

# THE WIDE AWAKE

MAY, 1886.

## THE TOP OF THE LADDER.

*Grace Dennis Litchfield.*

SO this is your eldest boy, is it? A fine fellow — a fine fellow! He'll be at the top of the ladder some day, won't you, Master Ned, eh?"

The visitor patted the tall handsome boy admiringly on the head, while the father laid his hand on his son's shoulder well pleased, and Ned stood between them straight and strong and well-built as a young pine-tree. How could one but be proud of him?

Poor little lame Dick was sitting near by, half-hidden by his mother's dress. He looked wistfully out at the group beyond, then lifted his eyes to her face. Her arm was already around him, and as he turned she bent instantly towards him, with that smile of smiles which only a mother's face can wear, and which is brighter than anything else on earth, brighter even than the sun on a June morning.

"Well, my darling?" she said softly.

Dick slipped his thin little hand into hers. "Shall I be at the top of the ladder, too, some day, mother?"

A shadow crossed the sweet face at the boy's words, as a cloud sweeps over the sunlight, and her fingers closed on his swiftly.

"Ah, my poor little Dick," she murmured tenderly, "my poor little darling!"

She would have drawn him closer to her without any other answer, but he resisted, still looking earnestly up at her.

"Shall I?" he repeated anxiously. "Shall I get there too, mother, as well as Ned?"

The mother sighed, and tears came to her loving eyes.

"We do not even know that our Ned can get there, my darling," she answered. "It is not many who reach the top of the ladder. But we will hope that Ned may, won't we? so that we can all

be proud and glad. He is getting so big and strong that we must expect great things of him."

"But I want to get there too," persisted Dick, trembling with suppressed eagerness. "Why can't I get where Ned does?"

She bent nearer and kissed his forehead, as if to heal beforehand with her love any hurt that her words might give.

"How can my poor little lame boy hope to get so far as such a great, strong, active fellow as Ned? Who knows but his crutch may keep him back?" she said with gentlest pity in her voice. "Be content just to be mother's pet. Is that so hard? She loves you best as you are, dear one, crutch and all."

Dick did not answer, but sat very grave and silent on his little stool, with his hands folded seriously on his knees, and a great resolve growing in his heart till it seemed to steady his poor little frail body, as great determinations often do, and he stopped trembling. He would get to the top of the ladder, too. His mother should be proud and glad for him as well as for Ned. His crutch should not keep him back. His heart swelled, and his eyes grew very big and shining. He said nothing, only once suddenly lifted his grave face to his mother's for a kiss. That kiss meant much to him, though he did not know it himself; it was like a seal set upon his resolve; his mother kissed him back with deeper tenderness than usual, for she divined his need of her love even while failing to guess his thoughts.

Dinner was announced before long, and everybody went to the dining-room, including Ned, who had lately entered upon many grown-up privileges, so that little Dick was quite alone. He waited, sitting very still with folded hands, till he heard the door of the dining-room close behind them.



Generally he didn't like the sound, for it seemed to be shutting him out from so much that was nice, and to be saying: "There! don't you just wish you might get in!" But to-day, as soon as he heard it, he got up, put his crutch under his arm, and going into the hall took down his straw hat from its low peg, and went out into the garden. He would get to the top of the ladder *that very night*.

It was late, for the sun was sinking fast, and the sky was all streaked with colors as if some giant artist had wiped his brushes on the clouds before putting away his work. But little Dick never

looked up at the sky. He was wholly absorbed in his desire to do this thing which had seemed impossible even to the most credulous of all loves, and there was a fixed look about his tender little mouth, and a gravity of purpose in his brown eyes, mingling strangely with their usual softness of expression. No king ever set forth to do battle in his country's cause more valiantly than this little lame hero started out to do or die for his mother's sake.

There were several ladders somewhere about the grounds, for Dick had often seen them in use, and



SO LITTLE DICK STARTED SOBERLY OUT.

he remembered how Ned had once spent a whole afternoon most delightfully in leaping down from the various rounds of one they had found propped up against the greenhouse wall, although he didn't get nearly so far up as to the top of it. Indeed he didn't get even half-way up. That had been a particularly tall one however. Did the length of a ladder make any difference in the glory of getting to the top of it? Dick wondered; and would he be just as much at the top of it if it chanced to be only a short one? He couldn't help hoping it would be a short ladder that should fall to his lot. You see climbing is such a very, very awkward matter where one is lame.

So little Dick started soberly out in the beautiful summer evening on his quest. It was six o'clock, and as there are few hours in the day more promptly observed all the world over than the stop-work hours, the gardeners had already gone home, and the tool-house was locked up for the night, and the ladder that had been by the greenhouse was gone, and the child was puzzled where else to look until he recollected the orchard, where of course ladders grow as naturally as trees. This orchard was very far from the house, and was a lonely spot at any hour, but Dick did not stop for that. If the way was long, there was all the more hurry to begin it. So he stumped sturdily on, his great yellow



straw hat making him look like a big buttercup moving all of itself across the grass; and as he went, he kept peering this way and that way with anxious eyes, but without any success, until he was quite discouraged. At last, however, just as he was becoming altogether hopeless, he came upon a ladder at the very end of the orchard, beyond all the fruit-trees — such a tall, narrow, shaky, abominably perpendicular ladder — placed against the trunk of a giant oak upon whose head the very skies seemed to rest, so that as Dick looked up he almost wondered if the stars did not get entangled among its branches at night. Some of the lower boughs had been lopped off and lay strewn about the ground, but Dick thought less of the oak than of his ladder, which rose up before him like the skeleton of a sum in long division, with the figures blotted out and only the lines left; except that in such sums one ought to begin at the top and work down, while Dick, poor little unit, was in this instance to begin at the bottom and work up — carry one, carry one, all the way. His heart beat violently; he was very pale, and the light rings of hair on his forehead were moist with perspiration, yet he never once thought of turning back. It is not fear itself, but the yielding to it that is cowardice; and little Dick, in spite of his white face, showed himself truly brave in just the fact that he did what he was afraid to do.

So taking a deep breath our manful little Dick dropped his useless crutch, and grasping the ladder on both sides with tiny, desperate hands, he knelt down on the first round, and then drawing up his sound foot to it, raised himself on it and stood. One step safely accomplished. And there were how many more? One, two, three, four, five, six — he guessed he wouldn't count any more till he had climbed up those six. In the same slow, laborious way therefore, each step a pilgrimage in itself, the child toiled on, with panting breath and hot cheeks and heart throbbing louder and louder till it seemed to have got up into his ears and to be knocking on the inside of his head, asking peremptorily to be let out. But the sixth step was reached somehow, and little Dick looked down in triumph at the ground left so far beneath. That downward glance well-nigh cost him dear. The height at which he stood made his unaccustomed head spin, and he clutched convulsively at the ladder and sank down on it thinking he must surely fall, and shut his eyes tight, while his heart suddenly seemed to stop beating altogether. Only six steps done, and there were how many more above?

At last, finding that he hadn't fallen, he unclosed his eyes — gently, as if the raising of his eyelids

might shake the ladder — and timidly looked up. Oh how many more than six there were still! But he also made the discovery that it was far less giddy looking up than looking down, and he wisely concluded not to look down at all, but to keep his eyes fastened on the very next round ahead; and after that moment of frightened hesitation he began the ascent again, summoning back his courage by thinking of his mother and of the pleasure she would feel when she saw him actually at the top of the ladder — her poor little lame boy of whom she expected nothing that she expected of the well and strong.

Higher and higher he climbed, and the steps grew many behind him. He soon ceased to count them, for the sum of them made his brain reel. He tried instead to put them out of his mind, thinking only of the step he was on, till at last he was so near the top that he began to count the rounds backward. That was encouraging. Only five more steps now! Now only four more! Now only three — only two — only one — and — oh positively now no more at all! His little feet were planted on the very topmost round, and a drooping branch of the great tree brushed his head lightly like a kindly hand touching him in approval.

The child's heart was full of mingled exultation and terror. He had done the impossible. He had reached the top of the ladder! Nobody, not even Ned with his two strong firm legs, Ned, of whom so much was expected, could go any farther than to the top. Oh if but his mother were there to see! He gave a little weak laugh, and the leaves rustled merrily about him as if laughing too for pleasure, as he was.

And now what should he do? Of course he must not go back, for no one would believe he had been to the top of the ladder unless they saw him there; so he must wait where he was till his mother came. She would certainly come before long, for she would miss him and follow him, and he laughed again thinking of her delight when she found him there, and the leaves laughed again and shook with glee.

Just where the ladder rested, the tree divided into two great branches, and in the niche made by this division, little Dick, turning around very cautiously, managed to seat himself as if in an arm-chair, with the topmost round of the ladder as a footstool. He was quite safe so, yet even now he did not dare look down, the ground was so dizzily far away. So he sat looking steadily off into the sky, where the glorious colors had long since faded into a gray so pale and soft that it seemed as if it

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hadn't strength to open and let the night in.

Dick had never been out alone so late as this, and a shiver ran over him as he realized the loneliness. The birds had said their final good-night and gone to sleep. It was so still that his breathing made a quite perceptible noise, and everything looked strangely indistinct and unfamiliar, as if the wavy gray light blurred it, like a damp-finger passed over the pictures on a slate. To his surprise Dick found himself crying a little. At least his lip was quivering, and there was a wet spot on his cheek.

But it would never do for him to begin to be cowardly now. So he swallowed back the lump in his throat, and tried to keep up his courage by all sorts of fancies. First he imagined himself an acorn, hidden up there by a squirrel who was going to come back and eat him for supper. Then he made believe he was a bird, and tucked his head under his arm as if it were a wing. But that was too warm and uncomfortable, and he took instead to opening his mouth as wide as he could, pretending it was a beak, and that another bird was coming to



SUDDENLY IT ALL CAME BACK TO HIM.

drop a ginger-cookie down into it; or rather (as birds don't eat ginger-cookies), a big fat worm, at which thought he shut his mouth very tight immediately. Oh dear! How could the better educated birds, those who flew highest, prefer even the fattest worm that ever wriggled, to a nice mashed potato with gravy on it!

And just here Dick naturally remembered the forfeited dessert, and wondered very particularly what had been done with his own especial share of it when he hadn't appeared as usual to claim it. The poor little fellow was getting very cold and

stiff and cramped by this time, as well as hungry and sleepy; but he kept his post bravely. His mother would surely come soon; she would not delay long now. And when she came—he would say—he would say, "I'm a bird, mother—top ladder—nest—up in sky." And all in a moment, little Dick was sound asleep.

Nothing knew he of all the trouble at the house because of him; nothing of the questioning and wondering, the excitement and the seeking, the running to and fro, the calling and the crying and the sorrow. He knew nothing more whatever



until a good deal later, when he half roused up with a vivid impression that his arms were changed to wings and that he had flown so near Heaven that he heard the angels talking, and the sweetest of them saying, "Oh, my darling! Dick! my child!"

And then he awoke fully and knew it was his mother's voice, and saw her standing below him in her pretty dinner dress, with bare head and upstretched arms, and others too, with blazing lights like rockets about to go off. At first he felt bewildered, and couldn't think who he was, nor how he ever got out of his crib into that queer place. But suddenly it all came back to him, and in his joy at his mother's presence his fear quite vanished, and bending down his dear little happy face, still wet with tears, he called out,

"See! see, mother! I am at the top of the ladder! You thought I couldn't get here, but I did. I am at the very top, and there isn't any farther for any one to go!"

And there he lost his balance and fell forward, and a cry of terror went up from his mother's lips.

But some one who had been climbing the ladder toward him caught him, carried him down unhurt, and laid him in her arms, which closed around him as if she could never, never let him go again.

"Oh my dear one," she sobbed, "my heart's darling! Is it so that you misunderstood me to-day!"

Dick patted her face with his tiny cold hand.

"Aren't you very proud now, mother?" he asked with a happy laugh. "You see my crutch didn't keep me back, because I wouldn't let it, and I got there too, just as well as Ned."

Whether or not little Dick ever got to the top of the ladder in after life, I do not know, but I am inclined to think that he did. For to one who brings such pluck and courage and perseverance to the overcoming of his difficulties, there is no knowing what may not become possible; and it is he therefore who is bravest, rather than he only who is strongest, who in life's long upward struggle may soonest hope to reach to the top of the ladder.

## ST. NICHOLAS.

JULY, 1886.

### DAISY-SONG.

BY GRACE DENIO LITCHFIELD.

I AM only a plain little daisy-flower,  
Sprung up at hap-hazard 'neath sunshine and  
shower,  
To live out as I may my life's poor little hour,  
Yet who is so happy as I?

Oh, the days they burn hot, and the nights they  
blow cold,  
And the shadows and rains,—true they fall,  
manifold;  
But my dress is all white, and my heart is pure  
gold,

And who is so happy as I?

There's many a gladsomer meadow than mine,  
Where greener trees shelter and softer suns shine  
For others than me; but how can I repine,  
For who is so happy as I?

There's a brook I can't see by that far-away beech,  
And a bird that wont whistle, for all I beseech,  
And stars are up yonder, quite out of my reach,  
But who is so happy as I?

I just look up at Fate with my brave little face,  
I stir from my post in no possible case,  
And I keep my dress clean, my gold heart in  
its place,

And who is so happy as I?