



DARCY
THE YOUNG ACROBAT



THE TIME OF TEYPrATION.

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CHAPTER 1.

ON ALFSTER PIER.

“**A** GRAND acrobatic performance will take place this evening, on the new pier, at half-past seven o'clock, when the celebrated Stephen Hurt and his young son will perform some wonderful feats, marvellous to behold. There will be an extra charge of twopence for entrance to the pier.-A large shoal of whiting have been caught this morning in the bay, and are now being sold **in** the town at very low prices.-Lost on

the esplanade this afternoon, a small pebble brooch, set in silver. Whoever will bring the same to the town-crier will receive a handsome reward.-God save the Queen!"

It was the town-crier going his afternoon round; and, as he went, he delivered his news in a sing-song tone. Up and down the esplanade of the small seaport town of Amster he walked; and everybody in turn stopped to hear what the old man had to say, who, on his part, seemed to enjoy tantalising them by keeping his news from them as long as possible-for he rang his bell many times before beginning, and many times between whiles.

And, after all, it was not much that he had to tell them-a couple of acrobats about to act. It would seem nothing to most of the great hurrying world; but to that small out-of-the-way place it was something, and caused a certain amount of excitement, especially as the news came just at the close of a long wet day, during which the people had been hard-up indeed to find amusement; and, as it was now clearing up, they had the pleasant prospect given them of a sharp walk along the pier, and at the end of it an hour's entertainment.

At half-past seven o'clock the small pier was quite crowded, nearly everybody having turned out to get what pleasure they could from the performance that was just beginning.

At the end of the pier was a little fancy building, half of which was used as a small music hall, the other half as a refreshment room, in front of which a space had been cleared, and a piece of carpet laid down, on which were placed the few necessaries for the performance.

Stephen Burt began the performance by going through a round of wonderful feats before his son appeared. He was tall, well-built, and good-looking; and, though he certainly could not be classed as a proficient, or even a second-rate acrobat-in fact, his performances were of the poorest-still there was something to admire and like in the man, though it was hard to say what. Perhaps it was the dogged, determined way in which he went through his part, in spite of the cold wind piercing through the fine texture of his dress, and the jeers and laughs at his expense which were uttered by some of the audience, who, in loud whispers, said to each other, "He is not up to much; we

could do the same any day with a little practice. "

Yes, they spoke the words out loud, so that Stephen could hear, quite regardless of his feelings; and, after all, he was doing his utmost to amuse and interest them; but they did not heed how their careless words cut him, or notice that his limbs lost more and more spirit and life, only moving in a machine-like way, while his face grew set and very sad,-whereas one shout of applause would have done him good and encouraged him.

He went on to the end, however, and then stood resting for a few seconds. His face softened, and a smile played unconsciously round his lips as the crowd drew back to make way for his son.

He came as if by magic from the refreshment room, and like a flash of lightning. A run, a spring, a marvellous somersault, and he stood making bows by the side of his father.

A burst of applause greeted him. A child performing was more interesting than a grown man. And such a child, too, as he looked, standing there! A mere slip of a boy, with limbs delicately and finely moulded, but full

of sensitively wrought nerves, supple and lithe, whose every movement was full of grace. An earnest, beseeching face, framed by his soft brown hair, and his one claim to beauty a pair of great, dark, expressive blue eyes, completed the picture of the small acrobat.

With a half-nervous movement, he slipped his hand into his rather's, and shivered as the sharp March wind blew on his frail little body.

Stephen bent his head towards the boy. He had felt the coldness of the hand and the sudden shudder pass through him, and, as he looked into the sensitive face, he saw the blue eyes raised to his, wistful and confiding, and noticed the tremble of the lips as they forced themselves into a smile. He stooped down, and whispered, "Courage, my boy; think of mother." The words seemed as if they contained some sort of electric force, for in a moment the face brightened, a light springing into the boy's eyes, and his limbs were straightened into firm and decided lines.

Darcy bravely began his part, and went through it well to the end. The crowd, forgetting the father's somewhat laboured and

clumsy performances in watching the son's easy and graceful movements, applauded loudly.

A short time after, Stephen Burt walked out of the gates at the end of the pier on his way home; his son Darcy, resting in his arms, already nearly asleep.

The 'rain had come on again, and the night was dreary and miserable, the wind damp and searching. Suddenly, as Stephen turned a corner, he was quite dazzled by the brightness of the light that came streaming across the footpath and lighting up the whole place; it came from a public-house he was passing. He stopped and hesitated. It was very tempting, that brightness and warmth and the sound of merry voices.

It was such a dismal night, and he knew that nothing but sadness awaited him at home - a sadness that was already gnawing at his heart; and here was, for the time at least, warmth, comfort, and, above all, forgetfulness. He had money in his pocket, and he could afford to spend a little.

He remembered that Darcy was still in his pretty dress, and would only want waking up and bidding to do some of his "tricks for father's friends to see," and the

boy would be willing and ready. Re knew he could trust to, and work on, that tender heart to do his best, however tired he was, for "father's sake"; and he also reckoned that he would make a lot of money here, far more than he had got already at the pier, and money was much needed at home. He argued with himself that there would be no harm just this once. He had not given way to the temptation for so long a time now; he would only go just this once more. He would be soothed into forgetfulness, and his burden of sorrow would be lifted for a time.

Stephen turned towards the open door, made a few steps forward, raised Darcy from his shoulder to rouse him before going in.

The child, disturbed in his half sleep, only tightened his hold of his father's neck, let his head fall again on to his shoulder, and murmured sleepily the word "Mother."

But the whisper was loud enough to catch Stephen's ear, and in another moment he was walking rapidly away from the temptation.

Already that evening that one word, "Mother," had done its work; and once more it was spoken, and once again the sweet name worked its influence.

CHAPTER H.

MOTHER'S LAST CHARGE.

IT certainly was not much of a home to which Stephen Burt was carrying his little son. Only a large caravan, drawn up on one side of the bit of waste land on the edge of the town of Amster; one of its many resting-places, mostly bleak and bare, or scorched and dry, but always just outside of either town or village. It was in company with two other travelling homes, with which it had fallen in somewhere on the way, and with which it would travel on to the next large town, whither they were all three bound. A year ago the same three had gone about together, so that the inmates of each were known to the others. It was well for Stephen that he had fallen in with old friends, for a heavy sorrow was coming each hour nearer to him.

Darcy remembered little more of that

night. He was cold and sleepy, and though at first he rebelled at not having "mother" to put him to bed, but only Mrs. Rudge, he was too weary to trouble himself further, contenting himself by sobbing rather drearily until he was snugly tucked up in bed; and then he forgot all else in happy, restful sleep.

Late on the following afternoon Darcy seated himself on the short flight of steps that led into the caravan. He had been out all the morning with his father, going through some of his performances in a low part of the town, and the rest of the time hung heavily on his hands. He had not seen his mother all day; they told him she was ill, and he must keep quiet and be a good boy. But it was hard work being a good boy without mother; he was not used to it, and could settle to nothing. At last, worn out with wandering aimlessly about, he seated himself on the steps and gazed up at the hills. He had intended to stroll down to the beach and watch the sea, but just as he was deciding to do so, some one passed him, saying, "Darcy, your mother is very ill—much worse; stay somewhere about, in case she wants you."

He asked to go to her then, but was told

she was too ill-he must wait. So he sat on there patiently, with unshed tears in his eyes, as he puzzled over all the grief, bustle, and excitement that was going on, and which he could not understand. His heart was very full; he had never been so long without seeing his mother before, and he yearned for her. He never before remembered coming home to find no loving arms in which to rest his weary limbs. She had always been waiting for him, ready to shower all a mother's love and praise on him, and refresh him with warm, good tea,-to pet and make much of him.

He sat gazing and thinking, getting half sleepy, the hills and his mother becoming hopelessly mixed up, when he was roused by a voice calling to him, and saw Mrs. Rudge standing by him. He asked directly to be taken to his mother.

"Come along, then, dearie. I had just come to fetch you. She wants to see you. Poor little lad, he'll soon be without one." The last was spoken in a low voice, but Darcy caught the words, and, child that he was, understood the meaning, and knew that very soon the light and joy of his young life would be gone from him.

The caravan where the sick woman lay was half-darkened, but there was light enough for her little son to see her, and as soon as he entered he took one spring on to the bed, and, flinging his arms round her, sobbed, "Mother, I've got you!"

There was silence for a time after that first short cry—a cry full of passionate love, a beseeching, heart-rending, pitiful cry that made every heart that heard it ache, and none dared for a time break the silence that fell upon them; while the two, mother and son, lay locked in each other's arms—arms that clung to and held each other, and feared to unclasp, knowing that once loose they would never so hold and cling again.

Gently at last Stephen bent over them and tried to disengage those young warm arms, fearing their eager pressure would be too much for his wife; but her soft, sweet voice stopped him, saying—

"Let him rest, Stephen, it's no long as he'll have me—poor little fellow, mother's own little boy. Hush, dearie, you must not take on so; I want to tell you about the baby I'm going to leave with you. Bring her, please, Mrs. Rudge, There now! you look, Darcy; what do you say to her?"

The mother's ready wit did its work. Slowly the fingers unclasped, and Darcy raised himself, childish curiosity for a time overcoming grief.

"Is it ours, mother?" asked the boy, in an eager, questioning voice, as the baby was brought close to him.

"Yes, dearie, all yours and father's own, to take care of for mother. You must always be good to her; let her name be Mary, little Mary, and you will love her dearly for mother's sake. And, darling, you must try and be a good boy, and then some day you'll go to the great heavenly Father-you know about Him, Darcy. He will look after you when I'm gone; and when you go to Him, please God, I'll be there to meet you. And be sure to take care of father for me. And now, oh, my boy, my boy, I must let you go!" Then in a fainter voice, and stretching out her arms to her husband, "Stephen, Stephen, come to me-I'm going fast."


Mrs. Rudge hastily lifted Darcy off the bed, and, holding his hand, led him away, his childish sorrow spending itself in long-drawn sobs.

She took him to another part of the

caravan, and, giving him a chair, gently laid the baby on his knee. She trusted to its being his little comforter, so, after telling him to be very careful, she returned to the bedside.

CHAPTER III.

DARCY AND HIS FATHER.

T first Darcy took no notice of the little creature on his knee, but held it mechanically, while his tears fell so fast and thick as almost to blind him. By degrees, however, he grew quieter, until the great tears fell at intervals, and the quick-drawn sobbing breaths came further apart, and at last he sat quite still, staring into the fire.

The baby awoke, and moved. Darcy's attention was attracted. Very gently he removed the shawl to look at the tiny sister his mother had left him. A yearning, loving look came into his face; a smile, contrasting oddly with the wet cheeks and tearful eyes, played on his lips; and he bent his head and kissed the wee face cradled on his arm. Mrs. Rudge was right: the baby was, and would be, his little comforter.

He was very gentle, and made a good nurse, talking to her in his wise, old-fashioned way. For the most part she was asleep, but that made no difference, for he went murmuring on-the words, "Baby, I wish you and I might sit here for ever," being the oftenest repeated.

Indeed, it was a long while before anyone disturbed them, and then it was Mrs. Rudge and another woman.

The two stood at the door watching the pretty picture for some time, unnoticed. "Dear, dear! it's pretty to see him; but whatever is to become of the child? Some one will have to do for it, I suppose."

Darcy turned, but only to look up into their faces wistfully.

"It would be a happy thing if it had gone with its poor mother, Mrs. Rudge, for it will only be a useless care and worry."

"It's a fine child enough, leastways," answered Mrs. Rudge, taking the baby from Darcy's unwilling arms. "Some one must look after it; for poor Stephen he is a'most heart-broke; but I've plenty to do, I'm sure."

"Please," interrupted Darcy, layin g his hand on Mrs. Rudge's arm-' ,please, our baby shall be no trouble to anyone; if you'll

just tell me what to do, I'll do it, and she shan't be in anyone's way-but you won't take her from me, will you? Mother said as I was to look after her; give her back to me, please."

The tears welled up into good Mrs. Rudge's eyes; and, indeed, the sad, earnest face, with such a depth of love and pleading in it, must have touched a much harder heart than hers.

"There, there, Darcy, don't take on; you shall have baby as much as you like, and **I'll** look after her for you, 'cause a baby so young wants a deal of care, which she shall have for her mother's sake; so you must let me take her with me to-night, and you shall have her first thing in the morning. Now go to bed, and then you'll be ready to-morrow."

Late on that night, Stephen Hurt came into the caravan. Ten years might have passed over him since the morning, his grief had told so terribly on him. He was utterly weighed down, and appeared hardly able to walk without support; wearily he drew a chair towards the smouldering fire, and sank down on it, gazing vacantly before him.

Suddenly a little white-robed figure slipped out of the bed, and ran and stood in front of him, with wide-open eyes, and eager, excited

voice, saying, "Father, you will let us keep baby with us always, won't you? "

"What baby, Darcy?"

"Why, the one as mother gave us."

"Yes-oh yes. I had quite forgotten it. Where is it?"

"Mrs. Rudge has got her for the night; but please say we may keep her."

"To be sure. Poor little creature! there is no one so ready to want it. Yes, Darcy lad, we will keep it always with us; it has only us two now, my boy."

"I know, father; and, please, aren't you coming to bed to-night? Mother said as I was to look after you; and she would not like you to be sitting up alone."

"She is not here to mind what I do now; I may as well go quite to the bad, for all that anyone would care. It'll be no use trying to keep straight now,"-and he hid his face in his hands.

Darcy stole back to bed; he dare not say more to his father then.

An undefinable fear came over him. Suppose the old miserable days were coming back again, what should he do? It was not so long ago but that he could well remember the time when mother sat through long weary hours,

waiting for father to come in. And then, when he did appear, drunk and surly, her bright voice would greet him, asking him to eat some supper and get a bit warm before going to bed; or, if he was incapable of understanding anything, how she would gently tend and care for him until he was laid so that he might sleep off the stupor. No reproachful, complaining words ever passed her lips; always bright and cheerful, however cross or unreasonable he was. And then, too, Darcy remembered how, when the effects had passed off, he would grow soft and repentant, and declare he would never touch a drop of beer again—a resolution he probably broke the next evening. But for some time back things had been different: father never went out at night, but spent his evenings at home, reading or talking to mother, playing with Darcy himself, and teaching him new tricks. But now mother had gone, and there was only himself, he could not think what would become of them. The thought drove sleep away, and the dark eyes remained wide open, watching the bent figure crouching over the fire.

He somehow felt that if he could only keep awake and watch, his father would be prevented from going out, At first it was easy work,

for the over-wrought brain would not stop thinking, and troubling, and thinking again, throbbing and starting, making the heavy eyes bright and large, and allowing itself no rest, consequently utterly driving away sleep. Gradually, however, the quietness of all around, the fitful half-light of the flickering fire, and the warmth, worked their soothing influence on the weary head, and after a time it grew hard work for a very tired-out little boy to keep awake, and, do what he would, his eyes would shut; and at last nature had her way, and the eyelids remained closed, and he slept.

Suddenly a slight noise awoke him; he started, and sprang up in bed, calling, " Father, father! don't go; don't leave me !"

Oh, what a relief it was when he felt his father's arm round him, and heard his voice, saying--

" Well, Darcy boy, lie down. I be only getting into bed."

With a deep sigh of relief he drew the arm closer round him, and in another minute was sleeping peacefully enough.

CHAPTER IV.

DARCY'S FIRST SORROW.

THE next few days were sad and strange to Darcy. He was very miserable; he missed his mother terribly, and no one seemed to want him. His father was so much wrapped up in his own sorrow, and, man-like, thought a child's grief would pass off in a day or two. Little did he know how sore the tender young heart was, or how the child longed to be comforted, for Darcy went about quietly, doing all he could to make his father's loss more bearable.

He kept the caravan as clean and neat as he well could, and was always ready to welcome Stephen as soon as he entered. His mother's last words, desiring him to "take care of father," were for ever ringing in his ears, and haunting him. He did not

quite see how that was to be done, or what she meant; but somehow he felt the one right thing at present was to do all he had seen her do. And, little as Darcy knew it, he was doing the very things she meant when she gave him the charge.

It came easier to Darcy than to most boys, as he had been much with his mother, and knew all about the small household. He had never been a very strong boy, but timid and sensitive, and when they had met other children he had cared little about being with them. He would sit for hours thinking out his own thoughts, many times puzzling his mother with strange, hard questions, which must be answered somehow, and which made her look anxiously into those blue eyes, astonished at their depth and far-away look; and many a time she murmured to herself, "It would go hard with wee Darcy if he had not his mother at his side to help him through the world." And yet she had been taken—that good, hard-working woman, and he—that small boy—had been left.

Darcy was for hours alone during those first few days of his great sorrow, as he did not like to go out, for everything he saw re-

minded him of his loss. His father was away nearly all day, wandering about alone, trying to find comfort. The only bright thing about him was the baby. Mrs. Rudge was very good to it, and let Darcy have it as much as possible. He was happy then, and for a time forgot his trouble while nursing it, and watching all its marvellous ways.

Then came the funeral, and Darcy was taken to church, holding his father's hand. Mrs. Rudge had bade him be a good boy and not cry, so he walked along, choking back his sobs, and looking up at the sky, as if to find comfort there. Only when the coffin was lowered into the grave he pulled his father's hand, and whispered-

"Please, father, however will mother get up into heaven if they put her so deep into that there hole?" but, on seeing Mrs. Rudge's warning look, he gazed straight before him, with eyes wide open, to prevent the tears that trembled in them from falling.

"If only some one would tell me what it all means, and why mother went away so quiet, without feeling more sorry to leave me, and why everything seems to be all

wrong and strange, I could bear it better," he kept saying to himself.

Then came the walk back again; and at last he found some comfort, when left alone, in creeping away into a corner and nursing his tiny sister.

CHAPTER V.

DARCY'S PRAYER.

FIVE days later, and the three caravans had reached the town of Berkington, and settled themselves on some waste land where several other caravans and shows were congregated; in fact, there was a small colony of them—a circus, under the mastership of Mr. Counsel, having arrived two days previously.

It was the second evening after their arrival, and Darcy was sitting listless and weary over the fire, feeling very miserable and lonely, when Stephen Hurt, who had been out for some time, entered.

"Darcy," he began, and hesitated—CC Darcy, my boy, you know I told you this morning as how I had come to an agreement with Mr. Counsel to take the place of the acrobat that left him last week?"

"Yes, father."

"Well, I have come to tell you we are to go into the circus this evening."

"To-night, father! am I to go as well? "

"It's over-soon, I know, but what's to be done? money must be made somehow, and I have been thinking it'll be a deal better for you not to have to be out so often in the night air; the circus will always be dry, and you can come straight back here when your part is over. I know, lad, your mother was best pleased when we joined a circus, as she said it was more certain work, and she knew where you were. You remember last spring we went about with Mr. Sands, and you liked it."

"Yes, father; but I'm afraid it will be hard work without mother looking on."

"Hush, child, I cannot bear it; I feel as if I were mocking her, going and making a fool of myself so soon; but Mr. Oounsel says, if I want the place, I must get to work directly, and the circus has been very badly attended, so he has given out that a new acrobat and his young son will perform this evening."

"And, father, I don't think mother will take on about it, 'cause she always liked to

see us act; somehow I think she will be watching still."

How hot and close the tent felt when Darcy entered some time after, and how his head swam when he looked round on all the eager faces, and then up to the ropes he was to climb! It was nearly a year since he had last been inside a circus, and it was difficult at first to keep his head clear and steady. The glare of the lamps, the close damp smell of the earth, and oppressive heat, were so different from the clear, sharp night air he had been lately accustomed to; his limbs felt heavy and limp, and it was a wan, white little face indeed that was raised to the audience as he made his bow.

Two other acrobats were waiting, and one held his hand out to Darcy; in a second the little fellow was scrambling up him, and then, standing on his head, he gave one hand to him, and stretched up the other to catch the rope he was to perform on; but suddenly the man let him slip into his arms, and whispered, "Pluck up, and try your best, young 'un, I'll take care of you," and then tossed him up again. He had seen the lips quiver, and felt the hand tremble, and wished to give him time.

.After that Darcy went through his part bravely and well, and when he had finished the whole place rang with cheers. The boy's eyes sparkled with more than their usual brightness, the colour flushed into his cheeks, his hair was tossed back, and there was quite a murmur of admiration all through the tent. He smiled up at the people, and making a bow ran out, and as he disappeared gave a ringing joyous shout of "Mother!"

.At that sound one of the acrobats stood still in the midst of his part, and shivered; but no one noticed it; they were still applauding the child.

Poor little fellow! for one short minute he had forgotten; for a time he had gone back to his happy days. He knew he had done well, and was all eagerness to run and ask his mother if she had heard the cheers, and ran out ready to spring into those loving arms, quivering with pride and excitement; but only the cold damp air met him, and darkness. Where was his mother? For one minute he looked round for her, bewildered; the next he remembered, and the whole weight of grief and trouble came back to him with stunning force. One sharp wild cry, and he rushed out into the darkness,

regardless of the rain, and springing into the caravan, threw himself on the floor in a passion of weeping.

So Stephen found him, when he came in, half an hour later; he had been anxious to know what had become of the boy, for he had heard the shout of joy-and then fainter the cry.

"Oome, Darcy, what's up?"

"Mother! I want her." And the sobbing little figure allowed itself to be lifted up, and rested in the man's arms.

Could the people who had attended the circus have seen the two as they sat, it would have been difficult for them to realise that they were the two smiling acrobats who had pleased them so much; they had then appeared so unconscious of sadness or trouble, so free from all pain, and yet there they were, a most touching picture, full of pathos; the father, still in his gay clothes, sitting before a smouldering fire, with his little son clasped in his arms, and tears shining in his eyes.

"What made you think of mother?"

"I am always thinking of her; and somehow I thought she would be waiting for me, and I am very cold."

" Why, you have not changed your clothes; these are so thin; why did you not put on your others again?"

"I can't get these off without tearing them."

" Well, let me see if I can help you; it's almost your bedtime; get your things."

After some mistakes and blunders Darcy was ready for bed; and as he was cold, Stephen carefully wrapped him in a shawl, and lifted him on to his lap again.

"Father, don't you think I might say my prayers to-night, 'cause you could help me ~ I've never said them since she went, 'cause I was afraid of making mistakes; but I always went to bed feeling all wrong."

" Darcy, you must always say your prayers, though mother is not here; you'll be a real naughty boy if you don't."

" I suppose it's not naughty of men, 'cause, father, you don't? I've watched many times."

Stephen Burt started; the words had called to his mind his own mother, at whose knee he had knelt nightly, and repeated the baby prayers after her; he never remembered having said any others, and the words of those he had forgotten. What a number of years had passed away since he had knelt in prayer!

Was the child right in supposing that it was not wicked of men not to pray? Was it needful for women and children only? He had firmly believed in his wife's goodness and prayers-but now she was no longer with him. He had just begun to learn the good of religion, and to feel its influence, and took pleasure in reading a chapter from the Bible every night to his wife; but since her death he had given it up; his boy's words recalled it to him; ought he to give up trying, just because he was alone?

Meanwhile those questioning eyes were waiting for an answer, raised to his face with a look of complete trust, ready to accept as truth whatever answer they should receive. How was he to return their steady gaze, while he felt so utterly incapable of satisfying' them? He turned his head still further away, and took one of the bare little feet into his hand, and rubbed it gently up and down, to give himself time. Anyway, his boy must not forget his mother's teaching; he was too young to give it up; so with this thought Stephen roused himself, saying-

"Leastways, Darcy, I always said my prayers when I was a boy, and your mother would not like you to forget yours; so

you'd best say them now, and mind you always do."

" I suppose it's all right then, father; but she told me the great God loved all the people who said prayers, and I want Him to love you; " and without saying any more, he slipped from his father's knee on to the floor, and kneeling against him, said the Lord's Prayer; then -" Great and Holy Father, please to take care of father." Here a pause, and a deep sob interrupted him; and he whispered, "I+, 's very hard to leave out mother, but she don't want no more taking care of now. I'll ask Him not to let her forget us. 'Take care of father-let mother often think of us three, and make me and baby good children, and bless us, for Christ's sake. Amen.'"

Stephen lifted him up, and putting him gently in bed, whispered, as he bent over him-

"Darcy, pray for father to be a good man."

" Yes, one of God's loved ones," answered the sleepy voice. "Good-night, father."

CHAPTER VI.

~THE BABY'S FIRST VISIT TO CHURCH.

Ir was Sunday-the first Sunday in April. Spring had really come, and though there were sharp April showers at intervals, between times the sun shone brightly.

It was in one of these fine gleams during the afternoon that Darcy, burdened with his small sister, descended from the caravan and threaded his way among the other caravans, crossed the common, and set his face towards Berkington.

There was a determination about his whole bearing that told plainly that he had a fixed purpose in his mind, and that his walk was no ordinary one, just taken for pleasure. He stepped out, looking neither to the right nor to the left, but kept his head bent towards the sleeping child in his arms.

He had not far to go before reaching the

town; his way hitherto had been straight and easy, but as street after street opened out before him his face became puzzled, and he looked about nervously, uncertain which road to take. But there was no thought of turning back, or giving up the object of his walk; his hesitation was only from anxiety to lose no time by going out of his way. Every now and then he stopped some passer-by, and timidly put a question to them, his natural shrinking from and dread of strangers being overcome by the earnestness of his purpose; and, encouraged by the willingness each showed in helping him on his way, he pushed on, though his arms were aching with the unusual weight they had carried so far, and his steps were becoming more broken and uneven.

One more short street, and then straight before him towered the grand old parish church of Berkington. Darcy stood awed and silent, gazing up at the vast building standing out grey and solemn. For a moment his courage wavered and seemed about to fail; it would have been much easier to have turned and run straight back to the caravan than to have mounted those few steps and gone in at that great door.

However, one glance at the baby, and his mind was made up, his purpose as strong as ever, and, without taking his eyes from the little face, he went up the steps, then stood a moment to recover his breath.

Before Darcy had time to go further a clergyman came quickly after him, and would have passed on through the half-open door, but a small hand was laid on his arm, and a timid voice said-

"Please, sir--"

He turned back and looked down on Darcy standing before him.

"Yes, my boy?"

But Darcy's courage had all gone, and left him no voice to answer; he stood trembling, his heart beating rapidly, his cheeks crimson, his eyes fixed on the flags at his feet. And yet, had he ventured to look up, he would have seen there was no need for fear; it was such a good, loving, patient face - a face inviting only confidence and trust - that was looking down on him.

"You spoke to me, did you not? Can I do anything for you?" went on the clergyman.

"Yes, please sir."

"Well, then, look up, my child, and tell



DARCY AND THE OLERGYMAN.

me what it is," laying his hand on the boy's shoulder. And Darcy looked up, right into those kind eyes, and then out it all came; no more hesitating, no more fear - only eagerness and willingness to confide his purpose to this new friend.

"Please, sir, this is mother's little girl, and please she has got took up to heaven, and she left father and me this little baby, and we is to take care of her, and please we don't rightly know how; so we wants God to help us-Him as mother has gone to live with; and mother says that children should begin going to church as soon as ever they can. Mother took me when I was a little one, and, please, sir, I've brought baby, and will you tell me how to get her the great Father's blessing?"

And then Darcy stopped almost breathless. The clergyman did not speak for a moment; he was steadying his voice to answer, but impatient Darcy broke in again-

"Please, sir, you will help me? I've walked a good way."

"Indeed, my boy, I will help you as soon as possible. But you are tired; let me hold her, and come and rest in the

vestry a little; there is to be a service for children soon, and meanwhile you can tell me what your name is, and where you live."

As the burden was lifted from his arms, Darcy straightened himself, giving a sigh of relief, then slipped a confiding hand into the one held out to him, and trotted along cheerfully, quite content to be taken wherever the clergyman should lead him. He felt he was in good hands, and that already the responsibility of his undertaking was lifted from his slight shoulders and laid on those broad ones, so much better able to bear it.

The vestry reached, Mr. Graham drew a chair to the fire and sat down, still holding the baby, while Darcy stood up before him. He gently put aside the shawl and looked into the tiny face cradled on his arm, saying-

"So this is your little sister? and a very pretty little one too. And you, who are you, my boy?"

"I'm Darcy, and I'm an acrobat."

Mr. Graham raised his head, astonished.

"An acrobat! Then do you belong to the circus that has come on to the com-man? "

"Yes, sir, me and father."

"And what is your father's name?"

"Stephen Burt; mother's name is Polly, but she got took afore we came here."

"Not very long ago?"

"It seems a long time."

"And she left you this baby to take care of?"

"Yes, please, sir."

"There are only you two children, then? "

"Only me and baby, sir."

"Why did your father not come with you to-day?"

"He did not know I was coming; but he would not mind; he'd be sure to think I was gone to church, 'cause mother and I always did a Sunday."

"And did he go as well?"

"Sometimes. But he's a big man; perhaps it don't matter so much about men going to church, 'cause father he don't go often, not like mother."

"Get your father to go with you as often as you can. And tell me, child, what made you think of bringing baby to church to-day? "

"It seemed as if it were going to be

fine. And I know mother would a-brought her if she had been here; 'cause she and I used often to go of a Sunday, and she said as how children should be took when they was quite little; and, please, sir, mother sort a-left this little girl in my care, and as this is the first chance I've had, I just took and brought her. Won't the service soon be beginning, 'cause it's getting late, and I must be going back?"

„You did quite right, and I will not keep you long. See here, there are some other children coming as well as yourself."

Two or three ladies entered the vestry, and stared at small Darcy standing before the minister, who held in his arms a strange baby.

Mr. Graham rose and returning Darcy's charge to his care again, he greeted the ladies, speaking kindly to each, and then turned to one, whom he drew aside, and for a few minutes the two were engrossed in earnest conversation.

A few minutes later, they all joined the congregation in the church, Darcy taking' his place among the others, as indicated by Mrs. Graham, who sat near him. He watched keenly all that was going on. The

singing of the hymns pleased him greatly, and he listened eagerly to a simple kindly address given by the minister about Jesus, and how He loved little children when He was on earth, and loved and took care of them still.

Darcy sat still for a few moments after the service had come to a close. Mrs. Graham came, and taking the baby, who by this time was fast asleep, in her arms, said to Darcy, "And what is this dear little one's name?"

Darcy, for an instant, looked puzzled; but then suddenly a light spread over his face, and he said quickly, "Oh, I know, her name is to be Mary-little Mary-mother said so."

He drew close to the lady, never moving his eyes from the baby, jealously watching all that was done to her. He smiled as Mrs. Graham gave her back to him, and he bent his head and kissed her forehead, murmuring-" There, baby, now we'd best be off;" and before anyone was aware of his intention, he folded the shawl round her, walked towards the door, and then disappeared through it.

Mrs. Graham looked at her husband, to see if he wanted her to stop the boy; and

though it had been his first impulse, the words to do so were not spoken, and in a moment or two the little figure had quite disappeared.

CHAPTER VII.

DARCY'S NEW TROUBLE.

THE next day was to be the last spent in Berkington, and a grand farewell performance was to take place in the evening; most of the day was spent in packing up and getting ready for the move.

One unusual excitement happened for Darcy; he had some visitors-Mr. Graham and his wife; but the visit somehow was not a success. Stephen Burt was out, Mrs. Rudge had the baby with her, and Darcy was shy and stupid, and looked very much like any other lad of ten years; far different from the exalted little being he had appeared on the previous day. For the most part he stood on one leg, edged as far as possible from his visitors, gazing at them timidly from under his tumbled hair. They seemed so terribly formidable in the small caravan, and so close to him. He

had looked upon them while in church as very little more than mere helps, but now they stood out as real live human beings, and his dread of strangers, as usual, took a firm hold of him. He certainly answered their questions, but that was all, and it was a relief to all three when they took their departure.

No sooner were they out of sight than Darcy became himself again, and it was a very excited little boy that greeted Stephen when he came in for his tea. The meal was made a very lively one by Darcy's unceasing chatter about his visitors, and all they had done and said. Then followed a short, very short account of yesterday's proceeding, at which Stephen listened in silent wonder, and then, without a word of comment, he bent down and kissed the soft brown head pressed against his shoulder, whispering, "God bless my boy!"

At the evening performance Darcy again saw his friends among the audience; they smiled and nodded their heads to him, and he tried his very best to please them.

When Darcy's part was finished, he went to his caravan, to wait for his father to come and help him undress, as he had done

every night. It was later than usual when he appeared, and he seemed in a hurry, but was very tender and gentle while he helped Darcy. He put him in bed, and was turning away, when Darcy said-

"Fat~er, I've not said my prayers; aren't you going to hear me to-night?"

A slight frown overspread Stephen's face, and he said, uneasily-

"I have not time to-night; some fellows are waiting for me to go into the town with them; you say them in bed this once." And before the boy could answer he was gone.

Darcy turned his face away from the door, and his words, "Mother, he's gone!" were accompanied by a deep sob.

He knew how she looked whenever "some fellows were waiting for him," and how restless and unhappy she was until he returned. He must keep awake until then, as she did, to be ready with a cheerful word; but he thought he would lie in bed, as it was chilly outside; but first he slipped out and knelt down, saying-

"It would be all wrong to say prayers in bed; I don't think the great God would think I meant it half so much if I asked

Him lying down to make father a good man, and let him be one of them He loved."

After a few minutes he crept back, and lay down with a fixed determination of staying awake; but he was dreaming quietly, long, long before Stephen returned, very much in the same state as in the old days.

The sight of his child sobered him a good deal, and as he bent over him, he murmured-

" Polly, Polly, I did mean to keep straight, and sure I've failed already. If you would only come back, I would never give you any more trouble; but now it's so lonosome I can't bear to bide in the house."

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DOTTLER OF LAUDANUM.

RATHER more than a year passed away, and once again the early summer had come round.

Mr. Counsel had during the preceding winter kept his circus stationary in one of the large towns in the North; but as soon as spring really settled in, it once more began its roving life, journeying from place to place, seldom stopping anywhere more than a week, and then on again.

There had been a few changes made in the company of the circus, but on the whole they were much the same as when Stephen Burt first joined, and he was still with it. The circus, after a long journey lasting many days, had arrived at the small market town of Bromfield, and had taken up its station in the fields behind the church.

As Mr. Counsel intended making some stay

there, he said there should be no performance the first evening, but only a rehearsal.

While everyone else was busily employed in settling down into their new quarters, Stephen Burt sat dull and unoccupied on the flight of steps leading up to his caravan, smoking a short clay pipe, which, however, seemed to afford him little pleasure, as he constantly let it remain between his teeth until it smouldered out, while he rested his cheek against his hand, and winced once or twice as if in pain.

Presently Darcy came out of the door behind him, and laying a hand on the bowed shoulder, said-

"Father, will you mind baby a bit, while I run into the town to get some things we want?"

Stephen nodded assent.

"She's not quite herself this afternoon, 'cause she is after her teeth, so they tell me. How I wish Mrs. Rudge was still along of us ; she always knew what was the matter with the little one, but now there don't seem no one to turn to. You'll mind her, then, father, and I won't be long," he went on, as Stephen took no heed of his words;

"Yes, lad, I'll mind her."

"Is your tooth any better?" questioned the boy, stopping as he reached the bottom step, and looking up anxiously into the man's face.

"No, nor likely to be, as far as I can make out. What have you done with that laudanum as I got for to ease the pain? I'll put some more to it, and see what that'll do."

"It's on the mantel-shelf, father;" and Darcy was once more at his father's side, kneeling against him, his face close to his, so as to enforce his words the more. "You'll be sure and not let baby get hold of that bottle, 'cause it's poison; I see it marked on the label."

"Who's a-going to let her get hold of it? Be off, lad, and look sharp back; I can't be looking after the child all day."

And off Darcy was in a moment, "Speeding away, in spite of the hot afternoon sun, which glared down on him terribly, as fast as his legs would carry him.

That evening, as soon as the rehearsal was over (it had been a long and unusually trying one), Darcy bounded over the piece of ground between the tent and his cara-

van. It took him little more than a minute to get across, and then almost like lightning he was up the steps and in the room.

He was startled to find her fast asleep on the floor. He picked her up at once, put her in the small cot (which was placed in the cosiest corner of the room), and watched the sleeping child for a few seconds, and then turned away, saying-

"She is fast asleep, so I'll change my things, to be ready when she awakes. What a long sleep she is having! I reckon it will do her good; she has not had much rest these last few nights, with her teeth worrying her. I've no doubt she'll be as merry as ever when she wakes. I wonder," lifting his small shoulders with a weary jerk, and sighing deeply, "I wonder how long I shall have to sit up for father tonight; I feel tired, and would like to go to bed early;. I'm dreadful afraid as he's getting worse."

A very sad look came into his face as his thoughts turned to his father; and for a few minutes he stopped in his preparations unconsciously, putting a hand on each slight hip to rest.

As soon as the brightness and light died

out of the boy's face, it was easy to see how pale and thin it had grown, and what a weary, troubled expression it bore—very different from the previous year; his eyes, too, seemed to have become larger, and were restless and anxious, and it was a very poor, thin little arm that was hastily thrusting itself into the old much-worn jacket. Yes, that one year certainly had told much on Darcy; and it would have been strange had it not done so, for indeed he had gone through much.

Stephen Burt, slowly at first, but very surely, grew more reckless, and fell lower and lower, until at last there had been no time in all his life before that he had been so entirely a victim to his terrible enemy as he had become during the last few months.

Heavy and dull all day, fit for very little; then brighter towards evening, and able to again go through his part in the circus; and then night after night returning to the caravan only in the small hours of the coming day.

And night after night his boy was there, waiting to greet him with some word of welcome, always bright; never for a moment was one word of reproach allowed to pass

through those childish lips. And no one knew how much Darcy suffered in those lonely watchings. Nervous and sensitive by nature, the bare fact of being alone was pain and fear, and added to that was anxiety and weariness.

How thankful he would have been to have crept into bed, to hide under the coverings, and to forget his miseries in sleep. But no, he *must* be awake and ready for father, as mother had ever been. His love for her, and her kind, gentle training, stood him in good stead through those hours. Whenever angl'y thoughts about his father arose in his heart, he put them away, saying, "He'll never be one of God's loved ones if I give up loving and praying for him."

The child's faith was wonderful and beautiful in its simplicity, never doubting but that in the end all would be right, and never forgetting that a heavenly Father's hand was ever ready to guide him.

One comfort Darcy had-Stephen was always gentle to him; even in his worst moods the sight of the child would quiet him; and when sober, his better thoughts were aroused, and he would make many a resolution to keep away from temptation.

When Darcy returned to the cot some little time after, and found the child asleep, he grew somewhat uneasy. She was sleeping so very heavily. He had put out the supper, and seen after several household duties; Stephen had been in, changed his clothes, and gone out again, saying he should be in presently for supper, and through it all she slept on. Generally this was' the time she was so ready for a game of play before going to bed, but to-night nothing seemed to rouse her.

As Darcy watched her tiny face, his own grew very grave; she did not look like herself. He longed for some one to tell him if anything was wrong with her; he felt sure she was not as she should be. Mrs. Rudge was the person he used always to consult, but she had left the company some months back, and since then the whole responsibility of the baby had fallen on his young shoulders, for somehow he had never cared to ask advice of the other women belonging to the circus. So far little Mary had got on very well, wanting on the whole little care; she seemed almost to thrive on the love that Darcy was so lavish in giving her.

At last in despair he lifted her out of her

cot, and sat down holding her on his lap. Gently he rubbed her little hands and feet and called softly to her, but after opening her eyes for a moment she lay still again heavy with sleep.

Again and again Darcy tried to rouse her, but all in vain; she only seemed to grow heavier, and the limbs to lie more powerless,' while each breath came thicker and at the same time weaker. Darcy, thoroughly frightened, hung over her in speechless horror. What could be the matter? Would she never awake?

Suddenly the rocker of his chair grated against something; the noise, slight though it was, startled him in the intense stillness that pervaded the room; he looked down, and in another moment his gaze was riveted on a small dark-coloured bottle that rolled slowly across the floor, and as his thoughts thronged into his brain, his heart almost ceased beating in its sudden, intense fear.

One quick glance showed him the laudanum was no longer in its place on the mantelshelf; and as he looked again to the floor the bottle ceased rolling, and all that he saw of it was the red label marked poison. Then he remembered how, when he had

returned from the town, he had found his father gone, and little Mary fast asleep on the floor, some of her playthings scattered round her. It had seemed nothing unusual to find her so, and he had then gently lifted her and put her in her cot; and now-suddenly a sharp ringing cry broke from him, the last notes dying away in piteous pleading-

"Baby, baby, you never be a-going to die, be you? Do stay with poor brother Darcy I he will be all alone if you goes as well as mother, and I love you so I" And then for a time there was perfect silence.

CHAPTER IX.

DARCY'S NIGHT WATCH.

“**W**HAT'S Up, Darcy? whatever is the matter, lad?”

Darcy, startled, turned round towards his father, holding the baby to him.

“Oh, father, I'm afraid baby is going to die, like mother, and what must I do?”

Stephen took the child, carrying it to the light of the lamp, gazed down on the little face, and murmured-

“It's wonderfully like Mary.”

“I always told you she was; is she going to die?”

“She is only asleep, I'm thinking, but she looks a bit strange.”

“Father, what did you do with that laudanum bottle? Did she get hold of it?”

Stephen looked puzzled. “I don't remember what became of it; I know as she was sitting on my knee I gave it her to amuse

her, but it was corked up, and then-let me see-some one came and asked me to go out, and I put her down on the floor."

"And you left her alone, and she had that bottle still; you --" but the passionate voice suddenly faltered, and the flashing eyes fell, and though the boy's whole frame quivered and shook with suppressed anger, he bravely kept back the rising words, and when at last able to control his voice, said gently, "I am going for a doctor."

Stephen had sunk on to a chair, still holding the child, and was looking at Darcy in a dazed, helpless way, unable to make out clearly what was happening, and only answered, "Yes, go."

"Will you hold her quite steady, father, until I come back? you won't let her fall, or leave her, will you? 'cause "-and he put his arm round his father's neck-C1 she's mother's little girl."

"No, I'll not leave her-be off."

Darcy, after one more look at his treasure, darted off. He was dreadfully afraid some more harm would come to her, for, as he said, "Father's arms were so unsteady now, and very often he did not know what he was doing." But there was no one else to leave

her with; so all he could do was to run as fast as possible.

He remembered noticing the doctor's house when he was in the town in the afternoon, little thinking how soon he would be standing breathless and exhausted on the doorstep, waiting for an answer to his hasty summons.

"It's baby as is ill, sir, very ill, I'm afraid, so I've come to fetch you," said Darcy, as he stood a few minutes later before Dr. Pelham, in that gentleman's study. The grave face that was bending over Darcy brightened at the simple message. He liked to think, that strong, clever man, how certainly and surely, rich and poor, friends or strangers, came to him in their need, never for a moment doubting but that he would and must be ready and willing to tax his skill and brain to the utmost to plan out and think what must be done for their sufferings. There was no hesitating, no wondering if it would be convenient for the doctor to go here, there, and everywhere at a moment's notice; they were ill, and he was the one who had given up his time and life for their sakes; and they looked upon him as their own property, the one to whom they might turn and lean on.

And when Dr. Pelham was dispirited and disheartened, weighed down with care and responsibility, it was sweet and good to remember how needful he was to each in their sufferings, and how they looked to him to soothe and relieve them.

"You are quite exhausted, my child; rest awhile, and tell me what is the matter with the baby."

"But there's no time to rest, sir; she is dying-maybe she's gone already; it won't be no use unless you comes along directly."

Dr. Pelham looked at his watch. "Rather more than an hour before --; come then, I'm ready, and you shall tell me as we go along."

"Thank you, sir;" and Darcy, feeling already he had found a friend, slipped a confiding hand into his tall companion's, and the two stepped out into the night together.

The walk barely took them a quarter of an hour, and when they entered the caravan they found Stephen still sitting before the fire, holding his child, both fast asleep. Darcy sprang forward, catching his father by the arm-

"What did you go to sleep for, father? she might have fallen into the fire. See, sir, she is still asleep."

Stephen gave the child up, and walked away ashamed; he felt half afraid of Darcy, and did not like to meet his reproachful look.

"Has the child had anything given her? anything to soothe her? Is she cutting her teeth?" Dr. Pelham asked, in slow, measured tones; then added quickly, "Is there nobody but you to look after her?" He had turned for an answer to his first questions, expecting to see a woman, or at least a grown-up person, but only Darcy's small figure presented itself, standing by him with great, earnest eyes, and with old-fashioned expression.

"Nobody but me and father."

"Where is father?"

"He was here when we came in; I reckon he won't be out long."

Dr. Pelham saw the crimson flush overspread the pale cheeks, and said no more, for his ready instinct told him there was something that the boy's pride wished to conceal and screen in his father.

And then Darcy spoke out his fear about the laudanum, bringing the bottle to be examined, and Dr. Pelham told him it was as he feared, and after that very little was said for more than an hour; both were too much engaged to allow time for conversation: Dr. Pelham

doing all his power and skill could do to save that frail spark of life, and Darcy watchful and ready to render him any assistance.

"Now listen, my boy; have you anyone to help you?"

"No, sir, not that I knows of."

"And I'm almost sure you will do better than anyone else. Are you very much tired? "

"Not over-much, sir."

"Well then, I think baby will do nicely now, and be all right again; but remember this, she must be kept awake for two more hours; not for a moment must she be allowed to sleep, or we may not be able to awake her again. Now, do you think you can manage it?"

"I'll do it, sir."

"My brave boy, you must play with and amuse her-in fact, do anything to rouse her; then, when the two hours are over, you may let her sleep. I only wish I could stay with you, but I am due already elsewhere and must go, but I'll look in first thing in the morning; and now good-night, my child, my poor child, you look worn out yourself; will you have strength, I wonder?"

"Won't the great Father help me if I ask

Him, 'cause baby and me is both of us His children, please, sir?"

"May He ever guide and bless you both, and keep you for His own! Yes, He will help you."

Once more Darcy was alone with the sick child. After a time Stephen came in, and, without noticing anything, threw himself on the bed, and lay there. And still Darcy paced up and down with the baby, talking to it, playing with it, never letting the heavy eyelids remain closed for a moment.

At first it was easy work, but at last it seemed as if the time would never pass, the hands of the clock seemed almost to stand still, and yet the boy never for a moment thought of himself. Baby must be kept awake until two o'clock struck, that was enough for him; nothing would have induced him to give up his post. Backwards and forwards went those weary legs, up and down went the worn-out, tired arms, ceaselessly the boy talked and laughed and sang, and still there must be no rest. Would his strength hold out? Only one : short half-hour now, and yet it seemed the longest. But at last two silvery notes rang out from the small clock, to be fol-

lowed immediately by two deep, full-toned ones from the neighbouring church. The appointed time was up, baby was safe, and might sleep. The little hand was allowed to droop and rest on Darcy's shoulder, and the blue eyes to close, and in a few minutes she was sleeping quietly and naturally.

Darcy crawled into bed and lay down. For the first time he allowed himself to think what a worn-out little boy he was, and he turned his face away from his father, and as the tears rolled down the pillow one after another, through sheer fatigue, he whispered, "Mother, mother, I be so tired!"

CHAPTER X.

MR. COUNSEL'S MESSAGE.

“**I**r's no use, father; I cannot do it.”
“You won't try. Mr. Oounsel said, only the other day, that it was time you learnt something new; and now, when I want to try this one thing, you pretend you can't. You used to be such a willing little chap, so ready for anything, and now you seem so different. I don't know what's come to you. I remember I had only to speak the word, and you were as anxious as myself to learn, and almost afore I had put it plain you had took it all in, and in a few minutes the new jump or twist, or whatever it might be, was as easy to you as possible.”

The two were standing, still in their gay clothes, in the room. Stephen had been urging Darcy to try a new feat, and at first the boy had been all eagerness; but,

when it came to the point, and he saw how unsteady and nerveless was the arm that was to be his sole support, he shrank back, afraid to trust himself. Again and again he tried, even once getting so far in the trick as to have almost accomplished it, but suddenly the arm shook, and it was only by giving a quick, easy turn and spring he saved himself from falling heavily to the ground, instead of alighting safely on his legs.

Safe he was, but the trick was still not done, and Stephen grew vexed at the repeated failures; perhaps the knowledge that he himself was most in fault angered him more, but he would not allow it, so laid all the blame on Darcy.

"It seemed so easy then, father," faltered the boy, struggling manfully against the rising tears.

"It's just as easy now, only you are such a baby. Come, be a man, and let's have another try."

Darcy once more nerved himself for the trial, crushing down all fear, determined to do his part. But again the arm yielded in its steadiness, and Darcy fell with some force.

Stephen turned away, impatiently muttering, "There's no use in teaching you anything, you are such a silly little coward!"

Darcy picked himself up, and stood with downcast eyes and crimson cheeks. It was so hard to be thought a coward, and especially by father, and when he had tried his best. Surely he must have been very stupid and silly, to make father speak so sharp. What was he to do? Would father ever forgive him?

Presently Stephen rose from the chair he had sunk into and walked towards the door. As he was passing Darcy he stooped down and kissed his forehead, saying, "Never mind, lad, it was more my fault than yours. We are indeed going wrong, to make me speak so hard to you; but, child, whatever are we to do without your mother?" And then, without waiting for an answer, he went out.

"It's just that, mother; what are we to do without you?" echoed Darcy, rousing himself, however, his heart lighter already at the kind voice.

"Tell you what," he went on half aloud, "I will try that trick over and over again by myself, and then ask father to let me

do it with him, 'cause it's dreadful bad not to be able to do as father wishes; and he called me a coward; but I don't think he meant it. I wish you were here to help me, mother; you seems a long way off."

Just then a baby voice roused him, calling, "Da, da, tome;" and presently all his troubles were forgotten, or, rather, put away for the time, while he had a merry romp with the little one.

Later on, when Mary was tired, Darcy put her carefully on the bed, safe out of harm's way, and, laying her favourite doll in her arms, bid her "Hush dolly, by-by, and watch brother Darcy." He then set to work at his new trick, but had scarcely begun before he was interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Counsel.

"Good-evening, Darcy; is your father in?"

"No, sir; but I think he won't be long."

"Where's he gone? He's never at home."

"Please, sir, I don't know. He didn't say where he was going."

"I think you know as well as I do where would be the most likely place to find him; and you can go and tell him, if he goes on as he has been doing ever since his wife's

death, I'll turn him off and have no more to do with him. He is never sober, and he'll be getting me into a fine scrape, some of these days; so the sooner he mends his ways the better; and you may tell him that-good-for-nothing, worthless fellow that he is!" Without further words Mr. Counsel turned his back upon the boy and walked off, leaving Darcy with cheeks crimson with shame and anger; and though the proud little head had held itself high while the master had been speaking, and the lips had been parted (in readiness to defend his father, when Mr. Counsel should give him time to speak), they closed (as the door banged behind the man) with a piteous quiver, and the head drooped lower and lower until it hung on the heaving breast. But Darcy was not crying, only striving to keep back the torrent of passionate words that trembled on his lips, and to overcome the dreadful feeling of shame that was weighing him down.

"Was it father as he was speaking of; him as is to be one of God's loved ones?"

But no time must be lost. Baby was hastily dressed in her hood and cape and lifted into his arms, the little one crowing

with delight at being taken for "ta, ta," so late, patted his face with her soft hands, calling him, "Da, da." But even her prattle could not cheer him, and he at last laid her down in his arms and hushed her to sleep as he walked.

Mr. Counsel had been right, in one way. Darcy knew only too well where was the most likely place to find his father, and his feet almost unconsciously took him to the "Star and Garter," a somewhat pretentious-looking inn. He did not, however, venture any farther than the doorstep for some time, but sat and waited. It was, however, getting late, and Darcy knew each moment that passed would make the task of getting his father home more difficult. So at last he got up, and looked into the sleeping face cradled on his arm, and as he looked his own grew graver than ever.

"Baby, I can't bear taking you in there, it isn't a fit place for a little girl like you; whatever would mother say? It don't seem right at all;" and he hesitated, but the next moment he raised his head and looked away far into the sky. "It's for his sake, mother, as I'm taking her there, and you said I was to take care of him; and, please, heavenly

Father, to keep mother's little girl asleep until we gets safe out again."

A few minutes afterwards Darcy with his sleeping charge stood in the brightly-lighted room. A very odd little pair they looked, standing there, under the gas-lamps, the light touching up the baby's coloured hood and golden hair, and reflecting itself in the boy's beautiful dark eyes, which were raised beseechingly to the rough, coarse faces around him. They were the only bits of colour about the two, all else seemed grey, washed out, and in shadow.

Silence for a moment reigned throughout the room, that noisy throng having suspended their talking, singing, and jesting as if by one consent when the children suddenly made their appearance. Perhaps even to their dulled and deadened senses came the thought, how strangely out of place the two little ones appeared. The boy standing up among them, utterly fearless for himself, but holding the baby tighter and tighter, jealous even of the looks cast at her.

At last one of the men broke the silence—
"Why, Stephen, it's your little lad, as is such a one for climbing, is it not? Let's have him show us a trick or two; here, lad, put

down the child and mount the table, and let's see what you can do, come."

Darcy had at first been dazzled by the light and all the strange faces, and felt half-stifled by the smell of spirits and tobacco; but when the man drew near him he started back and almost ran to his father's side, his eyes large with fear. Stephen put his arm round him, but turned his head away, ashamed and unable to meet the mute appeal in his boy's eyes. He had not had much drink that evening—in fact, had hardly taken any, so that his brain was clearer than usual, and his senses keener.

"Father, take us home, baby and me," pleaded Darcy; but the man interrupted him—

"No, no, mate, you bide here; don't you be led by a baby; come, set the boy to do his tricks, and we'll each stand you a drop. It's well he came this evening; we'll get some fun out of him."

"Father, I'll stay and do my tricks if you'll carry baby home; she must not stay here, it is not fit, and she's mother's little girl, and whatever would she say to see her here? Take her, father, you'd carry her safe to-night, 'cause your arms are steady now, and I'll stay if you like. I can do most of my tricks without you, and I'll do my best, only take

her and go;" and Darcy laid the baby in Stephen's arms and pulled at his hand to urge him to get up.

Stephen rose, and clasping the child tight, caught Darcy's hand and turned to the door; but many arms were outstretched to stop him, and loud, angry voices jeered and called after him, but none dared really to meddle with him when they saw the expression on his face, and noted his powerful frame; they knew few of them could stand against Stephen Burt when he was roused.

"Am I to come, father, with you?" questioned Darcy.

"Yes, yes, quick."

And he needed no second bidding, but clung tighter to the hand that held him; he felt weak and faint after his intense fear of being left with those men, fear that few could understand, yet fear that he would willingly have borne and braved-that timid, over-sensitive child-for the sake of those two he loved so well. He spoke no word, it was enough to be walking towards home, his hand in his father's, like the old days; and every now and then a few muttered words from Stephen reached him, "Mary's boy there, in such a place I her boy, and I took him there !"

Before they went to bed that night Darcy climbed on to his father's knee, and, with his arms about his neck, he gave him Mr. Counsel's message; but so tenderly worded, in his fear of hurting his feelings, that it would have been difficult to recognise it; then, as Stephen kissed him without speaking, he went on-

"And, father, did you remember to see about the new rope that's wanted? Mr. Counsel told you to-day about it, and you were to have it done."

" I'll see to it to-morrow, lad, never fear."

CHAPTER XI.

THE BROKEN ROPE.

THE next evening Darcy dressed himself with unusual care; but as he pulled on the fine silken garments he shook his head sorrowfully over them; they were getting sadly worn, and he repeated for the hundredth time since his mother's death, "that somehow his things did not last half the time they did when mother was here."

He always seemed to grow too long for them before he had grown up to them in breadth. He surveyed himself in the looking-glass when his toilet was completed, then turned away with a dissatisfied expression, saying-

"I wish I looked a bit more smart; seems to me I'm all eyes and arms; I'm afraid little Mary won't be very proud of brother Darcy, but, anyway, I can do my part well."

Yes, that was the secret of all the prepara~

tion and anxiety; baby Mary was to be amongst the audience for the first time. Darcy had found a snug corner for her in the tent, and put her in charge of a young woman who had lately joined the company, and for whom Darcy had taken a fancy.

It was long since he had felt so much excited about the performance; generally he went through it with mechanical skill, but to-night it was different, and he was all impatience to begin. Directly he entered the tent he looked eagerly round on all the strange faces until his eyes rested on the one he sought, and then his own lighted up with a radiant, beaming smile, and the baby lips parted and laughed back an answer.

One clever feat followed another in quick succession. Mr. Oounsel was delighted; he never remembered to have seen the boy act so well, though he was always applauded heartily; but this evening he was creating quite a sensation, and again and again the cheers rang through the tent.

The master told himself he must indeed put up with the father's faults and somewhat laboured acting, in order to secure the benefit of the son's wonderful gift. It seemed to the lookers-on as if there was nothing that the

child could not do with his lithe, supple figure and beautifully formed limbs; every turn, bend, and twist seemed to come by instinct, and with perfect ease and grace.

Darcy's part was nearly over; all eyes were fixed on him when he stood for a moment's pause on the rope before beginning his final triumph, when suddenly, without warning of any kind, without even a moment's notice, the rope snapped, the two ends dangled apart, and with a dull, heavy thud, Darcy fell on to the sawdust many feet below.

For a moment the whole place was electrified, and then in the stillness rung out a baby's voice, calling piteously, "Da, mine da, tome!"

The sound broke the spell; in a minute the spot where the child lay was surrounded, but way was made for one of the acrobats, a great strong fellow, who fell on his knees beside the inanimate little form and lifted it into his arms, crying in heart-rending tones, "Darcy, my boy, my dear lad! speak to me for your mother's sake!"

Mr. Counsel whispered something- to him, and helped him to rise, and Stephen walked to the opening of the tent, carrying his precious burden.

Later on Dr. Pelham stood beside the bed where they had laid the boy, and as he looked down on to the still unconscious face, he recognised his little friend Darcy; he turned sharply to the bystanders, his voice stern and angry as he spoke--

"What have you all been doing, to let such a child as this come to harm? But I expect few among you knew his value; it almost seems a pity to bring him back to life and this world of cares."

Nobody answered for some minutes; only a baby's piteous wail broke the silence, while Dr. Pelham turned again to the bed.

"Can no one quiet that child? Take it away, some of you."

The young woman, Sarah Lee by name, who had had the care of little Mary during the evening, still held her in her arms, doing her best to soothe and comfort her. At Dr. Pelham's order she hastened to obey him, but before she could leave the room Stephen stopped her. He had been kneeling beside the bed in speechless grief, apparently unconscious of all that went on around him; but he roused himself, and going to Sarah, laid his hand on her shoulder, and said, "Give her to me." She complied, and he

carried the child to the bed, and laid her down beside the unconscious little brother. Dr. Pelham's first impulse was to order her to be taken away, but somehow the words died away unuttered on his lips.

The piteous wailing ceased, the little one drew herself up by her brother, while her baby hands strayed over his face, and her blue eyes looked wonderingly on his closed lids; the lips trembled, and went down ominously at the corners, and the watchers dreaded another outbreak; but, no, they dimpled and curved into a smile, the little head nestled down on to the pillow, the golden curls mingling with the boy's brown locks, and the soft round baby cheeks pressed against the white one (so white and thin, now Darcy lay so still), and with a contented, weary sigh, little Mary closed her eyes, saying, "Night, night, da!"

Perhaps it was the touch of the familiar hands, or the sound of the dearly-loved voice, that roused the boy; anyhow, a faint colour came into his lips, and he slowly opened his eyes, saying, "Father."

It was late on that evening when Dr. Pelham left the caravan. He had installed Sarah Lee as chief nurse; but, in truth,

Darcy wanted no one as long as Stephen sat by the bed holding his hand.

No bones were broken, or any real serious injury done, but the boy would require constant care and watching for some days, and must lie still and not be moved, and good nourishing food given him at stated times.

"You'll not leave him to-night?" Dr. Pelham whispered to Stephen, as he was preparing to take his departure. But a look into the man's face was enough answer, without his confirming words.

"Let this be a warning to you; he will, I hope and trust, pull through this time, but your boy is no common child; almost too sensitive and tender-hearted to get on in this world; he will want a lot of love and care, which only you can give him. I think you hardly know what a blessing and treasure you possess in having such a child."

The next few days were perhaps the happiest Darcy had spent since his mother's death. It was so pleasant lying there in bed, so still and quiet, not obliged to make any effort; nay, in fact, forbidden to do so. Hour after hour slipped away, and hour

after hour Darcy lay there perfectly contented, not attempting to move or rouse himself, excepting to take the nourishment that was brought to him.

The child's nerves had received a severe shock, and coming upon an already overwrought brain, it was necessary for him to have complete rest and quiet for a few days, at any rate; for, added to this, Darcy had been growing fast beyond his strength, so his limbs ached and dragged in an unnatural way, and they felt glad to rest.

And all this time Sarah moved about quietly and deftly, waiting on the boy, nursing and caring for the baby. How Darcy loved to shut his eyes and listen to her gentle movements, or the bright, even click of her needle as it flew in and out of her work, or her soft voice hushing little Mary! It almost seemed as if mother had come back; and as he listened and lay he would pretend it really was mother, and pictured just how she would be looking, making up whole conversations in his mind to pass between them, until his imaginative brain almost made him believe she was really there; and he would force himself to open his eyes, to make sure of the truth before the dream

should grow too long, and the awakening be too bitter.

Then, above all things, his father hardly ever left him-never at all at night, and generally in the day only to go through his part in the circus.

It was well indeed that the boy had that time, short though it was, to regain some of his strength, before taking up his burden again; for his troubles were by no means ended, and dark days were yet to come.

But two good things he had gained-two staunch friends, Dr. Pelham and Sarah Lee.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ARREST.

Ir was about six weeks after Darcy's accident, and he, of course, by that time had become again quite independent of everyone, and was doing for himself, baby, and father, as usual.

It was somewhere between eleven and twelve o'clock at night when Stephen Burt ran up the steps of the caravan, and, pushing the door open, entered hastily. He looked unlike himself, and was hurried and nervous, while a hunted, wild expression overshadowed his face. For a moment he stood as if bewildered, casting uneasy glances round the room, until his eyes fell on the one thing that never failed to quiet and comfort him, and that was the figure of his little son.

The child was seated in the arm-chair, all ready for bed, in his little white night-shirt, his bare feet peeping from underneath, a shawl loosely thrown round his shoulders, the large Bible open on his knee, his hands clasped as if in prayer, his head thrown back against the chair, his eyes fast closed, and an almost unearthly expression on his fair young face. He was only just keeping one of his nightly vigils, and sweet sleep had overtaken him.

Cautiously, and step by step, afraid of disturbing him, Stephen drew near, and then kneeling down by the side of the chair, he bent his head until his lips touched those clasped hands, and he murmured-

"Good-bye, my boy; though I am not worthy to call you child, yet, still, you are mine as well as hers, and I must leave you-perhaps never again to see you-my little son, my precious little son, the one good thing about me; and I must leave you, and all because I had not strength to give it up; and now I have brought my punishment on myself. What matters it what they do with me, if they take me from you, my boy? You love me, child, and you pray for me-yes, I know it; have I

not heard you over and over again asking Him about me? Child, child! will you go on loving me? and will He hear those prayers?"

"Father!" The blue eyes slowly open, heavy with sleep, and the loving arms twine about the bowed head. "Is that you?"

"Yes, my boy; and it's time you were in bed."

"Carry me like you used to do, father, when I was small."

Gently he was lifted up and pressed against his father's breast, while Stephen gazed into his child's face as if his eyes were riveted there.

"Kiss me, Darcy, and say you love poor father."

Again and again those childish lips pressed themselves against the rough cheek, and the sweet voice repeated continuously-

"I love you, father, I love you."

"And you'll go on asking Him to?"

"Who-the Holy Father? of course-I never forget-one of His loved ones. He's quite sure to hear. He hears all we say, 'cause He is always listening; but I go on saying it, to show Him how much I want

it; and He never gets tired of hearing the same, 'cause He loves His children speaking to Him. Sometimes, father, I think I'll ask Him to take me to see mother, and live up with Him; but then I don't know what you and baby would do; and, you see, if He really wants us He'd be sure to fetch us, so I'd best wait His time."

"Yes, yes, wait, and stay with me as long as possible; you must not go."

"Very well, father; good-night! I'm so sleepy."

So Stephen laid Darcy down, pulled the clothes round him, pressed one more kiss on his lips, and then he suddenly raised his head, put his two hands together in imitation of the child, closed his eyes, and murmured-

"Holy Father, Him as the little lad is always speaking to, keep. him safe from all harm, and comfort him. when I'm gone! "

Scarcely had the words been uttered when the door was again opened, and two policemen entered. They stood for a moment astonished at the picture they saw before them. Certainly they had not expected to see the man they had come to take prisoner standing withuplifted hands beside his child's

bed, and they hesitated before fulfilling their mission.

Stephen himself was the first to break the silence; turning away from the bed, he advanced towards them, saying-

"I'm ready; but don't make a noise to wake him; he must not see me go like this."

The policemen placed themselves on either side of him, and one produced a pair of handcuffs. Mechanically Stephen allowed his hands to be taken; his eyes still wandered to where his boy lay, and his thoughts were far away from the present, but as the cold iron touched and clasped his burning flesh, a sharp quivering shudder ran through his whole frame, and shook him, until the chain rattled; and his wrists, so strong and powerful, so equal to dealing with any weight or power, struggled passionately to free themselves from their fetters, against which they were as helpless as a child's, and then sank weak and heavy down before him. He raised his head, and looking piteously at his keepers, said: "Take them off, I will come quietly with you."

At first they refused; but then something in Stephen's face gave them confidence that

he would be true to his word, and they set him free. For a moment the liberated arms raised themselves and stretched out to their full length, as if to throw off all remembrance of restraint, and then fell again at his sides.

CHAP TER XIII.

DARCY LEFT TO HIMSELF.

IT was in everyone's mouth the next morning. It was the talk and excitement of the small country town; the whole place echoed and rang with different and startling reports of it. It had flown like wild-fire. A murder, or almost as good as one, had been committed late at night. One of the principal acrobats belonging to Mr. Counsel's circus, having been engaged in a fight with one of his comrades, had all but killed him. Had not Dr. Pelham been up all night with the sufferer, and when morning dawned, given very slight hope of recovery?

Free from all reports and talk, shut in and surrounded by silence, left to his own thoughts, was the principal person concerned; and while his name was handed from one to another, he sat there through the

long hours, his head resting on his arms, without movement or sign, apparently dead to all around him.

And through the town, and up and down, went a boy, clasping tightly in his arms a baby; a boy with wan, white face, and large eyes growing each moment more wild and piteous in their entreaty, as they questioned and searched each face they met, the white, set lips refusing to fulfil their part-but the mute appeal was enough without words. And though kind and pitying tones were used in the telling, still all told how his father had nearly killed a man, how he was in prison, and how he would be tried at the next Sessions, and if the man died-but none cared to finish the story with that child's face before them.

And then, as the day wore on, the excitement grew less, and by the time the short summer night set in, it had become almost a thing of the past. The sick man had shown signs of recovery, and it was said one had been as much to blame as the other. But still up and down wandered the boy, until at last his legs refused to carry him farther, and he sank down on the first door-step he came to, leaning his head back

against the friendly door, his heavy eyes raised to the refreshing darkness of the early night, and the great moon looked down and threw her soft yellow light around the two children.

"I suppose," said Darcy to himself, "the Holy Father is still up there watching us two little children, but I don't know about taking care of us; it don't seem much like it. Mother was took away first, and now they've shut father up, and we are quite alone. Perhaps He has gone and forgotten us, and given up loving us 'cause we are so small. He might very easy overlook us among all the rest of the world, and He is the Father so great and mighty." A pause, and then the lips moved again: "But Jesus once were a little baby, quite as small as this one, and He came straight down from heaven and was just like us, only without sin. Yes, the Child Jesus, and He only came because He loved us; He came down here to die for-oh, what was it He died for? I can't remember-oh yes, to save people, men-all men-and father is a man--so He died to save father from sin, and He does love us, and will take care of baby and me. I was wrong to think He

had forgotten. And, after all, we are quite safe, no harm has come to us two all day; and though we are only on a door-step we are, quite safe. I wonder why we are not in bed; it is long past our time. What could I have been thinking of? We must be off. There'll be no father to sit up for to-night."

Before he moved the boy prayed-le Please God, take care of father, and if he should get drunk, make some one look after him until he is himself again, 'cause they won't let me go to him."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE TRIAL.

“**L**OOOR Up, my boy, and try and be brave again. In spite of all this trouble, I believe there are brighter days in store for you; not yet, perhaps not for some time; but still I think the clouds are at their darkest now, and that soon we shall see the light shining out behind them.”

It was Dr. Pelham who spoke; he and Darcy were together in the caravan, Dr. Pelham sitting in the arm-chair, and Darcy standing before him; but such a dejected, broken-hearted Darcy, unable to lift his head and look into the face above him, because of the burning sense of shame that overwhelmed him.

Stephen Burt and James Green had been that day before the magistrates (their trial

having been delayed some days, on account of James Green being unable to appear). On inquiry it was proved that both men were under the influence of drink at the time of the quarrel. In the first instance, James Green insulted Stephen Burt, and then in a sudden, wild fit of passion, Stephen had sprung upon him and felled him to the ground. James Green had been dismissed with a caution to keep the peace, and Stephen Burt was sentenced to three months' hard labour, which was to be worked out in Dudford Jail.

And it was at the close of the trial that Dr. Pelham had hastened to the caravan (where he had bidden Darcy wait for him), to tell to the child, as gently as possible, the result of the inquiry. Darcy listened silently, his head sinking lower and lower, his cheeks growing whiter and whiter, and as the lips still remained closed and mute when all had been told, Dr. Pelham tried to rouse him, and to bring back to that young face some look of childishness again, for it had become strangely old and drawn during the last quarter of an hour, and it grieved that clever, clear-sighted man to see such an expression on a boy's face.

"It will make your father's punishment much harder to bear, if he knows you are so miserable; he is almost beside himself when he thinks of you, and if I cannot give him a brighter picture of you, I don't know what will become of him; so look up, my child, and tell me you will try and be brave about it, and not despair."

This time the right chord had been touched. Once more the love of his father shone out in the boy's nature, and drove out the anger and shame. Darcy raised his head, the fierce angry light fading out of his eyes.

"Please let me go to father and see him before they take him away; I want to tell him how much I love him, and to tell him not to take on about baby and me while he is away."

* * * * *

Stephen was standing in the centre of his small cell when Darcy was admitted. He was trying to accustom himself to the prison clothes that a short time ago had replaced his own, and the first impulse, when the boy entered, was to put his two hands up to the closely-shorn head, to hide the mark

of disgrace; the next the two arms were stretched out towards the child, a hungry, eager expression in his eyes; but he did not offer to move a step forward, but cast a questioning glance at the warder who had come in with Darcy. Already the discipline and restraint of prison life were telling upon him, and he waited for permission before acting.

Darcy, however, was under no control, and though for a second he hung back, astonished at the alterations in his father, the next moment he had sprung into the outstretched arms, and pressing his head against his father's cheek, whispered-

"What's gone with all your hair, father?"

"Never mind, child; it'll soon grow."

And then for some time the two could think of nothing else to say; it was enough for them to be once more together.

"Time is nearly up, so you had best make the most of it," suggested the warder.

"Hold up your head, Darcy, and let me look at you; it'll be a long time before I see my boy's face again; and I have so much to say, and there is so little time. Dr. Pelham tells me he will look after you while I'm away. I don't know why

he takes so much trouble for me; I doubt he does not know what a weak, foolish chap I am; but he is a good man, one of the sort who is willing' to lend a helping hand to a man when he is down, and when you meets such a one it makes you long to be some'at like him. Mr. Counsel owes me some money, which will be paid to you, and as long as he stays here, you are to go on acting for him; but when he goes away you are to stay behind here, as I may know where you are. The caravan is my own, so you'll live in it; they wanted to take you to the workhouse, but Dr. Pelham tells me he has arranged that you shall not go there; so, Darcy, you and little Mary will wait here until I come back. Dudford is only twelve miles away, they tell me. Hush, hush, child, don't cry, or you'll kill me! And you must promise ~~me~~ one thing-to try and be happy, and when you want or miss me, say to yourself, 'Father's gone away to a place where they will help him to be a good man, and will soon be home.' It's best I should go where they will keep drink away from me; it will help me in my resolution never to touch a drop again so long as I live. That's the only way to make sure

that it shall never be the master of me again. I have been terribly wrong and weak since your mother went away; but I've been thinking it all over these last few days, sitting here alone, and I do mean to be-well, to be more worthy of the love she gave me. Tell me, child "-this almost under his breath-" do you think God will listen to me if I pray to Him, and ask Him to help me? Will He hear me even though I am in prison? "

"Yes, 'cause He is everywhere; He'll be with you, and with me at the same time. Really and truthfully He can, because He watches over all the world at the same time; mother said so. And He loves you, father, 'cause He sent His only Son to die for you; and He will send His Holy Spirit to teach you and to make your heart clean, if you ask Him."

"Ask Him, Darcy, to keep you safe while I am away."

"Yes, father, to let me and baby be here when you come home; I think He will."

" Good-bye, Darcy, child."

"Good-bye, father dear."

Surely, though only those every-day words,

"Good-bye," were used, the full meaning of them, if ever, was intended though not actually uttered-CC God be with you until we meet again." And then once more the great doors opened and closed again: opened to let the child out into the sunshine and fresh air, and closed to keep the man in solitude and confinement.

CHAPTER XV.

WAITING FOR FATHER.

FOR the first week all went on pretty smoothly, and much as usual, Darcy taking his part in the circus, and teaching his little sister in the meantime.

Towards the end of the second week Mr. Counsel once more gave the order to move on. He had a long conversation with Darcy, and tried hard to persuade him to go with him; he even offered him the same payment that he had given Stephen for both their services; and finally, thinking it was from fear of being separated from his little sister that the boy still refused, Mr. Counsel went so far as to say she should go as well. But no; Darcy kept firm to

his word, saying, "Mary and I are to wait here till father comes home."

"He's not worth waiting for, and as soon as he gets free again he'll be as bad as ever; you are a deal better off without him; but if you are so stupid and obstinate, well, stay where you are and starve, for I don't believe that good-for-nothing father of yours will ever take the trouble to find out whether you are alive or not; he'll only be too glad to have no one but himself to spend the money on."

And so the circus went away, and the one caravan was left in solitude.

But the children were not alone, for, by Dr. Pelham's management, Sarah Lee was installed into the place of housekeeper, and was to live with them until Stephen Burt's return, and then she was to be taken into the doctor's own establishment. It was well there was some one to do for them, for from the time Mr. Counsel went away Darcy began to flag; he had kept up bravely at first, but after a time, in spite of all Sarah's care and Dr. Pelham's skill and watchfulness, he drooped and pined away, until he became a mere shadow of his former

self, and they grew more .and more anxious about him; and sometimes, when Dr. Pelham looked into the thin face, with the beautiful eyes growing larger and brighter each day, he doubted whether the frail hold the boy had of life would last until the three months were over.

Darcy was not really ill; there was nothing to catch hold of, but he seemed to be quietly wasting away. In vain Dr. Pelham tried to rouse him; even once going so far as keeping Sarah away for two days, so that all the responsibility and care of the small household should again fall on Darcy's shoulders, thinking, perhaps, it was not good to have taken away his occupation, and so given him more time to dream and think. But it did not answer; the boy was quite exhausted by the second night, and when Dr. Pelham went to see how his plan had succeeded, he found both children in bed, though it was still early in the afternoon; and in answer to his questions Darcy said- "He and baby were so tired, he thought they'd best go to bed, and he was asking the great Father to let them both sleep until father came home."

"Do you miss your father so very much, my child?" Dr. Pelham said, sitting on the edge of the bed, and drawing the boy towards him.

"Yes, sir-terrible-it don't seem as if there was anything to live for now; and sometimes I gets afraid that he'll never come back; that those men will forget when the three months are up, and keep father on; or that he will die, and go straight out of prison to mother; and my head thinks and thinks until it forgets what it is thinking about. I wish there was some way for making our heads go to sleep directly we want; and, please sir, do you ever feel as if your legs and arms did not belong to you, but were ever such a long way off?"

"Not for many years; but, yes, I remember feeling just so once when I was a boy. You are growing very fast, and it makes you feel tired and weak; you should be lying out in the fields instead of being in bed; it would do you and baby much more good. I wonder how it would do for you to go to school each day; but, no, I think we will leave that for the present. Now, get your things, and we will all three go

and sit 'Out in the fields. I have a little time to spare, and I want to see how my friend baby is getting on with her walking."

What a friend he was to those two children! Hardly a day passed during those three long months but some one hour of it, and often more than one, would be spent in their company. And while he was with them all thought and anxiety were put away, so that he might bring himself down to their childish level, and he would throw himself heartily into whatever amused or interested them. And then, too, what wonderful talks he and Darcy had, when little Mary had grown tired with play and fallen asleep in Darcy's arms!

Dr. Pelham dearly loved the boy, and often when he left him he felt rested and refreshed; something in his sweet simple talk and pure childish philosophy did him good.

And so the days dragged on, and Darcy, as the time for his father's release grew nearer, began to look up again; but even on his best days he was a sad contrast to baby Mary, who was the picture of health,

a joyous, toddling graceful creature nearly two years old, with round sturdy limbs, straight, upright little figure, masses of soft golden hair, rosy sun-burnt cheeks, and merry, laughing blue eyes; a child full of life and light, and the delight and pride of Darcy. He never wearied of playing with her, and teaching her new tricks and words, and all the teaching hung on one thing—"You must learn it, baby, afore father comes home; 'cause he loves you."

"Do you never think how pleased your father will be to see his boy, as well as baby?" questioned Dr. Pelham once, wondering at Darcy's perfect forgetfulness of himself; it seemed to him as if no baby face, however pretty, could ever come anywhere near the boy's, which was full of intelligence and expression; and, above all, his beautiful eyes, which almost seemed to speak to you without need of words.

It was the remembrance of that young face that had first drawn Dr. Pelham to take an interest in Stephen Burt, and incited him to helping him; and then, as he got to know the man himself, somehow a feeling of liking for him crept into the

doctor's heart, in spite of the degrading circumstances he found him in; and it was one of his great desires and fervent prayers that Stephen should fairly set out on the right way..

CHAPTER XVI.

FREE ONCE AGAIN.

I^T was still early morning on one of the last days of October, when the great prison gates and bars were opened to let out Stephen Burt, and set him free once more in the world.

Had he not counted the days, hours, nay, even minutes, to the time of his release, and pictured to himself over and over again how he should feel and what he should do? But, when the moment had really come, and he was standing out there in the fresh early morning, with God's beautiful world all around him, and the knowledge that he might go wheresoever he would, no man having the right to hinder him or take away his liberty any more, he felt numbed, almost as if he had no feeling, and was quite unable to drag himself along farther than to the shade of a neighbouring hedge.

Again and again he tried to remember the words of thanksgiving that the chaplain had taught him, and which he had intended should be his first prayer and thought as soon as he was free again; but all in vain. He tried to recall all his good resolutions, and the long talks he and the chaplain had had together, but all to no purpose—everything seemed a blank to him.

Vaguely he surveyed himself, dressed in his own clothes once more, instead of the prison garb. Mechanically he thrust his hands into each familiar pocket, turning out the contents of each, and looking at them wonderingly, when suddenly he came upon a soft parcel, and, as he removed the cover, out rolled a pair of fine small pink silk stockings. In a moment the dull look faded from his face, but only to be replaced by one of intense shame, and the red blood rushed vividly into cheek, neck, and brow. Throwing aside the stockings, he covered his face with his hands. What memory had those small silken hose recalled ?

A certain evening came back to him, the last one he had spent at home. He seemed to be standing once again in the caravan, having finished his supper, and Darcy, seated

on the floor, was slowly pulling off his stockings, which had been worn at the previous performance. Carefully the boy smoothed and pulled out the creases; and Stephen almost thought he could see again the somewhat rueful expression that overshadowed the child's face as he said, "I hope these won't get too small, like the others, 'cause they cost a lot of money. Mother had to save up a long time afore she could get them for me. If they won't fit, why, I'll have to give up acting, or go without any stockings, 'cause we never should have enough money to get some more now."

Stephen had not answered, but, in spite of himself, the words, "They cost a sight of money," rang in his head, and he began to reckon to himself how much they were really worth, and then the silver almost seemed to dance before his eyes, and a closer reckoning began—how many glasses of beer would those shillings procure? .And after that (Darcy having gone out) he stole cautiously to the drawer where the stockings had been put away, and as the door opened to re-admit Darcy, Stephen's hand closed quickly on the soft, white paper that

wrapped them round, and the next moment they were stowed away in his pocket. He remembered how much like a thief he had felt as he slipped out of the caravan, without uttering a word to the boy, who, all unconscious of the deed, only sighed, saying, ".I hope father won't be very late."

But the stockings never found their way to the pawn-shop after all, for the quarrel put all else out of Stephen's mind.

" And I really had fallen so low as that—that I had taken my child's stockings, the last ones his mother got for him, to be given away for a sup of beer!" he murmured. "Shall I ever be able to keep straight, I wonder? I almost think it would have been better to have kept me always shut up away from temptation. How would it be if I never went back to the little lad? He'll have learnt to do without me now, and perhaps I shall only bring more trouble on him. It would be best to keep away; and yet the thought of that face has kept me straight all this time, and my heart aches for one look at it. Have not I dreamt of it each night? I wonder—yes, I am a'most sure the little chap would say as it was the great Father as sent me those dreams, just

to comfort me a little, I reckon; and let me see what it was the boy said, 'Yes, father, I'll ask Him to let little Mary and me be here when you come home. I think He will.' Yes, those were his words. Maybe he's watching for me now. My boy, my dear boy! And what am I doing sitting here, instead of getting on my way? Darcy, child, I reckon it won't be long afore you see father again! "

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MEETING.

I^T was towards the close of the day. The sun was setting behind the distant hills in a flood of crimson glory, and the evening stillness was falling on all things. The tall figure of a man seemed to be the only moving thing in that dusky landscape, as he trudged wearily along the white high road towards the town of Bromfield. The man was evidently foot-sore and weary; he walked as one unused to walking, and sometimes seemed almost inclined to give it up, and sit down on the wayside and rest awhile. But, no, though his steps might be somewhat uncertain and faltering, still his face was full of purpose, and his eyes were fixed along the road as far as they could see it, and then into the rosy light beyond, and towards that light he walked.

Suddenly over the brow of the hill appeared

a tiny speck, showing black against the sky; it hardly seemed to move, and yet, surely, as the traveller watched, and, to while away the time, set it as a mark, and reckoned how long it would take him to reach it, it seemed to advance to meet him. It grew and grew, that small speck, until it became an object, and then it suddenly seemed to divide and become two, though the division was unequal, one side appearing many degrees smaller than the other; and still on it came, and the man smiled, saying, "Why, after all, it's only two children. How odd things look in this half light!" And yet, though they were only two children, he seemed unable to take his eyes from watching their progress - very slow indeed, on account of the mere toddling of one.

"It's over late for such young 'uns to be out alone," he muttered to himself. "A little lad and lass, as far as I can make out. What a time it seems since I saw a child! Maybe it's that as makes m~ take such note of these two, and, for the first time to-day, takes my thoughts a bit from my boy. I'll ask them where they are bound for when we meet. How long the



THE HAPPY MEETING.

road is; we hardly seem to get nearer. Ah, there now, I can see them quite plain. Why --." But the sentence was never finished, for suddenly the taller of the two children bounded forward, leaving the little one far behind, and at the same moment the man, all weariness forgotten, broke into a run, and, two minutes later, father and son (Stephen and Darcy) were locked in each other's arms.

And then Stephen set the boy at arm's length, and looked him through and through, as if unable to satisfy himself enough with the sight of him; and then again he was drawn to him, and held there tight, while Stephen murmured-

" Just the same, just my own dear boy still! "

The words broke the spell that had fallen upon them, for Darcy struggled to free himself, saying-

"Why, you've not seen baby yet-we'd almost forgotten her, 'cause we were so full of gladness there was no room to think of anything else."

The baby was standing much where Darcy had left her, her small figure swaying from side to side in her efforts to balance herself

on her tiny feet, now her support, in the shape of brother Darcy, had forsaken her.

She smiled up at him as he clutched her hand and drew her on towards their father.

"Oome, baby, it's father; can't she walk well? Take her up in your arms; she knows all about you, and can say 'father' quite nice now."

And Stephen bent to do the boy's bidding; but baby drew back, and hiding her face against Darcy, lisped-

" Man, man, not 'ike."

"But it's father, baby! him as I've told you about, him as we comes every evening to meet, and now he's come, don't you know him? "

Darcy was kneeling before her, pulling her hands away from her face, where in her shyness she had hidden it; he was greatly distressed. What would father think of baby? Her little face wrinkled up, the blue eyes :filled with tears, the baby lips quivered.

" Never mind, Darcy, she'll soon get to know me, she is a bit shy," said Stephen, sorry for the boy's distress, and disappointed himself; somehow he longed for the little one to come to him, and yearned for her baby kisses.

"I never thought she would be like this; she's such a loving little thing;" and Darcy rose from his knees and stood looking ruefully down on his little sister.

The child, puzzled, looked from one to the other for a moment, then suddenly ran with toddling steps to Stephen, holding out her arms, saying, "Fathie, fathie;" and as he lifted her up and clasped her to him, she pressed her soft lips to his cheek, kissing it over and over again.

"And so you and baby come each evening to meet me, do you, Darcy?"

The trio had reached the town, and would soon be at home, baby asleep in Stephen's arms, and Darcy clinging to his hand.

"Yes, 'cause we thought you might come any day now, and it was terrible hard each night when we had to turn back without you; but now it's all right, and you will never leave us again, will you? "

"Never, God helping me, child! "

At that moment a stream of light shone out across the footpath, coming from the open door of a public-house. Instinctively Darcy tightened his hold of his father's hand, and glanced nervously up into his face; but Stephen took

no notice of anything, his eyes were fixed on his little girl's face, and Darcy heard him murmur, "She is the image of her mother."

The boy's cheeks flushed with anger at himself for allowing the fear for a moment to have filled his heart, and drawing closer to his father's side, he covered the hand he held with kisses.

Late on that evening, Stephen knelt beside his boy's bed, his heart going up in one long prayer for forgiveness for the past and strength for the future.

Darcy had fallen asleep at last, wearied out with excitement and happiness, but his hand still clasped one of his father's.

"How good it is to beat home again!" spoke Stephen, half aloud. "I reckon, Mary, you've known all about it; but I should like to tell you as it were all the little lad's prayers that has brought me to the right path again. Somehow when I was sitting in that lonely cell I always seemed to see our boy kneeling in his little night-shirt with his eyes closed, talking to the great God, and asking Him to look after father and make him a good man, one of those He loved;

and I could not bear for the child to go on and on, and never to get his way. It were that almost more than anything at first that made me want to be good; and then, too, I began to get afraid as he would be taken away before I got out of prison; and I kept on thinking what would become of me if I were never to see him again, not only in this world, but never to go to him in the next; and when I thought that, my heart was like to break with grief and fear; so, Mary, wife, I just laid me down in despair, and then all of a sudden the boy's last words came back to me, 'He loves you, father, 'cause He sent His only Son to die for you; and He will send His Holy Spirit to teach yon and to make your heart clean, if you ask Him.' And after that it seemed to come a'most light in that cell, and I just knelt me down and asked that Son to help me, and to ask the great God to give me another chance, and to make me a good man. I thought He would be sure to know all about our troubles, as He had been down in this world and knew all about it; and from that moment I sort o' took heart again. The chaplain he was very good to me and helped me, for I scarce knew anything, and wanted a deal of patience and

teaching. And now some day, please God, me and the two little ones will be coming along to heaven, and then we shall not be parted any more. Until then **I'll** do my best here on earth to become one of His loved ones! "

THE END.

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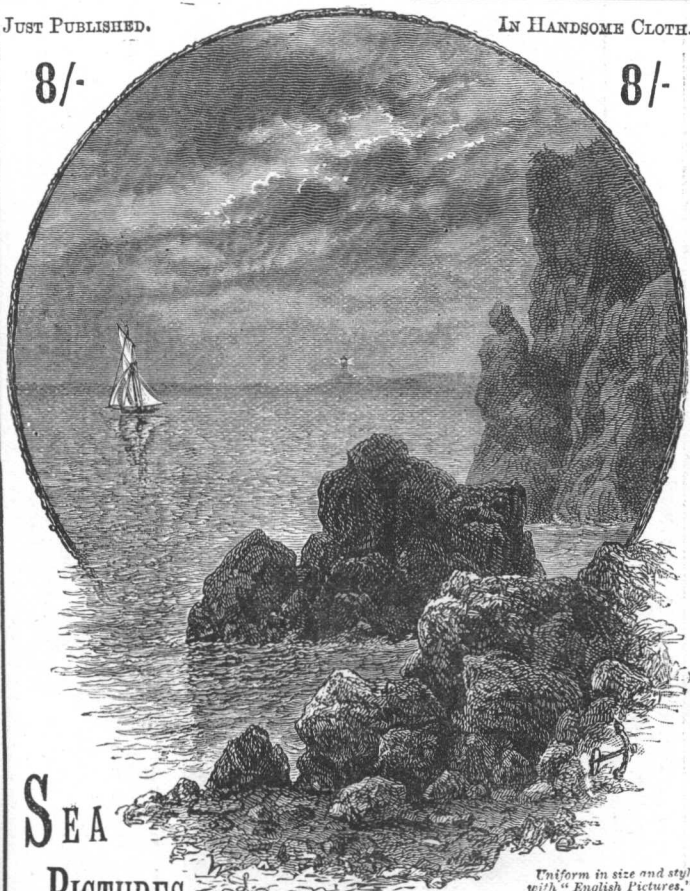
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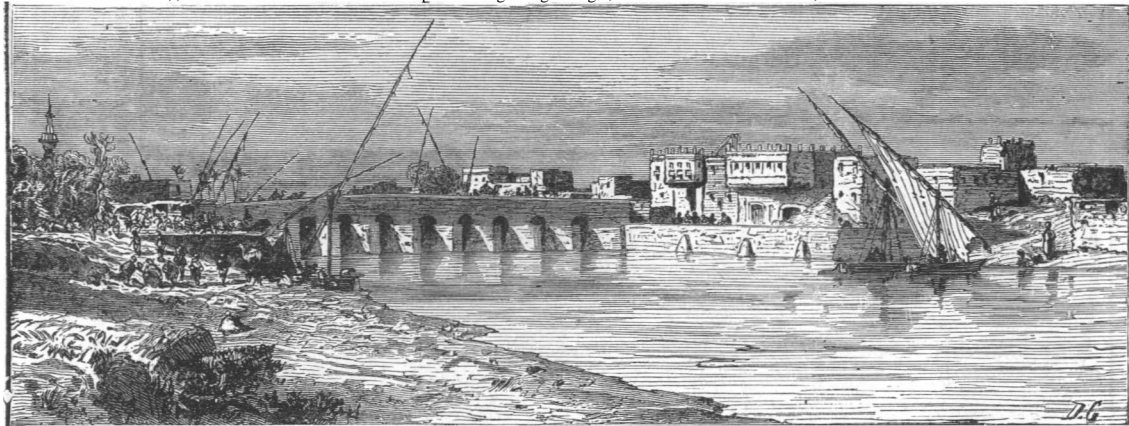
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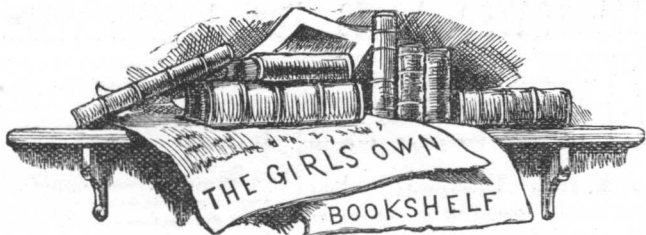
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