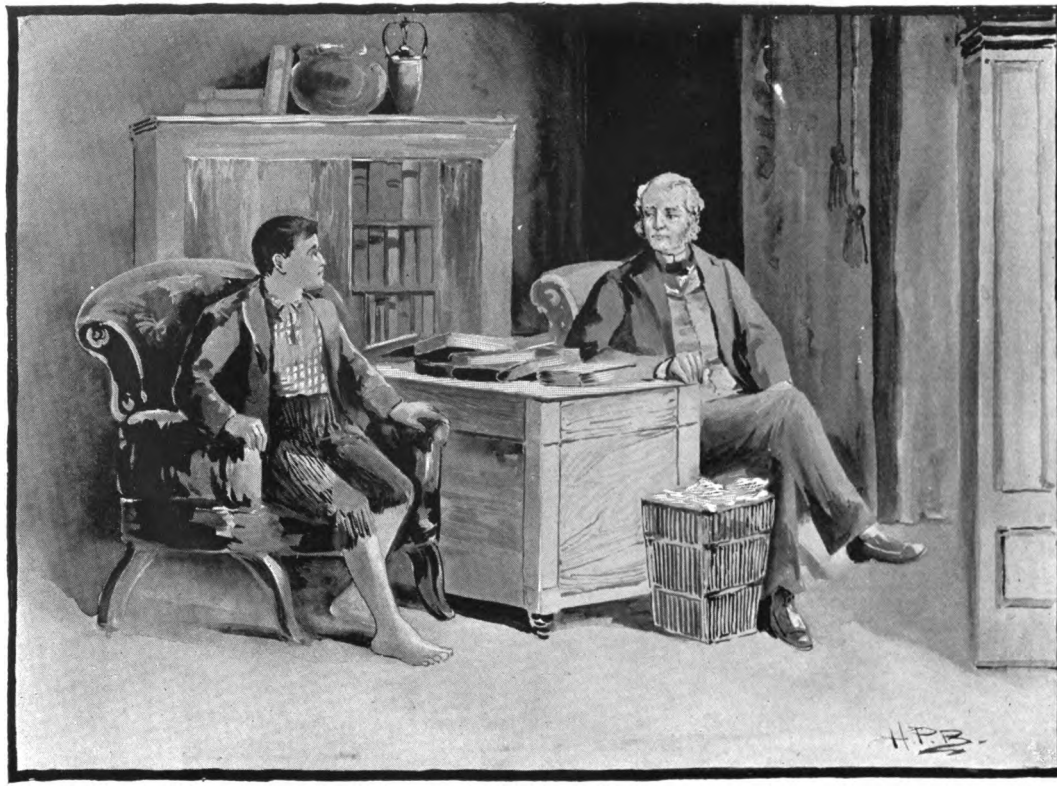
THE PANSY BOOKS



HE FELT THE JUDGE'S STERN EYES FIXED UPON HIM. (*See page* 68.)

REUBEN'S HINDRANCES

AND

HOW HE MADE THEM HELPS TOWARD PROGRESS

A Story for Boys

BY

"PANSY"
(MRS. G. R. ALDEN)

AUTHOR OF "ESTER RIED," "WANTED," "OVERRULED," "THE PRINCE OF PEACE," ETC.

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REUBEN'S HINDRANCES.

CHAPTER I.

HINDERED BY FIRE.

IT was November, but the weather wouldn't have told you so; the grass was green, and the roses and tulips and all manner of bright flowers were in bloom; and there was sunshine everywhere. Groups of girls in white dresses and no wraps walked leisurely along the streets; occasionally one fanned herself with her broad-brimmed hat, and said, "How hot it is!" Yet it was almost Thanksgiving Day.

Oh! it snowed in some parts of the world that day; the papers told about an unusually heavy fall of snow, — about sleet, and drifts, and sharp, cutting winds. The girls in white would have laughed at the thought of such a thing; they could not imagine frost and snow anywhere; they lived in Florida — away down on the peninsula, where snow never comes, and even the frost just touches the flowers

once in a while ; almost like a kiss, for lightness, is his touch in that part of the world — and the girls may wear white dresses and flower-wreaths at Christmas as well as at Thanksgiving, and are liable at any time through the year to be complaining of the heat.

Out in the country, at least two miles away from the groups of merry young people in their white dresses and flower-trimmed hats, was Reuben Stein, hurrying along as fast as tired feet would take him. A hurried boy was Reuben, nearly always. He worked for his board and clothes at Mr. Hardman's ; and though the board was so poor that Reuben often went hungry, and his clothes were of the poorest, and worn until he felt ashamed to be seen on the street by daylight, they seemed to cost a great deal ; for work as he might all day and every day, he was constantly told that he was not worth the salt which it took to season his food. When Reuben was younger, he might have seasoned his food with his tears, had they been shed at the right time, and not saved up until he was safe in his bed for the night ; but as he grew older, and reached the age of fourteen, he made up his mind that tears did no good — only unfitted him for his work the next day, and that he would brave it out and do the best he could ; one of these days he would be old enough to run away, and then the

Hardmans would never see him again. Just how old he would have to be before he ran away, he had never quite decided — nor how he was going to manage it, since he had long before settled it that he would never be a tramp ; but when he ran, would wear good clothes and have enough money in his pocket to pay for his food, and a decent place in which to sleep. A respectable, gentlemanly sort of runaway Reuben meant to be.

It would not, however, be right to leave you to suppose that Mr. Hardman was cruel, or that he intended to half starve Reuben. The truth is, the Hardmans were very poor, and had a trying time themselves ; they worked hard every day of their lives, not excepting Sundays. Often it was as much as they could do to get themselves enough to eat. Often the older children went hungry, too, though it was Reuben's turn oftener than it was the others'. Perhaps that was but natural ; Reuben felt this himself, and would not have minded the hunger, or the ragged clothes, half so much if he had not been scolded and grumbled at every day of his life. Still, in their way, the Hardmans had been good to Reuben Stein ; they thought they had been very good. When his father and mother died, both in the same week, during that awful yellow fever year, were they not the ones who came forward and offered him a home until he could do better ? And

while they had grown poorer each year, had Reuben ever been able to do better?

Reuben, as he hurried along on this November afternoon, went over the story of the years, as he so often did, and wondered if there would ever be a way out. While he owned to himself that the Hardmans had been as good to him as perhaps people like them could be, and told himself for the hundredth time that when he got to be a man, and had a home, and money, he would be sure to remember them — nevertheless, he told himself, also, that he did not believe he could stand it much longer; and that if he did not get this place in view, he believed he should die. He felt the more sure of this because he had strong hope of securing the place. Only the night before, he had seen in the village paper the advertisement of a Northern gentleman who was boarding at a farm-house three miles out. He wanted a strong boy of twelve or fourteen to go North with him as an attendant and care-taker of a little invalid lad who needed somebody with him all day. One who applied must know how to read and write, and must be willing to give his whole time during the day to his charge.

Now, it happened that Reuben was what is called a natural reader; though really I do not think there was any "happen" about it. His mother had been a good reader, and had taught him when quite

young to read carefully and with expression. Since he had been left alone in the world he had had very little to read; the Hardmans were not people who cared much for any sort of reading, and besides had no money to spend for even a weekly paper. The consequence was, that Reuben read and re-read the few books and magazines that had been given to him when the home was broken up; and because they were well worth reading, he learned more, perhaps, than he would if he had had plenty of books and papers. When the advertisement called for somebody who knew how to read, his heart beat faster over the hope that here was his chance. What more reasonable than to suppose that part of the duties of the place would be to read to the invalid boy? Of course books would be provided, and it was possible that among them might be some of the very ones about which his mother had talked, and which he had so longed to read. Whether they were or not, Reuben was sure to like whatever was to be read; so fond of it was he that he enjoyed reading the very advertisements as he went along the village streets. As for the writing, he chuckled to himself as he remembered how his mother had prided herself on the clear, round hand which he wrote, and told him that perhaps it would make his fortune some day. What if the time had come for his fortune to begin? As

he hurried over the road he told himself that he had been very "lucky" to get hold of that paper last night, and see that advertisement. If it had not been for his having to trudge back to the grocery after the saleratus that Nancy forgot to tell him about when he went for the meal, he shouldn't have seen it; and he also told himself that he would never grumble again about having things go wrong, as he did all the way back to the grocery. At this point he came to a sudden halt. He was passing a young orange-grove, whose small, straight trees were leaved in lovely green. It was not the trees which arrested his steps, but the fence, or rather, what was going on at the foot of the fence. Actually a fire! and looking for all the world as though it had been set; for there was a little pile of pine boughs near by, as though they had been brought there to feed the fire. It was burning briskly now, and as the fence was largely made of pine, would be likely to burn briskly. "It will go all around the grove!" said Reuben to himself, "and worse than that, it will creep along the bushes to the young trees and ruin them. Why, it might even reach the house and burn it. I must put it out." Suiting the action to the thought, he began to pull away the wood from around the fire, and to separate the parts which were then burning, and smothered the blaze. It was still a small fire, having evidently

REUBEN CAME TO A SUDDEN HALT.

been started but a few minutes. A little vigorous pulling and beating left only smoking embers, which Reuben separated so far from each other that they could not act as feeders. He would have been better satisfied with his work if he could have poured a few pails of water on it, but the house for which he had had fears was far back in the grove, and had the appearance of being shut up. "The folks are not at home," said Reuben, still talking to himself, as he strode through the grove and looked carefully at the closed blinds. "I don't believe I could get in to get any water; and I don't believe it is necessary. I guess I have put it all out; and I've got to hurry if I get there before four o'clock. 'Apply at the Portland farm before four o'clock on Tuesday;' that is what it said. I'm pretty near a mile from there this minute, and by the looks of the sun it isn't far from four o'clock. What if I should be too late!"

The thought lent wings to his feet; although at the same time he really had little fear of being too late. He knew the neighborhood pretty well, and did not think of another boy besides himself — who would be likely to care for such a chance as that — who could meet the requirements. There was Vick Brasier who wanted a place, and who had been threatening all summer to run away if nothing opened; but Vick was a horrid reader, and

as for writing, he could not write his own name so he could be sure of it himself an hour afterwards. There was little to be feared from that source. Still, the Portland farm was only four miles away from the next village, and there might be boys there whom he did not know. Anyhow, it would not do to be late. He was speeding over the ground again, having decided that his fire was safe, when, as he turned the corner to reach the road which led directly to the Portland farm, he made another full stop. Those scamps, whoever they were, had started another fire around this side. It had failed them, to be sure, but not before it had done a little harm, and some of the embers still had a good deal of life in them; and there was more danger on this side than on the other, for the breeze which was already sprung up, always came from this way, and might fan those embers into flames. Reuben looked at the sun and felt sure it was almost four o'clock. He had tried to get an earlier start, but it seemed as though Nancy Hardman wanted more things done for her that afternoon than ever before. He looked toward the house in the distance; it was as much shut up on this side as on the other, and besides, he had seen Mr. Fenning's carriage pass early in the afternoon with Mr. Fenning himself and three ladies in it. And Ann Jones, who lived next door to their house,

told Nancy, in the morning, that she and Mrs. Fenning's cook were going to the circus that afternoon. He felt sure there was nobody at home, but he would run up there and knock. The boy who did chores might be around somewhere. So he ran with all speed, and knocked hard, and received no answer. He came back and looked at the fire. Should he go on and leave it to take care of itself? No, there was really danger here; those embers had more life in them than he had supposed; one had broken into a blaze while he was gone; and all along was a trail of pine boughs which contained a good deal of pitch. Moreover, half-burned bits were scattered along close to the fence; it was very dry, and there was no telling how soon they might blaze; in fact, some of them were blazing now. There was no help for it; he must make it safe for the people who lived in that house before he took another step. It was harder work than before; the fire would break out in another place after he thought he had entirely conquered it. If there was only some way to get water! But that was not to be had without getting into the locked house; he must depend on sand and beating. At last, after a full hour of busy work, during which all the dangerous-looking bits of pine were gathered and carried to a safe place, Reuben felt that he could go on with a clear

conscience. He took the precaution to run around the grove this time to make sure there were no more attempts at setting it on fire, and then made what speed he could to the Portland farm, much troubled all the way by two thoughts: First, would he be too late to have his trip do any good? Secondly, what would Mr. Hardman say to him for being gone so long? Of course it would never do to say anything about the Portland farm to Mr. Hardman; he believed that Reuben's only errand this afternoon was to see if the Sedgwick boys could come with their team and help Mr. Hardman plough his grove the next day. Now, the Sedgwick boys lived a half a mile this side of the Fenning place. What kind of a story could he tell Mr. Hardman? If he explained about the fire, which was really what had delayed him, — for by running every step of the way, he had calculated that he could get back from the Portland farm in about the time that he would be expected to take, — he would of course be asked what he was doing near the Fenning place. There is no denying that matters looked gloomy to Reuben Stein. Nevertheless, he meant to visit the Portland farm before he went home that night.

It was a very pleasant farm-house, with long, wide piazzas running all around. The house itself was set in an orange-grove, whose beautiful dark

foliage made a dense shade. On the south piazza was a wheel-chair of a peculiar shape, and lying back among its cushions was a fair-faced boy of about Reuben's age, though he was so slight and pale that he looked to Reuben much younger. Beside him, in an arm-chair, sat a middle-aged man with an open book in his lap, from which he had evidently just been reading; though he laid it down to watch Reuben as he hurried, out of breath, up the long carriage-drive.

"Only see how fast he can walk," said the sick boy, watching Reuben with keen interest.

"Yes," said the man cheerily, "that is the way you will be walking through the world when you get well and strong again."

The boy's only answer was a faint smile; he did not believe in his heart that he would ever walk in that way or any other, again; but he did not tell his father so.

"Is this Mr. Oliver?" asked Reuben; and then, all but breathless with the haste he had made, as well as with anxiety, he told his errand.

"I am sorry, my boy," said Mr. Oliver; "but you are — let me see," and he drew a handsome gold watch from its pocket, "yes, you are exactly fifteen minutes too late. It is just that length of time since the boy whom we have decided to try, went from the door. He wasn't in all respects

satisfactory; but as this is the third time we have advertised, and we could not delay our journey longer, we decided to try him."

"O father!" exclaimed the invalid, a little pink flushing into his cheeks.

His father turned and looked at him inquiringly. "You like the looks of this boy better than the other, Charlie? To tell the truth, so do I. But we promised to try him, you know; we must keep our word, must we not?"

"I suppose so, sir," said Charlie wearily.

"I am really very sorry," said Mr. Oliver; "if you had only been fifteen minutes earlier."

There was no occasion for staying longer; yet Reuben lingered, partly because it seemed to him that he could not go back home. He found, now that it was all over, that he had built very strong hopes on this chance. If it had not been for that fire he would have been in time. Mr. Oliver seemed much interested in him, asked many questions, and so did Charlie. In fact, they were so sympathetic that he found himself telling about the fire, and the trouble he had putting it out. "And I put myself out by the means, it seems," he said mournfully.

"Well," said Mr. Oliver, "I'll tell you what, my boy; we will take your name and address, and keep you in mind; something might occur very

soon which would make it desirable for us to make a change. Who knows? We are sorry not to have seen you earlier, but at the same time I cannot be sorry that you stopped to put out the fire. Nobody loses anything in the end by doing right. That is my doctrine."

CHAPTER II.

A LOST SUPPER.

AS soon as Reuben was far enough down the road to make it safe to appear, two boys dodged out of the woods where they had evidently been hiding, and looked about them.

"Yes, sir, he's done it!" exclaimed one of them in an excited tone as he stooped and examined the remains of the fire. "Put it all out; every spark! there isn't the ghost of a chance to start it again without matches, and I haven't got a single one left. The mean little coot! What right had he to interfere with us, I'd like to know. I'll pay him for this, see if I don't."

"He didn't know it was us," ventured his companion.

"Well, what if he didn't! He knew it was somebody — and he hadn't any cause to interfere. What are you saying that for?" he added in an angry tone; "are you trying to stand up for him?"

"No, I ain't," said the other, looking injured.

"I'm only thinking you better be careful, talking as if he knew it was us. And you can't pay him off without being found out; that's what I'm thinking of."

"Trust me for that. I'm not green, I guess — your business is to do as I tell you, and let me take care of the rest. What I say is, that fellow has spoiled our plan, and he shall pay for it, or my name ain't Joel Potter."

That his name was Joel Potter the teacher in his ward of the public school could have testified to her sorrow. Nobody knew any good of him, nor, indeed, of any one of his name. What excuse a boy has for going wrong, Joel Potter could plead. His father had been out of the penitentiary but six months, and those who knew him best prophesied that he would soon be back there.

His mother was a broken-spirited woman, who kept her house in filth, and her children in rags, and cared little where they were, so they did not "bother" her.

Joel inherited from his father, among other evil things, a revengeful spirit; if a person was so unfortunate as to excite his anger in any way, he could not rest until he had, as he said, "paid him off." The last person who had crossed his path was Judge Fenning.

The Judge had come upon him at the school-

house door one morning when he was in the act of setting a snare for the unsuspecting feet of his teacher, which would be likely to trip her up the moment she attempted to cross the threshold. It is an old trick, I know, but Joel made no pretence at smartness. Old tricks, so that they were mean enough, suited him perfectly. And he chuckled at the thought of Miss Benson "sprawling flat on the ground" — which was the refined way in which he pictured the scene to himself.

Judge Fenning, who was a trustee of the building, had been examining one of the rooms that needed repairing, and came in contact with Joel on his way out. He discovered the fine wire just in time to save himself from a fall; and his words to Joel were sharp and to the point. He not only ordered the wire up, but waited to see his order obeyed — and went away presently, with the wire in his pocket, and a threat to Joel to give him what he deserved if he ever heard of such pranks being played.

It was for this reason that Joel, whose wrath rose steadily the longer he nursed it, contrived the plan of firing Judge Fenning's fence. I should not say he contrived the plan; the truth is, he got it out of a wretched dime novel which he had been reading. It was especially unfortunate for Joel to get hold of a book with anything evil in it, because

he was one of those boys who always copied the bad and let the good alone. One thing ought to be said for him; he was too ignorant to know, and too heedless to think, whether or not the fire would do other damage than that of burning down the fence; that was as far as his intention went. Possibly he might even have planned some other way of being revenged if he had thought of the house burning down, for instance; but that he did not think of it when the idea occurred to Reuben Stein the minute he saw the fire, shows what sort of a boy he was in that respect. As for his companion, he was one of those hopelessly weak boys who seem compelled to follow the example of those with whom they are for the moment. If Bennie Wilcox could have been fastened all his life to a good and true boy, he might really have made somebody, for he was willing to copy good as well as bad examples. What a pity that the bad ones were so much more easy to find than the good! What a pity, also, that the good boys who might have helped him were so thoughtless and indifferent; often passing him by with a good-natured, half-contemptuous "hello," and leaving him in the very midst of temptation, when a few words from them, and a few minutes spent in winning him, might have saved him. Such boys will have a great deal to answer for, one of these days. Yet

after all, I confess to having very little patience with Bennie Wilcox. Hadn't he a mother at home who cried over his wrong-doings, and begged him each morning, when he left her, to be a good boy that day? And hadn't he promised his father when he lay dying, that he would try to grow up to take his place, and always be good to his mother? Why need a boy who had made such a promise allow himself to become the tool of a fellow like Joel Potter?

"Yes, sir," said Joel, walking around the scene of his late fire, "that fellow has upset the whole of it; we won't have time — hello! I don't know but we will if you will lick it around the corner to Colonel Payton's and borrow some matches, we might get the thing to going again before old Fenning gets back."

"Oh, no!" said Bennie, who was already tired of his part of the work, which had been to wait on Joel without the prospect of getting any fun out of it; they couldn't even stand around and see the fire burn, lest they should be caught and suspected. "There wouldn't be time; it is getting late now; let's let it go till another time. I say, Joe," in a changed and excited tone, "what if that should be Judge Fenning coming down the road! — I hear horses coming."

Sure enough; Joel had just time to turn and look,

and then to run for the woods without waiting for another word. Judge Fenning's horses were coming at a rapid rate. Bennie, with shorter legs and stouter body, ran as fast as he could, but was not sure that the friendly trees hid him in time for Judge Fenning's keen eyes to escape him.

"We 'most got caught," he said, dropping into a little heap and panting for breath; "I dunno but he saw us after all."

"We!" said Joel, with exasperating calmness; "speak for yourself, little chap. He didn't see me; and if he did, what of it! Haven't I as good a right to be rambling through the woods as the next one? Don't be such a ninny! Somebody has been firing Judge Fenning's fence, and we stopped to look at the damages; that was all."

Bennie regarded him with open-mouthed wonder, and then laughed. He actually thought that this was a sign of smartness in Joel. It had not occurred to him until that minute that he could tell a lie, and so escape being blamed for the fire. Poor, weak Bennie! It is very sad to think what an apt pupil he was.

"What in the world has been going on here!" said Judge Fenning, looking about him in surprise as the burned fence caught his eye. "Hold on, Caleb, look at the fence."

Caleb was looking, making his eyes large with

astonishment. "What do you make out of that?" asked his master at last. "Has some stray spark from a careless cigar set it on fire?"

"It is my opinion, Judge," said Caleb, with the gravity of a judge on the bench, "that that there ain't got no accident about it. It have been set afire, or my name ain't Caleb Joshua Abram Peters."

"Oh! please drive on," said Mrs. Fenning, putting her head out of the carriage window; "I'm so afraid Alice will reach home before us. The child would not know what to think at finding us all gone."

"Alice is all right," said Judge Fenning; "but look at the fence, Fanny." Nevertheless, he gave the order to drive on up the avenue. As soon as the ladies were helped out and had vanished inside the door, he returned with Caleb to the burned fence. They drove slowly around the grove, and discovered evidences of fire on the south side, also, and noted the fact that some effort had been made to clear a space. Caleb called attention to this. "Somebody has done took away a heap of brush, Judge, since morning. I was noticing it when I was down this way. 'Pete,' says I, 'there's a heap of stuff on the south side that would feed a fire this dry weather, first rate.' Says I, 'it ought to be took away,' but Pete he allowed that he couldn't do it to-day

nohow, 'cause he must plough around them trees at the other grove; but somebody done took it away."

"I wonder who?" said the judge thoughtfully; "and I wonder who could have started a fire here in the first place — always supposing it was started intentionally. I have no enemies that I know of."

"Dar ain't no accident, 'pend upon that!" said Caleb again with marked earnestness; "accidents don't start up just alike twice in one afternoon; two sparks from cigars don't start in two places on the same fence, nohow; accidents don't go that way."

Judge Fenning admitted to himself the force of this; and then something happened which put all idea of the fire out of his mind. Miss Geraldine Carleton, who was visiting at the Fennings, and had been to town with them, now came running down from the house, calling eagerly: "Oh! Mr. Fenning, Alice has fallen down the back stairs and hurt herself dreadfully, we are afraid. Mrs. Fenning wants you to come as quick as you can, and send Caleb for the doctor."

Whereupon Judge Fenning gave the order in quick, sharp tones, and then went with all speed to the house.

Not long afterwards, Reuben Stein made his way rapidly down the road toward the Hardmans.

He glanced at the sun anxiously as he walked. Mr. Hardman would be sure to question him as to this afternoon's work; for he was certainly late. If it had not been for that fire, he could not only have secured the situation, but have got back in time to have had his absence unnoticed, but whatever he said must be truth. He had not decided what to say. Mr. Hardman, without being what could be called cruel, was often severe. If he should send Reuben to bed without his supper, the boy half believed he should starve; his dinner had been none too hearty.

"I never saw a fellow with such luck as mine," he murmured, although it was not two hours since he had determined never again to grumble at his luck.

Arrived at the Hardman home, what was his surprise to find it in silence and darkness.

Not even a light in the out-kitchen, where Nancy was generally at work at this hour of the day. It was *quite* dark, for they have no twilight in that part of the country; almost as soon as the sun disappears from the sky, unless the moon has taken his place, darkness settles over the earth; and it seems to come in a moment of time. When Reuben passed the Fenning place the sun was still shining; he remembered it, because, hurried as he was, he had paused and given a careful look about

to make sure that no further harm had come from the fire. Yet when he reached home, he stumbled through the dark kitchen, and had much trouble in finding matches and lamp. What could have become of all the folks? It did not seem possible that they could have gone to bed so early as this, although they were given to early hours. Having nothing to read, and but little sewing to do, time hung heavily on the hands of even Nancy, after dark. Having lighted the smoky little lamp, Reuben held it high and gazed about him. No signs of supper, unless a hump on the corner of the kitchen table with a tin basin turned over it might stand for something to eat. Wait; what was that pinned to the wall near where his own small lamp stood, with just oil enough in it to get him to bed, if he made all speed after it was lighted. A piece of paper with some writing on it; Nancy's square, business-like hand. It must be intended for him to read. He unfolded it with a curious feeling tugging at his heart. Something must have happened. He was not in the habit of having notes written to him. Holding the paper to the dim light, he read: —

"You've got paid for your laziness, for once! Uncle Kastor has come for us all to go there to supper and to a merry-making in the evening. We sha'n't be at home till late. You'll find your supper under the tin on the table, if

you get home in time to eat any. Uncle Kastor asked for you, and offered to wait a spell for you, but father told him you had been gone long enough to be back three times over, and it served you right. Take care of the lamp, and don't do any mischief of any sort; just eat your supper and leave the matches where we can find them, and get yourself off to bed as quick as you can."

The note was not signed, and needed no signing; Reuben would have known Nancy's style anywhere. He folded the paper, and stood like one stunned. How persistently his luck had followed him. "Uncle Kastor" was his one friend in all this world. A jolly, warm-hearted man; Mrs. Hardman's own brother, and as unlike her husband as a man could well be. Poor he was, but with a different sort of poverty from that of his brother-in-law. Some way or other, his large family always managed to have enough to eat; and they all, from the father down to the youngest, contrived to have good times. Money was almost as scarce there as it was at Mr. Hardman's, so Uncle Kastor, with the best intentions in the world, could never help his sister's family in that way; but he had a fashion of swooping down upon them once in two or three months, and carrying them all off to supper in his log cabin, three miles away through the woods. And what a jolly supper it always was! Wild turkey, which one of the boys

"had the luck to shoot the other day;" fish, that another of them "happened to catch;" sweet potatoes, cooked as only Uncle Kastor's wife knew how to cook them; and better than all, to Reuben's hungry heart, merry faces, and much laughing, and hearty, kindly words, for him as well as for the others. In fact, Uncle Kastor, having only words to offer, bestowed them with special care on Reuben, seeming to have a dim realization of his loneliness and homesickness. Next to the misery of having lost his one chance of getting away out of the country, no bitterer trial could have come to him than to have lost this evening at Uncle Kastor's. If it had not been for that fire, he could have reached home in ample time. No doubt Uncle Kastor waited for him as long as he could; he knew his kind heart. And now they were probably just sitting down to the table, with everything smoking hot, and smelling, oh so delicious! and a place left vacant where he would have been tucked in. Uncle Kastor always contrived to have the table large enough for him to sit down with the rest. Despite his fourteen years, and his determination to be manly, Reuben put up his smoke-begrimed hand and brushed away great hot tears. By and by, he went toward the tin basin; he was very hungry. Two biscuits, large and heavy, and yellow with soda, lay waiting for him,

and beside them, half of a cold sweet potato. This was all. There are boys who would have scorned to touch such a supper. But Reuben was too hungry for that. Besides, he had sense enough to know that Nancy had done the best she could for him. They lived in a country where milk was a luxury, and butter hardly less so. And Nancy did not know how to make biscuits. Reuben ate every crumb; he even looked hungrily about him, and wished that he had another; but not for anything would he have opened the pantry door and tried to find more. After that, there was nothing to be done but to follow Nancy's advice, and get himself off to bed. And his pillow, if he had had one, would have been wet that night with tears.

CHAPTER III.

THAT OTHER BOY.

THE week following Reuben's disappointment was a hard one for him. It seemed impossible for him to forget that he had been so near to good fortune and lost it. As the days passed, this feeling seemed to grow stronger, rather than lessen, as he hoped it would. He made himself miserable by asking over and over again why it had to be as it was. Why, for instance, need that fence around the orange-grove have taken fire just when it did? Or, if it must needs burn, why did he have to see it and stop, and be hindered long enough to lose his chance? Not only that, but he must lose his chance of a visit at Uncle Kastor's. And not only that, but both of these losses were connected with another.

When the Hardman family came home, which was not until the next day, Uncle Kastor brought them; and from him Reuben learned that a man whom he called "well to do," had been looking for a boy to spend the winter with him, and do chores

and go to school; Uncle Kastor had thought at once of Reuben, and been resolved to give him the chance. "I didn't say anything about it," he explained, "because it would look like trying to get you away from my brother's folks, don't you see? but all the same I knew you hankered after school, and it seemed to me that you ought to have the chance; and I told the man I would bring you along down with me, and he could see what a likely chap you were. And I knew he would take a notion to you, and make you an offer. That is the very reason I swooped down on the folks that day; and lo and behold, you weren't home at all! I tried my level best to have them wait till you came, but they felt sure you wasn't coming back till after dark, since you'd staid so long; and I didn't think Mr. Peters would wait much after dark. And I couldn't explain things, you know, so there was nothing for it but to drive off without you; but I tell you I kind of hoped all the way that you would get back just after we started, and run on and overtake us, and I drove as slow as I could — and Peters, he waited till the moon came up, to see you. I guess I could have got him to wait till to-day, if a shack of a boy hadn't come along within an hour after we got home, looking for a place; and Peters, who always likes to do things up in a hurry, took him."

This story had been very hard for Reuben to listen to. It did seem discouraging, that a second time in one day he should be so near the end of his ambition and yet should fail. All this because some wicked man, or boy, chose to set fire to a fence. "If I only knew what rascal did it!" said Reuben to himself, setting his lips firmly the while, "I'd like to choke him; mean old wretch! Spoiling all my chances in life just for the sake of having a little fun!" Work at Mr. Hardman's never seemed so hard as it did during those trying days. It was almost more than he could do to get through the weary round that he hated, not so much because it was hard, as because it seemed as though he accomplished almost nothing, and because it was always accompanied with sharp, or at least cross words.

One evening, nearly a week after his trip to the Portland Farm, he sat in the kitchen before his untasted supper; it was only a piece of corn-bread and a dish of molasses — and his appetite seemed to have deserted him. He had been late in getting home that evening, through no fault of his. Old Dingle, the sorrowful-looking cow which the Hardmans kept, had seen fit to stray much farther away than usual, and had led him a long, tiresome walk through sand and across patches of woods. When at last, very tired, he succeeded in bringing her

safely home, Mr. Hardman had scolded as though it had been Reuben who had run away, instead of the cow — even going so far as to give him a box on the ear, which tingled with the blow, but not so much as his nerves did over the thought of it. His mother had never boxed his ears, and it was a form of correction that he hated; while Mr. Hardman apparently enjoyed administering it. Of course it did not make matters any cheerier for Reuben to reflect that he had done nothing that called for punishment of any sort; on the contrary, he had stoutly resisted the inclination to come back without Dingle, and declare that he could not find her; and had gone on and on, until it seemed that his feet could carry him no farther, before he caught the sound of her bell in the distance.

I said it was harder for Reuben because he did not deserve blame; but, after all, I cannot see why a sensible boy could not have got comfort out of that thought. If one could only realize how much better it is to be blamed for nothing than for something, one could take such things better. Reuben, however, realized nothing of the kind; his heart was swelling with indignation, and there was such a lump in his throat that it seemed to him he would have choked if he had tried to swallow a mouthful. He had torn his blouse in a scramble through some of the low bushes. He had stepped on the sand

spurs with bare feet until they felt full of thorns, and he was so tired that even the effort of carrying the corn-cake to his mouth seemed too much for him. He leaned his elbow on the corner of the kitchen table which was free from dishes, leaned his head on his hand, and let one or two great tears roll slowly down his sunburned, dusty cheek. You will remember that he did not often cry in these days; that he did so this evening was a proof of how utterly tired and discouraged he was. He had just been telling himself that he hadn't a friend in the world.

It did seem sad and strange that in all this great world there was not only no one to help him, but no one to care whether he ever found any better life than this.

Nancy Hardman was out on the porch, looking at nothing in particular, and waiting for Reuben to finish his supper, so she could put away the things.

"Come, hurry up!" she said sharply. "You are going to be as long eating your supper as you were getting home." She turned as she finished the sentence, and was in time to see those two tears, and to note the utterly discouraged look on the boy's face. Nancy, although she had a habit of speaking sharp, harsh words, and was always dashing around and making others uncomfortable,

had not an ugly heart; there were times when she actually felt sorry for Reuben — when her father was especially hard on him — though no one would have been more astonished than Reuben himself to have known this. She felt sorry for him at this moment; she knew he was probably not to blame for being late, but she had a strange way of showing sympathy.

"What are you crying about?" she asked severely, coming in at the door as she spoke, and standing in front of Reuben, so that he could not even brush away the tears without being seen. "Before I would spend my time in crying like a baby, such a great boy as you are! You ought to be too old to cry, especially when you ain't got nothing to cry for. If you had real trouble, now, you might talk; there's lots of trouble in this world, Reuben Stein, and you'd better be glad that it doesn't come to you — instead of growling and snivelling because you have to work for your living. Who doesn't, I should like to know! All the folks around here — unless it is the Fennings and a few such — have a hard time to keep soul and body together; I am sure of that."

It was such a new thing to hear Nancy Hardman moralize that Reuben, in spite of himself, was somewhat interested. He shaded his eyes with one hand, and looked through it at the hard-featured

NANCY HARDMAN WAS OUT ON THE PORCH.

girl; there was nothing comforting in her tone, and her words were certainly not very sympathetic, but for some reason they made him feel more as though he had to do with human beings than he generally felt with Nancy.

She busied herself about some work, occasionally glancing at the boy as if to see what effect her words were having on him. "Lots of trouble," she repeated after a moment's silence. "People who have beds to sleep in and things to eat, better not grumble. There's been an awful accident on the railroad, and ever so many killed outright — to say nothing of the folks that have lost legs and arms. I don't know but I'd rather be killed than to lose my legs, for instance, so I couldn't go around. My! what would become of this family, then?"

"When was the accident?" asked Reuben drearily; he had not much interest even in this — people lived, and travelled, and died, and he knew nothing about it. What did it matter that some of them were killed? they were nothing to him; he had not been to the village for seven days, so had heard no news.

"It was last Thursday night; the express ran into a freight-train, and smashed two of its sleeping-cars all to bits. Well! what's the matter with you now?" for Reuben's hand had been suddenly

withdrawn from his face, and he sat up straight, his eyes full of anxious interest.

"Last Thursday night," he repeated. "O Nancy! are you sure?"

"Why, of course I am; you don't suppose I've been making it up, do you? Where have your ears been that you haven't heard it? Everybody is talking about it. Why, what makes you interested all of a sudden?"

"Did you ever see the people that boarded at the Portland Farm, Nancy? There was a lame boy and his father. They went North last Thursday night. Oh! I wonder if" —

"Yes, I saw him out riding one day with his boy; but they won't go out riding any more; they were both killed!"

"O Nancy! are you sure?" Reuben's tone was so full of pain that Nancy forgot to be vexed with him for questioning the truth of her news.

"Why yes, I am; I heard Mr. Fenning telling Uncle Kastor all about it; he stopped here this morning while you were up in the swamp-lot. He said that man and his boy were both killed outright, and" —

"Nancy," interrupted Reuben, his face pale with excitement; "there was a boy went North with them; he was from Weymouth, down below here, you know; did you hear anything about him?"

Nancy nodded her head. "He was killed too; and his folks are going to have him taken to his uncle's in the North, because they can't afford to have him brought back here. How came you to know so much about these folks?" she asked with sudden sharpness. "How did you know they took a boy North with them? did you know the boy?"

"I heard about it," said Reuben evasively. "No, I didn't know him; but it seems strange to think that he is dead."

"Well, he is," said Nancy, speaking almost as though she enjoyed the news. The truth is, she lived such a starved, lonely life that excitement of any sort, even though connected with a railroad accident, was in a sense a relief.

Reuben finished his supper like a person dazed. Nancy, dashing around washing and putting away the plate and saucer which he had hardly used, went on with her story, telling all the particulars she knew, and making comments that were meant to be impressive. It was very new business for Nancy to talk to Reuben, but she had so much news to-night that it seemed as though she must tell somebody. He became a very unsatisfactory listener; he had no comments to make, no exclamations even over the harrowing parts. She grew provoked at last, and, forgetting her momentary astonishment over his excitement, said, —

"You take it cool, I must say! one would think you had been mixed up with railroad accidents all your life; I'd show a little more feeling — as if I wasn't made of wood. You can sit and cry over yourself, with nothing in the world to cry for, and you haven't even a sigh for the folks that are in such trouble to-night. Think of that woman who won't ever see her boy again, and he was all she had, too. He wasn't much comfort to her, I s'pose — boys never are; but then I dare say she will miss him."

"Yes," said Reuben; the lump in his throat had grown so large that he could not say another word. He said that in such a way that Nancy thought he did not care. She went into the other room, and told her father that she didn't believe Reuben was more than half-witted; he had no more feeling than a stone.

"He's 'witted' enough," said her father significantly. "He has himself to think about, and it takes all his time."

Reuben went up to bed — there was nothing more to be done that night, and he would not for anything have stayed down-stairs and run the risk of being spoken to about the accident, or of hearing more about it. He had heard enough — too much. He never felt so strangely in his life. How very near he had been to death! What if

that fence around the orange grove had not been set on fire that day, and he had reached the Portland Farm in time! Mr. Oliver would have been sure to have engaged him, for didn't he and the lame boy both say that they liked his looks, and were sorry he was too late? Then he would have been the one to be buried somewhere in the cold North, instead of that boy whom he had been almost hating because he had been ahead of him; now he was dead! How did it seem to be dead! Reuben shivered at the thought. He felt of the pulse at his wrist; he laid his hand on his steadily beating heart, and wondered what it would be like to have it still. He did not want to be dead, although he had wished himself so a great many times; it was one thing to make the wish when every nerve in his body was quivering with life, and quite another to think of it with death almost at the door. "There is but a step between us and death" — somewhere, sometime, Reuben had heard that verse; he knew it was in the Bible, but he could not remember where or when he had heard it. It seemed to repeat itself to him now in slow, solemn tones. What if he were being buried now, to-night — and the Hardmans were sitting in the room down-stairs talking about him. Nancy would tell all the particulars just as she did about that other boy; she could tell more about him;

she would go over that last day before he went away, and tell what he had said and done. Then the excited and nervous boy tried to remember all the things he had said and done that day when the Olivers went North. Would the words sound well, repeated? He slammed the door, he remembered, when Nancy sent him the third time after wood, which was not to be found, and she had told him to take the door along with him the next time, hinges and all; would she tell her part, he wondered, if she were going over those last things about him? and where would he be if it really were he? Was it possible that he might be where he could overhear all the talk? Would he like to have them go over his past, and remember the things he had done and left undone? No, he couldn't hear it; he would be buried under the ground — but then, there was the soul — they didn't bury souls; what became of them? Good people went to heaven — but he was not good. Oh! he was by no means ready to die; he would never wish himself dead any more — he had not realized what it was before. Suppose God should take him at his wish, and make him dead that very night. People died who were not on the cars — he *must* not die; he *could not!* And here poor Reuben buried his head under the clothes; not to cry, but to shiver and tremble, and feel hot and cold

by turns. It seemed to him that he had never come so near to death — not even when his mother died; he was such a little boy then and had not realized it; but that boy of about his age whom he had envied — it was so strange — so terrible to think of him being gone out of the world!

By and by he grew calmer, and ceased to tremble, but he was very wide awake, and found himself unable to get away from his thoughts; unable to think of anything but the accident and his narrow escape. Gradually his thoughts took form about one idea. He wished that he did not care so much about dying — no, not that, exactly. He was a sensible boy, and realized that so great a change one, not an idiot, must care about. What he meant was, that he wished he did not care about it in such a frightened, awful way. There was such a thing as being ready to die, and thinking and talking about it calmly, even though you thought it very near. The last time he had visited at Uncle Kastor's he remembered hearing him tell about a neighbor who was very sick and going to die; how he said that night when Uncle Kastor called to see how he was: —

"Well, neighbor, tell the friends that I'm almost home, and feel very safe and glad."

For the first time in his life, Reuben coveted such a feeling, and wondered how it was secured.

The last thing he remembered on that eventful night was a determination to find out for himself — and if it was a possible thing make himself ready for any possible accident that could come to him.

CHAPTER IV.

A BEWILDERED BOY.

REUBEN was splitting wood the next morning when Mr. Fenning's carriage drew up before their door; the pine stump had to wait a few minutes while Reuben admired the silken coats of the span of horses, and watched to see how they curved their necks, and took dainty steps in the sand, even while they waited; for Mr. Fenning, after discovering that Mr. Hardman was at home, had gone into the family sitting-room — thereby putting Nancy Hardman into a state of consternation. There was not a chair in the house which she thought fit to offer to such a great man. Horses like his were not seen often in that part of the world; most of them had as much as they could do to plod through the sand with slow, discouraged steps and heads bowed, and had no strength to waste in restless steppings about when they were left to stand.

"I wonder what he came for?" said Reuben to himself as he watched the horses. "What if he wanted to take me out riding!" and he chuckled

over the folly of his thoughts. "I'd like it first-rate to ride in such a rig as that; but I don't believe I could go this morning — I haven't got time!"

If he could have heard what was going on in the Hardmans' front room, what would he have thought? Nancy, in the bedroom which opened from it, with the door ajar, lost the first of the talk, though she tried her best to hear. Mr. Fenning seemed to think it necessary to speak very low. Her father's reply was plain enough.

"I shouldn't wonder at all — boys are always getting into scrapes — and this one is no better than he should be. What has happened, Mr. Fenning?"

Once more Mr. Fenning's words were so low that Nancy only caught one now and then, and could make nothing of it. "I want to know!" said her father. "It doesn't seem possible that Reuben would do such a thing. How do you say you found out that he was the one?"

This time Nancy fixed the door so she could hear.

"I am not sure of it, of course, Mr. Hardman; one ought to have very good evidence to accuse a boy of a thing like that. My informant is not altogether trustworthy. You know the Potters, I presume? — their boy Joel came to me of his own

accord to give information. That in itself looks badly — or would in another boy. I am not sure but that it is so much Joel's nature to try to get other people into trouble that he watches for chances. He came to me the morning after the fire, and wanted to know what I would give him to tell me all about it. I was vexed with the fellow, and told him I would arrest him as an accomplice in mischief; which would doubtless give him what he deserved. Over that, he looked injured; said he didn't want anything, of course, but had come because he thought he ought to tell, seeing he happened to know all about it. Then he told something like a straightforward story about being in the woods with another boy, hunting for a certain kind of air-plant which a man stopping near them wanted — and he saw your Reuben come down the road. He said he was going slowly, and looking about him as if afraid of being seen; and his manner attracted the two boys, so they determined to watch him. According to them, he gathered brush, and pine-knots, and everything he could find of that character — heaped it against the fence and set fire to it. Not content with that, he went round to the other side, where the wind was more brisk, and set still another fire close to the fence — planning it so skilfully that there was soon a big blaze; and as soon as he was safely away, they

came out of their hiding-place and worked like beavers, scattering the fire, and stamping out the sparks. Now, of course, I don't know that there is a word of truth in this; I only know that my fence was on fire that day, and burned quite briskly for a few minutes, and must have been started by some one, because — as my man observed — an accidental fire doesn't generally choose two places on different sides of the same ground on the same afternoon. And it was evidently put out by somebody who took a good deal of pains to do it; for the brush, of which there was some lying around loose, had all been carried to a safe distance. And there were other evidences of somebody being at work there. These boys came to me with their story, the morning after the fire, as I said, and I promised to look into it; but my little daughter, who had a fall that same day, occupied so much of my attention at first, as to put other things out of my mind; then I was called away by business, and have only recently returned. But I mean to find out the truth of this if possible; for a boy with such tendencies is hardly safe to have around us."

"I should think not!" said Mr. Hardman excitedly; "he ought to be flogged within an inch of his life; and if you don't do it, Judge Fenning, I shall. For that matter, I shall anyhow. To think of my feeding and clothing such a scamp as that!"

At that moment the bedroom door was thrown wide open, and Nancy Hardman came into view.

"Father," she said, "I don't believe a word of that story. Reuben is aggravating enough — all boys are; but he ain't of that sort, and I should think you would know it. He doesn't do things for mischief, if he does blunder a good deal, because his wits are somewhere else instead of on his work; but when he can keep his mind to it, I do say for him that I think he does the best he knows how. As for setting anything afire on purpose, to spoil other folks' things, it ain't in him."

Judge Fenning turned toward the excited girl with a pleasant smile on his face. "I am glad to hear you say so," he said. "I never heard anything ill of the boy before — and I am slow to believe this. It seems so utterly uncalled for; so far as I know he can have nothing against me; I never spoke to him that I can remember; but for the boy's sake as well as my own, I mean to look into it very thoroughly, and to find the guilty one if possible."

"Of course, of course!" said Mr. Hardman, "he ought to be found; and if it proves to be Reuben, he will have reason to remember it before I get through with him. I won't stand any nonsense like that, Judge Fenning, you may well believe. Nancy seems to think he couldn't have

done it — and it doesn't sound like him, I think myself; but then somebody did it, and what would that boy have told such a story for, if there wasn't any truth in it? Nancy, do you know what Reuben was about the day it happened?"

"Yes," said Judge Fenning; "if we could prove that Reuben was quietly at home that afternoon it would go a great way toward establishing his innocence."

"I should think it would," said Nancy. "Well, when did it happen? I can count back — most days; there's always something to mark the time."

"The fire must have been started last week, on Thursday afternoon between the hours of two and five; I was at home just before two; and back again about five. The fence was all right when I left, and burned when I returned."

"Last week, Thursday," repeated Nancy, and her face grew gloomy.

"Can you think, Nancy, where the boy was that afternoon?" asked her father.

"Yes, I can. That was the day Uncle Kastor came for us and we all went up to his house and stayed to supper."

"And did Reuben go along?" asked Judge Fenning in a tone which said, "I should be only too glad if it should prove that he was miles away at the time."

"No, he didn't," said Nancy sharply. She felt vexed and disappointed over what she must now own. "He wasn't at home, and he didn't come home until — we don't know when. We waited awhile for him, and then father wouldn't wait any longer, and we went off."

"I remember," said Mr. Hardman. "That doesn't look very well for the scamp, Nancy, after all you have said. He was out that way as sure as fate, Judge Fenning; at least, he was out to the Sedgewick place; I sent him there on an errand, and he was gone long enough to go there and come back twice over. I remember it well, for Uncle Kastor wanted to wait for him — he has taken a kind of notion to the boy; I don't know why, I'm sure, though I never thought he was much worse than other boys. But Uncle Kastor wanted to wait and take him; and we did, for a spell — until I said they needn't wait any longer on his account, because he shouldn't go if he came, to pay him for being so long doing an errand. What he was about all that time is more than I know. I tried to get something out of him the next morning, but I remember now he had very little to say for himself."

Judge Fenning sighed. "I am afraid something tempted him to indulge in this piece of mischief," he said gravely.

"I don't see why you should say that!" put in Nancy sharply. "Because a boy was gone on an errand longer than he ought to have been, it does not follow that he was at work setting fences on fire; there are other things he might have done."

Judge Fenning smiled again. "That is true. Well, trust me to see that only the truth is discovered. I'm glad the boy has a good friend in your daughter."

How astonished Reuben would have been if he had heard that Nancy Hardman was his friend!

"What I suggest is," continued the judge, "that you allow me to take him away with me now, to my house, for a quiet talk. I should like to see him entirely alone, and have a first word with him before he has a chance to hear of the suspicion from any other person. You are willing, I suppose, to trust him to me?"

"Of course, of course," said Mr. Hardman. "I know you will do the right thing, Judge Fenning." Nor did either gentleman heed Nancy's muttered protest that it was taking a mean advantage of a boy to carry him off like a prisoner before he had heard anything about it. They went out together to the yard where Reuben was struggling with the pine-stump.

"Good-morning, my boy," said Judge Fenning kindly. "You have a tough job before you, haven't

you? I wonder if you would be willing to leave it for a while and take a ride with me?"

This question so astonished Reuben, coming as it did after the thoughts he had had on the subject, that all he could do was to stare, until recalled to his senses by Mr. Hardman's sharp voice. "Why do you stand there staring like an idiot, and keeping the judge waiting! Don't you know enough to get into a carriage when you get a chance?"

"Yes, sir," said Reuben; and dropping the axe, he took long strides toward the carriage which was waiting at the gate, opened the door and sprang in. If this was all a huge joke, the point of which he could not understand, at least he would have the pleasure of seeing how those great plump cushions felt. He had often wondered, and never expected to know.

Judge Fenning smiled gravely; and, lifting his hat to Mr. Hardman as though he had been the first gentleman in the land, followed Reuben without more words, and Caleb drove away; Nancy watching from the window, a curious, choking sensation in her throat, and a feeling of indignation at both Judge Fenning and her father in her heart. Why had not her father spoken up for Reuben, and told the great man that somebody else fired his fence? Why had not the man sense enough to

see that Reuben was not one of that sort? Above all, why did she care so much about it all? Was she really fond of Reuben Stein? She had not suspected it.

The judge tried to enter into conversation with his companion; asked several questions about his work and his plans. But Reuben, who under almost any other circumstances would have been only too glad of a chance to tell Judge Fenning his plans, so far as he could be said to have any, in the hope of getting some help from him, was now so overcome by the strangeness of his position as to be unable to do other than to answer with the briefest "yes sir," and "no sir;" his mind full meantime with the question — "What did it all mean?" Why was he being taken at such speed over the road? Where were they going? Was it possible that the judge wanted some work done that he could do, and had asked Mr. Hardman to lend him? But that was nonsense — gentlemen did not come after their workmen in a carriage; still it was positively the only explanation he could think of. At last he ventured a question.

"Has Mr. Hardman hired me out to work for you, Judge Fenning?"

"Oh, no," said the judge, smiling at the idea. Then he glanced at Caleb, who was so short a dis-

tance in front of them, with all the carriage windows open. Caleb had remarkably sharp ears, and had been much tried by his master's slowness in looking into the matter of the burned fence. Judge Fenning did not know whether or not Caleb had heard the Potter boy's story; he took care to say nothing about it himself, and he meant not to prejudice Caleb against Reuben if he could help it. "Oh, no!" he said again after this moment of thought, "I wanted to have a little talk with you about some matters, quite alone; and I asked Mr. Hardman to let you ride home with me, to give me a chance." And then Judge Fenning knew by the swift glance which Caleb gave them that he had heard the Potter story.

"Yes, sir," said Reuben, wondering still more.

"Do you go to school?" asked the judge; and Reuben explained — his face red the while, that he used to go, but he couldn't manage it very well.

"That is unfortunate," said the judge. "We have a better school here this fall than ever before; a new teacher, you know. Have you seen him?"

No; Reuben had not even seen him, except on the street — at a distance. "We live out quite a stretch, you know," he explained; "and folks don't generally come that way."

"And you are too busy to spare time for school?

I shouldn't think Mr. Hardman would have enough work to keep a boy of your age busy all the time. He has no orange-grove, he tells me."

"No, sir — it isn't that," said Reuben, his face growing redder. It seemed a disgrace to have to explain what it was — but there was no help for it. "The fact is, sir, my clothes gave out, and it was a hard season, you know, and we couldn't manage to get any more."

"Is that it?" and Judge Fenning gave him a swift glance. His clothes were patched and were too short in the sleeves, and too narrow on the shoulders. Yes, he did look rather shabby; still, there were boys in school who looked worse. Was this an excuse for a fellow who was glad to get rid of the restraints of school, or was it the self-respect of a boy who had been used to better things? Judge Fenning was much away from his Southern home, and knew little of what was going on in the neighborhood. He dimly remembered having heard about the boy who lived at Hardman's, but could not now recall whether what he had heard was good or bad.

Reuben struggled with his pride, and resolved to explain. It was dreadful to have a man like Judge Fenning think that he didn't want to go to school. "I tried every way I could think of to earn some money this summer, so I could buy

some decent clothes, but I couldn't. Then I tried to get a chance to go North, and had one, almost — but it failed."

"Did you, indeed? What made you want to go North?"

"Well," said Reuben, hesitating — "I don't quite know, unless it was because we came from there, and I seemed to think if I could get back I could earn enough to get an education; people in the North seem to go to school."

"Not all of them," said the judge, smiling. "So you want an education. Did you ever hear the old proverb — 'Where there's a will there's a way'?"

"Yes, sir," said Reuben gravely. "Mother used to say so; but I haven't found any way yet — maybe I will."

CHAPTER V.

CROSS-QUESTIONED.

THEY had been making swift time over the road while this conversation was going on, and with Reuben's last word Caleb drew up before the Fenning gateway. Before he knew what was being done, Reuben was out like a cat, and swung the gate open.

"Well done," said the judge, smiling; while Caleb showed all his white teeth in thanks.

"You are quick-motioned, I see. Will you climb in again, or walk to the house?"

Reuben chose the latter; and taking the short road, was standing by the steps when the carriage wound around the avenue. He had often wondered how that handsome house looked inside — now he would have a chance to see. Perhaps, though, the judge would take him to the carriage-house, or the stable, for his talk.

No; he took him to his own handsome library, and seated him on one of the elegant leather-covered chairs. "Now," he said, taking the great

arm-chair, "we are comfortable, and can have our little talk. So you are from the North?"

Reuben could not help staring in reply. Had Judge Fenning brought him in his carriage away out here merely to ask such questions as that? There seemed to be no reply to make, as he had already answered the question; but the judge had others.

In the course of the next few minutes he learned all that Reuben knew himself about his journey down there in search of health for his mother; and how both father and mother were, only a year after their coming, victims of yellow-fever — and the Hardmans took him home with them because Mrs. Hardman's mother had known them in the North. Reuben grew so interested in going over the old times to somebody who was listening and seeming interested, that he almost forgot the strangeness of his present position, until suddenly brought back to it by a question.

"Now, Reuben, you seem to have a very good memory — can you tell me where you were, and what you were about, two weeks ago to-day — say between two o'clock and five?"

Then Reuben's face flamed red, up to his very temples. Why, he could not have told, save that he knew at once that it was the day on which he made his visit to the Portland Farm and planned

his desperate effort to get North once more. In a flash of thought it came to him that Mr. Hardman must have heard of his attempt and been angry about it, and appealed to Judge Fenning to have him punished; perhaps it was against the law for a boy who had been fed and clothed by a family for three years to try to get away from them — and Judge Fenning was a great lawyer. Reuben knew very little about law, just enough to fill him with awe of it. He felt himself trembling from head to foot, and his anxiety and actual terror grew stronger as he felt the judge's stern eyes fixed upon him. Yes, the eyes of the judge were growing stern. "This boy has been deceiving me; he talked like an honest, outspoken, well-meaning boy who wanted to make something of himself, but directly I mention that afternoon, he turns crimson and trembles like a culprit. He thought he was not found out, and now he thinks he is. What could have been his motive?" These were some of the thoughts which filled the mind of the judge.

"Well," he said, while Rebuen tried to speak, and felt that his voice trembled so that he did not dare trust it; "has your memory played you false at last? Perhaps I could help you. Were you over in this direction? — Yes," he said to himself, "he undoubtedly did it." For Reuben had opened his lips, and stammered something not understood

— then closed them again; he certainly acted like one afraid to speak. It may seem strange to you that a boy of fourteen could get into such a state of terror for so slight a reason, but you must remember that Reuben was very much alone in the world, and about some things as ignorant as a child; then, too, his nerves had been unsettled by the railroad accident, and his narrow escape from death. There were times when he told himself that it must have been very wicked for him to try to steal away from the Hardmans, and that God meant to punish him for it. However, as a rule he was a boy of a good deal of courage; if he had not been utterly taken by surprise with Judge Fenning's question, he would not have shown such fear. As it was, he soon got control of himself. He decided that he certainly had not intended wrong; the Hardmans had told him more than once that they kept him out of charity, and he knew they were too poor to do it; he had honestly meant to relieve them, as well as himself, although he knew that in some things it would be harder for them if he were away. He decided that the thing for him to do was to tell a plain story of where he was, and exactly what he was about — and frankly say that he meant no wrong.

"Yes, sir," he said suddenly; "I was by here. I went to the Portland Farm; there was a man

boarding there named Oliver, and I saw in the paper that he wanted a boy to go North with him, and I went for the place; that is what I meant when I told you I tried to go North once, and didn't succeed; I was fifteen minutes too late, and another boy got the place. I didn't want to say anything about it, because I didn't tell the Hardmans — the fact is, sir, I meant to run away." Here Reuben unconsciously lowered his voice, as though he were telling a great secret. "Perhaps I ought not to have done so, but I did not know it was against the law. They are really nothing to me, and they have fed me for three years; and, while I work as well as I can, they have often told me they could not afford to keep me, and I don't think they can. If I did wrong I am very sorry — but it didn't amount to anything, you see, sir; and I am ready to promise not to do it again, if it is against the law."

Was this acting? Had the boy really no knowledge of the burned fence? Judge Fenning felt very much puzzled. He found himself wondering if Reuben had been near the Portland Farm that afternoon; perhaps he had heard of the railroad accident, and knowing that Mr. Oliver and his boy were both killed, it had occurred to him that nobody could dispute such a story — he would tell it and account for his time in that way.

"Do you know where Mr. Oliver is now?" he asked gravely.

"Oh, yes, sir! — or I mean I know he is dead; he was killed that very night — and the boy who got the place was killed too; and I should have been if I had gone. That was one of the things that made me think perhaps it was wrong to do it."

Judge Fenning could not help smiling over such queer logic; the boy seemed to be a curious mixture of man and child. He did not know what to say next.

"How came you to be late that day?" he asked, more to gain time than because he thought it made any difference why he was late.

A sudden light broke over Reuben's face; curiously enough this was the first time he had thought of the burned fence since the questions began. What he considered the graver matter had driven the other out of his mind.

"Oh! a very strange thing hindered me," he said eagerly. "Haven't you noticed a piece of your fence burned, Judge Fenning? It was burning when I passed here on my way to the farm — at least it had been burning, and had kind of died out; but I was afraid it would get started again, and there was lots of brush, and leaves, and things around it, so I had to stop and clear them away.

Then I ran around to the other side, and found it on fire too, and it looked worse than it did in front; it took quite a little time to get all the knots and brush away, and to stamp out every spark; it took more than fifteen minutes, sir — and that is the reason I was late."

The judge studied his face thoughtfully. "Who helped you in putting out this fire?" he asked.

"Nobody helped me, sir. There wasn't a person around; not even any one passing by — if there had been, I should have run away and left them to do it, for I was in an awful hurry."

"But I should suppose it would have been the most natural thing in the world to have run to the house for help."

"Oh, I did! and knocked and knocked, but there was nobody to answer; I made up my mind you were all away."

"What is your opinion about that fire, Reuben? How came it to be on fire?"

"Why, I'm sure I don't know, sir; I thought perhaps somebody with a cigar had been careless, but I don't know."

"Did it strike you that there was more brush lying about than there would have been on a well-kept place?"

"I don't know, sir; I didn't think much about it. You see, I was in such a hurry that all I

thought of was to get it where I could leave it as soon as possible."

"Why didn't you leave it, and go on?"

"Sir?" said Reuben, looking bewildered.

"I mean, how came you to take so much trouble? It wouldn't have been your fault if the fence had burned down."

"Why, it would if I could have helped it, I suppose; and it wasn't only the fence, sir; the wind was blowing just in the right direction, and I was afraid for the house — I thought I ought to see to it — I mean I thought that was the right thing to do."

"And you always try to do right, do you?"

"No, sir," said Reuben, his face crimsoning. There came to him suddenly the memory of times when he had shirked work which Nancy Hardman wanted done; to be sure, many of her wants seemed unreasonable to him, but he knew very well that he ought to have obeyed her. "No, sir, I don't always; but I tried to, that day."

"Well, Reuben," said Judge Fenning, after what seemed to the boy a long silence — "to tell you the plain truth, I brought you out here to-day to hear your story of the fire. Perhaps it is only fair to tell you that I have heard another which doesn't match with yours at all." He looked steadily at Reuben as he spoke, but the boy returned the look only with one of interest.

"I don't see what it could be," he said, "because there wasn't a living soul within sight or hearing. I called two or three times as loud as I could shout, in the hope that I could make somebody hear, and come and help me. And if anybody knows how it got started, I should think he would have tried to be there to put it out."

"Reuben, did it occur to you at all, that perhaps the fire had been started on purpose?" asked Judge Fenning, his keen eyes watching the boy as though they would read his very thoughts.

"Yes, sir," said Reuben, "that was the first thought I had; things were so kind of heaped up, as though they had been fixed on purpose; but after I came to think it over, it didn't seem sensible, and I decided that it might have been a cigar — as I told you — or I thought maybe some very little boys had been playing with matches — though I don't know of any boys around here who are little enough not to know better than to start a bonfire right by a fence."

Judge Fenning became silent again, and this time considered so long that it gave Reuben a chance to look about him and admire some of the wonders of the beautiful room.

"Well," he said at last, and this time he arose from his great leather chair, "I think I will let Caleb drive you home — and come again to-morrow

to see me. At that time I will try to have here the persons who have told me the other story. I want you and them to put the two stories together to make them match. How should you like that?"

"I should like it first-rate," said Reuben, without the least hesitation. "I have thought a good many times that I'd like to know just how that fire commenced, and all about it. But I can walk home, Judge Fenning — Caleb mustn't go back for just me."

Judge Fenning smiled. "Caleb has to go to the village on an errand for me," he said, "and it will take him but a few minutes to set you down at home; if you don't like a ride with a couple of fast horses better than a walk through the sand, you are different from any boy I ever saw."

"Oh, I like it!" said Reuben, his eyes twinkling; "I've often wondered how those cushions of yours felt, and to-day I had a chance to find out."

"Very well, you may try them again. I will send a note to Mr. Hardman, making arrangements with him to have you call here to-morrow at twelve o'clock. And now I have a request to make of you. I should be very glad if you would promise not to talk to any person about the burned fence, between this time and to-morrow morning when we meet here. Not only that, but I would rather you would not talk about this interview we have had,

nor explain in any way what was wanted of you. Are you willing to promise?"

"I don't know," said Reuben. "I am willing to promise not to talk about it more than I can help; but Mr. Hardman and Nancy Hardman will ask ever so many questions, and I don't see how I am going to help telling them what you wanted of me."

"What did I want of you?" asked the judge; and his face was so kind that Reuben, to his own after astonishment, laughed outright as he said, "I don't know, sir, I'm sure, unless it was to give me a nice time."

"Then you wouldn't have a very clear story to tell, after all, would you? But what I mean is, that I ask you not to talk about this matter more than you can help. If direct questions are asked, which you feel it your duty to answer, of course your promise will not bind you."

"Oh! I can promise that," said Reuben promptly. "I will not talk more than I can help."

Five minutes afterwards he wondered if Judge Fenning knew what a talker his coachman was. During that swift drive homeward, Caleb used his utmost skill to discover just how much Reuben knew about the burned fence. He began as they were driving down the avenue.

"See that hole in the fence? We don't commonly have no such holes around our place."

"No," said Reuben, "I suppose not."

"How do you suppose that hole got there?"

"Holes are sometimes broken in fences," said Reuben, with the air of a sage.

"Yes, and holes are sometimes burned," said Caleb, fixing his large, solemn eyes on the boy, who wanted to laugh but didn't. "That there hole was burned just two weeks ago to-day; I reckon you ain't heard of that before?"

"I saw it," said Reuben, "as we drove in."

"Oh, you did! Well, I reckon you don' know nothing about how it happened, nor why?"

Reuben, not knowing how to answer this after his promise to Judge Fenning, decided to say nothing. Caleb eyed him suspiciously, and continued to talk about the fire and the fence, and the boys, and mean people, in what he thought was a most expressive way. And Reuben listened and smiled, and sometimes looked grave, and wondered what the fellow meant.

CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS.

"SHO!" said Caleb at last, "there's no use talking to poor white trash — they don't know even enough to answer when they are spoken to."

Two hours later, Caleb, who had just finished giving his master an account of his errands, added: "It's my opinion, Judge Fenning, that I had the pleasure of taking the boy who burned the fences a ride in the carriage this very morning."

"Indeed!" said Judge Fenning, "what leads you to suppose so?"

"Well, Judge Fenning, my knowledge of boys is consid'able; and in my opinion that boy acts like the very one."

"How does he act?"

"Why, Judge, he hasn't got nothing to say for himself. Won't talk, you know — not about the fences nor the fire. I gave him mo' than a dozen chances, and he was just mum. Didn't even have no curiosity to know how such a thing happened. It looks bad, Judge; it does, so!"

The judge smiled. So far, at least, Reuben had followed his instructions.

There was a second sensation that day at the Hardmans', when Reuben was brought home in the carriage.

"Well," said Mr. Hardman, almost before the boy had sprung out like a deer, and hurried up the walk, "seems like you go and come in style! You don't feel quite so fine as when you went away, I reckon? I wonder that he let you come back. I would have locked you up, if I had been he. I don't want to harbor no such around me, I can tell you. And when he gets through with you, I want you to understand that you'll have to answer to me."

"What do you mean, sir?" asked Reuben, his face flushing a dark red. "What can you suppose I have been doing?"

"Oh! dear me, how innocent you are! You can't come no such tricks on me, and you needn't try. They may go down with Judge Fenning, and even Nancy — but I'm too old to be caught that way."

"I am sure I do not know what you are talking about," said Reuben, with severe dignity. "Here is a note which Judge Fenning wished me to bring you. Now shall I go on with the wood?"

Mr. Hardman had no answer ready; he was

already devouring the note. A letter for his eye alone, from Judge Fenning, was certainly distinction; but he did not find it quite to his mind.

"How lofty he can be!" he said in a discontented tone; "I'll talk as much as I please; my tongue's my own, I guess. What do you stand there staring for? Why don't you go to work? Isn't it enough that you have wasted the whole morning?"

Reuben waited for no further orders, but concluded that the pine-stumps must be his work, and went at them with a will.

Just then Nancy appeared. "What have you got, father?" she asked; "what does Reuben say?"

"He says nothing, just as he usually does when he ought to speak," said Mr. Hardman crossly. "And Judge Fenning has laid down his orders to us as though we were slaves, and he owned us. We are not to question the boy, if we 'please,' until after he sees him again. What if I don't 'please' — what right has he to order me?"

"I don't see but the note is nice enough," said Nancy, glancing it through. "He says 'Dear sir,' and 'yours truly,' just as gentlemen do to each other; and I wouldn't ask questions if I were you, so long as he don't want you to. There's likely some reason. There's no use quarrelling with a

man because he's rich and drives around in his carriage. I sha'n't say a word to Reuben, though I am dying to know what happened."

Mr. Hardman, though he grumbled more or less, apparently came to a like conclusion. The day passed, and Reuben was asked no questions. However, both father and daughter had said enough. Some of Nancy's words floated back to Reuben between the blows of the axe, and added to those which Mr. Hardman had spoken, made his face grow troubled and puzzled, and then finally gather into a frown, as for the first time it dawned upon him that not only the Hardmans, but Judge Fenning, actually believed that he set the fence on fire — or helped it along in some way! No such thought had occurred to him while talking with the judge, or even with Caleb. Secure in conscious innocence, he had been slow to take the hints which Caleb's words might have conveyed. But the more he thought about it, the more he realized that herein lay the explanation of some things that Judge Fenning said. Probably that was the "entirely different story" which he had heard. From whom? Who could suppose for a moment that he would do such a thing? Why should he do it? and why should anybody think he would? Was he a boy to amuse himself with mischief? Had he ever gone prowling around seeing what he could

do to trouble others, as some boys he knew of did? Had he not during all the years he had spent in this part of the world — and they seemed to Reuben many and long — been faithful to his work, and honest in his ways? What right had Judge Fenning to suppose for a moment that he would be guilty of such an act? As for Mr. Hardman, of course he would believe the worst of him. "And be glad of the chance, I suppose," said Reuben to himself, with a swelling heart; "it is hard, I declare, that a fellow who has done his best to make something of himself, should not only have no chances, but be hindered all the time by things which he can't help, and then be told lies about in the bargain. I might as well give up and be the sort of fellow they think I am. But I never will," he added after a few minutes of bitter thought; "I'll be somebody yet, in spite of them all."

Nevertheless, it was a very hard day. Reuben always looked back to it afterwards as one of the hardest he remembered. Mr. Hardman did not ask any questions, but he did worse.

"Let the matches alone!" he said roughly to Reuben, when in the course of the afternoon he came for some to light the kitchen fire. "The less you meddle with matches, the better. We don't want to be burned out of house and home, either from carelessness or wickedness."

Reuben's face was white with anger; but he turned away without a word, and went off to the kitchen.

"Well," said Nancy, who was waiting for the matches, "did you stop to make them?"

"No; your father told me to let them alone. He seems to have grown suddenly afraid to trust me with matches."

Nancy uttered an exclamation which he did not catch, and rushed after them herself. "Father," he heard her say, "seems to me I wouldn't be a goose, if I could help it. Reuben didn't set that fence on fire any more than I did; and I don't believe in treating him as if he did. That isn't the way Judge Fenning would want you to do, I can tell from his note."

"I'm not Judge Fenning's slave, nor yours either," said Mr. Hardman, who was in unusual ill-humor that day, for several reasons. In the first place, several plans of his own had gone wrong; and in the second place he had been drinking hard cider — more of it than usual — and it had the effect which hard cider has on some brains; it made him cross without reason. But for the first time in his life the voice of Nancy Hardman sounded like music in Reuben's ears. Here was one who believed in him in the face of all suspicion. And he admitted to himself that since Judge Fenning

could suspect him, it was not unreasonable, perhaps, for the Hardmans to do so. He must have told them some story in the morning to base suspicion on; but despite it all, Nancy Hardman believed in him! A few days before, Reuben would have laughed at the idea that it made much difference to him what Nancy Hardman thought about anything. "I'll always remember it of her," he said to himself gratefully. "After this, I'll fill her tubs, and bring her pine-knots, and split her kindling-wood without having to be told, and I'll do everything I can to help her. To think that she should speak up for me in that way — I can hardly believe my ears!" The memory of it softened the rest of the day for him. On the whole, he bore Mr. Hardman's unreasonableness much better than he had feared he should. But he looked forward to the next morning with mingled feelings of anxiety and indifference, while he worked hard with his hands, and spent hours of thought trying to puzzle out who could have gotten up the story about him. Was it possible that somebody had seen him working hard to put the fire out, and had supposed that he was, instead, trying to build it? "But nobody passed," said the poor fellow — "not a soul. I was too anxious to have help to let anybody escape me."

Meanwhile Judge Fenning, though a very busy

man, gave a good deal of thought to the honest-faced boy whom he had questioned that morning, and at the tea-table made known his perplexities. "I'm a good deal puzzled just how to manage the callers whom I expect to-morrow."

"Callers?" said Mrs. Fenning inquiringly; and Alice looked up from the orange she was sipping, to ask, "Who are they to be, papa?"

"Three boys," said the judge; "and I fancy they will not care to meet. The more I think about that manly-looking fellow who was with me to-day, the more sure I feel that he told the truth."

Alice was interested at once. "O papa!" she said, "did you have a trial right here in your study? How nice! tell me about it — please, papa."

"Why, it was about the fence that was burned," said the judge. Then he looked up suddenly at his wife, remembering that they had agreed not to say anything about that before Alice until she was quite strong again. Mrs. Fenning laughed at his startled look. "Never mind," she said, "Alice is well enough now, I think, to hear about the fire. It happened the day you were hurt, darling," she continued; "the fence around the grove took fire in some way, and quite a hole was burned. We did not mention it before you, lest it might excite

you when you were weak, as it happened the very day you were hurt."

Alice looked excited now; her cheeks glowed, and her voice was eager. "O papa! I know about the fire; it was that which made me go up those ugly back stairs in the dark — so they could not find me if they got into the house — and I was coming down again when I fell. Why! isn't it strange that I forgot all about it?"

No, they did not think it very strange. In the fall she had hurt her head, and had been burning with fever and delirium for several days; then, as she grew better, the doctor would not allow her to be questioned about the accident, lest it might excite her; and for the same reason the accident to the fence had not been mentioned in her presence.

"Never mind," said Judge Fenning anxiously, when he saw her glowing cheeks. And he asked himself how he could have been such an idiot as to mention the boys in her hearing. "Never mind, the fire was over so long ago it is no wonder you forgot it; and it wasn't much of a fire, anyway."

"Oh! but, papa, I know all about it. Let me tell you; it won't make me excited. I was silly to be afraid then — I can't think how I happened to be such a dunce! but it seemed queer to be in the house alone, you know; and then to see those boys

burning sticks and things, and setting fire to them right close to the fence, did look dreadful. I thought perhaps the kitchen door was unlocked — I had not thought to look — and that they might come in and try to steal things; so I locked all the doors in the front part of the house, and took the keys, and ran away up those back stairs where I was sure they couldn't find me. How silly I was, wasn't I? How could they have got to me in any of the rooms after I had locked the doors? but I seemed to want to get as far away from them as possible."

Poor little girl! the utmost they had thought was that a desire to rummage in some of the boxes in the back attic had come to her; and here she had been frightened into making the journey! No wonder she had been delirious all night, — and for two or three nights, indeed, — and imagined that all sorts of people and things were coming after her! Judge Fenning began to look not only grave, but stern. The boys who had by their wickedness perilled the life of his darling would not have fared very well at his hands just then. But Alice was quite herself again, and it could do no harm to ask her a few questions.

"Were there two boys, daughter?" he began quietly.

"Oh! yes, sir. One was a good deal smaller

than the other. They worked hard for quite a while — at least it seemed a long while to me — getting ready for the fire. I could not think what they were about. I had a mind to run down and tell them they must go away — that my father did not like to have boys playing around there. But when they made a blaze, it frightened me so that I thought of nothing but thieves. Papa, I had read a story only a few days before about some men who set fire to a house, and burned it down so they could steal things. Wasn't it strange that I should have read about it just before it seemed to be going to happen?"

"I don't wonder that you were frightened," said her mother gravely.

"Yes; but then it was silly to run up those old back stairs. Oh! well, I had another reason for going; don't you know, papa, from that back attic window you can see away down the road? I thought I could keep watch what they did next, and could see the first glimpse of the carriage when it turned the corner; oh! but wasn't I glad to see it? Just the minute it turned the corner, I started to run down; and then my feet caught and I fell — and that is the last I know."

"Were the boys there all the time you stayed up in the attic?" asked her father.

"Oh! no, sir. Why, there is ever so much more

to tell. They went off into the woods, and there came another boy along; he was going by real fast, as though he was in a hurry, but when he saw the fire burning, he stopped and looked at it a minute, then he began to pull the sticks away and stamp on them, and I knew he was going to put out the fire. After that I didn't feel half so much afraid. I thought of starting down to tell him how it got afire, and to ask him if he knew who those boys could be; but while I was deciding whether I dared go and talk to him, he ran around to the south side where I couldn't see him, and very soon afterwards you came."

"Well," said Judge Fenning, after a thoughtful silence, during which Mrs. Fenning questioned Alice as to some other particulars which she had wondered over during her illness; "well, I begin to understand. Alice, do you think you would know those boys again if you should see them?"

"I think I should, papa. You see, I sat up there and watched them quite a while; and the big boy especially, who put out the fire. I'm most sure I should know him again; I felt so grateful to him, you know, I wanted to run down and tell him how glad I was that he came along just then; oh! I'm most sure I should know him."

"Mamma," said Judge Fenning, "do you think it would hurt Alice to come into my office to-mor-

row morning for a few minutes, and see if she will recognize the boy?"

"O papa! did the boy come to see you who said he put out the fire? How nice! I wish I had seen him to-day. Did you give him something nice, papa?"

"No," said her father, with a grave smile, "I asked him to come again and see me to-morrow; if mamma is willing, you and I will have a little talk with him."

After that, Judge Fenning felt almost certain that Reuben had told the exact truth. Several little words which Alice had let slip confirmed his story. For instance, "that tall boy," she had called him; and he remembered with satisfaction that Reuben must be considerably taller than the Potter boy. But what could have been that Potter boy's motive for such conduct? If it were pure mischief — the desire to harm something that belonged to others — a desire which some boys seemed to have born with them — surely he need not have carried it to such an extent as to come of his own accord to accuse an innocent person. "But that might have been in self-defence," he added, continuing, after the manner of a lawyer, to think the case out carefully on both sides; "if his guilty fears troubled him, he might have thought to forestall all inquiries by furnishing the boy who

had done the mischief. If this proves to be the case, Joel Potter is a dangerous character to have in the neighborhood; he had better be sent away to a reform school, or something of that sort, before he grows too old to be reformed. Well, we shall see what they will say to-morrow."

VII.

HINDERED BY FALSEHOOD.

PROMPTLY at ten o'clock Reuben Stein was at Judge Fenning's piazza door. Caleb eyed him in no friendly way, and said in a discontented tone, "What do you want now? 'Pears to me if I had a safe place to stay in, I would stay there if I were you, and not come prowling around here so much."

"Judge Fenning directed me to be here at ten o'clock," said Reuben stiffly. He began to understand that Caleb didn't believe in him. Reuben's heart was very sorrowful this morning. Mr. Hardman had not got over his ill-humor. The truth is, it irritated him to think of Reuben being mixed up with a secret which he was not at liberty to talk to him about; he had grumbled over it a good deal the evening before.

"Like as not the fellow will get me into trouble!" he said crossly to Nancy. "If there is a trial, as of course there will be, I shall be dragged in as a witness and have to answer all sorts of questions,

and go to nobody knows how much expense. I wish we had let him go to the poor-house, instead of getting ourselves mixed up with him."

"Oh! now, father," Nancy had said, "what is the use of borrowing trouble? we have enough and to spare, I think, without borrowing any. I don't believe there will be any kind of a trial; if Judge Fenning isn't smart enough to find out the truth from an honest boy like Reuben, he isn't fit to be a judge. As for being a witness, I'd like the chance myself; I'd like to witness to the fact that Reuben Stein is as honest and above-board as the sun is at noon. There isn't a deceiving streak in him. Why, father, you know we've always been able to trust to Reuben's word."

The only reply Mr. Hardman could make was to say: "You never can tell what turn a boy like him will take; he's smart enough to tell any sort of story if he took a notion." His distrust in, and annoyance with Reuben showed in every word that he spoke to him. And the boy had hard work to keep from making disrespectful replies, and was relieved rather than otherwise when the time came for him to start for Judge Fenning's. It was hard to be looked upon with suspicion. He had thought of his mother oftener than usual since these troubles came upon him. How sure she would be to know that he spoke the truth — and perhaps it would

not be possible for him to convince Judge Fenning that he did. If Mr. Hardman, who had known him well for years, could so easily give up all belief in him, what was to be expected of a stranger?

It was not Caleb's business to answer the door-bell. A trim mulatto girl did that, who smiled on him and asked: "Is your name 'Reuben'? If it is, you are to go into that little room there, where the door is open, and wait until Judge Fenning sends for you."

Into the "little room" he went. Such a pretty room! There was white matting on the floor, and in the centre a thick green rug; there was a soft couch in one corner, covered with some puffy green stuff which looked to Reuben's eyes like velvet; then there was an easy-chair or two, and in the low, wide window-seats, half-hidden by long white curtains, vases of flowers were standing. The table in the middle of the room was strewn with papers and books, and the walls were lined with shelves reaching half-way up the ceiling and filled with books. Troubled as Reuben's heart was, he could not keep the brightness from his eyes at the sight of so many books; and venturing to take up one while he waited, he soon became so interested in it as to almost forget where he was and for what he was waiting. Just the other side of

WHILE REUBEN WAITED HE TOOK UP A BOOK AND READ.

the hall, in the large library, sat Judge Fenning in his leather-covered arm-chair; and three feet away from him, seated on chairs which had been placed for them, were Joel Potter and Bennie Wilcox.

"Now, Joel," said the judge, "I want you to begin at the beginning, and tell me the exact truth about the burned fence; put in every detail as nearly as possible, and give me the whole story without being questioned."

"Why," said Joel, looking injured, "I told you the exact truth the other day, Judge; what is the use of going over it again?"

"But if I want to hear it, you have no objection to going over it, have you? If your story is true, it cannot be much trouble to tell it."

"Oh, no!" said Joel, returning to the saucy air which was habitual; "if you want to hear it again, I suppose I can tell it." And he went over with great apparent care the account of his discovery of the fire, and his effort to put it out. The judge, who had made a shorthand report of the same story as given a few days before, glanced from time to time at the paper which lay near him, and noted that in several particulars the two accounts contradicted each other. Once he called the boy's attention to it. "Look here, Joel, didn't you tell me the other day that you didn't notice the fire on the south side of the grove until you had put out the

other? And to-day you say that you saw the fire on the south side."

"Oh! no," said Joel glibly, "I didn't say that; you have mixed me up with somebody else; of course I saw the fire around on the south side first — that is where I had the hardest time getting it out."

"Indeed," said the judge, looking all the while at his paper where the former story was written, not in the least like this. Joel, who was looking at it too, made sure that there was no writing on it, and repeated his statement very confidently. He hadn't an idea that those queer little dots and marks were writing. When Judge Fenning was satisfied that Joel did not mean to tell the truth, and that the little fellow by his side was too much under his power to do other than agree to all he said, he directed the boys to wait there a moment, and crossed the hall to speak to Reuben. It seemed to give him pleasure to find Reuben so busy reading that he did not hear a footfall. "That does not look like guilt," said the judge to himself; then he spoke: —

"Good-morning! you have found something that interests you, I see."

"Yes, sir," said Reuben, dropping the book and springing to his feet; "I found something about a meeting in New York, and it felt like home. I

have been in the hall where it was held, and I've seen the man who made the speech; he used to come to our Sunday-school quite often and talk to us." Then there seemed to come suddenly the remembrance of why he was there, and his face grew red. "Perhaps I ought not to have touched the book, sir," he said; "but I saw the picture, and took it up without thinking."

"That is all right," said the judge heartily. "I am glad you enjoyed it; that is a picture of a good man whom we all honor. Now are you ready to hear that other story I told you of?"

"Yes, sir, as ready as I can be," said Reuben with a very faint smile. "I can't imagine who knows anything about it besides myself; because if there had been anybody within sight or hearing, they must have heard me call for help."

"Before we go in," said the judge, glancing at the small note-book he held in his hand, "let me ask you again about the fire, that I may have your story freshly before me." Then he questioned him as he had done Joel, keeping his eye on the note-book as Reuben answered. The two stories agreed in all important points. Once Reuben hesitated.

"I don't know," he said; "I can't think whether that was before or after I went around on the south side."

"Never mind," said the judge, smiling; "it is of

no consequence which it was." He found himself pleased to think that Reuben could not remember; it would have been so easy to have "remembered" if the story were being made up. "Well," he said, making some more little marks in his note-book, "I think we are ready now to meet our friends in the other room."

Joel Potter gave a start of surprise, and a look which the judge thought was dismay appeared on his face as he caught sight of Reuben. As for Reuben, he, too, looked surprised.

"You here?" he said, by way of greeting; then Joel recovered himself and grinned vindictively.

"Yes," he said, "I'm here; you didn't expect me, did you? I'm around quite often when folks don't know it."

"Joel," said Judge Fenning, "you may begin at the beginning, and tell Reuben the story of that Thursday afternoon."

"Oh, my!" said Joel; "I've told that story often enough; he knows about it without my telling it."

"See here, sir," said the judge sternly, "I want you to do as I tell you without more words than are necessary. Tell Reuben Stein exactly what you have already told me."

So Joel, looking a trifle frightened over the judge's stern tone, began his story — telling it

awkwardly enough, with Reuben's eyes fixed upon him; it was altered in more than one important particular from the other versions which he had given. Judge Fenning had his note-book before him, and made the usual little marks which no one but he understood.

"Well, sir," he said to Reuben when Joel finally stopped, "what do you think of that story?" He looked at Reuben when he spoke, and the boy burst forth in answer, —

"I think it is the most astonishing story I ever heard! What in the world does the fellow mean? If he saw me at all, he saw me working away for dear life to put that fire out; but I can't imagine where he was; he couldn't have been around when I called for help. Where were you? and why in the name of sense didn't you come and try to stop me? then you would have discovered that I was working to save the fence, instead of burning it!"

Judge Fenning was greatly puzzled; the more he saw of these boys, the more he felt like believing that Reuben was telling the truth. But he had expected him to fly into a passion, and call Joel Potter all the ugly names he could think of; instead, he was evidently trying to piece the two stories together as if both of them might be true; if this was acting, it was being done very cleverly. Just then he bethought himself of Alice. It was

not probable that the girl would be able to tell which boy she saw putting out the fire — she was so far away at the time; it would be very easy, he thought, to mistake one boy for another; it was hardly fair to Reuben to apply such a test. Still, he had promised Alice she should come in. Joel had certainly not told the entire truth to him, yet it hardly seemed possible that his story could be all false. He would not have had the courage to look straight at Reuben and get it all off. On the whole, he decided to hear what Alice had to say; then he should probably send all the boys away and consider further.

"Reuben," he said, "oblige me by opening that door at your left."

Reuben did so, and Judge Fenning called, "Alice."

"Here I am, papa," said a clear voice, and a bright-eyed little girl came tripping into the room. She was all in white, and looked to Reuben's eyes like a flower that might have been picked that morning from the judge's garden. The moment her eyes rested on Reuben, she gave a little exclamation of satisfaction.

"You are the very boy!" she said, "aren't you?"

"What boy?" asked Reuben, smiling in spite of himself; though, truth to tell, he had felt very

little like smiling. It had not occurred to him to believe that Joel Potter could be telling a downright falsehood. He had had little to do with boys, having been kept much with his mother while she lived, and very hard at work since she died; what few boys he used to know were not of the sort who would lie; so thinking it over, he could only believe that this boy Joel, hidden away somewhere in the woods, had mistaken him for some boy who had set the fence on fire; if this was so, how could he hope to make Judge Fenning believe his story? He had no friends to speak for him; and even Mr. Hardman, who knew him best, evidently believed that he did it. Life looked all but hopeless to Reuben just then, yet he smiled on Alice Fenning; how could any one help it?

"Why, the boy who worked so hard to put out the fire," she said eagerly. "How you did stamp and tug! I wanted to come and help you; but I did not dare for fear those others would come back — and there were two of them. Where are they?"

She wheeled around as she spoke, and caught sight of Joel and his miserable companion. "Oh! here you are," she said; "what made you work so hard to set papa's fence on fire? Where did you hide while the other boy was putting it out?

Down under that clump of trees? I thought you did, but I couldn't quite see you from my window."

"What are you talking about?" asked Joel sullenly, though his face had grown both red and pale since Alice began to talk.

She laughed gleefully, and turned toward Reuben. "Shouldn't you suppose he would know?" she said; "though, after all, I don't suppose he knows much; he must be a very silly boy to think he could build a bonfire so near a fence without doing harm." Upon which she turned to Joel again. "When you found out the fence was going to burn, why didn't you make a fuss about it, and go to work like a sensible boy to try to undo the mischief, instead of hiding like a coward?"

Joel's face was pale now with dismay. What an easy way out of it all he might have had if he had only kept still! Here was Alice ready to believe that the fire was made just for play, and that he hid away afterwards from fright. Oh! to be able to take back those stories he had told to Judge Fenning; but there was no hope of any such plan now. Yet even then he tried to brave it out.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he said, looking down at the matting, and speaking sullenly. You needn't try to make out that I had anything to do with that fire — only what I said;

Judge Fenning knows all about it; I told him just how it was a good while ago."

"Look here," said Judge Fenning sternly; "do you suppose you are deceiving me all this time, my lad? You haven't been telling the truth, and you are such a bungler that you cannot even tell the same falsehood twice in succession. On this paper in my hand is written down the story you told me first, and beside it the second version; and in some important particulars they are not alike — as I will prove to you if you care to have me read them. I have known for some time that you were not speaking the truth; and I have given you three different opportunities to repent of your attempt to injure an innocent boy who was trying to save my property, but it has been in vain. Had you even at this late hour tried in any way to right the wrong you have done, my plan of action in regard to you might have been different from what it now will be."

Just what Joel would have said or tried to say will not be known, for poor little Bennie Wilcox did not give him a chance to speak. He burst into a loud wailing cry and sobbed out, "I didn't want to do it, I didn't, I didn't; and I'll say it if he knocks me down. I told him it was mean, and I wouldn't; and he said I must."

It was very pitiful; Alice Fenning looked as

though she was going to cry, and turned anxiously to her father. "You won't punish him, papa, will you? He is so small, and such a coward. He was afraid of that big boy all the time, I suppose; oh! say you won't do anything to him!"

CHAPTER VIII.

FLOWERS AND THORNS.

"MY daughter," said Judge Fenning, "cannot you trust your father?"

The words and the look which accompanied them seemed to recall Alice to her senses. "Why, of course, papa," she said; "what was I thinking about? You always do just right, don't you?"

The judge smiled on her. "At least I try to," he said. "Now, Alice, you may take Reuben, and go to the garden until I call you. I want to have a word alone with these two boys."

Thus dismissed, Alice led the way with great satisfaction to the lovely rose-garden, talking eagerly as she went. "Did you ever hear such a story as that big boy told? I don't see how he could sit there and talk to papa, and not say a true word. Seems to me I should have to tell just the truth to papa, whether I did to other people or not; his eyes would look right through me if I didn't. But O Reuben! I am so glad that I saw you that day. Wasn't it strange that I should have been looking

out of the window at you all the time, and you never knew it? Reuben, doesn't that seem a little bit like God? I mean, doesn't it make you think of Him? He sees everything, you know; and we don't think of such a thing, very often — at least I don't."

"I don't, either," said Reuben humbly. "I thought about Him to-day, though, when I was feeling discouraged for a few minutes because there wasn't anybody to be a witness for me in any way. I felt kind of glad to remember that He knew all about it, and knew I was doing right and had spoken the truth."

"Of course you did," said Alice confidently; "you always do, don't you? Seems to me I should know that by just looking at you. O Reuben! why don't you go to school? We've got such a nice school now; such a nice teacher — not a bit like old Miss Jenks. She is just as pretty! and the man is nice too; I suppose you would be in some of his classes, but I'm not; I'm in the smaller room — I'm a good deal of a dunce," she added gravely. "I've been sick a good deal, and had to stay at home when other girls were learning."

"I'm a regular dunce," said Reuben sadly. "I have to stay at home all the while and work; and I don't know when it will end. I thought Mr. Hardman would surely let me go to school through

the winter months; but here it is almost Christmas, and I haven't heard anything about it."

"I never heard of such a thing!" said Alice indignantly. "Of course you ought to go to school. I'll ask papa to speak to Mr. Hardman about it."

"Oh, no!" said Reuben in alarm. "I shouldn't like to have you do that. It would look too much like begging. Besides, if Mr. Hardman was ever so willing there are reasons why I couldn't go; and I suppose, when one thinks of it, they are the very reasons why he doesn't send me."

"What can they be?" asked Alice seriously. "I cannot think of a single reason why a boy who is well, and wants to learn, should not be in school every day."

But Reuben did not like to tell her that he had on at that moment the best clothes he had in the world, and she could see for herself that they were too small in every way, besides being patched in all shapes and shades; so he called her attention to a curious flower, and asked its name; and Alice, who was very fond of the flowers, and knew them all intimately, went off into a description of some of the rarest. Still, they could not long keep their thoughts away from the scene in the library, and the events which had brought it about. They went over in detail every step of the way. Alice

graphically described her feelings on that eventful day when the fence was burned.

"I felt queer enough at finding myself alone in the house," she said; "I am seldom left alone. They expected to get home earlier, but papa was detained. If they had, they would have found you at work, wouldn't they? And all this trouble would have been saved — no, they would have found the burning fence, wouldn't they? And you wouldn't have had to stop. Where were you going, Reuben?"

"I was going to the Portland Farm," said Reuben gravely; "and if I had not stopped for the burning fence, I suppose I would not be here to-day."

"No," said Alice; "that is what I say, and I wouldn't have had a chance to know you. I am almost glad it burned, aren't you? because now we know each other, and can be good friends."

"But I mean," said Reuben, "that I wouldn't have been anywhere, or — of course I don't mean that, but — well, I'll explain, and you will understand what I'm talking about." So the story of his hopes and plans on that day which seemed so long in the past, was gone over. He explained how sure he would have been of getting the place but for the burning fence, and how dreadfully he felt about it, and what a sorrowful evening he had

all alone, mourning over his failure. Then he explained who the man was who would have hired him, and who went in his place, and what had happened.

Alice exclaimed over this, her face pale with sympathy. "Oh, dear! Isn't it strange and wonderful? Now we must be glad about the fire; but we mustn't be glad that that horrid Joel Potter did a wicked thing, I suppose. I don't know how to fix it; but I am glad you are here, aren't you?"

"Yes," said Reuben gravely, "I'm glad I'm not dead. I don't think I am ready to die yet."

Alice looked at him timidly. "Do you mean you are afraid?" she asked; "I am too. And sometimes I feel awfully about it. Some of the girls at school like to go to funerals. They coax their mothers to let them stay from school whenever there is going to be one, so they can go. But I wouldn't go to one for anything; and I always run away up-stairs to a part of the house where I can't see the road, when I know a funeral procession is to pass. Do you feel like that?"

Reuben shook his head. "No, I don't know as I ever felt just like that; I never thought much about death, except when my mother died — then I wanted to die myself, for a while. But that night after the accident I thought a great deal about it.

I knew of course that sometime I should have to die, and that people who were as young as I, often did" —

"I know it," interrupted Alice, a shiver running through her delicate little frame. "Isn't it dreadful that everybody has got to! I don't like to think anything about it. It makes me cold when I do."

"But not thinking about it won't keep it away," said Reuben gravely; "and that is what I thought that night. I knew some people were not afraid to die — that they rather looked forward to it, and wished for the time to come."

"Oh! but, Reuben, that is when they get to be old."

Reuben shook his head. "That doesn't make the difference. Don't you know that old Mr. Judkins who lived down near Mr. Hardman's? He was so old that his teeth were all gone, and he was lame, and almost blind, but he was awfully afraid to die. Even Mr. Hardman, who isn't afraid of anything, said he never wanted to live through another such night as he had with him."

"Don't!" said Alice, almost crying; "what makes you talk about such dreadful things?"

"But, Alice, I thought perhaps you would like to hear something nice about it. I made up my mind that night that if there was anything that

would keep me from being afraid to die when the time came, I would get it. There were things my mother had taught me to do, but I had seemed to forget them. I began to pray again, just as I did when I was a very little boy; and I read every night in mother's Bible; and — I don't know how it was, but after a while, when I thought of dying, it didn't seem such a dreadful thing. I began to like the thought of being in heaven with father and mother, you know, and everybody. It makes a great difference, Alice."

"Does it?" she said, looking earnestly at him; "I don't see how it could. Praying doesn't make any difference with me; I've said my prayers always. I never go to bed without them; but I don't feel the least bit different about things, and I'm sure I never want to die, never!"

She spoke with a great deal of earnestness, and with as much decision as though her not wanting to do a thing made it sure that she would not.

Reuben opened his lips to remind her that she would have to die, whether she wanted to or not, but thought better of it. What was the use in making the little girl unhappy? He did not know how to explain to her what she must do to make matters different, although he knew very well by experience that to say one's prayers and to pray were two quite different things.

Just at that moment Judge Fenning's voice was heard calling them, and Alice ran eagerly forward. "O papa!" he heard her saying as he reached the piazza, "are those boys gone? What did you do with them? I think that eldest one is horrid! He ought to be sent to jail."

Her father smiled gravely. "You think he ought to be sent to jail for life, and the other one ought to be given a stick of candy and comforted? Is that the idea, daughter?"

"O papa! it isn't at all; but don't you think that Joel coaxed the little one into doing wrong?"

"Undoubtedly he helped to lead him astray, but people need not be coaxed into doing what they ought not, Alice."

"Oh! I know it; but it is pretty hard sometimes. Where are they, papa?"

"I have looked after them, dear, and will explain to you at another time. I suppose Reuben is in haste to get home. My boy, I have written a line to Mr. Hardman which I will ask you to deliver; and in addition to it, you will tell him, of course, whatever you please about this whole matter; my request to you to keep silent is now withdrawn. And I want to say that since my very first talk with you I have had almost no doubt of your entire truthfulness. I have been slow and cautious in order to give the other boy the utmost

possible help in righting himself if he could. As it is, I am quite convinced that you saved my orange grove for me, and probably my home. I shall not forget it; and one of these days I may have something more to say to you. I ought not to keep you any longer this morning, as Mr. Hardman hinted to me that he could ill spare you."

It seemed to Reuben that he flew rather than walked home. His heart was very light, and he had never in all his experience been quite so eager to get over the ground. There was a sense of triumph in the thought of the letter which he carried in his pocket; so many things had been hinted at during the last twenty-four hours, it was certainly a triumph to have come out of his trouble not only without blame, but actually commended for faithful service. What would Mr. Hardman say now? It also gave him a great deal of pleasure to remember that Nancy would be glad — she might not say anything of the kind to him. "Nancy is queer," he said. She had kept her kind feelings for him so entirely to herself that he had not so much as suspected them. But it was very pleasant to feel that he had a friend.

"Well," said Mr. Hardman, greeting him with a scowl, "so you are back, are you? I didn't much expect to see you again."

"Yes, sir," said Reuben respectfully; then he handed out the note without more words.

Nancy Hardman, who seemed to be always within hearing, now came to the door. "What is all that?" she asked; and without further ceremony looked over her father's shoulder.

"Humph!" said Mr. Hardman as he read. Reuben stood with his cheeks aglow and his eyes shining. He had not the least idea what was in the note, but it did not matter. Of course it told that he was not a suspected boy any more, and it was possible that it explained the part which he really had taken in the fire.

"Humph!" said Mr. Hardman at last, "fine words."

"I think as much!" exclaimed Nancy, "and nothing else. Do you mean to say, Reuben Stein, that he hasn't given you a cent, when he says that you saved his grove and house for him? I didn't think anybody would be as mean as that!"

"I didn't want pay for putting out a fire," said Reuben, his cheeks glowing now for a different reason.

"Oh, you didn't!" said Mr. Hardman angrily. "Well, suppose you didn't; that is no reason why a man as rich as Judge Fenning shouldn't have done something handsome. Words are cheap. I am not so well off as you — I wouldn't be above

taking a little of his plenty. And the time you spent fussing around his fences belonged to me, I reckon. I don't suppose you thought of that. I wonder now if you could have been such a fool as to refuse to take anything," he added quickly as this new thought struck him. "If you have, you deserve a whipping."

"I wasn't offered anything," said Reuben; "I never thought of such a thing;" and he turned away, all his pleasure gone for the time. After all, there was nobody to care that he had got out of his trouble and been proved to be an honest boy.

"Well," said Nancy, "I think it was mean in the judge not to give you something, I must say; but it has turned out just as I expected. I knew you hadn't got into any such scrape as that, and I told him so to his face."

Reuben looked back to smile. "Thank you," he said; "I am glad you believed in me." Then he went out to the back yard to set to work mending the door of the hen-house, with as much energy as though he had not spent part of the morning in a lovely flower-garden, talking with one of the fairest flowers that grew. For in his fancy Reuben called Alice Fenning one of her father's flowers.

CHAPTER IX.

"WHAT MAKES THINGS HAPPEN?"

THE day passed much as other days had done, except that Mr. Hardman threw out no more hints that Reuben was in disgrace, and treated him with as much kindness as he knew how to show. He seemed to be ashamed of his outburst about the judge, and made no more reference to him or to the late excitement. He took care to keep Reuben almost busier than usual, to "make up for lost time," he said; and the work was of a kind which had no interest in itself for the boy; but he worked faithfully, and was tired enough at night to throw himself down on the lowest step of the back piazza, after everything was done, to rest himself with the quiet and beauty of the evening before he went up to his dreary little room. It had been a beautiful summer-like day, although November was past, and in a very short time it would be Christmas. The little boy Reuben used to be very fond of Christmas, and to look forward to it months ahead; but this old Reuben — for sometimes he felt very old —

cared little about the holiday. He never had any presents; and it was not different from other days, unless he felt more lonely because there was less to be done. Last Christmas, he remembered, the family had gone to Uncle Kastor's; but he had been left at home to guard the house, because there was a report that tramps were around, forcing their way into any old house that was left deserted, and helping themselves to whatever they fancied.

"We haven't got much that even a tramp would want," Mrs. Hardman had said; "but, such as it is, we can't get along without it, and you'll just have to stay."

The Christmas before, Uncle Kastor's folks had been there to dinner; but he had the mumps, and was banished to his little ugly room, and forbidden to so much as look down the cracks, for fear some of Uncle Kastor's boys would catch the disease. So Christmas had no pleasant memory for him. He thought of it to-night, and counted just the number of days there were before it would come, and wondered what would happen this time to keep him from joining in the family frolic. Probably there would be none; for there was sickness at Uncle Kastor's this year, and Mrs. Hardman had been there for a week.

Nancy came out, and sat down on the upper step of the piazza, while Reuben lay, rather than sat,

on the lower one. "Well," she began, "I suppose you couldn't tell anything about the house out there, for the world. I reckon you saw the inside of it, didn't you; or did they talk with you out at the barn, or hen-house, or some such place?"

Now, Reuben had been in the habit of answering Nancy's questions in as few words as possible. She never talked about anything which interested him, and he had never cared to take the trouble to satisfy her curiosity; but to-night it was different. Had not Nancy believed in him when everybody else doubted? He turned himself on the step, leaned his elbow on the step above him, and spoke briskly.

"Oh, I was in the house! In a little room — at least, they called it little; I thought it was pretty big, but not so big as the library, where I went next. They are beautiful rooms, pictures on the walls, and flowers all around, and books — oh, my! so many books."

"Pictures and flowers," said Nancy with a disdainful sniff. "Is that all there was? Didn't they have any carpets, or curtains, or things to sit on?"

"Why, of course," said Reuben; and he launched forth on a description of the rooms which must have astonished Nancy; he had never described anything to her before. She gave a sigh of satisfaction when he came to a period.

"I'd like to see such rooms," she said. "I've read about them in books; but I never was in a fine house, and I don't suppose I ever shall be. Lots of books, you say? I'd like some of them. I think it is mean that we can't ever get hold of anything to read. We used to have; there was a family lived here when I was a little girl, before you came, that lent me books. I carried eggs and things to them, and they had a new book or a magazine or something for me every time I went there. They moved away, and I haven't had anything since." Nancy sighed again, and Reuben looked at her in sympathetic surprise. He had not known that she cared for reading.

"I wish for books too," he said timidly. He did not know but she would resent his having the same wish as hers. "Mother had only a few, but we read them over and over until I almost knew them by heart. I might let you have them, if you would care."

Nancy looked her astonishment. "I didn't know you had a book!" she said. "You have kept them dreadful close. What are they? story-books?"

"No," said Reuben thoughtfully. "I don't think they would be called story-books exactly, though they have a good many stories in them. One is called by a very long name, — 'Encyclopædia,' — and it is full of very short accounts of peo-

ple and things; mother said they were all true. But they are as good as stories, I think. And there are some *Harper's Magazines;* they have some stories in them, but not many. And the numbers I have of them are odd ones. A January number, you know, and then a June one, and an October one of another year; and the stories are sometimes chapter fourteen, and sometimes chapter twenty-nine — and different stories at that; but I've read them all, and imagined beginnings and endings to them."

"Well, I'd like them," said Nancy with energy; "I would read a dictionary, I guess, if I had one; I do get so tired doing nothing, and having nothing to read."

Reuben found his interest in this young woman growing every moment. He had not imagined that she ever thought of a book. "I would like to lend them to you," he said heartily. "I never thought of offering them, because" — then he was silent for a moment. It would not sound well to tell her that he did not know she ever read anything. He began with a fresh sentence. "I think everything of the books, because they were mother's, and because they are all the reading I've got; but I shall like to have you read them if you want to."

"There isn't much use in wanting things," said Nancy gloomily. "I've wanted so many things

that I couldn't get, that I've about given up. I reckon you wouldn't suppose that I've wanted all my life to go to school, would you?"

"No," said Reuben, with a touch of respect in his voice such as he never gave to Nancy Hardman before. If she had really wanted that thing on which his heart was so earnestly set, they must be something alike after all.

"Well, I have," said Nancy, feeling the change in his tone, and being unconsciously made more communicative thereby. "When I was a little girl I did go; and I learned to read and write, and such things, and got a start at figures. I think it is figures I would have liked; they seemed to come natural to me. I can keep father's accounts now — when he has any to keep — better than he can, and he went to school all the time when he was a boy. But you see we are too awfully poor to have chances to do anything; and then I'm getting such a big girl I don't suppose I'd be willing to go to school now, if I had the clothes, which I haven't, nor the books. I'd have to begin away down with the young ones, and I shouldn't want to do that. But I've tried a good many times since you've been here to plan ways for you to go. I don't suppose you knew it, but I have. Father says I've just pestered him about it; but we couldn't manage it. You know as well as I do that it takes all we can

rake and scrape together to live; and that was what made me so mad at Judge Fenning. He's got lots of money; and if he had just given you some decent clothes you could go to school for a while, anyhow; and there, he doesn't do a thing!"

"I thank you very much for thinking about it," said Reuben gratefully; "I didn't think you cared."

"Well, I just thought I'd let you know how it was," said Nancy; "folks care for things sometimes, even when they don't talk about them. What about Mrs. Fenning, did you see her? Well, it isn't any loss, I guess," she added, as Reuben shook his head; "she is a stuck-up piece; I know by the way she holds her head when they ride by. She wouldn't have anything to do with such common trash as you and me, and the little miss is like her, I suppose."

"Oh, no!" said Reuben; "or, that is — the little girl isn't proud a bit. I saw her, and had a long talk with her. Why, she is the one who helped me out;" and then, much to his own astonishment, he began at the beginning, and told Nancy the entire story about the fire; since she had been confidential, why should not he be? She was an interested and appreciative listener, and expressed her opinion of Joel Potter in very plain English.

"He ought to be sent to State prison! That is where he belongs. Little scamp! He wasn't con-

tent with being evil himself, but must try to get a decent boy in trouble!"

"About the reading," said Reuben, lingering even after he had risen to go up-stairs; "there is another book that I read a good deal in nowadays, and that is my mother's Bible."

"A Bible!" repeated Nancy in curious tones. "Do you read that? We've got one ourselves, but I never thought about it. It's pretty dull reading, isn't it?"

"Oh, no!" said Reuben; "not when you remember that it is all true, and that a great deal of it means us, and is about what is coming."

Nancy stared at him thoughtfully. "You are a queer boy, I guess," she said at last. "A great deal queerer even than I thought you were. But it is kind of strange, now I come to think of it, that folks don't read the Bible more. I believe it; I never was one of the infidel kind. I believe every word it says; but I don't know as I ever thought of its really being about me, though I suppose it is. Whereabouts do you read?"

"I pick out verses," said Reuben timidly. He hardly knew how to talk to Nancy of his Bible-reading. "I don't know how to read it very well; I only began just a little while ago; but I find verses that I like almost everywhere. Some of them seem real strange. There was one last night — I felt

awful last night. I saw that your father didn't believe in me, and I didn't know how to prove that I had told Judge Fenning the truth; it seemed as though there wasn't anybody to help me. At first I thought I wouldn't read in the Bible; I'd give everything up and go to bed. But I had promised myself that I would read a little every night, and I didn't want to break my promise; so I opened it anywhere, and found this verse, without looking. 'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and delivered him out of all his troubles.'"

"Well, I do say!" said Nancy admiringly; "seems as though 'twas meant for you, didn't it? If you ain't a man yet, you are on the road to being one. But then I don't suppose you was crying, was you?"

"Oh! but you know," said Reuben, surprised out of his timidity by such dense ignorance, "that means praying — crying to God."

"Did you do that?" Nancy asked.

"Yes," said Reuben quietly. "I asked him to help me out."

"And you think he did? Well, now I don't think so. I think it just happened."

"What makes things happen?" asked Reuben, with which unanswerable question he turned away.

"Here," said Nancy, dashing after him when he was half-way up the back stairs, "take this lamp, if

you are going to sit up half the night to read. I guess there isn't more than a drop of oil in the one in your room."

Reuben received it gratefully. A dim, smoky little lamp, but very much better than the one he usually had; and then it was so kind and so strange in Nancy to offer it! He sat with his unopened Bible in his hand for some minutes, and thought of this strange day he had lived — not the least surprising part of it being his conversation with Nancy Hardman. The idea of his really talking to her, describing things to her as though she had been a friend; and above all, telling her about his Bible-reading and praying! How did he come to do that? He did not understand it. If anybody had told him, when she came out and sat down on the steps, that before he left her he would have said all that he did, he would not have believed it. Somehow he *had* to tell her; talking about the other books, and saying nothing of his Bible, seemed mean and small, especially after finding that verse the night before. To be sure, he had not trusted it very much, but had gone to Judge Fenning's very much cast down. However, tonight he could feel that it helped him; and it seemed someway as though Nancy ought to know it. But he had not meant to say a word about the praying; that had grown out of Nancy's un-

dreamed-of ignorance. But how kind she had been, and how strange it was that she had suddenly seemed to grow kind! Perhaps she had been better all the time than he had supposed. Perhaps if he had taken the least trouble to tell her anything interesting they might have had pleasant talks together long ago. "Maybe it is I who am more than half to blame for all my dreary times," said Reuben, as at last he opened his Bible.

The day's excitement, as well as a good deal of hard work that had been put into it, made him feel unusually tired; and he decided to stop with a look at a single verse, and to let the Bible open where it chose. "I'll take the first verse I glance at, no matter what it is," said this boy, who evidently did not know how to read the Bible. What if the first verse he had "happened" to see had been a list of names? But what he found was this: "If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, when men rose up against us." This fitted his expectations so exactly that he felt as though he must read another verse: "Then they had swallowed us up quick, when their wrath was kindled against us." "Yes," he said aloud, "that is so. Joel Potter wanted to 'swallow me' — I don't know why, I'm sure, but he is certainly my enemy." He could not help reading on, stopping for some seconds

over the verse: "Blessed be the Lord, who hath not given us as a prey to their teeth."

"I wonder what Nancy would say to this?" he thought. "I told her the book was about us; and here it is, just what I've been through this very day. 'Our soul is escaped as a bird out of the snare of the fowler: the snare is broken, and we are escaped.'

"Yes, sir, we are!" said Reuben in much excitement. "Joel Potter made as nice a snare for me as he ever used to catch a mocking-bird with; and it is all broken to pieces, just because one little girl, that he didn't know anything about, was looking out of an attic window. No, I suppose it was because God planned to have her there, and to make it all come out just as it has. 'Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.' Nancy may say what she likes about things 'happening,' I believe my help was from the Lord. He took care of me."

"'This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and delivered him out of all his troubles.' That is as true as anything can be. I've read the whole Psalm, and I only meant to read a verse. Hold on! what is that next verse, 'They that trust in the Lord shall be as mount Zion, which cannot be removed, but abideth for ever.' I'll take that verse too, and it shall belong to me; I'm one of them.

From this hour Reuben Stein means to trust in the Lord, and do just as he tells him, as far as he knows how. Now I've said it. I've kind of meant it all along, ever since that night when I first began to read; but this is downright earnest. From this minute I belong to him."

CHAPTER X.

HINDERED BY HIMSELF.

HE felt very grave as he closed the Bible and dropped upon his knees, — felt older, indeed, than he ever had before. He knew exactly what he was about. He was not, like Nancy Hardman, ignorant of Bible language, and of the way to Christ. His mother had been a good woman, and had carefully taught her boy the way to become a Christian, though she had made the mistake of supposing that he would not understand it until he was older, and had therefore never looked or hoped to see him a Christian boy before she left him alone; nor had Reuben given the matter a serious thought until the railroad accident which seemed to bring him so close to death. Before he went to sleep that night, you remember, he resolved to find out how to live so as not to be afraid of death. The very next day the Bible-reading and praying had begun, because Reuben, being well taught, knew that prayer was a necessary part of Christian living. He had meant it all, and yet someway this evening

was the final settlement of the whole matter. It was almost too much like a business contract perhaps you will think, and yet it was very sensible reasoning. God had taken care of him that day — brought him out of trouble as he had promised to do. He had done, indeed, more than he promised, because Reuben confessed to himself that he had been far from trusting fully, yet God had done his part. Now he would fully and forever give himself up to the God who had cared for him, and who promised to care for him forever.

"I must do my part, though," he said aloud, when he rose from his knees, "and I must find out what my part is; I suppose it is all there, in that big book, and it will take me a good while to find it all out; but as fast as I find it, I must carry it out; that's common sense. If I had hired out to a man who was to send me to school, and board and clothe me in return for certain work that I was to do for him, I wouldn't expect him to keep his bargain if I didn't do my part. Or no, it isn't like that, after all. It is like a father, a good father, who takes care of his boy, of course, because he loves him; but the boy would be mean and low, and not deserve a father, who wouldn't do his best to please him. I'll try hard for my part."

A few minutes afterwards he began to whistle; not a very loud whistle — he did not want to dis-

turb the Hardmans. But it was a very merry note. What! a boy who had just been reading in the Bible and praying, go to whistling? Certainly. Who ought to feel more like it? Yet Nancy Hardman didn't understand. She heard the merry note, and curled her lip in the darkness, and said, —

"That is what I supposed; much his Bible-reading amounts to!"

There are some people who seem to think one ought to be long-faced, and cry a good deal, if one makes a daily habit of Bible-reading and prayer. They are the people who know nothing about it by experience. The actual fact is, that the boy who can afford to be happy all the time is the one who knows not only that God is his Father, but that he is trying to please his Father every day. Suddenly the whistling stopped, and Reuben's face grew grave. It came to him as a new thought that Joel Potter knew nothing about a good father. He himself was an orphan; but his father had been good and kind, and had done the best for his boy that he could. Reuben understood that now better than he did when his father was living. So often he told himself mournfully that he was such a little fellow then that he did not know how hard life was for his father and mother, and did not seem to himself to have helped them as he might. But Joel Potter's father was a disgrace to a boy. How

could Joel be expected to be a good boy? Who had taught him anything?

"I wish Judge Fenning would forgive him," he said aloud; "perhaps he would if he had known I wanted him to; I am the one who has suffered most from him. Oh! of course there is the burned fence; but then, punishing Joel Potter won't pay for that, and perhaps he will be a better boy after having had such a scare. I wonder if I dare ask the judge to let him go this time. I might get Alice to, she would be willing to, I guess, if she thought I was — though she felt anything but sorry for him this afternoon. Well, I didn't either; but to-night it seems as though he hadn't had half a chance."

He was surprised and not a little pleased with himself over this change in his feelings. Only a very short time ago he had felt nothing but anger in his heart toward Joel, now he actually wanted him forgiven. He got down on his knees again, and prayed very earnestly for the boy whose father had taught him wrong ways instead of right ones, and who knew nothing about the Father in heaven.

Contrary to his expectations, the next day was a trying one to Reuben. The truth is, that, having got so happily out of his great trouble, he had rather fancied that life would be bright for him all the way through; but the actual fact was, that

almost everything went wrong. Mr. Hardman had some anxieties of which Reuben knew nothing, and they did not serve to sweeten his temper. He scolded Reuben without the slightest reason for doing so, except that he was there to be scolded, and found fault with everything he tried to do. Nancy, too, seemed to have got over the genial mood of the evening before. She spoke sharply to Reuben, bidding him not "move like a snail," when he was simply being careful lest he should spill water over her clean floor. She called him stupid for dropping the sharp knife into the dish-pan, when it was her elbow that had jostled him so that the dropping could not be helped. She reached the climax at last, when she told him that if he had not sat up so late to read his Bible, he wouldn't be so stupid. She believed in people living, rather than talking.

Without a word in reply, Reuben set down the pail of beans he was sorting for her, and marched out of the room — sure that if he stayed a minute longer he should say words which he would afterwards regret. He did not think he slammed the door; but Nancy called after him. "There now, bang yourself away in a rage. Great religion that is! I've seen more than I want of that kind already."

Reuben went out to the hen-house, which seemed

to be always in need of repairs, and set about the unfinished job of yesterday with a swelling heart. It was hard to be scolded and insulted when he had not done a thing to deserve it.

Nancy Hardman was certainly very provoking, if she *had* stood his friend through his trouble. He even told himself that there was nothing so very astonishing about that. Nancy knew he wouldn't do a mean thing, and when she was good-natured, she was willing to say so; but she was so seldom good-natured that there was no use in trying to have her for a friend. And poor Reuben felt, someway, more friendless that morning than ever before. The memory of the beautiful garden where he had walked but yesterday, and the pretty white flower who had walked and talked with him, made him feel sick at heart over the thought of the dreary life which stretched out before him.

As the day drew toward its close his loneliness and discontent deepened. In his secret heart, he had had a belief or a feeling that he should hear from Judge Fenning during the day. Just why he should, or just why he wished to, he did not try to explain even to himself. Perhaps it was an eager wish, rather than a belief. The judge had been so kind to him, and had thanked him so heartily for saving his grove, was it silly to think that perhaps he would drive that way and speak a pleasant word

to him? or at least bow as he passed? He did not expect a present he told himself scornfully; and it made him angry to have the Hardmans repeat, as they did several times that day, their opinion of the man for not giving him anything. But despite his not wanting it, there lurked in his heart a miserable feeling of disappointment that the day passed just as other days. So did three more, during which Reuben was quite as miserable as he had ever been in his life, and Mr. Hardman was fully as trying, if not more so.

At the end of that time Reuben took himself sharply to task. Was it possible that he was such a mean fellow that a few kind words and a walk in a pleasant garden had spoiled him? If a little brightness had such an effect on him as that, no wonder that he was not allowed to have any brightness in his life! He sat in the darkness, and thought it all over. Since that one evening, when Nancy had given him a lamp which would burn, she seemed to have repented her goodness; and the one he had this evening went out almost as soon as he lighted it.

Never mind, he could think in the dark. Was he the same boy who had whistled a few nights ago, and been sorry for Joel Potter? He had a feeling now that he could not afford to be sorry for anybody but himself. But he had the grace

to be ashamed, and to realize that there were ever so many boys worse off in the world than he. Wasn't there a Bible verse that ought to help him? In the days when he went to Sunday-school he used to learn Bible verses; why, once he learned an entire chapter. How many times he had said it to his mother! How did it commence? "Therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus." Although he had not thought of it for some time, he found that he could recall nearly all the verses. There were many of them that he did not understand; but he stopped long over this one, "Thou, therefore, endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ." When he was a very little fellow, the desire of his heart had been to be a soldier. He remembered that he was never happier than when his father's old military belt was fastened around his waist, and he was marching up and down the yard, with a stick thrust into the belt, which he imagined looked somewhat like a sword. Well, he was ambitious still; here was a chance to be a soldier, and the first direction was to "endure hardness;" if he thought his life hard, it was only what a soldier must expect. Then a voice seemed to sound out of his little past to help him: "A good soldier is always proud of his commanding officer, if he has a good one." How often he had heard his father say that. And here

was he, enlisted as a soldier of Jesus Christ; how proud he must be of his Commanding Officer! and he must show that he was. Had he shown it to Nancy Hardman, for instance, during these last few days?

Then the other verse which he took to himself was, "Study to show thyself approved unto God: a workman that needeth not to be ashamed." The last part of the verse, about "rightly dividing the word of truth," he did not understand; but that about a workman not being ashamed, he did. That very day, in fixing the kitchen window, he had done it in so bungling a manner that he said to himself at the time, "If Mr. Hardman knew how to fix such things, or cared how they were done, I should be ashamed of that; but it doesn't make any difference."

He blushed now as he thought of it. Here was proof that it did make a difference. He was a soldier of Jesus Christ, and all his work had to be approved or disapproved by him; even the kitchen window his Commanding Officer knew about — knew that his soldier had not fixed it as well as he could! Altogether, perhaps that half hour Bible-reading in the dark was the most profitable that Reuben had ever done. Before he went to bed, he settled it that soldiers enlisted not for bright days spent in gardens, but for war. And he, Reu-

ben Stein, enlisted for life under the command of Jesus Christ, meant to be faithful — meant to be at all times, and in all places, a workman who would not need to be ashamed.

He resolved not to think of Judge Fenning any more, or to hope for help from him. A soldier should look to his commanding officer for the help he needed to do his duty.

Perhaps some boy thinks this was all fancy, and that by the next morning, when Reuben was out in the yard with the hens, feeding them, and cleaning their houses, all idea of being a soldier had been put away. Such a boy is mistaken. It was not fancy, but actual fact. Reuben Stein had enlisted. He realized it now more fully than before; that is, he realized that the decision had to do with every little step of his daily life; and he meant business. The consequence was that the days began to grow better. The work was fully as hard, sometimes harder than usual. Mr. Hardman had hours of such utter unreasonableness that it was not possible to please him; and Nancy, who was apt to reflect her father's moods, was often disagreeable, and not an interesting thing would happen from morning until night; yet Reuben whistled over his work when he was where he thought it would disturb no one, and drove every nail, and hoed every spot, as well as he possibly

could. Also he kept a thoughtful watch of Nancy's water-pails and wood-pile, and in the course of five days' time wrung from her the words, "You've been amazing good to-day, anyhow. I guess you've been reading that Bible again, haven't you?"

"I read it every night," said Reuben with a cheery smile, as he turned away with her ever-empty pail on his arm. There was a spring at quite a distance from the house where that pail had to be filled.

That very evening something "happened."

CHAPTER XI.

A "CHANCE."

THE first person Reuben saw, on his return from the spring, was Uncle Kastor, whose cheery face seemed to light up the entire kitchen. He brought good news. Alvira Jane was better, and Mrs. Hardman had sent word that by the first of the week she thought she could be spared to come home. It is true that Nancy grumbled, declaring that "next week" was a long way off; there was time for them all to get sick before that; but Uncle Kastor was used to her grumbling. He laughed good-naturedly, and said they had all decided that they would keep well, for a change; he thought himself than Alvira Jane would be quite chirk by Christmas. The doctor said he must expect the getting well to be slow, but that would be slow enough, he was sure; but he told mother this morning that they would have the fattest turkey and the jolliest Christmas yet, if Alvira Jane pulled through all right. Then he turned to Reuben.

"Halloo, young man! I hear you've been getting famous since I saw you. Been took up and took down again, eh? Or is it the other way, took down and took up again? I guess that's it, according to all I hear." And he laughed a laugh which seemed to fill all the space about him, so loud and jolly was it. "Let's see," he added, "I believe they call it arson up North, don't they? The idea of a man having no more sense than to suppose a boy like you would do that kind of thing! Why, I'd know, just to take one good look at you, the folly of it. What's the use of being a judge, if he can't do better than that?"

Reuben immediately felt it necessary to speak for the judge. "He believed in me from the first, Mr. Hansen; he told me he did; but it was to help find out who did it, and to give another boy the chance to tell the truth if he would, that he had me come again and see him. He was very kind to me in every way."

"Yes," said Nancy, "Reuben is ready to fall down at his feet and worship him because he didn't send him to the penitentiary for saving his old grove for him!"

"He thanked me, just as any gentleman would," said Reuben stiffly. He might feel a little sore at heart because the judge, and especially the little white flower who had called herself his friend, had

so quickly forgotten him, but he did not like to have others speak of it.

"Oh, *thanked!*" said Nancy with a disagreeable toss of her head; "words don't cost anything. If I had as much money as Judge Fenning, and you had done for me what you did for him, do you suppose I'd stop with *words?*"

"I didn't want to be paid for putting out a fire," said poor Reuben once more, his face getting red. This was really growing to be a sore subject to him.

"No more you didn't; I believe you," said Uncle Kastor soothingly. "I believe you; but all the same I think, as Nancy says, it wouldn't have hurt him to make you a little present. Still, big folks don't often think of nice little things to do; I've noticed that before. Well," rising from the old-fashioned splint-bottomed chair as he spoke, "I must be attending to business, and be getting home again, though I can't go till the doctor gets his powders and things ready. It takes a powerful lot of medicine to keep us running lately; and it makes one kind of shake all over to think of the bill there will be to pay one of these days; but we don't let on about that to Alvira Jane, you may believe.

"'Pa,' she says to me last night, 'how ever will you pay the doctor's bill?' and your ma, Nancy,

she spoke up before she thought, I suppose, and says she, 'Sure enough! won't it be a big one, though?' — 'Sho, now,' says I, 'the idea of thinking about that! Why, I'm that grateful to him, that if his bill reached from here to the North I'd be kind of glad; I'll risk but that we'll pay it all right. Ain't the turkeys getting fatter every day? And isn't Christmas coming? And as for the chickens, I believe they know they must get themselves ready for chicken pies. The doctor will take some of his pay in chickens, I'll be bound, and be glad to get them.' That's what I said before Alvira Jane, and I mean it too; only I wouldn't have her know, for the sake of having the mortgage on my place paid up to-morrow, what a big bill it is likely to be. She's been too sick to count, you see, and don't know how many times he's been there, and so we can keep it from her; there's mercy in all things, ain't there?"

Reuben could not help laughing a little over this curious mercy; but as he looked at Uncle Kastor's kind old face, the thought came to him, "How much I should like to help him pay that bill. Oh! if I only had money what nice things I could do; and he has been so good to me."

"It does beat all," said Uncle Kastor, "how I run on about my own affairs, and forget the most important thing I came for — no, I didn't exactly

forget it either, I was kind of waiting to see how to put it. The fact is, Reuben, I've struck luck at last for you, I do believe."

"What is it?" asked Reuben, his eyes aglow with interest.

"Why, I came across the new teacher this afternoon. A nice man he is; the nicest spoken Northerner there is around here, to my thinking. Do you know him, Reuben?"

The boy shook his head, but did not speak. He was too anxious to hear what Uncle Kastor had to say to delay him by a word.

"Well, I seem to know him pretty well. He is one of those fellows that acts like he was your friend the second time you meet him. When I was coming out of the doctor's the third time — I've been there three times in all to-day — he's powerful busy, the doctor is, and wasn't at home till the last time — well, as I was going out for this third time to wait for him to get the things ready to send for Alvira Jane, I met Mr. Kensington, that's his name, — queer name, isn't it? sounds like a city, somehow, — and he asked me if I knew of any boy hereabouts who would like to come and live to his house, and do the chores and things, and go to school. That makes your eyes flash, doesn't it? Yes, sir, I thought of you in a twinkling! It didn't take me long to tell him all about

you, and to promise to come and see you while I was waiting for the doctor, and to tell you if you wanted the place you were to call and see him this evening at seven o'clock, and talk it over. There ain't no doubt but what you will go, is there?"

Uncle Kastor finished this sentence with a loud laugh. He was very much excited — almost as much as Reuben himself. The kind-hearted old man had taken this boy so entirely into his heart, and been so anxious to do something for him, that to think he had actually succeeded made him feel very happy. When he thought of this, in addition to the fact that his dear girl, Alvira Jane, was getting better, he felt as though there could not be a happier man in the country than he.

As for Nancy, her surprise over the news was mingled with a little touch of envy and dismay. How strange that anybody living in their part of the world should want a boy! Such a thing had not happened during all the time Reuben had lived with them. And how were they going to do without Reuben? He was a nuisance, of course, — all boys were. Hadn't she said this a hundred times? And he ate more than his work would be worth, even supposing they needed help, which they didn't; for father could do all he had to do if he only thought so. But after all, they were used to having Reuben around. He was handy to make

fires, and look after the hens, and milk the cow, and carry the milk, and hoe the garden, and bring water from the spring — why, the more she thought about it, the more she felt as though he *could not* be spared. Besides, why should such luck come to him? Hadn't she wanted to go to school all her life? And nobody ever appeared who wanted a girl to do chores and be paid in that way. Just because Reuben was a boy, all sorts of nice things must happen to him — that was always the way! Yes, it cannot be denied that poor Nancy was jealous.

After Uncle Kastor went she dashed about the kitchen, working very fast, and slamming the dishes so hard when she set them on the table, that Reuben, who had meant to have a talk with her over his good fortune, decided it would be wise not to say a word, and took refuge among his friends, the hens, until he was called to supper.

Of course at the supper-table nothing was said about it. Mr. Hardman was silent and stern-looking, and Nancy was silent and gloomy; so Reuben ate his corn bread and molasses in utter silence, and wondered how to get permission to go out at seven o'clock to make his important call.

There are boys at fourteen to whom this will sound like almost an impossible thing; yet it is a fact that Reuben had never been on the street

after seven o'clock in his life. While his mother lived, there had been no occasion for his going, and he was too fond of her to be other than glad that she wanted to keep him close beside her until bedtime. Since he had come to live at the Hardmans', one of the first things he had learned was to be in the house for the night by seven o'clock, and in bed by eight. "He would have no loafers from his house prowling the streets and getting into mischief," Mr. Hardman had said; and Reuben had not cared for the streets, because he knew no boys, and had nowhere to go. But to-night he must surely get away, and he could not think how it was to be planned. Mr. Hardman looked in the mood to say "no" to anything asked of him. But sullen as Nancy looked, she had her plans, and presently brought them out in an angry tone.

"Reuben, if you should ever happen to get through eating, you are to take a pint of milk over to old Mrs. Bascom below the sawmill."

Mr. Hardman looked up in as much surprise as Reuben felt. "Why in the world didn't you send it before?" he asked. "It is almost seven o'clock now, and Mrs. Bascom lives at the other end of the town."

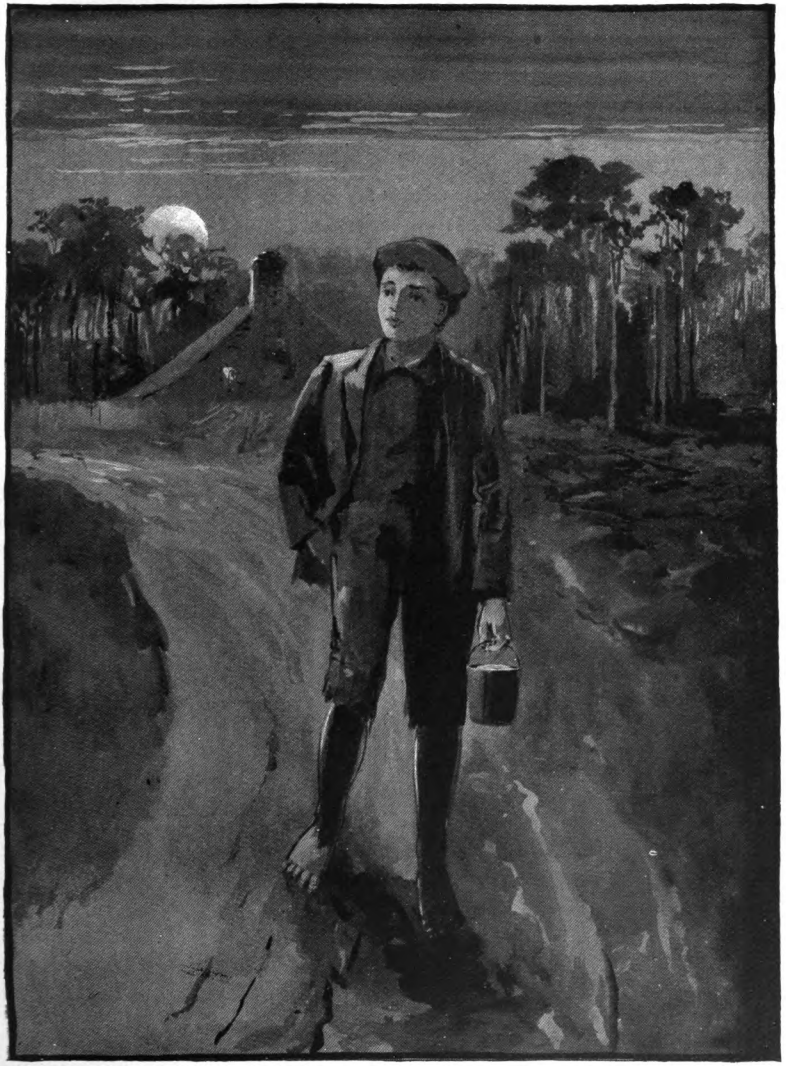
"What if she does? Reuben isn't a baby who is afraid of the dark, I should hope! There's no sense in a great boy like him not doing an errand

in the evening if anybody wants him to. There are reasons why he couldn't go before, and why he has to go now. I don't suppose you'll be scared, will you?"

"No," said Reuben. And he smiled at her gratefully. To get to old Mrs. Bascom's one had to pass the house where the new teacher lived. He began to understand Nancy.

No sooner was he gone with the pint of milk than Nancy undertook to tell the news to Mr. Hardman, and was not much surprised to discover that he liked the idea no better than she had. Reuben had been a very useful boy to him, and he was beginning to realize it in his own fashion. In fact, he took the news much worse than Nancy had. At first he was angry with Uncle Kastor, and wondered what right he had to come meddling with his affairs, and getting his boy away. But his daughter soon spoiled that kind of talk by reminding him of the number of times he had told Uncle Kastor that he could ill afford to feed Reuben, and only kept him out of charity.

Then he said there wasn't any sense in Reuben running off that night; morning would have done just as well. If he had known what the errand was, he would have told him he could not go. This was precisely what Nancy had foreseen when she planned the errand to Mrs. Bascom, but she



ON HIS WAY.

was wise enough not to say so; and only replied coldly that business was business, and that when a boy was told to come to a place at seven o'clock, he ought to be there at seven. But Mr. Hardman kept getting into a worse humor every minute. He declared that Reuben was an ungrateful dog! He had always known it, and this proved it, — rushing off the very minute he heard of a place which suited him better, after all that had been done for him. Hadn't they clothed and fed him for nothing for three years.

"You've told him so often enough," said Nancy angrily; "what would a boy of any spirit do but leave the first chance?"

No excuse can be offered for Nancy Hardman's very improper way of speaking to her father, except the weak one that it was all that could be expected of her. The poor girl had never received right training from any one, and she had been trained to be sharp and rude with her tongue. When it was not used against him, her father admired its sharpness, and had shown her more than once that he did.

CHAPTER XII.

HINDERED BY CONSCIENCE.

IN point of fact, Mr. Hardman had been right in his statement that the morning would have done just as well for Reuben's errand, or that is the way it looked to short-sighted people. Mr. Kensington was not at home. He had left word that if a boy called he was to be told that a message had come for him from a very sick scholar whom he must see at once, and that the boy might return the next morning.

"Humph!" said Nancy, "he's one of the kind that wants other folks to be on hand, and he will do as he likes about it himself."

Her father had gone to bed, disgusted with her and Reuben, and all the world, so she was free to make her comments on that side if she chose.

"I don't suppose he could plan to have the boy get sick at some time that would be more convenient," said Reuben, resolved to stand up for the teacher, though he was sorely disappointed, and in a quiver of fear lest something should

happen before morning to make him lose the chance.

"He ain't a doctor as well as a teacher, is he?" snarled Nancy. "What good will his going do the sick boy?"

"I don't know," said Reuben gravely. "Maybe he is a good man, and the boy is going to die, and wants to see him."

"Humph!" said Nancy again, "I don't see no use in thinking all the time about dying; it is hard enough work to live."

Neither of them knew that the first question Mr. Kensington asked when he reached home was, "Did the boy come?" and on being told that he did, he smiled and said, "So far, so good. He is a boy who can do as he is told, and be prompt about it. If I had known that I could return so early, he might have waited. It is only a quarter after seven now."

The clock had not finished striking eight the next morning when Reuben appeared at the side door asking for Mr. Kensington. Nancy had taken care to see that her father did not forbid his going that morning, by starting him off on one of her errands before that gentleman was up — early rising not being one of his virtues.

Reuben was shown at once to the dining-room, where the family were at breakfast, — a pleasant-

faced lady with gray hair, two young ladies, one of them with so bright a face that Reuben found himself tempted to stare at her, and Mr. Kensington himself.

"Ah!" said Mr. Kensington, glancing around as Reuben slipped quietly in, "here is my boy whom I disappointed last night, I suppose. I generally keep my appointments, young man, but it was unavoidable last night. Have you breakfasted?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" said Reuben quickly; and he thought of the slices of corn meal mush which Nancy had hastily fried for him. They were out of molasses she had explained, but she had given him some pork gravy, and Reuben had made a good breakfast. On this table was a dish of toast, another of eggs, and a plate of muffins. The coffee also seemed very unlike that which Nancy made. And the beautiful glass dishes which stood at each plate were piled full of some golden-colored fruit which Reuben did not recognize. Certainly this was a very different breakfast from his, but he was not hungry.

"Very well, then," said Mr. Kensington; "take that chair by the window, and we can talk while I eat mine. What can you do, my boy?"

"Sir?" answered Reuben, bewildered. How in the world was he expected to answer such a question as that?

"Why, I learned from your friend who talked with me yesterday that you wanted a place where you could earn your board, and have a chance to go to school. Now, I ask what can you do toward earning your board — isn't that plain?"

"Oh!" said Reuben. "Well, sir, I can do — or, at least, I can *try* to do — what I'm told."

Both Mr. Kensington and the elderly lady laughed. "If you can," said the younger woman, who was not pretty, "you are the first boy I ever knew who could."

Then the pretty lady, "Edward, do take him. He will be such a contrast to Billy that we shall be sure to like him. Don't you know Billy's weakness was never to do quite as he was told about anything."

A number of merry words passed between them. But presently Mr. Kensington turned again to Reuben, and began to question him closely as to what he knew, and did not know, and wanted to know.

"Well," he said at last, pushing back his chair, "I am inclined to think we will try one another — that is, if it strikes you favorably, mother and Clara. How is it, Clara — shall we make the trial?"

"We can but try," the young woman said somewhat gloomily. Reuben was afraid, as he looked at her, that he could not suit her. She might be even as hard to suit, in a different way, as Nancy

Hardman was. Mr. Kensington turned toward him with a smile.

"This lady," he said, "has had a very hard time with boys. I look to you to redeem her opinion of the entire race. Now, my boy, there is one thing which must be settled if I undertake to try you, and I think I will, — I shall want you to come at once, say to-morrow morning, or this evening. How would this evening after school do? Could you come then?"

"I think I could, sir," said Reuben. "I have not spoken to Mr. Hardman, and I do not know that he even knows that I have a chance; but he has been wanting to get rid of me for so long that I don't think it can make any difference to him how soon I go."

Mr. Kensington laughed again. "You are frank, at least," he said. "Very well; then we will say this evening; you may come at seven o'clock again, if that will suit. The question is, can I depend upon you? There is another boy who wants the place, and I promised to give him a final answer this noon. If I had the slightest idea that you would change your mind and disappoint me, I would take him at once. I am a busy man, and have no time to waste."

"I'll come, sir," said Reuben confidently. He could hardly help smiling at the idea of the man

being anxious lest he shouldn't keep his word, when here he had been for more than a year looking for just such a chance as this, and was so eager to get the place that he could hardly wait for night to come.

"Very well," said Mr. Kensington. "As to school, it is near the close of the term, but that need make no difference — you may as well begin at once. You would like that, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir," said Reuben, his face flushing. "At least, I am very anxious to go to school; but I don't know how I can manage it until I can contrive some way to get some clothes."

Mr. Kensington gave him a swift glance, and noticed that every garment he had on was patched and worn, and was much too small for him.

"You will probably have to take your Sunday suit for every day," he said cheerily. "After a time we can perhaps manage another suit."

But now Reuben's face seemed to him to fairly blaze. "I have none," he said.

"Have no Sunday suit, do you mean? What other clothes have you, my boy?"

"I have none at all, except another shirt like this — only it is a little smaller, and I can't very well get into it," replied Reuben.

"I should think not!" said Mr. Kensington; and he laughed outright.

"Is it possible?" said the lady who was not pretty.

"Poor boy!" said the gray-haired lady. "Edward, we must fix him up right away. I think some of Chester's clothes will do, with a little fixing."

"We will manage the question of clothes, I think," said Mr. Kensington very kindly. And then Reuben was dismissed.

He made all speed homeward, to find Mr. Hardman waiting for him, and very cross. He sneered at everything which was told him about Mr. Kensington, and said that Reuben would find himself no better than a slave. These Northern teachers were tyrants — every one of them; and that Reuben was in a dreadful hurry to get away from them. Why had he not said that he could not go for a week yet? At least it would have been no more than decent, after all that had been done for him, to wait until the extra work was done.

Poor Reuben stared at this, and began to realize for the first time that Mr. Hardman actually considered him useful. On the whole, the day was a long one. Mr. Hardman was more difficult to please than usual, and Nancy gave them very little of her company, and looked glum when she was there. By five o'clock he began to feel glad that there were only two hours more of this kind of

life. Almost any change, he decided, would be better. And then came suddenly a vision which for several days he had watched and hoped for, but of late had given up.

Judge Fenning's carriage wheeled around the corner, and drew up before the gate; and Judge Fenning alighted and came into the house, leaving Caleb in charge. The little "flower" sat daintly among the cushions. Reuben dropped his axe, and went out to her.

"Oh, here you are!" she cried out. "Papa has gone in to see Mr. Hardman. I am so glad you are not in there. I wanted to be the first to tell you. O Reuben! don't you think, you are coming to our house to live! and go to school with me every morning; and papa says when the weather is not pleasant you can drive me in and keep the pony. Oh! won't we have such fun together? Papa has always disliked to have me go to school alone, and sometimes he can't take me. Papa has been away, or it would all have been settled long ago. I was in such a hurry! I thought he would never get home. Why don't you laugh and dance, Reuben? Aren't you very glad?"

Said Reuben, speaking slowly and with great gravity, "I can't come."

"Why, Reuben Stein! how can you say such a thing? Why can't you?"

"Because I have promised Mr. Kensington to be there at seven o'clock this evening; and he let another boy go who wanted the chance, because he trusted me."

Then did the little flower sit up very straight and talk eagerly. Papa would make that all right, she was sure. Reuben must not lose such a chance. Papa wanted to help him to get an education, to pay for saving the grove. Mr. Kensington would not hold him to his promise when he heard all about it.

But Reuben was firm. He was sure a boy ought not to break his word simply because a better place offered. Just then the door opened, and Judge Fenning came out, followed by Mr. Hardman, who had evidently told him of Reuben's prospects.

"Well, sir," said the judge, "I see my little daughter has explained our errand to you. What have you to say?"

Poor Reuben! It seemed like taking a beautiful gift which was within his reach, and dashing it with his own hand to the ground. But he answered firmly that he was very sorry, but believed himself bound in honor to Mr. Kensington. What was Alice's dismay and chagrin to learn that her father thought the same! In vain she argued, and even cried. Judge Fenning declared that he

thought with Reuben that for a boy to begin life by breaking his word to one man because he considered another offer better was not the way to expect to win success and honor.

"I like your decision, my boy," he said, "and your firmness. I am sorry not to be able to carry out my plans as I proposed; but this may be even better for you. Mr. Kensington is a fine man, and is always at home, while I am much away. And now I must not detain you any longer. I shall see you again soon, I hope. Good-by." And the carriage rolled away.

"If you hadn't been in such a hurry, sneaking off before anybody was up," snarled Mr. Hardman, "you wouldn't have lost the best chance that will ever come to you. But boys who choose to manage for themselves, without asking advice of their elders, must take the consequences."

"I must say I think you are both awfully particular," said Nancy. "It ain't likely that Mr. Kensington would have cared; there are other boys in the world."

Poor Reuben! all the while he was swallowing his last supper to be eaten in the Hardman kitchen — and Nancy had made it as good as she could — he was saying to himself: "I wonder why God let me lose such a *lovely* chance?"

CHAPTER XIII.

A NEW WORLD.

IT was as bright a December morning as is often found even in Florida, — that one on which Reuben Stein opened his eyes in his new home at the Kensingtons'. The first thing he did, when he was enough awake to realize anything, was to raise himself on his elbow and look about him. A greater contrast between this room and the place at the Hardmans' in which he had slept could hardly be imagined. It was not large; but it looked so to Reuben, because there was space for two windows, and a great deal of furniture — I mean, Reuben thought there was a great deal. The floor was covered with white matting; there was a bureau and a washstand, all in white, as was the bedstead. There were two chairs, one a rocker, white like the rest. White curtains fluttered in the morning breeze from both the open windows. Reuben, lying there gazing about him with an air of bewilderment, decided that it was much the nicest room he had ever seen. There could not be

anything more beautiful than this, even at Judge Fenning's.

As for the bed, he had heard of covers made of down, and that they were very soft and delightful — he wondered if they made mattresses out of the same material. Nothing like this had ever rested his tired limbs before. He looked down at the spread which covered him, and patted it tenderly, telling it that it was white and beautiful; the question was, why had he been put into a room like this to sleep? He thought about it for a few minutes, and decided that this was what people called a spare room. His mother had told him about the spare chamber there used to be in grandfather's house, ready always for guests. Undoubtedly he had been slipped into one, for one night of his life. He had come earlier than Mrs. Kensington had supposed a boy was going to, and his own place probably wasn't ready. He felt dismayed when he thought of it. Perhaps he ought to have offered to have slept in the attic, or the woodshed, or anywhere. They might have given him an old comforter for a bed, then he need not have spoiled such loveliness. He was glad to remember that he had had no opportunity to say anything after seeing his room. Mr. Kensington had kept him busy, examining how far he had been in arithmetic, until the rest of the family had disappeared, and then

had merely opened the door of this room, and told him to get to bed as soon as he could. Perhaps he would have felt less troubled about spoiling the beauty of the room if he had known how simple and inexpensive the furnishings were. The bureau and washstand which he admired so much were of the commonest wood, and the tops were covered with white oilcloth neatly tacked on. The window curtains cost but five cents a yard, and were looped back with bits of bright cambric. As for the bed-spread, which Reuben scarcely dared to touch, Miss Clara had bought half a dozen of them at a dollar apiece, because she said they would wash as easy as sheets.

While Reuben was considering the beauties of his new stopping-place, there came a knock at the door, and a moment after Mr. Kensington opened it and peeped in. The idea of his knocking at the door! Mr. Hardman had been in the habit of walking into Reuben's room whenever he chose.

"Excuse me," said Mr. Kensington, "I thought perhaps you were sleeping."

"No, sir," said Reuben, his cheeks growing very red; "but I just waked up, and I'm afraid I'm very late."

"Oh, no! it is not late yet; but if your sleep is over, you may as well get up. We are rather early risers here; Miss Clara likes to get the morning

work well under way before the sun is very high. I am going to the other end of town on an errand. When you are ready, you may go down to the kitchen, and see what you can do for Miss Clara. You will find some new clothing on this chair, which my mother has been getting ready for you; she would like to have it tried on this morning."

Reuben said not a word. Afterwards he was much ashamed of this, but at the time his astonishment was so great that there seemed to be no words which would fit the occasion. The idea of Mrs. Kensington, that grand old lady, getting clothes ready for him to wear!

He looked over at the chair where the neat pile lay; then, giving a sudden spring, he landed in front of it, and began to examine in earnest. A pair of trousers, a white shirt, and a shirt-waist with collar and cuffs, a pair of stockings, and some trim-looking shoes. Very plain and simple clothes were these; but there was something about them which made a choking feeling in Reuben's throat, and set him to winking hard to keep tears from falling. He had not had on a real shirt with collar and cuffs since the day his mother died; and as for stockings, he had almost forgotten how they felt.

The business of dressing took more time that morning than it ever had before in Reuben's life.

In the first place, he felt dreadfully about using the pure whiteness of the washstand. A basin filled by himself at the pump and set on the bench beside the pump, for washing, was the utmost he had expected; behold here were two towels, a white one with a bright border, and a heavy rough one such as his mother had used for rubbing his father. Reuben thought he must be intended to take a bath, and he took it; and spattered water on the white washstand, and was dismayed, and then was delighted to discover that the whiteness was made of oilcloth from which drops of water being wiped off would show no sign.

When at last he was dressed from head to foot in the new garments, he stood looking at himself in the mirror, and decided that Nancy Hardman even, well acquainted as she was with him, would not know him. Who could have imagined that clothes would make such a change? Then he was in distress as to what should be done next. It could not be possible that they meant him to wear those wonderful clothes all day! Yet Mr. Kensington had said that his mother wanted to see how they fitted. At last he decided that the way for him to manage, was to make all haste to the kitchen and show himself, then hurry back and get into his every-day clothes and be ready for work.

The kitchen was bright with shining tins, and a pleasant gurgle of sound was coming from various pans and kettles on the stove. The young lady who was not pretty was bending over one of these kettles, carefully stirring a mixture. She looked up as Reuben entered, and said, "Good-morning. Did you have a good night's sleep?"

Then Reuben decided that he had been mistaken in her; she was pretty. How could any one with so pleasant a voice be other than pretty?

He replied promptly that he had slept splendidly; and added that he was afraid he had slept too long. He did not understand why he had not awakened earlier.

"It is early enough for the first morning," she said kindly. "When you get acquainted, you may get up and make the morning fire for me, and bring water from the spring to the tea-kettle. Do you know how to make fires?"

"Oh, yes, indeed!" Reuben said. He had made the fires for Nancy Hardman, and set the table, and almost got breakfast.

Miss Kensington laughed. It was evident she did not think that a boy could get breakfast for her. Reuben laughed too; her laugh sounded so pleasant that he could not help it. Then he made bold to ask a question.

"Mr. Kensington said your mother wanted to

see these new clothes. Do you know if she would be ready to see them now, so I can get them changed?"

"Mother isn't down-stairs yet," said Miss Kensington, smiling again. "I think you will have to wait a while. Do you wish to take them off, did you say? Are they not comfortable?"

"Oh! yes, ma'am; yes, indeed. I never had any on that felt nicer. And it is years and years since I had on any such clothes; but I wanted to save them, you know."

"Save them for what?"

"Why, I thought" — said Reuben in some confusion, for the lady had turned toward him, and her eyes were very bright, and the light in them seemed to dance. "I thought they must be kept nice for Sunday."

"Oh! I don't think you will have work to do to-day which will injure them; and as you are to commence school this morning, you would better keep them on. I think mother intends to have you wear those clothes to school."

The shining of Reuben's eyes was pleasant to see. He was actually to go to school well dressed! What would Alice think of him? What if Nancy Hardman could see him? The more he thought about this last question, the greater it grew. He felt an almost burning desire to run away and

show himself just for a moment to Nancy. Miss Kensington watched him, the smile on her face growing sweet and kind. She liked the face of the boy. In his new clothes he looked better to her than he had the night before. She had been, as her brother said, much tried with boys. Perhaps this one was really going to be different.

She continued to watch him as she went briskly about her work.

"What can I do to help?" he had asked timidly; and added, "Shall I strain the milk?"

"Oh, no!" she said quickly; and after a moment she added, "Is that one of the things you used to do for Nancy? I always attend to the milk myself. I think the fire needs some more wood; if you go out of that door, down the gravel walk, you will find a woodshed."

"Yes'm," said Reuben, and vanished. He came back presently with his arms full of wood. He put it in the box prepared for it, without noise or dust; selected with skilful eye two sticks which he felt sure would fit the state of the fire, and mended it. Then he observed the empty water-pail, and inquired for the place to fill it. Returning with a brimming pail, he was just in time to see Miss Kensington in the act of lifting a heavy kettle from the fire. It was the work of a second to spring to her side, and with deft fingers set it in its place.

"Really!" said Miss Kensington, "you can be quick-motioned, on occasion, can't you? I'm not sure but you are a handy boy."

Before breakfast was ready she was quite sure of it. The number of little things which Reuben, by keeping eyes and wits on the alert, contrived to discover needed doing, were surprising. They surprised Miss Kensington.

"Now," she said, as she set a dish of smoking oatmeal on the table and brought a generous jug of cream from her ice-box, "we are ready. This is your seat, at my right. I think I will call you my right-hand man. You certainly have been that this morning. You have set the chairs, I see. I think you will like that straight-backed one better for yourself."

But now Reuben stopped half-way across the room and looked at her, his face aflame, his eyes bewildered and questioning.

"Well," she said kindly, "what is it?"

"You don't mean, of course, ma'am, that I am to sit there now!"

"Certainly; that is, as soon as you have rung that bell, and my family have obeyed its summons. Why not?"

"But, ma'am, I did not think — I mean, I thought — why, I am to wait, of course, until you are through?"

"Oh, no! we do not keep any of that kind of help in our family. We like to have well-behaved, self-respecting boys who will sit at the table with us and be one of our number. We all work, in this family. My brother and sister work in school, and I work at home, and mother takes care of and directs us all. As for you, you are to be helper in general to the entire family; a most important post, you see; and I actually think you will be a help and not a nuisance. Now you may ring the breakfast-bell."

As Reuben rang it, he said to himself that the lady he had said was not pretty was the most beautiful woman in the world.

CHAPTER XIV.

TRIUMPHS AND PUZZLES.

REUBEN STEIN had been in his new home about three weeks. Sometimes, when he thought it over at night, he almost decided that he had been there for years. Not that the time by any means seemed to pass slowly; instead, the davs fairly flew away; but he had lived so much, seen and heard and felt so many new things, that at times it hardly seemed possible that all these experiences had been crowded into three weeks.

In the first place, he was quite settled in school; began to feel like an old scholar — one who must be on the lookout for new scholars, and help to make them feel at home. He thought he knew just how to treat new scholars, but the term was so near its closing that he had not been tested. Some things about his own entrance had been hard. He was such a little fellow when he left school, and such a tall boy now, that his face grew red more than once at the thought of how far behind the others he should be.

That first day he will never forget. The boys stared at him as though he were a being from some other world than theirs. Two fellows of about his age, who sat just behind him, whispered to each other that that was the boy who was bound out to "old Hardman," they believed. How did he happen to get dressed up? and was it possible that "old Hardman" meant to let him come to school!

Others gathered in groups at recess, and talked about him; some of which talk he overheard. "No, he was not the boy who was bound out to 'old Hardman;' at least, if he was, he had been 'unbound;' he was living at Professor Kensington's, working for his board and schooling."

"H'm!" said some of the boys, and looked at Reuben doubtfully. These were boys who had not been well brought up, and who had got the notion from some ignorant person that there was some disgrace connected with working out for one's living. For a while Reuben was left to himself.

Very soon after recess Professor Kensington came into the room, and it appeared that he had what was called the class in elocution. Reuben had not the slightest idea what this hard word meant, and was much astonished to discover that it seemed to be simply a reading-class. A very interesting article was being read; and the professor had the same sentence read over half a

dozen times, to illustrate what a difference could be made in the sense by the method of reading it. Reuben forgot himself, and listened with the keenest interest. He felt that he should like to try that sentence himself, and had just decided that he should read it differently from any he had yet heard, when he was startled by a summons to join the class.

"Come and try this paragraph, Reuben," Mr. Kensington said pleasantly, quite as though he had been reading in the class for weeks; "perhaps you will give us a new idea on it."

Then Reuben, with cheeks the color of the damask rose in the professor's button-hole, went forward, accepted the book some boy held out to him, and read the sentence as he had planned he would. Great was his pleasure on being assured that it was just as the professor himself would have read it.

The remainder of the hour was a delight to Reuben. For the first time in his life he had a lesson in reading; and then in language. The large dictionary was turned to, and each boy asked what questions as to meaning he would like to ask; and the professor read the wisdom of the dictionary to them when he chose, explaining and adding to it until it was not possible for them to misunderstand.

When at last, to Reuben's deep regret, the sound of a bell in the distance seemed about to spoil all this pleasure, Mr. Kensington turned to him and said, "I think, Stein, you will need to join this class. We read and talk over reading-matter of some sort at this hour every morning; I was divided between this and the next lower class in the same line, but I have concluded that this will be your place. It is our highest class in elocution."

The highest class! When Reuben graduates from college, as perhaps he will, I doubt if the sound of the college president's voice as he confers his diploma will be any sweeter than was Professor Kensington's that morning. Reuben had feared that he would find his place in the lowest classes.

Another comfort was in store for him. He did not know much about rules, but he had a natural taste for figures; and it came to pass that instead of being in the lowest class in arithmetic, he was placed with boys, yes, and girls, fully his size and age, and in the mental operations held his own with them.

But the crowning joy of the morning came when the entire older portion of the school was given a twenty minutes' exercise in spelling, Professor Kensington himself giving them ten words to write on slips of paper; then the papers were gathered, and

three teachers looked them over; and behold, Reuben's was the only slip which was entirely perfect! Reuben knew he could spell. He never glanced at a newspaper, or passed a sign, that he did not notice by a sort of instinct how any new words which caught his eye were spelled, and try to determine how he would have spelled them had he heard, instead of seen them.

No, this was not quite the crowning joy; that came when Alice Fenning, who was in the lower department, skipped up to him as the scholars were passing out, and caught both his hands in hers, with an eager "Good-morning," and an assurance that she had been watching for a glimpse of him all the morning. And then Judge Fenning, whose carriage was at the door waiting for Alice: "Ah, my boy, good-morning; how are you to-day?" and actually held out his hand to Reuben!

After that, all the boys, even those who had said "Hm!" and looked doubtful, decided that it would not be beneath their dignity to own Reuben Stein as a schoolmate; especially since he was such a "tip-top reader and speller."

After that first day, school life became rose-color for Reuben Stein. He wanted to study, and he had the opportunity. What more could a reasonable boy want? Oh! he had his troubles, of course; some of the boys were simpletons — there

are always simpletons in all schools, I think; some of them were fond of fighting, and tried to pick quarrels with the new boy; but Reuben was so busy from morning till night that he had not much time for the sneers of the simpletons, and as for the fighters, he told one of them good-naturedly that he had too much wood to get in that afternoon to waste any of his strength on fighting, and then ran away whistling.

What was the use of trying to make a boy angry who whistled so much, and laughed when he was expected to knock?

Meantime, everything was going smoothly with him at home. To his great surprise he was still occupying what he had thought was the spare room. When at last he gathered courage to speak to Mr. Kensington about it, that gentleman laughed pleasantly, and assured him that he was in the room that belonged to him; that he might bring his treasures there, and call it home, and arrange it in any way he pleased. Reuben had no treasures except his Bible, and a few things in his trunk, which had been his mother's, and he would not have changed one little thing in that perfect room for the world; but he took such care of it as no boy of Miss Kensington's acquaintance had ever done before.

Daily he grew in the good graces of that lady.

She laughed at first over his careful watch of her water-pails and wood supply, and quoted to her mother the old proverb, "A new broom sweeps clean." Reuben overheard it once; but it being quite new to him, he had not the least idea what it meant, and looked thoughtfully around at the half-worn broom with which he had just swept the back piazza; it was far from new, yet he certainly had made the piazza clean. But after three weeks had passed, and the pails were as carefully watched as ever, and the supply of wood never failed, and the fire was always burning brightly when she came into the kitchen in the morning, and the kettle filled, and every possible step which Reuben could think of taken to save hers, Miss Kensington began to admit that perhaps they really had at last found a boy who was not "more trouble than he was worth." She had not the least idea how grateful Reuben was for her kind words and kind smiles. She was not acquainted with Nancy Hardman, and so did not understand.

Now it was Saturday afternoon, and in two more days it would be Christmas. Reuben stood in the kitchen doorway considering. His chores were done, all that could be done until later, and he had a long afternoon for study. Before that, however, he must think. The question was, how was he going to get some clothes? Twice he had

been to church with the Kensingtons. They seemed to expect it as a matter of course. "Just brush your clothes well that you have worn during the week, and with a clean shirt they will do nicely," Miss Kensington had said. So they certainly had. Reuben felt more dressed up than ever in his life before; but the thing which troubled him was, that Miss Kensington invariably added to such sentences the words, "By and by you will be contriving a way to get a Sunday suit, before these begin to grow too rusty; but in the meantime, they will do very well."

Now the question was, how was Reuben to contrive any such thing, if he was to keep up with his classes in school, and certainly Mr. Kensington expected that? He kept a close watch, and gave help where help was needed, and would not have been a comfortable man to meet had Reuben not studied faithfully. But if he was to continue to give as much time as this to study, how was he to earn some clothes? For that matter, where could he get anything to do with which to earn clothes, even supposing he had the time? He had lived long enough in that part of the world to discover that "chances" were not plentiful. He would take the utmost care of his clothes, and make them last just as long as he could; but when they began to grow shabby, what was to be done?

He could certainly never go to church walking beside Miss Kensington and her sister, as they directed him to do now, with Mrs. Kensington in her beautiful black silk dress just ahead of them, leaning on her son's arm, if he were in the least shabby. And he should hate, oh! how he should hate, to stay at home all day Sunday, now that he had found how nice it was to go.

"I wonder," he said slowly and thoughtfully to himself, "if it would be wrong to pray about such a thing as that? Why should it be? If he is my Father, — and that is what Jesus told us to call him, — and I need clothes, why shouldn't I ask him about them, and get him to help me plan out a way to get them? I would do it in a minute if I had a father down here. Why not try it? People don't seem to pray that way exactly; and yet, I don't know; the minister asked last Sunday that we might learn to 'cast all our care on him;' and that is my care. It can't be wrong, anyhow; and it wouldn't do any hurt to try. I don't know what else to do."

CHAPTER XV.

THE WAY GROWS PLEASANTER.

BY which reasoning you will see that Reuben did not yet know very much about the Christian life, else he would have been sure that the right way was to take every care to his Father in heaven. Still, perhaps he knew as much as many Christians. Only the other day I heard a woman who has belonged to the family of Jesus Christ for more than thirty years say that she was very much perplexed about a certain matter; she really could not decide which of two things should be done.

"Have you prayed about it?" asked a very intimate friend, who yet had been separated from her so that they had gone their separate ways for years.

"Prayed about it!" the lady answered, wonderment in eyes and voice; "why, no! one can't pray about such trifles as that."

But the more Reuben thought, the more sure he felt that he had a right to pray, even about such trifles as clothes. So sure was he that, with-

out waiting even to go to his room, he leaned his head against the door-post, and shading his eyes with his hand, offered this simple prayer, "Father in heaven, if I need some new clothes to look nice in in church, will you show me how to get some, for Jesus' sake?"

Never perhaps was a simpler prayer; yet there have been shorter ones. Do you remember Peter's? "Lord, save, or I perish!" Reuben never forgot his prayer that December afternoon.

It was the sound of wheels and of horses' feet that made him open his eyes, and in the near distance was the Fenning carriage. The wheels made no noise in the sand, but in crossing the bridge just above they did. Could Reuben help wondering whether, supposing he had not promised Mr. Kensington, and so had gone instead to live at Judge Fenning's, he should be driving those horses now? Perhaps only the pony would have been put in his care; but it was barely possible that Caleb might have allowed him to drive the carriage horses, at least with him sitting beside him. Caleb was managing the splendid span now in his masterly way, and Alice was quite alone in the roomy carriage. Where could she be going? Barely time for this thought, when Caleb, with a grand flourish, drew up before the Kensington gate, and Alice's bright head leaned out.

"O Reuben, I'm so glad you are at home! I was afraid you would be gone after mistletoe and magnolias with the other boys. Why don't we say mistle*toes*, I wonder? Reuben, you are to go home with me and stay to tea; you can, can't you? Mamma said so. She wants to see you particularly, and so does papa. You are to come in the carriage with me; and I have three errands to do for mamma, one of them is two miles away. Won't that be fun? Can you come right away, so we can get back before tea?"

Reuben's face was a study. "What a lovely thing!" he began eagerly; "but then, I can't go, you know. I don't belong to myself; and there are chores to do, besides studying. I was to get three hours of study in this afternoon."

"Oh, *study!*" said Miss Alice in her most contemptuous tone; "on this beautiful Saturday, and Christmas coming on Tuesday. What do you mean, Reuben! it is vacation!"

"I know; but I am behind in my lessons, you see. I want to get into the other history class just awfully; and the grammer class too. Mr. Kensington said if I would study hard during vacation he thought I might manage it; and I tell you I'm going to try."

"Oh, well," said Alice, "I would. I like to have you in the big classes; it is such fun to be even

with the boys and girls who looked down on you; but I don't want you to begin this afternoon. Where is Professor Kensington? I've got a note for him from papa."

Saying which she opened the carriage door, and hopped out like a canary-bird before Reuben could help her, and was shown to the professor's study. He received his callers with a smile, though Reuben was dismayed at the idea of interrupting him. Alice was in no wise disturbed, however; a note from her papa she considered sufficient excuse for interrupting anybody.

"Well, my boy," Mr. Kensington said, looking up from the note, which, though short, seemed to take some time to be read, "I think we shall have to make an exception to our rules for once, and send you back with this young lady. Judge Fenning has a special reason for wishing to see you."

"But what about the cow, sir?" asked Reuben quickly, his eyes shining. "It wouldn't do to milk her before I went, would it? Or could I leave her until I got back?"

"Neither plan will work very well," said Mr. Kensington, laughing a little; "but I think we can manage that. The man who lives just around the corner from here used to milk the cow for me before you came; we will press him into service

for to-night; and you may stay as long as Judge Fenning desires."

"I thank you very much," said Reuben, his face one glow of pleasure.

"Now, hurry!" said Alice, as the study door closed after them; "you are all ready, aren't you? How nice you look nowadays, Reuben; not a bit like the boy who set our grove on fire."

She laughed merrily over her little joke, but Reuben was already on his way to the kitchen. "I must lay the fire before I go," he said, "and see that the pails are full of water; then I'll just set this table for Miss Clara, so she will have as little trouble as possible."

"Dear me!" said Alice, "do you set the table? how funny!"

"It isn't my work," Reuben explained, moving briskly about the kitchen as he talked. "That is, I mean she never told me to; but one day I did it, and she seemed pleased, and since that I have done it whenever I had time. Miss Clara is so nice that I want to help her all I can."

"She doesn't look so pleasant as our Miss Kensington," declared Alice, whereupon Reuben spoke with energy in favor of the one whom he had but a short time before mentally named "the cross lady."

Never was ride more thoroughly enjoyed than

that which was taken in the Fenning carriage that sweet December day. The air was as mild as a Northern day in June, and sweet with the breath of roses everywhere. Alice was in a flutter of happiness, and had interesting things innumerable to talk about.

"Drive down the Hawley road, Caleb," she directed. Then, to Reuben, "We are going past your old home. Does it begin to seem funny that you ever lived with the Hardmans? It must be so different at Professor Kensington's. Have you been there since you left? I mean, out to the Hardmans'; mamma says, for a girl who studies grammar, I mix sentences dreadfully. I suppose you will talk beautifully after this because you are in Professor Kensington's grammar class. Papa says that for a boy of your opportunities you speak unusually correctly. O Reuben! there is Nancy Hardman standing in the door. Isn't she a cross-looking girl?"

Reuben turned his head quickly. He had by no means forgotten Nancy. Indeed, he was surprised to think with what grateful feelings he remembered her. How kind she had been to him that last night! contriving an excuse for getting him off down-street; and then she had gotten him such a nice supper for the last one. He had meant to go and see her just as soon as he could.

"WE ARE GOING PAST YOUR OLD HOME," SAID ALICE.

He took off his hat, much as he had seen Mr. Kensington and Judge Fenning do, and bowed low, as the carriage rolled past. How did Nancy Hardman receive this courtesy? I grieve to tell you; but she actually curled up her nose, and pushed out her lips, and made a disagreeable face!

"Why!" said Alice, in intense astonishment, "did you see what she did? What a queer girl! What do you suppose is the matter with her?"

Reuben knew instinctively. Poor Nancy resented his riding by in a carriage, neatly dressed, and with apparently nothing to do but enjoy himself, while her life was so hard. But how should he explain to Alice? It is one thing to feel the reason for things, and quite another to explain them to somebody else.

"She doesn't mean to be — rude," he said, hesitating for a word, "or — that is — she doesn't think how it will look. She isn't a very happy girl; she wants, oh, ever so many things, and sometimes it makes her feel badly, and she can't help looking cross. Don't you think, she has never been in a carriage in her life!"

"Oh, my!" said Alice; and if you had heard the tones in which both spoke, you would have thought that to have never been in a carriage expressed the sum of human misery.

"Yes," said Reuben, answering the exclamation,

"she told me so; and she likes pretty things, and never sees any; and they don't have very much to eat, except when they go out to Uncle Kastor's. If I had any money I should like to make Nancy Hardman a Christmas present. She never has any presents."

"Poor thing!" said Alice, "how queer! But then I don't think she ought to have made a face at you just because you bowed to her as politely as though she were a grand lady. But we don't know what we would do if we had to live with Mr. Hardman all the time; do we? But you did live with him, till only a little while ago; and that didn't teach you to make up faces and look cross. But then, he wasn't your father, and that makes a difference, doesn't it?" Alice could answer her own questions, before others had a chance to do so.

The carriage drive was by no means the only new experience which Reuben had that day. What a thing it was to sit down at Judge Fenning's tea-table! It was not in the least like the Kensington table. That was white and neat and beautiful; but even a boy as inexperienced as Reuben saw that the china and silver and glass on this table were very different. Moreover, the teas which Miss Kensington prepared were quite simple; choice bread and butter, and sauce of some kind, and generally a nice piece of cake, and occasionally a

fresh egg; royal suppers Reuben thought them; but here there was stewed chicken, and little round brown balls of potatoes, which Alice called "croquettes," and several dainty dishes of which he did not even hear the name, and coffee which Reuben owned to himself smelled very different from that at the Hardman table; but he had never tasted coffee, so cannot be called a judge of its merits. He expected to be a good deal frightened at the fine table, but if he had only known it, he conducted himself very well. The napkins were larger and finer than those which the Kensingtons used, but Reuben's quick eyes saw that they were managed in much the same way; and for the rest, he had not taken his meals under Miss Kensington's eyes three weeks for nothing. Mrs. Fenning smiled her approval on him when he carefully applied his fork to the dainty piece of cake which had been served to him; evidently he was a boy from whom Alice need not at least learn bad manners.

For one as "stuck up" as Nancy Hardman considered her, that lady was certainly very kind. She said several pleasant things to Reuben about his new home, and his school life, and then she left him to carry on a conversation with Alice in lower tones, while she talked with Judge Fenning. On the whole, Reuben, having gotten through with his excellent supper and away from the table, without

spilling a drop of milk or sauce or gravy on the beautiful cloth, gave a little sigh of relief and satisfaction. It had all been beautiful. What would Nancy Hardman have thought of it, he wondered? Wouldn't she believe that Judge Fenning had done something "handsome" for him now? For Reuben believed that he was being invited to tea at this fine table because he had helped to save the orange-grove; and he considered it quite reward enough. When therefore, soon after supper, while he and Alice were sitting together on the piazza talking over school life, Judge Fenning came to the door and said, "Reuben, my boy, Mrs. Fenning would like to see you a moment in her sewing-room," he arose wondering and a trifle embarrassed. What could she want of him?

CHAPTER XVI.

CHRISTMAS PLANS.

THE sewing-room was pretty enough for a parlor, at least in Reuben's eyes; but he had no time to examine it in detail. Mrs. Fenning sat beside a chair that was piled high with garments of some sort, and the moment he entered she addressed him.

"Alice wanted to wait for Christmas Day, Reuben; but we thought that since to-morrow will be Sunday, you might possibly like to have part of Christmas come before. I think the things will fit; we borrowed some measurements from Mrs. Kensington to make sure of it."

Behold, on the chair was an entire new suit of clothes! Even to the handsome new collar and necktie, everything was complete. When it finally dawned upon Reuben that they were all for him, the effect upon him was peculiar. Instead of going into raptures of delight, as would have been Alice Fenning's nature, and as she expected from him, he stood for an entire minute gazing down at

them, speaking not a word, his breath meantime coming faster and faster, and his eyes actually filling with tears.

To Alice it was a most extraordinary time to choose for crying, and her amazed face recalled Reuben to an attempt at speech.

"It is so very sudden, you see," he stammered out. "It seems to almost scare me, and I don't know what to say."

"Never mind," said Mrs. Fenning kindly, pitying his embarrassment. "You need not say any thing. We understand how boys say 'thank you.' Here is the box in which the clothes were packed when they came from the tailor's. It was almost a pity to unpack them, but Alice wanted to see each individual pocket and button. I'll place them in the box again for you, and you can take them home with you to-night. If anything needs altering, I will have them attended to."

"I wish I knew how to thank you, ma'am," began Reuben in great earnestness; "I needed to get a new suit of clothes; and I was trying to plan; and only this afternoon — but it was so very sudden. I didn't dream of its coming so suddenly, you see."

Reuben knew exactly what he meant, but certainly no one else did. Then Alice, with great tact or else great heedlessness, broke suddenly into his words, with a change of subject.

"Mamma, Reuben wants to get Nancy Hardman a Christmas present. Don't you think, she never had one in her life, and she is a great big girl, — a woman almost! How old is she, Reuben? Mamma, she is as big as Katie. Couldn't we give her a present, Reuben and I?"

"Oh, ma'am!" exclaimed Reuben in deepening distress, "I did not mean that; I did not think of such a thing! I only said to Alice that if I had any money I should like to get her a present because she liked pretty things, and never had any."

"I understand," said Mrs. Fenning, laughing at the young people did not know what. "It is some of Alice's heedlessness. She always jumps into the middle of things. We will have to see what we can do. There ought to be pretty things enough to go round, at Christmas time at least. But, my dear, we must not delay Reuben. I suppose he thinks it time he was starting for home. Caleb is going to drive to town, and Reuben and his box can ride with him."

When the judge and his wife were alone, Mrs. Fenning told about Reuben's desire to get Nancy Hardman a Christmas present, because she never had anything pretty.

Judge Fenning leaned back in his chair, and laughed heartily over the idea. "The poor thing

is forlorn enough, certainly," he said when his laugh was over. "Did you ever see her, my dear? As dreary a looking girl as can be imagined. I think she cannot be more than sixteen or seventeen, and yet her face looks drawn and worn enough for a woman of thirty. And to judge from what I have seen of the girl, her wardrobe is extremely limited and unbecoming. You need not be at a loss what to get her for Christmas."

"But the time is so short," objected his wife. "Tuesday will be Christmas, you know. I don't see what I can do in one day. I might buy some ready-made clothing. Alice is quite resolved upon her having a white dress, but I do not know her size. I confess I would like very much to have the girl dressed for Christmas. Alice has some queer fancies; what do you think she wants to do?"

"I haven't an idea. When Alice and Reuben put their heads together I fancy there is a team."

Mrs. Fenning laughed. "Alice wants you to let Reuben take the carriage on Christmas Day, and take Nancy Hardman to ride. She says Nancy thinks Reuben feels above her because he has gone to the Kensingtons' to live, and that Reuben wants to do everything he can to let her know it isn't so; and Alice thinks that if he could take her to ride that would be doing a good deal

towards it. Reuben tells her that Nancy was never in a carriage, and looks with envy upon ours. Moreover, it appears that the poor thing is to be deprived of her usual Christmas treat. There is an uncle living eight miles or so out of town who plans to have the family with him on Christmas Day; but there has been a sick daughter, who it seems is not so well as they had hoped, and the doctor has ordered a very quiet Christmas; so the Hardmans must all stay at home. Reuben met the uncle on the street yesterday, and got this piece of news, and he is very sorry for Nancy. That is what suggests the Christmas ride. But Alice admits that unless I succeed in getting Nancy some new things, she will hardly 'match the carriage.'"

The two laughed again; but Judge Fenning's face became grave in a moment, as he asked, "Is this Reuben's plan, do you think? Has he arranged that Alice shall ask for the carriage?"

"Oh, no, indeed! Reuben knows nothing about it. Alice has arranged everything in her own wise brain; but she had sense enough not to say a word to Reuben until she won our consent. I do not think there is anything presuming about the boy."

"No," said the judge; "I believe there isn't. He seems singularly humble; but I was afraid I

was going to be disappointed in this case. I could not imagine our little mouse getting up such a queer scheme. But after all, why not? We are to be away all day, and the horses will need exercise, and Caleb is a wise attendant. It is an original idea, certainly, yet I do not know but it is a good one. What do you say?"

"It seems," said Mrs. Fenning, "when one thinks of it, a very strange thing that there has been a family so poor and neglected as these Hardmans apparently are, living so near us all these years, and this homeless boy is the only one who has thought of doing them a kindness."

"That is true," said Judge Fenning; "I have known Hardman ever since we came down here, but it has not occurred to me to inquire into his affairs much. I know he is very poor; he isn't particularly prepossessing, however — the sort of person whom one forgets as soon as one can. I am much afraid you will find Nancy of the same sort, though I was pleased with the decided way in which she took Reuben's side. Well, my dear, what can you do for her?"

"I am sure I don't know," said Mrs. Fenning in a musing tone; "if I could see the girl, I think I could get some idea of how to manage. Can you not plan some business with Mr. Hardman, and

drive there on Monday on our way to the train? Then I might get a glimpse of the girl."

"Oh, yes," said Judge Fenning; "that is easily managed. I want to see him about a certain breed of hens which I understand he has."

It was this which brought Judge Fenning's carriage to stand at an early hour on Monday morning before the Hardman place. Nancy herself answered Caleb's knock; and Judge Fenning's glance having so informed his wife, she alighted in haste from the carriage, to Nancy's astonishment and dismay, and walked towards her.

"Good-morning," she said pleasantly; "I want to get a nearer view of this vine. Can you tell me what it is?"

It was a very pretty vine, a golden bell, which clambered over the side of the Hardman cabin; the only pretty thing in or about the place. Nancy made her reply as short as possible; but Mrs. Fenning thought of more questions to ask, detaining her with them while she studied her shape and height, and even made a mental measurement of the latter as Nancy leaned against the side of the house.

"I think I can manage it," she said complacently to her husband as the carriage whirled away; "aren't these lovely?" and she held up a spray of golden bell for his admiration. "That poor

girl interests me. Alice says she has a cross face; but I think it is more sad than cross; she looks like a girl who has always been repressed. I shall quite like to experiment with her a little in the matter of dress. She leaned against the house in the most satisfactory manner; it gave me a chance to calculate her height within an inch or so. I think she is just about the size of Katie, and I have all her measurements in my shopping-book.

"Oh! I can get Miss Nancy ready for a Christmas ride, I am sure. Wouldn't it be fun to see them drive away in their new suits? Reuben looked every inch a gentleman in his yesterday. I am very much interested in your *protégé*, Judge Fenning, but still I think it will be rather pleasant to have one of my own."

"It is a pity she is not a few years younger," said Judge Fenning; "then you could plan about them together."

Mrs. Fenning laughed, and declared that she had no such foolish plans as that in mind. And then the carriage drew up at the station just in time for the morning express.

For Mrs. Fenning to undertake a thing was equal, her daughter Alice believed, to having it accomplished. The afternoon express brought out a box carefully packed and addressed to Miss Nancy Hardman, which contained everything a

young lady might need for a most careful toilet. Not only a pretty white lawn dress, which was just the dress for a Christmas ride in that part of Florida, but neat and tasteful undergarments that matched the dress. Even shoes were not forgotten. A pair of slippers, such as Mrs. Fenning was sure would delight the girl's heart, were packed in a small box of their own. Another box contained a hat, which for neatness and daintiness might have satisfied a much more particular girl than Nancy Hardman. There were also a pair of mitts, which Mrs. Fenning felt compelled to choose instead of the gloves she wanted, because she reflected that it was really very hard to fit a person to gloves of whose hand she knew so little. The mitts would do very well, if they were a trifle large. On the whole, she was well pleased with her purchases. It astonished and almost saddened her to think how many really pretty things she had been able to get for what was to her a very small sum of money. Less by many dollars than she was in the habit of spending for one dress for herself. As she whirled along on the express, two thoughts occupied her. First, how should she get the gifts to the girl, and get them accepted? Secondly, how should she plan more sensible clothes for her for every-day wear? Probably it would have been better to buy some neat prints

instead of the white lawn; but Alice's heart was set on white.

She had a happy thought just as the train reached her station, which settled the first perplexity. The other must be left to be studied over at some future time.

CHAPTER XVII.

CHRISTMAS EVE SURPRISES.

THE way out of her perplexity which had pleased Mrs. Fenning was to let Nancy's gifts come from Reuben himself. With this purpose in view, she directed Caleb, as he drove her from the station, to call at Mr. Kensington's. Reuben was in the back yard milking the cow, but he came promptly at her call. As he listened to her plan, the astonishment which he felt showed in his face.

"But, Mrs. Fenning," he said earnestly, "how can I give them to her? She knows I have no money to buy things with. I should have to tell her they were from you. Can't I do that, ma'am? I should like nothing better in the world than the chance to carry her something pretty; but, indeed, I do not see how I could possibly pretend that they were presents from me."

Mrs. Fenning laughed pleasantly. "What shall we do with this boy?" she said to Miss Kensington, who came to the door just then; "he is so painfully honest that I cannot even make use of him to

carry out a Christmas plan. Never mind, Reuben, honesty is not such a common thing that we can afford to make fun of it. I'll tell you how it is. The things in this box are yours. They do not in the slightest degree belong to me any more. I give them to you to do exactly what you like with. You may borrow a wheelbarrow, and cart them over to the lake and toss them in, if you want to; I shall not call you to account for it in any way. Or you may give them to Miss Kensington here, if you choose, or keep them up in your trunk, or do what you will with them. You have the very largest liberty. How will that answer?"

Reuben's eyes twinkled. "That will do beautifully, ma'am," he said; "I know exactly what I shall please to do. I'll borrow a wheelbarrow, and cart them out to Mr. Hardman's, and tell Nancy that one of the best and kindest ladies in the world gave them to me, and was thinking of her when she did it."

There was a general laugh over this answer. Mr. Kensington had also appeared in the door, and joined in it, as he said, —

"How will that do for a reply, Mrs. Fenning? It strikes me that Reuben has been almost a match for you."

Reuben was as good as his word. That very evening he borrowed Mr. Kensington's wheelbar-

row and set out for his old home. He had not so much as had a peep at the things which the box contained. He had been busy with the chores until the last moment, and had been obliged to make all speed lest the Hardman household might have retired before he reached there; and as it was Christmas eve, of course it would not do for the package to be tardy. Before Mrs. Fenning left she had explained to Reuben that he might have the use of the carriage and horses, with Caleb to drive, for three or four hours the next day. The family were to be gone all day, and would rather the horses were used than not; and Alice had expressed her desire to give Nancy Hardman a ride in a carriage.

"How would it do," Mrs. Fenning had asked, "for you and she to drive out to the uncle's, and call on the sick cousin? Caleb says that is a good road, and that you could have time for a pleasant call, and get back before dark." Certainly nothing could have suited Reuben better. His face fairly beamed with delight as he told Mrs. Fenning that if he only knew how to thank her, he would be glad.

As he made rapid strides over the road to the Hardman cottage he had but one anxiety. In what mood would he be likely to find Nancy? No one understood better than he that she was entirely

capable of refusing to have anything to do, either with the gift, or the day of pleasure which had been planned, should she choose to do so. It would not be the first time that he had seen her go exactly contrary to her own interests for the sake of indulging her ill-humor. What if she should receive all Mrs. Fenning's kindnesses in a way which would disgrace her in the eyes of that good woman? Reuben stood still in the road, his heart thumping an accompaniment to his dismay over this thought. He was almost tempted to turn back, and beg Miss Kensington to find some one else to perform the errand; some one to whom Nancy would be afraid to express herself freely, and commit herself against the gift, should she happen to be in ill-humor. Perhaps the strongest reason why he did not do so, was his inability to think of any person before whom Nancy would be afraid to express herself freely, if she felt like it. There was nothing for it but to try; so he took up the handles of his barrow and hurried on. Soon the little old house came in sight, with its one dreary lamp burning on the dreary table. How desolate that room looked to Reuben! How much he should like to make it bright and pleasant, like the sitting-room at the Kensingtons'! What would Mr. Hardman think of a shaded lamp to read the paper by, that he borrowed once in a

REUBEN STOOD STILL IN THE ROAD.

long time from his nearest neighbor? And Mrs. Hardman, who so often sat and darned laboriously over their clothes to keep them from falling to pieces, — she could do it so much better and easier if she only had a good light.

"If ever I get five dollars of my very own that do not have to be spent for things which I must have to eat and to wear, I'll buy a nice lamp for that table, and a little rocking-chair for Mrs. Hardman, see if I don't." With which firm resolve Reuben knocked at the door. Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Hardman was in sight; but he could see Nancy moving restlessly about, as though uncertain what to do with herself this Christmas Eve.

"Dear me!" she said, throwing wide the door in answer to Reuben's knock; "if this isn't my lord Reuben himself, in his best new suit, come to see if his old acquaintances will recognize him! How did you find the way? I supposed you had quite forgotten the road here. Or did you come in the carriage? That must be it, of course. Won't you have the table-cloth, or a sheet, or something to spread over those precious horses while they stand?"

"I came in a wheelbarrow," said Reuben good-humoredly, "or behind one. I've been wanting to come ever since I went away; but I have a good

many chores to do evenings, after school; and then I have to study every evening. How do you do, Nancy? And how are your father and mother? Are they at home?"

"No; they aren't," said Nancy shortly. "There isn't a soul in the house but me. I had a mind not to open the door, for fear it was some old tramp. Father and mother have both gone out to Uncle Kastor's. Mr. Rizley was going within a mile of there, and he took them; and they'll have to walk back that mile to be ready to come home with him. Mother will be all tuckered out; but we haven't heard from there in 'most a week now, and she would go. I wanted to go myself dreadfully, but of course I couldn't. There wasn't hardly room for them to squeeze in. When did you ever know me to have a chance to do things that I wanted to?"

"I know a chance that I hope you will want," said Reuben, resolving to plunge at once into the middle of his wonderful errands. "I want you to go to-morrow and take a Christmas ride with me. I've got permission to be gone for three or four hours, and we can drive out and see Uncle Kastor, and wish them all a Merry Christmas. If it is a pleasant day, I'll come for you at exactly one o'clock. You'll go, won't you, Nancy?"

But Nancy only stood and stared at him. The

greatness of the invitation seemed to take from her the power of speech. At last she said, —

"What will you come in — the wheelbarrow?"

"No," said Reuben with a burst of laughter; "there isn't room for us both in the wheelbarrow. I've got it all planned, Nancy; say you will go. I haven't been to Uncle Kastor's in ever so long; and I want to see them all again. And, Nancy, I've brought you a Christmas present. It is out in the wheelbarrow. I'm going to bring it in in a minute, and then I must hurry back. I was so late in getting started that I have not time to stay. This isn't my Christmas present, though I am to call it so. I did the wishing, Nancy, and Mrs. Fenning did the rest. I said to Alice that I should like to get you something pretty for Christmas, if I had any money; and Alice told her mother, and they got it up; and then Mrs. Fenning gave it to me to do what I liked with, and of course I liked to bring it to you. I don't even know what is in the box; only I think it is sure to be something pretty."

He talked as fast as he could, not giving the astonished Nancy a chance to put in a word. If she should be tempted to declare that she would have nothing to do with Mrs. Fenning or her presents, as he more than half feared, he knew her obstinate nature well enough to be afraid that

he could not get her to alter that resolution. The safest way was not to let her make it; so before she could recover from her amazement long enough to say more than, "Well, I never!" he had dashed out of the house, and was bending over the package in the wheelbarrow. It was a box large enough to add to the utter astonishment of Nancy. She had seized the smoking lamp, and brought it to the door with a view to helping Reuben; and as he lugged in the treasure, she exclaimed again, "Well, I never!" but this time added; "what in all creation can there be in there? Is it heavy? What ever possessed you to want to make me a Christmas present? I never have Christmas presents, nor any other kind. I suppose it is some of her worn-out clothes and things that she has picked up. You can just take them back where they came from, Reuben Stein; we may be poor, but we are not beggars, and we don't want any of Mrs. Fenning's old duds poked off on us as presents."

But Reuben had set the box on the table, and was already at the door. Nancy's storm of words had come, but they had taken a line of which he had not thought.

"I don't know what is in the box, Nancy," he said eagerly; "but I don't think there is an old thing there. At any rate, I cannot take them back

to Mrs. Fenning, for she told me they were mine to do what I liked with; that I might dump them into the lake if I wanted to. And I wanted to give them to you; so if there is nothing there that you like to keep, you can throw them into the lake yourself; you are nearer to it than I am. Good-night; I am coming for you at exactly one o'clock to-morrow."

And then he made all haste down the road, fearing all the time lest he should hear Nancy calling him back. He felt sure it would not be wise to linger another minute. Nancy, alone with the treasures he was certain that box must contain, might have a gentler spirit come to her; but with him looking on it would be almost sure to take the form of indignation over something. As he trundled his empty barrow along the road, and thought of how much perhaps hung on the way in which Nancy received that gift — for if a woman like Mrs. Fenning was willing to become her friend, what might not be done for her? — there came to him the memory of the prayer he had timidly offered, leaning against the door-post on Saturday afternoon. It had been about a new suit of clothes; and on the very next day he had gone to church clothed from head to foot in a new suit. Had his prayer anything to do with that result?

"The clothes had already been ordered from

the tailor, and were in Mrs. Fenning's room hours before you prayed at all; so how could the prayer have had anything to do with them?" a miserable little enemy inside of him named Unbelief whispered in the darkness.

"What of it? Did not God know that you meant to pray about them hours and weeks before you did pray? And couldn't he plan, if he chose, to have the clothes there, ready for your prayer?" This the friend who wanted to live with him always, and whose name was Faith, murmured in reply to Unbelief's little sneer.

"That is true," said Reuben. "If I had overheard somebody wish for a thing, and had got it ready for him before he asked me anything about it, wouldn't I be answering his wish just as much and more than if I had waited until afterwards. I believe God gave me the clothes because I asked him for them. I'm going to trust him about little things after this as well as big ones. I'm going to ask him this minute to make Nancy like the things in that box so much that she can't help keeping them, and being friends with Mrs. Fenning."

CHAPTER XVIII.

"A CHRISTMAS PRESENT!"

REUBEN was right in his estimate of Nancy's disposition. Had he remained, she might have gone on talking until she had worked herself into such a belief of ill treatment at the hands of people who thought them paupers as to refuse to look at her gift; but left alone with that large box before her on the table, and the knowledge that its contents were hers if she would have them, she could not resist the temptation to peep.

"I won't keep them," she said scornfully, "not a rag of them, if they are old clothes, and of course they are; but I can pack them back in the box just as I find them, and I would like to see what she has condescended to pick up for me, the stuck-up thing!"

Then she untied the wrappings, and brought to view the lawn dress in its exquisite whiteness, with its delicate lace at throat and sleeves. So fair and pure it looked that Nancy uttered an exclamation almost of awe, then stood and gazed, without an

attempt to touch it. Then, curiously enough, her eyes began to dim with tears; she could not have told why. The thought that somebody had chosen anything so perfectly white and pure and beautiful for her made a strange lump come in her throat. At last, first rubbing her clean hands carefully on her apron, she gathered courage to lift the beautiful thing from its box, and shake out its folds and hold it up before her; long and full and carefully made. "No skimping anywhere," she said with a note of exultation in her voice. There had been always "skimping" about every garment she and her mother had ever tried to make.

The white skirt, which she allowed herself to shake out next, was almost as pretty and fully as bewildering as the dress. After that she gave full rein to her fingers, and drew the treasures forth one after another in almost breathless eagerness. What would have looked to Reuben Stein like commonplace enough white cloth had such a charm for Nancy as only those girls can understand who have daintily made and exquisitely trimmed undergarments fashioned for them by a mother's careful hand. Nancy had never had them, yet her heart yearned for them. Here were some as pretty as she had ever imagined, prettier than had hung on her line that winter her mother did fine washing for some boarders in town; and they were her

own! When she opened the box that contained the pretty hat, Nancy's feelings gave way entirely. She made a loud, queer noise which was an effort to repress a sob, but it would not be suppressed; and very much astonished that it was so, Nancy Hardman dropped in a limp heap on the floor, and lifted up her voice and cried. That such a hat as that should be for her to wear, and that it should have such a dress, yes, and such mitts, and slippers to match it, were almost beyond belief, and quite beyond composure.

The tears did not last long; in truth, the girl was much ashamed of them, and extremely grateful to Reuben for hastening away. Though she assured herself that she would not have cried if he had stayed, not by a long sight! Hark! Were her father and mother coming? She sprang to her feet at the thought, brushed away the tears in extreme haste, and began to return the treasures to their boxes and papers. Nobody but herself should feast their eyes upon them to-night. Mother and father would have enough to occupy their minds telling about their trip; for one blissful night Nancy would hug her beautiful secret, and gloat over her wonderful gift. No thought of returning the things was upon her now. Instead, for perhaps the first time in her life, she felt a strong sense of gratitude. This was no cast-off finery,

crushed and faded and torn, hunted for in somebody's attic as useless things which had been stowed away for the rag-man or for beggars. These were new, *new!* They had just been planned and selected and bought for *her!* It seemed almost beyond belief. Why should Mrs. Fenning, who did not know her, and for whom at times she had felt almost hatred because she rode always in a carriage and lived such a charmed life, have thought of her at all? Then she remembered. It was Reuben who had thought, and she had planned and given for his sake. Well, that was reasonable; Reuben had saved their house and their young grove for them — he ought to have been well paid for it; but how queer in him to choose to have what belonged by right to him, come to her, who had nothing to do with it! She had never been very good to Reuben, although she had often admitted to herself that he was a good boy, and she liked him; but no one knew better than she how cross and disagreeable, sometimes how positively hateful, she had been to him — and this was her reward! It was beyond her understanding.

Good sleeper though Nancy Hardman generally was, for that one night excitement got the better of her; she tossed and turned on her hard bed, and shook her poor little pillow, until, if there had been any possibility of putting life into the feath-

ers, she would have accomplished it. When she finally slept, it was only to dream that she put on her elegant white dress over the old green calico which she had worn every day for a month, and drew her faded and soiled gray sunbonnet over the dainty little hat with its sprays of exquisite bloom. She awoke in a fright at last, while trying to put her pretty new slippers on her father's large feet. She turned over once more, and said aloud, "Who would have supposed that I could be such a fool! I believe I haven't slept an hour. And such dreams! Dear, dear! One time I thought it was all a dream, and that I hadn't any new things; but I have; the box is under my bed this blessed minute! I wonder what mother will say to it? I wonder what she and father will think when I tell them that I'm going to take a ride. That's queer too; what can Reuben be going to take? Mr. Kensington don't keep a horse, but he gets Mr. Marshall's little fat pony and low wagon to take his mother out riding; I s'pose that is what Reuben has got; likely Mr. Kensington asked the Marshalls to lend them to Reuben. That boy beats all. It ain't like any boy I ever heard of to fuss around after a horse to take a girl out riding who is so much older than he is, and who was never nice to him in her life. There's lots of things I might have done to make his life easier while he was here,

and I didn't do 'em. I'm awful sorry. If I had a chance to do it over again, I believe I'd be different. I've a great mind to be different now, and show him that I can act like other folks. Maybe it will come natural to act like nice folks when I get on my new clothes; who knows? Oh, my sakes! I ought to send some word to Mrs. Fenning about them. How will I ever do that? If I could write a letter to her, that would be something like; but every word would be spelled wrong if I tried it, and the capitals and commas and things would be sure to go just where they weren't wanted. Besides, I ain't got any paper or pen; I *can't* write to her, and that's the whole of it. I might get Reuben to do it for me. I wonder how that would do? I reckon I'll ask him about it this afternoon; perhaps he has been living with quality folks long enough to know the right way of doing things. The fact is, he is kind of quality folks himself; I always knew it, and that is one of the things that used to make me feel mad at him."

After relieving her mind of all these thoughts, Nancy did contrive to get a little sleep. When next she awakened it was broad daylight, and she made all speed into her every-day clothes; she knew she must by this time be expected in the kitchen. She had by no means slept off her excitement. There was a pretty pink glow on the cheeks which

were usually sallow, and her eyes were so bright that Reuben would have been astonished at a sight of them. Her mother was astonished when at last the girl made her way to the kitchen.

"Well!" she said, glancing at her, then turning and giving her a careful look, "what is the matter with you? You look as though you had had a fortune left you. You need one, I must say. How that dress is worn out, to be sure! What be you going to do for clothes, child? You haven't anything that's decent to wear. Uncle Kastor wanted you to come out as soon as you could, but I don't know how you are ever going there or anywhere else, nor what is going to become of us; times keep growing harder and harder." The sentence ended in a weary little sigh, and Mrs. Hardman bent again over the mixture she was stirring. Nancy's ordinary way would have been to answer in a snappish tone, words to the effect that she neither knew nor cared what was to become of them; they would go to the poor-house, of course; the way other folks did when they got to the end of their rope. Instead of this, she said with actual cheerfulness, "Oh! I'll get clothes somehow, mother; don't you fret. Queer things happen sometimes, when folks least expect them." She meant to hug her delicious secret a little while longer; it was such fun to have a box full of lovely

clothes lying that very minute under the bed in her room, and nobody but herself knowing anything about it. All the while she was frying the pork for breakfast, her heart was singing a merry little tune. She did not know how to sing, at least she thought she didn't, never having had any opportunity to learn. She could imitate the mocking-birds a little; and sometimes tried it, but never except when she was quite alone. Now she sang in her heart, keeping time to the frizzling of the pork. The words she sang were: —

"I've got a new dress, new dress, new dress,
And a hat, and a hat, and a hat,
And shoes for my feet, and mitts for my hands,
And I'm going a-riding to-day."

No, it didn't rhyme, except in her thoughts; but that did not matter; it was a gay little song, and thrilled through all her nerves, keeping her eyes bright and her voice pleasant.

By way of telling her wonderful piece of news, she began in a way that was characteristic of her, in the middle.

"I'm going ridin' this afternoon," she remarked, just as her father was helping himself to a second piece of pork.

"Ridin'?" repeated her mother. "How? I'd like to know; on a wheelbarrow? Uncle Kastor

can't come in, not in a — well, he don't know when he can come; one of his horses is lame. You better go a-walkin'. I should think a great strong girl like you could walk out to Uncle Kastor's. I never used to think much of eight miles for a walk, when I was of your age. Seems to me the girls we have nowadays are kind of worthless critters."

"I'd rather ride," said Nancy, with a toss of her head. "I'm going out to Uncle Kastor's this afternoon; going to make a call." She giggled a little as she spoke, and her father and mother stared.

"There's nothing to take you that I know of," said her father, "except the big rooster, and he won't stand no harnessing." Said her mother, "What do you mean? why don't you speak out?"

"I did speak out; it's just as I said. I'm going out to Uncle Kastor's with Reuben; he is coming after me at one o'clock, and we are going to make a call; he says so." The sentence ended with another giggle. It was funny; she could fully appreciate her father's and mother's bewilderment.

"My, my!" said Mrs. Hardman, "how that boy is coming on! He will be having a team of his own next. Where did he get a horse?"

"Borrowed it, I s'pose; he said he had permis-

sion. I didn't ask him, but I reckon it is the fat pony from Marshalls'; they've got a little light wagon, you know, that Mr. Kensington gets to take his mother out riding. The Kensingtons seem to think lots of Reuben; and I s'pose they have got him permission to take the pony, and the wagon, and *me*, for a Christmas ride."

"Well, I never!" said Mrs. Hardman again. She stopped at that point, seeming to be unable to express her feelings in words. Mr. Hardman received the news with a contemptuous sniff which cannot be spelled; but Mrs. Hardman, after a minute's silence, began again:

"Reuben's a great deal better boy than he had the name of being, I believe. I always sort o' liked him."

Said Nancy, "I always knew he was a good boy, and I told you so; but that isn't all the news. He brought me a Christmas present."

"A Christmas present!" Her mother's voice, as she repeated these wonderful words, was full of interrogation points.

CHAPTER XIX.

"'TAIN'T ME!"

"YES, he did!" said Nancy, "and it is a stunning one, too; I reckon you never saw anything like it, mother. You see," she added, plunging headlong into her story, for she felt that the time had come to tell it, "the way it came about was, Mrs. Fenning made up her mind that she wanted to give Reuben a present for saving their house and grove for them, you know; it is about time she thought of it, I think. Well, as near as I can understand it, she had Reuben there and talked with him about what she should give him, or something of that kind. Anyhow, he told her that he would like first-rate to give me a Christmas present; he said I liked pretty things, and never had any, and he would like to give me one. So what does she do but go and buy a lot of things for him to give to me! She told him that the box was his to do what he liked with; he could throw it in the lake if he wanted to, or he could give it to anybody that he pleased; so he bor-

rowed the Kensingtons' wheelbarrow, and trundled it out to me; now, if there isn't a boy for you, I'd like to know where there is one!"

"Humph!" said Mr. Hardman, "it would have been more honest if he had taken a notion to give it to me; if I know anything about it, it is I who fed and clothed him for years, and never got so much as a 'thank you' for it."

Nancy giggled; her father's determination to believe that he had fed and clothed Reuben for nothing, often made her indignant; but to-day she could not afford to be anything but amused.

"The things wouldn't fit you, father," she said pertly, "so there's no use in talking about your having them. The prettiest rig that ever I laid eyes on; it doesn't seem as though they fitted me, but I suppose I ought to wear 'em, seeing they are a present, and came just as they did."

"What in the world are they?" asked Mrs. Hardman, "and where are they? Why didn't you show them to us last night?"

"There wasn't any chance. You got home so late, you know, and kept talking about Uncle Kastor's folks. I thought morning would be time enough." Then she arose suddenly, and began to dash the few dishes together and to make sudden trips to the out-kitchen, so that it would not be convenient to question her further. Not for the

world would she have let her father and mother understand that, on the evening before, her heart had been so full of a strange feeling that she could not look at or even think of her new things without the tears gathering in her eyes; how queer it would have been for her, Nancy Hardman, to have been caught crying!

There was more or less excitement throughout the Hardman family that day. Even the father, disappointed, irritable man that he was, with a habit for grumbling so fixed upon him that he could have found occasion for it, even though his life had become a sunny one, found himself deeply interested in the new clothes. He criticized them, it is true, and said, what it may be feared was correct, that they were not suited to Nancy's needs, that there wasn't a place in the house to keep them, and nowhere for her to go to wear them. It would have been a good deal more sensible, in his opinion, if Mrs. Fenning had given her two or three strong calicoes, and kept her finery to herself.

"Oh! I don't know, pa," said the wife soothingly, "pretty things is worth something in this world; and Nancy she hasn't had none of them. I can't help feeling kind of glad that she's got one pretty rig from head to foot. I own I'm in a kind of a hurry to see her in them. Nancy, if I were you, I would curl my hair; I would, so; it would

curl easy enough if you would let it; it always wants to twist up in little rings around your face. When you was a little bit of a thing I kept your hair curled all the time. My! how sweet you looked. Folks used to stop on the street and look after you; you was little for your years, then, and awful cunning."

"Dear me!" said Nancy, "how I must have changed." But she slipped away up-stairs in the course of that forenoon, and put her hair into curl-papers; it would curl, she knew very well, if she could leave it up for an hour or so. She wouldn't have been such a "silly" as to do it of herself, she declared, telling the square of broken mirror in her room all about it; but since her mother had spoken of it, why, that was another matter.

If I had a photograph of Nancy Hardman just as she looked when she was finally ready for her drive, I should like extremely well to show it to you. Her hair, as her mother had said, needed only a hint to curl, and the difference that it made in her face to have the hair in soft rings about it, instead of being stretched straight back and braided in two fat braids, needs to be seen in order to be understood. Her white dress fitted to perfection, the bit of lace at the throat refining and softening her face in a manner that was truly marvellous to her. The pretty hat set on top of the

soft curls completed the picture, and seemed to fit her face exactly.

"'Tain't me!" she said solemnly, surveying herself as well as she could in the bit of glass, behind which she had stuffed her small towel in order to make it tip forward as much as possible — "'Tain't me! I don't know who it is, I'm sure; nobody that ever I see before. It is the queerest thing that putting on some clothes will take you away, and put somebody else in your place! I wonder if folks ain't themselves, anyhow; nothing but their clothes? I wonder what is choking my throat up so? I feel exactly as though I was going to cry again. What in the world should I cry about? I won't, so there! It seems an awful pity to get into that wagon, and sit down on that little tucked-up seat with all these nice clothes on; it will muss them awful. But there! if there's room enough for Mr. Kensington and his mother to sit down, I should think there ought to be for Reuben and me. Mrs. Kensington wears soft silk things that don't stand out and take room; but I like the stand-out ones better. I just wonder what mother will say to me. Dear me! What's that in that paper? I've got everything out, and there's a piece of tissue paper that looks as though it had something wrapped in it."

She dived after it, and, with nervous trembling

fingers, undid its folds, to find a long pink ribbon, which, at first, she gazed upon with a sort of awe. It was so delicate and pure, and yet so bright.

"It is to wear around my waist!" she exclaimed at last, in a tone that would have gone to Mrs. Fenning's heart, it was so suspiciously near to tears; but the girl swallowed them down with a resolute air; no tears should dim the sparkle of the eyes she saw in her broken mirror. She told herself that when she got home, and had taken off and folded away her good clothes, and was in her own room and it was dark, she would have a downright good cry, and get all the lumps out of her throat; but there was no time for crying now. Reuben had said that he would be there at one o'clock, "sharp," and he had always been a boy who had done things just when he said he would. She must go down-stairs at once. She knew how to arrange the sash, — trust a girl for that, — and it gave the touch to her dress which pleased her gay taste. Then she hurried away to show herself to her mother.

The effect upon Mrs. Hardman was curious. She had no desire to cry; her amazement was too great for such a feeling. Her thought, if she had expressed it, might have been much like the one which Nancy had of herself: —

"It ain't her at all." But she did not put the

"'TAINT ME!" SHE SAID.

thought into words; they would have seemed improper words to say to this beautifully dressed young lady. However, her second thought was: "It's my girl, and nobody's else; and she is just as pretty as a picture, too; if I do say it, that shouldn't! If she'd only had chances, what a girl she would have made! Nobody ever knew she was pretty before!" She stood at a little distance, with hands on her sides, and gazed, and thought, but had not a single word to speak aloud.

"Well," said Nancy at last, "can't you say what you think of me?"

"N-o," said Mrs. Hardman, bringing herself slowly back to speech. "I ain't got no words that fit. It does beat all what a difference it makes, Nancy!"

"'Fine feathers make fine birds,'" quoted Mr. Hardman, appearing in the doorway, with a sneer on his face; "I supposed you knew that." But he came nearer, and took a critical survey of the girl as she posed before him; and though he said, once more, that there was no place for her to go where she could wear such a rig, there was, nevertheless, a little gleam of satisfaction in his eyes as he studied her. It was interesting to think that such a stylish creature belonged to him.

The truth was, both father and mother had a curious feeling that a certain degree of respect was

due to this new daughter, and there seemed to be nothing which it was quite the thing to say to her. A visible embarrassment was settling upon them. Just how it would have been gotten over no one will ever know, for at that moment their excitement took a new form.

The clock on the kitchen mantel struck one, and the Fenning carriage rolled up to their door, with one of Caleb's most skilful flourishes. Almost before the horses had come to a halt, Reuben had opened the carriage door, and sprung out.

"Good-afternoon," he said respectfully to Mr. Hardman, who still filled the doorway. "Is Nancy" —then he stopped, for behold! just back of her father was a vision, a girl in white, with clustering curls about her face, and a hat which belonged to the curls, and a sparkle in her eyes such as Nancy Hardman's had never worn before. It wasn't possible that that could be Nancy!

There was a single moment of hesitation; in the next, Reuben had taken off his hat. "I beg your pardon," he said, trying not to laugh. "I don't think I knew you, not for the first second."

"It's no wonder," said Mrs. Hardman; "I don't know her myself; I don't more than half believe it's my girl. Them curls look kind of natural, though; I used to fix 'em just so when she was a little bit of a thing. I don't know why she had

a notion of stretchin' her hair straight back always, just as though it was made of sticks. Well, if you ain't got the big carriage! You do beat all, Reuben Stein! How did you manage that? and where are you going to?"

"We are going out to Uncle Kastor's," said Reuben gayly; "and I didn't manage it, Mrs. Hardman, it managed itself." Then he gave his hand to Nancy as nearly as possible in the way he had seen Judge Fenning do to ladies; and before Mrs. Hardman could think of further questions to ask, they were off.

She stood in the doorway, and gazed after the fast-disappearing carriage. "Well, if that don't beat all that ever I saw!" she burst forth; "our girl riding off in the Fenning carriage, looking as fine as the best of them. What do you think of that, pa? I wonder what Uncle Kastor will say when he sees them?"

"He'll say we are a couple of fools, letting her get notions into her head that will do her no good; and he will be about right, I reckon," said Mr. Hardman.

"I don't think any such thing," was Mrs. Hardman's sturdy reply. There were times when she stood up for her own views.

"Nancy has had dreadful few chances in the world, the land knows. I never expected her to

have one like this; nor to have any of 'em come through Reuben Stein, I must say. But I don't care how they come, so it's honest and decent. She never had a ride in a carriage in her life, not since she was old enough to remember it; and I'm just glad to have her have one good lark. She looked as pretty as a picture, too. I never did think Nancy was pretty, not since she was a little girl six years old; it is just amazing what a difference clothes make. But it can't be all clothes, after all. Clothes don't make her eyes bright, and her cheeks red, and her lips all in a pucker of smiles. Well, the clothes help, of course; but they couldn't do it all. I reckon they've got to have cheeks and eyes and lips to work on. I don't know as we've any cause to be more miserable than is necessary. We better take streaks of nice when we can get 'em; they are scarce enough. Half of your misery has been because you couldn't do nothing for Nancy; and now, here's one little nice spot for her. Why don't you take the comfort of it?"

How astonished Nancy would have been, could she have heard them! It had never entered her mind that her father cared for any "little nice spots" in her life.

CHAPTER XX.

"CLOTHES IS GREAT THINGS."

HOW am I going to describe to you the feeling it gave Nancy Hardman to be skimming over the road behind such horses as Judge Fenning's, managed by a driver like Caleb? Her memory of driving was all connected with Uncle Kastor's worn-out, discouraged team as they toiled slowly through the sand.

"Pesky roads!" Uncle Kastor called them, and laid his slow progress largely to their condition. But these horses seemed to think nothing of sand. They held their heads high, and danced along as though it was pure fun simply to go. Then the carriage cushions were so soft! softer than Nancy had imagined possible; and she had imagined them a great many times. Her dress seemed to her to fit in with the soft grayness about her. She laid a bit of her pink sash ribbon on the pretty gray of the cushions, and flushed with delight over the effect.

"Look at that, Reuben," she said. "Those two things put together make a picture."

Reuben looked and laughed. He did not see the picture; he had not Nancy's eye for color.

"You will have to say that kind of thing to Alice Fenning," he said; "she is the greatest one to see pictures! She finds them in the stones, and the grass, and I don't know where not. Alice would have enjoyed taking this ride with us; she likes to go into the country over new roads. If she had been at home to-day perhaps she might have come with us. But then," he added with a laugh, "if she had been at home I don't suppose we could have come at all. It is because they are all away that they did not need the horses."

Nancy echoed the laugh as she said she was glad they were not at home. In her heart she added that she wouldn't have had that stuck-up little Alice Fenning along for anything; in fact, she wouldn't have gone a step with her. But she did not say it aloud. In truth, this Nancy, whom Reuben was taking to ride, appeared to be new inside as well as out. Apparently she had put away her ill-humor and discontent with her old clothes. She leaned back in the carriage, and looked as much like a fine lady as she could, and talked and laughed in a way that astonished her companion. She was bent on carrying out her resolution to show him that she could be "like other folks when she had a chance." It was very surprising and almost dis-

appointing to see how fast they got over the road. Caleb's horses made nothing of doing in an hour's time what would have taken Uncle Kastor's the whole of the short Florida afternoon. At Uncle Kastor's they made fully as great a sensation as they had expected to; but it was entirely a pleasant sensation. Uncle Kastor was jubilant over them. He rested his rough hands on his worn blue trousers, and laughed so long and loud that the people at work in the yard stopped to listen and laugh with him.

"Well, well, well, my girl!" he said to Nancy. "'Fine feathers make fine birds,' eh? I should say they did!" How very different the quotation sounded from what it had when her father said it. "You do look fine, and no mistake. Fits you too, somehow. Don't it, Jane? And so you came away out here in the splendid carriage with the dancing horses? Dear! dear! And you, too, Reuben; you look like a professor, or the minister."

At these words Nancy turned and looked full at her companion for the first time that day. She had been so thoroughly occupied with herself as to actually forget to examine him critically. Now she made up for it.

"A new suit of clothes, from head to foot," she said; "and I've come away out here without taking them in! Oh! I knew you looked awful nice,

but someway I didn't think to see what it was made you look so."

"It beats all," said old Aunt Kastor, as she waddled about, in haste to treat her guests to huge pieces of cold strawberry shortcake. Yes, I know it was Christmas Day; but they were in Florida, you will remember, and in that curious country the very day of all others to enjoy strawberry shortcake made of freshly picked strawberries just beginning to prime, may be Christmas Day.

"It beats all what a difference fixing up makes! Here I've known Nancy ever since she was born, and had her in my arms the first one; and I've been most as well acquainted with Reuben as any of 'em; and I stood in the door and see that carriage come along and says I, 'Here's a fine young lady and gentleman taking a ride out this way; I wonder who they can be?' and I didn't know you from Adam!" Nancy laughed; it was pleasant to be so entirely unlike her old self as not to be recognized.

When the strawberry shortcake had been eaten, and the invalid had aroused herself and examined in an interested way every article of dress which Nancy had on, and Reuben had told Uncle Kastor all about his work and his school, it was time for them to go. The starting away caused an excitement. The sick girl's couch was wheeled to the

window that she might watch Nancy enter the carriage, and uncle and aunt stationed themselves on the doorstep for the same purpose. Nancy, with the glow on her cheeks deepening, lifted her dress with remarkable skill in one hand, rested the other on Reuben's arm, and stepped in as though she had been all her lifetime used to entering carriages. She had not watched Mrs. Fenning for nothing.

"Clothes is great things," said Uncle Kastor in a meditative tone, as he stood still on the doorstep, and watched until the carriage was a speck in the distance.

The ride home was more quiet than the coming out had been, at least upon Nancy's part. Seeing that she did not want to talk, Reuben exerted himself to try to entertain her. He told her stories of their school-life, of how splendid certain boys were, and how mean others were, and how wonderfully Mr. Kensington managed them all; and what large girls Miss Kensington had in her classes, and everything else he could think of which would be likely to interest a girl. But all the time he was feeling disappointed to notice that the old lines of discontent were gathering on Nancy's face again. Was it not possible for her happiness to be made to last even through one afternoon? He had tried so hard to make it bright! As if in answer to his

thought, she broke into the midst of one of his school stories with a question.

"After all, what's the use, Reuben Stein? Don't you think I was a kind of a fool to rig myself up in this way and go off riding? I'll have to go back home, and to-morrow morning — to-night, for that matter — take off all this finery, put on my old duds, and go to work at the same old things; and to-morrow will be just like any other day. What was the use in being rigged up for one day? It is just as father said; the clothes don't fit me. I've got no place to wear them to, and none to take their place when they wear out; and they'll wear out awful quick. I'm just nobody, and there isn't any sense in pretending. I wish I had sent these clothes back, and stayed at home this afternoon, and been just myself."

Reuben decided that the time had come for plain-speaking. "Nancy," he said earnestly, "that isn't the way to look at it; I know, for I have tried it. There was a while that I felt just as you do; it was when I lived at your house. Things didn't go right, and I couldn't please your father, do what I would; and there didn't seem to be any use in trying to be anybody, so I just gave up. I did the things I had to do, not as well as I could, but well enough to get along, and I didn't touch a thing unless I was told. I remember all one day walking

around an old stick that had tumbled down and was in everybody's way, because I hadn't been told to pick it up. I went on in that kind of way for three or four days, and was never so miserable in my life. I felt mad at everybody, and I couldn't keep from showing it all the while. Then, all of a sudden, I made up my mind that that wouldn't do; I couldn't live along so. I knew my mother would have been ashamed of me if she had been there, and I was ashamed of myself. It seemed a pity not to get any comfort even out of myself, and I decided on a change. I said to myself, 'I'll do the very best I can every day of my life; I'll keep my eyes wide open, and I'll plan my work in the way to get it done the quickest, and I'll help everybody I can; and I'll study the books I've got, and I'll keep on the lookout all the while for something better.' Well, you see how it worked. The 'something better' came in a little while. If people are determined to learn, and to make the most of themselves, I don't think they *can* be hindered. No matter how much trouble they get into, they get out again somehow, if they do their best. See here, Nancy, don't you think I might help you a little? You said once that you liked books, and such things; you know I could lend you books now, and I could show you about them, and tell you the way we recite in school, and all that. You could

study at odd times, you know, and learn a good deal. Wouldn't you like to?"

"I should like it well enough," said Nancy gloomily, "if I thought it would ever come to anything. But things get worse and worse with us, and father grows gloomier and crosser all the time, and I don't know what is going to become of us. It is all well enough for you, Reuben; you haven't got a father and mother to think about." She spoke exactly as though "father and mother" were burdens of which Reuben had gotten rid. He could not help getting that thought from her words. He gave a quick little sigh, and then, in a tone which he had not used before, asked, —

"What do you suppose I would give, Nancy, if I had a father and mother to think about? It is true I am all alone in the world, but in spite of that I am going to do the very best I can. And if I, all alone, and with nobody in particular to care, can accomplish something, you, with parents to take care of, ought to be able to do a good deal more."

This was a new way of looking at things. It made Nancy feel a little ashamed of her words. She began to be ashamed, too, of letting her ill-humor come back even while she was taking a ride in that beautiful carriage, and Reuben was doing his best for her. She laughed a little, and her face cleared as she said, —

"Well, there's no use in talking; I've had one good time, anyhow, and I won't borrow trouble about to-morrow, if I can help it. It was awful good in you, Reuben, to get this all up for me; and I sha'n't forget it."

This was a good deal for Nancy to say; more than many extravagant words would have been in some others, and Reuben understood her well enough to know it.

After the milking had been done that night, and the fire laid for morning, and everything that Reuben could think of planned for Miss Kensington's comfort, he still lingered in the kitchen, where she was busy at her cooking-table about some dainty work. Her sister, the teacher, had been out there with her, leaning against the sideboard, and talking earnestly about matters which did not interest Reuben. Now she had gone, and Reuben, lingering, wished very much that Miss Kensington would ask him some questions about Nancy. There were things concerning the girl which he would like to tell her. Presently his wish was gratified.

"Well, Reuben," she said with her bright smile, "did your Christmas Day turn out as you planned it should? Did you have a pleasant ride, and was your friend agreeable?"

"Yes'm," said Reuben gratefully. "We had just

as good a time as anybody could have; and Nancy was nicer than I ever knew her to be. You can't think how different she looked, Miss Kensington; why, for the first minute I didn't know her! I never supposed that clothes could make such a difference in people."

Miss Kensington gave him a swift glance from head to foot, and smiled; she did not know Nancy Hardman, but clothes had certainly made a great difference with him.

Reuben's face had, however, taken on a shade of gravity, and there was a mournful touch to his voice as he said, —

"But Nancy needs other things as much as she did clothes; I wish I knew how to help her."

CHAPTER XXI.

NANCY'S CHANCE.

"WHAT sort of help does she need?" asked Miss Kensington. This was just the very question Reuben wanted. It opened the way for his story. He began at the beginning of his acquaintance with Nancy Hardman, and told all he knew about her, trying several times to cut his story short lest he might be taking too much of Miss Kensington's time, but being started afresh at intervals by her thoughtful questions, and made bold by her evident interest.

"Well," she said at last, as, her pretty preparations done, she washed the dough from her hands at the sink, "we'll think about this, you and I, Reuben. It does seem as though there was something in her that would be worth helping. I'll talk with mother, and see if she has anything to suggest; it takes mothers to have ideas, my boy—did you know that? Meantime, I wonder if you know one thing that you might do for her? The most important thing that anybody can do for anybody else?"

"Oh! you must mean praying," said Reuben, his face bright in an instant. "Oh, yes'm, I know about that! I pray for Nancy every day; and I've had answers too. I prayed for something pretty for her, and it came so quick it almost scared me. I didn't pray for clothes, I didn't think of them; I only asked for something pretty for Christmas; something that a girl would like very much — and I believe she liked them better than she would anything else, and needed them more."

Miss Kensington laughed pleasantly. "So the answer 'almost scared you,' did it?" she asked. "You see, you spoke to One who understood Nancy and her needs. That is the advantage we have in praying. The Lord knows just how to reach her in the quickest way; and as you and I don't exactly know how to do for her, I think we would better ask him again. Let us talk to him very especially about her to-night, and get him to show us ways of helping her."

After that, Reuben went to his room with a very happy heart. It was but the morning before that he had found and been much struck by the verse: "If two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven." He had read it again and again, and thought sorrowfully that he had nobody to join him in asking. It was

of no use to talk to Alice about these things; interested as she was in his plans, and eager to help him carry them out, she seemed to have no interest in praying, and no idea that anything could be accomplished thereby. He felt that he must be willing to pray alone until such time as he could find a friend who would be in sympathy with him. And behold! here was one who had herself proposed that they two should ask that very night about ways of helping Nancy!

In view of all this, Reuben received his next direction from Miss Kensington with a very bright face. I mean his next very special direction. A day had passed since the compact they had made, and nothing had been said about Nancy; but after breakfast on the second morning she gave him orders about the morning work, and added: "And Reuben, sometime to-day, whenever there seems to be a time that you are not needed, suppose you skip out to your friends the Hardmans, and see if you can get Nancy to come and help me for a few days. You may tell her that I expect a woman in the house to do some sewing for us, and that I shall need a little help about the cooking, and the dish-washing, and the sewing, and I hardly know what else. A sort of general helper I want for a few days, you understand."

"Yes'm," said Reuben, with a flash of intel-

ligence in his handsome gray eyes, "I understand."

"Very well. If she cares to come for two or three days, or possibly longer, and help me, I will pay her, of course, and then we shall see what we shall see." The two exchanged smiles, and felt that they understood each other. Reuben's faith was strong. Nothing could have convinced him that this was not in response to the "asking" in which they two had agreed.

Nancy Hardman was having a trying day; she had made some weak resolutions in the morning, but they had faded out before noon. She was finding it almost impossible not to be more discontented than usual with all her surroundings; and her father's grim hint, that her ride and her fine feathers had had exactly the effect he expected they would, had not helped her any. Perhaps one of the hardest features of her lot was that she really had nothing with which to occupy her time. Had there been hard work for her to dash at with all her strength, she would have hailed it with a sense of relief; but in a household where there was very little to cook, and very few dishes with which to cook it, and where even soap and rags for scrubbing were scarce and must be used sparingly, there was little to be done. It seemed to the poor girl that she was never more glad of any-

thing in her life than she was of the cheery sound of Reuben Stein's whistle that December afternoon. Mr. Kensington had kept him busy all the morning, and it was not until he came down town for the daily mail that he found time to do the important errand of the day. Even then he was in haste, and must do his errand as promptly as possible. So he made it known without delay, and Nancy's cheeks grew scarlet as she considered her answer. The Hardmans had all the silly false pride belonging to ignorant people, especially in the South, about "working out" for a living. Mrs. Hardman had been known to affirm that they had seen hard times in their day, and that things were getting harder, but that they had never got to the pass yet that her girl had to be anybody's servant, and while she had a live bone in her body they never would. Nancy was supposed to share all her prejudices; yet she stood there with eyes aflame and cheeks aglow, and evidently considered her answer while the mother talked.

"I must say, Reuben Stein, I thought you knew better than that! My girl don't go out to do housework for no folks. She never has, and I don't expect as long as I'm above ground that she ever will. We may be poor, but we are respectable, and we mean to keep so."

"Why," said Reuben in wide-eyed astonishment,

"I don't mean anything of that kind, Mrs. Hardman. I didn't think of such a thing as this not being one of the nicest chances in the world. Miss Kensington doesn't keep any servant. She does the work herself; all the work in her kitchen — cooking and baking, and everything. She wanted Nancy to come and help her just a few days, because there is to be a woman to sew."

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Hardman, with a toss of her head, "I know well enough how that will be. 'Help her!' humph! She will put on her best gown and sit in the parlor and entertain company, and Nancy will drudge in her kitchen. She sha'n't do it, and that's the whole of it."

"Look here, mother," said Nancy, in her most decided tone, "I'm going. There isn't anything to do at home, and I'm sick and tired of lazing around doing nothing. It will be a chance to earn a little something, perhaps. I don't care if it is working out; they treat Reuben decently, and it is likely they will me. Anyhow, I'm going to do it."

"Nancy Hardman!" said her mother, planting her hands on her sides and gazing at her daughter, partly in dismay, and partly, let it be confessed, in a secret feeling of pride over the spirit of the girl; "I never heard the like in all my days! Nobody need ever try to tell what you may take into your

head to do next!" She had spoken, before, almost entirely for the girl's sake. She had supposed that she was dumb with indignation, and that her mother must take her part. "It is the last thing I thought you would ever consent to," she added, in a lower tone, dropping her arms like one who had failed. "You must want money bad, I do say, to be willing to get it that way."

"I do," said Nancy; "I want everything 'bad.' I want to go somewhere and see how folks live; what they have to eat, and how they cook it, and put it on the table, and everything. I'm tired to death of the same old way. You said yourself that the way was to take all the chances you could get. This is a 'chance' of one kind, just exactly as much as a ride in a carriage was."

"That's it," said Reuben eagerly; "that's exactly what it seemed to me. I think it is a first-class chance to be with Miss Kensington. She isn't like most folks that work in kitchens, I guess." This might have been a dangerous speech to make had anybody been listening closely to him, for the only people who "worked in kitchens" that Reuben had known intimately were Mrs. Hardman and her daughter; but they were too busy now in making their plans to heed what he said.

A difficulty had arisen in regard to the matter

of dress. Nancy had declared, almost as soon as she finished her argument in favor of going, that she didn't believe she could, after all, because she hadn't a decent thing to wear. Then her mother, as interestedly as though she had made no objection to her going, began to consider that point, affirming that the green calico the girl was then wearing, washed and mended, would be nice enough for anybody's kitchen; and that there would yet be time enough that day to wash, iron, and patch it. Nancy looked down at the faded green gown in infinite disdain, but knowing it to be her only resource, unless she wore the white lawn, finally settled the matter by beginning to hunt for the old kettle which did duty as a wash-boiler, while she told Reuben to say to Miss Kensington that she would be on hand bright and early the next morning.

Then began an experience for Nancy Hardman almost as interesting in its way as Reuben's had been to him. True to her word, she appeared in the back doorway of the Kensington house the next morning, just after the family had scattered from the breakfast-table, leaving Miss Kensington alone.

"Good-morning," that lady said to the red-faced, rather frightened creature in the doorway, who, in a faded and patched and starched dress which had

once been, and was still, in spots, a vivid green, did not look like the girl whom Reuben had taken to drive. "You are Nancy Hardman, I presume? Come in; you are just in time. Do you like muffins? Here are two or three nice ones that must have been left for you." Certainly this was a different greeting to bestow upon "hired help" from any which Nancy had imagined. She came forward into the room, awkwardly enough, muttering, however, that she had had her breakfast. But to this Miss Kensington paid no attention. She set a chair in front of a plate and knife and fork which lay on the white-covered table very near to a vase of roses, poured a cup of coffee, sugared and creamed it carefully, and pushed the little wire basket with its freshly boiled eggs closer to the plate and motioned Nancy forward.

"Sit down here," she said, "and eat a muffin or two and a fresh egg, and take a cup of my coffee. You drink coffee, I suppose? Well, try a cup of this; even if you have had your breakfast, after so long a walk on this warm morning, you must be ready for a second one." In the course of her cross-questionings of Reuben, she had come to the shrewd conclusion that a breakfast at the Hardman home could not be a very appetizing or nourishing thing, and was the more pressing of her hospitality on that account.

Nancy wished she wouldn't. She was afraid to eat before this elegant lady; but on being hard pressed, she broke one of the delicate muffins, put a tiny crumb of butter on the smaller piece of it, and managed to get it to her lips. The first taste settled the matter; she *must* eat those muffins, frightened and ashamed though she was. She might not have known that she was hungry, but never, it seemed to her, had such a delicious morsel been in her mouth. Miss Kensington watched her with an interested smile, then brought an egg-cup and broke and prepared an egg, rightly judging that Nancy's timidity would be too great to allow of her performing such a service for herself, even supposing she had known how.

The muffins disposed of, which were really so small and delicate that it would have taken a good many to satisfy hunger, Miss Kensington produced a large slice of bread, with the remark, "Now you must try my brown bread; Reuben is so fond of it that I think you may like it too."

Undoubtedly she did; especially when it was spread with such butter as she had not known existed. She grew less timid with each mouthful, and managed to make every crumb of the bread speedily disappear. So this new acquaintance in the Kensington home began with a delicious breakfast. And when one has breakfasted for many

mornings on wads of baker's bread, dipped in strong cheap coffee made without milk and sweetened with the cheapest brown sugar, this is not a bad way in which to commence a new experience.

CHAPTER XXII.

A NEW WORLD.

"NOW," said Miss Kensington, "if you are through, we will wash these dishes, and get the morning work out of the way as quickly as we can. I have a sewing-woman, and the more help we can give her the better." It was evidently no part of her intention to leave Nancy to herself in the neat kitchen. There might have been two reasons for this. Miss Kensington was very particular about her work, and in her heart she did not believe that Nancy Hardman would know how it should be done; but there was a deeper reason. She wanted Nancy Hardman's help a little, but she wanted a great deal more to help her.

"I must do it," she had said, when mother and sister and even her brother had exclaimed over her announcement that she had sent for Nancy Hardman to come and help her.

"What can have happened?" said Mrs. Kensington, lifting up her hands in surprise; "I am almost alarmed. As hard as we have coaxed you

to have some help; and nothing we could all of us say would induce you to let anybody into your immaculate kitchen."

"And now she is going to let in a Hardman girl!" laughed her sister, who had seen Nancy on two or three occasions. "It really looks, my dear, as though you had lost your wits."

"I must do it," Miss Kensington had replied with energy. "I feel ashamed every time I think of it. Here is a family who has been living neighbor to us one may say ever since we came South; living in ignorance and poverty and hopeless discouragement, and we never so much as thought of lifting our hands to help them. Nobody has, so far as I know, save this poor, homeless, friendless boy, who has received nothing but ill-temper and neglect at the hands of that family, and who needs, we think, help in every imaginable way himself; yet he is the only one who had a thought or a care for that girl. If I did not try to do something for her now, I should feel disgraced in his eyes."

"There is truth in that," her brother said thoughtfully, looking upon his sister with those appreciative eyes of his, which told her that she would have an ally in him in whatever she undertook to do. As for the sister, she said, with a merry toss of her head, "Oh, if Reuben has demanded it, that is a full explanation. Miss Ken-

sington, the boy-hater, has gone over to the enemy, body and heart; what Reuben Stein wants is to be done." They all joined in the laugh; yet they were all interested in the sister's new effort, and stood ready to help.

Nancy watched like one in fairyland while the, to her, curious preparations were made for washing dishes. In the first place, Miss Kensington wheeled into the room a table, or box, on legs — Nancy did not know what to call it. There were four legs of light wood crossed in a way to add strength, supported on heavy roller casters; and resting on them, or rather setting securely in the niche arranged for it, was something like a large drawer, with many compartments lined with tin.

"Here," explained Miss Kensington, "is where I put every article from the table which needs washing. See, it is divided into compartments to receive them. Here is the place for the cups, this is for platters and large dishes; here go the plates, and this is the silver department. I gather the spoons, and lay them in first, so there will be no disturbance from them. Now, you see, they cannot fall on the floor and make trouble, and on the other hand, the forks cannot scratch them."

"What a funny thing!" said Nancy; "I never heard of anything like it."

"Perhaps few people have," said Miss Kensing-

ton; "I do not think they are in the least common; but my brother has seen to it that I have every convenience for doing work swiftly, and with the least trouble to myself. Now, Nancy, you may put all the dishes in their places here, while I am putting away the eatables; then I will show you where to roll the closet."

It was very simple and very swift work. Nancy admitted to herself that it was certainly an improvement on running back and forth with arms full of dishes ready to fall and smash themselves on the slightest provocation. When everything was ready, almost a touch of the hand rolled the queer machine into the neat, cool kitchen. Yes, it was cool, although the morning was warm — warmer than perhaps could have been found elsewhere in the United States in the month of December. The only visible sign of heat came from a single jet of flame which was doing duty in an oil-stove, for the purpose of keeping the water hot.

Nancy regarded the oil-stove as a curiosity. "Don't you burn wood?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, I have a range; it is in that other kitchen; but this morning was so warm that I would have nothing to do with it. It happened that my plans were such as could be carried out on my oil-stove. You are wondering what that big

black thing in the corner is, aren't you? That is a dish-washer. Did you ever hear of such a thing?"

"Only the kind that has two hands," said Nancy with a touch of her natural grim humor. Miss Kensington laughed pleasantly.

"I like this kind better," she said; "it saves my two hands a great deal of work. If you never saw one, you will enjoy seeing it perform. It is great fun to wash dishes with it. I suppose you are not over-fond of washing them in the usual way? Young girls hardly ever are, though I confess I don't understand why. It always seemed pleasant enough work to me. I like to make soiled things into clean ones. It takes a good deal of power to be able to do that. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know," said Nancy, not sullenly, but in the tone of one who was in a new world and was not sure of anything. She could only look on in silent amazement while Miss Kensington's swift, skilful fingers managed those dishes. All the heavier dishes were piled into a deep pan, soapy water was poured over them, and they were hurriedly "rinsed," with more carelessness than even Nancy herself was in the habit of using. Truth to tell, as she watched the strange process, she said to herself, with an air of great satisfaction,

"I'm neater than that, anyhow, if Aunt Kastor does think I'm not particular enough."

But Miss Kensington's next movements were so astonishing that Nancy stopped thinking about herself, and gave attention to them. As fast as the dishes were rinsed in this careless way, they were set into little wire niches which seemed to have been prepared expressly for them, in the aforesaid big black box. Vegetable dishes, sauce dishes, meat dishes, pitchers, bowls, all had their places. Next came the plates, each plate standing up by itself, not another dish touching it. Then what Nancy called to herself the "down-stairs doors" were closed, and cups, saucers, glasses, spoons, knives, forks, every imaginable kind of table furniture in need of washing, went into little apartments prepared for them.

"The house was built a purpose for 'em, and they're all moving in!" exclaimed Nancy gleefully, forgetting in her excitement where she was, and that she was afraid of Miss Kensington. Whatever Nancy Hardman had been in the past, it was certain that she had not been very gleeful; her life had been too hard for that. Next came a large pailful of boiling water, into which a spoonful of soap powder had been stirred. Miss Kensington poured this into the lower part of the dish-house, and shut down the cover. Then she

turned a crank with swift, skilful movements, perhaps a dozen times, while Nancy looked on in dumb amazement. When the cover was raised, a perfect foam of hot soapsuds was found to be spread over all the dishes. A faucet below was opened, and out poured the white foam into a pan waiting for it. Swift, silent movements upon Miss Kensington's part; another pailful of water boiling hot, which, to Nancy's horror, was dashed over the dishes. At least she knew better than that. "You'll break the tumblers!" she exlaimed in great excitement; but Miss Kensington smiled and shook her head. "No — no danger of that; they are too thoroughly and evenly heated now to break. You noticed that I poured the other water below to prevent any accidents of that kind; but this pailful can be dashed over them without the least danger."

The process of turning the crank was repeated, and the water drawn off as before. Then the cover was lifted, and the dishes, smoking hot and shining beautifully, were exposed to view. "There!" said Miss Kensington, satisfaction in her voice; "our dishes are washed. Here is the drying-cloth — you may dry the silver and the glasses. I like better to have them dried at once and put away; but the other dishes will take care of themselves. I washed the few cooking-dishes that I needed this morning,

as soon as I had used them; so in a very short time we will be ready to go to the sewing-room."

Said Nancy, "Well, I never! I've washed dishes ever since I was born, but I never see any washed like that before. Why, it's nothing but fun! Does that crank go hard, Miss Kensington?"

"No, not particularly hard for a strong-handed, willing-minded person. Do you know how much easier hard things go if one is willing minded? Half the discomforts of housework come because people don't know how to do it in the best ways, and have no desire to learn. I quite enjoy my housework. I like to plan ways of doing it more skilfully, and at the same time more quickly. Nearly every morning I have some new little motion about my work which interests me. You may drop the cover of the dish-washer now, and sweep the room; then, when you have swept and dusted, raise the cover again, and leave the dishes exposed to the air. When we come out by and by to make preparations for dinner, we shall find them all dry and shining; then those of them that are needed on the table for the next meal can be moved into their other house, and wheeled into the dining-room. It is a very nice arrangement; don't you think so?"

"It is lovely!" said Nancy with the deepest interest. None of her work had she hated more

than her dish-washing, perhaps because she did not know the best ways of doing it.

"It is such nasty, mussy, dirty work!" she had said to her mother more than once, in a disgusted tone, and added that there was one thing to be thankful for anyhow; "they hadn't many dishes to wash."

On the whole, Nancy Hardman's first day from home was one that she might well remember in after life. Almost every movement which was made in this refined household was new to her. The very names and uses of the dishes which she was required to set on and off the table had to be explained in detail. The way in which she set that table for dinner so astonished Miss Kensington that she had to turn away quickly in order not to utter an exclamation that might have humiliated Nancy. She walked into the pantry, and busied herself refilling her salt-dishes while she considered. When she came back there was no laughter on her face, and her voice was quiet and pleasant. "I ought to have shown you how to arrange the dishes; you haven't them quite as we place them. Different people have their different ways of doing things, you know. I'll show you how to place them in my way; then, if you stay with me for a few days, you will remember and do it in that way, won't you?"

"I'll try for it," said Nancy emphatically; and she resolved then and there to do in everything possible exactly as Miss Kensington did. After a moment she added frankly, "We don't have no dishes to speak of to our house; I don't suppose I know nothing about them."

She looked on in admiring silence while Miss Kensington rearranged almost everything on the table, changing its entire appearance as if by magic, and making a picture out of the dining-table.

"It looks nice," said Nancy with satisfaction. "It makes as much difference as it does to put another kind of dress onto folks;" and she thought of her beautiful white dress and all its dainty belongings. Miss Kensington laughed pleasantly. "That is an original idea," she said. And although Nancy did not in the least know what she meant, she liked the sound of the words, and felt that for some reason she had been approved.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A ROUGH PATH.

WHEN the Kensington family gathered at the dinner-table, Nancy Hardman had another lesson in home life. She was seated with them, opposite Reuben. Now, although she had considered this very question, and was prepared to be properly indignant if she should not be so treated, she was nevertheless a very much scared girl; and confessed to herself that it would have been much more comfortable for her to eat her dinner alone in the kitchen.

However, she made an heroic resolve to do her very best; and longed exceedingly to appear what she called "nice."

It surprised and half vexed her to see how entirely at home Reuben seemed to feel at this table which was to her elegant. How easily he managed his napkin and his forks! and how "nice" he was in waiting upon other people! Nancy could not see but that he was fully as well-mannered as was Mr. Kensington himself. She copied some of

his movements in a stealthy way, as well as she could, and thought she was unobserved. Miss Kensington looked on, greatly amused, and decided that it would not take long to make a reasonably well-mannered girl of Nancy Hardman. She certainly had the gift of imitation.

In fact, before that day was done, Miss Kensington had become very much interested in her new study, and had resolved to keep Nancy with her for a few weeks at least, provided she chose to remain.

She need have had no anxieties upon that ground. As Nancy, tired but happy, went over in her mind all the varied experiences of that day, it seemed to her that she had been in a sort of fairyland. If this was "working out for a living," she assured her mother that she should want no better living in this world than to be able to work out with folks like Miss Kensington. No; she didn't know how much they were going to give her, and she didn't care. If she got nothing but her board it would be worth it, to live like folks for a little while. Miss Kensington had given her a white apron to put on, and set a little white rocking-chair for her by the window, and showed her how to baste the seams of a dress; and she had learned more in that one day than she ever had before in her life. Yes, indeed, she was going back in the morning, and

was going to stay just as long as they would keep her.

In the solitude of her own room Nancy walked around its little space gleefully, and said aloud: "I've sot down to a table like folks, and had a napkin and a butter-dish and a silver fork, and been helped to pie like any lady. Whatever comes in this world after this, I've been a lady for once."

After this first experience, you will not be surprised to be told that the days lengthened into weeks, and still Nancy Hardman remained at service. The Kensingtons were much amused that the heretofore almost too careful housekeeper had at last found, not only a boy, but a girl, that she was willing to tolerate in her kitchen. "And such a girl!" exclaimed Miss Mary Kensington. "Reuben, now, is gentlemanly by nature; but what can be said in favor of Nancy Hardman?"

"A great deal," said Miss Kensington good-humoredly. "In the first place she is more anxious to be a 'lady' than she is to be anything else in the world, I am afraid; and in the second place she succeeds in imitating the people about her to an almost alarming extent. It fills me with a queer mixture of amusement and dismay to find some of my blunders as carefully copied as my accomplishments. Oh! we shall be proud of Nancy Hardman yet."

And Mother Kensington, who always had something good to say of everybody, remarked that Nancy had real bright eyes; and that for her part she was glad to see her daughter willing to take what help she could get, instead of doing everything herself this warm weather.

And so it came to pass that Nancy had been trudging to and from the Kensington home every day for four weeks, and had been paid a dollar a week in money for her services, and had learned more in that time than she had ever dreamed of knowing, and had been three times to church on Sundays, twice in the lovely white suit, and once, when it rained, in a neat brown dress of Miss Kensington's which that good lady, with her mother's help, had taught Nancy how to fix over for herself, and in which she looked, as her parents said admiringly, "every inch a lady," when something happened in the Kensington family of such grave importance as to put all other interests into the background for a time. It was while they were seated at the breakfast-table that Reuben, who had been sent to mail an important letter, came in with a yellow-covered envelope which he handed to Miss Mary Kensington.

"I met the messenger-boy at the gate with it," he explained to Mr. Kensington. "Shall I sign for it and pay him, sir?"

When he returned, after attending to this, he found that his yellow-covered letter had brought trouble. The entire family had risen from the table in various stages of excitement. Mrs. and Miss Kensington were both talking at once, the one eagerly, the other soothingly, to Miss Mary, who seemed to be in an agony of grief and haste, and all but wild with excitement. Mr. Kensington had taken a time-table from his pocket, and was intently studying it. Nancy, who stood in doubt which way to turn, undertook to explain in undertone to Reuben, "There was bad news in it; some one is awful sick — going to die; she's the one that cares the most. I don't know who it is." Then Mr. Kensington spoke, —

"Mary, if you make all possible speed, you may be able to reach the eight-twenty train. Reuben, you could get a carriage, and drive her to the station in time for that train, I am sure. Shall it be attempted, Mary?"

"Oh! can I do it? You said it was too late for that train. Ready? I can be ready in two minutes!" She dashed from the room as she spoke, followed by mother and sister; and Mr. Kensington issued his orders to Reuben, —

"Make all speed to the livery, Reuben; I am sure I can trust you to do that; it is a matter of the gravest importance to Miss Mary to reach that

train. Tell Mr. Giles to give you a safe team. Get back here as quickly as possible, and wait for Miss Mary. Meantime, I will go directly to the station and learn about the route, and secure a ticket and sleeping-berth if possible. There is not a moment's time to be lost. Tell Miss Mary that I will meet her at the station, and give her all needful directions. She would better not stop for a trunk; we shall have to express one to her. Nancy, you may as well finish your breakfast; the rest of us will be too busy for some time to give it any attention."

While he spoke he was hastily drawing on his rubbers and mackintosh, for a steady rain was falling; and in less time than it has taken to tell it, Nancy was left alone to do what justice she could to a very excellent breakfast. Miss Kensington mentioned it afterwards as a proof of how thoughtful she had become, that instead of attending to her own wants, she carefully disposed of the breakfast in a way to keep hot what should be hot, and to protect from heat what should be served cold.

In an incredibly short space of time, considering the distance that he had to go, Reuben was at the door with a carriage, and Miss Mary came rushing down-stairs, followed by Nancy tugging at a satchel which had been hastily packed.

"Drive fast!" said Miss Mary. "O Reuben! if I should miss that train, or if my brother should not be there! I haven't money enough to buy my ticket."

"You won't miss it," said Reuben. "There are seven minutes yet; I looked at the clock as we passed. And Mr. Kensington will be there, and have everything ready; he always does."

"I know it; I am wild with anxiety, and cannot do anybody justice. Reuben, the very best friend I have in the world is lying very low; he may not live until I reach there."

"Oh!" said Reuben, a world of pitiful sympathy in his voice. Then, after a moment's silence, he added timidly, "We can pray to God to let him live. I think it is such a comfort to remember that he will do it if it is the best thing."

"Do pray, Reuben; pray for him all the time, and for me. I need everybody's prayers, I am sure. I won't forget it of you. I am glad you are such a good boy, Reuben, and will be at home to help take care of them. I came off in such a hurry that I did not even kiss mother good-by; tell her how sorry I was about that. I don't know what will become of my school, I am sure. But my brother thinks of everybody's comfort but his own. It will make him a great deal of trouble."

"Mr. Kensington will manage, ma'am," said Reu-

ben, in a voice full of assurance; "he always can, you know."

At two o'clock of that same day, as Reuben, seated in the schoolroom, was struggling with a troublesome example, Mr. Kensington summoned him to the desk.

"I find, Reuben, that I have left my record of the week's work at home — the little red book, you know, that I use in class. It is probably lying on my desk; if not, it will be in the left-hand drawer. You know the book, do you not?"

"Yes, sir," said Reuben.

"Then I think I shall have to ask you to go for it; and I need not tell you to be as quick as possible, I suppose?"

"No, sir," said Reuben, answering the smile on his teacher's face. He prided himself greatly on his promptness in doing errands. Mr. Kensington smiled again when he returned with the book. "You go on swift feet, Reuben," he said. And the smile lingered with Reuben for many a weary day; for it chanced that it was the last one he received for a long time. That very evening, while he sat in his room hard at work over those puzzling examples, there was a knock at his door, and Mr. Kensington entered.

"Reuben," he began abruptly, "I sent you to my room this afternoon, you remember?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where did you find the book I sent you for?"

"Lying on the desk, sir, just where you said."

"And what else was lying on the desk?"

"Let me think," said Reuben, leaning an elbow on his little study table, and resting his head on his hand, — "the inkstand was there, and a pen, and a pen-filler, and a foot-rule, and a paper-weight. I don't remember anything else."

"Don't you, indeed!" said Mr. Kensington, in a peculiar tone. "A boy with so good a memory as yours ought, it seems to me, to remember something else — something of greater importance than any of the articles you have mentioned."

Reuben looked up at him with bright, fearless eyes. "I do not, sir," he said respectfully. "There might have been something else, of course; but when I shut my eyes, and try to bring the picture of the desk before me, those are the only things I can see. I didn't set out to remember anything about it, you know; those just put themselves into my mind. I don't know why, but there won't another single thing come."

"I am very sorry," said Mr. Kensington, and his tone was so peculiar that it made a flush spread over Reuben's face. Was it possible that Mr. Kensington thought he was not speaking the truth? His voice sounded like that.

HE BURIED HIS FACE IN HIS HANDS.

"If you would tell me what else was there," he said earnestly, "I think I could be sure whether I saw it or not; but if I did, it has gone out of my mind entirely now."

"I repeat," said Mr. Kensington, "that I am very sorry indeed, more sorry than I can tell you. What should you say if I should tell you that I know there was a piece of money there?"

Reuben shook his head resolutely. "I did not see any money; I am very sure of that. Of course it might have been there; but if it was I should have thought I would have seen it."

"So should I," said Mr. Kensington, and without another word he turned and left the room.

Poor Reuben! It was of no use to try to bring his mind back to those examples. He leaned both elbows on the table, and buried his face in his hands, and lost himself in the most painful thoughts he had had for many a day. How suddenly this bright world had turned black for him! Only a little while before he had been so happy; and now, he was actually thought to be a thief!

CHAPTER XXIV.

AT LAST.

WHILE Reuben was brooding over the trouble which had suddenly shut down upon him, Mr. Kensington was seated in Judge Fenning's library, talking with him about that very thing.

"The truth is," Mr. Kensington was saying mournfully, "I may have unwittingly put temptation in the boy's way; it never occurred to me but that he was perfectly honest, and I have treated him as though he were one of us."

"Do you think, then, that you have discovered dishonesty in the boy?" Judge Fenning asked.

"Why — I am afraid so, Judge; the circumstances are peculiar. Let me tell you the story in brief. I have already explained in regard to my sister's sudden call from home. Of course it required some rushing on the part of all of us to get her off, and there was more or less confusion. Before I started for the station to see about her ticket I went to my room, unlocked a drawer which contains money that I drew from the bank yes-

terday. I counted out what I wanted, then laid a ten-dollar bill under a paper-weight on my table, intending to leave word for Mary to take it with her, lest she might not be supplied with money for incidental expenses. But I regret to say that I forgot to mention this to my mother or sisters as I intended, and did not think of it again until, when I went to my room, I saw it lying under the paper-weight where I had placed it. I was then in haste; and as I am in the habit of keeping my door locked during my absence, on account of chemical apparatus there which it would not be wise to have handled, I concluded that the money was as safe there as anywhere, and left it. I am afraid you will think me culpably careless; but I had forgotten it entirely when I gave Reuben my key this afternoon, and sent him home for a book. But even if I had thought of it, I presume I should have done the same — I trusted him so entirely. Now, the sad part of it is, Judge, that he is the only one who has had access to the room, and the money is gone."

"And you are quite sure that no other person could have had access to your room?"

"Entirely sure. I gave the key to Reuben, and he returned it to me in a remarkably short time; moreover, I have questioned my mother and sister, and they did not even know of Reuben's presence

in the house at the time. There has been no other person at our house to-day; the young girl, Nancy Hardman, who is staying with us, went home early in the forenoon for the day. Of course I have gone over every possibility before accusing the boy, even in my mind. I am methodical in my habits; and I know to a penny how much money I have, and how I have spent what is gone. I have counted and calculated it all at least a dozen times since making this discovery without the variation of a penny. My accounts will not balance without that ten-dollar note which I know I left on my desk."

"There is no way of communicating with your room, you say, save by this one door?"

"Why, yes; there is another door which opens into the room that my sister who has gone away occupied. But that door is almost never used; in fact, there is a heavy piece of furniture against it. And besides, there was no one to enter the room save the members of my own family and Reuben. Still, I thought of that door, and questioned Miss Kensington; and she assures me that she locked my sister's door before going down-stairs to see her off, lest the aforesaid Nancy might be tempted to investigate; and there has been no one in that room besides herself, she says, to-day."

"It looks like a very straight case," said Judge

Fenning; "and I fear you will think me a very poor lawyer when I tell you that nevertheless I do not believe Reuben knows anything about the lost money. Let me tell you how my acquaintance with the boy began."

Whereupon the judge told the story of the fire, and the careful investigation that followed. "Through it all," he concluded, "Reuben, under great provocation and with splendid opportunity for deceiving, held as strictly to the truth as it was possible for a person to do. I kept a short-hand record of his various statements, and it was curious to note afterwards how every small particular matched. I have watched him since with a good deal of interest, and inquired here and there as opportunity happened to offer; and you will find, if you look into it, that every one has confidence in him. Even Mr. Hardman, who has not much faith in anybody, admits that he believes Reuben a boy to be trusted."

"I hope it is so," said Mr. Kensington with a faint smile. "As I told you, I have trusted him myself implicitly; but what is one to think?"

He found on his return home that both his mother and sister were ready to echo Judge Fenning's opinion. They could not imagine what had become of the money, and they owned that it was very strange; but they were as sure of Reuben as

they were of themselves. And Nancy had been sent for just as Mary was starting, and had remained at home all day, so she was outside of suspicion.

A great deal of thought and prayer were given to Reuben's case during the night. By morning Mr. Kensington had decided what to say to him.

"I shall have to confess, Reuben, that things look suspicious for you. I am a very methodical man, with not a great deal of money, and I take utmost care of what I have, so there is really no hope of my being mistaken; my accounts balance to a penny, including the missing bill. Nevertheless, your previous record for honesty and truthfulness counts for a good deal. Mrs. and Miss Kensington believe that you are as innocent as they are; and strange as it appears to me, I am inclined to think so myself. What I mean to do is to let the matter rest. We will try to be in all things as we were before this happened; and in the meantime, if you or I can ferret out the mystery in any way, I am sure we will do so."

It was all very well to say, "We will try to be in all things as we have been before;" poor Reuben knew that this could not be. He turned away with a sigh that had a touch of hopelessness in it, and a mournful, "Thank you, sir!"

Mr. Kensington echoed the sigh when he was left alone, and told himself that he would rather have seen the boy indignant. If he were entirely innocent, why did not his eyes flash with righteous indignation?

If it was indignation that he wanted, Nancy could have supplied any amount. Nobody had intended to tell her the story; but in some way she got a hint of trouble, and Reuben himself explained. Then did Nancy's righteous anger burst forth. The Kensingtons were all a "mean, low-lived set." She would not work for them, not she! She would rather starve than eat their victuals another day! What did their education amount to, if it could not show them what she knew with her eyes shut, — that Reuben never took a penny which did not belong to him!

"O Nancy, *don't!*" said Reuben, to whom this outburst was made, when it had continued until he felt that the girl was beside herself with rage. "Think what you are saying. Mr. Kensington is a good man; they are all as good as gold. Almost any other man would have sent me to prison, or sent me out of the house anyway. Do not spoil your own good chances, Nancy, by being unjust to them. I do not, for my part, see how he can help feeling that I took the money. He has not known me very long, and he knows I am a poor boy and

need money. Besides, what could have become of it?"

"Oh, 'become of it!'" mimicked Nancy, in uncontrollable wrath. "I am out of all patience with you too, Reuben Stein! You talk exactly as though you were trying to convince yourself that you took it! The next thing you will be confessing it, just to please Mr. Kensington."

Reuben shook his head. "No," he said mournfully, "I will not tell a lie, of course, even to please Mr. Kensington; and I'm going to believe that this thing will 'work together for good' to me, somehow. I'm sure I can't see how; but God has promised it, and I'm going to believe it."

Now, it happened that Miss Kensington overheard this entire conversation. She could hardly help hearing the beginning. Nancy's loud, excited voice arrested her steps just as she was entering the kitchen; and after hearing a few words she resolved to listen to what Reuben had to say in reply, in the hope that his words might throw some light on the puzzle. The result was that, as she repeated the substance of the conversation to her brother, she said: "You see Reuben is just as innocent as we have believed him to be, all the time. I am glad I never doubted him for a moment. If I had, I should have felt ashamed of myself this morning."

Mr. Kensington smiled, and shook his head; and that afternoon he took down and put back again every book on his study shelves with a vain hope in his heart that he might in a fit of absentmindedness have shut the bill into a book, although, as he told himself, he *knew* that he did not. In like manner he went through his drawers and boxes, with no result.

The days passed, apparently, much as usual. Reuben went to and from school, and did his work as faithfully as he could, and tried to keep his violent friend, Nancy, within bounds, and tried in every way to do his duty. Mr. Kensington was uniformly kind, but Reuben could feel, rather than see, that there was a difference in his manner; and the shadow of a great sorrow seemed to be always hanging over the boy. He neither whistled nor sang at his work, and often when he thought he was unobserved had the air of one hunting for something.

Meantime Miss Mary Kensington remained away. At first there came only sorrowful news from her. Her friend was very low indeed; the doctor had no hope of his rallying. Then, after a few days, he was no worse, and that in itself was encouragement; then, he was just a trifle less weak; and at last, "really rallying." There followed days of anxiety lest this should be a false hope. Then he

was pronounced to be steadily gaining, and a journey to the mountains was planned which was to include Miss Mary. She had failed under the steady strain of watching and anxiety, and the doctor thought it was almost as important for her as for his patient to have change and rest. Her place had been supplied in the schoolroom, and the substitute could be retained until the term closed; and the family at home united in urging her to accompany her betrothed husband and his mother and sister to the mountains. And so it came to pass that it was just eight weeks from the day that Miss Mary left them that Reuben met her at the station.

Her first words to him were, "Why, Reuben, you have grown thin and pale. What is the matter with you? We shall have to send you to the mountains next. See how young and strong it has made me;" and she sprang gleefully into the carriage without waiting for his helping hand.

It was when they were seated, three hours later, around the tea-table, enjoying to the utmost this family reunion, that Miss Mary said, turning to her brother, —

"By the way, Edward, did you miss anything valuable after I left? If you did, I suppose you guessed who was the thief; but it seems queer that I have never thought to mention it from that morning to this."

Mr. Kensington glanced at Reuben, whose face crimsoned to his very forehead, then grew deathly pale, while he dropped his fork and stared at Miss Mary, as though his very life depended upon her next words. Then he said to his sister, with what calmness he could, "What does that mean, Mary? You speak in riddles."

"Why, that morning that I went away in such a rush, I found I had almost no money in my pocket-book. I had moved my secretary only the day before from where it always stood, in front of the door, you know, that leads into your room; and I rushed in through that door to ask you about it, just as mother called to me that you had gone to the station to get my ticket, and would meet me there. And I saw a ten-dollar bill lying under a paper-weight on your table, and pounced upon it, thinking I would have so much money about me, anyway. Of course I intended to speak of it when I saw you at the station, and ask for some more, but I didn't; and I haven't mentioned it since, although I suppose I have thought of it a dozen times after my letters were sealed. Why! what is the matter with all of you? Did anything dreadful result from my carelessness?"

"Yes," said Mr. Kensington gravely, "something dreadful. My dear boy, *don't!* you will break my heart!" For Reuben, the composure with which

he had borne up under his trial having utterly forsaken him, had buried his curly head in both trembling hands, and was sobbing like a child.

"I reckon that there is the best day's work that ever happened to him yet," said Uncle Kastor sagely, when the story, in many chapters and much detail, was given to him by the still-excited Nancy. "Mr. Kensington will never forget it of him, never! And he'll find it 'works together' for lots of good, or I'm much mistaken."

And Uncle Kastor was not mistaken.

THE END.