattering with nervousness. "I don't know," she answered, "only I heard a noise in the road."

"Why have the boys gone down?" asked Mollie. "And oh, here's father going too!"

Meanwhile the boys had reached the garden, and had sprung over the hedge which separated them from their neighbour's grass-plot, and were already standing by the policeman, who was grimly holding on to a crouching figure under the front hedge.

As the policeman's lantern was turned on the boys' faces, the imprisoned man looked up and exclaimed—

"Speak for me, young sirs; you know me, don't you? These young gentlemen live next door to me, and they know I live here!"

"I don't believe you," said the policeman; "you're here for no good, that I do know. Get up and come along with me."

"I'm not going to," said the man stoutly. "I live here. And if I like to be in my garden at this time of night, I shall please myself."

"We'll go and rouse the house and see if you belong there. Who else lives here?" asked the constable suspiciously.

"No one else," said the man, springing to his feet, and releasing himself, though he did not attempt to move away. "I live alone, and it's no business of any one's if I do. What sort of a policeman can you be not to know me who has lived here for this past year, and worked in my garden day and night?"

"Yes, it 'is' our neighbour," broke in Conway, while Mr. Shaddock, who had now come out, assured the officer of the law that this was the case.

"Well, I'm new on this beat," said the man, letting go unwillingly. "But when I see a feller poking along by a hedge, and hiding down beneath it when he hears a footstep, I sez to myself, 'He ain't up to no good.' And no more he isn't, be he neighbour or no neighbour to respectable folks!"

He stood aside angrily, while the man, with curt thanks to his releasers, strode up the garden path and let himself into the house with a latch-key.

"Rum," remarked the policeman; "for when I first took hold of him, I could swear I saw a light in the bottom room. And how should it go out and all be black and dark now, I should like to know?"

He moved off, shaking his head, while Mr. Shaddock and his sons made their way back to their home.

On the doorstep stood Mrs. Shaddock and her eldest daughter, Mollie, who had been looking on in great excitement, fearing, or perhaps hoping, that a veritable thief had been caught.

The disturbed household gathered in the deserted dining-room, a motley group in their quickly-donned costumes.

Ned could not help laughing as he pulled Mollie's long hair, and asked her if she were sure her head was not chopped off?

"After that tug, I 'am,'" she answered. "But, father, what did he say? We could not hear."

"Yes," said Mrs. Shaddock, "do tell us."

"I've nothing to tell," answered her husband. "Our strange neighbour, it seems, was meandering about outside, and a new policeman took him up in mistake for a thief; that's all!"

"All!" echoed Mrs. Shaddock. "Suppose you had been taken up when you were smoking a cigar."

"Well, he wasn't smoking," said Conway; "he was hiding apparently. Besides, he says there is no one living in the house with him, and yet the 'Bobby' saw a light put out."

Mrs. Shaddock turned white. "'I' saw a light put out," she said, "just after your father went out. We were standing on the doorstep when a light was slowly moved a few yards, and then it went out."

"That can't be, my dear, if nobody besides lives there," said Mr. Shaddock.

"It is very queer though," she said, turning to Mollie, "for we both thought it was strange the person did not come to the door."

"What a good thing it is we had been up so late!" said Ned, yawning. "If we had not been at that concert, this would not have happened!"

Conway laughed. "Or we should have slept through it," he said.

"I feel scared," remarked Mollie. "I wonder if Daisy is awake?"

"There is nothing to be scared at," said Ned, "and father is next door to you. Anyway, I love excitements. We will watch the Strange House, Conway, and see what comes of this."

"Yes," assented his brother, "if it is worth while. That feller next door has told a lie, anyway!"

"Oh, that's nothing," said Ned carelessly. "It's more than that, I think. I shall keep my eyes open."

"And I shall shut mine," said Conway, "if they aren't shut already!"



## CHAPTER II.

### POVERTY KNOCKS AT THE DOOR.

"HOW does it look, Phyllis?"

The child glanced up from her lessons, and stretched out her hand across the table for a fine piece of cambric which her mother was holding out to her.

She took it under the lamp, and examined it critically.

"I've seen you do it better, mother."

"I was afraid so," answered Mrs. Ashlyn slowly. "I can do no more work by candlelight."

"Mother!" exclaimed the child, with an accent of dismay.

"I have feared it for a long time," she said, passing her hand over her eyes, and leaning back in her chair rather wearily.

Phyllis looked in her face consideringly, and then her eyes met a pair of dark ones opposite—those of a young man seated with a pile of books before him, in the study of which he had been buried, till interrupted by the serious nature of the conversation between his two companions.

For that it was a serious conversation both knew.

Mrs. Ashlyn was a widow with very limited means, and had been accustomed to eke out her income by fine needlework for a large baby-linen warehouse in the neighbouring town.

If this source of income should fail, what would become of them? So thought the three seated in that cosy little room.

From outside came the subdued roar of the sea, as its ceaseless waves broke on the beach near; while inside the clock ticked on audibly, and the lamp shone on Phyllis's shining hair and on Otto's curly head, both bent over their respective books, though their thoughts were busy elsewhere.

Otto, the son of an old friend, had lived with Mrs. Ashlyn for three years, while preparing for his medical examinations, and had become, as Phyllis expressed it, "quite one of the family." But at any rate, he shared all their interests, and, so far as he understood them, sympathized in their cares.

What would happen now, if one of the chief sources of income should be permanently dried up?

The meditations of the three were broken in upon by a light step coming swiftly up the little garden path, and by the turning of the handle of the front door.

"There's Gertrude!" exclaimed Phyllis rather unnecessarily, for both her companions knew that quite well.

Mrs. Ashlyn rose, folded her work carefully into a spotless handkerchief, and placed it in a dainty, covered basket which stood at her side. Then she looked up with a smile as the door opened to admit a girl of about twenty-two, who came in with a bright look and manner that seemed like a May breeze.

"You look like news!" said Phyllis. "Are they going to keep you on?"

"No," answered Gertrude.

Mrs. Ashlyn's eyes were fixed on her face inquiringly, with an anxiety in her answer which the others understood, if Gertrude did not.

"No," pursued Gertrude, "they are not. They want to make other arrangements. So now there is nothing to be done but to look out for something else!"

"That is not so easy," said Mrs. Ashlyn. "Camptown is not so very large, and the schools there are limited in number. But I dare say we shall find something in time."

"Of course we shall," said Gertrude heartily. "Why, mother, do you not 'know' that all our ways are in our Father's hands?"

Mrs. Ashlyn was leaving the room, and received her daughter's kiss with a sweet, patient smile, the patience of which was not noticed by her child so much as its sweetness.

"Mother! I had something to ask you. Now Phyllis is so 'competent' and—well—everything, would you spare me if I heard of a situation near London—at Hampstead?"

"Have you?" asked her mother, starting. And she was not the only one in that room who started too.

"Yes, Miss Timely told me of one—"

"I will think of it," said Mrs. Ashlyn quietly.

And then the door closed and the three young people were left alone.

Gertrude looked after her mother with a puzzled look. Then she said to Phyllis—

"Is mother not well?"

But Phyllis did not answer at once, so Otto said quietly—

"Her eyes have troubled her again to-night, and I think she has gone to bathe them."

"You speak in a different tone from what you do generally, Otto," she said, going to his side. "Has anything happened while I have been gone?"

"Nothing but what I said—nothing fresh," he added in a quick undertone. "But I think it has come over your mother more than ever before—what I have long foreseen—that the work which she does so beautifully is injuring her sight, and that she will soon be unable to do it."

"Otto!"

There was a pause. The young man was gathering his books together, as if he had finished.

"Have you done?" asked Phyllis, surprised.

"For to-night," he answered. "I am going for a walk along the beach."



## CHAPTER III.

### LOVE DOES NOT FLY OUT OF THE WINDOW.

OTTO let himself out into the darkness, leaving the two girls looking at each other.

"He said he had heaps to do!" exclaimed Phyllis.

"He has altered his mind. But what is this, about mother's eyes?"

Phyllis explained, and then Gertrude ran up-stairs to find her mother.

The rooms were all dark, but as she peeped into her mother's, across the strip of moonlight was a kneeling figure.

The figure rose on hearing her step, and her mother came to her side and drew her to the window. Neither spoke for a moment, then Gertrude said gently—

"Your eyes may be better again, mother!"

"I hardly expect that my dear, but—"

"You have seen a way?"

"Yes; 'I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.'"

"That is the best help there can be."

Again they stood in silence, watching the bright rippling sea, sparkling like diamonds in the moonlight.

"What is this situation you have heard of, my dear?"

"It is near Hampstead; Miss Timely knows the people well, and says I should be very comfortable. There are four boys and two girls—"

"Boys?" asked Mrs. Ashlyn.

"Oh, not all for me to teach! One little boy, I think, and the two girls."

"When do they want you?"

"Directly. But, mother, the salary is good, much better than what Miss Timely gave me. And then you will not have my board, you know!"

"Your board!" said her mother fondly. "But, Gertrude, how shall I part with you, and how shall you bear to go?"

"That I do not know," she answered, in a tone that had a sort of huskiness in it. "But sometimes I have wished for a change—"

"Have you, dear?"

"Yes," answered Gertrude slowly, her voice growing clear and calm again, "yes, I have. I thought it would be good for us all. I shall come back again, God willing. But—if you do not mind, I should like to go."

Mrs. Ashlyn was very thoughtful for a few moments, still with her arm round her daughter's waist, and still looking out on the sea.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the question got no farther than her lips.

Perhaps Gertrude did not desire to prolong the interview. At any rate she drew herself away gently, and said in a would-be sprightly tone—

"I must write about this at once, mother, and then set to about some adornments! What a good thing it is you have made me keep my clothes in such good order!"

"I never thought it would be for this," said her mother ruefully.

"Ah! We do not know what good things are in store for us, by and by, mother. Let us trust on; we have been cared for hitherto."

Mrs. Ashlyn followed her down-stairs, and superintended the letter to a certain Mrs. Shaddock, living in a certain road near Hampstead; which letter got written and posted before they went to bed.

"I'll run over and put it in the box," said Gertrude, throwing a light shawl over her head. "Mother, I shall not be able to be so primitive at Hampstead!"

"No, my dear. You will miss the freedom."

"I shall miss a great many things," she answered soberly.

Meanwhile Otto had made his way from the houses of the little village, and had found a sheltered nook among the rocks where he could be alone, and yet could see the sea and the moon.

But though his eyes were fixed upon it, his thoughts were elsewhere.

He felt conscious of having received a blow. He was unwilling to acknowledge it to himself, and yet he felt it was there.

He had been sure two years ago that he had buried something—a very dear hope—safely and securely in the depths of his heart, never again to rise, he had assured himself. And yet—yet the imprisoned hope was not dead! It had burst its chains, and was there by his side, with more life than ever!

When he had first come to Lanriffe, the pretty little fishing village near to the larger town of Camptown, and had settled down in Mrs. Ashlyn's happy little cottage, he had found out after a few months that there was one in that cottage who had become worth all the world to him.

Then had come thoughts of prudence and necessity—his unfinished studies, his uncertain future, his poverty, everything.

He had had a sore struggle, but he had considered he had conquered.

"As sisters henceforth," he had assured himself. And till to-night he had believed it true.

Now she was going away! Uncertain?—Nonsense, of course she would go!

All his patience and self-control were cast to the winds. He bent his head to the blast, and felt as if there were nothing in the world of any use now! Gertrude was going away!



## CHAPTER IV.

### GONE.

THE answer from Mrs. Shaddock had come. Gertrude was to go as soon as she could arrange to set off, and Mrs. Ashlyn and the two girls were very busy during the days which elapsed, stitching and planning and packing.

When they were together, all tried to face the impending parting with as much cheerfulness as possible. But the nearer it got, the worse it seemed.

Otto, after that one lonely walk on the shore, buried himself in his studies with more diligence than ever, seldom looking up to joke with Phyllis or fall into one of those talks with Gertrude that had been such a happiness to him before.

The last day seemed a very long one. In the afternoon, when they were up-stairs putting the final things into the box, the door opened and a sweet face peeped in.

"Rose!" exclaimed Phyllis.

Any one could see that the lady whom Phyllis addressed was her own sister, but the sad eyes and ethereal mournful look did not match Phyllis's bright face at all.

"My dearest!" said Rose's mother, rising. "Have you come home?"

"Yes, we came last night. To-day I have done nothing but set my house in order."

She sighed heavily, as she put her bonnet on the bed and turned to smooth her hair at the glass, which reflected back a singularly lovely young face set in wavy hair, which at thirty was already almost white. She smoothed it back with careless grace, and turned to her mother with a faint smile, saying, "I have come to tea!"

"I am so glad," said Gertrude. "It would have seemed worse to go without seeing you, Rose."

"I need not ask?" said Mrs. Ashlyn, tenderly. "You have had no tidings?"

"None," answered Rose, sadly. "We spent all our holiday in searching, and could gain not the slightest clue."

When they went down-stairs, Otto sat in the window still buried in his books. But on their entrance, he closed them and rose to greet the new-comer, glancing in her face inquiringly, as the others had done, knowing that the answer was to be read plainly enough without any words.

Rose and her husband had passed through a terrible sorrow—one so dreadful that life had seemed a blank to them from the moment, two years ago, when they had become childless!

No little grave belonged to the sorrowful parents; no last days of love and tenderness could be remembered; no little clothes in which their darling had died were left for that broken-hearted mother. Their child had been snatched from them, and had left no mark behind.

The young mother, when lodging for a few weeks at the seaside, had suddenly been called away to attend her husband, who was dangerously ill.

The landlady, who had only one boy, offered in the kindest way to take charge of their four-year-old darling. And in an agony of doubt, torn between love for husband and child, Rose left the child in her charge, and set off on her long journey to Scotland.

While she was there, she received one letter from the landlady to say all was going well. And then a week elapsed and no further tidings came.

She wrote to inquire, and on receiving no answer, she left her convalescent husband and hurried south.

When she arrived at the lodgings, all things were as she had left them a fortnight before, but the house was empty!

No landlady, no boy, no child!

The neighbours said she had hurriedly set out ten days ago, saying the little visitor was ill and must be taken to his mother. And this was all any one knew. They had taken tickets to London, and there all trace of them ceased.

That was Rose's story: no wonder that Otto looked in her face to see if in their weary search any hope had crept in.

No earthly hope had entered, but in that depth of desolation, when their hearts had been almost broken, the One who healeth the broken in heart had drawn near to them to bind up their wounds.

"He belonged to Jesus," Rose had said to her mother; "he loved Jesus, even though he was so little. By and by we shall meet again, either here or in heaven, and I can trust Him!"

Oh, the depth which that loving heart had reached before she could say, "I can trust Him!"

Otto knew all the story. Besides, Rose's husband was Otto's own brother.

So they sat down to tea, and Rose put away her own sorrows while she entered into all the interests at the cottage.

At last it was time to go, and Otto offered to accompany his sister-in-law home.

"To-night?" she asked, surprised. "I can easily go back in the omnibus, Otto, and you would rather not be away this last night?"

"I shall come with you," he answered; "there will be all too much time for good-byes even then. Goodbyes are wretched things."

His eyes met Gertrude's, and then looked away again. "Shall you be up when I come home?" he asked.

"That depends on what time that will be," she answered, smiling a very little.

"Then I will come in time to see you," he said.





## CHAPTER V.

### MOLLIE'S WELCOME.

THE train was speeding towards London, bearing Gertrude to her new home.

The partings had all been said. Oh, the terrible wrench it was to leave her mother, to know that henceforth she must be left to Phyllis's care and thoughtfulness!

Then Phyllis! How her large eyes had filled with tears, and how sober her sweet face had looked as she realized for the first time her responsibilities as sole home-daughter!

And then the third parting had perhaps been the worst of all, because the feeling on both sides had not been able to be expressed.

"Will you think of me and trust me, Gertrude?" was all that Otto's dry lips had been able to falter.

And Gertrude had put her hand in his, and had answered a very quiet, "Yes, Otto," as their eyes met.

Now, seated in the train, she felt as if she would like to have been able to live the last twelve hours over again.

Towards afternoon a cab drove up to that certain road near Hampstead where the Shaddocks lived, and Gertrude and her two modest boxes were deposited within the hall of her new home.

"Good afternoon, Miss Ashlyn," said a tall, pleasant-looking girl of about thirteen, coming out of the dining-room, where she had been waiting on purpose to receive her governess. "Mother is out just now, but told me to make you welcome."

"Thank you," said Gertrude. "Are you Mollie?"

"Yes. Will you like to remove your things, or will you have some tea first?"

The prospect of a cup of tea after her long journey looked very inviting, and gave Gertrude a pleasant impression of her new surroundings that such a thing should have been thought of.

"Stay!" said Mollie, ere she could reply. "I will have it brought to your room; you will feel more at home so."

"She won't!" said Ned, peeping in at the door and hearing his sister's remark. "People don't get at home in their bedrooms! Besides, I want to see Miss Ashlyn, and if you shut her up there, I shan't."

Mollie tossed her head at this advice. While Ned came forward on Gertrude's holding out her hand, with an awkward attempt to be at his ease.

"I shall soon be at home, I dare say," said Gertrude, as brightly as she could, though her heart felt like a lump of lead, and she would like to have hidden her face and had a good cry.

"Come up-stairs, Miss Ashlyn," said Mollie then, "and do not mind Ned. He is always rude."

The matter-of-fact tone of this revelation was very astonishing, but Mollie left no time for Ned's rejoinder, as she tripped on before, having taken up Gertrude's umbrella and waterproof in her hand.

"This is your room," she said, when they had gained the top floor. "You will find a nice view from the windows, which 'I' think compensates for the stairs!"

"Beautiful!" said Gertrude.

"Susan will bring up your boxes in a moment. Oh! Here she is with your tea. We shall have high-tea at seven o'clock. When you are ready, if you will ring, Susan will tell me, and I will come up to show you the way down."

"Thank you, Mollie," said Gertrude gratefully. "You seem to have thought of everything!"

The girl looked rather astonished, but answered, abruptly, "Oh, that is nothing. I hope your tea will be good."

She left the room, and Gertrude laid her bonnet down and threw off her jacket, just as two maids came to her door with her boxes.

They were soon uncorded, the servants glancing at her a little curiously, though not unkindly. And then the door was shut and she was alone.

She looked round; her room was large and well-furnished, with a somewhat low ceiling, but the window was wide and low too, giving an impression of space and expanse very cheering to the country girl, who had dreaded brick walls and endless roofs.

No walls or roofs, at least near ones, obtruded themselves on her view. Before her stretched the gardens of neighbouring houses, and beyond these were a few more distant streets of villas, shut in finally by green hills and fields, with Highgate spire in the distance.

Then she turned her attention to her tea. On the dainty tray was a pretty tea-set with a plate of sandwiches and some cake for her refreshment.

So she sat down to partake of it, leaving her boxes and all else till she should have tasted that fragrant cup which had been prepared.

Greatly revived, and feeling that the world looked decidedly less dark than it had done a quarter of an hour ago, she rose and prepared to unpack her boxes, having gathered that this was what Mollie expected her to do.

The things which had taken so long to work at and pack at home, took but little time to take out of the box and arrange neatly in the wardrobe. All was done very quickly, and then she stood ready to begin her new life.

"This is the last time I shall be mistress of my own time," she said to herself with a little smile on her lips. "How strange it will seem!"

Then she knelt down by the bed, and asked that she might be blessed in this home and be made a blessing.

Then she rang her bell, as directed, and waited Mollie's appearance with beating heart.





## CHAPTER VI.

### ALL SIX!

MOLLIE looked round on her governess's room with approving eyes.

"You have found out where to put your things," she remarked. "Do you like your room?"

"Very much indeed, thank you."

"We have only had one governess before," said Mollie, "but the boys go to school now, all but Randall, and he's spoilt." She laughed lightly as she led the way down-stairs once more.

"Will you make acquaintance with the schoolroom first, Miss Ashlyn?"

"Anywhere you like, dear."

"Then here it is," she said, pausing on the landing of the first floor. "That is mother's room, that is mine and Daisy's; there is the spare room, and this is our own special study, where we 'grind,' and play, and practise."

The view from the window looking towards the front, though different from her room up-stairs, Gertrude considered very good "for London," for it was over the well-kept grounds of a gentleman's house, which was nearly hidden in the autumn-tinted trees.

But only a glance did she give at that, for at the table sat her pupils, who would henceforth be everything to her.

Daisy was a plain little girl with a dark, sober face, who looked up quietly and even calmly into her face, murmuring, "Good afternoon, Miss Ashlyn."

So different was the child from bright, energetic Mollie, that Gertrude almost felt abashed by her reception. She shook her little hand, however, and looked round at the other occupants of the room.

Ned, whose acquaintance she had already made, sat perched on the end of the sofa, swinging his legs backwards and forwards.

"I'm not one of 'em," he announced with a wink at the others, at which Randall winked back and gave a giggle.

"I know that," answered Gertrude pleasantly, "so now I must put names to these two. This is Randall, I am sure, by what I have heard; and this must be Hugh."

She bent towards the boy—rather taller than Randall, but not so robust—and looked into his face.

Did something in him remind her for an instant of that little nephew who had gone out of their life so mysteriously? For a moment she felt as if she were speaking to him. Then her eyes nearly filled with tears, and very tenderly she said, "I hope Hugh and I shall be friends."

The child, for he was about nine years old, looked up with great astonishment. While Randall burst out—"He's a cry-baby; you won't care for him."

"Shall I not?" answered Gertrude. "We shall see."

"Oh, fie!" said Daisy, colouring. "You should not tell tales out of school."

"We haven't begun yet," said Randall, nodding.

"Why, there's mother; she's coming in."

He ran to the window to make sure, and then bounded down the stairs.

"What are you playing at?" asked Gertrude, turning to Daisy and Hugh.

"A word game," said Daisy, rather curtly.

"Would you care to join?" asked Mollie. "But I do not think it is worth while, for mother is come in, and she will want to see you, she said."

"I will look on then," answered Gertrude.

She stood by the table watching the game till Randall came tearing back to say that Mrs. Shaddock was in the drawing-room, and would Miss Ashlyn go there to her.

She found Mrs. Shaddock a woman evidently accustomed to society, apparently with but little in common with the life which Gertrude had left—a life full of Sunday-school work, Church interests, and desires after pleasing God above everything else.

"I am sure you will satisfy me," Mrs. Shaddock concluded, after they had talked for half an hour; "so do not be discouraged if you find things difficult at first."

She rose as she said these words, and Gertrude found herself dismissed, with all the load of her six charges on her hands.

"I am out a great deal," Mrs. Shaddock had said, "and I require a governess who will act in my absence as if she were an elder daughter."

She went up-stairs pondering deeply. So she was expected to "manage" the whole six! What if they should prove too much for her?

Then she remembered a promise which she had often "tried and proved."

"As thy days so shall thy strength be."

So she entered the study with a peaceful face.

"Here is Conway," said Mollie, looking up. "Now you have seen all of us! And, Miss Ashlyn, Conway said he had something to tell us, when you came up. Do you know we have a Strange House next door?"





## CHAPTER VII. CONWAY'S DISCOVERIES.

CONWAY was a tall boy of between fifteen and sixteen, and acknowledged Gertrude's salutation with not over-ceremonious courtesy. He was, however, full of some news he was anxious to bring out, and directly the door was shut and Gertrude had taken the seat Mollie pushed towards her, he began—

"I say! Such a lark as I have had!"

"When?" asked Ned. "What do you mean?"

"I went just now to the Strange House. I thought as it was the last day of the holidays that I would signalize it!"

"Miss Ashlyn does not know anything about the Strange House," interrupted Mollie.

"Then I shall tell her," said Ned, "so that Conway can gather breath for his story."

"Pooh!" laughed Conway. "But, anyway, Miss Ashlyn must be told about our episode the other night, or she will not see why I was so anxious to find out about our mysterious neighbour."

"First, then," said Ned, "about a year ago the next house (which you perceive is a somewhat old-fashioned one, and is not nearly such a good one as ours) was taken by some one, and a van with furniture came in the evening just before dark.

"We did not take much notice, but thought one van was but little for the size of the house. We were somewhat curious about our new neighbours, but never could see any of them about, except a man, who could not be called a gentleman, whom we dubbed 'Mr. Eccentric.'

"No tradesmen seem to call. No postmen bring letters. Except for that one man who continually works in his garden, the house might be empty."

"Perhaps he likes solitude," suggested Gertrude, as Ned paused.

"But," said Mollie eagerly, "that's the strange part of it. Mother and I certainly saw a light moved and put out that night when the new policeman took the man up for a burglar."

Conway now took up the thread and explained all about the events recorded in the first chapter, gratified to find a fresh listener in the governess, and to see that her attention did not flag.

"Well, let all that be," said Ned at last. "Now tell us what you have found out more. You do not mean to say that you went up to the house, Conway? But you've got cheek for anything."

"I had cheek enough for that," laughed Conway. "I went just now and knocked at the door, intending to ask the old fellow how he felt after his apprehension the other night. But I knocked and I rang, I knocked and I rang, till I was tired of that game. Nobody came to the door, for the very reason that nobody was at home to do so, I suppose. Just as I was turning on my heel, the old fellow came up the garden path and asked stiffly what I might want.

"I told him I had come to make inquiries as to his health—"

"You never did!" exclaimed Ned.

"I did! I sympathized with him in the bobby's rough handling, et cetera, et cetera, and got him round into a good temper before I had done with him."

"That's like you!" said Mollie.

"He told me that he lived by himself, that he might be perhaps a little peculiar, but that gardening was his hobby. And that if only folks would let him alone, he did not wish to meddle with any one. He would go his way, and they could go theirs."

"How funny!" said Ned.

"But for all his peculiarity, there was a certain uneasiness about him," Conway went on, "that made me suspicious. He's got heaps of vegetables and fruit in that back garden!"

"Of course he has," said Mollie; "any one with eyes can see that from our back windows! Why yesterday there were half a dozen beautiful marrows on trellis-work, and to-day they are all gone."

"He's eaten them all," said Ned.

"They were gone when I got up this morning," said Mollie, "for I noticed. I believe he sells them."

"Who to?" asked Conway scornfully.

"At Covent Garden, or somewhere. He sauntered in at the front gate about eight o'clock this morning. 'I' believe he gets up and goes to market early when no one is about."

"There's something queer about it," said Conway; "don't you think so, Miss Ashlyn?"



## CHAPTER VIII.

### DAISY'S "CHUM."

GERTRUDE looked from one to the other, listening and trying to comprehend in quick succession the different statements of her various entertainers.

Daisy said no word, but she followed all that was said with keen interest, her dark face changing and varying as one after another gave out their opinions.

Conway had got so friendly over his interesting news that he ceased to feel Gertrude quite such a stranger, and now began telling her about their school, to which he, Ned, and Hugh went daily by train, and which ought to have begun a week ago, but had been postponed owing to a scare of illness.

"Have you got your books together?" asked Mollie. "For there's such a hunt the first morning, Miss Ashlyn, generally."

"Don't you bother," said Conway. "I can mind my own affairs, thank you."

"Well, don't ask me to get them, then," said Mollie.

"I shall be sure to remember," said Conway, crossly. "Come, Ned, let's go down now."

"Yes; we've had enough of the girls," said Ned.

They went off, Gertrude looking after them with some surprise in her eyes.

"Did you ever see such boys?" asked Mollie, vexedly. "But they always are worse with strangers; they will be pleasanter when they get used to you."

Gertrude did not answer. Her heart sank; she busied herself over her work-basket, which she had brought down in her hand, in silence, though her eyes were too blinded to see what she was doing. At length she drew out a piece of crewelling on which she had been engaged at home, and spread it out before her.

The familiar pattern brought back with a rush all the circumstances in which she had put in those last leaves: the lamplight, the red table-cloth at home, Phyllis's beautiful little oval face bent over her lessons, her mother's presence so restful as well as cheering, Otto's quiet friendliness.

It cost her a great effort not to let a sob escape her.

She put down her work, and murmuring something about "up-stairs," hastened to her room.

For one instant she felt as if she 'must' fly home again! Oh, the dreadfulness of this home-sickness which swept everything before it! Why had she wished, sometimes even longed, to get away from the little daily round of getting the breakfast ready, going to Camptown, walking home again, getting the tea ready, and then spending the evening in reading and work!

Now she would have given everything to be back again!

She hastily bathed her eyes, which she knew must be red with the unshed tears, which she was keeping back so resolutely. And then with one swift prayer for help and comfort, she gulped down her sobs, and slowly made her way back again to the study.

Meanwhile, when the door had been shut after her, Daisy had volunteered a remark.

"Miss Ashlyn will hate us all if the boys go on so."

"Let her," said Randall, pouting; "I don't care if she does."

"I do," said Mollie; "it is not ladylike to behave badly, and I don't mean to. What is more, Randall, I shan't let you, either."

Randall's round face put on an ugly frown. But after a moment's thought, he nodded defiantly. "You won't be able to help it," he said.

"Shall I not?" asked Mollie. "I have ways and means."

"Oh, hush," said Hugh. "I do hate to hear you quarrel."

"Do you, cry-baby?" asked Randall, turning upon him with his little bold, lionlike face.

"Never mind, Hugh," whispered Daisy; "'handsome is, as handsome "does.'" You can always behave the best, in spite of what anybody says."

Hugh had flushed scarlet, and his small, thin hand was clenched into a fist beneath the table. But at his little sister's soothing whisper, it relaxed, and he gave a slight laugh, which however, angered Randall far more than a blow would have done.

Just at the moment, however, Gertrude's step was heard at the door, and Mollie hastily rose, saying—

"Oh, Miss Ashlyn, shall we go and get ready for tea? You have not seen my room yet."

Mollie's room looked over the gardens at the back, as she had said. And while she brushed her abundant hair, she explained about their neighbour's doings, and how his garden, both back and front, was kept in the best order of any in that suburb.

After that they went to the drawing-room, where they found Mr. Shaddock, listening to Conway's account of his visit next door.

Tea was rather formidable to poor Gertrude among such a number of strangers, though Mr. and Mrs. Shaddock exerted themselves to find topics of conversation, while Mollie did her best to join in, and to interest her governess in what went on.



## CHAPTER IX. A CHAMPION.

AFTER tea, Daisy and Hugh went back to the study, only waiting to beg Ned not to come. And Gertrude asked if she might go with them.

Perhaps the children looked a little disappointed. But very soon, when they were all shut in with the curtains drawn and the cheerful lamplight, they drew near to her, and condescended to examine her photograph album, which she had brought down for their inspection.

"The boys learn their lessons in the little library," they told her; "and Mollie stays with mother and father. Randall goes to bed if he will, or stays up till nurse makes him come; or else he comes in here and bothers us."

"Do you always spend your evenings together?" asked Gertrude.

"Yes," said Daisy; "they do not want us down-stairs, and I am sure we do not want them!"

After a time a motherly-looking woman entered, greeting Gertrude with a respectful manner, and asked if Hugh were not ready for bed.

"Oh, nurse, I 'am' so happy," said Hugh. "Is Randall up-stairs yet?"

"Not yet, my dear. But you know how tired you will be for school if you sit up."

"Yes," urged Daisy, "do go, Hugh. You can have Miss Ashlyn's company to-morrow, and nurse says quite true. Do go!"

The boy put away his things-without another word, and wishing Gertrude good-night, left the room. When the door was shut, and Daisy had watched the handle for a moment, she got up and softly drew near to Gertrude's side.

"You will not notice what Randall says, will you, Miss Ashlyn?"

"How do you mean, dear?"

"About Hugh." She hesitated, then went on hurriedly, "He calls him cry-baby. But perhaps you didn't hear? Anyway, you will not be long before you do hear it, for he tells everybody."

"I did hear it," said Gertrude, "but I thought I would judge for myself."

"Oh, that's all right, then," said Daisy eagerly. Then, as if she could hardly leave the subject there, she added—

"He isn't strong—Hugh, but he's not a cry-baby! He does cry sometimes, and they tease him dreadfully. But not one of them can do the brave things Hugh can. Not one of them tries so hard to control himself; not one of them is so good to people who are in trouble! And yet—yet Hugh is always in hot water because his spirits are not very strong."

Daisy's face had flushed deeply, and she put her small hand gently on to Gertrude's knee, looking up beseechingly in her face.

"I shall be sure to remember all you have told me," she answered, putting her arm round the small shoulders, and drawing the little girl towards her.

"Oh, thank you," said Daisy earnestly; "I am so very glad I have told you. I don't know why I did, except that you seem so very kind. Besides, I thought you took to Hugh."

"He is very like a little nephew of mine, whom we have lost."

Daisy glanced at Gertrude's dress curiously, but her eyes returned to her face without a satisfactory answer to her questioning look.

"No, I am not in mourning," Gertrude answered, "but by and by, if Hugh and you and I become friends, I will tell you both all about it."

"Oh, that would be kind!" exclaimed Daisy. Then she paused, and hung her head for an instant. "Miss Ashlyn," she exclaimed in a low voice, "I will be good to you, indeed I will! I didn't mean to be—We are none of us at all good, but Hugh—but indeed I will try all I can!"

Gertrude bent and kissed her, then she said softly—

"Daisy, dear, you have made my heart lighter, but I wonder if you know the blessedness of trying to please the Lord Jesus? Have you ever thought of that?"

Daisy shook her head slowly.

"Then I will try to teach you, and it will make you so happy!"

"Nurse does sometimes talk to Hugh and me like that, but I don't understand what she means."

"Would you like to understand?" asked Gertrude.

"I don't mind—" said Daisy.

"Do you not sometimes feel very sad and naughty, and as if you could not be good any way?" asked Gertrude.

"Well, I suppose I do, sometimes," acknowledged Daisy.

"And do you not feel then as if you do not care to think about God, and would rather keep away from Him?"

Daisy's wondering eyes were fixed upon her governess's face, but she did not answer in words.

"That is sin," said Gertrude, "and unless that sin is got rid of, we can never get near to God, we can never please Him. Daisy, is it not the best news to hear that the Lord Jesus has died on the cross to make an atonement for this dreadful sin, so that we sinners may be forgiven and come back to God?"





## CHAPTER X.

### A SONG.

AT last, the evening came to an end. Daisy departed to bed, Randall came in and looked at her, and sauntered out again, leaving the door open, and Mollie finally came for a few minutes, bringing a message from Mrs. Shaddock to the effect that Miss Ashlyn could retire whenever she felt inclined.

"We generally have friends in the evening, or she goes out, but mother will not let me sit up late because she says I should lose my colour," said Mollie, glancing at herself in the glass over the mantel-piece and shaking out her hair.

"She is very wise," answered Gertrude.

"But all the same, I do as I like," pursued Mollie. "I read in bed as often as not, or talk to nurse. She does not encourage that, I can tell you. But all the same, I do not get to bed as early as mother thinks."

"Do you feel happy in doing so?" asked Gertrude, looking up with a bright little smile.

"Oh dear, yes! 'What the eye doesn't see,' you know."

Gertrude shook her head, smiling.

"Are you awfully strict?" asked Mollie.

Gertrude paused for an instant. She felt this might be a momentous conversation.

She prayed in her heart one of those three-word prayers that she often pondered over, "Lord, help me!" And then, strengthened and calmed, she looked up at her questioner and answered—

"When I have found out what your mother's wishes are in things, I shall be 'awfully strict' in carrying them out."

"Shall you go telling tales, and asking her if I am to read in bed and do this and that?"

"You will see," said Gertrude with a smile.

"I should hate you if you did," said Mollie, also smiling.

"I hope you will not hate me," answered Gertrude, "but whether you do or not, I ought to do my duty, ought I not?"

"We shall see," said Mollie, looking at her somewhat curiously. "Now I must say good-night. I hope you will sleep well, Miss Ashlyn."

"Thank you, dear, for trying to make me at home," said Gertrude.

Then Mollie put out her cheek to be kissed, and Gertrude was at last alone.

But though she looked round on her cosy study, she did not feel it enough her own, as yet, to indulge herself in even a thought towards home.

She was just considering whether she should go to her own room, when Susan appeared with a little tray with biscuits and lemonade, asking if Miss Ashlyn would please to take some milk or anything more that she could bring her.

"I am to be well cared for, at any rate in this way," said Gertrude to herself. But she did not feel inclined to eat.

She cleared up her work, put the room straight, lowered the gas, and ascended to her own room and shut herself in.

The moonlight streamed over the floor, making the little jet of gas which was already lighted quite tiny in comparison. She went to her window and looked out. How still it all was!—except for the occasional sounds of music coming up from the neighbouring drawing-rooms.

Gertrude leant her head against the sash and buried her face in her hands, for some one near was singing a song which Otto had sung only last night—"When the mists have rolled in splendour." And after it was over, they had stepped outside to look at the harvest moon rising over the sea.

While they had stood there, he had asked her whether she had any desires for things to be different from what they were, or whether she were quite satisfied to do the will of God, just as she found it every day?

And she had thought about it, watching the slow red moon rise and rise out of the mist and enter a little cloud, till, after a few minutes' eclipse, she had suddenly shone out triumphantly above it in the clear deep blue.

And she had answered thoughtfully—

"I think my life feels something like that moon in the mist just now—"

"Uncertain as to its true duty and position?"

"Well, perhaps, Otto, but I don't know," she had answered.

"And then?" he had asked.

"I feel as if to-morrow were like that bit of dark cloud, which, after all, in the wonderful fashioning of our Father's hand, may only serve to brighten the light when it does shine out!"

"Yes," he said considerably, "only it is so hard to wait so long in the mist and in the cloud, Gertrude!"

"If that is our appointed path?" she had asked.

"It might all be clear sky if the mists did not come from earth," said Otto.

"I see—self-made. Well, Otto, I don't know; all I can do is to ask God to work in me what He wills. I can't see the way myself, or tell how to act, sometimes."

"Nor I," he had answered in a low tone.

Then Phyllis's clear voice had called out from the front door, "Come, you two, it is ever so late, and we have to be early to-morrow!"

Gertrude remembered it all, while still some beautiful tenor voice sang over and over again—

"We shall know each other better  
When the mists have rolled away!"

"Ah, but that is in heaven," she murmured. "It is not a song of earthly things at all! To do our Father's will every day is our portion, and it shall be mine to do it willingly, if He will help me!"



## CHAPTER XI.

### A SCRIMMAGE.

"DO you like Miss Ashlyn?" asked Randall of Hugh as they were being dressed the next day.

"I don't know yet," said Hugh, "but I think I do."

"Daisy said yesterday she should not mind her, or do what she wished, unless she chose," said Randall.

"Then Miss Daisy hadn't ought to," interposed nurse; "it was very naughty of her."

Nurse spoke with such unusual energy that Hugh was quite surprised.

"I don't mean to either," nodded Randall.

"Well, you'll 'have' to," remarked Hugh, "so it is no good boasting. Of course I am different; I go to school, and she's only got to help me with my lessons."

Hugh and Randall both looked up suddenly, for there stood Gertrude close to them asking nurse a question.

"I don't care," said Randall in a low, defiant tone; "she shouldn't have come in—"

But Gertrude had received her answer from nurse and had turned away, something in her face making Hugh sure that she had both heard and been grieved by the tone in which the boys had spoken.

Hugh looked after her doubtfully, then he turned angrily upon Randall.

"I wish you would not behave so!" he exclaimed. "She was going to like us, and now she won't."

"I don't care," said Randall, "whether she does or not."

"I do then," answered Hugh.

"Then you should not have said that about the lessons," retorted Randall.

Hugh stood silent. What had he said? It had seemed nothing to him, and yet somehow he was conscious that some slighting words had passed his lips which he had hardly intended.

His dressing being finished, he went down-stairs slowly, wondering how he could make Miss Ashlyn understand that he had meant to be kind, in spite of what he had said in his haste.

She was coming out of her room as he passed the door.

Their eyes met. Something in the little boy's made her pause.

"I didn't 'mean'—" he said hesitatingly.

"Did not mean what, dear?"

"About my lessons—I ought not to have said you 'had' to!"

"I understand," said Gertrude, stooping to kiss him, "and I will help you gladly."

Hugh looked anxiously in her face.

"They are hard sometimes," he said, "but I will be as industrious as I can—"

"I shall not mind the hardness," said Gertrude, smiling. "This is the dining-room, is it not?"

So they went in, to find Conway and Ned eating their breakfast in great haste.

"Come on, Hugh, you will be late. What's the good of getting into hot water the first day?"

Gertrude found that neither Mollie nor Daisy had yet appeared. And Mr. and Mrs. Shaddock, she found, breakfasted after the rest had gone.

She sat down and waited, wondering what she was expected to do, and presently Mollie came in looking pale and sleepy.

"Hullo, Moll!" said Ned. "One would think it was bedtime for you."

"I wish it were," said Mollie. "Miss Ashlyn, are you not going to have some breakfast?"

"I was waiting for you, Mollie."

"Oh, don't another time," said Mollie.

"Moll is often late," remarked Ned, "or she has a book to finish before she gets up, or something."

"Yes," said Mollie, "so long as I am ready for school by half-past nine, it does not matter to any one what time I get up."

Gertrude felt that the "any one" included her, though Mollie spoke very unconcernedly, and took her seat at the table and began her breakfast as if she were the only person in the room. Then she looked round at the tea-tray and said—

"Oh, Miss Ashlyn, do you mind pouring out? Miss Halling always did, and the boys could never get off without your help."

So Gertrude took her place at the urn, and Conway looked up to pass her some bacon, immediately after burying himself again in a book he was reading.

Daisy appeared when the rest had begun to move, wished Gertrude a rather abrupt good morning, and then seated herself by Hugh and began to whisper to him.

Soon there began a commotion, such as Gertrude in her quiet life had never imagined.

As the time for the train drew near, there were calls for boots, books, pencils, caps and straps, and Daisy was sent hither and thither to find what was wanted.

Mollie condescended to do one thing for Ned, after which she took herself off up-stairs. While Daisy waited close to Hugh, chiefly to protect him from the jeers and cuffs of his brothers, and from the more pungent taunts of little Randall, who took evident delight in irritating his sensitive little brother.

At last they were off, and Gertrude, with a sigh which sounded quite ponderous, turned and met Daisy's eyes fixed on her face.



## CHAPTER XII.

### MARMALADE.

"YOU'LL get used to it, Miss Ashlyn," she said, looking down the road after her brothers.

"Shall I?" asked Gertrude, as she turned away with a heavy heart.

She went to her room, closed the door, and sat down by the window, feeling unutterably desolate.

Were all of them going their own way without reference to her? Only speaking to her when they must, only asking her help when they could not possibly do without it?

Why had she left her happy home for this? It was true she had found it difficult to get anything to do in Camptown; it was true that her mother's income was insufficient for them without her help; it was true that she had her own reasons for wanting a change, which she had hardly acknowledged to herself. But for all that, now she was really away, the home-sickness and loneliness seemed more than she could bear, and she felt sick at heart as she reviewed the difficulties in her path.

She buried her face in her hands, too utterly despairing to cry, but certainly more desolate than she had ever been before. Perhaps the bitterest drop in her cup was little Randall, with his handsome face and sharp tongue.

She was roused from her reverie by the thought that school-time would quickly be there, and that she could not begin her duties with such a burden on her heart.

She rose from her seat and knelt down by the bed, not able to form any words of prayer, but still with an earnest uplifting of her heart for help.

"I asked to be guided about coming here," she thought, "and if my Father in heaven has sent me here—"

Then the tears came at last as a relief, and she laid her head down on her arms and wept heartily, praying for submission and faith and help, as she had never prayed before, perhaps.

"If He sent me, He has something for me to do here," she thought, "and I must set about the doing of it at once. Oh, how wrong I have been to repine or be afraid!"

What had her text been that morning? "Certainly I will be with thee." What could she want more than that assurance?

She rose from her knees and found that the burden with which she had knelt down was all gone. Nothing remained but a thankfulness that she was so loved and so protected that such promises could indeed be hers in Christ Jesus. She had only just bathed her eyes when a knock came at the door, and on opening it, she found Daisy standing waiting.

"We are ready for school, Miss Ashlyn," she said.

"Is it half-past nine?" asked Gertrude, surprised.

"Yes; it is later than that—"

"Then my watch has played me a trick," she said, turning to the dressing-table to take it up. "It usually goes so well, but it says twenty past nine now."

Daisy looked soberly at her, as if her watch being fast or slow was not of much interest.

Gertrude put it in her dress hastily, anxious to go down-stairs, and as she did so she discovered that her fingers were sticky.

"How strange!" she said.

"What?" asked Daisy.

"I had but that moment washed my hands, and yet they are sticky!"

Daisy suggested washing them again, and went down to tell the others Miss Ashlyn was coming, while Gertrude turned back to the table to put down her basket again.

Just where her watch had lain, there was a little mark on the toilet cover as if a finger had been drawn along it to remove some stain, and on looking closer she found a little streak of marmalade had been left behind too.

"I wish I had not left my watch there all breakfast-time," she said to herself, as she went down-stairs; "it was careless of me."

Seated at the table in very good order were her three pupils.

"It's jolly late," said Randall.

"Never mind," interposed Mollie; "what if it is? Miss Ashlyn, what shall we do first? Miss Halling always—"

"I have written out this rough time-table, Mollie, which your mother approves. I think we shall find it work well. Daisy and Randall can write, while you and I have a history lesson."

"Oh, but—" began Mollie.

"Wait, however, an instant," continued Gertrude calmly, "till I have settled the other two. That is right, Daisy, you have your book ready. Is this yours, Randall? I see you both write very well."

Randall disdained to be pleased by the pleasant tone, and passed his pen over to Gertrude with an abrupt, "I want a new nib."

"Oh, you don't!" exclaimed Mollie. "I gave you one this morning! You've spoilt it drawing with it since breakfast!"

Gertrude took the pen in her hand to examine it, and found that once more, her fingers had grown sticky!



## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE OVERTURNED BASKET.

GERTRUDE got through the morning's school better than she had feared, and when twelve o'clock struck they were all quite surprised.

"We go for a walk now," said Mollie.

So the four set out together, Mollie taking the lead, showing Gertrude the beauties of Hampstead Heath, and describing the long walks they sometimes took on Saturdays to Highgate, Finchley, and other places round.

They were coming home, and had almost reached their own door, when, turning the corner of the road, Mollie gave a start, and exclaimed in a low tone, "There is Mr. Eccentric!"

While at the same moment the man who was in front of them, recognizing the young people, and wishing apparently to get out of their way as quickly as possible, stepped aside to let them pass, and in doing so stumbled over the kerbstone, and slipped down on his knee.

He quickly picked himself up, but his basket had sped many yards in front of him, and the old-fashioned lids opening, the contents were scattered on the path.

Daisy hastened to replace the fallen things, while Gertrude turned her attention to the man, who was brushing the dust from his knees, and answering her curtly that he was not in the least hurt. When he turned round to look after his basket, Daisy was trying to gather up some rice which had fallen out of a paper, while Mollie was holding in her hand some lilac print, a reel of white cotton, and a little pair of child's shoes which had evidently been freshly mended.

The man took the things and stuffed them into the basket in silence, though his face had turned very pale.

"I fear you are hurt," said Gertrude again.

But he would have no more to say about it, and limping a little, he pushed on to his own gate and left the four to turn in at theirs.

"'We've' had an adventure!" said Mollie. "Far greater than Conway's. How I do long to tell the boys! Miss Ashlyn, what could he want with those things if he lives alone?"

"I do not know," said Gertrude thoughtfully.

She went up-stairs to her own room, but all the way she was haunted by an impression of having seen that little pair of child's slippers on some little pair of feet! How could that be possible? Were there not hundreds of little slippers in the world?

Mrs. Shaddock was very interested with their news at dinner, and the meal passed much more comfortably than the previous ones, Gertrude feeling less forlorn as they began to have things in common to talk over.

When she went back to the schoolroom, on the mantel-piece was a letter from her mother.

She sprang towards it, then sat down by the window with it in her hand, and began covering the envelope with kisses.

"Oh, how could I go away from you? How could I?" she murmured over and over again.

Then she ran up to her room, tore the letter open, and devoured the precious contents.

They were words written from a full mother's heart, words of advice, and cheer, and encouragement. Rising from their perusal, Gertrude felt strengthened to go on her way.

"You must expect difficulties, my dear—" (the letter ran). "These things are allowed to happen in our lives, but our God is equal to it all. There is such a storehouse in the Lord Jesus, that whatever happens, there is grace enough for it. Go to Him in everything, and you will find 'everything' just a

ladder reaching to heaven."

"Even Randall," she said to herself, as she put the letter in her pocket and prepared for school.

When she reached the schoolroom again, Mollie was practising, Daisy was buried in the perusal of a book, but no Randall was there.

She was looking round and wondering how she should find him, when Mollie volunteered—

"He isn't coming; he has worried mother till she has taken him out with her."

So the school went on without him, and just as they were putting up their books at five o'clock, they heard a great commotion in the hall, and Randall's voice saying loudly—

"Well, cry-baby, have you 'blubbed' to-day?"

"There are the boys!" exclaimed Mollie. "Now for our news! Come along, Daisy, let us go down to the dining-room to see them!"

They ran off, leaving Gertrude alone.

She turned to her letter once more, reading the dear lines over and over, till she knew them by heart.

Then she bent her head on her hands and thought of her mother's advice.

"Grace enough for 'all' that happens."





## CHAPTER XIV.

### "X. Y. Z."

"HAVE you been to call for letters to-day?" asked a woman, looking up from her work with anxious eyes.

"No, I haven't," shortly answered the man addressed. "I can't always be callin' there, ye know. It looks so queer."

"Not at all," answered the woman decidedly. "People must have letters, and you buy your tobacco there. That's nonsense!"

"Not nonsense at all," answered the man. "I'm pretty near sick of it. Here's a pretty go I've had this morning. I slipped down, and the things you sent me for flew out of the basket—shoes and all—and the folks next door helped to pick them up."

The woman glanced at him in dismay, but after a moment, her own anxiety overcame even that, and she said slowly—

"James, I can't 'think' how it is there wasn't a letter the other day; I do wish you had called there this morning."

"It's rubbish you're being so fidgety," said the man. "He's all right. I tell you what it is, this is driving us into our graves. I'm near sick of it."

He turned towards the little fire with his pipe, and the woman gathered up some lilac print which she had been cutting out, and left the room.

"A living death," she said to herself, "and all for the want of a bit of courage at the right time!"

Slowly she mounted to the top of the house, and taking a key from her pocket, unlocked a door, letting herself in and locking it from the inside again.

There was a little fire burning in the grate, protected by a cheap nursery guard, and an unlighted candle was on the table beside a work-basket.

On the floor were bricks and toys scattered hither and thither.

The woman glanced towards a small bed in the corner of the room, and then lighted her candle and sat down by the fire with her work.

But ever and anon she buried her face in her hands, and pressed her forehead with her fingers, as if to keep back thought.

"He said he would write without fail, every week, and it is three days over the time now!"

She turned again restlessly to the light, and put her needle into the print. Then with a sudden movement she folded that together and went to a drawer, taking from it a worn pair of knickerbockers, which she spread on the table, fitting on a patch carefully, and bending over it with a certain look on her face that would have made an observer's heart bleed—if he had had a tender heart.

"I 'can't' bear it," she whispered at last.

She put out her hand to extinguish the candle, when a low whistling was heard on the stairs and a slow step came nearer and nearer.

She hastened to unlock the door, looking in the man's face and speaking abruptly.

"You'll stay here a bit, James? I'm that uneasy that I can't bide here at all. I must go to Oxford Street and see if there ain't a letter for me."

"What, at this time o' night?" questioned the man. "It's ridiculous. But do as you like; it don't matter either way, and you'll get a bit of air."

He sat down by the fire and put his pipe in his mouth once more.

The woman went into an adjoining room to get her bonnet, and soon had let herself noiselessly out of the front door, and was speeding towards the high-road which led down from Hampstead to the more populated districts of Camden Town.

It was not till she reached one of the main thoroughfares that she aided her steps by entering a tram-car, and there her veiled face and plain garments attracted no attention.

She alighted among the crowd when she reached Oxford Street, and disappeared among them up one of the wide turnings.

By and by, she came to her destination, and on her inquiry, two letters were handed over to her, and she turned away.

Both bore the Highgate postmark, but were in different handwriting. Yet as the woman grasped them, she knew that her journey had not been in vain.

She clasped her hand over the precious lines, addressed in a large boyish hand to "X. Y. Z., Tobacconist, Dash Street." And without apparently dreaming of opening them, she hurried out into the crowd again, and was soon seated in a returning tram, speeding back whence she came, and alighting where she had got in before.

At length, her weary walk over, she let herself into the house with a latch-key, and passed quickly up the dark staircase.

In answer to her low whistle, the door up-stairs was noiselessly unlocked, and she entered the room she had left nearly two hours ago.

"I've got it!" she exclaimed, sinking into the chair the man had left.

"Two?" he questioned.

And while with rather trembling fingers she broke the seal of her own, he did the same by the second envelope.

Hers ran—

"Dear mother—I wish you'd come to see me; I ain't well, and the master—"

That was all. The large lines only reached to the bottom of the page and then stopped.

His ran—

"To X. Y. Z. Madam—Your boy has been taken suddenly ill, and I regret to tell you that the doctor looks seriously upon his complaint. I would have telegraphed, but your wish to keep your address from us has precluded my doing so. Will you come at once? I am, etc., etc., Head Master."

Both letters bore the date of two days before.



## CHAPTER XV. LITTLE LESTER.

THE young people were so full of the overturned basket and its mysterious contents that Randall forgot to tease Hugh as much as usual. And besides, Miss Ashlyn's quiet presence rather awed the little bully, who was not quite sure how she would take it, if he let his sharp tongue loose on his delicate brother.

Indeed, since the episode of the sticky pen, Randall could not forget the sudden glance Gertrude had given towards his little hands, nor the quiet and firm tone in which she had told him to go to nurse to have them washed. Nor did he like Daisy's exclamation as he was leaving the room—

"Why, Miss Ashlyn, how funny that your watch should have been sticky too!"

So he decided to keep quiet for a time and make some plan of mischief which should be more annoying and more difficult of discovery.

Hugh and Daisy soon made their way to the schoolroom, and settled themselves cosily under Gertrude's wing, the little boy conning his lessons with great industry, only occasionally asking for some help in a gentle, entreating little tone, which Gertrude thought she quite understood since their conversation that morning.

At last, the books were put away, and Daisy came over to Gertrude's side and said softly, "Are we friends enough yet?"  
Gertrude smiled. "What do you think?" she asked.

"I think we are," said Daisy. "When Hugh and I take to people, we 'take' to them, and we don't change a bit."

"I see; so you consider you have 'taken' to me?"

"You are laughing at us?"

"Only a very little. I am so glad, Daisy, if you have. Come, then, and sit by the fire, and we will have a sort of story—

"About seven years ago my pretty sister Rose was married—"

"Was she like you?" interrupted Daisy with a little smile.

"Oh no! A hundred times prettier," said Gertrude enthusiastically; "oh no! Her husband travels for a large firm in London, and my sister generally has her home at Camptown, near where I come from."

"Yes," nodded Hugh. "I know about Camptown; there are soldiers there."

"Yes. Well, by and by there came a dear little baby boy to my sister's home, and she and her husband doted on him more than I can say. My sister used to take him about with her, if the places that her husband went to were near enough, and they used to have such happy times. Sometimes, however, he went alone.

"Once, when she was staying at a watering-place in the south, she was suddenly called to Scotland to nurse her husband, and left her darling little boy in the landlady's care.

"Whether she was right or wise to do such a thing does not matter now. The landlady seemed a very nice woman, and my sister trusted her completely.

"When she got back again—think of it, Daisy and Hugh—the house was empty, the woman and her husband and little boy were all gone too!—and with them our little darling, the most precious thing in the world to all of us!"

Hugh and Daisy gazed in Gertrude's face, but they seemed as if they could not ask a question.

"Ever since, my dear sister has gone about searching for her lost child, little Lester. And never have we heard one single word of him from that day to this."

Hugh's little hand was put out till it touched Gertrude's softly, and he said—

"Perhaps, some day—"

"Yes," she answered, "we live in hope of that. Hugh, he used to say, 'I've opened my heart to Jesus, and He's come in!'"

"Who taught him that?" asked Daisy gently.

"I think I taught him," said Gertrude. "My dear sister did not know her Saviour herself then, and it was not till little Lester was taken away that she found she needed a Saviour."

Hugh's eyes gave a flash, but he looked down quickly and was silent.

"I believe you love Him too, Hugh," said Gertrude, drawing the boy to her.

"I'm so bad," said Hugh in a low tone. "So afraid—and so nasty sometimes, but yet—" he paused. Then meeting Daisy's eyes, and flushing up to the roots of his hair, he added courageously, "Yes, I do. In spite of not being a bit what I should be, I do. And He loves me!"

Daisy looked well satisfied. She had been almost afraid that Hugh's courage would vanish under the test to which it was being put. But as she had found many times, to her surprise, there was a secret of strength in the frail little boy that surpassed her utmost expectations.

"Now we must go to bed," she said, rising reluctantly. "Thank you ever so much, Miss Ashlyn."

Hugh put up his face for a kiss, and then Gertrude was left alone with her heart full of her sister Rose and of lost little Lester.

And every time she shut her eyes, she seemed to see before them a pair of worn, shabby little kid-lined slippers!





## CHAPTER XVI.

### A LATE VISITOR.

"I MUST go to-night," said the woman in a hoarse voice, rising from the chair into which she had sunk ere she had opened that letter which bore such sad tidings.

"You can't get there," said her husband. "It's ten o'clock now, and every one 'ull be in bed."

"If he's bad—" She tried to finish the sentence, but her dry tongue would not say the words.

"Perhaps he's better by now," said the man, not unkindly. "Mightn't you as well go the first thing to-morrow?"

"I daren't go out in daylight, as you know. No; I shall be away all to-morrow most likely, so you'll stay and mind him," glancing towards the corner.

"I'll see to that," said the man.

The woman put her hand to her head as if dazed.

"Take a drop o' tea, or somethin'," urged the man. "You're about beat. To think that there was a letter after all!"

"I somehow expected it," said his wife wearily. "Ought I to take anything with me? I'd near done those little knickers, but he'll never want them now."

"Oh, don't say so!" exclaimed the man.

She shook her head again. Then, after an instant's hesitation, she went to the bed in the corner and bent over it, and there was a sound in the still room as of a kiss.

The man looked on wondering. But in another moment, with a brief good-bye, the woman had gone noiselessly down the stairs and had let herself out into the darkness.

How she reached Highgate, she could never recall afterwards. Almost blindly she hurried along, helping her steps by an omnibus on which she happened to see Highgate written, and at length arrived at her destination long after the clocks had struck eleven.

Almost breathless she paused at the house she was seeking, and with anxious eyes gazed up at the windows. Darkness reigned, not a sign of light or life appeared in any of them.

She began to breathe more freely, and to chide herself for her frantic fears. All were evidently in bed and asleep.

But almost ere that thought had crossed her heart, came another which seemed to strike her with more terrible fear still. What if all should be over, and her boy should be dead?

She went up the front steps and took hold of the bell, but ere she had rung it, came another thought. She quickly turned from the door, and made her way up a side lane which was close by, and from that position scanned the back of the house.

At the very top, two windows seemed to have a dim light in the room belonging to them.

The woman put her hand to her heart as if with a sudden pang, and almost stumbling along in her eagerness, once more reached the front door, where she gave a low ring.

The sound went through the quiet house, and she heard it outside.

The minutes, though in reality they were very few, seemed very long before a light began to glimmer through the ground glass of the door, coming nearer and nearer.

Then a step was audible, and some one set the light down and undid the fastenings of the door.

The woman, who was grasping the stone balustrade for support, lifted her eyes to meet those of a sweet-looking nurse, who in snowy cap and apron stood holding the door in her hand.

"Are you—" she asked and paused. Then altering the form of her question, said gently, "What may you be wanting, ma'am? Have you come to see any one?"

The woman's lips formed some words, but they were inaudible.

"Perhaps you are my patient's mother?" suggested the nurse. Then seeing that this was the case, she held out her hand and led the woman into the hall, placed her in a chair, and carefully closed the front door.

"Then he is alive," the poor mother at last found voice to say.

"Yes, he is alive," answered the nurse.

"May I go to him?" asked the woman, starting up.

"Not yet. You are not fit to see him yet. Come in here, and I will tell you about him. Perhaps you will be able to quiet him better than I. He has something which is on his mind, I fear."

The woman hung her head, but then with a sudden passion she exclaimed, "It was no fault of his—no fault at all. It was all my doing! Oh! I have suffered for it—My boy! My boy!"

"Hush! If you wish to see him, you will have to be a great deal calmer than this. I will go back to him, and will fetch you in five minutes."

"Oh, let me come now!" besought the woman, rousing herself. "Oh, I will be calm, indeed I will."

"Wait an instant then," said the nurse in her sweet, calm tone.

She left the room and returned in a moment with a glass of milk, which she evidently expected the poor mother to drink, and which she held to her lips authoritatively, not noticing her reluctance. Then with a kind cheering word, in which she heard, "The dear Saviour has been here before you," she led the way up the quiet staircase, to that room where the dim light was burning.



## CHAPTER XVII.

### BEFORE DAWN.

"INFLAMMATION of the lungs," the nurse had whispered.

But when the woman entered that darkened room, she was hardly prepared for the little figure she found propped up in the narrow bed, nor for the sunken cheeks and staring eyes of her once healthy boy.

Her promise of calmness and her fear of not being allowed to see him kept the woman from the first wild impulse to throw herself at his feet and devour him with kisses.

As she crossed the room to his side, she felt like some untamed animal being robbed of its offspring. But all she did was to bend over him and say with a strangled sob—

"Oh, Johnnie, are you very ill, my dear?"

After trying vainly to speak, he nodded slightly, but looked appealingly towards his nurse, and laid his head back on his high pillow.

"He will be better presently, ma'am," said the nurse, putting a chair near. "He wants to tell you something, but he has not much breath at times. He will speak when he feels able. Is not that right, dear?"

Johnnie was watching his mother's face with those pathetic eyes, in which some urgent request lay hidden. As the nurse bent over him with some medicine, he whispered—

"Shall I have time?"

"I think you will," she answered. "But if not, Johnnie, I can tell her what you have told me."

"Ah, but—"

No telling of hers, he felt, would have the weight of his own dying request. But he could not as yet gather strength to speak.

"He has been light-headed a good bit," explained the nurse, "but he is better of that now."

The woman had taken her child's hand, but he drew it away as if more than he could bear, and in a short breathless way gasped—

"I'll speak presently."

Just at this moment the door opened noiselessly, and the master of the school came in.

"We feared you would be too late," he said gravely, in a low tone, to Johnnie's mother. "Did you not receive my letter?"

"No," answered the woman briefly; "not till to-night."

Then, as if impelled by something she could not resist, she asked in an almost inaudible tone—

"Is there no hope, then?"

"I fear not."

The master turned to the bed, spoke a few kind words to the boy, and noiselessly left the room.

Still Johnnie lay with that distressed look on his face. And the nurse stood by watching him, but without saying a word to break the silence, lest in doing so she might hinder rather than help her poor little invalid.

The mother, sitting there in that unbroken silence, felt as if she could not bear the agony of it much longer.

She was just turning towards Johnnie with an appealing look, when he said in that same short, gasping way—

"I want you to take him back, mother."

The woman shrank, and the child felt it.

"I never knew how wicked it was—till now," he went on, gazing still at her averted eyes.

"You did not know," whispered his mother.

"No—no, mother—not that! But taking him away! It was awful of me to do what I did—I never knew the harm—but you will take him back now, mother."

"I don't see how I can," she said at last.

"Mother!" he urged. "'He's' got a mother."

There was a breathless pause. The nurse, standing by, feared that her little patient's life would ebb away in the agony of that ungranted request.

"I'm going to Jesus," whispered Johnnie again, in a broken voice. "He's forgiven me that, and all my other sins—every sin. He has washed me clean and white. But, mother, you must give him back, indeed you must."

"She will," interposed the nurse soothingly, "when she has had time to think of it! Just tell him that you will, if you can, ma'am!"

With a warning glance she went to the fire for some broth, while the woman, urged by her look and by the beseeching, dying agony of her child's eyes, said slowly—

"I will—Johnnie—I will."

Then realizing what she had done, she buried her face in her hands, and trembled from head to foot.

Johnnie's hand, which had lain listlessly on the counterpane, sought his mother's now, and pressed it with what little strength he had, and he drew her towards him.

"Kiss me, mother," he said.

After that, though he took what the nurse gave him, he did not seem able to speak. His eyes never closed, but were generally fixed on his mother's face with an expression the nurse did not understand.

The hours crept on; sometimes his mother said a word of tender endearment, sometimes only her suppressed weeping broke the stillness.

The daylight was beginning to creep in when he spoke once more.

"Mother, you will come to Jesus too?"

"Oh, Johnnie, I'll do what you ask me about the other. But don't make me promise what I can't do, my dear!"

"Ah, but you can," he panted. "Nurse told me the words—they make it so plain—'Him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out!' Can't you come after that, mother?"



## CHAPTER XVIII.

### SUNRISE.

BUT the poor mother was too bewildered and heart-broken to take any comfort yet.

Her only child was being snatched from her under circumstances so pitiful that to her mind no ray of hope or consolation could enter.

She would have given everything she possessed at that moment to pacify her dying child, and yet the promise he wanted of her was one she thought she could not give.

Johnnie still held her hand, and all she could do was to bend down and kiss his little one softly, stilling her passionate longing to clasp him in her arms by an effort which seemed to her to be almost killing her.

As her eyes were fixed on his wan little face, she saw his lips move, and at the same moment the nurse came quickly to his side with her gentle, untiring, "What is it, dear?"

"You'll be glad by and by—" said Johnnie, tenderly, to his mother.

"Glad? Oh, Johnnie, you do not know—"

"Glad that I am gone to Jesus. Mother—if you will not promise me—still you'll try?"

"I'll do what I can, Johnnie," she answered at last.

He glanced towards the nurse as if struggling to remember something.

She sat down on the edge of his bed and put her arm under his head.

"Say it again," he whispered.

So she said, slowly and distinctly—

"Him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out."

"Yes; that's it!" he answered, with a sigh of content.

Just then a ray of sunshine broke from a dark cloud in which the sun had been hidden, and crept along Johnnie's bed, covering his thin little hands, and shining right up into his wide-open eyes.

"What's that?" he asked with a sudden smile, the only one his mother had seen on his face, an eager, tender smile which astonished her.

"It's the blessed sunrise," said the nurse soothingly.

But his eyes were still gazing upward, the smile growing and growing till it became radiant.

"It's—it's 'Jesus'!" he murmured.

The eyes continued to look while the gasping breath grew fainter and fainter. And then, with one more weary, yet rested sigh, he went away to the glory which his Saviour has prepared for those who love Him.

Twelve terrible, hopeless hours of heart-rending grief must elapse before the woman could venture to retrace her steps to her home, or tell her husband of the blow which had fallen upon them.

The kind nurse did everything in her power to try to comfort the desolate mother.

But to all her gentle words, the woman only answered, "You do not know—no one can ever know—it is no use to talk to me. Oh, my Johnnie! My Johnnie!"

Once during that long day which she spent in the housekeeper's room, she had asked permission to visit the place where lay all that remained of her boy. But thither no earthly eye followed her, and her grief, with its secret sting, was seen only by Him who can unlock the chambers of every heart, and knows what each one needs to bring it to feel its need of Himself.

At length the weary day was over, and darkness began to gather. Directly the woman saw this, she took her bonnet and shawl, and with a few words of broken thanks to the nurse, she left the house and turned towards home.

An hour after dark, the woman climbed up those stairs at home, and was let in to that top room, which looked so like, and so unlike too, the room she had left less than twenty-four hours ago.

As she threw aside her veil, her husband saw all at a glance.

"Yes—" she said, and then sank down in the chair and laid her head on her arms on the table.

The man broke into bitter reproaches, walking up and down the room pouring forth thick words of anguish, in which he laid the blame on his wife, as if she were not heart-broken enough already.

Presently the woman raised her head, and throwing off her shawl and bonnet, she went to the corner and lifted from the bed a little child, wrapping it in a blanket and sitting down by the fire with it on her lap.

"How's he been?" she asked briefly.

The man, who had been watching her movements and gradually ceasing to rage, now mumbled something about "very poorly," and without any more words went down-stairs, and shut himself into the room they occupied there.

The woman proceeded to feed and wash the little invalid in unbroken silence. But as she did so, the first tears she had shed since Johnnie died fell down her cheeks, and dropped on to the soft golden curls of the little boy.

"Oh, Johnnie, Johnnie!" she whispered at last. "How could I have promised you what I did? I shall never, never be able to keep it!"

And still, as she tended the little one, her tears dropped down on his golden hair as she remembered Johnnie's beseeching words—

"He's' got a mother too!"



## CHAPTER XIX.

### ROSE GUESSES SOMETHING.

"HERE is a letter from Gertrude," said Otto, walking into his sister-in-law's pleasant sitting-room one evening.

"That is always welcome. And so are you," answered Rose, looking up from her work.

Otto smiled slightly. He looked worn, and after the first flush caused by his brisk walk into Camptown had subsided, he seemed to become paler than his observant sister had ever seen him.

"Sit down," she said, putting aside her work, and stirring the fire into a blaze; "have you come to tea?"

"If you will have me."

"Willingly indeed. Have you read Gertrude's letter, or is it private and particular?"

"It is not private, but all her letters are particular—"

"Yes. So, Otto, we will have her letter together before I ring for the tea; then we shall not be interrupted."

She settled herself in her chair near the lamp, and opened the sheets, proceeding to read out what Otto had already heard: all Gertrude's account of the overturned basket, with its mysterious little pair of shoes.

Rose drew her breath as she reached that part of it, and when she had put down the letter, she looked into the fire with an absorbed gaze, while she seemed to forget Otto's presence altogether.

"Strange!" she murmured. "Otto, did it give you a queer feeling when you read that?"

"We are apt to fancy every little trifle may bear upon little Lester," he said softly, "but this seems too unlikely. Do not build upon it, dear Rose."

"I know I am too ready to do so," she answered sadly, "but—"

Still she looked into the fire in deep thought.

"Otto," she exclaimed, "I must go and call at that house!"

"They would not admit you."

"Do you think so? At any rate, I should like try. Oh, if I could have seen those little slippers! I should have known them anywhere."

She rose from her seat, and began pacing to and fro in the little room, her sweet, calm face looking worried and anxious.

"If—supposing, Otto, that man were afraid of what his basket had revealed, and were to move away as they did from Blank  
—"

"But, dear Rose, this may have nothing to do with them at all!"

"But then it may—"

She sat down again, looking troubled, her hands lying listlessly in her lap, her brow full of lines.

"God is our Refuge and Strength, a very present help in trouble," said Otto. "Perhaps, Rose, He is leading us along, though we cannot see the way."

"But it is so hard to trust in the dark—"

"His road will lead to the light," said Otto; "there are no 'blind thoroughfares' with our Father, Rose!"

She looked up quickly. "'No' blind thoroughfares, Otto!" she answered, significantly, throwing off her own care as she so often did, in order to comfort another. "You must remember that, as well as I."

He flushed a deep red, but his eyes looked frankly into hers nevertheless.

"I do not forget it," he said quietly, "but I have had a long spell in the dark."

"You have," she answered.

After that there was silence, till, suddenly bethinking herself, she rang the bell, and began to busy herself in preparation for tea, taking some cake from the sideboard, and putting the caddy on the table.

When the maid had left the room, and they sat down to their meal, just those two, Rose began—

"Then you do not advise my going off to see Gertrude?"

"I cannot advise anything," said Otto, "but if you think it likely, it might be worth trying."

"I feel as if I must, Otto."

Again there was silence. She was planning when she could go, and what might be the consequences. He was wishing with a great longing that he could go too, and in his thoughts was almost forgetting little Lester altogether.

At last, their eyes met, and something in her brother-in-law's made Rose say gently—

"Otto, I hope it will all come right some day."

She was referring to his thoughts, not to her own.

Again, he coloured vividly, rising to go.

"So soon?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes, I only came over to bring you that letter." Then, as he stood in the doorway, he added abruptly: "Rose, I see you have guessed my secret. I never knew till she was gone that I could feel so much—and with my poverty and all, it is so hopeless."

"Nothing is hopeless when we look above," she said.

And when he was gone, she sat down again and took the lesson home to her own heart. And her thoughts shaped themselves into these words—

"With God nothing shall be impossible."



## CHAPTER XX.

### UP THE CHIMNEY.

"LET me look at it!" exclaimed Randall, pushing Hugh aside, and standing on tiptoe to reach the mantel-piece.

"You mustn't. I ought not to have touched it," said Hugh eagerly. "Let it alone, I tell you; mother would not like us to touch her letters."

"It isn't a letter, it's a bank-note, and I mean to look at it, whatever you say—"

Hugh put his hand upon the object of their dispute, to protect it from further molestation, while Randall, with a sudden movement, caught it from under his brother's hand, and then in his eagerness dropped it.

It fluttered down, down, down; both boys made a dash at it, but the draught from the blazing fire was too strong—it eluded their grasp, and quietly floated into the midst of the flames, where it caught fire, and went crackling up the chimney.

There was a moment's silence, while both children stood spell-bound.

At length Randall found his voice, though it was choking with anger and dismay, and he exclaimed—"You did it! It was your fault!"

"Oh, Randall!" said Hugh, turning white.

"You did! I shall tell mother so! It was all your doing—"

He ran from the room, and Hugh could hear his voice explaining and protesting, and his mother's tone of vexation as she realized her loss. Then he heard steps approaching, and they both came in.

"I was in the arm-chair," said Randall, "and he was holding it there, on the hearth-rug, and then he dropped it, and it blew into the fire—"

"Oh, Randall!" began Hugh, in a despairing tone. "It wasn't a bit so, mother! I was telling Randall not to touch it, and he would try to, and he snatched it from me, and then—I don't know how—it got burned."

Mrs. Shaddock looked from one to the other.

"Which' did it?" she asked angrily.

"It was Hugh," said Randall; "I was quite away from him, and I saw it in his hand."

"Randall let it fall in the fire," said Hugh steadily, his face white even to his lips, and his hands clenched together till they ached.

"I don't believe it," said Mrs. Shaddock. "Don't you hear your brother was sitting in the arm-chair, so it could not have been his fault. Here is a whole five pounds gone, and you shall have no Christmas presents at all, Hugh for being so careless, and then trying to put it on your brother. Do not let me have another word on the subject. I do not know what your father will say."

Mrs. Shaddock left the room in great displeasure, and the two boys stood looking at each other.

"Now, cry-baby, go and tell it all to nurse," said Randall, shaking his yellow mane defiantly. "I know it was your fault, so I don't care."

Hugh slowly left the room, his heart stinging with the pain of his little brother's taunts.

Soon his father would be back from town, and then he pictured the fresh investigation of the whole matter, and the fresh disgrace, and perhaps punishment, which would fall upon him. It was not the first time that Randall's selfishness and want of truth had got him into dire trouble, and he was too sensitive, and too little respected, to fight for himself.

He laid himself down on the nursery hearth-rug to think it all over, and remained like that till the gong sounded for tea, and he must go down.

Mr. Shaddock had come in, and Gertrude and his sisters had returned from a lecture they had been attending. Everybody was present, as Hugh, pale and dark-eyed, walked into the room.

"You need not come here," said his father, looking up. "Tell nurse to give you your tea up-stairs, and put you to bed. Five-pound notes are not to be burned with impunity."

Hugh said nothing. He went slowly up to the nursery, and sat down dejectedly on a chair. Nurse had heard the account from Randall, and knew all about it, or at any rate, so much as could be gathered from one side.

"I expect I shall be caned," said Hugh at length, "and it was Randall who did it from beginning to end."

"Then never mind, dear," said nurse gently.

If there was one thing that nurse found hard in her comfortable place, it was that Hugh was often severely punished, while Randall got off free.

But Hugh would not be comforted. He ate no tea, and crept into bed, utterly crushed.

As he lay there in the darkness, above the fear of punishment, above the threat of no Christmas presents, above the misery of being wronged, came over him a greater misery still. For while he knew that every word Randall had said was false, and that the burning of the note was entirely Randall's doing, yet in his inmost heart he felt he had been the one to touch it first, and this fault he had not acknowledged.

He could not do it! That was his first and strongest feeling. Nothing on earth could make him volunteer that which would partly justify all their displeasure. He had "not" burned the note, there it must rest. That was his ultimatum.

But to those who are Christ's, a still small voice comes; the Shepherd's hand is stretched out to restore the soul, and lead it in the paths of righteousness.

A sudden thought came to poor little Hugh, and he looked up above the misery and despair which had seized him. "Oh, help me to do right, by Thy mighty power," he whispered. "I can't do it by myself—do help me, Lord Jesus."



## CHAPTER XXI.

### BY THE NURSERY FIRE.

STRENGTHENED with a new strength, Hugh sat up in bed, and considered what he ought to do.

Truth and falsehood were strangely mixed up in his mind. But of one thing he was certain, he had not told any one the whole truth.

Great as was his fear of punishment, his fear of offending his God and King was greater. What therefore ought he to do?

Just at this moment his father's step was heard crossing the nursery.

"I am going to put a stop to this deception," he said to the nurse. "If he had said boldly that he had done it and was sorry, I would have excused him, but to make it worse by a lie—"

"Oh, sir!" interrupted the nurse earnestly. "Do ask him to explain it—indeed there may be some mistake. Master Hugh is so good and straight and little Master Randall—you know, sir, in the heat of things children do not always see quite how it is. Please, sir, do wait till we can find out more about it!"

Little shivering Hugh could hear his father turn towards the fire-place, and for a moment, he breathed more freely. But, even then, after what his father had said, punishment must follow, no matter what he might confess. Though he had, indeed, not been the one who had burned the note, his father had in his estimation described him accurately when he had accused him of a lie. If he had not told one, he had acted one.

Then he heard—"Well, nurse, I do not mind waiting, of course, for I respect your opinion very much, as you have been with the children so long. But if it turns out to be as I think it is, nothing shall come between Hugh and his punishment. I cannot make my children all I would, but untruth shall not pass unreproved."

Nurse murmured some words of thanks and he seemed to be turning away.

Hugh sprang out of bed, and without waiting for his courage to ebb, he rushed into the nursery.

"Father!" he said.

"Well?" said Mr. Shaddock, turning round, rather coldly.

"Father—will you hear all about it—will you hear about it before you punish me?"

Mr. Shaddock came back to the fire-place and sat down. Something in the boy's face touched him more than he had ever felt touched before.

"It was not my fault about the note—but—"

"I did not come back to hear you say that—" said Mr. Shaddock.

"No, but I was going to tell you all about it. It was my fault, because I touched the note first, and said to Randall that it was such a dirty old thing to be worth so much. But it was quite safe on the mantel-shelf again, and Randall would touch it. And I tried to prevent him by putting down my hand on it, and then he snatched it and it fell into the fire."

Whether the child's eyes convinced his father, or whether the story bore the impress of truth, Mr. Shaddock felt that he knew the whole.

There was a silence while he thought it all over.

"Why did you not tell this to your mother?" he asked, at length.

"I did try to, but—she did not understand."

There was another pause.

"Did you tell her all this?" asked his father, opening his arm to invite the little boy within it.

Hugh thought of Randall's overbearing clamour and was silent.

"Did you?" persisted Mr. Shaddock.

"I tried to—" Hugh's eyes looked appealingly in his father's face, but he said no more.

"I see. Now, my boy, go back to your bed. I am glad that you have told me."

But Hugh hesitated. Never before had he stood like that within his father's arm; it was hard to go out from it, and yet he must.

"Father," he said, gently and bravely, "are you not going to punish me? I would rather get it over, and then, perhaps, you will forgive me?"

Mr. Shaddock looked down upon him wonderingly. "Forgiveness does not depend upon punishment," he said, slowly, "but upon—other things."

"But I deserve what you said," answered Hugh, "because I 'did' not tell all the truth."

In that five minutes Mr. Shaddock had learned a great lesson. He had never thought of "forgiving" his little son. He had considered it his duty to punish him, and there the matter would end. Now he was asked for forgiveness!

What had he to do with forgiveness?

Hugh's eyes were still fixed upon him inquiringly his colour going and coming.

"I freely forgive you, my boy," he answered then; "God bless you."

Hugh flung his arms round his father's neck, and was inclosed in an embrace such as he had never had before.

Mr. Shaddock rose then, and leading his child back to his bed, kissed him, and went slowly down-stairs.

"I doubt if I could have done such a thing myself," was his mental comment. And all the evening afterwards, those words which he had heard so often in church, but had never heeded before, seemed to sound in his ears—

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered."



## CHAPTER XXII. NO THOROUGHFARE.

"THERE is a lady down-stairs waiting to see you, Miss Ashlyn," said Mollie, putting her head in at the door of the schoolroom one morning, and then withdrawing it without waiting to receive any answer.

"For me?" exclaimed Gertrude, colouring with surprise. "I do not know anybody here."

"Go down and see," said Randall. "I dare say it's some old fogey! Our last governess had some of those sort to see her."

If Gertrude had not blushed before, she blushed now. Suppose it should be her mother whom Randall had called by such a name?

"You are very rude," she said coldly, turning to him ere she left the room. "Do not move till I come back. I will at any rate not be long."

She ran down-stairs, her heart beating. Could it be her mother? But she would never have come unless something had been the matter!

She had not long to be in doubt. As she opened the door, a white-haired lady indeed sat near the window. But the beautiful complexion and soft, dark eyes belonged to no one else than her sister Rose!

In a moment they were clasped in each other's arms, and then Rose in rather an agitated way began to explain about the basket, and the old man, and the Strange House, and the little slippers.

At mention of these, Gertrude turned pale.

"Rose!" she exclaimed. "That is what has been haunting me ever since. I could not make it out!"

"That makes it more necessary than ever for me to do my utmost to find out if my child is really—"

Rose broke off. She could not get through those words. The imagined nearness of her child, if as she fondly believed, he were in the next house, made her altogether frantic. She could hardly control herself.

"Dearest Rose," said Gertrude persuasively, "sit down quietly now, while I go and tell Mrs. Shaddock you are here, and speak to my children up-stairs. I am sure they will be interested in it all, and Mrs. Shaddock will perhaps advise us as to what is best to be done."

Rose sat down obediently, though she glanced out of the window at every passer-by with such anxiety, that Gertrude feared she would not even allow her time to make her explanations, before she would want to be out of the door, and knocking at that Strange House which she thought contained her darling.

However, Gertrude hastened to the schoolroom to beg Daisy and Randall to amuse themselves with a book till her return, and then she sought Mrs. Shaddock, who was busy with Mollie in the dining-room writing invitations for an "At Home" the next week.

The explanations were soon made, and Mrs. Shaddock went into the other room to make acquaintance with Mrs. Leigh, and in her hospitable way to beg her to use her house as if it were her own.

Rose's tearful eyes were a grateful answer enough.

"I am going to the house to see if I can find out anything," said Rose, rising. "You cannot wonder that I dare not delay after my sad experiences!"

They let her go, and Gertrude went back to the schoolroom to tell Daisy about it, and to wait her sister's return. Rose had begged them not to accompany her or be seen outside.

Meanwhile with trembling steps, growing more firm as she went along, Rose tried to remember Otto's words of there being no "blind streets" in God's paths, and so gathered courage as she leaned on Him who is mighty.

But her repeated knocks at the door brought no answer, and after she had stood there a whole quarter of an hour, she began to despair at last.

She ceased knocking and ringing, and then could bear the strokes of a spade in the back garden.

She went to the side gate and shook it, and after some time an elderly man came shuffling up the path and approached the green lattice-work fence.

"Does Mrs. Swift live here?" said Rose as boldly as she could, her heart beating.

"My name's Brown," said the man surlily.

"Could I speak to your wife?" asked Rose, looking earnestly in his face.

"I'm alone," answered the man with increased surliness. "What's the good of asking me to see my wife? She went away from me a long time ago,—and, as I tell you, I'm all alone."

He began to turn towards his garden again.

"Oh, please!" implored Rose. "Would you tell me if you ever lived at Blank—?"

A startled look, despite an evident effort, overspread the man's face.

"No, I never did!" he answered heartily enough. "You never heard of a Mrs. Swift there, a lodging-house keeper, with one little boy?"

Did Rose fancy a spasm passed across the haggard face before her? It was only for an instant.

"Didn't I tell you," he asked roughly, "that I was never at the place? How is it likely I should know any one there? Why do you come here hindering me at my work?"

He left her abruptly, and Rose stood baffled.

"Oh, please!" she called in her soft, musical voice, which must have reached him well enough. "Please do come and talk to me a little while!"

But the man crunched over the gravel unheedingly, and took up his spade within sight of her, and so dug and dug persistently till, tired out, and fearing she was ridiculous, Rose turned back to the Shaddocks' house, feeling that indeed this had been "No thoroughfare" in good earnest.



## CHAPTER XXIII.

### A HINDRANCE.

"I THOUGHT—I hoped," sobbed poor Rose, "that—at last—my waiting time was over, and I—might be going to find my little Lester—if it were God's will."

"And the worst is," she added, when she was calmer and was sitting in Gertrude's bedroom, "the worst is, Gertrude, if there should be anything wrong, they will move away at once."

"Yes," said Gertrude, kneeling down by her and laying her head on her sister's shoulder, "but then—even supposing all that, if God has allowed us to get on this track, and it is the right one, He will certainly make a way out of what seems so dark and difficult now."

The words quieted Rose's aching heart.

"I was almost forgetting that in my disappointment! Dear Gertrude, you are a true comforter."

There was silence then, Rose reviewing all the strong consolation which she felt at the times when she remembered that her Father in heaven could work for her; while Gertrude realized, as never before, how precious were her dear ones at home, and felt it would certainly break her heart to see Rose go away and leave her behind.

A summons to dinner interrupted these thoughts.

"How truly kind Mrs. Shaddock is!" said Rose, as they went down. "She has asked me to stay the night here, or as long as I like. I never saw strangers so kind."

At dinner, the plans for the afternoon were freely discussed, for till Rose could communicate with her lawyer and ask his advice, she could do nothing, "but enjoy herself," as Randall told Daisy.

"I have to go to Highgate to make two or three calls," said Mrs. Shaddock, "and shall drive. If Mrs. Leigh will come with me  
—"

"And me, mother?" interrupted Randall.

"Very well—and you—the rest can walk and meet us there. Then you can show Mrs. Leigh the cemetery while I make my calls, and I will take her up at the lower gates at five o'clock. Miss Ashlyn, I know you like walking, do you not?"

This plan was hailed with applause by the children. For Mrs. Shaddock, if she took them a little jaunt in this way, was always very generous in her plans. And they knew that a pleasant tea at the best pastrycook's in Highgate would be in the programme, and that their mother would perhaps tell them to have a cab to bring them home.

So they set off in wild spirits, some time before their mother's carriage was ordered, and timed their arrival at the upper gates at Highgate Cemetery just as it came bowling along the road.

It stopped to put Mrs. Leigh down, and then Mrs. Shaddock beckoned Mollie to the window.

"Have a nice tea," she whispered, pressing some money into Mollie's hand, "and do not hurry. Mrs. Leigh says she would like to walk home with her sister. So either, of you girls, can come with me or walk home, which you like."

"Daisy can come then," said Mollie; "I would much rather stay with them."

The carriage drove on, and the party was left standing on the path.

"Which way are we to go?" asked Gertrude.

"I know!" exclaimed Randall. "Come along, Mrs. Leigh, I'll show you."

Mrs. Leigh, looking upon every little boy with the eyes of a bereaved mother, had longingly regarded little Randall as perhaps reminding her of her own six-year old child. But even if his bright colour and yellow hair might have done for little Lester's pink cheeks and golden curls, the defiant eyes and bold mien did not remind her of her tender darling, and no amount of imagination would turn Randall into a little Lester. She however took the child's hand, her fingers thrilling at the little fingers, and went forward with him in front, the rest following at leisure.

It was a glorious afternoon; the sunshine was perfect, and the fresh breeze and the autumn foliage were so entrancing that the children's spirits could hardly be kept within bounds in that quiet resting-place of the dead.

Several times, Gertrude had to warn them to be more moderate, till at last Randall said, "We always do just as we like here, Miss Ashlyn."

"Not if I am in charge," said Gertrude quietly.

"Let us go and look at what we call 'the catacombs,'" said Randall. "If you peep in, you can see the coffins all along!"

He went off with his sisters, and Gertrude and Rose were left alone.

"You have a handful with that little boy?" said Rose, looking after them.

"Yes," answered Gertrude, "he is my cross."

"Then, darling, he may yet be your 'crown'!" Rose answered tenderly.

Gertrude did not reply, but followed on the heels of her flock to see that they did not get into mischief.

By and by, they began to clamour for tea, and the party made their way out of the cemetery and wandered into the town, looking at shops as they went along, till Mollie exclaimed, "Miss Ashlyn, I 'must' buy that pattern; it is just what I have been wanting for ever so long."

Gertrude feared that it was getting late, and begged her to defer her purchase till after tea, but she would not hear of it. Then the shop was full, and they had to wait, so that when they finally reached the pastrycook's, the clock pointed to ten minutes to five.

"You will keep your mother waiting!" exclaimed Gertrude. "Daisy, dear, have something to eat, and let us hasten to meet her. I had no idea we should be so long in that shop."

The child took some cake and hurried back with Gertrude through the quiet cemetery, and arrived breathless, five minutes before the carriage came.

"What will they think has become of you?" asked Daisy, to whom the moments while they stood waiting seemed longer than they really were.

"I told them to have their tea and to go home without me if I did not come," said Gertrude.

And then the carriage came, and she left Daisy with her mother and retraced her steps back through the trees and flowers and graves.



## CHAPTER XXIV.

### AT THE GRAVE.

THE autumn afternoon was closing in, and but that Gertrude had noticed some men filling in a new-made grave as she went down, she would have feared that she might find the gates shut.

She walked as fast as she could, taking one of the narrower paths, and was almost within sight of the upper gates when her attention was arrested by a figure crouching over that very new-made grave which she had seen.

Her quick steps took her past before she had realized that there was some one who was in great need.

But what was it to her that a mourner should be weeping there? Were not all those graves dear to some hearts? And was this not one among many?

Still she could not go on and leave the drooping figure. Somehow there was an abandonment in the grief that made Gertrude feel she "could" not "pass by on the other side."

One moment she hesitated—then advanced softly across the grass, which had already in the dusk lost its greenness, and was now nothing but a carpet of deep shade beneath her feet.

She sat down on the ground beside the weeping woman and touched her hand.

"You are in great trouble," she said gently.

A moan was the only answer.

"Have you lost your husband?" asked Gertrude tenderly.

A decisive shake of the head.

"Then perhaps it is a child?" asked the soft voice again.

The woman turned away with a sudden sort of pang, but after a moment she said, as if in spite of herself—"My only one!"

"That must be terrible," said Gertrude, thinking of Rose, and trying to match this woman's grief with what she knew of her sister's.

The woman raised herself a little, but only to cover her head in her shawl more effectually, out of which her voice sounded far-off and thick.

"Could you tell me?" said Gertrude tenderly, thinking about her Lord and Master, and trying to picture "His" great love and sympathy, so that she might copy Him.

"Why do you care for a stranger?" flashed this woman from the depths of the shawl.

"Because I love the Lord Jesus," answered Gertrude, "and He wept at the grave."

"At the grave?" questioned the woman. "Whose grave?"

But before Gertrude could answer, she had flung herself round again, and ended in burying her face in her hands on the girl's lap, where she shook with a paroxysm of grief such as Gertrude had never imagined could be.

It was impossible to leave her, and yet what about those closing gates and the growing darkness?

Then Gertrude noticed to her intense relief that some men were spreading gravel near the entrance, and were rolling it backwards and forwards without apparently any signs of giving up.

So she turned her attention once more to the mourner, who was clasping her as if she were the only comfort left.

She whispered words of the love of Jesus, of His sympathy, of His ability to save to the uttermost, of His love for the little children. And as she went on, feeling her way as it were, she began to understand what a mighty Saviour she had for her own, and a great longing came over her for this poor soul who, evidently, was a stranger to His great love.

"I'm a wicked woman," groaned her listener at last. "You would not speak to me so if you guessed how wicked I have been."

"Jesus our Saviour came to save sinners," whispered Gertrude.

"That is what 'he' said," she exclaimed, her eyes raining down tears.

"Your little boy?"

"Yes; but—but he asked me to do two things, and I can't do either."

"He wanted you to come to Jesus?" asked Gertrude eagerly.

"Yes, but though I cannot do that, it was not the hardest thing. I promised him, and yet I am going to break my word!"

"Break your word to him?" asked Gertrude reproachfully. "You will not do that."

"I shall—simply because I never can do it! I thought I would when I promised, but I can't. No, I can't. Johnnie, it is of no use."

Again she wept hopelessly, while Gertrude trembled, she hardly knew why.

"Is it something you ought to tell?" asked Gertrude.

A movement of the woman's head seemed to acknowledge that it was.

"Then God will help you to tell it, if you ask Him."

"I have never asked Him anything. Yes, I have; I asked Him that Johnnie might not die, and He did not hear."

"Ask Him for this, and perhaps He will make the other plain to you by and by. The reason, I mean!"

"I know the reason!" said the woman bitterly. "It was because of my sin!"

"You do not know the reason. Perhaps the loving and merciful God could find no other way to show you your sin, and lead you to Himself to be forgiven."

There was a long silence, while the woman's thoughts chased each other through her torn heart.

Gertrude watched the men rolling the gravel; she heard their cheerful tones as they went backwards and forwards. Then she bent over the prostrate form once more.

"Dear friend," she whispered, "shall I pray that God will give you His mighty help to keep this promise?"

The woman pressed her hand, and Gertrude prayed a prayer, the earnestness of which had never perhaps passed her lips before.



## CHAPTER XXV.

### JOHNNIE'S JOKE.

"WOULD it help you to tell 'me'?" asked Gertrude, bending over the woman as she still knelt with her head buried in her lap.

She laid a tender hand on her head, and stroked her hair softly, wondering at herself that she could, and yet feeling an overwhelming pity in her heart. Was not she a sinner too, and did she not know that the seeds of all sorts of evil lurked in her own heart?

"A sinner saved!" she thought. And then she said aloud, "I have learned what it is to be forgiven myself, you know, and so I can sympathize."

"You have never done what I have," murmured the woman. "But—I do not know why, yet I trust you! I will, if I can, tell you about it. You will see then that I shall never be able to keep this promise."

"You will, if you believe that the dear God is able to help you. Oh, if only you would, from your heart, ask Him to forgive you—whatever it is—I am sure, after that you would be able to keep your promise."

The woman trembled, and after a minute or two's silence, she said in a low tone—

"I never meant to—not at first. But before I say a word more, you will promise me that you will never tell 'any one'?"

"No," said Gertrude; "I will keep your secret faithfully."

Then the woman went on almost beneath her breath—

"It was two years ago. I never meant to do it! I was as honest and straightforward a woman as you would find.

"We lived—no matter where. My husband was a steward on board one of the steamers going to and from China, and was not at home then. I settled down in a seaside place, and hired a house and furniture, and set up lodging-keeping.

"I had nobody but my Johnnie with me, and we were enough for each other.

"By and by there came a lady and a little boy—a dear little fellow."

She caught her breath for a moment with a sobbing sigh, and then went on in a low almost inaudible tone—

"His mother was obliged to go away to Scotland, and I took care of him while she was gone. One afternoon I was called into a neighbour's to help with some one who had got a bad scald, and the time ran away, and I was gone longer than I had ought to have been. I know that—I'd no business to have left him so long."

The woman wound her shawl round her face and wept bitterly.

Gertrude's heart was beating so fast that she felt choked, while she breathlessly listened to the tale which matched—yes, yes it did!—that dreadful one of her sister's.

Then a blank despair fell upon her. Why had she given that reckless promise not to tell any one? Ought she to hear the rest of the story and remain silent? And if she interrupted now, the secret might be gone for ever!

In this terrible crisis, Gertrude could but breathe in her heart a swift prayer for guidance and help to her unseen but ever-present Friend. Afterwards, she knew that it had been given, but now she could only trust.

Could this be indeed the clue to Rose's mystery? She knew not what to do, so she waited.

"When I came back," the woman went on at last, though her words were choked and broken, "Johnnie—my Johnnie—met me in the passage full of excitement.

"'I've had such a lark,' he said, in his cheerful little way.

"I went into the parlour (we had no lodgers just then) with my mind full of the scalded girl, and I said—

"'Where's the little one, Johnnie? I did not mean to be gone so long.'

"'Come up and see,' he said. And he led me up-stairs and opened one of the bedroom doors.

"I gave a great scream—I remember it all as if it had happened yesterday—for there before me was a great monster which Johnnie had dressed up for fun, with a big mask on and a candle behind it, shining out of the eyes. Of course it was only for a moment I was frightened, and I turned round to scold Johnnie about it, when I saw close to it the figure of the little boy I was taking care of, standing with his finger touching it.

"He was such a wonderfully timid child that my heart gave a great jump when I saw him first. But after all, I thought, he was less scared than I was.

"'Come along, dear,' I said, 'we will go down-stairs.'

"But the little fellow did not move. He went on touching the great monster that Johnnie had made, and took not the slightest notice of me.

"I went up to him and looked in his face.

"'Ain't you tired of this ugly thing?' I said. 'Johnnie hadn't ought to have done it. Come along, dear!'

"But though I took him up in my arms, he still looked with those startled big eyes, until I got him safe down into our parlour.

"When I got there, I expected him to 'come to,' and perhaps have a little cry. But oh, miss! How can I tell you my feelings when he just sat where I put him, or stood where I stood him, without taking any more notice than a doll.

"'Johnnie!' I said. 'What did you do?'

"Johnnie was terrified enough. 'I only told him to go up-stairs and see something pretty in your room,' he said.

"And did he go?"

"He was mighty afraid at first, and then he ran up all at once, very brave-like, and I thought there was no harm!" said Johnnie.

"And no more he did, miss; he loved the little fellow as much as I did. Only Johnnie was always one for those jokes; that's what it was."



## CHAPTER XXVI.

### FLIGHT.

GERTRUDE could hardly breathe, but she kept quiet, and the woman continued her narrative, still in the same dull, hopeless, heart-broken tone in which she had spoken all along.

"I did everything I could think of. I gave him a warm bath—I poured out prayers and tears—I did everything to bring him back, but to no avail.

"As to Johnnie, he hung over him too, and cried as I never wish to hear a child cry again; it wrings my heart now to think of it.

"All night we watched him, and kissed him, and coaxed him, but it was of no use! At last, Johnnie fell asleep, kneeling on the floor by us, but no sleep came to my eyes.

"Then I made my fatal mistake and committed a dreadful sin.

"When the morning sun crept in, and still those wide-open startled eyes gave no sign of intelligence, I made up my mind for flight.

"At first I only intended to gain time, perhaps to consult a doctor in London, or to try what change of air would do to restore him. But I did a dreadful thing—I robbed a mother of her child, and I prevented her doing what she might have done to repair the mischief.

"You will blame me—I know you must—I feel your knees trembling beneath me. But oh! No one who has not passed through it can conceive what I suffered then, and what I have suffered since!"

Gertrude's knees did tremble, but by a great effort she murmured some words of sympathy. While the woman raised her face to wipe from it the drops of perspiration which stood on her brow.

One thought crossed Gertrude's mind of what they would think if she did not arrive at the confectioner's, but she was reassured that they would conclude that she had been persuaded to drive home with Mrs. Shaddock, and till both parties arrived, each would think she was with the other. This woman's story would be enough excuse when once she got home!

"It was my terror of what would be done to Johnnie," the woman went on at length, "that made me fly. Ah! I had better have faced it all, ten thousand times! Better for myself, better for him. As to me, I have grown an old, broken-down woman; as to him—he lies here in the cold ground, and I shall never, never see him again!"

"He is gone to Jesus," whispered Gertrude in a broken voice; "if you seek Him too, you will meet your boy again."

She did not know how to articulate the words, and yet—still she thought of herself as a forgiven sinner, and must she not forgive too!

The woman seemed to listen.

"Oh, if I could!" she said, with a yearning cry.

"Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out," said Gertrude earnestly. And then she thought of the unfinished story, and how could she bear to speak of anything till that was told?

But had she not in that brief prayer asked her Heavenly Father to take it all in hand? And was she going to slight "His" work, which He had given her to do, in order to take what she thought the best road to finding little Lester?

"Those are the very words my Johnnie said!" exclaimed the woman, raising her face for the first time, and letting Gertrude gaze upon its haggard lines—at least upon so much of them as could be seen in the increasing darkness.

"In no wise cast out! Those are good words!"

She laid her head down again on the trembling knees, and did not speak for ever so long.

"Why are you so good to me?" she asked at last.

"Because I am so sorry for you," said Gertrude in a low tone.

"I'm not worthy to come to Him," the woman went on; "and yet—yet I think I must try. Johnnie said he'd been forgiven—and he said I should be. And oh, though you may not think it, from such a dreadful thing as I am, but if I could be forgiven by God, and know that the poor mother I robbed—"

She broke off and flung herself upon Johnnie's grave, and lay there with her face against the cold clay.

"Dear friend," said Gertrude kneeling down beside her, "go to Jesus now! Do not wait any longer. You will never be happy without Him; you will be at peace even in the midst of this dreadful sorrow, if only you have Him for your Saviour. Do not wait another moment."

And again repeating those words which have brought balm to thousands of hopeless hearts, Gertrude said, as Johnnie's nurse had done, "'Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.'"

Perhaps Johnnie's persuasion had prepared her, perhaps the week of anguish she had just passed had softened her heart; at any rate, the woman believed the loving promise and acted on it.

She "came" to Jesus, and found that she was not cast out! But, covered with the Atoning Blood, she was drawn into the circle of everlasting love!

"I've done it!" she whispered at length. "I've come, and He has not cast me out! Oh, I never saw such love!"

She rose from the ground, and taking Gertrude's hand, pointed towards the entrance, where the men were beginning to put away their tools.

"I shall never be able to thank you, miss," she said brokenly, "but if ever there was a grateful heart!—To think that I 'shall' see Johnnie again now! Oh, miss! I'm lost in joy and wonder. I cannot think that I am the same woman that I was an hour ago!"

Gertrude, amidst all the conflicting feelings of joy for this new-born soul, sorrow for her sister, and anxiety as to the future, could do nothing but weep.



## CHAPTER XXVII.

### A DARK RIDE.

THE woman, still holding her hand, led her to the gates.

"Dear miss," she said at last, "why do you cry? You, at any rate, ought to be very glad, for you have brought me, by your great kindness, what is worth the whole world to me! Why do you cry?"

Again Gertrude could do nothing but pray a silent momentary prayer, to be taught to say the right words.

"I am crying because I am glad for you; because I do not love our blessed Saviour half enough myself for all He has done for me. But I am crying, too, I think, because—because—I want you to tell me the rest about that poor little boy, and because I

want you to give him back to his mother."

The woman let go her hand suddenly, and there was a long pause. Their steps carried them through the gates into the dark road outside.

"You have asked a very hard thing," said the woman, slowly.

Gertrude was silent; her heart sank at the altered tone.

"And yet—" the woman went on, "and yet—I see that it will have to come to that; I saw it as I lay with my face on my Johnnie's grave. The moment I had come to Christ to have my sins forgiven, I promised Him that for His great love to me I would show that little bit of love to Him, and do it for His sake. Yes, what I could not do for even Johnnie's sake, I will do for Jesus!"

She clasped Gertrude's hand again, and covered it with kisses; while the poor girl, wholly overcome, sobbed convulsively.

"I will tell you the rest as we go along," whispered the woman.

"Where do you live?" asked Gertrude, when she could speak. "Shall we have a cab? I will drive you home if you will let me."

"It is a long way," said the woman. "I live at Hampstead."

At Hampstead! Gertrude started, and then she said quietly—

"We will go together then, and you will tell me on the way? I know you will be kind now. I too have something to tell you!"

They were quite silent till they were seated in the vehicle and driving down the long road that led from Highgate to Hampstead Heath.

None too long, however, as Gertrude knew, for all she wanted to hear.

The woman began of herself.

"Dear miss," she said, "I have made up my mind; so now there is nothing to do but to carry it out. For His great love, I'm going to have just a little love, and try to do right—at last."

"Tell me about the little boy!" whispered Gertrude.

"Yes, yes, but I must find his mother! That is the next step, no matter what it costs. Do you think she will have me imprisoned?"

"I should hope not—I should think not!" exclaimed Gertrude.

"Well, well, no matter now. I must find her; life is but short, and soon I shall see Jesus and Johnnie! I cannot look at things as I did; it is all new and wonderful. What was very dreadful does not seem so dreadful, and this world seems far-away, and heaven very near."

She looked up into the starry sky, and seemed lost in thought. Gertrude's touch recalled her.

"Yes," she said, as if taking up the thread with an effort, "I must tell you the rest.

"As I said, we tried everything we could possibly think of to bring the poor little dear back to his senses. Oh, it was a cruel, cruel trick, miss; you cannot say it more strongly than I did; but Johnnie did not mean to do harm. Never was a boy more bitterly sorry than my little Johnnie. I don't think he often had a happy moment after, till he died. Oh, tricks are dreadful things! This one has ruined my life, and Johnnie's, and—other lives too."

Again she broke off with a gasp. Gertrude noticed that she could hardly speak of little Lester without it.

"At last, my husband came home and found us hiding, as you may say, in a street in Bermondsey. He was dreadfully cut up about it, and wanted me to give the child back to his mother at once. But fear kept me from doing what was right, and I would not hear of it.

"At last, we decided we could not live where we were. The little one's health grew very poor—" (Gertrude gave a shiver of pain, but she kept silent)—"and so at last we decided to send Johnnie to school, and to take a house near Hampstead, where my husband could employ himself. He used to be head-gardener at a gentleman's place before he went as steward, so that was what he turned his hand to. The little one and I lived at the top of the house, and there he is now."

"Is he ill?" asked Gertrude, in a smothered voice, her heart sinking at what the answer might be.

"Very poorly," answered the woman, in a low tone; "very poorly indeed."

"If you could find his mother, would you let her see him?" asked Gertrude.

"Yes," said the woman slowly.

"May I help you to find her?"

"Ah, miss, that will be a job. You see, it's two years ago, and I only know her name, and the name of the place where she did live once—Camptown."

"I am sure I can help you if you will trust me," said Gertrude, trembling, "but what about my promise not to tell?"

The woman was silent for a moment. Already the cab had crossed the broad Heath, and was rattling down the steep town of Hampstead. They would be home in five minutes.

Then the woman took Gertrude's hand in hers again, and pressing it till it ached, she said, brokenly, "You may tell 'her,' if you can find her."



## CHAPTER XXVIII.

### ALMOST.

ON they drove, till the cab, as directed by the woman, turned up one of the openings leading from the main road, and at length stopped at the gate of a house, just as Gertrude had anticipated, next door to her own home.

All along the way, she had been questioning with herself what she ought to do, but she could not form any definite plan.

They got out, Gertrude paying the man, and then they paused and looked each other in the face, under the gas-lamp, Gertrude raising her eyes with an appealing look in them.

The woman caught both her hands as if terrified, and drew her nearer the light.

"Your face—something in your face brings back to me another face, which all these months I have fled from and dreaded to see."

"But you do not any longer?" said Gertrude, with quivering voice.

"I hardly know, dear miss. I owe you so much, but let me go in and have time to think! You seem—and yet it is impossible—as if you were some one belonging to that poor mother I have wronged, or else to be herself grown different!"

She trembled all over, and Gertrude led her into her own garden and up to her own door.

"May I come in too?" she asked, as the woman fumbled in her pocket for a key.

"No, no!" she answered, turning round suddenly. "I must speak to my husband. Not but what he will be glad—this has pretty near worn him out. But I do not think I can let you in!"

"Dear friend," said Gertrude, in an imploring tone, "if I go away now, you will not disappoint me afterwards, and refuse to see us if I find the little one's mother? You will remember then all we said and did at Johnnie's grave?"

"Yes, yes, I will," said the woman. "Now go and leave me." Then, suddenly altering her mind, the woman pulled her into the dim, fire-lighted kitchen, and struck a match.

"No, you are not his mother!" she said slowly.

"But," added Gertrude, "I am her sister. I never guessed it when you began to tell me. I thought you were just a stranger out in the wide world—some one who needed Jesus! But now—oh, you will not refuse to let me bring my sister to her lost darling! You will let me go and fetch her, that she may once more clasp him in her arms, as you clasped Johnnie only a week ago!"

The woman sank into a chair, and Gertrude knelt in front of her, pouring out entreaties, feeling as if in the woman's silence, little Lester were slipping away and away, just as she had grasped him.

Then she thought of her Unfailing Refuge. Why was she so anxious and dismayed? Would not He, who had brought her thus far, bring her to the end?

She buried her face in her hands in silent, earnest petition to Him who is ever near.

"Dear miss," said the woman softly, "did I not say that I would give him up?"

Gertrude looked in her face, and then she rose up from her knees, and bent her head to kiss the careworn cheek.

"Then I will bring her," was all she said. "Shall you come to the door if I ring there?"

"Yes," said the woman, "I'll come."

\* \* \* \*

In another two minutes Gertrude was standing in the Shaddocks' bright hall, with all the family crowding round her.

"Where have you been?" exclaimed Mollie.

"We have been so anxious about you," said Mrs. Shaddock.

"We stayed at the confectioner's till we were ashamed to stay any longer," said Rose.

"I expect you've had a spree!" said Randall.

While behind stood tall Conway with his rather supercilious look, Hugh and Daisy filling up the rest of the circle.

But Rose, more accustomed to Gertrude's ordinary aspect, saw something different in her sister's face.

And just as Mrs. Shaddock was saying, "How tired you must be! I hope you have not walked all the way," Rose drew close to her, and said—

"I am afraid you have been frightened. Is anything the matter?"

"I have met some one who told me a very sad story," said Gertrude, meeting her sister's eyes, where in a moment came a startled look.

"Who told you a sad story, dear Gertrude?" she asked breathlessly.

A silence fell upon the whole group. That something had happened, every one saw.

"You are worn out!" said Rose. "Come in here and tell us. Mrs. Shaddock, may I give my sister some tea?"

The rest followed the sisters into the dining-room, while Mollie poured out some tea, and Rose put Gertrude into an arm-chair.

"I want to tell you all!" she exclaimed, looking up at the eager faces, "but I am bound over to tell only one person at present. Dearest Rose! Can you bear to hear that I believe I have found a clue which will lead us to little Lester. But, Rose, darling, he is not very well—not very strong—"

Rose's eyes were like burning coals as they tried to take in the meaning of her sister's words.

"He is not—not dead?" she exclaimed.

"No—no, but ill. I must not say more. Oh, how I wish I could! But the woman will let me by and by. I feel sure. Dear Mrs. Shaddock, forgive me, but if I had made any objection to her terms, I might have lost little Lester altogether!"

"Do not be distressed on our account," said Mrs. Shaddock, heartily; "surely we can wait, when such a joy has come to you both!"

"Ah! But it is not all joy," said Gertrude, remembering what had to be told to that sorrowful mother, of the cruel trick and its consequences.

And then, looking up to thank Mrs. Shaddock, she found that they were all leaving the room, and she and Rose were alone.



## CHAPTER XXIX.

### AT LAST.

"GERTRUDE! Where is he?"

Left with her sister by the kind thought of their hostess, Gertrude tried hard to recover her firmness. To have such a joyful piece of news in her possession as that little Lester was found, and then to have to tell that poor mother that her darling had almost better be dead; how could she say it?

"Dearest Rose, it is a very sad story, and I want to prepare you for a great blow—and yet I cannot do it as I would."

"Oh, do not keep me in suspense!" exclaimed Rose. "Tell me the worst at once; I can bear anything better than this. If Lester is indeed found, what do I want more?"

"Rose," said Gertrude earnestly, "you will have a great wrong to forgive—a greater wrong than you can picture—and yet—you will forgive it when you realize the sorrow they have gone through."

But what was so plain to Gertrude was all an enigma to poor Rose. Her expectant look was so imploring that her sister knew not what to say.

"Tell me all," said Rose; "hide nothing."

"Little Lester is, I believe, found, dear Rose, but through—through a sad accident, his mind is affected."

"What?" exclaimed Rose, her eyes dilated with horror. "Where—where?"

"Very near us," said Gertrude tenderly. "If you think you can command yourself, and bear what has to be borne bravely, I will take you to him, Rose."

Her sister looked round mechanically for her bonnet, then left the room hurriedly to seek it.

Gertrude hastened to the drawing-room, where she found the whole family waiting, almost breathlessly, having heard the opening door, and Mrs. Leigh running up-stairs.

"I must hardly tell you a word," said Gertrude, "but I believe I have found her little boy. Do not ask me, for I may not answer! We will come back as soon as we can. Oh, how kind you all are!"

She heard her sister returning down-stairs, and with an apologetic look she joined her in the hall, and they left the house together.

"Where?" asked Rose, turning to her as they got to the gate. "Not—no, it is not next door, after all!"

"Rose," said Gertrude, taking her trembling hand, "I must not take you till you are calm. When we remember, that if we find him, it will be all our Father's doing, that ought to calm us."

Rose pressed her hand, and walked on with her slowly and steadily, entering the garden of the Strange House and walking up to the door without the agitation which had made Gertrude so anxious about the coming interview.

They rang the bell, and there was a long pause. Gertrude's heart almost failed her, lest the woman should repent her bargain. But then she thought of the earnest promise she had given; she thought again of her great Helper, and took courage.

"Will they let us in?" whispered Rose.

"I think so; she said she would."

"Who is she? Is it the landlady?"

"Yes, dearest! She has suffered terribly for what she did; you will pity her by and by."

"Ring again, Gertrude," said Rose. "How can I bear it?"

But even as she spoke the door opened, and the woman stood within, cold and silent.

"I have brought my sister," said Gertrude, putting her hand on her arm.

"Have you told her?" asked the woman abruptly.

"Some of it; I have not had time for all."

"Will she ever forgive me? Does she forgive me?"

"I am sure she will by and by. You remember she wants to see little Lester now; she has not seen him for two whole years."

The woman turned slowly, and holding the flickering candle in her hand, led the way up the uncarpeted stairs to the very top, where she went through an open door, the sisters following her with beating hearts.

"He is very poorly," said the woman, in a smothered voice, as she set the candle down and went to the little crib in the corner.

All was scrupulously clean. The coverlet as white as snow, the sheets fresh and spotless.

Rose took it all in, but as the woman drew aside the coverings, the little form brought to view was not what she had expected.

There were the bright golden curls lying on the pillow, but the little face which she had pictured day and night since she lost him was quite different and altered.

A tiny shrunken face now, with closed eyes.

"Lester!" said Rose, in the cooing tone one would use to a half-waking baby. "Lester, here is mother come back!"

The child stirred and opened his eyes dreamily.

"Will you come on my lap, Lester?" she said, bending over him and kissing his cheek lightly, thinking not of herself but of him. "Will you come, Lester?"

As she held out her arms, the child seemed to understand, and held out his. But before they reached her neck, they fell back weakly, and he remained with his eyes fixed on her face.

She raised him up tenderly, and lifted him to the fireside, her heart failing her as she perceived that he was nothing but skin and bone.

His little head lay on her breast. At last! At last! But not an answer could she get from his little pale lips, not a glance of intelligence from his quiet blue eyes.

Gertrude stood by, and the woman stood by, their tears dropping one after another unheeded down their cheeks, while Rose seemed to see nothing, hear nothing, besides her child. She rocked him backwards and forwards, she kissed him softly, she smoothed his silky hair, she held his emaciated hand in hers, and ever and anon she said, as if to herself, "Lord, I thank Thee—I thank Thee—that I have him again. My little Lester, my little Lester!"





## CHAPTER XXX.

### WRAPPED IN A CLOAK.

THE first time Rose appeared conscious of the presence of any one else in the room, was after what seemed to the woman and Gertrude a very long time.

She had been bending over her child examining his thin little limbs, seemingly trying to reconcile facts which were so contrary to her remembrance; apparently the joy of having him in her arms again had swept away all else.

At last she raised her eyes to the woman, and spoke to her for the first time, still with a far-away look that had no realization of what all the present circumstances implied. She had got her child, as yet that was everything.

"How long has he been ill like this?" she asked.

"Nearly two years," the woman replied, in a low tone.

"And I never knew," said Rose dreamily. "Gertrude, he ought to have a doctor."

"Yes," said Gertrude, quickly wiping away her tears, and coming nearer.

"Let us send for one," said Rose.

But then her eyes caught the woman's shrinking look, and for a moment there was a breathless pause.

"I see," said Rose slowly, rising with a dignified gesture. "My sister said I should have much to forgive. I did not understand her; I do not think I do now. But all I know is that I have my child again. I will take him away now. You have restored me my child, for that I thank you with all my heart. For whatever else, I pray God that I may forgive you when I understand it. To-night I can understand nothing."

She moved from her chair, holding little Lester easily in her arms, then looking round for some covering, she took from her sister's hand the cloak she had thrown off on her entrance into the room, and wrapped it tenderly round her child.

"But, dear Rose—" began Gertrude.

"Do not hinder me," she said pathetically. "I have got Lester, nothing else matters!"

She went swiftly to the door and began descending the stairs, the woman hastening to the landing to light her steps.

"Good-bye!" said Gertrude, pressing the woman's hand, as she quickly prepared to follow her sister. "I will come to see you to-morrow. Oh, thank you, thank you for letting me bring her! If you could only guess what we feel!"

"I'll love you for ever!" said the woman, weeping. "If I could do anything for you!"

"Would you do it if I asked you?" said Gertrude eagerly.

"Indeed, indeed I would!"

"Then let me tell just my nearest friends about this. If you would do that, it would be the kindest thing you could do now."

"To let it be in the papers to-morrow morning," said the woman. "I can't do that."

"No—no, indeed; only ourselves. Oh, do let me!"

For a moment there was a pause, then the woman let go her hand suddenly, and set the candle down on a box.

They could hear Rose's steps had reached the hall, and Gertrude must go.

"I owe you everything—everything; you may do what you like! I know you will do nothing but what is right."

She turned into the desolate room, and Gertrude sped down-stairs.

There stood Rose, leaning against the banisters for support.

"How can we get out?" she asked hurriedly. "She will not stop us, will she?"

"I do not think so—oh no. But see, I believe we can open this from the inside."

While she fumbled at the lock with trembling fingers, they heard steps coming down the stairs, and saw the flickering light of a candle drawing nearer and nearer.

"Oh, thank you!" exclaimed Gertrude, when the woman turned the last corner. "We do not know how to open this."

The woman undid the fastenings in silence, but ere she opened the door, she turned to Rose with an appealing glance.

"It's too soon to ask you, even if you ever can. But, ma'am, if ever you are able to say the word 'forgive,' it would be the most blessed word that my sad heart could hear. I don't ask you for it to-day, but if ever you can—"

Rose looked up in the woman's eyes, then she looked on the little form in her arms which she was clasping to her bosom so tenderly.

"I did love him and do all I could for him," whispered the woman; "all but giving him back to you,—and now you've got him."

"Yes, I have got him," said Rose, still looking into those sorrowful eyes; "and I—" She waited as if thinking how far her words might be true, then added impulsively, "If it will comfort you, if it will show my thankfulness to my Lord who has heard my prayer, I will say it now—I do, yes, I do forgive you!"

Then she turned and went through the hall door and stood out under the starlight with her burden in her arms. The door closed behind them, shutting in a sound of weeping, and then the sisters paused, looking at each other.

"Hasten to Mrs. Shaddock's," exclaimed Rose, as if waking up to her natural self. "Ask her if I may bring Lester in, but I know I may. I must, till we can decide. I am sure they will not refuse."

They hurried on, and in another minute were standing once more in the lighted hall, with that muffled bundle in the agitated mother's aching arms.





## CHAPTER XXXI.

### ANOTHER PROMISE.

AT the slight bustle of their arrival, Mrs. Shaddock came to the dining-room door, and when she saw them, she exclaimed joyfully—

"You have never got him?"

But Rose's face was an answer, while Gertrude said, in a low, broken voice, which they would hardly have known to be hers, "We have got the shadow of what he was."

Mrs. Shaddock said not another word, but led Rose into the bright warm dining-room, placing her in an arm-chair, the rest following in silence.

Mr. Shaddock had returned from town, and when Gertrude saw him, she went up to him at once.

"Mr. Shaddock, it is a terrible story, but if I tell it to you, no indignation—nothing—can justify any one in making the thing known without our permission. We have only got our darling back on those terms."

She looked in his face appealingly. What if some stranger, who was bound by no promise, should take the matter up?

"You may trust me, but what has happened?" asked Mr. Shaddock.

While the rest gathered round Mrs. Leigh, too anxious to see her little boy to care, just then, to ask any questions.

Gertrude gave him a few particulars, and then both followed the others to where Rose sat caressing her little boy, and trying to coax him to reply to her endearments.

"'Why' does he not speak to me?" she asked at last piteously, meeting Gertrude's eyes.

"He has been frightened," said her sister gently; "perhaps if we have first-rate advice—"

"Frightened?" asked Rose. "Who—who could be so cruel—not Mrs. Swift?"

"No, dear Rose; it was a playful trick of her poor little boy."

"Poor?" echoed Rose sternly. "No wonder she asked me to forgive her!"

"And you did, darling," said Gertrude, kneeling down by her and smoothing Lester's golden curls. "You will not take it back now! It was not Mrs. Swift's fault—not that—"

"But Johnnie—that was his name, I remember now—where is Johnnie, who frightened my little Lester?" She laid her hand on Gertrude's shoulder, as if to impress her words.

And Gertrude, just fresh from Johnnie's grave and the woman's grief and repentance, could find no voice to answer. She only looked in little Lester's face and tried to think of suitable words.

"Where is he?" reiterated Rose.

"He is dead."

"Dead!"

"I have been at his grave to-night," said Gertrude. "If poor little broken-hearted Johnnie had not been dead, nothing on earth would have drawn your secret from the woman's lips. Little dead Johnnie has given you back your child!"

Rose's eyes fell, and as her glance once more rested on her child, the hard look which had for a moment clouded her sweet face passed away.

"Oh, forgive me!" she said, bending down to her child's face. "And little Johnnie is dead, and I have you still—"

Mr. and Mrs. Shaddock signed to the rest to follow them from the room, so that Mrs. Leigh might have time to recover from the shocks of the last hour. And Gertrude, seeing their kind intention, went with them, and was soon explaining all the circumstances to a breathless audience in the drawing-room.

"But the child looks dying," said Mrs. Shaddock at last. "Can nothing be done for it?"

"I hardly know," said Gertrude. "But, dear Mrs. Shaddock, I feel ashamed to trouble you—but my sister is not usually distracted like this—but if you could lend us a warm shawl, we will drive to the nearest hotel, and put him to bed. Can you tell me which to go to?—And may one of the maids get a cab?"

"You shall not go out again to-night!" exclaimed Mrs. Shaddock, appealing to her husband. "We could not allow it, could we?"

"No, indeed," he answered heartily.

"I will go and prepare his bed at once," said Mrs. Shaddock, rising.

"Oh, mother, let me help!" exclaimed Mollie.

"And you, Daisy," said Mrs. Shaddock, turning at the door, "go and ask cook to make a little bread-and-milk quickly, and carry it to Mrs. Leigh, for the little boy. Oh, to think we should have the pleasure of doing anything for such sufferers!"

Her eyes were tearful as she hastened away, and Gertrude thought that she had not given her credit for so much heart.

Daisy sped on her errand, and waited while the order was carried out. After two or three minutes she came up again, bearing the cup in her hand.

And just as she was hesitating at the dining-room door, Conway came across and opened it for her with an encouraging "Go in, Daisy; she won't bite your head off," which reassured her very much.

Mrs. Leigh sat in the same position as before, but she had thrown off her bonnet, and was now chafing her little boy's feet at the fire, while traces of tears were on her cheeks.

"This is for little Lester," said Daisy, advancing shyly; "perhaps it will help to make him warm."

"Thank you, dear," said Rose, taking it from her hand.

Daisy did not know whether she ought to withdraw, but Mrs. Leigh's next words showed that her presence was welcome.

"Hold the cup while I put some in his mouth, dear. He was never like this in the old days. But they frightened him—my dear little boy. By and by, when he begins to remember mother, he will not be frightened any more!"

She addressed the last words to the child, and he opened his quiet eyes and looked in her face. Then as he perceived the spoon held to him, he mechanically moved his mouth to receive the food.

"See, he understood me!" exclaimed Mrs. Leigh joyfully.



## CHAPTER XXXII.

### A VIGIL.

THE little one took but a few mouthfuls, and then seemed to tire of the food his mother was so eager to give him.

"He has not eaten much, has he?" she said to Daisy, who was looking on earnestly.

"Not very much," answered Daisy, "but, you see, it is all strange here. To-morrow, perhaps, he will know us better."

Mrs. Leigh seemed lost in thought. "Where is Gertrude?" she asked at last.

"She is helping mother and Mollie to get a bed for him. It is nearly ready now, I should think."

"I am afraid I ought not to let you take all this trouble," said Mrs. Leigh. "But—how can I bear to take him out in the cold?"

"Of course not," said Daisy simply. "Mother said so, and so did father."

"I am afraid he is very ill, dear?" she asked appealingly. "His feet are so thin, and his hands—and so he is all over; nothing is the same but his eyes and his hair, and even his eyes do not look at me as they used."

Daisy could not answer. She had heard a few words of Gertrude's description, and she feared, from her mother's looks of dismay, that the child's condition was far more serious than Mrs. Leigh supposed.

"Shall I fetch Miss Ashlyn?" she asked in reply.

"Ah, do, please, dear!" said Mrs. Leigh.

She busied herself over her child again till Gertrude came in.

"Ought we not to telegraph to Fritz?" she asked at once. "Poor Fritz! To think he does not know!"

"I have been thinking so," said Gertrude. "What shall we say, Rose?"

"Tell him he is found!" said Rose.

"Shall I say he is ill?" questioned Gertrude, gently.

"It is hardly worth while," answered Rose; "he will come directly, if he can."

Gertrude was silent. She could not let her brother-in-law have the joy without suspecting the sorrow. So she went back to Mr. Shaddock.

"My sister does not seem to take it in yet," she said, after she had told him about the telegram, "but I must tell Mr. Leigh cautiously—he is not very strong. I fear it will be a dreadful shock."

So together they framed a message which they hoped would convey their meaning, and then Gertrude went back to her sister to say that the room which had been prepared for her was ready.

Rose got up at once, and with her precious charge followed her sister up-stairs.

On the landing stood Mrs. Shaddock and Mollie, who led the way into the spare room, where a bright fire gleamed.

"We have warmed the bed," said Mrs. Shaddock. "Dear little man, I long for him to be in it!"

Rose accepted it all in silence, laying her little boy in the soft, white sheets, and hovering over him in the luxury of having him once more to tend.

"Lester!" she said, in her soft tone. "Shall I say your little prayer as I used?"

She knelt down by the bed, and laid her cheek upon his little hand, whispering the childish requests which for two long years had not been on her lips, and then, kissing him tenderly, she covered him up and moved towards the fire.

Mrs. Shaddock and Gertrude were standing there waiting; Mollie had gone behind the curtain, and was crying quietly, as if her heart would break.

"I think I will go to bed," said Mrs. Leigh, dreamily. "I feel tired, somehow. Will you think me very ungrateful if I retire now?"

"Not at all," said Mrs. Shaddock; "your sister will help you, and will bring you some tea if you will allow her."

"Will you kiss me?" asked Rose. "I do not know how to thank you. To-morrow I hope I may be able."

Mrs. Shaddock bent over her and gave her the desired kiss, and then quickly left the room, signing to Mollie to come too.

And thus the eventful day closed for the poor young mother.

She laid her head on the soft pillow, put her hand out to her child's, and fell at once into a profound and dreamless slumber.

It was midnight when the striking of the clock on the staircase roused her with its unaccustomed sound.

She sat up in bed, and saw Gertrude reading by the light of a shaded lamp beside the fire.

"Dear Gertrude!" she said, in a wondering tone. "Is it not very late?"

"Yes, dearest, but I am not tired. Do you want anything? See! Here is your supper all waiting for you. May I bring it to you?"

Rose took the plate in her hand. But after a moment or two she said, in her usual natural tone, "Gertrude, I seem as if I had been dreaming, but it is not a dream that I have my little Lester. And yet, Gertrude, I wish it could be a dream, that—that—all that has happened!"

She hid her face in her hands.

"Dearest Rose, He who has found our darling will help us to bear all His will. He will make some way of escape for us!"

"Ah, yes!" she said. "I know that. But oh, what will Fritz say when the little one does not know him? For me it does not so much matter, because I have him again. But poor Fritz—poor Fritz! Besides, I can trust my Lord even in this, but Fritz, he does not know what that means."

"Good will come out of it," said Gertrude; "this has been so wonderful that I am sure of that."

She went round the bed, and bent over the sleeping child.

"I think we ought to give him some more food, Rose. Mrs. Shaddock says he should be fed every two hours. It was for that I stayed up."



## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### "FRITZ IS COMING."

ROSE sprang out of bed at once. She had quite come back to her old self.

She threw her cloak round her, and went to her child's side.

She raised his head and again tenderly fed him. But though he opened his mouth obediently, he did not respond to her love and attentions in any other way.

Gertrude saw that now her sister was beginning to realize what in her joy at having her child again she had not noticed. But except for a little firm-set look about her sweet lips, she made no sign that as the shock passed away, so the certainty of continued sorrow grew upon her.

When the little one turned away his head from the food, his mother covered him up again and went back to the fire, Gertrude following in silence.

"Go to bed, darling!" said Rose, stroking her pale cheek tenderly. "I will sit up now."

"Not all the time? You will need your strength so much to-morrow."

"Yes," said Rose quietly, "I shall. But I must watch by him, Gertrude. Besides, I have to think what we must do."

"We need do nothing till we hear from Fritz."

"No—at least if you think these kind people will allow us to stay here till then."

"I am sure they will. Nothing could be more hearty than they have been."

"I shall rest here, dear Gertrude, till the morning; I shall have time to think. Go to bed now."

Early the next morning there was a knock at Gertrude's door, and she started up with a strange impression of not knowing where she was, or what had happened.

But in a moment it all came back to her. Lester was found! But—but—

"Miss Ashlyn," said Daisy's quiet little voice, "mother has sent me to call you; she thought perhaps you might not wake, as you sat up so late."

"Oh, thank you, dear!"

"Here is a telegram come—" said Daisy.

Just as she spoke, Mrs. Leigh came up from her room and entered behind her.

As Gertrude glanced at her, she saw that she was her quiet self.

She took the telegram in her hand, and stooping to kiss Daisy's upturned face, she said—

"Would you like to stay with Lester while I read this, dear?"

The child ran off joyfully, and Rose tore open the envelope. The words ran—

"'Shall be with you by six o'clock this evening.'"

"Fritz is coming! Oh, Gertrude!"

She stood silently holding the pink paper in her hand, as if in deep thought.

"He will come here then?" questioned Gertrude.

"Yes—I suppose you gave no other address. He will have started from Carlisle ere this, so it is of no use to telegraph back. Besides, I have no other address to give him."

"We will consult Mrs. Shaddock after breakfast," said Gertrude.

But no consultation was necessary. When Mrs. Leigh appeared in the dining-room, leaving Gertrude in charge of her little nephew, Mr. Shaddock came forward to meet her, and taking both her hands welcomed her heartily, telling her at once that they should not hear of her leaving the house for two or three days, in fact till her plans were quite formed, and that he should feel positively hurt if she and Mr. Leigh did not feel quite free to come and go as if the house were their own.

Rose turned white with emotion and tried to answer, but her quivering lips would not get out more than a very broken "thank you." And she sat down where they placed her, trying to recover herself, but feeling as if to have a good cry was the only thing she could do.

Mr. Shaddock seemed, however, quite to understand, and supplied her with an egg, while Mollie poured out some coffee, and the rest watched for opportunities of being of use.

"Where is Miss Ashlyn?" asked Hugh.

"She is sitting with Lester," said Mrs. Shaddock, "and Daisy shall take her some breakfast."

"Shall we have school to-day?" asked Randall. "I'm sure I hope not."

"No," answered his mother. "Miss Ashlyn will be busy with her sister."

"That's a good thing!" said Randall.

While Daisy looked shocked, and said reproachfully, "I am sure, Randall, you need not talk so, Miss Ashlyn makes school very interesting."

Mrs. Leigh looked up now. "Do not allow my being here to interrupt lessons," she entreated. "I cannot but accept your great kindness—but it would indeed be a pity to make any difference."

"Miss Ashlyn will say what she thinks best," suggested Mollie, which was decidedly nice of her, as she was longing to throw her influence into the scale of a holiday.

"Yes," assented Mrs. Shaddock; "we will ask her."

And when Gertrude was asked, as Mollie expected, she begged that lessons might proceed as usual for the morning, offering, however, to give a holiday in the afternoon if Mrs. Shaddock approved.

"Then we can sit with little Lester!" said Daisy.



## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### SET TO WORK.

IT seemed a long morning to all concerned, if the truth must be told, to all at any rate but Mrs. Leigh, who found absorbing employment in ministering to the wants of her darling.

At length school was over, and the children were released.

"Oh, may we go?" exclaimed Mollie. "I do want to see little Lester so much!"

Gertrude consented at once, hoping, however, that Randall would make himself an exception.

But he had no such intention; curiosity overcame everything else, and he ran on tiptoe with the others across the landing to Mrs. Leigh's room.

"Are we too many?" whispered Mollie, when, after her low tap, Mrs. Leigh came to the door.

"Come in, dears," was her ready response. "I know, after all your thoughtfulness for us, that you will be longing to see my little Lester."

The children advanced, Randall pushing in front of the others, so as to be able to see well; Hugh, who was kept at home by a cold, and was with the others, hardly getting a place at all.

"Come here, Hugh," said Gertrude softly; "this chair will bring you close to Lester's pillow. You can stand here."

The little boy looked up gratefully. Rose was uncovering her child, and showing them his bright, golden curls.

"Can't he be dressed?" asked Randall.

"He has no clothes," said Mrs. Leigh, smiling a little. Then her face resumed its quiet, grave expression as she added, "But I am afraid he has hardly strength just yet."

"We have heaps of Randall's clothes up-stairs," said Mollie. "I shall ask mother if he could not have some of those."

"Do not trouble her, thank you, dear," said Rose. "I can easily get some when I can go to a shop. He will do very well till the doctor has seen him."

Mrs. Shaddock, however, had been before any of them in her thought for the little stranger under her roof. She came in at the moment, followed by nurse bearing a heap of dainty clothes, which a few years ago had adorned her youngest boy.

"You are entirely welcome to these!" she exclaimed. "I have no use for them at all. I believe I ought to have given them away long ago, but you see I never have."

But when she bent over little Lester, her manner changed, and she added gently—"Perhaps it would be kinder not to disturb him with clothes and fussing at present. What do you think, nurse?"

Nurse was entirely agreed. "Let him be, ma'am, and give him as much nourishment as he is able to take," was her advice.

The little clothes were folded together in a drawer, and no more was said about them.

"Has he been out of bed yet?" asked Daisy shyly.

"Only to be washed. Oh, he is so thin!" answered his mother, looking up at Gertrude. "I feel as if I could hardly wait till Fritz comes."

"I am sure you must," said Gertrude, "but a few more hours will soon pass now, and perhaps Fritz may have some special doctor he wishes to consult."

So Gertrude left the children with her sister, and put on her hat to make her promised visit to Mrs. Swift at the Strange House.

She was quickly admitted, and the woman led the way into her kitchen without a word.

"I have come," said Gertrude.

"Yes, I knew you would. Have you any good news to tell me about the little boy? What does the doctor say?" she asked abruptly. She seemed as if she had strung herself up to ask those questions, for her lips looked dry and parched.

"Not yet," answered Gertrude. "We are waiting for his father."

The woman gave one of those gasps which Gertrude had noticed before, and then said hurriedly—

"It seems funny to have kept him so long myself without a doctor, and now to be sorry that you are even waiting a single day! And yet I am, miss. I'm afraid whether the little dear is not dying!"

Gertrude felt as if her blood grew cold to her finger-tips. But she answered after a moment quite calmly—

"I hope not—I trust not. Our Heavenly Father, who has so lovingly given him back to us, will lead us straight on now."

The woman glanced up with a faint smile. The first which she had seen on that woe-begone face, Gertrude thought.

"Ah! What a thing it is to have God to trust!" she exclaimed. "Dear miss! I believe if I had had my Saviour to go to two years ago, this would never have happened."

"I feel sure of that," answered Gertrude heartily. "Things will be different for you now, will they not?"

The smile faded, but the woman answered steadily—

"Yes, indeed, miss. But this is the last time you will see me. My husband says he cannot bear the house, and I am sure no more can I; so we have decided to go at once. You see, miss, we've got a little money coming in regularly, or we couldn't do it.

We shall go somewhere where I can get to and from Johnnie's grave. That's all I care about now."

Gertrude put her hand on the woman's arm gently.

"Time will soften your sorrow," she said tenderly, "but there is something better for you than time. Jesus will soften your sorrow—nay, has He not already?—And will give you something to do for Him."

"My working days are over," said the woman dejectedly; "I seem to have lived my life."

"Yes, so you have, your past life. Now it is the new life you have to live; the life by faith in the Son of God, who loved you and gave Himself for you!"

"Dear miss, I wish I could."

"Ask Him, and He will show you how."

"Now Johnnie and the little one are gone, I seem to have nothing to do!"

"But there is your husband. There is everything to do for him, is there not?"



## CHAPTER XXXV.

## OUTSIDE THE GREAT NORTHERN.

WHILE Gertrude was away, Mrs. Leigh was surrounded by her audience of young people, who did not know how time passed in their interest in the beautiful young mother and her little invalid.

"I cannot think how you can bear it all!" said Mollie, as they stood gazing at the little impassive face.

"Do you really want to know, Mollie?" asked Mrs. Leigh, taking the tall girl's hand in hers.

"Oh, I was only wondering. Some people can bear things better than others, I suppose."

Mollie drew her hand away a little shyly.

Mrs. Leigh did not reply, but continued to look down at her child thoughtfully.

"I don't believe it is that," said Hugh in an undertone to Daisy. "Mrs. Leigh looks as if a breath would blow her away; it is not that she is stronger than most people."

Daisy shook her head assentingly, but Rose had heard the remark, so she said—

"It would be very wrong of me to take the credit to myself, Daisy. I could not bear it at all if it were not for looking up from moment to moment to Jesus. He is my refuge; were it not for Him I should be distracted."

Hugh smiled brightly. In his own little difficulties he had found it the same. How wonderful it was that the Lord Jesus could be just the Friend for everybody!—he thought.

When Gertrude came in from the Strange House, a telegraph boy was at the door, and handed in an envelope as the maid opened to her.

"It is for my sister," she said, and ran up-stairs with it.

"Fritz wants one of us to meet him at Euston," said Rose, when she had read it. "I cannot leave Lester. Will you go, Gertrude? Do you think Mrs. Shaddock would spare you?"

"But he will be here half an hour after," objected Gertrude; "is it not almost a pity—"

"Perhaps he wishes to hear all particulars before he gets here," said Rose. "At any rate, he says, 'Will Gertrude meet me, or you?' It is evident he wants one of us."

So Mrs. Shaddock was again consulted. And soon Gertrude set off, Conway, who had just returned from school, volunteering to escort her if she wished.

But she rightly guessed that her brother-in-law would prefer to hear all the sad story without a stranger being there, so she went alone.

As she stood on the arrival platform of the great terminus, with the screaming whistles round her, the buzz of the coming and going trains, the roar of London outside, she felt as if the world of Hampstead and that quiet bedside were far-away and indistinct; as if she could hardly belong to both.

She wondered vaguely what the next few hours would bring to her and her sister; what Fritz would decide about his invalid child; how he would bear the shock of her intelligence; and while she was thinking all this, she was conscious that the porters, who had been waiting about, suddenly seemed to be alert, the cabs made a move to draw up at the other side of the platform, and when she looked down the dim lines, two great eyes seemed to come creeping towards her, and in a moment the long train from the north was in the station.

She stood back, almost bewildered, for in her quiet life at home she had never seen such confusion or bustle before.

Where was her brother-in-law? Had he not come after all? She looked hopelessly up and down the emptying carriages, but no Fritz was emerging from them, that she could see.

Then a hand was laid upon hers, and a voice said so like Fritz's that she thought it was his, and yet—no, it was not Fritz who said in that tone—

"Gertrude! At last! Did you think we had not come?"

"Otto!" she said.

And then Fritz came hurrying up, too, followed by a porter with two portmanteaus.

"I hoped you would come," said Fritz at once, "because Otto would have been so disappointed not to see you, and we must drop him at the Great Northern Hotel as we pass. I could not bring him on to Mrs. Shaddock's, could I?"

"You 'could,'" said Gertrude, watching the portmanteaus being thrown on to the cab, and wondering what she ought to say. "But if you have made arrangements otherwise, perhaps it would be better. But they are the kindest people I ever saw."

Otto was holding the cab door open; she got in, and in a moment they were off.

"Tell me all!" said Fritz. "I felt as if I must bear it before I saw him. What is it?—What has happened to him?"

Before Gertrude had said more than a few words, the cab drew up at the Great Northern, and Otto had come to his destination.

"I cannot say good-bye yet," he exclaimed. "Have my luggage put in here, Fritz, and order our rooms. I will go on to Hampstead and come back again by and by."

Fritz got out to give the desired order, and Gertrude and Otto looked after him.

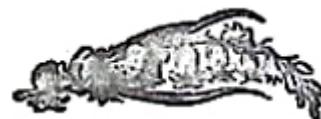
How well afterwards Gertrude remembered that ceaseless roar of omnibuses and cabs passing and repassing along the crowded street.

"Gertrude," said Otto's voice, "can we not manage to go somewhere together to-morrow? I have one day in Town, and I feel as if I could not go home again without seeing you?"

"I do not know, Otto. I cannot plan my own days now; already I feel I have run away from my pupils dreadfully."

"Bring them with you," he said hastily; "we will go to the Kensington Museum, or somewhere, to-morrow afternoon. There will be the doctor in the morning. Oh, Gertrude! If you only knew—"

Then Fritz came hurrying back and jumped into the cab, and they were off again.



## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### BY AND BY.

BY the time the cab arrived at Hampstead, Fritz knew the extent of his grief—knew that his only son would not be able to welcome his father or respond to his love. Otto would not enter, but wished Gertrude farewell when she left the cab, and had himself driven back in it to his hotel, where his brother intended to join him later in the evening.

Mrs. Shaddock met Mr. Leigh in the hall, and after a few words of kindly greeting, asked Gertrude to take her brother to his little boy's bedside.

She led the way up-stairs and opened her sister's door, herself passing on to her own chamber; she felt as if she could bear no more.

She did not know why, but the moment she was alone, she laid her head down on the window-sill and cried as if her heart would break. She thought she was crying over the sad scene that must be happening on the next floor; she pictured Rose's face as she uncovered their little Lester and showed what a shadow only was left of their bright darling; she pictured Fritz's anguish and indignation. But all the while, she wept with a nameless pain, as if for herself too, until she remembered that she would be expected down-stairs, and must not give way thus.

This thought roused her, so taking off her bonnet and putting on some little evening adornment, she hastened to the dining-room, where she knew the whole family were just collecting for their late tea.

On the stairs were her brother and sister, who explained that nurse had offered to stay with Lester, so they thought they would do well to join the family circle, and put aside their anxiety in deference to the kind wishes of their host and hostess.

At tea the merits of various physicians were discussed, Mr. Shaddock recommending one of whom he had heard at his office, who had treated an analogous case most successfully.

It was at last decided that Mr. Leigh should call in Harley Street on his way home to his hotel, and should if possible make an appointment for the morning with the physician, if he should advise little Lester's being brought to him.

"And what am I to tell Otto?" he asked at last, when he rose to go.

Gertrude had been dreading that question all the evening. How could she make Otto's proposition? And yet how could she refuse to do so?

"My brother came up from Rugby with me yesterday," said Mr. Leigh, turning to Mrs. Shaddock, "and asks if you will allow Gertrude and some of your young people to visit the South Kensington Museum with him. He has never seen the Natural History collection yet, and if they would like to come, he would be so pleased."

"I cannot come, because it is our 'at home' day," said Mollie. "Mother always wants me."

"Would you like to go, Daisy?" asked Gertrude.

"I should," said Randall; "it would be far nicer than school."

"Thank you—" answered Daisy, hesitating, "if—I should 'like' it very much; Hugh and I have always wanted to go there."

"I s'pose you wouldn't care to go without Hugh," said Randall, "but he ought not to miss school; he is always missing school for something or another!"

"Oh, Randall!" exclaimed Daisy. "It is not his fault that he is not strong."

Randall shrugged his little shoulders expressively; he was, however, too interested in the South Kensington plan to pursue the subject, so he asked—

"Will you take me, Miss Ashlyn?"

"Certainly, my dear, if your mother will let you go."

Hugh's eyes were fixed on his mother's face, while his father was watching him unobserved.

"To-morrow is your half-holiday, is it not, Hugh?" he asked.

Hugh started and coloured. "Oh, I should like to go," he exclaimed, hesitating, "if Daisy is going, and if Miss Ashlyn does not mind."

Randall was close to him, and nudged his arm now with a whispered comment, which, however, he did not hear.

"What did you say?" he asked, as he received a second nudge.

"Mother said you should have no treats nor anything because of your burning that five-pound note."

Hugh crimsoned, and then, catching his father's eye, he went to his side.

"Randall says I ought not to go because of that five-pound note."

"That is forgiven," answered his father quietly; "do not trouble about Randall, my boy."

Hugh raised his head, a light shining in his eyes.

Gertrude was rapidly arranging times and trains with her brother-in-law, as he was anxious to be off. Then he ran up-stairs once more to kiss his newly-found child, and with a grateful adieu to the rest, he was gone.

Rose remained with Lester; the boys were already busy down-stairs with their lessons; Daisy and Hugh hastened to their schoolroom to prepare theirs; and Gertrude, after a brief visit to her sister, sought them and settled down to lessons and work, feeling as if the last few days had been a dream.

When Daisy rose to say good-night, she put her hand on Gertrude's shoulder: "Miss Ashlyn, Randall will love you by and by."

"I hope so, dear."

"I'm awfully sorry he is so disagreeable—but indeed if you go on being kind, he will by and by."

"Yes, dear," she answered, "that is what I look for."



## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### A NEW THOUGHT.

IT was by the first post that Rose received a letter from her husband appointing to be with her at ten o'clock, bringing an easy carriage for their darling.

The whole household could think of nothing else, and now Randall's dainty clothes, which he had grown out of a year or two back, were brought out, and Lester was taken from the bed and carefully dressed in them.

Mrs. Leigh sat with him on her lap, her face very white and quiet, as each fresh thing done for her child made her realize more fully all he had lost.

He passively suffered them to do what they would with him. But by the time the little outside coat had been buttoned up, his head dropped on his mother's shoulder, and he was tired out.

Rose looked up at nurse beseechingly. "Ought I to have dressed him?" she asked anxiously.

"It is hard to say, ma'am," nurse answered, "but another time I would not trouble about these last things, a shawl over all would have done as well."

Then came the carriage, and Mr. Leigh was shut up in the dining-room with Mrs. Shaddock and Rose for what seemed a very long time, while Gertrude waited rather breathlessly up-stairs with the drooping child.

At last they came out, Mrs. Shaddock wiping her eyes, and Mr. and Mrs. Leigh hastening up the stairs to where Gertrude sat, holding little Lester on her knee.

In a moment more the young father came down carrying the little invalid, Rose and Gertrude following.

"I can never, never thank you," said Rose, taking Mrs. Shaddock's hand. "Some day I hope we may come back and be able to do so better than to-day!"

She nearly broke down, but, struggling for calmness, she bade a hasty adieu to the rest, and quickly got to the carriage, where already Fritz was seated.

Gertrude went to the carriage-door, and kissed her sister through the open window.

"Oh, how I wish you were going with me!" said Rose regretfully.

"I could not, dearest; they have been so kind already. We shall meet this afternoon."

"Yes, yes; good-bye till then."

The carriage moved away, and Gertrude turned back to the house, wishing intensely that she could have gone to the physician's with them.

Daisy and Mollie were waiting for her in the hall.

"Miss Ashlyn, do tell us what makes mother cry. Does the physician give any hope? Mother does nothing but cry."

"Go up-stairs, dears," answered Gertrude; "I will follow you in a moment. I expect your mother is rather upset with it all."

She really felt great compunction when she saw Mrs. Shaddock sitting with her face buried in her hands.

She advanced to her side and sat down by her, quietly drawing her white shawl over her shoulders, and said, in a soothing, comforting tone—

"They got off very comfortably, thanks to all your kindness, dear Mrs. Shaddock. I hope that I may bring you a better account this evening."

"Oh, that poor little mother's face!" said Mrs. Shaddock.

"Rose?" questioned Gertrude.

"Yes—if you could have seen her face when her husband was telling her what Dr. Blank said."

"Did he give any opinion?" asked Gertrude eagerly.

"Not on this case, of course," said Mrs. Shaddock, looking up, "but he gave a hope."

Gertrude did not reply; this was almost more than she had dared to expect.

"I could have wished that they might return here," Mrs. Shaddock went on, "but I can see that the distance is great, and that it will be well to be near Dr. Blank while things are not quite decided."

Gertrude expressed again her earnest thanks for their hospitality, and then proposed that she should seek her pupils, and take up the lessons which had been so interrupted.

"Do not worry over that," said Mrs. Shaddock; "their father says all this is the best education they could have."

"Does he?" said Gertrude. "How very kind, and what a nice thought!"

She had risen to go to her pupils, but Mrs. Shaddock seemed as if she could not bear to let her go.

"Miss Ashlyn—my dear—your sister. I cannot forget your sister."

"She will be better when all this is settled," said Gertrude consolingly.

"Better?" echoed Mrs. Shaddock. "She could hardly be better! Her patience, her resignation, her trust—I never saw anything like it."

"Yes, indeed it is," answered Gertrude heartily.

She had become so accustomed to Rose's beautiful character that she had hardly noticed it.

"You found me very upset," Mrs. Shaddock went on hesitatingly, and yet as if she must say it, "but she said something as we sat together last night, which made me feel different from anything I have ever felt before."

Gertrude looked inquiringly at her.

"I had just said to her, 'I never saw any one bear a trial such as this so bravely; I suppose you would say it is religion helps you, but I do not understand it.' And she answered, with such an earnest look, 'Mrs. Shaddock, it is not 'religion,' it is just Jesus! He is everything to me—everything!"'

"What Rose said is the truth," answered Gertrude softly. "She would not have said it unless she had known it was true."



## CHAPTER XXXVIII. IN THE MUSEUM.

"AH! Here you are!" said Otto.

There were Hugh, Daisy, and Randall, all eagerly peeping out of the train at Kensington.

"Here is Mr. Leigh," exclaimed Randall, turning round to Gertrude. "You see he did not keep us waiting, did he?"

This referred to a discussion Hugh and Daisy had carried on during the short journey, as to who would be at Kensington first.

Otto helped them out of the carriage, and then pointed to the way out, telling the children not to get too far in front.

"Randall, my dear, keep near me," said Gertrude; "you are 'mother's baby,' and must be taken care of!"

She said it with a playful smile, but Randall did not respond pleasantly.

"I can take care of myself," he said, with a shrug. "I don't want to be tied to girls' aprons!"

He walked, however, just in front of her, close to the heels of his brother and sister, Otto and Gertrude bringing up the rear.

"I will not tell you till we get out of these noisy streets," said Otto, "but I feel as if I had so many things to say, that I hardly know where to begin!"

"I must not ask, then, whether they are back from Dr. Blank's?"

"You may ask," he said, smiling, "but I shall not answer."

"Then I had better not put the question," laughed Gertrude. "You are, however, cheerful to-day, Otto!"

"That is because I am so glad to see you."

"Are you? So am I glad, Otto. I never prized friends so much before."

He had glanced up eagerly at the beginning of her answer, but as her voice took a more formal tone at the end, his eyes went back to the contemplation of the busy traffic.

"I should be sorry to live in London," he said quietly.

"So should I, unless—"

"Unless?" he asked, rather eagerly.

"Unless those I loved had to live here; of course that makes such a difference."

"Yes," he said.

They came now to the Museum, and here the children turned to them, asking what they were to see first, and which way was it to go?

They were all so inexperienced that Otto told them they had better walk straight on for a little while, keeping their eyes open meanwhile.

"Above all things, do not let us get separated," said Gertrude. "Keep close to us, Hugh and Daisy. Will Randall like to be with you or with me?"

"We will take him," said Daisy.

"Yes, I'll go with them," said Randall.

They soon came to the large Hall, and here Otto proposed to sit down, while the children walked about examining the various objects of interest.

He found a seat for Gertrude, and when some one moved away, he sat down beside her.

"May I ask now?" she said. "Oh, Otto, do tell me!"

"They have been, Gertrude! Dr. Blank has examined little Lester thoroughly."

"And he says—"

"That time, and care, and love 'may' restore him."

"Oh, Otto! How thankful I am."

"He says that one-room-business of Mrs. Swift's would soon have finished the story. But now, he hopes with plenty of sunshine, and sea air, and patience—Gertrude, he says he will need infinite patience."

"Rose can give that."

"Yes, no one better, unless it were you."

"I? I should not be half as patient as Rose! Besides, she is his mother."

"Oh, yes; that makes a great difference, of course."

"Are they going home?"

"Not for a few days."

Gertrude sighed with relief. Then she might see Rose once more perhaps.

"You are not happy here, Gertrude, are you?" asked Otto, suddenly turning and looking her in the face.

"I was, oh, as happy as I could be away from you all, till this about Lester happened. That has unsettled me, I think. Why do you ask, Otto? I do not look unhappy, do I?"

"You look different," he said consideringly. "Yes, as I thought, not so happy."

"I shall feel all right again directly all this is settled, Otto. You can hardly believe all I have gone through."

He was silent, his eyes following the three children as they slowly walked round the large room, coming nearer and nearer.

"It is hard sometimes to square one's wishes with one's possibilities," he said at length.

"Very," she answered; "that is where discipline comes in, Otto. Like my text this morning, 'Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?'"

"Was that your text, dear Gertrude? What did you answer?"

"I asked that whatever He pointed out for me to do, I might do willingly."

"Ah! That speaks to me."

"Does it not speak to all of us?"

The children had reached them now.

"May we go into the next room?" asked Randall.

"We will come too," said Gertrude, rising.

"There's no need," said Randall, "but you can do as you like, Miss Ashlyn. I wish Mr. Leigh would come and explain this old furniture to us."

"So I will," said Otto readily. "Gertrude, sit still and rest till I come back."

He went off with them. And Gertrude sat down again and thought over the conversation which had just passed, wondering at Otto's manner, which had constraint in it which she had not remembered at home.

Then once more, she thought of her text as settling all wonderings, and giving quiet and peace in the midst of every circumstance.

"Lord, what wilt 'Thou' have me to do?" And in that will and that Lord, she took refuge and found her rest.



## CHAPTER XXXIX. HIDING.

THE time seemed to her rather long before she saw Otto's thin face coming back through the doorway.

He was closely followed by Daisy and Hugh, and came up to her at once, surprise in his tone as he inquired—

"Where is Randall? Is he not with you?"

"With me?" echoed Gertrude, starting up. "No, he has not been with me at all. He went off with you, Otto."

"He was with me, but he asked if he might find you. And I brought him to the doorway and pointed you out, and left him. How very strange!"

"I did not see either of you," said Gertrude, looking alarmed.

"No—you were deeply meditating, and did not look up. Do not worry yourself, he'll be all right. Boys don't get run off with every—" He stopped short. He had touched too near home to their recent sorrow about Lester, to bear it yet.

"At any rate," he added hastily, "he will be all safe. We must go and look for him."

They quickly arranged a meeting-place, and Gertrude took Daisy with her, while Hugh volunteered to go with Mr. Leigh.

But they wandered through the rooms, one after another, searching in every part fruitlessly, till they were utterly weary and footsore.

Again and again they met, only to acknowledge that their search had been in vain.

At length it grew dusk, and the Museum began to thin. People were leaving for their homes before the fresh accession would come in with the lights.

Gertrude was worn out. She felt as if her feet would not carry her another step.

"Did you ever know of his doing such a thing before?" she asked Daisy, as she sank on to a seat for an instant.

"No—never," said poor Daisy, who could hardly keep back her tears. "He said this morning, 'I'm going to have a lark to-day, Daisy,' but I thought he meant coming to the Museum."

"He meant to play us a trick," said Hugh decidedly; "at least I think so—he did say—don't you remember, Daisy?—that he would do something that really would tease Miss Ashlyn."

Gertrude felt herself get hot from head to foot.

"How can we go home and tell your mother?" she said piteously. "It is too dreadful. Otto, you have asked all the men at the doors to keep any little boy—"

"Certainly I have. Not one has noticed such a child pass."

"It makes it worse to think he could have been so cruel as to play such a trick," said Gertrude. "We must stay here, Otto, till the place shuts, and you must go home and tell Mrs. Shaddock. It is too dreadful—"

"Come, do not give up," said Otto cheerily, though he little liked the errand on which he was sent. "If Randall has done it for a trick, he will probably turn up all right. Anyway fretting will not mend it. He has had his wish and spoilt our day!"

He left them regretfully, and made his way with all speed to Hampstead.

It was, however, nearly an hour before he reached the Shaddocks' comfortable home.

To picture the dismay which spread through the house at his story would be impossible. Mrs. Shaddock gave up her darling for lost. And Mr. Shaddock, between indignation and real apprehension, hardly knew what he was doing.

He set off at once with Otto, feeling as if trains were a slow mode of travelling, when the heart had reached the end of the journey before the whistle had more than sounded!

Hurriedly they retraced their steps through the warm and crowded rooms, till they reached the one where Otto had left Gertrude.

There, in front of the anxious father's eyes, sat the group he had come to seek, Randall in the middle of them looking flushed and sullen, the rest white and weary.

"You have found him?" asked Mr. Shaddock.

"Where? How?"

Gertrude looked up, her eyes tearful, her lips trembling.

"We cannot well explain it here," she said in a low voice. "He came to us of his own accord. I believe he is beginning to be sorry."

"Beginning to be sorry?" echoed Mr. Shaddock.

"What can you mean?"

He took Randall's hand in his, and turned towards the door.

"How is this, my boy?"

"They left me alone—I got lost," said Randall, whimpering.

Hugh had joined his father on the other side, and heard the last words.

"Father!" he began urgently.

"Hush—I will hear all about it at home."

Mr. Shaddock hurried them into the train, Gertrude and Otto following.

"He thinks we carelessly let him get lost," said Gertrude. "What shall we do?"

"Stick to the truth," said Otto. "How did you find him, Gertrude, after all?"

"He was hiding somewhere," said Gertrude in a low voice. "Just before the place was lighted up, not long after you had gone, he sauntered up with his hands in his pockets and asked how we were getting on."

"What did you do?" asked Otto, almost too astonished to speak.

"I asked him where he had been, and told him what a fright he had given us all, and was just bidding him to sit down by me, when he gave a strange little glance at Hugh—gone in a moment—and then sat down by me, pushing his hand away from mine. Then I guessed that it was a trick."

"Shameful!" said Otto indignantly.

"It breaks my heart that he could—" said poor Gertrude.





## CHAPTER XL. RANDALL'S MISCHIEF.

THE trains were crowded, so that in the bustle of getting a seat at all, Otto found himself almost pushed by the guard into a carriage where were Gertrude, Hugh, and Daisy, while Mr. Shaddock and Randall found room in a compartment farther down the train.

"It was not my fault, one bit," Randall began, when they were off. "They ought not to have left me."

Though Mr. Shaddock had not intended to discuss the subject with his little son, he was taken off his guard by the last words, and asked—

"Who?"

"Mr. Leigh and Miss Ashlyn."

"Left you, how?"

"Mr. Leigh said I could easily find her, and I went where he said, and she was not there. Then I got lost."

"Why did you not speak to a policeman? You have always been told to do that. You would have saved us all this fright if you had."

"I did not think of that," said Randall.

Mr. Shaddock was looking out of the window in anxious thought.

"Hugh always tries to get me into trouble—" began Randall, "and so does Miss Ashlyn."

"Nonsense!" said his father.

"I wish I hadn't gone with them," pouted Randall. "I haven't had any tea, and I am as tired as anything, hunting everywhere for them."

"Well, you had better keep quiet now," said his father. "I do not understand it. But I dare say we shall hear it explained when they tell me all about it. How you can have escaped meeting all these hours I cannot conceive."

Randall did not reply to that.

And by and by the journey was over, and they got out of the train and walked up the hill under the starry sky.

"When do you leave London?" asked Gertrude of Otto. She felt as if she knew nothing of his plans; for they had been separated at different ends of the railway carriage, and the search for Randall had taken up all the rest of the day.

"That is not decided. I had much to tell you, but there is hardly time to even begin it! Gertrude, Dr. Blank asked me a number of questions about myself and my future."

Gertrude felt startled. Again came that strange tone of constraint into Otto's voice.

"He was interested in you?" she asked falteringly. She hardly knew what to say, or how to question him, unless he wished to tell her. Did he wish to tell her? That was what she asked herself.

"I think he was, though why I cannot imagine. I told him of my long struggle with my medical studies, and what exams I had passed, and so forth, and then he told me a sea voyage would do me a world of good!"

"A sea voyage!" echoed Gertrude.

"Miss Ashlyn," said Hugh, turning back from where he was walking with his father, "I wish you would tell me about those constellations again."

"Never mind now," said Mr. Shaddock, "let Miss Ashlyn have a moment's peace. The constellations will keep, that's one good thing."

Hugh did not press the matter further, but contented himself with going back to Daisy and pointing out to her the Great Bear and the "Pointers," which was the greatest astronomical achievement of which he could boast at present.

Gertrude had echoed Otto's words, "a sea voyage," but the announcement seemed in some inexplicable manner to darken her life, and make everything dreary. She managed, however, to force herself to say, "And you are going—you think it necessary?"

"Yes, not so much for my health, though that has not been very good lately, but for my prospects—"

"Will that improve them? Otto, you are holding something back; you have some news you do not like to tell me."

Otto did not reply to that. But after a moment he added, "Dr. Blank has taken a sort of liking to me. I think he will try to push me on in my profession."

Gertrude could not ask her question again, but she felt hopelessly that they were nearing their destination, and then Otto would say good-bye, and their day would be over.

"Gertrude, I have promised to go for this voyage if—if you do not object."

"I?" said Gertrude.

"It is to accompany a patient of his, who needs care and supervision. It will be for a year."

"And then?"

"Then I shall come home!"

Oh, the rest that seemed to come into his voice as he said that! They had reached the turning to the Shaddocks' house. Still Gertrude knew that Otto was withholding some of his thoughts. How could she bear to part from her friend thus? She thought of their friendship at home, of all his brotherliness, of their constant interchange of thoughts and ideas, and she felt it very hard to be constrained just as they must part.

"I am going to see Dr. Blank again to-morrow, and shall have a long talk with him. He has asked me to spend Sunday at his country house. After that I shall see you again, and tell you all."

"You will tell me all?" asked Gertrude, in a relieved tone.

"All—both bad and good. I might have done so to-day, but for this child's doings. That has spoilt everything. Gertrude, you did not answer me? Shall I go for the voyage?"

"Am I to be the arbiter of your fate?"

He smiled a sunny smile, while Gertrude could have cried.

"Ah, our future is in Better Hands," he answered gently, "but if you thought I ought not to go, for any reason, I will not go."

"I know of no reason; if it will do your health good, it would be everything you could wish!"

They had reached the steps. Already Mr. Shaddock had let himself in, and Hugh was holding the door open for them.

"Now for Randall's mischief!" said Otto.



## CHAPTER XLI.

### TWO SIDES OF A STORY.

WHEN they entered, Randall was already in his mother's arms, and Mrs. Shaddock was pouring out questions and condolences as fast as she could speak. Her 'at home' day had come to an unpleasant end, as she had felt too ill and pre-occupied to enjoy her guests.

"However was it?" she was asking him.

"Mr. Leigh and Miss Ashlyn were talking and I got lost," was his response.

"They were not!" exclaimed Daisy, following him into the drawing-room. "Mollie, don't let mother think so—"

Mollie shrugged her shoulders. "I do think it was awfully careless," she said, "and has given mother a dreadful fright!"

"He gave us a worse one," answered Daisy indignantly, "but Miss Ashlyn will explain all about it."

"I don't care about explanations," said Mollie. "I should have thought between you, you could have looked after Randall. You know how things upset mother."

Gertrude and Otto had spoken to Mr. Shaddock in the hall, and then Otto bade Gertrude farewell and went to the door.

"I wish you could stay to see me through with this," she said with her hand on the latch, and her eyes raised to his.

"I wish I could—but I am not asked—"

"No, we are in disgrace," she said, "and that is very hard."

"It will come out all right in the end. I must go, but I would give anything to stay—"

And then she opened the door, and his light feet sprang down the steps, and he was gone.

She went slowly into the dining-room, feeling as if she could not bring her mind down to Randall and his doings.

Otto had looked as white as a sheet, and had eaten nothing since an early lunch; how could she have let him go like that?

Mr. Shaddock came in almost at once.

"Where is Mr. Leigh?"

"He is gone."

"Gone! Why did you let him go? I expected him to have supper, or whatever meal it is. Have you had anything to eat?"

"I bought some buns—"

"Buns?" echoed Mr. Shaddock disdainfully. "Could you get no tea?"

"I was afraid to spend any time over that. We did nothing but search."

"Well, it cannot be helped now. I am very vexed Mr. Leigh has gone so soon. As to this matter, the children and Randall give different accounts. I suppose it often is so in a question of missing each other. So I suppose we must think 'all's well that ends well,' and be glad it has come right now. Pray sit down, Miss Ashlyn, you look ready to faint."

"I never faint, thank you," Gertrude answered, "but we are very tired, almost too tired, perhaps, to look at the matter fairly."

"Oh, I should let it drop," said Mr. Shaddock good-humouredly. "Randall got lost, and is found again, and now let us forget it, and eat some supper."

Gertrude had been wondering in the train what dreadful punishment would be given the little delinquent, and only feared it might be too severe. She was therefore astonished to find that all was to be overlooked, and the matter left as if it had not happened.

She determined to talk to Randall herself, and try to get him to confess his share of the spoilt day. But now nothing could be done but to accept the offered tea, and think again of poor Otto making his way back to the West End, tired and lonely.

Daisy and Hugh came in at the sound of the gong, but Mrs. Shaddock had Randall's tea carried to him in the drawing-room by Mollie. And when they went there after the meal, he had gone to nurse to be put to bed.

Gertrude soon went up to her schoolroom, and sat down in her arm-chair utterly wearied out.

Daisy and Hugh came to wish good-night, and then she was left alone for half an hour.

She tried to recall all the events of the day, all Otto's words and tones which had been so refreshing to her as part of her old home life, but nothing seemed to come before her eyes but that scene in the Museum, when he had appeared in the doorway without Randall, and then their frantic search afterwards.

She was just coming to the conclusion that she should never be happy at the Shaddocks' any more if they were going to blame her for the accident, when a tap came at the door, and nurse's kind face peeped in.

"I came to see if you might want anything, Miss Ashlyn," she said quietly, "and to tell you I am so sorry about the child being missed."

"Thank you," faltered Gertrude. Her lips trembled, and she could not get out another word.

"Don't you be upset, miss. The children have told me their different stories, and I can see how it is."

"I wish I could be sure he did not do it on purpose—" began Gertrude; and then she wished she had not said so. She looked up quickly in nurse's face. "I hardly like to have said that," she added, "but—"

Nurse nodded. "Time will show," she said. "Sometimes when we can't right ourselves, there's One takes it up for us, miss, and brings good out of bad!"

"Oh, if He only would!" said Gertrude with a long breath.

"Don't be afraid, miss; I've seen it over and over, and have reason to trust Him!"



## CHAPTER XLII.

### CLOUDS.

EARLY the next morning Gertrude was up, and was bending over her Bible to get refreshment before the day's work began. She dreaded what it might bring to her, for she had seen enough of the way Randall had carried through the misfortune of the bank-note, to hope that he would unsay any of his yesterday's story.

Nurse's cheering words, however, had done her good, and she rose from her reading with a heart at rest in the promises which were so abundant and so full.

Her eyes had rested on some words which seemed to fit into her perplexity and vexation, giving her fresh hope and courage.

"I will love Thee, O LORD, my strength!"

So when Daisy peeped into her room, she met the child's inquiring look with a smile.

"Here is a letter for you, Miss Ashlyn."

It was from Rose, telling of their disappointment at her non-appearance the evening before, and saying how sorry Otto was to arrive alone without the bright party which Fritz had invited to tea at his hotel.

Then Rose went on to say a few words about Lester, adding that time forbade her to write more, but if Mrs. Shaddock and Gertrude could call upon her during that day, she could better explain everything by word of mouth.

"I shall not ask that," said Gertrude to herself, "though I suppose I must convey Rose's invitation."

"Mother is not very well this morning," said Daisy, "and Randall is as cross as two sticks."

"Never mind that, dear. He must be sorry he was so unkind."

"I do not think he is. Miss Ashlyn, make haste, for the boys are ready for breakfast, and Mollie is not down. They want to get off to school in good time; they've got to meet a boy at the station."

Gertrude felt her life had begun again in good earnest. She put away her Bible and followed Daisy to the dining-room, where Conway and Ned were already eating their breakfast in haste.

When Mollie came in, she did not seem to have recovered her temper from yesterday any more than Randall had. She brought a message from her mother, however, that she begged Miss Ashlyn to spend the afternoon with her sister, but that she did not feel equal to any excitement, and was going to stay in her room all the morning.

"Will you take your mother the letter I have had from my sister?"

Mollie took the letter in her hand, but sat down to her breakfast without offering to carry it to her mother.

By the time Daisy's music-lesson was over, however, she brought back the answer.

"Mother thanks Mrs. Leigh, and if she is well enough in the afternoon she will drive to town and call upon her. At any rate, you are to go, Miss Ashlyn. Daisy and I are to go to see our cousins who live on the Heath, you know. Randall is to stay with nurse."

Gertrude felt that the plan was very kind, and yet she would almost have preferred to remain quietly at home with her pupils.

"Are you sure that is what your mother wishes?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss Ashlyn. Mother would not like to be worried with any more questions. She had quite enough worry yesterday."

Gertrude looked up steadily at the pretty girl as she stood before her with her little air of half-condescending, half-defiant politeness.

"We all had a great deal of worry yesterday, Mollie. However, I will do as your mother so kindly suggests. I hope I may be able to thank her for all her kindness some day."

Mollie looked rather surprised at the quiet answer, under which she could not but perceive a slight reserve. She, however, dismissed the matter with a light—

"Well, let it be settled so, Miss Ashlyn. I am sure you must be longing to see Mrs. Leigh." And with a toss back of her long hair over her shoulders, she hastened away to fulfil the housekeeping duties before school, which devolved upon her when Mrs. Shaddock was ill.

Gertrude rang the school-bell, but as Randall did not appear, she made her way to the nursery to inquire for him.

He was there, leaning over the guard, with his chin on his hands. "Are you ready for lessons, my dear?" she asked kindly.

"He does not seem quite the thing to-day, Miss Ashlyn," said nurse. "Perhaps he had better remain up here with me? He says his head aches."

"If you think Mrs. Shaddock would wish that."

"Yes, I am sure she would. She is so poorly this morning that I cannot worry her with telling her that he is not well. I hope an hour or two will see him better. I suspect he took a chill yesterday."

So Gertrude went back to Daisy and Mollie, first, however, carrying Randall a puzzle from her box to amuse him, of which he took no notice beyond an abrupt "thank you," turning again to the fire as before.



## CHAPTER XLIII.

### "WAITING FOR YOU!"

THE morning passed away peacefully.

Daisy was angelic, and though Mollie had still her little supercilious air which chafed Gertrude inwardly, she kept it enough within bounds to avoid rebuke.

When they came out from lessons, Mollie found that her mother was no better than she had been in the early morning, and nurse was busy with her.

"It is one of her heart attacks," said Mollie in a reproachful tone to Gertrude. "That is how she always is when she has any excitement or alarm. She will be ill for days, I expect, and nurse will hardly be able to leave her."

"I did not know she was subject to these attacks," said Gertrude.

"No, I suppose you did not, or, of course, you would have been more particular about Randall—"

"But, Mollie, it was Randall's own doing."

"Oh, well, there are two opinions about that. At any rate, what with the excitement about Lester, and now this about Randall, mother is perfectly upset, and it is a great bother."

Gertrude did not pursue the subject. She gathered her books together, wondering if she could be spared to go to her sister, but not liking to employ Mollie as her messenger to ask this question.

Daisy came in at the moment and settled the difficulty.

"Miss Ashlyn, mother is not well enough to visit your sister to-day. But would you please go and enjoy yourself. Mother hopes Mrs. Leigh will have good news for you, and that you will be able to help her."

Gertrude sent a message in reply. And then the dinner gong rang, and they went down to their rather forlorn meal, Mollie presiding instead of her mother, and Randall sitting at the side, but eating very little and talking less.

The moment after dinner, the girls dressed to go to their cousins, Randall went back to the nursery, and Gertrude was set free.

When she went out, anxious as she was to get to her sister, as she turned to shut the gate, her eyes fell upon the Strange House, and she thought of Mrs. Swift.

No, she must hasten on to see Rose, she thought.

And yet—yet—it would not take five minutes to greet the poor, desolate woman who had so recently lost so much.

A moment's indecision, and then she turned that way and walked up the garden path.

Her ring at the bell brought Mrs. Swift very quickly to the door.

A haggard face, with anxious, sunken eyes, met hers.

"Mrs. Swift! You have been ill," exclaimed Gertrude.

"It's my husband!" was her abrupt answer. "He will not have a doctor, and I'm at my wits' end!" She opened the door wide, and Gertrude stepped within it.

"What is the matter?"

"I do not know!"

"Is he very bad?"

"Well, not to say very bad, but he's too ill to leave his bed. We were going to move at once, but now we can't, and he says he shall stay till Christmas."

"I will come and see him to-morrow, if I can," said Gertrude. "I am on my way to visit my sister and her little boy."

"Little Lester, miss?" asked Mrs. Swift, forgetting for a moment her own anxiety.

"Yes."

"It was kind of you to tell me, miss. Has he been to a doctor yet, miss?"

"Yes; I have not seen my sister yet, but I believe he has been."

"I hardly dare to ask, miss,—I am sure I have no right; but—does the doctor give any hope, miss?"

"I can hardly tell you, because I know so little myself. But I think he does hope that time may improve him. Time and care, and sunshine and sea air."

Again Mrs. Swift gave one of her long, deep-drawn breaths. "Ah! He did not have all those with me," she said sadly.

"No, Mrs. Swift. Shall you think me unkind if I say that the doctor gave it as his opinion that he was brought away just in time?"

Mrs. Swift nodded sadly. "I knew it," she said. "Oh, miss, if you had not come along that night, and had not stopped to speak to me! Oh, miss, how can I thank you?"

"Do not thank me, but God," said Gertrude gently. "Now I must go, but tell your husband from me that I do entreat him to have a doctor; perhaps he would accept a message from me?"

"He thinks a deal of you, miss, in a quiet way—"

"Then say so, and remember that you have a mighty Saviour now to help you in everything. Tell Him all about your husband, and He will do for you what you cannot do yourself."

She hastened away, and sped to the high-road, where she hoped to meet with a cab or omnibus which might expedite her journey to the Great Northern Hotel.

As she turned the corner, pacing up and down with quiet, patient step, was a figure which she instantly recognized.

It was walking away from her, but when it came to the next road, it turned and came towards her slowly.

"Otto!" she exclaimed. "Whatever brought you here?"

"I have been waiting for you! Your note told Rose you would come in the afternoon. I have been waiting for you for a long time, Gertrude!"



## CHAPTER XLIV.

### A SHORT DRIVE.

THEY walked down the hill together, Otto looking out for a cab, but saying very little.

"At last I can talk to you!" he exclaimed when they were seated. "Gertrude! I have accepted Dr. Blank's offer, and I am to go abroad for a year with his patient!"

"It will do you good, Otto—you have been overworking for a long time."

"I could not help that—it was so important for me to make the most of my time. But, Gertrude, he holds out a hope for my future which has made all the difference to me. But the greatest difficulty is, you said you did not care to live in London—?"

"But that makes no difference to your plans, Otto, unless you meant that you wanted mother to come—"

"I don't want mother! I want you. Of course it makes all the difference in the world. You know that well enough."

Gertrude was silent. How could she answer such words?

"What is the plan?" she asked, after a pause.

"Dr. Blank thinks he will have work for me to help him with, while I complete my medical studies. I told him—Gertrude, I told him that there was a certain dear girl whom I loved with all my heart, and that my great object was to make a home for her. He bid me work and hope."

"That is always best," said Gertrude, with a little smile.

"Do you bid me work and hope?"

"Certainly I do, Otto. Have I not always?"

"Then at the end of the year (for he pays me well, Gertrude), if I can find a house, can you bear to come right into the heart of London and make a very small beginning with me?"

"I never guessed you wanted that!" she said, turning her eyes towards his face. "Otto, do you really mean what you have said?"

"I have meant it for years! At first I thought I must not, and put it away. But lately I found that it was a great blessing and a great gift, one I could not dismiss unless I ought. There is no ought about it, is there? Gertrude, you knew all this long ago!"

Whether she had guessed it or not, it was very different to hear him saying it all. But the cab was nearing her sister's hotel, and there was one thing she did want to tell him, if she could say nothing else.

"You must not think—oh, Otto, never think for one moment that living in London would be any trial to me if—"

"Go on, Gertrude—if what?"

"If you wanted me to."

"Ah! Do I not? But you knew that, when you said what you did the other day."

Gertrude shook her head.

"It was what you said then that made me dare to accept Dr. Blank's offer."

The cab had almost reached the hotel. In a moment it drew up abruptly.

Otto sprang out; he handed her from their humble conveyance, and led her straight up to her sister's room.

Gertrude felt once more as if all were a dream, all but Otto's hand, which did not let hers go till he had brought her right into her sister's presence, announcing, in a voice that was full of joy—

"Rose! I've brought her. And though we have not had time to say a quarter of the things we would, yet she has promised to be my wife, and come and make me happy when I come home next year!"

Of course Rose looked very glad too. And for a few minutes, Gertrude could do nothing but bend over little Lester, hiding her hot cheeks against his curls, while Otto and Rose and Fritz exchanged congratulations.

Then Rose came over to where she sat, and knelt down by her and Lester.

"How does he look?" she asked yearningly, laying her hand on her child's.

Gertrude was gazing in his little face.

"I think he looks decidedly less frail than two days ago. Not so pinched and weary."

"That is what 'I' said!" exclaimed Rose joyfully. "Fritz was afraid it was my fancy."

The child lay on the sofa with a light shawl thrown over him, his eyes open and turning to watch them as they moved about, but without any recognition in them.

"When he knows me," said Rose softly, "I shall begin to hope—really."

"Ah! You hope now, little mother," said Fritz tenderly. "Hope? Why if I had as much faith in some things as you have in Lester's knowing you by and by, I should be on the high-road to being all you want me to be!"

He spoke lightly, covering an earnest thought beneath his jest.

"I have faith in both," said Rose, looking up, "or rather, I have faith in God about you both."

They all knew that she spoke truly. But what seemed such a very simple matter to some people was an insurmountable difficulty to Fritz.

"I can't make myself a Christian," he thought. And forgot that Rose had often responded,—

"No, dear Fritz, but He says, 'Him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out.' You have not tried to come yet."



## CHAPTER XLV.

### TILL WEDNESDAY.

"WE only wanted to see you before we went home," said Rose, when Gertrude, having taken off her hat, had settled herself into one of the luxurious arm-chairs, with Lester on her lap. "I am very anxious to get home, to say nothing of telling all to dear mother."

"I shall see them off to-morrow morning, and then go down to Dr. Blank's country house," said Otto. "He says I am to be introduced to the invalid boy, and am to spend Sunday with them."

"Them?" echoed Gertrude.

"I did not tell you that it is his brother and sister who are going for this long sailing voyage, for the sake of their only son, who is heir to their fortune."

"And what will you have to do with the boy?"

"He needs constant care and watching, and yet bright companionship. I don't know that I shall suit in that latter respect. Perhaps I shall now."

He smiled archly at Gertrude, but went on with his explanations, which were intensely interesting to her, as she had heard hardly anything that day at Kensington.

"Then, when I have spent a year in going round the world, he says I am to come back and finish my studies. He says I shall have a good deal of time on board ship, for the boy's parents take his education upon themselves, and take infinite pains with him."

"Is he mentally afflicted, then?" asked Gertrude.

"It is of that nature; he is improving, and they have hopes that he will be quite restored eventually."

"How sad it must be for them!" said Gertrude.

"Yes, very. They do little else than go about with him from place to place. But they have boundless confidence in Dr. Blank."

"No one who has been to him for advice could feel anything else," said Rose. "Gertrude, I should like you to have seen how he took to Otto from the first. His eyes seem to see everything."

"Did he give any reason for his fancy?" asked Gertrude.

"Only his treatment of little Lester. He said directly he saw his way with Lester, he knew that he was worth training in his special branch of the profession. Fritz says Otto's fortune is made."

"It was made to-day," said Otto, smiling; at which all the others could not help smiling too.

"When do they sail?" asked Gertrude, partly because she was very desirous of knowing, and partly to turn the subject.

"Ah," said Otto, "I have not told you that! The fact is, I can hardly bear to think of it. Yet it must be said."

"And it is—" said Gertrude, while her heart sank at the long parting. Her life had seemed nothing but partings lately.

"On Wednesday."

"We can bear it!" she said, looking up. "We have so much now."

Otto did not answer. He had turned to the window, but after a moment he came back.

"When must you go, dear Gertrude?"

"I ought to be at home by seven, I thought. They did not name a time, but as Mrs. Shaddock is ill, and little Randall very poorly too—"

"And shall I be able to see you again? Gertrude, do not shake your head—surely when they hear all they will spare you?"

"They have been so kind already," said Gertrude, "but, Otto—"

"No 'buts,'" said Otto. "I must call on Mr. Shaddock on Monday before I go down to Lanriffe to get some of my belongings. I shall ask him to allow you to come to Gravesend to see us off."

"I can ask—" said Gertrude, hesitating. Her wishes pulled her one way, her objection to be further troublesome another.

"That will be best," said Fritz, turning to Otto. "Nobody with any consideration would refuse such a request as that. A whole year!"

The afternoon passed all too quickly. Gertrude sat and caressed little Lester, feeling as if she could never part with him. Rose hovered over the two as if too full of joy and sympathy to say much. Fritz paced up and down the room watching them all, and joining in whatever was said. Otto sat near Gertrude, content to be in her company, and to hear her talk to her sister.

At six o'clock, Gertrude said she must go, and Otto prepared to accompany her to Hampstead.

Rose did not know how to part from her. She clung to her and whispered words of thanks and blessing, for had not Gertrude been the means of restoring her child?

"Look here, sister Gertrude," said Fritz, taking her hand, when at last she really was going. "You tell those people that Rose and I want you with Lester! Rose will have to have somebody to be out all day with him, why not you? She will slave herself to death else. You tell them so, and come home to us! I never thought of it before!"

"And you must not now, dear Fritz," she answered gratefully, "indeed you must not. I could not leave them with my work half done. It is bad enough to think of only a year."

"Well, that you will have to tell them," interposed Otto.

"Yes," she said, "but not the other. I must stay with them a year, at any rate, if they want me. I have Randall to win yet!"

An hour after, Gertrude walked into the house, having said good-bye to Otto; good-bye till the Wednesday which he assured her he should arrange for, and then a long good-bye such as they did not like to think of.



## CHAPTER XLVI.

### NURSE'S PLAN.

GERTRUDE stood within the threshold.

She heard Conway's voice speaking in a hushed tone on the stairs, she saw Mollie's skirts at the corner, and heard her reply In the same awed way, and then both turned and saw her, and came quickly down to her.

"Miss Ashlyn!" Mollie whispered. "Mother has been so dreadfully ill all the afternoon, and we have been obliged to send for the doctor. And now he has come it is worse still, because he has seen Randall, and he says he has the scarlet fever."

"What?" asked Gertrude in a startled tone, but she had heard well enough.

"Yes," added Conway; "is it not dreadful? Father is not yet home, and we are not to even tell mother, her heart is in such a weak state—and Dr. Forde says either Randall must be taken somewhere to be nursed, or we must all go away from home."

They had mechanically moved into the dining-room, and stood round the end of the table looking at each other.

"Nurse says," pursued Ned, who was sitting with his lessons in his hand, "that if she could leave mother, she would take him somewhere. But then she cannot, or mother might die, and besides, we don't know of any place. And it must be done in a hurry, that is the worst of it."

"Where is Randall?" asked Gertrude.

"He is in the nursery at the top. Nurse would not have him put to bed till you came, because she wanted to consult you about a plan she has thought of."

"I will go to her, then. Is she up there?"

"Yes—but do not go in, Miss Ashlyn; call nurse outside."

"Very well, but somebody must go in, you know."

She ran up-stairs, and tapped lightly at the closed door.

Nurse came out at once.

"Oh, Miss Ashlyn!" she said in a low voice. "We are in trouble, and no mistake. If his mother could be asked—but the doctor absolutely forbids that. I have thought of one way out of it, but I hardly dare ask such a thing. Have you ever had it, miss?"

"When a child, I believe I did."

That was not the thing that nurse hardly dared ask.

"Miss Ashlyn—if we could find a house—a cottage—or an empty house near where they would take him in, could you go with him there? I know his parents would not hear of a hospital, and I have heard of such things being done, if I only knew where—"

"You want me to find such a place and take him—to-night?"

"That is the only thing I could think of," apologized nurse. "I would go in a minute, but I should never forgive myself if my doing so caused his mother's death. The doctor says the slightest alarm might be fatal in her present state."

Gertrude felt stunned, while nurse could do nothing but gaze anxiously in her face. How little she knew all that was passing in her mind!

"May I have five minutes to consider it?" asked Gertrude, feeling as if all the world were turning round.

She went to her room and shut the door.

Slowly, with her hands pressing her forehead till it ached with the pressure, she knelt down by the side of her bed.

She could not pray; she could only think of the five minutes at her disposal for her decision, and the numberless things which she must decide.

Wednesday! Where would be her promise to Otto to come down to Gravesend to bid him farewell? If she were established as sole nurse to little Randall, she would not be able to leave him to go to Gravesend?

And even if she could leave him, how about carrying a chance of infection to that out-bound vessel, which would contain so many precious lives? How about carrying infection to that only boy whose life was so infinitely precious to his parents? That boy whom Otto had already undertaken to guard and cherish to the best of his ability?

And then, supposing she could undergo the sacrifice of not seeing Otto again, for whom was this sacrifice to be made? For Randall, whom in that moment of anguish she acknowledged as having almost regarded as her enemy!

"I cannot do it," she moaned. "I cannot—it is too hard, too much. Oh, how could nurse ask it?"

And then amidst her tears she bethought herself of praying.

"Lord, what wilt 'Thou' have me to do?" she whispered.

If she could have asked any one's advice! If Otto could be consulted! If he should bid her do it, would she not gladly, cheerfully?

"Lord, what wilt 'Thou' have me to do?"

Then she gave up all her questioning, all her disappointment, all her anxiety into His hands, and as she knelt, a wonderful peace stole over her.

"If thine enemy—" Gertrude started at the word. Surely, surely, it could not be that she was cherishing such a thought! "'If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink.'"

"O my Lord," she whispered, "I will do whatever Thou dost point out! Thou knowest best, only let me have Thee with me, whatever it is, and wherever I am!"

She rose from her knees, and with the tears still wet on her face, she went back to nurse.

At her soft knock nurse came back, looking intently in her face.

"If his father wishes it, I will do it. I believe I know a house to which I could take him at once."



## **CHAPTER XLVII.**

### **THE STRANGE HOUSE AGAIN.**

"WHAT does she say?" asked Conway, coming to the foot of the stairs as Gertrude came down.

"Will you come with me, Conway? I have a question to ask before I can propose nurse's plan to your father."

She moved to the front door.

"Now?" asked Conway.

"Yes; it will not take us long."

They went out into the darkness, and Gertrude turned towards the Strange House at once.

"Here?" asked Conway, utter astonishment in his tone.

"Yes; I believe Mrs. Swift will help us."

Mrs. Swift came at once to the door, and, without noticing Conway in the dark, she exclaimed the moment she saw Gertrude—

"Oh, miss! Such a wonderful thing! My husband has seen a doctor, miss, and he has told me what to do. It's bronchitis, miss; that's what it is!"

"I am very glad you were able to prevail upon him—"

"It was like this, miss. There was a doctor's carriage going up and down for ever so long this afternoon, and I watched it till I felt nearly frantic. Then I thought, dear miss, of what you had said about my Mighty Helper, and I did ask Him to make it all plain. Then I went straight to my husband, and told him there was a doctor outside, and might I call him in?"

"I am so glad—"

"He was awfully bad just then, and he said yes; so I told the coachman, and presently in he came."

"I am truly glad," said Gertrude again; "I hope he will soon be much better."

"I can never thank you, miss, for all you have done for me. As I have been helped so much in this, I shall go on to other things."

"Yes," said Gertrude, thinking of the words which often ran through her mind, "Because Thou hast been my help, therefore under the shadow of Thy wings will I rejoice." "Yes, indeed, you will find it so over and over."

"It is kind of you to come in, miss—"

"I did not come just now for kindness," said Gertrude, feeling that her words were binding her at once to the plan which involved her imprisonment for weeks, "but to ask a great favour."

"A favour of 'me,' miss?"

Then Gertrude briefly explained the case, and made her request, which was, supposing of course that Mr. Shaddock approved the plan when he heard it, that Mrs. Swift should lend them two rooms in which to nurse little Randall, and help her by cleaning and cooking for her, and by communicating with the outward world for her.

Mrs. Swift ran to ask her husband, and in a few minutes came back with her reply.

And when she was gone, Conway drew nearer Gertrude, and said in a low tone—

"Miss Ashlyn, I should like to shake hands. I do declare it is the kindest thing I ever heard. And considering my mother's state, and that all of us should have to turn out, nobody knows where, it is an admirable idea. But it is asking a great deal of you!" He held out his hand and shook hers warmly. "I feel I have not behaved to you as I should—not been right down jolly, you know."

Gertrude understood, but she only said, "Thank you, Conway," very softly. Her heart was very full; for what would Otto feel when he realized that they should not be able to say good-bye?

Mrs. Swift returned and brought an earnest consent with her. "My husband said, 'If we can do anything for the young lady that has been such a comfort to you, let us do it by all means.'"

So Gertrude and Conway went back.

"I wonder if your father will be at home yet?" she said as they entered their own garden.

As they mounted the steps, a figure stood there holding a beautiful bunch of flowers.

"Gertrude!" said a voice.

"Otto!" she responded.

"I got half-way home, and then I saw these flowers, and I felt as if I must bring them to you. I did not intend to come in."

"This is Conway," said Gertrude, introducing him, "of whom you have heard. I have come home to find great trouble. I must not ask you in, but—"

"I will leave you to speak to your friend," said Conway as the door opened. "Mr. Leigh, we are in sad trouble; my little brother has scarlet fever, and we dare not ask you in. Miss Ashlyn has been a brick, and has proposed—But she will tell you."

And so what Gertrude had dreaded above all things—the fear of grieving Otto, and letting him go forth on that long voyage without a farewell—never came to pass!

In the few minutes in which they stood on the doorstep, he gave his entire sanction to her plan. And, while making light of his disappointment at not seeing her again, so strengthened her in what both felt was right that she saw him finally walk away with a brave heart.

And as she carried her bunch of flowers to her own room, she could only remember his brave, cheery words as he parted from her: "Gertrude, we have every reason to trust our Father!"



## CHAPTER XLVIII.

### RANDALL'S REQUEST.

ON the first landing, Gertrude met Mr. Shaddock.

"I have seen Conway, and he has explained all about it," he said in a low tone. "And now nurse says the greatest thing is to get him out of the house as quickly as possible—because of the others."

"Yes," assented Gertrude; "I will collect a few of my things, and then we will go. How shall we get him carried across to the other house?"

"I can do that," said his father. "How long shall you be? Miss Ashlyn, I cannot express all I feel for your self-denying kindness. If it were not for my wife, I would not permit it. But if she were to miss all the children, or even nurse, I do not know what would be the consequence."

"I quite understand all that," said Gertrude, "and indeed I am glad to be able to help you."

For an instant her voice trembled; she thought of herself banished from all she loved, shut up with one who would rather have dispensed with her help or company. But it was only for a moment.

Otto's words came back with a sense of strength. "It is quite right," he had said.

And, remembering this, she had looked up once more.

"I shall not be much more than five minutes. Will you tell nurse so, and ask her to get Randall ready?"

In less than half an hour a heavy bundle, muffled in a blanket, was carried down-stairs. And then the door of the Strange House opened, and Mr. Shaddock deposited his little son on the horsehair sofa in the kitchen, and turned to look into Mrs. Swift's face.

"I have not done as much as I could have wished," she said, addressing Gertrude, "but the dear little boy's bed is ready, and I have lighted a fire up there. Dear miss, I will make you as comfortable as I can."

Gertrude held out her hand to Mr. Shaddock.

"Perhaps you had better not stay," she said, "because of the others. I will take all the care of him that I can, and be as kind to him as—as you were to our little Lester."

"I am sure you will," said Mr. Shaddock huskily. "I will send the doctor in, in the morning, and will speak to you, Miss Ashlyn, in the garden every morning and evening."

With a farewell touch on the head to his little son, and a smothered "God bless you," he turned away at last, and Gertrude was left in charge.

She and Mrs. Swift lifted poor little Randall to his room, and then they set about making him comfortable, unpacking nurse's thoughtfully-prepared basket, and arranging all things so that he might miss home comforts as little as possible.

He was very tired and miserable, and rolled himself up under the bedclothes directly, and would not respond to their questions. But when Mrs. Swift had gone out to get some necessary supplies, he opened his eyes, and seeing Gertrude's lovely bunch of flowers upon the table, said slowly—

"Where did those come from?"

"From a friend."

"Who?"

"Mr. Leigh."

"Oh!"

"Do you like them?"

She got up to put them near enough for him to smell them.

"Are they for me?" he asked.

"You and I can enjoy them together."

"I would rather they were mine. Can't I have them?"

"Can you not share them with me?"

He shook his head. "I hate sharing," he said irritably, closing his eyes.

Gertrude's heart smote her. Did she hate sharing? Why did she mind Randall having her flowers?

And then she thought of him as of one of the "little children" whom her blessed Saviour would call to His arms and bless. Could she grudge giving anything to one whom He would bless?

But Randall seemed to sleep, and she sat in silence by him, thinking and praying, seeing herself in a light in which she had never seen herself before—she saw herself selfish!

Would Randall never wake? How long would that heavy, restless sleep last?

Then she heard a carriage drive up. And in a minute a bell rang, and she remembered, with a start, that she had promised to answer the door while Mrs. Swift was out.

"Mr. Shaddock directed me here to see his little boy," said a gentleman, whom Gertrude rightly guessed was the doctor. She led the way up-stairs, and was thankful to receive all the necessary instructions, and to know exactly what to do.

"I am to look in twice a day," he said on leaving, "and you need not feel that the anxiety rests on you, Miss Ashlyn. You are doing these people a great service, and you will be happy, I trust, in feeling that."

He went rapidly down-stairs, and Gertrude felt that a load had been lifted from her shoulders.

"How kind my dear Lord is to me!" she thought. "I felt as if I could hardly bear the anticipation of this long night, and now it seems quite different."

Randall had been roused by the doctor's visit, and lay looking at Gertrude in silence.

"I wish I were in my nursery," he said at length.

Gertrude rose, and brought the flowers and put them on a chair close to his pillow. He looked at them without speaking.

"They are for you, dear!" she said very quietly.

"For my very own?"

"For your very own!" she answered.

And while he gave a little smile of pleasure, Gertrude felt that she had given away Otto's last gift!



## CHAPTER XLIX.

### WEDNESDAY.

THEN followed weary oppressed days for the little invalid, in which Gertrude watched and tended him with untiring patience.

Four very slow days, during which she knew that Otto was near, and must be making his hasty preparations for his long journey.

He and she had decided that no communication whatever must pass from her to him, because of the nature of the illness from which Randall was suffering, as well as the nature of the case which Otto was taking up.

"If my boy took it, or any one had it on board, I should hardly be able to forgive myself," he had said, "so we will run no risk whatever. I can write to you every day; that will be my only comfort."

"And I shall not have that comfort," she had answered sadly, "because I can send no letter to you!"

Each morning Mr. Shaddock brought messages and dainty food from the next house, meeting Gertrude in the garden and hearing all particulars of his little son.

"My wife keeps on asking for Randall, but I have told her that he has an infectious complaint, but is under your care, and that the doctor sees him twice every day."

"That is the greatest comfort," said Gertrude.

Wednesday came at last, and with the postman another bunch of flowers and a good-bye letter from Otto.

"I felt last night as if I must come and look at you through the window, but I am glad that I did not give way to it. I feel our duty is plain, and though it costs us a great deal, we will try to be happy in it."

Gertrude too was glad he had not come, though all that Tuesday she had hoped and feared alternately that he would.

Now the last chance was over, and he was gone!

She laid her head down on Randall's bed and wept her good-bye till she had no tears left.

The child had been very ill all night, and she and Mrs. Swift had shared the watch, each taking half the night. To-day, however, she fancied there was a change for the better, and she anxiously waited the doctor's arrival to hear her hopes confirmed.

She was just wiping away her tears, and was going to raise her head, when Randall's hot little hand was put out and touched her forehead.

"Miss Ashlyn."

"Yes, dear?"

"Where am I? Oh, I remember! Is it morning yet? May I get up?"

He tried to start up, but found himself too weak.

"My flowers are very fresh this morning," he said with a little smile, as he saw the new bunch just where the faded ones had stood.

"Are they not sweet?" she answered.

"Were you sorry you gave them to me?" he asked wistfully. "I think you've been crying."

"I was glad I gave them to you, dear. These are some fresh ones that Otto sent to me to-day, because he is gone away."

There was a pause. Randall lay looking at the flowers meditatively, but he did not ask for them.

"Where are the others?" he asked at last.

"I have thrown them away. I could not keep them after they were faded you know, dear, because of the scarlet fever."

He assented, adding, however, "Did they fade in one night?"

"You have been ill four nights, dear."

"Have I? Well, I thought it was a long time! Sometimes I saw you sitting there, and sometimes didn't know where I was. That was funny, wasn't it?"

"Very funny, but people do feel like that when they are ill."

"I s'pose they do. Then sometimes I felt very cross, Miss Ashlyn, and wished you would go away. But all the same, you seemed very kind to me, and did not turn cross, as I am sure anybody might."

"You see, I knew you were ill, and did not know what you did," she answered gently.

Again Randall was silent. He took his jelly, and bore her attentions as if used to them. But his eyes, which before had hardly seemed to recognize her, now were quietly looking in her face, with a look she had never seen in them before.

"Am I getting better?" he asked presently.

"I think you are, dear."

"I'm glad of that. I did not want to die."

"When the Lord Jesus is our Saviour, it does not matter whether we live or die," she responded. "If we live, it will be to try to please Him and be His; if we die, we shall be glad to go to Him: as glad, Randall, as a little tired child is to run to its mother's arms!"

"I'm very tired, I think," he answered, "and I wish I could run into my mother's arms!"

"I wish you could, dear," she answered, her eyes watering with sympathetic tears, "but though your dear mother cannot come to you because she is ill, the Lord Jesus is always near, and loves you so much, and will rest you so sweetly if you ask Him!"

"I have never asked Him anything. Hugh has, but I always thought Hugh was a baby."

"We cannot do without Jesus," said Gertrude earnestly, "and I would not—oh, for the world."

"I see that," answered Randal wearily, "and I'm sorry I called Hugh a cry-baby—very sorry."

"Oh, are you, dear? I am so glad."

"Glad?"

"Glad that you are sorry for it. Now, dear, you have talked quite enough. But just turn round on your pillow and rest your head on its cool softness, and say to yourself, 'Jesus loves Randall! He will rest me if I come to Him! Jesus loves me.'"

The child did not answer in words. He gave one glance at her, and then turned as she had advised, nestling his head into his pillow, as if weary and satisfied.

Whether he had taken the rest of her advice, she did not know. But from his deep peaceful sigh as he fell asleep, she thought he had.

After all, that was a happy Wednesday.





## **CHAPTER L. IN THE CABINET.**

MRS. SWIFT was sitting with Randall one morning while Gertrude went out for the constitutional which the doctor insisted on, and he had been chatting to her about all his affairs with great volubility, she listening, as she said to her husband afterwards, "with one ear," and meanwhile plying her needle and thinking her own thoughts as well.

"Where's Miss Ashlyn?" he asked at length.

"Out for a walk, or else she's gone in to see my husband."

"Is he better?" asked Randall, with interest.

"Yes!—a deal better. He's better every way since Miss Ashlyn came to see us."

"Then you are glad I've been ill here?"

"Very glad," answered Mrs. Swift heartily.

"So am I—"

Mrs. Swift looked up at him with surprise.

"Yes, I'm very glad," said Randall. "Do you know, all that time that my throat was so bad, she used to read to me out of her little Bible, or say a verse now and then, till it got right into my head. Wasn't that funny? Now I can't forget it, and I don't want to either."

"That is very nice, I'm sure, dear. What words was it that you can't forget?"

"I think she said them oftener than any others. Sometimes I'd sort of wake up, and there she would be feeding me with little bits of ice, and saying so softly, it didn't disturb me a bit, 'Him that cometh to Me, I will in no wise cast out.' I've never forgotten it, now I'm better."

"Those are beautiful words—she said them to me. Have you come to Jesus too, dear, and found He speaks true?"

Randall did not answer. His eyes shone, but the "yes" which he murmured was hardly audible.

"I made up my mind to tell her something yesterday," he said presently.

"Miss Ashlyn?"

"Yes,—I want to ask her something, and to tell her something too."

"She is coming up-stairs, now," said Mrs. Swift, rising to leave the room, "so I'll go down to my husband and repeat to him your text, dear! It's always best to pass on good things!"

Randall smiled, and as Gertrude entered, she caught the look.

"What is it?" she asked brightly.

"I want you to let me do something!"

"To get up to-day? You may if you like; the doctor has permitted it."

He shook his head. "It is not that," he said. "Only—I've got nobody but you here, and I want you to let me call you—Gertrude!"

She bent and kissed his forehead, answering softly, "If you love me enough to wish it, I will let you, gladly, Randall."

He put his two arms round her neck. "I do love you—now," he whispered.

She sat down by him, still holding his hand and stroking it softly.

"Do you love me—now?" he questioned with a comical little look which made her ready to laugh and cry both at once.

"Indeed, I do."

"You did not always? I don't wonder, because I was very nasty. But you didn't love me till lately, did you, Gertrude?"

How could she answer? How could she acknowledge that there was a time when this child had seemed almost an enemy? Still he was gazing in her face expecting a reply.

"I began loving you when I remembered how much Jesus loved you," she answered at length.

He pressed her hand in both his. "Ah, that was nice!" he murmured.

And Gertrude saw that the love of Jesus can bind together what else might never be bound, can make the crooked straight, and the rough places plain; so that each one of His loved ones may boast joyfully, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

Presently Randall started up with fresh energy.

"Gertrude! Oh, how kind you are to let me call you so! Gertrude, I'm going to tell you about the Museum that day."

"Are you, dear?"

A week ago the thought would have made her shiver. Now she rejoiced that she could think of it calmly, almost without pain.

"I didn't get lost—" began Randall.

"I knew that, dear."

"Did you? Why didn't you get me punished then? Well, I didn't get lost, I lost myself. When Mr. Leigh left me in the doorway to go to you, I waited till he was behind a big bit of furniture, and I just slipped into a corner, and when no one was looking, I got into one of the old cabinets! I could see you through the crack of the door searching about for me."

"Oh, Randall!"

Still he looked in her face with quiet eyes. "I did it on purpose to annoy you—I wasn't a bit sorry, I was very glad."

"But you are not now?" she said anxiously.

"Oh, no! Gertrude, you've been so very good to me that I ought to tell you what made me sorry. Shall I?"

Her eyes were answer enough.

"It was yesterday—at least I think I was rather sorry before—but when you told me to just say to myself, 'Jesus loves me,' all at once I thought, how could Jesus love such a naughty, wicked little boy? And then thought how kind He was not to cast out anybody, but to forgive them; and then I asked Him to forgive me; and after that I was so sorry—oh, so sorry for everything I have done wrong."

And as Gertrude kissed him again, she felt more glad than she could say. Her prayer had indeed been answered abundantly.



## CHAPTER LI. AT LANRIFFE.

AFTER that, Randall quickly recovered, and very soon was running about the Strange House, and even walking in Mr. Swift's well-kept garden, where Mr. Swift himself walked slowly round the paths, his hands in his pockets to keep them from

trying to pick up the weeds, which as yet he was too weak to do.

"Who'd think," he said to his wife, "that weeds would get ahead in three weeks as these have done! I'm a'most ashamed to say as this garden belongs to me."

He watched the child wistfully, as day by day Randall gained strength and grew more and more such as their own Johnnie had been. But when his wife saw the sad look in his eyes, she would say, with unusual gentleness, "He's in better keeping than ours, husband, and I can hardly wish him back. There are no weeds and no sin in heaven!"

When prudence permitted, and all the disinfecting was properly gone through, the doctor advised that Randall should be taken to the seaside before he mixed again with his brothers and sisters. So Gertrude was allowed to write to her mother at Lanriffe, asking her to find a cottage where they could be received. And in a very short time, she and Randall were standing on the beach, drinking in the autumn air, and feeling the salt spray dash in their faces from the restless sea.

Mrs. Ashlyn prepared everything beforehand for their comfort, and, waiting just a day to allow the sea breezes to blow upon them, she came to see her child, who had passed through so much since they had parted only so few weeks ago.

Randall was out on the beach in front of the cottage, when Gertrude was at last clasped in her mother's arms.

There was so much to tell, and so much to ask, that at first they seemed to have nothing to say.

"My dear, you look—as if you had been a long journey, and had come back different!"

"The same in love to you," faltered Gertrude, for her mother's look was almost more than she could bear.

"Ah! Absence does not make much difference in child-love and mother-love," answered Mrs. Ashlyn.

"And your eyes?" asked Gertrude, looking lovingly in the patient face.

"Not worse, my dear. I have been saving them up. Phyllis is such a treasure now you are gone; she does everything for me."

"I guessed she would."

"Yes; and Otto! Directly you were gone, Otto came to me and told me he intended to be my son."

"Did he?"

"Yes—not only in name, as a sort of pretence, but a son in real earnest. He told me of his love for you, and asked my consent."

"Oh, mother! And you never told me! But of course you did not."

"I left him to tell his own tale. And now he is gone abroad, Phyllis and I seem too lonely. You intend to stay in London, my child?"

Did her mother speak wistfully?

"I must—I think I ought; indeed, I wish it for every reason. You would not have me leave them, mother?"

Mrs. Ashlyn did not at once reply.

So Gertrude continued—

"You see, mother, Mrs. Shaddock has learned to trust me, and I should like to go back and help her. There is much to teach the children that they have never even heard of! Hugh wants help—Mollie is so nice in many ways, but so indulged and independent. I do really think that it would be unkind to leave them now, after all their kindness."

Mrs. Ashlyn did not press the matter further, and the conversation then turned on Mrs. Shaddock's health, which Gertrude explained was not yet satisfactory, though she was much better than she had been.

"I did not know she was subject to such attacks," said Mrs. Ashlyn.

"She has only had one other as serious as this," answered Gertrude, "but many slight warnings. Poor little Randall's piece of mischief has cost him and his mother very dear."

"Have they any idea how he took this?"

"We have no idea. People have suggested that there was some poison lurking in the old cabinet where he hid himself, but I am at a loss to guess what it could have been. He says he sat for ever so long on a form watching for us, by a woman who had a very funny smell in her shawl. Of course that may have been it; people are so careless about carrying infection!"

"Rose is longing to see you," said her mother, "but will wait for a day or two. It was very kind of the Shaddocks to plan your coming here, my dear."

"They are full of such kindnesses. I never saw people so thoughtful for others before—except you, mother; you are always everything!" she added fondly.

"You have heard from Otto?" asked her mother, returning her kiss.

"He writes by every mail that he can. His letters are full of incidents of the voyage—the strange people he meets, the amusing things they do and say, the dogs that people bring with them, the pets they patronize, the absurdities they perpetrate. It reads like a story, only more interesting!"

"I expect it is," said Mrs. Ashlyn, smiling.

"The boy has quite taken to him, and is improving every day. How I long to see Lester, to know if 'he' has gained anything!"



## CHAPTER LII. RANDALL'S RETURN.

"HERE is London!" said Randall, as the houses thickened fast, and the fields melted as it were into brick walls and chimneys, while the express train flew past them.

"Where?" asked a girl with a beautiful face, who was sitting opposite to Randall, looking out eagerly.

Randall gave a little laugh, at which Phyllis coloured vividly.

"I have never seen London, you know," she said apologetically.

"It is everywhere," said Randall, waving his hand about, "all these houses, and churches, and gardens, and factories, and Board Schools, and everything are London!"

"I see," answered Phyllis.

"Never mind, Phyllis," said Rose, who was seated by her, "you will have to be a little 'country cousin' for a few days. When you go back to Lanriffe, you will be 'the London young lady.'"

"I do not wish to be anything but what I am," said Phyllis quietly.

"I wonder what Dr. Blank will say of Lester?" remarked Gertrude, looking down at him as he nestled against her shoulder.

The little boy glanced up at her as she spoke. They sometimes fancied—was it only fancy?—that he did look up when his name was spoken.

Randall and Gertrude had been at Lanriffe for more than a month, and were now returning to spend Christmas at Hampstead.

The weather had been unusually mild for the time of year, and Randall had passed most of his time out of doors, catching all the air and sunshine he could.

Soon after their arrival, Rose had brought little Lester over from Camptown on a visit to her mother and Phyllis. And Randall had found a new delight in tending the little invalid, wheeling him about in his easy carriage, and talking to him of what he saw around him.

Those looking on so anxiously and eagerly noticed that the child was more bright when Randall came near him, and would put out his arms to welcome him. That even sometimes there was a movement of his lips as if he were trying to speak; and once a rippling laugh broke from him at one of Randall's sallies.

The boy was devoted to him, and one day when they were left for a few minutes on the beach together, he was seen to coax him from his little carriage, and tenderly to lead him a few steps along the firm sand. By the end of the month he had begun to run about, and each day strength of body seemed to be coming back to him.

"Randall," Gertrude had said on the last evening before they were to return home, "you have been very, very kind to Lester, and Rose and I love you dearly for it."

Randall threw his arms round her neck.

"I never was kind to anybody before, but I thought now I loved the Lord Jesus—it seemed the only thing I could do for Him."

If ever Gertrude felt happy and thankful, it was at that moment.

So the train that bore Gertrude and Randall back to Hampstead, bore Mrs. Ashlyn to consult an oculist, as well as Rose and Lester to see Dr. Blank, Phyllis having been invited meanwhile to pay a visit to Mollie Shaddock.

But Rose was not to stay long in London. She was to meet her husband from one of his frequent journeys. And after the physician had examined little Lester, she and her mother were to return home together.

Rose and Fritz had arranged to take up their abode with Mrs. Ashlyn and Phyllis at their seaside cottage.

This had been Rose's own thought.

"Mother!" she had said one day. "Here am I lonely at Camptown when Fritz is away, and there are you lonely at Lanriffe. Suppose we pack up our furniture and come over to you? Gertrude will never come back for more than a brief visit, because she is going to stay with her Shaddocks till Otto comes back. And then, why, mother, Dr. Blank told me they would be married directly, as he needs Otto so much, and he wants to see them settled!"

"But, my dear—" Mrs. Leigh had begun.

"Oh, I know all about the furniture and all that! Fritz and I have made a grand calculation, and he wants you to give anything you can spare to Otto and Gertrude, and we will bring ours to your house. He was going to buy them some, but instead, he will put a hundred or two in the bank for you. That will be a little help all round."

Mrs. Ashlyn was greatly astonished, but when she had time to think of Fritz's plan, she liked it the more she thought of it. To have Rose and Phyllis always near her, and to be able to cherish little Lester—well, nothing could be nicer.

And Rose had whispered "that she never need think of care any more about money matters, because Fritz said he had enough for everybody!"

So the party in the train were in very good spirits. And when they separated, Rose and her mother to the Great Northern Hotel once more, and Gertrude and her two young companions to Hampstead, it was difficult to say which was the happiest or most hopeful party of the two.

When the cab stopped at the house at Hampstead, Conway sprang down the steps to meet them.

"Welcome back!" he exclaimed. "Welcome back!"

And there in the hall was Mollie, ready to greet Phyllis, while Ned and Hugh stood behind with Daisy, waiting for their turn.

"How grown Randall is!" said Mrs. Shaddock, when, after tea, he stood within her arms for the twentieth time at least.  
"And how different!"

"I 'am' different," whispered Randall. Then, as Gertrude passed near, he held out his hand to her and drew her close. "Am I not different, Gertrude?"

And Gertrude thankfully answered, "Yes, indeed, darling."

THE END.

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE STRANGE HOUSE \*\*\*

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