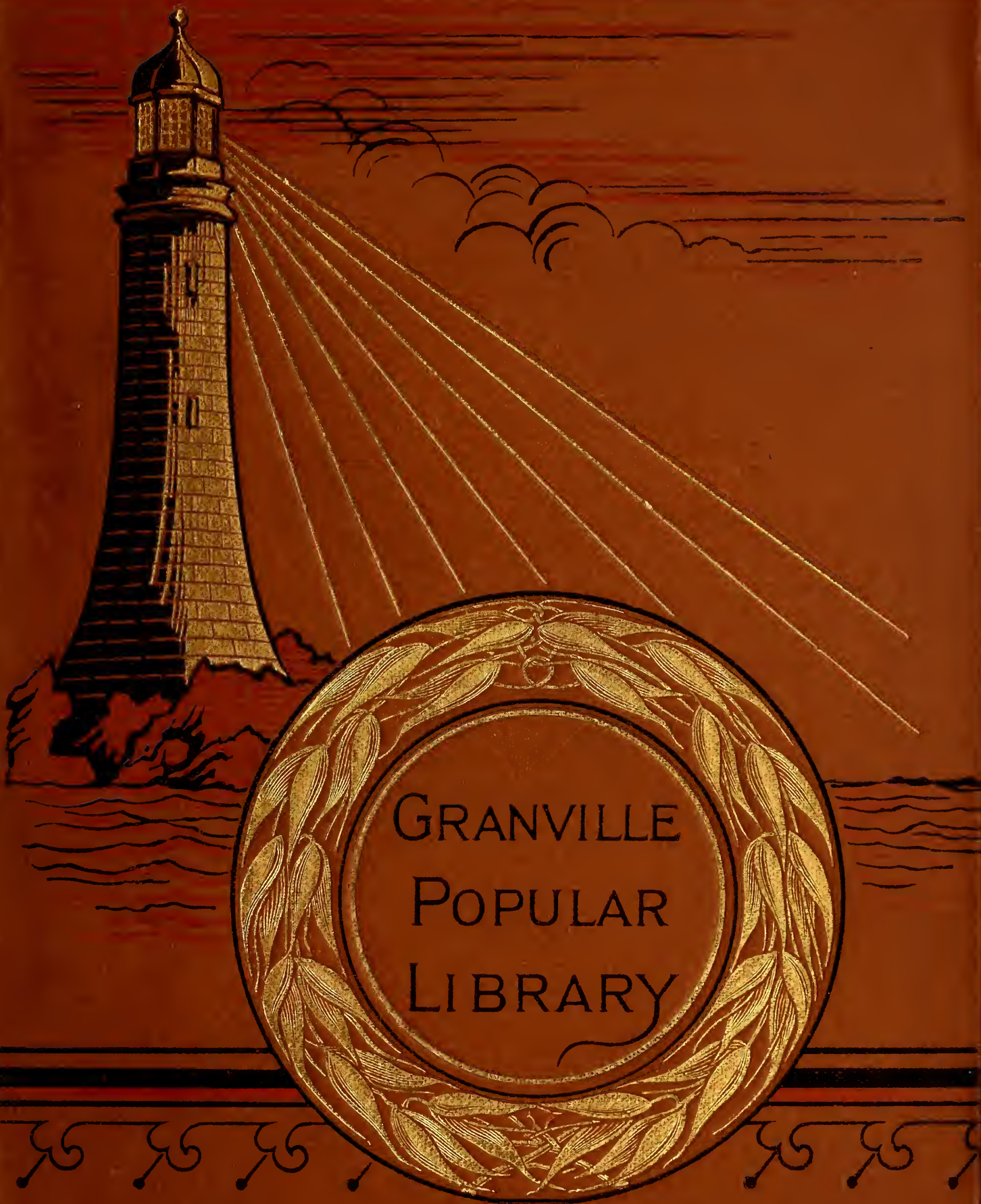
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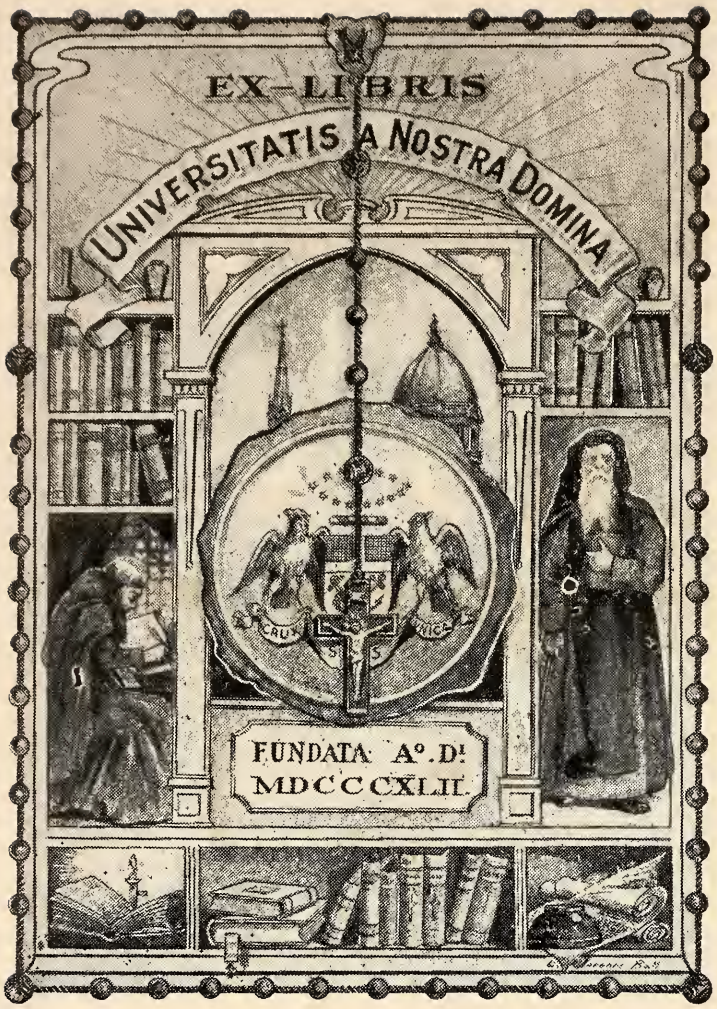
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THE MISER OF KING'S COURT.

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BY

CLARA MULLHOLLAND,

AUTHOR OF "NAUGHTY MISS BUNNY," "LINDA'S MISFORTUNES," "PERCY'S REVENGE," ETC.

"Opinion, varying o'er his hidden lot,
In praise or railing ne'er his name forgot."

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THE MISER OF KING'S COURT.

CHAPTER I.

HOPES AND FEARS.

"Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and dreary."

"I CAN'T write any more, Olive. I'm so tired of pot-hooks;" and Topo threw down his pencil and crossed his arms upon the table.

"Very well, dear. You may put your books away now."

"Olive!"

"Yes, dear."

"I want my tea. I am ever so hungry."

"We must wait for mother, Topo. She is late to-night. But we must not begin till she comes."

"I wish she'd be quick then."

"Poor mother! I am sure it is not her

fault ;" and the speaker, a slight girl of twelve, rose from her chair, and, lifting the window-blind, gazed anxiously out into the street. "That horrid fog is coming down again, Topo. Her cough was very bad this morning. I am afraid it will make her ill."

"I wonder why God makes fogs," cried Topo. "They do nobody any good I'm sure. London would be twice as nice without them."

"Yes, it would. But God has good reasons for all He does, Topo, so we must not grumble. Only I do wish dear mother could get away to some place where the air is fresh and pure. The doctor says that is all she wants."

"Let us take her somewhere, Olive. Somewhere nice, to Brighton or——"

"But we have no money, Topo."

"Get some."

"But where ?"

"Why, in the bank, of course. It's quite easy. Jim Smith says he went with his big brother Tom there—he's just twelve—and the man smiled and bowed and asked him how he'd like it—in gold or notes—and then he gave Tom ever so much money to take home to his mother.

So just you go and try. You're twelve, and I'm sure he'd be as kind to you."

"Poor little Topo. It sounds very easy no doubt," said Olive, drawing the boy upon her knee. "But did Jim not tell you that Tom had a piece of green or pink paper with something written on it?"

"Yes, I believe he did. But that's nothing."

"But that's everything, dear," said his sister, smiling. "That paper was a cheque. Without that the man would not bow and ask me how I would like it. Oh, no, Topo. It is only people who put money into the bank to be kept for them who are treated that way. A cheque is just a little note to say, 'Please let me have three pounds or ten pounds of my own money'. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Topo, disconsolately. "I am so sorry. I thought I had found a capital plan."

"Poor little man," said Olive, with a kiss. "But, Topo, do you think you could keep a secret?"

"Indeed I could, Olive. I love a secret. I shan't tell a creature. Not even Jim Smith—I promise you."

"Very well, dear. Then I will tell you mine;" and the girl gave the fire a poke, and set on the kettle to boil. "You know, Topo, although you are too young to remember him, that our papa was an artist."

"Yes, I know," said the boy; and he glanced round the walls, where hung many pictures by his father's hand. "Well?"

"Well, one day, when I was about six years old, I was sitting on his knee, looking over a little scrap-book that some friend had given me."

"I know it, Olive. Why, you have it still."

"Yes, dear, so I have. I got so few presents that I always kept those I did get. But this day I was tired of the old book, and I said, 'Papa, do buy me a story book. I want something new and pretty.' 'My darling, I can't,' he answered. 'I have no money. The pictures don't sell, Olive, and I have no shillings to spare for presents.' 'Well, draw me something,' I cried. 'Very well,' he said, laughing. 'That I'll do with pleasure,' and he took a pencil from his pocket. 'What shall it be?' 'A beautiful lady,' I said. 'No,' he replied; 'that is an every-day subject. I'll draw the portrait of a cruel

man, who hoards his wealth, and refuses to help his kith and kin when they are in poverty and want.' And, bending over the book, he made a sketch of a tall, fierce-looking man, standing by a table covered with bags of gold."

"I know it. I know it," cried Topo, running to a drawer and pulling out the old scrap-book. "I know the fellow—here he is. But what is written underneath, Olive? Read it for me;" and the boy held the book out to his sister.

"Lewis Derwent," read Olive, "Miser of King's Court, Sussex, Uncle of Topham Charlton, pauper and artist."

"Papa's uncle," cried Topo. "What a horrid old man!"

"Yes, he looks hard and fierce," said Olive, sighing. "I am afraid he will never do what I asked him."

"Asked him? Why, how could you ask him to do anything? You never saw him."

"No, dear. But I wrote to him."

"Wrote to him?" cried Topo, staring at her in surprise. "But why?"

"That is my secret, Topo. But I am afraid it will do no good. One day, I was sitting think-

ing and thinking about my mother; longing to fly off with her from the London fogs, when my eyes fell upon that picture. You had been playing with the book and had left it lying on the floor. There you are, I thought, a great strong rich man, living in your beautiful King's Court, whilst my poor darling is dying for want of a little country air. Then, Topo, a sudden thought struck me. Perhaps he was not quite so hard or so bad as he looked. Perhaps if he knew how ill she was, and how poor, he might let her go and stay with him for a short time. So I wrote and told him all, and implored him to send us a little money to pay her expenses down to Sussex."

"Will he, I wonder? I hope he will," said Topo. "If you don't, old man—I'll—I'll hit you on the nose," and he shook his fist at the picture.

"Why, my children, how quiet you are," said a sweet voice that made Olive start to her feet and push the arm-chair to the fire. "I did not hear a sound as I came up-stairs."

"No, we were talking," said Olive. "But sit down, mother dear! You look tired to-night."

"Yes, dearest, I am;" and Mrs. Charlton sank into the chair.

"I am so glad you have come home, mamma," cried Topo, climbing up on her knee. "Olive has been telling me a story about——"

"Topo!" exclaimed his sister severely. "You are too heavy. A boy of five does not require to be nursed like a baby;" and she seated him on the hearth-rug at his mother's feet. "Remember," she whispered. "Not a word of my secret."

"Olive is a good, patient little sister," said Mrs. Charlton, laying her hand caressingly upon the child's curly head. "She is very kind to her brother Topo."

"Yes," answered Topo readily. "But she makes me do too many pot-hooks."

"But that is for your good, darling. That is because——" But the mother's words were stopped by a racking cough, that shook her frail form in a manner terrible to see. Olive stood by, holding her hand, her little face white with sorrow.

And when at last the fierce fit was over, and the poor lady lay back exhausted, the child

covered her carefully with a shawl. Then, signing to Topo to keep very quiet, she slipped out of the room with her mother's bonnet and cloak.

In a few minutes she returned, and, glancing anxiously at the sufferer, she stole quietly about, getting everything ready for tea. For some time Mrs. Charlton seemed in a deep sleep, and Olive did not venture to disturb her.

"Sleep is what she requires," she said, sadly. "More than tea or anything else. She gets so little rest, poor dear. But, oh, how white and strange she looks to-night!"

Then, seeing Topo cast longing eyes at the bread and butter, she helped him silently, and sat down on the floor at her mother's feet.

"My God, touch that old man's heart," she prayed earnestly. "My poor dear is not fit for the life she leads. But if she had change, if she got away from this fog, she would soon grow strong and well. My God, make him help us. Make him help us." Her mother moved slightly; a faint moan escaped her; and raising the thin, almost transparent hand that hung by her side, Olive pressed it to her lips.

This silent caress roused the sleeper, and a smile flickered over her face.

"My darling child," she murmured. "Ah, my pet, it grieves me to think how desolate you will be—when I leave you."

"Not at all," answered Olive, brightly. For, full of her letter to her uncle, she fancied her mother alluded to her short absence in the country. "Topo and I will get on very well, and when we meet again——"

"Ay. When we meet again, darling;" and tears fell from the mother's eyes.

"You will be strong and well," continued Olive, stroking the delicate fingers. "The fresh air will do you good. A week or so in the country will set you up and——"

"Darling, I am not speaking of the country," she cried; "I shall never go there—but——" and then the cruel cough shook her frame once more.

"Mother, mother, do not speak so sadly," cried Olive, when Mrs. Charlton again lay at rest. "All you want is change of air. This fog is dreadful. It makes you cough, and then you feel ill."

"Yes, darling—very ill."

"But try to eat, mother. You must want food after your long weary day. I am sure you do;" and Olive pressed the poor sufferer to begin her evening meal.

"I will take a cup of tea, dear," she said. Then, seeing her daughter's look of disappointment, she tried to swallow a little bread. "It is no use, dearest—I have no appetite;" and she laid her head against the chair.

"Mother, you are worse to-night. Let me go for the doctor," cried Olive. "He would come to you at once—I know he would."

"He could do nothing for me, Olive," she replied. "I am past the help of doctors. But I am in God's hands. When He calls I must go. My little girl must grow accustomed to the thought of losing me. I am dying, darling; no doctor could save me now."

"Mother! who said so? Who said so?" cried Olive, flinging herself on her knees, and burying her face in her mother's dress.

"The doctor, dearest. But I knew without his telling me. I went round to my pupils as usual to-day, Olive, but when I reached the

Wards I was taken very ill. Mrs. Ward was most kind—sent for the doctor and put me to bed. She wished me to stay the night; but when my hour for returning home came round, I felt a little better, and fearing to alarm you by staying away—I took a cab and came back."

"Poor mother—and I never knew," gasped Olive. "But it was only a bad turn. It will pass over, and you will soon get strong and well."

"We will hope for the best, dearest," she said, calmly, "and yet be prepared for the worst. I feel, my little Olive, that I shall never be strong again."

And, alas! the poor woman was right. From that day she grew rapidly worse, and before the end of the week death was very near.

But Olive, with all the strength and ardour of her loving nature, still hoped for the best. Change of air, she believed, was all her mother required, and she watched every post, hoping and praying that it might bring the much longed for invitation to King's Court.

But day after day passed over, and no such letter came.

Mrs. Charlton grew visibly weaker, and was at last unable to leave her bed.

Mrs. Ward, in whose house she had taken ill, was very kind, and came to visit her frequently. She told her not to fret about her children, and promised to look after them for her, when she should be no more.

The invalid thanked her and seemed comforted. But she knew this offer could mean very little; for Mrs. Ward was not rich, and had a large family of her own to provide for.

So her heart was torn with anguish, as she thought of leaving her darlings to face a life of poverty at their age and alone.

And yet her trust in God was great, and she firmly believed that He would take care of the orphans and keep them from harm.

And her simple faith and earnest prayers were not allowed to pass unheeded; and before long the children were provided for in an unexpected manner.

One evening towards the end of the week, as Mrs. Charlton lay in a light sleep, Olive sat in the dim firelight, thinking sadly over the cruel ending of all her dreams.

Her mother was dying, that she knew now; the change of air that might have prolonged her life had never been obtained; the Miser of King's Court had taken no notice of her appeal for help.

Topo sat on the carpet beside her, his head leaning against her knee; and his little face looked pinched and wan as the flame from the fire flickered across it.

They were both silent and sad. Their mother was sleeping, and they dared not speak lest they should disturb her; she so seldom slept now, and she wanted rest so much.

Suddenly the postman's knock sounded through the house. Mrs. Charlton moved uneasily, and, sighing heavily, opened her eyes. Olive sprang to her side in an instant, and, gently smoothing her pillow, gave her a refreshing drink.

"Perhaps there is a letter for us, Olive," whispered Topo; and he stole away to see.

In a few minutes he came slowly back, holding a blue envelope in his hand.

His mother had dosed off to sleep again, and Olive held up a warning finger as he entered the room.

"It's only a bill," he said, sighing. "Why will they send in bills when mother is ill, and we have no money to pay them with?"

"Why indeed? But they cannot know, Topo. How could they?" and taking the letter from him, Olive opened it slowly.

A piece of paper dropped out of the envelope, and fluttered down on Topo's lap.

"Why, it's a letter after all," she whispered, breathlessly, and stooping towards the fire. "Who can it be from?"

"And this little piece of green paper, Olive?" said Topo. "Look, it's just like what Tom Smith took to the bank for money. Is it? can it be a cheque?"

"Yes, dear," answered Olive with a great sob. "It is a cheque for five pounds. It is from Uncle Derwent at last. He says we may go there—but it is too late—too late——" and letting the letter and cheque fall to the ground, the girl flung her arms round her brother and burst into tears.

"Olive," said her mother, faintly, "come here, darling."

"Yes, mother," and in a moment the child

dashed away her tears, and hurried to the bedside.

"I feel—very weak, dearest—and think my time will be but short," she whispered in a low gasping voice. "And—before—I go—I——"

"No, no, you must not go, mother!—do not talk of going," cried Olive. "Just now when I can take you away—just now when I have money——"

"My darling—I do not understand. Take me away—money——?"

"Yes, mother. I have this moment received a letter inviting us to go to Sussex and five pounds to take us there, so——"

"But who sends this, Olive?" asked her mother in surprise.

"Uncle Derwent, mamma. Papa thought he was a miser, but he cannot be I think, or he would never send us so much money."

"But how did he know about us, dear?"

"I wrote to him sometime ago and implored him to help us."

"You? But—how did you know? I of course knew that my husband had an uncle called Derwent, for I often heard him complain of him

—often—but you? How did you know where he lived?"

"I found his address in an old book," said Olive, "and I wrote to him nearly a month ago. He says we may all go to King's Court now, mother. If you were just well enough to get there, the change would cure you at once."

"No, darling—there is only one change—possible for me."

"Then his letter has come too late. Oh, why did he send it too late?" and burying her face in the bed-clothes, Olive wept bitterly.

"My darling!" And a white hand was laid caressingly upon the bowed head, whilst a peaceful smile played about the mother's lips. "This letter has not come too late."

"Oh, mother!" and Olive sprang joyfully to her feet. "Then you will get well?"

"No, Olive—not in this world. But sit down and listen to what I have to say. And, little Topo, come here and give me your hand, dear."

Topo crept over, and, sitting on the side of the bed, clasped his mother's hand tightly in his own.

"For a long time, dear children," began the dying woman, "I have known that I had but a

short life before me. Four years ago, when your father was taken from us, I knew that I should soon follow him to Heaven. Then it was I first discovered that I was in consumption. We were very poor, and all I could earn was but little, and barely kept us from starvation. Had I been strong I might have done more. But as it is, I have saved nothing for you, my pets, and must leave you altogether without money. This thought has filled me with anguish and made me fear to die. I have prayed earnestly for patience, have tried hard to resign myself to God's will. But it seemed so cruel—so terrible to leave two young creatures—like you—alone——"

Emotion and weakness interrupted her words, and she closed her eyes with a sigh.

Raising her gently, Olive moistened her lips, and in a few moments she continued :—

"My sorrow was all for you, darlings—for when one is ill and in pain it is good to be at rest. It is a good thing to go home to our Heavenly Father, Olive. And I have longed for the deep long sleep of those He loves. He giveth His beloved sleep. Those words have haunted me through many a wakeful night.

But much as I yearned for rest, I trembled to think of leaving you alone. Now God in His mercy has sent us help. My mind is easy about you, and I can go when my Master calls. You can go to your uncle, dearest—when—I am—gone. In the country air you will grow well and strong. The long dreary days are coming to an end. You shall soon—be happy. Thank God for His goodness to us. Pray with me—children. Pray with me——"

"Yes, mother, yes," cried Olive, and drawing her little brother to her side, she knelt by the bed, and raised her streaming eyes to Heaven.

Mrs. Charlton lay perfectly still, her hands clasped, as though in prayer. But she scarcely seemed to breathe, and no sound issued from her lips.

For many hours the children remained by her side, afraid to move or speak.

The house grew very silent; hardly a footstep was heard in the street below; the fire burned low in the grate; but still the little ones knelt on, close to their dying mother.

Poor Topo, worn out with weeping, at last dropped to sleep, his head pillowed on his

sister's breast. But she had no inclination to slumber, and kept faithful watch over every movement of the beloved patient.

As midnight tolled from a neighbouring church-tower, the sick woman raised herself slightly, and felt for her daughter's hand.

"Olive—I am going," she whispered. "I feel that death is near. God bless and keep you. Take care of your brother—my little Topo. Teach him to be a good man—to love God—and keep—His commandments. Be patient—and gentle—obedient to your uncle—and——"

"Mother darling!—don't die—don't die!" cried Olive. "Stay with your children—your little son and daughter!"

"It is God's will I—should go, dearest. Do not dispute His will. Pray, Olive. Be calm. My God,—my God, Thy will be done. Say that, child—that I may hear you—and—know you are content."

"My God,—Thy will be—done," sobbed Olive, flinging herself on her mother's breast.

"My God,—my God," murmured Mrs. Charlton. Then, with a faint sigh, she turned her head upon her pillow, and fell asleep.

And her sleep was indeed long and unbroken ; she had found the rest she had coveted, and her soul was with God.

CHAPTER II.

ALONE IN THE WORLD.

"There are only two of us."

WHEN the funeral was over, and her dear mother gone from her for ever, Olive felt as though nothing in the world was of the slightest consequence.

But then the dying woman's words came back to her, "Take care of Topo"; and glancing at the child, she was shocked to see how ill he looked; how pale and white was his little face; how thin his tiny hands.

Since that dreadful moment in which she had realised that her mother had indeed breathed her last, the girl had paid but scant attention to the food that was put before her. Topo, too, had shown little appetite, and she had not tried to make him eat.

In fact, she noticed nothing that was going on

around her, and was not aware that had it not been for the kindness of the woman in whose house they lodged, they would have had neither dinner nor supper to sit down to.

But at last a day of reckoning came, and Olive was obliged to shake off her lethargy, and begin to think of the future. The first thing that recalled her to herself was the wasted appearance of her little brother.

She had neglected him, she said, with a sob, and if she did not look after and cherish him, he, too, might be taken away from her, and whom then would she have to love her.

"Topo, you look thin and pale," she cried, clasping him in her arms and covering him with kisses. "Come out, my pet, and take a walk."

"It is so sad without mother, Olive," he said, his blue eyes full of tears. "Oh, why did she go and leave me behind?"

"To take care of me, darling. Think how lonely I should be if my little Topo were taken from me?"

"Yes, but you are big and strong, and I am so small and thin. And see, my hands are like

mother's were before she died. Perhaps I may go to her soon."

"Topo, Topo, do not talk like that," said Olive, sobbing. "I could not do without you, my pet. There are only two of us now, remember. I could not live if you were to die. You must grow strong, dear, if only for my sake."

"But this room is so sad, Olive," answered the boy, plaintively; "I am alway swatching to see mother come home. But she never comes—no, never."

"We shall leave this room, dear boy, we shall——"

"If you please, Miss Olive, I want to speak to you," said a voice, and looking up, the children saw their landlady standing beside them. "Yes," said Olive, wearily. "What is it, Mrs. Smith?"

"Well, my poor child, I hope you will not think me unkind. But I must tell you that I cannot afford to let you live in these rooms any longer. I must think of my own children first, and it takes all the money I can get to keep them in anything like comfort. Without the rent of my rooms we could not live. You have not paid for a single thing for the last fortnight."

"I am so sorry," said Olive. "But indeed I have no money. So what can I do?"

"Poor child. My heart is sore for you—yet I cannot allow you to remain here. Mrs. Ward spoke of getting you into orphanages—but that will take time. I have had a good offer for the rooms, and must accept it. Yet I do not like to turn you out. Is your money all gone?"

"Yes, all. My uncle sent us five pounds to take us down to him in the country—but when I paid for—for the funeral—it—it was all done;" and Olive began to weep afresh.

"What! have you an uncle in the country?" cried Mrs. Smith.

"Yes. At least my father's uncle."

"And did he invite you to go to him?"

"Yes. When I told him mother was ill, he said we might all go and stay with him for a while."

"Then of course you must go," said the landlady, briskly. "This furniture, these pictures, all belonged to your mother, and now belong to you. The party who wants the rooms wants them furnished. So I'll buy everything from you just as it stands. That will give you money

to get some respectable mourning for you and your brother, and take you down to the country to your uncle."

"Thank you. But perhaps he would not want us now," said Olive, doubtfully. "I ought to let him know. I should write and ask——"

"Nonsense! Just you ask nothing—but go. He might put you off if you wrote. But, unless he has a heart of stone, he could not turn you away once you are there. Why, Topo looks as if he should die if he remained much longer in London. Besides, what can you do? I have not much faith in Mrs. Ward's orphanages, and you are both too young to work."

"Yes," said Olive. "But still——"

"Do go to the country, Olive dear," pleaded Topo. "Uncle said we might go—and it would be so lovely to get away from here;" and he glanced round the room with a shudder.

"Yes, darling, I will go, if you wish it," cried his sister, pressing him in her arms. "And when uncle sees your sweet little face, he will be glad to let us stay. Please, Mrs. Smith, will you kindly help us to get ready for our journey?"

"Indeed I will, with the greatest pleasure.

You can't think how happy I am to hear that you have a relation to go to. Poor little orphans! I thought you had not a friend in the world. But I must go and ask my husband about the price of the furniture;" and the good woman bustled out of the room, looking extremely well pleased.

And so the meagre contents of the two rooms were valued and paid for, the simple mourning bought and made, and within four weeks of their mother's death the orphans started on their journey into Sussex.

Topo was glad to go, and his spirits rose and his health improved visibly, immediately it was arranged they should leave their dreary lodgings.

Olive was delighted to see this happy change in her darling, and tried to feel equally pleased as the time of departure drew near. But she felt so uncertain about this strange uncle, so doubtful about the future, that her heart sank low, and it was only by the greatest effort that she refrained from weeping, as she bade Mrs. Smith good-bye and thanked her for her kindness.

"We must go third-class I think, Topo," she said, when they reached the station. "I could

pay for second-class tickets, but it will be better to keep a few shillings. We may want them for something by-and-by."

"Yes, so we may. But Olive, I wonder if uncle will be glad to see us. Do you think he will?" asked Topo for about the twentieth time since they left the house.

"I don't know, dear—I don't know," replied Olive, with a kind of wail in her voice. He has my note by now, to say we are coming. Mrs. Smith made me write just at the last. So it is too late to turn us back. But, please God, he will not be very angry when we arrive."

And having paid for her tickets, Olive lifted her brother into the train, and took her seat beside him with a heavy heart.

"Now we're off," cried Topo, watching the guard with great interest. "See, Olive, he's just going to whistle."

"Yes, dear, so he is," she answered. "I am glad no one has come in. It will be much pleasanter to be left to ourselves."

But, as she spoke, the guard opened the carriage door, and two boys came running along the platform and jumped in.

They were hot and out of breath, and as they lay back, gasping and panting, the train rushed out of the station.

"I say, what a jolly close shave," cried the tallest, a fair-haired lad of about fifteen. "If we'd been a minute later, we'd have missed our train. Wouldn't papa have been in a wax, if he came in to Arundel all the way and found we'd not arrived?"

"Yes. I should think so," said the other, mopping himself with his handkerchief. "And it would have been all your fault, Frank."

"Come now, stick to the truth, Master Ulric Lester. If I had not been obliged to go and fish you out of the National Gallery, I'd have been in heaps of time."

"Yes, but you were late coming there," said Ulric, quietly; "fearfully late—as per usual."

"Well, then, if you will have it so, I was late—just a tiny bit late. But still the Gallery was the last straw, don't you know. However, we sha'n't dispute the matter. Here we are, safe and sound, so it is not of much consequence."

"None at all," said Ulric, cheerfully. "But did you remember to buy those cartridges for father?"

"Yes, just at the last moment. Paying for them nearly cleared me out. I had barely enough money left to pay for a third-class ticket."

"I thought you'd come to that, when I saw the way you were going on," said Ulric. "For my part, I made up my mind to go home third-class from the very first. I think it's stupid to spend so much money for the sake of being a little swell."

"It's all a matter of taste, dear boy," answered Frank, laughing. "Our cousins thought you a fool when they saw you spending all your spare cash on paints and canvas. Most boys of thirteen——"

"Like nigger minstrels and stupid pantomimes," interrupted Ulric, contemptuously. "The amount of money those chaps spend on that kind of nonsense is something extraordinary."

"So it is. And I am afraid papa will think I have been very foolish. He does not quite approve of those amusements, I know; but when others are going a chap gets drawn in, even more than he intends. However, he gave me a certain sum of money to spend as I liked, and he knows I am not the solemn party you are."

"No, I don't think any one could call you solemn," said Ulric, smiling, as he looked at his brother's beaming face. "You look the very picture of merriment and fun. But tell me, Frank, what did you think of Mr. Buckwheat's entertainment yesterday?"

"It was downright spiffing. *Tout à fait chic*, as the French say. He sang a rousing good song, I can tell you. Here's a verse of it."

And in a clear ringing voice Frank began to sing—

"There was born a little man,
But he didn't know where,
Pompy, pompy-pomp, pomp, pomp".

"That noise," he explained, "is made to imitate the banjo. And, by Jove, he does it splendidly."

"That was a stupid man," piped Topo in shrill tones from the far end of the carriage. "Why, I am only five, and I know where I was born. Don't I, Olive?"

"Yes, dear," whispered his sister, blushing. "But you mustn't talk out like that. It is rude, Topo."

"Do you really know where you were born?"

said Frank, laughing merrily. "Well, you are a knowing cove to be sure. But come over here and talk to me. I am certain such a clever boy will be able to give me a great deal of valuable information."

"I don't know what you mean," answered Topo. "But I'll go and talk to you if you like. Are you going to the country to see your papa's uncle? We are."

"Are you indeed? Well, that's a piece of news. We have been in London for the Christmas holidays. We were staying at our aunt's, and are now going home again."

"Oh," said Topo. "And was your aunt kind to you, and did she let you have fun?"

"Yes. She was very kind. She allowed us to do exactly what we liked."

"Do you think a papa's uncle would be like that?"

"Don't know, I'm sure. Never had such a relative that I'm aware of."

"Then you don't know what he'd be like, of course. But what used you do at your aunt's?"

"All kinds of things, Little Mark of interrogation."

"What's that?"

"A thing like you. A small black thing that asks questions."

"Do I ask too many?"

"Not you. Fire away!"

"Does that mean go on?"

"Yes—exactly."

"Well, what did you do all day in London?"

"Oh, I used to go about and amuse myself at all sorts of things. My brother, there, was always poking through the picture galleries, gaping at old masters, and making drawings of them. I couldn't bear them. But then you see he wants to be an artist."

"An artist—he?" cried Topo, scornfully. "My papa was an artist. But then he was a man."

"Well, strange as it may appear," said Frank, in a melodramatic voice, "that wretched boy, there, will be a man some day."

"You're a funny fellow," remarked Topo, climbing up on the seat, and perching himself at the big boy's elbow. "Sing me that song again. I think he was a stupid, but I like the pompy-pomp."

"Topo," cried Olive, aghast at her brother's boldness, "you must not be so troublesome."

"He is not at all troublesome, I assure you,' said Frank, smiling. "I like to hear him talk. I am very fond of small boys."

"Yes, my brother has a wonderful way with youngsters like that," remarked Ulric, going down to the end of the carriage, and seating himself opposite the little girl. "I remember hearing a lady once say to my mother, 'Mrs. Lester, your eldest son is invaluable at a children's party. Everything goes off well when he is there. I never know what to do with them.'"

"No?" said Olive, absently; and then there was a pause. She looked out of the window, and Ulric examined the various notices posted round the carriage.

"How glad your uncle will be to see that chap!" Ulric ventured to remark after a time. "He seems a merry little grig."

"Do you really think uncle will be glad to see us?" cried Olive, eagerly, and starting from her seat with glowing cheeks. "Alas! I am afraid he will not—I am afraid he will not."

"I am quite sure he will," replied the boy,

soothingly, surprised at this sudden outbreak. "Uncles and aunts are always glad to see their nephews and nieces. So, of course, he will."

"Yes—he shall—he must," said Olive, feverishly; then, remembering she was talking to a stranger, she blushed and turned her head away.

"Had you a pleasant time in London?" she asked presently, anxious to change the subject of conversation and divert the boy's attention.

"Yes, very. I never enjoyed myself so much before," said Ulric, brightly. "I am sorry to go back to the country—although you know I am glad to go home. But London is the best place for people who want to work."

"And do you want to work?"

"Yes, indeed I do. I want to work, and work hard, for I hope some day to become an artist."

Here the small boy and his new friend became so uproarious, that, between their noise and the rattle of the train, it became extremely difficult to hear. So Olive lay back in her seat, and relapsed into silence.

"Why, I declare, here we are at Arundel," cried Frank as the train shot into a station. "I had no idea we were so near. Good-bye, young

un' ; you've passed the time for me splendidly. Don't forget to sing that song for your papa's uncle. It will fetch him awfully. Adoo—as they say in France. Come, Ulric. There's John looking about for us. I expect father is waiting for us in the phaeton. Come on ;." and snatching up his rug, Frank sprang from the train and disappeared.

"Can I do anything for you?" asked Ulric, kindly, as he saw Olive prepare to leave the carriage. "Is there any one to meet you?"

'I—I don't know," answered the girl, trembling with terror at finding herself so near the end of her journey. "Topo, take my hand."

"I wish I could help you," he said ; for he noticed her agitation, and felt sorry for the lonely child. "If I only knew where——"

"Are you Miss Charlton?" asked an elderly woman, who at this moment came up to the children.

"Yes, I am Olive Charlton——"

"Oh, good evening, Mrs. Bell," cried Ulric. "Are you going to look after her?"

"Yes, Master Lester," answered the stranger. "I am here for that purpose."

"I am glad," said Ulric. "She——"

"Ulric—Ulric! Papa is in an awful hurry," called Frank. "Come quick."

"Good-bye, then. I am afraid I must go," said Ulric. "Good evening, Mrs. Bell—good-bye, little Topo,"—and he ran after his brother.

"I am your uncle's housekeeper," said Mrs. Bell to Olive. "He could not come himself, so I came."

"Thank you so much," said the girl, giving her her hand, and raising her eyes full of gratitude to her face. "I was afraid uncle would be angry with me for arriving so soon after my letter. But we were very lonely and desolate, Topo and I."

"Poor dears," said Mrs. Bell, kindly. "And is this Topo?"

"Yes, this is Topo. He has not been at all well since my mother's death."

"The country air will do him good, I hope. But come now and point me out your boxes."

Olive's little trunk was soon found; and giving it in charge to a porter, Mrs. Bell took Topo by the hand and led him out of the station.

An old-fashioned gig, with a broken-down

looking horse, stood at the door; and having seen the box tied on securely at the back, their new friend told the children to jump in. Then, covering them carefully with a much-worn rug, she climbed up on the front seat, took the reins in her hands, and drove off.

As they jogged slowly along, they passed a handsome mail phaeton drawn up at the side of the road.

The driver, a gentlemanly man, with a fine face and commanding figure, was leaning forward talking to a policeman, who listened with attention and respect to all he said.

Two boys sat together on the back seat, and a girl of about ten years old occupied the place of honour beside the driver.

As the gig containing our little friends passed by, one of the lads started and looked after it in surprise.

"Ulric, that's Mr. Derwent's trap. I'm sure it is. I know it is."

"Yes, you are quite right. He must be the uncle the children are going to. I saw Mrs. Bell at the station. She came to meet them."

"What a life they will lead there!" cried

Frank. "Poor little creatures, I do pity them."

"So do I. It is no wonder the girl was afraid he would not be glad to see them. I understand now why she got into such a state of excitement. I don't think they'll be very happy."

"Happy! They'll be miserable," exclaimed Frank. "But how old Derwent ever allowed them to come beats my comprehension."

CHAPTER III.

A STRANGE RECEPTION.

"No voice in the chambers,
No sound in the hall;
Sleep and oblivion
Reign over all."

AFTER jogging along for more than an hour, over a dreary country road, the old gig was at last turned in through a large gate-way, and driven up to a great white house that stood in the midst of a spacious and well-timbered park. The whole place was dark and silent. Not a creature appeared to welcome the travellers; and Olive shivered as the door was opened and she found herself in the gloomy hall.

"I always use a latch-key," said Mrs. Bell. "It is convenient, and makes no noise. The master cannot bear to hear the slightest sound."

"No? Then we shall walk very quietly," said Olive; and she slipped her arm round Topo, and drew him close to her side.

Passing on across the large square hall, Mrs. Bell led the children into a small cheerless room.

"This is my parlour," she said, "and you must take your meals here for the present."

Then, striking a match, she lit a candle, and poked the fire into a blaze.

"Come over here and warm yourselves, whilst I go and look after the house. We don't keep many servants; so I have a good deal to do."

And she went out, leaving the children alone.

Topo looked round him curiously, then spread his little hands over the fire.

Olive sighed heavily, and laid aside her hat.

"Where is the miser, I wonder?" said Topo.

"Hush, Topo dear, you must not call him by that name," cried his sister in alarm. "You must call him Uncle Derwent."

"All right. But I think he might come and see us."

"So he will soon, I daresay. If not, I shall go and see him. I cannot feel happy till I have seen him, and know that we are welcome."

"I thought King's Court would be a grand place, Olive."

"Well, dear, so it is. At least it looked very big from the outside."

"Yes, so it did. But I don't believe this parlour is a bit better than our room at Mrs. Smith's."

"No, indeed it is not. It is very strange that Uncle Derwent would not allow us to go to the dining-room, or one of his other big rooms," said Olive, sadly. "But I suppose he is rather odd. People often get so when they live so much alone. However, Mrs. Bell seems kind, so we must not complain."

"No, I won't complain, Olive. But I tell you what, I want my tea very badly."

"Yes, I am sure you do. Perhaps Mrs. Bell may give us some soon."

"I wish she'd be quick, then, for I'm jolly hungry," he cried. "May I go to the door and call her?"

"No, no, dear. We must wait till she comes."

Half-an-hour passed slowly over, and still Mrs. Bell did not appear. Topo grew impatient, and Olive knew not what to do to pacify him. The long journey and want of food had made him cross and irritable, and he was very

indignant at the strange manner in which they were treated.

Olive felt sorry for him, and longed to get something for him to eat. But just as she had screwed up her courage, and resolved to go forth in search of Mrs. Bell, that good woman entered the room carrying a tray.

"My poor children, you must be starving!" she cried. "Come and eat your supper."

And she placed a mug of milk and some bread and butter before each child.

"I hate milk," cried Topo, crossly. "I'd far rather have tea."

"You must take it or leave it then," said Mrs. Bell, sharply. "There is no tea for you."

Then, seeing Olive look at her in surprise, she added, gently, "I did not mean to be cross, dear child. But I am tired and worried. Milk is much better for you than tea. We want you to grow fat and rosy, you know."

"Yes, Topo dear, it will do you good," said Olive. "Country milk is quite different from London milk. I am sure you will like it."

"Very well," said Topo; and, feeling really hungry, he began his supper at once.

"That's a wise little woman," remarked Mrs. Bell, approvingly. "I am glad you do not spoil him. And now I must leave you. I will come back as soon as I can to show you your bedroom. But Mr. Derwent told me to go to him in a quarter of an hour. It is awkward that he should happen to want me just now; but it can't be helped. Do not stir from here till I come for you. The house is large, and you might lose yourselves."

"But mayn't I go to see my uncle?" asked Olive. "I——"

"No, no," cried Mrs. Bell, hurriedly. "Not to-night. He never sees any one in the evening. He is not strong—he—— You must stay quietly where you are. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Olive, sadly. "But I should like to have seen my uncle. I want to thank him for sending us that five pounds, and for——"

"You must never mention such a thing to him," cried Mrs. Bell. "He hates to be thanked —he—— And do not call him uncle—for he is not your real uncle, you know. So if you happen to meet him just call him Mr. Derwent, and talk as little as possible to him. He must

not be excited—he—— But I'll explain all this to you by-and-by. I cannot stay any longer now. My master does not like to be kept waiting. But do not dare to follow me."

And before Olive had time to answer a word, Mrs. Bell left the room ; the key turned sharply in the lock, and the children were prisoners till she should choose to release them.

"Mrs. Bell isn't at all kind," said Topo. "And if I'd known it would be so miserable here I wouldn't have come one bit."

"But, my poor darling, where could we have gone?" said his sister. "We have but little money and no friends, Topo. If we had not come here, I do not know what would have become of us. We might have died of starvation;" and, bowing her head, the poor girl wept bitterly.

"Don't cry, Olive. Don't cry, dear," said Topo, climbing up on her knee, and putting his arms round her neck. "I'll tell uncle how cross Mrs. Bell is, and he'll make her be kind."

"I don't think she means to be cross, Topo. I don't indeed. But there's something strange about it all—something I cannot understand. I don't think we're wanted here, and that makes

me unhappy. But I'll know better in the morning, when I've seen my uncle."

"Yes—you'll know better to-morrow," said Topo in a sleepy voice. "I wish I could go to bed, Olive. I'm so tired."

"Go to sleep here, darling," she said, gently; and drawing him towards her, she pillowed his head upon her breast.

"You're like a little mamma to me, Olive," he whispered—"you're like a little mamma; and I love you very much."

Then closing his eyes with a smile, he dropped asleep on her knee.

"Poor Topo. I'm a useless kind of mamma," said Olive, tearfully, as she gazed at the boy's delicate face. "I wish I were old enough to work and earn money for us both. Then I would soon hurry away from this dreary house. But I must not forget my mother's last prayer: 'My God—my God, Thy will be done'. It was God's will that we should come here. So I must try not to grumble."

And soon Olive also grew weary; and with her arms tightly clasped round her brother, she fell fast asleep.

Some two or three hours later, Mrs. Bell walked quickly through the hall, unlocked the parlour door and went in.

"Come along quickly," she began; "it is time——" but stopped abruptly when she saw that the children were asleep.

She approached them softly, and, kneeling beside them, gazed upon them with tearful eyes.

"Poor little creatures, how tired they are. How pale and thin. It makes me sad to think of their desolate condition," she murmured. "Was it wise to bring them here, I wonder? How will it turn out? But it must be right. They are his nearest relatives—his heirs. It would never do to let them starve. And had they not come? Well, whatever happens, nothing can be so bad as to have them alone in London, without money or friends. But we must be cautious and secret. And I fear that will be difficult. The girl is too outspoken—too—but there, I must not be so easily alarmed. He was gentle and quiet to-night—and—who knows, perhaps——"

"Where am I?" cried Olive, starting up

suddenly. "Ah, now I remember. Have I been long asleep, Mrs. Bell?"

"I don't know, dear. You were in a sound sleep when I came back. And now you had better come to bed. Give me the boy; I will carry him for you. Poor little fellow, how tired he is. Take the candle, Miss Olive, and I'll show you the way."

The child did as she was desired, and followed Mrs. Bell, through a side door, and down a long narrow passage.

Presently the housekeeper stopped, and, taking a key from her pocket, unlocked a door, and entered a large wild-looking room, in which the one candle gave but little light.

A great mahogany four-post bed stood in the middle of the floor, and poor Olive shuddered at the thought of sleeping under the heavy canopy. The other furniture was of a dark old-fashioned kind, the curtains of thick materials and of sombre hue.

At one side of the big bed was a crib, and on this Mrs. Bell laid the still sleeping Topo.

"You will be nice and comfortable here together," she said. "It is the quietest room in

the house, and the farthest away from—— But don't attempt to leave it in the morning till I come for you. You could not find your way back to the parlour—at least it is best not to try. These old houses are so rambling, you might lose yourself. Shall I undress your brother for you?"

"No, thank you, I always undress him," said Olive. "He is accustomed to me."

"Then I'll say good-night. Put out your candle very carefully, and get into bed as fast as you can."

When Mrs. Bell had taken her departure, and she found herself alone, Olive looked round the gloomy chamber in terror.

How strangely silent it all felt; how nervous she was; how many horrors the dark corners held concealed within their depths. And her brain whirled, and her brow grew damp, as she stood as one transfixed in the very spot where Mrs. Bell had left her.

"What a goose I am," she cried at last; and, placing the candle as close to her as possible, she began, with trembling fingers, to undress her brother.

Very tenderly, lest she should awake him, she took off his clothes, put on his night-dress, and covered him up in his crib. Then, kneeling by his side, she repeated her evening prayer.

And just as she had completed her own preparations for bed, the candle, which had burnt low in the socket, gave a sudden splutter and went out.

Again Olive's frame shook with terror ; and, giving a little scream, she climbed into the great four-poster, dived under the blankets, and buried her face amongst the pillows.

For many hours the strangeness of the place and the dreadful fear that had taken possession of her prevented the girl from sleeping ; but at last nature asserted itself, and forgetting terror and loneliness she fell into a sound sleep.

And so passed the orphan's first night at King's Court.

CHAPTER IV.

TOPO IN DANGER.

"Trembling, as trembles a bird's quick heart,
When it vainly strives from its cage to part,
So knelt she in her woe."

THE next morning Topo was ill, and Olive was wild with grief. Quite early, almost before it was day-light, the boy awoke, and, calling to his sister, asked her for a drink.

"What is the matter, darling?" she cried, starting up in alarm. "Don't you feel well?"

"No; I am so thirsty, Olive, and so hot. I'm burning just like fire," he answered. "And my head is aching so badly."

"Poor little man!" and in an instant Olive was by his side, holding a glass of water to his lips.

"Thank you, dear. That is very nice," he murmured, and fell back upon his pillow with a sigh.

Olive dressed herself at once, and was about to rush out to call for Mrs. Bell, when, to her surprise, she found that the door was locked.

"Why, we are like prisoners here," she cried, stamping her foot. "It is perfectly absurd to shut us up the way that woman does. But I shall tell my uncle, and he will surely put a stop to it."

And, full of indignation, she sat down by her brother's crib, watching his every movement with a heavy heart.

Topo tossed about feverishly for some time, but at last, to his sister's delight, he fell asleep again.

Then Olive heard the sound of approaching footsteps, and a moment later Mrs. Bell opened the door and entered the room.

"What, up already, dear?" she said. "Well, you are an early riser. Why, it's only half-past seven."

"Oh, Mrs. Bell, my brother is ill. What shall I do?"

"Ill? Dear me, I hope it is nothing of any consequence;" and she looked closely at the little boy.

"He is very hot and feverish."

"Yes. He has caught cold, I daresay. But I don't think it will signify. You must not be

alarmed. Come and have some breakfast. When he awakes you can bring him some in here."

"But he might wake up whilst I was away," said Olive.

"There is no fear of that. He is in a sound sleep, and it's my belief there is not much wrong with him. It's only a feverish cold."

"I'd like to have a doctor to see him."

"That is quite impossible," said Mrs. Bell, hastily, "and quite unnecessary."

"I don't think so," replied Olive. "And I cannot see why it should be impossible. There must be some doctor in the neighbourhood. If you will not allow me to have one, I shall ask my uncle."

"You shall do no such thing. It would be madness—it would spoil everything. And—and—I cannot allow you to see your—Mr. Derwent to-day. It is—too soon."

Olive stared at her.

"Too soon," she repeated.

"Yes, at least——" began Mrs. Bell; and the girl wondered why she seemed so strangely confused.

"You see Topo may be taking something dangerous—some contagious disease," continued the housekeeper, after a pause. "Mr. Derwent is an old man, and not strong, so it would be wrong to expose him to infection. Neither you nor your brother must leave this room, except to go with me down the passage to my parlour, till he is better, or till we are quite certain what is the matter with him."

"Perhaps you are right. But indeed I think we should send for a doctor at once."

"Nonsense," cried Mrs. Bell, impatiently. "He could do the child no good. I can doctor him perfectly well."

Olive made no further remark upon the subject, but she resolved to fetch a doctor herself, if, within the next few hours, Topo seemed to grow worse.

"I think I will stay beside him till he wakes, Mrs. Bell," she said, quietly. "He might be frightened if he found no one here."

"So he might. And, in case he is catching anything, it is just as well for you both to stay in this room. I'll bring you your breakfast, and light a fire for you directly."

"Thank you. That will do nicely. I am sure it will be the best thing for Topo."

Then Mrs. Bell went away, locking the door securely behind her. And once more Olive grew full of wrath at the thought of being so imprisoned.

For several weeks the children remained in close confinement in the big gloomy room. Topo, it is true, had not developed anything more alarming than a severe cold. But as he was so frail and delicate, both Mrs. Bell and Olive thought it safer to keep him a close prisoner till the sharp winds should have abated, and the weather become milder.

These were dreary days for the orphans, for they had but little to amuse them, and saw no one but Mrs. Bell.

But at last the boy grew much better, the sun shone in brightly through the windows, and he implored his sister to take him out.

This she gladly promised to do, if Mrs. Bell would give her consent. For it was a lovely day, and she, too, was longing for a breath of air.

So when the housekeeper appeared with breakfast, Olive ventured to make her request.

"Yes, I have no objection," said Mrs. Bell, glancing out across the garden. "You may go for a walk, but on one condition."

"What is that?" asked Olive, gaily. "I hope it is nothing very serious."

"On condition that you do not seek to see your uncle, or, if you do see him, that you will not speak to him."

"Good gracious, what a strange request!" exclaimed Olive. "Really, Mrs. Bell, you are very funny about my uncle. One would think he was an ogre by the way you go on."

"No matter what he is. He must not see you at present—you must not speak to him to-day. Promise me, Miss Olive."

"Oh, I promise," said Olive. "I am not at all anxious to see him now. I think he must be a hard-hearted old man. He knows we have been here for nearly a month. He knows my mother is dead—that Topo has been ill—and yet he never came near us or seemed to care anything about us. I shall not go to him, you may be quite sure—not till he sends for me anyway. If I happen to see him I'll run away as fast as I can."

"Then you may take Topo out for his walk," said Mrs. Bell, smiling; and there was a cheerful ring in her voice that showed she was well pleased. "The air is quite mild and balmy, so it will be a treat for you both."

"If I could only find some way of earning my bread," thought Olive, as she and Topo walked down the broad avenue hand in hand, "I would soon run away from King's Court. It is a miserable thing to be obliged to eat the bread of a man who hates the very idea of our being here. For if he did not do so, he would surely treat us in a more friendly manner. But what a strange creature he must be. Mrs. Bell always seems so frightened at the thought of our speaking to him. I wonder why? If he dislikes us so much, why did he tell us we might come? Why did he send money to bring us here—my mother and all? I cannot understand him in the least."

"Come and have a race, Olive, right away down the road," said Topo, breaking in upon her reverie. "Give me five minutes' start, and then see if you can catch me."

"Very well, dear," she answered, smiling, "off you go."

And, as the little boy ran on, she stood still in front of the big entrance gate, waiting for the desired time to elapse before she should start after him.

Just then an old man came along one of the side walks, and, stopping near the gate, looked cautiously up and down.

He was small and thin, with sharp, inquiring eyes, and dark over-hanging brows. His coat was shabby and much worn ; his shoes patched and mended ; and his gray hair, which hung in straggling locks over his shoulders, was covered only by a black velvet skull-cap. He leaned heavily on his stick and seemed very feeble.

Olive glanced back uneasily at this weird-looking figure.

"Who is he, I wonder?" she thought. "And what is he doing in there?"

But here Topo was heard calling to her to follow him, and she sped quickly down the road.

"I feel certain that child passed along the avenue and out of this gate," muttered the old man, thumping his stick upon the ground. "Some of Mrs. Bell's nonsense, I suppose. It is too bad of her to bring people about when she

knows I hate the sight of strangers. I can't have youngsters like that running through the place—and I'll tell her so. Why, good gracious, they might go prying into the house, and finding out—— But there, I must put a stop to them at once. I'm not master of King's Court for nothing," and, muttering and mumbling to himself, he turned and walked back towards the house.

Meanwhile Olive went after Topo, and at last, out of breath from running and laughing, she caught him in her arms and covered him with kisses.

"You are my prisoner, Topo," she cried, "and you must not run any more. It will make you ill again, my pet."

"I don't think it will, Olive," he answered, gaily. "Isn't the air delicious?"

"Yes, lovely; and I tell you what we'll do. We'll leave the road, and ramble away through those woods. The big trees are rather bare yet—just beginning to bud. But look, I declare there are some snowdrops peeping out. Aren't they sweet, Topo?"

"Dear little things," cried her brother. "And, oh, Olive, look at the primroses and violets!"

"Yes, such crowds of them. This is an enchanting place. I am glad uncle allowed us to come—although he does treat us so strangely. The air is, as you say, delicious;" and Olive threw back her head and drew a long breath. "What a change this is from foggy London, Topo!"

"Yes, so it is. But, Olive, I do wish Jim Smith was here. It's so dull stuck up in that big house with only you and Mrs. Bell. You are very kind and nice, dear; but, oh, I would so like to have a game of marbles with Jim. He was such a jolly boy."

"Poor little man! But I'll tell you what, Topo, you must teach me marbles, and pretend I'm Jim Smith."

"I couldn't," said Topo, shaking his head sadly. I don't know how to very well myself, and I haven't any marbles."

"Two very good reasons for not teaching me," answered Olive, laughing. "What shall we do then?"

"Have another race."

"Very well, if you feel rested enough. But don't go too far. Take care not to fall amongst those brambles."

"No fear," said Topo, scornfully. "I'm not such a baby;" and off he went through the wood.

Then Olive dived after him; and at last, hot and tired, they sank down to rest upon a mossy bank.

"It is rather dangerous to sit still, dear, I am afraid," said Olive, wisely.

"Not at all," cried Topo, lying on his back. "I'm so tired. I'd love to go to sleep."

"Don't lie there, dear. It's damp."

"No, it isn't, it's very nice."

"Well, if you really must lie down, come over here," said Olive. "See, just under this thick clump of holly and laurel, it is as dry as possible. I do not want this shawl now, I am so hot. So I'll put one part of it on the ground under you, and cover you up with the other half."

"How jolly," cried Topo. "You are a good sister. Just you keep quiet, Olive, and I'll take a little dose."

"I am afraid that would not be wise, dear."

"Of course it would be wise. It would be delicious."

"Well, I'll give you ten minutes," said his

sister. "And then you must jump up and run about again."

"All right," cried Topo. "Don't talk to me any more;" and, closing his eyes, he fell asleep.

"Poor little darling, how weak he is," said Olive sadly. "I do wish I could take him to a doctor. If I could only manage to do so without telling Mrs. Bell anything about it. She gets so angry when I mention such a thing. But I wonder where there is one to be found. This is such a lonely place. I can't see a house anywhere about except King's Court. Nothing but woods and trees for miles"—and she gazed around her. "Ah, there is smoke going straight up over there to the right. That must be a house. I wonder who lives in it. Now, if some one would pass through the wood, I might ask. But it is a lonely country—not a soul anywhere. How pretty these little snowdrops are. I think I'll gather a lot of them, and take them home to our big, gloomy room;" and, leaving her brother to enjoy his nap, she wandered away amongst the trees, picking the sweet spring flowers that grew thick on every side.

Presently the sound of approaching footsteps

attracted her attention, and she raised her head in eager expectation. But no one was to be seen, so, with a sigh of disappointment, she bent once more to her work.

As she rambled along, she came to a large hedge, and under the shelter of the bushes she found hundreds of primroses budding forth luxuriantly.

"I will take some of these beautiful roots," she cried, joyfully, "and plant them in some pots on our window-sill. They will grow there and look so nice. But I wonder if Topo has his pen-knife with him. It is very blunt, but it would help me to dig them up. I must slip my hand into his pocket and see."

And laying her flowers on the ground, she stepped back towards the sleeping boy.

Suddenly she heard some one moving on the other side of the bushes, and, to her surprise, the sound of voices fell on her ear.

"There is something in there," was said in a whisper. "It's a bird—or a rabbit. I'll have a shot." And, to her horror, the muzzle of a gun was pointed straight through the clump of holly.

"Stop!" she cried. "Stop!"

But she was too late. The shot was fired. And with a wild shriek, she fell fainting across her little brother.

"What a fool you are, Ulric! Such a short-sighted creature has no right to carry a gun;" and a tall lad sprang through the furze, and knelt down beside the unconscious girl.

"How dreadful!" cried Ulric, turning pale.

"Oh, Frank, I might have killed the poor children!"

"You might," said Frank, dryly, "if you had been a good shot. As it is, you have not touched them. The girl has had a fright, that's all."

"Thank God for that," cried Ulric, reverently. "Poor little creatures. Where do they come from, I wonder?"

"Come from? Why, from King's Court, of course. Don't you remember the children that came down in the train with us that night?"

"To be sure I do. And I declare the youngster is fast asleep. But are you sure the girl is all right, Frank? I didn't touch her, I hope."

"Not you. She's only fainted. But haven't you something in that flask of yours?"

"Only claret and water. Will that do?"

"Well, it's better than nothing," he replied. "I'll see what it will do for her."

Then taking the flask from his brother, he poured a few drops of the contents into Olive's mouth. Ulric bathed her face and hands with fresh water from a neighbouring stream, and in a few moments she opened her eyes and looked about her.

"What has happened?" she cried. "Ah, I remember, Topo!"

And starting up, she threw her arms round the child, and kissed him passionately.

"Oh, Olive," he grumbled, pushing her away. "Why did you wake me up? I was having such a jolly dream. I thought those two fellows we met in the train were here, and that the funny chap—— But, I declare, it isn't a dream after all—and there you are;" and springing to his feet, he shook the big boys warmly by the hand. "I am glad to see you."

"And we are enchanted to see you," said Frank, smiling. "Wait till your sister is all right again, and we'll have some fun."

"All right. Why, she is all right," cried Topo. "It was I that was ill. Wasn't it, Olive?"

"Yes, dear. But I had a fright—I was sure——"

And to her brother's surprise she began to cry.

"Oh, I say, don't cry," said Frank, looking very uncomfortable. "There's nothing to cry for now. It's all right, you know."

"Yes—I know—I know. Please don't mind me—I'm—very silly."

"You are not one bit silly. You are my own darling sister," cried Topo. "Go away, boys. I thought you were nice and kind—and—I liked you. But if you frightened Olive—you are horrid—so there. I shan't speak to you any more;" and he turned his back upon them indignantly.

"It was my fault," said Ulric, meekly. "But indeed it was an accident. I did not mean to frighten you, Miss Olive. I thought I saw a rabbit, and I fired. I am terribly near-sighted, and, as my brother says, I should never carry a gun."

"I know you did not do it on purpose," said Olive, giving him her hand. "And pray do not look so sad. No harm has been done. I feel quite well now."

"That's all right," said Frank, cheerfully. "And how do you like living at King's Court?"

"Not much," answered Olive, sighing; "it's very dull there."

"I hate it," said Topo. "It's just like a prison. Mrs. Bell locks us up, and lets us out, just as if we were thieves and people."

"Hush, Topo; Mrs. Bell is very kind," said his sister, reprovingly. "She took great care of you when you were ill."

"She's a horrid bore," he answered. "And she's often very cross to us. You know she is."

"But your uncle?" asked Ulric. "Isn't he kind to you?"

"I never saw the old boy in my life," said Topo, disrespectfully. "I don't think there is an uncle;—or else Mrs. Bell locks him up, the way she does us."

"Oh, Topo!" cried Olive.

"Well, where is he? The house is all empty, and we never see anyone about."

"Is that true?" asked Frank. "Have you not seen your uncle yet?"

"No; not yet," replied Olive, blushing. "Mrs.

Bell says he is ill—or he is busy—and so we have never seen him."

"How strange," said Ulric. "But he is a very eccentric man, I know. You must be fearfully lonely there, poor children. I say, Frank"—and, bending forward, he whispered a few words in his brother's ear.

"A very good idea," said Frank. "And I don't mind giving up my shooting for to-day. Mother would be quite pleased, I'm sure."

"Yes; I think she would," he answered. Then, turning to Olive, he said, "Would you mind coming back to Ashford with us? Frank and I would like you to know our mother and sister."

"Thank you—you are very kind," stammered Olive. "But would they——"

"They would be delighted," he said, smiling. "Lucy will be so glad to know you, and my mother will tell you what to do with Topo to make him strong and fat."

"Then I will go with you," she said at once; and, springing to her feet, she shook out her frock, and put her hat straight.

"Is it far to your house?" asked Topo. "I am very tired."

"Then I'll carry you," cried Frank; and, perching the little chap on his shoulders, he dashed out of the wood and down the road.

"If I am near-sighted, Master Frank, you are careless," said Ulric, laughing, as he stooped to pick up the gun that his brother had left amongst the bushes.

"We are a sad pair, Frank and I, Miss Olive. We are always getting into some scrape or another."

"Are you?" said Olive, looking up brightly into his face. "But then you are both extremely kind. That makes up for everything."

CHAPTER V.

DAWNING FRIENDSHIP.

"Friends, given by God in mercy and in love,
My joy in grief, my second bliss in joy."

THE morning-room at Ashford was a bright, sunny spot. It was large and airy, full of good old furniture, rare china, and dainty water-colours. At one end was a bow window leading into a handsome conservatory filled with choice flowers; and this opened directly upon the lawn and tennis ground beyond.

This was the general family room. Here Mrs. Lester did her needle-work, went over her accounts, and wrote her letters. Here the boys, Frank and Ulric, learned their lessons and prepared their exercises. Here little Lucy loved to come with her book to read aloud to her mother.

And so here we find the lady and her daughter, on this morning, when Olive and Topo are roam-

ing through the woods making acquaintance with the country.

"I think you have read enough for to-day, dear child," said Mrs. Lester, looking at her watch. "You have not practised yet, have you?"

"No, mamma," answered Lucy, a dark-eyed girl of ten; "but I would much rather read. This book is so interesting."

"Yes, so it is. But if you do not practise now, you will not get it done at all. The boys will be here in the afternoon, you know."

"I don't think so, mamma. They went out to shoot this morning early. They took their lunch with them, and I am sure they will not be back till the evening."

"Perhaps not. But still, Lucy, I would advise you to go to your music now. It is always best to do one's work at the proper time."

"Yes, mamma, so it is," said the little girl; and she went to the piano at once.

Laying aside her work, Mrs. Lester rose from her chair and entered the conservatory. She was fond of flowers, and took great pleasure in watching their growth.

She spent a considerable time amongst them,

picking off faded leaves, admiring opening buds, and training young sprays of delicate creepers.

Suddenly she found, to her surprise, that it was near luncheon time, and that, if she wished to be punctual, she must hurry away and wash her hands.

But she still lingered amongst the flowers, gazing lovingly at her treasures.

And just as she was bending over a beautiful camellia, almost the last of the season, a loud shout upon the lawn caused her to look up in astonishment.

"Why, it is Frank!" she exclaimed. "What can have brought him home now?"

The next moment the door was burst open, and a gust of wind came rushing through the conservatory, shaking the plants, and making Mrs. Lester shiver.

"What a blast! My dear Frank, pray shut the door."

"'Tis only a March wind, mother mine, that has sprung up all of a sudden. And just see what a funny little object it has blown my way;" and he deposited Topo on a shelf amongst the plants.

"Take him down, Frank. How can you be so rash? Close to my camellias, too. But who is the boy? Where does he come from?"

"Who are you, sprite? Answer the lady," cried Frank, setting Topo down on the floor. "This is my mother, Mrs. Lester; so pray put on your best manners."

"Do not tease him, Frank. What is your name, dear?"

"Topham Charlton, and I come from King's Court," answered the little boy, looking rather frightened. "This—this—fellow carried me here—away from Olive."

"And who is Olive, dear?" asked Mrs. Lester, kindly.

"Olive? Why, she's my sister. Oh, there she is;" and Topo flew to meet the girl, and hid his face in her skirt.

"Mother," said Ulric, "this is Miss Olive Charlton. She is staying at King's Court, with her uncle, Mr. Derwent."

"I am very glad to see you, dear," said Mrs. Lester, taking Olive's hand, and drawing her into the morning-room. "Lucy, here is a little visitor for you."

Lucy got down from her music-stool, and greeted the new arrivals with mingled feelings of delight and astonishment.

Children of their own rank were scarce in the neighbourhood, and she was charmed to see a child so near her age, with whom, perhaps, she might soon become friends.

But Olive was sad and shy ; so, after the first words of politeness, the little girl relapsed into silence.

However, if they were silent, the boys were not ; and Frank rattled away in his usual off-hand fashion.

"And I tell you what, mother," he said, "it's a very lucky thing that those two children were not shot dead by that old stupid there. He——"

"Why, what do you mean?" questioned Mrs. Lester, anxiously. "You were not hurt, I hope?"

"No, not at all, thank you," replied Olive, quickly. "I was only a little frightened."

"No fear of her being hurt," cried Frank, rashly contradicting his first alarming statement. "Why, Ulric could not possibly hit anything he aimed at. He saw poor Topo on the ground, under a bush—thought he was a rabbit. 'I'll

shoot him,' he said,—cocked his gun—shoot—bang—fire—screams from Miss Olive—plenty of smoke—exciting tableau—but no harm done."

"My dear Ulric," said his mother, reproachfully, "you must really be more careful."

"I shall never carry a gun again, mother," said Ulric, gravely. "I am much too near-sighted. I thought I was pretty safe in these lonely woods. But even here one comes across people unexpectedly. For the future I shall keep to my paintbrush. That is a harmless weapon."

"Well, thank God, you have done no mischief," said Mrs. Lester. "When did you come to King's Court, little Olive?"

"Nearly a month ago," replied Olive. "Just at the beginning of February."

"She came the night we returned from Aunt Margaret's, after our holidays," cried Frank. "Don't you remember my telling you about the funny little chap we were talking to?"

"Yes, I think I do. So this is not your first meeting?" she said, smiling. "Topo, do you like King's Court, my boy?" And she took Topo on her knee.

"I hate it," he answered, shortly.

"Do you, indeed? And yet it is a handsome old place. How is Mr. Derwent, Olive?"

"I—I—don't know," said Olive, blushing and stammering. "I—I——"

"She has never seen him, mother. Isn't it strange?" cried Frank. "I think he might have sent for them once or so. Don't you?"

"Yes, dear. But Mr. Derwent is rather peculiar. He would not know what to say to children. Even when I knew him——"

"Oh, did you know him, Mrs. Lester?" asked Olive, eagerly.

"Yes. I knew him very well, a great many years ago."

"Then, perhaps you can tell me what to do," said the girl. "It seems so odd and unkind never to go near him. Mrs. Bell says we must not speak to him—or—or visit him."

"It does seem strange, certainly," said Mrs. Lester, thoughtfully. "But still you ought to do exactly as Mrs. Bell tells you."

"Well," said Frank, "if I were you, I'd go boldly up to the old gentleman's room, and say, 'How do you do?' anyway. That couldn't do much harm, and it would look civil."

"I—should feel afraid," said Olive. "And—and—I think he ought to send for us."

"Quite right, dear," said Mrs. Lester. "So he should. And it is much better for you to obey Mrs. Bell in every particular. She is an excellent woman, and will be sure to tell you what is right. Did you say you were Mr. Derwent's niece, Olive? I never knew he had a brother."

"My father's mother was his only sister," answered Olive.

"Then he was your father's uncle, and is only your grand-uncle."

"Yes."

"Is your father dead?"

"Yes; he died when Topo was a year old, four years ago. My mother is just two months dead;" and the girl's eyes filled with tears.

"Poor little Olive," said Mrs. Lester, drawing the child to her side. "It is indeed hard to lose a beloved mother. Was it then Mr. Derwent sent for you?"

"Yes, at least—we came."

And then Olive told the story of her mother's illness and death, of the letter and

cheque, and their strange reception at King's Court.

"It is certainly curious that Mr. Derwent should send you money, allow you to come to his house, and then treat you so coldly," said Mrs. Lester. "But if you are patient and obedient all will come right, I am sure."

"But, mother, they are kept like prisoners," said Ulric, indignantly. "They are locked up in their room at night, and cannot move without leave from Mrs. Bell."

"That is very trying, I must confess. But Mrs. Bell is kind, I am sure. She gives you plenty to eat?"

"Yes," said Olive; "she's very kind. We get plenty to eat?"

"I don't think she's a bit kind," said Topo. "And she's always looking about as if she thought someone was behind her. I think there must be a ghost in the house. She looks so frightened sometimes."

"Indeed?" said Mrs. Lester, smiling. "But I never heard there was a ghost at King's Court, Master Topo. What put such things into your little head?"

"Stories," said Topo. "I've often heard ghost stories. But I never saw a ghost. Did you?"

"No, I cannot say that I did," replied Mrs. Lester, smiling.

"Because there are none to see," cried Lucy, laughing. "Mother says it's only our imagination makes us think we see ghosts."

"Well, I'm sure Mrs. Bell is afraid of seeing one," insisted Topo. "Doesn't she look frightened sometimes, Olive?"

"Yes, dear. But then she is always anxious about Uncle Derwent. There are no bells in the place, and she is always afraid he wants her, just when she comes to us. I wish she would let me do things for him. But she won't."

"Isn't Mr. Derwent a miser, mother? The people about here say he is," remarked Frank.

"Everyone in the neighbourhood says so," replied Mrs. Lester. "But it is hard to tell. He leads a strange life, never sees anyone, and spends very little money. His mysterious ways make people talk and wonder about him."

"Was he always like that?" asked Ulric.

"No, quite the contrary. When I knew him

he was extremely gay and fond of society. When I was first married and came home here, King's Court was the pleasantest house in the whole county."

"Oh, I say," cried Frank, "what a falling off was there!"

"Yes, indeed, a sad falling off," said Mrs. Lester—"very sad."

"But how did it begin, mother?" asked Ulric. "Was it sudden?"

"Yes, very sudden. One Christmas, Mr. Derwent and his wife——"

"What? Was he married?" cried the children.

"Yes: and to one of the prettiest and sweetest girls I ever knew."

"Poor thing," said Frank. "She was to be pitied."

"She did not think so, dear," replied his mother. "Her husband was handsome, rich, and gay. She was young and beautiful, and they were devoted to one another. She had a pretty house, plenty of friends—in fact everything she could wish for."

"Any children?" asked Frank.

"No, they had no children. But they did not seem to mind that. They were very happy. One Christmas, Mrs. Derwent became delicate, and was ordered to Nice. They went, and soon afterwards we heard that Mr. Derwent had been playing and losing heavily at the gaming tables at Monte Carlo."

"Such a fool!" cried Frank.

"Yes, indeed he was. Then for some time we heard no more about them, till one day Mrs. Bell came running up here to say that her mistress was dead. She had died suddenly of disease of the heart, and her husband was distracted with grief. Then he came home. But he refused to see any of his old friends; sold everything that was not strictly entailed; put the money no one knows where; and retired to live in King's Court, with no one to look after him but Mrs. Bell."

"What a strange story," said Ulric. "I wonder what he did with the money."

"Keeps it in a big box and counts it over every day," said Frank. "That's what misers always do."

"I cannot imagine him as bad as that," said

Mrs. Lester. "Your father says there is some mystery about him. But we have never tried to find it out. If he chooses to live a retired life, we have no business to pry into his affairs and ask questions. Mrs. Bell says he is most generous to her—gives her high wages, and pays them promptly."

"But the whole place is going to rack and ruin," cried Frank. "There is scarcely a servant about the place. I don't know what will become of those poor children in such a hole. I've a good mind to go up and tell the old gentleman what he ought to do for them."

"Don't talk nonsense, dear boy," said his mother, smiling. "And now it is just luncheon time. Olive, will you and Topo stay and lunch with us?"

"I should like to, very much," answered Olive shyly. "But I am afraid Mrs. Bell might be uneasy. So I think it will be best for us to go home."

"Perhaps so. But come over to us early to-morrow, and spend the day. Tell Mrs. Bell where you are going, and I am sure she will not object."

"Thank you so much. You are very, very kind," cried Olive. "We will certainly come to-morrow if we can."

"That is right. Frank, I think you had better go part of the way with the children. It would never do to let them get lost."

"I will go the whole way," answered Frank, gaily. "Come, Topo, my man. Jump up on your horsie."

The little boy sprang up on his back, and they cantered off together.

"I will go also, mother," said Ulric. "Frank and I have our luncheon in our pouches. So do not wait for us. Come, Olive, say good-bye—if you must."

Olive put out her hand shyly, but Mrs. Lester drew her towards her, and gave her a loving kiss.

"You must come here often, dear child," she said. "Lucy will be charmed to have you for a friend. Eh, Lucy?"

"Yes, mamma, indeed I will."

Then the little girls kissed, and said good-bye until the morrow. Ulric drew Olive's arm within his own, and led her through the conservatory into the garden.

"Poor orphans," murmured Mrs. Lester, as she watched them go across the lawn. "I am afraid they will have a sad life in that lonely, deserted house. But how did Mrs. Bell ever persuade the old man to allow them to come there? That is a question that puzzles me much."

CHAPTER VI.

A PLEASANT ARRANGEMENT.

"There is sunshine everywhere
For thy heart and mine;
God, for every sin and care,
Is the cure divine."

THE next morning Topo was up at the first peep of day. But the bed-room door was locked, so out he could not go till Mrs. Bell should come to call him for breakfast.

Olive, too, was early astir, and spent the weary hours in brushing her black frock and putting fresh lace in the neck and sleeves.

"For we must be neat, Topo," she said, smiling, "or that nice lady will not be pleased."

"Yes, of course we must. But, Olive, what shall we do if Mrs. Bell won't let us go? I wish you had asked her yesterday."

"I thought it was better to wait until to-day, dear, for she seemed annoyed about something.

But I am sure she will have no objection to our going. I don't see why she should. So cheer up, Topo. I feel so happy, for I am certain we are going to have a pleasant day."

"Yes, I know we shall, if we go. Those boys are so jolly."

"And Lucy has a sweet little face. I think our lonely days are over now, dear. It was God Himself who sent those boys to meet us in the train. My heart feels lighter to-day, Topo, than it has done for a long, long time."

"Yes," said Topo, "and I feel quite strong."

"It will be so pleasant to have a nice friend like Lucy. But, oh! how I envy her having a piano to practise on. I'm afraid I shall forget all my music here. And poor mother took so much trouble to teach me."

"Perhaps Lucy might lend you her piano," suggested the little boy. "She looks kind."

"But I should feel too nervous to play before all those people, Topo. Wouldn't it be enchanting to have a piano in the corner of this big room? I could practise beautifully then, and I shouldn't mind being locked up for hours together."

"It is horrid being stuck in here the way we

are, though," cried Topo. "Why doesn't Mrs. Bell come, I wonder? I'll just try and let her know that we are ready;" and he kicked vigorously at the door.

"Topo, Topo, pray don't," said Olive, pulling him away. "Mrs. Bell will be——"

But, as she spoke, the door opened, and Mrs. Bell appeared on the threshold. She looked greatly annoyed, and laid her hand heavily on the boy's shoulder.

"You are extremely naughty to make such a noise," she said. "If you do it again I shall punish you well."

"I don't care," cried Topo, rudely. "You're very unkind to lock us up here. I want to go out and run about the garden."

"And that you cannot and must not do. If you are not good, I shall lock you up here all day."

"You're a cross old woman," screamed the child, passionately. "I hate you; go away."

"Oh, Topo!" exclaimed Olive, reproachfully. "How can you be so rude? But please, Mrs. Bell, do not mind him; he—he——" and she burst into tears.

"Poor little girl," said Mrs. Bell, kindly. "Do not cry, dear. He is only a baby, I know."

"I'm not a baby," shouted Topo. "Frank Lester says I'm a brave little boy."

"Frank Lester? Where did he see you?" asked Mrs. Bell.

"We first saw him in the train coming here," replied Olive. "He was very kind to Topo."

"Yes, now I remember, his brother was talking to you that evening at the station. Have you met the boys since?"

"We met them yesterday in the woods. They were extremely nice to us, and took us to Ashford and introduced us to their mother and sister."

"Did they indeed?" said Mrs. Bell; and she began to walk up and down in apparent agitation. "And what did Mrs. Lester say? Did she think it strange? Did she—but there—I'm sure she was kind. She is a true-hearted woman."

"She was—very kind," said Olive, nervously; "and she asked us to go over there to lunch to-day. May we go?"

"Certainly. You may go there as much as you please. At least, as much as she will allow

you to go. It will be good for you, and will help me somewhat."

"I am glad you are pleased," said Olive, joyfully. "Poor Topo finds it so lonely here."

"Yes, of course. That is only natural," she answered, "but for the present you must both be good and quiet. Your uncle is not well. It would worry him to hear noise and see children about."

"Is he a great invalid?" asked Olive.

"Yes—he—at least," began Mrs. Bell, turning away her head. "But come, dear," she added quickly. "Your breakfast is ready."

And, opening the door, she looked cautiously up and down the long passage; then, taking Topo by the hand, hurried him off to the sitting-room.

Olive followed close behind; but remembering suddenly that she had forgotten her handkerchief, she turned back to look for it. She soon found it, and, putting it in her pocket, ran up the corridor again as fast as she could.

Just as she reached the parlour door, someone passed across the far end of the passage, and a loud, discordant laugh rang through the house.

Looking round in astonishment, she saw the same old man that she had seen the day before at the gate. His back was towards her, and he was shuffling along, laughing and talking as he went.

"What a curious creature!" thought Olive. "I wonder why uncle keeps him here?"

"Olive," said Mrs. Bell, in a low, fierce whisper, "come in directly;" and she caught the girl roughly by the arm and dragged her into the room. "You will destroy everything by your disobedience," she cried, white to the very lips. "Why did you linger behind in such a manner?"

"I only went for my handkerchief," said Olive. "I did not know I was doing wrong," and she looked ready to cry.

"Well, well, no harm is done, fortunately. Take your breakfast, and go out as soon as you can. It is a lovely day, and you can wander about the woods till it is time to go to Ashford."

"Very well," answered Olive; and she sat down to the table in silence.

Immediately after breakfast, Mrs. Bell brought the children their jackets and hats, and, as soon

as they were dressed, led them away down a narrow path to a little side gate.

"It will be best for you to go in and out this way," she said. "It is quieter, and more direct than going round by the avenue. Good-bye. I hope you will have a pleasant day," and she pushed them out on the road and shut the gate.

"Well," said Olive, "that is the strangest woman I ever met. One minute she is kind and nice. The next I feel quite afraid of her, and feel sure she hates us both."

"She did give my arm a squeeze this morning," cried Topo. "But I'll pay her out—see if I don't——"

"No, my dear, you must be good," said his sister. "If she were to send us away, what should we do? I don't think Uncle Derwent would prevent her. I don't, indeed."

"I wouldn't care if she did. I'd go and stay with Mrs. Lester. She'd take us in fast enough, I know."

"It would not be fair to ask her, dear. We are not her relations, and she has her own children to look after."

"Yes, of course, but——"

"The top o' the morning to yez, as our man Paddy says," cried a merry voice, and Frank Lester drove up in a pretty pony carriage.

"Good morning. Good morning," cried Topo, jumping about in delight. "I'm so glad to see you. I'm so glad to see you."

"Steady, young man," laughed Frank. "Don't excite yourself too much. Good morning, Miss Olive."

"Good morning," said the girl, smiling, and catching Topo by the hand. "Don't go too near the ponies, dear. He is quite wild with joy at the sight of you, Frank."

"So it would seem. But will you jump into the phaeton? I am going into Arundel to fetch my mother and Lucy. They went in to dine with some friends there last night. I am to pick them up at a shop in the town. Will you come?"

"Yes, yes. That will be jolly," cried Topo, and he sprang into the low carriage.

"But will there be room coming back?" asked Olive, thoughtfully.

"Plenty," answered Frank. "Sprite Topo counts for nothing, and we often go five inside. Do come. It's a nice drive."

"I am sure it is;" and Olive stepped in, and took her seat beside her brother.

"That's right," said Frank gaily. "Mother and Lucy will be very glad to see you."

Then cracking his whip, he drove briskly down the road.

It was a fresh breezy morning, and the wind soon brought colour to the little pale faces, as the ponies trotted merrily along.

The trees were everywhere budding into leaf, the hedges were full of primroses and violets, and Olive thought it the most lovely country she had ever looked upon.

Then, as they went over the bridge into the town, and found themselves at the foot of the hilly High Street, with its quaint houses, red brick roofs, and pointed gables, the whole surmounted by the beautiful ivy-grown castle, she gave a cry of delight and admiration.

"What a charming place! What a lovely town!"

"Yes, it is nice," said Frank, carelessly. "Ulric raves about the beauties of Arundel. I have seen many places I like better. He is always painting pictures of it."

"Is he, really? That must be pleasant work."

"Do you think so? I call it great rubbish. But there are my mother and Lucy," and he drew up sharply at a shop door.

Mrs. Lester was delighted to see the children, and Lucy seemed pleased to meet them so soon again.

"Mother, we must have a pic-nic," remarked Frank, as they drove home. "Olive has a taste for scenery. So we must give her a treat, and take her to dine at some of our pretty places."

"Oh, yes," cried Lucy. "That would be delicious. Don't you love pic-nics, Olive?"

"I never was at one," answered Olive.

"What?" and the little country girl looked at her in surprise. "Never at a pic-nic. Well, that is strange."

"Not so strange as you think, Lucy," said Mrs. Lester, smiling. "When people live in town, they do not go in for pic-nics the way we country folks do. But it is rather cold for such amusements just yet. We must wait until summer comes round."

"But Olive and Topo may be gone then."

"Oh, no, We have no place to go to," said

Olive, her cheeks flushing, her eyes filling with tears.

"Of course they will be here. And I hope by then you will be quite happy, dear child," said Mrs. Lester kindly. "I must have a talk with Mrs. Bell, and see what we can do to bring a little more sunshine into your lives."

"If we lived with you we'd be very happy," said Topo, nestling up to Mrs. Lester. "But Mrs. Bell is just like the ogre's wife in 'Jack the Giant Killer'. She——"

"Topo," cried Olive, "for shame!"

"Well, you are a caution, Master Topo," said Frank, laughing. "How can you keep your countenance, mother?"

"Because I am very much shocked," replied Mrs. Lester, gravely. "Topo should be ashamed to speak in such a manner about a person who has been so good to him."

"But she's not good to me," said Topo, tearfully. "She squeezed my arm, and she shook Olive like anything this morning. Didn't she, Olive?"

"Yes. But we both deserved it, I'm afraid," answered Olive, sadly. "You kicked about and

made a noise—and I ran back down the passage by myself."

"Well, that doesn't seem much of a crime," said Frank. "I'm blowed if it does."

"You know I do not like those expressions, Frank," said his mother, shaking her head "And you must not encourage Topo to be naughty."

"Not for worlds, mother. The young man must be severely chastised."

But there was a twinkle in Frank's eye as he spoke; and Master Topo soon saw he was not in earnest.

"Mr. Derwent is old and nervous," continued Mrs. Lester, "and noises and children might annoy him very much."

"That's just what Mrs. Bell says," cried Olive. "But there is a funny looking old man, who——"

"Why, there is Mrs. Bell this moment," interrupted Frank as they drove round a sharp turn in the road. "Speak of a certain individual and—etc., etc. You all know the rest I presume?"

"Frank, you are incorrigible," said his mother, laughing. "But stop a minute. I will get out

and walk back with Mrs. Bell. You can drive on home without me."

"But, mother, the luncheon," cried Frank in alarm.

"Do not be uneasy," she replied, looking at her watch. "I shall not keep you waiting. It is only ten minutes past one, and we do not lunch till two. That will give me ample time to get home. Please draw up."

"As you will, mother mine," said Frank, with a sigh. "But my mind misgives me sadly. I feel certain I shall have to wait for my lunch."

"You dreadful boy! But I will surely be in time. And, if by any chance I should be kept late, pray go on without me."

"That would not be at all pleasant, mother, dear, especially when we have visitors," he replied. "But here is Mrs. Bell; and if you must talk to her—I suppose you must."

And, stopping the phaeton, he jumped out, and helped his mother to alight.

"Good morning, Mrs. Bell," cried the young Lesters. "Pray do not keep mamma too long."

Mrs. Bell looked up, with a smile and a bow; but Olive fancied she saw signs of tears about her eyes as she raised them to the carriage.

"How sad she always seems," she murmured, as Frank drove on. "And yet I wonder why? Perhaps she, too, is lonely in that dreary old house. Or perhaps she is anxious about my uncle if he is so ill——"

But here the sound of Topo's merry laugh changed the current of her thoughts; and very soon she was listening to all kinds of stories, about the celebrities of the neighbourhood, from that irrepressible youth Frank.

At five minutes to two the children were ready in the morning-room, waiting for luncheon.

"Where is mother?" asked Ulric, looking round. "She is late to-day."

"She will be here directly," said Lucy. "She stopped to speak to Mrs. Bell."

"Here directly, indeed," cried Frank. "I am pretty sure she won't."

But, as he spoke, the door opened, and Mrs. Lester stood before them. The expression of her face was grave and thoughtful; but she smiled as she saw all the young people assembled together.

"The gong has just sounded," she said, "so you can go on into the dining-room."

The little party flocked off joyfully, Frank and Topo leading the way.

"Olive," said Mrs. Lester, drawing the girl towards her, and kissing her affectionately, "I have been having a long talk about you and your brother."

"Yes," said Olive, blushing. "With Mrs. Bell, I suppose?"

"Yes, with Mrs. Bell. She is very anxious about you both, and wishes to make you happy if she can."

"She is very kind," said Olive, doubtfully. "But——"

"But you are afraid you can never be happy in that lonely old house. Is that it?"

"Yes, indeed, I am afraid we never shall. But, oh, Mrs. Lester, I do not care much for my own sake. But poor little Topo is so wretched," cried Olive, her eyes filling with tears.

"Well, dear, I am determined to do what I can for you both. I have arranged with Mrs. Bell that you are to come up here every morning early, and stay till the evening. Topo can play in the garden, go out with the boys, and amuse himself as he likes. You can have your lessons with Lucy."

"Oh, thank you—thank you, dear Mrs. Lester," cried Olive, rapturously. "That will be delightful. And may I go on with my music?"

"Certainly, dear. Lucy's governess is an excellent teacher, so if you are industrious you will get on very well. So now dry your eyes, and come in to luncheon. Those boys are quite impatient, I am sure."

Then, putting her arm round the little girl, Mrs. Lester kissed her again, and led her into the dining room.

CHAPTER VII.

A STRONG TEMPTATION.

"He who hesitates is lost."

SIX long months have passed away since the day on which Mrs. Lester kept her impatient family waiting for luncheon. And, thanks to her kindness, and the pleasant companionship of her children, this lapse of time has worked a happy change in the orphans.

Olive is no longer the timid girl, with a pale, sickly face, but is bright and straightforward, a perfect picture of health and happiness.

Topo, too, is much improved, and has grown round and rosy. He is a general favourite at Ashford, and is not at all so troublesome to Mrs. Bell as he was during the first days he spent at King's Court.

Lucy and Olive are bosom friends, and work well together at their lessons.

The boys are as lively as ever ; and Frank plays many a trick upon the young ladies and their governess, but always in a kindly spirit.

Ulric spends all his spare time at his painting, and hopes that, when he is some years older, his father will allow him to go to London to study in earnest ; for he is firmly resolved to be an artist if he can.

Early in June, Mr. Lester had started on a trip to America, and so his wife had stayed quietly in the country with the children, instead of going up to town for the season, as she generally did.

This was fortunate for Olive, as she would then have lost her little friends, and been left to continue her studies alone.

And very hard she worked, learning everything she possibly could, for she knew that in the future she would be obliged to provide for herself.

Olive was bright and clever at most things, but her greatest talent was for music. This she loved ; and, as she had a good teacher, and was very industrious, she soon made rapid progress.

Every morning at Ashford she was allowed to

practise for a certain time, but this did not satisfy her; and, as she sat through the long weary hours of the evening, in her big bed-room or in the parlour at King's Court, she longed for a piano on which she might play the airs and pieces she was fond of.

But this was a luxury not at all likely to be supplied to her.

Mrs. Bell was just as strict with the children at the end of six months as she had been on the night of their arrival.

From the parlour to their bed-room they went, but no farther; and if they lingered or talked much upon the way, she hurried them on, in great agitation and alarm.

And so, although the children had lived for such a long time under his roof, they had never yet spoken to their uncle.

At first they had wondered much over this, and Olive had fretted at his unkindness and want of affection. But Mrs. Lester had done her best to comfort her, and advised her not to think about it, and to make herself as happy as she could.

The girl took her advice, and, as time went

on, grew accustomed to her position, and asked no further questions about the strange old master of King's Court.

One morning in August, when Olive entered the school-room at Ashford, she found Mrs. Lester and Lucy in deep consultation with the governess.

"Ah, here she is, to speak for herself," said Lucy, gaily. "Olive, dear, mamma wants you to do something for her."

"Then she has only to let me know what it is—and it is done," answered Olive, smiling. "What is it, dear Mrs. Lester?"

"Don't be so quick to promise," said Lucy. "I don't think you will care much about doing it."

"No matter, I'll do anything Mrs. Lester asks me;" and Olive looked lovingly at her good friend.

"It is not such a very difficult task, dear," said Mrs. Lester. "It is only that I want you to play your last new piece next Tuesday evening for me. I am having some friends to dinner."

"But I do not play it well enough yet," said Olive, blushing. "Do I, Miss Forde?"

"Not quite," said the governess. "But then you have a whole week to practise it."

"Yes, but still——" began Olive, doubtfully.

"I knew she wouldn't like to do it," cried Lucy. "I guessed she would be shy and——"

"But I will do it, Lucy," said Olive, with determination. "I do not know it well, but I shall work very hard for the next few days. And if you think I play it well enough on Tuesday, I shall certainly do it."

"That is a good girl. And that duet with Lucy? You know that, I think?'

"Oh, yes, I know that quite well; and so does Lucy."

"Then I may count on having some music," said Mrs. Lester. "My friends come from a distance, and I would like to have something to make the evening a little lively. But now, I must not keep you from your lessons." And she left the room.

But, although Olive had promised so cheerfully to play for Mrs. Lester on the occasion of her dinner-party, she was really much alarmed. She had never performed for strangers before; she had so little time to practise, and she knew her piece so badly.

"What shall I do, Topo? What shall I do?" she cried one evening towards the end of the week. "Tuesday will be here directly, and I do not know that gavotte at all."

"Practise it," said Topo, wisely.

"So I do, as much as I can; but our time at Ashford is so short," she answered, despairingly. "Oh, if there was only a piano in this lonely big house."

"Would an old one do?"

"Well enough. So long as I could go over and over the notes, that is all I want."

"Well, there is one then."

"What, here?"

"Yes. Not in this room of course. But in the large drawing room at the other end of the house."

"Oh, Topo, how do you know that?"

"I have seen it."

"But how? Mrs. Bell never allows you to go down the corridor below our bed-room."

"No, of course not," said Topo, laughing. "Nor did I. But I have been through a good part of the house all the same."

"But how, child? How?"

"Why, through the windows to be sure. Sometimes when you are learning your lessons here, and I begin to make a noise (and I do it on purpose very often), Mrs. Bell marches me off to our bed-room, and locks me in. But she forgets that the window is not very high and that I can easily get out, and run about the garden as I like."

"Oh, Topo, you know she does not allow you to do that."

"I don't care whether she does or not," he replied. "She has no business to lock me up the way she does. If I made a row she'd be cross; so I just say nothing, and slip quietly out when she is gone."

"I'm afraid you are a sadly disobedient boy, Topo."

"Not at all. I would not disobey Mrs. Lester for the world,—but Mrs. Bell is quite different. Sometimes I have great fun, I can tell you. One evening I found a ladder up against the side of the wall, so I climbed up, and went in at one of the windows."

"You naughty boy. You might have fallen and killed yourself."

"No fear," said Topo, coolly. "The ladder

was not very high, and quite steady. There are jolly rooms round there. Rather dusty—but still——"

"And did you really see a piano?"

"Yes, really. A funny, long-shaped thing. Not a bit like the one at Ashford—but it was a piano—for I tried."

"I wish I could get to it," cried Olive, eagerly. "No one would hear me playing if the doors were shut."

"I don't believe there is anyone to hear," said Topo, nodding his head. "Where uncle Derwent hides himself I can't think. I've hunted and hunted for his rooms, but I never could find them. There's a strange old man I see sometimes, but he looks so cross that I always duck down behind something till he goes away. He walks up and down, and up and down, but he has never seen me yet."

"How do you get to that window, Topo?" asked Olive, paying no attention to this last piece of information.

"It's just round——But here comes Mrs. Bell, so we must not say anything about it. Mum's the word, as Frank says."

"Miss Olive," said Mrs. Bell, as she laid the table for tea, "you must look after yourselves for this evening, and go quietly to bed when the time comes. Mr. Derwent is not well, and I am obliged to go off to Arundel for some medicine for him. I may be kept rather late; so go to your room at the usual hour, and do not make a noise."

"Yes," answered Olive, dreamily. "But I hope uncle is not really ill?"

"I trust he will be better to-morrow," she said, sighing. "But he is feverish and excitable to-night."

"Bring a doctor to see him," suggested Olive.

"That would make him worse," answered Mrs. Bell. "But I must go now. Do as you are told. Go to bed quietly, and make no noise."

"Olive," cried Topo, as the door shut behind the housekeeper, "this would be a capital chance to get at the piano. Shall we go?"

"No, not now, dear. We must take our tea;" and the girl seated herself at the table.

But, when the meal was over, and Olive had learned her lessons for the next day, Topo returned to the charge.

"Come now, before we go to bed. Do come, Olive."

"I'd be afraid, Topo. I would indeed."

"But just come and see where it is. Mrs. Bell is in Arundel by now. I know the way round through the garden. So do come."

"Then I'll only go and have a peep at the ladder," said Olive, yielding to his entreaties. "But I will not play a note; so do not tempt me."

"I shan't tempt you," replied the boy, gaily. "No fear."

And, putting on his hat, he ran across the hall to a side door, that led into the grounds at the back of the house.

Olive followed him slowly, for she had strong misgivings about going out thus, in Mrs. Bell's absence.

"And yet what harm can it do?" she said to herself. "It is a lovely evening, and there is no one about. If uncle is ill, he is sure to be in bed —so there is no fear of meeting him."

"Look at the moon, Olive," cried Topo. "It will be a splendid night. Let us climb up the ladder, and sit in the drawing-room till it is

quite dark, and the moon shines over all the fields."

"That would be too long to stay, dear," said Olive, her hand on the ladder. "And I think we had better not go up at all. Is it in there the piano is?"

"Yes; come up and see;" and light as a squirrel Topo flew up the ladder and disappeared.

"Topo," cried Olive, nervously. "Topo."

"It's lovely in here," said the boy, popping his head out of the window. "There are arm-chairs and sofas, and the piano is not half bad. Come along up."

"I think I'd better not. But still——"

"Don't be such a silly. You may never get such a chance again; come on."

"Well, just for a moment;" and Olive stepped on to the ladder, and went after her brother.

"Isn't it a fine room?" cried Topo, flying about as if the place belonged to him. "Look at those beautiful pictures—and see, the sofas are all covered in silk under these old cotton things. Why, it's twice as smart as Ashford. And oh, dear, this is a delicious place to sit. It's like a little house;" and he dived into the depths of an

immense arm-chair, and lay back amongst its cushions, with a chuckle of delight.

"Topo, pray do not make so much noise," cried his sister, looking round her, in fear and trembling. "What if uncle were to hear you?"

"Let him," said Topo, folding his arms. "But he's not likely to. He's sure to be in bed."

"Yes, I suppose he is. But come away now, Topo. We have seen enough."

"Not yet, Olive; please not yet. Just open the old piano and play one little tune. It will sound lovely in this room."

"But it's so dark now. I can't see properly, dear."

"But you can feel. And look; there is the moon beginning to shine out. Why, it is just over the piano."

"Yes, so it is. Oh, how exquisite it looks, Topo. What a charming room this would be if it were all lighted up, and there were ladies and gentlemen going about in rich dresses and——"

"Let us pretend it is all like that," suggested Topo from his chair. "I will be Mr. Derwent, the master. All those sofas and things shall be

the people ; and you can be the lady, playing music. Do, Olive, just one little tune."

"I feel nervous, Topo," she answered. "It's such a strange ghostly-looking place."

"Frank Lester would call you a funk," cried the boy. "And if you don't play on that piano I'll tell him all about it, and won't he laugh at you just ? "

"That is a terrible threat," said Olive, smiling. "Well, I'll play two or three chords to see what the old thing is like. But I will play very softly—so softly that you shall hardly hear me over there."

"I'll hear you fast enough. But be quick and begin."

So at last Olive yielded to temptation, and, raising the lid, seated herself at the piano.

At first she played as she had said, softly, and the sounds were scarcely audible at the other end of the big drawing-room. But by degrees she grew less fearful ; the touch of the keys encouraged her ; and, forgetting everything but her music, she wandered from one air to another, playing with all the strength of her small fingers.

For some time Topo listened attentively,

humming a little accompaniment when she played anything that he happened to know. Then, as the evening advanced, and his hour for going to bed grew near, he became drowsy, and, laying his head against the chair, fell fast asleep.

For some hours Olive sat on in the moonlight, perfectly forgetful of the passing time.

She had gone over all her new pieces, and many old ones, when almost unconsciously she wandered into a dreamy melody that her mother had often played for her in days gone by. Tears gathered in her eyes, and fell thick and fast upon the key-board, as a vision of the dear lost one rose before her.

Then, drawing her fingers from the piano, she leaned her head upon her hands, thinking sadly of her dependent position, and the weary loneliness of her future life.

She remained for some moments in this attitude, completely absorbed in thought; then, suddenly remembering where she was, she started to her feet with a cry. "Topo, wake up. Come away out of this," she said, taking the little fellow by the arm.

But Topo paid not the slightest attention, and slumbered on peacefully.

"I must carry him down the ladder, I suppose," she thought. "But that will be rather difficult. He is quite heavy now. Oh, dear, if he would only wake up. Topo! Ah, what is that? Someone is coming, I am sure. Can Mrs. Bell have returned from Arundel and missed us? She will be angry. What shall I do?"

A strange creaking noise, the sound of approaching footsteps, filled the girl with terror, and she longed to fly from the place.

So, bending forward, she was about to raise her brother in her arms, when the door opened, and the old man that she had seen so often in the distance entered the room, a look of wonder and alarm upon his withered countenance.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE INTRODUCTION.

"He comes at last in sudden loneliness."—*Byron.*

As this unexpected visitor advanced into the room, Olive withdrew, as far as possible, under the shelter of the big arm-chair in which Topo was sleeping. Her heart was beating wildly; her whole frame shook with terror.

The idea of being seen by this extraordinary individual alarmed her greatly, and she trembled as she thought of Mrs. Bell's anger should she allow herself to be discovered.

The old man looked cautiously about; in his hand he carried a lighted candle, and, raising it above his head, he peered into all the corners.

"I heard music," he murmured. "Someone must be here. And yet there is no one to be seen. Who could it be? Who could it be?" And his lips were white and quivering with

emotion, as he laid his fingers on the notes of the old piano.

"Silent for so many years—and now to give forth music. Someone must have played upon it. Someone must have opened it. But who? And that air I heard was the air she loved. At first I fancied I was dreaming; for who could enter this room? How could they get in? Ah! this explains it all. This is how they came;" and to Olive's intense horror he approached the open window, and the end of his dressing-gown touched her as he hurried past.

"Yes," he cried, "some stranger has been up that ladder—has been in this room—and played on her piano that has been silent all these years. If I but knew—If I could find out——"

Then, turning suddenly, his eyes fell upon Olive, and such an expression of rage and indignation flashed across them, that the poor child shuddered, and shrank farther from his sight.

"Who are you?" he thundered forth, bringing his candle close to her face. "Who are you? and what brings you here?"

"I am Olive Charlton—Mr. Derwent's niece,"

she answered, in a choking voice. "I only came——"

"Mr. Derwent's niece. That is not true," he cried; and the candle dropped from his hand with a crash. "I am Mr. Derwent, and I have no niece. Begone!"

"Oh, uncle," said Olive, tearfully, "my father was your nephew, Topham Charlton, the artist. And when he and my mother died—you sent us money—at least, just before my mother died—and you said we might—come and stay with you and——"

Then, utterly bewildered and alarmed, the girl broke down and began to weep.

"A very good story—a very good story. But I know better than to believe it. You steal in by my window, and when you are discovered you say you are my niece. But I know you—I know you—you are a little thief—and I'll have you punished—imprisoned; there are plenty of rooms," he cried, with a loud laugh.

And as the strange, weird sound rang out through the room, Olive's heart beat more wildly than before.

"It is not a story—it is true," she cried, boldly.

"You sent us money—you told us we might come to King's Court, and we came. We have been here a long time; but Mrs. Bell——"

"Well, what of her?" he asked, eagerly. "Did she believe your story?"

"Of course she did. She met us at the station—brought us here—and has taken care of us ever since."

"Then she may send you away again," he said, angrily. "Mrs. Bell presumes too much. I will have no children prowling about through my house—making noises and——"

"Oh, uncle, do not send us away. We are orphans—we are poor. What can we do?" and Olive sobbed aloud.

"Do what you like—but go. I cannot have you here. No one must come here," and the old man strode up and down the room in great agitation.

"But we shall starve—we shall die. Uncle, I implore you do not turn us out," cried Olive, with streaming eyes.

Then, falling on her knees, she stretched her arms towards him, in silent supplication.

But he turned away with a sigh, and, wander-

ing up and down the moonlit room, seemed suddenly to forget her very existence.

"There was music," he murmured, after a time. "Music—soft, sweet music. And the sound of it took me back to happy days, when my darling was still here and I was—young and gay. Alas! all is now changed and gone. But would that I could hear those sounds once more—would that I could hear them once more."

Wondering much at this curious change in his demeanour, hoping to please and soothe him, Olive rose from her knees, seated herself at the piano, and, with trembling fingers, played the simple melody that her mother had taught her.

The old man ceased his restless wanderings, and went close to the piano. A softened look stole over his face, a far-away, rapt expression, that showed his thoughts had gone back to some well-nigh forgotten time.

And as the beautiful harvest moon shone in through the high uncurtained windows, its brilliant rays fell on a strange and interesting picture.

They touched with their tender light the figure of the young girl at the piano, and played softly

over her long golden hair; they lit up the sad face of the old man, and gave dignity to his faded silk dressing-gown and straggling grey locks; they penetrated to the farthest corners of the room, and made the gaunt chairs and sofas stand clearly forth, in their ghostly white wrappers; and they gently kissed Topo's rosy cheeks as he lay asleep amongst his cushions.

As Mr. Derwent stood beside Olive, absorbed in the music, the door was thrown open, and Mrs. Bell burst in upon them, her eyes flashing with anger and excitement.

"Olive," she cried, "how dare you come here? You know——"

Then catching sight of her master, she fell back in astonishment.

"Hush," said the old man; "you must not disturb her;" and he put his finger to his lips.

"What a strange thing! He thinks it is the mistress," said Mrs. Bell, under her breath. "That is the air she played so often the winter before she died. The sound of it has taken him back to old times. But what can have brought the children here? Now he must know all; and what the up-shot may be, no one can tell."

When Olive saw Mrs. Bell glaring wrathfully upon her, she struck the final chords of the melody, and started to her feet.

"Oh, Mrs. Bell," she cried, "uncle never knew we were here, and he says he never sent us any money."

"I send money! No; that is not likely. My money is too precious," cried Mr. Derwent; and again his strange laugh rang out through the room.

"But I——" began Olive.

"Hush; say no more," whispered Mrs. Bell. "He is not well to-night. Do not attract his attention again. Hide yourself, and I will try and get him quietly to bed. You have done mischief enough already;" then, approaching the old man, she laid her hand upon his arm. "It is late, master. I have got your medicine. Will you come to your room?"

"No, no, Margaret Bell," he cried, shaking her off roughly. "You think I am a fool, and you want to cheat me. But I am not. And I will have you remember that I am master of King's Court."

"Yes, yes; of course you are," she said, soothingly. "But——"

"Who brought that girl here then?" he shrieked.

"I did," she replied, turning round and facing him boldly. "They are your own flesh and blood, and heirs to your property, the children of poor Topham Charlton. Had I left them to die of hunger in London, it would have been found out. People would have learned whose relations they were, and would have come here to find you and inquire into your affairs, and——"

"No, no," he said, cowering before her. "Do not let them do that—do not let them do that. I must be left in peace."

"So you shall. I sent the children money, and brought them here."

"You had no right to send them money. It is too scarce—too——"

"I had every right to send it," she answered, looking him full in the face. "It was my own."

"But this is no place for children, Margaret," he said, plaintively. "It is dull and cold; and that girl will be curious."

"No, she won't. I will keep her away from you. She shall never know anything about you," answered Mrs. Bell, gently, and leading him

towards the door. "They shall live at the far end of the house; you shall never see them, and they shall not give you the slightest trouble."

"No, indeed we shan't," exclaimed Olive, starting forward. "Pray let us stay, uncle, and we shall never go near you. We spend almost all our time at Ashford with our dear friends the Lesters, and——"

"Ashford—Lesters! What is that I hear?" and, shaking himself free from Mrs. Bell, the old man turned and glared at the girl. "What have you to do with the Lesters?"

"They are our very best friends," replied Olive, shrinking back in terror. "We go there every day. I have lessons with Lucy. In fact we almost live at Ashford."

"The Lesters of Ashford. They who used to know—they whom—— But this must not—cannot be allowed. You must never speak to them or see them again."

"Oh, uncle!" cried Olive, in a voice of anguish. "But why? They are so good—so kind—if you only knew——"

"No one in this house may have friends out-

side," he said, fiercely. "I'll have no prying—no talking and jeering over my affairs."

"No, of course not, master dear," said Mrs. Bell, soothingly. "Whatever you wish shall be done. She shall not go near her friends again. We shall keep ourselves as private as ever, and no one shall know what we do in here. Olive shall not speak to people you do not wish her to know."

"I will make no such promise," cried Olive, passionately. "The Lesters are good. They have been kinder to me than you have been. I will not give them up."

"That name again," said the old man, wearily. "Why am I tormented so? Girl, if you live under my roof you must do as you are told. For fifteen years I have held no communication with anyone. No one knows what kind of life I lead, and I will not have things changed now. Pay but one more visit to those people, and my doors are shut on you for ever. Do you hear, Mrs. Bell? My orders must be obeyed;" and he drew himself up with proud dignity.

"Yes, master, I hear and understand—and you shall be obeyed. Any person who dares to dis-

obey your commands shall be sent away at once," replied the housekeeper. "Do not say another word," she whispered to Olive. "Keep out of his sight, and he may forget you. Come, master, it is late; you are not well to-night. Come to bed now."

And taking his arm, she tried once more to draw him towards the door.

"No, I am not well, Margaret," he answered feebly. "My head burns and strange thoughts crowd in upon me. There was music just now —soft, sweet music—that disturbed and alarmed me as I lay on my sofa. But it was a dream, I suppose—a sad, sad dream. I fancied the house was gay once more, and that she—but alas! it is silent and deserted."

And murmuring to himself in a low voice, he at last allowed Mrs. Bell to lead him from the room.

For some moments Olive remained standing, transfixed to the spot where they had left her.

"Would that it were a dream!" she gasped— "a night-mare from which I might awake, and find everything as it was, before I entered this hateful place. But all is now changed. My poor

uncle must be mad. Now I know why Mrs. Bell did not wish us to see him; now I know why she kept us shut up. But what shall we do without our dear friends the Lesters? How shall we live in this wretched prison?"

Then, wild with grief, she flung herself upon a sofa, weeping bitterly.

"I must wake Topo and fly from this place," she cried, starting to her feet again. "I do hope we may get to our room without being seen by Mrs. Bell. I feel afraid to meet her. I am sure she is angry with me for my disobedience; I'm sure she is. Oh, why did I yield to temptation? Why? Why?"

And bending over the little boy, who had slept soundly through this stormy interview between his sister and uncle, she shook him gently and imprinted a loving kiss upon his forehead.

"Play your tune—Olive—and—I'll listen," he said, turning his head on the other side. "It's very comfortable here."

"Come, Topo; you must come away out of this," she cried, impatiently. "You have been asleep ever so long, and it's getting quite late."

"Oh, I say," said Topo, sitting up and rubbing

his eyes, "I haven't been asleep at all. I have been waiting and waiting for you to begin that tune."

"Don't talk rubbish," said Olive ; and without further ceremony she hurried him out of the window, and down the ladder before her.

CHAPTER IX.

OLIVE SEEKS ADVICE.

"I know not what may soon betide
Or how my wants shall be supplied."

THE next morning Olive rose with the sun, dressed herself hastily, and, going out of her room, locked the door, and put the key in her pocket.

Topo was still asleep in his crib, and knew nothing of her movements.

"Well, this is the first time since we have been in King's Court that I could have got out without Mrs. Bell's assistance," she said, as she went cautiously along the corridor. "She seems to have forgotten about us last night. So much the better. But I think it will be safer to lock Topo in whilst I am away. He might wander through the house and get into mischief. I don't believe uncle saw him, he was so much hidden in his arm-chair. Heigh-ho! I wish he

had never seen me. But I am determined to see Mrs. Lester, and ask her advice before I meet Mrs. Bell again. What will become of us? How shall we bear our lives? If we are not to be friends with the Lesters, I must tell them why."

And, choking back a great sob that rose in her throat, Olive opened the side door and ran down the narrow path through a little gate out on to the road.

It was a beautiful morning. The woods were rich in leaves and flowers; the distant corn-fields golden with the ripening harvest, and hundreds of little birds sang hymns of praise to their Creator, as they rejoiced in the fresh glories of the dawning day.

It was about a mile and a half from King's Court to Ashford, and the little girl walked slowly along, pondering deeply over the strange incident of the night before.

But although she went leisurely, and spent so much time on the way, it was barely seven o'clock when she knocked at the door of Lucy's room and begged leave to enter.

"My dear Olive," cried her friend, turning in

surprise from her dressing-table, "why have you come so early? Is Topo ill?"

"No, no. Topo is all right; but I want to see Mrs. Lester as soon as I can. Is she up, do you think?"

"Yes; I am sure she is up. We breakfast at eight, and mother nearly always spends an hour amongst her flowers before breakfast. But what can be the matter, Olive? You look so unhappy."

"And so I am. Oh, Lucy, I have seen my uncle at last."

"Well, what did he say to you?"

"Say? Lucy—" and Olive lowered her voice to a whisper,—"he is mad."

"How dreadful! But surely you are mistaken, dear? He is a foolish old man—but he can't be mad."

"But he is, I am sure. Listen, dear."

And Olive related all that had occurred the night before.

"He does seem to have behaved strangely," said Lucy. "But oh, what a pity you ever allowed him to see you! That was the reason Mrs. Bell kept you and Topo from going to him."

"Yes, of course. And if she had only told me, I would have been more careful. But she told me nothing. How could I know it was wrong to go into that old shut up drawing-room for a minute or two? How could I? But there, it is all over. We are not to come here any more; and we shall die shut up in that gloomy house by ourselves."

"It will be very wretched, dear; and I'll miss you so much—and the boys too," cried Lucy, flinging her arms round Olive's neck. "What shall we do without you?"

"I don't—know—I'm sure," said Olive. "It —will—be very—miserable."

And the two girls sat down in the window, both weeping bitterly.

"I'll go for mamma," cried Lucy, suddenly, starting to her feet. "She will tell you what to do. She loves you dearly, Olive, and she will not leave you in that old man's house by yourselves. She will make you both come here, I am sure. You and I can be sisters;" and, kissing poor Olive, she ran out of the room.

In a few moments she returned, with her hand in her mother's.

"My dear child, this is sad news," said Mrs. Lester, drawing Olive to her side. "Your uncle is angry at the thought of you coming here, Lucy tells me."

"Yes," answered Olive, sobbing. "He says if we come here any more, we shall not be allowed to live at King's Court."

"And if you do not come here, may you stay?" asked Mrs. Lester.

"Yes. He did not say we were to go, after Mrs. Bell told him people would come down to question him, if he left us to die of starvation in London. But the mention of your name seemed to drive him wild."

"Poor old man! But that is rather better than Mrs. Bell expected. She thought he would never allow you to stay—that he would order you out at once," said Mrs. Lester. "It was a great risk bringing you down. But she went in for it bravely, although it cost her much."

"If she had only told me all about it," sighed Olive.

"Yes, it would have been better, I think. But had you been obedient, my child, this would not have happened. You knew Mrs. Bell wished

you to stay at her part of the house—told you so, in fact. Yon have disobeyed her, and now you must bear the consequences."

"But, mamma, the poor children cannot stay at King's Court always," cried Lucy. "They must surely come here sometimes."

"The children must obey Mrs. Bell," said Mrs. Lester, firmly. "If she says they are not to come here, then they must not do so on any account."

"But, mamma, dear——"

"But, Lucy. The children's first duty is obedience. Mrs. Bell knows their uncle, and understands his wishes better than we do. Therefore what ever she says is to be done—must be done—no matter how it may grieve us."

"Mrs. Bell told my uncle we should come here no more," said Olive, sobbing. "But indeed, Mrs. Lester, I think the old man is mad."

"No, dear, he is not mad—only odd and peculiar from having lived so long alone in that dreary, desolate house. And now, listen to what I am going to say to you;" and Mrs. Lester put her arm round the weeping girl. "You would like to do that poor man good if you possibly could, I am sure."

"Yes, yes, indeed I would," cried Olive. "But what can I do?"

"Much, if you will; though I admit it will be a difficult task for a child of your age. It will require both patience and self-denial. But still, I feel certain that you can do a great deal, if you only try."

"I can't think how," said Olive, despairingly. "And oh, Mrs. Lester, if you saw him, and heard him talk."

"I know he is strange, and even wild at times, dear child, but never violent," said Mrs. Lester, gently. "And Mrs. Bell thinks that if you would play to him, and read to him, sometimes, you might soften him by degrees, and make him happier. The poor man is often miserable and wretched."

"Then why was Mrs. Bell afraid to let us see him?" asked Olive. "Why did she lock us up, and never allow us to go near him?"

"Because she was so uncertain as to how he would receive you. She brought you down here, altogether on her own authority. Before you came she felt sure that you would do him good; that your society would give him pleasure. But

after your arrival she grew frightened. He was not well—became more and more strange, and she began to think she had done wrong in bringing you into the house. She kept you away from him, but lived in constant terror of your meeting him, for she was convinced that he would send you out of the place at once. And now that he has seen you, and has allowed you to stay, you must respect his wishes and do what you can to make him love you."

"Oh," said Olive, with a shudder, "I do not want his love."

"I know he is not attractive, dear child," said Mrs. Lester. "And I am sure it will be a great trial of temper and patience to be obliged to devote yourself to him. But if you do so, and do so well—if you draw this lonely old man out of himself, and make him less selfish and miserly—above all, if you make him turn to God, and think a little of the duty he owes to his Creator—you will be doing a noble work, and will make yourself very pleasing to your Heavenly Father."

"If I could do that," cried Olive, "I should not mind the loneliness in the least."

"I am certain you will be able to do it, if you only go the right way about it."

"But what is the right way?" asked Olive. "That is just what is difficult to know."

"Well, first, dear, we must all pray to God and ask Him to help you. Then you must work very hard, and be very self-sacrificing and gentle."

"I will do what I can. But oh, Mrs. Lester, I am only a little girl."

"I know, dear; but you are a clever little girl, Olive, and, I think, a good, affectionate little girl."

"But still," cried Olive, blushing and stammering, "I—I do not—I cannot—love my uncle."

"No, not yet; but perhaps you may before long. And you do love God, Olive? You would, I know, be glad to please Him, and do His holy will."

"Yes—I—would," answered Olive, in a low voice. "The last words my dear mother made me say were—'My God, Thy will be done'."

"Then you must say them now, dear child, from the bottom of your heart," said Mrs. Lester; and there were tears in her eyes as she spoke. "It is plainly God's will that you should do what

you can for your uncle, and win him from the strange, unholy life that he has led for so many years."

"I wish I could," cried Olive. "But oh, Mrs. Lester, I dread the thoughts of living shut up in that lonely place, without a soul to speak to. I dread it all the more since I have seen my uncle and know what he is."

"Poor child, I am sure you do. But you must work and hope that as time goes on he will come to hear our name without anger; that, according as you win him back to a more wholesome frame of mind, he will allow you to have friends, and will not object to your coming to us."

"Yes; but what shall I do all day? How shall I go on with my studies? Who will teach me, and prepare me to earn my bread later on?"

"You must do so alone, Olive. Lucy will let you know exactly what she is doing. I shall send you books, and you can keep up with her in everything. It will not be so pleasant to study by yourself, but still you will be able to do so very well."

"Yes," said Olive, dejectedly; "but how am I to begin with my uncle?"

"You say he listened eagerly to your playing?"

"Yes; he became quite absorbed, and looked so pleased."

"Then you must begin by playing for him. After that you must sing. You know one or two little songs and some hymns, I think?"

"But perhaps Mrs. Bell will not allow me to go to the piano?"

"I am sure she will. Tell her I advised you to play often for Mr. Derwent."

"Yes," said Olive, with a sob; "I shall tell her."

"Then, dear child, you must read to him. You must be bright and cheerful, and, above all, you must never contradict him."

"I will do my best—I will, indeed."

"Then God will give you help, dear child, and you will certainly succeed."

And after this there was a long silence, broken only by the sobs of the two girls.

Lucy was deeply grieved to lose her friend, and considered it very hard that poor Olive should be banished in such a manner. But her mother thought it right she should go; and so, though she was most anxious to keep her at Ashford, she did not dare remonstrate any fur-

ther. When Mrs. Lester said a thing must be done, her children never disputed her will or found fault with her decision.

At last Olive rose up, and, flinging herself into Mrs. Lester's arms, kissed her over and over again.

"I must go now," she whispered. "Topo is locked up in our bed-room, and he will want to get out for breakfast. If he makes a noise, he may make uncle very angry."

"Then you had better go, darling. You must avoid everything that will excite or anger Mr. Derwent," said Mrs. Lester, pressing the girl to her heart. "Good-bye, Olive, good-bye. May God bless and protect you."

"Good-bye, dear, kind friend. Pray for me every day. Good-bye, Lucy,—good-bye, all."

Then, tearing herself away from her little companion's clinging arms, Olive rushed out of the room, and down the stairs.

Her heart was very sore at leaving her dear friends; but she was firmly determined to do her duty, and, if possible, win the Miser of King's Court to a better and a happier life.

CHAPTER X.

MR. DERWENT SHOWS HE IS THE MASTER.

"Like red-hot steel is the old man's ire."—BYRON.

WHEN Olive emerged from the Ashford grounds, and came out on the high road, she dried her eyes, and resolved to weep no more.

"Topo will be frightened if he sees I have been crying," she said, sadly. "And I must do my best to make him happy. Poor little boy, how he will miss Frank and Ulric. No more pleasant rides and pic-nics now; no more dabbing with paint-brushes in the studio; no more games and romps; heigh-ho! how wretched we shall be."

Then, feeling the tears rushing to her eyes again, she choked them back, and ran on towards King's Court as fast as she could.

"If Topo begins to kick at the door, and scream to get out, Mrs. Bell will be so angry," she thought presently. "And if she finds I

have gone to Ashford without permission, she will get worse. But I do wish she would be kind and nice with me now. I think she might, especially when I am going to help her with uncle. I shall have a good talk with her after breakfast, and tell her all that Mrs. Lester advised me to do. But I must get her to show me the way to the big drawing-room through the house. If I am to play much, I cannot be always going up that ladder. Besides, its rather dangerous for Topo; so it had better be taken away. Well, thank goodness, here I am at home at last. I am so tired after my long walk; and oh dear, how I should like a cup of milk. Poor little Topo shall soon be released from his prison. I do hope he is still in bed."

And Olive put out her hand, and gave the small side gate a push.

"How stiff it is," she cried in astonishment. "Why, it was quite easy to open this morning. What can have happened to it? Ah! it is locked. Mrs. Bell has done this, thinking I was in the house, to prevent my going out—to keep me from going to the Lesters."

Then she stood for some moments debating

with herself,—wondering what she should do, and longing for the housekeeper to appear to let her in. But at last, as there seemed no chance of that, she decided to go round to the large front entrance, and walk boldly up the avenue to the hall-door.

This she did in fear and trembling, for Mrs. Bell did not allow her to go in that way; and she was in terror lest her uncle might be lurking about somewhere in that neighbourhood.

Before opening the gate, she looked cautiously around, and seeing no one, stole swiftly in, under the shadow of the trees.

But suddenly a shrill whistle sounded in her ear, and from behind a clump of ever-greens came forth a voice that made her turn pale with fright.

"Where have you been, girl?" hissed Mr. Derwent, with angry looks, as he darted forward and placed himself before her. "Where have you been? Answer me that."

Olive's heart stood still. She could not tell a lie, and yet if she were to acknowledge that she had been to Ashford, she would surely enrage him the more.

"I have been for a walk, uncle," she answered, trying to smile. "It is a lovely morning."

"For a walk," he exclaimed, scornfully. "Don't talk rubbish. You and Mrs. Bell treat me as if I were a child. She thinks I do not remember, but I do; and I have not forgotten you;" and he laughed fiercely. "I remember when I say a thing is to be done, and I will and must be obeyed."

"Yes, uncle, of course, and——"

"And so you steal off early in the morning, to Ashford, to laugh——"

"Oh, uncle——"

"To laugh over the silly old man, who was moved at your music; for now I know it was you who played——".

"Indeed, uncle, I never——"

"To make fun of the poor master of this wretched old ruin—King's Court;—to sneer at him, and turn him into ridicule."

"Indeed, uncle, the Lesters are too good to——"

"Don't mention them to me. But you may go back to them, and stay with them. Away you go. I will have none of you here."

"But, uncle," cried Olive, feeling dazed and bewildered, "I——"

"Don't call me uncle," he exclaimed, angrily. "You are no niece of mine. You have disobeyed me, and I will have you here no longer. So away you go! I will allow no one to live in my house who goes prowling about carrying stories of my doings to the Lesters. Go!" and he pointed to the gate.

"But I must get Topo," said Olive. "I cannot go without Topo."

"What is Topo? There is no Topo here."

"Topo is my little brother. You might have seen him in the arm-chair last night. Let me get him, and then I shall go away; though God knows what will become of us;" and wringing her hands, Olive shed tears of vexation and alarm.

"I saw no Topo. I thought there was only one of you," said Mr. Derwent. "But he shall be sent after you, very soon. I want no boys here, prying into my affairs. Go. I will not move from here till I see you out of that gate. You thought to come in quietly by the little one, and sneak back to the house. But mad as you

think me, I was too quick for you. I locked you out, and forced you to come round here. Now I know you are a spy of the Lesters, sent to watch me, and find out how I live. But go at once; go this instant;" and clenching his fist, he shook it in her face.

"You are a cruel, bad man!" cried Olive, with flaming cheeks. "But some day you will be sorry for your wickedness."

Then, sobbing bitterly, she turned, and fled away from him.

"I am glad to have seen the last of that little spy," muttered Mr. Derwent, as he gazed after the girl's retreating figure. "Now I must consider what's to be done with this Topo, as she called him. But lest she should try to get in again, I must make the lock secure."

And putting up an immense chain, he locked the gate, put the key in his pocket, and shuffled off up the avenue.

Meanwhile, the family at Ashford had assembled at breakfast, and loud were the boys' exclamations of regret, when they learned that their little friends, the Charltons, were to come no more amongst them.

"I call it downright shameful," cried Frank, indignantly. "What a selfish old crone he must be!"

"Yes, of course he is," said Ulric. "Did you ever know a miser who wasn't?"

"My acquaintance with misers is limited—very—I am happy to say, brother mine," answered Frank, laughing. "But I tell you what. You and I must make raids upon King's Court, and carry Topo off for walks and drives. What do you think? Shall we begin this morning?"

"But that will make Mr. Derwent angry," said Lucy. "If he finds you going there, he will be twice as cross to poor Olive."

"He shall not find us there," said Ulric. "We are rather too clever for that. But what do you think, mother? Would it be a good thing to do?"

"Of course it would," cried Frank. "Mother could not object to our doing so. It would only help to amuse the little chap."

"But I do object, Frank—very seriously," said Mrs. Lester. "Mr. Derwent does not wish the children to have anything to do with us; and whilst they remain under his roof they must

respect his wishes. It would never do to teach Topo to be disobedient ; so please do not go near King's Court."

"It's hard lines on Topo," said Frank. "But, of course, I'll do as you tell me."

"That is right," replied his mother. "I have a great dislike to doing things in an underhand manner. So, for the present, we must leave our little friends to themselves."

"Why do you say 'for the present,' mother?" asked Lucy: "I am sure Mr. Derwent will always be cross and disagreeable."

"Well, I think not—at least, I hope not," answered Mrs. Lester. "And I said 'for the present,' Lucy, because, if, as time goes on, he does not improve, the children shall be taken from King's Court and placed somewhere else."

"I am glad to hear that," cried Frank. "It made me quite dismal to think of those poor kids being shut up in an old dungeon like King's Court for the rest of their lives."

"It would be very cruel to leave them there always," said his mother. "But, believe me, such a thing will not be allowed. I had a letter from Mrs. Bell, just after Olive left this morning, tell-

ing me all that occurred last night. She seems rather pleased at the way the old man behaved."

"Why, mother, Olive said he was dreadfully angry," cried Lucy.

"Yes; but Mrs. Bell knows him best, and she thinks he might have been much worse. He has allowed the children to stay on at King's Court, but on condition that they neither see nor speak to us again. So, if Olive is obedient and pleasant with him, she may do a great deal for him."

"It's a terribly hard condition, and will make the poor children very miserable," said Ulric. "How long are they to be shut up like that?"

"For six or seven months," replied his mother. "And if, at the end of that time, the old man has not softened a little, and does not seem to improve, they are to be taken away."

"But where to, mother?" asked Frank. "Olive says they have not a friend in the world, and they have no money."

"Then Olive was wrong," said Mrs. Lester. "Mrs. Bell is a true friend to them. She is not wealthy, but whatever money she has saved will be employed to keep those children from want."

"But then she lives at King's Court," said Ulric. "So, unless she deserts the miser, she cannot do much for them."

"She would never do that, nor will it be at all necessary," answered his mother. "If they do not get on well with their uncle—if he does not grow fond of them, and allow them to go freely about, and have what friends they choose—Mrs. Bell and I have agreed to share the expense, and put them to board at Mrs. Blount's in Arundel, till Topo is old enough to go to school. So now, I hope, you are all quite satisfied that these little ones have not been neglected."

"Quite," said Frank, jumping up and giving his mother a kiss. "We might have known that anyone you had to deal with would be well taken care of."

"Frank's sentiments are exactly mine, mother dear," cried Ulric. "But the sooner you make your arrangements with Mrs. Blount the better. That old miser is too tough and hardened to be won over so easily. It would take a good shock to bring him to his senses. A poor little shrinking girl, like Olive, would have no chance with him. Why, the very first time she does anything

to displease him, he'll get in a rage and send her flying."

"You are wonderfully wise, Master Ulric," said his mother, smiling. "However, we have determined to try the effect of a little gentle liveliness. If Olive——"

"Please, ma'am," said the butler, entering the room and approaching his mistress," Miss Charlton is outside, and wishes to speak to you."

"Miss Charlton? Olive? What can have brought the child back again?" cried Mrs. Lester in surprise; and, rising from her chair, she hurried into the hall.

In another instant Olive was clasped in her arms, and, with her head pillowed on her motherly bosom, was sobbing out the story of her uncle's cruelty.

"Here's a rum go, and no mistake," exclaimed Frank, as the door closed upon his mother. "The children have been hunted out already, by that old stick-in-the-mud, Derwent. By Jove! my most talented artist, you have proved a true prophet this time."

"Yes; and I'd be jolly glad, too," said Ulric.

"Only I'm afraid they will be a trouble to my mother."

"Not at all," said Frank, gaily. "She can easily put them up here. Two kids, more or less, cannot make much difference."

"Not to you, perhaps," said Ulric, laughing. "And there goes Lucy to give them a hearty welcome. But, all the same, they will give mother plenty of trouble."

"I don't think so, wisehead," replied Frank. "But come along and get Topo. I'll give him a ride on the pony to cheer him up. I daresay he's crying his eyes out at leaving that lively old hole, King's Court."

And, opening the door, he ran into the hall.

But in a minute he returned.

"Topo is not there," he cried. "There has been an awful row. Olive has been chased away by the miser. Topo is at King's Court still; and Olive is crying like anything."

"Poor little girl. I wish we could do something for her," said Ulric; "but——"

"My dear fellow, we boys are quite out of it, when a girl is weeping like that. Leave her to

the mater and Lucy, and come off to Criklebank for a ride."

"Perhaps it would be just as well," said Ulric. "When we come back, things will be a bit more cheerful."

And he rose from the breakfast table, and followed his brother through the conservatory into the garden.

CHAPTER XI.

OLIVE SPENDS AN UNHAPPY DAY.

"The very walls seemed full of gloom."—*Howitt.*

MRS. LESTER and Lucy were extremely sorry for Olive, and did all they could to console and comfort her. But, notwithstanding their kind efforts, the day was one of weary wretchedness for the unhappy child.

Topo was away from her, and, uncertain as to his well-being, she could not feel content.

The recollection of her uncle's anger, and the cruel words he had used, filled her with terror; and, as time passed over and her brother did not appear, she began to imagine all kinds of horrors, and longed to rush back to King's Court and carry him off.

But Mrs. Lester would not hear of such a thing.

"The boy is in no danger, Olive," she said. "And if you will only have a little patience, Mrs. Bell will soon let you know what you are to do."

"But why can't she send Topo? Why does she keep him there by himself?" cried the girl. "It is cruel to separate us, as she has done to-day. What should I do if she were to keep him away from me for ever?"

"My dear child, she will not do that, I am sure," said Mrs. Lester. "You may make yourself quite happy on that point."

But Olive refused to be comforted, and sat all day in a state of gloomy despair, paying little attention to what was going on about her.

And at last, when evening came on, the girl bade her friends "Good-night," and dragged herself wearily up the stairs to her bed-room.

Mrs. Lester followed her, and, putting her arm round her, kissed her affectionately.

"And now, dear," she said gently, "do not fret any more. Say your prayers with great attention and devotion. Ask God to protect you and your brother, and show you the best way out of your present difficulties."

"Yes, yes. But oh, Mrs. Lester, if Topo were only here. I am sure he has been very miserable all day without me."

"I am not at all certain of that, dear. Topo

is but a baby, remember ; and if anything turned up to amuse him, he would not fret about you."

"But he dislikes Mrs. Bell so much."

"Yes, so he does ; I cannot understand why. She has been so good to you both. But, from his not appearing to-day, I think something must have happened."

"Oh, Mrs. Lester," cried Olive, shivering, "that is just what I have been dreading."

"But I do not mean anything terrible, dear child. I was thinking rather that Topo might have done something to please his uncle, and that he might have taken a fancy to him. If so, Mrs. Bell would certainly keep him, no matter where you went."

"And separate us? Oh, Mrs. Lester, you said this morning she would never do that."

"So I did. But it has since struck me that if the boy pleased Mr. Derwent, she might keep him for a time any way. Her whole idea is to make her master's life more happy. She is devoted to him."

"How can she care for him? How can she?" cried Olive. "But she shall not keep Topo a day longer. I could not live without my darling."

"Would you not give him up for a time, if you heard that his presence cheered that lonely old man's miserable existence, dear child?"

"No," answered the girl, fiercely. "I am glad he is miserable. He is a bad, wicked man."

"Olive, that is not a Christian way to speak," said Mrs. Lester, reprovingly. "I am sorry that you do not feel more pity for your uncle."

"I hate him," she replied, passionately. "So how can you expect me to wish him well? I would not help him if I saw him dying before my eyes. He has driven me out of his house—left me to starve—or die—and—and he shan't have Topo—my poor little Topo."

"Dear child, you must not talk so wildly. We must forgive our enemies, remember. We have Christ's own words for that. It is wicked to nourish such feelings of hatred against anyone. Besides, your uncle has not done you any real harm, he——"

"What!" cried Olive, with flashing eyes. "Not when he called me a spy, and turned me from his door? Not when he has kept my brother, and made me so wretched——"

"Well, dear, he has only kept Topo for one day."

"But who knows how long he may keep him? And then, think how fiercely he spoke—how——"

"He has acted harshly, no doubt. But still, there are many excuses to be made for him, dear child," said Mrs. Lester, soothingly. "You had been brought to his house without his knowledge. He did not want you. He allowed you to stay, but on one condition. You disobeyed him. And, being a passionate man, anxious to live quietly and secretly, he resented your running off here to tell all that had taken place—as you know you did. Finding this out, he punished you at once, as severely as possible."

"I should not have cared so much, if he had only allowed me to get Topo."

"It is just possible that he may have forgotten all about Topo. Do not forget how strange he was last night, and how, even whilst you were there before him, he seemed unconscious of your presence."

"Yes, so he was."

"Well, that shows how odd he is, and how short is his memory. Very likely he soon forgot

about you—Topo and the whole affair. Poor old man, what a wreck he seems to be."

"But he remembered all that had occurred last night, this morning," said Olive, bitterly. "And it was very cunning of him to lock the little gate, just to catch me."

"Yes, it certainly was. But still, it is quite possible that he has forgotten about you now. Perhaps, Mrs. Bell knows nothing of what has happened, and has been expecting you back all day."

"That would be too bad."

"Well, I should not be surprised if I were right. I shall write a note before I go to bed, and send it off to her in the morning. I shall ask her, to meet me on the road between this and King's Court, and talk the matter over with me. If Mr. Derwent has said nothing and seems quiet, then you might go back, perhaps. She could ask him cautiously, and see what he would say."

"I will never go back to King's Court again," cried Olive, vehemently. "Never."

"Poor little girl, I am really sorry for you," said Mrs. Lester, gently. "But you know, dear,

you are quite dependent on your uncle ; so you must take Mrs. Bell's advice, and do exactly what she thinks right. She alone can manage the old man. So, if she says that by returning and treating him kindly, you may do him good, you must go, of course."

"Oh, Mrs. Lester, how could I ever be kind to him? He would never allow me; and I hate him so much."

"But you must not hate him, dear. You must forgive him, and be ready to do all you can for him."

"That will be hard—very hard," said Olive, sighing. "Do you think God will expect me to do that?"

"Most certainly He will, dear child. And now, Olive, kneel down and ask your Heavenly Father to take all feelings of bitterness and anger from your heart. Do not sleep till you have said this prayer with fervour and humility.

"I will try to say it well," said Olive, with streaming eyes ; "I will try indeed."

"That is right, dear. God is always ready to help and bless those who are anxious to do His will. And when you think of your uncle's harsh-

ness, and feel it difficult to forgive him, remember the words of St. Paul: 'Be ye kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you'."

"Yes," answered the girl, meekly; "I will not forget. I have been angry and passionate to-day —and—and I hope God will forgive me."

"He will, dear, if you are truly sorry, and humble yourself before Him. And now, good-night. To-morrow you will have forgotten and forgiven all."

Then, glancing round to see that the child had everything she required for the night, Mrs. Lester kissed her once more, and left the room.

When Olive found herself alone, she put out her candle, and drawing up the blind, flung herself on her knees by the window.

She prayed long and fervently, and by degrees became more calm, more reconciled to her fate, whatever it might be.

She did not grow to love her uncle all at once, or long to make him happy. But she began to pity him, and wonder over his lonely life. Her heart was gradually softened, and she thought sadly of the weary days he must spend, wander-

ing alone through the long corridors and empty rooms at King's Court.

"And if he was cruel and unkind, perhaps I deserved it," she reflected after a time. "I should not have come here when he had told me not to. I should have written, and then all this misery would not have taken place. But I thought it would be so wretched. I felt sure Mrs. Lester would do something for us. And I could not bear to remain shut up there, without telling her all that had happened. But I ought not to have done so. I should have waited patiently till I was allowed to come. I must try now to be good and obedient, and so atone for my past misconduct. I must learn to bow my head humbly, and say the prayer my dear mother taught me on her death-bed: 'My God, my God, Thy will be done'."

And with great fervour, Olive repeated the words over and over again.

"My poor little Topo, may God bless and keep you," she murmured presently, as, raising her eyes, she gazed out across the moon-lit fields.

She could not see King's Court, but she knew

where it lay, and she began to wonder if her darling were asleep, if he were dreaming of her, and how he had managed to pass his day without her.

"Mrs. Lester says you are small and easily amused, dear boy," she said; "so I hope you have been happy. I hope you have not missed me, as I have missed you. Good-night, my pet —my little Topo, good-night," and she blew him a kiss over the tops of the trees.

Then, springing to her feet, she began to prepare for bed.

"But I must shut out the moonlight," she thought. "It is so lovely, I could never go to sleep with it flooding the room like this. I cannot even think of undressing, with it shining in so gloriously."

So, striking a match, she lit her candle, and approached the window to draw down the blind.

But suddenly she gave a cry, and her face grew pale with terror.

The sky that had been so white and clear but an instant before was now changed to a dull lurid red.

"What can it mean?" she exclaimed, "what can have happened?"

Then the light became more intense; flames and sparks rose high in the air, and with a wild shriek the girl rushed from the room, and fled down the long corridor.

With trembling fingers she knocked at all the doors as she passed along, calling frantically for some one to help her.

"King's Court is on fire!" she shrieked. "King's Court is on fire! Frank—Ulric! For God's sake, come and save my brother!"

CHAPTER XII.

A TERRIBLE NIGHT.

"Forgot were hatred, wrongs, and fears."

THE two boys had been reading together in Ulric's little studio, and were about to separate for the night, when Olive's cries of anguish rang through the silent house.

One glance from the window told them what had alarmed her, and, without a moment's hesitation, they sprang down the stairs, and away round to the stables.

In an incredibly short time, before Mrs. Lester had quite realised what had happened, the pony was harnessed, and the two lads and Olive were on their way to King's Court.

It was a maddening drive; and, as Olive sat in silent misery at the bottom of the carriage, she thought it never would come to an end.

But Frank used his whip freely, and the pony

almost flew over the ground. So, at last, they came in sight of the dreadful fire, and, turning in at the big gate, drove swiftly up the avenue.

Numbers of people, both men and women, had gathered in from all parts, and stood gazing in horror at the burning house.

The whole of the immense pile was on fire, and, as it crackled and blazed in the still night air, not a hand was raised to arrest the progress of the flames.

"Have you sent for the fire-engine?" asked Frank, as he drove in amongst the crowd.

"Yes, sir," answered a man, respectfully. "But it has some way to come. This old place is like a band-box. It will be burned to the ground before it arrives. We can do nothing to save it."

"Topo! Topo! Where is Topo?" screamed Olive, springing from the carriage, and rushing madly towards the house.

"Here I am, dear; here I am;" and a little white figure ran across the grass.

"My darling," she cried, clasping him to her heart. "Thank God you are safe."

"But I am so cold, Olive—so cold."

"Poor lamb! Why, I declare, you are in

your night-gown. You should have put on your clothes, Topo."

"I couldn't find them—I couldn't find them," said the boy, with chattering teeth."

"Put this on," said Olive; and taking off her jacket, she wrapped it round him.

"Thank you, Olive; that is nice and warm."

"But, my poor child, I wish you had your shoes," she said, looking down sadly at the little bare feet; "could you not find them, either?"

"There was no time to look for them," said Topo, weeping. "I was asleep, and would soon have been burned to death, only a man jumped in by our window, and carried me out."

"My own darling," cried Olive, hugging him close. "But where was Mrs. Bell?"

"I don't know. The man said she was looking everywhere for Uncle Derwent, but that she could not find him."

"What! Are they still in there amongst the flames? My God—my God, do not allow them to perish," cried the girl, falling on her knees. "Save them, in Thy mercy, from such a horrible death. Pray for them, Topo. Oh, my God, save Mrs. Bell. Save, oh save, my uncle."

At this moment a shout went up from the crowd, a murmur of horror and alarm.

Olive looked up, and the sight that met her eyes, froze the blood in her veins, and paralyzed her every movement.

At one of the windows on the second floor, in the midst of smoke and flames, stood her uncle, a weird-looking figure, with flowing garments and straggling hair. His face was white and set, and he waved his arms above his head, gesticulating wildly to the people below.

"My master—my poor master. To think that he should have hidden himself in that room," cried Mrs. Bell, gazing at him in anguish. "Is there no one to save him? Is there no one to save him?"

"The staircase is in flames," said a young man. "It would be death to go up to him."

"To die thus before my eyes!" wailed Mrs Bell. "Cruel—cruel fate! Oh, my master, would that I could save you."

"I will save him. He shall be saved," cried Frank Lester. "It would be shameful to let him perish, with so many people near. Is there no ladder?"

"No, sir," answered the man, sullenly; "we'd all be as glad to save him as you. But we dare not risk our lives. Anyone who goes up that staircase will never come down alive. Why doesn't he come himself?"

"I don't know," said Frank. "He does not appear to realise that he is in such danger. The poor old man is childish, almost foolish in his ways."

"We have shouted to him to run down the stairs whilst there is time, but he pays not the slightest attention. What can be done with such a creature?"

"Some one must go up and force him out of the burning house," said Frank. "It would be a disgrace—a dishonour, to let him die in such a manner.

Then he paused for an instant and looked over the crowd. Not a soul stirred to help him. The staircase was burning; the window was too high to reach without a ladder. How, then, was he to accomplish the task he had undertaken? How was he to rescue Mr. Derwent from the death that menaced him?

Suddenly an idea occurred to him, and gave him fresh courage.

On the grass was piled furniture of all kinds, that had been carried out of the lower rooms, at the beginning of the fire.

"Bring over some of those things, my men," he cried, in a tone of command. "See, there are several mattresses amongst them. Pile them, one on the top of the other, beneath the window. With God's help, I shall go up that stair, and reach that room in time. I shall force Mr. Derwent to jump out, and follow him at once. If you are ready, you will be able to break our fall, and save our lives."

"We'll be ready, sir," cried the men, and they flew to do his bidding.

"The fire engine is coming down the road, Frank; it will be here very soon," said Ulric. "Do not risk your life unnecessarily."

"There is no time to spare, Ulric. When the engine arrives, it will be too late. With God's help, I am determined to save that old man."

Then the brave boy raises his eyes to heaven, murmurs a low prayer, and springs quickly up the burning staircase.

In breathless silence the people watch for him to appear, and when they see him enter the room above, a loud cheer rings through the air.

Almost immediately a crash is heard; the staircase has fallen in.

Frank rushes forward and throws open the window. Then he turns to Mr. Derwent and implores him to go—to quit the burning house at once. They hear him urge him to jump out. But he will not move. Then he bends down and attempts to raise a large box in his arms, without this he will not go. But it is too heavy; he cannot lift it. Frank tries to do so, but in vain.

The flames creep up swiftly behind them; the room is full of smoke.

Still the old man refuses to stir.

"Save yourself, Master Frank," shout the men. "Save yourself, and leave the miser to his doom."

But Frank heeds them not. He has come to save this poor creature, and save him he will.

An awful moment follows. The fire is close upon them. Their faces are scorched by the cruel flames.

Then the boy sees there is but one way before him. He must get the old man out of the window, whether he will or not. To remain another instant will be death to both.

So, gathering up all his strength, he raises his clenched fist and strikes the miser straight between the eyes.

The old man falls; and for a second they both disappear. But, quick as thought, Frank rises again, and, dragging him to the window, pushes him out.

The mattresses are ready, the men raise their arms, and Mr. Derwent falls, insensible but unhurt, amongst them.

Then, with a thankful heart, Frank springs to the ground, and is soon on his knees by the old man's side.

"I had to stun him," he explained to Mrs. Bell. "He would do nothing for me; but I was determined to save him."

"God bless you, Master Frank. You are a brave—a noble boy," cried Mrs. Bell, as she bathed her master's head and face. "You are a brave lad. God will reward you for your goodness."

"I am glad I was able to save him," said Frank, simply. "I hope he will soon recover consciousness."

"I sincerely hope so. But he has had a dreadful shock. What can I do for him now? Where can I take him to? That house will never shelter him again;" and she pointed sadly to the once noble King's Court, now a charred and blackened ruin.

"He must come to Ashford," said Frank "We shall take him there at once."

"To Ashford? Why he hates its very name."

"No matter? It's the only place for him. But here comes my mother. She will make you take him there."

At this moment Mrs. Lester and Lucy drove up in the brougham.

Seeing Olive and Topo shivering together on the grass, they went to them at once, and, rolling them up in shawls, made them get into the carriage.

The children were speechless with terror, and clung to their friends, sobbing and crying.

"Poor little creatures, they are almost dead with fright," said Mrs. Lester, sadly. "Take

them home, Lucy, and put them to bed. I may be of use here, so I will stay."

"Yes, mamma," said Lucy, with her arms round Olive. "I will take care of them, poor darlings."

And, without delay, the brougham carried them back to Ashford.

"What a frightful calamity this is, Frank," cried his mother. "How fast the old house has burned."

"Didn't it? I never saw anything so rapid. Before the fire-engine arrived, the whole thing was burned down."

"There were no lives lost, I trust?"

"Not one, thank God," said Frank, from his heart. "But poor old Derwent is quite unconscious. What shall we do with him?"

"We must take him home," she replied. "Ashford is the nearest house; so he must go there. You have the pony-carriage here?"

"Yes, mother."

"That will do. Have one of those mattresses laid upon it, and we can take him quietly along. Where is he?"

"Round at the far side of the house, with Mrs. Bell."

"Well, bring the carriage there as soon as you can," said Mrs. Lester; and she went over the grass to where the old man lay.

For some time Mrs. Bell refused resolutely to take her master to Ashford.

"It would kill him, to find himself amongst people he hates," she cried. "Why should I risk his life in that manner?"

"At such a time I wonder you can hesitate," said Mrs. Lester, severely. "If you keep him here in the damp night air, he will surely die. If you bring him to Ashford, he may recover."

"The very mention of your name, last night, put him in a passion."

"So I heard. But, whatever the secret of his hatred is, I cannot forget that he and his wife were once my dearest friends. He need not know where he is, till he is strong again, and you yourself can nurse and tend him."

"But——" began Mrs. Bell.

"I insist upon his being taken to Ashford at once," said Mrs. Lester, firmly. "So say no more against it, please."

Then, as Frank appeared with the carriage, she placed cushions and rugs upon the mattress

and bade the men raise Mr. Derwent, and lay him gently amongst them.

With much tenderness, she arranged the pillow under his head, and covered him from the chill night air.

"Drive carefully, Frank," she said. "And go slowly. We must keep near, lest he should recover consciousness as he goes along."

Then, drawing Mrs. Bell's arm within her own, she walked down the avenue beside the carriage.

And thus, unconscious of all that was going on, lying still and white as death, the Miser of King's Court was borne from his home, to be tended and cared for by people whose very name was sufficient to rouse his fiercest anger.

CHAPTER XIII.

OLIVE RESOLVES TO BE KIND.

"I see all mankind, if they are inclined,
May constantly help one another."

WHEN Olive and Topo arrived at Ashford, Lucy gave them some hot soup, and sent them to bed. And, worn out with fatigue and anxiety, they soon fell fast asleep.

Olive slept long and soundly; and when at last she opened her eyes and looked about her the sun was shining in through the windows. Beside her bed sat Topo, fully dressed, a bunch of beautiful roses in his hand.

"So you are really awake, Olive?" he cried. "I thought you were going to sleep for ever."

"Is it late, darling?" she asked, sitting up and rubbing her eyes.

"Late! Why, it's three o'clock in the day."

"My dear Topo, you must be dreaming."

"Indeed, I am not. Why, Olive, I didn't get

up till ever so late; and Mrs. Lester had such a hunt for some clothes for me. This is an old suit of Ulric's. Isn't it fine?"

"Capital," she answered, looking at him critically. "You are very smart. How lucky that they fit you so well."

"Yes; but there were no boots for me. So Frank drove me off to Arundel, and bought me a pair. Isn't he good?"

"Very. But is it really so late?"

"Of course it is. We had lunch long ago. I wanted to wake you up, but Mrs. Lester would not allow me. She said you should sleep as long as you liked, and you have been a jolly time, I can tell you."

"Yes, indeed, I have. But when did you come in?"

"About ten minutes ago. I gathered these roses for you, and stole in on tip-toe. Aren't they lovely?"

"Delicious. But, Topo, how is poor uncle now?"

"Just the same as he was when Frank pushed him out of the window. He lies there, white and still, and never says a word."

"Is he in bed?"

"Yes, in the big blue room. Mrs. Bell is with him."

"Poor Mrs. Bell! How tired she must be," exclaimed Olive. "Did she not get to sleep all night?"

"No, I'm sure she did not. She could not leave uncle for an instant. Because, you know, he might go mad if he woke up and saw Mrs. Lester beside him. Frank says he hates them all. Isn't it strange?"

"Yes, dear," said Olive, absently.

"And do you know, Olive, that funny old man that I used to hide from was uncle all the time? And I never knew."

"Yes, I know. But, Topo, I wonder if I could help to nurse him. I wonder if I might dare——"

"But Frank says he was very unkind to you yesterday morning. So, if I were you, I would not go near him."

"He was unkind, Topo. But I have forgiven him," she replied, earnestly. "I disobeyed him, and that made him angry. Then I said wicked things about him to Mrs. Lester; but I am

sorry—very sorry. I would do anything I could for him now."

"That is very good of you, dear."

"No, Topo, it is only right. St. Paul says: 'Be ye kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ's sake, hath forgiven you'. So you see, if I ask God to forgive me for being naughty, I must be ready to forgive uncle, and be kind to him."

"But who told you St. Paul said that?"

"Well, I saw it in the Bible, Topo; but Mrs. Lester reminded me of it last night. We had such a beautiful talk together before she went to bed. Then when she left me, I said my prayers, and I had just resolved to go back to King's Court, if I were allowed, and be good and gentle with Mrs. Bell and my uncle, when I saw that dreadful fire."

"Yes, it was dreadful," said Topo, with a shiver. "But, Olive?"

"Yes, dear?"

"If St. Paul said that about being kind and forgiving people, I suppose I must forgive Mrs. Bell. But I was in a rage with her yesterday."

"You certainly must forgive her, darling, and be as good to her as you can. Why were you in a rage with her?"

"Well, you see I wanted to come over here as usual, after breakfast, and she would not allow me. She said uncle had forbidden us to go near the Lesters. Then I got angry, and told her I knew you were with them."

"But how did you know?"

"I guessed fast enough where you had gone. I thought you had slipped off early, to get at the piano before Lucy came down. So, when I found the door was still locked, I climbed out by the window, and went round to the parlour for my breakfast."

"Was Mrs. Bell angry when she heard I had gone?"

"Very. She called you a disobedient girl, and declared you should never set your foot in King's Court again."

"Well, that is all over now. But I am determined to make both my uncle and Mrs. Bell fond of me yet. I'll do all I can to show her I wish to help her, and, then, she will soon forgive me for being disobedient. I am sure

there are plenty of things I could do; but has the doctor seen uncle yet?"

"Yes; and he says he may get well, if he is taken great care of and kept very quiet. But that he may be a long time just as he is now."

"Poor old man. What made him unconscious, I wonder? Was it the blow Frank gave him?"

"I don't know," said Topo; "I suppose it was, for Frank can hit fine and hard. But here comes Lucy; she'll tell us all about it. Lucy, why is uncle such a long time insensible? Was it Frank did it?"

"I am afraid he had a great deal to do with it," replied Lucy, as she stooped to kiss Olive. "But you see he could not help it. It was better to get him out of the fire that way than leave him to be burned to death."

"Yes, a great deal better," cried Olive. "And Frank behaved very bravely."

"Indeed he did," said Lucy, with glowing cheeks; "I feel quite proud of the dear fellow. And then, you know, Frank's blow would not have done Mr. Derwent much harm, only, as he fell, he came against the corner of a large box.

This cut him severely just at the back of his head."

"Poor old man! Then that is what makes him so ill," cried Olive. "Was that the box he tried so hard to lift?"

"Yes, the very one. Frank says he declared he would not leave the house without it. Neither of them could move it, so then Frank knocked him down."

"What a pity the box was so near. Was it iron?"

"No, it was a wooden chest, but it had iron corners, Frank says."

"What was in it, I wonder?" said Olive.

"His money, I think," answered Lucy. "At least all the people about declare he kept his money in a box. That is the reason they call him a miser."

"My papa called him the miser of Kingscourt too," said Olive, "and yet I am sure he never saw him. The portrait he did of him was not at all like him. He made him tall and stout, with great big features, and uncle is really small and thin. But he refused to help him when he was very much in want of money."

"He was not generous," said Lucy; "but mother does not like us to say he kept his money in that box. She cannot believe he had become so mean."

"Still he was very anxious to save it," remarked Olive, sadly. "Why it looked as if he thought more of it than his life."

"Well, it is all gone—lost in the fire," said Lucy, "and mother says he will have very little money to hoard now. He has only a few farms left. The rents he gets from them will be barely enough, she thinks, to keep him in some small cottage."

"I am so glad!" cried Olive, "I am so glad!"

"Are you?" said Lucy, in surprise. "Well I don't know; I think I am rather sorry."

"No, no, I am glad—quite glad," repeated Olive; "for, now that he is poor, he may let me go to him and be good to him."

"Why, you said you hated him yesterday."

"Yes, so I did, but that was wicked. I have resolved to be kind to him, and do my very best to make him happy. I hope to show him that it is better to lead a useful life in a tiny cottage

than to save and hoard money in a big house like King's Court."

"Well, you have grown wise all of a sudden," cried Lucy. "Mother will be delighted to hear you talk like that. Those are her ideas exactly."

"Of course they are," said Olive, gaily, "and it was she put them into my head. You don't imagine I could think of all that by myself."

"I don't know, Olive," remarked Lucy, gravely. "You are a very wise, good girl for your age."

"No, dear, indeed I am not—not if I were to follow my own inclinations. Do not forget how hard and unforgiving I was yesterday."

"Oh, that was nothing; it was only a little puff, just because you were angry and anxious about Topo. You are too good Olive, to hate anyone long or bear them ill-will."

"I hope so, dear, I hope so. But I had to pray a long time before I could feel that I really forgave my uncle."

"Well, your prayers have been certainly heard, dear, or you could not speak as you do now," cried Lucy.

"Yes, God has been very good to me," answered Olive, gently. "The moment I saw my

poor uncle at the window in the midst of the flames, I knew I had quite forgiven him. I forgot all his unkindness, and longed to see him saved. Now I think of nothing but how I shall make him happy."

"And you are so earnest over it, I am sure you will succeed," said Lucy. "I fully expect to see you prime favourite with your uncle, who will give up being a miser and become a model of gentleness and good temper."

"If that were to be the result of the fire, the burning of King's Court would be the luckiest thing that ever happened."

"Well the money is all gone, and a miser cannot be a miser without money to count."

"I am not at all sure of that," said Olive, thoughtfully. "If a man is a miser at heart, he will be miserly with a little money, as well as with a great deal."

"If that is true, you will have rather a hard time with Mr. Derwent."

"Perhaps so. 'But where there's a will there's a way,' remember, and I am determined to do what I can for him. But run away, Lucy. I want to get up. I shall go off at once to the

Blue Room, and ask Mrs. Bell to let me help her to nurse him."

"She won't let you. She keeps the door locked, and will not let a creature near her. Mother says she is quite ill, between the fright of the fire and her terror lest Mr. Derwent should die. But she will not allow anyone to take her place beside him."

"Not a Lester, perhaps. Because she is afraid he might get into a passion if he saw one of you. But she may let me in."

"You seem to forget how he called you names and sent you out of his house yesterday morning," said Lucy. "The sight of you might enrage him also."

"No, I don't think it would. I am sure he has forgotten all about me. I hope so, at least. Then, I shall be able to win him over by degrees. Anyway, I will try what I can do. I feel quite anxious about poor Mrs. Bell. She must be so tired."

"Yes, I am sure she is. Mother has been up and down to her several times, but she will not allow her to do anything for her."

"Poor woman. She certainly is devoted to

her master. But I shall beg so hard, that she must let me in, sooner or later, for peace sake."

"Very well, if you are so determined, I hope you may succeed," said Lucy. "But when you are dressed come down to the morning-room, and I shall have some coffee and toast ready for you. Now, Topo, come along; Olive is——. But I declare the boy has vanished."

"Yes; some time ago," said Olive, laughing.

"He found our conversation dull, I suppose, and thought he would prefer a run in the garden."

"I daresay. Doesn't he look nice in that little blue suit of Ulric's?"

"Very nice. And he does not seem at all the worse for his fright last night."

"Not he. He is as fresh as a daisy, and ate a capital breakfast. The boys are enchanted with him."

"What lucky children we are to have found such kind friends," cried Olive, throwing her arms round Lucy's neck, "poor little lonely orphans that we are. Where should we be now, only for you and your dear mother?"

"That is a difficult question to answer, dear," said, Lucy smiling. "But I am sure God would

have sent some one else to take care of you, if we had not been here."

"Well, I am glad He sent you," said Olive, simply. "For indeed, indeed, I love you very much."

"And we all love you dearly, both you and Topo. But now I must run away—and you must get up."

Then, releasing herself from Olive's clinging arms, Lucy gave her a loving kiss, and hurried from the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE BLUE CHAMBER.

"A good deed is never lost."

WHEN Olive went down to the morning-room there was no one to be seen. But in a few moments the butler came in, with some coffee and toast, which he placed before her on the table.

"Where are they all, Grey?" she asked. "Are they out?"

"The young gentlemen and Master Topo have gone over to King's Court to visit the ruins, miss," he answered. "But the mistress and Miss Lucy are reading in the garden together. Shall I tell them you have come down?"

"No, no," said Olive. "Pray do not disturb them. When I have had some breakfast, I must go to my uncle."

"Very well, miss;" and taking up his tray, the man returned to his work.

Olive drank her coffee and ate her toast; but she felt little appetite for the repast.

Her heart was beating quickly, and her thoughts were full of the approaching interview with Mrs. Bell.

So, in a short time, she slipped from her chair, and went upstairs to the Blue Chamber.

She knocked softly at the door, but received no answer. She waited for a minute or two, and then knocked again; this time a little louder.

But still no sound was heard within the room.

"Mrs. Bell must have fallen asleep," she thought. "What if uncle should suddenly become conscious, and find no one near? That would be terrible."

Then she summoned fresh courage, and tried to turn the handle; but she found that no use, for the door was locked.

"Please let me in," she whispered through the keyhole—"please let me in."

But not the smallest notice was taken of her appeal. So, feeling certain that the housekeeper had fallen asleep, and fearful of what might happen should the old man awake and find him-

self alone, she grew bolder, and gave three sharp knocks with her knuckles.

Then at last footsteps were heard crossing the floor, a heavy sigh fell on her ear, and Mrs. Bell appeared before her.

She was deathly pale; her eyes were sunken and red, as though from much weeping. She seemed very weak, and looked ten years older than when Olive had seen her a few days before.

"What do you want?" she asked, roughly. "What brings you here?"

"I want to help you," said Olive, her heart in her mouth. "I want to help you, and to nurse my uncle."

"You cannot help me, and he requires no nursing. I wish he did. Go and play."

"Oh, please," said Olive, clasping her hands, and looking earnestly into the woman's face, "let me go in and sit beside him for a time. You ought to have some sleep. If you do not you will be ill; then when he becomes conscious there will be no one to do anything for him. So be wise now and rest for a while."

"But you would be afraid to sit beside him alone," replied Mrs. Bell, more gently, touched

by the child's earnestness. "He looks like death, although they say he still lives."

"No matter," said Olive, "I shall not be afraid. If you will lie down, I shall say my prayers by his side. Do, I implore you, you look so tired."

"You are a good little creature," cried Mrs. Bell; "and if you are quite sure you will not be frightened, I will lie down on the sofa for an hour or so. Come in."

So, trembling in every limb, yet determined to show no fear, Olive was admitted to the Blue Chamber and allowed to take her seat by her uncle's bed.

The curtains were closely drawn, and, brave as she was, she did not dare to open them to look at him as he lay unconscious of her presence.

Mrs. Bell kissed the little girl softly; then, lying down upon the sofa, closed her eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

And Olive kept faithful watch, never stirring from her post till far into the evening.

Then Mrs. Bell awoke refreshed, ready to take her place once more beside her master.

"Thank you, dear child," she said, gratefully;

"your kindness has saved me. Without that sleep, I should have probably become ill. But now you had better run away; you must be tired after your long watch. I was afraid at first to allow anyone near him but myself. However, so long as he remains as he is, it matters little who sits by him."

"But, Mrs. Bell——" began Olive, nervously.

"Well, dear, speak out."

"I was going to say," she whispered, blushing. "I hope you won't think me rude. But I think you are always too much afraid of what my uncle will do if you—let—him—know—things."

"But, my dear child, I fancy I know how he should be treated, better than you do," said Mrs. Bell in surprise.

"Yes, of course, but still——"

"For many years he and I have lived almost alone at King's Court. During that time he has been irritable and easily roused to anger. I have been obliged to manage him carefully, and tell him things very cautiously."

"Yes," said Olive; "but when you allowed us to come to his house, and sent us money, you should have told him."

"I was afraid to tell him. I thought he would surely send you away."

"It was good of you to do so much for us," said the girl, tearfully. "I am sure you must often have thought us very ungrateful; but we did not understand."

"I know you did not, dear, and I never imagined you ungrateful. And remember that if I kept you from your uncle, it was merely because I believed it was for your good and his."

"I know that now, Mrs. Bell—I know that now, and I thank you for your kindness."

"I could do very little for you, poor children—very little."

"But you sent us your own money."

"Only five pounds. That was a small sum to spend on my dear master's relations. For, though people round about called him a miser, he was always good and generous to me."

"But what did he do with his money? He was rich. Lucy says it was in that box, that he wanted to save from the fire."

"That is nonsense," cried Mrs. Bell, indignantly. "I don't believe there was money in it. But I know nothing about it. My master's

affairs were not mine. If he chose to live mysteriously, I had no right to interfere. And had he been happy, I don't think I should ever have sent for you. But, when I saw your letter, I thought perhaps you children might do him good and cheer him up."

"Was he angry when the letter came?"

"He never saw it, dear. He was ill at the time. So I opened all his letters. At first I was going to send you money, and tell you you were not to come. Then I felt sure you ought to come, and so on—till, at last, one day I sent you off that cheque, and an invitation for you and your mother."

"That was what kept you so long sending it," said Olive, sadly. "But if you had only known how I was craving for a little money, you would have sent it sooner, I am sure. My dear mother was dying for want of fresh air. The fogs of London were killing her. My greatest wish was to get her into the country."

"Poor child. I wish I had sent it sooner, then. The change of air might have saved her."

"I am afraid not. She said not herself—and she was quite ready to go," sobbed Olive. "But

your letter and cheque, late as they came, filled her with joy. She died happy in the belief that Topo and I should never want again."

"And she was right in that, dear. I have saved a little money, Olive; enough, I think, to keep us all in a quiet place like this."

"You are a kind friend," said Olive, gently. "Give me a good education, Mrs. Bell. Then, when I grow up, I shall be able to provide for myself."

"Well, we will not talk of that at present," said Mrs. Bell, kissing her. "But run away now, dear. You have been long enough in this dark room."

"But may I come to-morrow?"

"Certainly. Together, we shall nurse your uncle back to life. And who knows, perhaps, he may grow to love you yet."

"I hope so—I hope so. I shall pray night and morning that he may," cried Olive. And, please God, we'll make him a happy old man yet."

"Your sympathy is a great comfort to me. I am truly thankful that I allowed you to come, dear child."

"I am glad to hear you say that," said Olive, joyfully. "And I hope I may be able to help you a great deal."

"I am sure you will. When my master comes to know and love you, he will be much happier than when he wandered through that old house, without a creature to speak to but me."

"But I am afraid he will be sorry about King's Court, Mrs. Bell. He has no home now."

"No, dear; and I know the loss will grieve him terribly."

"I wonder how the fire began," said Olive.

"I don't," replied Mrs. Bell. "I lived in constant terror of fire. My poor master used to wander about at night, carrying a lighted candle everywhere he went."

"Then, I suppose he set fire to the house himself?"

"Yes, I am sure he did. That is the only way I can account for it. But run down now to your little friends, dear. It is very dull for you here."

"Not at all," said Olive. "But I must bring you some supper, Mrs. Bell. What would you like?"

"I do not care in the least. I am too anxious to have much appetite."

"But, still, you must eat. If not, you will get ill; and then what should we do? I will go now, and see what I can get for you."

And opening the door gently, she stole out of the room.

Presently she returned, carrying a small tray, neatly laid with a most appetising little supper.

"It was all ready when I went down," she said. "Mrs. Lester prepared it with her own hands. She says you are to be sure to drink the wine."

"Mrs. Lester is too good," cried Mrs. Bell. "Her kindness is more than I can ever repay."

"She has been very good to us all. But I am sure the only payment she cares for is to see us well and happy."

"Do you think so, little Olive? Then we must do our best to satisfy her. If my poor master would but get well, and be somewhat as he used to be in days gone by, I should soon repay her a hundred-fold—that is, if my happiness would please her."

"Was uncle happy long ago?"

"Till his return from Italy, after the death of my dear mistress, he was the brightest, most genial man alive."

"And was it sorrow for her that changed him?"

"Partly that—and partly—— But there, I must not gossip about his affairs. His greatest wish, for the last fifteen years, has been to hide himself and his doings from the world around him. It is not our business what his motives may have been."

"No," said Olive, thoughtfully. "But still it was a pity that he lived as he did. People believed he was hard-hearted, and called him a miser."

"So they did. But I am sure they were wrong. For a long time I have felt certain there was some secret reason."

"Secret reason? But what could it be?"

"Hush, child. Do not ask curious questions. I must not mention what I think. Run away now."

"Well, eat your supper and drink your wine."

"Yes, dear, most certainly I will. Good-night, little Olive."

"Good night. But oh, Mrs. Bell, Frank told me to say, that he is sleeping in the next room. Should Mr. Derwent get worse—or any change come—and you want the doctor, you have only to call to him. He will ride off to Arundel for him at once."

"He is a good boy. Tell him it will make me much more comfortable to know he is so near. He is a noble fellow."

"He is very uneasy about uncle, Mrs. Bell. He has been blaming himself all day, Mrs. Lester says. He thinks now he was wrong to stun the poor old man as he did."

"My dear, I am sure it was the only way he could have managed. My master was very obstinate, and the cruel flames were close upon them. Had he not fallen on that box, it would have done him but small injury. Tell Master Frank not to blame himself any more."

"I will indeed. I think he is the bravest boy in the whole world. Ulric is good and gentle, but Frank is strong and brave. Only for him, my poor uncle must surely have died in the fire. I am glad to hear that you think he did right. Good-night, dear Mrs. Bell," cried Olive; and

putting her arms round the housekeeper's neck, she kissed her affectionately.

Then she stole across the room on tiptoe, and slipped down stairs to the dining-room.

CHAPTER XV.

A CRITICAL MOMENT.

"Learn thou with joy to stand or fall
Where sacred duty leads."

HAVING lain unconscious for several days, Mr. Derwent came slowly back to life. He opened his eyes, looked quietly round the room, and without asking any questions fell into a deep sleep.

During these hours of keen anxiety, Mrs. Bell never moved from his side; and Olive flitted about, doing all she could to make the tedious watch as little irksome as possible.

And when at last the old man awoke, he was very weak, and did not appear to notice that he was in a strange place. In a feeble voice he complained of a pain in his head, swallowed a few mouthfuls of beef-tea, and dozed off again.

He remained in this state for more than a week, and except that he occasionally looked up,

and thanked his faithful nurse for her kindness, there was but little change in his condition from one day to another.

Mrs. Bell, Olive, and the doctor were the only persons admitted to his room. It was considered dangerous to allow strangers near him; and so, although the inmates of Ashford were deeply interested in his recovery, they did not venture farther than the door of his chamber, and left him completely to the housekeeper's tender care.

But everything was done that could in any way help her in her arduous task. The greatest attention was paid to her slightest wish, and all their thoughts were full of the strange occupant of the Blue Chamber.

Mrs. Lester's expected guests were requested to postpone their visit; and the house was almost as silent as King's Court had been, when Mr. Derwent had wandered through its vast corridors alone.

And every time the old man roused himself and looked about him, Mrs. Bell trembled lest he should ask where he was, and what had happened.

She dreaded these questions more than tongue could tell.

But he did not ask them ; and when awake lay gazing at the ceiling in silence.

He was wonderfully gentle ; took everything she gave him ; and sighed heavily from time to time, as he murmured :

" You are too good to me, Margaret. I have not deserved such goodness—I have not indeed."

Then he would sink back upon his pillow, and close his eyes.

" His memory is gone. Poor master, he does not remember anything," Mrs. Bell said one day to Olive. " He knows nothing of the fire, I am sure ; but thank goodness he has not forgotten me."

" Perhaps he may never remember about it," said Olive ; " and I do hope he may forget his anger against me. I have prayed so hard that he may be nice to me when he gets well, and I ask God every day to make him happy."

" You are a good child, and I trust your prayers may be granted ; but it would take a great deal to make him happy again. Indeed I fear such a thing is impossible."

"God is good," said Olive, reverently; "and if we pray earnestly He will do many things for us. He has already heard some of our prayers, dear Mrs. Bell, for the doctor says my uncle gains strength every day."

"Yes, so he does; but slowly—very slowly."

"But still he grows stronger, so you must not fret about him. And now I want you to go out, Mrs. Bell; uncle is fast asleep, and will not wake for a long time. You have not had a breath of air for a fortnight."

"No, dear. But this room is large. I can do very well here for some days longer."

"No you cannot," insisted Olive. "The doctor says you must go into the garden every day now."

"But——"

"No buts," whispered the little girl. "Away you go. If uncle wakes up I shall call to you out of the window. Don't be lazy."

"Very well, dear, I'll go for a few minutes. I'll walk round the flower beds close to the house. The instant you call I shall run in."

"That is right. He has had some soup, and will sleep for a long time."

"Yes, I am sure he will."

And, taking a long look at her patient, Mrs. Bell put on her bonnet and went out.

Olive seated herself in a large arm-chair at the foot of the bed, ready to spring to the window, should her uncle show any signs of waking. The room was only dimly lighted, so, finding it difficult to read, she folded her hands on her lap and began to think.

How long she sat thus she did not know ; but suddenly she heard the old man move, and looking up with a start, she found his eyes fixed upon her.

Her first impulse was to summon Mrs. Bell from the garden, but as she rose he put out his hand as though to detain her.

"Who are you?" he asked, curiously.

"I—I—" said Olive, trembling, and afraid to tell him the truth. "I—am—a—girl—who is helping Mrs. Bell to nurse you. Shall I call her?"

"No, no; I want to talk to you. I have noticed you going about for the last few days. You are kind and gentle, and always do what you are told. But I seem to know your face.

I seem to—have seen you before—when you were not good—or—gentle. Have I?"

"Yes—unc——, at least Mr. Derw shall I call Mrs. Bell?"

"No, no," he answered, pettishly, "I don't want her. She's always here. But tell me—have I been ill?"

"Yes—very ill."

"But how? What made me ill?"

"I—I—don't know,—at least—I—" began Olive, trembling violently.

"You don't know," he cried, sharply, "and yet you have been here all the time nursing me. It is nonsense to say that; you must know. I was quite well yesterday—when I went out early to—— Ah, my head is strange—I cannot remember. But something—has happened—some change has come over me—and—— Why this is not King's Court! Where am I, child? Speak!—Where am I?

And clutching Olive by the arm, he glared into her face.

"Amongst—friends"—she said, in a low voice—"amongst friends. You had a fall—a shock—and you have been ill. But you will soon be quite well again."

"A fall—a shock," he repeated, dreamily. "Now—I begin to remember—now I know.—King's Court is on fire—I see the flames coming on me—I hear the shouts of the crowd. Someone urges me to fly—to save my life. But I cannot—I must not leave without my treasure—the only thing I care for in this world. Then I—see a hand raised—I fall—and all is forgotten—all is lost." And quite exhausted, the old man sank back upon his pillow.

"Oh, if Mrs. Bell would only come," cried Olive, wringing her hands and gazing at him in terror. "I know not what to do—or what to say. I must call her—I must."

But as she moved towards the window, Mr. Derwent again opened his eyes, and signed to her to approach.

"Was everything destroyed?" he asked.

"Everything. The house was burned to the ground. Nothing was saved but some furniture out of the lower rooms."

"Poor old house! But my box—my treasure—did it perish also?"

"Yes," said Olive, nervously. "But, uncle, dear, never mind about that. You will have money enough to live upon without it."

"Money!" he cried. "There was no money in it. Only a few trinkets—some books—and my dear wife's portrait. Money—as if I cared for money."

"Oh," cried Olive, joyfully. "Then you are not a miser after all."

"Miser—I a miser? Ah, I suppose I had that name. But, indeed, I was not a miser. I pinched and saved; but only because I was forced to do so."

"Thank God for that. But, uncle, why did you live in such a strange manner? Why did you refuse to help my poor father, when he went to ask you for a little money?"

"Who was your father?" he asked, looking at her in astonishment.

"My father was Topham Charlton, your nephew," she said, trembling, for she could not forget his former rage and indignation, when she had told him she was his niece.

"Poor Topham," he said, softly. "I remember him well. But he came to me at a time when I had no money to give to anyone. Ah, dear, it is all coming back to me;" and, raising

his hand to his head, he sighed heavily. "So you are poor Topham's child?"

"Yes, uncle," answered the girl, amazed and delighted at his gentleness. "I am his daughter and your niece."

"But how came you here?"

"We were left desolate in London, my little brother and I—without money or friends, and good Mrs. Bell sent for us. We have been living at King's Court for several months."

"Quite right—quite right," he answered, dreamily. "Now I know where I have seen you before. And I was cruel to you—and sent you away. Yes—now I know. That was before that terrible night—when everything was burning—burning round me."

"Yes, uncle. But do not think of it. I was naughty—and disobeyed you, and so—— But do not think of it, pray——"

"You have a kindly little face," he said, gently. "And I hope you have forgiven me."

"Yes, yes—indeed I have," cried Olive, in delight. "And I do trust you are not angry with me now."

"I—angry—I. No, dear; why should I?

But I am sad and lonely—a poor, wretched old man—forsaken by God and man. No one loves me—I have not a friend in the world."

"Indeed, that is not true," exclaimed the girl, earnestly. "God loves you, and watches over you, uncle, believe me. It was He who gave Frank strength and courage, to save you from that dreadful fire."

"Frank? Who is Frank? Is he the brother you spoke of?"

"No, no. Frank is big and strong. He is a noble boy. He is only fifteen, and yet, when the staircase was burning—when no one else would venture near you—when all the men would have left you, on the chance of the fire-engine arriving in time—he rushed into the house, and saved you in spite of yourself."

"It was a brave act. But it would have been better to have allowed me to die."

"No, no, uncle; you must not say that," cried Olive, eagerly. "You must live and get strong. I am your niece; and, please God, I shall make your life happy yet."

"You are a good little girl," he answered, sighing. "But I do not think I could ever be

happy. You do not know the story of my life, child, or you would not talk of happiness to me."

"I do not know the story of your life," said Olive, gravely. "But I know that God is good, and that I have prayed very hard for you. You have had troubles and sorrow, but there are others who have suffered more than you. Holy Job was more terribly afflicted—had more things he loved taken from him, and yet he did not despair. He just bowed his head as each fresh trial came upon him, and said it was God's will."

"Wise little girl—wise little girl. But tell me again. Is King's Court completely destroyed?"

"Yes," said Olive.

"Then where am I? Who can have opened his doors to take a lonely creature, like me, into his house? I have not spoken to any of my neighbours for years. So who has taken pity on me in my hour of need?"

"Do you really wish to know?" asked Olive, anxiously. "Will you not be angry if you find that the people who have done so are those whom you hate?"

"Child, I hate no one now. My life is sud-

denly changed. Since King's Court is gone, I must live as I can. The whole world must know my secret soon—I can keep it from them no longer. So it matters little to me where I may be."

"Then I will tell you," said Olive; and bending forward, she whispered, "The boy who saved you so bravely was Frank Lester, and you are now at Ashford, the Lesters' house."

"I guessed as much," he murmured. "Kate Lester had always a good heart, and was ever ready to forgive and forget. I dearly loved her in days gone by. But go fetch that boy, that I may thank him for his noble conduct."

"I will, when Mrs. Bell returns," she said. "But I must not leave you alone, uncle, not for an instant."

"Good little nurse—kind little girl. How shall I ever repay you for your care? I am poor and wretched, dear—poor and wretched."

"Uncle, uncle, I want no payment. Unless—except"—she stammered, blushing—"unless you will love me, and let me be good to you."

"God has not forsaken me after all," he cried. "My child, if you will bear with me, and help me

to begin a new life, I may be, if not happy, at least peaceful and content."

"So you shall, please God," cried Olive, earnestly, and she pressed a loving kiss upon his brow. "All that I can do to make you happy shall be done. Our Heavenly Father will hear my prayers, and do the rest. But here comes Mrs. Bell. I will leave you to her now, and go off to look for Frank."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE STORY OF A LIFE.

"Yet will I, as 'tis fitting now,
My wonted silence break."

BUT Frank was not admitted to the Blue Chamber that day nor the next.

Mr. Derwent was ill and feverish. His conversation with Olive had excited him; and the doctor declared that he must be kept perfectly quiet for some time longer.

"If not," he said, "a fever may intervene, and in that case I could not answer for his life."

So the house remained still and silent. The boys went about on the tips of their toes, and spoke only in whispers, when passing up and down the stairs. But they were more interested in the old man now than ever. He was not a miser, he had said, and so they wondered much over his mysterious life. Olive was made to

repeat, again and again, the exact words he had uttered ; and Frank burned with anxiety to see him and hear him talk.

"It is the strangest thing I ever heard," he remarked to his brother, pausing, in the midst of a game of tennis. "Olive says he speaks quite quietly and sensibly now, yet the first time she saw him in the drawing-room at King's Court, he seemed half silly."

"I don't think that is so very astonishing," replied Ulric, "when you consider how he saw her. I am sure he thought she was a ghost."

"Very likely. And when she told him she was his niece, he was disappointed, and got into a rage. Then the music carried him back to old times. If Mrs. Bell had just stayed away a little longer, it would have been all right."

"Perhaps. But it is hard to say. He seems to have been very fond of his wife."

"Yes ; mother always told us that. But I wonder what the secret of his life is. I do wish he'd tell me some day. Poor old man, I am sorry I could not save that box for him."

"It is very lucky you were able to save himself," said Ulric. "But here comes Olive.

What's the news now, I wonder? She looks very pleased and happy."

"Yes, so she does," said Frank. "It is really wonderful how anxious she is about that old man. I believe she is growing quite fond of him."

"Of course she is. But see, she is beckoning to you."

"So she is. I wonder what she wants," cried Frank; and, throwing down his racket, he ran to meet her. "How is Mr. Derwent now, Olive? Is he better?"

"Much," she answered, gaily. "He is up to-day, and has gone into the boudoir next to his bed-room."

"I am glad. May I go to see him soon?"

"Yes, you may come now. He sent me to fetch you. Your mother has been with him for some time. He is most anxious to see you."

"Does he look very ill?" asked Frank, nervously. "What shall I say to him?"

"You need not say very much," said Olive, laughing. "Why, what a coward you are. Just say, 'Good morning, Mr Derwent; I hope you are well'."

"Good morning, Mr Derwent; I hope you are well," repeated Frank, solemnly. "I think I can manage that. Shall I change my clothes?"

"No, no. Put on your coat; I like you in your flannels. Come along now, or he may be dropping off to sleep again."

And taking the boy's hand, she drew him towards the house.

When the two children entered the boudoir, Mr Derwent was sitting in a large arm-chair drawn close to the window. Mrs. Lester sat by his side, and they were conversing together in low, hushed voices.

"My husband and I always had a great love and respect both for you and your wife," said Mrs. Lester; "and it pained us deeply that you would never allow us to go near you in your time of trouble. I grieved for her, as a true friend, when she died; and had you not shut your doors against us, we should have done our utmost to console and comfort you."

"I am sure you would," he answered, sadly. "But indeed, dear friend, I suffered much in cutting myself off, as I did, from those I loved

and respected. But I had made a vow ; that vow I would have kept to the day of my death, had not the burning of King's Court released me from it."

"Thank God, it was burnt, then ; for had you continued to live as you were doing, you must surely have lost your reason."

"Yes, that is not improbable," he replied, thoughtfully. "And there were times when I was not myself—when I forgot all that had happened, and sought my darling in every room in the house. One night, as I lay on my sofa alone, I heard music in the big drawing-room, and, as I entered, the very melody she had loved so well and played so often fell upon my ear——"

"Yes, Olive told me how you seemed to love that old melody."

"Poor little Olive," he said, gently. "It was she who played it, and the sounds carried me back to happy days. Then, on learning that she was intimate with you, from whom, of all other people in the world, I wished to keep the secret of my life, I was harsh to the child, and spoke to her in a cruel, heartless manner. But

she has forgiven me, and treats me with loving tenderness."

"Yes, Olive has a kind heart. She has quite forgotten your words of anger, and forgives you completely. Her greatest wish is to be as a daughter to you, to make your future life a happy one."

"So she says, poor child."

"And she will do it, believe me, if you will but allow her."

"God has been more merciful to me than I have any right to expect," he said. "So much love and affection has power to touch even my hardened heart."

"You tried to harden it by the life you led," replied Mrs. Lester, gently. "But you have not succeeded. There were many prayers said for you during these long years, and remember—

'More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of'."

"Doubtless," he answered, "or I should never have lived to know the goodness of God, as I am beginning to do now."

"Through all your troubles you have had one true friend. Mrs. Bell is a most devoted woman.

Her whole desire has been to make you happy. She prayed for you constantly, and always hoped to see you forsake your lonely life. She it was who brought little Olive to your house; she was the guardian God placed over you, and right nobly she has fulfilled her task."

"So she has. God bless Mrs. Bell," cried the old man; and there were tears in his eyes as he spoke.

"Uncle," said Olive, stealing up and putting her arm round his neck, "here is Frank; he has come to ask you how you are?"

"Ha! The noble boy who risked his own life to save a half-crazy old fellow like me!" he cried, grasping Frank's hand, and shaking it warmly. "Heaven bless you, dear lad. May the Almighty reward you, for I cannot——"

"Pray do—not—speak of that," stammered Frank. "But I am sorry I was not able to save that box."

"Do not mention it," said the invalid, with emotion. "It was a part of my old life—a link with the past. But it is gone—buried with the rest;" and, leaning back amongst his cushions, he gazed out over the trees.

For a few moments all were silent. Frank stood twirling his hat nervously between his fingers; Olive sighed, and smoothed the rug upon her uncle's knee; whilst Mrs. Lester took the old man's hand within her own, and pressed it affectionately.

"Come here, my boy, and sit beside me," said Mr. Derwent at last. "And you, Olive, come close to me, dear—round here, where I can see you."

The children did as desired, seating themselves together upon a low stool at his feet.

"And now, since you have all been so good to me, and seem to take such an interest in me and my doings," he began, "I will tell you the story of my life."

"But will it not pain you to do so?" asked Mrs. Lester.

"Yes, it will pain me deeply," he answered, in a low voice—"more deeply than words can say——"

"Then do not tell it. We have no wish to learn your secrets, dear Mr. Derwent. To have you once more amongst us, willing to treat us as friends, is quite enough for us. Forget the

past, and live only for the future—the happy future."

"You are good and kind, as usual," he said, "and would gladly spare me all pain. But I have set myself a task, and I shall do it. The story of my life contains a lesson, which I hope your boy will take to heart and never forget."

"Poor uncle, you have suffered much," said Olive, sadly.

"Yes—I have suffered, dear child. But my sufferings were brought about by my own foolish, wicked conduct."

Here the invalid paused; and, covering his eyes with his hand, seemed lost in thought.

"Seventeen years ago," he continued, after some time, "I was a happy man. My home was all anyone could possibly desire. My wife was young, beautiful, and good."

"Yes," said Mrs. Lester, "indeed she was."

"We loved each other dearly, and had everything the world could give us—money, position, rich and gay friends. King's Court was filled with visitors from month end to month end; balls, parties, hunts, and pic-nics occupied our

days and nights. We had not the smallest care or trouble."

"Not one," assented Mrs. Lester. "I remember those merry doings well."

"Yes, I am sure you do. You and your husband were always amongst our favourite guests. But, at last, there came a shadow across our lives. My dear wife grew delicate. The doctors declared the air of Sussex too keen for her, and advised me to take her abroad. We put off our departure, unwilling to leave our home. Then she became worse, and we felt bound to follow the advice we had received. With much sorrow, we broke up our pleasant Christmas party, and, bidding good-bye to our friends and neighbours, started for Nice."

"That was truly a sad farewell," said Mrs. Lester. "Poor Marion wept bitterly when leaving the home she loved."

"So she did. She had a presentiment that she should never return to it again. And that presentiment came true—she never did—for, before the summer came round, my darling was lying under the acacia trees, cold and dead."

"Oh," said Olive, "that was sad."

"Sad—and yet not sad, dear," he replied. "For death saved her from great and terrible sufferings."

"Then I am glad God took her whilst she was young and happy," cried the girl. "But it must have been a bitter sorrow for you to lose her."

"A bitter sorrow, Olive—and yet a relief. You look surprised and shocked, dear child, and no wonder. But, before she died, she knew that we were ruined—that our property must all go—that nothing but poverty and disgrace could be our future lot. And so she lost all love of life, and died."

"But she must have gone, sooner or later, dear friend," said Mrs. Lester, sadly. "She was in consumption, remember. No earthly power could have saved her."

"No. But she might have lived for some years longer, had not my wicked folly grieved her poor heart and hastened her death."

"But, when you loved her so dearly, uncle," said Olive, doubtfully, "how then could you grieve her so deeply?"

"So you may well ask. But I was mad at the time. Not mad in the way I have been often

since, during the lonely days I spent at King's Court, but wildly mad—tortured and tormented by a passion for play. At Monte Carlo, I went night after night to the gaming tables; and, as my darling lay at home too ill to accompany me, I played, and lost thousands of pounds. In some way the news of my folly reached her. With tears in her eyes, she implored me to fly temptation, not to go near the tables any more. I promised, and I kept my promise to the letter. I never entered the gambling rooms again."

"That was right," said Frank. "But was all your money gone then?"

"No, not then. And all would have been well with me, had I not fallen still deeper into the mire. A man—a demon I might almost call him—had seen me frequently at the tables. He knew I owned property in England, and, I daresay, thought it was a pity I should escape. He saw I delighted in high play, and determined to tempt me back. But his persuasions were useless. I had promised; back I would not go."

"I am glad," cried Olive. "How vexed he must have been."

"He did not appear vexed, dear child. On the contrary, he said he quite approved of my conduct, that it was a bad thing to make such binding promises; but that when we made them, we should certainly keep them."

"Then he was not so wicked after all," said Olive.

"Just what I thought at the time, dear. And I foolishly trusted him as a friend. One evening he invited me to dine with him, and I went. It was a small party, consisting of only two other men, besides ourselves. After dinner, cards were produced—a quiet game suggested. I played, and lost. The next night I returned, and lost again. Wild with rage, I vowed that I would play until I won. This went on night after night. We played for immense stakes; and at last I found that, to pay this man all I owed him, I must sell my property, and live for ever more in a state of extreme poverty."

"How dreadful," gasped Olive.

"Dreadful, indeed," he said, with emotion—"very dreadful. When I staggered home into my wife's presence, I was shocked to see how ill she looked, and for a moment forgot my losses

in my anxiety about her. 'What is wrong?' she cried, gazing at me in horror. 'You look wild and strange. Lewis, Lewis! you have not been playing cards again? Tell me you have not.' 'I have,' I said, faintly, 'but for the last time.' 'You have lost—I know you have lost?' 'Yes,' I replied, scarce knowing what I said; 'I have lost—lost everything. The property must be sold. I am a ruined man.' My poor wife answered not a word, but fell back fainting on her pillow. And when she recovered consciousness, her grief was terrible to witness. 'We are disgraced,' she cried, frantically—'disgraced for ever. How shall we live in poverty, and have the finger of scorn pointed at us wherever we go? I shall hear my husband laughed at, and called a ruined gambler. I could not live to hear it—I shall die soon—I know—I feel. But you, Lewis, Lewis, how will you bear it?' 'No one shall know what I have done with my money; why I think right to sell my property,' I cried, 'I shall keep it a secret.' 'You could never do that.' 'Yes, I could and I will. This man who has won my money will be as secret as the grave, for his own sake, I know. I shall

sell everything that is not entailed, give him his money, and we shall live quietly at King's Court for the rest of our lives.' 'I shall never return to King's Court, Lewis; my days are numbered. But I cannot bear to think of you being pointed at as a ruined gambler. Oh, my husband, try and keep this quiet. Let no one guess how or why you live in such retirement. For my sake, keep the real reason a profound secret.' 'Yes, dearest; for your sake, I shall do so if I can. But you must live and comfort me in my seclusion, Marion. King's Court and several farms in the neighbourhood cannot be sold, for they are strictly entailed. It may take me years to pay this man, even after I give him all I can raise upon the property; but there will still be something for us—we shall not starve. We can live together in our old home. Mrs. Bell, who has known and loved you from your childhood, will take care of you. We love each other, dearest, and even in poverty we may be happy.' 'No, Lewis, my hour has almost come. If I thought you could keep this secret from the world—if I thought none of our friends should hear of our disgrace, of our dishonour—

I could die peacefully.' 'I shall do all I can to keep the whole story a secret. No one shall know how foolish I have been. But I must return to Sussex at once, sell my property, and pay my debts. Then, with or without you,' I cried, clasping her in my arms, 'I shall retire to King's Court; and until the old house falls about my ears, or is burned to the ground, not a word shall pass my lips about this miserable affair. Are you satisfied?' 'Quite. But, Lewis — Lewis, you must go alone. This dreadful news has shortened my life;' and she fell back exhausted. The next morning she died. And when I laid her at rest amongst the flowers, I hurried home to Sussex, sold everything I could, paid my creditor, and, with his receipt in my pocket, retired to King's Court. Except Mrs. Bell, no one ever came near me, as you know."

"How fearfully lonely you must have been," cried Olive.

"At first, yes; but by degrees I grew accustomed to the stillness, and dreaded the sight of a stranger. The promise I had made to my dead wife weighed upon me, and everyone I saw seemed a spy, set to find out my secret.

When I first heard a boy upon the road call me the miser of King's Court, I was delighted. It was an ignominious name, and did not suit me in the least. But it told me that no one guessed what I had done with my money, and I determined to keep up my character as a miser as far as I could."

"You certainly succeeded admirably," said Mrs. Lester; "for every one in the neighbourhood looks upon you as a miser. But, thank God, that kind of a life is at an end for ever."

"Yes; I am glad too," he answered, "very glad. The burning of King's Court releases me from my vow of secrecy, although, at the time I made it, I never for an instant imagined that such a thing could, or would, take place."

"It was a curious thing that you should have mentioned it," said Mrs. Lester.

"Yes; but I only did so to show how resolved I was to keep my promise. However, except to yourselves, I shall never tell the story of my life. It is believed that my money was in that box. Be it so. To the world at large I may still remain the eccentric old miser of King's Court, and my secret will be faithfully kept."

"Yes," replied Mrs. Lester; "but you must make yourself a little more comfortable than you did in the lonely old house. Your income is small, but still, living as you did, you cannot have spent it all."

"No, I spent very little," he answered. "Mrs. Bell I paid liberally, because I wished her to have sufficient money for her old age. But I had many debts to pay. When I sold my property, bills came in from all parts, and I determined to settle them by degrees. As my tenants brought their rent, I received it from them in notes or gold. But, instead of putting it away in a box, and counting it over every day, as they thought, it was lodged by Mrs. Bell, in her own name, in the bank at Chichester. She wrote the cheque and paid my bills."

"Well, it is too bad to think that, whilst you were pinching and saving to pay your creditors in an honourable way," said Mrs. Lester, "we, your friends, should be learning to regard you as one of the meanest creatures on earth—a miser."

"Yes; and that you did so was by no means the smallest part of my punishment. But I had

made a vow. Whether I did well or not, I kept it. Now I am free to take my place amongst you again, if you will allow me. Olive and Topo will be my passports ; whilst you love them, you cannot refuse to receive their crabbed old uncle."

"My dear Mr. Derwent, you require no passport. It will be a most delightful surprise for my husband, when he returns from America, to find that he can take his old friend once more by the hand. I must tell him the good news in my letter to-morrow."

"Yes, do. And now, since I have told you so much, I must tell you more. I have not a single debt left. The morning before the fire, just after I chased poor Olive from the grounds, I received a receipt for the very last sum of money I owed."

"That is good news, indeed," cried Mrs Lester. "For you will now have quite enough to keep you comfortably, for the rest of your life."

"Yes, for I require very little, dear friend. And, if King's Court had not been burned, I think I should have gone on living as I have done for so many years. The habit of pinching

and saving grows on one, as any other bad habit does. I should probably have become a miser, indeed, had not this fire swept away the old house, and made me change my life."

"Well, now we must look out for a new home for you," said Mrs. Lester. "And if it is not a luxurious one, as you had in days gone by, it will, at least, be comfortable and respectable."

"Yes," he answered, smiling, and laying his hand on Olive's head. "Comfortable and happy. My little niece has promised to make it that for me."

"Oh! uncle," cried Olive, joyfully, "may Topo and I live with you?"

"Certainly, dear, if you will. And, when I am gone, whatever property is left shall be yours. Perhaps, when Topo is a man, he may one day rebuild the old house, and become master of King's Court."

"Perhaps so, for Topo is clever, and will be a steady, industrious man, I hope," said Olive, kissing him. "But I do not care much about rebuilding King's Court. My only thought, at present, is how I shall make you forget your long years of sorrow, and become truly happy."

"Thank you, dear child, thank you. I shall try to do as you wish. It will take time, Olive; but in the end, I hope and trust, you may not be disappointed."

CHAPTER XVII.

A PLEASANT SURPRISE FOR OLIVE.

"And Hope, enchanted, smiled, and waved her golden hair."

FROM that hour Mr. Derwent grew rapidly better.

For some days he did not venture farther than the boudoir, where he sat by the window, enjoying the beautiful view. But, as time went on, and he became stronger, Olive would give him her arm, and lead him out into the garden.

"And now, dear child," he said, one afternoon, as they sat together under a shady tree, "we have been here too long. Don't you think we should soon take our departure from Ashford?"

"Yes. But are you strong enough, uncle?" she asked. "Remember, it is only six weeks since your terrible illness."

"I know, dear, and I wonder at myself. As I

lay, half conscious, in the blue room, and watched you flit about me, I thought I should never be strong again. But care and love have done much for me, Olive. You and Mrs. Bell have coaxed me back to life, and I grow stronger every day."

"I am very glad to hear you say so," answered the girl. "But if we leave this, where can we go?"

"Ha!" he said, laughing; "wise as my Olive is, she does not know everything."

"No, indeed, uncle; I know very little for my age."

"I am not so sure of that. But there is one thing that you have not heard."

"What is that, uncle?"

"That about two miles from here I have a cottage with a pretty garden, out of which the tenants went some three months ago."

"I know it. Virginia Lodge. Oh, uncle, are we to live there?"

"Yes. That is, if Mrs. Bell approves of it. She and Topo have gone over there this morning to see what they think of it."

"Why, it is charming," cried Olive, clapping

her hands. "It will be most delightful to live in such a dear little house."

"It is certainly small," he said, sighing. "The world will not think much of us, living in such a hovel."

"But what need we care about the world?" cried Olive, scornfully. "We shall be happy there, no matter what the world thinks. It may be only a hovel, as you call it; but oh, uncle, it will be our home."

"Yes, dear, so it will. I was foolish to repine; but recollections of old times come over me, Olive, and I remember, with anguish, the wealth I have squandered, the happiness I have lost."

"Poor uncle! Forget it all; forget it all. And, after all, it is better for a small family, with only one or two servants, to live in a neat little cottage, than in a big rambling place like King's Court."

"I suppose it is. But every stone of the old house was dear to me, Olive—every room had a memory of its own. I had grown accustomed to my loneliness there during the last few years, and I had almost ceased to regret the loss of my fortune. But since my recovery—since I have

known and loved you—since I have felt your goodness and devotion, I am overwhelmed with grief at my own wicked stupidity."

"You must not think or grieve about it any more, uncle dear," she cried. "Why, to me, the thought of living in that pretty cottage is perfect happiness. I feel enchanted at the idea. The few hundreds a-year that you look upon as poverty is unheard-of wealth to me. Try and feel as I do. I hope—I feel sure that we shall be happy in our new home. So do be thankful to God for having spared you so much."

"I am thankful, dear, very thankful," he said, smiling, "when I hear you talk, and look at your bright eager face."

"And when you find yourself in our dear little house; when you have your own room, and your favourite chair; when the roses are peeping in at your window, and the birds singing sweetly in our garden, then you shall be happy, and the old days of past grandeur will be forgotten."

"Why, you grow very eloquent, my little one."

"Yes," said Olive, laughing and blushing, "I

feel so full of hope and happiness, that I know not what to do or say."

"It does me good to see you so bright. But here come Mrs. Bell and Topo. How the boy jumps and runs. What a strong, bonnie fellow he is."

"Since Topo left London he is a different being; he was pale and delicate then. Now he is as strong as a little mountain pony."

"So he is. What a rate he runs at. Poor Mrs. Bell is left miles behind."

"Yes," said Olive, laughing; "but then Mrs. Bell is old. Well, Topo, why are you in such a hurry?"

"I wanted to get up to you first to tell you the news," he cried, throwing himself down upon the grass. "We have been to see if Virginia Lodge would do for us. It is the jolliest little place in the world. You'll just love it, Olive."

"Does Mrs. Bell think it will do, then?"

"Of course she does. And, uncle, there is a big sitting-room for you, opening into a bedroom, a dear little room for Olive, and a stable for a pony, and a kitchen garden, and a flower garden, and a hen-house: and a——"

"My dear Topo, pray do not talk so fast," cried Olive. "Tell us quietly what the cottage is like."

"Oh, there is nothing more to tell," he answered, waving his handkerchief, and setting up a cheer as Mrs. Bell came across the lawn to her master. "I beat you, you see. My short legs go faster than your long ones."

"I should rather think they did," replied Mrs. Bell, laughing. "One would imagine you had wings, the way you flew over the ground."

"Well, Margaret, what do you think of Virginia Lodge?" asked Mr Derwent. "Will it suit?"

"Admirably. It is small, but neat. There is a pretty well-grown garden, where you can be as secluded and quiet as you please."

"And there are pear-trees, uncle," cried Topo. "I climbed up one, and had such a jolly feed."

"Topo," said Olive, severely, "do not be so greedy."

"No, dear; but they were delicious pears;" and he smacked his lips at the recollection.

"Well, as you all seem pleased at the idea," said Mr. Derwent, "I think we had better agree

to furnish the cottage, and get into it as soon as we can."

"Hurrah! That's prime," cried Topo. "There goes Frank. I shall go and tell him about the pear-trees. He won't lecture me about greediness the way some people do." Then, with a sly wink at Olive, he sprang to his feet, and darted down the avenue after Frank.

"Well, now that that young pickle has taken his departure, we shall be able to talk the matter over more peacefully," said Mrs. Bell. "How are we to manage about the furniture? There are a few things saved from the fire, and——"

"None of those things are to go into the cottage," cried Mr. Derwent. "Let everything be new. It pains me to see the old furniture about me. I wish to forget the past."

"Very well, sir. But what is to be done with it?"

"Store it for Topo. When he rebuilds King's Court he can replace the old things."

"Just as you please. But where shall we get the furniture we require now? There is little choice in Arundel or Chichester."

"Send to London," he answered, promptly. "Mrs. Lester is going up there for a few days. Let Olive go with her; together they can choose what they like. The ordinary articles you can get in Arundel."

"That will be delightful," cried Olive. "But can you spare me, uncle?"

"Spare you? Of course I can. What a vain puss you are," he said, laughing. "Mrs. Bell will look after me, and Topo and the boys will amuse me. Do you begin to imagine I cannot live without you?"

"Oh, no," answered Olive, blushing. "But——"

"But you are a good, unselfish little girl, and think of others before yourself," he said, pinching her cheek. "Go to London, dear, get all you want, and, when you come back, I shall be right glad to see you."

So Olive went to London, and spent several happy days there with Mrs. Lester.

They visited some first-class upholsterers, and chose simple but pretty furniture, suitable in every way for a tiny house like Virginia Lodge.

And when they had given their orders, and purchased all they required, they turned their

backs joyfully on the hot, dusty city, and returned once more to Sussex.

And, as the train puffed into Arundel station, the boys and Lucy rushed forward to meet them, and welcome them home.

"Well, where is the furniture?" cried Topo, gazing about the railway carriage. "I thought you were to bring it with you."

"You silly old goose," replied Olive, hugging him. "How could you think such a thing? It will follow us in a week or so."

"But that is a very long time," he said. "Isn't it, Frank?"

"It will be quite time enough, my boy," answered Frank. "The painters are still at work, you know."

"Yes, I know. But that's Ulric's fault. He's always changing. Uncle said he was to direct the men, because he is an artist. So one day he says a room is to be green, and the next he says, 'No, I'll have it a nice red,' so——"

"No, Topo, that is nonsense," cried Ulric, laughing. "I only changed the colour in Mr. Derwent's sitting-room, because I thought a light shade of terra cotta would look more

cheerful than the dull green they had put on the walls. Isn't that so, Lucy?"

"Yes, that is the true state of the case," said Lucy. "But the fact is, Topo is longing to leave Ashford, and so he thinks the cottage is taking an immense time to get ready. I think it is very unkind of him."

"That is not the reason one bit," cried Topo. "And I love being at Ashford. But I'm just dying to sleep in my little bed-room at Virginia Lodge. It is so pretty."

"Topo likes change, like a great many other small boys," said Mrs. Lester, smiling. "But you must content yourself at Ashford for a few weeks longer, dear, as the carpets and curtains have to be made."

"Oh, I dont mind," said Topo, condescendingly. "But I hope Ulric will not change the walls any more."

"Do not be afraid, old chappie," cried Ulric. "My task is done. Olive has returned. Henceforth all orders must proceed from her."

"What magnificent language," said Olive, laughing. "But when will the painters have finished, do you think?"

"In about ten days, I fancy," replied Ulric. "But I hope you are not as impatient to leave us as Topo is?"

"No; I would rather never leave you. But uncle would like to be in his new home before Mr. Lester comes back from America."

"Then you have nearly a month to spare. Papa will not be home before the beginning of November," said Frank. "Will he, mamma?"

"No. He says he hopes to be with us on the second or third of that month."

"Then you have plenty of time, Olive."

"Plenty," she answered, gaily. "But we must hurry the workmen all the same."

CHAPTER XVII.

HAPPY AT LAST.

"Cometh sunshine after rain,
After mourning joy again."

BUT although Olive did her best to hurry the workmen, it was nearly the end of October before the little party removed from Ashford, and went to live in their new home.

The pleasant atmosphere of the Lester family; the kind attentions with which the children and their mother surrounded Mr. Derwent, had a wonderful effect upon him; and when the hour for departure came round, he felt quite sorry to leave them.

So, when they had been at Virginia Lodge for about a week, he told Olive that he was anxious to gather his young friends around him once more.

"Ask them all to tea, dear," he said, "and let us have some merry games, and a little music."

"Capital!" cried Olive, clapping her hands in delight. "We shall have a royal spread, and call it our house-warming."

Then taking pen and paper, she wrote an elaborate invitation, in her uncle's name, to Mrs. Lester and family.

Topo put on his hat, and, full of joy, hurried off with it to Ashford.

Before long, he came running back with a merry reply, written by Frank in his very best writing. But this was only for Olive's edification, for in another envelope was a note from Mrs. Lester to Mr. Derwent, accepting politely his kind invitation to tea.

Very much delighted at the thoughts of entertaining her friends, Olive ran off to Mrs. Bell to tell her the good news, and to consult her as to what kind of dainties she could procure for the coming feast.

Mrs. Bell told her she might safely leave all that to her. She could make many nice things herself, and could get the rest from Arundel.

So, feeling quite satisfied about the eatables, Olive began to consider what she could arrange for the amusement of her guests.

"If there were only a few more of us here, we might get up a little play," she thought. "But Topo and I could do nothing—two are of no use."

Then having puzzled her brains for some time, and not being able to think of anything, she suddenly resolved to go over to Ashford, and consult the guests themselves.

"We can keep it a secret from Mrs. Lester and uncle," she said to Lucy and the boys; "and I daresay acting in a play yourselves will be more fun to you all than sitting looking on."

"I should just think so," cried Frank. "Fancy me perched quietly on a chair watching Ulric act. I'd soon get tired of the fellow, I am sure. But to hold forth oneself, that will be quite different."

And he strutted up and down the room, reciting the "Burial of Sir John Moore".

"Sit down, Frank," cried Lucy; "how can we think of a play, if you go on like that?"

"Why, even to look at me should inspire you, sister mine," he replied. "Well, what is it to be?" and he flung himself upon the sofa.

"Something from Shakespeare," suggested Ulric.

"Just the thing for such a fine set of actors as we are," said Frank, laughing. "Methinks thou art mad, my noble brother."

"Go to," cried Ulric, "or thou shalt have a thrust from my most trusty sword;" and he made a dive at Frank with his stick.

"Boys, boys, please keep quiet," said Lucy. "Olive has to go home soon, and we have arranged nothing yet."

"Speak, most wise lady," cried Frank, kneeling on one knee, and bowing low; "thy servant is all attention."

"My servant is very troublesome," said Olive, laughing. "But listen."

"With all mine ears. Thy words are like precious pearls. Ahem; methinks I grow poetical," said Frank. "Well?"

"Well, I think, as the time is so short, we had better not attempt a play."

"Oh," groaned Ulric; "I'd have made a splendid Richard III."

"I could have played Hamlet to the life," said Frank.

"Silence!" shouted Ulric. "Let's hear what Olive proposes."

"I think we might get up some tableaux," said Olive. "They will be easier and take less time."

"Capital," cried Frank. "We'll do the 'Babes in the Wood'. I'll make such a sweet babe," and he extended himself full length upon the carpet.

"You boys are too wild to-day," said Lucy, severely. "It is impossible to arrange anything properly for you."

"Yes, quite," said Olive, rising. "I think I had better go. Perhaps you may be more sensible to-morrow."

"Now, sit down, Olive," cried Frank, pushing her gently back upon her chair. "Friends must not quarrel for so little. We are going to be as quiet as mice. You have only to tell us what you want us to do, and we shall do it. Eh, Ulric?"

"Certainly," said Ulric—"certainly."

So, at last, peace was restored, and, after a long and solemn consultation, Olive was escorted home by the boys.

"I think it will be splendid," she said, as she

bade them good-bye. "But not a word to Mrs. Lester. I must tell Mrs. Bell, but uncle shall not hear of it till the evening of the performance."

"Wild horses shall not tear the secret from us," said Frank. "Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said Olive. "I hear my uncle calling me. Our first rehearsal is at two o'clock to-morrow, remember;" and, kissing her hand, she vanished into the cottage.

For the next ten days the air was full of mystery.

Every moment that Olive could spare from her uncle was spent at Ashford. Lucy's room was a mass of rags and clippings; and the most animated conversations, the noisiest laughter, would be instantly hushed when Mrs. Lester appeared at the door.

That something out of the common was going on, that good lady never doubted, but, seeing that the children wished to keep it secret, she paid no attention and asked no questions.

At last the great evening arrived, and Mr. Derwent sat in the little drawing-room, ready to receive his guests.

A great change had taken place in his

appearance since Olive first saw him at King's Court. During his illness his hair had turned snow-white, and had been cut close to his head. He no longer wore the loose flowing garment, in which he had been wont to wander through the lonely old house, but a neat black suit, that Mrs. Bell had purchased for him in Arundel. His face had a calmer, more peaceful expression, and a pleasant smile played about his lips, as he watched his little niece flitting about the room, in her white frock and black ribbons.

"Here they are," cried Topo—"here they are;" and he flew to open the hall door.

In a few moments Mrs. Lester was beside Mr. Derwent, holding his hand in a warm loving clasp.

"Welcome to Virginia Lodge," he said, smiling. "I cannot entertain you here as I did in my old home, years ago. But it gives me great pleasure to see you."

"Thank you," she replied. "May you live many happy years in this pretty place. It is a charming little spot."

"Yes; Olive and Mrs. Bell have worked

wonders, thanks to your kind assistance. They have really furnished it neatly and well. There was money in the bank to pay for everything, it seems. So all has been accomplished without incurring the smallest amount of debt. This is a great comfort to me."

"Doubtless," said Mrs. Lester. "But Mrs. Bell is a wonderful manager. She has a perfect genius for making a little money go far;" and she smiled brightly at the housekeeper, who stood beside her master's chair.

"Does he imagine he had money enough to pay for all this?" asked Frank, glancing round the pretty room. "Why, it cost——"

"Hush," said Olive, putting her finger to her lip; "Mrs. Bell wishes him to think so. It took all her savings and all that he had left. But some of the farm rents came in this week, so he has money in the bank now. It would make him miserable to think he had any debts left."

"Mrs. Bell is wonderfully good," cried Frank. "I am sure no one ever had such a devoted servant."

"Indeed, they never had," said Olive. "She is worth her weight in gold."

"That would be a goodly sum, then."

And as Frank spoke, he looked across the room at Mrs. Bell's buxom figure.

"A goodly sum," answered Olive, following his glance, "yet not half her value. For remember, Frank, the price of a virtuous woman *is* far above rubies."

"Very neatly turned, Miss Olive, upon my word," said Frank. "And now, don't you think we might begin?"

"Yes, I think we may have a little music before tea;" and seating herself at the piano, Olive played the opening bars of a bright chorus from one of the operas.

The other children grouped themselves round her, and the room was soon filled with their fresh young voices.

The words they sang had been written by Frank for the occasion, and were intended to express their joy at Mr. Derwent's recovery, and to wish him every happiness in his new abode.

As the last note died away, the old man rose from his chair, and, with tears in his eyes, thanked them for their kindness and good wishes.

"I was not worthy to find such friends," he

said; "for my life has not been a good one. Such kind-heartedness makes me forget my past troubles, and fills me with gratitude to God. I am growing old. I am poor, and have little power; but your goodness and affection make me thankful to live. God bless you; God bless you."

"God bless you, my master," said Mrs. Bell. "May you live long, and be happy yet."

"Thanks, good friend," he answered, with emotion. "And pray forgive me, for the many years of loneliness and privation I made you pass in that deserted old house."

"Do not mention them," she cried. "They were well spent, when spent in your service."

"Three cheers for Mr. Derwent!" cried Frank. "Three cheers for Mr. Derwent!"

And, with all the strength of their lungs, the young people shouted, till the room rang and echoed with their cheers.

"That is enough," said Mrs. Lester, putting her fingers to her ears. "That is quite noise enough, Frank."

"Quite," said Topo. "And please come to the dining-room. Everything is ready for a lovely tea."

"Topo never forgets the main point," said Mr. Derwent, laughing. "But it is time I remembered my duty;" and, offering his arm to Mrs. Lester, he led her from the room.

The tea was an excellent one, and was fully appreciated by our young friends. Mrs. Bell was warmly thanked and applauded, Frank declaring that she had covered herself with glory.

They were altogether a very merry party. The boys were in wild spirits, and vied with each other in telling funny stories and cracking all kinds of jokes.

The girls and Mrs. Lester joined freely in the fun, whilst Mr. Derwent laughed at their sallies, till the tears ran down his cheeks.

Then, when the good things had been discussed, and ample justice done to Mrs. Bell's dainties, the children rose one by one and slipped quietly away.

"They cannot bear to sit still very long," said Mr. Derwent, smiling. "They have gone off to have a dance, I suppose."

"I do not think so," said Mrs. Lester. "I imagine there is something more exciting than dancing going on."

"Indeed. Well, we shall soon see."

In a short time Topo returned, and, bowing low, presented his uncle and Mrs. Lester with a prettily painted card, on which was neatly printed the following announcement:—

TABLEAUX VIVANTS,

AT 8·30,

IN THE MORNING-ROOM, VIRGINIA LODGE.

An early answer will oblige.

"Well," said Mrs. Lester, laughing, "your invitation is short. But, as we are not otherwise engaged, we accept it with much pleasure. What do you say, Mr. Derwent?"

"I shall be in the morning-room three minutes before the hour named." he answered, brightly. "It will give me great pleasure to see the tableaux."

"That's all right," cried Topo, and away he went.

At twenty-five minutes past eight Mr. Derwent again offered his arm to Mrs. Lester.

"If we start now, we shall just be in time," he said, and then led her down a narrow passage to the little morning-room.

It was gaily lighted up, and prettily decorated with plants and flowers. At the end of the room were two arm-chairs, and to these Topo conducted the audience with much pomp and ceremony.

Now the window in this apartment opened into a small conservatory, in which, so far, there had never been any plants; in this the children had arranged their tableaux.

A crimson curtain hung before it, and, in large gold letters, appeared the word—

"WELCOME".

"Very nice, indeed," said Mrs. Lester. "I had no idea the young people had so much taste."

"They are really wonderful," replied Mr. Derwent. "I never suspected there was anything going on here. How Olive managed it all I cannot think."

But, as he spoke, the crimson cloth went slowly up, showing another curtain, on which was printed—

"THE STORY OF THE SLEEPING BEAUTY".

Then that was quickly raised, and a pretty picture was displayed to view.

The little conservatory had been made to resemble the turret chamber. Olive, her beautiful fair hair about her shoulders, and dressed in a long flowing robe of white muslin, trimmed with gold, was the princess; whilst Lucy, in a short red skirt, white neckerchief, and high-crowned hat, sat at the spinning-wheel, tempting the young girl to play with the distaff.

The audience clapped vigorously, and, each time the curtain rose, were more and more delighted with what they saw.

At last, having gone through the various stories of the Sleeping Beauty, Red Riding Hood, and Blue Beard, the children came forward and sang a merry chorus, announcing that all was over, the house-warming at an end.

"You have done everything beautifully," said Mr. Derwent; "and I thank you very much."

"You have shown great ingenuity," said Mrs. Lester. "For your materials were limited, and yet you did everything extremely well."

"Necessity is the mother of invention," cried Frank, laughing. "And you forget we have an artist in the family."

"Not to mention a poet," exclaimed Ulric. "Weren't the words of our songs capital, mother? Frank wrote them all."

"Very good, indeed. But who made the dresses? They were quite artistic."

"Ulric designed and directed. Mrs. Bell, Olive, and Lucy made them up," said Frank. "They have got clever fingers."

"And Topo gave the invitation cards very nicely," said Mrs. Lester, smiling, and patting the child's rosy cheek. "He made a charming Red Riding Hood, too. I should never have known he was a boy."

"Topo is a brick," cried Frank. "He's the most obliging little chap ever was, always ready to run a message, or do any single thing he is asked."

"So Mrs. Bell was saying yesterday," said Mrs. Lester, "and I was glad to hear her speak so well of him. You and she get on nicely now, Topo?"

"Oh, yes," answered Topo. "I love Mrs. Bell now. She is always very good to me."

"That is right, dear. I thought you would love her when you came to know her properly."

Here a loud knock at the hall door startled them.

"Who can it be?" they cried together.

"May I come in?" asked a cheery voice.

"Papa! Papa!" shouted the young Lesters. "We are glad to see you."

"Well, this is a surprise," said Mrs. Lester, joyfully, as she found herself in her husband's arms. "I had no idea you could get home so soon."

"You all seem very happy," remarked Mr. Lester, looking round at the laughing faces. "But why are you here?"

"Because——" began Frank.

"My dear husband, do you not remember your friend, Mr. Derwent?" said Mrs. Lester, leading him towards the old man, who had

withdrawn a little from the happy family party.

"Of course I do," he answered, shaking Mr. Derwent warmly by the hand. "I have heard of your troubles, and sympathize with you deeply."

"Thank you," said the old man, tremulously. "You have a good wife and noble children, Frank Lester. You should be proud and happy."

"I am both," replied Mr. Lester, smiling, "and right glad to be home again."

"But we did not expect you till to-morrow, papa," said Lucy.

"No, dear; but I hope you are not sorry that I stole a march upon you?" he said, gaily.

"No, no, papa, I should just think not," cried the children together.

"That's right. The boat got in sooner than we expected, so I came on home at once. To my surprise, I found Ashford deserted, and was told you were here."

"Yes; Mr. Derwent has given a house-warming, and we have had great fun," cried Frank. "It is a pity you did not arrive an

hour or so earlier. You would have seen some magnificent tableaux."

"I am afraid I should have been too tired to enjoy them," he answered. "I am so sleepy, I can scarcely keep my eyes open."

"That is from having been so many days upon the sea," said his wife. "But you shall not be kept out of bed much longer. Come, children, we must go home now."

And, gathering the young people about her, Mrs. Lester bade her host good-night, and hurried out to the carriage.

But the children were not easily separated. They had many last words to say to each other, many remarks to make about their wonderful performance.

However, as their father and mother grew impatient, the Lesters were forced to cut short their lively sallies, and get into their places.

So, after a great deal of preparation and tucking up, they were ready, and, amidst cheering and waving of hats, the carriage drove off to Ashford.

Mr. Derwent and Olive stood together at the door; and as the boys' merry voices grew fainter,

and at last died away in the distance, the little girl approached her uncle, and laid her cheek caressingly against his hand.

"We have had a very happy evening," she whispered. "I hope we have not tired you too much."

"No, dear," he answered, taking her in his arms. "I have been happy also."

"I am so glad, uncle—so glad."

"Not as glad as I am, dear. And, from my heart, I thank my Heavenly Father for His great goodness to me. From this day, Olive, I shall never again repine at my lowly lot. I feel now that I can be happy here, with you and Topo to love and care for me."

"That is good news for me, uncle, and Mrs. Bell will be delighted to hear it too."

"Yes, so she will. God bless you both. For, with God's help, you two have touched my hardened heart, and taught me to remember my Creator."

"It was not so hard after all, uncle."

"Perhaps not. But it was hardening fast. Now, thank God, it is quite changed. I am not rich, and intend to live quietly here; but I hope and trust that I shall no longer

deserve that hateful name that I once rejoiced to hear."

"You shall never hear it again, I am sure," cried Olive, brightly. "For, by your own noble conduct, by your generous kindness to two little orphan children, you have prevented its ever being used again. "You, yourself, dear uncle, have put an end to the Miser of King's Court."

THE END.