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Two Little Travellers, by Frances Browne

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TWO LITTLE TRAVELLERS

A Story for Girls

by

RAY CUNNINGHAM

(FRANCES BROWNE ARTHUR)

Author of "For Gilbert's Sake," "John Carew's Daughter," &c., &c.

Thomas Nelson and Sons London, Edinburgh, and New York 1903

"Oh! there's nothing on earth half so holy
As the innocent heart of a child."

CHARLES DICKENS.

TO MY CHILDREN

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TWO LITTLE TRAVELLERS.

CHAPTER I.

UNDER THE CEDAR TREE.

"There are twelve months throughout the year, From January to December, And the primest month of all the twelve Is the merry month of September! Then apples so red Hang overhead, And nuts, ripe-brown, Come showering down In the bountiful days of September!"

MARY HOWITT.

It was pleasant under the shade of the huge cedar tree on the lawn at Firgrove that golden Sunday afternoon. It was autumn, really and truly, going by the calendar at the back of the small cat-eared diary which Darby had coaxed from his father and always carried in his pocket. Yet the sunshine was so bright and warm, the birds were singing so joyously in the thickets, the rooks cawed so loudly as they wheeled and circled like a dense black battalion at drill up against the cloudless blue of the sky, that it was hard to believe the diary people had not made a mistake in their reckonings or stupidly mixed their dates.

Indeed, one would have been quite sure they had done something of the sort, and that it was still summer, only for the unmistakable signs and tokens of harvest that everywhere met the eye. In the fields on the hillside sloping up to meet the sky there were stooks of rich, ripe, yellow grain still standing, waiting to be carted home to Mr. Grey's stackyard, and there heaped into high domed castles round which children loved to play or linger silently, watching the sleek dun mice that darted so swiftly hither and thither, planning for themselves such glorious games in and out and round about their well-stocked store-houses amongst the crisp, rustling corn. Red-cheeked apples, dark-skinned winter pears ripened slowly on the orchard trees. Big bronze plums and late Victorias mellowed against the garden wall. And now and then when a breeze, gentle as the flutter of a fairy's wing, fanned the branches of the stately spreading lime tree that was comrade of the shining cedar on the lawn, there dropped on the grass border beside the tall hollyhocks a pale dry leaf, falling softly to the earth from which it grew, silently as a tired bird sinks to her nest amongst the clover blooms of summer.

On a wide wooden seat beneath the sheltering branches of the cedar tree Captain Dene sat with his little ones close beside him. They were very close to him indeed--as close as they could come: for Darby was bunched up on the bench, legs and all, with his head tucked under his father's elbow; while Joan was folded in his arms so tightly that the golden tangle of her shining curls mingled with the deeper hue of the dark cropped head which bent so lovingly over hers.

And no wonder that those three cuddled so close together this balmy September afternoon. No wonder they looked sad in spite of the sunbeams that boldly forced their way through the spikes on the cedar branches in long, slanting shafts of light that rested lovingly on Joan's burnished hair like the tender touch of caressing fingers. And no wonder, either, if they were all three silent--not because there was nothing to say, but because there were so many things they wanted to speak about, and yet the words would not come. For on the morrow, early in the morning, at day-dawn even, when the birds should be yet only half awake in their nests, while Darby and Joan should be still sleeping in their cribs disturbed by neither dream nor fear, their father was to leave them. He must be up and away to join the company of brave fellows who called him captain, and with them go aboard the big transport ship that even then was lying at anchor in Southampton Water, waiting to carry them, with many of their comrades, away, away--far, far away!--over the sweeping, separating sea, to fight for their beloved Queen and country amidst perils and privations on the wide, lonely veldts of South Africa.

How were they to live without him--the dear, darling daddy who had been to them father and mother for almost a year now? And that is a long time to little children, a large slice from the lives of such mites as Joan and Darby Dene. Darby was not quite seven, with thick, short brown hair and great gray eyes. Joan was five. Her hair was long and curly; it had a funny trick of falling over her face in golden tangles, from which her

eyes, velvety as the heart of a pansy, blinked out solemnly like stars from the purple darkness of a summer night: while her cheeks were exactly the colour of the China roses that bloomed so freely, month in month out, about the porch at Grannie Dene's front door.

Their names were not really Darby and Joan. They had been baptized Guy and Doris; but their father had begun to call them Darby and Joan when they were tiny toddlers, just for fun, because they were such devoted chums; and after a time nearly every one called them by these names, even their mother. Only grannie, who was very much of an invalid, and whom in consequence they did not often visit, kept to Guy and Doris. But for that they should soon have forgotten that these charming names were actually theirs.

Their mother had died about nine months previously, just before Christmas, shortly after the birth of baby Eric, the wee, fragile brother whom Perry, the careful, kindly nurse, seemed always hushing to sleep and rarely permitted the others to touch. Already Joan had ceased to remember her mother, except at odd times, and in a hazy sort of fashion; and to Darby it appeared quite a great while since that day when he had heard the servants say to each other that their mistress was dead.

It was a bright, crisp winter day outside--Darby knew, because he had been sliding on the pond behind the barrack wall quite early after breakfast--but inside the house it was chill and gloomy; for all the blinds were down, and every room seemed strange and still.

At twilight their father came up to the nursery. He stood for a minute or two looking down upon Joan lying asleep in her crib. Then he took Darby in his arms, and drawing a low chair close to the window, together they sat there until from the fleckless blue of the frosty sky the little stars shone out one by one, twinkling soft bright eyes towards Darby as if to say, "Good-night, you poor little motherless lamb! Go to bed; sleep sound, and we shall watch your pillow the whole night through."

But these memories were nearly a year old now. Already they were becoming less vivid in Darby's mind, and being gradually pushed aside in order to leave room in the storehouse for more recent impressions. Many things had happened since then. Baby Eric had grown from a tiny pink morsel into quite an armful, Nurse Perry declared, and a heavy handful as well, whatever that meant. They had dwelt in different places, too, during that time; because when the regiment moved the officers also moved, and Captain Dene kept his motherless children as constantly with him as it was possible to do. Recently, however, it had become no longer possible--quite impossible, in fact--for Captain Dene's company was under orders for active service in South Africa. Darby and Joan would have been more than willing to accompany their father to the ends of the earth, riding at the tail of a baggage-wagon, seated on a gun-carriage, or perched on the hump of a camel. But Captain Dene only smiled and shook his head at the eager little ones. Then he made for them the best arrangement that circumstances permitted.

In consequence, just the previous Thursday he had brought his three children, with Perry their nurse, to Firgrove, where they were to remain during his absence, under the care and guardianship of his own two aunts, the Misses Turner.

Aunt Catharine and Auntie Alice, as Darby and Joan were told to call the maiden ladies (who in the children's eyes looked old enough to be the grandmothers of all the young folks in the neighbourhood around their country home), were sisters of Captain Dene's mother. They were not really old at all, although Aunt Catharine's thick black hair was shaded by a lace cap, and in Auntie Alice's nut-brown waves there were streaks of silver that lent a chastened charm to her faded face. Firgrove was their birthplace, and there in his boyhood Captain Dene had spent many a happy holiday.

Auntie Alice was a little, slender body, whose gentle voice and quiet ways just matched her meek brown eyes; while Aunt Catharine was a tall and stately lady, with a prim, severe manner, and a fixed belief in the natural naughtiness of all children, whom she kept down accordingly. And although he knew how truly good and kind

she was at heart, Captain Dene wondered somewhat anxiously how Darby's unbroken spirit would bear the curb of such strict, stern rule. But there was Auntie Alice as well, and Captain Dene smiled as he remembered how she had petted and indulged him in his juvenile days. The aunts between them, like John Gilpin's bottles, would keep the balance true. The children would be all right. Besides, he did not expect to be very long away--six months or a year at most. The time would soon pass, and when he came home from Africa he would have his little ones to live with him again, until Darby should be old enough for school at any rate.

CHAPTER II.

LEFT BEHIND!

"If I could but wake and find it a dream! But I can't--oh, what shall I do? It's only the good things that change and seem, The bad ones are always true. And miracles never happen now, And the fairies all are fled; And mother's away, and the world somehow Is dark--and Flopsy's dead!"

M. A. WOODS.

The group on the lawn had been silent for a long time--far too long, thought Darby, who liked to use his tongue freely as well as his sturdy little legs.

At length Joan raised her head from its resting-place on her father's shoulder, and flinging her arms round his neck, she burst into a storm of sobs.

"Daddy, daddy!" she cried, "we can't do wifout you. Don't go away and leave me and Darby all alone!"

"I must go, my pet," replied Captain Dene gravely. "I am a soldier, dear, and soldiers must obey orders. Besides, I am not leaving you alone. You shall have the aunts to take care of you. They will know better how to look after a wee girlie than a great blundering fellow like father."

"You isn't a great blun'rin' fellow; you's my own dearest, sweetest daddy!" declared Joan warmly. "And I doesn't want no aunties. Auntie Alice is nice, but we doesn't love Aunt Catharine one teeny-weeny bit.--Sure we doesn't, Darby?"

"Joan!" exclaimed Darby in a shocked tone, although he smiled as he peeped in the direction of the front door, for already he had learned that Aunt Catharine had a trick of pouncing upon him when he least expected. It was embarrassing, to say the least of it, and Darby disliked it greatly.

Captain Dene pulled at his moustache as though puzzled how to act. He quite understood how little there was about his aunt's grim presence to attract a soft little creature like Joan--for a while at least. After a time he knew things would be on a freer footing between them; therefore he thought it better to take no notice of his small daughter's frankly-spoken sentiments, and after a pause he said,--

"You are forgetting Eric, surely. He will soon be old enough to play with you, and you must be very gentle with him, you know."

"Baby!" cried Joan in fine scorn. "Why, how could we play wif him? he doesn't know no games."

"I think you needn't count much on Eric, father," put in Darby wisely; "he's nearly always sleeping or crying, and nurse hardly ever lets us touch him. It's because he's delikid, she says. So when you're away there'll just be Joan and me," added the little lad sorrowfully.

Suddenly Joan spoke again, asking a question that awoke afresh the pain at her father's heart--a pain so sharp, so deep-seated as to be at times almost unbearable.

"When you have to go away in the big ship wif the solgers, why did mamsie not stay and take care of us? Other chil'ens has nice lovely muvers. Why have we none, daddy?"

Why, ah, why?

"Does she not love us any more, father?" whispered Darby, in broken, quivering tones--Darby, who remembered his fair young mother as one remembers a pleasing dream.

"Will she never come back no more? Shall we not see her again--never, never?" asked Joan shrilly.

"Listen to me, my darlings," said Captain Dene, in a solemn, earnest voice, after a pause, during which he wondered how he should answer his children's questions. "Mother has gone to live with God in heaven. Her body was tired and worn out, and in a way it had grown too small for the spirit within. And just as you leave off wearing your garments when they grow shabby or small, and father provides you with new things, so mother has left her weary, frail body behind and gone to God, the great and loving Father of all, where she shall be clothed anew."

"But wasn't she put in the ground, father?" asked Darby the doubting. "I 'member quite well seeing a big, long box with brass handles and flowers and wreaths and things, and nurse and Hughes said it was mother."

"You silly!" struck in Joan sharply. "That wasn't *weally* muver; it was only the bit of her that used to be tired and sick and have headiks. But the thinkin' place and the part of her that used to say 'Joan, darlin',' and 'Darby, my son,' in such a cuddlin' kind of voice, and--and--why, just all the lovin' bit of mamsie is up in heaven!--Isn't I correc', daddy?" she demanded confidently.

"Quite correct, dear," replied the father, fondly kissing the flower-like face upturned to his.

"And will we ever see her again?" asked Darby, who was feeling somewhat snubbed. "You are not telling us that, father, and that's what I want most partikler to know," he added, with a pathetic sigh, behind which there lay a whole world of longing.

"Yes, my boy," answered Captain Dene promptly; "but not here! You shall never see her again in the house or about the garden, at prayer-time or for good-night. Yet she has merely gone out of our sight; she is often with us, I believe, although we cannot see her. And by-and-by, I do not know when or how soon," he added, thinking of the cruel warfare in which he was about to take his share, "if you try to be brave and true, and kind and loving to every one, you also shall go to dwell with God in that happy, beautiful home where mother waits to clasp her dear ones again in an embrace from which they shall never be separated."

Darby's eyes were raised to the sky with an expression so rapt, so exalted, so pure, as if he were already beholding the glories of the heavenly land. But Joan had still some more questions to ask.

"Will God--or wouldn't it be politer to say Mr. God? No?" as her father shook his head. "Well, will He send an angel to fetch us to heaven when He wants us?"

"Yes, dear; and when His messenger comes for us we must make no delay," replied Captain Dene softly.

"And will He let me take Miss Carolina, my dolly, wif me, and the pussies?" queried Joan eagerly.

"Well, no, I hardly think so," said her father, with a sympathetic smile, for he understood perfectly how hard it is this leaving behind of friends and possessions. Did not the Master Himself foresee the trial when He enjoined His followers, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth"?

"But Jesus will give you something far better than toys or kittens, my darling," continued Captain Dene--"more beautiful than I can either imagine or describe. There will be pleasures of which you shall never weary."

Joan thought hard for a minute, with a pucker in her white brow. Then she slid from her father's knee and

snatched up a shabby, battered doll that was lying on the grass beside the bench, and clasping it tightly to her breast, she delivered her decision,--

"I doesn't want no new fings. I wants my sweet Miss Carolina and the pussies. So please tell dear Lord Jesus that He needn't trouble to get anyfing ready, 'cause Joan isn't comin'."

The father gently stroked his little daughter's hair, but he said nothing. What if God's last message to him were to come through the muzzle of a Mauser rifle? Should it find him any more willing to leave his motherless babes behind than was Joan to forsake her favourites?

"Now, chicks," he resumed, trying hard to speak cheerfully, "there is Aunt Catharine at the door. It is your tea-time, I expect, and children's bedtime comes early at Firgrove, as I know," he added, smiling into Darby's wistful wee face. "But before you go in I want you to sing me something that I shall think of when I am far away."

And in their clear, piping treble, with now and again a deeper note from their father to carry them on, the little ones sang a favourite hymn, the key-note of which, so to speak, dwelt with Captain Dene during many a weary day and sleepless night,--

"Ever journeying onward, Guided by a star."

Early next morning Darby had a queer dream. He dreamt that his father came to his bedside, bent down, and kissed him repeatedly.

Was it a dream? Darby wondered, as he slowly awoke, sat up in bed, and rubbed his eyes. Then suddenly he remembered that this was the day the dear daddy was to leave them; or what if he were already gone!

Daylight had not yet come, but from a table in the far corner of the nursery the night-lamp still glimmered faintly. Darby sprang to the floor, calling loudly on Joan to come quick--quick. Together they trotted downstairs. The breakfast-room was empty. From the drawing-room, whither she had gone to have a good cry, came Auntie Alice, with tears running down her cheeks, while close behind her sailed Aunt Catharine. She was wrapped in a big, soft white shawl, and there was a curious redness round her eyes, as if she had a cold in her head. But father was not to be seen!

"You poor dears!" murmured Auntie Alice, throwing tender arms around their little white-gowned forms.

"Who allowed you to come downstairs at this time in the morning?" demanded Aunt Catharine, eyeing the pair severely over the rims of her spectacles; "and in your night-clothes, too! 'Pon my word!"

Then Darby knew that his dream had been no dream, but a sad reality, and father was, in very truth, gone! So drawing Joan along with him up-stairs, they both cuddled into Darby's bed, where, clasped in each other's arms, they sobbed themselves to sleep again.

* * * * *

Firgrove was a charming old place. It had belonged to the Turners for generations; but as Aunt Catharine and Auntie Alice were the last of the family, after them it would come to Captain Dene. The house had originally been a square eight-roomed cottage, built of plain gray stone; but one Turner after another had, either for convenience or display, added a wing here, a story there, until it had been turned into a handsome, roomy residence. From the outside it looked rather picturesque, with windows framed in ivy, clematis and wistaria peeping out of the most unexpected places, chimney-stalks shooting up from the least likely corners. Inside, the same surprises awaited one. No two rooms were similar in size, scarcely any exactly the same in shape.

There were passages here, recesses there; steps leading down to this apartment, up to that; with curtained doors and draperies in such abundance that the children found within their shelter the most delightful hiding-places imaginable. And many a romp and game they had, in which once in a while Auntie Alice joined, when Aunt Catharine was not anywhere about to be disturbed by the noise or shocked at her sister's levity.

Out of doors there were other delights which Darby and Joan at first felt they could never exhaust. In the stable Billy, the fat pony, munched and snoozed every day and all day long, except when occasionally he was harnessed into the basket-carriage to take the aunties for a drive, or ambled into the meadow, where Strawberry and Daisy, the meek-eyed Alderney cows, browsed at will over the sweet, juicy after-grass. There were big, soft-breasted Aylesbury ducks on the pond, fowls in the yard, pigeons in the dovecot so tame that they would perch on Auntie Alice's shoulder and peck the grains of corn from between her lips; and up in the loft above the stable there lived a cat, called Impy, who was the proud and watchful mother of three dear little kittens, as black, as soft, as sleek as herself.

Behind the house was the garden, a peaceful old-world spot, with its prim gravelled paths, boxwood borders, holly hedges, and wealth of vegetables, fruit, and flowers. There Green, the deaf old gardener, reigned supreme, not always paying heed to Aunt Catharine herself. And there also, in a sheltered corner, stood Auntie Alice's beehives, around which the small, busy brown bees buzzed and droned from dawn till dark, laying up their stores of rich golden honey that was to supply the little ones with many a toothsome morsel. Then there was the lawn with its velvety sward, spreading shrubs, and stately cedar; and at the back of the buildings, beyond the garden to the right, sloped the fields of Copsley Farm; while to the left, lying in a gentle hollow, there uprose the dark massed pines of Copsley Wood.

Darby and Joan were not allowed to go beyond the boundaries of Firgrove alone or without special permission, but within their limits they wandered about free as air. It was their father's express wish that they should not be molly-coddled in any way, and, indeed, nurse had little leisure to look after them. Her time was chiefly occupied with baby Eric, who, although improving, was still delicate and fretful, and seemed to find the difficulty of cutting his teeth, and life in general, almost too much for him. Aunt Catharine's notion of the needs of children began and ended with giving them plenty of plain, wholesome food, seeing that they went early to bed, were properly clothed, and knew their Catechism thoroughly. She instructed Darby and Joan for an hour each morning in the mysteries of reading, writing, and counting. She drilled them most conscientiously in the commandments, and always with the "forbiddens" attached. She hedged them about with "don'ts", and believed she was teaching them obedience. And when the tasks were done, and the books put away for the day, it would have been hard to say whether the teacher or the taught uttered the heartier thanksgiving. Then, believing that she had done everything that duty demanded of her, Aunt Catharine felt herself free to attend to her prize poultry, her poor women, and parish meetings.

Auntie Alice loved the little ones dearly. She enjoyed their chatter and a romp with them now and again. But she had not been used to children; she was actually shy of them! She fancied they might be happier without her, so she kept mostly to the company of her piano, her books, and her bees, and the little people were left very much to their own devices.

As long as the weather was fine enough they almost lived out of doors, and were perfectly happy; but when it "broke," as country folks say--when the heavy autumn rain beat against the nursery window, and the wind shook and swayed the cedar tree on the lawn until it sighed and moaned as if in sorrow for the death of summer--then they longed for the dear, loving daddy with a longing that was almost pain! They had letters from him as often as was possible. Darby wrote in reply, and Joan covered a piece of paper with pot-hangers, with a whole string of odd-looking blots at the end, which she said were kisses and her message for daddy. Letter-writing, however, especially if one does not write easily, is but a poor substitute for speech. It did not seem to bring their father close to them as he came in conversation.

And so it happened, exactly as Darby had foreseen, that now since he was gone there were just the two of them left--Darby and Joan!

CHAPTER III.

THE BABES IN THE WOOD.

"What are you singing of, soft and mild, Green leaves, waving your gentle hands? Is it a song for a little child, Or a song God only understands?"

Answered the green leaves, soft and mild, Whispered the green leaves, soft and clear,-- 'It is a song for every child, It is a song God loves to hear; It is the only song we know, We never question how or why. 'Tis not a song of fear or woe, A song of regret that we must die; Ever at morn and at eventide This is our song in the deep old wood,-- "Earth is beautiful, heaven is wide; And we are happy, for God is good!'"

F. E. WEATHERLY.

"Have you anything for us to do, Auntie Alice?" said Darby Dene one day, after he had watched Aunt Catharine safely into the fowl-house to have a look at her Brahmas.

It was a still, bright afternoon in October, when the ripe apples were dropping from the trees in the garden, and up at Copsley Farm Mrs. Grey's turkeys wandered at will over the stubble whence the grain had all been carted and built into stacks beside the farmyard.

"Do say that you can think of something, please," pleaded the boy--"a message or anything. We are so tired of the garden, and the lawn, and the swing, and--and--everything.--Aren't we, Joan?"

"Yes, werry, werry tired," agreed Joan with ready assent. She always did agree with everything that Darby said. He was her model, her hero, who, in Joan's eyes, could do no wrong.

"I'm afraid I cannot invent or suggest any fresh occupation for you just now," answered Auntie Alice, smiling down into the eager upturned faces beside her knee. "Would you not run away and have a romp with pussy? she is frolicking with her kittens in the garden, quite close to the tool-house."

"We were playing with pussy for ever so long, and look there!" said Darby, holding up for his aunt's inspection one small brown and not over-clean hand. Across the back of it ran a long, straight scratch from which the blood was slowly oozing. "That's what pussy did! That's why we left her, and why we don't want to go back to the garden."

Darby's tone was so rueful, his expression one of such patient forbearance towards base treachery, that his aunt laughed outright. Yet she kissed the wounded hand again and again, whispering gently the while,--

"Poor Darby! poor little hand! and poor pussy too!" she added below her breath. For she guessed correctly that pussy--who was in general a long-suffering animal--must have been sorely beset when she used her claws in defence of herself or the rights of her family.

"If you really haven't an errand, won't you just invent one, auntie?" persisted Darby. Then suddenly he cried, while his face beamed with the happiness of the thought that had struck him, "May we go up to the farm and see Mrs. Grey? Oh, do say 'yes,' Auntie Alice!"

"Well, I'm sure I don't know. Perhaps we should hear what Aunt Catharine thinks. Still, I suppose you might," decided Auntie Alice, her hesitation overcome by the pleading look in Darby's eyes.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, dear Auntie Alice!" said both children in a breath, flinging themselves in ecstasy upon their aunt. She, however, did not like to have her delicate ribbons crumpled by smudgy, sticky little

hands; so she gently withdrew herself from their embrace, shaking a warning finger playfully at the pair as she gave them a caution,--

"You must not stay too long or tease Mrs. Grey, either of you."

"We shan't stay very long," promised Darby; "and Mrs. Grey says we never tease her."

"Mrs. Grey hasn't got no chil'ens of her own to play wif and 'muse her, and that's why she likes Darby and me to go and talk to her whiles," explained Joan sagely, looking up at her aunt through the mop of golden curls which shaded her big blue eyes.

"Is that the reason? Well, since you are going, you might just bring those Cochin eggs with you that Mrs. Grey promised us. Your aunt Catharine was speaking about them a little ago. Wait a minute, and I'll hear what she says," and Auntie Alice made as if she would follow her sister to the fowl-house.

"Oh, please don't!" cried Darby wildly, clutching with both hands at his aunt's gown in order to stay her steps. "She'll be sure not to let us. She'll ask if we've learned our Catechism, and send us to wash our hands or change our clothes, or--or *something*. You know how she does, Auntie Alice!"

Yes, Alice Turner knew her elder sister's little way very well indeed, and because of this she yielded to Darby's importunity.

"Dear, dear, what a droll boy you are!" and by the way she spoke the youngsters knew that they had won their way. "Off with you both, then, quick! Take my white basket out of the breakfast-room, and see that you carry the eggs carefully, or I'm afraid we shall all get into trouble."

"Which way shall we go?" asked Darby, gleefully swinging the basket about his head. "May we go through the fields, Auntie Alice? The ground is quite dry to-day, and the path is ever so much nicer than the road past Copsley Wood."

"You may go through the fields, dear; but come back by the road. You might break the eggs if you were to return the field way; there are so many stiles to climb. And listen to me, chickabiddies," continued Auntie Alice earnestly. "You must not on any account go into the wood; it is not a safe place for children."

"Why?" demanded Darby in astonishment, for he had little or no fear of any living thing--man or beast.

"I need not detain you now, dear, to explain further than to say that there are sometimes rough people about who might think it rather funny to behave rudely to unprotected little children."

"Don't you know there's bears in Copsley Wood, and lions and tigers and effelants, and--and--oh, heaps of drefful fings!" explained Joan, as glibly as if she had in person penetrated the many mysteries that--to her infant mind--were hidden in the cool, dark depths of the old pine wood.

"Nonsense!" and Darby smiled in scorn of his sister's ignorance.--"Do you hear her, Auntie Alice?--Why, you little goose, don't you know that there aren't any bears, or lions, or tigers, or elephants in this country? If we were in a lonely part of Africa, we might see some; but there's only rabbits and squirrels and perhaps wild cats in Copsley Wood.--Isn't she a silly, Auntie Alice?"

"I'm not a silly!" said Joan stoutly.--"Sure I isn't, Auntie Alice?"

"No, child; and you are quite right to be shy of the wood," answered her aunt gravely. "And now, if you want to go to the farm to-day, you had better be off. I think I hear Aunt Catharine coming!"

Her caution came too late, however, for in another instant Aunt Catharine was upon them.

"What is it now?" she demanded, glancing from one to another of the guilty-looking group.--"What are you doing with that basket, Darby?"

"I--we--Joan and me were going up to the farm to see Mrs. Grey," faltered Darby. "And please, please, Aunt Catharine, don't say we aren't to get!"

"We's goin' to bring your Cochon eggs," added Joan sweetly.

"I hope you won't mind, sister," struck in Auntie Alice, in her soft, timid voice, "but I gave them leave to go. And I thought they might as well fetch the eggs when they are coming back."

"Alice Turner! when do you mean to grow up?" exclaimed Aunt Catharine, in withering accents. "Is it that boy you expect to carry a basket of eggs? Those fidgets! Why, they'll leave the half of them on the road or sit on them by the way!"

"We willn't sit on them," said Joan stoutly. "Jetty shall sit on them, and they'll turn into dear, soft, fluffy chickens! Willn't they, Aunt Catharine?"

Aunt Catharine did not answer directly, but she looked as if she did not feel quite so sure of results as Joan.

"We'll be very, very careful, indeed!" promised Darby earnestly; and Joan echoed likewise, "Werry, werry careful!"

"Well, well; since your Auntie Alice has already given permission, I shall not prevent you, and I must admit I am in a hurry for the eggs. Jetty is making a terrible to-do over a solitary china one in her nest. But if they are broken or shaken--"

There Aunt Catharine paused; yet her listeners perfectly understood what she did not say.

"And remember, children, what has been so often said to you about Copsley Wood. You are not to go there on any pretext whatever! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Aunt Catharine; and we've promised Auntie Alice already," replied Darby meekly.

"Very well; see that you keep your promise, my boy. You always say that you forgot when you have been disobedient, but you are both old enough to do as you are told. And I should not be doing my duty if I did not try to teach you," added Aunt Catharine significantly, as she bent and kissed the little ones good-bye.

"And that just means that she'll punish us badly the next time we're naughty," explained Darby to Joan, as they clambered over the stile at the foot of Mr. Grey's turnip field. "Well, I shouldn't mind greatly if it wasn't putting to bed. I do hate going to bed; don't you, Joan?"

"Yes, werry much; for they're always sure to come for us when we're not ready, nurse or Aunt Catharine! They seem to know 'zactly when we're in the middle of somefin' awful nice, and then they says, 'Bedtime, chil'ens!' Oh, it's just ho'wid!"

Joan puckered up her pretty face so comically in imitation of nurse's worried expression, and mimicked Aunt Catharine's lofty tones so cleverly, that Darby clapped his hands in delight and admiration. Then they raced each other along the breezy headland, across the sweet-smelling stubble field, through the stackyard and the orchard, until, flushed and breathless, they stood beside the mistress in the cool, red-tiled dairy of Copsley

Farm.

Mrs. Grey was always well pleased to see the little folks from Firgrove, and made them warmly welcome; just as, in the long-ago days, she had welcomed their father when he too found it a relief sometimes to slip away from the prim precision of his aunts' establishment, and come rushing up the hill to count the calves, tease the turkey-cock, ride the donkey, plague the maids, and generally enjoy himself to his heart's content. She dearly loved children although, as Joan said, she had none of her own; and the day always seemed brighter to her when Darby and Joan came flying over the fields to pay her one of their frequent visits.

There was a new donkey at the farm in those days, and as neither of the children was particular about a saddle, they rode him in turn until Neddy rose in revolt--actually, with his heels in the air!--or lay down, which was more hopeless still; for once he did that they knew that he, for one, had frolicked enough, that day, at any rate. But there were other things. They played hide-and-seek round the stacks with Scott the huge collie, who was so gentle that he would allow Joan to put her fingers in his eyes or pull his big bushy tail. They gathered apples in the orchard, hazel nuts in the copse, late blackberries from the hedge at the back of the stackyard; and they watched the pigs at their afternoon meal until Joan turned away in disgust, declaring that "the dirty fings should be teached better manners, and made to sup their pow'idge wif a spoon!"

Then, when the sun was sinking low in the west, and they had feasted to their complete satisfaction on all the dainties that their hostess loved to set before them, it was time to return to Firgrove.

Mrs. Grey put into Darby's hand the shallow basket of round brown eggs, with two tiny white ones on the top for themselves that had been laid by Specky, the lovely black-and-buff bantam. Then, with many kisses and warnings to be careful, she set the happy pair upon their homeward way.

They took turns at carrying the basket, and paused now and again to peep at their bantam eggs, not much bigger than marbles, and the others which held the promise of such sweet baby Cochins within their smooth, silk-lined shells.

"Oh, I am tired!" sighed Darby at length, when they were still only half-way down the road, just passing by the entrance to the pine wood. "Are you tired, Joan?"

"Yes," assented Joan promptly; "this basket's so heavy. Can't we rest awhile after we pass the trees?"

"We shall rest here," said Darby decidedly; and suiting the action to the word, he took the basket from his sister's hand, placed it carefully on the roadside, and, with a deep breath of satisfaction, dropped on the soft grass beside it, just where the path branched off the highway into Copsley Wood.

"Darby!" cried Joan in remonstrance, "are you forgetting what you promised Auntie Alice, and that Aunt Catharine said we wasn't to go into the wood?"

"I'm not forgetting one bit," he replied loftily. "Sure, sitting here isn't going into the wood, is it, Miss Joan? Besides, I don't believe there's any bad people in it. They only want to frighten us," he continued, in a grown-up sort of tone; and when Darby spoke like that, Joan felt quite sure he knew what he was talking about--better even than Aunt Catharine herself!

They sat still for a little while, resting on the soft, mossy grass, listening to the song of the robins in the hedges, watching the snowy sea-gulls that hovered about the tail of Mr. Grey's plough as it turned the stubble into long, even furrows of dark, fresh-smelling soil.

Then a couple of rabbits darted by to their burrow in the wood; and at the foot of a big beech tree growing close beside the children a whole party of squirrels had gathered, nibbling hungrily at the nuts that were

scattered round its base.

The little ones hushed their chatter, afraid to breathe almost, lest they should disturb the merry family meal.

By-and-by, however, Joan spoke, for she could not keep silent many minutes at a time.

"I wish I had one of those dear pretty fings, Darby," she whispered. "How sweet and soft it would be to love and stroke! far nicer than pussy, for I don't think it would scratch. Look at their great bushy tails!"

"Well, sit you still and mind the eggs, and I'll creep over ever so softly and catch one for you," replied her brother under his breath, only too willing, alas! to gratify her wish. "It'll be quite easy: just one grab at its tail and there you are!"

"But, Darby, Aunt Catharine. What ever will she say? Darby!" cried Joan in distress.

Darby was creeping on all-fours over the springy grass, and did not mind her. Slowly, stealthily he went--near, nearer, and yet nearer the root of the beech tree with every movement of his lithe, wriggling body. He is now only a few feet from the squirrels, who seem not to notice the intruder. He puts out his hand. He almost touches the smallest member of the group, a bright-eyed, furry little fellow. Joan starts to her feet in excitement. Darby does exactly as he had planned--makes a sudden clutch at the coveted prize. The object of her desire is really within her reach, Joan believes, and she shouts aloud in her delight. There is a flash of bead-like eyes, a waving of plummy tails, a scurry of flying feet, a chorus of queer, chattering cries, and, lo, the squirrels have disappeared, some up one tree, some up another--all except one, the very one which Darby desired to possess, and it scampered along the pathway, seeming too frightened to know where it was going; and, without giving a thought to the Cochin eggs, to Aunt Catharine, or to probable consequences, away rushed Darby in hot pursuit, with Joan treading closely on his heels.

Soon the squirrel found refuge in a lofty pine where, most probably, some of its friends had their home, and the children halted to take breath. Just at that instant, however, a frisky young rabbit started from its hiding-place in a hole at their feet. Off it went, scampering over the fallen fir needles that were spread so thickly like a soft brown carpet over the ground. And away, too, Darby and Joan raced after it, as quickly as they could thread their way through the trees, following where in front the rabbit led the way, its stumpy whitish tail turned up like a beckoning signal-flag. Still they struggled and stumbled on and on, in and out, until they stopped for want of breath in what seemed the very heart of the wood. Their prey had escaped into the shelter of a burrow, and the hunters gazed blankly at the spot where it had disappeared. Then they turned to each other in discomfiture and disappointment. Afterwards they looked about them, and were filled with confusion and affright, for the pathway was nowhere to be seen.

"The eggs, Darby!" cried Joan, suddenly conscious, now that the play was played out, of what had been, what was, and what might be. "Let us go back directly and get Aunt Catharine's basket of eggs."

"Yes, of course, that's what we shall do; but don't be in such a hurry. You only confuse a fellow," answered Darby, trying to speak lightly, although his lips were quivering. He had sought up and down, backwards, forwards, and roundabout, but still could see neither track nor footmark--just trees, tall trees everywhere, one seeming the exact counterpart of the other.

Joan, however, was quick to catch his expression of bewilderment, which so sadly belied his brave words, and she began to sob weakly. She always cried easily, and seemed sometimes to enjoy it; at least Darby thought so privately.

"Be quiet, can't you! There's nothing for you to cry about," he said, in a tone of easy assurance; "at least not yet--not until after we get home," he added comically. "I do hope Aunt Catharine will be in the drawing-room,

or out to dinner, or--or--something when we arrive. If she sees us like this, she'll be certain sure to put us to bed at once," continued Darby, with sad conviction, glancing anxiously at his soiled sailor suit, which a few hours before was white, his straw hat with the brim dangling by a thread; and, worst of all, at Joan's torn pinafore, scratched legs, and shoeless foot--for in the flurry and fervour of the chase one small slipper had somehow been left behind.

Joan still sobbed.

"Hush, Joan! don't cry any more, like a good girl," said the little lad soothingly. "We shall be sure to find the way out very soon now. We left the basket at the edge of the wood; I don't think any one will have taken it away. And when we get it, we shan't be hardly any time going down the hill. We'll slip in softly, softly, and find Auntie Alice first. We'll ask her to coax Aunt Catharine not to be too angry; and perhaps, if we tell her we're sorry, she'll not punish us very badly. I think we had better not say anything about forgetting this time; we'll just be sorry right off."

Joan ceased crying. She dabbed her eyes with the corner of her soiled pinafore until they smiled like violets new washed with dew; she wiped the trickling tear-drops from her smudgy China rose cheeks until they bloomed afresh.

Thus the brave boy soothed his small sister's terror, although his own heart was heavy with fear; for the farther they walked the deeper they seemed to go into the depths of the dark pine wood. And night was coming on. In daytime, even, Copsley Wood was a shadowy place; but now, when above the trees and beyond their margin twilight had fallen, it was indeed a dark and lonesome spot. All around the pines rose straight and tall, like gaunt giant forms flinging out long, skeleton arms eager to infold them in a cruel clasp. Strange and stealthy sounds from bird and beast came to their ears at intervals, while the unfamiliar music of rustling branches and whispering leaves filled the souls of these two little travellers with a feeling of awe and vague alarm. Nevertheless they kept moving on, on; now stumbling over a fallen branch, again shrinking in terror as a great soft owl flitted slowly by, or hooted solemnly right above their heads.

At length Joan cried out that she could not walk another step. A sharp stone had cut her poor little shoeless foot, and she was limping painfully. She sank down on a smooth tree-stump, and Darby sat beside her, allowing her to lean her drooping head against his shoulder.

"Are we lost, Darby?" she asked piteously. "Are we goin' to die here like the babes in the wood? And will the robins come in the mornin' and cover us up wif leaves?"

"No, no," answered Darby, shivering at the mere thought of such a hurried burial, yet trying to speak cheerfully in spite of the tears in his eyes, the lump in his throat. "When you are rested a bit we will go on again. If you can't walk, perhaps I could carry you--a short distance, anyway. Surely we shall soon find the path, or some one will come to look for us," he added, feeling as if at that moment any one, even Aunt Catharine herself, would be welcome.

"It's gettin' awful dark," sobbed Joan, in a choked, weak voice. "Why, we can't see even a single star."

"We'd be all right if we could see anything," replied the boy ruefully. "Maybe the moon will shine soon; then we'll find our way," he added, still trying to cheer his little chum as best he could.

For a while they were silent. Joan was almost asleep, with her head still resting on Darby's breast. None but the creatures of the wild were near them; only the sounds of the night were in the air--those soft, mysterious voices that whisper to the listening soul of the spirit world which wraps so closely round the pure in heart.

But stay! Who dare disturb the sweetness of nature's symphony? Whose stealthy steps are those that steal so

cautiously over the tell-tale twigs and withered bracken? What figures are they that crouch and slide from tree to tree, then pause within half a dozen yards of the wandered children, ready to pounce like cruel beasts upon their prey?

The shuffling noise attracted Darby's attention. He looked all about him, but observed nothing unusual. He peered into the gathering gloom, yet failed to see the ugly, red-haired man, the bold, black-browed woman who glared at them from behind a screen of hazel bushes. And again he settled himself comfortably on the moss-grown stump, and drew Joan's head into an easier position against his shoulder.

He thought she was asleep, and was nearly over himself, when suddenly she sat up and said eagerly,--

"Darby, I'se been finkin'. Don't you know in that nice hymn of ours--the one we singed to daddy the Sunday before he goed away--there's somefin' about bein' 'guided by a star'? P'raps if we was to sing it now God would un'erstand, and send a star to show us the way out of the wood."

Darby hesitated.

"Well, I don't know; I'm not sure," he said at length. "Still, if you think singing would make you feel better we might try it," he yielded. "Yes, we'll do a verse, anyway. It'll be cheerier than praying--not so much like as if we were going to bed. And it doesn't really matter which we do; God will be sure to know 'zactly what we mean. Now, are you ready? Come on!"

And there, in the depths of the forest that to these two babes was as desolate, dark, and drear as any of which they had heard in fairy tale or nursery rhyme, they raised their clear, tremulous voices in pathetic appeal to that unseen Presence whom from their cradles they had been taught to look upon as "our Father:"--

"From the eastern mountains Pressing on they come, Wise men in their wisdom, To His humble home; Stirred by deep devotion, Hasting from afar, Ever journeying onward, Guided by a star."

CHAPTER IV.

FAR, FAR AWAY!

"The leaves were reddening to their fall, 'Coo!' said the gray doves, 'coo!' As they sunned themselves on the garden wall, And the swallows round them flew. 'Whither away, sweet swallows? Coo!' said the gray doves, 'coo!' 'Far from this land of ice and snow To a sunny southern clime we go, Where the sky is warm and bright and gay: Come with us, away, away!'"

F. E. WEATHERLY.

Just as they paused on the last note Joan uttered a scream of delight.

"Look, Darby, look!" she cried, clutching at her brother's arm. "The star! the star! God has sended it soon, hasn't He? He must have been listenin' close by when we sang. Auntie Alice says He is every place at once."

"Where?" eagerly asked Darby, peering anxiously into the darkness, but looking in the wrong direction.

"There--right behind you," replied Joan, pointing with her finger. "It's comin' nearer and nearer. Don't you see it?"

Yes, sure enough there was moving slowly towards them, out of the shadows, a small bright light not unlike the twinkle of a tiny star. It came steadily on, then stopped, wavered, and was gone.

"Holloa! who's there? Speak up!" called out a loud, hearty voice.

Heavy footsteps followed the voice--footsteps that halted and stumbled among the gnarled tree-roots and spreading branches, yet kept straight on--and in another instant the kind, ruddy face of Mr. Grey looked down upon the children.

"The babes in the wood, by George!" he ejaculated, at the same time stooping to peer into the small, eager faces which were so fearlessly upturned to meet his gaze. Then, when he made out who the forlorn-looking little objects really were, he gave expression to his astonishment in a long whistle, which frightened the birds in the trees, the rabbits within their burrows, and the wicked man and woman behind the hazel bushes, so that they cowered closer beneath the branches, wishing themselves well out of the way of Farmer Grey's stout blackthorn staff.

"Oh, it's you, Mr. Grey!" said Darby, with a curious catch in his voice of glad relief to find that the face bending over them with such kindly, quizzical scrutiny was not that of either gipsy, tramp, or poacher; for in spite of his lofty scorn of unknown dangers, he had grown terribly frightened for the possibilities which might lurk in the gloom of Copsley Wood.

"Ay, it's me, an' no mistake," replied Mr. Grey readily. "But I'm blessed if I knew ye at first in the dusk. 'They're tramps,' says I to myself, 'or gipsy weans.' But then, when I got a good look at ye, I saw that it was the little folks from Firgrove--Miss Turner's youngsters."

"We isn't Miss Turner's youngsters," struck in Joan stoutly; "we's daddy's chil'ens."

"Ho, ho! so that's the way the wind blows!" laughed Mr. Grey. "Ye're a pair o' pickles, anyway, an' no mistake! Who would think ye were the little angels whose pretty speeches my missis was divertin' me with all the time I was at my tea! An' what may the two o' ye be doin' here in the dark, I should like to know?" he demanded, in his big, gruff voice.

"We were lost--quite lost," cried Joan, "just like the babes in the wood. If God hadn't sended you to find us, I s'pose robin redbreast would have comed by-and-by to cover us up wif leaves and twigs and fings."

"Tush!" and Mr. Grey laughed into the little girl's earnest face, although he was moved at the thought of the anxiety and distress these small creatures must have endured. "Lost! why, you're not more'n half a dozen yards off the highroad."

"You must excuse Joan, please," put in Darby formally. "If she says silly things sometimes, it's because she's so little. At least, that's how I 'splains her to myself," he added.

Then he went on to give Mr. Grey a clear and full account of how and why they were wandering at what was for them such an unusual hour in the mazes of Copsley Wood--frankly owning up to more than his own share in the escapade, casting not a shadow of blame upon his little sister.

"So, so!" said Mr. Grey, much amused by the lad's quaint manner and grown-up air. "But I thought I heard some kind o' singin' as I came up the hill. It was that fetched me into the wood. I had been down at Firdale seein' about some seed-wheat for sowin' to-morrow, an' I was in a hurry home."

"It was us you heard," Joan told him gravely. "We were askin' God to send a star to show us the way out of the darkness."

"I'm afraid you'll certainly think my sister very childish," said Darby, in an apologetic tone. "But you see, just when we had finished the first verse of our hymn, a light really did shine. We didn't know at the time that it was only the matches you were striking for your pipe, and Joan thought (in fact, we *both* thought--for a moment, you know) that God had really sent a star to point us out the path, just as long ago He guided the wise men to the place where the dear little baby Jesus lay."

For a space there was silence. Joan was almost asleep on her seat on the tree-stump; not a quiver of the hazel bushes betrayed the presence of the couple lurking there. And into the big farmer's eyes a sudden moisture had sprung as he heard these little ones expressing in simple speech their perfect confidence in the ability and readiness of their heavenly Father to make good His own promise: "I will guide thee with mine eye."

"That's right, my boy," spoke Mr. Grey at length, in deep, earnest tones. "Always look out for God, an' you'll find Him close beside you, in the darkest forest as well as in the starry sky. An' now we must be movin', or the ladies'll be sendin' the police to look for the pair o' ye.--Eh! Anybody there?" he shouted, as the sudden snapping of a twig broke the stillness about them.

There was no answer, only the flutter of a belated bird as it failed to find its accustomed perch among the pines, and the sighing of the wind through the tree-tops overhead.

"Some beast, I expect, or a poacher, maybe," Mr. Grey muttered to himself. Then he turned towards the children. "I was never reckoned much o' *a star*," he said, with a chuckle of amusement, "but I guess I'll manage to steer ye straight to Firgrove."

"Do you think you could carry Joan, please, Mr. Grey? She's not *very* heavy; I sometimes carry her myself," added Darby, as if doing so were a mere trifle instead of a feat of which he was privately proud. "She's tired, I'm afraid.--Joan! Waken up! Aren't you tired?"

"Yes, werry, werry tired," assented Joan sleepily, as the farmer cradled her comfortably in his strong arms; and with Darby holding hard by his coat-tail they started.

"The eggs, Darby! Is you forgettin' Aunt Catharine's eggs, and the bantam's too?" Joan cried, when they

neared the opening in the wood.

Outside the fringe of dark trees twilight still lingered, and there, just where Darby had set it down, was the basket, safe and sound.

With a whoop of delight at the welcome sight of the basket--for its possible loss had lain heavily on his tender conscience--Darby sprang forward to seize it. But in the dusk he did not notice a long, twisted tree-root that straggled between him and his desire. His toe caught in it; he suddenly tripped, swayed, and fell flat forward, crunching right smash down into the shallow basket of smooth brown Cochins eggs.

"Whoa, there! steady, my man!" called the farmer, vainly struggling to suppress his amusement at sight of Darby's deplorable and moist condition. "You forget that you've a heavier seat on the eggs than a hen, young sir, an' you must sit down easy."

A sharp sob, however, and the smothered cry of "The bantams! we're bantams!" that burst from the little creature in his arms, indicated that what was a joke to him was a catastrophe to the children, and that his mirth was ill-timed and unseemly.

"Never mind, sonny," he added, in a soothing tone; "just tell the ladies when you get home that it was all an accident. Here, rub down your clothes wi' this wisp o' grass, an' I'll see if my missis can't coax them Cochins to lay some more eggs between this an' Christmas."

Then, with Joan cuddled cosily against his broad shoulder, and Darby's small hand clinging closely to his, the party set off down the winding road towards Firgrove.

At the same time two figures raised themselves from their cramped position behind the hazel thicket. The man stretched himself, hitched up on his shoulder a bag, from which peeped the tail of a pheasant and the paw of a rabbit, while he muttered savagely and shook his fist in the direction of the retreating farmer.

"Spoiled yer little game, did he?" and the dark-eyed woman laughed wickedly as she rearranged the faded scarlet shawl more closely round her shoulders. "Well, better luck next time, Joe my dear," she added airily.

"Shut up!" said the gentleman called Joe, with a heavy scowl. "It's kids like they I've been lookin' out for this many a day, an' I'll have them yet," he growled, "as sure as yer name's Moll! See if I don't! Come on!" And in another moment they were not to be seen, they had plunged into the heart of Copsley Wood.

At the gate of Firgrove Mr. Grey set Joan down, and watched until she and Darby reached the front door. There a curious group had collected--Auntie Alice, who was softly sobbing; Aunt Catharine, wearing her garden-hat and strongest boots; Nurse Perry, Mary the cook; and Green the gardener, armed with a stout staff and the stable lantern. It was the search-party in the act of setting out to explore the recesses of Copsley Wood in quest of the missing children.

Mr. Grey thought it would be in better taste to retire. He knew Miss Turner, and he guessed that probably the next scene in the drama would be purely private. Well, the youngsters had unquestionably disobeyed orders, and on their own showing. They must be punished, if by no other means they could be taught obedience, which is the first if not the chief lesson of life. Still, it was a pity, thought the big, soft-hearted man; and the confiding eyes of the children followed him as he sauntered up the hill, forgetting that he was in a hurry home. The words that had floated from their pure lips through the gloom of the pines rang in his ears, and as he went along he hummed softly to himself, in his deep, bass voice,--

"Ever journeying onward, Guided by a star."

"Aunt Catharine's real angry this time, and no mistake," Darby thought, as in almost perfect silence she gave him and Joan their supper, then helped Perry to undress, bath, and put them to bed. "She's sure to punish us somehow to-morrow though she's saying nothing about it to-night. Oh dear! if she would not look so cold and cross, but just give me enough spanking for us both and get it over, I'd much rather."

But Aunt Catharine had decided not to administer any bodily chastisement to her nephew's children, although she considered that a smart whipping now and again was almost as necessary to the well-being of young people as cooling medicine in the spring. She had talked the matter over with Auntie Alice, who could not bear the idea of either Darby or Joan being put to any avoidable pain. They had been very disobedient certainly, she was obliged to admit, and must be taught somehow to do as they were told--Darby especially, who should have been so much wiser than Joan. She would herself have cheerfully borne the penalty of all their misdemeanours if she could. That was impossible, however; but she succeeded in impressing upon her sister that perhaps Captain Dene might not like his motherless children to be subjected to such old-fashioned discipline. Aunt Catharine, consequently, had laid her plans for a different course of action.

Next morning Darby slept quite late--for him--being tired out from the fatigue of the previous evening. He awoke refreshed and brisk, however, and was about to spring out of bed and dress himself in readiness for the fun, frolic, and mischief of a new day, when the nursery door was thrown wide open, and Aunt Catharine sailed into the room, arrayed in all the glory of a Paisley-pattern morning-gown and black crochet breakfast-cap. Now, Miss Turner was one of those people sometimes to be met with whose moods usually match their clothes. Darby understood this peculiarity of his aunt's in a vague sort of way, so that the moment he set eyes on the many-coloured wrapper and sombre headgear he knew that now they were in for it and no mistake.

"Well, what have you to say for yourselves?" she demanded in a loud voice, seating herself solemnly in a chair between the two cribs, and looking from one child to the other with her severest expression. "You can answer me, Guy; Doris is hardly awake yet."

She addressed them as Guy and Doris; and knowing what that meant as well as what was indicated by her awful attire, Darby discreetly held his peace.

Joan sat up in bed, rubbed her eyes with her dimpled knuckles, nodded her tangled curls towards her aunt, and, sweetly smiling, murmured, "Mornin'!" to which cheery greeting her aunt did not respond.

There was a prophetic pause for a while; then Miss Turner spoke.

"I am pleased that at least you have the grace to be silent, to make no excuses; because there is nothing you could say that would make your sin appear any less heinous in my eyes--and in God's eyes," she added as an after-thought.

"Where's the 'henas,' Aunt Catharine?" cried Joan, peeping in the direction of the door. "I'd love to see a 'hena!' There's a picter of some in Darby's Nat'ral Hist'ry book. They's just like wolves."

"Hush, Joan!" said Darby, in a frightened undertone; "there's no hyenas here. Aunt Catharine means 'heenyus,' and that's a thing in the Catechism--far on! It's only me that has come to it yet."

"You have both been guilty of the gravest disobedience," continued Miss Turner, "and it is my duty to punish you. I have therefore decided to keep you in bed until you repent of your naughtiness."

Here Darby started up in anger. His gray eyes flashed, his cheeks were scarlet, his small fists clenched under the bedclothes.

"This is Saturday," went on his aunt, in her relentless voice. "You shall stay where you are until to-morrow, Sabbath morning. Then, if you are in a proper frame of mind, you may both get up as usual; but for one week you shall not go beyond the garden.--And you, Guy, because you are older than Doris, and should set your sister a good example instead of leading her at your heels into every mischief you can devise--you are to have an additional punishment. I desire that while you are in bed you shall occupy yourself with your Catechism. And to-morrow, before breakfast, I will hear you repeat the fifth commandment, with the three following questions and the proofs thereto. After that perhaps you shall have a clearer conception of your duty to your parents, which means, in your case, those who are in charge of you." And having delivered herself thus, Aunt Catharine sailed away as majestically as she had come.

Darby flung himself about in his wrath.

"Parents indeed!" he cried, in passionate scorn. "*She's* not our parents! she's nobody's parent. Why, I heard Postie telling Perry the other day that the Miss Turners were both old maids when he was a kid; and people can't be old maids and parents as well! Oh, if daddy hadn't gone away, or if mother was only here!" he wailed in his dire distress. Then he buried his head in the blankets, for his feelings were too deeply wounded to find relief in words.

For a while Joan howled lustily, but by-and-by, when she had eaten her breakfast of porridge and milk, she tumbled off to sleep again, being still weary after her recent wanderings.

Darby, however, lay wide awake, feeling, now that his burst of anger had passed away, very tired of things in general, and of himself in particular. It was too dreadful, he thought, to be kept in bed on a fine day when he was quite well, only stiff and aching all over. Outside the air was balmy and still. The garden was ablaze with late dahlias, hollyhocks, and asters; and down by the tool-shed Mistress Pussy and her family would be contentedly sunning themselves beside the boxwood border--the close-clipped boxwood border, which always gave out such a strong, queer, haunting smell.

Oh dear, how tiresome it all was, and what a pity a fellow could not *sometimes* do as he liked without being called naughty and then punished! Should life always be like that, Darby wondered. Surely not, he told himself, or else he felt that already he had had about enough of it. But he did not believe things were quite the same with other children. They were different for him and Joan, because daddy was abroad and mother dead. If they had only not been left at Firgrove with Aunt Catharine! There were plenty of pleasant places in the world besides Firgrove. Could not he and Joan go away somewhere, just themselves together, where they would want only to be good, because there should be no temptation to be naughty; where there should be no Catechism, no Aunt Catharine, and no more punishment, especially putting to bed, which was Darby's detestation? He really wished to be obedient, this little lad of seven years old, and tried very hard to remember everything he was told. But forgetting comes easy; consequently he was frequently in trouble. He was often good for days together--quite good, as Joan said. But the difficulty with Darby, as with older folk, was not the *being* good, but the *keeping* good.

For a long time the boy lay pondering some of the problems of life which from the beginning have puzzled many a wiser head than his. But Darby did not know that he was only going over a well-beaten track. He just knew that he was wishful of finding some pleasant spot where, without effort or trouble, he could be happy after his own fashion, untrammelled and untroubled by restrictions or consequences.

The morning had glided on to noonday. Joan, having had her sleep out, was playing with Miss Carolina in her crib. Outside a family of lingering swallows sat on the meadow fence discussing their plans for a hurried departure on the morrow; and from the dovecot in the yard came the soft, continuous cooing of Auntie Alice's pigeons as they strutted about the flags or preened their feathers in the sun. The distant barking of Mr. Grey's collie, Scott, as he followed the sheep to the pasture, floated in through the open window; while from the next room came the soothing murmur of nurse's low, droning voice, singing baby Eric over to his midday sleep.

What was it she sang? but, indeed, she seemed always singing it. Nothing much; only a snatch here and there from that old hymn she was so fond of, or perhaps sang almost unconsciously from habit:--

"Oh, we shall happy be, When from sin and sorrow free!

"Bright in that happy land Beams every eye; Kept by a Father's hand, Love cannot die.

"Come to this happy land, Come, come away; Why will ye doubting stand? Why still delay?"

Suddenly Darby sat up in bed in his excitement. A brilliant thought had struck him. Why had it not occurred to him sooner? The Happy Land! that's where they would go. It was far, far away, certainly; but they should take some food with them, and ask the road from time to time.

Joan was soon weary of nursing Miss Carolina. She had slipped out of her crib and trotted over to the window, where she was occupying herself happily in catching and shutting up in an empty pill-box the flies that buzzed drowsily in the warm, bright sunshine.

She paused for an instant in the act of conveying with her nimble little fingers another captive to its dungeon, when she noticed Darby's flushed cheeks and shining eyes.

"What's the matter, dear?" inquired the tiny, white-robed maiden, in quite a motherly manner. "Has you got a pain, Darby? or was you dreamin' about somefin' werry nice? You does look awful funny, I fink."

"I'm not sick, and I haven't been dreaming," answered her brother, in earnest assurance. "But I've been thinking, and I've made up my mind. We're not going to stay here any longer. I've 'cided where we'll go. We'll go to the Happy Land--that place nurse is often singing about, where we shall always be good, and never be naughty, or sick, or punished, or put to bed any more. It'll never be dark or raining either, but always fine, and bright, bright as day!"

"How lovely!" cried Joan, clapping her hands in ecstasy, at the same time dropping the pill-box, from which the autumn flies crawled lazily, as if too indolent or too stupid to enjoy their newly-regained liberty.

"Just wouldn't it!" said Darby, with quivering lips and sparkling eyes, for he was terribly excited over his scheme. "And you'll come, Joan, won't you, lovey?"

"Yes," assented Joan, without the slightest hesitation, giving a decisive nod of her golden head that set all her curls bobbing up and down like daffodils in a March breeze--"yes, I'm comin' wif you, Darby dear. When's we goin'?" she inquired anxiously, as if in haste to be off.

Darby drew her into bed beside him, tucked up her cold pink toes in the blankets, and in earnest, subdued tones the two discussed the how and the when of their projected pilgrimage.

They could not set off that day, for they were prisoners. The next day was Sunday. They would be sure to be out; but then Sunday was not a suitable day on which to start on a lengthy journey. Monday would be a more fitting time, and Darby remembered with a thrill of thankfulness that early on Monday morning the aunts were going away to spend a couple of nights at Denescroft, as grannie's charming, China-rose-trimmed cottage was called. That would be their chance! Nurse would be almost entirely occupied with Eric, and they two should be left to do pretty much as they pleased. By the time their aunts returned on Wednesday evening the little travellers would be far away, or perhaps they should be safe within the boundaries of the Happy Land.

Before breakfast the following morning Darby repeated his appointed task, proofs and all, without so much as a single blunder. The children went with their aunts to church as usual. In the evening Auntie Alice remarked

to her sister how very quiet the little ones had been all day. Aunt Catharine also had noticed their subdued demeanour. She set it down to the chastening effect of penitence for their recent disobedience, and hoped that it might continue during the days of their absence at least.

"Good-bye, pets," said Auntie Alice to the children the next day, as they hung about the basket-carriage and Billy, waiting to take his mistresses to the station. "Cheer up, Darby," she whispered. "Be a good brother, and take care of Joan; and see and be happy until we come back."

"Yes, Auntie Alice, I'll take care of her, sure. And we're going to be very, very happy," he added, with a look of exultation in his eyes that haunted his aunt until she saw him again.--"Aren't we, Joan?"

"Yes, werry, werry happy!" murmured Joan out of a tousel of sunny hair. "Good-bye, Auntie Alice. Kiss Joan again."

"There, that will do. Stand clear of the wheel, both of you," said Aunt Catharine, settling her ample figure comfortably into the little basket-chaise. "Don't dirty that nice clean pinafore, Joan; and Darby, see that you wash your hands properly before dinner."

The aunts departed, and by the time they had reached the first stage on their journey, two little travellers stepped bravely out at the front door, down the gravelled drive, through the wide gate, and there they halted to hold a hurried council as to which way they should go.

Up the hill in one direction sloped the broad white road that led past Copsley Wood. No Happy Land lay in its vicinity! By another route, along which Billy and the basket-carriage had vanished, was the station; but who ever heard of any one arriving at the Happy Land by rail! Some other way still they must seek to bring them to their destination.

From the gable end of Firgrove the fields slid gradually down until they were merged in a long, level stretch of meadow ground, through which was cut a deep, straight canal, whose waters reached like a shining silver belt across the emerald sward of the surrounding pasture-lands. Many a time Darby and Joan had sat on the garden wall watching the dingy barge-boat come and go. They had listened curiously to the voices of the man and boy on board chatting to each other, or shouting to the patient, plodding horse that towed along the clumsy craft, laden with this and that for the villages and hamlets that dotted the landscape thickly between Firdale and the far-off range of hills, which rose so proudly up to meet the sunset and the sky.

The October day was mild, and bright as days not always are, even in midsummer. Great gold-tinged clouds floated slowly across the high, wide dome of the azure sky. The hilltops were bathed in a warm, soft glow; the placid waters of the canal sparkled, dimpled, and smiled beneath the caress of the passing breeze, until they broke into tiny ripples and wavelets against their sedge-grown banks.

Along that silvery waterway they shall go, the children decide. Up there, beyond the hills, they say, rise the walls of the Beautiful City. That radiance is assuredly reflected from its streets of gold. Those big, fleecy clouds certainly curtain the approach to the portals of pearl!

Just then, emerging from behind a screening clump of trees, the *Smiling Jane*, as the dingy old boat was called, slowly hove in sight. They would run fast and coax the man to take them on board when he stopped to get his vessel through the lock; or, better still, they would slip in unnoticed when he was otherwise engaged. Without a thought of wrong, with never a qualm of fear as to failure or consequences, hand in hand they raced along in the direction of the canal, casting not so much as a glance behind.

And thus it came about that Darby and Joan set out to seek the Happy Land.

CHAPTER V.

GONE AMISSING!

"The old house by the lindens Stood silent in the shade, And on the gravelled pathway The light and shadow played.

"I saw the nursery windows Wide open to the air; But the faces of the children, They were no longer there."

LONGFELLOW.

When dinner-time came without bringing the children in, nurse became very cross indeed. Baby had been somewhat troublesome all the forenoon. Auntie Alice had lately got into the habit of taking him of a morning, walking him about in her arms, crooning sweet nothings over him in her soothing voice. He was old enough to miss her, and to-day was not satisfied at being put off with only nurse. He had, besides, a new tooth coming--a tiny pearly thing, peeping like a speck of ivory from a bed of coral. Very pretty to look at, certainly, but doubtless extremely painful; at least Master Baby felt it so, for he fretted and cried in a way which set poor Perry's nerves all on edge, and made her think that the responsibilities of her position were almost too heavy to be borne on one pair of shoulders.

Then Master Darby and Miss Joan--how tiresome they were! always up to some mischief or other, said nurse to herself, as she ran between the nursery window and the front door to watch if they were not coming before their dinner should be spoiled. And such a nice dinner as it was, too! Cook had arranged it as a surprise for them, because they were all by themselves, knowing how much they enjoyed roast fowl, stewed apples and cream. Now the fowl would be dried to a cinder, the potatoes moist and sodden, the apples cold as charity!

They must have again disobeyed orders and gone away to the farm, nurse concluded, when twelve o'clock, one o'clock, two o'clock passed, and still no sign of the little ones. They would be well stuffed up there, she was sure, and quite safe; only it was really too bad of Master Darby to steal off that way without leave, and drag his little sister along with him. He should have nothing but dry bread for his tea, Perry decided. Then with a glance at the bassinet, where baby was soundly sleeping away some of his fretfulness, and a careful adjustment of the fire-guard on the nursery grate, nurse stole downstairs to get her own dinner, which, like the children's, would be none the better for waiting so long past the usual time.

Eric awoke from his sound, sweet sleep refreshed and hungry. Nurse fed him; then, as the air was mild and the sun warm, she put on his coat and cap and carried him into the garden to watch the pussies at play.

The afternoon shadows began to lengthen, the sun slipped slowly to the west, baby grew weary of pulling at the pussies' tails and turned peevish again, and still the others were absent. By this time nurse had grown downright angry with them for staying away so long. It was a shame of Mrs. Grey to keep them. Master Darby deserved a sound smacking, nurse said to herself; and only that she was not permitted to punish her charges in such a manner, a sound smacking Master Darby should have had--when nurse could catch him, that is to say. Now, however, she must go for them. Mrs. Grey would be thinking they were neglected in the absence of their aunts, and perhaps telling tales. So, after wrapping Eric up warmly in a big woolly shawl, she tucked him into his perambulator and set off up the glen road, past the wood and the turnip-field, to Copsley Farm, expecting at every turn to meet Darby and Joan rushing towards her on their homeward way. But no such interruption to her progress occurred.

When she reached the farm an unpleasant surprise awaited her. Neither Darby nor Joan had been there that day--not since the Friday, said Mrs. Grey; and she was disappointed, because, having heard that the ladies were going from home without the children, she quite expected they would have lost no time in paying her a visit.

At that moment Mr. Grey came in from the barn, where he had been threshing corn all the afternoon. He was tired, heated, and hungry for his tea, and only laughed when his wife told him that the little folks from Firgrove had gone amissing.

"Well, an' what if they have?" he exclaimed, in his loud, hearty voice. "That needn't scare you. Aren't they always gettin' into trouble o' some kind or another, the pair o' them? Why, sure it's only the other day there that I found them wandered in Copsley Wood, like two motherless lambs! They were lost, the little 'un told me, quite lost! An' there they were sittin', the two o' them, on the stump o' an old tree, wrapped in one another's arms, for all the world like the babes in the wood--an' not more'n half a dozen yards from the highway!"

"An' that's where they are now, sure enough," said Mrs. Grey, in a tone of conviction. "They'll have gone back after them squirrels that led them such a dance on Friday! What do you think, Miss Perry?" she asked anxiously.

"I am certain of it too, now that you mention it," replied nurse, looking aghast at the thought. "Miss Joan was fair wild to get a squirrel; and Master Darby, he's that venturesome he would face anything. He doesn't know the meaning of fear for all he's so gentle and innocent-like. And Miss Joan follows him just like a dog. Dear, dear--to think of it!"

"You may well say that, for Copsley Wood's no place for them to be in by themselves," said Mrs. Grey, eyeing nurse with some disapproval in her glance.

"It's no place for decent people, let alone children," retorted Perry in her turn. "It was no further back than yesterday that the butcher's young man was telling me that a couple of gipsies or tramps have set up their tent there. He was pressing me to take a walk with him," she explained, hanging her head and playing with the fringe of baby's shawl; "and I said as how I'd never been in the wood. 'All the better,' says Jenkins, quite short, 'because that wood ain't no place for you, nor for any other nice young lady.' Oh, if they've gone and got kidnapped or murdered, what ever shall I do!" sobbed Perry, who was really a well-meaning woman, and good at heart in spite of a certain narrow-mindedness, not uncommon to her class, which hindered her from seeing at any time much further than her own nose.

Mrs. Grey had listened to nurse's speech with ill-concealed scorn.

"Young lady indeed!" she said afterwards to Mr. Grey, giving a contemptuous sniff. "Her a lady--and young too! Why, she's eight-and-twenty if she's a day! And a lad like Jim Jenkins! Sakes alive! the conceit o' some folks is sickenin'!"

Then when Perry began to weep and lament, the older woman watched her curiously in order to make sure how little of her feeling was real, how much assumed. But such distress was undoubtedly genuine, Mrs. Grey decided, and her eyes held a kindlier expression as she said soothingly,--

"Come now, cheer up! Takin' on that way won't do no manner o' good. You had better hurry home with the baby now. It's gettin' late for him to be out, pretty dear! Maybe you'll find the other two there before you, and famishin' for their tea."

"The missis is right," agreed Mr. Grey, rising from the table as he spoke, and wiping his mouth with a huge, red cotton pocket-handkerchief. "You get along as fast as ever you can, an' if the young shavers isn't at Firgrove afore you, send somebody up wi' a message. Then me an' Tom Brook 'll take a look round; an' if they're anywhere inside Copsley Wood, we'll bring them home to you afore bedtime yet, I'll be bound."

But when nurse got back to Firgrove, Darby and Joan were still absent; so, giving Eric in charge to Mary the

cook, she sped up the hill again herself, flying as fast as fear and excitement could urge her, and reached the farm, panting and breathless, just when Mr. Grey and his head man, Tom Brook, were putting on their coats and preparing to leave the barn for the night.

Until almost midnight the two men tramped hither and thither through the labyrinths of Copsley Wood, carrying the stable lantern to give them light, armed with stout sticks with which to poke among the dense undergrowth of laurel, holly, and hazel that formed such a close cover for the game of various sorts with which the wood was so thickly populated. Now and then from her form amid the withered fern a frightened hare leaped among their very feet. Startled rabbits scurried here and there over the soft moss and rustling leaves. The cry of a night-bird from time to time broke the intense stillness of the lonesome place, while more than once they were alarmed by a soft something that brushed their face, as a big, downy white owl passed them by in search of its prey. In a dell hidden in the very heart of the wood they came upon what apparently had been the camping-ground of some wanderers--the gipsies probably, concerning whom the tales and rumours were so rife and so exaggerated of late. It must have been used quite recently, for where the fire had been built the wood ash was white and undisturbed; while the crusts, bones, and fragments of a rough-and-ready meal still littered the green turf that spread in such a fresh, delicious carpet all around the spot. But now the dell was deserted. The feeling of desolation always conveyed by the sight of a burned-out fire, a forsaken hearth, struck chilly on Mr. Grey's senses, and he turned away in disappointment from the tenantless place. Then the two men gazed blankly into each other's eyes. The children could not be found; not a trace of them was to be seen, except a small battered shoe--the shoe that Joan had left behind the preceding Friday.

By this time they were so tired out that they were reluctantly obliged to give over their search for the night; so, feeling footsore, and disheartened by their want of success, they went each his own way homewards.

Mr. Grey was now thoroughly alarmed for the safety of his wife's little favourites, not knowing what mishap might have overtaken them. As for nurse, her state of mind was pitiable. She alone had been left in charge of the children, and she only was responsible to the Misses Turner for their safety. And what would Captain Dene say--her master, whom she had solemnly promised to take good care of his motherless children? She had done her best, poor Perry; for although often impatient and unsympathetic with the little ones, she loved them devotedly, and would now willingly have imperilled her own safety to secure theirs. Oh, how earnestly she wished that Miss Turner and Miss Alice were home again, or rather that they had not gone away! It was, of course, too late to communicate with them that night, but it must be done first thing next morning--as soon as the telegraph office should be open.

"How shall I face them?" cried nurse wildly, pushing cook and baby away in her impatience.

Cook looked hurt. She had good-naturedly taken care of Eric all evening, and been much diverted by his funny ways. She had offered the little fellow to nurse with the best intentions in the world, thinking that attending to his wants might distract her attention from her trouble. But nurse was not to be consoled thus. She could think of nothing except the calamity which had befallen the household in general, herself in particular, and for the time being baby was of no importance in her eyes; even the adoring Jenkins was forgotten! Nothing remained but her own nervous terror and distress.

Next morning, as soon as it was daylight, Mr. Grey hastened down to Firgrove to inquire if Perry had heard anything of the missing children. She had not, and was in a most miserable frame of mind after an anxious, sleepless night.

While she and Mr. Grey stood talking together, Tom Brook passed by on his way to work at the farm, and seeing the two in conversation, joined them. But he brought no comfort to their council with the tidings he had to tell--not much at most, yet important as furnishing a possible clue to the fate of the lost ones.

The previous forenoon some of his children at play beside the lock had noticed Master Darby and Miss Joan down along the tow-path; but as they were accustomed seeing the pair trotting about by themselves continually, here, there, and everywhere, they paid no particular attention to their movements.

"They didn't go to Copsley Wood after all, then," said Mr. Grey, looking very grave, for his fears had been directed into a fresh channel.

"They've gone playing about the canal and fallen in!" cried nurse, with a great outburst of tears. "Now they're drowned, dead drowned, both of them! O my poor lambs! why did I let you out of my sight for one minute? What will master say? O my dear, sweet mistress, this would never have happened if you hadn't been taken away from us!"

Miss Turner and Miss Alice were seated at breakfast in Grannie Dene's pretty parlour, where the China roses, that were for all the world just the colour of Joan's cheeks, peeped and nodded round the window. They were chatting briskly with grannie, whom they had found much stronger, and able easily to move about and attend to the affairs of her small household, and making their plans for the day. Aunt Catharine was arranging everything in her usual capable way. Grannie nodded her head in approval, looking the very picture of a sweet, high-bred old lady; while Auntie Alice agreed to all her sister suggested, as was her placid wont. She appeared contented and at ease, yet from time to time an anxious, far-away look would unconsciously creep into her eyes and shadow her gentle face when she thought of the little ones at home, wondering how they were all getting on--whether Eric's new tooth had come properly through; if Darby was being an obedient boy and taking good care of Joan.

The click of the garden-gate attracted their attention, and immediately after a whistling telegraph-boy passed the window and the China roses on his way to the hall door. Auntie Alice rose from the breakfast-table with a queer, fluttering feeling about her heart, and hurried to meet the messenger. She took the rustling, brick-coloured envelope from his hand, and in another instant the message dictated with much anxiety by Mr. Grey lay open before the alarmed ladies,--

"Come home at once. Darby and Joan missing since yesterday."

"Oh, my dears, my dears! Sister, sister! why did we leave them?" was the cry that broke from Auntie Alice's trembling lips. It was but the expression of a nameless dread which had weighed upon her ever since she started from Firgrove, leaving Darby standing looking after them, with that expression in his eyes of such perfect purity and peace.

Grannie's thoughts flashed like lightning from the lost children to the absent father. She was not a woman of many words, and made little outward sign of the sorrow that had suddenly seized upon her. She just hid her patient face in her thin white hands, murmuring brokenly,--

"Oh, Guy, Guy! my son, my son!"

"Well, I declare! One would think those two had never got into a scrape before from the way you are going on," said Miss Turner sharply, addressing her sister, yet casting a glance of disapproval in the direction of Mrs. Dene. "It was only the other day that they went wandering into Copsley Wood; and here, when we were ready to set out in search of them, didn't they turn up as cool as you please, smiling as sweetly as a couple of cherubs! Mr. Grey is alarming us needlessly. He and his wife are perfectly silly about those children! It was exactly the same when Guy was a boy. He had nothing to do but run up to Mrs. Grey for petting and sympathy whenever he made things too hot for himself at Firgrove. Well, if Darby has disobeyed me this time, after all I said, and the Catechism and everything, I won't be so soft with him in future, that's certain!" declared Aunt Catharine, in her severest voice; yet her fresh-coloured face had grown pale, her eyes were troubled, her lips trembled. In her heart of hearts she wished she had not been quite so strict with her nephew's children, Darby

especially--poor Dorothy Archdale's motherless little lad.

It was afternoon by the time the ladies arrived at Firdale, the small wayside station nearest to Firgrove. Mr. Grey had forsaken his farm and his threshing, and was waiting to receive them. But one glance at his honest face was sufficient to assure them that he was not the bearer of any good news. Nothing further had been heard of the missing children. Copsley Wood had been scoured by a band of beaters from end to end, with no better success than had attended the efforts of the two men the night before. Mr. Grey's thoughts had reverted again and again to the ill-favoured man and black-browed woman--gipsies they were said to be, but more likely they were only ordinary vagrants--who had been seen lately loitering about the neighbourhood, and whose appearance had given rise to the wildest and absurdest rumours. One cottager, it was said, had lost all her hens; another missed a young pig out of its sty, while the ailing infant of a third had died in convulsions soon after the dark-faced female was at the door demanding a draught of milk! Mrs. Grey had suggested that perhaps the evil pair had kidnapped the pretty children, meaning to make use of them in some way--for such things happened, if one was to believe all that appeared in the newspapers--or in order to draw a reward out of their friends. Her husband laughed at the idea; yet he caused the tramps to be traced and followed from their deserted quarters in the wood up to the time when they had forced their way, as the bargeman affirmed, on board the barge-boat close beside the village of Shendon. They had no youngsters with them then of any description, bargee was positive; just the man and woman by themselves. They were not gipsies at all, he added, but some sort of play-acting people journeying to join their party, who had preceded them to Barchester by a few days. Folks of that class were not likely to have had a hand in the disappearance of anybody's children; they usually had plenty of their own.

The ladies discussed the ins and outs of the odd affair with Mr. Grey in all its bearings. At length they were forced to the conclusion that it was in the region of the canal they must seek the little ones--whether about it or in it only time should tell. Miss Alice wept softly, while Miss Turner was wondering, with a terrible weight on her heart, what she should say in the cablegram to Africa; for if Darby and Joan did not turn up, and soon too, she knew that their father should have to be informed of the calamity which had befallen him.

Mr. Grey hurried home to snatch a hasty meal and tell his wife not to be anxious about his absence. Then he and Tom Brook, with two other men, set off to follow the clue furnished by Tom Brook's children. At Firgrove the household waited, eager for news, with what patience they could command, and they needed a good share; for waiting, as everybody knows, is wearier work than doing.

Step by step, two of them on one side and two on the other, they tramped along the course of the canal, poking with their sticks into the long, sedgy grass and reeds beside its banks, peering among the clumps of osiers that grew thick and tall in the damp, spongy ground below the tow-path. On, on they went, only pausing for a few minutes now and again, to take a rest or to hold a consultation. They questioned closely every pedestrian whom they met by the way, but nobody could give them any tidings to help them in their search. And still they pressed on, past locks, hamlets, villages--on, on, until, when night was closing in around them, they reached Barchester. There, perforce, they must pause; for beyond Barchester was the sea, so at Barchester the canal came to an abrupt conclusion.

It was a weary and dispirited little group that gathered on the wharf in the fast-falling darkness of the October evening. The other men, as well as Mr. Grey, had known Captain Dene from his infancy almost, and two of them had little ones of their own snug and safe by their cottage hearths at that dull evening hour. They consequently felt keenly the sorrow that threatened the absent father; also the distress and trouble of the aunts at Firgrove, who had so generously taken upon them the responsible duty, which not infrequently turns out a thankless task, of taking charge of somebody else's bairns.

The wharf, except for themselves, was deserted. It was almost dark, too, lighted only by one badly-trimmed paraffin lamp that swung above the door of the room or office which the keeper occupied during the day. Its flickering rays fell on the deep, sluggish waters of the canal as they lapped and gurgled round the wet, slimy

beams on which the planks were supported. Mr. Grey stood somewhat apart from the others, and gazed idly at the shadows cast by the dimly-burning lamp, as they swayed backwards and forwards, up and down, with each slow movement of the water; yet he did not actually see anything. He was thinking of the winsome wee pair whom he had come upon a few days before sitting on a tree-stump in Copsley Wood--of their trusting eyes, their sweet voices, their artless prattle, their firm faith in the protecting power of their heavenly Father. Assuredly He had them in His careful keeping some place; but where?--on earth or in heaven? This was the question which so sorely perplexed the anxious searchers.

Suddenly something attracted Mr. Grey's attention--something that had got jammed in a space between two rotten beams which floated alongside the flooring of the crazy old wharf--and his heart leaped in his breast with a throb of sickening fear. He stooped over the water, reached forward his stout staff, and with its hooked head carefully hauled up that something which he instinctively shrank from seeing, without exactly knowing why.

Yet it was nothing much after all, neither more nor less than what may be seen any day drifting hither and thither amongst scraps and straws upon the surface of a stream--only a child's sailor-hat, which had once been white, but was now sadly discoloured, soaked with water, and hanging almost in pieces. A faded blue ribbon dangled from its battered brim, bearing on its surface in tarnished gold letters the title of the ship to which its wearer belonged--H.M.S. *Dreadnought*.

With a queer choking in his throat Mr. Grey carried his find close to what light there was beneath the dirty lamp, while with strained, eager faces the other men peered over his shoulder, and then, sure enough, they saw what they feared. For there, inside the hat, stitched to the lining of the crown by a careful mother's loving fingers, was a piece of tape on which a name was plainly written, the name of--Darby Dene!

CHAPTER VI.

THE CRUISE OF H.M.S. "DREADNOUGHT."

"Shall we call this a boat out at sea, We four sailors rowing? Can you fancy it? Well, as for me, I feel the salt wind blowing. Up, up and down, lazy boat! On the top of a wave we float; Down we go with a rush. Far off I see the strand Glimmer; our boat we'll push Ashore on fairyland."

--A. KEARY.

And now it is time to return to the two little travellers.

The big red barge-boat came swinging slowly through the lock as the children came close to the canal. They were too late to get aboard there, and they hung back in disappointment and indecision. After clearing the lock and exchanging a word or two with the woman at the toll, the bargeman had laid himself down upon a heap of empty sacks, to take a nap most probably, leaving his boy in charge of the tiller. Soon bargee was wrapped in slumber, and the boy buried in a penny dreadful. Darby and Joan did not desire to disturb either of them. They were anxious above all things to get on board the boat unnoticed; so, after a hurried consultation carried on in whispers, they agreed that their best plan would be to walk on to the next stopping-place--a tiny clump of cottages and a shop or two, called by courtesy a village--and make sure of embarking there. This hamlet was only about half a mile off. They could reach it easily before the barge; and keeping well in the shelter of the fringe of alders, osiers, and reeds that grew thickly in the marshy ground below the tow-path, lest the man or the lad should look about and spy them, the children trotted straight along, with their eager eyes steadfastly fixed upon the far-off hills in front.

Bargee was soon snoring lustily; the boy seemed to find his story all-absorbing; the old brown horse knew every step of the way, foot for foot, better than either of them, and required no guiding: consequently the little ones were in scarcely any danger of detection. Besides, even if the man or the boy on board the canal-boat had noticed the pair stealing along behind the bushes, neither would have thought of challenging their presence or casting upon them more than a passing glance. They would have simply accepted them for what they appeared to the casual observer--two cottage children who were either altogether motherless or sadly neglected--and then forgotten all about them. For, to be quite candid, they looked far from respectable--entirely unlike the trim, spotless little persons whom Perry had dressed with such care and precision only some hours before; bearing but small resemblance in their general cut to the dainty figures which had run the gauntlet of Aunt Catharine's eagle eyes as they sat opposite to her at breakfast early that morning.

Soon after the children's arrival at Firgrove, Miss Turner had gone carefully through their clothing,--adding a number of fresh garments to their stock, discarding others which had been purchased according to Perry's idea of fitness as being entirely unbecoming or unsuitable, laying aside for distribution among her poor a goodly quantity that had grown either so small or so shabby as to be altogether unfit for further wear--by Captain Dene's children and Miss Turner's young relatives, that is to say.

Upon this store Darby had drawn; for with an eye to thrift which would have done credit to Aunt Catharine herself, and expectation of the fresh and beautiful rig-out awaiting them in the land for which they were bound, he considered that it would be sheer and sinful extravagance to carry away with them any clothes, except what they could with an easy conscience cast aside--as Christian left *his* rags behind when by the Shining One he was dressed anew.

Picture them then, please!

Darby wore a velveteen suit which had once been black, but now, from stress of wear and weather, had turned a sickly green. From the scrimpy legs of the knickerbockers his knees shone bare and brown. Out of the

sleeves, that reached only half-way below the elbows, his arms stuck freely, showing a broad band of untanned wrist between the button-less cuffs and the chubby, sunburnt hand. A pair of sadly-scuffed shoes, which originally had been nut-brown calf, were held upon his feet by one solitary button and a piece of string; while his headgear consisted of a sailor-hat, with battered brim, and blue ribbon band so stained and faded that only with difficulty one could make out the name upon its silken surface--H.M.S. *Dreadnought*--a most appropriate one for the ship in which this dauntless mariner sailed, for he had in truth a brave and fearless spirit!

As for Joan, she appeared to be even more after the tinker type than Darby. Her cotton frock had once upon a time been pink and pretty as a double daisy. Now it was washed-out, worn, and, sad to say, in several places torn. At different points the skirt had rebelliously escaped from the confinement of gathers round the waist; the back gaped open where in sundry spots the hooks and eyes had quarrelled and agreed to meet no more. On her shining golden curls she had set a cast-off garden-hat belonging to Aunt Catharine, of brown straw, in what was known as the mushroom shape. Surmounting Joan's tiny figure it looked exactly like a small umbrella, which hid her blue eyes, and shaded her pink-and-white complexion so completely that several times Darby stooped down, peeped under the floppy brim, crying merrily, much to his sister's amusement, "Anybody at home to-day? any one within here?" Her feet were dressed somewhat after the same fashion as her brother's; while round her shoulders, crossed in front and tied by Darby's fumbling fingers in a clumsy knot behind, was a faded tartan shoulder-shawl that had once been Perry's, but for many a month and day had been used as the nursery blanket of all the invalid dolls in Joan's large family.

They were a pair, without doubt. No one could have known them a little way off, not even their father or nurse--well, not nurse certainly, although their father might, if he had glanced at them a second time; for love's eyes are keen, and not mother-love itself is deeper, stronger, truer than a good father's for his trusting children.

Bargee slept soundly on his couch of empty corn-sacks; the lad was still lost in his story; the brown horse went slower and slower, pausing now and again to snatch a mouthful of grass from the bank beside his feet, until at length he stopped altogether, and, settling himself comfortably on three legs, he shut his eyes and prepared to follow his master's example.

The little ones were now some way in advance of the boat; but when they looked back and observed that boat and horse had come to a standstill, they agreed that they also might rest awhile, and joyfully threw themselves down upon the soft, cool meadow grass, taking good care to keep well out of sight of those other two afloat upon the canal.

"It's hungry--werry," said Joan, with a tired sort of sigh. "Isn't it never near dinner-time yet, Darby?"

"Yes, I think it must be by this time," replied Darby, looking knowingly in the direction of the sun, as he had seen Mr. Grey and Green the gardener do. "And if it isn't it ought, for I'm hungry too. Come, and we'll eat some of our biscuits and things."

"But there's no meat or potatoes or puddin'. It won't be real dinner wifout meat," grumbled Joan.

"Well, we can't have real dinner--pilgrims on a long journey never do--but we can make believe that we have. Won't that do instead, Joan?" asked Darby anxiously.

"Yes, it'll do quite well--to-day," answered Joan, jumping up and beginning in true housewifely fashion to set out their repast.

From each child's pocket came a crumpled pocket-handkerchief, not very large, and, if the truth must be told, not over clean. These Joan spread on the grass to serve as a tablecloth. Then Darby proceeded to distribute the

rations for the midday meal--to each a tiny tart, a slice of seed-cake, one biscuit, and a mellow russet pear.

"Now, isn't that a lovely dinner?" he demanded proudly; "and there's nearly--not quite, but almost--as much more for tea," he added, peering into the depths of the old reticule which was slung, haversack fashion, across his shoulders.

"Yes, it's 'licious," agreed Joan, with her mouth full of cracknel biscuit. Now cracknels are rather dry eating, and when one's mouth is otherwise occupied it is not easy to speak distinctly. However, the biscuit went over with an effort, and Joan's mouth was free for further speech. "It's a puffic'ly 'licious dinner," she repeated. "Why, if we'd been at home instead of goin' to the Happy Land, nurse would only have given us chops, and maybe rice and jam."

"Yes; she's always giving us things like that, and they've hardly any taste. When I'm big I'll never eat rice or mutton, but nice, nippy, mustardy meat, like what father used to give us from his dinners. We never get nothing like that now," sighed the little boy, as if he were very badly used indeed.

"It's because Aunt Catharine doesn't think they're good for you," replied Joan wisely. "I heard her tellin' cook to be sure an' give the chil'ens plenty of pow'idge, bread an' milk, an' lots of busted rice. I wonder why she calls the rice busted."

"It's not 'busted'," corrected Darby, laughing gleefully; "it's *burst* you mean!"

"It doesn't matter which, I'm sure, for it's just nonsense to speak about rice bein' busted. It's us that's busted when we've eaten great plates of it--nashty, messy stuff!" and Joan turned up her dainty little nose in disgust at what she was so tired of hearing called "plain, wholesome food."

Then she sighed heavily.

"What's the matter with you?" anxiously asked Darby. "Have you not had enough?"

"Yes, I've had enough--at least--it doesn't matter. I was only wishin' we had a drink of milk. I don't want to be gweedy; but oh, I does want a drink so badly! I's so awful thirsty. 'Twas the biscuits, I'm sure," added Joan apologetically.

"I'm afraid I forgot to bring any milk," said Darby regretfully. "There's lots of water in the canal, of course. I could carry you some in my hat; but then I don't think it's very clean."

"I'm sure it looks all right," replied the little girl, grasping eagerly at her brother's idea. "It's brown, but see how it sparkles!"

"Come on, then, and I'll lift you out some," assented Darby. "But you mustn't take much, mind; just what will wash down that biscuit, for it *was* dry!"

They crept up the bank of the canal in shelter of a sheaf of tall reeds. Together they crouched upon the brink. Joan held Darby's hand fast while he leaned down and with his hat ladled her up a small measure of the doubtful-looking liquid, which she swallowed greedily and pronounced the nicest water she had ever tasted--better even than milk.

Darby shook the moisture from his hat and waved it in the air to dry--backwards, forwards, round and round, faster and faster. It was almost dry. A few more turns would complete the process, and he twirled it quicker still, when all at once it went flying from his fingers, skimming right into the middle of the canal, hopelessly out of reach!

He gazed after it with such a blank look that Joan laughed gleefully. Away it went, sailing slowly along, the blue ribbon trailing like a tail behind; on, on, farther and farther, until at length, behind a clump of osiers that hung over the bank and dipped into the water at a bend in the canal, the watchers lost sight of the gallant little craft--H.M.S. *Dreadnought*!

"It's gone!" said Darby ruefully. "Well, it's a good thing that it was only an old one," he continued, in a cheerier tone. "I'm just as comfy without a hat. Perhaps it'll be to one of those big schools where the boys wear nothing on their head but their hairs that father will send me by-and-by, so I'd best be getting used to going without. And in the Happy Land hymn, although it tells about the robes--at least, I expect it's them that's 'bright, bright as day'--there's not a word about what they wear on their heads, except a crown, and one couldn't wear anything else along with that."

"I wants another drink," whimpered Joan after a pause, preparing to lay hands on Aunt Catharine's mushroom hat. "Take my hat, Darby; it'll hold lots and lots of water. That ho'wid old cracknel's stickin' in my froat yet," and she gasped piteously, like a chicken with the pip.

"Certainly not," answered Darby decisively, putting down his foot, so to speak, in his most masterful manner. "You can't have any more of that bad water. Don't you know it's very dangerous to drink bad water? There's funny little beasts living in it called microscopes. They get into the blood and carry on dreadful. They give people fever, and typhus, and palsy, and cholera-mortis, and--and--I don't know what all," and he took a long breath, having somewhat exhausted the supply along with his list of horrors. "I heard Dr. King telling Auntie Alice all about it one day."

Joan heard him out with open mouth and wondering eyes. How clever Darby was! He knew everything--almost! Her admiration was short-lived, however. Soon she returned to the charge, and with the skirt of her cotton frock at her eyes, she wailed anew,--

"I want a drink, I do, or my tea. Bo--o--o! I wants my tea!"

"Don't think any more about being thirsty, Joan, like a good girl," coaxed her brother, laying his arm lovingly round his little sister's shoulders. "That's the right way to do when you've got a pain or anything that won't get better--just pretend it's not there. Or we'll make believe that we've had our tea--although it's only done being dinner-time--and that nurse has just handed us our second cup, and, by mistake for her own, put four lumps of sugar in it. My, isn't it sweet!" And Darby smacked his lips, but Joan did not lift her head. "Maybe we'll get some nice fresh water when we get into the barge," he added, seeing that his first tactics had failed. "And when we reach the Happy Land there'll be oceans of it--streams and streams of pure, sparkling water, clear as crystal! Think of that, Joan!"

The prospect, though pleasing, was too remote to satisfy Joan's immediate craving, or fancy rather, for she was not nearly so thirsty as she indicated, and she kept on whimpering,--

"Bo--o--o! I want a drink--I wants my tea!"

Darby always felt helpless when Joan went on crying in that persistent way, and he looked about him in despair. Then he started up in haste, at the same time dragging at his sister's hand.

"Come on!" he cried. "See, the horse has started; the *Smiling Jane*'s moving. They're a good way in front. We'll have to run a bit to catch up on them."

Thus opportunely diverted from brooding on her grievance, Joan quickly dried her eyes, trotted contentedly along by her brother's side, and soon they arrived quite close to the rude wharf, where the boat would stop long enough to deliver the goods intended for the village and take in some fresh cargo to be handed out at one

of the hamlets further on.

As the boat came in a number of people were collected on the wharf waiting to receive their goods, because to this out-of-the-way place the canal-boat served instead of a carrier's cart; therefore all kinds of things--from bags of corn, tons of coal, sacks of potatoes, down to small packages--were sent and received by this route, and the arrival of bargee and his boat made quite a break in the uneventful lives of the inhabitants of that remote, far-scattered district. They chatted, laughed, shouted, and bandied jokes with each other and the bargeman, who had sprung from his craft the moment she was made fast to the wharf, and stamped about, up and down, as if he was glad to find himself with plenty of elbow-room once more.

In the hubbub and general bustle the children had little or no difficulty in stealing unobserved on board the barge. They had been on her once before with a friendly old bargeman but recently retired to give place to a younger, more active man, who was a stranger on the route, consequently did not know the little folks from Firgrove. Darby drew Joan behind him, and making straight below for the bunker, called by courtesy the cabin, they curled themselves up on an old rug in its farthest, darkest corner, where, worn out with excitement and fatigue, they soon fell fast asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

HILL DIFFICULTY.

"He was a rat, and she was a rat, And down in one hole they did dwell; And both were as black as a witch's cat, And they loved one another well.

"He smelt the cheese, and she smelt the cheese, And they both pronounced it good; And both remarked it would greatly add To the charms of their daily food."

--Anon.

The cargo for Ashville had been discharged, the stuff for Shendon stowed away. A fresh horse waited on the path; the gathering of people had scattered, carrying their goods and their gossip with them. The boy was feasting upon a hunch of bread and cheese, as a change from devouring his story. Bargee was in the act of stepping on board when a man laid a hand on his arm, and a rough voice arrested his steps. Two persons were standing beside him.

"Say, mate, will you give me an' my wife a lift as far as Engleton? We've been on tramp this last week, an' we're both dead beat."

Bargee looked curiously at the speaker, a great, ill-looking fellow, with coarse red hair and a crooked eye. From the man he glanced at his companion, a tall, broadly-built woman, with bold black eyes, olive skin, and flaming cheeks. They were the pair, in short, who had watched Darby and Joan from behind the clump of hazel bushes as they sat upon the tree-stump that day in Copsley Wood.

"Can't," said the young bargeman shortly. "It's against rules for this yer boat to carry passengers."

"Ay, ay, I know all that; but just for once you might oblige a chap. We could make it worth yer while," added the fellow insinuatingly.

"Do now," put in the woman in a wheedling voice, fixing her big, bold eyes on bargee's face. "My feet's blistered, an' my legs that stiff I couldn't walk another mile to save my life."

"Don't then," he answered shortly, preparing to push past her and get into the boat.

But she clung to his hand, determined not to be thrown off, smiling broadly into his dull face, almost dazzling him with the flash of her strong white teeth, which she displayed so freely.

"Well, to be sure, who would think now that a fine feller like you could be so hard-hearted! Sich a well-set-up lad," she continued, "an' with sich a fetchin' kind o' look, shouldn't be backward in helpin' other folks, especially a woman as is tired out like me."

"Can't you stop here overnight and rest, then? you'll be fit enough to foot it to Engleton in the morning. Where's your hurry?" asked bargee, beginning to relent under the smiling glances and flattering words of the temptress.

"Well, it's this way," explained the red-haired man, fixing bargee with his straight eye, while the crooked one gazed into space about half a foot above his head. "We belongs to the Satellite Circus Company; we're the proprietors, in fact, me an' my missis here--"

"You don't mean that old shandrydan of a caravan that passed along there two or three days ago?" and bargee jerked his thumb in the direction of the hilly tract sloping up from the canal course, through which a narrow road, little better than a sheep track, wound its circuitous way. "Do you call *yon* a circus company?" he asked, laughing broadly into the proprietor's ugly face.

"Undoubtedly--the Satellite Circus Company, as I think I remarked before. We're a small party, small but select--*very*" and the red-haired man winked knowingly in the direction of his wife. "As I was tryin' to explain, the caravan with part of our troupe went on to Barchester the other day; but me an' my missis here--she wasn't feelin' well-like--we stayed behind in the country to recruit, as the newspapers says about all the big folks, an' get the benefit o' the fresh air."

"Then 'twas ye was loiterin' about Firdale an' Copsley Wood scarin' people out o' their wits? Poachin'--eh?" asked the young fellow, with a grin.

The proprietor of the Satellite Circus Company made no reply, and after a moment's hesitation his wife answered for him.

"Look ee here," she said insinuatingly, sidling at the same time nearer to bargee, and speaking with her mouth close to his ear. "Wouldn't *them* make a tasty stew for yer supper to-night, my lad?" opening as she spoke a huge wallet which hung concealed beneath the folds of her faded scarlet shawl, and drawing from its depths a couple of plump young rabbits and a pair of wood-pigeons.

"By jingo! wouldn't they though!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips at the prospect of the toothsome meal the woman was willing to provide. What a pity he could not oblige her and her husband! They were only tramps, to be sure, but decent enough for all that. What harm could they do on board the old tub of a boat? And what a supper he should have after he reached Barchester!

Bargee looked about him. The boy was seated beside the tiller and paying no attention to his master; he was still busy with his bread and cheese. The toll-keeper yet lingered within the office, so for his benefit bargee raised his voice as he said roughly,--

"No, no, I tell ye. There's no use o' ye hangin' an' pesterin' here no longer. I durstn't disobey orders, an' that's the end o't." Then he added in a rapid whisper into the woman's quick ear as he boarded his craft,--

"Push on to the next lock, it's about a mile further, an' I'll take ye in then. But mind, if ye're asked any questions, mum's the word."

With a knowing wink and comprehensive smile the pair leisurely sauntered off the wharf; and when the canal-boat slowed in passing the next toll, with an agile spring the red-haired man leaped from the path to the deck, then helped his missis, as he called the bold-eyed, black-browed woman, in beside him.

Thus Joe Harris, or Thieving Joe, as he was known among his associates, and his wife Moll came to be passengers along with our two little travellers on board the *Smiling Jane*.

The bargeman himself now took the tiller. The boy had stolen back to his story, so the newcomers drew somewhat apart, where they sat talking to each other in subdued, earnest tones of the small voyagers then sleeping so serenely in the dirty bunker below--the pretty pair whom they had of set purpose shadowed along the canal, watched aboard the boat, and determinedly followed.

"We've trapped them sure enough this time, Moll, my beauty," said the man, indicating the cabin and the little creatures therein by a side nod of his great red head.

"Ay, surely," answered Moll, with a slow smile. "I expec' the pretty dears is sleepin' sweet as angels down in that dirty hole. But, Joe, now as we have got 'em, do you think it'll be safe to keep 'em? Won't their folks make a row, an' sen' the beaks after us?"

"Folks!" echoed Mr. Harris in mockery. "My, you are a green un, though you're sich a black beauty! Do you suppose if they had any folks belongin' to 'em worth speakin' o' that they'd be let go galavantin' round as we've seed them--here, there, an' everywhere? No, no; they'd be walkin' about hand in hand as prim as peonies, wi' a starched-up nurse girl at their heels."

"They're out on a lark, you bet; that's what it is," said Moll, nodding her head sagaciously. "Kids like they is allus up to somethin'. Maybe they've runned away. More'n likely."

"Humbug!" snapped Joe shortly. "Didn't you notice their clo'es? They're nothin' but washed-out rags an' far-worn clouts!" he declared, as if his opinion should settle the question beyond further doubt.

"Rags an' clouts if you like," agreed Moll cheerily, "but they wasn't allus that. They're the remains o' real nice good things. Mind, Joe, I knows, an' you don't; men never does about sich matters."

"Stuff an' nonsense," he growled. "Clo'es or rags, it don't matter a button, for they're only common brats, I tell you. There'll be a bit o' an outcry after them for a day or two; then it'll die down as quick as it rose. Poor folks haven't time to indulge their feelin's. Besides, once we've got clear off they'll never find us. We've covered our tracks purty cleverly, I'm thinkin', an' so has the kids," he added, with a smothered chuckle.

"Hum! Well, maybe you're right, my man," said Moll, after a moment's silence, during which she sat twirling the fringes of her old red shawl. "I'm willin' to stand by you in this business, as I've done in others afore now," she added meaningly, while her better half scowled at her, and muttered under his breath something that was hardly complimentary; "but if trouble comes o't, as it will, or my name's not Moll Harris, you can't say as I didn't warn you, like a wife should."

"Shut up!" commanded Joe gruffly; but as this was a frequent and favourite remark of his, Moll did not take the trouble to resent it.

Then he changed his tune, and continued in an eager undertone,--

"They'll make the fortune o' the company, Moll, old girl, will them kids! The little chap's just at the best age to train for the tight-rope an' the trapeze. An' the lass, with her yeller curls an' big eyes same's a wax doll's--my, just you picter the crowds she'll draw, trippin' round so pretty-like with Bruno at her foot! Can't you see the big bills an' posters starin' at you from every wall, flarin' out o' every winder:--

"The Wonderful Child Acrobat! The Most Marvellous Aeronaut of the Age! Little Boy-Butterfly, and Bambo the Musical Dwarf!"

"Sweet Sissy Sunnylocks, and Bruno the Performing Bear!"

"Countless other attractions! Come one, come all, To the Satellite Company's Variety Hall!"

"What do you think o' that, Moll, my lady? That'll empty folk's pockets, or Joe Harris is mistaken for once in his life. My, this *is* a stroke o' luck!" and Mr. Harris rubbed his dirty hands together and laughed gleefully. "We've been on the lookout for a couple o' youngsters this many a day; now we've hit upon them at last. A bear an' a dwarf's all very well, but there's nothin' that touches the hearts an' reaches the coins o' an audience like a kid, especially if it has got great innercent eyes an' golden hair!"

"Oh, it's mighty fine for *you*, no doubt," said Moll angrily. "You'll eat an' drink your fill, an' dress up in fine clo'es o' an off evenin' to go rollickin' about an' enjoy yourself. But what good'll it do *me*, I'd like to know?" she asked shrilly. "I share yer dirty work, I know, but precious little else; just grub, grub away all the year roun', with never a bit o' pleasure, nor a stitch o' handsome things to my back!"

"I'll give you a silk gownd, Moll, I declare I will, if this bold venture turns out for us what I expect--whatever colour you please; only say the word," said Mr. Harris grandly.

"I'd like claret--a nice bright claret with plenty o' lace, an' that shiny trimmin' wi' tinsel through it," admitted Moll, beginning to recover her good humour, and flashing a smiling glance into the squinty eye fixed somewhere about her forehead. "Ay, an' what else?" she demanded, determined to take full advantage of her husband's unusually bland mood.

"I'll buy you a gold ring too, my girl--one o' them real shiners," promised Joe, thinking that as he was in for the penny he might as well pledge himself to the pound. "Ah! that makes you sit up, I'm thinkin'," and the generous man gave his wife a playful poke in the ribs.

"Reely an' truly, Joe, fair an' square? A true di'mon', an' none o' your sham bits o' glass?" cried Moll in ecstasy.

"Fair an' square, my woman; a real di'mon' as big's a pea, Moll. There's my hand on't, if you just help me through wi' this little business. You can, you know, if you like."

"So help me bob!" said Moll quite solemnly, and the well-matched pair shook hands over their guilty compact. And thus Moll, who in her better moods might have befriended the children, pledged herself, for sake of vanity and greed, to work her hardest for their undoing.

Twilight was drawing in when the canal-boat stopped at Engleton, the last stage on the journey before reaching Barchester. It was a tiny village, nestling at the foot of a range of undulating hills that rose, plateau after plateau, until their summits seemed to meet the sky. The wharf was crowded as usual at that slack evening hour. And in the babel of voices, banging of boxes, shifting of stuff, and general confusion, our little travellers, rested and refreshed by their long sleep and the remainder of the provisions which they had consumed in the cabin, had no difficulty in stealing off the boat and away from the wharf without attracting any notice, except from two persons, a man and woman--Joe Harris and his wife Moll, who did not lose sight of them for a moment, but followed hard upon their heels.

"Look, Joan!" cried Darby, as they turned their faces towards the hills. "See, we're near the Happy Land now!" and the lad pointed to the golden radiance that glowed in the sky and bathed the peaks behind which the sun had only lately sunk from sight. "That's the light from the city. They've opened the gates because they know we're coming."

"Hurry, lovey! Here, take my arm. That's what father used to say when mother was tired; I 'member quite well. It's just a little bit further now. In one of my Sunday books there's a picture of Christian climbing a hill that led to the City Beautiful. The Hill Difficulty it was called. I expect this is it. Come on, Joan; we're almost there! Then we'll never be tired any more, but 'reign, reign for aye."

At that moment the children heard steps behind them, and looked round to see, only a few yards away, an ugly red-haired man, with a curious crooked eye and evil face, and a tall, sturdy woman with gleaming teeth, dusky locks, and crimson cheeks. He had seen them before, Darby remembered all at once, hanging about the back gate at Copsley Farm one day when he was peeping from the skylight in the stable loft. They must be the gipsies who had been haunting Copsley Wood; and the brave boy drew his sister closer to his side, as if with his own small body he would shield her from all harm.

"Good-evenin', my little dears," spoke the man's gruff voice right above Darby's head.

"Good-evening," answered the boy courteously, at the same time instinctively putting up his hand in order to raise his hat in the direction of Moll's flashing eyes. But there was no hat there, so he gave her a military salute instead.

"My, you are a rum un!" laughed the lady, looking admiringly upon the charming child.--"You're right, as usual, Joe Harris," she whispered, turning to her husband. "Them's the style for the Satellite Company! The silk gownd an' the shiner's mine; you can buy them soon's you please."

So saying, Moll snatched the screaming Joan clean out of her brother's encircling arms, raised her to her breast, and completely smothered the frightened child's sobs in the folds of her old scarlet shawl.

The after-glow had faded from out the west; the hilltops seemed bare and brown. The gates of the city were closed, thought Darby, and his lips quivered in disappointment as they had not done from fright. The moon now sailed slowly on her way through a placid sea of pearly sky. Her beams flooded the fields with a soft, pure radiance; they lingered over the sluggish waters of the canal until they shone with light and borrowed beauty. Everything was quiet; all around was peace.

Darby boldly stood his ground, and manfully faced his foes. Yet, with the wicked countenance of Joe Harris bending over him, with Joan's stifled cries beating in his ears, it was impossible to do anything more than *seem* brave; and the plucky little lad's face blanched paler than the moonbeams, while his heart stood still with nameless fear.

CHAPTER VIII.

BAMBO AND BRUNO.

"Will you walk into my parlour?" said the spider to the fly; "Tis the prettiest little parlour that ever you did spy. The way into the parlour is up a winding stair, And I have many curious things to show when you are there."

MARY HOWITT.

"An' where may you an' little missy be goin' at this time o' the evenin'?" asked Thieving Joe, in a voice which he intended should be pleasant and reassuring; for now that he had come close to the children--looked in Joan's face, and witnessed Darby's brave, proud bearing--he knew Moll was right: that these were no common brats, as he had called them, no rustics running wild from morn till night, but *somebody's* little ones, gently born undoubtedly, carefully reared unmistakably.

At the first blush of this discovery Mr. Harris felt that perhaps he had been a trifle rash--that it might have been wiser to give more heed to his wife's advice; but since he had got his captives secure at last, he was not going to be such a fool as to set them free after waiting and watching so long for a similar opportunity. He would safeguard himself as cunningly as possible against the chances of being detected in his crime, and that was all Joe Harris possessed in the way of a conscience; that was what constituted the chief difference to him between right and wrong--the cowardly yet restraining fear of being found out. Then, if the worst did come to the worst, he would swear that he had not stolen the children, but had accidentally come upon them wandering about at nightfall alone, and out of charity took them temporarily under his protection. Their friends would be deeply grateful, and doubtless reward him handsomely, so that he should be none the poorer, no matter which way the little enterprise turned out.

He judged correctly that Darby would be more easily led than driven, and he did not want to frighten him, not just at first--that would be time enough afterwards, or if he turned rusty--so he spoke to the little lad as smoothly as he knew how. But genuine gentle speech cannot be assumed at will. It is not a mannerism merely put on, but an outcome of kindly acts and pure thoughts; and Darby was quick to detect the false quality in Joe's tones as he repeated his question,--

"Come now, won't you tell me, an' this nice lady here, where the pair o' ye was bound for so late in the day?"

For a moment the boy hesitated, looking straight at his questioner. How could he tell this dreadful man the truth? and it did not occur to him to trump up a story or put him off with a half-truth, as some children might have done.

"We're going on a journey, my sister and I," said the lad simply.

Then he closed his lips tightly, and his sweet little mouth was set in a new resolute curve. He would not speak of the Happy Land to this odd pair, who had thrust themselves so unexpectedly and so rudely where they were not wanted. They might laugh at him, and who enjoys being laughed at, or having their plans and dreams ridiculed and scattered in shreds before their very eyes?

"It's late for ye to be out by yerselves," continued Joe. "Aren't ye frightened for the dark?"

"Oh no," replied Darby readily; "*that* never frightens us. God is in the dark as well as in the light, and He always takes care of us."

"Ahem!" and Joe coughed awkwardly, not knowing what to say. He was not used to replying to such remarks.

By this time Joan had hushed her sobs to listen to the conversation. She wriggled uneasily under the confining shawl; and hearing that she was quiet, Moll allowed the little thing to sit up in her arms and look about her.

At this point Joe made a movement of impatience, which Moll understood. He was in haste to push on, for it would soon be dark, and he was hungry for his supper.

Moll frowned at him. She wanted to work things in her own way, and she understood that little people don't like to be hurried.

"Aren't you afeard to be out on this lonesome place so late, my pretty?" she asked in a sugar-sweet voice, turning a beaming face upon Joan.

"No--I's never f'rightened of dark, or dogs, or fings," she said, drawing somewhat back from the bold face so near her own; "but I's sometimes f'rightened for peoples. I's f'rightened for you, some, and I's awful f'rightened for *him*," added Joan in a whisper, pointing her tiny finger in the direction of Mr. Harris, who was busily engaged in lighting his pipe.

Moll scowled, and gave the little girl a slight shake.

"You're frightened, are you?" and she laughed wickedly. "All the same, the pair o' ye'll have to come along o' us. We'll see ye safe to yer journey's end. Ye might meet tramps or gipsies, or--oh, I don't know what all! They'd pop ye into a bag an' carry ye away wi' them."

"Isn't you tramps an' gipsies--you an' *him*?" asked Joan innocently. "Will you put us in a bag an' carry us away wif you?"

"There! take that for yer impidence," and Moll dealt the child a smart slap on her delicate cheek, which made the little one wince with pain and terror. "Tramps an' gipsies indeed! I'll learn you another lesson, I'm thinkin', afore you're many days older."

"Well done, my lass!" cried her husband proudly, for Moll was rising to the occasion even better than he had expected. She had a soft spot somewhere in her heart, had Moll, although it was pretty well crusted over with wickedness and worldliness, and sometimes she seemed a little disgusted with Joe and his shady ways. She could do very well when she chose, however. She was, when she pleased, an out-and-out helpmeet, and now she was excelling herself. It was the prospect of the claret silk and the diamond ring, her better half believed.

"How dare you slap my sister?" cried Darby, darting forward with flashing eyes and crimson cheeks, and laying violent hands on Moll's gown. But Mr. Harris pulled him roughly off, clapping upon the boy's quivering lips a great, dirty, grimy hand.

"Darby! Darby! make her let me go!" Joan cried piteously; but Darby was powerless to come to the rescue. "Don't you know," she continued, addressing her captor, "we're goin' to the Happy Land? Didn't Darby tell you? Well, we are; an' if we doesn't hurry fast, we won't find our way to-night."

"Indeed! An' does yer pa an' yer ma know where ye are?" asked Moll curiously, seeing that Joan was freer with her tongue than her brother.

"We never had no pa an' ma. We once had a faver an' a muver," Joan admitted, "if them's what you mean. But muver's away livin' wif God, an' daddy's gone in the big, big ship over the sea, an' lefted Darby an' me all alone," she added, in a piteous little whine. "Daddy's a solger-man, an' wears a wed coat an' a shiny sword."

Mr. Harris heard this statement with feelings of relief. So he was right after all: the kids were practically

orphans. Their friends, if they had any, must be mighty careless, argued Joe, and he could do with his captives as he pleased, and nobody bother much about them--unless the Tommy from Africa should turn up some fine day. But there were so many chances against that contingency that it was not worth thinking about.

"Ay, an' it's for the Happy Land ye're bound!" he cried in ridicule. "Well, it's a goodish bit from here, so we'd best be movin'. I'm about tired o' this foolin', anyway, an' I'm wantin' my supper. Come on!" and he gripped Darby's delicate little hand more tightly than before.

"Let me go!" demanded the boy indignantly. "We don't know you, and we don't want to go with you.--Sure we don't, Joan?"

"No, no!" wailed Joan. "I doesn't want to go nowhere 'cept back. An' I wants Miss Carolina an' my supper, an' my own dear comfy cwib," she added, feeling, for once in her life, that it would not be entirely disagreeable to be put to bed.

"You hear that," pleaded Darby. "Please put her down. She'll only tire you, because she's very solid for her size; I sometimes carry her myself. *Please!* We're not a bit afraid, and we haven't far to go now," he added, glancing up toward the brow of the hill, which was now flooded with moonlight. And as he saw how short was the distance to its summit--although, alas! the shortness was only seeming--his heart bounded with gladness and relief; for in spite of his courageous bearing, poor Darby was dreadfully afraid. All the stray stories and ridiculous remarks--many of them never meant for his ears--that he had ever heard concerning highwaymen, robbers, tramps, poachers, foreigners, and wicked people generally, came crowding to his memory thick and fast, and for the first time since they had fled from Firgrove he began to wish himself safely back there once more.

Moll made no answer. She glanced around to make sure that no straggler was near who could by any chance have heard Joan's cries. Then she swathed the child's head in her shawl again, and, with Joe striding in front and Darby dragging at his heel, the party set off at a rapid rate, which sorely tried Darby's short, tired legs, sturdy though they were. But notwithstanding the smartness of their pace, they did not seem to come much nearer to the top of the hill.

The winding road upon which the travellers had set their faces, after turning their backs on Engleton, had by this time dwindled into a narrow bridle-path. And as they proceeded, it too gradually disappeared until it was completely lost in the wide stretch of hilly land, half heather, half scrubby grass, that spread all around them as far as Darby could see.

All at once Joe stopped, and looked anxiously away in front, round the base of the hill.

"They were to halt hereabouts," he muttered to his wife, "but I don't see a sign o' them. Do you, Moll? you've allus had sharp sight."

Moll swept the landscape with a glance quick and keen as a hawk's. Then, without speaking, she pointed with her finger to a spot about half a mile off where the ground dipped slightly and formed a sort of hollow, sheltered on the far side by a clump of stunted firs.

Darby had followed the direction of Moll's large forefinger with his gaze. After a little he made out quite plainly, rising against the clear sky beyond the low-lying ground, a faint trail of blue-gray smoke; and lower down, considerably below the smoke, there shone a small spot of light which winked intermittently through the gathering gloom, as if behind it there blinked a very sleepy star.

"Ay, that's the caravan, sure enough," said Joe, in a tone of satisfaction. "My, Moll, you are a cute un, an' no mistake!--Come on, my young shaver; step out the best you know, for I'm wantin' some supper, I can tell

you!"

"But we're not going that way," said Darby, trying to withdraw his hand from the vice-like grip in which it was held.--"Please put Joan down, ma'am," he begged, turning to Moll. "I'm much obliged to you for carrying her so far. Our way lies up the hill and yours down," continued the child, bending his grave, innocent eyes upon the woman's hardened countenance. "So you see we must part here," he added, with a brave attempt at a smile.

"Must we?" and Joe Harris laughed harshly. "Look here, my chick," said he, with an ugly leer, "you're comin' wi' us; that's settled, so you may stow yer cheek an' hurry up, or it'll be the worse for you!"

"You stop, Joe," whispered Moll angrily, nudging her husband with her elbow. "You'll frighten the little un, then she'll make a row, an' somebody'll hear her. Leave them to me.--Don't mind the gentleman, ducky," she continued, addressing Darby. "He's fond o' sayin' funny things; that's his way. Do you see the smoke an' the light yonder?" she asked, pointing in the direction of the caravan. "Well, that's our house--the purtiest little house that ever you seed; an' when we gets home there'll be some nice goody-goody supper for us. You come along, sensible and quiet, an' you an' little missy here'll both get share. Then after supper there's heaps an' heaps o' cur'osities for you to look at. Our house is jest chock-full up wi' funny things."

Darby was in a difficulty. Moll certainly spoke very fair. He *was* hungry, notwithstanding the refreshments he had consumed in the cabin of the *Smiling Jane*, and the prospect of something savoury was undoubtedly tempting. Then he dearly loved looking at things--odds and ends, picked up here and there, such as he imagined Moll's house contained. Joan was in a deep sleep, with her golden head pillowed on Mrs. Harris's broad shoulder. There would be no use in waking her up; she would only begin to cry. Darby was weary himself, too--so weary that he would fain have flung his little body down on the heath where he stood and slept some of his weariness away.

But the Happy Land! Would it not be better to hurry on, late though it was? They would be sure to get in if they knocked loud enough and gave their names at the gate. Then they could rest as long as they pleased, with nothing to disturb or frighten them any more, and live always good and happy--"blest, blest for aye."

These thoughts flashed through Darby's busy brain very fast. Then he answered Moll in his direct, simple way.

"No, thank you," he said; "you are very kind, but we must be getting on our way. I will carry Joan," he added, with a tired little gasp, looking apprehensively up the long stretch of rough ground rising right in front, and the now gloomy hilltop, above which heavy black clouds hung, like the curtain of night about to descend and smother them in its sombre folds.

"You can go on yer journey when you've rested a bit," coaxed the cunning woman. "Or in the mornin'," she added; "that 'ud be best. You'd lose yer way in the dark, sartin sure. I'll give you an' missy one o' the nice beds that's in my house, where ye'll sleep soun' as tops. Then after ye've had yer breakfasts in the mornin' ye'll start; an' my, ye'll be there--wherever ye're goin'--in a jiffy! What do you think o' that?"

"Well, perhaps, since you are so very kind as to invite us to supper and to stay for the night, and my sister seems so very tired--perhaps your plan might be best," said Darby slowly. Then he added quickly, "But are you sure you'll let us go when we want to in the morning--first thing after breakfast?"

"Sure's anythin'," declared Moll unblushingly. "Mr. Harris himself here'll put ye on the road.--Won't you, Joe?" asked Moll, with a sly laugh.

"Sartin," answered Joe promptly. "I've never bin in the Happy Land myself, but I'm familiar wi' the way there.

"I'll start the kids for it right enough, you bet," and the ugly man winked at his wife knowingly.

On the strength of these false promises Darby agreed to accept the hospitality of Mr. and Mrs. Harris for the night. But he did not see the glances of triumph, greed, cunning, and cruelty which passed between the pair; and if he had, the single-hearted child would not have understood their significance.

It was a strange scene on which Darby Dene's eyes rested when the party halted at the hollow where the Satellite Circus Company had made their headquarters for the night. Within the shelter of the firs a fire of crackling sticks was burning brightly. Hanging over the flame, suspended by an iron chain from the centre of three crossed metal bars, swung a big black pot, from which there came such a savoury smell that, in spite of his disappointment over the break in their journey, Darby could not help thinking it a lucky thing that they were going to get a share. A lad of about twelve years old was feeding the fire from a pile of dry branches that lay by his side--a lad with short woolly curls, shining, gleaming white teeth, thick lips, and a skin as dark as if he had been blackleaded all over. He was a negro, Darby knew. He had seen a black man only once before, and he now stared at this boy as if he could not remove his gaze. The lad's clothes, too, were queer. He had on a dingy purple velvet jacket, covered with frayed gold lace, tawdry tinsel braid, tarnished gilt buttons, with long, wide red and white striped cotton trousers, from which his dusky ankles and bare flat feet flopped about like the fins of some great ungainly fish.

Squatted on the grass, on the further side of the fire from the black boy, was a small figure which Darby at first thought was that of a child. But when at the sound of Joe Harris's footsteps it rose, moved slowly close to the crossbars, stood on tiptoe, lifted the lid, peered into the steaming pot, *then*--with the firelight falling full upon it--he saw that this was not a child; it was a man.

But what sort of a man? Was he a *real* man, or only a make-believe, such as was sometimes seen at shows and fairs? Darby knew about dwarfs, certainly, although he had never seen one, and at last he concluded that this must be a dwarf--this small creature not much taller than Joan, yet with a huge, broad-shouldered body, square and solid as Moll's own, overgrown head, covered with a thick mop of heavy dark hair, pale, sad face, weary eyes, short, stunted legs, large feet, and the longest arms, the thinnest hands Darby had ever seen in all his life. This was Bambo--Bambo, Mr. Harris's musical dwarf! and the boy shrank instinctively behind the shelter of Moll's ample skirts, scarcely knowing whether he was more attracted or repelled by the ungainly body, which, as the little ones discovered somewhat later on, housed such a beautiful soul within.

But what is that beside the dwarf--that great, soft-looking object that is just for all the world like a big brown furry bundle, with a tiny, chattering, jabbering monkey, decked out in all the bravery of scarlet coat and jaunty forage cap, perched on top of it? Darby steals forward step by step to get a closer view. The bundle of fur unrolls itself, grunts and turns over as if quite ready for a frolic with its queer comrade, and the little lad leaps back in terror. For it is a bear, gaunt and grizzly, with funny snout and blinking eyes!

Darby did not notice that the monster was chained, and he moved back again behind Moll, whence he gazed fascinated upon the grotesque group, over which the leaping flames cast such weird and curious lights and shadows.

The gaudy yellow caravan was drawn up on one side, and with the screen of trees served as an effective background to the scene. The skinny piebald horses had been unloosed from their shafts, freed of their harness, and, with rude fetters on their legs, turned adrift to seek their supper among the coarse grass and springy heather spreading so bountifully around them upon every side.

CHAPTER IX.

THE NEXT MORNING.

"Oh, my heart grows weak as a woman's, And the fountain of feeling will flow
When I think of the paths,
steep and stony, That the feet of the dear ones must go.

"Oh, those truants from earth and from heaven, They have made me more manly and mild;
And I know now how Jesus could liken The kingdom of God to a child!"

CHARLES DICKENS.

Roughly the spell of the picture was broken by the loud voice of Joe Harris.

"Hillao!" he cried, by way of general greeting to the troupe around the fire.--"Any grub ready, Bambo?"

The dwarf glanced round from the pot which he was carefully stirring with a long-handled wooden spoon, and then Darby noticed how gentle was the expression of his deep-set eyes.

"Yes," he answered, in a curious, husky voice, thin and vibrating; "supper has been ready an hour and more. It's done to rags by this time, I'm afraid. We thought, from what you said, that you would have been here long before now," he added, speaking more correctly than Mr. Harris himself--differently, somehow, from what one would have expected from his uncouth appearance.

"So we should, only we were delayed by business--*important* business," said Mr. Harris grandly, "and a good stroke o't, I can tell you! See what we've brought wi' us, Bambo--the missis an' me," he explained, pointing to the children, who were seated side by side upon the grass, for Moll had retired within the caravan. Joan was awake now and sobbing wildly, while Darby was doing his utmost to soothe her by every artifice of which he was master.

"Who are these children, and why have you brought them here?" demanded the dwarf sternly, as he left his stew-pot and came over beside the frightened little creatures, who clung to each other as if for dear life. "Have you been at your thieving tricks again, Joe Harris?" he asked angrily, yet there was an expression of keen anxiety in the kindly gaze he bent upon the captives.

"Come, now, none o' your cheek!" growled the ruffian savagely, though his eye fell before the dwarf's straight look and meaning tone. "Who are they, you're askin'?" he went on in a milder voice. "Why, jest two beggar brats we found wanderin' on the hillside. As to *what* they are, you'll see by-an'-by," he added, with a satisfied chuckle. "Look ee here now, Bambo," he continued, trying to be conciliatory, "there's no use in turnin' crusty. Haven't I learned you long ago that Joe Harris isn't the man to put up wi' no nonsense? All right, that's settled, then. Now, don't you think we've run this company on narrow lines long enough? Anyway I do, an' we're goin' to widen them--to strike out on fresh ones. What would you say to a tight-rope dancer an' a trapeze performer added to the attractions o' the troupe, eh?"

But the dwarf made no reply; he only continued to watch the pathetic-looking little pair, as with kisses and caresses they bravely strove to comfort one another.

"Wouldn't that boy be the very thing for it?" resumed Joe, after a moment's pause. "Isn't he jest the cut for an aeronaut, an' the right age to train as an acrobat? An' the gel! Look ee here!" and roughly snatching Joan from her seat at Darby's side, Joe swung her over to where the big furry bundle, which was the bear, and the mimic soldier--tired probably from their recent gambols--lay huddled in a heap together, and dropped her down on the grass beside them.

"Here, Bruno, get up," he shouted, giving the creature a heavy kick with his coarse boot. "Rise, sir, an' salute your new playfellow."

The bear growled, stirred, and with a lazy stretch of his big body slowly rose upon his hind legs and approached his master; while the monkey climbed, chattering and jabbering, to the roof of the caravan.

Darby and the dwarf had followed close at Joe's heel; and when the boy saw the huge beast, with sparkling eyes and slavering mouth, tower right above his little sister and heard her screams of terror, he felt, just for a moment, sick with fear.

"You brute!" exclaimed the dwarf, in his thin, hoarse voice, as he reached up his long arms and firmly gripped Bruno by the leather collar which was round his neck. But whether he addressed the man or the beast was not quite clear, and certainly Joe Harris did not care to inquire.

Joan had flung herself in her panic on Darby's shoulder, with her small, wet face buried in the bosom of his old velveteen blouse. The awful faint feeling passed from him at the touch of those clinging arms around his neck, and with indignant eyes and flushed cheeks he turned and faced the great, ugly bully, who only laughed, as if enjoying the sight of their distress.

"How dare you frighten my sister so?" he demanded haughtily. "Why did you bring us here if you only wanted to be rude to us? You are cruel, and a coward as well; for my father says that only cowards would try to frighten children or helpless things. Wait until I go home," said the little fellow boldly, forgetting in his excitement that he had deliberately left home for altogether, "and I shall tell him about you. Then you'll be punished as you deserve," he added loftily.

But as Darby uttered this threat a wave of memory swept over him with an overwhelming rush. Father! what could *he* do to help or deliver them, away in Africa, or maybe lying dead somewhere? Joe and Moll might ill-treat them as they chose before father should be able to interfere. And mother! Father in Africa or killed, mother in heaven! and with one bitter, thrilling cry the boy's brave spirit gave way, and he sank unconscious at Joe Harris's feet.

Mr. Harris gave expression to his amusement in a whistle.

"That's capital!" he cried; "the best piece o' actin' I've seed this many's the day! Eh, Bambo, what do you think o' *that* for an amatoor? Why, it 'ud bring down the house, I declare!"

But Bambo did not answer, not by so much as a single glance. He was crouching on the grass beside the boy.

Then Joe shoved the sobbing Joan aside, stooped over the limp figure of the child, and satisfied himself that he had only fainted. Afterwards he followed his wife within the caravan, whistling gaily as he went.

Tonio, the negro lad, slid near the group, and with wide, rolling eyes stared at Darby's motionless form and white face. Bruno had rolled himself up again comfortably, and was preparing to resume his nap just where he had left off when his master so rudely aroused him. Joan had hushed her sobs, although now and again a long, shuddering sigh shook her little body from head to foot, as with small, smudgy fingers she gently stroked her brother's cheek. Puck, the monkey, had skipped nimbly from his perch on the chimney of the caravan and found another more to his mind on top of Tonio's woolly head, where he sat glowering and grinning at the group, as if he wanted to ask, only he couldn't in words, "What's the matter, friends? what's to do?"

Bambo raised the boy from the grass, pillowed the drooping head against his own broad shoulder, chafed his hands, and put some water to his lips, which Tonio carried from the spring that bubbled up from out the mossy ground beneath the fir trees. Soon he recovered, and was able to sit up in the dwarf's arms and look

about him.

Then he remembered everything--where he was, what had happened--and his face grew white again.

"There, there, sonny, don't fret any more; and don't cry, either of you," added Bambo, gently laying one long, lean arm around Joan's shoulder. "If you do you'll make the master angry, and maybe he'll beat you. You needn't be afraid of Bruno; he's perfectly quiet, except when he's angered: besides, he's chained."

"Are you quite, quite sure?" asked Joan timidly, glancing nervously in the direction of the bear.

"Certain, positive!" answered Bambo, smiling into the eager faces raised so confidently to his, while an odd, unaccustomed thrill stirred his pulse and warmed his heart. "If you look you'll see where the chain that's attached to his collar is fastened to the back of the caravan."

"And will the monkey bite us?" again asked the little one.

"Puck! Puck bite! Why no, bless your heart!" and this time the dwarf actually laughed. "Puck's about as old as Methuselah, and hasn't got a tooth in his head! He'll maybe pull your hair if he takes the notion, and that's the worst Puck 'll do to you.

"Hark! there's master calling," cried Bambo, shuffling to his feet as a roar resounded from the caravan like the growling of a lion near feeding-time. "Sit there, and I'll bring you some of my stew. It's made of pheasant and partridge, and very nice, I assure you."

"There, fellow, that'll do," shouted Joe, standing on the steps of the caravan; "you've palavered plenty over them brats. Leave them to howl themselves to sleep if they like, but bring me my supper," he commanded angrily--for Mr. Harris was hungry, and somebody who knows about such things says that "a hungry man is an angry man"--then with a bang of the door and an ugly word he disappeared again. And as the dwarf dished up the supper he muttered to himself,--

"God help you, poor innocents! You have fallen into bad hands when you fell into the clutches of Moll Harris and Thieving Joe!"

He carried a plateful of dainty morsels out of his stew to where the children waited far back beyond the firelight and the limit of the bear's chain. He sat on the grass beside them, coaxing and scolding them by turns, until they forgot their fears and made a hearty supper, finished off by a draught of sparkling water from the spring.

Just at first the tiny man with the long arms, pale, sad face, and queer croaking voice had alarmed the little ones, because they had never seen any one the least like Bambo before. But when they discovered how gentle was the touch of those thin hands and bony arms, how kind and soothing the tones of that croaky voice, all their fears vanished. Darby determined that he would never again listen to unkind remarks about deformed persons, and Joan cuddled close beside her new friend in a most confiding fashion.

"Why has you taken no goody supper?" she asked him when all had finished, and the fire had sunk to a glow of red embers mixed with feathery flakes of ash. "Isn't you hungry? or did you take too big a tea?"

"Well, little one, I don't think I did. I'm just not hungry to-night. Grown-up folks don't usually be so keen-set as youngsters, you know," replied Bambo, looking down into the blue eyes that scanned him so curiously.

"But *you* isn't a grown-up," cried the child, in an amused tone. "You're just 'bout as big as Darby, only with a queer man-face an' grown-up arms. Does you call yourself a boy or a man?" she asked seriously, and without

a hint of mockery. She merely desired information.

"Joan!" said Darby, in a distressed whisper, at the same time giving her a dig with his elbow, almost pushing her over.

Joan was going to make a fuss, when Bambo put in quickly, "Hush, missy! you mustn't do that, or Moll will hear you. Let me try to answer your question, although I hardly know how. I'm only a boy in size, as you say--a small boy; yet in years I am a man, for I was four-and-twenty last May, the tenth of May," he added thoughtfully. "But I'm not a man as other men.--And you need not mind your sister saying that I'm not grown up," he continued, laying a thin hand on Darby's dark head, "for neither I am--leastways not like other folks.--I'm a dwarf, dearies--a poor, stunted bit of a thing like yon fir over yonder that has grown this way, that way, and every way except straight up and down like the rest of the trees about it. I'm Bambo the dwarf, Joe Harris's musical dwarf," and the little man laughed whimsically.

"Maybe I'll be different in the next world," he continued, after a moment's silence, which the children did not break, as they could think of nothing suitable to say, therefore tactfully held their peace. "I hope I shall, I *believe* I shall," he added, with a far-away look in his eyes, as if he had become unconscious of his audience; "for has not the blessed Lord Himself said, 'Behold, I make all things new'?"

Here he was seized with a violent fit of coughing, which shook his poor frame sadly, and left him panting and spent.

"You's got a werry bad cold," said Joan, with a pretty air of concern. "Can't you take some nashty medicine or sticky sweeties or cough drops to make you better?"

"Our nurse or our aunt always rubs us with stuff called 'lyptus, and sometimes puts a poultice on when we've got cold," Darby remarked. "I don't s'pose they'll have any 'lyptus in the caravan; but wouldn't you try the poultice?"

"Ay, sonny; only it wouldn't do me any good. I never was used with physic or poulticing; and I'll be better soon without anything," answered the dwarf, trying to stifle another fit of coughing lest it should distress the little ones. "I'll be quite well, in fact--before long, too," he added softly, with his shrunken face raised to the sky whence, with shining, sleepless eyes, the stars looked down upon the odd little group as if they were God's sentinels guarding the outposts where danger lurked.

"P'raps you shouldn't sit on the grass; it's usually damp at night," said Darby, in that quaint, old-world way of his which always attracted people greatly even when it most amused them. "Nurse doesn't allow us to sit on the grass when we're not well.--Sure she doesn't, Joan?"

"Never, never!" Joan affirmed solemnly, shaking her tangled golden head.

The dwarf got to his feet.

"Very well; I'll have to obey, I suppose," he said with a smile. "Now, I must find out where you two are to be put up for the night. It's high time you were under shelter. This sort of thing," he went on, waving his hand towards the open space, the caravan, the dying fire, and the chained bear, "is not what you're used to; anybody with half an eye could see that--even Joe, although it suits his purpose to pretend he doesn't. To-morrow you'll tell me all about your home and your people, and how you wandered this way, and everything. Then we'll see what's to be done next," he added under his breath.

Moll carried the children off to the caravan, where Mr. Harris was already sleeping the sound sleep which is generally supposed to be the outcome of an easy conscience. She was about to bundle them, clothes and all,

into a bed hastily spread upon what to Darby looked like a narrow shelf. He was too sleepy to offer any objections to the arrangement; but Joan stoutly resisted, declaring that she never went to bed without being undressed and saying her prayers.

"Boo-oo!" she wailed, putting her knuckles into her eyes. "I wants a nightgown, and I wants to say my p'ayers," she persisted.

"Shut up, will you!" ordered Moll, giving the little girl a rude shake. She would have slapped her, only she dared not disturb her better half, for then the blows might have gone round. "I ha'n't got no nightgown for ee," she went on, in an angry undertone; "but ee can take off yer frock an' wrap the shawl roun' ee." Which Joan proceeded to do, although she felt that nurse's old tartan shoulder-shawl was but a sorry substitute for a nightgown.

"Now I's goin' to say my p'ayers," she said, kneeling on the bare floor at this prayerless woman's knee, with closed eyes and piously-folded hands--a pathetic little figure in her comical attire. "You'll say the big words and join in the 'amen.' That's what nurse does. Is you ready? Now--

"Gentle Jesus, meek'n mild, Look upon a ickle child, Pity my--'I can't say it!-- Suffer me to come to Thee.

"Fain I would to Thee be brought; Dea'est Lord, forbid it not; In the kin'dom of Thy gwace Give a ickle Joan a place. Amen!"

After the "amen" Joan opened her big blue eyes and looked steadily at Moll without rising from her knees. The woman fidgeted on her seat, toyed with the amber beads on her neck, but she would not meet the pure gaze fixed upon her; for there was a tremulousness about her lips, a moisture in her eyes, a sense of ashamedness all over her which she did not wish the child to see.

But Joan *did* see, and vaguely understood that here there was somewhat amiss, and forthwith proceeded to offer her sympathy after her own fashion, which, when all is said, is about the oldest and sweetest form that sympathy can take. Silently she got to her feet, climbed on Moll's lap, and laid a kiss--light as a snowflake, holy as a benediction, pregnant as a prayer--upon the woman's broad, sunburnt brow. Then she tumbled on to the shelf beside Darby, and soon both were wrapped in the deep, dreamless sleep of wearied childhood.

A few hours afterwards quite an air of stir and bustle pervaded the encampment. The crossbars for the support of pots and pans were taken down; scattered utensils were gathered up and stowed away; Bruno was driven into his cage under the body of the van; the wandering horses were caught, harnessed, and put in their places; and soon the Satellite Circus Company was on the move once more. For Joe and Moll had not failed to observe the dwarf's openly-evinced interest in their captives; and fearing that he might take it into his head to decamp during the night, carrying the children along with him, they quickly made up their minds to push on and put as many miles as the horses could cover between them and the possibility of escape, pursuit, or capture before daylight the next morning.

The little ones slept soundly side by side on their narrow shelf; the bear snarled uneasily behind his iron bars, with only an inch of plank between his hairy embrace and their soft young bodies; the monkey curled closer into the warmth of Tonio's black breast; the dwarf sat on his perch above the plodding piebalds, watching the stars and speculating about the pretty children--who they were, whence they came, and what would be their fate if left to the tender mercies of Thieving Joe and his bold wife Moll.

It was broad daylight when Darby and Joan awoke and sat up to look about them. For a few minutes they remembered nothing of what had occurred, and could not make out where they were. Oh yes, of course, Darby at length understood. They were in a caravan where they had sheltered all night, not very far from the foot of that hill over whose summit lay the entrance to the country which they had set out to seek.

He slid cautiously off the shelf, helped Joan to put on her frock and tie her shawl round her again; then they opened the door, stole down the steps, and there they paused in dismay. The caravan had come to a standstill, and been drawn up on the edge of a stretch of dreary common; the horses were unyoked, and grazing near by. Along the further boundary of the common wound a broad, level highway, bordered by a wide footpath; and in the distance, from the valley front, rose the towers, spires, and smoking chimneys of a large-sized town. But Firgrove, Hill Difficulty, and the Happy Land all lay behind--far, far away!

CHAPTER X.

THE HAPPY LAND.

"Heaven lies about us in our infancy."

WORDSWORTH.

"To be good is to be happy; angels Are happier than men because they're better."

ROWE.

"Now, please, Mrs. Joe, will you show Joan and me the nearest way to the place where you found us?" asked Darby in all good faith when they had finished their breakfast. It had been a most unusual one for them, and not much of a treat: the bread was dry, the bacon strong smelling, the bitter coffee guiltless of either cream or milk, and poor Joan made many a wry face in her efforts to get it down.

"Time enough, time enough," answered Mrs. Joe cheerily, yet with a shamefaced look. "What's yer hurry? Are you so keen to leave us, eh?" she asked, fixing her bold, smiling eyes on the earnest countenance of the little lad.

"No--that is--ah--not 'zactly," stammered Darby, feeling himself in a fix between truth and politeness. "We didn't come on a visit, you know; we came only for the night. And you promised to let us go this morning after breakfast, and to show us the way."

Molly only laughed, looking this way and that; but Joe began roughly,--

"Look ee here now, young Hop-o'-my-thumb, we've had enough o' this humbug. Ye're both here, an' here ye're goin' to stay till I've done wi' ye. Do you heed?" he shouted, gripping Darby by the shoulder and giving him a hearty shake, while the dwarf's sunken eyes flashed with an angry gleam.

Joan began to whimper softly into the folds of her tartan shawl, but Darby looked from the black-browed woman to the coarse, red-haired man with stern, reproachful eyes.

"You promised--*she* promised," he said bravely, although his lips were quivering piteously, and all the healthy colour had fled from his cheeks, leaving them pale as the petals of a faded white rose.

Moll laughed again more loudly than before. Did the little softy really believe that big folks meant everything they said? And looking into her broadly-smiling face and unscrupulous eyes, Darby Dene had his first lesson in the meaning of deceit. He there and then began to realize that there are people in the world to whom falsehood comes easy, who think little or nothing of a broken vow.

"Why do you wish us to stay with you?" he asked, turning to Joe as the more hopeful of the two, because Joe said pretty much what he meant, and Moll did not. "You don't love us, and of course you can't expect that we can be very fond of you after--after--well, we know you for only such a little while. Do please let us go," urged the child in pleading tones; and now the big tears rolled down his cheeks and splashed in heavy drops, like a summer shower, over the breast of his shabby velvet blouse, while Joan sat and stared from Moll to Joe in wide-eyed silent terror.

"Not likely!" replied Mr. Harris, with an ugly laugh. "You're goin' to begin yer eddication, my son, an' little missy here too. So now shut up, an' let's have no more o' yer blubb'rin'. Ye're goin' to do as I bid ye, or if ye don't I'll manage to learn ye, I'm thinkin'. Eh?" he cried, playfully pinching Joan's small pink ear until she

screamed with pain, then glancing from face to face of the party gathered around the fagot fire, fingering idly at the same time the heavy whip in his belt with which he kept Bruno to his tasks. "An' min', if ye try to slope--to run away--well, it'll be all the worse for ye an' for anybody as helps ye," he added savagely, with a scowl in the direction of the dwarf, who sat a little apart, his head leaning upon his hands, his barely-tasted breakfast on the ground beside him.

Joe then lighted his pipe, took a gun and some rabbit-snares from the caravan, and shouting to Tonio to look sharp, he sauntered off in the direction of the fir plantation, with the black boy following dutifully at his heels.

Moll shortly after retired within the caravan, where they could hear her singing snatches of a rollicking street song as if for her own diversion; then--with only the dwarf, the bear, and the monkey to witness their distress--Darby and Joan threw themselves on the grass, where, wrapped in each other's arms, they gave free vent to their disappointment and dismay.

Bruno rolled on the ground, grunted, sat up and blinked at the children out of his funny little slits of eyes, but he said nothing. Puck skipped hither and thither, chattering and jabbering as if begging them to forget their grief and crack some nuts for him instead. The dwarf sat motionless, his head still sunk upon his hands, as if he had forgotten their very presence, yet all the time he was watching them through his fingers. And as soon as their sobs had subsided into long-drawn, gasping sighs, such as the west wind makes in a wide chimney, he left his place, and sitting down between them, put a long arm around the shoulders of each, and drew them close beside him.

He was only a dwarf, but in his heart there were pity and love for all creatures helpless and weaker than himself. And because of this he was like God--*he*, Bambo the object: mean, lowly, poor, so far as money went, yet rich in the priceless power of loving, which is beyond the riches of gold or lands; for is not love of God? Is not God Himself the beginning, centre, end--nay, not *end*, because it endureth for ever--of all real, true love? And in their desolation Darby and Joan turned to him with a feeling of confidence and hope.

"Now, I want to hear everything," he said coaxingly; "then perhaps I shall be able to help you. You must be quick, for Joe and Tonio won't stay long away. There's no rabbits or birds over there, I'm sure," he continued, nodding his great head in the direction of the plantation, "and at any moment Moll may come and interrupt us."

Then Darby told their odd new friend everything, as he had desired the child to do--who they were, where they lived, why they had left their home, whither they were bound, and what had befallen them upon the journey.

"Dear, dear!" exclaimed Bambo when the recital was ended, and Darby paused to draw a long breath. "Firgrove! Turner of Firgrove! Old Squire Turner folks about Firdale used to call him. Why, my grandfather, Moses Green, was gardener there once upon a time."

"And he's there yet!" declared Darby, looking highly delighted at the discovery. "Green my aunts call him; an old, old man with white hair and a bended back--'all 'count o' the rheumatiz,' he says."

"Ay, ay! so grandad's still alive. Deary me! deary me! Although he always had a sort of spite at me for being as I am," added the dwarf to himself.

"Had you never no muver?" demanded Joan curiously; "or does funny-lookin' peoples like you just grow the way Topsy did? Topsy never had no muver. That was 'cause she was black, I s'pose; and Tonio won't have none either?"

"Yes, I had a mother once, missy--a good and loving mother, and a kind grandmother too. But they are both

gone this many a year ago, and--except grandad, who doesn't count--I have neither kith nor kin in the world."

Bambo sighed deeply, overcome by sad memories. A tear trickled slowly down his hollow, weather-beaten cheek, and Joan put up a smudgy, gentle, little hand to wipe it away.

"Don't be sorry, please, dear dwarf. Joan loves you; you's so kind to Joan," she murmured.

"Couldn't *we* be your kith and kin?" asked Darby anxiously. "I expect by 'kith and kin' you just mean friends. We'll be your friends if you'd like us to. We're both very fond of you already.--Aren't we, Joan?"

"Yes, werry," Joan assented warmly, continuing to caress the dwarf's haggard face with her soft, chubby fingers.

"Bless your dear, loving little hearts!" he ejaculated fervently, looking from one to the other of the earnest faces raised so trustfully to his. "Them's the sweetest words that anybody has spoken to poor Bambo this many's the day--since my mother died. *She* always had gentle words and sweet looks in plenty for her misshapen boy; and granny too, bless her! But after they went and left me the world seemed all cold and cruel, with nothing better for the likes of me than cuffs and kicks. It was always, 'Get out of the way, you object!' 'Oh, poor wretch! how horrid-looking he is!' or else jeers, gibes, and laughter. And since I became a man, *this* kind of a man, I mean," he explained, glancing from Joan to his stunted limbs, huge feet, and claw-like hands, "it has been harder still--harsh words and heavy blows if I did not bring in money enough at shows and fairs. Now, I think the Lord Jesus has seen my loneliness, taken pity upon me, and sent two of His own to cheer me, and brighten a bit of the wilderness for a weary pilgrim. And we'll see if the dwarf can't do something to show his gratitude," said Bambo resolutely, yet speaking softly as if to himself. "Firgrove! And this is Barchester, you may say--only about three miles from it as the crow flies--and Barchester's thirty odd miles from Firdale. It's not so far after all, and yet it would be a goodish bit to tramp," he added thoughtfully.

"But do you think we must go home?" queried Darby anxiously. "You see, when Mr. Joe and Mrs. Moll overtook us we were on our way, as I told you, to the Happy Land--we were quite close to it, in fact. Would it be right to turn back now?" the little lad asked, fixing his clear gray eyes seriously on the face of the dwarf. "Wouldn't we be like somebody--I forget who--that put his hand to the plough and looked back? Didn't Jesus say that it's wrong of any one to do that?"

"Ay, sonny, our blessed Lord does say that 'no man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God;' and, of course, we oughtn't to do it. But we must first make sure that we've put our hands upon the right plough, that it's pointed in the proper direction in the very field the great Husbandman wants us to turn over. Then we can forge right ahead, cutting the furrow clean and straight, no matter how stony the soil, or how stiff we find the ground."

"I *think* I understand what you mean," said Darby slowly. "You are trying to tell me as nicely as you can that we haven't got our plough pointed in the right direction. Is that it, Mr. Bambo?"

"That's it, deary, and the sooner you get it turned about the better," replied the dwarf briskly. "Your field's waiting for you at Firgrove, so back there you and missy must go as soon as ever you can give Joe and Moll the slip. My, won't the ladies be in a fine way! By this time, I expect, they'll have scoured the country, and be getting the canal dragged in search of you both."

"Isn't we goin' to the Happy Land at all, then?" asked Joan, in a tone of glad relief.

She had been listening to the talk between Bambo and her brother in somewhat of a puzzle as to their meaning. She had, however, gathered the gist of their remarks, and is that not about all that is worth gathering of most conversations?

"Wait a little," whispered Darby, gently prodding her behind the dwarf's back. "Don't be in such a hurry. We're coming to that."

"Cause if we isn't," continued Joan the irrepressible, "I's werry, werry glad. I doesn't know nuffin' 'bout the Happy Land--nuffin' much, anyway, 'cept what nurse's hymn says--but I knows Firgrove, and I love Auntie Alice, and the pussies, and baby when he's not cryin'. They's quite 'nuff for me--just now at least," she added as an after-thought. "And I wants to go back to Miss Carolina and the rest of my dear, sweet dollies. Darby wouldn't let me bring none of them wif me. Now I's lonesome for them," she whimpered, "and I won't go to no Happy Land wifout my fings. There!" declared the mutinous little maid, with an emphatic waggle of her sunny head, such as she had seen Perry finish up with when argument waxed warm between her and Molly the cook.

And just as Captain Dene had smiled sympathetically over a similar speech of his small daughter's, so did the dwarf bend an understanding gaze upon the winsome, wilful face, with its dewy eyes and quivering lips. At the same time there came back to his memory a verse of a hymn or poem, Bambo did not know which, that his mother had been very fond of and often repeated:--

"Fair Anwoth by the Solway, To me thou still art dear; E'en from the verge of heaven I drop for thee a tear. Oh, if one soul from Anwoth Meet me at God's right hand, My heaven will be two heavens In Immanuel's land."

"Should we try to go to the Happy Land some other time, do you think, Mr. Bambo?" asked Darby anxiously, half frightened and wholly distressed by the feeling of satisfaction which filled him at the prospect of going back to the security of Firgrove. It seemed to him as if a return implied an easy entrance at the wide gate upon the broad and pleasant way, and turning their backs on the strait and narrow path, which had proved so tortuous and stony for their tender, stumbling feet.

For an instant the dwarf hesitated, hardly knowing how to answer the boy's question. Then he spoke.

"If I was you, I wouldn't set out again in search of the Happy Land; because them that turns their backs upon the duties which lie close to their hand, and their faces away from the place where God has put them, never find a happy land, neither in this life nor in the next," said the little man solemnly. "It mostly comes to folks, often when they little expect; leastways it did to me," he added softly.

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean," said Darby, with a puzzled pucker between his brows. "How could the Happy Land come to one? Can you tell me that, please?"

"Well, if you're looking for a country on this side of time such as the hymn describes, and I think that's the notion that's taken hold of your wise wee head," said the dwarf, laying a gentle hand on the lad's dark hair, "you'll never find it; for there's no such place as that in this world--where the sun's always shining, and night never falls; where folks are never tempted or wicked; where there's no need to struggle, and nobody makes mistakes; where there's neither sickness nor sorrow, parting nor death--nothing but music and pleasure and happiness all the year round. Only in heaven are all these joys to be found--the heaven that awaits us after our work is done, when the blessed Lord Himself sends His messenger to bring us home."

"Then, dear dwarf, isn't there any Happy Land at all," asked Joan, fixing upon her friend a pair of wondering, wide blue eyes--"no nice place where me and Darby can always be quite happy and good, wifout naughtiness or puttin' to bed same as at Firgrove; where I could keep my dollies and the pussies wif me, and where there 'ud be no Aunt Catharine?" she added emphatically. "Tell me, please, isn't there no Happy Land like that anywhere, wifout bein' deaded and put in a big box in the ground, the way they did wif muver?"

"Ay, missy, there's a Happy Land sure enough for us all; but each of us must seek it within, and create it

around us for ourselves," said the dwarf dreamily. "And I think that you surely make yours about you wherever you are," he added, as he softly smoothed the little one's tangled yellow curls.

"Please 'splain it to me again, Mr. Bambo," begged Darby, in his sweet, grave tones; "I'm afraid I don't quite understand your meaning yet. I'm only seven years old, you see, and not very wise for my age, Aunt Catharine says."

"And I'm not wise at all," laughed Bambo, shaking his great head in a droll way, which vastly amused Miss Joan, "although I'm more than three times your age. I fear I'm not good at explaining, either, for I'm just a dull, unlearned fellow. I never had no schooling, not since I wore petticoats!"--here Joan laughed merrily--"and have no knowledge except what the Master has taught me out under the sky and the stars, from the hedgerows, the beasts, the birds, the trees, the flowers. But I'll do my best to tell you what I mean, and the great Teacher Himself will make the rest clear to you if you are willing to learn of Him.

"I believe that the only truly Happy Land is just wherever the Lord Jesus is, and He dwells with those who love and desire Him above all others, no matter what their station or where their habitation may be--whether in a palace or a caravan; beyond yonder storm-blown hill, or safe in the snug shelter of Firgrove. Then if He is to walk always beside us, we must conduct ourselves as befits them that keep good company. We must shirk no duty, no matter how disagreeable; leave never a task unlearned, be it ever so hard; and travelling along hand in hand with a Friend who is always faithful, a Counsellor who is ever wise, a Guide who never stumbles, earth will become for us a real Happy Land, and life a foretaste of the bliss of that kingdom prepared for the Lord's own subjects 'from the foundation of the world.'

"This is what I believe, sonny, and I think it is what the Lord Jesus wanted the multitudes to learn and remember when He said in His sermon on the mount, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'"

"Oh, thank you, thank you, dear Mr. Bambo; I know now 'zactly what you mean. How clever you are!" exclaimed Darby, in a tone of mingled respect and admiration, looking at his new teacher with glowing eyes, while his cheeks were flushed from the excess of his delight. "And I am so glad we needn't go away any more to look for the Happy Land from father, when he comes back, and Eric, and Auntie Alice, and--and--everything," he added, hurriedly lumping Aunt Catharine along with the odds and ends that were too numerous to mention separately, "but just stay at home, and be good and brave and true and loving to everybody. How easy it sounds! I feel as if I never could be disobedient or naughty any more," he added, with a look of such angelic innocence and high resolve that the dwarf had not the heart to mar his lofty mood by so much as a hint of danger or a word of warning. He only repeated softly, almost below his breath, a verse from the battered old Book in his pocket, that was at times his sole companion, and comfort always:--

"Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven."

CHAPTER XI.

A SUDDEN FLIGHT.

"Little robin redbreast sat upon a tree, Up went pussy-cat, and down went he; Down came pussy-cat, and away robin ran; Says little robin redbreast, 'Catch me if you can.'

"Little robin redbreast flew upon a wall, Pussy-cat jumped after him, and almost got a fall. Little robin chirped and sang, and what did pussy say? Pussy-cat said 'Mew,' and robin flew away."

Meanwhile time was passing: morning had slipped on to afternoon. Moll would not stay inside the caravan all day, and Joe might be back at any moment.

"And now that you know where your Happy Land actually lies, don't you think we'd better make tracks for it as soon as we can?" said Bambo at length, speaking out of the silence that had fallen over the group. For both Darby and Bambo had been thinking, and Joan was asleep, with her head resting against the dwarf's shoulder.

"Why do you say 'we'? Are you going to come with us?" asked Darby, in great delight. "Oh, how kind you are! But won't you be very tired walking all that long way to Firgrove and back again, and your cough so troublesome?" he inquired with concern.

"I won't want to come back again, sonny. I've been intending to leave Joe and Moll for a good while past. I always put off and put off. Having no friends to go to, and there being nothing else I could fall back upon for a living, I suppose I was timid about making a change. Now I can see God's hand in it. He kept me on with the Harrises because He had something He wants poor Bambo to do before he dies. If only I can hold out until I deliver you and little missy safe into the care of your friends, that's all I'll ask. My work will then be done; I'll be ready for the call whenever the messenger comes."

"How? what do you mean?" asked Darby, in an eager whisper, for he was frightened--awed, rather--he knew not why, by the look on the dwarf's face.

"Because, deary, Bambo's soon going home--home to the dear Lord Jesus, whose love has made the world a happy land for the poor, despised, misshapen dwarf since first I sought and found Him waiting and willing to claim and receive me--*me*--even me, for His own."

The ready tears coursed quickly down Darby's cheeks, but he remained silent. He did not know rightly what he ought to say, and, guided by the inimitable tact, the heaven-born wisdom of childhood, said simply nothing.

"Whish! here's Moll," spoke Bambo, in a warning undertone. "Don't let on to her what we've been talking about. Better not say anything to missy, either; but the very first chance we get we'll give them the slip--see if we won't! Don't fret, sonny," he added, giving Darby's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Just you leave things to me, and never fear, for God will certainly set us free."

Almost directly Joe and Tonio returned. Joe was ravenously hungry and extremely cross because they had come back empty-handed, and Joe did not like that. He had an odd and occasionally inconvenient knack of picking up something--no matter what--wherever he went. This talent of his was well known among his friends, and had gained for him the nickname before mentioned of Thieving Joe, a title of which he was actually proud, until--But better not anticipate.

To-day, however, Joe had picked up nothing. Not a bird had they seen worth the waste of powder and shot; not a rabbit had even so much as sniffed in the direction of the snares. Joe was disappointed and out of temper

in consequence, and flinging down his gun, and administering a cuff to the long-suffering Tonio, he roared for Bambo to bring him his dinner, in a voice which awoke Joan bolt upright from her sleep, and set Darby to shake and shiver down to the very soles of his shoes.

When the savoury meal which the dwarf had so carefully prepared was disposed of, Mr. Harris lay down beside the fire to rest after the fatigues of the morning. There he slept until twilight was stealing over the common, and within the belt of fir trees darkness and gloom peopled the spaces with shadows, and filled the air with that silence which speaks in no known language, yet with many voices. And again, as on the previous night, soon the encampment was in the bustle of removal. Bruno and Puck were shoved into their cages, the horses harnessed and yoked to the caravan, Darby and Joan carefully hidden away inside under Moll's guardianship, and the party were on the move once more.

They were not going far, only to the outskirts of Barchester, the big, busy, noisy town whose tall chimneys rose through the smoke-laden atmosphere which hung so dark and heavy above their belching mouths. Barchester was about eight miles off going by the less direct road along which they would travel in order to elude pursuit. There they would halt for the night, awaiting the proprietor's orders for the morrow.

The black boy capered alongside the caravan, aiming stones at the sparrows hunched up on the leafless branches of the hedges, or chasing the shy young rabbits that scuttered frightened to their burrows in the mossy bank by the roadside, as the piebalds plodded sedately on their monotonous way. The bear snarled behind his iron bars, the children crouched silently in a corner of the caravan, while Joe and Moll smoked and lounged, and discussed their plans concerning their captives and the company generally during the approaching winter. Bambo occupied his accustomed perch above the horses; and through the badly-fitted squares of glass in front, which by no stretch of politeness could truthfully be styled windows, the hum of their voices and the meaning of their words reached distinctly and sharply his ears and brain.

"I say, Moll, are you mindin' that our term o' the van's about up?" asked Joe, after some minor matters had been talked over. "We'll give the bloomin' old shay back at the end o' the time, an' I don't think as you an' me'll ever ride in it again, my woman! We ought to be able to do better for ourselves than travel the country like this afore another summer comes roun'."

"I'm sure I hope so, for I'm gettin' kind o' tired o' bein' cooped up in a box like a rabbit in a trap," answered Moll sulkily.

"We'll go to lodgin's for the winter," Joe went on, taking no notice of her surly mood; "jest a couple o' rooms, wi' a corner in an outhouse where we can keep the bear. Bambo an' Bruno, wi' the little un on his back fixed up in tinsel an' spangles, an' her yeller curls flyin', ought to bring home a tidy penny every night--a heap o' coppers, I tell you! Tonio will take to the hurdy-gurdy again; him an' Puck should win money too. An' as for you," he continued, "you can make yer livin' any day by yer black eyes an' slippery tongue. My, Moll, you are a cute un, an' no mistake!"

"Come, give over yer palaver, for I'm not wantin' it," said Moll roughly, yet not ill pleased at her husband's judicious tribute to her smartness and her charms. "It's all very fine--you have everythin' nicely fixed up accordin' to yer own notion," she continued mockingly; "but I'd like to know where *you* come in? What are *you* goin' to do?" she demanded angrily. "Nothin', I expect. Play the fine gentleman an' live upon what the rest o' us earns. Not if I knows it, Joe Harris," said Moll harshly, with a vicious snap of her strong white teeth.

"Now, now, you mustn't turn rusty, Mrs. Harris, my dear; it don't suit yer style o' beauty. I'm not goin' to be either idle or extravagant. I'm goin' to work hard an' train them kids to work for us. There's money in them, I tell you, especially the boy, an' see if Joe Harris can't draw it out o' him! He'll be a bit stubborn at first, maybe, but we'll soon cure him o' that," added the man savagely. "An' min' you promised to help me, Moll! You're surely not forgettin' the bargain we made? You were to stan' by me wi' the brats, an' I was to give you the silk

gownd an' the glitters--eh, my lass?"

"I'm not sure if I want yer silk gownd nor yer glitters, Joe Harris," answered his wife moodily. "It ud be dirty money that ud buy them. I don't like this business, I tell you agin, as I telled you afore, an' there'll no good come o't. Let the little uns go, Joe," she urged in pleading tones. "For all that you purtend the other way, you know well that there's folks breakin' their hearts about them somewhere. Sen' the dwarf back wi' them to Firdale; they'll know their own way from there. An' as for Bambo--why, if he never turns up agin he'll be no loss. He's dyin'; you can see that wi' half an eye. His cough's 'nuff to give a body the shivers."

"Are you mad, woman, that you bid me throw away the best chance ever I had? An' the dwarf too! Why, do you want to ruin us all at one sweep?" growled Joe furiously.

"I don't want to ruin you, an' well you knows it," said Moll soothingly; "but I'm kin' o' tired o' livin' from day to day in dread o' you bein' followed an' took up an' put in prison. For it'll come to that, or worse, Joe, mark my words!" she added oracularly. "'The fox runs long, but he's caught at last,'" she quoted solemnly, "an' I never felt so downright sure o't afore. I think it's the look o' them children's eyes, the little lass in partik'ler," added the woman, remembering with a queer thrill at her heart Joan's kneeling baby form, the folded hands, the lisping prayer, the unexpected kiss. "She makes me wish I was a better woman," said Moll in a broken voice, softly sobbing the while.

Joe made no reply whatever. Possibly he was so vastly astonished at his wife's strange mood that his usual ready flow of forcible argument for once had failed him.

"Won't you let them go, Joe? do ee now," Moll resumed, in her most persuasive tones. "An' when you return the van, send Tonio off on his own hook too; the lad eats more'n he earns. An' sell Bruno; he's a vicious brute--nothin' but an encumbrance. You couldn't do much wi' him anyhow, once Bambo's out o' the road. The beast has a grudge agin you, for the way you whip him, I expect. He'll do you an injury one o' these days if you don't have a care! Then when we've only ourselves to think o', you an' me'll make a nice, comfortable livin' easy--you an' me, an' Puck an' the organ, wi' no fear o' the beaks or the jyle, or--or--anythin'. My! it makes me young agin thinkin' o' the fine times we'd have."

"Shut up, will you?" roared Mr. Harris, with a savage stamp of his huge foot, which set Bruno to growl ominously, and all the pots and pans slung around the van to jingle in unison.

After a moment Moll spoke.

"You bid me shut up," she said, with an angry jangle in her naturally soft, full tones. "All right, I will, Joe Harris; but when the time comes--as come it shall--that you're sorry you didn't listen to me, don't look to Moll for pity. There, them's my last words."

Then a sullen silence fell upon the pair; but by the time the caravan had reached its destination they were chatting as harmoniously as if no difference of opinion had ever arisen to disturb their peace.

The horses were again unyoked, the bear dragged from its lair, and arrangements put in train for the night. After a scanty supper of scraps and fragments--for by this time the store in the larder was at low ebb--having charged Bambo and Tonio with threats and strong words to look well after the children on peril of their lives, and on no account to allow them out of the van, Joe and Moll dressed themselves in their best, and set off to look up some old friends and spend a pleasant evening in the town.

No sooner were they safely out of the way than Tonio slyly disappeared--following, doubtless, the example set him by his master and mistress--possessing no more sense of responsibility to restrain his movements than a kitten or a butterfly. Thus the dwarf found himself, greatly to his satisfaction and delight, left in sole charge

of the captives and the encampment.

* * * * *

The first faint light of the misty October morning was spreading up slowly from the east, the delicate hoar frost of autumn was lying like a filmy veil of silvery gossamer over the furze bushes and rough grass around the camping-place, before the pair of pleasure-seekers returned. By that time, however, Tonio was sleeping soundly beside the piebalds in shelter of a tumble-down wall, with the monkey curled closely in against his dusky breast. Joe and Moll were stupid, tired, and decidedly out of sorts, as people are wont to be after a surfeit of enjoyment and a scant supply of sleep. Bruno growled as usual at being disturbed, and clanked his chain as if in remonstrance; from behind the wall the uneasy fidgeting of the hungry horses could be plainly heard; while Tonio's noisy snoring rose and fell upon the still, damp air with rhythmical regularity. But over the old yellow caravan a curious and suspicious silence reigned; not a sound was to be heard within its wooden walls, not a glimmer of light came through its curtained panes.

Joe muttered an ugly word, roughly threw open the door, struck a match, lighted the lamp and peered about him. Bambo's usual shakedown was deserted; the pallet where the children should have been was unoccupied. The place was empty; the prisoners had escaped--under the guidance of the dwarf undoubtedly, many hours before, probably.

Behind her husband's back Moll executed a sort of breakdown dance, so great was her satisfaction at the unexpected way in which her wishes had been carried out. But the disappointment and wrath of Joe over this sudden overthrow of his schemes were deep and furious.

CHAPTER XII.

FOLLOWED BY THE ENEMY.

"What will the fishers do, When at the break of day They seek the pretty boats they left Moored in the quiet bay? They seek the pretty boats, And find that they are fled; Alas! what will the fishers do? How can they earn their bread?"

--"A."

After his talk with Darby, the dwarf thought long and anxiously as to what would be their best route to Firgrove. Under ordinary circumstances their simplest one would have been to start from Barchester, or else go back to Engleton, then straight along by the canal to Firdale, thence to Firgrove, which was only about a mile from the village. But Joe and Moll would be sure to follow them, in order to make an attempt to recover their captives. Several times before Joe had tried to kidnap an attractive smart child whom he could train to be a sort of golden prop upon which his laziness could lean, but hitherto he had always been balked in his purpose. He would be furiously angry, Bambo knew, when he discovered that, just when a life of ease and idleness such as he had longed for seemed certain in the near future, he was as far as ever from accomplishing his object.

So, in order to avoid the chance of being brought back and subjected to greater cruelty than before, the dwarf decided to take a much longer way than that by the canal. They would strike out across the common behind Barchester, then double back a bit, and follow an unfrequented road which also led to Firdale, winding through a long tract of hilly land, laid out chiefly in runs for mountain cattle and hardy sheep, and scarcely inhabited except by herds and shepherds.

They could, of course, have travelled by rail, but this mode did not even occur to Bambo. For one thing, he was penniless, except for a few coppers that had escaped Moll's covetous eyes and grasping fingers the last time she rifled his pockets, when she supposed him to be asleep; and for another, he was not used to railway journeys. He had never, in fact, been inside a railway carriage in all his life, and he would have hated and shrunk from the attention he would most assuredly have attracted from all sorts of people--pity, horror, shrugs, smiles, grins, jeers, and laughter. It was bad enough to be stared at in booths and fairs when he was dressed up as a general in a shabby scarlet uniform and plumed hat with Bruno by his side. That was different. That was the only way he had ever hit upon by which he might honestly earn his food and shelter, such as it was. But from choice the dwarf had always avoided his fellow-creatures. Surrounded by the strong, the self-satisfied, the handsome, the gay, the consciousness of his own oddity and deformity was borne in upon his sensitive spirit in the keenest manner; but in the woods and fields, by the roadside and the hedgerows, he felt another person entirely. There Bambo forgot that he was so unlike his fellows; and among the birds, the beasts, the trees, the flowers, with God's wide heaven above and the green earth under foot, this simple, large-souled child of nature dropped his burden, and for the time being felt happy and at home.

He knew quite well the way along which he proposed to travel, for he had footed it from Firdale to Barchester more than once when he was a boy. In the scattered cottages and herdsmen's huts there were simple, kindly souls, who would welcome any one from the outside world, and willingly give them a bit of bread, a drink of milk, with maybe a shakedown by their fireside for the night, without asking any awkward questions or gazing too curiously at the odd little man and his charming companions. They might get a lift, too, for a few miles now and again in a cart or wagon going between one and another of the few farms along the route. Bambo sincerely hoped they should, for Joan would not be able to walk very far at once. Her feet were tender, and her shoes were thin. Bambo knew she should have to be carried the greater part of the way, and his great anxiety was lest his fund of strength, which had gradually grown so sadly small, should fail him before he had completed his self-imposed task. What would become of the little ones if he were forced to lie down under the friendly shelter of some wayside hedge, utterly unable to drag himself another step? Would Joe and Moll find

them and force them back to a life of lovelessness, hardship, and degradation? Oh, surely not! and the dwarf's soul sank within him as he contemplated the bare possibility of such failure and defeat.

For a while Bambo gave way to despondency and these by no means unnatural fears. Soon, however, this mood passed away, banished as swiftly as mist before sunshine, by the recollection of a promise--old almost as the everlasting hills, yet new as the song which the redeemed ones sing around the throne of God,--

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

Like a whisper of sweetest music the peace of the words stole over the dwarf's troubled spirit, soothing and fortifying him so that he felt himself no longer a weakling, a pigmy, but a veritable giant to fight and to endure. And with a smile upon his lips and a light not of earth in his sunken eyes, Bambo and his charges slipped noiselessly away from the bear, the monkey, and the caravan, and set out, not to *seek* the Happy Land, as Darby said with one of his quaint, grave glances, but this time to *find* it.

* * * * *

The first streaks of sunlight were lighting up the landscape before the little party paused to take a rest, and to eat some of the food which the dwarf's fore-thought had provided. Darby found a dry seat upon the trunk of a fallen tree. Upon it they sat and ate their breakfast of cold rabbit and dry bread, washed down by a draught of pure water carried in a tin porringer from a spring which bubbled out of the bank hard by--a spring that was half hidden by the feathery moss, trailing periwinkle, and brown fern fronds with which it was surrounded. The children breakfasted heartily, their early outing having sharpened their appetites; but Bambo's eating was only a pretence, for he was not hungry. Joan was a fairly solid weight for a girl of five, and he had carried her in his arms nearly all the way from the encampment. He was tired and exhausted in consequence; his hands burned, his lips were parched, his brow fevered. He laved his face with the clear, cool water; and after a long, deep drink from the porringer, which Joan held to his lips with all the precision and gravity of a professional nurse, he felt strengthened and refreshed.

By-and-by they set out again, and now Joan trotted by Bambo's side, chattering gaily the while. The sunshine was warm and bright. The air was alive with myriads of insects flitting and buzzing their brief life away. Sparrows chirped and wrangled in the bare brown hedges, robins piped their sweet, plaintive tune from every tree; film-like webs of silvery gossamer decked the grass beneath their feet, and draped the stunted furze bushes as with a bridal veil of rarest lace. It was all so gladsome, so beautiful, so free, that Joan laughed and skipped for joy. And was she not going back to Miss Carolina, and the cats, and baby, and Auntie Alice, and Firgrove? Darby trudged more soberly by the dwarf's side, and they chatted as they went. Bambo told tales of his boyhood. He described to the children the tiny two-roomed cottage, long since swept away to be replaced by a more sanitary habitation, where he and his widowed mother lived with his grandfather and grandmother. He spoke of his kind grandmother's death, and his mother's, almost immediately after, from the same destroying fever. Thus Bambo was left practically alone in the world. His grandfather was a sour, silent man, disappointed first in his only son, who had never been anything but a ne'er-do-well and a burden to his parents; then in his grandson, whose deformity and helplessness the old man resented as a personal injury at the hand of Providence. He could not tolerate the child as a baby--never set eyes upon him, in fact, if he could help it. When the baby grew from infancy to childhood, he quickly learned, guided by the unerring instinct usually possessed by the young, to keep out of his grandfather's way and to fear him, so that there was little love lost between them. After the two women were gone the state of matters grew worse. Sore from a sense of injustice, starved for want of affection, the boy was often sullen and sometimes disobedient. Strife and even blows were the outcome, until life in Moses Green's lodging--for he had quitted the cottage--became unbearable to the wretched, misguided boy. Indeed, so unhappy did he feel in those dark days after his mother's death, that he had been often tempted to wonder why God had made him at all when he was not made as others, when in all the big, wide world there seemed no fitting place for such as he.

There were several kind, good people who, aware of the harsh, unnatural feeling of the surly old gardener towards his grandson, were anxious to befriend the orphan child--Squire Turner of Firgrove, the father of Aunt Catharine and Auntie Alice, being among the number. But the first thing they one and all proposed was that for a while he should be sent to school, and to this the lad resolutely refused to submit. Did he not know what strong, active boys who could leap, and run, and fight, and play football were like out of school? They were his enemies, his tormentors, who mocked, gibed, jeered, stoned him even, until he sometimes felt he would like to wrap his long arms round their necks and strangle the whole lot of them. And if they were cruel and unkind out of school, when he could generally get away from them somehow, or hide, what would they be in it where there should be no escape? School indeed! Not likely! So in order to free himself from the attentions of those who meant well enough, no doubt, but, in the dwarf's opinion, did not know what they were talking about, Bambo did what many another boy has done on the top of his temper before and since--he ran away, far, far away to the big town of Barchester, upon which he and the children had just turned their backs, tramping every step of the long, weary journey.

It was quickly made plain to him, however, that most of the lads who loafed about the Barchester street corners were curiously similar to the boys of Firdale in their love of teasing and making a mock of any creature weaker than themselves, any one whose appearance or peculiarities presented a fair butt for their rough ridicule, and gradually the dwarf grew to cherish a rooted hatred to his race.

The days went on. He had arrived in Barchester with only a long-treasured threepenny piece in his pocket. Rapidly it melted away; for a few pence do not last very long, even when one buys only a halfpenny worth of bread a day and sleeps on a doorstep. He was almost famished and worn to a shadow when, by good luck or ill, he fell in with the proprietor of the Satellite Circus Company and his troupe, as Joe so grandly called the occupants of the huge yellow caravan. They were just starting on tour--the phrase is Joe's--for the summer. Joe eagerly invited the dwarf to accompany them, being on the lookout at the time for a fresh sensation, and seeing in the extraordinary-looking lad, with the huge head, stunted legs, and sprawling feet, a novel addition to his party at the cost merely of some scraps and a shelter, when a shelter was available and not required for any other purpose.

The boy on his part jumped at the man's offer, for was he not starving? Besides, he was overjoyed at the prospect of the freedom and the outdoor life held out to him by the proposal that he should become part and parcel of the constantly-moving caravan. And what a fine way of escape from his persecutors! So there and then the dwarf was enrolled as a regular member of the Satellite Circus Company. His real name--plain Jimmy Green--was scornfully cast aside. Mr. Harris voted it slow and commonplace. After a good deal of thought and much indecision, he substituted the more catchy one of Bambo as being both novel and appropriate to the profession--Bambo, the musical dwarf; though why he was dubbed musical was always a puzzle to the poor little man, because nobody had ever known him to sing a note in his life. Sing! why, with his hoarse, croaky voice he could no more make music than a frog in a marsh. The absurdity of it amused him at first every time he saw his name flaring in big red and yellow letters from placards and hoardings. Bambo was all right; he rather liked the change. And Bambo he had remained ever since, until, like Darby and Joan, the dwarf had almost forgotten his claim to any other name.

From year to year he stayed on with Joe and Moll. Other members of the company came and went, but still the dwarf remained--now cuffed and kicked, when he did not by his grotesque antics and claptrap tricks bring in as many pence as his patrons believed he might; again let alone when he had been lucky, and they were in a good humour with themselves and all the world. He acted as bear-leader and buffoon, villain and hero, alternately in public; while in private he was cook, drudge, messman, and menagerie manager for the rest of the party, for animals of some sort invariably formed part of the attractions of the troupe. Now it was a performing poodle, picked up somewhere in Mr. Harris's own ingenious way of finding things which had never been lost; again it was a cage of white mice; at another time a wonderful parrot, with always a monkey, and generally a bear. Bambo had a great way with these creatures, and often succeeded in teaching them tricks when Joe had failed. His methods were few and simple, based chiefly upon kindness and perseverance;

whereas Joe's one idea of imparting instruction was by threats and chastisement in some form, dealt out impartially to each and all, and more than one valuable animal had come to grief on the system.

It was a hard life, and after a time became very monotonous to the dwarf, who was often heartsick of it all. But what else was there for him to do? Nothing that he knew of, so he stayed on.

One after another the changing seasons slipped swiftly away, and in their passing brought to the Satellite Circus Company reverses and bad times. They found it impossible to keep pace with the ever-growing craze for something fresh, a new excitement, and in consequence had slowly but surely been losing their place in public favour. Then the company was broken up. The Swedish giantess went over to an opposition troupe; the German ventriloquist and conjurer had died of apoplexy; their leading lady, who so airily executed the tight-rope performances as well, went off one fine day without saying good-bye, and married the clown, with whom she had serious thoughts of setting up a select show on her own account. The roomy, comfortable caravan was sold, and an old lumbering machine hired each summer instead; while in winter the party lived from hand to mouth on their wits, putting up here, there, and anyhow. The animals had all died or been disposed of except the horses--a pair of broken-down yet intelligent piebalds--Puck, and Bruno, the bear that Bambo had trained from a cub, and tamed until he was as gentle as a lamb with every one but Joe, towards whom he seemed to entertain a dislike both deep and savage.

As the years rolled round, Bambo became reconciled to his lot, and in course of time more than reconciled, even happy. For in the many solitary hours he passed perched above the horses upon the box of the caravan, when the soft summer wind fanned his face, or in dark, dewy midnights, when in the shelter of some leafy forest glade he felt himself alone with nature, long-forgotten words he had heard from his mother's lips, prayers she had taught him, hymns she had crooned beside his bed, came back to his memory--not quickly or clearly all at once, but slowly, hazily. He eagerly welcomed these memories, and hungrily held them close. At first they represented to him his mother--gentle, pitiful, loving--come back from the dead, and the friendless youth felt no longer desolate. Then he began to ponder the meaning of the thoughts that filled his heart and brain; and God, by His silent lessons, conveyed through every bird that flies, every insect that crawls, each flower that raises its smiling beauty to the sun, helped him to understand. He had learned to read, in an imperfect sort of way, during his early years. He bought a Bible with clear type in the next village they stopped at, and, by dint of frequent practice, he was soon able to read it easily. The Book became his constant comfort and delight. Henceforth existence ceased to be a burden to the despised dwarf; each day brought a fresh message of hope, and held a sweeter significance of love for this hitherto hopeless, loveless creature, because the Lord had discovered to him the real meaning of life, and he knew himself--mean, unworthy though he was--at his true value: no longer only a log, a spectacle, an offence, but an immortal soul for whom the dear Christ Jesus had esteemed it no shame to die! He was sure that he was wanted in the world, that there was a use for him, a something which he alone could do, and he patiently awaited the Lord's orders. Now he knew that his special work had been put ready to his hand--the deliverance of these two little ones. And although the call to action did not sound until his sands of life were well-nigh run, the answer "Ready!" rang none the less cheerily and promptly.

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At midday, which Bambo was able to guess pretty nearly by the sun, the fugitives halted to have their dinner. Joan said it was not dinner at all, only breakfast over again; for it consisted of some more cold rabbit, a slice of bread each, with a drink of water. And very good it tasted to these hungry little people, who many a time at Firgrove had discontentedly turned up their noses at much more dainty fare. Then Joan fell asleep, cradled comfortably in the dwarf's long arms, and Darby dozed at his side.

When they awoke it was well on in the afternoon. The sun was no longer visible; a chilling wind had sprung up from the east; dull gray clouds hung loweringly overhead; a close mist, as of coming rain, wrapped the landscape as in a mantle. Bambo felt that they must push on, and, if possible, find somewhere to shelter in for

the night. It would never do for these tenderly-nurtured children to be exposed to a drenching. About himself the dwarf had no anxiety. A shower more or less could not matter much, he thought, as a more severe fit of coughing than usual shook his frail, thin body and tore at his poor, raw chest. Nothing mattered now, he told himself, except that he should accomplish the work his Master had given him to do, and along with the work he believed that he should also be granted a sufficiency of strength. After that--why, he would be quite ready and eager for the next call upon him, whenever it came.

But there was not a house or cottage within sight, only a long stretch of barren land, half heather, partly coarse grass, over which some small, horned sheep and half-grown cattle had been turned out to pasture. About three miles off, at a place called Hanleigh Heath, there was a farm with a solitary wayside dwelling attached--a big, bare barn of a place, part of which the farmer had utilized as a sort of rude hostelry. The dwarf knew it well. It was called the Traveller's Delight. He had put up there with the Harrises one night several years before. The landlord and Joe seemed the best of friends--as "thick as thieves," in fact. Therefore Bambo felt that he dared not venture within the hostelry with his charges--it would not be safe; besides, they had no money to pay for lodging. Nevertheless, they must make for it with all speed. The rain was coming on, and soon too. The Traveller's Delight held out their only chance of refuge from the wet and the darkness, and the dwarf hoped that in some of its straggling outhouses they should find shelter for the night.

It was almost dark when Darby and the dwarf saw a light twinkling a short way off, like a bright, friendly eye from out the gloom. Oh, how thankful they were! for both were weary beyond the power of moving many yards further. Darby was staggering from giddiness and stumbling at every step. His little legs dragged one after the other as if each foot were weighted with lead. Bambo spoke no word, for speech was now hardly possible to him, his throat was so sore, his breath so laboured, his chest so torn by the deep, grating cough, which, in spite of all his efforts, he could not suppress. The instant the rain actually began to fall he had taken off his jacket to wrap around Joan, who was sound asleep in his arms, and his vest he had put upon Darby. It hung about the boy's slim shoulders and over his knees somewhat like a sack. It had saved him from a wetting, however; while Bambo, thus stripped of his outer garments, was soaked to the skin.

He carefully laid the still sleeping Joan under the shelter of a hayrick in the stackyard behind the inn; and charging Darby neither to make a noise nor leave her alone, no matter what might happen, the dwarf crept cautiously forward--stealthy in his movements as a cat stalking a mouse--to ascertain whether there was any safe cover to which he could convey the children.

From the front of the inn the lamplight streamed through the uncurtained windows, shining cheerily on the wet cobble-stones of the sloppy courtyard, and now and again a shrill voice pierced the silence of the night as a woman's figure moved to and fro within the warmly-glowing kitchen. But outside there was no sign of life; all was still except for the occasional shuffling of the horses' feet in the stable, the slow, deep breathing of the cows in an adjacent shed; and Bambo became bolder. He peeped in at this window, he peered within that door, until at length he found what he wanted--an empty house with plenty of clean, dry straw strewn upon its floor.

In summer it had probably been used for housing the calves which were now wandering at will over the wide, wet pasture-lands, having arrived at an age when they could be promoted to share the privations without enjoying any of the comforts of the grown-up creatures belonging to the establishment. No one was likely to have an errand there now that its former occupants were away. In any case, nobody would be about before morning, Bambo reasoned, and by day-dawn he and his charges would have once more taken the road for Firgrove.

Gently and carefully he raised Joan from her bed beside the haystack, fearing that if she awoke she might make a noise. She did awake, however, sat up, looked all round in a frightened fashion, then began to whimper. Drawing a fold of shawl across her mouth and whispering to Darby to keep close, the dwarf carried her as swiftly and silently as possible to the shelter which he had discovered. There, snugly curled up among

the clean, dry straw like kittens in a basket, the little ones were both soon sound asleep.

But Bambo could not sleep, although his weakness and weariness amounted almost to pain. He was strangely wakeful, and eagerly on the alert for the slightest sound which might indicate either disturbance or danger. By-and-by, however, his head began to droop on his chest; his eyes were closed, his long arms lay limply by his side. The present faded away from him; he drifted back into the past again. Once more he was a child at his mother's knee; his brow was bent upon her lap, his hands were folded as she bade him fold them when he said his evening prayer--a simple petition which in all his wanderings the dwarf never forgot, and of late years never omitted to repeat each night--in perfect faith and childlike confidence that his words would be heard, his requests granted:--

"I lay my body down to sleep, And pray that God my soul will keep; And if I die before I wake, I pray that God my soul will take. Amen."

For a while all was still within the calf-house. Darby and Joan slept the profound, dreamless sleep of tired childhood; the dwarf was buried in an oblivion which was as much the stupor of weakness as the blissfulness of sleep. About an hour he remained sunk in sweet forgetfulness of present danger and future difficulties. Then his big head began to bob uneasily up and down, from one side to another, until it fell upon his shoulder with a sudden jerk which only partially aroused him. He opened his eyes with an effort. Where was he, and where was his mother? Surely that was not her voice which broke in so coarsely through the closed door and the hole in the wall? That harsh laugh never burst from her mouth; those ugly words never soiled her pure lips! All at once Bambo started upright, thoroughly awake and trembling with terror. He remembered everything, and for a minute his brave, loving heart died within him as he recognized the voices in the court outside of Thieving Joe and his wife Moll, wrangling with the sleepy landlord for admittance at that unseemly hour to the shelter and comfort of the Traveller's Delight.

The dwarf put his ear to a chink in the door and listened intently. He could not make out what they said, however, but that they were there in hot pursuit of himself and the children Bambo felt not an atom of doubt. Some one must have taken note of the runaways, given Joe and Moll warning, and here they were already on their trail. They would question the landlord; next, search every corner and cranny about the inn for the fugitives. At any moment their hiding-place might be discovered.

CHAPTER XIII.

A TERRIBLE FRIGHT.

"No will-o'-the-wisp mislight thee, No snake or slowworm bite thee, But on, on thy way, Not making a stay, Since ghost there's none to affright thee.

"Let not the dark thee cumber; What though the moon does slumber? The stars of the night Will lend thee their light, Like tapers clear without number."

R. HERRICK.

Behind the stackyard at the Traveller's Delight the ground dipped down into a hollow, which, even in daylight, was completely screened from the view of any one within the house or about the yard by a great clump or patch of scraggy furze bushes. In this secluded spot there stood a lime-kiln, one of those built somewhat like a low circular tower, with gaping mouth and open roof; but for many a day the kiln had not been used--not since the present tenant entered on possession of the farm at Hanleigh Heath. During the course of these years of disuse nature had been busy beautifying the original ugliness of the structure. Now ivy climbed boldly here and there over the rough mason-work, trails of late convolvulus festooned the opening, hardy hart's-tongue and tufts of parsley fern sprang from every crevice in the stones, while the top was covered with a tangle of briars, nettles, and matted grass. These combined to form a species of thatch which perfectly protected the interior from both wind and rain.

Bambo had come upon this spot long ago. He had, in fact, slept there one night snugly and safely, and thought to himself what a fine hiding-place it would be in case of need, for nobody seemed to go near it. Now, in his dilemma and sore strait, the remembrance of the old lime-kiln came back to him, and he welcomed the idea with joy and gratitude. It would never occur to Joe Harris to seek his runaways in such a spot--he probably did not know of its existence--and the dwarf did not believe that the landlord would take any part in the chase. He surmised, and correctly too, that such a shrewd person would prefer to ignore the claims of friendship to running the risk of bringing the Traveller's Delight under the notice of the authorities, or mixing himself up with what might turn out to be an awkward business.

For what seemed to the watching Bambo a very long time lights continued to burn within the house, while now and again a burst of noisy laughter broke the silence of the night, rising discordantly above the steady, persistent pitter-patter, pitter-patter, drip, drip, drip of the soft, thick autumn rain. At length the darkness and stillness of midnight held the homestead in possession. Even the rain had ceased to fall; not a sound was to be heard except the dwarf's hoarse, laboured breaths and the gentle, regular breathing of the sleeping children.

Gradually and cautiously Bambo awoke Darby. For a minute or two the little fellow could not make out where he was; but in a few hurried whispered sentences the dwarf made him understand how near and how dire was the danger which threatened them--how absolutely needful it was for them to be quick, and to be wary in their attempt if they meant to escape.

Without arousing Joan, Bambo lifted her up from her nest among the straw, and keeping her still well wrapped up in his own worn jacket, he held her easily in his arms. Then, with Darby pressing close beside him, they crept noiselessly forth from the shelter and warmth of the cosy calf-house.

By this time the moon rode high in a soft gray-blue sky, shedding a flood of pale, pure radiance on all things, touching the homely, commonplace details of the farmyard with a love-like caress until they were idealized into objects of wonder and beauty. But Bambo had no eyes just then for admiring nature's marvellous transformation scenes; the work in hand occupied his whole attention. He barely glanced at the moon, although he was well aware of her presence, which he considered rather unfortunate, and heartily wished it

had been still dark, because then their movements would have been more certain to escape notice.

Slowly and stealthily they moved from the cover of the door, keeping well within the shadow cast by the walls of the outhouses. Step by step they stole along until they reached the greater security of the stackyard. There they were beyond view from the windows, supposing any one were looking out, which was hardly likely. Inch by inch they crawled across the bright patch of a hundred yards or so between them and the clump of friendly furze bushes. There they paused to take breath and look about them. There was nobody at their heels; nothing in sight except the sheep huddled in heaps for shelter behind the low stone dikes, and the young cattle herding in groups here and there over the wet, glistening fields. In the hollow below lay the place of refuge for which they were bound. And just as Bruce's plucky spider made that "bold little run at the very last pinch" which "put him into his native spot," so one quick rush down the incline in front of them landed the fugitives inside the empty lime-kiln, where they were safe, for the moment at least, with a roof over their heads, a dry green floor beneath their feet, on which they could stretch their weary limbs.

But afterwards! The inn seemed wrapped in slumber just then. The landlord would be back in his bed. Joe and Moll might have left--gone off in another direction, disappointed at not finding the fugitives or any news of them at the Traveller's Delight on their arrival; or possibly they were resting, with the intention of making a thorough search through the premises in the daylight next morning. This was the more probable explanation of how matters actually stood; at the same time, Bambo had no sense of security that it was the correct one. At that very moment their enemies might be prowling from barn to byre, from cart-shed to stable in pursuit of their prey. They would undoubtedly explore the stackyard. Next, they would notice the furze bushes. They would poke and peer among them and about them. Failing to find what they sought, they would be sure to look this way and that, up and down, until their eyes lighted upon the lime-kiln. Then--

Here the dwarf drew a quick breath, set his teeth hard, and again asked himself what was to be done next.

The children were worn out. Joan sobbed from time to time in her sleep, and brave, strong-souled little Darby shivered with cold and fright, while he pressed closer and closer to the dwarf's side for warmth and protection. As for Bambo himself, he was feeling extremely ill. The fever that raged in his blood cracked his lips and parched his tongue, until it felt in his mouth like so much dry sponge. His breathing had become so laboured from the sharp, shooting pains in his chest and back that it was only with difficulty he could speak; while his hot hands shook, and his thin, stunted limbs trembled beneath the weight of his big, ungainly body. He wondered what would happen if he were not able to go any further! What would become of the boy and little missy if he were to die there in the kiln before morning? Alas! there could be but one answer to that question, with Moll Harris and Thieving Joe hovering around like hawks about a nest of doves. But no; God was not going to deliver them up to the destroyers in any such fashion. After having brought them thus far on their way in safety, He would surely see them over the rest of the road; and Bambo took heart again. They would rest where they were until dawn; then one more effort would surely bring them to some farm or decent cottage. He would tell the children's story, and perhaps a cart or other conveyance could be found to take them on to Firgrove; some one, at least, there would surely be willing to hasten to inform the ladies of the whereabouts of the two wee wanderers.

Thus far the dwarf's thoughts ran readily on, then stopped in confusion. Further they would not seek to penetrate, and it did not matter. Once the little ones were safe with their friends he should have plenty of time to think about himself. Then he would be free to lie down in some quiet spot and sleep away some of the weakness and weariness which every moment threatened to overpower him. Sleep! oh, if he could only sleep until the racking pains in his chest were better! Sleep--sleep--sleep! and perhaps it might even be permitted him not to wake at all until he had reached that land whose inhabitants are never sick, and the people who dwell therein are forgiven their iniquity.

"I'm afraid your cold is worse," whispered Darby at length through the silence, that was broken only by Joan's sobbing sighs and the dwarf's hoarse breathing, which every moment became more painful and more difficult.

"Ay, I think it is," answered Bambo, giving the little fellow's hand a grateful squeeze. "But don't you fret about Bambo, deary; he'll soon be all right, never fear, once you and missy are safe at home."

"Are we far from the canal here, Mr. Bambo?" Darby again asked, after a long pause, during which the dwarf thought he had fallen asleep.

"Yes--no--well, let me see," said the dwarf thoughtfully. "Why, it's just a matter of about two miles as the crow flies, over the fields on the other side of the inn."

"Could we walk as the crow flies?" demanded Darby eagerly. "That is--of course--well, you know what I mean," and the little lad smiled and coloured in the darkness.

"Ay, there's nothing to hinder, so far as I know. Why are you asking, deary?"

"Because I've been thinking that if we could get there--and Joan should be able to walk that length easily, I'm sure, after this nice long sleep she's having--the man would let us into the boat, and that would take us home without tiring you any more. Or we could slip on board when he wasn't looking. You know that's how we came," added the boy, with an amused little chuckle.

The dwarf did not answer immediately.

"Well, sonny, I wouldn't say but you're about right," he replied at length. "I never thought of going by the canal, knowing as how the boat's not allowed to carry passengers. But if we were to tell the man in charge where we're bound for, and explain things a bit to him, it's more than likely he'd stretch a point and take us to Firdale. And if he refuses, we could do just as you say--slip in at the next stopping-place without anybody being anything the wiser.

"Bless you for a wee wisehead!" gasped Bambo, in his hoarse, quavering voice, at the same time drawing the child still closer to his side. "You've put new life into me. Here I've been fearing as how I should never reach Firgrove, and blaming the Lord for forgetting us. And now, out of the mouth of a babe, so to speak, He brings the very plan that will be easiest and best for us all," and tears of joy and thankfulness trickled down the poor creature's hollow, fevered cheeks.

"We needn't go just yet, not for ever so long," said Darby, quite proud of his post of commander-in-chief for the time being. "The boat leaves Barchester early, early in the morning, but she doesn't reach Engleton till about eight o'clock. I've talked with Mrs. Grey of the *Smiling Jane* lots and lots of times, so I know. She reaches Firdale some time in the evening. We'll be home in time for tea. Oh, won't it be lovely!" said Darby, clasping his hands in ecstasy.

"Ay!" assented Bambo, earnestly, solemnly. It was not of the tea he was thinking, however, but of the deep satisfaction and gratitude with which he would hand over his charges to their proper guardians. "And now you must try and sleep a while, sonny, like missy here. See, lie down on this nice dry place, and you can lean your head on Bambo's knee."

"You must rest too," coaxed Darby sweetly. "You are so good to us, yet you never think of yourself. Wait, see if we won't take care of you when we go to Firgrove! Aunt Catharine will soon cure your cough. She's fine for doctoring, though she *is* so--so--"

"Don't fret about me, sonny; I'll rest plenty by-and-by, never you fear," and with that strange smile lighting up his pale, plain face, a smile which to look upon--only now it was too dark--made Darby feel as if he were in church or had newly finished saying his prayers, the dwarf watched until the little lad's heavy eyelids drooped over his tired eyes.

Soon he would have been, like Joan, fast asleep. Bambo also was hovering on the undefined borderland, when the sound of footsteps from the field above the kiln caught his quick ear, and with a sudden jerk of his great head he sat up to listen. At the same time a flare of light from a lantern streamed over the top of the kiln, and loud, angry voices rose upon the still night air in quarrelsome tones.

"I ain't goin' prowlin' about here no longer, Joe Harris, I tell ee," said Moll shrilly. "I've tramped at yer heel for the last twelve hours a'most, till I'm ready to drop, an' now you'd keep folks from their proper sleep all for nought!"

"Stow yer cheek, I say, or it'll be the worse for you," growled Mr. Harris savagely. "I'm goin' to fin' them kids an' that rascally imp o' a dwarf wherever they are, an' you're goin' to help me. They come this way, right enough--there's no mistake about that--an' where else would they be but here? There's not another spot they could shelter for miles an' miles."

"Fin' 'em, then, if you can!" snapped Moll sharply. "Anyhow, I'm goin' away to my bed like a decent Christ'an woman. Come along, Joe, do," she urged, with a swift change of tone. "You can have another look roun' in the mornin' if you must. But if you'd take my biddin'--only that's what you never do--you'd let 'em go back where they come from."

"Shut up!" commanded Joe, in the same savage tone as before. "Haven't I told you agin an' agin that I'll never let 'em escape--not if we were to swing for't!" he added grandly. Then he went on in a wheedling sort of way. "Here, old girl, take the lantern an' look down below there; you've sharper sight nor me. Pullen, he says as there's a tumble-down lime-kiln in that hollow. Bambo ud hardly hit on't; but it's best to make sure."

Moll snatched the lantern from her lord's hand with an extremely bad grace, and an exclamation which sounded very like "Bad luck to Pullen an' the Traveller's Delight!" For she heartily disliked the mission upon which they were bound--the recovery of the captives. Having had frequent experience of her husband's furious temper and the weight of his fists, she dared not directly refuse to aid him; but from the bottom of her heart she hoped the two sweet innocents would never fall into his clutches again.

"Better for them to be dead!" muttered Moll passionately, as, lantern in hand, she nimbly slid down the shiny wet slope to the lime-kiln. "The little lass, leastways," she added in a softer voice. And as the memory of Joan's freely-bestowed kiss fell upon the woman's half-awakened heart like the touch of an angel's finger, a tear trembled on her long black lashes, and a wordless prayer winged its way through the inky darkness of the murky sky--a prayer which in heaven was understood to indicate a struggling soul's yearning after better things.

Straight and swift to the mouth of the kiln came Moll, the lantern flinging its trail of light from side to side as she moved. At length she paused opposite the opening, darted inside, looked about, and stopped short with a smothered cry as her keen eyes discerned the little group huddled in the far corner.

"Whish!" was all she said. Then she laid a finger on her lip, pointed upwards, and whispered, "Joe!"

Neither Bambo nor Darby moved or spoke, and Joan slept on. They were too frightened to do anything but stare at Moll in astonishment, wondering, yet thankful, because she seemed disposed to be so friendly.

Moll put the lantern on the ground, fumbled for an instant in a huge hold-all that hung beneath her skirt, whence she produced a handful of coppers with a hunch of bread and cheese. These she silently handed to the dwarf, who grasped her hand and murmured a fervent "God bless you, Moll!" Then moving forward to where the sleeping child lay upon the grass, the woman dropped on her knees beside her, bent down until her face was on a level with the little one's, and reverently pressed her lips to one of the small hands that were flung in a position of perfect grace across the folds of the dwarf's worn brown jacket.

"Wait here till everything quiet," she breathed, leaning towards Bambo's ear; "then fly for yer lives. Joe's as mad as mad! Make for the canal. Bargee'll take ye on board if you tell him that these is the runaways the beaks was on the hunt for. But don't split on us--leastways, not if you can help it," added Moll, suddenly remembering how little reason she had to expect mercy at the dwarf's hands. "An' now farewell! Don't forget that Moll tried to do ye a good turn when she had the chance." And giving Darby's head a rough pat, and casting another long look upon the unconscious Joan, the woman clambered up the slope almost as quickly as she had come down.

"Mercy me!" they heard her exclaim in accents of annoyance; "if this bloomin' old lantern hasn't gone out! What ever'll you do, Joe?"

"Fool!" shouted Joe angrily. "Why, get it lighted agin, to be sure. Come, hurry up. I ain't agoin' to stay here for ever."

"No more be I," answered his wife coolly. "You've burrowed enough roun' in this direction, surely; leastways I have, an' now I'm goin' to get some sleep. If you want that thing lighted, you can do it yerself, for I won't. There!"

Directly after the dwarf heard her rapid steps retreating in the direction of the hostelry, and again he blessed Moll Harris in his heart; for he knew full well that the lantern had not been extinguished accidentally, but by a quick-witted woman's willing fingers.

CHAPTER XIV.

AT EVENING TIME.

"Ah! what would the world be to us If the children were no more? We should dread the desert behind us
Worse than the dark before.

"Ye are better than all the ballads That ever were sung or said; For ye are living poems, And all the rest are
dead."

--LONGFELLOW.

It was not quite a week since Darby and Joan had so suddenly and mysteriously disappeared from Firgrove; yet to the distracted aunts it seemed as if years instead of days had dragged away since that bright morning when they had bidden the little ones good-bye, and left them standing among the pussies and the flowers, looking the picture of health, beauty, and innocence. And where were they now? Dead, drowned, Aunt Catharine felt convinced, although she had no further proof of their fate than what was indicated by the finding of Darby's hat; for, notwithstanding all their efforts, not another trace of the missing children had been discovered. They had assuredly fallen into the canal, argued Miss Turner. The locks were so often open, the keepers so dull and unobservant, that their bodies might easily have drifted by without being noticed. Then, once past Barchester, they would be washed away by the next outgoing tide--far, far away, wrapped in a tangle of brown and green seaweed; or perhaps they were lying fathoms deep beneath the restless, shifting waters, whence they should rise no more until that day "when the sea gives up its dead."

Nurse Perry took the same hopeless view of the children's fate as Miss Turner. She wandered about from morning till night with Eric in her arms, searching the most unlikely places, questioning everybody she met in her eager desire to discover the lost little ones--"for all the world," said cook, "like a creature that was off her head!" She grew quite pale and thin, with a sad, frightened look in her eyes which even the blandishments of Mr. Jenkins, when he came of a morning for orders, could not banish; their rims were red, too, as from frequent tears, for many a good cry poor Perry had. She blamed herself unreservedly for the disappearance of her charges; and as Miss Turner believed that *she* also was in fault, far more than Perry, they mourned and lamented in company.

For during those days of sad suspense Aunt Catharine appeared an altered woman. No longer stern and stately, self-satisfied and self-sufficient, she and her sister seemed to have changed places. She it was who clung to Miss Alice for sympathy and support in the sore trouble that had befallen them. Miss Alice it was who kept brave and cheery--hoping against hope that things were not actually so black as they looked; but Miss Turner could not be coaxed to take any comfort to herself.

"It's very easy for *you* to keep hopeful and calm," she would say to her sister. "*You* have nothing to reproach yourself with. You were always soft and sweet and loving with them, whereas I--I was afraid to let them see how closely they had wound themselves about my heart for fear they should become petted and spoiled: so they thought me stern and harsh, when I only meant to be firm and judicious; they believed me hard and unsympathetic, when I was trying to teach them self-command and obedience. Oh, why did I not win their hearts by tenderness, and gain their allegiance by kindness, rather than seek to mould them after my pattern by laying down laws and holding constantly before their eyes the fear of punishment!"

"Don't grieve so, dear sister. You never were either unkind or harsh to Darby and Joan. I'm sure no one could ever imagine any such thing," answered Miss Alice soothingly. "Every one knows, and Guy knew too, before he went away, how dearly you loved the children."

"Yes, yes," said Miss Turner impatiently; "of course people would take it for granted that I loved my nephew's little ones--and who could help it?--but what I am angry with myself for is that I did not let them see it. What good is love if one only shuts it up in one's heart to be looked at in private? It must be seen and felt if it is to be of any value, or to make any impression on its object. Ah! I was blind before, but now I see things more plainly. Those two--Darby especially--have gone away, wherever they are, with the idea that Aunt Catharine was in a sense their enemy, who grudged them every bit of happiness they wanted to have, while all the time I would willingly have given my life for either of them. Oh, if they were only back, how different I would be!" sobbed poor Aunt Catharine, leaning her aching head and faded face upon her sister's shoulder.

"Hush, dear," coaxed Auntie Alice, in her soft, cooing voice. "You will make yourself ill, and what should I do then? Besides, there is no use in giving way like that--until we are sure there is no longer room for hope, at any rate. It is not a week yet since the children disappeared. There's no guessing where they may have gone--off to Africa to find their father, as likely as not!" laughed Auntie Alice. "Darby would start in a minute--you know how hazy are his ideas of places and distance--and Joan follows wherever he leads. Some one will be finding them wandering about and bringing them back to us directly, you'll see. I shouldn't be a bit surprised," she added, in answer to her sister's look of astonishment, in which there was mingled a faint ray of hope. "And Dr. King agrees with me that it's some wild scheme or other that has taken them off, although perhaps not just Africa."

"Dr. King!" exclaimed Miss Turner, with a touch of her former asperity; "what does Dr. King know about the affair more than I do? But, of course, he would agree with you--ay, if you said the moon was made of green cheese!"

Miss Alice blushed prettily at her sister's words; indeed, she always did blush when Dr. King's name was mentioned. Even Darby used to notice it, and invariably fixed his eye upon his aunt to see the soft rose-colour rise in the cheeks which were still smooth and round enough to show off a blush becomingly.

"It's not alone Dr. King who believes they've gone off on some wild-goose chase," continued Miss Alice presently. "The rector thinks so too; and Mrs. Grey gets quite angry when her husband declares the children are drowned."

"Maybe, maybe," replied, Miss Turner gloomily; "and I'm sure I hope you're right. But one thing I'm certain of is that they've not set out for Africa. Darby would never take such a ridiculous notion into his head. He knew perfectly well how far away it is, and how people go there. Why, if there was one thing I drummed into him thoroughly over and above everything else--except the commandments, perhaps--it was Africa! But all the same, it's the thought of Africa that's just killing me, sister," moaned the poor lady in piteous tones. "What will their father say? What will he think of us? How are we to tell him? for tell him we must without further delay. That cablegram has got to go to-morrow. It's all very well for Dr. King and Mr. Grey and the rest of them to say, 'Wait, wait; time enough.' But we've waited too long already, so to-morrow the message goes, as sure as my name's Catharine Anne Turner. Then there's granny--Guy's poor mother at Denescroft. We've put her off and kept her in the dark quite long enough, even if there is a risk in letting her know the truth. I'm going there myself, Alice Turner," announced Aunt Catharine resolutely, "the minute I get that cablegram off my mind. I, and I alone, shall bear the pain of telling her that the grandchildren she adored have gone to be with their mother in heaven--her son's dear dead Dorothy. After that, I suppose the next thing will be seeing about our black gowns," whispered the elder lady, with a grievous burst of sorrow for which her sister had no words of comfort ready, because she too was softly sobbing.

"Come, cheer up," said Miss Alice at length, after she had dried her eyes. "Try to keep brave--for this one day at least. Who knows what may happen! Why, at any moment they may walk in," she added brightly, and her cheerfulness was not altogether assumed. For Auntie Alice could not bring herself to believe that the children were really lost, or gone from their sight for all time--that until they met together, small and great, around the throne of God in heaven they should see them no more. In the dead of night, when the house was still and

baby sleeping quietly in his bassinet by Perry's bedside, she would leave her room and go into the nursery, where the sight of the empty cribs, the waiting garments, the books and toys lying in their usual places, was almost more than she could bear. Then she would feel with her sister that they were indeed gone for ever, and an earnest prayer for the absent father, upon whom the sudden blow would fall with stunning force, would wing its way out of the silence of the midnight hours to the God who is so specially a children's God. And would He not watch over them faithfully and keep them in safety? Ay, surely. But whether He should give them back in life to those who grieved so deeply for their loss, or fold them gently in the everlasting security of His own bosom, was a question to which as yet there had come no answer.

But in broad daylight, when the sky was blue, the sun shining, and the kittens whisking merrily round after their own tails among the autumn flowers in the garden, Auntie Alice was able to put away from her the dread fears which in the darkness took such real and awful shapes, and to agree with Dr. King and Mrs. Grey that the children had only gone off for a frolic somewhere, and, like bad halfpence, would certainly come back when least expected. They were not dead, she told herself; they *could* not be dead, she said in her heart over and over again. Darby, the wise, manly little lad, many of whose quaint, sweet sayings were carefully stored in his aunt's memory--Darby, with his clear eyes and winning ways, lying among the mud and slime of the canal! Horrible! And Joan, bright, merry, loving Joan--"little jumping Joan," she sometimes called herself--the very sunbeam of prim, quiet Firgrove--Joan sleeping among the fishes with folded hands and curtained eyes! Awful! And a long shudder would seize Auntie Alice's slender figure. No, no! the children were not drowned, she was certain; they would come back to them some day and somehow: so from hour to hour she watched and waited, hoped and prayed.

* * * * *

And now it is time to return to the old lime-kiln and our little travellers hidden there.

Being abruptly left to himself by Moll in the darkness--for the moon was now hidden behind a bank of dense black cloud--Joe prowled and stamped and beat furiously among the furze bushes, while now and again a snarl of baffled rage broke from him which boded ill for the future of the fugitives--if he could only lay his hands upon them!

In a short time, however, he concluded apparently that further search in that quarter, and with no light to guide him save "the cold light of stars," would prove fruitless, for his retreating footsteps seemed to follow Moll's. Then Darby and the dwarf felt free to breathe again, and held each other's hands in mute thanksgiving for their deliverance.

But hark! what was that? Steps once more--Joe, probably, come back with the newly-lighted lantern to take a final look around. This time he would search the kiln himself. Then--And the dwarf noiselessly changed his position so that the dark bundle which was Joan lay behind him, and wrapped his long arms tightly round the boy, determined to shield them to the last against all danger.

The steps came nearer and nearer, slow and deliberate; then they stopped as if in indecision, then came on again--not down the incline this time, but advancing from the front. Faster and louder thumped the hearts of Darby and the dwarf as they watched and waited; nearer and nearer drew the black, shapeless *something*, until it halted right opposite the mouth of the kiln, only a few yards away.

It must be Joe Harris, Bambo was sure. He had paused to strike a light, and in another minute they should be discovered. Darby clung to his protector with all his strength. His teeth chattered in terror, but the brave little lad did not utter a sound.

The footsteps again, and Bambo closed his eyes an instant while his soul rose to heaven in one of those earnest petitions which oftentimes are prayed without a word. Then he looked towards the entrance to the kiln,

fully prepared to see the wicked face of Thieving Joe leering in upon them--to hear his shout of satisfaction at beholding his prey so securely caught in a trap from which there was no escape.

But instead of their enemy, what do you think stood there? Just an innocent-looking red and white calf--probably one of the family, now at grass, which had formerly occupied the snug house in the farmyard. It was, doubtless, in the habit of coming to the old kiln occasionally for a change, or for shelter in wet weather. And now it stood and surveyed the intruders with solemn, serious eyes, as much as to say, "What are you funny little folks doing in my place, pray?"

The sense of relief was so great, the situation seemed so ludicrous, that Darby broke into a peal of shrill, nervous laughter, which he as suddenly suppressed; while the dwarf again lifted his heart to Heaven in grateful acknowledgment of deliverance from danger.

Darby fondled the calf's cold nose and stroked his rough, wet coat; and Master Calf, seeing that his self-invited guests were not so odd or fearsome as they looked, marched slowly inside, deliberately lay down in what apparently was his own particular corner, and calmly commenced chewing his cud. Then, with his hand in Bambo's and his head resting against the animal's warm, shaggy side, Darby soon fell asleep; and the dwarf dozed at intervals until the first streaks of dawn broke up the blackness of the eastern sky.

* * * * *

The *Smiling Jane* came crawling along the canal towards Engleton, gradually slowed, then stopped altogether as she hove abreast of the wharf. It was thick with people standing about in twos and threes awaiting the arrival of the boat. The bargeman jumped ashore, strutted hither and thither, chatting with this one and that, discussing the weather, retailing the latest gossip from Barchester, when, from behind the pile of miscellaneous stuff collected on the wharf waiting transit by the *Smiling Jane*, three small figures appeared suddenly, as if they had sprung from the water beneath the planks. It was Bambo with his little charges.

"Well, well!" exclaimed bargee, staring at the trio in open-mouthed astonishment.

"Did ee ever!" cried a woman who was mounting guard over some hampers of quacking ducks and cackling hens.

"The pretty dears!" ejaculated another; "eh, the sweet crayters! But just look at *him*! See his big, ugly head, an' the arms o' him like the flappers o' a win'mill! Save us all!" she piously added, gazing her fill at the dwarf and the children, whose winsome faces and uncommon appearance could not be concealed under a few days' smudges, nor disguised beneath a cotton frock or faded velveteen suit.

Darby, who was to be spokesman for the party, here approached the bargeman with frank, courteous manner; while the dwarf hung timidly in the rear, still keeping Joan well within the shelter of his arm.

"Please, Mr. Bargee, will you take us in your boat as far as Firdale?" begged the boy, in gentle, winning tones. "We've come a long way, and Mr. Bambo here," pointing to the dwarf, "has such a bad cold that he's not able to walk any further. Do say 'yes;' won't you, Mr. Bargee?"

For an instant the young fellow hesitated, looking from the boy to the dwarf and the golden-haired girl. Then he shook his head decisively.

"Can't do it, little un," he said kindly. "It's agin the rules, an' I durstn't break them. I was near gettin' the sack not long ago because a couple o' tramps or play-actor folks over-persuaded me to give them a lift. The perlice was on their track. Reg'lar sharpers they was. That was only two or three days back, when them kids belongin' to Dene o' Firgrove disappeared," explained bargee to the gaping loungers hanging about the wharf.

"But we're Dene's kids! we come from Firgrove! Father--Captain Dene, you know--left us there with Aunt Catharine and Auntie Alice when he went to Africa," cried Darby, in eager, rapid snatches of speech.

"Likely!" laughed bargee good-humouredly. "Tell that to the marines, chappie. Maybe *they'll* b'lieve you, for Will Spiers don't. He's not sich a green un as to be took in by a tale like that. Dene's kids was drowned in the canal. Their clo'es or boots or somethin' was found the other evenin'. Leastways, so I heerd," he added, with a look round the company, as if challenging confirmation of his words.

"Ay, they was drowned, sure enough," spoke a woman's shrill voice, high above the cackle of the hens and the quack-quack of the ducks--"drowned dead, an' more's the pity; an' their ma dead, too, an' their pa in Africa, an' their aunties takin' on terrible 'bout them."

"We isn't drownded," called out Joan in her clear, sweet voice, shaking back her yellow mane and surveying the faces about her with merry eyes. "We was lost--quite lost--and now we's founded and goin' home again."

"Don't you see that we're not drowned?" said Darby seriously, turning round and round before the amused onlookers. "We wouldn't be here if we were *drownded*, would we? I'm really and truly Darby Dene--I mean Guy Dene, for that's my proper name; and this is my sister Joan--Doris, I should say--with kind Mr. Bambo, who has helped us to run away from some wicked people who wanted to keep us always. Now, please, won't you let us on board the barge? We'll go below into the little house where we hid before, and not disturb you a bit. You see, we came with you, and you ought to take us back again," added the boy, with a sudden gleam of amusement in his big gray eyes.

Here the dwarf came slowly forward, painfully conscious that all eyes were fixed upon him. Yet he did not flinch. He beckoned the bargeman aside, and in a few broken, gasping sentences told him the main facts of the children's story.

The instant the young fellow clearly grasped the situation and understood his own share in the adventure, he generously cast all fear of consequences to the winds, and there and then agreed to take the travellers with him to Firdale as fast as his boat could bear them.

And as the old brown horse pulled slowly off, dragging the big red barge-boat away behind him, a hearty cheer broke from the watchers on the wharf, and "A safe journey!" was flung from every lip after the *Smiling Jane* and the little voyagers whom she bore on board.

It was a mild, mellow day, such as not infrequently comes towards the end of October--a day whose brightness almost deludes one into thinking that summer is not entirely gone, yet with a hint of change in the still, waiting earth, the silently-falling leaves; a touch of crispness in the air which foretells winter, and at the same time indicates that winter is not really a bad time after all.

On the deck of the barge Joan made herself quite at home. She had been so shielded that she was really none the worse, except for outward tear and wear, of all she had gone through. She trotted hither and thither, watching the patient horse plodding along the tow-path, throwing bits of bread to the white-winged gulls which hovered in the wake of the boat, chattering to bargee, who had speedily become her willing captive, enchained in the meshes of her sunny hair, held fast by the innocent witchery of her long-lashed violet eyes.

Down in the bunker below lay Bambo, too worn out now to do ought but toss and tumble in the fever and restlessness which were hourly becoming more consuming and distressing, thankful to be at liberty just to let himself go, without fear or danger. For now he felt that the children were, beyond a doubt, safe out of reach of Thieving Joe, and he himself separated at last and for ever from all further connection with the Satellite Circus Company. Soon the little ones should be safe at home with their own people, and he, Bambo, homeless and friendless, should be free from future care concerning them--free to creep away somewhere, unnoticed and

alone, to lie down and rest--sleep--suffer--or maybe die, if such were God's will for him.

Beside the dwarf's pallet Darby kept loving watch, dozing from time to time when Bambo seemed sleeping; again, rousing up to hang over him in distress when he babbled so queerly about Firgrove, his mother, Thieving Joe, Moll, and the bear. Then the raving would cease, and the dwarf would look up with intelligent, grateful eyes into the white, anxious face of the boy bending over him.

"It's only my head, sonny; you needn't be frightened," he would gasp, in his hoarse, croaking whisper. "I was just wandering a bit, I think. Sick folk often does that. There, deary, don't cry! we'll soon be at home now--ay, soon, very soon," murmured the little man to himself, while that faint, sweet smile, which Darby thought made the haggard face quite beautiful, played around his poor parched lips, and a glad light shone from his sunken eyes.

In the afternoon the good-natured bargeman brewed a can of tea. Along with it he produced some solid slices of bread and butter--the best his locker afforded--and to this repast he made his passengers warmly welcome. Joan ate a hearty meal, but Darby was not hungry, and the dwarf could take only a deep draught of the strong, hot tea. It revived him somewhat, so that by the time the barge slowed up at Firdale he was able, with the help of Darby's willing hand, to creep out of his bunker up on deck.

The *Smiling Jane* was in that evening rather before her regular time. There were, therefore, none of the idlers on the wharf who usually awaited her arrival, only a few people, beside the wharf-keeper, who had come to receive or send off stuff. These were too much occupied to notice, except by an amused or curious glance, the odd-looking trio who slipped so quietly through their midst and away up the field-path towards Firgrove. Indeed, had not bargee, after their backs were turned, told their story and made known their identity to an open-mouthed and delighted audience, no one would have suspected that the two little ragamuffins in company with the outlandish-looking mountebank were the lost children whose tragic fate had cast quite a gloom over the neighbourhood, and elicited such universal sympathy with the ladies at Firgrove and the poor bereaved father fighting for his country far, far away in Africa.

It was almost sunset when the little travellers reached their journey's end. The western sky was ablaze with crimson and gold, the hilltop was flushed with warmth and beauty, the streak of sluggish water which was the canal lay athwart the level land like a shining, jewelled belt, while every window-pane in the quaint old house shone and glowed as if there were an illumination within by way of welcome for the wanderers.

But Darby and Joan heeded none of these things. They trudged sturdily on as fast as their short legs could carry them and the dwarf's failing strength would permit, until they came to the gate. There they paused, with their backs to the glory of the sun-setting, the blush on the hilltop, and the radiance beyond. For now they knew that at last they had found the country they had travelled so far to seek, while all the time it was spread out wide and fair about their very feet, shut up within themselves, whence it should well forth in an atmosphere of obedience, love, duty--the chief elements which go to make a truly happy land.

CHAPTER XV.

BAMBO'S FRIEND.

"After the night comes the morning, After the winter the spring; We can begin again, Dolly, And be sorry for everything.

"We love, and so we are happy; No beautiful thing ever ends; 'Tis good to cry and be sorry, But better to kiss and be friends."

E. COXHEAD.

This evening the sisters were pacing arm in arm up and down the long, wide gravel walk between the front door and the gate. Miss Turner looked pinched and worn, with pale cheeks and great hollows about her eyes, which were dim and dry as if from want of sleep. Her head was bent, her step was slow like the step of an old person; and indeed she seemed old--ten years older than the brisk and vigorous Aunt Catharine who had trodden the same path with such a stately air only a week ago.

Miss Alice's gentle face also was thin and white. Her eyes, which were big and gray like Darby's, and usually soft and calm in their glance, were alert, bright, and restless, as if always on the watch for something they could not see, while in her nut-brown hair there were nearly twice as many silver streaks as had been visible when Darby and Joan went away.

They had been speaking of the lost little ones, but now a silence had fallen upon them which neither showed any desire to break. There was nothing more to say except what had already been said over and over again. Everything had been done that they and wise, kind neighbours could do or suggest; and on the morrow Dr. King and Mr. Grey would put the case into the hands of the Barchester police--more to satisfy Miss Turner than from any faith in the result on their own part. The Firdale men had done their best and failed; what cleverer would they be in Barchester?

The air had grown chilly, although the sun was not yet set, and Miss Turner shivered, as much from nervousness as from cold. Her sister was drawing her within doors, when the latch of the gate clicked sharply, and both ladies turned round to look in its direction.

And what did they see as the wide iron gate swung slowly back on its hinges? The oddest looking group that had ever sought entrance to Firgrove--the most pathetic, yet the most grotesque! First and foremost was a small boy in soiled, sodden garments--hatless, unwashed, unbrushed, tired, drooping, and travel-stained, yet with an expression of unutterable gladness beaming from out a pair of clear gray eyes that seemed far too big for the thin white face which they illumined. By his side, holding fast by the boy's hand, stood a little girl--bedraggled, unkempt, untidy, with a glimmer of pearly teeth, and great blue eyes gleaming out from a mop of tangled curls that glittered as if they had caught within their burnished strands all the sunbeams which had lighted up that bright October day. And leaning against the pillar of the gate was the third figure of the party, and the queerest--a tiny man, not much taller than the little girl, with huge head, long arms, shrivelled, haggard face, and deep-set, eager eyes--a dwarf, in short, and, at the first glance, the most uncouth that ever was seen.

Miss Turner drew herself up in astonishment and annoyance at the ill-timed intrusion of the three little tramps. A something in the boy's eyes, however, arrested the words of rebuke and dismissal which hung ready to fall from her lips, and she looked at them again before stepping forward to shut the gate in their faces.

But Miss Alice's sight was quicker than her sister's, her instincts truer, her faith stronger, and with a low, glad cry of "My dears! my dears!" she sprang, swift as a girl, toward the children, bent down, and Darby and Joan

felt themselves gathered close and tight within Auntie Alice's loving arms; while from Aunt Catharine's eyes the thankful tears rained thick and fast, mingled with a shower of kisses, upon their smiling, upturned faces.

"We's comed home again, Aunt Catharine," announced Joan cheerfully and easily, as if the pair of them had just returned from church. "Is you glad to see us?" she asked, smiling sweetly into her aunt's swimming eyes.

"Yes, Joan, very, very glad; I don't think you'll ever know *how* glad," answered Miss Turner gravely.

"Darby and me went away to look for the Happy Land--like what nurse sings 'bout, don't you know?--far, far away," explained the little girl. "But we didn't find it after goin' miles and miles and miles; we only finded a old caravan, and some bad peoples, and Puck, and a *ee-mornous* (enormous) bear! Now we's back, and I's awful hung'y! Is there any cake or cold puddin', or anythin' good for tea?" she inquired anxiously, looking audaciously up into the familiar face of Aunt Catharine--familiar, of course, yet with a something so new and strange in its softened lines that the little one instinctively put up a dirty hand and softly stroked her aunt's cheek, murmuring as she did so, in her sweet, cooing voice, "Poor Aunt Catharine! Joan loves you, and willn't never, never go away from you any more. Now, please tell me, *is* there anythin' good for tea?" she demanded.

"Joan!" exclaimed Darby in a shocked undertone, as if mere creature comforts like cake and cold pudding were not to be thought of at such a time. Then he addressed his aunt.

"Joan's quite correc'," he said, standing right in front of her, bravely bent on confession of his naughtiness and getting it over as quickly as possible, so that he could start fair with a clean sheet. "I was mad because you punished me, and we made up a plan--at least I did--to run away and find the Happy Land, and I coaxed Joan to come with me. It's all my fault, Aunt Catharine; so whatever putting to bed or catechism there is I'll take it, for I was the naughty one. But we found out that there's no Happy Land at all--at least not like what I thought. Our Happy Land's here at Firgrove, and oh, but we're glad to get back to it!--Aren't we, Joan?"

"Yes, werry, werry glad," agreed Joan readily.

"And I'm never going to be disobedient or troublesome, never, never any more, if you'll forgive me this time, Aunt Catharine, and let me begin over again," begged the boy, slipping a grimy little paw into Aunt Catharine's spotless hand.

"Forgive you, child!" cried Aunt Catharine, in a broken voice. "Why, of course I'll forgive you, and we'll both begin over again, Darby," she whispered.

"That's right," he replied cheerily. "And I'm going to try to make a Happy Land all about me wherever I am. Mr. Bambo 'splained it to me ever so nicely. He's very clever, you know. This is he," said Darby, pointing to the dwarf, who still leaned, as if for support, against the pillar of the gate.

Bambo advanced a step, tried to speak, but his voice was too hoarse to be intelligible.

"He's my own dear dwarf!" declared Joan, patting the little man's shoulder with gentle, caressing touch.

"He is called Bambo, but his real own name is Green--Jimmy Green; Green, our gardener's grandson, Aunt Catharine," explained Darby in rapid sentences. "The wicked man and woman took us to their caravan when we were on our way to look for the Happy Land, and only for Bambo we should not have known where to find it. We love him, Aunt Catharine, Auntie Alice. He is ill--very ill, I think. Won't you please be good to him, both of you?" pleaded the boy, in eager, coaxing accents.

The ladies looked from Darby to the dwarf in a bewildered way. Again he attempted to explain his presence there, and again he failed. He was about to steal quietly away--for was not his work done, his mission

accomplished?--when all at once the ground seemed to slip from beneath his feet; he swayed, reeled, and with a low moan, as of a hurt animal, fell on the grass border within the gate, at the very feet of the children whose safety he had counted of so much more consequence than his own life.

Darby flung himself on the ground beside the still, pathetic little figure, and Joan, with sobs and cries, implored her dear dwarf to open his eyes, to waken up and speak to his own little missy once more. But the dwarf did not move or speak. His ears were deaf to Darby's tender tones and Joan's insistent pleading.

At this moment Nurse Perry, with Eric in her arms, popped her head out at the front door--just to get a breath of fresh air, as she would have said. For a long minute she gazed at the group by the gate; then with a loud cry, and dumping baby down upon the door mat, she flew along the gravel path, and flinging her arms around the children, she laughed and cried over them by turns.

"My precious pets!" she sobbed. "And have they come back to their poor old Perry? And us thinkin' you was both dead and drowned in the canal. Oh, did I ever!"

"There, nurse, that will do. You'd choke a fellow," declared Darby, wriggling himself out of her clinging embrace. "Of course we're not either dead or drowned. How can you be so silly?"

"Eh! and is it silly you call me for near frettin' myself into the grave about you?" cried nurse, stung by Master Darby's want of feeling.--"Miss Joan won't call nursie silly; sure you won't, lovey? And aren't you glad to get back to your own Perry, and baby, and everything?"

"Yes, werry glad," agreed Joan readily; "and I hope you've got lots and lots of jam and goodies for tea. Has you, nurse? 'cause I's as hung'y as hung'y as anythin'!" she whimpered.

"Yes, darlin', there's a seed-cake and toast, and a whole pot of beautiful strawberry jam that has never been touched. I couldn't eat hardly a mouthful these days for picterin' my pretty lyin' in the mud at the bottom of that slimy, smellin' canal," whined Perry, wiping her eyes on the corner of a much-betrimmed white apron.

"That'll do, Perry," called out Miss Turner, in her usual brisk tones. "Come here; I want you."

"Yes, ma'am," answered Perry meekly. "But oh, ma'am, what's *that*?" she screamed, noticing for the first time the odd little object on the grass over which the ladies were so anxiously bending. "What ever is it, Miss Alice? Is it a *man--that*? and is he living?" the woman inquired in a shocked whisper, drawing back her skirts, and gaping with eyes and mouth at the quiet figure huddled in a little heap at Miss Turner's feet. Yet when Perry had been made to understand that it was even to this small creature they owed the safety and return of their darlings, she was as warm in her expressions of gratitude and as eager to be kind to him as her mistresses themselves.

Bambo was carried to a pleasant top room overlooking the lawn and the cedar tree, and laid in a comfortable bed--the most comfortable in which his poor body had ever lain in all his weary life. But its softness did not soothe him; the down pillows were not restful; he paid no heed to the cool freshness of the linen: for when he recovered from the stupor into which he had sunk beside the gate, he was in the grip of an enemy which he would have a hard fight to shake off. The wet and cold to which he had been exposed without sufficient clothing, together with the fatigue he had undergone, working on a constitution already in a critical condition, had brought on pneumonia; and when Dr. King saw him, late that night, he had little hope of being able to save his life.

The next morning, after a long, sound sleep and a good breakfast of porridge and milk, Joan was as bright as a button, petted by Perry, playing with baby, and teasing the pussies. Her troubles were behind, and she did not talk much about her adventures.

But Darby was weak, wandering, and feverish. Dr. King said, however, that his illness was merely the effect of excitement and the strain upon a not over strong system. He would be all right in a few days. He chattered incessantly of the Happy Land, Bruno, Joe, Moll, and the monkey, but in broken snatches from which no reliable information could be gleaned.

Miss Turner would have liked to send the police after the Harrises without a single hour's delay. It was dreadful, she declared, to think of such a wicked pair being permitted to wander at large, working mischief without let or hindrance. But her friends advised her to wait until Darby was well enough to be questioned; or possibly the dwarf might yet be able to furnish such a clue to their haunts and habits as should enable the police to pounce upon them unawares.

For a few days Darby continued in a low and feeble condition; then he took a turn for the better, and soon he was strong enough to listen to Joan's merry prattle, and to be amused by baby's funny attempts at speaking. The weather was still mild and bright; so as soon as he was able to be about he was allowed out into the garden, where the kittens loved to sun themselves in the sheltered corner down by the boxwood border.

Still Bambo's life hung trembling in the balance. The actual disease had abated, but his weakness and want of vitality made his recovery seem almost impossible. One hour he would revive somewhat, and the next sink so low that Miss Turner and Miss Alice felt that at any moment the end might come. Between them they kept constant watch beside the faithful creature, feeling as if nothing that they might do could repay him for the devotion which he had displayed towards the children. Bit by bit they had gathered from Darby and Joan the story of their quest of the Happy Land, what befell them by the way, and all that the dwarf had done to deliver them from the clutches of Thieving Joe, and the captivity of life dragged out within the narrow compass of the Satellite Circus Company's old yellow caravan.

At last a day came when the poor dwarf smiled up into Miss Turner's anxious face with a world of intelligence and gratitude in the eyes whose sweet expression made the wan, pinched features look almost beautiful to the aunt of Darby and Joan. She did not regard him as an object utterly unlike other people, a bit of lumber for which the world could have no real use or fitting place. She remembered only that by this man's promptitude and courage two innocent, helpless children had been rescued from a fate infinitely worse than a peaceful death, with a green grave under the daisies, and those who loved them delivered from a lifelong sorrow. So there were real gladness and true thankfulness in Aunt Catharine's look and voice as she laid a cool hand upon the invalid's brow, saying kindly,--

"You are better, are you not, Bambo?--that is, if it is Bambo I am to call you."

"Yes, ma'am, I do feel better," answered the dwarf, in a low, quavering voice. "And, please, call me Bambo; it is the name little master and missy knows me by."

"You have been very ill, but you will soon be stronger and able to see the children. They come to the door very often to ask for you."

A flush of pleasure crept into the dwarf's hollow cheeks. He was not used to having anybody asking after his health, or interested in him in any way. Then Miss Turner held a cup of nice strong soup to his lips, and soon after he fell into a sweet, refreshing sleep, which lasted many hours.

Dr. King was standing by the bedside when he awoke.

"You've had a close shave, my lad!" he said, in his quick, direct way. "You'll pull through now though.--Plenty of nourishment and perfect rest, that's all he wants in the meantime," added the doctor to Miss Turner, as he hurried off to visit another patient, or perhaps to have a little chat with Miss Alice, who was amusing Darby in the garden, where the bees buzzed and worked about their hives along the sunny south wall.

After seeing the doctor down the stairs Miss Turner came back to the dwarf, and as she entered the room she saw him turn his face away from the window to the wall with a sigh, which filled her heart with pity for the forlorn little being.

"Now, Bambo," she began, "you have done so much for me and mine that I want you to let me be as kind to you as I know how. You have been more than a friend to my dear nephew's children. I desire above all things to be a friend to you."

"O ma'am, that is impossible," answered the dwarf in a choked voice. "You are a lady, while I am nobody--an insignificant, despised object! And don't you know who I really am? Green, your gardener's grandson--Jimmy Green the dwarf, the boy who ran away from Firgrove long ago, when you and Miss Alice were in foreign parts for your eddication!"

"I believe my sister and I were in Paris at that time," answered Miss Turner lightly. "But what difference does the fact of your being Green's grandson make, except to give you an additional claim upon our friendliness? And, Bambo, your grandfather is truly sorry he treated you harshly and unjustly in the past. He has asked me to tell you so, and to say that instead of feeling ashamed of you now, he's really proud to think what you have done for Master Darby and Miss Joan."

"'Twas nothing, nothing," murmured the dwarf in confusion, although his beaming face plainly showed the gratification he felt at his grandfather's message.

"And now," resumed Miss Turner, "if I am to be your friend, you must tell me why you sighed so sadly just now. Come; you won't refuse, I am sure," she added in a persuasive tone.

For a while there was silence in the room. Miss Turner waited for the dwarf to speak. He kept his face towards the wall, and from time to time put up a long, thin hand to wipe away the big tears that forced their way beneath his closed eyelids to trickle slowly on to the snowy pillow in which his head was half hidden.

At length he raised himself in the bed and looked straight at Miss Turner. And as he met the kindly glance of her keen, true eyes, a quick smile parted his lips and shone like a flicker of pale sunlight all over his worn features.

"You are very good, ma'am, so good that because you ask me I will tell you. Well, I was only wishing that I had not got better. I have been ailing for a while back--since last spring--and I was kind of looking forward to getting away home soon," said Bambo, as calmly as if he were talking of a journey to Barchester. "You see, ma'am, it's this way," he explained, in an apologetic tone. "When a body's made like me--just an object for folks to pity, laugh, jeer, and peep at, without a real friend--the world is a poor place in comparison to that one the Lord has prepared and waiting for all who love Him and want to go there."

"Don't, Bambo, don't!" implored Miss Turner, looking at the dwarf through a mist of tears. "You make me feel that I, who have always been strong and well, am one of those who have done so little to make life a less burdensome possession, a pleasanter thing for such as you. Do not be so anxious to depart, dear friend. The little ones love you; your old grandfather needs you. Here you shall always find a home. At Firgrove we will make a place for you as soon as you shall be able to fill it. Meantime you have nothing to do but try to get well. Perfect rest and plenty of nourishment--these are the doctor's orders, and there's nothing for it but obedience."

The dwarf drank in Miss Turner's words, hardly daring to believe he was in his sober senses, for they sounded almost too good to be true. He to stay on at Firgrove with the dear boy and sweet little missy! What had he done that he should be so kindly treated, so generously dealt with? Nothing, Bambo said to himself, less than nothing, for there had been scarcely anything to do.

Nothing? Ah! was it nothing to be willing to lay down his life for those friends of his? nothing to give the cup of cold water in the name of Jesus to two of His children? "Verily, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me."

From that day the dwarf grew rapidly better, and before the flowers were all gone out of the borders, or the last red and yellow leaves had fluttered from the lime tree on the lawn, he was able to saunter up and down the gravel paths, his hand on Darby's shoulder, the baby holding fast by one of his fingers, with Joan and the kittens frolicking among their feet, and racing here, there, and everywhere, all over the place.

He quite agreed with Miss Turner that from no mistaken feelings of mercy or pity should Joe Harris be shielded from the reach of the law, so he gave all the information that he could supply concerning the rascal's favourite resorts and usual associates. He and the little ones pleaded hard on Moll's behalf; but Dr. King declared that in her case the receiver was as bad as the thief, and she would just have to take her chance along with her husband.

Soon the Barchester police were on their track. They came across Tonio wandering disconsolately about the streets, with only Puck for company. He, however, knew nothing of the movements of his late master, except that the caravan had been returned to its lawful owner, and that the Satellite Circus Company, as a company, had ceased to exist.

But neither Joe, Moll, nor Bruno was anywhere to be found. They had a long start of their pursuers; consequently they had disappeared as completely as last year's snow, leaving not a trace behind.

CHAPTER XVI.

COMING AND GOING.

"For me, my heart that erst did go Most like a tired child at a show, That sees through tears the mummers leap,
Would now its wearied vision close, Would childlike on His love repose Who giveth His beloved--sleep."

E. B. BROWNING.

The winter, which proved a mild and open one, passed very pleasantly at Firgrove. By Dr. King's orders Darby and Joan were granted a long holiday, for Darby was still fragile and delicate looking. He had never quite got over the effects of the excitement and fatigue of his travels in search of the Happy Land. They now lived almost out of doors, with the dwarf as their faithful attendant and constant companion. The little ones never wearied of his company, he could entertain them in so many different ways. He showed Darby how to make whistles of the hollow bore-tree stem, and a huge kite, with a lion painted on its surface, the Union Jack flying at its head, and an old map of Africa cut into strips to form the tail. Darby considered this a masterpiece, and laid it carefully by until he could display it to his father in its full significance. He caught a squirrel in the wood for Joan, and tamed the little animal so that it would nibble a nut from her hand, or hold it in its own paws, looking at her the while with fearless, shining eyes, as much as to say,--

"Thank you, little lady. If all children were as good and kind to us wild creatures as you at Firgrove are, we should have a better time of it than many of us often have."

He brought primrose roots from the glen, and planted a bank with them behind the house. He filled the rockeries with rare ferns, and covered over all the waste corners about the grounds with delicate anemones, variegated hyacinths, and the sweet, wild white bluebell, rifled from the darkest recesses of Copsley Wood.

He carved curious wooden animals and toys for Eric, attracting the little fellow so strongly to himself that often he would cry for "Bam'o," and stay quite happily with him for hours, when all poor Perry's nursery tricks had failed to divert him from brooding over a coming tooth or some other infant ailment. Nurse soon grew to count the dwarf among her blessings at Firgrove; while Miss Alice used to smile, and say to her friend Dr. King that she did not know how ever the children had amused themselves before he came.

And day by day, by his little acts of fore-thought for others and loving-kindness towards all with whom he came in contact, he showed them what a Happy Land even the humblest, the youngest can create around them, what an atmosphere of love, what a foretaste of the existence whose essence is love, because God is its centre--that heaven wherein the pure in heart shall dwell for evermore!

And what of Bambo himself? How can one picture or describe such deep happiness as his? He was well aware that he could not live long. At any time a cold or a chill might hasten the end, yet the knowledge caused him no real regret. During his years of loneliness and privation he had learned to regard death as an open door through which he should escape from drudgery, ill-treatment, desolation, into the rest, the love, the happiness that remain to the children of God in that home where there is no death, "neither sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain: for the former things are passed away." Now, the wretchedness was all behind. His daily path was hedged around by affection and watchfulness; but Bambo felt that it could not continue. His friends would by-and-by weary of their self-imposed burden. The children would grow up, go away, form new friendships, find fresh interests in life, and where should he be then? No, no; life was a grand, a satisfying, a beautiful thing for the clever, the strong, the brave; but the like of him could have no continuous part, no fixed place in its keen warfare; so for him he felt that it was better to depart than to hang on a weary, sickly weakling. Therefore, when Darby and Joan were looking forward to the coming summer and making their plans for enjoying it, in all of which they included their little friend, the dwarf would smile--his sweet, childlike smile--and say nothing. He did not want to cast a shadow upon their gladness.

The children frequently had letters from their father, for whom they longed with an eagerness that grew keener as the months went by and still the cruel warfare continued, and always the date of his return was put back from time to time. Oh, why did he not come, they cried. They had so much to tell, so many things to show--lots of precious trifles given and gathered since he went away.

Slowly the winter seemed to pass, day by day, week after week, month in month out. Then spring came shyly creeping over the land, with snowdrops nestling in her breast, primroses and violets budding in the grassy banks beneath her feet. Later on pink and white blossoms crowned the orchard trees, balmy breezes gently stirred the opening leaves, azure skies stretched high overhead, daisies carpeted the ground under foot. At length it was actually summer--summer in the first flush of her fresh, untarnished loveliness. And as the children looked out of the nursery window one bright May morning, they remembered with a sudden thrill of joy that at last daddy was coming home. Any day he might be with them--any hour, in fact; for even at that moment the ship might be lying snug and safe at anchor in Southampton Water!

That very evening he arrived--not Captain, but Major Dene, for he had been promoted while he was away. Joan flung herself wildly upon her father, hugging and kissing him with all her might for a minute or two; then she turned her attentions and her fingers towards his pockets, in search of whatever spoil she could find. Darby stood silent and shy, gazing with wide, troubled eyes upon the tall, gaunt man who carried such a cruel scar across the hollow of his bronzed cheek. Then with a low, sobbing cry of "Father! father!" the little lad clasped his arms about his father's neck, and on his father's breast wept out some of the ache, the loneliness, the longing which for many lagging months had lain in such a heavy weight upon his tender, faithful, loving heart.

* * * * *

"Why mayn't we go up to see Bambo this morning, Aunt Catharine?" asked Darby next day, as soon as he and Joan had eaten their breakfast. "We didn't see him at all yesterday, and I have so much to tell him about father and the Boers and Africa and--and--everything."

"And I wants to take him some marigolds," said Joan, holding up a huge bunch nearly as big as her own head.

Aunt Catharine was silent, and Darby almost dropped the rod he was trimming into a stick for baby and looked up into his aunt's face. It was pale and sad, and there were tears in her eyes. "What is it, Aunt Catharine?" inquired the boy. "Has anything vexed you, or are you angry with us?" he added timidly; while Joan rubbed her rosy face up and down against her aunt's hand, for all the world like a confident kitten.

"No, dears, I'm not angry with either of you; why should I?" answered Aunt Catharine quickly. "But I have something to say that will make you both sad, and I don't like doing so."

"It is about Bambo, I am certain," said Darby slowly, throwing down the rod he was whittling, shutting up his precious knife and putting it into his pocket, while a shadow fell upon his face, and clouded the gladness in his eyes. "He's not up yet, and when we were going to his room after we were dressed, nurse dragged us downstairs again; and she looked so funny, as if something had frightened her."

"Please let me go to my dear dwarf, Aunt Catharine," coaxed Joan. "One of Topsy's legs is comin' off, and nobody knows how to mend it 'cept Bambo."

"Bam'o! Bam'o!" cried Eric, at the top of his voice. "Bam'o! tum an' div baby swing--high, high!"

"There, Alice, you tell them, for upon my word I can't," whispered Miss Turner to her sister, who had come into the breakfast-room just behind the children; and catching Eric up in her arms, Aunt Catharine carried him outside into the glory and promise which the beauty of the summer morning held for her saddened spirit.

"Bambo won't be able to mend your doll to-day, Joan," said Auntie Alice gently, lifting the little girl on to her lap and drawing Darby close beside her knee. "He will never talk to you, or amuse you, or do anything for any of us again; because last night, after we were all asleep except your father and Aunt Catharine, God's messenger came and whispered to him that he was wanted--that his errand on earth was done. And early this morning, long before you were awake, when the young birds were yet nestling in the warmth of their mother's wing, ere the lambs were astir in the fields, when the world was hushed in that sweet stillness which awaits the dawn, he went away--away where he will not be weak or sickly any more, where he will no longer be Jimmy Green, the gardener's poor grandson, or Bambo, Joe Harris's musical dwarf, but a new creature, with a new name--a name that is written in the Lamb's book of life!"

Then Auntie Alice soothed and petted the little creatures, talking to them in her soft, caressing voice, telling them once again of that fair country to which their friend had gone. And when their sorrow had sobbed itself dry they stole away to find their father, going on tiptoe, as if they feared to disturb the slumber of their little comrade.

Three days later the dwarf was laid to rest in a corner of the Firdale churchyard beside his mother. Major Dene erected over the spot a rugged granite cross with his name upon it, his age, and the date of his death. And below this he caused to be cut another name--the name by which the dwarf always seemed to know himself best, because by it he was known to those whom he had loved and served so faithfully and so well:--

BAMBO.

"Sown in dishonour, raised in glory."

"Now, what you all require is a thorough change," said Dr. King when he called at Firgrove a few days after Bambo's death. "The young people here have both been through a great deal.--You, my dear sir," to Major Dene, "must make the most of your time, and build up your strength as firmly as possible before you go back to Africa. The ladies, too," he continued, addressing Miss Turner and Miss Alice, "will be all the better of a little holiday, a complete change before--ah--in short, before any further changes take place." And the staid elderly doctor beamed upon Miss Alice, who held down her head, toyed with Joan's curls, and blushed in a most becoming way--the sort of blush which made her gentle face look almost like a girl's again.

"What's you's cheeks gettin' so red for--just like as if you'd got the toofache, eh?" demanded Joan, with awkward directness.

"Are you too hot, Auntie Alice? Shall I draw down the blind?" asked Darby politely. "Or would you prefer to come out into the garden?"

"Yes--no--thank you, dear--that is--" stammered Auntie Alice, in such painful confusion that, although intensely amused, Major Dene felt obliged to come to her rescue.

"Look here, kids!" he said: "I expect you're bound to know later on, so you may as well be told now. Come, and be introduced to your future new uncle--*our* new uncle!" he added with a laugh, at the same time leading the little ones up to Dr. King.

"Oh!" exclaimed Joan, drawing a long breath and surveying the doctor with her head sideways, like a fastidious young robin eyeing a crumb. "Is that why you was allus comin' to ask if we had headiks, or stumukiks, or if baby wanted castor-oil, and to look at our tongues? I s'pose uncles is like that. Never had none before," she added, still gazing at the stout, bald-headed gentleman in front of her, as if the honour of being her future relative had invested him with a new personality and lent him fresh interest in her eyes.

"What'll Aunt Catharine do without you?" asked Darby of Auntie Alice somewhat reproachfully, and giving

but a limp, indifferent shake to the hand which Dr. King held out as a peace-offering.

Auntie Alice glanced timidly and sadly at her sister, for this was the one bitter drop in her cup of sweetness--this severing of the ties which for years and years had bound the two Misses Turner as closely together as the Siamese twins almost.

"Tush!" cried Aunt Catharine briskly, although there were tears in her eyes. "She's not going out of the country. Beechfield is but a short walk from Firgrove; we can meet every day, if we want to. Besides, I have you children, and your father will be back and forward between this and Denescroft--for a while, anyway," added she, laying a loving hand on Darby's head.

The boy pressed closely to her side; but Joan confidently clambered upon her knee, and laid her golden head against her aunt's shoulder.

"Aunt Catharine has got me," she announced, flinging her arms round that lady's neck, creasing the dainty lace collar, crumpling the delicate lilac ribbons, tumbling the neatly-banded hair. But Aunt Catharine did not seem to mind; in fact, she looked as if she rather enjoyed the feel of those soft little hands upon her face, the pressure of those clinging arms about her neck. "I'll stay wif her allus and allus. I used to like Auntie Alice best, but she's got *him*," Joan went on, pointing a small pink finger at Dr. King, who, it must be admitted, looked a trifle sheepish at being so frankly and openly sat upon in family council; "so now I's goin' to give the most of the love to Aunt Catharine," she declared, bestowing upon her aunt a shower of hearty kisses. "And I'm never goin' to leave her, never, never--unless," she added thoughtfully, "she gets a doctor man too, by-and-by. Then I'd just have to stay wif daddy."

Darby giggled behind Aunt Catharine's back, and the others laughed heartily.

"What would you say to Scotland?" asked Dr. King, well pleased to get gracefully away from a subject which he had been feeling rather personal. "That would be a change indeed--the very thing after South Africa," he added, looking with a keen professional eye at Major Dene's gaunt cheeks and too sharply outlined profile. "There are some pleasant places on the west coast--bracing, yet not too cold. In my boyhood I spent a summer in a village called St. Aidens. It was out of the way, certainly, but you could not go to a more delightful spot."

"St. Aidens!" echoed Miss Turner, with a note of pleasure in her voice. "Why, I stayed there one year too, long ago, with my father. Yes, let us go to St. Aidens by all means," she said heartily. "Your mother could come with us," she continued, addressing her nephew.--"And you," turning to the doctor, "I daresay Alice will make you welcome if you will join us during our stay."

So there and then the question was settled, and by the second week in June to St. Aidens the family went.

* * * * *

It is the time of the yearly fair at St. Aidens. The buying and selling are done, and now the people who have flocked thither in crowds are free to enjoy the shows and performances which make the fair a festival to be looked forward to and back upon as the chief outing of the season.

There are many items of attraction. Here Punch and Judy make public their domestic broils for the benefit of the onlookers--old, young, and middle-aged--whom this sample pair never fail to draw around them wherever they appear. There an Indian juggler squats, the centre of a gaping circle, as without a grimace he swallows swords, scissors, knives, old nails, and scraps of metal that would tax the stomach of an ostrich. Farther away is an Italian basket-maker, with olive skin and oily manners; while leaning listlessly against the railing behind him is a woman--his wife, probably--with dusky hair, and sad dark eyes which hardly seem to see her green love-birds pecking knowingly at their pack of dirty cards. Along near the pier a negro minstrel with his banjo

is singing one of the simple melodies of his race, its sad, sweet refrain almost drowned in the roars of laughter called forth by a chalky-faced clown, who appears to be not a compound of flesh, blood, and nerves like ordinary mortals, but just a bundle of wire springs and india-rubber balls.

The hobby-horses go round and round, with their ever-changing load, in monotonous regularity. The switchback railway sways up and down to the time of its own mechanical music, amid shrieks of delight and peals of merriment; while youngsters yell aloud with excitement or fear as the gaudily-painted gondolas swing them up higher and higher than before.

The noise is deafening. Between the cries of ice-cream vendors, the high-pitched eloquence of medicine-men, peddlers, tired children, and scolding mothers, it is well-nigh maddening. Still the crowd elbows and jostles along, gradually growing noisier and denser. There they mingle shoulder to shoulder, the squalid and the well-to-do, lads and lasses, boys and girls, husbands and wives, grave and gay; while friendly greetings are exchanged, light jests bandied as they move backwards and forwards, intent upon the fun of the fair, with hardly a glance for the feast of beauty which nature has spread around them with such a lavish hand.

Along the level ground above the beach the tents and caravans are drawn up in orderly array. Stretching away from the shore is the bay, lying calm and unruffled under the summer sky, except when its glassy surface is rippled by the dip of an oar or churned into froth by the restless pulsations of a passing steamer. Across the bay the hills rise beautiful and purple-blue through the evening glow, throwing out encircling arms around the villages dotted thick and white along their base, as the arms of a mother are open wide to infold her nestling children.

Away to the left the bay stretches on till its waters are merged in ocean; while to the east, above the little town, with its swarming streets, its bustling railway station, its quiet cemetery, its chimneys, and its spires, rises another range of hills, seeming in their nearness like a God-built barrier between that old-world village on the Scottish coast and the steadily advancing steps of the great city which lies beyond.

CHAPTER XVII.

ADIEU!

"We need love's tender lessons taught
As only weakness can; God hath His small interpreters--
The child must teach the man.

"Of such the kingdom! Teach Thou us, O Master most divine,
To feel the deep significance Of these wise words of Thine!

"The haughty eye shall seek in vain
What innocence beholds; No cunning finds the key of heaven,
No strength its gate unfolds.

"Alone to guilelessness and love
That gate shall open fall; The mind of pride is nothingness,
The childlike heart is all."

WHITTIER.

Six o'clock had chimed from the church tower, and already the sun's rays were falling slantwise across the water, and tingeing the kingly heights of Arran with a royal purple radiance.

On a bench, somewhat removed from the bustle and the hubbub, Major Dene sat smoking and dreaming. He had come out a little while before to seek the children, who, along with Perry, were enjoying the fresh sights and novelties to the full. From where he lounged he could see them standing on the fringe of a crowd that had rapidly collected on the road right in front of one of the hotels.

It was not a safe stand for little people; not a fitting place for them to be, either. Perry should have more sense and less curiosity, thought Major Dene, as he sent the stump of his cigar hissing and sputtering into the placid blue water at his feet, and rose to join the children and accompany them home; for it was their tea-time, and going on quickly for the dinner-hour at Westfield, the comfortable house where the family from Firgrove had temporarily taken up their abode.

All this time the youngsters had been straining and tiptoeing to get a glimpse at whatever was causing so much interest and excitement amongst those of the pleasure-seekers who were fortunate enough to have a peep. Just then the crowd swayed and split, so that through the opening they had an uninterrupted view of the performers who had drawn about them so many of the sightseers.

They numbered three--an ugly red-haired man, with coarse features and squint eye, armed with a heavy-handed dog-whip; a tall, black-browed, sad-faced woman; and a bear, big, brown, shaggy, and savage-looking.

For one long moment the children gazed at the group as if spellbound. Then, with a ringing cry from Joan and a choking sob from Darby, they instinctively clutched at each other's hands and fled in the direction of the open ground beside the water, coming bang up against their father just as he was sauntering slowly forward to join them.

"Daddy, daddy! the bear, the bear!" screamed Joan, hiding her small, scared face against her father's arm, burrowing her fluffy head beneath his coat like a frightened rabbit.

"Do you know what the people over there are staring at, father?" asked Darby, in a low, strained voice, while his lips quivered so that he could hardly articulate the words. "It's Joe, father, Thieving Joe--Joe Harris and Moll! They've got Bruno with them--the bear, you remember--and he's dancing and capering. But there's foam

at his mouth, and his eyes are glittering; for Joe's raging at him just the way he used to do, and lashing him on his legs with the long whip. Oh, it's dreadful!" and the boy shuddered, more at the recollection of past terror than in fear of present danger. His father's strong fingers were folded firmly round his little hand; so he held up his head and tried to feel brave.

"Are you sure?" asked Major Dene, in a queer, tense tone--a tone which Darby had never heard from his father in all his life before.

"Quite, quite sure," answered the boy decidedly. "Do you think I *could* be mistaken?"

"And I's sure too," added Joan, lifting her head for the first time, and looking timidly about her with wide, tearful blue eyes, as if she expected to see Bruno waiting to play at hide-and-seek with her from behind her father's back. "I'd like to speak to Mrs. Moll, 'cause she heard me say my p'ayers and put me to bed. But I don't want never to see that howid Joe or the dwdedful big bear no more. Please pwomise you won't let them come near us, daddy!" she begged in piteous accents.

"Take the children home at once--directly," said Major Dene to Perry, who, breathless and flushed, at this point joined them, with Eric kicking and struggling in her arms, quite cross, because he wanted a longer look at the huge beast, which in his baby eyes appeared neither more nor less than a great big pussy cat.

"Please, sir--" began Perry; but the expression of her master's face checked the words, whatever she had intended to say, on the woman's lips, and obediently she drew the little ones away. It was such a look as his men might have seen in their commander's eyes as he doggedly led them on to avenge some of the blood that has flowed so free and red to enrich the arid plains of South Africa, at the cost, alas! of the impoverishment of many a desolated heart. But none of his home folks had ever seen those frank, smiling eyes snap and sparkle in the way they did now, like broken steel; not one of them would have imagined that those almost boyish features could set in such stern, grim lines as they fell into while he waited for the much and long desired interview with the rascal who had tried to rob him of his children.

Major Dene stood and watched until Perry and her charges had turned up a side street that would take them straight to Westfield. Then grasping his tough Malacca firmly in his supple fingers, he strode swiftly forward to face the foe.

As he came close to the mob of people around the performers there arose a hoarse shout, mingled with shrill screams and piercing cries. Then the crowd surged, broke, scattered, and fled hither and thither in panic, until, in an incredibly short time, there were only about half a dozen who stood their ground to watch the closing scene in the final exhibition given by the remaining members of the old Satellite Circus Company.

It was, in truth, a gruesome spectacle! A huge beast--maddened to fury by the sharp lashes of a stinging whip, blinded by the blows that had fallen thick and fast about his head and ears, goaded by the memory of years of cruelty and brutality--crushing to death in his hairy embrace his tormentor, as together they rolled over and over in the thick white dust of the village street, not a sound breaking the awesome silence but the fierce, deep growling of the savage bear and the wild, hysterical weeping of a terrified woman.

For one brief, breathless moment Major Dene held back, gazing in horror at the unequal combat. Then, forgetting everything except that there on the ground before him was a fellow-creature in dire need of help, he sprang to the rescue. With one hand he tried to drag the brute off its victim by the leather collar that encircled its neck, while with the cane, which he still held in the other hand, he belaboured it smartly about the snout and eyes. Fired by one man's courage, several others came to his assistance, and among them they at length succeeded in securing Bruno. But not before his thirst for revenge was satisfied; for when Joe Harris was lifted and laid gently down upon the soft greensward alongside the sea, one glance was sufficient to show the medical man, who was quickly on the spot, that he was beyond the reach of human aid.

Yea, verily, "whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

* * * * *

"Couldn't we help poor Mrs. Moll somehow, father?" suggested Darby next morning, after their father had briefly told the children that Thieving Joe was dead, and Bruno had been taken in charge by an enterprising organ-grinder, who, shrewdly surmising the real state of feeling between the brute and his late master which had led to such an awful tragedy, promised to be answerable for his good behaviour in the future. "She tried to help us as well as she knew how. Bambo thought so too."

"Let us take her back to Firgrove wif us, Aunt Catharine," coaxed Joan; "she can do heaps and heaps of fings, I know."

"I'm afraid that would hardly do, little one," answered Aunt Catharine, shaking her head. "But we'll think it over, and do the kindest thing we can for the poor creature."

The following day Major Dene and his aunt bent their steps towards the village, intending to seek out Moll, have a talk with her, and befriend her in whatever way should seem wisest and best. But although they sought high and low, peering inside canvas caves, walking boldly into booths and marquees, haunting Aunt Sally alleys and shooting galleries, inquiring of her probable whereabouts from any likely person they saw, Mrs. Harris was not to be found. She must, they concluded, have caught a glimpse of Darby and Joan, taken fright, and, fearful of consequences, made off.

So there was an end of all kindly intentions towards poor Moll, who, under other circumstances, might have been a better woman. And who can say that after her husband's tragic death, aided possibly by the altered conditions of her life, she would not henceforth endeavour to live more honestly than she had done hitherto? Certainly Aunt Catharine hoped she would, but Joan *believed* she should. And for some subtle, inexplicable reason Darby felt that Joan was right.

* * * * *

If you journey some day through the heart of happy England, it may be that you will come upon the village of Firdale, and not far away, sheltering snugly in the hollow below Copsley Wood, the old-fashioned, handsome homestead of Firgrove.

Darby and Joan are a big boy and girl now. Eric is in knickerbockers, and trots quite proudly up the hill to Copsley Farm and down again, all by his own self! There is a bright, clever governess at Firdale, and Joan has quite left off dolls. Even Miss Carolina, the well-beloved, has long since ceased to charm. Darby is at school--a real, proper boys' school, as he says, where they have forms and fags, masters and mischief in plenty.

But he and Joan still preserve their spirits pure, simple, single, childlike, as they were on that bright October morning when, hand in hand, they set out to seek the Happy Land.

And now, having accompanied them so far, let us wish them for the remainder of their journey "*Bon voyage!*" and thus take leave of our Two Little Travellers.

END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK TWO LITTLE TRAVELLERS

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