VARIOUS

LITTLE FOLKS

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Содержание

Various
Little Folks / A Magazine for the Young (Date of issue unknown)

A LITTLE TOO CLEVER

By the Author of "Pen's Perplexities," "Margaret's Enemy," "Maid Marjory," &c

CHAPTER IV.—HAS ELSIE FORGOTTEN?

"Look you, Duncan," Elsie exclaimed, when they had walked on some way in silence, "I've made up my mind to go, and what's the use o' waitin'? The sooner the better, for it may turn cold any day now. We shouldn't be long if it was fine, but if 'twas wet we might have to wait up in places. I must sit down an' see if I can find out the way to go from the map."

"We shan't be to school in time," Duncan protested.

"Well, an' I dunno that I care," Elsie replied. "What's the odds o' one afternoon more or less? It'll be many a day I shall be called truant, I reckon. But they might be after tellin' of us, an' she'd be lockin' me up in the loft, which isn't what I want, so we'll get to school to-day," she added, meditatively. "Here, take the basket, while I try to make the map out as we walk along."

Now, Elsie had a great many faults indeed, but there was one thing you may have noticed about her that had something of a good point about it: it never occurred to her to desert Duncan. She might have said, "You run on to the shop with the beans while I study the map," for Duncan knew his way well enough; but the little fellow had ever depended upon her, and been her inseparable companion. She would guide him into stray paths, but it would never occur to her to forsake him, or withdraw from him the protection of her fearless, daring spirit. One good point, however small and obscure it is, may be taken as a proof that there is some good soil in the nature which has developed it where other similar plants may flourish. We have room to hope, therefore, that Elsie was not without her better side.

"It don't look far," Elsie said, meditatively, tracing the space with her finger on the map, which was a small one, and to the inexperienced eyes that were studying it reduced distance to a mere nothing. "Here's London printed very big. It's a goodish way down, is London, gettin' on to the end of England, only England's a very little place, accordin' to the map. Any way, it wouldn't be so very long, for that old guide they've got at home with the map in it makes this road look just about six times as long as it is."

"You're quite sure we're goin' to run away?" Duncan asked, rather dolefully.

"I won't say whether it'll be walkin' or runnin', but I'm quite sure I shall go," Elsie replied.

"I think they'll cry when they can't find us," Duncan said, meditatively.

"Poor bodies! if they cry it'll be with rage to think we're gone," Elsie said contemptuously. "I just wonder if they'll guess then I've got the letter, an' that I've found out all about it. I'm no silly like you, Duncan, or I'd never have made head or tail of it; and then, what 'ud become of us when we're big?"

"We shan't be hungry, or tired, or anything bad, shall we?" asked the matter-of-fact Duncan.

Elsie's mind had passed over the trivial matter of the journey, and all such minor details, to the grand result, when she had found their father, and would be living with him in a beautiful place, with all that heart could desire. But Duncan's imagination could put on no such seven-league boots. It stuck fast at the first disagreeable details, and was not even rewarded by the prospect which so delighted Elsie, for his mind could not picture any other life than his present one.

"And what would you be the worse for a wee bit of hunger or tiredness? Ain't we often that? I'm hungry now without any dinner, an' you'll be fit to eat your head before you get your tea," said Elsie.

"Only, we shall get it," Duncan replied, in his provokingly straight way. "If we was long on the road, where'd we get anything at all?"

"I've pennies in my box, an' so have you," Elsie replied impatiently. "A loaf an' a drop o' milk'll be all we want."

"Oh, yes, it'll do very well on the road. There'll be shops, of course."

"Of course there will. Runnin' away isn't bad. I'd almost like to do it just for the fun. Lots o' the books teacher's lent me out o' the school library has got runnin' away in them. Sometimes they get

into troubles, and all sorts o' queer things happen, but it always comes right in the end. I've noticed that particular."

They were near the village shop now, and as Duncan had no reply to make, they went on without further conversation till they reached it. "We had to bring you these instead o' takin' our dinners," Elsie grumbled.

"Dear, dear! poor little bodies!" said the kindly shop-dame, compassionately. "It's bad for the bairnies to be hungry. I'll fetch you a bit of cold puddin' with plums enough to put a stop to countin'. You can eat it as you go along."

She went into her room, and cut two slices.

"There," said Elsie, triumphantly, "I told you anybody 'ud be kind to children. Mrs. Callam thought it was a shame for us to be hungry, an' so'd anyone else. I ain't a bit afraid of runnin' away, are you?"

"Afraid?" Duncan replied, with alacrity. "You needn't think I'm afraid."

They reached school in time, and put the borrowed atlas back into its place unobserved. "I'd like to take it with me," Elsie said to herself, "only I couldn't give it back, an' then it 'ud be stealin'; but I can't forget the way."

Duncan got through his tasks in his usual fashion, not brilliantly or quickly, but pretty accurately. Elsie was in trouble more than once during the afternoon for inattention, and earned several bad marks, over which she did not fret.

On their way home Elsie appeared quite to have forgotten her grand scheme, for she said positively not one word about it. "P'raps she won't do it after all," thought Duncan, for it was no uncommon thing for Elsie to utter dreadful-sounding threats, and make boasts which came to nothing. Duncan grew quite gay and cheerful at this thought, and went dancing along with all his usual light-heartedness.

But he was quite wrong. Elsie had not tired of her idea, but she was dreadfully afraid stupid little Duncan might unwittingly betray them, and so, with the craftiness which soon comes to those who plot, she was bent upon turning his mind quite away from her schemes until the time came for action. She even went so far as to talk about all sorts of things in the most ordinary way, as if she and Duncan were to pass all their lives in the cottage on the moor.

The afternoon meal was waiting for them when they went in. Their mother had cooked them a nice slice of bacon, and had baked them each what the children called a bun, which was a little piece of dough from the regular bread-making, baked separately. It always seemed much sweeter than the ordinary loaf, and was crisp and crusty, like our rolls, so I don't think there was much to grumble over, although they had not had any dinner.

When it was ended Mrs. MacDougall sat down to her knitting, while Elsie cleared away. She was making stockings for the coming winter, and was employed on Elsie's at present.

"It's gettin' a long stocking," the old grandmother said, as she watched the length of leg and foot dangling from the pins. "You can't get to the end o' it so quick as you used when it was about three inches from toe to heel, an' the baby's five toes like so many pink beads."

All the children laughed at the idea. It seemed so funny to think of Elsie, big-limbed, strong, and sunburnt, as a tiny babe.

"But a bonnie baby was Elsie," the old grandmother went on: "the bonniest of all, eh, Meg?"

"Elsie was a beautiful baby," Mrs. MacDougall replied. "Her father was real proud of her, and used to carry her about with him evening times, long after she ought by good rights to have been a-bed. You remember that, mother?"

"Eh, well enough," the old woman replied.

Duncan glanced at Elsie uneasily, but he could read nothing in her face. Then he was guilty of laying a little trap.

"Was Elsie prettier than Robbie, then?" he asked.

"She was a prettier baby," Mrs. MacDougall answered, looking from one to the other, and putting her hand on Robbie's fair curls, almost as if she were doing him an injustice to say it. "Yes, I think every one would say Elsie was the bonnier baby. Robbie was but a puling, pasty-faced little thing, thin and miserable, not a crowing, bright little thing like the others. He wanted a deal o' care, did Robbie, an' I will say he's had it always."

"That he has, that he has," the old grandmother assented, warmly. "His poor–"

"Father wouldn't know him if he was to see him now," said Mrs. MacDougall, finishing her old mother's sentence.

For Duncan this little commonplace conversation had much more interest than those who were speaking could have any idea of. It puzzled him sorely too, for it seemed to tell such a different tale from the one Elsie had put together. He was watching Elsie closely, wondering what she could say to it. It was not so much what she had said that made Duncan uncomfortable as the way she said it. "Just as if she was our mother!" he thought to himself. "And then the letter said 'weak and delicate,' an' after all we was stronger babies than Robbie—leastways, Elsie was, and father used to be so proud of her. Elsie must have made a mistake. I feel quite sure she has."

Perhaps Elsie guessed what he was thinking, for the first moment they were alone she whispered to Duncan, "I can see through it," in a tone of so much confidence that Duncan was unsettled again. "D'you think I can't see through that?" Elsie said, contemptuously. "She talks like that o' purpose to misguide us an' every one else that comes near. She makes believe she's our mother always, even to granny, who knows she isn't, for fear anybody should get thinkin' about it. Besides, I doubt not we grew strong after a bit, maybe; an' if we ain't the babies, I'd like to know where they are."

"P'raps they was fetched away again after a bit."

"You've always got an answer ready, for all you look so stupid," Elsie said, crossly. "When did they go away, I'd like to know? Can you remember? I can't; an' I can call to mind as long ago as when Robbie was the baby, an father died."

To this Duncan could certainly find no reply. He himself had not the faintest recollection of any other babies than Robbie, and of course Elsie could remember better than he. He could not prove Elsie wrong, and yet he could not bring himself to realise that such a strange thing had been going on all these years in such a quiet, unnoticeable way—that Mrs. MacDougall could seem so exactly like a mother to them, and yet not be one. He was in a state of bewilderment, in which he could neither believe nor disbelieve, and so he went to sleep with a weary sigh, and left the mystery to unravel itself.

Not so Elsie. Her thoughts were very busy as she lay awake in her little room. At last a happy idea seemed to strike her. "Yes, that'll be the very time," she said softly to herself, and then settled herself to sleep.

CHAPTER V.—"THE VERY TIME."

Several days passed away, in which Elsie said nothing more to Duncan of her plans. Robbie's birthday passed off, and Elsie did serve the cake and milk under the alder-tree, after all. She was even kind to the little lad, and played with the two boys. Robbie was trying hard to deserve her attention, running himself quite out of breath after the ball she threw, and using all his strength to keep up with Duncan, who was ever so much stronger.

By-and-by, when Elsie proposed a run on the moor, Robbie looked timidly in her face, and said, "I wish I might come too."

"Well, go an' ask," Elsie said, condescendingly; and Robbie having obtained permission, coupled with many injunctions not to go far or run too much, they started, with Robbie in a radiant state of delight. And Elsie was so gentle with him that Robbie could not help saying, "I do like coming out here with you," in his own little gentle way; and Duncan, who loved peace, was quite happy.

Two or three days later there was a slaying of fowls, while Elsie and Duncan were set to pick a gathering of plums, apples, and beans, and arrange them in baskets. As a rule, Elsie disliked this day, and went about when she was at home with a cloudy face and many an impatient exclamation. This time, however, she seemed quite cheerful, and helped readily.

Very early the next morning Mrs. MacDougall was waiting at the cottage door in her bonnet and shawl for Farmer Jarrett's cart. Presently it came along, the farmer's round jolly face surmounting a heap of baskets, packed with butter, cheese, eggs, and poultry. Mrs. MacDougall handed her few baskets up to him, and when these were arranged in various odd corners she put her foot on the cart-wheel, jumped up by his side, and off they started for the little market town, where Mrs. MacDougall could get a better price for the few things she had to sell than in the village shop, and could also purchase more cheaply the groceries, calicoes, and other necessaries of her household.

"Tell granny to take care o' Robbie," Mrs. MacDougall called, as she waved her good-bye. "I shan't be later than six about."

"Take care o' Robbie, indeed!" muttered Elsie, just loud enough for Duncan to hear. "It's always Robbie. Why should he be taken more care of than any other body? P'raps she thinks he'll melt in the sun, or be drowned by the rain, or blown away by the wind, which can't never hurt us."

As Mrs. MacDougall drove off in the early morning, she looked somewhat anxiously at the heavy mist which hung over the moor, and remarked to her neighbour that there was a chilliness about the air this morning which felt like the approach of cold weather.

"Well, we mustn't grumble," the farmer said, in his northern dialect; "it's over fine for the time o' year; but when the weather does break we shall have the winter early upon us, and a long, hard one too, I reckon."

"If I have a good day I'll just take some warm stuff home for the children," Mrs. MacDougall said to herself. Then she pulled out her purse and looked over its contents, turning them over and over, and reckoning them up, as if by dint of careful arithmetic they might, perchance, come to a little more. In one part of it there was a little packet of money done up in paper, marked "Robbie." There was more there than in all the other divisions put together. It was clear Robbie would not go short. Mrs. MacDougall looked at it with a little sigh.

"I must get yarn to finish Elsie's stockings," she said to herself. "Duncan will have her old ones that she's grown out of. A fine lassie she'll be in a few more years, growing like this; but it's hard work to keep them without a man's earnings to look to."

"You're thinking out some very hard question, judging by your silence," the farmer said, after a while.

"Yes, it's just a puzzle to know how to bring the children up," Mrs. MacDougall replied. "Since my good man died and left me with them, it's been a hard matter at times, but never so hard as now.

There's my Elsie, growing as fine a lass as may be, though a deal bit wilful without a man to intimidate her. She'll have to take service in a few years more, for what else can I do with her? an' I'm thinking she'll take it hard, for she's got rare notions, an' is a bit clever above the common. Duncan's over young yet to fret about; Robbie'll be provided for, no doubt, when the proper time comes."

"I wouldn't fret at all," the farmer replied, heartily; "you've done the best, and worked hard for the bairnies since your good man was taken. They'll find a good provision, I doubt not. There's a special protection for the fatherless and the widow, so the minister's always saying."

"It's just the one interest of my life to see the children started," Mrs. MacDougall replied, "although sometimes I get pretty nigh disheartened."

"You've had a sorrowful life," the farmer said. "Some dead, others false and mean, but you've much to be proud of. The bairnies are strong an' winsome, an' I'm sure the little one's just a real credit to you."

"Ah! the poor little lad. I think his father would be astonished to see him. Yes, I'm bound to say he's done well, all things considered."

"But, if I may say it, I think you're a bit mistaken to treat him any differently from the others. Surely he's strong an' hearty enough now."

"Mother talks like that," Mrs. MacDougall replied; "but I must be just. There's many a time when I'd be glad to give the others a little more and Robbie a little less, but I regard it as a temptation to be resisted. He has a double claim upon me, an' if I were to push him to the wall, or let him be sacrificed in any way, the dead would rise up an' reproach me."

"But his father never intended you to make a difference between the children," the farmer continued. "I'm thinking if it mightn't make a jealousy among 'em, which wouldn't be a good thing for any of them."

"Children don't remark much," Mrs. MacDougall replied. "They know how weakly he is, an' they wouldn't be jealous. It's circumstances has made the difference. If their father had lived there'd have been plenty for all, doubtless, but now the strong ones must go without, since they can't all have everything; an' they know it must be so."

"Well, well, you do your best; but I will say I agree with the old dame," Farmer Jarrett replied; and then they changed the subject.

In the meantime Elsie, having seen her mother depart, and had her grumble against Robbie, turned back into the cottage. Mrs. MacDougall was very greatly mistaken in supposing that Elsie was not jealous. Duncan's matter-of-fact mind took things as he found them, and did not trouble to inquire why they were so or whether they should be different, but Elsie was quite the opposite. She was always troubling herself about things that did not concern her, and not being of an open, ingenuous disposition, which turns naturally to some other person for a solution of its difficulties, she formed her own conclusions, which, more often than not, were very erroneous ones.

It was not yet seven, so that there were more than two hours wanting to school-time. Elsie was very busy about the house for a little time; she changed her week-day clothes for her Sunday ones, and made Duncan do the same; she opened their money-boxes, and carefully counted the coppers they contained: they amounted altogether to elevenpence, halfpennies and farthings included. These she tied up in a handkerchief, and put in her pocket. Then she went to the pantry, and took from it a loaf of bread and some Dutch cheese, which she put into a basket.

This done, she called sharply to Duncan to make haste, for she was "going to have a run on the moor before school." Robbie asked timidly if he might come too, but Elsie would not hear of it.

"You can tell granny when she comes downstairs that we're not coming home to dinner. I've taken our dinner in a basket," she said to Robbie.

The little fellow stood at the door, and watched them wistfully as they ran off. It was dull to turn back into the empty kitchen, and wait there till the old dame came downstairs. If Robbie could have put his feelings into words, he would have said that he would have been happier roughing it

with Duncan and Elsie than with the constant care and consideration that separated him from them. Perhaps, after all, Farmer Jarrett was right.

Elsie was in an extraordinary state of excitement this morning. She danced along, laughing and talking merrily. Duncan wondered to see her in such spirits, for it was seldom that she had nothing to grumble at.

By-and-by they reached a point where there were two roads: the one leading to the village, the other a short cut to the school, running along the back of the village. Elsie took the long one.

"Where are you going?" Duncan asked, in astonishment.

Elsie looked at him gleefully, and burst out laughing. "I don't mind telling you now," she replied; "you can't let it out. We're going to England, and we've got the whole day before us, for granny won't expect us home till after afternoon school, and mother won't be home till sunset. Oh! wasn't it just a capital idea of mine?"

"To England?" echoed Duncan, somewhat ruefully, for the idea was, after all, sudden enough to take him aback. "Then let's be quick, Elsie. Shall we get there to-night?"

"That depends," Elsie returned, with the air of a person who knows all about it. "If we get a lift on the road, we shall get along quickly."

It had occurred to her that they might not reach London that evening, but she was not daunted by the thought, for she had a plan in her mind in case of such an event, only she considered it wiser to keep Duncan in ignorance of any possible difficulty.

CHAPTER VI.—ON THE WAY

As far as the village the way was straight enough. Elsie and Duncan skipped along merrily. Presently the sun began to struggle through the clouds and disperse the haze. The day promised to be fine and warm, which was certainly a great advantage.

The few straggling houses that formed the village of Dunster were soon passed, and then arose the first difficulty. The road for some little distance was direct enough, but at last it came to a sudden termination, or rather, opened out into a wider space, where there was a dirty pond, a patch of grass, and two roads: the one to the left, the other to the right. Right before them, filling up the way they ought to take in order to carry out Elsie's plan of keeping straight on, stood a tiny crofter's cottage, surrounded by its meagre crops enclosed within low stone walls. Beyond it the ground began to rise into hills, and far away in the distance rose the black-looking peaks of mountains.

Elsie stood still for a few minutes in puzzled thought. "If we begin to take turnings we are sure to lose our way," she said to herself, in woeful disappointment at this sudden check; but presently her spirits revived. "I see it all!" she cried, "Of course, if the road went straight on, apart from having to go right through the croft, it would lead us just straight away into the mountains; an' I'd like to know how we'd ever get over the top of that big one, with the clouds hanging over it. The road takes you clear away through the glen, of course, and it runs a bit to the side, no doubt. We'll just keep in the right direction, an' it'll be right enough. Let us think a minute. Is London to the right or the left, Duncan? Which think you?"

"It's more on the right side of the map, I think," Duncan replied, doubtfully.

"Ah! but, you little silly, we're up in Scotland, and we're to walk down the map. You must just reverse it, to be sure," Elsie replied.

"The map's a funny sort of shape, where it joins on to England," Duncan muttered. "It seems to run off more sideways like; we ought to twist about, I'm sure, or else we'll be going straight through the bottom of Scotland into the sea!"

"Oh, you baby!" Elsie cried, scornfully. "Do you think we couldn't walk along the edge? I'm not so sure it wouldn't be the best. We should be certain to know our way then, when once we got to the coast."

"S'pose we was to fall over?" urged Duncan.

"Oh, it is just the best idea of all!" Elsie cried, clapping her hands. "We'll just find the sea first of all; and won't it be a real bonny sight, with the ships sailing on it. Then we'll go along till we get into England, and any one'll tell us the way to London. This turning seems the most like going straight, so we'll take it."

This knotty point decided, Elsie tripped along with no sort of misgiving. Duncan was by no means so sure. He had received geography lessons, in which he had been told how many hundred miles long Scotland was, and he had a sort of dim suspicion that London must be farther off than Elsie thought; but he did not feel much uneasiness.

After a while the road became rough and uneven, and at last it turned sharp round in the wrong direction, but just beyond them the low wall suddenly ended in a scattered heap of stony fragments, and the grass stretched fresh and green away to the hills.

"Come on, Duncan!" Elsie cried, dragging him after her on to the grass. "We'll be seeing the sea from that hill, I'll be bound!"

The hill was farther away than it looked, but they reached it after a good sharp scamper. "And now we'll just be after eating a bit of something before we go any farther," Elsie said, dropping down on the grass, very hot and breathless.

"I s'pose there'll be shops by-and-by," Duncan said, "or a farm, where we can get a drink of milk."

Elsie was thirsty, but she was not going to be daunted by such a small inconvenience.

They began hopefully to climb the hill. As they mounted they began to find it steep and tiring. After ten minutes they stopped short, fairly out of breath. To her disgust and surprise, Elsie found that the distance to the top of the hill looked even greater than when they had been quite down at the bottom of it, and steeper a very great deal. They rested for a while, catching hold of the tough heather stalks to prevent them from slipping, then went on again, on and on, with by-and-by another pause for breath. There was plenty of fun and excitement in the climb, the only drawback being the weight and inconvenience of their strong rough boots and Elsie's basket, which, however, were each of them too useful to be left behind.

At last, however, the children reached the top, and Elsie stood still, and looked all round in eager hope.

But, alas! the sight that met her view was one of keen disappointment. The side of the hill descended very steeply into a narrow valley, through which flowed a small stream. Beyond were hills stretching as far as she could see, until their tall peaks mingled with the clouds. Just then the sun disappeared, black shadows crept rapidly over the mountain-tops, the whole landscape appeared dark, gloomy, and frowning. Nowhere all around was a sight of any living thing, except a few sheep perched far up on a steep crag. Presently masses of vapour gathered over the hills, and began to roll down their sides, hiding first one and then another. Elsie turned away with a shudder. The cows feeding on the smooth grass below, the very sight of the road, lonely and deserted though it was, seemed cheerful indeed, compared with the awful loneliness of those grim, endless hills.

"It's no use going this way," she said, with a little shiver. "The sea is farther off than I thought. We should lose ourselves among the hills; and it's so cold up here, and not a soul to tell us the way, not even a shepherd. Let's go back."

They began to descend by a circuitous route, for the side was steep enough to make it a matter for care, and in places the soil was boggy, and in others the rocky ground had broken and crumbled away, leaving sharp precipitous edges.

When at last they reached the even space, there was no sign of a road to be seen. "It must be just over there," Elsie said, in some bewilderment. "Perhaps there's a bank at the side hiding it."

"We've come down quite a different place to where we went up," said Duncan, slowly. "D'you think we're lost, Elsie?"

"No, of course not," Elsie replied, confidently. "Come on, Duncan; the road can't be far off."

Duncan followed without a word. He was beginning to feel a bit tired, and somehow he could not help giving a thought to the snug kitchen at home, with the little wooden arm-chair in which he was accustomed to sit when he was done up with running about. The sight of the cottage would have been far more welcome to him even than that of the unknown father they were seeking. But he kept his thoughts to himself.

They found a roadway after a goodish bit of running hither and thither. Elsie had been wise enough to avoid the hills, for the day had clouded over and a chill breeze had sprung up. It was dull enough even here, far worse away among the steeps and hollows.

"I don't think we shall get to London very soon," Duncan ventured to say, after a while. "There isn't any one to ask the way. Do you think we've got near the end of Scotland yet?"

"We shan't get to London to-night," Elsie said, with the air of one who knew all about it. "Of course I knew that all along. We shall have to get a night's lodging, and go on to-morrow."

"But who'll give it to us?" asked the practical Duncan. "There isn't any houses."

"Oh, well! we shall come to some," Elsie said.

"Do you think I might take off my boots and stockings? they seem so heavy like," Duncan asked.

"If you like to carry 'em," Elsie replied shortly. "We'll want 'em when we get to London. Hark! I can hear a cart coming."

Yes, sure enough there was a sound of wheels, and presently there came into sight a man driving a small cart, drawn by a miserable, starved-looking horse, that shambled along with its head held down as if ready to drop. The cart was a dilapidated-looking affair, and the man who drove was well in keeping with his vehicle. He was clad in tattered garments, surmounted by an old sack, fastened together round his shoulders with a wooden skewer. His hair was coarse and matted, looking as if a comb had never made acquaintance with it, his face unmistakably emaciated, in spite of the dark hue it wore from constant exposure.

As he gradually overtook them, Elsie stood by the roadside, and beckoned to him to stop.

"How far are we from the houses?" she asked.

The man scratched his head and stared for a few seconds, then he replied, "Don't know of none this side o' Killochrie."

"How far is Killochrie?" Elsie asked.

"Weel, seven miles and a bittock—so—more or less."

Elsie stood still in perplexity. A Scottish mile is reckoned to be two English ones, and the bittock might mean anything—another Scottish mile or two, as the case might be. The prospect was not encouraging.

"Isn't there any house at all?" Elsie asked.

"Well, there's not to say a house—a croft or two an' a cottage. Where would you be going?"

"Oh, to Killochrie, that's just where!" Elsie answered very quickly, with a glance at Duncan.

"Ah, weel!" the man replied, waiting in stock silence for some one else to speak.

"Can you tell us the time?" Elsie asked.

"It might be five, or getting on to six, thereabouts," the man replied.

So late, and a matter of fifteen miles about to the nearest resting-place! What was to be done?

"Are you going to Killochrie?" Elsie asked suddenly.

"Weel, noa, not that—along the road."

"Would you mind our getting into the cart?"

The man scratched his head again, and looked at her in silence. Elsie began to think he was a little daft. Presently he replied, "You maun sit on it, if you like."

"On what?" Elsie asked sharply.

"The fish," the man replied.

Elsie and Duncan had both noticed a strange odour, which Elsie attributed to a stagnant pool of water near which they were standing. She now peered over the side of the cart, which was more like a lidless box on wheels than anything else, and she perceived that it was full of fish. The man occupied the only available sitting-place in front. What was to be done? Elsie looked all along the road. There was no sign of any other vehicle, not even a person to be seen. Their choice plainly lay between walking the whole distance or riding in the cart.

"We are very tired," Elsie said, dubiously. "Shall we get in, Duncan?"

Oh, how the vision of home rose up before Duncan's longing eyes! Mother would be at home now, just sitting down to tea, perhaps.

"If you'd like to," he said, without much interest.

"Ye might take the sack," the man said good-naturedly, unskewering it, and laying it down on top of the mass the cart contained. It was really a kind action, for Elsie noticed that the rags he wore had nothing of warmth about them, and the air was already tolerably sharp and keen.

The children scrambled in on the top of the sack, and the man bent his energies to starting his old horse once more on his shambling trot.

When the children had got a little bit accustomed to the cart Elsie opened her basket to get some bread, for they were ravenously hungry. Just then the man turned round; his eye lighted with a hungry, almost wolfish, glance on the sweet white bread and firm yellow cheese. "Will you have some?" Elsie asked, almost in fear, for he looked so fierce.

In reply he stretched out his hand, greedily seized the remaining portion of their loaf which Elsie was just about to divide, and without a word of apology, devoured it like a hungry animal.

CHAPTER VII.—THE CROFTER'S COTTAGE

So far as speed went, the children might as well have walked. The poor old horse, as miserable and starved-looking as his master, kept steadily on, with a sort of halting trot, varied every now and then by an awkward stumble, which was saved from being a fall by the man's prompt use of the reins.

It seemed as if they were hours on the road. The murky atmosphere, obscured by storm-clouds, made the evening grow dark earlier than is usual in northern latitudes. The heavy rumbling of the wretched vehicle, the cramped position in which they were obliged to sit, the fatigue of a long day's walking without rest or refreshment, the dreariness of the road and chill aspect of the weather, combined to make this journey as miserable a one as it well could be. Yet it was only the very beginning of the troubles Elsie had brought upon herself and Duncan.

She was not feeling in the best spirits just now, but she buoyed herself up by thinking of the future, and telling herself that every one who ever ran away from home had some adventures that seemed trying at the time, though they were quite interesting to hear of afterwards, and she tried to picture herself being put in a book as a heroine. And she was not in the least daunted, only inclined to feel very cross and snappish.

Duncan sat huddled up in a corner, with a face that might have served for a Dutch doll, it was so blank and wooden. He was not the sort of boy to cry, but down in his heart there was a very forlorn feeling, which he would not like Elsie to have known anything about.

Presently a drop of rain spattered on to Elsie's forehead—another, and another—and then, down it came in torrents. To Elsie's despair, the horse slackened his already slow pace, and finally stood still, trembling and snorting. They were on an open road, with not even a tree near by for shelter.

"Why don't he go on?" Elsie cried out.

"The rain blinds her. She can't see," the man replied.

"Then why don't you lead her?" Elsie cried, in her peremptory fashion.

Elsie was more inclined than ever to think that the man must be a little daft. He got down, and did as she had told him. It seemed as if he had not thought of it before. He was so dazed and muddle-headed, that he would have sat apathetically on his seat, waiting for the horse to go on, although he could certainly get no wetter than he was by walking.

The rain had added the last drop to their cup of discomfort. The children were wet through in a very short time, and they were far better clad than the man.

They went along in dismal procession, all reeking wet. It was now tolerably dark, and not a soul passed them. There was clearly nothing for it but to persuade the man to take them in at his cottage. Elsie began now to wonder what sort of a place so miserable-looking a creature lived in.

During this latter part of their journey, Duncan, too, had been wondering where they would sleep; but it was no good asking, he said to himself, for if Elsie didn't know she couldn't tell him, and he supposed she'd find out some place as soon as she could.

At last Elsie, straining her eyes through the gloom, could make out a twinkling light or two, and something like a cottage. The roadside was no longer open, but had the low stone walls so familiar to Scottish eyes. As they drew near Elsie could see that the tiny tenement was only some crofter's cottage, and that the walls enclosed his bit of land, not large enough to dignify with the name of farm. Then it suddenly dawned upon her that their friend of the cart was most likely one of these crofters, whose poverty and hardships she had often heard her mother and grandmother talk of.

They stopped at last before another of these tiny hovels, much farther up the road. A faint light struggled through the small thick panes of glass of a window little more than a half-yard square. The door opened as they drew up, and a woman came out, talking very fast and shrilly in the native Gaelic, which the children had often heard spoken, but understood scarcely at all. Elsie could make out that

she was scolding very much, but that was all. As she came near her eyes fell upon the two children. She stood still for a moment, her voluble speech checked by amazement and dismay.

Elsie sprang out, and seized the moment. "We are wet through with the rain," she said; "and it is a long way yet to Killochrie. I have some pennies I will give you if you will let us stay to-night in your cottage."

The woman stood eyeing her cautiously. So little as Elsie could see of her, she was not a pleasant-looking individual. She seemed to be a big bony creature, with loose locks of hair hanging about her face, and great bare arms held a-kimbo.

"Show me the money," the woman said, holding out her hand greedily.

Elsie hesitated, for the incident with the bread made her afraid of letting her whole stock be seen, but the rain was still pouring down, and a night's shelter must be secured somehow. She drew her handkerchief out of her pocket, and untying the knots, tried to slip a few pennies out, and keep the others unobserved among the folds.

But the woman watched her fumbling movements very narrowly, and suddenly made a dart at the handkerchief, chinking the copper coins together, with a rattle that betrayed them at once.

"I will take care of them," the woman said, holding out her hand. "Go in, then—you can," she added, with a shrug of the shoulder which did not express a very warm welcome.

However, there was nothing else to be done, so the children, Elsie leading Duncan by the hand, made their way up to the cottage door, while the woman went off with her husband to some unknown region, either to assist him with the horse, or, what was much more likely, to talk to him about the strange load he had brought home with him.

Elsie thought she had never seen anything so horrible as the sight that greeted her when she pushed the door wide open, and stood on the threshold of the crofter's home.

The tiny place was dirty in the extreme. The floor, which had been of boards, had rotted away in several places, showing the bare ground beneath. A broken rickety table and a few dilapidated chairs and stools were the only furniture, with the exception of an old clock standing against one of the walls. A shelf in one corner displayed a few odd pieces of coarse crockery, for the most part chipped and cracked, and some pieces of bread.

Elsie perceiving a door, ventured to lift the latch and look in. It opened into a still smaller apartment, the principal part of which was occupied by something on the floor intended for a bed, where two children lay sleeping. The ceiling was very low, and had an open space at one end, with a ladder, which appeared to lead into a kind of loft, where onions seemed to be stored, by the odour coming from it. As far as she could discover, these comprised the whole accommodation of the crofter's cottage.

While Elsie was wondering where they would have to sleep, the man and woman came in. Elsie had stripped off her soaking jacket, and was standing near the smoky peat fire, endeavouring to dry her wet skirts and feet. Poor Duncan had no outer coat to protect him, and was consequently wet to the very skin. He was standing in his shirt-sleeves, shivering, by Elsie's side.

"What is your name?" the woman asked of Elsie, in the slow measured accents of one who speaks a language not perfectly familiar.

"Our name is Grosvenor," Elsie said, with a warning glance at Duncan, which, however, the woman's quick eyes noted.

"What for you are going to Killochrie by yourselves?"

"Our mother is dead, and we are going to find our father," Elsie replied. "We were living with some one who was unkind to us."

"Oh, Elsie!" Duncan whispered, under his breath; but Elsie checked him peremptorily. Poor Duncan had never felt so wretched in his life before.

"Where was that?" the woman asked.

"Oh! a long way off," Elsie replied. "We've come miles and miles."

"What you call the place you ran away from?" the woman asked, angrily.

"It hadn't got any particular name," Elsie replied. "It was out on the moor."

"You will know the way back?" the woman asked.

"But I am not going back," Elsie said, defiantly. "We are going to Killochrie to-morrow morning."

The woman only smiled grimly, and pointing to two stools, signified to the children that they might sit down.

"Will you give us something to eat?" Elsie asked. "We are hungry—he took our bread and cheese."

"Cheese?" the woman said, eagerly. "Where is it?"

"He ate it," Elsie replied.

"The pig! the greedy one!" the woman cried, angrily, as she reached down a plate of bread from the corner shelf.

It was coarse and stale, but the children were too hungry to be disdainful. At home they would have scorned such a supper with infinite disgust, but now they ate it readily.

Presently, however, the woman got some more plates, and taking the lid off an iron pot that stood beside the fire, she ladled out a mass of what proved to be boiled onions. Having served her husband and herself, she handed a small quantity to the children, which they found palatable and comfortable in their wet, cold condition.

When this frugal meal was ended, she signed to them to follow her, and taking them into the next apartment, led the way up the ladder. They found themselves presently in a tiny loft, where all sorts of rubbish was stored, together with a stack of onions. The woman cleared a space by piling the things together in a more huddled mass than they were already, and bringing several sacks out of the confusion, threw them down on the floor to form a bed.

"Is that where we are to sleep?" Elsie asked. "What are we to have over us?"

The woman pointed to one of the sacks.

"Look how wet my frock is!" Elsie cried, almost in despair. "Can't you give us something to put over us while our things are getting dry?"

The woman went rummaging among the lumber, and presently brought out a ragged, old gown of her own. Elsie took it from her almost with a shudder of loathing.

She took off her sopping frock, and gave it to the woman to hang up. Then she rolled Robbie up in one of the sacks as well as she could, and spread another for him to lie down upon, leaving herself one sack to serve as a bed, and only the old rags the woman had given her for a covering.

They lay down, not in the highest possible spirits. Elsie was so angry at being robbed of her food and of her money, that she dwelt more upon this grievance than the wretched discomfort they were enduring, until she heard a faint sound of sobbing emerging from the sack in which Duncan was encased.

That sound smote her with an uncomfortable sense of reproach. "Never mind, dear," she whispered softly; "it'll be all right to-morrow. Get to sleep and forget it."

"If it were not for being poked up in this loft, I'd slip out, without bidding them 'good-bye,' as soon as it is light to-morrow morning," Elsie said to herself, with an uneasy reflection of what disagreeable greedy people they seemed to be. "Any way, we won't stay a minute longer than we're obliged."

Fortunately for Elsie, she had no idea how long that was to be. Nance Ferguson knew what she was doing, and why she had put them up in the loft.

(To be continued.)

HINTS ON CANVASINE PAINTING

This is the art of colouring a photograph so as to imitate an oil-painting. Although we know that no imitation of this kind can ever reach the perfection of the real article, yet we can obtain very fair copies. The work, when well done, is really pretty, and it makes a good show on the walls. It is not at all difficult, and those who have a slight knowledge of painting can easily accomplish some creditable pieces that they will enjoy seeing in their rooms, and that their friends will consider welcome presents. The colours are unobjectionable as regards smell, for they have none, and the work is clean, and can be rapidly done.

The choice of the photograph is of importance, for it must be a good one, and suitable for the purpose. Those taken from the pictures in the Munich, Dresden, and Italian galleries will be found best to select from. The outlines of the subject should be well defined, and the whole photograph clear and distinct. It is advisable to begin on figure subjects, as they are easiest, and certainly the most effective. The picture should not contain many figures, or they must necessarily in that case be small, and some difficulty will, in consequence, be met with in colouring them. Young amateurs seem to think that small pieces are more within their province: they are afraid to attempt a larger size, but we assure them this is a fallacy. Minute details require great care, and it is more awkward to get small washes level than larger ones.

The first thing to be done is to buy our materials, and these we can get all neatly arranged in a box. The colours are: two flesh tints, light and golden yellow, vermilion and carmine, blue, violet, purple, light and wood brown, green, and black. All the colours are dry, except black; and ordinary Chinese white is used, as there is no white specially made for canvasine.

There are two bottles of medium, one adhesive and one preservative. Camel's-hair brushes of various sizes, canvas and stretchers, a roller, and a squeegee, or presser, are also requisite.

Having all our materials at hand, let us set to work. The stretcher has been bought to suit the size of the photograph, but probably the latter will have to be cut a little round the edges, to make it just about an eighth of an inch smaller than the former. Take some of the prepared canvas, and cut it an inch and a half larger than the photo; wet it thoroughly, and fasten it to a board with drawing-pins, the prepared side uppermost. The back of the photo will require to be rubbed with glass-paper, if it is a thick one; not otherwise, for fear of making holes in it. To manage this carefully is important.

A sheet of clean paper should be laid on a drawing-board, and the photo placed on it face downwards, and firmly secured with drawing-pins. Now rub it gently with the glass-paper, until the picture is rendered semi-transparent. Then take it from the board, and give it a bath in the solution. Lay it in a dish, and cover it entirely with the solution, letting it remain there for a few minutes; lift it out, and again lay it on the board face downwards, and with a small sponge dab off any superfluity of liquid. Pour that which is left in the dish back into the bottle.

The bottle of canvasine adhesive is next needed. With a brush well filled with it, lay a thick coating all over the back of the photo as evenly as possible, then take up the picture, and place it in exact position on the canvas which is stretched on the board, and now the face must be uppermost. Notice particularly that the photo lies straight with the threads of canvas; if it is crookedly placed it cannot be expected to look well; the perpendicular and horizontal threads should run perfectly level with the top and bottom and sides of the picture. Press down the photo with the hand, and then slightly roll it out.

Take another piece of canvas of the same size as the first: this has now to be pressed thoroughly, the roller being passed in every direction over the surface. Continue rolling it for five minutes or more, so that the canvas lines become indented in the paper and are distinctly visible. Watch it constantly during the process, and if it does not adhere quite firmly to the stretched canvas, put a little more

adhesive solution round the edges, and pass the presser quickly up and down over the photo, still with the spare canvas between, to rid it of all air-bubbles; then repeat the rolling.

Not until every part of the photo adheres, and all the canvas lines are clearly marked, must the process of rolling be discontinued. After this, the photo must be allowed to dry gradually, still stretched on the board. No painting must be attempted until it is quite dry, which it will be in about three hours. Some prefer to paint it when it is so far prepared, and afterwards to fix it on the stretcher; others consider the better plan is to fix it first on the wooden stretcher and then to paint it; but this is a matter of choice, and workers may follow either plan with equal chances of success.

To stretch it, we must proceed in the following manner. Lay the canvas evenly on the frame and nail it over the back; when all four sides are thus secured, take the wedges, and hammer them into the holes made purposely for them until the canvas is sufficiently stretched. Be careful to place the board in a good light for painting; it takes much longer to do, and cannot be done half as well either, if the worker sits so that the shadow of her hand falls on the picture. A piece of clean writing-paper to place at times under the hand to prevent finger-marks may be found useful.

Now for the painting. We will begin with the face. In colouring photographs, the paints have to be constantly washed off, and it is a well-known fact that nothing does this so well as the tongue, because it acts on the photo so as to remove all grease better than anything else will: but some people will perhaps be somewhat afraid thus to wet the surface, on account of the nature of the paints. The tongue may, however, be used at any rate for the flesh parts, and a small wet sponge can be employed for the rest of the picture. Wet the complexion over with the tongue, then wash in the shadows with some flesh shadow mixture, to which a little canvasine medium and water have been added, and wipe it off again at once. Pay attention to the shadows that they are of the right tints: for fair children they will be of a slightly blue hue; for dark complexions a little wood brown must be added to the shadow colour. Now lay over the complexion a wash of flesh-tint No. 1, and wipe it off again directly; repeat the wash as often as necessary until a good colour is obtained. Sometimes as many as six applications are needed; the great point is to get a good even layer of colour. In rendering dark complexions, a trifle of wood brown may be added to flesh No. 2, and this will give the requisite depth of colour. Put in the warm complexion-tints with flesh No. 2. Place a drop of it, modified with No. 1, over the whole cheek, and wipe it off again immediately. Repeat until the right strength of colour is secured; deepen the tint as it nears the centre of the cheek, so as to preserve the rounded appearance that is one of the greatest charms that youth and beauty possess. Strengthen the shadows under eyes and eyebrows, round the nostrils, and on the chin.

Mixtures of blue and brown, and of green and brown, serve for the demi-tints which soften the deep shadows by gentle gradations into the local colouring. The tints may be effectually blended into one another by an occasional wash of flesh No. 1 being carried over the whole.

Between each operation the colour must be dabbed off as soon as it has had time to sink into the photograph; it must not in any case be allowed to rest long, or the wash will dry spotty, and when that happens it is exceedingly difficult to remedy. The draperies are washed in before the details of the face are begun, as when the latter are painted the colours must not be wiped off afterwards; they are not treated in the same way as the washes, but more as finishing-touches.

Draperies and backgrounds are laid in with a full brush in broad washes, the photograph being first damped slightly with canvasine medium; the colours are laid on freely with decisive strokes, and sponged off, the washes being continued until the tint is dark enough. Skies may be represented with blue tinged with green, and when dry, some light clouds may be dabbled in with Chinese white.

Now we return to the face. With flesh No. 2 touch in the lips carefully, and shade the tint off gently, for they must on no account look hard; also mark in the nostrils with a little of the same, but now the colour must not be washed off. For the eyes, use blue, brown, or grey, as requisite; grey is composed of a mixture of blue and brown. The pupil of the eye is put in with black, and the light with a touch of Chinese white. In the corner of the eye a trifle of flesh No. 2 will be needed. The

eyebrows should be rather darker in colour than the hair, but they must not be too heavily painted; the best plan is to wash them in with a lighter tint first, working them up afterwards with a fine brush and almost dry colour of a darker shade. The eyelashes, too, must be washed in along the eyelid, and then a few hairs marked out with the point of the brush. It would never do to put them in entirely in thin fine strokes, for they would be sure to look hard. A little blue added to brown will make a tint dark enough for most purposes, and the use of black should be avoided whenever possible.

The hair will need our next consideration. For fair hair, golden brown must be employed; it is applied in washes, wiped off as before, and repeated until the desired depth of local colouring is obtained; the shadows are worked in with light brown, the lights with a little Chinese white. For dark hair, use wood-brown and sienna; and the darkest hair may be rendered with washes of blue, which must be applied before the sienna, with Chinese white used freely for the lights. Colour which has once been allowed to sink in cannot be removed, therefore we must be careful not to use a wrong one, or even too dark a shade. Then, again, colours dry darker than they appear when first laid on, so we must take the precaution to make our washes lighter than we intend them to be when finished.

Beautiful tints can be produced by the admixture of the colours, and charming effects by the juxtaposition of colours that form an agreeable contrast.

A RACE ON THE SANDS

One cool and pleasant afternoon,
Before the sun was set,
A fox and other country folk
Upon the beach had met.
The creeping tide far out had ebb'd,
And by the shelving strand
There stretch'd a wide and level plain
Of glist'ning yellow sand.

The hare, the hound, the neighing steed,
The lowing ox, the deer,
The sheep, the hog, the braying ass,
The sea-gulls hovering near,
With groups of various birds and beasts,
Of sorts both tall and scrimp,
Were gather'd there upon the sands;
And thither came a shrimp.

Now Reynard, who was eager bent
Upon some cunning wile,
Did boldly challenge any beast
To race with him a mile.
But when nor horse, nor hare, nor hound
His challenge would receive,
Up started Shrimp, and cried, "Good sir,
To race you give me leave."

A burst of merriment then brake
From all the beasts around,
The westward-sinking sun did smile,
Though he utter'd not a sound.
Then out spoke Reynard, red with rage,
"Thou mak'st a mocking boast!"
But near him whisper'd Master Hare,
"Forget not how I lost."

The race anon was quickly plann'd,
Eftsoons a judge was nam'd,
And Fox and Shrimp quite ready stood,
Though Shrimp seem'd half-asham'd.
And now they start, one, two, away!
See, Reynard darts ahead,
Unconscious that sly Shrimp had jump'd
Upon his tail outspread.

There snug he lay, so close and warm,
While Reynard tore apace,
And laugh'd, as only shrimps can laugh,
In his comfortable place.
At length, as Reynard near'd the goal,
He slowly slacken'd speed,
And stopping, ere he touch'd the post,
He turn'd—he did indeed.

Then off hopp'd Shrimp, and stood at once
Up at the winning-place;
While Reynard still look'd back and cried,
"How now, who wins the race!
Where are you, villain? where are you?
Not e'en in sight, I trow!"
"Nay, pardon, sir," behind him cried
That sly Shrimp with a bow.

Then Reynard, all abash'd, did stare
To find himself outdone!
While the jeering crowd, in high delight,
Went wild at all the fun.
But Reynard could not bear their gibes:
He slunk in haste away;
Nor ever guess'd how Shrimp contriv'd
To win the race that day.

THE KING AND QUEEN'S QUARREL

(NARRATED BY A DOLL)

I was very pleased indeed, when I first came into the world, to find that I was to become the property of a King and Queen. I had seen a great deal of life through my shop-window, and had come to the conclusion that I was formed for high society. So therefore, when my new mistress said to me, "Dolly, I am the Queen to-day, and Bertie is the King," I was not at all surprised, but held myself as firmly as before.

The King and Queen sat together on one chair, which I suppose is the constant habit of Kings and Queens. They were both very nice and neat, for the nurse had just brushed their hair. The Queen was four years old, and the King was six. And they were both the very prettiest children you could see.

The little Queen had a blue print frock, and a little round face. She had pretty shy eyes that looked out from beneath a shock of curly hair. The little King was very pretty too. And he liked to play with dolls, which I always think is a nice trait of character in a boy.

"Oh, what a lovely doll!" cried the Queen, when she first saw me. I may repeat it without vanity, for I suppose it was true. Anyway it is exactly what everybody said the moment they set eyes on me. People always praise dolls to their faces, and that is what makes us look so conceited. Even when we are old, and battered, and worn-out we still preserve a somewhat conceited air—we still look pleased and proud of ourselves so long as there is one little child who loves us, and who thinks us pretty still.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.