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“SAM, HALF CARRYING, HALF DRAGGING FRED, . . . STAGGERED
OUT INTO THE OPEN AIR.” — Page 275.

HALF A DOZEN BOYS

AN EVERY-DAY STORY

BY

ANNA CHAPIN RAY



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TO

E. E. J.,

THE ORIGINAL OF MY ROB,

IN MEMORY OF MANY PLEASANT HOURS WE HAVE
SPENT TOGETHER,

THIS LITTLE STORY IS LOVINGLY DEDICATED.

P R E F A C E.

“‘AN every-day story;’ I should think it was!” is the exclamation of that much-dreaded being, the critic, as he hastily turns over these simple pages. But that is just what it is meant to be. Most of our boys live every-day lives, with few exciting adventures or narrow escapes. And although they greedily absorb the highly spiced tales of youthful pirates and ruffians that are only too common in these days, by reading them they realize the more keenly the humdrum nature of their own surroundings, and too often are led to wish for the excitement of the other life. But, after all, it is the simple round of school and games, the frolics and scrapes, which seem so unimportant to their elders, that go to make up the sum of a boy’s happiness or misery; and if this be so outside of books, why is it not equally true within their covers?

Every New England town can show a Teddy, a Phil, and a Fred, more or less thinly disguised, while Rob and Fuzz, without any disguise at all, are even now important members of one small community.

With this warning as to the commonplace nature of our boys and of their doings, and this slight explanation of its cause, the writer steps aside, and leaves the Half Dozen Boys to tell their own story.

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HALF A DOZEN BOYS.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCES SOME NEW FRIENDS.

“‘THAT among all the changes and chances of this mortal life,’ ” intoned the musical voice of the rector, “‘they may ever be defended by Thy most gracious and ready help, through Jesus Christ our Lord.’ ”

“Amen,” responded the kneeling choir.

There was a moment of perfect quiet, as all bowed in silent prayer, and then the organist softly began to play the first lines of Barnby’s All Saints’ Hymn, “For all the Saints,” and the boys rose for their recessional. Their bright, happy faces smiled down for a moment on the waiting congregation, and then their voices rose in the inspiring old hymn.

As the white-robed figures came down the steps from the pretty chancel, singing, —

“ Oh, may Thy soldiers, faithful, true, and bold,
Fight as the saints who nobly fought of old,
And win with them the victor's crown of gold.
Alleluia, Alleluia ! ”

more than one person in the congregation was touched by the solemn prayer, almost thoughtlessly offered. The eyes of one of their hearers grew misty as she watched the boyish faces, and tried to fancy the battles in store for the young soldiers.

As the leaders passed her, they gave her a bright smile of recognition, while high and clear rang their voices, —

“ But lo ! there breaks a yet more glorious day ;

The King of Glory passes on His way.”

And the line went on out into the choir room, from which came the final Amen.

The people moved down the aisle, laughing and chatting, but the young woman of whom we spoke stood a moment, waiting until she was joined by one of the choir leaders, a bright-faced lad of thirteen. He came up to her, hold-

ing, for convenience, his hat in his teeth, while he pulled on his overcoat. His cheeks were flushed and his dark eyes shone with the excitement of the music, but his face was unusually sober.

“ Well, Rob ? ”

“ Oh, cousin Bess, have you heard about Fred ? ”

“ What is it, my dear ? I hope all is going well with him. But wait a moment ; I must speak to Mrs. Read. Then I'll come and hear all about it.”

Rob fidgeted about the door of the cosy little church until his cousin joined him. To go home from evening service without her, would have been to deprive Rob of one of his weekly pleasures. Cousin Bess was his confidante, adviser, and oracle ; and to-night, seeing the boy was really anxious to talk with her, she hurried her interview with the garrulous mother of eleven children, and, leaving half told the tale of Tommy's mumps and Sallie's teeth, she turned to the door, and, with Rob at her side, stepped out into the cold November starlight. The boy shivered a little.

“Cold, Rob? You’d better turn up your collar, after being in the warm church, and in your heavy robes, too.”

“I’m not cold,” he said hoarsely.

“What is it, dear? Is anything the matter?”

“It’s Fred. He’s come home from Boston, and he’s lots worse. The doctor says he can’t ever see again as long as he lives.” And Rob tried to swallow a great lump in his throat, as he told of his friend’s trouble.

“Why, Rob, what do you mean? When did he come home? Who told you?”

“Phil told me just now. He came home late last night, and Phil met his father to-day. The trouble’s all gone into his opposite nerve, Phil said, and they say he’ll be blind forever. Isn’t it awful, cousin Bess?”

“Indeed it is, my boy,” said Bess, too much shocked by Rob’s tidings even to smile over his “opposite nerve.” “But I don’t see what this can have to do with his eyes. I do hope there is some mistake.”

“I’m afraid there isn’t,” said Rob, shaking his head doubtfully. “You see, Phil saw Mr. Allen just this noon.”

“I know; but his eyes have never troubled him, have they?”

“Not much. A year ago, I guess 'twas, he stayed out of school about a week, 'cause it hurt him to read. But perhaps it isn't so bad as they think.”

“Poor Fred!” said Bess, drawing her little cousin closer to her side, as she thought of the suffering of this other boy. “If this is true, he has a sad, sad life before him. You boys, Rob, must do all you can to help him, when he gets strong enough to see you again. You can do so much for him if you only try. I know my boy will, won't he?”

“Why, yes. But how can we, cousin Bess?”

“In ever so many little ways. Go to see him, read to him, talk to him, only not about things he can't do; get him to go out with you, — anything to keep him from feeling he is left out in the cold, and you boys get on just as well without him.”

They walked on in silence for a moment, and then Bess asked, —

“Rob, do you remember the third verse of your recessional hymn?”

“I don't know. What was it?”

“‘Oh, may Thy soldiers,’” quoted Bess, and Rob took up the line, half under his breath. When he had finished it, —

“Well, what about it?” he asked.

“I was thinking to-night, as you came out singing it, that I wondered what fighting you boys would have to do. Fred has come to his, but the ‘victor's crown of gold’ will be very hard for him to win, I am afraid.”

“Why, cousin Bess?”

“Rob, my boy, suppose all at once you had to just drop right out of all your boy fun and games, couldn't read or study, or even go to walk alone; do you think it would be real easy to always be bright and cheerful, never complain or be cross? It is just by bearing this trouble like a man and a hero that the ‘victor's crown’ will come to Fred. It will not be a very happy life to live. But we will hope Phil made some mistake. Almost anything would be better than for him to be blind all his life; and I can't see what should bring it on. Did Phil say how he is now?”

“Mr. Allen said he was better, and asked Phil to go to see him before long.”

“I hope he will, and you too, Rob,” said Bess, and then added, “How well the music went to-night,” hoping to turn her cousin’s thoughts into a more cheerful line. But it was of no use.

“Fred was just coming into the choir when he was taken ill. The boys all wanted him, for he has a first-rate voice; but I suppose he can’t now. We’d been planning for his coming as soon as he got well, and he’s only a little shorter than I, so he’d have sat next either Phil or me.”

“I didn’t know he sang,” answered Bess. “But here we are at home. Won’t you come in, Rob?”

“No, I must go home and go right to bed. I was out late last night, you know. Good-night.” And the boy turned to go on as Bess called after him, —

“Sweet dreams to you, my boy! And come up to-morrow after school. I shall go down to see Fred in the afternoon, and I can tell you more about him then.”

She went into the house, stopping a moment in the hall to take off her hat and fur-trimmed coat, and then, pushing aside the portière, she entered the bright, pretty room, where her mother sat reading. The light from the fire, blazing on the andirons, flickered over the walls, showing a few fine pictures, some dainty bits of bric-à-brac, and, scattered around and among all, many books. But the prettiest thing in the room was the white-haired woman who sat by the table in a low chair. Her gentle expression and the loving, kindly look in her eyes plainly spoke the word mother; and a real mother she was, not only to her own flock, now all married and gone except this one daughter, but as well to all the young men and maidens, boys and girls, that ever came into her way. Years of delicate health had kept her much at home, but her parlor was the favorite resort of love-lorn maidens, ambitious youths, and small urchins whose broken kite-tails needed prompt attention. Not one of them left her without feeling better for her loving words of advice or consolation; her ears were always open, and to each she could and did give the one thing most needed.

Bess pushed a low stool to her side, and sat down on it, with her arm in her mother's lap.

“Did you have a pleasant service?” asked the older lady, laying down her book, and giving her daughter's hair a caressing pat.

“Very. Mr. Washburn did so well to-night, better than usual, and the music was” —

What it was, Mrs. Carter was never destined to know, for at the sound of her daughter's voice, there was a sudden uprising in the willow basket by the fire, and out jumped a small gray dog, who stretched himself for a moment, and then darted straight at his mistress, and climbed into her lap with sundry growls and yelps of pleasure, wagging, not his tail only, but his whole body, clear to his curly head. Standing up in her lap, he struck out with his forepaws, with an utter disregard for her comfort, and only intent on giving her a cordial welcome. Bess bore it meekly for a time, but a vigorous scratch on her cheek was too much for even her patience, and she pushed the dog gently down with a “That will do, Fuzz”; so he trotted away, and began to search diligently in all the corners of the room.

“Did Rob come up with you, as usual?” asked Mrs. Carter, when quiet was once more restored.

“Oh, yes; I can always depend on him. What a dear boy he is! Oh, Fuzz! have you found your ball?”

For Fuzz had returned on the scene, and brought with him the object of his search, a small, soft ball that he could easily hold in his mouth, or, when he preferred, carry it hooked on one of his teeth and hanging out at the side of his mouth. Now, rolling it up towards Bess, but just out of her reach, he ran back a few steps, flattened himself on the carpet, wagged his morsel of a tail convulsively, and rolled his eyes, first at the ball then at Bess. But Bess was in no mood to play, however much Fuzz might desire it. She was just beginning to tell her mother about Fred, when the dog, seeing that the suggestive wag of his tail had no influence, uttered a loud, sharp bark.

“No, no, Fuzz!” said Bess, frowning on the excited little creature. “I’m too tired, and I don’t feel like playing.”

But Fuzz was deaf to her remonstrances, and again gave vent to his feelings in the same bark, but this time, to add to his powers of persuasion, he sat up on his haunches, dropping his little forepaws in a supplicating fashion, while the stumpy tail still wagged furiously. It was not to be withstood. As usually happened in that house, Fuzz conquered; and Bess rose, took the ball, and threw it into the darkest corner, hoping to gain a moment's rest while the dog hunted up his treasure. Fuzz scrambled after it, his sharp little claws catching in the carpet as he ran, and in another moment he had deposited it at the feet of Bess, and run back as before. Experience had taught his mistress that when Fuzz wished to play, she must obey his will, and keep him running after the ball until, tired out, he should be ready to go back to his cushioned basket.

In the intervals of her attentions to Fuzz, she told her mother Rob's account of Fred, and then went on to speak of the people she had seen, of the sermon, and of other bits of news likely to interest her home-abiding mother. A few moments' rest from Fuzz were succeeded

by howls from the next room, at first low and mournful, but as these proved unavailing they gradually turned into the same deafening barks that had before carried his point.

“Oh, you tiresome puppy!” exclaimed Bess, in despair.

Rising, she went to the next room, where, in front of a tall bookcase, lay Fuzz, pawing wildly at the narrow crack that separated it from the floor, in the hope of rolling out his cherished ball. For the twentieth time that day Bess resigned herself to the inevitable, and, kneeling down on the floor, with difficulty she reached under the bookcase, grasped the ball with the tips of her fingers and drew it out, while Fuzz, utterly regardless of her nerves and her Sunday gown, capered back and forth over her, barking madly all the time.

Fuzz was the ruling member of the Carter family. Two years before, Bess, scorning Dominie Sampson, the family collie, had been anxious to own a toy terrier, and her indulgent father had for months been watching for an opportunity to gratify his daughter's wish, when one day he came triumphantly home, and

from his pocket produced a tiny, squirming ball of wool. The ball, on being set down on the floor, disclosed four wee paws, a dot of a tail, two huge ears, a short black nose, and an overwhelming tendency to tumble over on it.

Uttering feeble barks, the absurd little creature toddled up to Mrs. Carter's ball of yarn that had fallen from her lap, tried to take it in his mouth, tangled himself up in it, broke the thread, and then stood meditatively viewing the ruin he had worked. For a moment Bess and her mother looked at each other in despair, and then they began to laugh. From that time the puppy's destiny was an established fact.

Fuzz, as he was named, rapidly grew from the dimensions of a six-weeks-old puppy to three times the size of his ancestors. Though bought at a high price for his exceptionally small size, his long, silky blue hair, and his equally blue blood, it must be confessed that in all these respects Fuzz was weighed in the balance and found wanting. His silky blue coat was almost white, and, instead of sweeping the ground, as should the hair of a truly aristocratic Skye terrier, it curled in tight short rings

about his head and face, and from there gradually dwindled away until, at his tail, he was only covered with a few sparse locks, through which his darker gray skin was plainly visible. His baskets, collars, and other belongings were rapidly outgrown, and the new ones substituted for them soon shared the same fate. And, as if to keep pace with his body, his temper and will grew at the same time; for the disposition of the dog was an uncertain quantity. Though no one ever spent twenty-four hours in the house with him without yielding to his fascinations, strangers and chance callers, one and all, detested him. In spite of words and blows, Fuzz would run out and bark whenever the bell rang. And on some occasions he varied the monotony by firmly seizing the newcomer by the clothing, greatly to the resentment of the chosen few whom he favored with this attention. Tying him up or shutting him in a room by himself proved of no avail, for, in the one case, he invariably bit the string in two; and, in the other, his small paws scratched the door with such zeal that varnish and paint vanished before his attacks, while his voice was

meanwhile raised in protest against his durance vile. Two years fraught with bitter experience had taught Mrs. Carter and Bess that the dog's will was law, and when once his bark was heard the person nearest him hurried to do his bidding. Such was Fuzz, who, while we have been making his acquaintance, had retired, ball and all, into his basket by the fire, where he made his bed by pawing and mouthing his rug into a lump in one corner, and then settled himself to his well-earned repose, occasionally opening one eye and growling sleepily when the fire gave an unusually loud crackle.

For a long time the mother and daughter sat in the fitful light, talking of different matters, until Bess once more spoke of Fred.

“Doesn't it seem hard and cruel, mother, to just shut out that active boy from everything he most enjoys? I can't see any cause for it at all; and yet there can be no mistake.”

“Poor little boy!” said Mrs. Carter, gently pushing her daughter's hair back from her face. “He has a hard life before him, and no one to help him bear it, though he will have everything that money can give. His father and

mother are not the ones to teach him how much that is good he still has left; and he looks to me like a boy that will take this very hard."

"Who wouldn't?" said Bess impetuously. Then she added, "What a shame you couldn't have been Fred's mother! You ought to have the bringing-up of all the boys in the country."

"I should probably have been the worst possible mother for most of them," replied Mrs. Carter, with a smile. "But when shall you go to see how Fred is? I think you almost ought to go soon, for the boy is so fond of you."

"I told Rob I should go to-morrow; and oh, how I dread it! I don't know at all how I shall find him: whether he is over his old trouble, or whether he can see now. I suppose I ought to go, though. Poor Rob was quite upset by the news."

"He is a sympathetic boy and very fond of Fred. I wish he would go to see him when he can. He is so gentle he wouldn't tire him; and his quiet fun would be the best possible medicine for the poor child."

"Rob promised to go when he might. I think it took all his heroism, for he is so afraid

of Mrs. Allen. Why, now I think of it, she was at church this morning, for I remember noticing her new bonnet. How strange for her to leave Fred his first day at home!"

"I fancy that is her way of doing," said Mrs. Carter as she rose from her chair. "Well, I think I shall say good-night to you, my daughter."

A few moments later Bess followed her up the stairs, singing softly as she went, —

“ ‘ And win with them the victor’s crown of gold.
Alleluia, Alleluia!’ ”

CHAPTER II.

FRED.

A COLD, dreary November rain was driving against the windows, and the heavy, dull drops chased one another down the glass. Within the room all was bright and warm, with a cheerful fire in the grate. The double parlors were richly and tastefully furnished, yet they were far from attractive, for their very elegance made more noticeable their lack of homelike cosiness. No pets were ever allowed to invade their sanctity, no work-basket of mending ever encumbered one of their tables. The very books and papers were always carefully returned to their accustomed places, though they were to be taken up again ten minutes later. The glowing coals shone on only one object in any way suggestive that the room was ever entered except to sweep and dust it.

In the back parlor a low, broad sofa was drawn up before the fire, and on it lay a boy of

twelve, so quiet that one coming suddenly into the room might have fancied him sleeping. But with a sudden weary sigh he turned his head on the pillow, and pulled the gay afghan more closely around his shoulders, dropping, as he did so, two or three chocolate creams left from some previous feast.

“Oh, dear!” he said, half aloud, half to himself, “mother’ll scold if those get smashed on the carpet.” And, slowly getting down on the floor, he felt carefully about, evidently trying to find the missing candy, which lay, plainly visible, near the fender. At last his hand touched it, and, putting it on a table that stood close to the sofa, loaded with fruit, flowers, and candy, he impatiently threw himself down and covered himself again.

He was a handsome boy, with his light brown hair, swarthy skin, and great, dreamy, brown eyes; but his dark skin had no flush of health, and the beautiful eyes had a vacant, blank look, while the boy face wore a fretful, discontented expression, rarely seen in one so young. This was Fred Allen, who, ten months before, had been a leading spirit among the lads of his age.

Bright, frank, and full of fun, though rather quick-tempered and imperious, his friends had bowed before him, both for his skill in all the field games so dear to boyish hearts, and for the ease with which he kept at the head of his classes in school. Equally devoted to his baseball bat and his books, petted by his teacher, and adored by his boy friends, Fred was in a fair way to become spoiled and headstrong. Just at this time a prize was offered to his class for the best set of examinations, and Fred worked early and late over his lessons, that the prize might be his. It was a proud and happy moment for him when, after the teacher had announced that the prize was awarded to Frederic Hunter Allen, for general excellence in his studies, a boy voice called out: "Three cheers for Fred Allen," and the cheers were given with a will.

But the boy had overstudied, and within a week or two signs of intense nervousness showed themselves, and soon settled into a severe case of chorea, or, as the cook called it, "Saint Vitus's twitches." For three months the boy was very ill, seeing no one but his

parents and Bess Carter, who spent two or three afternoons of each week with him. Then his mother declared that her own nerves were getting so unstrung, and Fred was not gaining any, why not have him go to Boston to a specialist?

So a private car was ordered, and the boy was taken to Boston, where he was left in charge of a noted doctor and a professional nurse of undeniable reputation and heart of iron, who presided over her patients with a clock in one hand and a thermometer in the other, with no allowance made for personal variations.

His mother, in the mean time, was free to recuperate her nervous system by a round of calls, shopping, teas, and theatre-going, to which the illness of her only son had been a serious hinderance. People talked a little, as well they might, but Mrs. Allen spoke so regretfully of her own poor health, and wiped her eyes so daintily when any one asked for Fred, that it was the general opinion that she was more to be pitied than her little son.

As the months passed, and the boy did not return, inquiries for him grew fewer, and to these few Mrs. Allen responded with indiffer-

ence. Mr. Allen went occasionally to see his son, but he was a cold, proud man, whose chief ambition was that Fred should make a fine appearance in society, as a worthy heir to the fortune that he would one day leave him.

But the reports of the specialist were not encouraging. The chorea was a little better, but something seemed wrong about the boy's sight. A well-known oculist was called, and he ordered word at once sent to Mr. Allen that the trouble had all centred in the optic nerve, which was rapidly being destroyed, and that his only son must be blind forever, with no hope of any cure.

It was a terrible blow to the father, whose hopes and plans for the future were all destroyed. His feeling for his son had been pride, rather than love, and this pride was sorely wounded. A sudden press of business had kept him for some days from going to his boy, and by the time he reached him, the disease had made such rapid advances that Fred could no longer see his father, except as a dark shadow against the sun-lighted window. In other respects he was much better, and so anxious to be

at home that the next afternoon the journey of a few hours was taken, and in the early November twilight he was helped up the familiar steps into the hall, where his mother met him with convulsive kisses and sobs, called him her poor, dear little Freddie, and then — went away to dress for a dinner-party, leaving the boy to the tender mercies of the servants, who were thoroughly rejoiced to have him at home once more.

This afternoon, directly after lunch, she had helped Fred to the sofa where we found him, put a plate of Malaga grapes and a dish of candy on a table beside him, and, telling him to ring for Mary in case he needed anything, she had gone away “to take forty winks,” she said. But the forty winks lasted a long time, and for more than an hour Fred had lain there, listening to the dashes of rain against the window, and counting the street cars that jingled on their way past the house.

Suddenly the door-bell rang, and, at the sound, a dark red flush mounted to the boy's cheek, and a frown gathered on his face.

“Somebody coming to look at me!” he

muttered; and then lay very still, listening to Mary's steps as she answered the summons.

But when he heard a familiar voice ask, —

“Well, Mary, is Master Fred in?” his face grew suddenly glad, and, sitting up on the sofa, he turned his head eagerly towards the door.

Mary's reply was inaudible to him, as she said, —

“Oh, Miss Carter, I'm so glad you've come. Master Fred's all alone out in the back parlor, and he's sad enough, poor boy!”

Then he heard Bess speak again: “Please take my cloak, Mary, it is so wet; and ask him if I may go right in there.”

“Oh, do come quick, Miss Bessie!” he called out. “I'm so glad you have come.” And as he heard the door open, and the light, quick steps advancing towards him, he stood up and put out both hands to greet his guest, with no trace of his old fretful look.

With a hasty glance Bess noted the helplessness that prevented his meeting her at the door, but she only said, as she kissed him, —

“Well, Fred, I am so glad to have you back within reach once more.”

“You have missed me, then?” asked the child anxiously, as she drew him to the sofa and seated herself by his side.

“Missed you, you silly boy! What a question! Of course I have. ‘We boys,’ as Rob says, have been longing for you to be back again. I have felt quite lost without you.”

“How is Rob,—and all the other boys?” inquired Fred, relieved that Bess seemed so unconscious of his condition.

“Well, all of them. Rob is coming down as soon as you feel like seeing him. I see more of him than I do of any of the others. Phil runs in once in a while, but he is so busy all the time. Teddy was at the house one day last week, the same dear, slangy boy as ever. But tell me, am I not crazy to come down such a day?”

“It’s a kind of crazy I like,” said Fred. “You were awfully good to come, and I’ve been alone here ever so long.”

“So much the better,” said Bess, mentally abusing the mother who could leave her boy under such circumstances; “we can have a real good, old-fashioned visit, and when you get tired of me, you may send me off.”

Fred's hand moved about in search of hers, as he asked, —

“How did you know I'd come?”

“Rob told me last night.”

“Did he tell you” —

Fred could go no farther. Bess pulled the appealing little face over against her shoulder, and gently smoothed his hair, as she answered, using all her self-control to speak quietly, —

“Yes, dear, he did. I can't tell you how sorry we all felt for our boy. That doesn't make it any easier to bear, I know; but perhaps in time we can help you a little.”

For the first time since his learning the sad truth, the boy broke down. He had listened to the words of the oculist without a tear, too much stunned even to speak, and he had met his father and mother with perfect quiet. But the few gentle, loving words had broken his firm resolve not to be a baby; and the tears gathered fast and fell, as he sat with his head on Bessie's shoulder, her arm about his quivering little body.

“Oh, don't tell the boys!” he sobbed at last. “Don't tell them I cried. I didn't

mean to ; but it's all so dreadful, here in the dark."

The tears stood in the girl's eyes as she answered, —

"My dear little boy, we all know how terrible it must be ; but I won't tell the boys if you say so. Just cry it all out ; you have tried to be too brave. Rob almost cried for you last night."

The sobs came less often, but the look of sadness on the boyish face made Bessie's heart ache for the child, but she said cheerfully, —

"Now, my son, I am going to take my old place as nurse to-day. You aren't very strong yet, and I want you to lie down again here on the sofa, and if you can spare a little of this lunch — I don't approve of candy between meals, you know — I'll move the table away, pull up this low chair, and tell you all the news."

Suiting the action to the word, Bess tucked the afghan round Fred's feet, drew a willow chair up to the place of the despised table, and sat down close to the child, who once more reached out for her hand.

For an hour she sat there chatting to the boy, telling him of the scrapes his friends had been in, of the pranks they had played, until she began to see traces of the old merry Fred, as the look of sorrow gave place to a smile, and then to a hearty laugh, while she described Rob's recent attempts to climb a picket fence too hastily, and his being caught by his shoe and hung head downward, from which position he was ignominiously rescued by a passing Irishman.

In the mean time, Bess was glad that her little friend could not see her expression, as she sat looking at the worn, sad face, and the great vacant eyes, that used to have such bright mischief dancing in them. But she forced herself to talk on, as easily as she could, more than rewarded by the pleasure in Fred's face, and his tight grip of her hand.

At length a step was heard on the stairs, and Mrs. Allen, daintily dressed and looking provokingly fresh and unruffled, Bess thought, came into the room.

"Why, Bessie, when did you come? How stupid of Mary not to tell me you were here!"

"I told her I came to see Fred, and not to

disturb you," said Bess, as Mrs. Allen swept to the sofa and bent over her son.

"I am quite jealous of Fred, for you have hardly been here all the time he was away," she said. "But he needs you now badly enough, poor boy!" putting a delicately embroidered handkerchief to her eyes. "Isn't it hard to see him in this condition?"

Again the burning flush rolled up to Fred's hair, and the hand that was tightly clasping Bessie's grew suddenly cold. Bess gently kissed him before she answered, —

"You ought to know of my sympathy for Fred, Mrs. Allen. No words can express it. But I am glad to have him here again. We were having such a good talk, just like old times."

With an air of relief, Mrs. Allen took the hint, and left them alone again. When she was gone, the boy settled back on his pillow, saying gratefully, —

"It is awfully nice to have you here. Tell some more about the fellows."

So Bess talked on, racking her brains for any bright, funny bit of gossip that could rouse the

lad from his depression, and give him something to think of during the many sad, lonely hours that she saw were in store for him. But the dreamy chime of the cathedral clock on the mantel, as it struck four, reminded her of her promise to see Rob after school, and she rose to go, saying brightly, —

“Now, my boy, I have worn you all out with such a long visit, for a first one. I must go now, for Rob is coming up after school, and I must be at home in time to see him. I hope I sha’n’t drown on the way,” she added, as a fresh gust of wind brought a flurry of rain against the windows.

“I wish you needn’t go,” said the child. “It has been so jolly to see you again. You haven’t been here but a few minutes.”

“An hour and a half, exactly,” answered Bess, “but I’m coming again real soon.”

In the early twilight of the stormy day, the room was growing dark. As Bess stooped to say good-by to the boy, she was surprised to feel the hot tears on his cheeks. Sitting down on the edge of the sofa, she drew his head over into her lap, and stroked his face in

silence, for she felt no words could comfort the little lad.

“If you only needn’t go,” he said. “It all seems so much easier when you are here. Miss Bessie, I can’t stand it! What shall I do?”

“Fred, I know it is hard, so very hard. I wish I could stay with you always, if you want me. But I will truly come again in a day or two. We are all so sorry for you, and long to help you.” Then she asked, “May Rob come some day to see you? He is such a good little nurse.”

Fred shook his head.

“Not yet,” said he. “I’d rather not have the boys round just yet. But I mustn’t keep you. Good-by.” And, getting up, he moved a few steps towards the door.

“Don’t be in too much of a hurry, my dear,” said Bess. “I must ring for Mary to bring my cloak. Don’t try to come to the door, you will only tire yourself for nothing.” And, putting him back on the sofa with a gentle force, she kissed him and was gone.

Later, when Bess, her parents, and Rob, who had been prevailed upon to stay, sat at their

dinner-table, the young lady, after silently pondering some question in her own mind, suddenly announced with considerable energy, —

“I think Mrs. Allen is the most selfish woman I ever saw!”

Mrs. Carter, in her surprise at the outburst, dropped the biscuit that she was feeding to Fuzz, under cover of the tablecloth; for it was the rule of the family, agreed to by each, and broken by all, that Fuzz should not be fed at meal-times. The biscuit was at once appropriated by the dog, who trotted off to a corner with it in his mouth, and there proceeded to devour it, with sundry growls at the shaggy collie who gazed with longing eyes on the tempting morsel.

“Bess, my daughter,” began Mrs. Carter, “don’t be too severe. She may not be very strong.”

“Strong, mother! How much strength does it take to entertain one’s son who is ill? She’d better give up a few dinners and theatres. The idea of her leaving Fred alone all the afternoon. Rob, the next time you come up here, when you are tired and cross and headache-y, I am going to take a nap, so there!”

CHAPTER III.

THE BEGINNING OF THE FIGHT.

TRUE to her promise, Bess did go often to see her boy. For several weeks it was her habit to spend a part of every afternoon with him; and the lad's evident pleasure at her coming made her feel richly rewarded for the time she gave up to him. He at once recognized her step in the hall, and she always found him sitting up on the sofa, eagerly waiting for her to come to him.

Mrs. Allen rarely appeared, and the two had the room to themselves, while Bess either read aloud, or talked to Fred as she sewed on some bit of work she had brought with her. To her mother she confessed that after her usual call her mind was a blank, for she tried so hard to think of some bright, interesting conversation for the lonely, sad boy. Her patient was not an easy one to manage, for though Fred rarely complained, during the long hours he was alone he brooded over his trouble

until it seemed even harder than before, and the old days of school and games were like dreams of another and a happier world. His father was at his office all day, and his mother, absorbed in her social life, had little time to give to her son; and both of them regarded the boy as well cared for if he were only supplied with all sorts of dainties, and had the most comfortable sofa and chair given up to him.

Sometimes Bess found the child so disconsolate that she knew not how to comfort him; sometimes he was moody, and slow to respond to her efforts to be entertaining, but before she left him, her womanly tact had smoothed away the frown, and forced him to laugh in spite of himself. And in the worst of his moods he was never cross to her, but always seemed grateful to her for her coming.

“If you only needn’t go home at all!” he said to her one day. “It’s lots more fun when you are here, Miss Bess. The rest of the time I just lie here and think till I get cross, and everything seems awful.”

“Why do you ‘just lie here and think,’ then?” asked Bess, feeling that here was a

chance to make a good suggestion. "You are strong enough now to go to drive every pleasant day. Why don't you?"

"I don't know; I don't want to," said Fred, as the quick color came to his cheeks, that were beginning to have a more healthy look.

Bess was expecting that reply, for several times before now she had tried to coax the boy into going out. But he had been ill and by himself for so long, and had dwelt so continually on himself, that he had become very sensitive about his blindness, a state of mind not at all improved by his mother's tactless attempts at consolation. With Bess he could and did talk freely, but with no one else, and he shrank from meeting any one who called, and obstinately refused to see his boy friends, although Bess urged him to let them come.

It was such an unnatural life for the boy, who, save in the one respect, was rapidly returning to his old strength. Once let him break over this sensitive reserve, and persuade himself to go out and enjoy the boys, and Bess was sure that his life would be easier to bear.

To-day they were in their usual place by the

fire. Bess was sewing, and Fred was by her side, playing with the long loops of ribbon that hung from her belt. Suddenly the girl rose and went to the window.

“Where are you going, Miss Bess?”

“I am going to run away from you, you obstinate boy. I want to see your mother a minute. I’ll come back, so don’t you worry.”

For Bess had determined on a bold stroke. The air inside the room was warm and heavy with the fragrance of roses. Outside, all was bright and bracing, for an inch or two of snow had fallen the night before, and the air after the storm was clear and sweet. Across the street, two rosy-cheeked urchins were having a grand snowball fight, and Bess only wished that she and Fred could join them. She heard their shouts of laughter as a particularly large snowball struck one of them, just as he was stooping for more ammunition, and half the snow was scattered down his neck.

The next moment she had tapped at Mrs. Allen’s door.

“Come in,” said a languid voice, and in she went.

Mrs. Allen, in a light wrapper, lay on a sofa, while Mary was kneeling by her side, industriously polishing the nails of her mistress.

“Mrs. Allen,” said Bess abruptly, “may Fred and I have the coupé this afternoon?”

“Does he want to go out for a drive at last?” asked his mother.

“No, he doesn’t,” replied Bess, “but I want to have him go, and I think that if the carriage were all at the door, I could get him started. May I try?”

“Of course you can have the carriage, Bessie; (a little more on the thumb, Mary) but why do you tease him, if he doesn’t want to go? It won’t be any pleasure to him, and if he is more comfortable at home, why not let him do as he likes?”

Bess dropped into a chair, and wrinkled her brows with exasperation.

“Why, don’t you see, Mrs. Allen,” she said, “the boy can’t spend all his life in that one room. He must go out of it sometime, and the longer he waits the harder it will be for him. He ought to have been out weeks ago, for he needs the fresh air, and he is getting just blue

and morbid from staying alone in the house all this time.”

“Perhaps you are right (now the other hand, Mary). Of course you can have James and the coupé, if you will order what you want. It will be pleasanter for you, if not for Fred.”

Bess felt her color come. She had not expected much from Mrs. Allen, but this was too unkind, — to think that she was speaking two words for herself and one for Fred! But Mrs. Allen was not fine enough to see how her remark had cut, and Bess resolved to bear anything for the sake of her boy; so she thanked his mother, a little coldly, perhaps, and then departed to the kitchen, where she asked the coachman to bring the coupé to the door as soon as he could, and requested the plump, ruddy cook, the family tyrant, to get her Fred's coat and hat.

The good woman's face brightened perceptibly.

“An' is it goin' out he is? Bless the poor dear b'y; it's a long, long time since he's had a hat on his head, and it's I as am glad to be gettin' it for you. The air'll do him good, sure!”

Bess thanked the woman warmly as she took the wraps, for she noted the difference in tone between the mother and the servant. Then she returned to the parlor, where she dropped Fred's heavy coat and hat on a chair, and went back to her old place by the fire.

"Seems to me you've been gone a good while," said the boy, as Bess sat down on the sofa, and pulled his head, pillow and all, into her lap.

"I just wanted you to find out how charming my society is," she said playfully, as she twisted his scalp-lock till it stood wildly erect.

"As if I didn't know anyway," responded Fred. "But what are you trying to do to me?"

"Only beautifying you a little, sonny," said Bess, with one eye on the window.

In a few moments she saw the carriage drive up to the door and stop. She took the boy's hand firmly in her own, and said very quietly, from her position of vantage, —

"Now, Fred, I have a favor to ask of you; it is something I want so very much. Will you do it for me?"

“What is it?” asked the boy suspiciously.

“The coupé is all ready at the door, and I have brought in your coat and hat. It is such a lovely day, I want you to come for a drive. Will you?”

“No, I won’t,” said the boy, turning his face away from her, and putting his hand over his eyes.

“Listen, Fred,” said Bess firmly; “I know just how you feel about this, but is it quite right to give up to it? You have all your life before you, and you can’t lie on this sofa all your days. I have waited until you were stronger, hoping you would feel like starting out; but the longer you are here, the harder it will be! You will have to go sometime; why not to-day?”

“What’s the use?” asked the boy sadly. “I sha’n’t get any good of going. I don’t see why I’m not as well off here.”

“It is a beautiful day after the snow, and the air is so fresh it will do you good. You need some kind of a change. We will only go a little way, if you say so. Come, Fred.” And she waited.

She saw the boy shut his lips tight together, and two great tears rolled out from under his hand. Then he said slowly, —

“I’ll go, Miss Bessie.”

“That’s my dear, brave boy,” said Bess, as she went to get their wraps. She helped Fred into his hat and coat, quickly put on her own, and, drawing his hand through her arm, led him to the door, talking easily all the time to keep up the lad’s courage.

Just as they came out of the house, Rob and Phil chanced to be passing. Turning, as they heard the door open and close, they saw Bess helping their friend to the carriage, waved their hats to her, and started to run back to greet Fred. But Bess motioned to them to keep away, for she felt that her charge was in no condition now to meet these strong, lively friends, just as he was forced to realize anew his own helplessness. So the lads stood sadly by, looking on while their unconscious friend slowly and awkwardly climbed into the carriage. Bess followed, and, with a wave of her hand to the watching boys, they drove away.

“That isn’t much like Fred,” said Phil, as he

turned away with a serious look on his jolly, freckled face. "Just think of the way he used to skate, and play baseball and hare and hounds! It must be awful for him. But isn't it funny he won't let us go to see him?"

"I don't know," replied Rob, meditatively patting a snowball into shape; "I guess if I were like what Fred is, I shouldn't want the boys round, for 'twould just make me think all the time of the things I couldn't do. Cousin Bess is awfully good to him; she's down here ever so much."

"I know it. Wonder if anything happened to me, she'd take me up," said Phil, half enviously. "I just wish she was my cousin, Bob. Why, she's as good as a boy, any day!"

In the mean-time, Fred's first care had been to draw down the curtains on his side of the carriage, and then he shrank into the corner, answering as briefly as possible to Bessie's careful suggestions for his comfort. But her endless good-humor and fun were never to be long resisted, and he was soon talking away as rapidly as ever, while the change and the motion and the cool crisp air brought a glow to

his cheeks that made him look like the Fred of former days. After driving for nearly an hour, the carriage stopped.

“Are we home?” asked Fred, starting to rise.

“At mine, not yours. Mother was going out to tea, to-night, and you have been such a good boy that, as a reward of merit, I am going back to dinner with you; only I must stop and tell mother, and send word to Rob to come down after me. Shall I come?” And Bess paused with a smile, waiting to see the effect of her new plan.

“Oh, yes, do come!” said Fred eagerly. “And tell Bob not to come for you too early.”

“What fun we’ll have,” he continued, when Bess had come back from the house and they were driving away, regardless of the wails of Fuzz, who surveyed them from a front window. “We’ll play — how I wish I ever could play games any more!” And his face grew dark again.

“You can, ever so many. But will you go home, or shall we drive a little longer?”

“Home, please; that is, if you are willing, Miss Bessie.”

“Fred, do you think me a dragon?” asked Bess, soberly. “Now tell me truly, are you sorry you came out to-day? Even if you are a little tired, won’t the old sofa feel all the better for the change?” And while she waited for his reply, she looked with pleasure at the clear, bright color that the wind had brought into his cheeks.

“No, I don’t know as I’m sorry, as long as you came too. But it’s no fun driving alone, and mother’s too busy to go with me.”

There was a pause, and then he suddenly asked, —

“Miss Bess, what makes you so good to me?”

“Good, to have a pleasant drive with my boy. I didn’t suppose that showed any great virtue. But,” added Bess more seriously, “I want to teach my boy to make the very best of his life. You have one hard, hard sorrow to bear, dear; but you have ever so many pleasant things to enjoy, if you only think of it: your home,” here Bessie caught her breath, as a vision of Mrs. Allen crossed her mind, then went on calmly, “all your friends, who care so

much for you; and then there are so many things you can do, as you get a little more used to yourself. But this is enough sermon now, for here you are at home. Just take my arm." And she led the boy into the house and up to the fire.

Mr. and Mrs. Allen dined out that night, and Fred and Bess had the house to themselves. Fred was so roused by the little change, and Bess so pleased at her own success, that their dinner was a merry one. Fred insisted that it should be served on a small table by their favorite fire, instead of in the imposing dining-room, and Mary, rejoiced at anything that could bring Master Fred out of his languid indifference, was only too glad to make the change, however much work it might involve for herself.

The boy was in fine spirits, in his delight at having Bess stay to dinner, all to himself, and the two told stories and asked conundrums till the room fairly rang with their mirth. At dinner, Bess sent Mary away and waited on the boy herself, giving him the needed help in such a matter-of-course fashion that he forgot to feel

sensitive about it until long after his guest had gone.

After dinner, when the table was cleared away, and Fred's sofa moved again to the fire, they both settled themselves on it for a quiet chat. The fire shone out on a pretty picture. Bess, in her dark red gown, sat leaning luxuriously against the dull blue cushions of the oak sofa, while Fred was close by her side, with his hand through her arm, his head on her shoulder, listening with a laughing face to his friend's account of some college frolics. There was no light in the room but the steady glow from the grate, that plainly showed their faces, but for the moment kindly hid the sad, blank look in Fred's once beautiful eyes, and only gave them a dreamy, thoughtful expression, as from time to time he turned his face up to Bess.

In the midst of their conversation, the bell rang, and the next moment Mary, privately instructed by Bess, without word of warning ushered Rob into the room. For a minute he stood, hesitating whether to speak to Fred or not, but Bess quickly came to the rescue.

“Why, Rob, here so soon? Come up to the

fire; there's ever so much room here on the sofa."

And Fred's voice added, —

"Hullo, Bob!" as he hospitably made room for his guest.

There was another pause as Rob seated himself, for neither boy knew just what to say. Fred had straightened himself up, and was twirling his thumbs, while Rob crossed his feet and uncrossed them again, as he methodically folded up his soft felt hat into a neat bundle.

As both boys declined to break the silence, Bess again took the lead.

"Is it cold to-night?" she asked Rob.

"Yes it's freezing fast, and 'twill be fine skating to-morrow. All us boys are planning to go" — And Rob came to a sudden halt, as the idea dawned on him that such subjects were not interesting to Fred, who asked abruptly, —

"How's Phil?"

"He's well," replied Rob laconically, determined to make no mistake this time.

"What's Bert Walsh doing with himself?"

"Football, of course." And both the boys

laughed, for Bert's chronic devotion to the game was the joke of all his friends.

But the next moment Bess felt Fred's head come over against her shoulder. Rob watched him pityingly, not daring to speak his sympathy, though he read his friend's thought.

"We've been reading 'Story of a Bad Boy,' this afternoon," said Bess, trying once more to start the boys. Rob caught eagerly at the bait.

"Isn't it fine! That Fourth of July scrape just suits me."

And the boys were all animated as they discussed the details of the story. Bess sat and watched them, occasionally putting in a word or two, and soon all constraint had vanished, as the talk ran on from subject to subject, and the long year of separation was a thing of the past.

Rob, mindful of what Bess had told him about Fred's sensitive reserve, tried to seem perfectly unconscious of the change in his boy friend, but he looked anxious and troubled, between his sympathy for Fred, and his desire to say just the right thing. But when Bess rose to go, and Fred was slowly following her to the door, Rob could stand it no longer,

“Say, Fred, I’m awfully sorry for you!” he blurted out.

Contrary to his expectations, the simple, boyish pity went right to Fred’s heart, and did it a world of good, but he only said, —

“It isn’t much fun, Bob, I tell you. But won’t you come down again some day? I wish you would.”

And Bess went home, well pleased with her day’s work.

CHAPTER IV.

THE OTHER BOYS.

BESS was in her element.

“Cousin Bess,” Rob had said that morning, “may some of us boys come up to-night, or will we be in the way?”

“Not a bit of it!” replied Bess heartily; “I wish you would. Who are coming?”

“Oh, just the regular crowd, Ted and Phil and Bert and Sam. The boys wanted me to ask if we might, for fear you’d be out, or busy, or something.”

That afternoon the first flakes of a snow-storm were falling, as Bess started to make her usual pilgrimage to Fred, and by evening it lay over all things soft and white.

“I am afraid your boys won’t come,” said Mrs. Carter, as they sat lingering over their dinner. “It is too bad, when you are all ready for your candy-pull.”

“Don’t you worry,” predicted Bess, as she

slyly dropped a morsel in front of the nose of Fuzz, who for once lay asleep. "It will take more than this snow to keep those boys away, unless Teddy has one of his colds and can't come. I wish Fred could have been here."

"Why didn't you have him?" asked her mother.

"Have him!" echoed Bess. "It is easy to say 'have him,' but except for half a dozen drives, he has refused to go out at all; and he won't see any of the boys but Rob. Poor Rob tries to be very devoted, but I dimly suspect Fred is occasionally rather cross."

"Who could blame him?" said Mrs. Carter.

"Rob takes it very meekly," Bess went on, as she slowly peeled an orange. "Fred never shows that side to me, but I think it is there. But it is really scandalous the way Mrs. Allen goes on. Fred is left to himself the whole time, just when he needs so much help physically, mentally, and morally."

"I wish you could have him all the time, Bess," said her mother. "You are good for him, and he enjoys you."

"Let's adopt him, mother! He's splendid

material to work on, and I would take him in a minute if I could. Think of me with an adopted son!" And Bess drew herself up with an air of majesty as she began to devour her orange. Suddenly she laughed.

"I was so amused the other day, Saturday it was, when I went down to Fred's in the afternoon. I was later than usual, and Rob happened to be there ahead of me. You know I always go right in without stopping to ring, and that day, as I went, I heard loud voices in the back parlor. I went in there, and found that the boys had evidently been having a quarrel, for Fred had turned his back to Rob, and was decidedly red in the face; while Rob sat there, the picture of discomfort, his face pale, but his eyes fairly snapping. He departed as soon as I went in, and neither boy would tell me what was the trouble. Fred said he didn't feel well, and didn't want to see Rob, anyway. I offered to go away too, but he wouldn't allow that."

"What did Rob say for himself?" asked Mrs. Carter.

"He said he supposed Fred was angry at

something he had said in fun. He was quite distressed over it, and offered to apologize, but I advised him to just wait a few days till Fred recovered from his tempers."

"Much the best way," assented Mrs. Carter. "Fred mustn't grow tyrannical. Here come the boys."

It was a needless remark, for at that moment there was heard a sudden chattering of young voices, the sound of ten feet leaping up the steps, and the laughter and stamping as the boys shook off the snow. Fuzz darted to the door, barking madly, while an echo from without took up his voice and multiplied it fivefold. Bess picked up the wriggling little creature, who was carried off by Mrs. Carter; then she admitted her young guests, who came in all talking at once.

"Such a deep snow!"

"Five or six inches, at least!"

"I tell you, that fire looks dandy!"

"Phil fell down just below Bob's gate."

"Good evening, Miss Bessie. So jolly of you to let us come!"

"I am ever so glad to have you care to

come, boys. But come right in to the fire and dry those wet feet. Phil, I am glad to see you wore rubber boots."

"They're all full of snow where I fell down," answered Phil, as he struggled to pull them off. "Here, Bob, help a fellow, will you?"

And the boots came off with a jerk, while a shower of half-melted snow proved the truth of his statement.

As the lads drew their chairs to the fire and prepared to toast their toes, a moment must be given up to glancing at them, as they sit recounting to their hostess their varied experiences in the storm.

At her left hand sat Phil Cameron, a short, slight, delicate-looking boy of thirteen, whose gray eyes, large mouth, pug nose, and freckled face laughed from morning till night. Everybody liked Phil, and Phil liked everybody in return. His invariable good temper, and a certain headlong fashion he had of going into the interest of the moment, made him a favorite with the boys; while his elders admired him for his charming manners and his wonderful soprano voice, for he and Rob had the best

voices in the little village choir. Though not overwhelmed with too much conscience, Phil was a thoroughly good boy, and one that his teachers and older friends petted without knowing exactly why they did so.

Beyond him sat his great friend and boon companion in all their athletic games, Bert Walsh, the doctor's son, a lad whose poet's face, with its great, liquid brown eyes, and whose slow, deliberate speech, gave no indication of the force of character that lay below. Like Phil, he was fond of all out-of-door sports, but, unlike him, he was fond of books as well. A strong character, emphatic in its likes and dislikes, Bert's finest trait was his high sense of honor, that was evident in his every act.

On the other side of Bess was the minister's son, Teddy Preston, the oldest of eight children, a frank, healthy, happy boy, good and bad by turns, but irresistible even in his naughtiness. Brought up in a home where books and magazines were always at hand, though knees and toes might be a little shabby, Ted had contrived to pick up a vast amount of information about the world at large; and, added to that, he had

the happy faculty of telling all he knew. With an easy assurance he slipped along through life, never embarrassed, and taking occasional well-merited snubs so good-naturedly that his friends might have regretted giving them had they not known only too well that they slid off from his mind like the fabled water from a duck's back. A year younger than Phil, his yellow head towered far above him, and he outgrew his coats and trousers in a manner entirely incompatible with the relative sizes of the family circle to be clothed, and of the paternal salary. But Ted never minded that. He carried off his shabby clothes as easily as Bert did his perfectly fitting suits, and seemed in no way concerned about the difference.

A year older than any of the other lads was Sam Boeminghausen, a short, sturdy boy, a real German, blond, phlegmatic, and good-humored. But his light blue eyes had a look of determination that suggested that the day might come when Sam would be something or somebody. His father had recently made a large fortune in Western cattle-ranching, and, as yet, the family had not entirely adapted them-

selves to their new surroundings. Sam's grammar was erratic, and his expensive garments had the look of being made for another and a larger boy. But time would change that, and under the careless speech and rough manners Bess could see the possibilities of a glorious manhood.

On the floor at Bessie's feet sat our old friend Rob, poking the fire with the tongs. The light fell on his fine, soft, brown hair, delicate skin, and great, laughing dark eyes. Rob was the descendant of a long line of refined ancestors, a real little gentleman, and he showed it from the perfect nails on his small slim hands, brown as berries though they were, to the easy position in which he now sat, with one foot curled under him. A gentle, shy boy, affectionate and easily managed, he was an inveterate tease, and full of a quiet fun that sparkled in his eyes and laughed in his dimples.

But while we have been gazing at the five lads, all so different from one another, there was a sudden burst of applause as Bess rose, saying, —

“Now, boys, if you are all dry, I am going

to invite my company out into the kitchen. What do you say to making molasses candy and popcorn balls? It is just the night for it."

"That's just dandy!" exclaimed Ted, springing up with a force that sent his chair rolling back some inches.

"Ted, if you talk slang I sha'n't give you any to eat," said Bess laughingly. "But come, boys." And she led the way into the large kitchen, where her mother soon followed them with five large gingham aprons in which she proceeded to envelop the lads, in spite of their derisive comments.

"I am not going to have you spoil your clothes, children, for then your mothers will scold us. Now, if I can't help you, Bess, I am going to stay with Fuzz; and I leave you to do your worst."

"Don't go, Mrs. Carter," implored Ted, and the others echoed him; but Mrs. Carter was not to be bribed, even by Phil's noble offer to let her do his share of the work.

"I will eat your share of the candy, Phil, but I am going to stay with Mr. Carter and Fuzz. I'll come and look at you by and by." And,

drawing her white shawl around her, she was gone.

Bess quickly divided her forces. Rob and Ted were set to shelling the corn, while Phil and Bert scorched it and their faces at the same time. The impressive duty of stirring the molasses she reserved for herself, assisted at times by Sam.

For a short time all went well. But just as the bright new pan was nearly full of the white kernels, and the molasses was beginning to show its threads, a sudden determined bark was heard at the door, and the scratching of two active little paws. Then followed the sound of Mrs. Carter's voice in warning tones, —

“Fuzzy mustn't scratch the doors! No, no! Grandma 'pank.”

An instant's pause was succeeded by a fresh onslaught on the door by the small delinquent who scorned “grandma's” threats, having learned from past experiences that patience would carry the day.

“It's Fuzz,” said Rob. “Can't I let him in, Cousin Bess?”

“I wouldn't, Rob; he will be so in the way.”

Another assault followed, while the boys laughed irreverently as Mrs. Carter's voice was again heard, protesting, —

“Come here, Fuzz! Come to grandma! Mustn't scratch! Come play ball!”

“You'd better let him come,” said Bert, as he waved the corn-popper to and fro.

“I suspect I shall have to, if we are to get any peace. But you must all promise not to give him one bit of the candy if he comes; it always makes him sick. Now promise.”

“Yes, yes,” said the boys.

Rob, who was through with his labors, went to open the door, and Fuzz came rushing into the midst of the group, growling, squealing, and wagging his tail in his delight at having conquered, as usual.

Suddenly there was a crash, a yelp, and a cry of rage from Ted. The boys had set the full pan of corn into a chair. Fuzz, liking the flavor of popcorn as well as any boy, had gone to get some; and, standing with his forefeet on the edge of the dish, to eat at his leisure, he had tipped the pan, corn and all, over on the top of his curly head.

“Never mind, the floor looks clean. We’ll pick it up,” said Phil consolingly.

So the four boys dropped on their knees and began to collect the scattered kernels, eating industriously the while; and Bess, yielding the spoon to Sam, made futile attempts to catch Fuzz, who frisked about, now on Rob’s back, now rubbing back and forth under Ted’s nose.

The candy was finished and set out in the snow to cool, while ten hands were washed and buttered, ready to make the corn-balls and to pull the candy. Fuzz, meanwhile, had wandered back to the parlor.

“This is fine!” said Bert, scientifically rolling the balls into shape. “But what ails yours, Sam?”

“I don’t know,” replied that youth, as he patted and poked at a mass that insisted on sticking to his fingers, but obstinately refused to hold itself together. “It won’t stick to itself half as much as it does to me.”

“Why don’t you throw it away and start fresh?” was Phil’s suggestion.

“I can’t. It won’t throw.” And the boys

shouted, for Sam's tone was discouragement itself.

"Did you put enough butter on?" queried Bess, who stood at the other side of the room, working with Rob and Phil.

"Butter—No! I forgot to use any," replied Sam, with an accent of mild disgust.

"Isn't that candy outside 'most cold?" asked Ted anxiously. "I am afraid it will be covered up in the snow."

"I'll go see," said Bert, extricating himself.

He went outside, but reappeared announcing, "It's cool," as he displayed one of the platters in proof of his statement. "Isn't there another dish, Miss Bess?"

"Two more, Bert, one platter and the little deep plate. You know there was just a little left, and I put it in there. They are right where the other was."

"I'll go and help him look," and Sam departed, glad of a chance to scrape off the sticky compound on his fingers.

The platter soon came to light, but the boys reported the small plate as missing.

"I don't see where it can have gone," said

Bess. "But never mind. Come in before you freeze, boys."

The next moment, screams of hysterical laughter were heard from the parlor, and Mr. Carter opened the kitchen door, saying, —

"Just see here a minute."

The boys ran into the next room, and Bess followed, to find Mrs. Carter lying back in her chair, while tears of mirth ran down her cheeks. Before her sat Fuzz, the image of dejection and shame, with the long, soft locks about his nose and mouth smeared and stiffened with the fast-drying molasses until they resembled so many dingy spines. As the boys came in, with a sheepish wag of his tail, he sat up straight and deprecatingly waved two little forepaws, one of which was caught and held fast in the missing dish of candy.

As soon as any one could speak, the mystery was explained. Fuzz had teased to go out of doors, and his master, not thinking of the candy, had let him have his own way. He found the candy, promenaded across the small platter once or twice, and then settled himself for a feast, unmindful of the fact that, while he

was eating, one paw, resting on the soft candy in the little dish, was rapidly sinking down into it. By the time his appetite was satisfied, the cold had hardened the candy until the foot was held fast. Just then he heard Bert coming out, and, with a startled yelp and a clatter, Master Fuzz guiltily fled, plate and all, to the front steps, where his master had let him in. While Bess and the boys finished the candy, now almost too hard to pull, Mrs. Carter took the dog in hand and, after many trials, succeeded in freeing him from his trap.

Then five sticky but very happy lads, each with a piece of adhesive candy, settled themselves around the fire once more, with Bess in their midst.

“Only half an hour more we can stay,” sighed Ted, who was luxuriously seated in the wood-basket. “It’s been an immense lark, Miss Bess!”

“Yes,” said Phil, trying to let go of his candy, while he put on the slipper that Rob had just knocked from his toe where he was balancing it, “this is the best fun I’ve had since Christmas.”

“Is it still snowing?” asked Bess.

“Yes,” said Bert. “It will spoil all the skating. The snow has held off so long, but it has come to stay.”

“It will be just dandy coasting, though,” said Ted.

“Teddy,” interrupted Bess, “if you say ‘dandy’ again, I’ll take your candy away from you. I’ll tell you, boys, let’s form an anti-slang society; I really think you use too much for the parlor. It is well enough if you must have a little on the ball-field, but I don’t like it in the house, so much of it.”

“But, Miss Bess,” urged Phil, “if we use it in our games we can’t stop, and the first we know it just comes out, whatever we are doing.”

“Then drop it entirely, if it must be so. You boys don’t want to hear me say, ‘I’ll bet,’ and ‘dandy,’ and ‘bully,’ now do you?”

“I hain’t never used any of them words,” said Sam, raising his head with a proud consciousness of innocence.

Ted and Phil glanced at each other, and Rob’s eyes looked wicked, but he never moved a muscle.

It was Bert who came to the rescue.

“What a shame Fred couldn’t be here, Miss Bess! We fellows miss him awfully.”

“I’ll tell him you said so, Bert. He will be glad enough to know it, for he has such a dread of his old place getting filled, as time goes on.”

“Why didn’t he come?” asked Phil, turning his corn-ball from side to side, to see where to take the next bite.

“I knew it would be no use to ask him,” Bess replied. “I think you boys would be so good for him, but he dreads to see you.”

“I went there twice,” remarked Ted from his basket, “but the girl said he had told her not to let any one see him but you and Bob. He was such a jolly lad that I just want to see him again. Has he changed any, Miss Bessie?”

“Very little, Ted,” answered Bess. “Now, if you will get up long enough to let me have a stick for the fire, then I propose we have some games while you stay. What shall it be?”

Dumb crambo carried the day, and Bess, Ted, and Rob were chosen as actors. In the midst of an elaborate dental scene, where Rob extracted a tooth with the tongs, and filled

another with hammer and chisel, the clock struck nine, and Sam started up.

“I must go home,” he said reluctantly.

“Must you go, Sam?” asked Bess, and Ted added, —

“Oh, stay just ten minutes more. We’ll be through this word then.”

“I’d like to,” said Sam wistfully, “but I told father I’d leave at nine. You boys can stay if you want to, but I must go.”

“I am sorry you have to leave us, Sam,” said Bess; “but you are right, if you promised your father. Are you all going?” For the others had trooped to the door.

“I must,” said Bert, and the others joined him.

There was a great sorting-out of overcoats and hats, and Phil’s feet were with difficulty stowed away in his rubber boots.

“Good-night, Miss Bess; I’ve had a dandy time,” said Ted, with a wink.

“You have given us a very pleasant evening,” said Sam, with a flourish that was intended to be easy and graceful; while Phil added, —

“Tell Fred to come next time.”

“ Good-night ! good-night ! ” screamed a chorus, as they darted out into the snow, where Phil at once stumbled and fell into a drift, from which he was pulled by Rob and Bert.

Bess returned to the parlor fire and sat down on the rug, while Fuzz, his paw now freed from his candy, climbed into her lap and imprinted sticky caresses on her nose. As she sat there, thinking over her boys, her mother joined her.

“ Well, Bessie, has it been a success ? ”

“ I should think so ! How funny the boys are ! Ted will wear me out with his constant ‘ dandy ; ’ that is his great word now. But Rob is the boy of them all. Mother, next time I’ll have Fred here, if I have to bring him by force. ”

“ I wish you could. Would it do any good to ask him up here for a day or two ? I shouldn’t mind him in the least, and it might be a change for him. ”

“ I wish he would come. That house is the worst place for him. His parents neglect him, the servants coddle him, and he tyrannizes over them all. He needs a good, wholesome, every-day atmosphere. ”

“Try to get him to come, then,” said Mrs. Carter. “I really should like to have him here, and if you can give the time to him, it will be real mission work.”

“I’ll try,” said Bess, “but I fear me. Oh, mother!” And, lying back on the rug, she laughed hysterically.

“Well?”

“That Sam Boeminghausen will be the death of me! To-night he had a piece, a large piece of candy in his hand when I passed the corn-balls. Instead of taking one in his other hand, he coolly replied: ‘Just wait till I git this down.’ And he actually kept me standing there while he deliberately devoured his candy.”

“Bess!”

“It’s a fact, and I was left speechless.”

“After all,” said Mrs. Carter meditatively, “I rather like the boy’s idea. He was going to make a ‘clean sweep,’ as Teddy would say, and not have any scraps left over. And I did think his going home when he wanted so much to stay was really heroic.”

A yelp from Fuzz cut short the conversation.

CHAPTER V.

WALKS AND TALKS.

IT was one of the mild, warm days that, even in the midst of winter, come to our New England coast towns. The snow had all melted, and the mud had dried away, while here and there patches of grass showed a green almost like that of summer. Over the leafless trees the sun shone warm and bright.

Bess Carter slowly came down the steps of her home with Fuzz before her, tugging at his lead. Half-way to the gate she raised her eyes from a refractory glove button, and saw her little cousin coming towards her. His hat was pulled down over his eyes, his hands plunged deep into his pockets, and his very walk expressive of some deep determination. Absorbed in his meditation, he did not notice his cousin until Fuzz gave a shrill bark of recognition. Then he looked up, saw her, and took off his hat, but scowled vindictively the while. Bess

saw that something was wrong, and, as Rob had started to spend the afternoon with Fred, she surmised that there had been another quarrel.

“Well, Robin, my boy, is anything the matter?” she asked cheerfully.

“No, only I’m not going to see Fred again in a hurry, and I guess he knows it,” Rob replied, stopping and putting both elbows on the fence, preparatory to a conversation.

“What has happened, Rob? I don’t see why you boys always come to grief. Fred is pleasant enough to me.”

“Maybe he is,” said Rob half sulkily. “I s’pose I’m the one to blame.”

“Tell me all about it, Robin,” said Bess. “I know Fred is cross sometimes, but just think how hard it all is for him, this being shut up by himself.”

“He needn’t be shut up if he doesn’t want to,” said Rob impatiently. “It’s his own fault, if he won’t see the boys.”

“Oh, Rob, don’t be so hard on him!”

“Well, I know, but he needn’t be so uncommonly cross, then. I’m sorry for him, but I just won’t go there any more.”

“What was the trouble to-day?” asked Bess, leaving the question of future visits to be settled later.

“Why, nothing, only Fred asked something about Bert, and I said something or other about the polo game. Fred began to ask all about it, and so I told him. He seemed so interested, but all of a sudden he stopped and said, ‘Bob Atkinson, I wish you’d keep away from here!’ And I didn’t know what the matter was, so I asked him. He said, ‘You always do say the meanest things, and I wish you wouldn’t come any more. You’re always round in the way.’ And then I flared up. I didn’t mean to, cousin Bess, but I’d stayed home from the polo game just to go to see him, and I was awful mad. A fellow can’t stand everything, and I’d only just answered his questions.”

“I know, Rob. But, you see, only a year ago Fred was in all these good times, and I suppose it was more than he could bear, to hear about them, when he knew he couldn’t have any of the fun.”

“What did he ask about it for, then?”

“He probably did want to hear it all, only it

was too much for him. He ought not to be so irritable, I know, Rob; but I want you to go round in a day or two and 'make up.' You can afford to be forgiving, when you think how much more you have than he does. And then, Fred does deserve a great deal of credit, for he rarely complains."

"Yes," assented Rob, "but he's no end cross. But I'll go, cousin Bess. Where are you going now?"

"Just for a walk. It is so pleasant I couldn't stay in the house. Come with me if you've nothing else on hand."

"May I?" Rob's face brightened.

"Take Fuzz while I button my gloves, please. Where shall we go?"

"Let's take the woods road to the shore," said Rob eagerly. "There's lots more things to see that way."

The "woods road" was a charming walk, that mild January day. On one side rose, tall and straight, the glorious old oaks and chestnuts, and through their branches capered whole families of red squirrels, whose antics and chattering nearly drove Fuzz to frenzy. On

the other side lay the pretty, open fields, with their bunches of corn stalks, and their low, irregular fences. It was a favorite drive, but footpath there was none, so Rob and Bess were forced to wander along the middle of the road, turning aside occasionally to let a carriage pass them, while Fuzz barked defiance at its occupants.

“Cousin Bess,” asked Rob, “you know when birds fly south in winter, they go straight; how do you s’pose they know the way?”

“I don’t know, I am sure, Rob. Perhaps they remember from year to year.”

“I don’t believe they do. How fast do you suppose they fly? I’ve watched them lots of times, and they go so fast — Here, Fuzz!” as the dog made a dash towards a dignified goat that was lurching on a dead blackberry vine by the wayside.

“Sha’n’t I lead him, Rob? He must tire you.”

“Not a bit. He’s strong, though. How much could he pull, I wonder? My teacher told me the other day that no animal could pull

more than its own weight. Do you believe that, cousin Bess?"

"What an idea, Rob! You must have misunderstood Miss Witherspoon. Just think of the loads of coal that horses draw, and the crowded street cars."

"Yes, but she doesn't know much, anyhow," said Rob, with a lofty scorn that amused his cousin, who secretly shared his opinion. "But do you know what lots of turtles grow up in there?" and Rob pointed in among the trees. "I had six all at once last summer, and we used to set them to running races. It was hard work to make them go straight ahead, though."

"Rob," asked Bess, "why don't you be a naturalist? I think you might be a good one."

"Would you?" And Rob waited for his cousin's reply as anxiously as if his choice of profession must be made on the spot.

"You are too young yet to tell; but you seem to like such things, and you keep your eyes wide open when you are out of doors. I don't know why you couldn't be trained for it."

“I like birds and things, and I’ve watched them a good deal, and then I like to be round out of doors. But I don’t care much to read about them; I’d rather just look at pictures, and then see for myself.”

“But a good naturalist must study and read, as well as watch.”

As Bess spoke they stepped out on the smooth, dry sand of the beach that stretched beyond them to the right and left in the form of a crescent, one of whose horns bore the white lighthouse, while the other ended in a pine grove. Before them, the little waves danced up and down in the sun, that was turning their green water to a living, moving gold, while here and there the white gulls rode smoothly on the water, or whirled above it in their flight. Across the harbor lay the crowded, fantastic cottages and the large hotel of the summer colony, now deserted and forlorn; while close at hand rose three or four rough, jagged rocks, with a narrow strip of sand connecting them with the beach.

“Let’s go out to the Black Rocks,” suggested Rob. “Maybe we can find some starfish. I

want to get a live one and watch him crawl with his little sucker feet.”

Bess followed the boy's lead, and soon they were scrambling over the rough, slippery surface of the rocks, that, at high tide, were nearly covered with water. Fuzz dashed through all the little pools left by the last tide, and was soon absorbed in worrying a large snail that had injudiciously poked its head out of its shell.

Rob had vanished from sight, but he soon reappeared with scratched hands, and triumphantly asked, —

“Like raw oysters, cousin Bess?” as he threw half a dozen shells at her feet.

“What fun, Robin! Where did you get them?” asked Bess, as, unmindful of her years and dignity, she sat down on the slimy rock, and with a small stone tried to pry open the shells.

“You'll have to smash them,” said Rob, as with one scientific blow he crushed the shell, removed the fragments, and offered the oyster to his cousin.

“What an original idea!” she said, laughing,

as she took it. "I didn't know we were going to have an oyster supper, Rob."

As a frolic, it was a great success; but as a meal it would hardly have satisfied a ravenous appetite. Oysters were small and scarce, though Rob succeeded in finding quite a number. Then, too, the operation of opening them was attended with some difficulty, which was increased by Fuzz, who persisted in running away with the oysters that were laid by in reserve. But the rapidly sinking sun and the rising tide warned Bess that it was high time to think of a return; so Rob was forced to abandon his search for more food, and they turned their faces homeward.

As they came into the village again, Bess said, —

"I must just stop a moment at Fred's. Will you come too? He is coming up to-morrow to stay till Monday, and I want to tell him what time I'll go down after him."

"Whew!" Rob vented his feelings in a long whistle. "However'd you get him started? I'll go with you, though."

"He didn't want to come, when I first pro-

posed it; but now he quite likes the idea. You must come up and help entertain him, for I have no idea what I shall do with him for three days."

"What'll you do with Fuzz, take him in?" queried Rob, as they turned in at the Allens' gate.

"No, I will just tie him to the piazza rail," answered Bess. "He would only trouble Fred."

So Fuzz was left to wail his heart out on the front steps, while Bess, according to her usual custom, went directly in, without the formality of ringing the bell.

Fred was sitting alone by the fire, moodily pulling to pieces a tea-rose bud. At Bessie's step he rose and came to meet her, with his usual eager smile; but as he heard the sound of another person, he drew back again and waited.

"It's me, Fred," said Rob's voice. "I came to tell you I was sorry I made you mad."

"Oh, Bob, I'm glad you've come back! I was horrid."

And the reconciliation was complete.

Bessie's errand was quickly accomplished, for Fuzz was testing the hardness of the front door, and it seemed prudent to withdraw before he forced a passage through one of the panels. So, promising to come down again the next afternoon, to superintend the moving, the two cousins took their departure.

The next afternoon saw Fred settled in the Carters' parlor, with Fuzz asleep at his feet. The little animal, after his first resentment of this intrusion on the family circle, seemed to realize that Fred needed his especial care and protection. He attached himself to the boy's side, whining gently for attention, and occasionally giving a pleading scratch with his little paw, when the desired petting failed to be given. His snappish ways were laid aside, and he even allowed Dominie Sampson, the collie, to come and rub against Fred, without giving vent to a single snarl.

When the carriage stopped at the door, and Bess had led the boy into the house, Mrs. Carter had met him with a motherly kindness that made him feel at home with her at once. Fred could not see the tears that came into her

eyes at sight of the change in him, but the warm kiss on his cheek, and the gentle "We are so glad to have you here," told the story.

Those three days were the beginning of a new life to Fred. At home, he had moped and meditated. His parents, by their every word, reminded him of his trouble, and made him feel in countless little ways, well meant though they were, that he was not like other boys, not what he used to be. Here it was all so different. Beyond the little necessary help that Bess gave him so easily and pleasantly, there was nothing to suggest to him his blindness. Bess read to him, played simple memory games with him, or, with his hand drawn through her arm, they walked up and down the long hall, talking and laughing gayly, while Fuzz tagged at their heels. He held Mrs. Carter's skein of yarn while she wound it, and in many little ways began to live more like a natural boy, less like a wax doll.

The evenings were the pleasantest times. Then Mr. and Mrs. Carter were deep in their cribbage, by the lamp; and Bess sat in a low chair in front of the crackling fire, with Fred

on the rug at her feet, one arm in her lap, and his head on his arm, while she stroked his hair, and told him all sorts of bright, merry stories about the places and people that she had seen. For Bess had travelled through nearly every State in the Union, and had observed and remembered much that she had seen, so, with the flashes of fun and bits of pathos that she knew so well how to give to her descriptions, she was no mean story-teller.

But the three days were soon over, and on Sunday, the last day of Fred's visit, the gathering twilight found him pacing up and down the room with Bess, now talking, now taking a few turns in silence.

Suddenly Bess said, —

“Fred, you are going to church with me to-night.”

“Oh, no, Miss Bess! Please not!”

“Yes, Fred, I want you to escort me down. It is ever so long since you have heard the boys sing, and you have no idea how they have improved. We will go early, if you say so, and get all settled before many people get there, but I want you to go with me. The service is

short and won't tire you, and it will be a good ending for our pleasant little visit together."

"Must I go, Miss Bessie? Well, I will," replied the boy with unwonted meekness. Then he suddenly added, "Oh, how I hate to go away to-morrow!"

"Has the visit been a success?" asked Bess, as they went into the parlor and she guided Fred to his favorite chair.

"Yes, I've had such a good time, and you've all been so kind to me! Time doesn't seem half so long, and I don't feel near so cross and tired here, as I do at home. I wish mother liked to do things with me half as well as you do." And Fred's face looked worn and troubled.

"She has so many other things to see to," said Bess soothingly, "and I shall be down often. But, Fred, are you cross every time you feel like it?"

Fred blushed.

"I'm afraid I am, Miss Bess. I am sorry afterwards, but, in the time of it, I don't think. You see, I can't do anything at all, and when things go wrong, it seems worse than ever, and the first I know, I've said it."

“Just like Fuzz,” said Bess, as the dog raised his head from his basket, and gave a low, angry growl at the Dominie, who entered the room. “I know it is hard for you, Fred, when things go wrong, to be good-natured, but I want you to try as much as you can. I think you would be better off if you had some regular occupation, something to do with yourself.”

“What is there?” asked the boy hopelessly.

“I am not quite sure; let me think it over. But come, we must have our dinner, and be ready for church.”

As the procession of surpliced boys advanced up the middle aisle, Rob, who always came in with one eye on his cousin's seat, nearly dropped his book in astonishment, for at her side stood Fred, motionless and rather pale, his great brown eyes turned towards the chancel, his whole air and attitude suggestive of patient, anxious waiting. With a comically expressive glance at Bess, Rob passed on. A few steps back of him, leading the men, Bess noticed a new chorister whose boyish face, under a mass of curly brown hair, was striking from its delicate outlines, and told of a refined, happy nature.

The service went on much like all services. Fred mechanically rose and sat down with the rest, but Bess could see that the familiar words were making no impression on his mind. She had been glad that he could not see the expressive nudges and glances exchanged as, drawing his hand through her arm, she led him up the aisle to her usual seat. Once there, he shrank into a corner, just as some too audible words met his ear: —

“What’s the matter with that boy in front?”

“Blind, and always will be. A peculiar case, started from St. Vitus’s Dance. Isn’t it too bad? One of our best families.”

“Who’s the girl? His sister?”

“No, only a friend. She’s perfectly devoted to him, they say.”

Bess looked anxiously down at him, to see how he bore these comments. He pressed his lips tightly together, and the hot blood rushed to his face and then back, leaving it white and still. She put her hand on his reassuringly, and felt the answering pressure. That was all; but for the first time Fred had heard himself talked over by strangers as a case likely to

attract attention on all sides, wherever he went. In time it would not hurt him so much, but now — it was a bitter thought that his infirmity could not pass unnoticed. He wondered if all the people around him were watching him. Perhaps they were all whispering about him, only more softly. And they would look to see how he acted, whether he was awkward, and if he seemed sad. If he could only know just how many eyes were turned on him! Miss Bess had no idea how hard it was for him, or she would never have asked him to come. And Rob and Phil and the other boys, had they looked surprised to see him there?

Poor Fred! Had he but known that, except for Bess and Rob, who was watching in pity his friend's white, sad face, not a person in the church had a thought of him, now the service had begun! But what was the rector saying? — “The words of the anthem will be found” — And there was to be an anthem, then; Rob did say something about it. “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth.” — What was that whisper? Some one calling attention to “poor Fred Allen”? But Miss Bess was

rising, and he must too. He felt her small gloved hand rest lightly on his, as it lay on the rail in front of him, and he drew closer to her side — one friend who would not talk him over and wonder about him.

But the few notes on the organ were over, and then a voice filled the church, a rich, mellow tenor, now rising till the arches rang with its clear, high tones, now falling to a dreamy quiet, half covered by the sound of the organ. It was the new chorister. Standing there in the full glare of the gas that shone down on his innocent, boyish face, he seemed to be singing from very love of it, so simply and easily, as if the truth and dignified beauty of the words were filling his soul and insisting on utterance. “In the days of thy youth, when the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh.” Fred stood as if in a trance, listening to the wonderful voice, forgetful of the faces about him, forgetful even of his blindness. “While the sun, or the light, or the moon, or the stars be not darkened.” Then the voice grew low and sad: “And fears shall be in the way;” but again it rose triumphant, at the last hopeful burst:

“And the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.”

“Just look at Fred Allen!” whispered Rob to his neighbor, as they sat down, and the congregation drew a long breath after their eager listening, and turned to congratulate each other on the rich musical treat.

The boy seemed transfigured. With his head thrown up, his lips parted, and his cheeks flushed, he seemed held by the singer's intense feeling. But the voice died away, and he came back to a consciousness of the place where he was, and of the cloud that darkened for him the sun and the light.

“Who was it?” asked Bess, as Rob came up to where they still sat, waiting for him.

“Who? That tenor? He's a friend of Mr. Washburn, and sings in one of the large churches in New York. He just knows how to sing, too! Coming home now?”

Rob was looking unusually handsome as he stood there. His love of music, and the hearty way he joined in the singing, seemed to excite him, and it brought a bright color to his cheeks and a glow into his brown eyes. As the two

boys stood together, they made a strong contrast; Rob so delicately, nervously alive, quick, active, and full of quiet, happy fun; and Fred slower in his motions, now more than ever, and with a solid, sturdy strength that was little suggestive of his helplessness, while his face and manner were so sad and subdued. With a quick glance as she rose, Bess noted the difference in the faces, and rejoiced at the tact beyond his years that Rob showed as he guided his friend down the aisle and out into the starry night.

“How good the boys are for each other,” she thought. “I wish they might be together more than they are. Fred brings out all Rob’s chivalry and unselfishness, while Rob stirs him up and keeps him alive.”

CHAPTER VI.

FRED'S NEW HOME.

"REALLY, James," said Mrs. Allen, with a yawn, "I've half a mind to go with you."

"I wish you could, my dear," said her husband, after a puff or two at his cigar. "But what could we do with Fred?"

"That's the trouble. You know you promised you would take me the next time you went, for I have never been. Couldn't we put him in an asylum?"

"I don't think we could," said Mr. Allen decidedly. "I should never feel it was right to leave him in one, and go off to enjoy ourselves."

"I don't see why not," pouted his wife. "He would have every care, and the best of teaching. It's awfully inconvenient having him here, and" —

"Hush!" said Mr. Allen sharply. "The doors are all open, and he may not be asleep."

Don't let the boy hear you say that. He has the worst of the trouble."

"I know," said his wife meekly, for when Mr. Allen spoke in that tone, she knew it was time to obey; "I only thought if he would be as well off in some institution, and leave us a little more free, it would be a good thing. This care is wearing on me terribly."

"Poor Fred! He's a good boy," observed his father; "and I think he has shown some pluck the last few months."

"Well, he has had everything possible done for him," said Mrs. Allen, as she drew a vase of hyacinths towards her, and began to rearrange them.

"I wish we could plan to have you go with me," Mr. Allen went on. "I was going last summer, and only waited till Fred was better. I must go now, at once; and if you could come, if we had somewhere to leave Fred, we would stay over a year and make a complete tour, take a run to Egypt, and go up to Norway."

"I certainly must go. To begin with, think of me alone here with just that boy, morbid as he is! I should be insane."

“We might take him with us,” suggested Mr. Allen.

“James! The very idea! I’d rather stay at home than go through Europe tied to a blind boy. I should never have a moment to myself.”

“Why couldn’t he board at the Carters’?”

“The very thing! Fred had such a good time there three weeks ago! He would be so happy, and Bessie is very good to him. I really think he considers her as a sort of mother.”

“Well he may,” said Mr. Allen. “We owe that girl a debt we can never repay. But I wonder if they would take Fred. They have never had boarders, and he would be a great deal of care.”

“Not so much,” said his wife, shifting her ground to suit the new question at issue. “He could have Mary go with him to wait on him. You can arrange it, I know. You send them a note to-morrow, and if they will take him, I will be ready to sail—let me see, this is Wednesday. I will be ready next Wednesday.”

“I will try to arrange it,” said her husband

thoughtfully. "But I do hope they won't feel I am asking too much. When I think of it, to placidly request that they take an invalid and his servant to board for a year, is a good deal."

"Nonsense!" said Mrs. Allen. "You can pay them well; and, really, James, if Fred would only rouse himself, he would be as well as ever. He makes a good deal out of his blindness."

"Why, Louise, what do you mean? I have never heard him complain."

"No, he doesn't complain, exactly, but just lies on the sofa, and doesn't care for anything or anybody, and when I try to comfort him, he turns away his face and won't say anything. But I'm sleepy. I'm going to bed; and you just write that note to-night, so they will get it to-morrow, surely." And she went away, leaving her husband to muse over his cigar, in the light of the dying fire.

His wife was trying, at times. Years ago he had married a pretty little society girl, not so much because he loved her as that he wished a suitable head for his pleasant suburban home. Socially, Louise Allen fulfilled all the require-

ments; but her husband often longed for a companion, but found none in the selfish, wayward woman who presided over his household.

“Poor little Fred!” he thought, as he sat there. “I am afraid the boy has had a hard life of it. Louise doesn’t mean to neglect him, but she has so much else on her hands. I wonder what it’s like, anyway.” And leaning back in his chair he closed his eyes for two or three minutes, and then opened them, with a shudder, on the brightly lighted room. “It must be awful, sure enough, to be in such darkness. Well, I hope the Carters can take him in. He will be contented there. Louise ought to consider him a little more.” But the thought never occurred to him that he, James Allen, could ever spend an evening at home, giving up his club or theatre, to entertain the boy, as much his son as the son of Louise.

The next evening, Mr. Carter came in with a letter, which he handed to his wife. She took it, read a few lines, and uttered an exclamation.

“What is it?” asked Bess, looking up from the game of dominoes she was playing with Rob.

"It is from Mr. Allen," answered her mother. "I will give it to you as soon as I finish it."

"From Mr. Allen? How queer! Go on, Rob, it is your turn."

"See what you think," said Mrs. Carter, giving Bess the letter.

Bess read it hastily, looked at her mother, and then read it again, slowly and thoughtfully.

"Well?" asked her mother.

"Why, I'm not the one to decide," said Bess.

"What's up?" inquired Rob.

"Mr. Allen is going abroad for a year, and takes his wife with him," explained Mrs. Carter, "and he wants" —

"Cousin Bess to go too?" interrupted Rob so disconsolately that they all laughed.

"Console yourself, my dear little cousin," said Bess. "He only wants us to take Fred to board."

In his secret heart, Rob thought that was almost as bad. With Fred here all the time, good-by to his pleasant walks and games with his cousin. He was silent, but Bess read his thought.

“Don’t worry, Robin, the house is plenty large enough for two boys, and I’ll not let Fred cut you out.”

Mr. Allen’s note was the perfection of tact. He spoke of his invalid son, whose happiest hours were spent with the friend that had done so much to brighten his dark life; he regretted the pressing business which called him abroad just then, but Mrs. Allen’s health, much shaken by sorrow for her son, demanded a change and freedom from care. He went on to suggest very delicately that it would be a great accommodation if Fred might board with them; that Mary would be at hand to wait on him, to free them from any restraint, while she could either board with them or come in at certain hours; and, finally, that he should expect them to call on his coachman with perfect freedom, during his absence.

“What do you think of it, Bess?” asked her mother again.

“Why, mother, you must decide. I am not the one.”

“Yes, you are,” replied her mother, “for it will make more difference to you than to the

rest of us. Fred would be largely under your care. Are you strong enough to go through it? ”

“I think I am,” said Bess slowly. “I should like him here, if you and father don't object. The boy has to learn all over again the very A B C of living, and he has no one to teach him but us. Only, I don't want Mary.”

“Who would take care of Fred, to give him what help he needs?” asked Mr. Carter.

“I would,” responded Bess promptly. “He doesn't need much, and it will be less every day. Mary would be only an extra care and worry. She would be half servant, half companion, and that would just upset Bridget. We don't want her round in the way.”

“I think you are right,” said her mother. “But think this over carefully, Bess. If you don't feel equal to it, don't try. I shall not be able to do much, and it will make a great care for you.”

“I know it, mother; but I think I can go through with it. Fred will be happy with us, and Rob will help me with him, won't you, dear? ”

“One thing more, Bess,” said her father seriously. “If you start on this, you must make up your mind not to give up all your time to the boy, even if he does want you. You must go out, and walk, and make calls, as much as ever. You are not going to turn hermit for a year in your devotion to one small boy, however much good you may do him. And it would not do him good, either. He must grow self-reliant and unselfish, and not feel that he must be amused and waited on every moment.”

As if to add his opinion to the family discussion, Fuzz, whose attention was caught by the serious tones of their voices, jumped out of his basket, and, coming to the side of his mistress, sat up on his haunches, and waved his small paws in the air, as he swayed unsteadily from side to side in his eagerness.

“What is it, Fuzz?” asked Rob, leaning over to pat his head.

Fuzz only replied with a snarl so emphatic that it showed his very back teeth, and then turned again to Bess, and raised his paws higher than ever.

“Bess, that dog grows crosser every day,”

said her mother. "You really ought to give him a hard whipping for snapping at Rob like that. What will Fred do, with such a cross animal about?"

"He liked Fred, and if he is let alone I don't think there will be any trouble," said Bess, ready to take up the cudgels in defence of her pet. "I don't think he feels well to-night; he never snapped at Rob before."

"Fuzzy is a bad dog! Come here to grand-ma," said Mrs. Carter in slow, measured tones, as she glared at the dog, who looked in her face for a moment, and then turned his head away with a prodigious yawn. "Children, you must not laugh. He never will mind then. Well, Bess, what do you think? Shall we let Fred come?"

"Yes, I should like it so much, unless it would be unpleasant for you and father. You know I threatened once before to adopt him. Does he want to come?"

"They haven't, Mr. Allen says, told him anything about their plans, until they could settle on something. Will you write to Mr. Allen, then?"

“Yes, I will write this evening. But come, Rob, we’ve time for just one more game.”

The note was written, and the next evening Mr. Allen called to arrange for Fred’s coming four days later. The boy was to be left in the care of Bess, on whose judgment Mr. Allen felt he could rely. After an hour spent in discussing various minor details, Mr. Allen said, as he rose to go, —

“We have said nothing to Fred as yet, Miss Carter, about this; so suppose you tell him, that is, if you can spend time to-morrow to come down for a few moments. And, in case I do not have time to call again, I will say now how much Mrs. Allen and I feel indebted to you for taking our son into your home.”

And with a stately bow he was gone. “Did you ever see such an old iceberg!” remarked Bess disrespectfully, as she returned to the parlor fire to thaw herself out. “Between him and Mrs. Allen I should think Fred would be thankful for any change. Next Tuesday! Well, there’s a good deal to be done between now and then. Shall you worry, mother, with a new son on your hands?”

“Not at all,” said her mother heartily. “He is not my property, anyway; though if I see you going very wrong, I shall put in my word.”

“Oh, do!” said Bess. “I feel half terrified at the thought of my responsibility. Still, I think that, at least, I shall do as well as Mrs. Allen.”

The next afternoon Fred lay stretched on the sofa in an unusually dismal mood. The whole house was in a bustle; his mother and Mary had been up-stairs all day, rummaging through closets and drawers, with not a moment to spare for him; the fire had gone out in the grate, and there was no one near to build him another; and, worst of all, Miss Bess had not been near him for four days, while Rob had not been down for two weeks. Everybody had forgotten him, and he wished he could forget himself. Oh, for something to do! With nothing but eating and sleeping to break the monotony, life was so dull. He envied the man whom he heard shovelling coal into a neighbor's cellar. He could fancy just how he stooped and gave his shovel a powerful push,

raised it with one swing of his strong arms, and tossed it down into the opening before him; only stopping occasionally to wipe his forehead on his grimy sleeve. Fred felt to-day that he would give up all his comfortable home, just to change places with that man for one little hour, and be able to see and work.

“Lost in ‘maiden meditation,’ Fred?” asked Bessie’s voice at his side.

The boy sprang up with a glad cry.

“Oh, Miss Bess! I didn’t hear you come in. How glad I am you are here!”

“I mustn’t stay but a moment,” said Bess, as she sat down on a mussy pile of pillows and afghan. “How is your mother?”

“She’s well; but she’s awfully busy,” replied Fred, leaning on the back of a chair, with his chin in his hands. “I don’t know just what is up, but I haven’t seen her since breakfast — at least, she hasn’t been here,” he added hastily, for he was gradually giving up the old-time expression.

“I can tell you, if you wish to know,” said Bess quietly. “She is going to Europe next Wednesday with your father.”

Fred's face became so blank with astonishment that she hastily went on.

“But you are not going to be left here to keep bachelor's hall, nor to go with them. Instead, what do you say to coming to our house?”

There was no doubt of the answer. Too happy to speak, Fred dropped on the sofa, and turned his face to Bess, while a bright flush rose in his cheeks. At last he said, —

“Is it really true, Miss Bess? Can I? May I? It's too jolly!”

“So you like the idea? Can you stand it for a year, and not get homesick?”

“Homesick?” echoed Fred in lofty scorn. “I guess not! When can I come? Did you say a year?”

“You are to come next Tuesday afternoon at four o'clock, and you are to stay about a year. And now I must run away home again, for I have ever so much to do. But, first, let me straighten out this sofa. What a muss! Get up a moment.”

And Bessie shook up the pillows, folded the afghan, took Fred by his shoulders and put

him back in the old place, and was gone. At the gate she was met by her attendant, Rob.

“What did he say?” inquired that youth, as she reappeared.

“Not very much, but I don’t think he objected.”

The next two days were as busy to Bess as they were long to Fred, who no longer envied the coal-heaver. A room adjoining Bessie’s was to be given up to the boy, and she took much care and pleasure in arranging it.

“I feel just like a child with a new doll,” she told her mother. “I want this room to be just as pretty and inviting as if Fred could see it.”

By Tuesday noon, the room was ready, even to the tiny vase on the table, holding one pink rosebud.

“Boys do care for such things, though they don’t say much about it,” Bess told her mother and Rob, whom she had invited to inspect the results of her labors. “That sofa is my especial delight, though,” she added, pointing to the broad, old-fashioned couch between two western windows, where Fuzz lay serenely asleep on one of the cushions. “That can be Fred’s

growlery, where he can retire whenever he feels cross. I trust he won't use it often."

Two hours later, as the carriage came up the drive, Mrs. Carter stood waiting on the steps, while Bess ran out to meet Fred. The boy, clinging to Bessie's arm, came slowly up to the door.

"Welcome to your new home, Fred," said Mrs. Carter's voice.

And he answered as he gave her gentle face a great boyish kiss, —

"It's just splendid to come."

CHAPTER VII.

“AND WHEN THE FIGHT IS FIERCE.”

AFTER a week or two spent in making Fred feel at home and settled in his new quarters, Bess suggested her next plan. It was after church one Sunday night, and Bess was sitting with her hat still on, by the parlor fire, while Fred and the Dominie were in a promiscuous pile on the rug, where Fred had been eagerly listening for the familiar step on the walk outside. Since he had been at the Carters', he had lost much of his fretful look, and seemed better and brighter in every way. Mrs. Carter petted him, and talked with him, giving him many little hints of the way in which he might even yet be a useful, happy man; while her husband laughed and joked with him, and occasionally teased him a little. But, after all, it was neither gentle Mrs. Carter, nor her genial husband, to whom the boy turned for

advice and sympathy in every question that came up. To him, Miss Bess was the one person in the world, and well might he feel so, for she was most unselfishly kind to him. From the moment when, on leaving his room in the morning, he met her at the door, ready to guide him down the unfamiliar stairs, until, after he was all in bed, she came in to say a last good-night, she was constant in her attentions to him, and adapted herself to his every mood, bright and full of fun when he was blue, encouraging when he was despondent, and with apparently nothing to do but read to him or talk with him. When she went out, as she did nearly every afternoon, she always came in with some amusing adventure or bit of boy news to tell him; and while she was gone, he spent the time petting the dogs, and counting the moments until her return. When her step was heard, he always started to the door, and, as she reached it, he opened it before her, and stood smiling up at her as she closed it, and, with an arm around his shoulders, swung him about, and marched him back to the fire. And Bess learned to watch for this greeting, and stepped more

heavily as she came up the walk. Adoration, even from a child, is pleasant to have.

To-night, as Bess sat there with Fuzz in her lap and Fred at her feet, she was thinking back to that ill-fated day, just a year ago, when Rob had come home and announced that Fred had won the school prize. Such a change in the year! But the boy must not grow up in ignorance, even if he were blind. At her suggestion, it had been agreed with his father that Fred was to begin to have a few simple lessons again, of which Bess was to have the care.

“You know as well as I do, Miss Carter, what will make Fred happiest and best. I leave him wholly to you,” Mr. Allen had said.

The boy lay, his head pillowed on the dog’s shaggy side, his face anxiously turned towards Bess, as if trying to read her thoughts. Suddenly she said, —

“Well, Fred, what do you say to our starting on our lessons to-morrow?”

“What do you mean, Miss Bess?” said the boy, sitting up.

“Only just this, that I think it is time you went back and took up a few lessons again.”

Fred rose to his feet and began to walk slowly up and down the room.

“How can I?” he asked sadly. “I don’t see how I can study any more.”

“This way, Fred,” said Bess, as, putting down the dog, she went to join him in his march; “from nine till twelve every day, I have time to give up to it. We will shut ourselves up in a corner by ourselves, and I will read your lessons over to you a few times, and then ask you questions about them. You can do ever so much in that way; and we don’t want you to stop all study, even if you can’t read to yourself. How does the idea strike you?”

“I like it,” said the boy, whose face had been brightening again; “only it won’t be much fun for you.”

“Never you mind about me, my laddie,” said Bess cheerfully, “I will look out for myself.”

And so it came about that for two or three hours each morning, while Mrs. Carter was busy about the household cares that not even her delicate health had made her willing to resign to her daughter, Bess and the boy settled

themselves in the library, where Bess read aloud to the child, explaining as she read, and he listened eagerly, delighted at being able to break away from his forced inaction. Bess found him an apt pupil, and added to their other studies many simple lessons in the natural sciences, teaching the boy to understand the world around him, as well as to see it through her eyes. As college was out of the question for the lad, she tried to teach him just those facts that would be of the most interest and use to him, throwing aside any formal "course" of study, and only endeavoring to answer the questions that came up in the course of their readings. And such questions! Any young, healthy boy of ordinary intelligence can ask a surprising and perplexing number of questions; but Fred, shut up within himself as he was, with plenty of time for quiet thought, surpassed them all, and often sent his tutor on a wild search through encyclopædias and dictionaries, for a clear explanation of some knotty point.

All this time Rob had been very neighborly, for it had always been his habit to run in to see

his cousin nearly every day; and for some time after Fred came the two boys were on most harmonious terms. In spite of everything, Rob was jealous of Fred, and would gladly have changed places with him for the next year; but he kept this feeling to himself, with an instinctive fear that it might make cousin Bess feel badly.

For Fred's own good, it seemed to Bessie that, first of all, his shyness must be overcome; for, in spite of all her efforts to encourage him, he still showed his aversion to going out or meeting people, and always fled to his room when any one came to call. Accordingly, one evening Bess asked the boys, Rob and his four friends, to come in for an hour, thinking that Fred would enjoy it when once they were there. As the boys came in, with all their laughter and fun, she turned to speak to Fred, but no Fred was there.

“I heard him go up-stairs a few moments ago,” said her mother. “I will go up and call him.” She returned presently, looking rather anxious.

“He says he doesn't feel well, and has gone

to bed. He doesn't want anything," she said to Bess.

"Oh, dear!" said Bess, almost impatiently. "What will the boys think, when I invited them to see him?"

But the boys were ready to forgive everything, and the evening's games were pronounced a great success. As they went away, Rob lingered behind for a moment, to ask Bess if she thought Fred really ill.

"Oh, no; nothing serious, if it is anything at all. He may have some little headache, but I suspect it was just because he dreaded meeting you boys."

An hour later, as Bess went to her room, she stopped to listen at Fred's door. All was quiet, and she concluded that the boy was asleep. But just as she was falling into her first doze, she thought she heard a noise from the next room. Raising herself on her elbow, she listened intently, and soon caught the sound of a smothered sob. She quickly put on a wrapper and slippers, and went into Fred's room.

"What is it, my boy? Are you ill?" she asked anxiously.

“Oh, Miss Bess” — and Fred’s voice broke.

“What is it, dear?” asked Bess again.

“Nothing — only — I couldn’t see the boys to-night — and — and” —

Bess sat down on the edge of the bed, and took the child’s hand in hers.

“Is that the reason you ran away?”

“Yes.”

“But, Fred, the boys came to see you.”

“I know, Miss Bess, but when I heard them, I just couldn’t stand it. They are all so different from me, and I can’t do anything at all, and — and I didn’t want them round. They didn’t care.”

“They did care, Fred; and I cared very, very much. It worries me to have you hide when any one comes here. And I had asked the boys, you know.”

“I know it; but, Miss Bess, you don’t know how hard it is! That night at church I just felt as if they were all looking at me, and would talk about me as soon as I went home. It’s the not knowing that’s the worst. And when I hear the boys, it seems as if I couldn’t always be different from them.”

“My poor little Fred,” said Bess, as she passed her hand gently across the boy’s forehead, and hot, tear-swollen eyes, “I wish so much, as much as you do, that it need not be so. But, Fred, half the battle lies, not in bearing your trouble, but in making the best of it. It is so hard, but each time you try it will grow easier. I read once of an old blind woman who called all the good things that came to her ‘chinks of light;’ and perhaps, if we try very hard, we shall find some ‘chinks’ for you.”

“I wish you could,” said the child, with a long, sobbing breath. “It’s all so dark.”

“Well, dear, isn’t Rob a ‘chink’? You dreaded him at first, just as you do Phil and Teddy now. But, now you are used to him, you enjoy his coming in. Wouldn’t it be so with the other boys?”

“’Tisn’t so bad with just one, but when they are all here” —

“Yes, but if you had once seen them, Fred, to wear off a little of the strangeness? It is a year that you have been away from them, but they are just the same dear boys that you used

to enjoy so much. And they are fonder of you than ever, for they are all so sorry for you, and want to help you.”

“That’s the worst of it,” said Fred impatiently; “nobody can forget I’m blind one single minute!”

“Do you remember, Fred,” asked Bess, “when Bert sprained his ankle two years ago? You boys went often to see him, and he enjoyed your running in. He didn’t expect you to forget that he couldn’t step on his foot for three or four weeks, did he?”

“Yes, I know that,” admitted Fred; “but, after all, ’t isn’t the same thing a bit. He was going to get right over it, and be as well as ever, and I can’t ever do anything any more. Oh, Miss Bessie, I wish I could die and be through with it!” And the hot tears rolled down on her hand, as it lay against his cheek.

Poor Bess was at her wit’s end. The boy was nervous and excited, and she felt that she must quiet him, but she knew not what to say. His trouble was too great, too real, to make light of it; and yet, now was the time, if ever,

to impress on him the idea that he could and must be a man, in spite of it.

“ ‘ And win with them the victor’s crown of gold,’ ”

she thought to herself, as she listened to Fred’s convulsive sobs.

“ My dear boy,” she said very gently but firmly, as she put her arm around him and drew him over against her shoulder, “ I want you to try to stop crying and listen to me. You say you can’t ever do anything more, like the rest of the boys, but you have one chance that Rob and the others have not. One thing you can be now, while their turn hasn’t come yet.”

“ What is it? ” asked Fred wonderingly.

“ A hero, dear. A brave boy, who will grow to be a braver man. We know too well that you can never see again, but because you can’t see, that is no reason you should be a coward and want to die. We aren’t put here, Fred, just to have a good time ; but instead, we are to make just as much of ourselves as we can, with what is given us. Because you can’t go to college, or play baseball, or skate, you need not think there is nothing you can do. Which

is better, to be a great scholar and a strong, active man, or to bear bravely a sorrow like yours, be cheerful in spite of it, and, in thinking how to make people around you a little happier and better, forget your own loss? I'm not hard in saying this, Fred, but I am looking years ahead, and telling you what will make you the best and happiest man. Do you believe me?"

The boy's gesture was answer enough.

“What would you think, Fred,” she went on, “of a soldier who, in his first fight, ran away because he feared he might be hurt? I know you would call him a coward, but isn't that about what you did to-night? It would, perhaps, have hurt a little at first, but isn't it braver to face the pain now, than to run away from it, and put it off till another time? And the next time it would be just as hard, and a little bit harder. The boys had come up here to see you, thinking you were all going to have a bright, pleasant time together once more. In a way, they were as much your company as mine; but you went off and left them, with never a thought of their disappointment, you

were so anxious to escape being hurt. Was that quite worthy of my boy?"

"I suppose I'm cowardly and selfish," said Fred rather bitterly. "What else?"

"A thoroughly wretched little boy," answered Bess quickly. "I am not scolding you, Fred; only trying to help you. Now answer me frankly; if you had come down to see the boys, even if you did find it hard, wouldn't you have been happier now than you are as it is?"

"I suppose so," admitted Fred reluctantly. "But, truly, I didn't mean to be hateful."

"Neither does the soldier who runs away from his place, but he isn't as brave a man as the one who stays. But, Fred, you can do these very boys a world of good, if you only try in the right way."

"How?"

"This way. If they can see you going about with them, patient and uncomplaining in your great trouble, it will teach them to bear their little ones in the same way. If they see you bright and cheerful, the old jolly Fred they used to know and love, they will feel there is something worth living for besides school and

games. They will be more thoughtful and considerate, and through helping you and each other they will come to help every one who is in trouble. And you will be so much more happy, too. If all this shyness were gone, so you needn't be in constant dread of meeting some one besides ourselves and Rob, you could go out freely, take long walks with me, and be with the boys. I want you to live, my boy, not so that people will pity you for what you have lost, but admire you for what you are in spite of it all. Isn't that the truer way for our hero to live? ”

“I will try, Miss Bess,” said Fred slowly. “I know I am a baby, but I really do want to be brave.”

“That is my dear Fred! The old Greeks used to say, ‘Not to live, but to live well.’ We will take that for our motto, and hope that the day will come when you can feel that your life has done as much good in the world as it might have done if you could have seen us all.”

As Bessie paused, the old clock in the hall slowly struck twelve. She counted the strokes, and then said gently, —

“Now, my hero, beginning with this new day, we will try to live bravely and well, and to make the very best of our lives. And when it is harder than you can bear, come right to me, and we will talk it all over together and see if we can't make it easier. I don't like to have you go off by yourself in this way, as you did to-night. Haven't you been asleep at all?”

“I couldn't. I heard you come to the door, and I tried to keep still, for fear you'd worry. I'm sorry I disturbed you, but I am so glad you came. You do make things better, somehow!”

“I am so glad,” said Bess; “that is what I am for. But now I want you to stop talking and go to sleep. Do you think you will?”

“I'll try,” said the child, “but I don't feel much like it. My head aches a little.”

Bess laid her hand on his throbbing forehead.

“Your head feels so warm,” she said. “You lie down and don't talk any more, and I will bathe it a little. Perhaps that will make you sleepy.”

She turned and shook up the pillows, and the child lay back with a grateful sigh, as she gently

rubbed and patted his face. For a time he was in constant nervous motion, but he gradually became quiet. At length she fancied he was asleep, and was just slipping noiselessly from the bed, when he asked, —

“May I say one thing more, Miss Bess?”

“What is it, Fred?”

“I’d like to go for a little walk to-morrow; and may the boys come up again next week?”

At breakfast the next morning, both Fred and Bess looked rather the worse for their vigil; but, except for an increased gentleness on Fred’s part, and a little more careful attention on Bessie’s, there was nothing to show what had occurred, and the secret of their long talk remained all their own. As they went to their lessons, Fred said, —

“I had such a good dream last night.”

“What was it?” inquired Bess, as she opened the history they were reading.

“It was after our talk, you know,” Fred answered slowly, as if trying to bring it back again. “I was at home once more, lying on the sofa crying, for everything went wrong, and I was all alone. All of a sudden you came

into the room, and as you walked towards me, it grew lighter and lighter, till I could see you just as well as ever, — nothing else in the room, only just you. You looked exactly the way you did the last afternoon before I went to Boston. You remember how you went down to see me, don't you? Well, you had on the same dress and hat and everything you wore then, and you stood looking down at me, kind of laughing. And then you said 'Come,' and put out your hand to help me up. I stood up and felt so much better. I kept looking at you, because that was all I could see, and it seemed so good to see you again. Then you took my hand and led me out into the street, and along ever so far, to a strange place; and then, all at once, I could see again just the way I used to. But just as I was holding on to you, and looking at the trees and houses and people, I waked up, and it was only a dream."

"Only a dream!" said Bess regretfully. "How I wish it were all true!"

"But it was just like seeing you once more," answered Fred, as he slowly drew his chair to the fire; "and I feel just as if I had seen you

yesterday.” Then, as he settled himself comfortably, he added, with a flash of fun that reminded Bess of the old Fred, —

“Well, I s’pose if I were as well as I used to be, I shouldn’t be here now. That’s one good thing!”

CHAPTER VIII.

KING WINTER.

IF Fred had been the hero of one of the stories of good little boys, whose pages our mothers and grandmothers used to bedew with salt tears, from the hour of his midnight talk with Bess his whole character would have undergone a sudden and miraculous change. But he was only a natural boy, just starting to fight his own way against heavy odds, and his progress was slow and tiresome. Though he forced himself to go out with Bess, and to see the boys when they came to the house, he still had the old longing to avoid them, and the old quick temper would flash out at Rob now and then. But Bess, watching him closely, could see his struggle, and often rejoiced over some victory too slight to attract the attention of any one else. With a quiet word of suggestion or encouragement she helped the boy onward when he was cross and discouraged, or let fall

some expression of approval to show that she appreciated his efforts to live well, as a hero should do.

The first meeting with the boys was a trying one on both sides. Sam, in particular, was so anxious to make the most soothing remarks, that he well-nigh overwhelmed Fred by his expressions of sympathy and solicitude. But just as Fred felt he could endure it no longer, and must beat a retreat, Bert came to the rescue with some well-timed question that turned the conversation to less personal subjects. It was by no means the first time that Bess had been grateful to Bert for his quick perception of danger signals in the conversation, and she hastily followed his lead. But the hour the boys spent together was rather a stiff one, for Fred was silent and shy, and the boys had not the courage to approach him, as they felt, more strongly than ever, the sad difference between them. It was with a sigh of relief that Fred heard the door close behind them; and, returning to the parlor, he threw himself wearily into a chair, while Fuzz climbed on his knee and licked his face. A moment

afterwards Bessie's hand was laid on his shoulder.

“In a brown study, Fred?” she asked gayly.

“Yes — no — I don't know,” was the somewhat vague response.

“What is it now?” she inquired, as she bent over the fireplace to pile up the scattered embers.

“Nothing, only I didn't enjoy the boys much,” said Fred candidly. “And I don't think they enjoyed me. Do you think we shall ever have any more fun together, Miss Bess?”

“Yes, indeed, Fred! It will take a little while to make up for the year you have lost. But be patient; the time will come, and come soon. Was it as bad as you expected?”

“I am afraid it was,” confessed Fred. “Sam was the worst of all.”

“And yet he had no idea of it,” said Bess. “He meant to say something very kind, and we ought to find out what people really mean, before we judge them. I don't believe that, except for Rob, one of the boys would give up as much for your sake as Sam, in spite of his

long words and queer grammar. But come, we have our book to finish before bedtime."

January and February had come and gone with but little snow, and no cold weather. But from the very first day March seemed determined to make amends for this neglect. A week of cold, clear weather brought glorious skating, and the boys revelled in it. After a day or two of the sport, Rob, Ted, and Phil put their heads together, and, as a result of their planning, one fine moonlight evening the trio appeared to Bess, who was comfortably toasting her toes and holding Fuzz, while she read aloud to Fred.

"Cousin Bess!" exclaimed Rob, breaking in on this cosy scene, "just drop that old book and come with us! Fred doesn't want you half as much as we do."

"Do come," echoed Phil persuasively. "It is splendid skating, and we want you to come, too."

"But I don't know how to skate," demurred Bess, with an affectionate glance at the fire.

"It's high time you did, at your age," said Rob saucily. "And it's no use to beg off,

ma'am, for I know you have some skates, even if you don't know how to use them."

"Yes, we'll teach you," added Ted. "It's fine to-night, and we want you to go like thunder — oh!" And he had the grace to blush over his last word.

"But my skates are dull," pleaded Bessie.

"We've had them sharpened," said Phil, triumphantly dangling them before her eyes. "Sha'n't she go, Fred?"

Now Fred did want to hear the rest of the story, instead of passing a lonely evening. For a moment his face clouded, but a sudden thought came to him, that such a feeling was unworthy the hero he was trying to be, and he said bravely, —

"Please go, Miss Bess. I truly wish you would, and you can tell me how many times you fall down."

Bess had seen his struggle, and more than ever longed to stay with him; but the boys were clamorous, so she yielded, and went with them.

She had told the truth when she had said she could not skate, for, although she had

owned her skates for ten years, she had not put them on as many times. But she was naturally sure-footed, and, with the three boys to help her, she was soon able to propel herself slowly across the smooth sheet of ice, in spite of occasional collisions with the many skaters.

“But what makes me turn around?” she asked anxiously, after she had repeatedly had the mortification of starting for some desired spot, only to turn helplessly midway on her course, and drift aimlessly backwards, with her puzzled face fixed on the starting-point.

“It’s because you don’t strike out evenly,” said Teddy. “Now watch me, and do as I do.” And he glided away across the pond.

Bess tried to glide after him, but her left foot constantly ran away from her right, and she could only toddle along in a series of short strokes, until she once more turned her back on the coveted goal, and, after a brief slide, stopped short, awaiting further instructions. It was a merry evening, and before they left the ice, Bess had learned to appreciate the fascination of the sport, while she retired amidst the congratulations of her three knights, who vied

with one another in sounding the praises of their apt pupil. For a few days Bess made the most of her new accomplishment, and spent an hour or two of each day on the pond, where she quickly learned to feel at home, and at least could keep her face turned towards the object of her hopes. It was provoking to watch the ease with which her friends slid past her, looking so independent and sure of their footing; and Bess at first was tempted to give up the struggle, which she felt was making her ridiculous. But Rob's protestations encouraged her, and on the third day she ceased to be the new-comer. Her successor was a tall youth who awkwardly put on his skates, rose unsteadily to his feet, balanced himself for a moment, and then, with a smile that said as plainly as words, "Conquer or die," struck out boldly, only to land in an ignominious pile at her very feet. From that moment she felt herself a veteran in the art of skating.

It was late the next afternoon when Bess with one of her friends reached the pond. Their skates were soon on, and they struck out together into the merry crowd of skaters.

Bess looked about for her cousin and his boon companions, who were nowhere to be seen, and then watched her friend, who was moving away alone, her swaying figure outlined against the ruddy sunset. Then, refusing all offers of assistance, she struggled up the pond, against the strong wind that nearly blew her backward. Half-way up the ice she paused, stood for a moment to catch her breath, and then, with the breeze helping her, lazily slid back, almost to the dam at the lower end of the ice. This performance she repeated several times, greatly to her own satisfaction. At length, she had stopped to speak to a friend, when a sound of mingled scraping and shouting made them both raise their eyes, and glance up the ice. A peculiar apparition was bearing down upon them, as they stood there in the gathering twilight. At first, they could make out little but its outline, but as it came rushing nearer, it was revealed in all its splendor. Four sleds, two red, one yellow, and one blue, had been lashed together, two in front, two behind, and covered with a sort of platform of boards, from the front of which rose a complicated system of

bean-poles, crossed and re-crossed, bearing a red and yellow horse-blanket, spread as a sail. Seated in state on the four corners of this platform, each waving a diminutive flag, sat Rob, Ted, Bert, and Phil, while on an inverted keg in the middle stood Sam, blowing on a tin horn with such energy that his crimson cheeks looked ready to pop, like an overheated kernel of corn. There was no way to guide or stop this unwieldy ice-boat, when once it was well under way. For a moment, Bess watched it in amusement, until her friend suddenly exclaimed, —

“The dam! They don't think of it!”

True enough! They were rapidly approaching the edge of the ice; beyond lay a strip of still, green water, before it took its final plunge down on the rocks thirty feet below. The two women looked up the pond. There was no one near to help, and, besides, what could any one do? The boys were rushing to certain death; could it be that in the twilight they did not see their danger? But at that moment Bess saw them spring up, run to their improvised sail and try to pull it down, as if hoping in

that way to check their mad speed; but it was too firmly lashed to its place. Must she see them drown? There was the one chance for them, and, straining her voice to the utmost, she shouted: "Rob! Phil! Jump for your lives!" and then turned away her head, not daring to look.

But the answering "All right" came ringing back to her, and, turning, she saw five prostrate figures on the ice, and the sleds, blanket and all, just sinking into the strip of dark water. Skating to the spot as quickly as she could, she found four of the heroes ruefully picking themselves up: Rob with a black eye, Phil with a cut lip, and Sam with a bloody nose, while Ted was uninjured. But Bert still lay motionless, stunned by his fall.

"What is it? Is he hurt? Is he killed?" exclaimed the frightened boys, crowding around their companion.

"No, I think he has only fainted," said Bess, reassuring them as best she could. She sent Ted for some water, and soon had the boy on his feet, apparently none the worse for his escapade.

“Now, boys, come home,” said she, as she took off her skates, too much exhausted by her recent alarm to give the lecture the boys so richly deserved for their carelessness.

With Bert at her side, she started to walk home, closely followed by four crestfallen lads, who, though speechless, telegraphed to each other, in dumb show, behind her back, that they were going to be scolded. The culprits presented a forlorn appearance. Rob’s bump was already showing various rainbow hues, while Sam’s nose had no less quickly developed the size, shape, and color of a prize radish, and Phil’s lip had grown decidedly puffy. As they reached the Carters’ gate, Bess raised her eyes to the window where Fred, a dark little figure against the brightly lighted room, was sitting to listen for her step. Then she turned to the boys.

“Now, my boys,” she said, “I wonder if you know how near you came to being drowned, or worse. It was a crazy thing to do, that ice-boat of yours, and I am thankful that you only have some swollen eyes and noses to remember it by. Don’t do it again, children. You didn’t think

this time, I know, but you must never try it again. Will you promise?"

"It was first-rate fun," remonstrated Phil, the clearness of his speech rather impaired by his swollen lip.

"Yes, fun in the time of it; but suppose that you had gone into the water, or that Bert had been more than stunned by his fall. Such fun as that would not be worth while, I am sure. I want you to let this be your last ice-boating, until you are older."

"Yes, I guess we'd better let it alone," said Bert regretfully. "But you just ought to try it once, Miss Bess, to see how fine it is. Good-night!"

And the boys, glad to have escaped so lightly, were off with a shout, while Bess went in, to be met at the door by Fred.

The lads kept their promise the more easily because a heavy fall of snow, the night after their ice-boating, made the pond useless. But as winter is the boy's carnival time, and as boy ingenuity is endless as far as ways to tempt Providence are concerned, the quintette soon devised a new method of imperilling their lives.

For two days Phil was shut up, as a result of his bump, and Rob only ventured as far as his cousin's, where he inwardly rejoiced that Fred could not see the yellowish purple bunch that closed his eye for the time being. By the following Saturday, however, the boys were ready for fresh sport, and betook themselves to Bert's yard, where they found that their mates had been wasting no time. At the back of the grounds, Bert and Sam were putting the finishing touches to an inclined plane of boards, while Ted was covering it with a thin layer of snow, and beating it to a hard, smooth sheet.

"Hullo, black-eye!" shouted Bert, as he caught sight of his guests. "Come on; here's some fun for you."

"What's that for?" asked Phil, curiously eying the crazy structure.

"That? Don't you know?" replied Ted, with a disdainful emphasis on the last word.

"It's a toboggan chute," explained Bert. "We're going to cover it with snow, and slide down on it. By the way, there are you fellows' sleds."

“Where did they come from? I thought they went under,” said Rob.

“Sam went up the next morning and found them floating close to the dam,” answered Ted. “He cut a long pole and hauled them in. But you kids go to work and help me. We want to get this done, so we can have some fun before a thaw.”

After two hours of hard work, Phil ventured to suggest that it would be easier to go to some of the ready-made hills for their coasting, but his comrades scorned the suggestion and promptly suppressed him.

By noon the slide was ready, and the boys separated for a hurried dinner, agreeing to be back as soon as possible. Soon afterwards they reappeared, Ted peeling an orange, and Phil with a pocketful of crackers, while Bert came out with a vast wedge of pie in his hand. With their sleds, they scrambled up the incline, and were soon on their way down it again. It was not in all respects a success. The framework, insecurely supported, tottered beneath them, and the boards were not carefully joined, causing occasional bumps in the way. But the

charm of novelty covered a multitude of sins, and for an hour the boys followed one another down the slope and up again, with hardly a pause.

“Say, Phil,” asked Ted, as if suddenly impressed with a new idea, “what made you take the snow from the foot of the slide to cover it with? That’s what ails it, and makes our sleds stick so.”

“That’s so,” responded Phil, diving into his overcoat pocket for another cracker. “I didn’t think about that, and it was easier to get the snow here. I’ll shovel some on that place.”

“I’ll tell you what,” suggested Bert. “I’m sick of the sleds. There’s a pile of boards in the barn. Let’s each take one, and go down on that.”

There was a race to the barn, a quick pulling over of the pile, and the boys were back at the top of the chute again, each one armed with his bit of board. Rob went down first, and succeeded in managing his improvised sled so that he had the full benefit of the slide; but Sam, who followed him, was so heavy and came with such force that, at the foot of the incline, the

boy and his board parted company. The latter stuck fast in the soft snow and mud, and the boy went tumbling and rolling away, amidst the shouts of his friends. The fun waxed fast and furious. Mishaps were many, and Sam was particularly luckless. Sometimes his board would escape from his clutches, and go merrily bobbing down the slope away from him, or else it would run off from the side, and land him in the snow beneath, or, again, some other boy on his sled would come whizzing up behind him, and, knocking his feet out from under him, would carry him along on top of the pile, struggling and laughing.

“It’s curious,” he remarked at length, “there don’t seem to be no reason why my board should act so queer. If there’s goin’ to be anything left of me, I reckon I’d better quit.”

“I say, Bert,” suggested Ted, “let’s all go down in a crowd. There’s a short ladder over there that would be just dandy. Would your father be willing we should try it just once?”

“I guess so,” replied Bert. “I don’t suppose we’d hurt it any, and it would just about hold us five. That’s as much fun as ice-boating.”

“I don’t know,” said Sam, discreetly holding back. “I am afraid that won’t work. I don’t want to get my neck broke.”

“Sam’s getting scared,” said Ted, as he and Phil clambered up with the ladder.

“No, I ain’t!” said Sam warmly, “but I hain’t got an inch of skin now that isn’t black and blue.”

“This will have to be our last grand slide,” said Bert, as they took their places. “The snow is going fast.”

The five lads settled themselves on their unique toboggan, and at the word Ted gave the starting push. Away they went, rushing down the slope with such force that the forward end of the ladder plunged into the mud at the foot, and the rear flew up and described a half-circle in the air, scattering its riders in all directions. Two shouts broke on the air, one of woe as they took their flight, the other and longer one of mirth, as each surveyed his fallen companions. Phil was particularly funny, for a train of crackers scattered from his pockets marked the course of his flight.

“It was lots of fun,” Rob confided to Bess

that night. "We just flew all ways at once. But it's thawing so fast that we can't try it again soon."

And, in her secret thoughts, Bess was thankful that it was so.

Then came a week when it seemed as if the winter were a thing of the past. The snow melted quickly, and the ground settled so thoroughly that, when Saturday came round again, and it dawned warm and bright, Rob came in and invited Bess to play tennis with him. So through the whole March afternoon they played in the sunshine, while Fred, glad to be out once more, either wandered slowly up and down, or lounged on the lawn seat near them.

"I'll tell you what, cousin Bess," said Rob, as he took down the net, "I'll play an hour Monday noon, if you want to."

"Let me see," said Bess. "I've promised to go to walk with Fred in the afternoon, but I think I can play. Will you have time before school?"

"I'll hurry and eat my dinner, and we can play a little, anyway. Come on, Fred," and they went into the house.

But the next morning was cold and raw, as if to make up for the day before, and by afternoon a few flakes of snow were falling lazily and melting as they fell. When Bess with her little cousin came home from church, she suggested that their game could hardly be played the next noon; but Rob laughed at the idea, and left her with many assurances that the next day would see him on the spot, racket in hand.

But on Monday morning Bess woke up to find a real old-fashioned snowstorm raging outside. Already the drifts lay high and white, and the fierce gusts of wind swept the snow this way and that, and shook the house until each window and door rattled in its casing. Mr. Carter made his usual early start to his business, and Bess and Fred adjourned to the library, where they were glad to curl up over the register, for the wind seemed to force its way even through the walls. But the lessons went hard that morning. The roaring of the storm made Fred unusually nervous, and Bess caught his mood, as she glanced out occasionally to see the air filled with the hurrying snow-

flakes, and watched the drift against the window slowly mount up until it half shut out the outer world, while the wind blew more and more furiously. At length she put down her book.

“Fred,” said she, “this isn’t doing either of us any good to-day. Suppose we leave it, and go to see what mother is doing?”

“Is it still snowing?” asked the boy.

“Snowing! I should think it was; faster than ever. And such a large drift by the window! Come over here, and I’ll show you how high it is.” And she laid Fred’s hand on the window, at the top line of the drift.

“It must be awfully deep. Wish I could see it, or else not hear it quite so much. I’m sick of such a racket.” And Fred drew a long, tired breath, as he dropped back into his chair.

“You stay here and toast yourself, and I will go out and see how things are.”

Bess found her mother looking anxious enough over the storm. It was eleven o’clock, and no meat-man, no grocer’s boy, and no milk. The fires needed constant attention, and Bridget, absorbed in her washing, was unwilling to be called on for help.

“Never mind, mother,” said Bess consolingly. “I’m a splendid fireman, and I will see to the furnace to-day. And don’t worry about the dinner. We’ll manage without meat and milk. Let’s see, we have some codfish, I know, and we will make coffee by the gallon, if necessary. I pity people who have no water in their houses. But I am afraid father will have a severe time getting home. The snow must be very deep.”

She opened the door to look out, but was greeted by a small avalanche of snow that came tumbling in upon her.

“Two feet on a level, I should think,” she announced, with an apparent unconsciousness of the wrathful countenance of Bridget, who stalked to the broom, and swept out the snow.

“Where is Fred?” asked Mrs. Carter.

“In the library. He is so nervous with the storm that I found he was getting no good from the lessons, so I stopped reading.”

“It is too bad to leave him alone,” said her mother. “You’d better go back to him.”

“Not a bit of it,” said Bess gayly. “You

go stay with him, and Bridget and I will get you up a codfish lunch fit for a king."

The day slowly wore on, and the storm still raged.

"It will go down at night," Mrs. Carter had said, but as it grew dark the snow and wind were fiercer than ever; and it was evident that Mr. Carter could not get home that night. At dinner-time it was discovered that the dining-room on the north side of the house must be abandoned, for it was not only very cold, but the snow had forced its way under the door, and a small drift lay across the floor, where it melted and trickled lazily about the room.

By evening Bess felt that she had her hands full, between her duties as stoker, consoling Bridget, who, with the superstition of her race, declared this to be the forerunner of the day of judgment, cheering up her anxious mother, and quieting Fred's fears. The boy tried to be brave, but, in his inability to see the storm, he pictured it as far worse than it really was, and was thoroughly frightened and miserable. Looking up from her magazine, Bess watched him as he moved restlessly from window to

window, stopping at each and resting his head against the glass, as if trying to see out into the night. Then she rose and joined him, as he dejectedly turned away. As usual, his face brightened when he felt her hand on his shoulder; and, arm in arm, they walked up and down the long room, while Bess talked busily, hoping to tire him out until he should be ready to sleep. But it was late before he could be persuaded to go to bed, and, although Bess went to his room often during the night, she found him always awake and tossing restlessly, though he made no complaint. The morning found them all rather exhausted, and the boy seemed worn out with his long wakefulness. It still snowed fast, but the wind had died down a little. After a breakfast of such materials as they chanced to have on hand, Bess tucked Fred up on the sofa, hoping he might drop to sleep, and retired to the kitchen, to take an account of stock.

“Only two potatoes left, Bridget! How did we get so nearly out? And just this piece of cold steak and some codfish? Well, we must make the best of it all. They say fish is good for our brains.”

“Sure,” remarked Bridget sagely, “we’d better be ’atin’ a lot of it, thin, for it needs all the brains we can get to know how to get three meals a day, wid nothin’ to make ’em of. And all the clo’es layin’ wet in the tubs, miss! What in the world will we do wid ’em?”

The second day was longer than the first. Mr. Carter, they knew, was safe in his office, while a restaurant on the ground floor of the building would supply him with food; but they trembled to think of the suffering among the poor about them, suffering that they were powerless to relieve. The time dragged slowly along. Late in the day the wind ceased, and after their dinner Fred threw himself on the sofa, and at once dropped to sleep from sheer exhaustion. Bess covered him gently, and then followed her mother into the parlor, where she dropped into a chair.

“At last,” she whispered, with a backward glance at the brown head on the pillow, “I can draw a long breath. That child hasn’t slept a moment since yesterday morning. It is strange how nervous he has been.”

“It has been a fearful storm for all of us,”

Mrs. Carter replied, "and it has been even worse for him. He has been so brave and uncomplaining that I suppose we have no idea what he has suffered. And I confess that I didn't sleep much more than you and he last night. I wish I knew that no poor people were starving to death or freezing."

"I dread to hear the reports from the storm," said Bess soberly. "We have come out quite well. But you go to bed and try to have a little sleep. I'll stay here and wait for Fred to wake up. I hate to disturb him."

And tired as she was, drowsy and longing for rest, she sat by the fire until the clock struck one and the lamp burned low, rather than awaken the sleeping child. At length she went out to look at him, and sat down on the edge of the sofa, thinking to waken him; but as she saw his tired little face and quiet, even breathing, she waited and still kept her uncomfortable seat, till her cramped position forced her to move. The boy stirred as she touched his hand.

"What time is it? Have I been asleep?" he inquired, stretching himself.

“You certainly have. It is nearly two in the morning,” answered Bess, as he rose.

“Oh, Miss Bess! And you sat here with me? How could you? What a pig I am!” said the boy remorsefully. Then, putting his hands on her shoulders as she still sat there, too weary to move: “How awfully good you are to me!” he said. “I wish I could live with you always.”

And Bess thought no more of her weariness, as they went up the stairs together.

The next morning, Wednesday, found the snow still falling, but the clouds looked broken, and by noon some stray sunbeams were showing themselves here and there. As the Carters sat at their late lunch, their fourth consecutive meal of codfish, a scramble and clatter were heard at the front door, and the next moment Rob came tumbling in, with his pockets filled with bundles of all shapes and sizes.

“Hullo!” he shouted. “Where are you all? Want some grub?”

“Where did you come from, and how in the world did you get here?” asked his aunt.

“On my feet, aunty. I have taken to snow-

shoeing; want to see my runners?" And, with great pride, Rob led them to the door, and exhibited a pair of long, narrow boards, slightly turned up at one end, and furnished midway with a strap of heavy leather to support the toe.

"The genuine Norwegian article," he explained. "That man from out West, that civil engineer, you know, says they use them for their camping parties in the blizzards. He let me see his, so I made these. It's lots of fun, see?" and he went striding away over the four feet of snow as if it were covered with an icy crust. Then he came back, took off his coat, and prepared to tell his adventures.

"I thought you might be getting hungry," he said, "so I stopped at the market on my way up, and took what I could get. Hope you aren't particular."

"Not a bit," declared Bess. "We are starved until we will eat anything."

"All the better," said Rob. "Here, Fred, catch hold of these." And he piled into his arms two bologna sausages, a can of potted chicken, a slice of round steak, a can of con-

densed milk, two pounds of zoölogical crackers, a sheet of baker's gingerbread, and a bag of raisins.

“Oh, Rob! Rob!” said Bess, laughing until she cried, as she saw the motley collection, so evidently selected by the boy himself. “Your warning was needed. We surely ought not to be particular.”

Rob laughed, but his color came and he looked rather annoyed, so Bess hastened to add, —

“But it was so good of you to think of us, for we are dreadfully tired of codfish, and this will be a welcome relief. And now tell us how you all are, and what the news is — if you know any.”

“Everybody is snowed up,” answered Rob, as he helped Fred to lay down his pile of provisions. “No trains, no street-cars. We went to school Monday morning, but they sent us home about ten, and I didn't go out again till last night. Some men in front of our house were trying to plough a path, and I asked them if I mightn't borrow their horse to ride down after some milk. They said I might, so I hopped on and started. He went very well till

I was down in front of the church, but there he stopped, so I just hit him with my heels to make him go. He just swung up his hind feet and pitched me off, head first, into a tremendous drift. I went in all over, and all I could do was to kick. A man saw me go, and took hold of my feet to pull me out; but off came my rubber boots, and over he went backwards, with one in each hand. I guess he was scared, and thought he had pulled me in two. But pretty soon I felt him grip my feet again, and that time he got me out. The horse had walked off, back to his master, and I had a sweet time getting home. This morning I saw that man go by the house on his shoes, and I called to him and asked him to let me see what they were like. He was awfully nice, and told me just how to make them, and I'm going to make you a pair, cousin Bess. It's lots of fun to walk on them, only when you turn round you get them crossed, they are so long, and first thing you know you're standing on your own heel. But what about that game of tennis?"

CHAPTER IX.

THE I. I.'S.

“COME, Fuzzy, come!” said Bess, opening the front door an inch, and speaking in a tone of gentle persuasion.

But Fuzz only gazed fixedly at some distant point of the landscape, and refused to move.

“Come, good little Fuzz; come right in!” And Bess tried to express the idea that some pleasing secret lay hidden behind the door that she held open a crack. Slowly the dog turned the white of one eye towards his mistress; but otherwise he was deaf to her voice. Becoming impatient, she went out on the step.

“Come right here, Fuzz!” she said, very decidedly.

The little animal looked at her for a moment, wagged his brief tail as if to say, “Excuse me,” and then darted to the gate, where he stood barking furiously, occasionally turning his head

to see if his mistress were still waiting for him. She stepped back into the house and shut the door, with an elaborate care that he should notice the fact. Then she applied her eye to one of the glass panes. The dog trotted to the steps, looked about him, and, seeing that the coast was clear, leisurely came up them and lay down on the mat.

“Now I have him!” thought Bess exultingly, and, suddenly opening the door, she made a quick snatch at the spot where the dog had been, — had been, for at the first click of the latch he was several yards away, barking defiance at some imaginary foe.

“Oh, dear!” sighed Bess, adjusting the folds of her pretty spring suit. “How could Bridget be so careless as to let that dog out when I told her not to?” And again she peered out through the glass, only to see the dog peacefully lying on the lower step, with his little black nose laid up on the one above it.

“Can’t you get him to come to you with a piece of bread?” queried Fred’s voice from the next room. “I’ll go ask Bridget for a piece.”

He returned in a moment and offered Bess a

thick slice of bread, and then passed his hand approvingly down over her gown.

“How fine you are!” he said. “It is a shame for Fuzz to act so.”

“He always does when I want to go away, so I usually shut him into the house. To-day he saw me putting on my hat and suspected a departure, and in some way ran out past Bridget. I am sorry, for I ought to call on Mrs. Walsh.”

As she opened the door and stepped out into the May sunshine, Fred stood leaning in the doorway, waiting to know if his plan were successful. Fuzz sat on the grass ten feet away, watching their manœuvres with a look of calm, unbiassed criticism.

“Come, Fuzz, come get some bread,” said Bess caressingly, as she broke off a bit and tossed it to the dog. He moved lazily towards it, ate it as if he were conferring a favor upon her, then came a step or two nearer to get the next one, and the next, artfully aimed by Bess, in order to bring him by degrees to her feet. But Fuzz was wary, and had no mind to forego either the present feast or the prospective walk. By

watching his chance, he would contrive to run up to Bessie's very toes, snatch the morsel, and then dodge away again, before she could touch so much as one of his curls. In this way, he possessed himself of the entire slice of bread, and then returned to his former seat, leaving Bess none the better for her efforts.

"Won't he come?" asked Fred sympathetically, though with a strong desire to laugh.

"He hasn't the remotest idea of such a thing," replied Bess disconsolately, as she looked at her watch.

Mrs. Carter joined them on the steps.

"Fuzz, come here! Come to grandma!" she called authoritatively.

But Fuzz withdrew to the middle of the street, and contemplated a distant carriage.

"I'll tell you, Bess, what you can do. We will all go in, and then, in a few minutes, you can go out the back way, and through to the other street."

"A brilliant idea, mother. Come, Fred." And she led the way into the house, and shut the door with an emphasis to attract the dog's attention.

They waited until he returned to the step, and then, with a stealthy tread, Bess retired through the kitchen and was out of the house grounds when a small gray body rushed madly past her, and then returned to caper about her, leaving an occasional dusty foot-mark on her new gown.

“Bad Fuzz!” she scolded. “Fuzz must go right back!” But Fuzz would neither go of himself, nor let her pick him up to carry him. So she walked back to the house, saying to herself, —

“Well, I don’t mind my call, but I do hate to be late at Rob’s, when I’ve constantly tried to impress on those boys that they must be prompt at engagements. However, ‘the best laid plans of mice and men’ must be changed to suit the will of a small imp of a puppy.”

As she entered the house, Fuzz, with a skill that would do credit to a civil engineer, at the very least, took up his position at such a vantage point that he commanded an unobstructed view of both modes of exit, and sat watching them with an unblinking steadiness. Bess waited for a long quarter of an hour, hoping

that the dog would give up the idea and signify his desire to come in. But no imperative bark was heard. On the contrary, Fuzz appeared to be abundantly satisfied with his position. Then Fred went out and sat down on the steps, inviting the dog to join him. But he proved less attractive than usual, and neither his coaxing nor Mrs. Carter's commands could move the delinquent from his post of observation. Then Bridget, now truly penitent for the carelessness that was causing "Miss Bess" so much delay, promenaded up and down before him, trailing behind her a perfectly bare beef-bone, tied to a string. Fuzz eyed her with seeming indifference, while she made three or four turns, then he darted forward, seized the bone, pulled till he broke the string, and then triumphantly walked off to a safe distance, where he lay down and fell to gnawing his bone. Annoyed and impatient as she was, Bess laughed outright, as she saw the quick act; and Bridget, in her turn, gave up.

Another period of waiting, and then Fred had a fresh proposal.

"See here, Miss Bess, if Fuzz wants a walk,

I will give him one. I'll put on my hat and walk out beyond the tennis court, and he will come too. Then you can go."

"Could you, Fred? I am so anxious to go, only I hate to send you off alone," said Bess doubtfully, for as yet Fred's out-of-door excursions had mainly been made with her or Rob as escort.

"Yes, I'll be all right," said the boy, and then added wistfully, "How long shall you be gone?"

"No longer than I can help, my dear. Now be very careful of yourself." And she gave him his hat and the light, strong cane he depended on when alone.

She watched him as he moved slowly off across the broad lawn, with Fuzz frisking along by his side, and occasionally jumping against him with such unexpected force that it made him totter.

"Bless the child!" she thought. "He grows unselfish and considerate every day; and how well and happy he seems. I hope he will enjoy this new plan."

And she started on her errand, with one

backward glance at the lad, as he sat down for a moment on one of the seats scattered about the lawn, and turned his face to the soft, clear air. Above his head the trees were in the beauty of their first tiny leaves, so light and delicate in their unfolding that they looked like a cloud of butterflies lighted on every little twig and stem. And the birds chirped and twittered in all the gladness of the sunshine, rejoicing in the new life about them. The influence of the spring was over them all, and vaguely, in his boy fashion, Fred felt it too. For a moment he went back to a year or two ago, and longed for the old free, happy days; but as he remembered the lonely, dull hours he had spent between the times of his return from Boston and his coming to live at the Carters', his mood brightened again, and he patted the now docile Fuzz, saying cheerfully, —

“It isn't so bad after all, is it, Fuzz?”

And the dog presented his little paw, as if to shake hands, in token of their perfect agreement.

In the meantime Bess had betaken herself to her cousin's, where she was greeted by five

eager, curious lads, who, perched on the front fence, were awaiting her coming with loud denunciations of her tardiness.

“I couldn’t help it, boys. Fuzz wouldn’t let me come any earlier.” And, to the merriment of the lads, Bess recounted her experiences of the afternoon, and then asked: “Is aunt Bess at home, Rob?”

“No; but she said tell you to go right in and make yourself at home. Do hurry up, for we’re awfully curious and can’t stand it another minute.” And Rob led the way to their pleasant sitting-room.

“Doesn’t Rob know what’s up?” asked Phil, as Bess seated herself deliberately, and the boys gathered around her.

“Not a blessed thing,” said Bess, disregarding her cousin’s winks begging her to keep silence; “only that I told him to have you meet me here this afternoon.”

“Oh ho, young lad!” exclaimed Ted, giving his host a sounding thump on the back, “you’re a fraud. Here you’ve been pretending all day you knew what was going on, and you are as much in the dark now as any of us.”

“What is it, Miss Bess?” inquired Phil, swinging himself impatiently back and forth in his rocking-chair, as he sat astride of it, with an ankle clasped in either hand. “It’s sure to be fun, if you start it.”

“Don’t get your expectations too high, Phil,” said Bess. “It is only just this. If you boys have time enough to spare for it, how would you like to spend one evening a week with me?”

“Club?” suggested Rob, who had often begged for something of this kind.

“Yes, club; if you choose to call it so.” And there was an enthusiastic burst of applause from the boys, who took a true masculine delight in anything rejoicing in the name of club. When quiet was restored, Bess went on quite seriously: —

“Now, my boys, I don’t want you to be selfish in starting this club. It is for us all to enjoy together, and I want you to help me make it a great success; but most of all it is for Fred. He tries so hard not to be shy with you, but it is hard for him when he doesn’t see you but once in a long time. He needs boys

and boy fun now, more than anything else, and he is staying with me so much that there is danger of his growing girlish and — and — what is it you call it? — a mollycoddle.”

“Not much danger of that when you are round,” said Sam, with a smile to point his intended compliment.

Bess took it as such, and beamed on him in return, before she continued, —

“Well, as I say, he needs you all to stir him up and give him a taste of the old fun. Now, it depends on you whether this fun will do him good, or only make him feel farther away from you than ever. Can you think what I mean?”

“Yes, I think I know, Miss Bessie,” said Bert, who was leaning back in the depths of his chair, his knees crossed and his hands loosely clasped in front of him, while his eyes were intently fixed on Bessie’s face. “You mean, if we stir him up in ways he can enjoy, or whether we tease him and do things he can’t have the fun of with us.”

“Who’d be mean enough to tease Fred Allen, anyhow?” asked Sam belligerently.

“Nobody; so keep cool and let Miss Bess go on,” said Teddy patronizingly.

“Bert has my idea. How many of you will help to carry it out?” and Bess looked around at the eager young faces, beaming with goodwill to their absent friend.

“I! I!” shouted the chorus of five; and then Rob asked, —

“What kind of a club are you going to have?”

“How do you like this plan? Suppose you come up every Saturday evening early, say by seven, and stay two hours. At nine I shall send you off home, and to bed, for I don’t approve of late hours for children.”

“Children! Oh, cracky!” groaned Ted, in parenthesis.

“Yes, children,” repeated Bess, with a malicious pleasure in the word. “What else are you, I should like to know? But so much for times and seasons. And now for the way we are to spend our time. Beginning with myself, and working down by ages, I am going to let you each select some good subject for an evening, and then we will all bring in what informa-

tion we can about it, and talk it over together. You can give out your subjects the week before, so we can prepare them, you know. I only make one condition, that you submit your subjects to me, first of all. Then we shall end with some games. How does the idea strike you?"

"First-rate" and "dandy," exclaimed Phil and Ted in unison; and Sam added, —

"Have you told Fred?"

"Not yet, for I wanted first to talk it over with you, and see if I could depend on you to make it a success. It rests with you to decide, and if you go into it in the right way, each trying to help on the general good time, we shall have some very pleasant evenings, I am sure."

"But I don't see why we need study for it," sighed Phil.

"For two or three reasons, you lazy boy," answered Bess. "If we spent our evenings just playing games, we should soon be heartily tired of them and of each other. But a little work — I don't mean it to be hard work — will give a variety, so we shall like them both

better. And then it is high time you boys were getting some new ideas beyond your daily doses of arithmetic and geography. You can take any subject you wish, from the moon to potato bugs, or Napoleon Bonaparte, provided you take one about which we can really learn something. We shall work an hour, and play an hour, and enjoy each better for having the other." And Bess paused amid a hum of admiration from her followers.

"What shall we call the club?" asked Rob.

"Genuine Grubbers," said Phil, in whose mind the thought of study was still rankling.

"The Brotherhood of Frederick the Great," was Bert's pertinent suggestion.

"Queen Bess and her Jolly Lads would be good," remarked Teddy. "Q. B. J. L. for short, you know, and none of the other fellows would know what it meant."

"It strikes me," Sam interposed, "we'd ought to let Fred have something to say about it."

"I agree with you, Sam," rejoined Bess. "Come home with me now, all of you, and we will plan for the name, first subject, and so on,

and then on Saturday night we can have our first meeting."

And so Saturday evening found the house brightly lighted, and Fred in his best suit, with a white carnation in his buttonhole, while Bess arranged Fuzz with his basket, ball, and rag doll in a comfortable corner of the kitchen, to keep Bridget company, and persuaded the Dominie to retire to the dining-room.

Punctually at the moment came the boys, each one with a proud consciousness of being dressed up for the occasion, although Phil's front lock of hair would stand rampant, and Ted's shoes bore traces of his having splashed through some wayside puddle. After a few moments of chatter, Bess stepped to the table and rapped on it with mock solemnity.

"The members of the Club of Inquisitive Investigators will please come to order. I will call the roll of officers and members. President, Miss Elizabeth Carter. Well, I'm here. Vice-President, Master Frederic Allen."

"Present," remarked Fred from the corner of the sofa, where he was sitting with Rob and Bert.

“Treasurer, Master Edward Preston.”

“Yes’m, I’m here,” responded Ted with a giggle, “but I don’t see what there is to treasure.”

“Secretary, Master Robert Atkinson,” continued Bess, regardless of the interruption.

“Here! What am I to do about it?” inquired Rob meekly.

“Chairman of Entertainment Committee, Master Philip Cameron.”

“Trust me for coming,” answered Phil, while Rob whispered, —

“That means you are chief clown.”

“Beadle-in-chief and Disciplinarian, Master Samuel Boeminghausen.”

“Yes, ma’am!” said Sam, and then fulfilled his official duties by frowning on Ted, who, mindful of his “Pickwick,” murmured, —

“‘Samivel, my son, bevare of vidders.’”

“Grand Referee, Critic, and Curator of Encyclopædia and Dictionary, Master Herbert Walsh,” concluded Bess, and Bert’s response was lost amid the shouts of the boys, to whom these offices were unexpected honors.

“Now,” said Bess, in more natural tones, as

she seated herself, "we have just members enough for the offices, and just offices enough for the members, so I don't see how the I. I.'s can increase. To-night we were to talk about coal, and I will ask Phil to begin by telling us what he knows on the subject."

"Oh, dear!" groaned Phil, "that won't be much. Let's see. There are different kinds of coal, the hard or anthracite, and the soft or bit— bit—"

"Bituminous?" suggested Bert.

"Oh, yes! Bituminous. The bit-uminous has more oil in it, and is smokier. So people that live in cities where it is burned get black all over themselves when they go out on the street."

"Yes," interposed Sam. "When my father took me to Chicago with him, there was one day that it was so thick in the air you couldn't see any distance at all, and when I went back to the hotel to dinner, my nose was all covered with black streaks."

"I know how that is," said Bess. "But go on, Phil."

"We burn the hard coal here. Then they

divide it up by the size it is broken into, and call it pea-coal and nut-coal, and so on. I guess that's all I know, Miss Bess."

"Very good, Phil. Bert, can you tell us something more?"

"Not very much. Phil's told a good share of what I had found out. I think I know where some of the best coal-beds are, though."

Sam and Ted between them added a description of coal mining; Fred gave, as his share, a vivid account of the primeval forests, and the way the coal-beds were formed; while Rob contributed a few words about the fossils met with in the coal. Bess made a running commentary on the whole, and ended with a short account of the more common kindred substances: petroleum, illuminating gas, and the diamond. Then she looked at her watch.

"Half-past eight. Only half an hour for our games, boys."

"Is it really so late?" asked Ted incredulously. "This has been immense. What are we going to take next?"

"Well, Sam, that is for you to say." And Bess turned to the boy who was lounging in

his chair, with one foot stretched in front of him, the other toe hooked around the leg of his chair.

“George Washington,” he replied promptly, with a modest pride in the wisdom and novelty of his choice.

“You all hear it?” asked President Bess. “Rob, as secretary, I want you to keep a list of the subjects and their dates. Then, six months from now, we will have an evening when each one of you may take some one of these subjects and write all you have learned about it; and we will have these essays read before a small and select audience. That will be about the last of October. And one thing more I have to say before our games. I want my boys to be careful about their positions, to sit up straight like gentlemen, and not curl up like a set of small caterpillars.”

The sudden effect of this last remark was comical to behold. Feet were firmly planted, backs straightened, shoulders squared, and coats pulled into place; while Teddy vainly tried to conceal a yawning chasm in the knee of his stocking, which had mysteriously appeared since his arrival.

Promptly as the clock struck nine, Bess sent her guests away, but not before Ted, from the front steps, led off in a rousing: "Rah! Rah! Rah! for the Inquisitive Investigators." They then departed, chanting at the top of their lungs, as an appropriate serenade: —

“The owl and the pussy-cat went to sea,
In a beautiful pea-green boat.
They took some honey and plenty of money,
Wrapped up in a five-pound note.”

CHAPTER X.

ROB AND FRED ENTERTAIN CALLERS.

“I SAY, cousin Bess,” said Rob, coming into the library one evening, “why weren’t you at church last night?”

“Father and mother went to Boston Saturday afternoon, to stay till Wednesday, and it was going to be rather dismal for Fred to stay alone here, so we spent the evening reading,” answered Bess, moving to let Rob perch himself on the arm of her great easy-chair.

“I tried to make her go, but she just wouldn’t,” remarked Fred, in a remorseful parenthesis.

“Well, you’d better have been there, both of you,” responded Rob, as he slyly drew a long shell pin from his cousin’s hair, and tucked it into his side pocket. “Do you remember that friend of Mr. Washburn that sang here one night in January, that New York tenor? He was here again last night, and sang splendidly.

We had the worst time in the recessional. It was 'How sweet the name,' and just as we were coming down the steps, — I don't know what made him do it, but Phil dropped his book right whack down on his own toes. We both got to laughing so we couldn't sing any coming out. Wasn't it mean, when we wanted to do our best? And Mr. Washburn was awfully cross about it."

"I don't know that I wonder, Rob," said Bess.

"What did Phil do?" asked Fred. "Did he pick up his hymnal?"

"Course not," answered Rob, as he secured another hairpin; "he couldn't stop and stoop down for it. We just had to go ahead and leave the others to hop over it best way they could. Say, cousin Bessie, did you ever notice that old woman in the front seat, the one in the great big black bonnet, with the wreath of purple flowers?"

Bess nodded assent, and then turned her head to watch her little cousin, as he still sat on her chair-arm, steadying himself with a hand on her shoulder, while he talked animat-

edly, with his dimples coming and going, and his eyes sparkling with fun. At her other side sat Fred, with both elbows on the table, and his chin in his hands, as he listened to Rob's merry chatter, and occasionally threw in a word or two of his own.

"Well," pursued Rob, with a chuckle, "she hasn't as much breath as she used to have, but she always will sing in the hymns, and sometimes it's pretty hard work for her to keep up. Last night she lost her breath more than common; and once, after she had stopped to puff a minute, she struck in again, full tilt, about an octave and a half higher than we were, and it made a most awful noise."

"Poor old woman!" said Bess, trying to speak soberly, while Fred's shoulders shook. "You shouldn't laugh at such old people, Robin. Where's your chivalry?"

"I can't help it, cousin Bess. It was too funny to hear her go '*peep*,' way up high."

Bess felt her dignity fast collapsing at Rob's imitation of the high, quavering voice, and, to change the subject, she said, —

"Fred and I went to the shore this afternoon."

“Did you?” asked Rob. “Why didn’t you wait till after school and let me go, too? I haven’t had a drive with you for ever so long.”

“You couldn’t have had one to-day,” replied Fred. “We walked.”

“Well, you might have waited for me, anyhow.”

“How do you know we wanted you?” asked Fred teasingly.

Rob frowned for a moment, and then, determined not to be thrown out from his jolly mood, answered with a laugh, —

“What’s the difference, so long as I wanted you?”

“Of course we always do want you, Bob. We will go again next Saturday, that is, if Miss Bess can, and take our time about it,” said Fred, moved to gentleness by his friend’s unexpected meekness.

“Certainly I will go,” said Bess heartily. “Oh, there’s the bell! Rob, will you go to the door, dear?”

Rob vanished on his errand, and soon reappeared, saying disconsolately, —

“It’s Mr. Washburn and that tenor, to see

you. Mean old things! What did they come for?" And both the boys scowled darkly in the direction of the parlor, as Bess rose to leave them, saying laughingly, —

"Take good care of each other, and don't get into mischief. Rob, you'd better stay with Fred until they go." And taking a Jacqueminot rose from a vase on the table, she put it in the buttonhole of her new gray gown, and was gone, leaving the boys in solitary possession of the room, except for the great black cat that was slumbering peacefully on one end of the sofa.

"I want you to see Miss Carter, Muir," Mr. Washburn had said, as they were putting on their hats, preparatory to starting; "she is quite an unusual young woman. She is not only attractive and rather pretty, but she knows a thing or two; and then she has a great gift for managing small boys, and making the best of them. That little dark-eyed fellow that leads the choir is her cousin, and her influence over him and two or three of the others helps out my discipline wonderfully. I don't know how I should get along without her."

“Bring on your paragon,” laughed Frank Muir. “It passes my comprehension how any woman can manage to keep small boys in order, but I’ll take your word for it.”

But when he rose to meet Bess as she came into the parlor, he felt at once that she might easily deserve his friend’s praise, and that her pleasant, cordial manner would win the heart of the most cross-grained little urchin in existence. He was rather critical in his judgment of young women, perhaps because they usually courted his attentions in a most unblushing fashion; but this one was quite to his taste, and he settled himself for a long, enjoyable call, exerting himself to be as entertaining as possible, while the rector sat by, reflecting how well they were suited to each other.

But as Bessie sat there, talking so easily of one thing and another, with a frank pleasure in the young man’s society, she gradually became conscious of the fact that her hair was fast slipping from its usual smooth coils on top of her head, and dropping towards her neck. Cautiously putting up her hand to investigate the cause, she discovered that, of the four long

pins that usually held it in place, two were missing, and of course they were the more critical ones.

“It is that wretch of a Rob!” she thought. “Well, fortunately, it all grows on. But what can I do?”

Warned by the increasing looseness that any attempt to move from the room would result in a general ruin, she sat as motionless as possible, while she tried to talk away as if nothing were amiss. Her guests were watching the impending catastrophe, the older man, who had a wife and sisters of his own, with sympathy, and the younger one with unmixed amusement.

“How I wish they would go home!” meditated Bess, as she smiled brightly in answer to some sally of Mr. Muir. “Time is precious, for this won’t hold five minutes longer, and the least move I make will bring it all down.”

And at the moment, the last pin slipped from its place, and a mass of bright, wavy hair fell on the girl’s shoulders. It was a trying moment, but, determined to make the best of a bad matter, she said, —

“I shall have to be excused for a moment.

My mischievous little cousin has been experimenting with my hairpins, without my knowing it. Please excuse me a minute." And with flaming cheeks she fled to her room.

She was back almost immediately, but not before the gentlemen had enjoyed a hearty though smothered laugh, and Mr. Muir had inquired, —

“Is this a sample of the fine influence she has on small boys?”

The conversation was once more running smoothly, and Bess was just losing the recollection of her mortifying experience, when a little sound caught her ears, a light, stealthy footstep that cautiously advanced to the drawn portière, and then retreated. Five minutes later they all gave a sudden start of surprise, as the vigorous, clattering alarm attached to a noisy little nickel clock gradually unwound the entire length of its spring. It was difficult to talk away composedly, but Bess managed to do it; and while her guests were inwardly shaking over the too palpable hint, she was longing to give the boys an outward shaking for their annoying pranks.

Another half-hour passed by, a long one to Bess, who momentarily feared a fresh outbreak. But quiet seemed to be restored, and she was just beginning to breathe freely again, when once more she heard the quiet footfall. Turning, she gazed towards the doorway in an agony of apprehension. What now? The portière trembled, slightly parted, and through the opening was pushed the old house cat, a great black animal of staid demeanor and unimpeachable dignity. But at this moment the unfortunate creature's dignity was not so manifest as it might have been. Each one of her four paws was wrapped in a neat casing of heavy paper, while securely lashed to her glossy tail was the mate to the rose that Bess was wearing.

As if overpowered by her unwonted decorations, the poor animal stood motionless for a moment, and then attempted to walk across the room. However, this usually simple operation was attended with unforeseen difficulties. Pussy's toes, in their smooth envelopes, slipped this way and that as her weight was thrown first on one foot, then on the other; and as she lifted each foot, she gave it a hasty but energetic shake

to free it, before she put it down on the carpet again; and in the meantime she was angrily snapping her insulted tail from side to side. It was too much to be passed over in silence, and, to Bessie's great relief, Frank Muir burst into a hearty laugh, as he rose to rescue the unoffending cat, who, at sight of the stranger, fled under the sofa, and was only dragged out with some difficulty. Bess and the rector joined in the laugh, and for a few moments no one of the three could speak. When she could control her voice:

“I am sorry, Mr. Muir,” Bess said, “to be forced to apologize for such mischief. The truth of the matter is, that I left two small boys alone in the library, with nothing to do. This is only one more proof that ‘Satan finds some mischief still.’ ”

“Who are they?” asked Mr. Washburn, wiping the tears of mirth from his eyes, while Mr. Muir put the cat, now barefooted again, down on the floor, and fastened the rose into his own buttonhole.

“Rob and Fred,” answered Bess. “I am sorry to confess that my small cousin is such an imp.”



"FRANK MUIR BURST INTO A HEARTY LAUGH AS HE ROSE TO RESCUE THE UNOFFENDING CAT." — Page 190.

“I had no idea of it,” said Mr. Washburn. “He is always so demure in the choir, and I fancied that Fred was very quiet, too.”

“He usually is, but Rob is in one of his wild moods to-night, and I suspect they set each other on, for it isn't like either one of them, alone. Please excuse them, for I know it was simple thoughtlessness, and they had no idea of being rude.”

Bess spoke with such a pretty air of earnestness that Mr. Muir would have excused her boys twice over, even if he had been annoyed by their mischief, instead of thoroughly amused.

“Who are these boys?” he asked. “Is one the darker of the choir-leaders, the one with the high soprano voice? I think Mr. Washburn said he was your cousin. And who is the other? I think you ought to make them appear now.”

Bess hesitated for a moment.

“If Mr. Washburn will tell you about Fred while I am gone, I will go to call them,” she said.

Rob had prudently gone home, and Fred was

on the sofa, apparently asleep, but Bess knew better than that.

“Come, Fred,” she said seriously, as she bent over him, “I want you to come into the parlor now. Mr. Washburn and Mr. Muir have asked to see you. I am sorry my boy should have forgotten himself and been so rude to guests.”

“Oh, Miss Bessie,” said Fred penitently, for he read from Bessie’s tone that she was really displeased, “we truly didn’t mean any harm, only they stayed so long that we thought perhaps they’d forgotten the time, and would hurry a little if they knew it, so as to give us a chance to have some fun. I’m so sorry!”

“I don’t think you did mean to be quite so ungentlemanly,” answered Bess quietly. “But we will talk it over by and by. Now come with me.”

“Oh, no! Must I?” And the child drew back.

“Yes, Fred.”

Frank Muir glanced up as they entered the parlor. He had been interested in his friend’s account of the child, and was curious to see the imp who had caused so much embarrassment.

and amusement for them all. But when he caught sight of the strong, finely formed little figure, the head set so proudly on his shoulders, the refined, sensitive face that showed so plainly every thought and feeling, and the great, pleading brown eyes, as the boy came shyly into the room, his own eyes grew strangely misty, and his face was very tender and pitiful as he went forward, saying heartily, —

“So this is the small friend that has been giving us a good laugh.” And, drawing the child to the sofa, he sat down by his side.

“I didn’t mean to be rude,” said Fred slowly. “It sounded like such fun. Please excuse us.”

“Excuse you,” said Mr. Muir, laughing, though he watched the boy closely, attracted by his grace of manner and gentle face; “it doesn’t need to be excused, for we enjoyed it as much as you did; and then I have a vivid recollection of some of my own performances in that line, that makes me appreciate yours all the more. And so your friend went home, did he? I should have liked to see him, for I enjoyed his singing last night.”

“Rob told me about your being there,” said Fred, completely won from his shyness by the kind, genial manner of his new friend. “I wish I’d gone, for I heard you sing last January, and I don’t believe I shall ever forget that.”

Frank Muir had received many a compliment for his singing, but never had one pleased him more than this, so innocently given.

“Do you like music?” he asked pleasantly.

“Yes, ever so much,” Fred answered. “I was going into the choir, if I hadn’t been — sick; and that night you sang, it was the first time I had heard any music for ’most a year. Some people put too much flourish into their singing. I don’t know whether you’ll know what I mean, but, anyway, you sang just as if you meant it.”

Bess, in the midst of her chat with the rector, wondered to see the boy talking so freely with a stranger. She wondered yet more when to Mr. Muir’s frank, sympathizing question, —

“Have you been — sick long?”

Fred answered bravely, with no trace of his usual sensitiveness, —

“More than a year. I studied too much, and was sick ever so long. Then I went to Boston, and there I grew blind, about six months ago.”

“Poor Fred!” said Mr. Muir, gently stroking the firm little hand that lay by his side.

“Yes, it was pretty bad at first, but since I came here,” and Fred lowered his voice to a confidential murmur, “I’ve had such good times. You see, Miss Bess is no end good to me, and she’s more fun than half the boys. She reads to me and plays games with me, and we go to walk together, and, really, we do have lots of fun.”

“You are a real hero, my boy,” said Mr. Muir warmly. “A brave boy will make a brave man.”

“Yes,” said Fred, nodding soberly; “that’s what Miss Bess said she wanted me to be. But it’s kind of hard work sometimes, for I do get awfully mad at the boys when they do things I can’t.”

Frank Muir smiled to himself at the confession so artlessly made. The boy interested him greatly, for he seemed so shy, yet had responded so quickly to his attentions. And

what a picture he made there, sitting on one foot on the sofa, with the other foot in its dainty slipper dangling towards the floor, while, in his earnest talking, his color came and went, and his smile and frown succeeded each other by turns.

“As long as you were not at church last night,” the young man proposed, “suppose I sing something to you now. That is, of course, if Miss Carter will excuse us.” And he looked to her for her consent.

“That isn’t much like Muir,” said Mr. Washburn in a low tone, as his friend seated himself at the piano. “He isn’t given to singing, except when he has to. He seems to have taken a fancy to your charge there.”

“Fred surely returns the compliment,” said Bess, as the boy followed to the piano. “I don’t see what has come over him to talk so much to a stranger, for he is usually so shy.”

“Muir is irresistible to nearly everybody, I find,” replied the rector quietly.

Then they were silent, as Mr. Muir played a little prelude, light, rocking, swinging, with an occasional dash like the breaking of a tiny wave

on a pebbly shore. Then, in the same clear, sweet tenor that had fascinated the child before, he began to sing the quaint little lullaby, —

- “ Wynken, Blynken, and Nod one night
 Sailed off in a wooden shoe —
 Sailed on a river of misty light,
 Into a sea of dew.
 ‘ Where are you going, and what do you wish?’
 The old moon asked the three.
 ‘ We have come to fish for the herring-fish
 That live in this beautiful sea;
 Nets of silver and gold have we,’
 Said Wynken,
 Blynken,
 And Nod.”

When he had finished, he turned away from the piano with a laugh.

“ There!” he said, as he rested his hand on Fred’s shoulder. “ I know boys like nonsense songs, and what could be more appropriate than this charming little Dutch one, after the hint you gave us with that alarm clock? Washburn, we’ve made a disgracefully long call, and we ought to have left Miss Carter in peace long ago.”

“ Oh, Mr. Muir, don’t stop!” urged Bess.

“Please sing something more, just one.” And she motioned him back to the piano.

The young man demurred a little, but, as she insisted, —

“Well,” said he, “I sang to Fred before, now I will sing to you.”

And, after a few random chords, he gradually drifted into the prelude to Schubert’s “Serenade,” a song that had always won the enthusiastic applause of the impressionable young ladies whom he met in society. With all its intense sentimentality, it had never been a favorite with practical Bess; but there was no resisting the influence of such a voice, and before he had finished a dozen notes, Bess was held by the same charm which she had felt that other evening in the church. She was fast losing all consciousness of everything but the passionate beauty of the music, when a long, gusty howl brought her back to herself, and made them all turn their heads to see whence the sound proceeded. There on the floor sat Fuzz, erect on his haunches, his paws in the air and his curls dejectedly flattened over one eye, while, with his nose pointed skyward, he was giving expres-

sion to his feelings in wail after wail, each one longer and louder than the last. Bess sprang to catch the dog, but with a quick movement he dodged away, and ran to the other side of Mr. Muir, where he again sat up, and, at the next high note, chimed in with another discordant shriek, while his furiously wagging tail expressed his pleasure in this novel duet. It was useless to try to go on, and the singer rose from the piano, while Bess said, —

“This is too much, Mr. Muir! What must you think of such a household? Between the boys and the dog, your evening has been a remarkable one.”

And not even the young man's laughing assurance of his enjoyment of it all, could entirely restore her ease of manner while the good-nights were being said.

After Mr. Muir was at the door, he came back to shake hands once more with Fred, and say, —

“Good-night, my brave boy. I am glad I have seen you, and I hope we shall meet again some day.”

“I say,” he remarked to his friend, as they

walked away from the house, "I think your paragon is an uncommonly attractive girl, but if this is a specimen of her wonderful influence over boys, I shudder to think what your discipline would be without her help." Then, as he pulled up the lapel of his coat to sniff at the rose, he added, "That boy is a wonderfully lovable child. Some one is giving him splendid training, and, from what you tell of his parents, I dimly suspect that Miss Carter is the one. And, Washburn, that dog would be an invaluable addition to your choir."

CHAPTER XI.

THE DISADVANTAGES OF SCIENCE.

“I AM sorry, Miss Bess. I was sorry the minute I’d said so, but Ted’s bragging about his lessons always makes me mad.”

“He didn’t ‘brag,’ dear. I had asked him about school, and you were telling what your class did. You can’t blame him for standing up for his own class, can you?”

“No,” admitted Fred, “but he needn’t go to crowing over ours.”

“True. But you needn’t have resented it as quickly as you did. If you could have seen Teddy’s face, Fred, and how hard he tried to keep from answering you sharply, I don’t think you would have been so angry for a little inconsiderate word.”

“That’s just it!” said the boy forlornly. “Things seem so different now from what they used to, and I never know just how they are going. ’Tisn’t much use for me to try to be

good, Miss Bess! I go along well enough for a little while, and then all of a sudden I spoil it all." And Fred gave the carpet an impatient kick, as he sat on the floor at Bessie's feet. Then, reaching up for her hand, he pulled it down and laid his cheek against it.

"You see," he went on in the comically wise, old-mannish tone of explanation that his voice took on at times, "I believe I wish I'd had some brothers and sisters. Till I came here, I didn't see so much of the boys, except at school, for mother didn't like to have them round the house; and I guess, being the only one, I did get sort of cranky, and now I'm here, even, I don't get over it."

There was silence for a few moments, and then Fred continued confidentially, —

"Do you know, Miss Bessie, I don't think my father and mother care for me just the same way Rob's and Ted's do for them."

"Why, Fred!" said Bess, with a start of surprise. "What can have given you such an idea?"

"Well, lots of things; their going off and leaving me — but I'm awfully glad they did

that, because it's more fun to be here than at home, and they don't write often, nor care to hear from me, only once a month. I've thought it all out, and it's reasonable enough. You see, I can't do things much now, or by and by when I am a man, and they want somebody that can. Father used to say that he hoped I would study to go into his office; and mother wanted me to take dancing lessons, so I could go to parties and things; but of course I can't do that, and I s'pose they are sorry. I don't wonder a bit. I don't mean that they don't care anything about me. Mother said to me one day not long before she went, 'I love you just as well, Fred, as if you weren't blind.' That was the first I'd thought much about it, and then I began to think it over. I don't suppose she does, quite; do you, Miss Bessie?" And he turned his face wistfully up to hers.

"Why, of course, Fred. If anything, my boy, we all love you more than ever, and it is just because we care for you so much that we want you to be a man we can feel proud of."

"Do you honestly like me just as well?" persisted the boy. "I am sure mother doesn't,

for she doesn't like to have me round very much, and she never pets me the way she used to do. I heard her tell father once that she used to wish I'd hurry and grow up, but now she never did, because she couldn't see what they'd do with me. It's horrid to feel you're in the way, Miss Bessie!"

"I wish I could keep you always, Fred," said Bess seriously, for she felt the pain in the child's voice and face, as he spoke of his absent mother.

"I just wish you could! You are as good as a mother and sister and brother, all at once. But you said that night, ever so long ago, that I mustn't wish I was dead, or out of the way, or anything, because that's cowardly; but what can I do, when I know I'm going to be in everybody's way?"

"But you aren't, Fred. We all need you and want you with us. You help fill up this house now and make it brighter for us, so we couldn't get along at all without you. And, wherever you go and whatever you do in the future, I want you always to remember that you have this one friend who is looking for the

time when her Fred will be a good and true man, and she knows that it will come some day. And always, Fred, when things go wrong, come straight to me, and we will talk it all over together, and see if we can't find the right of it. But don't for a moment think that just because you can't see, we care for you any less, instead of a great deal more than ever."

"More than before I went to Boston?" asked Fred wonderingly. "And you aren't ashamed to take me round with you?"

"Fred!" exclaimed Bess, shocked at the idea. "What could ever suggest such a thing to you?"

"Nothing, only I know mother was. She never took me anywhere with her, and I heard her say so one day, when she didn't know I was there; and so I just thought I'd ask you about it. I'm glad you don't mind. And I'll tell Ted to-morrow night that I'm sorry. Good-night."

As was her usual habit, Bess went up-stairs a little later to say good-night, and see that the boy needed nothing. When she came down-stairs again, tempted by the warm June moon-

light, she went out to the piazza and dropped into a hammock. The tall trees on the lawn threw dark patches of shade on the grass, that came and went as the evening wind moved the leafy branches, or vanished in one dull, uniform shadow as the full moon went behind some fleecy bit of cloud. A distant whippoorwill, singing his sad night song, was the only sound that broke the stillness. Bess swung there with her hands clasped above her head, and one toe resting on the floor, enjoying the quiet beauty of the night.

“How lovely it all is!” she thought. “And Fred has none of it to enjoy. Poor child! And with such a mother!”

The next evening was Saturday, and with it came the boys, all in high glee, for their school had closed the day before, and the endless vista of the long vacation and its prospective good times was stretching before their eyes, and even the trial of a rainy Saturday was not as hard to bear, when thirteen weeks of continual Saturday lay in the near future.

“Phil and I had a fine scheme coming up here,” said Bert, as he took off his dripping

rubber coat; "Phil had a bag of peanuts, and we just stuck the umbrella handle down my neck to hold it, so we could both eat, all the way."

"Yes," put in Phil, as he furtively swallowed the last of his feast. "But I didn't get much of the umbrella, just the same, and my legs got awfully wet, for they hung out behind it, too. Any boys here yet?"

"Nobody but me," said Fred, strolling into the hall. "There come Rob and Sam," he added, as a step was heard.

"I don't see how you tell so quick," said Phil admiringly. "They all sound just alike to me; don't they to you, Bert?"

"Yes, they do to me," said Bert gently, as he passed his arm through Fred's and started for the library; "but if I just had to listen all the time, I think I should know you all apart. But I don't suppose I care to try; do I, Fred?"

Teddy was the last arrival.

"I stopped to get these," he explained, tossing a huge bunch of many-colored roses into Bessie's lap. "And here's an extra smelly one for you, Fred." And he put into his hand a

great pink blossom whose stem was carefully divested of every thorn.

The subject of the evening was, by Rob's choice, the shell-fish found along the shore; and the boys entered into it with an enthusiasm that moved Bess to suggest, —

“You boys seem so interested in animals and things of that kind, why don't you start a museum of specimens?”

“What should we get to put in it?” asked Phil, as, with both hands behind him, he endeavored to crack a nut without being caught in the act. A click of the shell betrayed him, and he blushed furiously, as Bess raised her eyebrows at him, while Rob answered promptly, —

“Oh, bugs and butterflies.”

And Sam added, —

“Stones and shells.”

“Want any snakes?” asked Ted wickedly.

“Never!” replied Bess with fervor. “I don't want anything alive. I only meant moths and butterflies, or perhaps pressed flowers and curious stones and shells, that would help us understand the world we live in, and teach

us all to keep our eyes open for fresh discoveries.”

“What should we do with them?” inquired Ted, who had been meditatively sticking out his tongue, as he pondered the subject of the museum.

“Which, discoveries or specimens? We can decide when we get them,” answered Bess, laughing, while another crack from Phil’s direction showed that that youth’s hunger was not yet appeased.

“Let’s put in Phil,” suggested Rob. “He’s as fond of peanuts as a monkey at a circus, and if we caged him up, he’d make a splendid animal to start with.”

“We’ll put you in for a hyena,” retorted Phil good-naturedly. “You howled like one at rehearsal last night.”

“We might start a menagerie among ourselves,” said Bert. “Ted could be the elephant, and Sam a” —

“Bear?” inquired Sam. “No, thank you; I’d rather get up a collection of smaller game. Now vacation has come, we’d have plenty of time” —

“Speaking of vacation reminds me,” said Bert, interrupting him; “I made a mistake the other day about my history mark. Miss Witherspoon found another mistake afterwards, and that made it lower than I told you. I just thought I’d speak about it, Miss Bessie, as long as I’d told you too high before.”

Bess was about to say that Bert’s honor in telling her this was far better than the mere getting a high mark, when Teddy, the irrepressible, suddenly broke in, —

“I’ve a conundrum for you young lads. What’s Phil’s favorite slang?”

Phil looked up curiously, while the boys ventured various suggestions.

“Give it up?” queried Ted. “Why, how stupid you all are! Cracky, of course!” And there was a shout at Phil’s expense.

The talk ran on, and no further mention of the collection was made. Bess thought nothing more about it, until the next Monday afternoon, when she sat sewing on the piazza, hurrying to finish some bit of work. Suddenly Fred, who was swinging idly in the hammock, announced, —

“Here come the boys.”

“I don’t hear them,” said Bess, after listening for a moment.

“I do, then. They are coming, but not very near. You wait and see.”

“I never saw such ears, Fred!” said Bess, laughing. “They are so long, I shall call you my rabbit.”

Fred rubbed his ears reflectively.

“Yes, they are good size, but I have to see and hear with them both. But what do you think about the boys now?” he added, as Rob, Ted, Sam, and Phil, a noisy quartette, turned in at the gate.

“I think your ears were better than my eyes,” answered Bess, as she rose to receive her guests.

“Oh, cousin Bess, we’ve got lots of specimens!” shouted Rob from afar, and Ted added, —

“A good start for our museum, sure enough!” while the boys settled themselves on the piazza rail, and pulled various boxes from their pockets.

“Here are five moth-millers and a hornbug,”

announced Sam, producing some rather dilapidated specimens, for the hornbug had lost three legs, and of the moths, one was minus both antennæ, and another had a great slit in one wing.

“I’ve got eight moths,” said Phil. “I picked them up under the electric light. They’re real good ones, only they are singed a little. I s’pose that’s what killed them. And here,” diving into his trousers pocket, “is a bumblebee my father killed yesterday. Oh, dear! His head’s come off. Can’t we stick it on?”

Ted had also brought his share of mangled veterans, and Rob showed three or four moths, quite well prepared, and a pair of golden yellow June bugs.

It was with some difficulty that Bessie preserved her gravity as she saw the ruins spread out before her. But, always mindful that much of her influence over her boys lay in her hearty sympathy in all their hobbies, she looked them over with an air of deep interest, and then sent Rob into the library for a certain book that not only had fine pictures of all sorts and conditions of insects, but also gave full instructions for their capture and preservation.

“If you are going to do anything about it, my boys,” said she, “you would much better start in the right way at the very first, so we can have a really good collection; and then we can try to have a full one, of all the insects in the region. If you must collect, this is better than the barbarous, cruel habit so many boys have of stealing birds’ eggs, too often nest and all. The eggs themselves won’t teach you anything about the birds; while from these, you can get some idea of the life and habits of these little creatures.”

“Just look at this one!” exclaimed Ted, pouncing on one of the two perfect specimens, a pale green lunar moth. “Oh, dear! There goes one of his wings. What are these fellows so brittle for?”

“That is another thing. You mustn’t handle these specimens or they will break. Now, let us see what we can find out about them.”

And the next hour was spent in a pleasant talk about the form and habits of these tiny creatures, a talk that the boys never forgot, for it taught them, for the first time, the great plan of creation, that develops in each living creature

the bodily form which will help it most to live its little life, an explanation so clearly and vividly given that even Fred felt no need of the pictures to understand the mechanism of their small bodies.

The collecting fever spread, and the boys were often seen skipping about the fields, or plunging headlong over fences, net in hand, in pursuit of some gaudy butterfly. Bessie tried faithfully to make the boys feel that the main object was not the catching and killing the insects; but that this was only to help them to a fuller understanding of the nature and varieties of their prey. Their whole energy was directed in the line of insects, and boxes of specimens so rapidly collected, that the prospect was that the whole Carter family would soon have to move out of the house, to make room for the army of moths and beetles, cocoons and butterflies, that speedily accumulated. Even long-suffering Mrs. Carter protested when, one day, on the piazza, she chanced to knock down a box containing a huge green worm that Rob had carefully provided with food and air-holes, and shut up, in the hope that

he would spin himself into a chrysalis; for, as the cover of the box fell off, out dropped, not only the captive worm, now dead, but also a multitude of little yellow wrigglers, that quickly squirmed away.

“The worst of it all is,” said Bess ruefully, when her mother brought up the subject, “people seem to think that I am having this done for my own especial pleasure and profit. I don’t see what they think I want of them, unless I collect them, as the Chinese do the bones of their ancestors and friends, to bury them in some particular, consecrated spot. I was writing the other day, in a great hurry to finish my letter to Mr. Allen in time for the steamer, when Bridget came up to my room, and said some little girls wanted to see me. I went down to the back door, and there stood the five Tracy children, in a row. As soon as I appeared, the oldest, who acted as spokeswoman, came forward and solemnly presented me with three tattered butterflies. I had such hard work to be just grateful enough to satisfy them, and yet not encourage them to bring me any more. And the last time Mrs. Walsh called, that day

you were out, she produced a small box that held a common little white moth, and told me Bert said that I wanted all those I could get, so she had brought me that one. Well, laddie, what now?" she added, as Fred came into Mrs. Carter's room, where they were sitting.

"There's a boy down-stairs," he replied, "that wants to see you. I don't know who he is. He saw me on the piazza, and went round there to me."

"I wonder who he is," said Bess, as she laid down her work and went out of the room.

She soon came up again, looking both amused and disgusted.

"Another!" she exclaimed, as she took up her sewing.

"What is it now?" asked her mother, laughing.

"It was that little red-haired Irish boy that lives in behind the church. I don't know what his name is, but alas! he knows me. He came to bring me some twigs, apple, I should think, and on each one was a horrid great worm" — and Bess shivered at the recollection — "covered with red and yellow bristles, I told

him I was much obliged, but I really didn't know where I could keep them; but the poor little fellow—I shouldn't think he was more than seven or eight—looked so disappointed that I finally took them. I grieve to say that I cremated them as soon as he had gone. Fred, if you love me, do, oh, do tell the boys that we only want dead specimens. My plan was for a museum, not a menagerie; but if matters go on like this, the club will soon become my bugaboo."

CHAPTER XII.

THEIR SUMMER OUTING.

“ISLAND DEN,” THOUSAND ISLANDS,
July 27, 18—.

MY DEAR BESS, — I know you always have been a good, kind-hearted little-soul, and now I am going to throw myself on your benevolence and ask a favor of you. Say yes, that's a dear little sister! It is just this that I want, — a two weeks' visit from you. “Island Den” was never half so cosy as this summer, and there were never half so many pleasant people over at the hotel. The change will do you good, and I have already heard from mother, saying that she can spare you as well as not. Jack and the children want to see you as badly as I do.

But as long as I know you'll never consent to drop all care — you've had too much these last months for a young thing like you — and leave that boy of yours at home, as would be ever so much better for you, bring him with you, if you think he will be contented here. Jack says two boys take up no more room than one, and Rob had better come too, to be company for him after we have talked each other to death. Isn't he impertinent? But it is a good idea, for they will amuse each

other and leave us more time. Rob has never been here, and I am quite curious to see your other charge. Do hurry to come, for I am impatient to see you. I should think you might start by the first of next week.

Jack wishes me to enclose these tickets for the journey, as a last inducement. He says I am to tell you that they will be wasted unless you use them, and that will be sure to bring you, as your frugal soul cannot bear to waste anything.

I won't say any more, for you will be here so soon; and then how we will talk!

Your loving sister,

ALICE.

This was the letter which had caused a sensation in the Carter household. Alice Carter, ten years older than Bess, had married a wealthy New York banker, and was now the mother of two little girls. "Island Den," their luxurious summer home, was on one of the Thousand Islands, whither for years they had gone to spend the months of July and August, and keep open house for their friends.

It was now three years since Bess had been able to accept her annual invitation to go there, for it was an expensive little trip, and of late some treacherous Western loans had decidedly

lessened her father's income, and reduced the family from the comfortable position of doing just about as their rather simple inclinations led them, to the need of carefully counting the smaller expenses that so quickly absorb money, — no marked change, only they did not travel quite as much, nor keep a horse and carriage, nor have quite so many gowns, while those they had they made themselves. The more than liberal sum that Mr. Allen was paying them for the board and care of Fred was far more helpful than he had realized when he had made them the offer, although the money bargain had been by no means a determining cause in their taking Fred into their home. And, this year, Bess had felt that it would be more than ever impossible for her to go away to leave Fred, both on her mother's account and the boy's own, for the child clung to her more and more closely, with a devotion touching to see.

But Alice and Jack had smoothed away every difficulty, and Bess, with her conscience at rest, could now accept their threefold invitation. Now there was a prospect of change,

the girl admitted to herself that she was a little tired, and well she might be, for, in addition to her other duties, she had given constant thought and care, as well as much time and countless steps, to the boy who had so grown to depend upon her. But if, at the close of a long day, the thought of her own weariness ever crossed her mind, the memory of all that the child had lost, and of the brave fight he was making against the burden of his blindness, made her scorn the thought of self, as unworthy of the courage and patient endurance she was daily preaching to the child, and gave her new strength to go on.

Rob was in raptures over the prospective journey, and, during the week before they were to start, he made almost hourly calls on Bess, to see how her preparations were coming on. The morning after he was told of his invitation and its acceptance, he was up early, and, before breakfast, had gone into the attic, scattered over the floor the usual contents of a small trunk, long past its days of active service and now only used for storage, and secretly conveyed the trunk to his own room. By dinner-

time, many of his possessions were stowed away in its depths ; books, games, his air-rifle, several yards of mosquito netting for butterfly-nets, a choice collection of fish-hooks, and an odd assortment of strings and small articles of hardware that filled it to the brim, leaving room for not so much as a single handkerchief. Each day he added to his hoard, to the amusement of his mother, who let him have his way until the final packing, when she should bring order out of chaos.

Fred scarcely looked forward to their going with as much pleasure as Rob, for at the idea of the journey and of meeting so many strangers, his shy sensitiveness returned in all its force, and he would gladly have spent the time alone with the servants at his father's house, rather than run the gauntlet of the curious and thoughtless, though not unkind comments that always met him when he went among strangers.

However, it was a merry party that, one cloudy August morning, Mr. Carter escorted as far as Boston, and settled in the train for Albany, where they were to change to a

sleeper. Rob, in a light summer suit, armed with a jointed fishing-pole and his tennis racket, his mother's compromise in the affair of the trunk, led the way into the car. Mr. Carter followed with a lunch basket of noble proportions, for experience had taught Bessie that boy appetites are unfailing, and, on Fred's account, she dared not depend on railway dining-rooms. Bess, with Fred, brought up the rear of the procession. Rob was bubbling over with fun and nonsense, so that Fred caught his spirit and answered jest with jest. As Mr. Carter left them, Bess turned and surveyed her charges with a feeling of almost maternal pride. Two more bonnie boys it would have been hard to find that day.

“I wonder if I look like their mother, or what people think I am,” she thought, as she looked from the quiet boy at her side to the lively one opposite her. “I don't care very much — Oh, Rob, be careful,” she exclaimed aloud, as that youth, in changing the position of his fishing-pole, recklessly battered the rear of the respectable black bonnet worn by an old woman in front of him.

Rob instantly turned to offer a meek apology, but it had no effect on the irate woman, who grasped her bonnet firmly with both hands, as she exclaimed, —

“Needn’t knock a body’s head off! Folks shouldn’t take boys on the keers till they know how to behave!”

“I am very sorry, ma’am,” ventured Rob again.

“So you’d ought to be!” was the snappish rejoinder. “I hope you are ashamed of yourself to go hitting a woman old enough to be your mother with your nuisancing contraptions!” Then, with a backward glance, she added, as if to herself, “That other one looks more as if he’d behave himself somehow. I guess I’ll move round and set behind him.”

And she gathered up her belongings and moved back, where the worthy soul lent an attentive ear to all their conversation, and watched Fred with curious eyes, while from time to time she scowled disapprovingly on Rob, who was quite subdued by his misadventure.

Of course, Rob wished to take a lunch before

they were fairly outside of Boston, and, equally of course, he desired to patronize every trip of the newsboy, and the vender of prize packages of cough candy, each one of which was warranted to contain a rich jewel; but on these small points Bess was firm, and he abandoned himself to the alternate pleasures of gazing out at the car window at the miles of back doors, each filled with a family as much interested in the train as if it were some rare and curious object, and of inspecting his fellow-passengers, the usual assortment. Across from them was a young Japanese, who had intensified the effect of his swarthy skin by mounting a white felt hat. With him sat a man who was so drowsy that his head constantly dropped forward on the round silver knob that headed his cane, at the imminent risk of putting out his eyes. The force of the blow never failed to waken him, and he straightened himself up with a sheepishly defiant air, as if to refute any possible denial of his wakefulness. Behind him sat a spinster of sixty, with lank side curls and a fidgety manner of moving her satchel about. There was the usual number of commercial

travellers — why have they appropriated the name? — who, with their silk hats carefully put away in the racks, and replaced by undignified skull-caps, took out their note-books and wrote up the record of their last sales; there was the usual Irish mamma with five small children, who walked the entire length of the car and planted herself in the little corner seat next the door, with her offspring about her, budget in hand, ready to leave the train at a moment's notice; and there were a few young women, each absorbed in her novel or magazine, whom Rob surveyed with disfavor, as not being as pretty as cousin Bess.

Leaning far forward, he was just describing some of these people for Fred's benefit, when a sudden voice behind them made all three of the party start. It was the woman whose bonnet Rob had hit.

“I want to know what's the matter with that 'ere boy,” she demanded in no gentle tone, as she pointed at Fred. “Can't he see, or what on airth's the matter with him?”

Poor Fred! His laugh died away, and, turning very white, he leaned back in his corner,

while Bess answered their inquisitive neighbor with an icy politeness, as she gave the boy's hand an encouraging pat. The brutal abruptness of the question was more than the child could bear, and it was long before he could speak or join in the conversation. Rob, meanwhile, was vowing vengeance. His opportunity soon came.

Directly in front of him, in the seat vacated by his enemy, sat a middle-aged man, who was carrying in his pocket a small gray kitten, probably a gift to some child at home. Rob had noticed the little animal as the gentleman came in, and from time to time he had turned to peep over at it, when its owner was absorbed in his reading. At length the man laid aside his paper, and turned to give his attention to the cat, which, however, was nowhere to be found. He began to search about for it, looking rather anxious. A sudden, naughty idea flashed into Rob's brain. Rising with an air of polite sympathy, he inquired in a loud and cheerful voice, —

“Can't I help you, sir? Which was it, a rattler, or just a common snake?”

The effect was instantaneous.

“Massy on us!” piped the aged heroine of the bonnet. “Snakes! Ow!” And she climbed nimbly up on the seat, an example quickly followed by her opposite neighbor. And though the cat was soon found and exhibited, the two worthy women sat sideways on the seat, their feet and skirts carefully tucked up beside them, until they left the train at Albany.

“Rob, how could you?” said Bess reprovingly, when quiet was restored.

“I don’t care, cousin Bess. She was so mean to Fred that I did it on purpose, and I sha’n’t say I am sorry.”

And Bess prudently changed the subject.

After a long delay at Albany, our travellers settled themselves anew in their sleeper. Neither of the boys had ever before travelled all night, and it seemed so cosy to go gliding away through the darkness that was slowly shutting in the landscape. There were few people in the car, and Rob prowled up and down, investigating his quarters, and making the acquaintance of the porter; while Bess chatted with

Fred, at ease once more now that his dreaded neighbor had departed.

“I wish people wouldn’t say such things,” he told Bess. “Once in a while I forget, but somebody always reminds me again, and it just makes me feel as if everybody was watching me.”

“It was a cruel question, cruelly asked,” said Bess with some energy, as she pulled off her gloves and took off her hat, preparatory to a comfortable evening. “If people only knew how such remarks hurt! I wish I could save you from them, laddie.”

At this moment, Rob came back to his seat, and remarked with conscious, but impenitent pride, —

“Didn’t I just pay up that old woman? Mean old thing!”

Then he devoted his attention to the porter, as he converted the seats into diminutive bedrooms, partitioned and curtained off and sumptuously furnished with a mirror and a wall pocket.

Long after the boys were stowed away for the night, Bess could hear them whisper and giggle

when a particularly loud snore from their next neighbor broke the stillness; and at each stopping-place she heard Rob's curtain fly up, to let him look out on the silent towns.

“Doesn't our Bess look matronly!” exclaimed Alice Rogers the next morning, when she saw Bess and her two companions coming towards her. “That one with her must be Fred Allen. Isn't he stunningly handsome, Jack?”

“Poor little cub!” said Jack sympathetically, as he hurried forward to meet them.

After the first confused moment of greeting and hand-shaking, question and answer, Alice, a plump blonde who still kept much of her girlish beauty, turned to the boys.

“Can this be my little cousin Rob, grown up to this?” she said, as she kissed him, to his secret disgust, for Rob scorned kisses except from Bess. “And this, I think, is Bessie's adopted boy, Fred, isn't it? I am so glad to have you both here, for I like boys almost as well as Bess does.”

Two days later, Rob sat on the piazza at Island Den, painfully fulfilling his promise to

write to his mother. Near him, Fred was swinging in a hammock, holding beside him the two-year-old daughter of the house. Little Alice had taken a violent fancy to the boy, who amused himself with her by the hour at a time. Up-stairs, in the warm August morning, the two sisters were lounging and talking "like magpies," as Jack had said when he left them.

And this is what Rob wrote: —

DEAR MOTHER, — We got here all right. We came in a sleeping-car to Clayton, and there we took a boat and came here. On the way we had a good time, only a woman was mean to Fred. I paid her up, though. I will tell you about it some day. I liked the porter on our car. I think I'd like to be one. All you have to do is to make beds and bring drinks to people and get them tables and black their boots, and most everybody gives you a dollar. We had ours, supper, I mean, on a table, and it was lots of fun. Have the rats eaten any more chickens? Island Den is a lovely house, very large, and it is right by the water. There isn't any other house on the island, but on the next there is a great big hotel. There are lots of islands. To-morrow cousin Alice says I may go fishing at the end of the island. She isn't as nice as cousin Bess, but she is pretty good. I don't think Fred likes her much. They have a tennis court here and a boat. Has Phil come home? Puck

liked the book you sent her. She has written to tell you so. I think it is a good letter for a little girl only five years old. Fred is in the hammock with Alice. She says, Don't you fink boys is naughty? I hope you don't forget the worms for my turtle. He wants five a day every day. I think this is all I can think of now. Fred sends love, so no more now.

Your affectionate son,

ROBERT MACMILLAN ATKINSON.

P.S. I forgot to tell you that the box under my table has a worm in it that I want to have spin himself up, so don't move it. R. M. A.

P.S. Number 2. Tell Ted I forgot to give him back his bat. It is in the corner of the closet in my room. ROB.

P.S. 3. The best worms are in the bed where the verbenas are. R.

Folded inside this letter was another, written in large letters on a grimy sheet of paper.¹

Marian C. Rogers.

New York City.

Dear Aunty

Bess I want

to thank you,

¹ A genuine letter, written by a child of five

for those nice
pictures you sent me.
In the cot oer the hill,
Lives little Jennie Gill.
She is but a tot,
As big as a dot,
How do you do?
I hope that yur doll is well.
And that your dog tray is well.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE BOYS MEET AN OLD FRIEND.

“HELP! Help! He-e-elp!”

It was a boy's voice that rang out across the waters of the Saint Lawrence, from a dainty little rowboat that was lazily drifting down the river. The boy was Rob. He stood up in the bow of the boat, looking to the right and left for help; while Fred had dropped to the seat in the stern, where he sat, white and still, waiting and listening.

“Nobody yet,” said Rob, trying to speak bravely, although his tone was far from cheerful. “We shall run across somebody soon.”

“Aren't there some rapids down below here?” asked Fred anxiously.

“Ye-es,” admitted Rob. “But I don't know just where they are. They're the salt—something or other. I've heard cousin Alice tell about going through them in a steamer. I wish I'd studied my geography a little more,

and then I'd have known how far down they are."

This was the outcome of Rob's fishing expedition. Early that August afternoon, he and Fred had gone down to the lower end of the island, at some distance from the house. After Rob had fished for a half-hour, with but poor success, he proposed to Fred that they should sit in the little green and white boat that was drawn up on shore, and he would fish from there. Fred fell in with the idea, and the next minute the boys were luxuriously lounging in the stern, quite unconscious of the fact that their motions had rocked the boat until it had left the bank and was quietly drifting off down towards the Atlantic, with never an oar on board.

If the boys had but known it, their situation was far from alarming. It was still quite early, so there were yet several hours of daylight before them, and they would soon be seen and rescued. Still, it was not exactly pleasant to be slowly moving away from home, with a very uncertain prospect of returning in time for dinner. And added to Rob's alarm for him-

self was the uncomfortable feeling that he had been the means of getting Fred into a scrape, and that cousin Alice would wish she had not invited him to her house.

“Boat ahoy!” called a clear voice across the water.

Rob looked around and saw a little boat with one occupant suddenly turn from the shore, where it was creeping along in the shade, and come darting towards them, with a long, steady sweep of the oars that told of an experienced rower. He answered the call, and then turned to communicate the good news to Fred, as the other boat came quickly alongside.

“Throw me your painter,” said the young man who was in the boat; “I’ll take you in tow. But how did you two youngsters ever happen to get in such a plight?”

Rob briefly explained their situation, honorably taking all the blame for the carelessness.

“Well, never mind. You’d better come into this boat,” said their rescuer. “I can row you better that way.”

Rob carefully helped Fred to step from one boat to the other, with the assistance of the

young man, who at once noticed Fred's infirmity, and, taking his hand, guided him to his seat in the stern, where he gazed at him attentively, almost curiously, while Rob was seating himself by his side.

"Now," went on the stranger, when they were settled, and the other boat made fast, "where are you boys trying to go? And where did you come from?"

"Island Den," answered Rob. "Perhaps you don't know where that is, but it's up by the hotel. We'll be ever so much obliged if you will take us back."

"I can do it as well as not," said their new friend. "I am on my way to the hotel now. And I do know Island Den, for I was going to call there to-morrow."

"Why, do you know cousin Jack?" asked Rob in astonishment.

"If cousin Jack is Mr. Rogers," said the stranger, laughing at Rob's surprise, "I know him quite well. But how does it happen that I have never heard of this small cousin?"

"Oh, he's no real cousin. Cousin Alice, Mrs. Rogers, is my cousin, and I've never been

here before. I'm Rob Atkinson, and I came here with cousin Bess and Fred, this fellow, three days ago."

At the mention of these three names, a sudden idea seemed to cross the young man's mind, and, looking closely at Fred again, he said, —

"I thought I had seen Fred before, and now I know I have."

"Yes," assented Fred quietly. "I knew your voice as soon as you and Bob began talking. Aren't you Mr. Muir?"

"I certainly am," he answered, "and very glad to see you again. I was sure I knew your face as soon as I saw you. And this is the Rob who tied up the cat's feet in papers, is it?"

"Oh, Mr. Muir," began Rob, blushing at the recollection, "I didn't" —

"Never mind that," said Mr. Muir; "but how odd that Miss Carter should be related to Mrs. Rogers, and that I should meet her up here!"

"They're sisters," said Rob, "but cousin Alice is lots older. She's real nice, but she

isn't like cousin Bess one bit, and I don't think I like her as well."

Fred looked horrified at Rob's alarming frankness, but Mr. Muir only laughed, as he said, —
"I think perhaps I agree with you, Rob."

As the boat drew near the landing, no one was in sight about the piazza or lawn of Island Den. Frank Muir pulled out his watch.

"Only half-past three now," he said, as if to himself; "still, I think I shall risk a call, even if it is rather early, and I am not in full dress. Rob, do you think your cousins would see me now? As long as I am all here, I think I'll not go away without seeing them."

"Oh, I'm sure they will," said Rob confidently, as he offered his arm to Fred, and they turned towards the house. As they came under the windows, he called out loudly, —

"Cousin Bess, come on down here! Fred and I were carried off down the river, and I want to tell you how we got home again."

"In just a minute, Rob," answered Bessie's voice from above.

Rob turned to his new friend with a smile of pleased anticipation.

“I thought I'd give her a surprise party,” he explained, “and not tell her you were here.”

Now it happened that the day was so warm that the sisters, feeling safe from all interruption, were lounging in Alice's room, having a long afternoon rest before dressing for dinner. At Rob's summons, Bess hastily twisted up her hair, put on a long wrapper of some creamy, clinging wool, and thrust her feet into an ancient pair of slippers, whose soles and uppers were rapidly parting company. Thus attired, she ran lightly down the stairs, and out on the piazza, exclaiming, —

“What have you boys been ” —

And then stopped aghast, as she caught sight of Mr. Muir, who rose to meet her.

“There! I told you she'd be astonished,” commented Rob triumphantly. “Only think, cousin Bess, he found us floating off down the river, and he knows cousin Alice and all.”

A week later, Rob was waked early one morning by a sound of splashing water. For a moment he lay in that pleasant interval between sleeping and waking, dreamily listening to the morning twittering of the birds, and

feeling vaguely that something very pleasant was in prospect. But an inquisitive sunbeam would shine directly into his eyes, and, as he rolled over, he opened them to find that Fred was not in bed.

“Why, Fred, where are you?” he exclaimed.

“Here,” responded a voice from the other side of the room. “I haven’t been asleep for ever so long, and my face felt so funny and hot I got up to put some cold water on it. I don’t know what’s the matter, but it feels so queer.”

Rob raised his head from the pillow, and eyed his friend curiously for a moment.

“Queer!” he said then, “I should think it might! You just ought to see yourself, Fred Allen. It’s all red and speckled — I’ll tell you, you must have hit some poison yesterday morning when we were out in the woods.”

“I wonder if that is it,” said Fred rather disconsolately. “My head aches enough to have it almost anything. How long does it last, Bob?”

“Oh, two or three weeks,” answered Rob encouragingly. “I’ve been poisoned lots of times, and it’s horrid. Pretty soon you’ll be-

gin to itch, and then you mustn't scratch it, or it will be worse. Want me to call cousin Bess?"

"Not now," said Fred, as he struck the repeater that his father had bought for him soon after his return from Boston. "Only five o'clock, three hours to breakfast time. It would be too bad to disturb her."

Rob subsided into drowsiness for a few moments, but his conscience would not let him sleep, when he knew Fred was so uncomfortable.

"I'll tell you, Fred," he said suddenly, "they told me once, just as I was getting over it, that plantain leaves are good for poison. You just keep quiet, and I'll go look for some."

And he sprang out of bed and hastily pulled on his clothes, without stopping for shoes and stockings. Out he ran, barefooted, over the dewy lawn, looking here and there for the coveted plant. But it was not in vain that Jack Rogers had a fine gardener for his summer home, and to the water's edge the smooth, even turf was broken by no weed. At last, out by the back door, Rob discovered two of the

green leaves, and, seizing them in triumph, he tiptoed up the stairs, past Bessie's door, to his own room.

"I've found two, Fred," he announced. "I've forgotten just how they said use them, but I think it was just to put them on outside. You'd better put one on each cheek, for they are the worst."

"How shall I make them stay?" asked Fred, after trying to balance the smooth, slippery things on his face.

Rob pondered a moment.

"Wet them," he suggested. "That ought to make them stick."

And he crept into bed again, clothes and all, and quite regardless of the mingled dew and dust on his small bare feet.

"I don't see why I had to go and get poisoned," said Fred, as he thoughtfully rubbed his puffy countenance. "Just the last of the time we're to be here, too."

"Say, Fred," asked Rob suddenly, "don't you wish we hadn't found Mr. Muir that day-?"

"I should say he found us," said Fred. "But I like him ever so much; don't you?"

“Not very well. He’s nice enough, but he’s been round all the time. He has been here every single day, and cousin Bess is always playing tennis or going rowing with him, when I want her to do something, and — Hullo! there goes one of your leaves.” And Rob carefully replaced it on the reddest part of Fred’s face.

“Well,” said Fred, “she’s always ready to do things for me. Mr. Muir is here ever so much, I know, and somebody has to entertain him; but Mrs. Rogers is generally busy, so I suppose Miss Bess has to do it.”

“I don’t think she minds much,” replied Rob grimly. “And last night, you know, I told you it was bright moonlight, and they were out on the piazza ever so long. After you went to sleep, I heard them. I don’t want him round in the way, and I am glad we are going home next week. And, you know, Fred, she always dresses up when he comes.”

“I don’t see what that’s for,” answered Fred loyally. “She’s always pretty enough.”

“Yes, I know,” said Rob loftily, from the height of his thirteen years’ experience of life

and its problems; "but women do that kind of thing, when they like anybody. Say, how do you feel, Fred?"

"Horrid!" said Fred tersely.

"Didn't those leaves do any good?" inquired Rob, as he sat up in bed.

"Not yet, Bob. But I wish Miss Bess needn't know, for to-day they're all going on that picnic up the river, and I'm afraid she won't go."

"Can't you?" asked Rob anxiously, for as this was to be the crowning festivity of their visit, his heart had been set on it, and ever since he had discovered Fred's poison, he had been longing, yet fearing, to start the subject.

"I don't feel much like it," said Fred. "I don't care at all, for picnics aren't as much fun for me as they used to be." Here Rob gave his friend's hand a consoling squeeze. "But you can all go and leave me, Bob. I shall be all right, and I want you to go just the same."

When Rob entered the breakfast-room, two hours later, he said to his cousin, —

"I wish you'd go up to Fred, a minute."

“Is anything the matter?” asked Bess, who was always anxious about her charge.

“No, only he doesn’t feel very well,” answered Rob, as he followed her out of the room. When they were alone in the hall, he went on hurriedly, “He’s poisoned a little, I think, but he doesn’t feel like going to-day, and he wants us all to go and leave him. You make him think we will, and I’ll start with you, and then, after you are gone, I’ll come back to the house again. I truly don’t care about it.”

Bess read her little cousin’s generous motive, and as they went up the stairs, she insisted that he should join the frolic, and let her stay; but Rob held firm, and she had to yield, much against her will, for she knew how the boy had anticipated the day’s fun.

A striking picture met Bessie’s gaze, as she went into the boys’ room. Fred had attempted to get up, as usual, but after dressing, he felt so ill and miserable, that he had thrown himself down again. His face had swollen until his eyes were half closed, and its ruddy hue was heightened by its contrast with his white

flannel blouse and the two bright green leaves that Rob had again plastered on his face, just before he went down-stairs. The remedy, applied in that way, was so original that Rob was at once dubbed "the doctor," a name that clung to him, to his disgust, till the end of the visit.

It was hard to see the gay party starting off in their three boats ; Mr. Muir rowing Bess in the first, Jack, Alice, and the children in a second, and the third in charge of a servant, with a tent and the lunch. Several friends from the hotel were to meet them, and among them was one little girl, with whom Rob had established quite a friendship. Yes, it would be great fun, but there was Fred, blind, ill, and alone, and the thought of his friend helped him to smile bravely and answer decidedly all their entreaties to go.

"I think Fred doesn't need you," Bess had said. "I am glad to have you willing to stay, Robin, but I am sure he really won't mind being alone."

"I'd rather stay," said Rob, and nothing could change his purpose.

But as the boats vanished around a point of land, Rob's resolution failed, and for a moment his face twitched. Then he started off, and tramped twice around the shore of the little island, as if running a race with himself. That done, he went into Bessie's room, took a book that she was reading aloud to Fred, and presented himself before the boy, who, now stripped of his foliage, had settled himself for a long, dull day.

"Got left," he said briefly, as he seated himself.

And Fred understood the sacrifice.

CHAPTER XIV.

PHIL'S FIGHT.

THE first of September found the boys all at home again, after their summer fun and wanderings. Phil had been visiting his grandmother in Vermont; Sam had gone with his family to Newport, where his boyish soul was greatly tried by their attempts to live in a truly fashionable manner; Bert had been in Western New York, visiting some farmer friends, who feasted him on milk and honey, and let him go fishing and ride the horses bareback, to his heart's content; while poor Ted was left to pine at home. But every joy has its accompanying sorrow, and glad as they were to be together once more, the immediate prospect of school was a cause for mourning. To Fred, it seemed strange to hear the other five boys bemoaning their fate, when he so wished he could go back into school again, and he could scarcely realize that only lately he had shared their feelings.

He needed no urging to return to his pleasant lessons with Bess; but the others, who had so many more resources, were by no means reconciled, and the first Monday in September saw them walking slowly, very slowly, towards the schoolhouse, with their books in their hands and rage in their hearts.

All of us who have been boys know how hard it is to leave all the frolics and idle enjoyment of the long vacation, to sit for five hours a day in a close room, amid the buzz of voices, and, with warm, sticky hands, turn over the leaves of the books that never before seemed half so prosy and dull — since last September. How all the out-door sounds that come in at the open windows, the notes of the birds, the hum of the passing voices, the distant bark of our own Nep or Rover, even the whir of a mowing machine in the next yard, tempt us to throw aside the lessons, and, braving the whipping that we know must certainly follow, to run out at the door, down the stairs, and into the clear yellow sunshine that was surely created for boys to enjoy themselves in! And how all the memories of the summer fun will come into our

minds, replacing the War of 1812 with a boat-race, and making the puzzling mysteries of the binomial theorem give place to an imaginary brook and a fish-line! Well, well! It is only what comes to us grown-up children, when we have taken a day, or a week, or a month from our business, and then have to settle down to work again.

One afternoon about two weeks after the opening of school, as Bess was coming in from some errands, she found five excited boys sitting on her front steps, eagerly waiting to see her. As she approached, she heard Rob saying, —

“I didn't think Phil had so much grit. If it had been you, Bert, or Sam” —

“Well, my boys,” said Bess, as she sat down in the midst of them, and took off her hat, “what is the occasion of this call? You look as if something were the matter.”

“Matter enough!” said Sam. “That Miss Witherspoon hadn't ought to teach school anyway!” And he scowled darkly on the unconscious Fred, who chanced to be in range of his glance.

“Sam! Sam!” remonstrated Bess.

“It’s a fact, Miss Bessie,” said Bert. “She’s too old and cross for anything! Just think, she’s going to keep Phil after school and whip him!”

“Yes,” put in Ted, “and it isn’t fair.”

“Phil!” said Bess incredulously. “You don’t mean that Phil Cameron has to be whipped in school! What has he done?”

“He hasn’t,” said Rob. “I don’t think he did it at all, only she doesn’t know who did, and so she is going to whip Phil.”

“Jiminy!” said Ted, rolling off the steps to the ground, in his excitement. “I’d like to go for her! It’s a burning shame to whip Phil. There isn’t a better lad in all the school, and she likes him herself, when she isn’t mad.”

From these remarks, however emphatic and lucid they might seem to the boys who were in the secret, Bess had gathered but the one fact, that Phil was in disgrace at school and was to be whipped. To her mind, corporal punishment in schools was degrading and brutalizing, and the idea of its being employed on a refined, gentle boy, like Phil, shocked her and

roused her indignation, for she knew the lad well enough to be sure that he had done nothing to justify such extreme measures.

“I'll tell you about it, Miss Bess,” said Bert. “You see, Phil has been feeling funny all day, and when we marched round to get the dumbbells, he just turned his toes square in, and waddled along, so,” and Bert illustrated the proceeding for Bessie's benefit. “We fellows all laughed, and that rattled Miss Witherspoon awfully, and started her down on him. I guess she didn't feel just right to-day, perhaps. Well, by and by, when we were studying, all of a sudden somebody snapped a great agate up the aisle, right bang against Miss Witherspoon's desk. It astonished her and made her jump, but she picked it up and only said, ‘If this happens again, I shall whip the boy that does it,’ and then went on with her class. Pretty soon another one went rolling along, but she wasn't quick enough to catch the boy, so she began asking us all if we knew who did it. We were all the other side of the room but Phil, and he was the only one in the room that said he did know. Miss Witherspoon asked

him who it was, but he just shut his mouth. Then she asked if he did it, and he just said 'No.' And then she told him she'd whip him unless he told, but he just wouldn't, and I say, Good for him!"

"Hurrah for Phil!" said Ted, turning a somersault on the turf.

Bess looked perplexed. She knew Miss Witherspoon too well, a veteran teacher who had grown hard in the service, a nervous old maid who ruled her children with an iron rod, and then went home and wept bitter tears because they did not love her, conscientious to a fault, and at heart anxious for the good of her pupils, although no consideration would make her take back a hasty word, or lighten a punishment ordered in a moment of anger. This was the first time that one of the I. I.'s had been publicly punished in this way, and each one of them felt the disgrace as keenly as if it had been his own, while with one consent they had come to Bess for advice and consolation.

"There comes Phil, now!" exclaimed Rob.

Bess gave one look at the small figure coming along the street, with his hat pulled down

over his face, and his hands plunged deep into his pockets.

“I don't believe he will feel like seeing you boys now,” said she. “I want to have a little talk with him, and you had better keep away.”

The boys obediently retired through the back gate before Phil had a chance to see them. He was going directly past the house, when Bess called him, —

“Come in a minute, Phil.”

The boy stopped doubtfully for a moment. Then he turned and came up to where she stood waiting. Taking his hand, all red and puffed up with the blows, she led him into the house.

“Now, Phil, my boy,” she said gently, “tell me all about it.”

Phil's face grew red, and his lips twitched. Then he answered abruptly, —

“There's not much to tell, only Miss Witherspoon whipped me because I wouldn't tell on one of the boys, and she isn't going to let me go back to school until I tell who did it. She'll just have to wait, then, that's all.”

Bess looked anxious. This was worse than she expected.

“But, Phil,” she said, “isn’t the boy manly enough to confess, rather than see you suffer for him?”

Phil shook his head.

“No, he’ll never tell.”

“And you really had nothing to do with it?”

The boy had been sitting with his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, gazing at the floor; but at this question he threw up his head proudly, and looked straight into Bessie’s eyes.

“Miss Bess,” he said simply, “I told Miss Witherspoon I didn’t, upon my honor, and did you ever know me to lie?”

“No, Phil, I never did.”

“I think she might believe me, too, then,” muttered Phil, as he settled back after his momentary flash. “She thinks I did it, and won’t believe me when I say I didn’t. Oh, how I hate to tell my father!” And he started up to go.

“Will you tell me, Phil, who it was?” asked Bess, as she followed him to the door.

Phil shook his head again.

“But I might be able to straighten the matter out. You mustn't lose your school.”

“I'll lose it always, rather than be a tell-tale.”

The boys were loud in their exclamations when they heard, the next morning, that Phil was suspended from school. One after another, they coaxed, wheedled, begged, and stormed by turns, but Phil could not be induced to tell them his secret, although one word would have put him back in his classes again. At Bessie's suggestion, Fred urged Phil to tell him, as long as he was outside the school set, but it did no more good than Bessie's call did on Miss Witherspoon.

“Yes, I am sorry,” that worthy woman confessed; “I was tired that day, and I think I was hasty, for I don't think Philip is a bad boy at heart. It was a little thing to punish so severely, but, if I give in now, I shall lose all my control for the future. Let the boys once feel that they can make me yield, and I might as well give up teaching.”

Poor Miss Witherspoon! After all her years of teaching, she had yet to learn how quickly

all pupils respect a teacher who can make herself as a little child in acknowledging a mistake, and making what reparation for it she can.

But a week had passed, and Phil was as obstinate on one side as his teacher was determined on the other. In vain his father and mother urged and commanded. Angry and smarting from the injustice done him, this seemed a different Phil from the pleasant, happy-go-lucky lad they used to know. At length, Mr. and Mrs. Cameron, at their wits' end, begged Bessie to take Phil in hand.

“Oh, dear!” Bess said to her mother, on the evening after this remarkable request. “I do wish people would discipline their own children. The idea of expecting me to succeed where they fail! It is too absurd.”

However, Phil was invited to dine at the Carters', whither he went somewhat suspiciously, for he regarded this as only a new plot to entrap him into telling what he had made up his mind to keep to himself. But Bess was wily. Dinner-time came and went, and no word of the dreaded subject, until Phil began to think that his had been a false alarm. But by

and by Mrs. Carter had gone out of the room, and Fred went away in search of Fuzz. Then Bess moved a chair up before the open fire, and pulled a low stool to its side.

“Come, Phil, I want to talk.”

Phil obediently settled himself at Bessie's feet, and prepared for the worst; but Bess only began to talk about the boys and the club. The child was just congratulating himself on his continued escape, when she suddenly asked, —

“What do you think I have started the club for?”

“I don't know. Fun, I suppose.”

“Partly for that, but, still more, to improve us in all sorts of ways. And yet I find I have failed to teach you the very first lesson of all.”

“What's that?” asked Phil curiously.

“Obedience, Phil. Your father and mother wish you to tell Miss Witherspoon who threw that marble, and you refuse to obey them.”

“I'm not going to tell tales,” said Phil sullenly.

Bess rested her hand lightly on the smooth brown head.

“Phil, the first duty you have now is to be guided by your father and mother. They know so much better than you what is right for you. I can see how hard it is for you to give in, in this case. But while a sneak and a tell-tale is the meanest of boys, you would not be either, under these circumstances.”

“Yes, I should,” answered Phil. “It’s a mean thing to do, and the fellows would all be down on me.”

“Suppose they were?” replied Bess. “Is it your parents or ‘the fellows’ that you want to please? I will tell you what one trouble is, Phil; you have read too many stories where the hero nobly bears the punishment for another boy, and is only cleared on the last half-page. Isn’t it true?”

Phil laughed, in spite of himself.

“That would be all very well if you had no duty to any one but yourself; but, back of that, you owe obedience to your father and mother, and if they think that you ought to go back into school, that is what you should do. You are too young, my boy, to decide these things for yourself. And it is because we have so

many hopes and plans for your future that we want you to do right now, every day. It will be hard for you to go back, but, even if it is, we all want you to go. Will you promise?"

Phil's face had softened at her last words.

"I won't promise, Miss Bess, for then I should have to, anyway, and I'm not sure yet, till I think it all over. I'll tell you to-morrow."

Bess patted his shoulder approvingly, for this was a concession at least. Then she went on, after a little pause, —

"Phil, dear, ever so long ago, Fred and I took for our motto a verse from your All Saints' Hymn, — 'Oh, may thy soldiers,' and we are trying to win our 'victor's crown.' Why not take it for your motto, too? You boys all have a good deal of the stuff that makes heroes and fighters. Just now you are forgetting that a soldier's first duty is to obey his superior officer, and that any disobedience, even a slight one, may ruin the whole campaign. Will this small soldier join our company, and fight with us, 'faithful, true, and bold'?"

"Ye-es, I s'pose so."

“ Even when you remember that your first step must be to yield your idea of right to your father’s ? ”

“ Ye-e-es. ”

It was a long-drawn yes, and it told of a whole battle, and a victory. As Bessie bent over the boy for a moment, she saw that the lashes over the gray eyes were a little damp, and the lips were quivering. But there was no time for Phil to have so much as a tear, for just then the door opened and Ted rushed in, capering like a mad creature, while Fred stood beaming in the doorway.

“ Why, Ted, what is the matter ? ” exclaimed Bess in wonder, as Ted rushed up to Phil, shook both hands furiously, and then backed out into the middle of the room, where he executed a sort of clog-dance, to the rage of Fuzz, who barked himself hoarse, from the shelter of his basket, whither he had retired for safety.

“ Jack Bradley fired that marble ! ” said Ted, interrupting his antics for a moment, and then resuming them again more vehemently than ever, while Fuzz leaped from his basket and

rushed distractedly this way and that, adding his voice to the general confusion.

“How do you know?” asked Bess, although a glance at Phil's face was enough to assure her that Ted's statement was true.

“I'll tell you,” said Ted, composing himself as well as he could on such short notice, while Fred deliberately seated himself in the place lately vacated by Phil.

“You see,” he began, “we boys have all been mad about Phil's scrape, and we have just formed a regular league of detectives. This is the way I went to work. That marble came out of Phil's aisle. Well, it came up out of it sort of cornerwise, and bounced off the other way. That showed the direction, so I was pretty sure which side of the aisle it started from. Then, half-way down the aisle is where that little milksop of a Jimmy Harris sits. He never could tell a lie, just like Washington — don't believe he knows enough! But he's always looking round, and would have seen who fired it, if it had been anybody in front of him, so I made up my mind 'twasn't. Then I knew it must have been one of three

boys, so I went to work. I kind of suspected 'twas Jack; he's a mean lad, anyhow. So yesterday I began to talk about Phil to him, and he was very talky, said 'twas a mean shame and all that, but he never once looked me in the eye. Thinks I, 'I don't believe you.' Then I asked Miss Witherspoon to let me see the agate. It was a queer one, and after school I went the rounds of the stores, looking for some like it. I found a whole lot at Smith's, and they told me they had just come in new last week. I said I thought I would take one or two, and get the start of all the boys; but the clerk said I was too late, for Jack had bought some the other day. That clinched the matter, for they were different from any I ever saw. I don't believe Jack knew he had that one in his hand, or he wouldn't have fired it. He's too stingy. Well, to-night after school, I asked him if he wanted to swap marbles. He looked rather uncomfortable, and said he hadn't had any since last spring. I asked him how about the ones he had just bought of Smith. He just turned all colors, and begged me not to tell, for he'd get a whipping, and another at

home. Great baby! But I didn't tell. I just gripped my arms round him, and hauled him up to Miss Witherspoon, and told her to ask him about Phil and the marbles; that's all. I had to carry the milk, so I couldn't go to Phil's till just now, and, when I found he was here, I came right after him. And he can go into school in the morning and — Oh, jiminy — scratch!”

There was a crash. Ted, always in perpetual motion, in his present excitement had seated himself sideways in a low rocking-chair, and with one hand on the back, the other clutching the edge of the seat, he had been rocking furiously to and fro, till at this point he went a little too far, and, losing his balance, he landed in an ignominious pile on the floor, amid the shouts of the other two boys.

CHAPTER XV.

“GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN.”

IT was one of Fred's blue days; for, though they came more rarely, there were often times when his trouble seemed more than he could endure, and he was either irritable and moody, or so sad and despondent that even Bess was in despair over him. For a long time he had been brave and bright, but now the reaction seemed to have set in, and on this particular day he was harder to manage than usual. The other boys had all gone away to a ball game, to which they had tried in vain to induce Fred to accompany them. Of late he had gone about with them to many of their frolics, but to-day he had refused to join them. He was lying in a hammock out in the warm midday sun of late September, and feeling at war with all the world but Fuzz, who lay curled up across his breast with his head laid on the boy's shoulder, occasionally nestling about a little, or

giving a lazy growl whenever Fred ventured to move.

Out on the lawn, Bess and Mr. Muir were playing tennis, — for it was strange how often the young man had occasion to spend two or three days with Mr. Washburn. Fred could hear the thud of their balls against the rackets, and listened idly to their voices; but although his admiration for Mr. Muir amounted to a sort of hero-worship, he was too cross and dismal to-day to follow him about, as he usually did, or to respond to his pleasant, merry greeting. Everybody was having a good time but just himself, and he couldn't do anything at all. Everything was going wrong to-day. Miss Bess was too busy to read to him, just because that bothering old Mr. Muir was always round, — and, for a moment, Fred almost hated his idol. If he had only known that he was going to be here, he would have gone with the boys. He wished he had.

Fred's meditations had just reached this point, when he heard Rob's voice calling from the street, —

“Cousin Bess, where's Fred?”

“In the hammock, Rob. What sends you home so early?”

“Early!” thought Rob mischievously, “I’ve been gone nearly three hours and a half. Mr. Muir must be exciting, if time goes so fast with him round.” But all he said was, —

“I want him to come down to Bert’s. We beat those fellows all to pieces, and we’re going to have a grand bonfire to celebrate. Can he go?”

“Yes,” said Bess rather doubtfully, “but you must take care of him, Robin. Remember, he can’t go into it just as you do; and be careful your own self. We don’t want any burned boys on our hands.” And she returned to her game, amidst Rob’s fervent assurances that all would be well.

This time Fred was induced to go. He rolled out of the hammock, and the two boys, arm in arm, tramped off down the street towards the house of Dr. Walsh. At the extreme rear of the large grounds, they found Phil, Ted, Sam, and Bert, with the rest of the victorious nine, busily piling up a huge mound of brush. To any one glancing about the well-

kept lawn, it was a question where the lads had collected their materials; but a careful gleaning had gathered in a rich harvest of light rubbish that would do a smoky honor to their victory of the morning.

Rob and Fred were greeted with enthusiastic shouts as they appeared, for Fred was rapidly regaining his old place among his boy friends. Several grimy hands were extended to help him to a post of honor, where he could be in the very midst of the fun, and, with a boyish chivalry, the lads often paused from their work to talk a moment with him, that he might not feel left out of their frolic. But, even by this time, Fred had not quite returned to his usual good humor, and as he loitered about, listening to the gay shouts of his friends, he was inwardly chafing at the infirmity that kept him apart from them, and, filled with an impulse to get away from them, he turned slowly, and walked towards the house.

“Where going, Fred?” he heard Rob call after him.

“Only just to the hammock,” he answered, for he had become quite familiar with the

Walsh grounds, as it was a favorite meeting-place with the boys.

“Fred’s blue to-day,” remarked Rob to Bert, who stood near him for a moment.

“Poor old lad! I don’t wonder,” answered Bert, as he watched the retreating figure. “I wonder if somebody’d better go with him.”

“I don’t believe so,” said Rob. “When he’s like this, he’d rather be let alone than anything else; and he won’t try to go beyond the hammock. I don’t think I’ll go.”

Poor Rob! How often and how long he regretted this decision!

The bonfire was ready and Ted applied the match. Instantly the flame began to crackle through the dry twigs, and soon it mounted in a roaring cone high above the pile of brush, dry as tinder, for no rain had fallen for more than a week. The boys joined hands and frisked about the fire; then, arming themselves with long poles, they thrust them into the midst of the blaze, stirring up a cloud of tiny sparks and larger flakes of fire that floated up and away in the gentle September breeze. Of course it was warm exercise, but what boy minds that, when

it is a question of some frolic? Let him have to work, and then the temperature at once becomes an important question, and there is danger of getting overheated; but with play, no such slight matters are taken into consideration. Although the bonfire was dying down, the fun was still at its height. The boys were poking the embers up into a pile, preparatory to the prudent sport of jumping over them, when Ted suddenly exclaimed, —

“Bert! Boys! The little barn!”

Near the bonfire, much, very much nearer than they realized, stood a small building, half barn, half shed, that for years had been used for storing hay. It was a favorite place with the boys on rainy days, and they never wearied of playing hide and seek through a maze of elaborately constructed tunnels, or of lying on their backs in the sweet-smelling mows, discussing school, club, baseball, and other vital interests. Here Fred had held a sort of court the first time he had joined the boys in the old way; and here he used often to be with them, during the long weeks of the summer. But this was all over now, as far as the little barn

was concerned, for some treacherous spark, flying farther than its companions, had blown in at the wide-open door and lighted on the hay, where it had lain smouldering until it had gained strength and was ready to burst forth in the long tongue of flame that had met Ted's eye. Already the hay was blazing merrily and sending up a thin banner of smoke, which soon became a dense yellowish cloud that hid the sun and the sky. It was too far from any other building to cause any danger of its spreading, so the boys felt that the worst had come. But this was bad enough, for it had gone too far, when Ted discovered it, to make it possible to put the fire out. While two or three of them raced up to the house to give the alarm, the others stood by, with their boyish hearts sinking as they thought of the damage done by their careless fun, and waited anxiously for Dr. Walsh to come, hoping, yet fearing, to have him know of the accident. The barn was well hidden from the house by the trees, and at some little distance. Would he ever come?

“What do you s'pose he'll do to us?” asked Phil remorsefully.

“I don’t know,” said Rob anxiously. “Something bad, I’m afraid. I do hope he won’t have us arrested or anything.”

“How could we be such dummies as not to look out for all this hay!” said Ted. “Hark! What’s that?”

“What’s what?” asked Phil.

“That noise. It sounded as if some one was calling. Listen!” said Ted excitedly.

The boys did listen. In a moment the cry was repeated, —

“Help! Boys! Rob!”

The boys looked at each other in consternation, while the color faded from their cheeks and lips, leaving them ashy white.

“Boys,” said Sam, “that’s Fred! He’s in there!”

“What shall we do?”

This exclamation burst from Ted and Phil, as another shriek came ringing from the barn, above the rush and roar of the flames. Rob had dropped on the ground with his face in his hands, unable to look, or even to think of anything but Bessie’s charge, “Take care of him.”

“Do!” answered Sam calmly. “There ain’t

but one thing to do, — get him out. You call back to him that I'm coming; I want to save my breath. I'll need it all," he added, as he gazed at the seething flame.

Rob sprang up and caught him.

"Sam, you can't! You mustn't! You'll be burned. I was the one to blame, for I told cousin Bess I'd see to him. Let me go!"

Sam shook him off.

"No, Bob. You're not strong enough to bring him out; and besides — you're the only one at home, and if — But I'll be all right. I can't let him be burned."

"Wait, Sam! Somebody else will come in a minute," said Phil.

"There ain't any minutes to waste," said Sam bravely. "Don't you worry. I'll be all right."

Followed by the awe-stricken boys, who, seeing that nothing could change his purpose, silently submitted to his will, he went quickly to the farther end of the barn, where the fire was only just appearing. Hastily pulling off his light summer coat, he threw it over his head, and, guided by Fred's cries, plunged into

the midst of the smoke and flame, just as Dr. Walsh came running down from the house, followed by Bert and the other boys.

“I wonder what all that smoke can be,” Bess had said to Mr. Muir. “I do hope the boys are not in any trouble with their bonfire. I wish I hadn’t let Fred go.”

“He will be safe with Rob,” answered Mr. Muir lightly, as he gathered up the balls on his racket. “What’s that! Somebody crying fire?”

They listened a moment. Then Bess threw down her racket excitedly.

“Mr. Muir, come quick, please. I think it is at the doctor’s, and I feel so worried about Fred!”

Frank Muir could scarcely keep up with her as she hurried along the street, into the doctor’s grounds, and to the burning barn. They reached it at the very moment when Sam, half carrying, half dragging Fred, who had lost consciousness, and hung a limp, dead weight, staggered out into the open air, and fell motionless at his side, amid the cheer and tears of the large crowd that had gathered.

They said that he must have breathed the smoke, for there was no mark of the fire upon him. His lips were set firmly together, as with the nerving himself for some mighty, heroic task; and the coat he had worn to protect himself was closely folded about Fred's head. Lovingly and reverently they raised him, and bore him into the house, where they laid him on Bert's bed, wrapped in the dreamless sleep that could have but one awakening.

Frank Muir had lifted Fred in his strong arms, and turned to Bess inquiringly.

"Home, please; that is, if you can carry him there. It is so near, and Mrs. Walsh has so much now. Oh, Frank, am I to blame?" And she shuddered at the thought.

"To blame; no! Of course not. But I can carry him easily, and we shall need you, so you mustn't fail us." And he looked at her anxiously, for she seemed about to faint.

It was some time before Fred was fully restored to consciousness, and then, while Bess and her mother dressed his slightly burned face and hands, Frank Muir sat by his side, trying to cheer and calm him. It was a long after-

noon, for Fred was feverish and nervous, and needed all their care. They let him talk but little, but he told them how he had left the boys, intending to go to the hammock, but, thinking of the hay, he had gone into the barn instead, where he had fallen asleep, and waked to find the air around him filled with smoke. After that, he remembered nothing more until he waked in his own bed, with them all around him. Then he was ordered not to talk, so he lay, sleeping but little, till far into the night, while Bess anxiously hovered over him, suffering even more than he did from the burns which she fancied had been caused by some neglect on her part.

Late the next day, he was so much better that they thought it safe to tell him about Sam. The boy's grief was beyond any words, but, clinging to Bess, he sobbed bitterly, as he learned the sacrifice so nobly made for him. As he gradually became calmer, Bess said to him gently, as she stroked his hair, —

“Fred, my dear boy, Sam has willingly given his life for yours, and nothing can change that now. He is at rest and happy. There is only

one thing you can do, — live each day so that, as he looks down on you and watches you, he can be happier still in feeling that the life he saved was the life of a true, noble boy, who deserves the sacrifice.”

The story of the fire had been told on all sides, and early the next afternoon the great house on the hill was full, and many were gathered outside on the lawn, for honest, manly Sam had, unknown to himself, many a friend; and now young and old, boys and girls, men and women, had gathered to do honor to the young soldier who had gained “the victor’s crown of gold.”

The deep hush of sadness as Mr. Washburn slowly began, “I am the resurrection and the life,” was only broken, now and then, by a sob from some one who suddenly realized what a large place the quiet boy had filled in all their hearts. Fred had insisted on being present, and with Bess sat near the family, looking sadly worn from his burns, and his sorrow for the friend who had saved him.

But the prayer was ended, and on the quiet that followed rose the sweet boy voices, for

Sam's mother had asked the four friends to sing for her son, as they had so often sung with him. Clearly and firmly they began, —

“Lead, kindly Light, amid th' encircling gloom,
Lead thou me on.”

But one after another the young voices broke and were hushed, until Rob was singing alone, unconscious of the people about him, only seeing the dark outline in the darkened room; forgetful of his hearers, only remembering the good friend and companion in the happy days they had passed together. Never had his voice been sweeter or clearer, until the close of the second verse. Then it was impossible for him to go on. It all seemed like some horrible nightmare, from which he must wake, to find Sam alive and well. He tried to go on with the hymn, but his voice failed utterly. For a moment there was a hush of expectation, a hush that seemed endless to the boy; and then, from behind him, in a clear, mellow tenor, low and gentle, yet so distinct that not a syllable was lost, came the words of the last verse, —

“ So long Thy power has led me, surely still
’Twill lead me on,
O’er moor and fen, o’er crag and torrent, till
The night is gone,
And with the morn, those angel faces smile,
Which I have loved long since — and lost awhile.”

It was all over, “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” but as the five lads, the half-dozen now no longer, sat on the Carters’ piazza in the gathering twilight, sorrowfully talking over the events of the last three days, they felt that no one of them had made a braver fight to win the victor’s crown. And as the stars came out one by one, and smiled down on the boys as they sat there, smiled as they had so often done before, only more sadly to-night, they felt that Sam, too, was looking down upon them from above, and each one resolved, in his boyish heart, to live from day to day, so that at last he should be worthy to meet Sam once more in the happy future world.

CHAPTER XVI.

A LITERARY EVENING.

THE I. I. CLUB

REQUESTS you to be present on Saturday evening, October 29th, at its semi-annual meeting. Essays will be read, to show the work of the club.

These invitations were scattered broadcast among fathers and mothers, uncles and aunts, and Saturday evening was eagerly awaited by the young clubbists.

It was now more than four weeks since Sam had left the boys, and although they missed him sadly and mourned for him most sincerely, there seemed to Bess no reason that the five lads should give up their long-talked-of festival. She was sure that Sam, unselfish as he had always shown himself, would not wish it otherwise. His memory had become a tender centre for all their highest, noblest thoughts and talks, and the five rarely came together without speaking of him, sometimes laughing

quietly at the funny adventures they had had with him, but more often dwelling with a boyish pride on the courage and manliness that showed in his every act. It was always, "Sam is," "Sam does;" never the dreadful "was" and "did," that past tense which seems to separate our friends from us by an impassable barrier. Bess encouraged this feeling of nearness, for she loved to have the boys feel that their friend had only left them as if for a little journey, and they would soon meet him again. It was the first time they had learned the real meaning of death, and it had been a terrible blow to them all, but the tender, loving memory, and the thought that their friend was always watching over them, had a sweet, helpful influence on their young lives. No one had been asked to fill his place in the club, but instead, when the lads were discussing the details of their open meeting, Sam's tastes and wishes were followed as closely as if he had been still among them.

Saturday evening found the Carters' large rooms well filled, and at exactly half-past seven Bess, followed by the five boys, took her place

on a small raised platform at the end of the room. Each one wore a white carnation in his buttonhole, from which hung the badge of membership, a silver interrogation point, Fred's gift. Four of them were armed with impressive rolls of manuscript, while Fred carried a large, loose bunch of roses that, with Bessie's help, he placed before a picture of Sam that stood on a small table in their midst.

Then, in a few words, Bess reminded the audience of the object and work of the club. Of what it had done in the past six months, they could judge by the evening's entertainment; the secret of what its members would do in the future lay hidden in the boys themselves. She added a few tender words, referring to the member who had left them, and then, after saying that the essays were the work of the boys, and that she had not even seen them, she introduced as the first reader, Master Philip Cameron.

Phil rose with a rather sheepish giggle, hastily smoothed down his scalp-lock that would stand aggressively erect, bowed to the audience, and announced his subject.

“GOLD.

“Gold is a yellow metal that we are all familiar with, though not as much so as we should like to be. It is used for money and for ornaments, and is very precious. It is found in a great many places in the world, and a great deal in a place, but people always wish there was some more of it. The most interesting place to us is in California. It was discovered there in 1848 by three men, partly Mormons. It was their daughter that found it and picked it up and said what a pretty stone. They tried to keep it a secret, but of course they couldn't, and pretty soon everybody was going to California.

“At least, not everybody,” explained Phil conscientiously, as he looked up from his paper, “but ever and ever so many people.” Then he resumed, —

“The State was soon full of people, and it was admitted to the Union.

“There are a good many ways of gold-mining. Sometimes the mines are in veins in the hard rock. Then the miners bore down

to them and dig out the rock, and break it up fine to get out the gold, just as they do silver. Another way is to find it in the loose sand in the bottoms of rocks and in gravel. When the miners first went out, they used to take a little gravel in a dish with some water, and shake it hard, so a little would slop over each time. The gold was heavy, and would sink and stay after all the rest had gone. They called it 'panning out well' when there was a lot left in the dish. Now they turn brooks to run over a row of troughs with holes scooped out in the bottoms, and the gold drops into the holes, and the other stone goes on. Then there is hydraulic mining. They turn a stream of water against the side of a hill and wash it all down to start with, and then they put it through the troughs just the same way.

"Gold is soft when it is pure, so they have to mix it with other metals to keep it from wearing out. They call that alloying it. We tell how pure gold is by the number of carats. Twenty-four is pure, but eighteen is very fine.

"I have only one thing more to say. When you say a person has 'sand,' or courage, that

comes from gold-mining. When a miner saw a certain kind of sand, he always knew that gold was mixed with it underneath."

And Phil sat down, amidst a hum of applause.

"Next comes Master Herbert Walsh," announced Bess, from her chair of office.

"We had an evening of the old Greek myths," began Bert, by way of introduction, "and I thought I'd take for my subject

"THESEUS AND THE MINOTAUR.

"Ever and ever so long ago there was a king of Athens that had a son named Theseus. This son didn't live with him, but with his mother, somewhere else; but when he was strong enough he lifted up a great rock, and found under it a sword with a gilt handle, and a pair of shoes. They had been left there for him by his father till he was strong enough to pry up the rock and get them. So he put them on, and started for Athens. He had a good many adventures on the way, with robbers, and a bed that opened and shut, and a wild pig, but at last he came to Athens, and his father was

glad to see him, but his nephews weren't, for they wanted the crown themselves. But they had to go away with their mother, Medea, and Theseus had all the right to the throne.

“ But in that country an expedition to Crete was prepared every year, to send fourteen young gentlemen and young ladies to the Minotaur, a sort of bull that looked like a man, a little. He was a pet of Minos, the king of Crete, and used to eat them up. Well, when Theseus heard about it, he said he'd go, too, and try to kill the beast. So they sailed away in a schooner with black sails and jibs and all, but Theseus promised his father that if he killed the Monitor, he'd put up white sails to come home with. They passed a brassy giant on the way, but when he found out where they were going, he let them pass without hurting them.

“ They came to Minos, the king of Crete, and while he was looking them over to see if they were fat, Theseus was so saucy to him that Minos said he should be the first meal for the Monitor — Minotaur, I mean. But Minos had a daughter, Ariadne, who was in love with

Theseus as soon as she saw him, and she let Theseus out of his prison, and led him to the labyrinth where the Moni — Minotaur lived. They had a ball of twine, and they tied one end to the gate-post, and then unwound it as they went in, so they could find their way out, for the walks crisscrossed every way so they would have been apt to get lost. When they came to the Minotaur, Ariadne stood back and cried, but Theseus had an awful fight with him and killed him. Then they came out, hauling in their line as they went along. They let out their friends, and he married Ariadne; and they went off on board their boat, but in their hurry they forgot to take the white sails out of the hold and hoist them, so the poor old king, who was keeping watch, died of broken heart, because the schooner came back with black sails, and he supposed Theseus was eaten up.

“My friends, I think there are two morals to this story. First, keep your promises; and, second, it is a very good thing to fall in love.”

A great clapping of hands greeted Bert's somewhat unexpected close. When quiet was restored, Bess said, —

“Master Frederic Allen will talk to us next.” And then she gave an anxious glance at the boy, to see how he would bear this ordeal.

It seemed impossible that this could be the same Fred who, less than a year ago, had been shutting himself up, away from all his friends, and brooding sadly over his blindness, because it had spoiled his life. With only a slight touch of shyness, he stood there so easily, with one hand resting on the back of the chair in which Bessie was sitting, and his whole face bright with the laugh he had just been enjoying over Bert's remarkable moral.

“I am going to try to tell you a little bit about that fossil over there,” he began, while Bessie silently pointed to a superb fossil fish that lay on a side table. “It came from high up in the Rocky Mountains, and people used to wonder how it could get there, so high above water, but now they know. You see, the earth used to be just a great ball of melted rock, whirling around in the air, and growing cool over the outside. But as it grew cool and hard, deeper and deeper down, the core seemed to shrink,

and so the outside began to wrinkle, just like a dried-up old winter apple. And because it was colder than the air, the water condensed on the earth like steam on a cold window, and it all ran down into the low places, so there was an ocean where the Rocky Mountains are now. That was where this fish lived. He died, and his body sank down, and the sand washed in on top of it and grew hard. But the earth kept shrinking and making new wrinkles, till by and by they had changed places, and the Rocky Mountains were high up out of the water, and the fish was left there in the rock."

There was a perfect quiet while Fred was speaking, for all those present knew the boy's sad story, and marvelled at the change in him. But as he turned back to his chair, there came a hearty burst of applause, not so much for the little talk, as for the boy himself who had made such a bold fight against his trouble.

"Master Robert Atkinson" was the next announcement from the mistress of ceremonies.

Rob shyly came forward and made his best bow, as he gave his subject.

“ LEPIDOPTERA.

“ That means moths and butterflies. It comes from two words that mean scale and wing, because the foundation of their wings is covered with little bits of scales that lap over each other like shingles on a roof, and give the color, instead of their being gray, like a fly. They are the prettiest of all the insects, and there are a great many kinds of them, but they all go in two classes: the butterflies, that fly in the daytime; and the moths, that come out at night. You can tell the difference when they settle, too, for the butterflies fold up their wings till they meet, straight up over their backs, and the moth's wings lie flat. Their ‘feelers,’ or antennæ, that are supposed to be to hear with, are different, too. In the butterflies, they are largest at the end; but in the moths they are larger in the middle or next the head, and sometimes they look just like two little feathers.

“ All these moths and butterflies live twice. First they are a worm or caterpillar, and then in the fall they spin themselves up into a silk ball.

It is very funny to see them. They hang themselves up head down from the corner of a fence, or some such place, and spin round and round, leaving themselves in the middle. They lie like that ever so long, and then they hatch out and eat their way through. They have to take good care of themselves while their wings are growing, for fear something will eat them up.

“In the silkworm, they wait till they have spun, and then they bake the cocoons to kill the animal inside, or else he would eat out. Then they unwind the silk. Each one lays about six or seven hundred eggs, so they can afford to kill a few.

“Some of the insects of this class are not so pleasant to have. The canker-worm belongs to it, and so does the moth that gets into houses and eats up woollen things.

“All caterpillars change their skins several times, getting a new one whenever it outgrows the old one. Some caterpillars have great appetites. One kind eats every day twice as much cabbage leaf as it weighs, as if I ate one hundred and seventy-five pounds of beef a day.”

Rob's somewhat mixed assortment of facts

was listened to with a profound attention that was most gratifying. Ted, as the last speaker, came forward with a smile of calm assurance, before his name was called. Unrolling his manuscript, which proved to be a single strip of paper about three inches wide and four feet long, he bowed cheerfully to the audience, and began his theme.

“NAPOLEON BONAPARTE.

“Napoleon Bonaparte was born in 1768, and died in May, 1821. He was born in Corsica, and was sometimes called ‘the ogre of Corsica,’ after he was dead, and they dared to. He was a very great general and a very bad man, but he did a few good things. When he was eleven years old, he began going to a military school, and when he was twenty-eight he was put at the head of forty thousand men, and he began to beat the enemy right off. In two years, he had won eighteen pitch battles. The way he came to have such a good position was because at Toulon, in a siege, he was the only man who could point the guns right to have them go into the city. That made him famous.

Well, he conquered Italy and Sardinia and Austria and Egypt. But that wasn't enough for him, so he came home for a little while, and went into politics. He made himself first consul of France when he was only twenty-nine. Five years later, in 1804, he made the pope crown him emperor. Then he went on conquering countries, and putting his own relations on the throne — they didn't have any civil-service reform then — till he had most everything but England and Russia in the family. And at home he made a few good laws, and straightened out things where the revolution had mixed them up. But in 1812 he made an expedition to Russia, and there he was beaten. Then, till 1814, he had ever so many defeats, and finally was arrested and sent to Elba. He was there about a year, and then ran away and came back to France. When he came, the king they had put on the throne ran away, and all his old soldiers came back to him. But on June 17th, 1815, they fought the battle of Waterloo. Napoleon was beaten and captured and carried clear down to St. Helena, where they kept an eye on him till he died; and I say it served him right."

While Teddy was reading, Bess^o had seated herself at the piano. When he finished, she played the opening bars of "Fair Harvard," as the boys rose, joined hands, and made a low bow to the audience. Then they began to sing.

"Dear friends, now this evening you've seen our I. I.,
And we leave you to judge of its work.
Of its many good times we will tell by and by;
For as pills under sugar coats lurk,
We must each do our work, ere we share in the play,
For such does our club make its rule;
And many's the lesson we learn day by day,
In this jolliest kind of a school.

We have wandered o'er many a subject ere this,
And our six months have been full well spent;
We no longer sit down and talk nonsense and fun,
For on learning we're all of us bent,
So we solemnly talk of the pagans and worms,
Of minerals, planets, and snakes.
We speak of the glory of Washington's fame,
Of cormorants, Zulus, and lakes.

But we all have a wish to impart from our store;
To improve those around us is kind;
So we've called you together, and made you a feast
Of crumbs from each overstocked mind.
And now, our dear friends, we thank you indeed,
Your attention has been most polite.
Six months from this time we'll invite you again;
In the mean time, we wish you good-night."

CHAPTER XVII.

ROB ASSISTS AT AN IMPORTANT INTERVIEW.

ANOTHER month had passed, and it was the day after Thanksgiving. The feast day had been a merry one, for Mrs. Atkinson had invited the Carter household, Fuzz and all, to dine with her, and the fun had been prolonged until late in the evening. The next day, as was usually the case after any unwonted dissipation, Fred was ill with a severe nervous headache, the only trace left of his illness of the year before. By carefully regulating his habits, Bess had generally succeeded in avoiding them, but the excitement of the day before had been too much for him; and soon after breakfast, he had gone up to the sofa in his room, where Bess had been busy with him all the morning.

In the early afternoon, Rob had strolled into the house. He found no one in the parlor or

library, for, as we have said, Bess was with Fred, and Mrs. Carter was lying down.

“Never mind,” thought Rob. “They will be down pretty soon, so I’ll just sit down and read till they come.”

Accordingly, he took up a book and settled himself comfortably in a vast reclining-chair that stood near one of the library windows, half hidden behind a folding Japanese screen. But the book was rather a dull one, and Rob, if the truth must be told, was decidedly sleepy after his late hours of the night before; so before he had turned many pages, the book fell from his hand, his head dropped back into the depths of his chair, and Master Rob was sound asleep.

Half an hour later the bell rang. As Bridget could never be prevailed on to leave her work and go to the door, Bess gave Fred a bell to ring, in case he needed anything, and went down herself. There on the threshold stood Frank Muir, looking extremely glad to see her, although he seemed a little nervous and excited.

“Oh, Mr. Muir, I am very glad to see you,”

said Bessie cordially. "Come right through into the library, won't you? The parlor seems rather cool."

He followed her into the room, and they drew their chairs up to the fire, quite unconscious of the boy sleeping away so soundly just the other side of the screen. For some reason, the conversation did not run on very smoothly. Bess was listening with one ear to Mr. Muir, and straining the other to catch any sounds from above; and then, too, the young man's uneasiness seemed to have extended itself to her, in a strange and uncomfortable fashion. They said all the approved things and in the approved way, but still there did not seem to be quite the easy, pleasant good-fellowship that had always existed between them. At length Mr. Muir rose and stood leaning on the mantel, looking down at Bess.

"Miss Carter," he was beginning abruptly, and with a sort of effort, "I" —

At that moment a loud, sharp, determined bark was heard at the front door, just the bark to waken Fred, if he chanced to have fallen asleep. Bess sprang up.

“Mr. Muir, excuse me a moment, but Fuzz will disturb Fred, who is ill to-day. I must just let him in.”

Frank Muir dropped down into his chair again, with an expression singularly like that of disgust on his pleasant face. Fuzz came dancing into the room, stopped at sight of a supposed stranger, and growled threateningly. Then, recognizing him as a friend, he leaped to his knee and began scratching at his shoulders and face, in token of friendly welcome.

There was another interval of brief remarks and long pauses. Then Mr. Muir cleared his throat and began anew.

“I was just going to say, when Fuzz” —

Another interruption, this time from Fred, whose bell rang sharply. Bess again excused herself and ran up-stairs. She soon returned.

“Poor Fred,” she said, as she seated herself once more; “he is paying dearly for his Thanksgiving frolic.”

“Am I keeping you from him?” asked Mr. Muir courteously.

“Oh, no. There is nothing I can do for him now.”

Mr. Muir drew his chair a little nearer to hers.

“Miss Carter,” he said, “I have for a long time” —

“M-m-m-h-m-m-m,” remarked Fuzz, in a plaintive falsetto.

Alas for Mr. Muir! Fuzz had brought his ball and laid it at the young man's feet, and then seated himself at a distance, wagging his tail, and blinking suggestively at his toy.

“What does he want of me?” asked the young man helplessly.

“He wants you to throw it for him,” said Bess. “See,” she added, as the dog rose to a sitting posture, “he is begging you for it.”

“M-m-m-m-m-m-m,” added Fuzz, in an explanatory tone.

Mr. Muir took the ball and threw it from him with an energy that was not entirely caused by his devotion to Fuzz. But this was just what the dog wished, and away he scrambled after it, twisting up the rugs and knocking down the fire-irons with a clatter as he went. Mr. Muir had returned to the charge.

“I have been trying for a long, long time to” —

“M-m-m-h-h-m-m-m-woof?” So spoke Fuzz, who had re-appeared, and again cast his ball at the feet of Mr. Muir. The young man paid no heed to him.

“M-m-m-h-h-h-m-m-m!” In a tone of low warning.

“No, no, Fuzz! Come here!” commanded Bess.

Fuzz disrespectfully turned the white of one eye up to her, as who should say, “Catch me if you can,” and then repeated his former remark.

Mr. Muir shut his teeth tightly together, and again hurled the ball into a remote corner. This time Fuzz collided with the waste-paper basket, and scattered its contents up and down the room.

“I have tried to see you to ask you if” —

“M-m-m-m-h-h-m-m-m?” said Fuzz inquiringly.

“You would” —

“M-m-m-h-h-m-woof!”

“Would be” —

“ M-m-m-h-h-m-m-wow ! ”

“ If you would be willing to ” —

“ Wow-wow-ow-ow ! Wow !!! ”

This time Bessie rose, took the dog, and shut him up out in the kitchen, from which place of banishment his voice could be heard, rising in bitter remonstrance against this undeserved punishment. Was he not trying to help entertain the company, to be sure? Bess was gone some little time, and when she returned her face was very red and there were traces of tears on her cheeks. They were not tears of sorrow.

Strangely enough, Mr. Muir seemed to have lost the thread of his discourse and could think of no other, so there was another prolonged silence until Bessie, taking pity on his evident discomfort, started an impersonal subject of conversation. But Mr. Muir was thoughtful, and only answered her vaguely and inattentively, so much so that Bess, in her turn, became silent, and the two sat there, staring hard at the fire, and almost wishing for a return of Fuzz to break the awkwardness of the situation. This had lasted for several minutes when Mr.

Muir pushed back his chair, rose, and began to pace up and down the room. Then he returned to his old place by the mantel, and once more began to speak.

In the mean time, Rob had been dreaming of his summer visit on the St. Lawrence. He and cousin Bess had been trying to row a large trunk from the hotel to Island Den, with a pair of tennis rackets for oars, and Fred stood on the bank, refusing to let them land. Each time that they came near the shore, he would push the boat off again. Then he seemed to hear Mr. Muir's voice calling them to row around to the other side of the island, — and at this point, Rob waked up with a sleepy yawn. As soon as he could collect his scattered ideas, he became aware that some one was talking near him, talking low and very earnestly. He recognized the voice at once as Mr. Muir's, and then he heard Bess speak a word or two, but so faintly that he was unable to hear what she said. What was happening?

Cautiously Rob applied his eye to the crack in the screen. His curiosity was increased. Mr. Muir was bending over Bess, and seemed

to be pleading with her, while her face was turned away and looked very white. Rob was sure that he saw that her eyes were wet. It was certainly very strange. What could Mr. Muir be saying to cousin Bessie to make her cry? And what was he doing there anyway? Ah, Rob, much better ask what you are doing there, wonderingly looking on at such a scene!

But a few words from Mr. Muir fell on his ears, and, by throwing some light on the affair, turned his anxiety into another channel. Here was a fine position for an honorable boy, to be caught eavesdropping in this way! Should he stay quietly where he was until they had gone, and then go away and never tell that he had been there? But if he stayed, he must hear every word of the interview, that was bidding fair to be a long one; and then, they might find him in his corner. But, on the other hand, if he emerged then and there, it would lead to an awkward explanation and mutual confusion. Holding his fingers in his ears to keep out the sound of their voices, he meditated on his position. What a stupid he was to go to sleep there, just like a great, overgrown baby! He

wondered if he could get out of the window without their hearing him open it. No, that was no use. They were exactly between him and the door, so escape on that side was impossible. But it was all still in the room; could they have gone away, and he not heard them? No, there they sat, their chairs quite close together, and Frank's hand lying on Bessie's. Their silence was but a short one, and they were soon talking again. The crisis must be past, for their voices were once more clear and animated. Rob didn't want to hear what they were saying, for it was no affair of his, and then, it must be confessed, their remarks were not of a nature to be generally interesting. More and more closely the boy held his ears, but it was no use: the words would find their way between his fingers, and he found that he must either show himself, or become a party to all their personal and private plans.

At this point, Rob's mischief asserted itself. It was a bad matter, at best, but he was resolved to have a little fun out of it. Their backs were towards him, that was one good

thing. Silently mounting his chair, he stood up so that his head and shoulders appeared above the top of the tall screen, extended his arms in the air, and shouted with the full strength of his lungs, —

“Bless you, my children!”

The effect was marvellous. Instantly the two chairs were drawn to the opposite corners of the hearth, while Mr. Muir began poking the fire with an unnecessary vigor, and Bessie dropped her head guiltily, as her face became rosy red.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to! I won’t again. I didn’t hear much,” said Rob incoherently, as he burst from his place of concealment. “I didn’t care to hear anything about it, really; only I went to sleep there all alone, and when I waked up, you were at it. I didn’t s’pose you would do it so soon, anyway. Next time, tell a fellow when it’s coming, and I’ll try to keep out of the way.”

Of course he was forgiven, and kissed, and petted, and made to swear secrecy, before he was sent away. And the boy actually kept his word.



“ BLESS YOU, MY CHILDREN! ” — Page 306.

Two hours later, as Bess was following Mr. Muir to the door, the young man said, laughing, —

“I’ll tell you what it is, Bessie. Rob has had so large a share in helping this along, that, when the day comes, he shall be best man, — and Fuzz shall sing the march.”

CHAPTER XVIII.

"THE VICTOR'S CROWN OF GOLD."

THE Old Year was dying fast. It had wrapped itself in a soft white mantle of snow, and was quietly waiting until the midnight bells should announce the coming of the young New Year, laden under its mysterious burden of joy and sadness, pain and pleasure, hope and its fulfilment or its disappointment, that, day by day, it would unfold before the busy world.

But although the New Year was anxiously awaited by many a soul, the old one, now dying, had been a good friend to them all, and especially to the little group now chatting in the Carters' library.

As Bess looked about among her boys, from Ted and Bert, now taller than herself, who sat at her either hand, to Rob, who stood leaning on the back of her chair, and then to Phil, who was perched on the large table that filled the

middle of the room, she could see many a pleasant mark that the year had left on them. And even Sam. Hard as the separation had been for those who were left behind, the boy was so safe and happy, safe from the many temptations that follow our boys through their lives, strengthening many a one, it is true, but all too often overpowering and destroying some fine, manly lad, who yet lacks just the courage to speak the one decided word that shall leave him the victor in the fight. Yes, Sam had gained in the past year, although it had been a sad lesson for the other boys, whose careless fun had brought the loss to them.

And Fred? It was with a feeling of un-mixed pride and pleasure that Bessie surveyed the bonnie boy who was sitting opposite her, with Fuzz on his knee. His figure and features were the same they had been on that rainy November afternoon, a little over a year ago; but that was all. In place of the pale, listless, sad boy that had greeted her then, there sat an energetic, rosy, happy lad, whose whole face was laughing at the frolic into which he had entered as heartily as any of the other lads, a

little gentler than the rest, perhaps, but as full of fun and mischief as ever a boy could be.

“Yes,” thought Bess, as she watched him, “Sam made the one grand sacrifice that the world admires and talks of; but Fred’s sacrifice is a longer and harder one, even, than his, the constant fighting to forget himself and his blindness, in trying to help make life pleasanter to the rest of us. He is winning his ‘victor’s crown of gold’ most nobly and truly.”

Half unconsciously, she hummed the line to herself. Phil gave her a quick glance of understanding.

“Well, Phil?” she asked, rousing herself from her reverie.

“Nothing, only I guess I know what you were thinking about.” And he took up the air where she had dropped it.

“Yes, Phil; that was it, and I was feeling so happy as I looked around at my boys, and saw what a good, faithful fight they have been making.”

“What is it?” asked Ted curiously.

“Only a little watchword between Fred and Phil and me,” answered Bess. Then with a

smile of invitation she added, “We have formed ourselves into a little army of three, to fight for the ‘victor’s crown of gold.’ Will you join it?”

“I don’t think I understand quite,” said Bert slowly.

Bess repeated the verse to them, and then went on, —

“All is, we boys want to be as true and brave and unselfish from day to day as we can possibly be, so that at the end of the years, as we look back over the little battles we have fought all through our lives, we can feel that we have conquered in them, and have won our right to the crown. Not all of us will have the power or the opportunity for one grand fight and unselfish victory like Sam’s, the day he went into the fire to save our Fred; but, after all, it is the way we meet the every-day cares and troubles, the little petty ones, such as we every one of us have, that shows our heroism as much as the greater ones. If we study a lesson when we should prefer to be playing ball, or do as our fathers and mothers wish, and do it cheerfully and pleasantly, even

if it isn't the very thing we choose, or give up some little frolic we have been anticipating, because, by doing that, we can make some one else happy, all these will be so many battles won, and the winning them will give us the crown. What do you think of our army?"

"It's a first-rate one," said Bert heartily, while Teddy pensively added, —

"I'm afraid I shall have to spend all my days fighting slang."

Bessie laughed outright.

"No, Ted; for if you go on improving as fast as you have done in the last six months, you will soon be free to fight another enemy than that one."

"I wonder what mine is?" said Phil, swinging his heels thoughtfully.

"Covetousness," responded Ted promptly. "It's only two days since I heard you wishing you had Miss Bessie's good temper."

"Poor Phil!" said Bess, reaching up to pat the brown head. "You'd much better wish for something more than that."

"I wonder if we shall all be together here a year from now," said Rob thoughtfully.

“Let us hope so,” answered Bessie; “but that is something hidden beyond our sight. As long as we can, my boys, we will try to be together, here or somewhere else, on the last night of every year.”

For some unexplained reason, Rob looked very wicked during the latter half of his cousin’s speech; but no one noticed it, for Ted inquired just then, —

“What are you lads going to be when you grow up?”

“My father says I’ve got to be a doctor,” remarked Bert ruefully, “but I’d much rather go West on a cattle ranch, or else be an architect. What shall you do, Bob?”

“Bugs and things,” answered Rob briefly.

“Ted?”

“I don’t know. Civil engineer, that is, if father can send me through college. That’s what I’d like best.”

“Phil?”

“A minister, I s’pose,” groaned Phil. “That’s the family plan, but I don’t think I’m much suited for it.”

“Think of the ugly duckling, and have courage,” suggested Rob consolingly.

“Fred?”

“Of course I can't tell yet what I can do,” said Fred thoughtfully. Then, suddenly turning to Bess with a smile, he went on: “What I want most of all is to be your faithful soldier.”

“And Sam has always said that he'd rather be a good mechanic than anything else,” added Bert. “That accounts for us all, Miss Bessie. How do you like the assortment?”

“Very much,” answered Bess. “I can have Bert to cure my body, and Phil my soul, while Ted shall survey my garden, and Rob shall make a collection of the insects that devour my crops. Fred I shall keep to fight for me and with me. Then, at the end of every year, we will all meet and talk over our battles, and make our plans for the next campaign. And now, my boys, it is growing late, and I must send you away. But, before you go, I am going to bring in some water, and we'll drink a health to the Old Year that has given us so much, and taken away one dear one from the half-dozen boys.”

As they stood grouped about her, Bess slowly repeated the toast, —

“ ‘Here’s to those that I love ; here’s to those that love me ;

Here’s to those that love those that I love ;

Here’s to those that love those that love those that love me ;

Here’s to those that love those that I love.’ ”

“ That’s most everybody,” said Ted, as he set down his empty glass.

“ It ought to include all the world, on the eve of the New Year,” answered Bess gently.

The last good-night had been said, and the boys were gone, leaving Fred and Bess standing together in the hall.

“ Need I go to bed yet ? ” asked Fred. “ I’m not sleepy a bit, even if it is late.”

“ No, dear ; I have several things I want to talk over with you,” said Bess, smiling happily to herself as she led the way back to the library fire.

Fred settled himself on a hassock at her feet, in his favorite position, and turned his face to listen. But Bess seemed in no hurry to begin the conversation. She thoughtfully stroked and patted the boy’s face, and played with his hair. Suddenly she asked, —

“Well, laddie, has the last year been any better than the one before it?”

“Ever so much.” Fred spoke with an air of happy conviction.

“Do you know why?” she went on.

“Of course I do,” said Fred, as he reached up and took her hand. “It’s because you’ve done so much for me.”

“No, Fred; that is a very small part of it. The change is all in your own little self. It is because you have tried so hard to make something of your life, even if you can’t see; and I hope another year will be a still happier one for you, happier and better.”

Fred shook his head.

“Not happier, if I have to leave you, for my year here is almost over. I wish it would last forever. But, Miss Bessie, it really isn’t near so bad as I used to think it was. You and the boys are all so good to me, and you have taught me to do so many things, that if I could only stay with you always, I shouldn’t much mind the rest.”

“That is my hero,” said Bess tenderly. “But, Fred, this makes it very easy to tell you

of a letter I had yesterday from your father. He says that he and your mother have decided to stay abroad another year, and asks if you can still be with us. Are you willing to stay?”

No need to ask. Fred’s gesture and smile were all the reply she needed.

There was another long pause. Then Bess said slowly, —

“Fred, I have one more thing to tell you, something you ought to know. I hope you will like it, for I am very, very happy. Mr. Muir has asked me to be his wife.”

“Mr. Muir! How splendid!” And Fred sprang up, in his delighted surprise.

“So you are pleased? Well, sit down again while I tell you the rest. Before the next year is over, I shall probably go with him, but it is all settled that our little new home shall have one room in it that will always be ‘Fred’s room.’”

It was long before Fred went to sleep that night. As he still lay awake, thinking of the happy New Year opening before him, across the still night air came the sound of a church

bell. Slow and solemn were its tones, as it tolled out the dying year. Then, at the stroke of midnight, it quickened to a merry peal, to usher in the new-born year, with all its hopes and fears. And, in a gentle undertone, he heard from the distant city the chimes playing that grand old hymn, so linked with sad, tender memories of Sam, so full of help and cheer for himself, —

“Lead, kindly Light, amid th’ encircling gloom,

Lead thou me on.

The night is dark, and I am far from home,

Lead thou me on.

Keep thou my feet; I do not ask to see

The distant scene. One step enough for me.”

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