Warner Susan

Opportunities

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http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23162099
Opportunities:
ISBN http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/30147

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Opportunities

CHAPTER I

It was the morning after that Sunday when Matilda had been baptized. The girls came down to prepare breakfast as usual; Maria in a very unsettled humour. She was cloudy and captious to a degree that Matilda could not understand. The kitchen was hot; the butter was soft; the milk was turned; the bread was dry. All things went wrong.

"It is no wonder the bread is dry," said Matilda; "it has been baked ever since last Friday."

"Thursday. I didn't say it was a wonder. Aunt Candy *will* have the bread dry. I hate it!"

"And it is no wonder the butter is soft, if you keep it up here in the kitchen. The kitchen must be hot, with this hot stove. But the milkman will be along directly."

"No, he won't. We always have to wait for him; or take the old milk. And I can't be bothered to keep the butter down cellar and be running for it fifty times in an hour. I have enough to do as it is. Whatever possessed Aunt Erminia to want corn bread this morning!"

"Does she want corn bread?"

"Yes."

"Well, corn bread is nice. I am glad of it."

"You wouldn't be glad if you had to make it. There! I knew it would be so. There isn't a speck of soda. Put on your bonnet, Matilda, and run round to Mr. Sample's and get some soda, will you? – and be quick. We shall be late, and then there will be a row."

"There won't be a *row*, Maria. Aunt Candy is always quiet."

"I wish she wouldn't, then. I hate people who are always quiet. I would rather they would flare out now and then. It's safer."

"For what? *Safer*, Maria?"

"Do go along and get your soda!" exclaimed Maria. "Do you think it will be safe to be late with breakfast?"

Maria was so evidently out of order this morning, that her sister thought the best way was to let her alone; only she asked, "Aren't you well, Maria?" and got a sharp answer; then she went out.

It was a delicious spring morning. The air stirred in her face its soft and glad breaths of sweetness; the sunlight was the very essence of promise; the village and the green trees, now out in leaf, shone and basked in the fair day. It was better than breakfast, to be out in the air. Matilda went round the corner, into Butternut Street, and made for Mr. Sample's grocery store, every step being a delight. Why could not the inside world be as pleasant as the outside? Matilda was musing and wishing, when just before she reached Mr. Sample's door, she saw what made

her forget everything else; even the mischievous little boy who belonged to Mrs. Dow. What was he doing here in Butternut Street? Matilda's steps slackened. The boy knew her, for he looked and then grinned, and then bringing a finger alongside of his nose in a peculiar and mysterious expressiveness, he repeated his old words —

"Ain't you green?"

"I suppose so," said Matilda. "I dare say I am. What then? Green is not the worst colour."

The boy looked at her, a little confounded.

"If you would come to Sunday-school," Matilda went on, "*you* would be a better colour than you are – by and by."

"What colour be I?" said the boy.

"You'd be a better colour," said Matilda. "Just come and see."

"I ain't green," the boy remonstrated.

Matilda passed on, went into Mr. Sample's and got her soda. She had a few cents of change. A thought came into her head. Peeping out, she saw that Mrs. Dow's boy was still lingering where she had left him. Immediately Matilda requested to have the worth of those cents in sugared-almonds; and with her little packages went into the street again. The boy eyed her.

"What is your name?" said Matilda.

"Hain't got none."

"Yes, you have. What does your mother call you at home?"

"She calls me – the worst of all her plagues," said the fellow, grinning.

"No, no; but when she calls you from somewhere – what does she call you?"

"She calls me out of the garding and down from the attic."

"Look here," said Matilda, showing a sugar-plum; "I'll give you that, if you will tell me."

The boy eyed it, and her, and finally said —

"Lem."

"Your name is Lem?"

He nodded.

"There, Lem, is a sugar-plum for you. Now if you'll come to Sunday-school next Sunday, and stay and behave yourself, I'll give you three more."

"Three more?" said the boy.

"Yes. Now come, and you'll like it."

And Matilda sped home with her soda.

"I should think you had been making the soda," said Maria; "you have been long enough. What kept you?"

"How *do* they make soda, I wonder?" said Matilda, looking at it. "Do you know, Maria?"

"I have enough to do to know how to get breakfast. Tilly, run and grind the coffee and make it – quick, will you? now I am in a hurry."

Matilda thought Maria might have done it herself, while she was waiting for the soda. But she said nothing of that. In ten minutes more the coffee was made, the corn bread was ready, and the ladies came down.

Matilda was in a mood as gentle as the morning, and almost as cloudless. Her morning's work and walk and the meeting with Lem Dow had given her an appetite; and the work of the night before had left a harmony in her spirit, as if sweet music were sounding there. Her little face was thus like the very morning itself, shining with the fair shining of inward beauty; in contrast with all the other faces at the table. For Clarissa's features were coldly handsome and calm; Mrs. Candy's were set and purposeful; and poor Maria's were sadly clouded and out of humour. Matilda took little heed of them all; she was thinking of Lemuel Dow.

"Matilda," said her aunt, suddenly – "I wish you to come to me every morning to read. A person who has taken the step you took last night, is no longer a child, but deserves to be treated as a woman. It is necessary that you should fit yourself for a woman's place. Come to me at ten o'clock. I will have you read to me some books that will make you better understand the things you have taken upon you, and the things you have done."

"Why, I am a child yet, Aunt Candy," Matilda answered in some dismay.

"You think so, do you?"

"Yes, ma'am, – I feel so; and I *am*."

"I thought you considered yourself more than a child. But you have assumed a woman's place, and it is now necessary that you should be fitted for it. *I* think the best way is to get the preparation first; but in your church, it seems, they prefer the other course.

You are under my care in the house, at any rate, and I shall do my duty by you."

"I do not understand you, Aunt Candy," Matilda spoke, quite bewildered.

"No, my dear, I suppose not. That is just what I think so objectionable. But we will do what we can to remedy it."

"What do you want to prepare me for, Aunt Erminia?"

"For your position, my dear, as a member of the Church. That is not a child's position. You have placed yourself in it; and now the question is how to enable you to maintain it properly. I cannot treat you as a child any longer."

Matilda wondered very much how she was to be treated. However, silence seemed the wisest plan at present.

"I suppose *I* am a child still," remarked Maria.

"I have never observed anything inconsistent with that supposition, my dear," her aunt serenely answered.

"And if I had been baptized last night, you would have more respect for me," went on poor Maria.

"My respect is not wholly dependent on forms, my dear. If it had been done in a proper way, of course, things would be different from what they are. I *should* have more respect for you."

"Clarissa has done it in a proper way, I suppose?"

"When she was of a proper age – yes; certainly."

"And then, what did she promise? All that they promised last night?"

"The vows are much the same."

"Well, people ought not to make vows till they are ready to keep them – ought they?"

"Certainly they should not."

"Well – "

"My dear, it is a very bad habit to begin every sentence with a 'well.' You do it constantly."

"Well, Aunt Candy – "

"There!" exclaimed Clarissa. "Again."

"Well, I don't care," said Maria. "I can't help it. I don't know when I do it. I was going to ask – and you put everything out of my head. – Aunt Candy, do you think Clarissa has given up, really, the pomps and vanities and all that, you know? She spent twenty-four dollars, I heard her say, on the trimming of that muslin dress; and she bought a parasol the other day for ten dollars, when one for three would have done perfectly well; and she pays always twelve dollars for her boots, twelve and ten dollars; when she could get nice ones for four and five. Now what's that?"

"It's impertinence," said Clarissa. "And untruth; for the four and five dollar boots hurt my feet."

"They are *exactly* the same," said Maria; "except the kid and the trimming and the beautiful making."

"Very well," said Clarissa, "I have a right to wear comfortable shoes, if I can get them."

"Then you have a right to pomps and vanities," returned Maria; "but I say you *haven't* a right, after you have declared and sworn you would have nothing to do with them."

"Mamma," said Clarissa, but with heightened colour, "Is this a child?"

"After the Shadywalk pattern," Mrs. Candy answered.

"Girls in Shadywalk have a *little* sense, when they get to be as old as sixteen," Maria went on. "Where you have been, perhaps they do not grow up so fast."

"People would put weights on their heads if they did," said Clarissa.

"It doesn't matter," said Maria. "You can imagine that I am as old as you are; and I say that it is more respectable not to make promises and vows than to make them and not keep them."

"Do not answer her, my dear," said Mrs. Candy.

"And that is the reason why I have *not* been baptized, or whatever you call it – "

"I never said so, Maria," said her aunt. "The two things are not the same."

"Imagine it!" said Clarissa.

"Well, you said just now – I don't know what you said! – but you said at any rate that if it had been done in a proper way, you would think more of me; and *I* say, that it is better not to make vows till you are ready to keep them. I am not ready to give up dancing; and I would have expensive hats and dresses, and feathers, and watches, and chains, and everything pretty that money can buy, if I had the money; and I like them; and I want them."

"I have not given up dancing," said Clarissa.

"Nor other things either," retorted Maria; "but they are pomps and vanities. That is what I say. You promised you would have nothing to do with them."

"Mamma!" said Clarissa, appealingly.

"Yes, my dear," said her mother. "The amount of ignorance in Maria's words discourages me from trying to answer them."

"Ignorance and superstition, mamma."

"And superstition," said Mrs. Candy.

"Matilda thinks just the same way," Clarissa went on, meeting the broad open astonished eyes of the little girl.

"Of course," said Mrs. Candy. "Matilda is too much a child to exercise her own judgment on these matters. She just takes what has been told her."

"Have you given up dancing too, Tilly?" Clarissa went on.

"I have never thought about it, Cousin Clarissa."

"Matilda all over!" exclaimed the young lady. "She has not thought about it, mamma. When she thinks about it, she will know what her part is."

"Very well," said Mrs. Candy. "She might do worse."

"I suppose you think I can't think," said poor Maria.

"No, my dear; I only think you have not begun yet to use your power in that direction. When you do, you will see things differently."

"It would take a good deal of thinking, to make me see that giving up the world and going into it were the same thing," said Maria. "And I don't mean to promise to do it till I'm ready."

"Mamma, this is not very pleasant," said Clarissa.

"No, my dear. We will leave the field to Maria. Come to me at ten o'clock, Matilda."

The two ladies filed off up-stairs, and Maria sat down to cry. Matilda began to clear the table, going softly back and forth between the basement and the kitchen as if there were trouble in the house. Maria sobbed.

"Ain't they mean?" she exclaimed, starting up at length. Matilda was busy going in and out, and said nothing.

"Matilda! Why don't you speak? I say, ain't they mean?"

"There's no use in talking so, Maria," said her little sister, looking sorrowful.

"Yes, there is. People ought to hear the truth."

"But if you know what is right, why don't you *do* it, Maria?"

"I do – as well as I can."

"But, Maria! – I mean, about what you were saying; giving up whatever is not right."

"Things are right for other people, that are not right for members of the Church. That's why I want to wait awhile. I am not ready."

"But, Maria, what makes them right for other people?"

"They have not promised anything about them. Clarissa has *promised*, and she don't do."

"You have not promised."

"No, of course I haven't."

"But if they are right things, Maria, why *should* you, or

anybody, promise not to have anything to do with them?"

"Oh, you are too wise, Matilda!" her sister answered impatiently. "There is no need for you to go to read with Aunt Candy; you know everything already."

The rest of the morning was very silent between the sisters, till it came to the time for Matilda to present herself in her aunt's room. There meanwhile a consultation had been held.

"Mamma, that girl is getting unendurable."

"Must wait a little while, my dear."

"What will you do with her then?"

"Something. I can send her to school, at any rate."

"But the expense, mamma?"

"It is not much, at the district school. That is where she has been going."

"Matilda too?"

"I suppose that will be the best place. I am not sure about sending Matilda. She's a fine child."

"She will be handsome, mamma."

"She is very graceful now. She has a singular manner."

"But she is spoiled, mamma!"

"I shall unspoil her. Tilly is very young yet, and she has not had enough to do. I shall give her something else to think of, and get these absurdities out of her head. She just wants something to do."

"Mamma, she is not an easy child to influence. She says so little and keeps her own counsel. I think you don't know her."

"I never saw the child yet that was a match for me," said Mrs. Candy, complacently. "I like best one that has some stuff in her. Maria is a wet sponge; you can squeeze her dry in a minute; no character, no substance. Matilda is different. I should like to keep Tilly."

"If you could keep her out of Mr. Richmond's influence, mamma, it would be a help. That church ruins her. She will be fit for nothing."

"I will take the nonsense out of her," said Mrs. Candy. "I cannot take her out of the church, while we remain here, for that would raise a hue and cry; but I will do as well. Here she comes."

A little soft knock at the door was followed by the little girl herself; looking demure and sweet, after her fashion lately. It used to be arch and sweet. But Matilda had been very sober since her mother's death. The room into which she came had an air now very unlike all the rest of the house. Mrs. Englefield's modest preparations for the comfort of her guests were quite overlaid and lost sight of. It was as if some fairy had shaken her hand over the room, and let fall pleasant things everywhere. On the Marseilles quilt a gorgeous silk coverlet lay folded. On the dressing-table a confusion of vases and bottles, in coloured glass and painted china, were mixed up with combs and brushes and fans and watch pockets and taper stands. The table in the middle of the floor was heaped with elegant books and trinkets and work-boxes and writing implements; and book stands and book shelves were about, and soft foot cushions were dropped

on the carpet, and easy arm-chairs stood conveniently, and some faint perfume breathed all through the room. Mrs. Candy was in one arm-chair and Clarissa in another.

Matilda was bidden to take a cricket, which she privately resented, and then her aunt placed in her hands a largish volume and pointed her to the page where she was to begin. Glancing up and down, at the top of the page and the beginning of the book, Matilda found it was a treatise, or a collection of advices, for the instruction of persons about to be received into the Church. Not a little dismayed by this discovery, no less than by the heavy look of the pages, Matilda however began her reading. It was dragging work, as she expected. Her thoughts wandered. What could her aunt think she wanted with *this*, when she had Mr. Richmond's instructions? What could these ponderous reasonings be expected to add to his words? The immediate effect of them certainly was not salutary to Matilda's mind.

"My dear, you do not read so well as usual," her aunt said at length.

Matilda paused, glad to stop even for a little.

"Your sentences come heavily from your tongue."

"Yes. They *are* heavy, aunt Candy."

"My dear! Those are the words of the Rev. Benjamin Orderly – a very famous writer, and loved by all good people. Those are excellent words that you have been reading."

Matilda said nothing further.

"Did you understand them?"

"They did not interest me, aunt Candy."

"My dear, they ought to interest one who has just taken such a step as you have taken."

Matilda wondered privately whether being baptized ought properly to have any effect to change the natural taste and value of things; but she did not answer.

"You understood what you read, did you?"

Matilda coloured a little.

"Aunt Candy, it was not interesting, and I did not think about it."

Mrs. Candy drew the book severely from Matilda's hand.

"After taking such a step as you took last night, you ought to try to be interested, if it were only for consistency's sake. Do you see that you were hasty? A person who does not care about the privileges and duties of church membership most certainly ought not to be a church member."

"But, aunt Candy, I do care," said Matilda.

"So it seems."

"I care about it as the Bible speaks of it; and as Mr. Richmond talks about it."

"You are very fond of Mr. Richmond, I know."

Matilda added nothing to that, and there was a pause.

"Do you want anything more of me, Aunt Candy?"

"Yes. I want to teach you something useful. Here are a quantity of stockings of yours that need mending. I am going to show you how to mend them. Go and get your work-box and bring it here."

"Couldn't you tell me what you want me to do, Aunt Candy, and let me go and do it where Maria is?"

"No. Maria is busy. And I have got to take a good deal of pains to teach you, Tilly, what I want you to know. Go fetch your box and work things."

Matilda slowly went. It was so pleasant to be out of that perfumed room and out of sight of the Rev. Mr. Orderly's writings. She lingered in the passages; looked over the balusters and listened, hoping that by some happy chance Maria might make some demand upon her. None came; the house was still; and Matilda had to go back to her aunt. She felt like a prisoner.

"Now I suppose you have no darning cotton," said Mrs. Candy. "Here is a needleful. Thread it, and then I will show you what next."

"This is three or four needlefuls, aunt Candy. I will break it. I cannot sew with such a thread."

"Stop. Yes, you can. Don't break it. I will show you. Thread your needle."

"I haven't one big enough."

That want was supplied.

"Now you shall begin with running this heel," said Mrs. Candy. "See, you shall put this marble egg into the stocking, to darn upon. Now look here. You begin down here, at the middle, so – and take up only one thread at a stitch, do you see? and skip so many threads each time – "

"But there is no hole there, Aunt Erminia."

"I know that. Heels should always be run before they come to holes. There are half-a-dozen heels here, I should think, that require to be run. Now, do you see how I do it? You may take the stocking, and when you have darned a few rows, come and let me see how you get on."

Matilda in a small fit of despair took the stocking to a little distance and sat down to work. The marble egg was heavy to hold. It took a long while to go up one side of the heel and down the other. She was tired of sitting under constraint and so still. And her Aunt Candy seemed like a jailer, and that perfumed room like a prison. The quicker her work could be done, the better for her. So Matilda reflected, and her needle went accordingly.

"I have done it, Aunt Erminia," she proclaimed at last.

"Done the heel?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You cannot possibly. Come here and let me look at it. Why, of course! That is not done as I showed you, Tilly; these rows of darning should be close together, one stitch just in the middle between two other stitches; you have just gone straggling over the whole heel. That will have to come all out."

"But there is no hole in it," said Matilda.

"Always darn *before* the holes come. That will not do. You must pick it all out, Tilly."

"Now?" said Matilda, despairingly.

"Certainly now. You make yourself trouble in that way. I am

sorry. Pick it all neatly out."

Matilda went at it impatiently; tugged at the thread; pulled the heel of her stocking into a very intricate drawn-up state; then had to smooth it out again with difficulty.

"This is very hard to come out," she said.

"Yes, it is bad picking," said her aunt, composedly.

Matilda was very impatient and very weary besides. However, work did it, in time.

"Now see if you can do it better," said Mrs. Candy.

"*Now*, Aunt Erminia?"

"Certainly. It is your own fault that you have made such a business of it. You should have done as I told you."

"But I am *very* tired."

"I dare say you are."

Matilda was very much in the mind to cry; but that would not have mended matters, and would have hurt her pride besides. She went earnestly to work with her darning needle instead. She could use it nicely, she found, with giving pains and time enough. But it took a great while to do a little. Up one side and down the other; then up that side and down the first; threading long double needlefuls, and having them used up with great rapidity; Matilda seemed to grow into a darning machine. She was very still; only a deep-drawn long breath now and then heaved her little breast. Impatience faded, however, and a sort of dulness crept over her. At last she became very tired, so tired that pride gave way, and she said so.

Mrs. Candy remarked that she was sorry.

"Aunt Candy, I think Maria may want me by this time."

"Yes. *That* is of no consequence."

"Maria has got no one to help her."

"She will not hurt herself," Clarissa observed.

"Aunt Erminia, wouldn't you just as lieve I should finish this by and by?"

"I will think of that," said her aunt. "All you have to do, is to work on."

"I am very tired of it!"

"That is not a reason for stopping, my dear. Rather the contrary. One must learn to do things after one is tired. That is a lesson I learned a great while ago."

"I cannot work so well or so fast, when I am tired," said Matilda.

"And I cannot work at all while you are talking to me."

Matilda's slow fingers drew the needle in and out for some time longer. Then to her great joy, the dinner bell rang.

"What does Maria mean?" said Mrs. Candy, looking at her watch. "It wants an hour of dinner-time. Run and see what it is, Matilda."

Matilda ran down-stairs.

"Do you think I have five pairs of hands?" inquired Maria, indignantly. "It is nice for you to be playing up-stairs, and I working as hard as I can in the kitchen! I won't stand this, I can tell you."

"Playing!" echoed Matilda. "Well, Maria, what do you want done?"

"Look and see. You have eyes. About everything is to be done. There's the castors to put in order, and the lettuce to get ready – I wish lettuce wouldn't grow! – and the table to set, and the sauce to make for the pudding. Now hurry."

It was absolutely better than play, to fly about and do all these things, after the confinement of darning stockings. Matilda's glee equalled Maria's discomfiture. Only, when it was all done and the dinner ready, Matilda stood still to think. "I am sorry I was so impatient this morning up-stairs," she said to herself.

CHAPTER II

Matilda's spirits were not quite used up by the morning's experience, for after dinner she put on her bonnet, and took her Bible, and set off on an expedition, with out asking leave of anybody. She was bent upon getting to Lilac Lane. "If I do not get there to-day, I don't know when I shall," she said to herself. "There is no telling what Aunt Candy will do."

She got there without any difficulty. It was an overcast, Aprilish day, with low clouds, and now and then a drop of rain falling. Matilda did not care for that. It was all the pleasanter walking. Lilac Lane was at some distance from home, and the sun had a good deal of power on sunny days now. The mud was all gone by this time; in its place a thick groundwork of dust. Winter frost was replaced by soft spring air; but that gave a chance for the lane odours to come out – not the fragrance of hawthorn and primrose, by any means. Nor any such pleasant sight to be seen. Poor, straggling, forlorn houses; broken fences, or no courtyards at all; thick dust, and no footway; garbage, and ashes, and bones, but never even so much as a green potato patch to greet the eye, much less a rose or a pink; an iron shop, and a livery stable at the entrance of the lane, seeming dignified and elegant buildings by comparison with what came afterwards. Few living things were abroad; a boy or two, and two or three babies making discomposure in the dust, were about all. Matilda

wondered if every one of those houses did not need to have the message carried to them? Where was she to begin?

"Does Mrs. Eldridge live in this house, or in that?" Matilda asked a boy in her way.

"In nary one."

"Where *does* she live?"

"Old Sally Eldridge? Sam's grandmother?"

"I don't know anything about Sam," said Matilda. "She lives alone."

"Well, *she* lives alone. That's her door yonder – where the cat sits."

"Thank you." Matilda thought to ask if the boy went to Sunday-school; but she felt as if all the force she had would be wanted to carry her through the visit to Mrs. Eldridge. It was a forlorn-looking doorway; the upper half of the door swinging partly open; the cottage dropping down on one side, as if it was tired of the years when it had stood up; not a speck of paint to be seen anywhere, and little, bare, broken windows, not even patched with rags. Matilda walked up to the door and knocked, sorely appalled at the view she got through the half-open doorway. No answer. She knocked again. Then a weak, "Who is it?"

Matilda let herself in. There was a worn and torn rag carpet; an unswept floor; boards and walls that had not known the touch of water or soap in many, many months; a rusty little stove with no fire in it; and a poor old woman, who looked in all respects

like her surroundings; worn and torn and dusty and unwashed and neglected. To her Matilda turned, with a great sinking of heart. What could *she* do?

"Who's here?" said the old woman, who did not seem to have her sight clear.

"Matilda Englefield."

"I don't know no such a person."

"Maybe you would like to know me," said Matilda. "I am come to see you."

"What fur? I hain't sent for nobody. Who told you to come?"

"No, I know you didn't. But I wanted to come and see you, Mrs. Eldridge."

"What fur? You're a little gal, bain't you?"

"Yes, ma'am; and I thought maybe you would like to have me read a chapter in the Bible to you."

"A *what?*" said the old woman with strong emphasis.

"A chapter in the Bible. I thought – perhaps you couldn't see to read it yourself."

"Read?" said the old creature. "Never could. I never could see to read, for I never knowed how. No, I never knowed how; I didn't."

"You would like to hear reading, now, wouldn't you? I came to read to you a chapter – if you'll let me – out of the Bible."

"A chapter?" the old woman repeated – "what's a chapter now? It's no odds; 'taint bread, nor 'taint 'baccy."

"No, it is not tobacco," said Matilda; "but it is better than

tobacco."

"Couldn't ye get me some 'baccy, now?" said the old woman, as if with a sudden thought. But Matilda did not see her way clear to that; and the hope failing, the failure of everything seemed to be expressed in a long-drawn "heigh-ho!" which ran wearily down all the notes of the gamut. Matilda felt she was not getting on. The place and the woman were inexpressibly forlorn to her.

"Who sent ye fur to come here?" was next asked.

"Nobody sent me."

"What fur did ye come?"

"I thought you would like to hear a little reading."

"'Taint a song, is it? I used fur to hear songs oncet; they don't sing songs in this village. They sells good 'baccy, though. Heigh-ho!"

Matilda grew desperate. She was not making any headway. As a last expedient, she opened her book, plunged into the work, and gave in the hearing of Mrs. Eldridge a few of its wonderful sentences. Maybe those words would reach her, thought Matilda. She read slowly the twenty-third psalm, and then went back to the opening verse and read it again.

"'The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.'"

Mrs. Eldridge had been very still.

"A shepherd," she repeated, when Matilda had stopped; – "he used fur to be a shepherd."

Matilda wondered very much what the old lady was thinking of. Her next words made it clearer.

"He kept sheep fur Mr. – Mr. – him they called the Judge; I don't mind who he was. He kept sheep for him, he did."

"Judge Brockenhurst?"

"That was it – I can't speak his name; he kept his sheep. It was a big place."

"Yes, I know Judge Brockenhurst's place," said Matilda; "he has a great many sheep. *Who* kept them?"

"He did, dear. My old man. He kept 'em. It's long sen."

"Well, didn't he take good care of them, the sheep?"

"My old man? Ay, did he. There warn't no better a shepherd in the country. He took care of 'em. The Judge sot a great deal by him."

"How did he take care of them?" Matilda asked.

"Oh, I don' know. He watched 'em, and he took 'em round, and he didn't let no harm happen to 'em. He didn't."

"Well, this I read was about the Good Shepherd and *His* sheep. He takes care of them, too. Don't you think the Lord Jesus takes care of His sheep?"

"He don't take no care o' me," said the poor old woman. "There ain't no care took o' me anywheres – neither in heaven nor in earth. No, there ain't."

"But are you one of His sheep?" said Matilda, doubtfully.

"Eh?" said the woman, pricking up her ears, as it were.

"Are you one of the Lord's sheep, Mrs. Eldridge?"

"Am I one of 'em? I'm poor enough fur to be took care of; I am, and there ain't no care took o' me. Neither in heaven nor on

earth. No, there ain't."

"But are you one of His sheep?" Matilda persisted. "His sheep follow Him. Did you ever do that, ma'am? Were you ever a servant of the Lord Jesus?"

"A servant? I warn't no servant, nowheres," was the answer. "I had no need to do that. We was 'spectable folks, and we had our own home and lived in it, we did. I warn't never no servant o' nobody."

"But we all ought to be God's servants," said Matilda.

"Eh? – I hain't done no harm, I hain't. Nobody never said as I done 'em no harm."

"But the servants of Jesus love Him, and obey Him, and do what He says," Matilda repeated, growing eager. "They do just what He says, and they love Him, and they love everybody, because He gives them new hearts."

"I don't know as He never give me nothing," said Mrs. Eldridge.

"Did you ever ask Him for a new heart? and did you ever try to please Him? Then you would be one of His sheep, and He would take care of you."

"Nobody takes no care o' me," said the poor woman, stolidly.

"Listen," said Matilda. "This is what he says —

"'I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.' He cared so much for you as that. 'I am the good shepherd, and know My sheep, and am known of Mine. As the Father knoweth Me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down

My life for the sheep.'

"He cared so much for you as that. He died that you might be forgiven and live. Don't say He didn't care?"

"I didn't know as He'd never done nothing fur me," said Mrs. Eldridge.

"He did that. Listen, now, please,"

"'My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them Me, is greater than all; and none is able to pluck them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one.'"

Matilda lifted her head and sought, in the faded blue eye over against her, if she could find any response to these words. She fancied there was a quieter thoughtfulness in it.

"That has a good sound," was the old woman's comment, uttered presently. "But I'm old now, and I can't do nothing; and there ain't nobody to take care o' me. There ain't."

Matilda glanced over the desolate room. It was dusty, dirty, neglected, and poverty stricken. What if *she* had been sent to "take care" of Mrs. Eldridge? The thought was exceedingly disagreeable; but once come, she could not get rid of it.

"What do you want, Mrs. Eldridge?" she asked at length.

"I don't want no more readin'. But it has a good sound – a good sound."

"What would you like to have somebody do for you? not reading."

"There was folks as cared fur me," said the old woman. "There ain't none no more. No more. There ain't no one as cares."

"But if there *was* some one – what would you tell her to do for you? – now, to-day?"

"Any one as cared would know," said Mrs. Eldridge. "There's 'most all to do. 'Spect I'd have a cup o' tea for my supper – 'spect I would."

"Don't you have tea? Won't you have it to-night?"

The feeble eye looked over at the little rusty stove.

"There ain't no fire," she said; "nor nothing to make fire; it's cold; and there ain't nobody to go out and get it fur me – I can't go pick up sticks no more. An' if I had the fire, there ain't no tea. There ain't no one as cares."

"But what will you have then?" said Matilda. "What do you have for supper?"

"Go and look," said Mrs. Eldridge, turning her head towards a corner cupboard, the doors of which stood a little open. "If there's anything, it's there; if it ain't all eat up."

Matilda hesitated; then thought she had better know the state of things, since she had leave; and crossed to the cupboard door. It was a problem with her how to open it; so long, long it was since anything clean had touched the place; she made the end of her glove finger do duty and pulled the cupboard leaves open.

She never forgot what she saw there, nor the story of lonely and desolate life which it told. Two cups and saucers, one standing in a back corner, unused and full of cobwebs, the other

cracked, soiled, grimy, and full of flies. Something had been in it; what, Matilda could not examine. On the bare shelf lay a half loaf of bread, pretty dry, with a knife alongside. A plate of broken meat, also full of flies, and looking, Matilda thought, fit for the flies alone, was there; a cup half full of salt; an empty vinegar cruet, an old shawl, ditto hood; a pitcher with no water; an old muslin cap, half soiled; a faded bit of ribband, and a morsel of cheese flanked by a bitten piece of gingerbread. Matilda came back sick at heart.

"Where do you sleep, Mrs. Eldridge? and who makes your bed? Or can you make it?"

"Sleep?" said the old woman. "Nobody cares. I sleep in yonder."

Matilda looked, doubted, finally crossed the room again and pushed a little inwards the door Mrs. Eldridge had looked at. She came back quickly. So close, so ill-smelling, so miserable to her nice senses, the room within was; with its huddled up bundle of dirty coverlets, and the soiled bed under them on the floor. Not much of a bed either, and not much else in the room. A great burden was gathering on Matilda's heart and shoulders; the burden of the wants of her neighbour, and her own responsibilities.

The afternoon was now waning; what was to be done? Matilda tried to think that somebody would come in and do what she herself was very unwilling to do; but conscience reminded her that it was very unlikely. Did that neglected cupboard give much

promise of kind attendance or faithful supply? or that rusty stove look like neighbourly care? But then Matilda pleaded to herself that she had her own work, and not much time; and that such a dirty place was very unfit for her nice little hands.

"Good-bye, Mrs. Eldridge," she said, lingering. "I'll come and see you again."

"'Taint a pleasant place to come to," said the old woman. "'Taint a pleasant place fur nobody. And nobody comes to it. Nobody comes."

"I'll come, though," said Matilda. She could do so much as that, she thought. "Good-bye. I must go home."

She left the old woman and the house, and began her walk. The lane, she observed, looked as if other houses and other people in it might be as ill off as those she had been visiting. "She is not worse than a number of others, I dare say," thought Matilda. "I could not visit them all, and I could not certainly take care of them all. It really makes little difference on the whole, whether or no I kindle Mrs. Eldridge's fire. It is delightful to get away from the place."

And then Matilda tried to think that in making her visit and reading to the old woman, she had really done a good deal; made a good afternoon's work. Nobody else had done even so much as that; not even anybody in all Shadywalk. The walk home was quite pleasant, under the soothing influence of these thoughts. Nevertheless, a little secret point of uneasiness remained at Matilda's heart. She did not stop to look at it, until she and Maria

went up to bed. Then, as usual, while Maria got ready for sleep, Matilda knelt down before the table where her open Bible lay under the lamp; and there conscience met her.

And when conscience meets any one, it is the same thing as to say that the Lord meets him.

That was what Matilda felt this night. For her reading fell upon the story of the woman who brought the precious ointment for the head of Jesus, and poured it upon His feet also; whom the Lord, when she was chidden, commended; saying, "Ye have the poor with you always, and whensoever ye will ye may do them good: but Me ye have not always. She hath done what she could."

Had Matilda? And these poor whom we have always with us, she recollected that in another place the Lord in a sort identifies Himself with them, saying that what is done to His poor is done to Himself. Mrs. Eldridge was not indeed one of the Lord's children, but that did not help the matter. "For perhaps she will be," Matilda said to herself. And what if the Lord had sent Matilda there now to be His messenger? The success of the message might depend on the behaviour of the messenger. But above all it pressed upon Matilda's heart that she had not done what she *could;* and that in declining to make a fire in Mrs. Eldridge's rusty little stove and in shrinking from waiting upon her, she had lost a chance of waiting upon, perhaps, the Lord himself.

"And it was such a good chance," thought Matilda; "such a good afternoon; and there is no telling when I may get another.

It was such a good opportunity. And I lost it."

The pain of a lost opportunity was something she had not counted upon. It pressed hard, and was not easy to get rid of. The disagreeableness of the place and the service faded into nothing before this pain. Matilda went to bed with a sore heart, resolving to watch for the very first chance to do what she had neglected to do this afternoon.

But Lilac Lane looked very disagreeable to her thoughts the next day, and the sharp effect of the Bible words had faded somewhat.

"Maria," she said as they were washing up the dishes after breakfast, – "I wish you would help me in something."

"What?"

"Do you call yourself a member of the Band yet?"

"Of course I do. What do you ask for?"

"I did not know," said Matilda, sighing. "You don't *do* the things promised in the covenant. I didn't know but you had given it all up."

"What don't I do?" inquired Maria, fiercely.

"Don't be angry, please, Maria. I do not mean to make you angry."

"What don't I do, Matilda?"

"You know, the covenant says, 'we stand ready to do His will.' He has commanded that we should be baptized and join the Church, and that we should follow Him – you know how, Maria. And you don't seem to like to do it."

"Is that all?"

"That is all about that."

"Then, if you will mind your affairs, Matilda, I will try and mind mine. And I will be much obliged to you."

"Then you will not help me?"

"Help in what?"

"There is a poor woman, Maria," said her little sister, lowering her voice, "a poor old woman, who has no one to take care of her, and hardly anything to live upon. She lives – you can't think how she lives! – in the most miserable little house, dirty and all; and without fire or anybody to sweep her room, or make her bed, or make a cup of tea for her. If you would help me, we might do something to make her comfortable."

"Where is she?"

"In Lilac Lane."

"Have you been to see her?"

"Yes."

"What do you think Aunt Candy would say if she knew it?"

"Will you help me, Maria?"

"Help make her bed and sweep her room?"

"Yes, and get her a cup of tea sometimes, and a clean supper."

"A clean supper!" exclaimed Maria. "Well! Yes, I guess I'll help you, when I have nothing of my own to do. When the dinner gets itself, and the house stays swept and dusted, and Aunt Candy lives without cakes for breakfast."

Matilda was silent.

"But I'll tell you what, Matilda," said her sister, "Aunt Candy will never let you do this sort of work. You may as well give it up peaceably, and not worry yourself nor anybody else. She'll never let you go into Lilac Lane – not to speak of getting dirty people's dinners. You may as well quit it."

"Don't tell her, Maria."

"You'll tell her yourself, first thing," said Maria, scornfully.

Matilda had to go up-stairs soon to her reading in her aunt's room. It was even more unintelligible, the reading, this time than before; because Matilda's head was running so busily on something else.

"You do not read well, child," said her aunt.

"No, ma'am. I do not understand it."

"But it is about what you have just done, Matilda. It is about the ordinance of baptism, and the life proper to a person who has been received into the Church. You ought to understand that."

"I *do* understand it, in the Bible."

"What does the Bible say about it?"

"It says, – 'My sheep hear My voice: and I know them, and they follow Me.'"

"What do you mean by 'following Him'?"

"Why, living the sort of life He lived, and doing what He tells us to do."

"How do you propose to live the sort of life He lived? It's almost blasphemy."

"Why, no, aunt Candy; He tells us to do it."

"Do what?"

"Live the sort of life He lived. He says we must follow Him."

"Well, how, for instance? In what?"

"You know how *He* lived," said Matilda. "He helped people, and He taught people, and He cured people; He was always doing good to people, and trying to make them good. Especially poor, miserable people, that nobody cared for."

"Trying to make them good!" said Mrs. Candy. "As if His omnipotence could not have made them good in a minute."

"Then why didn't He?" said Matilda, simply. "It *sounds* as if He was trying to make them good."

"Well, child – it's no use talking; I wish I had had the training of you earlier," said Mrs. Candy. "You are so prepossessed with ideas that border on fanaticism, that it is a hard matter to get you into right habits of thinking. Come here and take your darning."

So Matilda did. The darning was not wearisome at all to-day, so busy her thoughts were with the question of Mrs. Eldridge; how much or how little Matilda ought to do for her, how much she *could*, and what were the best arrangements to be set on foot. So intent she was on these questions, that the darning was done with the greatest patience, and therefore with the greatest success. Mrs. Candy and her daughter even looked at each other and smiled over the demure, thoughtful little face of the workwoman; and Matilda got praise for her work.

She had made up her mind meanwhile that "she hath done what she could" – should be her rule to go by. So as the after

noon was fair, and Mrs. Candy and her daughter both gone to make a visit at some miles' distance, Matilda sallied forth.

"Did she give you leave?" Maria asked, as she saw her sister getting ready.

"No."

"She wants you to ask leave always."

"I never used to do that," said Matilda. Her voice choked before she could finish her sentence.

"You will get into trouble."

"One trouble is better than another, though," said Matilda; and she went.

She went first to Mr. Sample's, and asked how much a pound of tea cost.

"The last I sent your aunt," said Mr. Sample, "was one fifty a pound; and worth it. Don't she approve the flavour?"

"I believe so. But I want a little of another kind, Mr. Sample – if you have any that is good, and not so high."

"I have an excellent Oolong here for a dollar. Will you try that?"

"Please give me a quarter of a pound."

"She will like it," said Mr. Sample, weighing the quantity and putting it up; "it really has as much body as the other sort, and I think it is very nearly as good. The other is fifty cents a pound more. Tell Mrs. Candy I can serve her with this if she prefers."

"I want a loaf of bread too, if you please."

"Baking failed?" said Mr. Sample. "Here, Jem, give this little

girl a loaf."

He himself went to attend another customer, so Matilda paid for her purchases without any more questions being asked her. She went to another store for a little butter, and there also laid in a few herrings; and then, with a full basket and a light heart, took the way to Lilac Lane.

CHAPTER III

Mrs. Eldridge was as she had left her yesterday; a trifle more forlorn, perhaps. The afternoon being bright and sunny, made everything in the house look more grimy and dusty for the contrast. Matilda shrank from having anything to do with it. But yet, the consciousness that she carried a basket of comfort on her arm was a great help.

"Good morning, Mrs. Eldridge; how do you do?" she said, cheerily.

"Is it that little gal?"

"Yes, it is I, Mrs. Eldridge. I said I would come back. How do you do, to-day?"

"I'm most dead," said the poor woman. Matilda was startled; but looking again, could not see that her face threatened anything like it. She rather thought Mrs. Eldridge was tired of life; and she did not wonder.

"You don't feel ill, do you?"

"No," the woman said, with a long drawn sigh. "There ain't no sickness got hold o' me yet. There's no one as 'll care when it comes."

"Would you like a cup of tea this afternoon?"

"Tea?" said the poor woman, "I don't have no tea, child. Tea's for the folks as has money, or somebody to care for 'em."

"But I care for you," said Matilda, gently. "And the Lord Jesus

cares. And He gave me the money to get some tea, and I've got it. Now I'm going to make a fire in the stove. Is there any wood anywhere?"

"Fire?" said Mrs. Eldridge.

"Yes. To boil the kettle, you know. Is there any wood anywhere?"

"Have you got some tea?"

"Yes, and now I want to make the kettle boil. Where can I get some wood?"

"Kettle?" said the old woman. "I hain't no kettle."

"No tea-kettle?"

"No. It's gone. There ain't none."

"What is there, then, that I can boil some water in?"

"There's a skillet down in there," said Mrs. Eldridge, pointing to the under part of the corner cupboard which Matilda had looked into the day before. She went now to explore what remained. The lower part had once been used, it seemed, for pots and kettles and stove furniture. At least it looked black enough; and an old saucepan and a frying-pan, two flat-irons very rusty, and a few other iron articles were there. But both saucepan and frying-pan were in such a state that Matilda could not think of using them. Days of purification would be needed first. So she shut the cupboard door, and came back to the question of fire; for difficulties were not going to overcome her now. And there were difficulties. Mrs. Eldridge could not help her to any firing. She knew nothing about it. None had been in the house for a

long time.

Matilda stood and looked at the stove. Then she emptied her basket; laying her little packages carefully on a chair; and went off on a foraging expedition. At a lumber yard or a carpenter's shop she could pick up something; but neither was near. The houses in Lilac Lane were too needy them selves to ask anything at them. Matilda went down the lane, seeing no prospect of help, till she came to the iron shop and the livery stable. She looked hard at both places. Nothing for her purpose was to be seen; and she remembered that there were children enough in the houses behind her to keep the neighbourhood picked clean of chips and brushwood. What was to be done? She took a bold resolve, and went into the iron shop, the master of which she knew slightly. He was there, and looked at her as she came in.

"Mr. Swain, have you any little bits of wood that you could let me have? bits of wood to make a fire."

"Matilda Englefield, ain't it?" said Mr. Swain. "Bits o' wood? bits of iron are more in our way – could let ye have a heap o' *them*. Bits o' wood to make a fire, did ye say? 'twon't be a big fire as 'll come out o' that 'ere little basket."

"I do not want a big fire – just some bits of wood to boil a kettle."

"I want to know!" said Mr. Swain. "You hain't come all this way from your house to get wood? What's happened to you?"

"Oh, not for *our* fire! Oh no. I want it for a place here in the lane."

"These folks picks up their own wood – you hadn't no need for to trouble yourself about them."

"No, but it is some one who cannot pick up her own wood, Mr. Swain, nor get it any other way; it is an old woman, and she wants a little fire to make a cup of tea."

"I guess, if she can get the tea she can get the wood."

"Somebody brought her the tea," said Matilda, who luckily was not in one way a timid child. "I will pay for the wood if I can get some."

"Oh, that's the game, eh?" said the man. "Well, as it's Mis' Englefield's daughter – I guess we'll find you what will do you – how 'll this suit, if I split it up for you, eh?"

He handled an old box cover as he spoke.

Matilda answered that it was the very thing; and a few easy blows of Mr. Swain's hatchet broke it up into nice billets and splinters. Part of these went into Matilda's basket, one end of them at least; the rest she took with great difficulty in her apron; and so went back up the lane again.

It was good to see the glint of the old woman's eyes, when she saw the wood flung down on the floor. Matilda went on to clear out the stove. It had bits of coal and clinker in the bottom of it. But she had furnished herself with a pair of old gloves, and her spirit was thoroughly up to the work now. She picked out the coal and rubbish, laid in paper and splinters and wood; now how to kindle it? Matilda had no match. And she remembered suddenly that she had better have her kettle ready first, lest the

fire should burn out before its work was done. So saying to Mrs. Eldridge that she was going after a match, she went forth again. Where to ask? One house looked as forbidding as another. Finally concluded to try the first.

She knocked timidly and went in. A slatternly woman was giving supper to a half dozen children who were making a great deal of noise over it. The hurly-burly confused Matilda, and confused the poor woman too.

"What do you want?" she asked shortly.

"I came to see if you could lend me a tea-kettle for half an hour."

"What do you want of my tea-kettle?"

"I want only to boil some water."

"Hush your noise, Sam Darcy!" said the woman to an urchin some ten years old who was clamouring for the potatoes – "Who for?"

"To boil some water for Mrs. Eldridge."

"You don't live here?"

"No."

"Well, my tea-kettle's in use, you see. The cheapest way 'd be for Mrs. Eldridge to get a tea-kettle for herself. Sam Darcy! if you lay a finger on them 'taters till I give 'em to you – "

Matilda closed the door and went over the way. Here she found a somewhat tidy woman at work ironing. Nobody else in the room. She made known her errand. The woman looked at her doubtfully.

"If I let you take my kettle, I don't know when I'll see it agin. Mis' Eldridge don't have the use of herself so 's she kin come over the street to bring it back, ye see."

"I will bring it back myself," said Matilda. "I only want it for a little while."

"Is Mis' Eldridge sick?"

"No. I only want to make her a cup of tea."

"I hadn't heerd nothin' of her bein' sick. Be you a friend o' hern?"

"Yes."

"We've got sickness in *this* house," the woman went on. "And everythin's wantin' where there's sickness; and hard to get it. It's my old mother. She lies in there" – nodding towards an inner room – "night and day, and day and night; and she'd like a bit o' comfort now and then as well as another; and 'tain't often as I kin give it to her. Life's hard to them as hain't got nothin' to live on. I hadn't ought to complain, and I don't complain; but sometimes it comes over me that life's hard."

Here was another!

"What does she want?" Matilda asked. "Is she very sick?"

"She won't never be no better," her daughter answered; "and she lies there and knows she won't never be no better; and she's all as full of aches as she kin be, sometimes; and other times she's more easy like; but she lies there and knows she can't never get up no more in this world; and she wants 'most everythin'. I do what I kin."

"Do you think you can lend me your tea-kettle? I will be very much obliged."

"Well, if you'll bring it back yourself – I 'spose I will. It's all the kettle I've got."

She fetched it out of a receptacle behind the stove, brushed the soot from its sides with a chicken's wing, and handed it to Matilda. It was an iron tea-kettle, not very large to be sure, but very heavy to hold at arm's length; and so Matilda was obliged to carry it, for fear of smutching her frock. She begged a match too, and hastened back over the street as well as she could. But Matilda's heart, though glad at the comfort she was about to give, began to be wearily heavy on account of the comfort she could not give; comfort that was lacking in so many quarters where she could do nothing. She easily kindled her fire now; filled the tea-kettle at the pump – this was very difficult, but without more borrowing she could not help it – and at last got the kettle on, and had the joy of hearing it begin to sing. The worst came now. For that tea-cup and saucer and plate must be washed before they could be used; and Matilda could not bear to touch them. She thought of taking the unused cup at the back of the shelf; but conscience would not let her. "You know those ought to be washed," said conscience; "and if you do not do it, perhaps nobody else will." Matilda earnestly wished that somebody else might. She had no bowl, either, to wash them in, and no napkin to dry them. And here a dreadful thought suggested itself. Did Mrs. Eldridge herself, too, do without washing? There were no

towels to be seen anywhere. Sick at heart, the little girl gathered up the soiled pieces of crockery in her basket – the basket had a paper in it – and went over the way again to Mrs. Rogers' cottage. As she went, it crossed her mind, could Mrs. Rogers perhaps be the other one of those two in Lilac Lane who needed to have the Bible read to them? Or were there still others? And how many Christians there had need to be in the world, to do all the work of it. Even in Shadywalk. And what earnest Christians they had need to be.

"Back again a'ready?" said the woman, as she let her in. Matilda showed what she had in her basket, and asked for something to wash her dishes in. She got more than she asked for; Sabrina Rogers took them from her to wash them herself.

"She has nobody to do anything for her," Matilda observed of the poor old owner of the cup and saucer.

"She ain't able to do for herself," remarked Sabrina; "that's where the difference is. The folks as has somebody to do su'thin' for them, is lucky folks. I never see none o' that luck myself."

"But your mother has you," said Matilda, gently.

"I can't do much for her, either," said Sabrina. "Poor folks must take life as they find it. And they find it hard."

"Can your mother read?"

"She's enough to do to lie still and bear it, without readin'," said the daughter. "Folks as has to get their livin' has to do without readin'."

"But would she like it?" Matilda asked.

"I wonder when these things *was* washed afore," said the woman, scrubbing at them. "Like it? You kin go in and ask her."

Matilda pushed open the inner door, and somewhat reluctantly went in. It was decent, that room was; and this disabled old woman lay under a patchwork quilt, on a bed that seemed comfortable. But the window was shut, and the air was close. It was very disagreeable.

"How do you do to-day, Mrs. Rogers?" Matilda said, stepping nearer the bed.

"Who's that?" was the question.

"Matilda Englefield."

"Who's 'Tilda Eggleford?"

"I live in the village," said Matilda. "Are you much sick?"

"Laws, I be!" said the poor woman. "It's like as if my bones was on fire, some nights. Yes, I be sick. And I'll never be no better."

"Does anybody ever come to read the Bible to you?"

"Read the Bible?" the sick woman repeated. Her face looked dull, as if there had ceased to be any thoughts behind it. Matilda wondered if it was because she had so little to think of. "What about reading the Bible?" she said.

"You cannot read lying there, can you?"

"There ain't a book nowheres in the house."

"Not a Bible?"

"A Bible? I hain't seen a Bible in five year."

"Do you remember what is in the Bible?" said Matilda, greatly

shocked. This *was* living without air.

"Remember?" said the woman. "I'm tired o' 'membering. I'd like to go to sleep and remember no more. What's the use?"

"What do you remember?" Matilda asked in some awe.

"I remember 'most everything," said the woman, wearily. "Times when I was well and strong – and young – and had my house comfor'ble and my things respectable. Them times was once. And I had what I wanted, and could do what I had a mind to. There ain't no use in remembering. I'd like to forget. Now I lie here."

"Do you remember nothing else?" said Matilda.

"I remember it all," said the woman. "I've nothin' to do but think. When I was first married, and just come home, and thought all the world was" – she stopped to sigh – "a garden o' posies. 'Tain't much like it – to poor folks. And I had my children around me – Sabriny's the last on 'em. She's out there, ain't she?"

"Yes."

"What's she doin'?"

"She is ironing."

"Yes; she takes in. Sabriny has it all to do. I can't do nothin' – this five year."

"May I come and see you again, Mrs. Rogers? I must go now."

"You may come if you like," was the answer. "I don't know what you should want to come for."

Matilda was afraid her fire of pine sticks would give out; and hurried across the lane again with her basket of clean things.

The stove had fired up, to be sure; and Mrs. Eldridge was sitting crouched over it, with an evident sense of enjoyment that went to Matilda's heart. If the room now were but clean, she thought, and the other room; and the bed made, and Mrs. Eldridge herself. There was too much to think of; Matilda gave it up, and attended to the business in hand. The kettle boiled. She made the tea in the tea-cup; laid a herring on the stove; spread some bread and butter; and in a few minutes invited Mrs. Eldridge's attention to her supper spread on a chair. The old woman drank the tea as if it were the rarest of delicacies; Matilda filled up her cup again; and then she fell to work on the fish and bread and butter, tearing them to pieces with her fingers, and in great though silent appreciation. Meanwhile Matilda brought the cupboard to a little order; and then filling up Mrs. Eldridge's cup for the third time, carried back the kettle to Sabrina Rogers and begged the loan of an old broom.

"What do you want to do with it?"

"Mrs. Eldridge's room wants sweeping very much."

"Likely it does! Who's a going to sweep it, though, if I lend you my broom?"

"There's nobody but me," said Matilda.

The woman brought the broom, and, as she gave it, asked, "Who sent you to do all this?"

"Nobody."

"What made you come, then? It's queer play for a child like you."

"Somebody must do it, you know," said Matilda; and she ran away.

But Sabrina's words recurred to her. It was queer play. But then, who would do it? And it was not for Mrs. Eldridge alone. She brushed away with a good heart, while the poor old woman was hovering over the chair on which her supper was set, munching bread and herring with a particularity of attention which shewed how good a good meal was to her. Matilda did not disturb her, and she said never a word to Matilda; till, just as the little girl had brought all the sweepings of the floor to the threshold, where they lay in a heap, and another stroke of the broom would have scattered them into the street, the space outside the door was darkened by a figure, the sight of which nearly made the broom fly out of Matilda's hand. Nobody but Mr. Richmond stood there. The two faces looked mutual pleasure and surprise at each other.

"Mr. Richmond!"

"What *are* you doing here, Tilly?"

"Mr. Richmond, can you step over this muss? I will have it away directly."

Mr. Richmond stepped in, looked at the figure by the stove, and then back at Matilda. The little girl finished her sweeping and came back, to receive a warm grasp of the hand from her minister; one of the things Matilda liked best to get.

"Is all this your work, Tilly," he whispered.

"Mr. Richmond, nobody has given her a cup of tea in a long

while."

The minister stepped softly to the figure still bending over the broken herring; I think his blue eye had an unusual softness in it. The old woman pushed her chair back, and looked up at him.

"It's the minister agin," said she.

"Are you glad to see me?" said Mr. Richmond, taking a chair that Matilda had dusted for him. I am afraid she took off her apron to do it with, but the occasion was pressing. There was no distinct answer to the minister's question.

"You seem to have had some supper here," he remarked.

"It's a good cup o' tea," said Mrs. Eldridge; – "a good cup o' tea. I hain't seen such a good cup o' tea, not since ten year!"

"I am very glad of that. And you feel better for it, don't you?"

"A good cup o' tea makes one feel like folks," Mrs. Eldridge assented.

"And it is pleasant to think that somebody cares for us," Mr. Richmond went on.

"I didn't think as there warn't nobody," said Mrs. Eldridge, wiping her lips.

"You see you were mistaken. Here are two people that care for you."

"She cares the most," said Mrs. Eldridge, with a little nod of her head towards Matilda.

"I will not dispute that," said the minister, laughing. "She has cared fire, and tea, and bread, and fish, hasn't she? and you think I have only cared to come and see you. Don't you like that?"

"I used fur to have visits," said the poor old woman, "when I had a nice place and was fixed up respectable. I had visits. Yes, I had. There don't no one come now. There won't no more on 'em come; no more."

"Perhaps you are mistaken, Mrs. Eldridge. Do you see how much you were mistaken in thinking that no one cared for you? Do you know there is more care for you than hers?"

"I don't know why she cares," said Mrs. Eldridge.

"Who do you think sent her, and told her to care for you?"

"Who sent her?" the woman repeated.

"Yes, who sent her. Who do you think it was?"

As he got but a lack-lustre look in reply, the minister went on.

"This little girl is the servant of the Lord Jesus Christ; and He sent her to come and see you, and care for you; and He did that because *He* cares. He cares about you. He loves you, and sent His little servant to be His messenger."

"He didn't send no one afore," the old woman remarked.

"Yes, He did," said Mr. Richmond, growing grave, "He sent others, but they did not come. They did not do what He gave them to do. And now, Mrs. Eldridge, we bring you a message from the Lord – this little girl and I do, – that He loves you and wants you to love Him. You know you never have loved, or trusted, or obeyed Him, in all your life. And now, the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance."

"There ain't much as a poor old thing like I can do," she said, after a long pause.

"You can trust the Lord that died for you, and love Him, and thank Him. You can give yourself to the Lord Jesus to be made pure and good. Can't you? Then He will fit you for His glorious place up yonder. You must be fitted for it, you know. Nothing that defileth or is defiled can go in; only those that havt washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Listen, now, while I read about that."

Mr. Richmond opened his Bible and read first the seventh chapter of the Revelation, and then the twenty-second; and Matilda, standing and leaning on the back of his chair, thought how wonderful the words were, that even so poor an old helpless creature as the one opposite him might come to have a share in them. Perhaps the wonder and the beauty of them struck Mrs. Eldridge too, for she listened very silently. And then Mr. Richmond knelt down and prayed.

After that, he and Matilda together took the way home.

The evening was falling, and soft and sweet the light and the air came through the trees, and breathed even over Lilac Lane. The minister and the little girl together drew fresh breaths. It was all so delicious after the inside of the poor house where they had been.

"Light is a pleasant thing!" said the minister, half to himself. "I think, Matilda, heaven will seem something so, when we get there."

"Like this evening, Mr. Richmond?"

"Like this evening light and beauty, after coming out of Mrs.

Eldridge's house."

"And then, will this world seem like Mrs. Eldridge's house?"

"I think it will, in the contrast. Look at those dainty little flecks of cloud yonder, low down in the sky, that seem to have caught the light in their vaporous drapery and embodied it. See what brilliance of colour is there, and upon what a pure sky beyond!"

"Will *this* ever seem like Mrs. Eldridge's house?" said Matilda.

"This is the world that God made," said the minister, smiling. "I was thinking of the world that man has made."

"Lilac Lane, Mr. Richmond?" said Matilda, glancing around her. They were hardly out of it.

"Lilac Lane is not such a bad specimen," said the minister, with a sigh this time. "There is much worse than this, Matilda. And the worst of Lilac Lane is what you do not see. You had to buy your opportunity, then?" he added, with a smile again, looking down at Matilda.

"I suppose I had, Mr. Richmond."

"What did you pay?"

"Mr. Richmond, it was not pleasant to think of touching Mrs. Eldridge's things."

"No. I should think not. But you are not sorry you came? Don't you find, that as I said, it pays?"

"Oh yes, sir! But – "

"But what?"

"There is so much to do."

"Yes!" said the minister, thoughtfully. And it seemed to have

stopped his talk.

"Is Mrs. Rogers the other one?" Matilda asked.

"The other one?" repeated Mr. Richmond.

"The other opportunity. You said there were two in Lilac Lane, sir."

"I do not know Mrs. Rogers."

"But she is another one that wants the Bible read to her, Mr. Richmond. She lives just across the way; I found her out by going to borrow a tea-kettle."

"You borrowed your tea-kettle?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Eldridge has none. She has almost nothing, and as she says, there is nobody that cares."

"Well, that will not do," said the minister. "We must see about getting a kettle for her."

"Then, Mr. Richmond, Mrs. Rogers is a *third* opportunity. She has been sick a-bed for five years, and there is not a Bible in the house."

"There are opportunities starting up on every side, as soon as we are ready for them," said the minister.

"But Mr. Richmond – I am afraid, – I am not ready for them."

"Why so, my dear child? I thought you *were*."

"I am afraid I was sorry when I found out about Mrs. Rogers."

"Why were you sorry?"

"There seemed so much to do, Mr. Richmond; so much disagreeable work. Why, it would take every bit of time I have got, and more, to attend to those two; every bit."

There came a rush of something that for a moment dimmed Mr. Richmond's blue eyes; for a moment he was silent. And for that moment, too, the language of gold clouds and sky was a sharp answer – the answer of Light – to the thoughts of earth.

"It is very natural," Mr. Richmond said. "It is a natural feeling."

"But it is not right, is it?" said Matilda, timidly.

"Is it like Jesus?"

"No, sir."

"Then it cannot be right. 'Who being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God; but made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Himself the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.'

"Who 'pleased not Himself.' Who 'had not where to lay His head!' Who, 'though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor.' 'He laid down His life for us, and we ought to lay our lives down for the brethren.'"

Matilda listened, with a choking feeling coming in her throat.

"But then what can I do, Mr. Richmond? how can I help feeling so?"

"There is only one way, dear Matilda," said her friend. "The way is, to love Jesus so much, that you like His will better than your own; so much, that you would rather please Him than please yourself."

"How can I get that, Mr. Richmond?"

"Where we get all other good things. Ask the Lord to reveal Himself in your heart, so that the love of Him may take full possession."

The walk was silent for the greater part of the remaining way – silent and pleasant. The colours of sunset faded away, but a cool, fair, clear heaven carried on the beauty and the wordless speech of the earlier evening. At Matilda's gate Mr. Richmond stopped, and holding her hand still, spoke with a bright smile.

"I will give you a text to think about and pray over, Matilda."

"Yes, Mr. Richmond."

"Keep it, and think of it, and pray about it, till you understand it, and love it."

"Yes, Mr. Richmond. I will."

"The words are these. You will find them in the fourth chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians."

"In the fourth chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians. Yes, sir."

"These are the words. 'Always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body.' Good night."

CHAPTER IV

Matilda thought so much over Lilac Lane and the words Mr. Richmond had given her, that Maria charged her with being unsociable. Much Matilda wished that she could have talked with her sister about those same words; but Maria was in another line.

"You are getting so wrapped up in yourself," she said, "there is no comfort in you. I might as well have no sister; and I guess Aunt Candy means I shan't. She gives you all the good times, up in her room, among the pretty things; I am only fit for washing dishes. Well, it's her opinion; it isn't mine."

"I don't have a good time up there, Maria, indeed. I would a great deal rather be down here washing dishes, or doing anything."

"What do you go there for, then?"

"I have to go."

"We didn't use to *have* to do anything, when mamma was living. I wouldn't do it, if I were you, if I didn't like it."

"I don't like it," said Matilda; "but I think I ought to do what Aunt Candy wishes, as long as it is not something wrong."

"She'll come to that," said Maria; "or it'll be something you will think wrong; and then we shall have a time! I declare, I believe I shall be glad!"

"What for, Maria?"

"Why! Then I shall have you again. You'll come on my side.

It's lonely to have the dirty work all to myself. I don't suppose you mind it."

"Indeed, but I do," said Matilda. "I don't like to sit up-stairs darning stockings."

"And reading. And I don't know what."

"The reading is worse," said Matilda, sighing. "It is something I do not understand."

"What does she make you do it for?"

"I don't know," said Matilda, with another sigh. "But I want to do something else dreadfully, all the time."

The darning was very tedious indeed the morning after this talk. Matilda had got her head full of schemes and plans that looked pleasant; and she was eager to turn her visions into reality. It was stupid to sit in her aunt's room, taking up threads on her long needle exactly and patiently, row after row. It had to be done exactly, or Mrs. Candy would have made her pick it all out again.

"Yes, that is very well; that is neat," said Mrs. Candy, when Matilda brought her the stocking she had been at work on, with the heel smoothly run. "That will do. Now you may begin upon another one. There they are, in that basket."

"But, Aunt Candy," said Matilda, in dismay, "don't you think I have learned now how to do it?"

"Yes, pretty well."

"Then, need I do any more?"

"A little further practice will not hurt you. Practice makes perfect, you know."

"But do you mean that I must darn all those stockings."

"Aren't they yours?"

"Yes, ma'am; I believe they are."

"Who should darn them, then?"

Matilda very sorrowfully remembered the hand which did darn them once and thought it no hardship. Her hand went swiftly up to her eyes before she spoke again.

"I think it is right I should do them, and I will. May I take them away and do them in my own room?"

"You may do exactly what I tell you, my dear."

"Does it make any difference, Aunt Candy?"

"That is something you need not consider. All you have to do is to obey orders. The more promptly and quietly, the easier for you, Matilda."

Matilda coloured, bridled, kept down the wish to cry, and began upon the second heel of her stockings. She was tired of that long needle and its long needleful of double thread.

"Matilda," said her aunt, "put down your stocking and look at me."

Which Matilda did, much surprised.

"When you wish to answer any thing I say, I prefer always that you should answer me in words."

"Ma'am?" said Matilda.

"You heard me."

"But I did not understand you."

"Again!" said Clarissa.

"I do not like to be answered by gestures. Do you understand that?"

"No, ma'am; I do not know what you mean by saying it."

"You do not know that you answered me by a toss of your head just now?"

"No, ma'am; certainly not."

"I am very glad to hear it. Don't do it again."

It would have been very like Matilda to do it again just there; but bewilderment quite put down other emotions for the time, except the sense of being wronged, and that is a feeling very hard to bear. Matilda had scarcely known it before in her little life; the sensation was as new as it was painful. She was utterly unconscious of having done anything that ought to be found fault with. The darning needle went very fast for the next half-hour; and Matilda's cheek was bright.

"They haven't got a fire up-stairs, have they?" Maria questioned, when her little sister rejoined her.

"No, not to-day. Why?"

"You look as if you had been somewhere where it was warm."

But Matilda did not say what sort of fire had warmed her.

She forgot all about it, and about all other grievances, as soon as she was free to go out in the afternoon; for now some of her visions were to be realised. Yesterday afternoon had been so pleasant, on the whole, that Matilda determined to seek a renewal of the pleasure. And first and foremost, she had determined to get Mrs. Eldridge a tea-kettle. She had money enough yet; only her

Bible and yesterday's purchases had come out of her twenty-five dollars. "A tea-kettle – and what else?" thought Matilda. "Some towels? She does dreadfully want some towels. But then, I cannot get everything!"

Slowly going towards the corner, with her eyes on the ground, her two hands were suddenly seized by somebody, and she was brought to a stand-still.

"Norton!" cried Matilda, joyously.

"Yes. What has become of you?"

"Oh, I have been so busy!"

"School?" said Norton.

"Oh no! I don't go to school. I have things to do at home."

"Things!" said Norton. "Why don't you speak straight? What things? your lessons?"

"I don't have lessons, Norton," said the child, patiently, lifting her eyes to Norton's face. "My aunt gives me other things to do."

"Don't you have lessons at all?" said Norton.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.