Warner Susan

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Содержание

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CHAPTER I

Christmas day was grey with clouds; on the roofs of the city and in the streets the sun never shone all day. People called it cold. Sarah Staples found it so on her crossing. Inside Mrs. Lloyd's front-door, however, it seemed to Matilda to be nothing but sunshine. She had not leisure to look at the grey sky, and to be sure the temperature was that of summer. Matilda had a great deal to do. Her various parcels were to be neatly tied up in white paper, with the names of the persons they were for nicely written thereon, and then committed to Mrs. Bartholomew for arranging on the Christmas tree. Then the presents for Anne and Letitia were to be directed and sent; Maria's basket packed and put in charge of the express-man; and several little letters written, one to Mr. Richmond. Till all these things were done, Matilda had no time to think of the weather; then she found that the snow was beginning to fall and coming thick.

"Yes," said Norton, to whom she announced her discovery; "and it's stinging! and coming on to blow. It will be a night! I like it. That feels like Christmas."

"Then there'll be no party?" said Matilda, rather more disappointed than she wanted to shew.

"Party?" said Norton, "what about the party? It won't snow in *here*. Pink. What are you thinking of? The party'll be all the merrier. I tell you, it feels like Christmas."

"But will they come, through all the storm?"

"They'd come, if the hailstones were as big as eggs," said Norton. "You never saw one of grandmother's Christmas trees, Pink; and they never did anywhere else. No fear but they'll come, every one of them. You go along and get dressed."

Matilda ran upstairs, glancing out of the hall window as she passed with a thrill of delight and mystery. The air was darkening already with the falling snow, and the wind swept it past the house in a white mass; by contrast the evening splendours seemed greater than ever. She dressed in a trembling excitement of pleasure, as far as her own part of the preparation went; then Mrs. Laval's maid came in to finish her toilette, and Mrs. Laval came to superintend it. Matilda had only to stand still and be curled and robed and sashed and slippered; till the work was done, the maid went, and Mrs. Laval took the child in her arms and asked if she was happy?

"*Very* happy," Matilda said.

"It does not take much to make you happy, love."

"Why, mamma!" said Matilda looking down at her white ruffles and then at her adopted mother, "I have so much that I don't know what to do!"

Mrs. Laval smiled and sighed, and kissed her again.

"And yet Christmas night is only beginning," she said. But the wind and the hail dashed at the windows as if answering her that it had indeed begun outside. Mrs. Laval went away to her own dressing, and Matilda stood a moment at the window listening. It was long after dark now; but she could hear the whistle of the sleet as the wind bore it past, and the rush of ice and snow against the window-panes, and even through the close-fining sash she could feel a little gush of keen air. And for one moment Matilda's thoughts darted to Sarah, at her crossing and in her cellar home all that day and night. The contrast was as sharp as that little gush of icy air. Was it right? Matilda thought. Was it right, that her dainty white dress should be so pretty on her and the Christmas party so fine, when Sarah and others like her were in cold and wet and rags? It was too disagreeable to think about, as Matilda could not help it; and she went downstairs.

How the house was lighted up! it was a second daylight, only more splendid. What delicious warm air filled every room, and every staircase, and every lobby! How handsome looked the marble floor of the hall, with its luxurious mats at every door! But as her foot touched the marble Matilda found something else to think of. Norton came out. He looked her up and down.

"What's the matter, Norton?" said Matilda, a little wanting to know his opinion.

"Nothing," said he nodding. "You'll do."

"This will be a very funny dress for me to play proverbs in, – don't you think so? I don't look much like Judy's Satinalia."

"Not much," said Norton. "You don't look much like Judy's anything. O Pink! do you know we are going to have a witch here to-night?"

"A witch?" said Matilda.

"A capital witch. It's a capital idea too, for it's a new thing; and it's so hard to get hold of something new. I expect this'll be the party of the season."

"What do you mean?" said Matilda.

"You'll see," said Norton. "Only don't be frightened. The witch won't hurt you."

And here came Judy, and took a good silent stare at Matilda. The two girls were dressed alike. Norton watched them with a sly glance. Without any remark or salutation Judy passed them with a toss of her head, and went into one of the drawing-rooms.

"She'll do," said Norton, with a competent nod of his head in Judy's direction. "That is, she'll do the insolent, whenever she has a mind to. She is a case, is Judy Bartholomew. Well, come, we must get out of the way, Pink. Somebody'll be here soon."

So they strolled into the lighted drawing-rooms, where Judy and David were; and strolled about, consulting arrangements for the play, till the doors opened and other white dresses, and coloured sashes, and gallant white-trowsered young gentlemen began to pour in and claimed their attention. And ladies accompanied them, not a great many, but a few favoured mothers and aunts and elder sisters; and soon the drawing-rooms were all alive with motion and colour, and noisy with the hum of many voices.

It was a wonderful scene to Matilda. She forgot that she had so little to do with it, and was so left out of it by the gay little throng. She did not at first think of that. To be sure she was a stranger; it was quite natural, as it seemed to her, that she should be left out. The pleasure was great enough, merely to look on. Everybody else was very busy talking and laughing and moving about the rooms, – all except herself. Matilda had never seen such a display of very young ladies and gentlemen; the variety of styles, the variety of dresses, the diversity of face and manner, were an extremely rich entertainment. She noticed airs and graces in some, which she thought sat very ill on them; – affectations of grown-up manner, tossings of curls, and flaunting of white gloves, and waving of fans, at which Matilda's simplicity was greatly astonished. Little gentlemen stood before little ladies, with hands behind their backs, and entertained them in conversation which appeared to be of the politest sort. And Judy's blue scarf flitted from end to end of the rooms, dipped to the floor as she courtesied to new comers, and fluttered with delight as she darted to speak to some favourite or other. The rooms grew very lively. The gas lights shone upon all the colours of the rainbow, moving and changing as if Mrs. Lloyd's house had been a kaleidoscope. David and Norton were not in the company. Suddenly Norton stood at Matilda's side.

"What are you doing here, Pink?"

"Nothing." Matilda looked and smiled at him. "Only looking at everything."

"But you ought to be *in it*, Pink."

"In what?"

"Why! in the work; in the talk. What are you sitting in a corner here for?"

"You know, Norton, I do not know anybody."

"Hasn't Judy introduced you? Not to any one?" said Norton. "Left you here? Judy Bartholomew! if it wasn't Christmas night and an inconvenient time to make a row" —

"Hush, hush, Norton. I am having a very good time," said Matilda, looking as she felt, like a very happy little girl.

"Well," said Norton, "there are two odd people here to-night. One of 'em's Judy Bartholomew, and the other is – somebody you don't know. Come! come here. Esther Francis! – this is my sister, my new sister Matilda. Hasn't Judy introduced you?"

Norton had caught by the arm, as she was passing, a girl of about Judy's age, whom he thus brought face to face with Matilda. She was sweet-faced and very handsomely dressed, and she had no sort of shyness about her. She took Matilda's hand and looked at her with a steady look.

"Take care of her, will you?" Norton went on. "I have got to go and arrange things with Davie; and Judy has her head full. Tell Matilda who's who; she does not know the people yet."

The two girls stood a minute or two silently together; Esther giving however a side glance now and then at her companion.

"You have not been long in town?" she said then, by way of beginning.

"Only three weeks."

"Of course then you are quite a stranger. It is very disagreeable, isn't it, to be among a whole set of people that you don't know?" Esther said it with a little turn of her pretty head, that was – Matilda could not tell just what it was. It shewed the young lady very much at her ease in society, and it was not quite natural; that was all she could make out. Matilda answered, that she did not find anything disagreeable. Esther opened her eyes a little wider.

"Do you know all about the arrangements to-night?" she whispered.

"I suppose I do."

"Will there be dancing?"

"I have heard nothing about dancing," said Matilda. "I don't think there'll be much time for it. I don't see how there can be."

"Are you very fond of dancing?" Esther asked, with her eyes at the further end of the next room.

Matilda was conscious of feeling ashamed of her answer. Nevertheless she answered. "I do not know how to dance."

"Not dance!" said Esther, with a new glance at her. "Did you never dance? O there's nothing I care for at parties but to dance. And there are just enough here to night; not a crowd. Aunt Zara will send you to dancing-school, I suppose. But it isn't so pleasant to begin to learn when you are so old."

"*Aunt* Zara!" said Matilda. "Norton did not say you were his cousin."

"Norton's head was too full," said Esther with another movement of her head that struck Matilda very much; it was quite like a grown-up young lady; and gave Matilda the notion that she thought a good deal of Norton. "Yes; we are cousins; that is why he told me to take care of you."

Matilda was tempted to say that Norton would save her that trouble as soon as he was at leisure to take it upon himself; but she did not. Instead, she asked Esther how old *she* had been when she began to take dancing lessons?

"I don't know; three and a half, I believe."

The deficiency of Matilda's own education pressed upon her heavily. She was a little afraid to go on, for fear of laying bare some other want.

"Yes," said Esther after another interval of being absorbed in what was going on in the next room; – "yes; of course, you know I began to learn to dance as soon as I began to wear – stays," she uttered in a whisper, and went on aloud. "The two things together. O yes; I was almost four years old."

Here she broke off to speak to some one passing, and Matilda was lost in wonderment again. A little uneasy too; for though the young lady kept her post at the side of the charge Norton had given her, and evidently meant to keep it, Matilda thought she had an air of finding her office rather a bore.

A young lady who had danced and worn stays from the time she was four years old, must necessarily know so much of life and the world that a little ignoramus of a country girl *would* be a bore.

"What are they going to do then to-night, if we are not to dance?" resumed Esther when her friend had passed on. "Just have the Christmas tree and nothing else?"

Nothing else *but* a Christmas tree! Here was an experience!

"Norton and David are going to make a play," said Matilda; "acting a proverb."

"Oh!" said Esther. "A proverb! David is a good player, and Norton too; excellent; that will be very good. I thought I heard something about a *witch;* what is that?"

"What is what?" said Judy, who found herself near.

"About the witch?" said Esther.

"It' – mystery."

"Then *is* there to be a witch?"

"Certainly."

"Who will it be?"

"Part of the mystery," said Judy. "Upon my word I don't know. I couldn't find out. And I tried, too."

"What is she going to do?"

"That's the rest of the mystery. Without being a witch myself, how am I going to tell?"

"I have heard sometimes that you were," said Esther.

"Ah! But there are witches and witches," said Judy; "black and white, you know, and good and bad. I'm a black witch, when I'm any. It's not my business to get people out of trouble."

"I shall never ask you," said Esther shaking her head. "But where is the witch to be? and when will she appear?"

"She won't appear. She will be in her den. All who want to see her will go to her den. So much I can tell you." And Judy ran off before another question could be asked.

The elder ladies came in now, and there was a fresh stir. Mrs. Laval introduced Matilda to several boys and girls in the company before many minutes had gone; but there was time for little else beside an introduction, for the boys were ready to play; and all the guests were assembled in one room to leave the other free for their operations and give a good view of them. In that room the lights were lowered too, to make the scene of the play more brilliant by comparison.

The play was a great success. Matilda laughed for very delight, as well as at the fun of the thing. David, who personated the poor man who had come to sell a piece of ground, talked so admirably like a countryman, and was so oddly crochety and cross and gruff and impossible to make terms with; and then Norton, who was the rich man he had come to see and who wanted the land, coaxed him so skilfully, and ordered all sorts of good things to be brought to him, when he found he had come a good way and was hungry; and the imaginary banquet was very funny, David making inquiries and comments over the dishes he did not know and Norton supplying him with others, till he was satisfied. Then, in soothed good humour, David was easy to deal with, and let his land go a bargain. The acting was really extremely good; both the boys being clever and without any sort of embarrassment or any even shy affectation. The proverb which Matilda and Judy were to have played was given up for want of time. The boys' proverb was guessed by one of the elder ladies – "It is ill talking between a full man and a fasting." Matilda was very glad, for her part, that she and Judy were let off.

A hush of expectancy fell now upon the little company. It was time for the tree to be displayed. Even talking hushed, while all eyes were upon the folding doors leading to the last drawing-room to be thrown open. Matilda was at the back of the crowd, but even there she could see the blaze of light beyond as soon as this was done; and the whole company pressed forward and peeped in. Such a beautiful sight then, her eyes had never beheld. The tree was a generous, large, tall young fir, set in a huge green tub; but whereas in the wood where it grew it had green branches, with fringy, stiff, prickly leaves, now its branches were of every colour and as it were fringed with light. From the

lowest bough to the topmost shoot it was a cone of brilliancy and a pyramid of riches. Lights glittered from every twig, and among the lights, below them and above them, near the stem and out at the tips of the bending boughs and covering the moss which covered the tub, were trinkets or toys or articles of wear or packages done up in white or coloured paper and made gay with coloured ribbands. So bountiful a tree, so elegant a tree, one so rich in its resources of pleasure, perhaps no eyes there had ever seen; for when Mrs. Lloyd did anything she was accustomed to do it thoroughly; and she had on this occasion two backers. One burst of admiration from the whole little crowd was followed by accents of delight and murmurs of expectation.

The tree stood in the middle of the large drawing-room, and the bright crowd which formed round it was surely a pretty sight. A sight for the elders alone; no child had eyes for anything but the tree. Eager eyes; glad eyes; sparkling and glowing with delight and expectation; a little, soft, rustling, hustling crowd, swaying gently, agitated, moved here and there, to and fro, but all fastened to that brilliant centre of a Christmas tree, as much as ever the planets to their centre. At the very back of the crowd, as she was, Matilda stepped on an ottoman to see better; and for her even expectation was almost lost in bewildered fascination. In truth the Christmas tree was a beautiful spectacle. The fairy-like beauty was what Matilda thought of at first; then she began gradually to notice how its branches were laden with other things besides lights, and how the little company was all on tiptoe with eagerness. With a certain faint flutter at her own heart, Matilda stood on her perch and watched.

Presently a tall young fellow, one of the oldest among the boys, took his stand by the tree with a long gilt rod in his hand. The crowd fell back a bit, and hushed its murmur and rustle. No danger of anybody seeing Matilda; not an eye turned her way. The lad with the gilt rod, who also was decorated with a favour of red and white ribbands, now lifted down from the tree one of its many packages, looked close at it, and called aloud the name written thereon. A name Matilda did not know. The crowd stirred in out place and a little figure came forward and took the package. Matilda wanted to know what it was, very much; but the little girl herself made no haste to discover. A slight private examination she gave, and with a smile and a blush clasped her little hand upon the package and looked to see what would be next. The play went on after this fashion; the presiding gilt rod was quick in its operations, as indeed it had need to be; names were called out in rapid succession; and presently the whole circle was astir, with coming and going, explanations and questions and whispers of delight, now and then a spring or a dance of exultation; and still the gilt rod went on hooking down things from the tree and signalling the owners to come and take possession.

"Mrs. Laval! – from Matilda. I suppose Mrs. Laval knows who Matilda is?" – said the master of ceremonies. A new thrill went all through the distant possessor of that name. "That's my obelisk!" she thought. "I wonder if she will like it? Yes, she knows Matilda, a little."

"Norton Laval! – from his sister. I didn't know that Norton had a sister."

"The things you don't know are always more than the things you do know, Edward Foster," said Norton coming forward to receive his watch-guard.

"'You' meaning – whom?" said gilt rod, hooking down another ribband-looped parcel. "By virtue of my office I know so many things just now, that I grow conceited, and am surprised to find myself ignorant any where. Matilda Laval! – from her mother."

With a great leap of her heart, Matilda jumped down from her ottoman and made her way as she could through the throng. The tall boy with the gilt rod presented to her a small square packet, sealed and tied. Matilda's fingers clasped upon it as she stepped back; and then for the first time that evening she found Judy at her side. Perhaps Judy would have spoken, if the next call had not been,

"Matilda Laval! – from Mrs. Bartholomew."

Flushing and trembling, Matilda stepped forward again and received a second little packet, much like the former. Then Judy herself was called; everybody by this time was getting his hands full; and still the Christmas tree blazed on as brightly as ever.

Presently Matilda got a third present; this was from David; much larger. She was very much astonished; for without opening she could guess that it was something valuable; it was hard and square and heavy. Of all there, not a child was in such private ecstasies as she. Her flushed cheeks told it; otherwise she was quite undemonstrative. Though I say wrong; for eyes and lips were abundantly expressive of tremulous joy.

"Is that my present?" said Judy, by her side again. "No, it is David's. Do you know what it is?"

"No," Matilda whispered.

"I don't either. Why don't you look?"

"I will look by and by."

"Nonsense!" said Judy; but Matilda was called off again to take what Judy had prepared for her.

"That isn't much," said that young lady, when Matilda fell back to her former place; "it's only bonbons. What has aunt Zara given you?"

"I don't know yet, Judy."

"O look. And mamma. Mamma wouldn't tell me. Those are their gifts in your hand there, aren't they? Look, and see. I can guess," said Judy peering round Matilda to see the packets.

"No, you can't," said Norton at the other side. He was fastening his guard-chain in its place. "*You* don't know, and she don't know. I like people who can keep cool, and not dash their heads under water the first thing."

"Stuff!" said Judy. "I want her to get her head above water; she don't see anything now, nor know anything."

"Her head's all right," said Norton composedly. "Knowledge'll come in time. I guess there's a good deal of it to come, too."

"What has David got, Norton?"

"Loads of books," said Norton. "And a rifle."

"A rifle!" screamed Judy.

"And a dressing-case. And a dressing-gown. And a riding-whip. And a watch-chain."

"And what have *you* got, Norton?" Matilda asked.

"Just what I wanted," said Norton, with a smile of confidence and secret good fellowship which was most pleasant to Matilda; it made her feel not quite so much alone in that crowd. "You shall see," he went on. "Hallo! you're called. Give me some of your traps to hold for you, Pink; you have not got a hand to take anything more."

So Matilda gave him her bonbons and box, if it were a box, to hold, while she went for ward again. This present was from Norton, and of itself filled her arms. Wrapped up in papers as it was, she could not know more of it than that. She came back to Norton with high-coloured cheeks and eyes very bright indeed.

"What's that?" said Judy. "What has Norton given you? it's big enough. Pshaw! I know; it's a desk."

"A desk!" exclaimed Matilda in tones of delight.

"Keep your own counsel, Judy," said Norton coolly. "You have no idea of keeping other people's."

"Norton," said Esther coming up to them, "who is the witch?"

"Can't tell, even if I know," said Norton. "I keep other people's counsel."

"But where are we to see her?"

"In her den, of course."

"Where's that?"

"You will know when the time comes."

"Then she won't come in here among us all?"

"I reckon not," said Norton. "She'll see only one at a time, I hear."

"What for?" said Esther.

"Ah, what for!" echoed Norton. "*I* don't know, I can tell you. And what's more, I don't know yet whose notion it is. Now, Pink, I propose we go upstairs and put these things away. Supper will be in a few minutes, and then what will you do with your hands full? Come!"

And away he and Matilda went, slipping out of the room as quietly as they could, and then running upstairs, till they found a quiet corner and breathing place in Matilda's room.

"Now, Pink, don't you want to look?" said Norton turning up the gas. He had his own curiosity too, it seems. But he did not interfere with her; he looked on, smiling and superior, while Matilda's trembling fingers pulled off the papers, from his package-first. Judy had spoken truly; it was an elegant little desk, all fitted and filled. Matilda's heart, Norton could see, was quite full with that.

"Come!" said he gayly, "let us see David's choice. I don't know what it is, David don't tell all his mind."

And he stopped, for Matilda uttered a little scream of pleasure. David's choice had been a work-box. It was of pretty fancy wood, charmingly lined and fitted up.

"Pretty well for David!" said Norton "He thinks you know what to do with a work box, and reason too. Good for him. But now, Pink, guess what this is!"

And Norton possessed himself of the little parcel which bore his mother's handwriting and held it up before Matilda.

"I can't guess."

"Try. What would you *like*, Pink? What would you like better than anything else? Think."

"Oh Norton!" said Matilda with changing colour, "I don't know; I am afraid to guess. It's something small; could it be a locket with her hair?"

Norton with a delighted face put his hand with the parcel close to Matilda's ear, with the other hand forbidding her to touch it. "Listen!" he said. Matilda listened, and absolutely grew pale with intensity of excitement.

"I hear something, Norton!" she said seizing the package.

"Ah, you do!" said Norton. "*Now* you know? Yes, just look at it. Isn't it a beauty? I was with mamma when she got it. There's no mistake in that, Pink; it's a splendid watch, Bars and Bullion said; – I mean, the man at Bars and Bullion's, and I believe it was Bullion himself. Do you like it? Now Pink, we must not stay a minute longer; supper will be on hand, and you want some, don't you. Come! Put these away, and come."

Matilda could do it, even without looking at her bonbons or Mrs. Bartholomew's present, and with only a glance at her watch. She locked up her treasures and went down with Norton; a happy child, if there was one in the city that night.

CHAPTER II

Supper was just served when they got downstairs. It was another variety of this wonderful evening. The dining-room long table was so beautiful with lights, fruits, greens, and confections, with setting of plate and glass, that to Matilda it was almost as much of a sight as the Christmas tree had been. But the others were accustomed to this sort of thing, and fell to tasting, with very little rapture about the seeing. What a buzz the room was in, to be sure! Tongues were fairly unloosed over oysters and sandwiches; and all the glory of the Christmas tree was to talk about, with comparisons of presents, plans, and prospects. Matilda looked on, half bewildered, but so very happy that it hardly occurred to her to remember that she might like something to eat too. Everybody was attending upon the wants of the guests, though certainly Matilda did notice that Judy had a plateful of something, and was eating as busily as she was talking. Doing neither, for she knew nobody to talk to, Matilda waited, and thought of her watch, in a trance of rapture.

"Why, my dear, is nobody attending to you?" she heard the voice of Mrs. Lloyd say at last. "Have you had nothing all this while?"

"No, ma'am – they are all so busy."

But David came up at the minute, and Matilda had no longer anything to complain of. He served her very kindly, and Matilda found that she was very hungry. She got a chance, however, to thank David for her work-box.

"I am sure you deserve it," he said. "What did Judy give you?"

He looked very little pleased, Matilda thought, when she told him. But he only helped her carefully to everything she would have, and said no more about it.

A third wonder to Matilda that evening was the style and amount of eating that went on. The ices were in beautiful fruit forms; and she thought when she had demolished one of them she had done enough, especially as caramel, and candied fruits, and other confections were awaiting her attention. But the circulation of these little ices went on at a rate that proved Matilda's moderation to be shared by few, and she heard one little lady say to another, herself with a plateful, "Is that your *third* or your *fourth?*" Slowly munching candied grapes, Matilda looked on and marvelled. Presently Norton came to see if she wanted anything, and then Esther joined them, and the talk was of the witch again.

"We are going to see her now," said Norton. "Just as soon as we have done with the table."

"What's it all for?" inquired Esther.

"I don't know," said Norton, shaking his head. "Some crotchet of somebody's. I don't know anything about it. Only everybody is invited to go and see the witch; and the witch's den is in the little reception room on the other side of the hall; and we must go in one by one; and we must answer every question we are asked, or we shall get no good of our interview. So much I am informed of."

"What good shall we get if we do answer all the questions?" Esther asked.

"If I was a wizard, maybe I could tell you, Esther. You should ask David. There used to be witches and wizards, too, among his people."

"They were forbidden," said David gravely.

"But they were there, all the same," said Norton.

"Not all the same," said David; "for it was death by the law; and no good ever came of them, and nobody good ever went to them."

"O David," said Matilda timidly, but the occasion was too tempting to be lost, – "do you know what they did? Did they only play tricks? or was there anything real about it?"

Perhaps David took a different view of the occasion; for after one earnest look into Matilda's face, as if he would answer her, he turned it off with lightly saying that the witches were real, for Saul had them all put to death that he could find; and then saying that he would go and look after this particular witch. And presently he came back and proclaimed that she was ready to receive visitors.

"Who are to go, Davie? Who are to go to see her?" were the inquiries huddled one upon another.

"Everybody," said David. "One at a time."

"What are we to do? What are we to say?"

"Answer questions."

"The witch's questions?"

"Certainly."

"Why must we answer her questions? and what will she ask us about?"

"Really you must judge for yourselves, about the one thing; and find out for yourselves, about the other. I cannot tell you."

"Will you answer her questions?"

"Perhaps."

"O come along!" was the cry then; "you can't get anything out of him. Who will go first?"

Caramel and ices had done their utmost, and now the witch became the absorbing interest. And as those who came back from the witch s den, it was found, would tell nothing of what had transpired there, the interest was kept up at white heat. First one went, and then another. Of course the young people of the household were the last.

The witch's den, when Norton entered it, was a place he did not recognize; though in reality it was manufactured out of the little corner reception room. Dark drapery enclosed and mystified the space into which he was admitted; the light came from he could not see where, and was dim enough too; and the witch was not to be seen. Nor, distinctly, anything else. Norton took his stand as he had been directed in front of a dark curtain and waited. The first question demanded his name, and when that had been answered the voice went on, —

"What do you want of the witch?"

"That depends on what she can do," said Norton.

"Power unlimited."

"Then I wish she would cast a spell upon Mrs. Lloyd."

"To what effect?"

"That she would let me have the little corner attic room for a greenhouse."

"How would you warm it?"

"It wouldn't want much more warming than it has now. A gas stove would do, I think."

"You may go. You shall hear from me in the course of the week."

Norton went out in high glee. "She's a brick, that witch!" he exclaimed. "Go along, Judy – and make haste; people are taking leave now. I don't know whose the voice is, though," he went on; "I couldn't make it out. I guess" – But Norton stopped; and Judy went in.

"Are you in want of anything, Judy Bartholomew?" the unseen witch asked.

"I haven't got all I want," said Judy; "if you mean that."

"State what is needed."

"There are a great many things," said Judy unblushingly; "but the two things I wish for most particularly are – to give a ball, for one; and to have a diamond ring, for the other."

"Short of these two things, all your wishes are satisfied then?"

"No," said Judy hesitatingly, – "I didn't say that. I want lots of things besides; but those two most."

"You may go. The witch always wants time. Have you any debts to pay? of money? of any other sort?"

"No indeed," said Judy decidedly.

"Is there anybody to whom you would like to do a kindness?"

"Not that I know of."

"You may go. Your wants shall be considered."

Judy came out triumphant. She would have had her brother go next, but he insisted that Matilda should precede him. So Matilda went into the darkened, mysterious boudoir of the receptions.

"Who is this?" said the voice.

And a gentle answer came; not like Judy's proclaiming of herself, yet clear and frank too.

"Matilda Laval, what would you like of all things, if you could have it?"

Matilda hesitated. "There are so many things" – she began, – "it isn't very easy" —

"So many things you would like?"

"Yes, ma'am. Not for *myself*," she added, in a kind of horror at being supposed to entertain such wishes under the flood of good things that had come upon her that evening.

"Well, go on. It is for yourself in one way. Say what, of all you can think of, would give you most pleasure."

Matilda's hands came together with a certain pang of hope, as she answered.

"If I could make somebody comfortable that I know of; – a poor, *good* girl, who is not comfortable at all."

"One of your sisters?"

"O no, ma'am; no relation."

"What is the matter with her, and how could you make her comfortable?"

"She is a very poor girl," said Matilda, so eager that she did not know what to bring out first; – "she lives in a cellar room with a wet mud floor, and no bed to sleep on that is like a bed; of course she cannot be very clean, nor have any comfort at all; and I should like to make them comfortable."

"Who is she?"

"A very poor girl, that goes to Sunday school. But she is very good."

"Does she live there alone?"

"O there are three of them; her mother and little brother."

"Then why does not the mother earn money and live better?"

"She works for it; she sews; but the people give her almost nothing for her work; and Sarah sweeps a crossing."

"How did you come to know all this?"

"I saw Sarah in Sunday school; and I heard about her from my teacher, and he shewed me the place where she lives. He knows she is good."

"And what do you want to do for her?"

"I want to get her out of that place, and into a decent room, and give her a comfortable bed."

"What is her name?"

"Sarah Staples."

"How long would she keep decent, do you think?"

"Always," said Matilda confidently. "I am sure she would be just as nice as she possibly could. Where she is, she has no chance."

"Well, go; the witch will look into it."

Matilda went out, hardly knowing what to think, or whether she might hope anything from this very doubtful interview. Just as she reached the door, she was called back.

"Have you no wishes for yourself, little girl?"

"No, ma'am; thank you."

"Is there nothing in the world you would like?"

"I suppose, a great many things," said Matilda; "but I have got so many now, I am afraid to wish."

"Why?"

"I don't think I *ought* to wish for anything more, for myself."

"You are the first person I ever saw, young or old, who put an 'ought' before his wishes. Most people put it after them. Well, as a reward, tell the one more thing, for yourself, that you would wish for if you could have it."

Matilda thought, and hesitated. She did not at all like to tell her thought. At last the witch urged her to speak out and be quick.

"If I were to choose – and wish for anything more," Matilda said slowly, – "which I don't; but if I *did* wish for anything more, it would be for a beautiful picture I have seen."

"Aha!" said the witch. "Where did you see it?"

"At Goupil's."

"And what picture was it?"

"It was the picture of the woman searching for the lost piece of money."

"Well. You are an odd child. You may go; and if there is anybody else to come, let them make haste. I am as tired as if I were not a witch."

A minute after David entered the den.

"I know who you are," said the witch. "Speak your heart's desire; and in one word, if you can."

"In one word, Hebrew."

"What of Hebrew?"

"To learn it."

"Learning is a thing I cannot do for you."

"No, but the means."

"What means?"

"Permission, time, books, and a teacher."

"You are another odd one. Is that your dearest heart's wish, David Bartholomew?"

"I think it is the greatest I have, at present."

"Well. Leave it with me and go."

"Hallo, David!" exclaimed Norton as he came out into the hall; "the people are all gone; the last one just had the door shut behind him."

"It's time," said David.

"Takes more than a party to shake you out of your gravity," said Norton. "Time? why yes, it's past twelve."

"Sunday!" exclaimed Matilda.

The other three, they were together in the hall, all burst out laughing.

"It's Sunday; and Christmas is over, and the Christmas tree," said Norton. "But the fruits keep. Extraordinary tree! Well, Pink; we have got to go and sleep now. Do you want to take another look at the tree?"

They all went into the drawing-room which had been the scene of so much festivity. The tree stood there yet in its tub, with ribbands and gilt work hanging to it; but the lights were burnt out, and the splendour was gone, and its riches were scattered. It was a thing of the past already.

"The fruits will keep," Norton repeated. "Did you find out who the witch was, David?"

"I thought I knew."

"I *knew* I knew," said Norton; "but she had somebody else to speak for her. What a jolly witch! We shall hear from her some of these days. Well, good night."

Kisses and thanks and good nights had to be exchanged with the older members of the family; and Sunday was well begun when at last Matilda shut her door behind her. She had to take one look at her watch; it was no doubt a little beauty; and to Matilda's vision it was a very fruit and embodiment of fairyland. Beyond even her wildest dreams of what was possible from a Christmas tree. Her own watch! She could scarcely believe it, even with the watch lying securely in her hand. And with the delicate minute hand pointing but fifteen minutes off from one o' clock, she still stood gazing and rapt. Then as the hand went on to fourteen minutes, and thirteen, Matilda started and laid it down. To

have her own watch telling her it was time to go to bed! But she must just look at Mrs. Bartholomew's present.

Hurriedly she untied the box and pulled off the silver paper. And within the silver paper inside the box lay a dainty gold bracelet.

It was extremely pretty, and had cost a great deal, no doubt. It was very kind of Judy's mother to give it. Nevertheless round the bracelet crept a sort of cobweb of thoughts and feelings which were not all of pleasure. It was too late to examine into them now. Matilda wrapped up the trinket again and put it away, and went to bed; as happy as it seemed possible for her to be.

Sunday morning was high and bright, it must be confessed, when she awoke. Bells were ringing, the eight o' clock bells she thought they must be; but indeed they were the bells for Sunday school. Matilda did not guess that, and so was not in an immediate hurry to get out of bed and end the luxurious rest which the excitements and late hours of the day before had made so welcome and so long. She lay still, shut her eyes, and opened them upon the morning brightness, with a thrilling and bounding rapture of recollection that there was a little gold watch in her drawer which owned her for its mistress and would be her inseparable friend and servant – and adornment – thenceforward. Matilda lay still for very happiness. Turning her head a little towards the window the next time she opened her eyes, it seemed to her that she saw a picture standing there against the wall. Matilda shut her eyes and told herself that she was not dreaming and had no business to see visions in broad daylight. "I have been thinking so much about that picture I suppose, and talking about it to the witch, that is the reason I thought I saw it. But what *did* I see, that looked like a picture?" She opened her eyes now and raised herself on her elbow to look, for this was curious. More curious still! there, against the wall, in plain view, in the broad light, stood the beautiful engraving that had so captivated her.

"It's there!" was Matilda's thought. "The very thing! But what is it there for?"

A half-formed suspicion made her jump out of bed very spryly and run to the picture. There was a little ticket stuck in between the glass and the frame.

"*For Matilda Laval*– with Mrs. Lloyd's thanks and *approbation*."

Matilda looked, rushed back into bed, and arranged herself so that she could comfortably see the picture, while she thought about it.

"Mrs. Lloyd's thanks" – thanks for what? She must know, she *must* know, about the shawl. Yes, she must; I guess mamma told her. And it is mine! it is mine! There she is, that beautiful thing, the woman hunting for her lost money; the odd little lamp, and all. It is mine to keep. Certainly I ought not to wish for another thing for a whole year to come; I have got so much. This and my watch. O delightful! – I ought to be good! How lovely the light from that little old lamp is. And that is the way Jesus looks for us – for people who are lost; lost in the dark. So he looked for *me*, and found me. And there are such a great many more lost, that are not found yet. Lost in the dark! – And if He cares for them so, he must wish his servants to care too, and to look for them, and save all they can. Then that woman with her pretty lamp just shews me what I ought to do and how I ought to feel. —

Musing on in this way, very happy, leaning on her elbow to look at the picture, too warm in the soft air of her room to be disturbed by the necessity of getting dressed, Matilda noticed at last that the bells had stopped ringing. It was eight o' clock past, she thought, and time to get up; but she would look at her watch to see how eight o' clock looked on its pretty white face. Lo, it was nine! Sunday schools already beginning their services, while she stood there in her night-gown; dressing and breakfast yet to be gone through. But the afternoon was the time for school in the place where Matilda went; so all was not lost.

And so ended the doings of that Christmas night.

CHAPTER III

The experience of the morning certainly was rather scattering in its tendency, as far as any sober thought or work was concerned. The young people were brimful of life and fun and excitement; and it was not possible for Matilda to escape the infection. Nevertheless after lunch she had firmness enough left to put on her coat and hat and trudge off to Sunday school by herself. Norton said he had not "slept out," and would not go. Matilda went, with her little watch safe in her breast.

Getting out into the cold air and setting her feet upon the snowy streets, had somewhat the effect of breaking a spell. For a while, that seemed now a very long while, Matilda had been in a whirl of expectation and pleasure and in a kind of dream of enchantment; nothing but soft luxury and visions of delight and one thing after another to make the child think she had got into very fairyland. But the streets outside were not fairyland; and the sharp air pinched her cheek with a grip which was not tender or flattering at all. The sense began to come back to Matilda that everybody was not having such rose-coloured dreams as she, nor living in summer-heated rooms. Nay, she saw children that were ill dressed, on their way like her; some who were insufficiently dressed; a multitude who were not nicely dressed; the contrast was very unpleasant, and a certain feeling of uneasiness and of responsibility and of desire to make other people comfortable crept over her anew. Then she remembered that she could not reach many, she could not do much; and she came into school and took her seat at last with a concentrated desire to do at least something effectual towards rescuing Sarah Staples from her miserable circumstances. After the lesson was done and the scholars were dismissed, Matilda asked Mr. Wharncliffe if she could speak to him?

"Is it a minute's work? or several minutes?" he inquired.

"I don't know, sir; I think, several minutes."

"Then wait a minute, and we will walk home together."

Matilda liked that, and presently in the clear late light of the waning winter afternoon, she and her teacher sallied forth into the street hand in hand.

"Now what is it?" he asked.

"About Sarah, Mr. Wharncliffe."

"Well? What about her?"

"I have been thinking a great deal, Mr. Wharncliffe, how to manage it; because I had not a great deal of money myself, and I did not know whether I could get help or no; but now I think I *shall* have some help; and I wanted to consult you to know what I had best do."

"What do you want to do?"

"First, I want to get her out of that dreadful place into a comfortable room somewhere."

"Suppose you do it, how is she going to stay in it?"

"What do you mean, sir?"

"The rent of such a room as you speak of would be, say seventy-five cents or a dollar a week. How are Sarah and her mother to pay that?"

"O I should have to pay it for them. I could do that, I think."

"For how long?"

Matilda looked at her teacher and did not immediately answer. She had not looked ahead so far as that.

"It is necessary to take all things into consideration," he said, answering her look. "You would not wish to put Sarah and her mother into a place of comfort for a little while, merely to let them fall out of it again?"

"O no, sir!"

"How are they to be maintained in it?"

Matilda pondered.

"I could take care of the rent, I think, I mean *we* could, for a while; for a year, perhaps; by that time couldn't they pay it, don't you think?"

"How?"

"By their work; by their earnings."

"But now, and for a long time past, their work has not enabled them to pay for anything better than they have got."

"Couldn't they do something better, Mr. Wharncliffe? something else? that would give them more money?"

"What work could you help them to, that would pay better?"

"I don't know, sir," said Matilda, looking up wistfully in her teacher's face. "I don't know anything about such things. Can *you* tell me? What work is there that they could get. What the other poor people do?"

"There are other things," said Mr. Wharncliffe thoughtfully. "There are better and better paying sorts of sewing; what Mrs. Staples does is very coarse, and she gets very little for it. But machine work now-a-days puts hand work at a disadvantage."

"What is machine work, sir?"

"Work done on a sewing machine. With a machine a woman can do I suppose, ten times as much in a day, and with more ease to herself."

"Well, wouldn't Mrs. Staples work on a machine?"

"I do not know. I think she used to take in washing once. She could do that again, if she had a better room and conveniences."

"And does that pay better?"

"I believe so. Indeed I am sure."

"Then she might do washing," said Matilda; "and Sarah might sew on a machine, Mr. Wharncliffe."

"She has not got one, you know."

"If we could get her one? Wouldn't that be nice, Mr. Wharncliffe?"

"My dear child, a good sewing machine costs a good deal of money."

"But *if* we could, Mr. Wharncliffe? I said *if*."

"Nothing could be better. Perhaps, by and by, it might be managed. In the mean time, Sarah might learn, and possibly get work; or get a machine and pay for it gradually by doing work for the makers. Such arrangements are made."

"How much does a sewing machine cost?"

"From forty five to sixty dollars."

"Forty five," repeated Matilda gravely. "But, Mr. Wharncliffe, in the first place the thing to do is to get them out of that place into a new room. Might we not do that? and don't you think the rest can be managed, somehow?"

"If we do that, the rest *must* be managed, if possible. It is always greater kindness and a far greater benefit, Matilda, to help poor people to take care of themselves, than to save them that care."

"Why, sir?"

"People are better and happier and stronger, working for their living and earning it, and keeping the sense of independence, than they are when living on the money of other people and losing their own self-respect. That is very ruinous to character. Avoid it always, in all your efforts to help people."

"Yes, I see," said Matilda thoughtfully. "But, Mr. Wharncliffe, Sarah and her mother cannot do anything to get in a better way while they live in that cellar. They want some help just at first. Don't they?"

"Certainly; and I think we have struck the right line of action to pursue for them. Help to put them in the way of being comfortably independent, is just what they want."

"Then the first thing is a lodging," said Matilda, with a relieved and brightening face. "How can we find one, Mr. Wharncliffe? I don't want them to know about it till we get it all settled and ready for them to move into."

"Ready for them?" said Mr. Wharncliffe inquiringly.

"Yes, sir; you know they have nothing to put into a nice room now, if they had one."

"Aren't you laying plans beyond your means?"

"Beyond *mine;* but I shall have some help. I don't know exactly how much, but some."

"Well, you will let me help too if necessary," said the gentleman. "And I will look out for a lodging."

"O thank you! Will you, sir?"

"To be sure. That is one way I am going to help."

"And when you have found one, you will let me know?"

"Whom else? Certainly, I will. I shall take no step without your direction."

"O thank you, sir!" said Matilda again.

They had been walking up the Avenue during this talk, to have uninterrupted time for it; now they had turned about to come home. Clear and bright and cold the sun was leaving the streets and lingering about the house roofs and chimneys; and the steeples of churches were shining marks of light on one side, on the other dark spires against the western sky. Mr. Wharncliffe and Matilda quickened their steps, which the frosty air made it pleasant to do. She supposed that the subject of their conversation was ended for the present, and so was somewhat surprised to hear the next question from her companion. It came out after some little pause.

"Matilda what has put this in your head?"

"This we have been talking of? Why I wanted to make Sarah comfortable. I could not bear to have her in that dreadful place. Mr. Wharncliffe, don't you think it is dreadful?"

"I do think it is dreadful; and your feeling very natural. Then you want to go to this expense and trouble for the comfort of knowing that she is comfortable?"

"I think so," said Matilda, somewhat puzzled. "I could not bear to think of her there."

"All perfectly right, Matilda," said her friend smiling. "I only want, while you are taking care of Sarah, to take care of you."

"How, sir?"

"There are so many ways in which good things may be done; and I wish you to take the best."

"What ways do you mean, sir? I do not understand."

"There is one way of doing kind things, merely or chiefly to save one's self from the uncomfortable feeling that the sight of misery gives. Kind people of that sort are benevolent in spots, just when they see or hear of something that touches them, and never at any other time. Others do kind things because they like to have a name for generosity, and giving money costs them nothing."

Matilda looked inquiringly up in Mr. Wharncliffe's face. "It made me very uncomfortable to see Sarah in that place," she said; "and to think of her in it."

"A third sort of kindness," Mr. Wharncliffe went on smiling, "is done because people love the Lord Jesus, and so love all whom he loves, and like to do the work he wants done."

"But it makes them feel badly to see people suffering?" said Matilda.

"Undoubtedly. They are the tenderest of all. But they will do as much for people they never saw, as for those at hand; and their spring of kindness never dries up. It is a perpetual flow. When they do not see objects on which to spend it, they seek them out."

Matilda pondered matters a little. Then she lifted a very honest face towards her companion.

"Which reason did you think made me want to do this for Sarah, sir?"

"I wanted *you* to think about it."

"Don't you think, Mr. Wharncliffe, it is very difficult to find out really why one does things?"

"Very difficult," said Mr. Wharncliffe with a comical drawing of his lips; "but very useful."

"I do not *think*," began Matilda again, very gravely, "I do not *think* my wanting to do this for Sarah was just to make myself feel comfortable."

"I do not think it, my child; but it is no harm to have your attention directed to the question. In all such matters, keep your action pure; let every thing be done for Christ, and then it will be all right. For instance, Matilda, when the real motive is self, or when there is no higher at work, one is easily tempted to do too much in a given case; to indulge one's self with great effects and astonishing liberality; when, if it were simply for Christ, one would be moderate and simple and prudent, and keep a due proportion in things."

"Yes," said Matilda looking puzzled, – "I understand. You will help me keep a 'proper proportion' in what I do for Sarah Staples, Mr. Wharncliffe?"

"How much are you thinking of doing?"

"I want to get her into a comfortable room," said Matilda. "That is first. Then – they have no furniture, Mr. Wharncliffe?"

"You want to get them some?"

"Would that be too much? a little? common things, of course, but what they cannot be comfortable without."

"How much money do you propose to spend on Sarah at this time?"

"I do not know. I know about how much I have, but I can't tell yet how much help I shall get. I want to do what *ought* to be done."

The last words were said with such an accent of earnest determination, that Mr. Wharncliffe again had almost smiled at his scholar; but he did not. He went on quite gravely: —

"A room and some necessary furniture, I should think, could be managed."

"Then we want to get them into a way of earning more."

"Yes. I will see about that. And about the room. And I can get what you want in furniture, at a second hand place, where the articles will cost very little."

"That's good," said Matilda. "Well, Mr. Wharncliffe, all *that* will not be too much?"

"I think not."

Matilda hesitated, and then added doubtfully, "Don't you think they want clean dresses?"

Mr. Wharncliffe smiled now.

"Where shall we stop?" said he.

"But they are very – uncomfortable," said Matilda, after waiting to choose a word. Her teacher thought for a minute of Sarah's well-worn, faded, lank, best dress, and how little evidently there was under it to keep the child warm, and his brow grew very sober indeed, and his blue eye misty.

"I'll not check you, Matilda," he said, "unless I see you going to some great extravagance. Go on, and I'll help, and we'll try to make one bad spot at least a little better. Good-bye!"

With a smile and a nod he parted from her at her own door, and Matilda ran up the steps and ran in with a whole little gale of pleasure freshening through her heart.

There was a gale of another sort blowing through the house that evening, and making the household lively. Pleasure was not wanting to it, though it was pleasure of another sort and largely mixed with excitement. The three other young ones were full of plans for the holiday week, reminiscences of the last evening, comparison and discussion of presents, and of people. Matilda in the midst of them listened and was amused, and thought of her gold watch and of Sarah with great secret throbs of delight in her heart.

"So you were the witch, grandmother," said Norton. "I knew it. I was sure of it. What did you do it for?"

"Do what, boy?"

"Take up a witch's trade?"

"I have not laid it down yet."

"No, ma'am; but what put it in your head?"

"I wanted my share of the fun," said the old lady.

"Did you get it, grandmamma?" asked David.

"Yes. A very good share."

"Did you ask everybody such questions as you asked us?" Norton inquired.

"I did not want to know the same thing about all of you."

"No, ma'am. Did you find out a good deal, grandmother?"

But Mrs. Lloyd laughed and declined to answer.

"There is something more I want to find out," she said. "I want to know what makes this little girl look so happy. She doesn't say a word, but her smiles speak for her!"

"Who, Matilda?" said Norton.

"It's easy enough to be smiling," said Judy with slight scorn.

"You might practise it then a little, and do no hurt," remarked Norton.

"Nobody ought to be always smiling," returned Judy. "It's vulgar. And it doesn't mean anything, either."

"Hush, Judy," said her mother.

"What were you smiling about, Matilda?" Mrs. Lloyd asked.

"A great many things I was thinking of, ma'am."

But the little girl's face was so gleeful as she answered, and the smile and the sparkle were so pleasant, that the old lady's curiosity was raised.

"A great many things?" she repeated, "A *great many* things to be glad of? I should like to know what they are. Come, I will make a bargain with you. I will give you a silver penny for your thoughts; and my silver penny shall be a golden half-eagle."

"For my *thoughts*, ma'am?" said Matilda, half bewildered; while the other young ones burst out like a pack of hounds after their leader.

"A half-eagle," Mrs. Lloyd repeated, "for *all* your thoughts; if you will give me them all. I want to know all the things you are feeling so glad about."

"Grandmamma, you'll do as much for me?" cried Judy. "Only, mine will take an eagle to bring them down. They fly high. You might have bought hers, I am confident, for a duck or a pigeon."

"I should like to make a bargain too, grandmother," said Norton; "if you are in that mood."

"Do you think your thoughts are worth anything?" said his grandmother; – "to anybody but yourself?"

"Whose are?" said David.

"Mine are not," said Matilda. She had flushed high, for she saw that the old lady was in earnest; and five dollars was a good deal to her just now.

"Everything is worth what it will fetch, though," said David. "I advise you to close with the offer, Matilda. Five dollars is five dollars, you know."

Matilda's eyes went doubtfully to Mrs. Lloyd.

"Yes," said the old lady smiling. "I will stand to my part of the bargain, if you will stand to yours. But mind, I want *all*."

"There were so many things," Matilda began; "it would take me a good while to tell them."

"Never mind; we have nothing better to do," said Mrs. Lloyd. "We are at leisure."

"Time's nothing," said Norton, in great amusement.

"At ten dollars or so an hour," added David.

Poor Matilda was in some difficulty. She was furnishing the entertainment of the whole circle; for even Mrs. Bartholomew put down her paper, and Mrs. Laval was smiling, and Mrs. Lloyd was waiting, and the children were all open-eyed. But she had nothing to be ashamed of; and five dollars! —

"I was feeling glad about my watch," she began, "and about my picture – O so very glad! I think they have hardly been out of my mind all day."

"Picture? what picture?" said Judy.

"Hush!" said her grandmother.

"She didn't have any picture!" Judy went on. Matilda looked at her and said nothing.

"Did you?" said Judy. "What was it? Is it in a locket?"

"You can attend to her afterwards, Matilda," said Mrs. Lloyd. "At present you are engaged with me. There is nobody here but you and me."

Matilda sincerely wished it had been so; but she had several curious pairs of ears listening to her.

"Then I was glad, I believe, about all the pleasure of last night, and the Christmas tree, and my other presents; but that wasn't all. To-day has been so very pleasant, and this afternoon particularly."

"This afternoon!" cried Judy. "Why she was away at that horrid Sunday school."

"She don't think it is horrid," said Norton, displeased.

"You don't mean she shall get through what she has to say," remarked David.

"If you would all hold your tongues, there would be some chance," said Mrs. Lloyd. "Try again, Matilda. Was there more? What made the afternoon so pleasant?"

"It always is at that school," said Matilda. "But besides that, this afternoon I believe I got some help for something I want to do; and thinking about that, and about what I want to do, was part of I what was feeling so glad about."

"Well if that isn't a confused statement of facts!" said Judy. "Feeling so glad about, – when?"

"When Mrs. Lloyd asked me what I was smiling at."

"But I am to have your thoughts, you know," said Mrs. Lloyd, with a rather pleasant smile. "You have not told me yet *what* it is you want to do, the thought of which is so agreeable."

"I did tell it, to the witch last night," said Matilda. "Do you want me to tell it again, now, ma'am?"

"Certainly. You don't think I am a witch, do you?"

On that point Matilda did not give her thoughts; but as desired, she told the story, briefly, of Sarah and her home, and of the reforms proposed in the latter. The attention of her hearers was marked, although most of them indeed had known the matter before.

"What was there in all this to make you so very glad?" inquired Judy.

Matilda hesitated, and could not find what to say.

"Pink has her own ways of being happy you see," Norton remarked.

"She is not the only one, I hope," said David.

"The only one, what?" said Judy sharply. "You are as bad as she is, David, to-night, for talking thick."

"Have we got through, my dear?" inquired Mrs. Lloyd kindly.

"Through all the things that were making me feel glad?" said Matilda. "No, ma'am – not quite." And she stopped and flushed.

"Let us have it," said Mrs. Lloyd. "A bargain is a bargain."

"Yes, ma'am," said Matilda. "I am afraid – I was afraid – perhaps you wouldn't understand me. I was glad of all these things; – and then, I thought, I was so glad that I knew about Jesus; and that I am his child; and that he has given me all these other things to be glad about, and this work to do for Sarah!"

There was a profound silence for a minute or two. Judy was astonished out of speech. David, perhaps, disgusted. Norton was a little proud that Matilda had independence enough to dare to speak out, even if he chafed a little under the subject of her plain speaking. The elder ladies looked at one another with an odd expression in their eyes. When Mrs. Lloyd spoke she went back to the practical question.

"How much money do you expect it will take, to do what you want for these poor people, Matilda?"

"I don't know, ma'am, yet. My teacher will find out and tell me."

"Is it your teacher who has suggested the plan?"

"The plan? – O no, ma'am," said Matilda. "It is my plan. I have been talking him into it."

"Who is he?" Mrs. Lloyd asked.

"Mr. Wharncliffe."

"What Wharncliffe? Is he any connection of General Wharncliffe?"

"His brother," said Norton.

This seemed, Matilda did not know why, to give satisfaction to her elders. Mrs. Lloyd went on with an unbent face.

"How much money have you got, Matilda, to work with?"

"Not a great deal, ma'am; I have saved a little. It won't take such a *very* great deal to get all I want. It is only common things."

"Saved!" Judy burst out. "*Saved!* Now we have got at it. This is the secret. *This* is why we are such good temperance people and think it's wicked to buy liqueur glasses. O yes! we save our money that way, no doubt."

"Judy," said her brother, "I'm ashamed of you."

"No need," said Judy coolly. "Keep it for yourself, next occasion."

"What is all this?" said Mrs. Lloyd.

"Nothing that had better go any further," said Mrs. Laval. "Nothing of any consequence, mother."

"It is of no consequence," said Judy, "because David and Norton made it up."

"And Judy didn't," said Norton.

"Not I; it was your affair," said the young lady. "My connections are not given to saving."

"That is very true indeed!" exclaimed Mrs. Bartholomew, bursting out into a laugh; "and you, Judy, least of all your 'connections.'"

"But what is all this?" repeated Mrs. Lloyd, seeing that the faces around her were moved by very various sorts of expression. It had to come out. Judy and Norton told the story between them, with some difficulty. Matilda felt very sorry, and very doubtful of the effect. David looked exceedingly dissatisfied. Mrs. Lloyd listened with unchanged gravity.

"There! you may call it what you like," Judy said in conclusion. "But I like to have things go by their right names."

"It wouldn't be always best for you," said her brother.

"Do you think it is wrong, my dear, to drink wine?" Mrs. Lloyd asked, addressing Matilda.

Matilda did not well know what to answer. She, a child, what business had she to 'think' anything about the right or the wrong of things done by people so much older and wiser than herself? And yet, that did not change the truth, and the truth was what she must answer.

"I have promised not to do it," she said, almost shrinkingly.

"That affects your own drinking or not drinking. Do you think it is wrong for other people?"

Again Matilda hesitated. She would have welcomed almost any interruption of Judy's; but this time Judy kept as still as a mouse. And so did everybody else. Matilda's colour came and went.

"If you please, ma'am," she said at last, "I don't want to say what you will think rude."

"I will not think it rude," said Mrs. Lloyd with a little laugh. "I want to know what notion such a child as you has got in her head. *Do* you think it is wrong?"

"Yes, ma'am," Matilda-answered softly.

"Hear her!" cried Judy. "She has got an idea that wine is money in another form, and heavy to drink."

Matilda thought that Judy had unwittingly put her very meaning into the words; but she did not say so.

"My dear," said Mrs. Lloyd, "I have drunk wine all my life. It has never hurt me."

Matilda was silent.

"Is that your notion, that it is unwholesome?"

"No, ma'am."

"What then?"

"People take too much of it," said Matilda; "and it ruins them; and if all good people would let it alone, wouldn't it help to make the rest let it alone?"

"Insufferable piggishness!" said Mrs. Bartholomew. "You must excuse me, Zara. I hope you will teach your adopted child better manners, arid get rid of a little of this superb folly."

"I am not so sure about the folly," said Mrs. Laval.

"I am sure about the manners," said Mrs. Lloyd. "She has said nothing but what I have made her say. Now, my dear, you have fulfilled your part of the bargain between us, and I will do my part."

The old lady produced a gold five dollar piece from her purse and put it in Matilda's hand. Then drawing the child kindly towards her, she added,

"And from this time you must call me grandmamma, will you? as the others do; and I will call you my grandchild."

She kissed the astonished Matilda, and the subject was dismissed. At least by the elders; the young people did not so easily let it drop. No sooner were they by themselves than Judy held forth in a long tirade, about "presumption" and "artfulness" and "underhand ways;" waxing warm as she went on; till Norton was provoked to answer, and the debate between them grew hot. Matilda said never a word, nor did David; she kept outwardly very quiet; but an hour after, if anybody could have seen her he would have seen a little figure cuddled down in a corner of her own room and weeping abundant tears. So ended the Christmas Sunday and the Christmas festival.

CHAPTER IV

There were too many pleasant things on hand for Judy's behaviour to have any very lasting effect on Matilda's spirits, besides that a good share of independence was one of her valuable characteristics. With the new light of Monday morning, her heart leapt up anew at thought of all the comfort preparing for Sarah and at her growing stock of means for the same. She got out her purse and counted her money. With the new gold piece there was a nice little sum; not enough indeed, but Matilda had hopes of David, and hopes floating and various, that somehow what was needful would be forthcoming when the time came.

The week was about half gone, when one afternoon David came to Matilda's door and knocked. Matilda had shut herself up to write a letter to Maria, and opened the door to David with a good deal of surprise and pleasure. The second time, this was. He came in and sat down.

"Where do you think I have been?" said he.

"To see Sarah?" said Matilda eagerly.

"You are quick," said David smiling. "No, I have not been to see Sarah exactly; but I have been to see where she lives and all about her."

"Did you see where she lives?"

"Yes."

"David, isn't it horrid?"

"It's disgusting!" said David.

"But she can't help it," said Matilda, again eagerly.

"No, she can't, but somebody ought to help it. There ought not to be any such horror possible in such a city as this."

"So I think. But *who* ought to help it, David? How could anybody help it?"

"There used to be a way among my people," said the boy proudly. "The corners of the cornfields, and the last of the grapes on the vines, and the dropped ears of corn, and the last beatings of the olives, were commanded to be left for the poor."

"But there are no vines nor cornfields nor olives *here*," said Matilda.

"Nothing so good," replied David. "I believe people grow wicked in cities."

"Then do you think it is wicked to build cities?"

"I don't know about that," said David; "that's another matter. Without cities a great many good things would be impossible."

"Would they? what?" said Matilda.

"Well, commerce, you know; without great centres of commerce, there could not be great commerce; and there would not be great fortunes then; and without great for tunes there could not be the grand things in music and painting and sculpture and architecture and books, that there are now."

What "great centres of commerce" might be, Matilda could not tell; and she did not like to ask David too many questions. She suddenly came out with an objection.

"But Abraham did not live in a city."

David started, looked at her, and then laughed a little.

"Abraham! no, he did not; and he was a rich man; but *one* rich man here and there could not do those things I spoke of."

"Then, wouldn't it be better there should be no cities?" said Matilda.

"Better than what? Better than have cities with such dreadful poor people? Can't have the good without the bad, I suppose."

"You said, people grow wicked in cities."

"Well, they do."

"Then ought people to build cities?"

"I don't know how the world would get on, at that rate," said David smiling. "Anyhow the cities are built; and we are living in one; and one corner house in it gives you and me as much as we can do."

"A single room in it, David."

"Yes. Well, you know you consulted a witch the other night."

"Did I?" said Matilda.

"The witch gave me orders to search into your matter. I have done it, and told her what I had found; and she has commissioned me to deliver to you – this."

So saying, David produced a little gold piece, the very mate to the one Matilda had earned by telling her thoughts.

"O David!" Matilda exclaimed, – "O David!"

"Well?" said David smiling. "What?"

"I am getting so much!"

"You will want it."

"But I don't see how it should take such a *very* great deal of money just to do this little thing," said Matilda; and she went on to explain Mr. Wharncliffe's propositions and helping agency. Before she had well got through, Norton dashed in.

"Hallo! David here? All the better. Isn't she a jewel of a witch, David?"

David looked up with a responsive twinkle in his eye; and Matilda asked what he meant.

"Mean?" said Norton, "I mean the witch. You went to see the witch, Pink; haven't you heard from her?"

"Yes! just this minute; but Norton, I don't know what you expected to hear. What have you heard?"

"Glorious!" cried Norton, swinging his cap joyously. "We've got that little room, Pink, for a greenhouse; and a stove in it for cold nights; and shelves and benches and frames and all those things I'll put up my self; and *then* we'll have a show of flowers. Your hyacinths will do a great deal better up there."

"Will they?" said Matilda. "They are doing very nicely here; and they look nicely."

"Now we can do all we've a mind to, Pink. I'll have some amaryllis roots right off; and japonicas, *japonicas*, Pink; and everything you like. Geraniums, and Bovardias, and Azaleas, and Cacti; and Cyclamens; and Cassia and Arbutillon. Fuchsias too, and what you like!"

"Why that little room will not hold everything," said Matilda. "Can't you have some roses?"

"Roses? O yes, and carnations; everything you like. Yes, it will hold everything. Lots of tulips, too."

"How about the money?" David asked.

"It don't take a fortune to stock a little greenhouse."

"You haven't got a fortune."

"I have got enough."

"Have anything left for other objects?"

"What objects?" said Norton. "I haven't but one object at present. One's enough."

"But Matilda has an object too," David said smiling enough to show his white teeth; "and her object will want some help, I'm thinking."

"What object?" said Norton.

"Don't you remember? I told you, Norton, about Sarah" —

"O *that!*" said Norton with a perceptible fall of his mental thermometer. "That's all your visions, Pink; impracticable; fancy. The idea of you, with your little purse, going into the mud of New York, and thinking to dean the streets."

"Certainly," said David, "and so she wauls a little help from our purses, don't you see?"

"David Bartholomew!" Norton burst out, "you know as well as I do, that it is no sort of use to try that game. Just go look at the mud; it will take all we could throw into it, and never shew."

"No," said David; "we could clear up a little corner, I think, if we tried."

"*You!*" cried Norton. "Are *you* at that game? *You* turned soft suddenly?"

"Do no harm, that I see," replied David composedly.

"These people aren't your people," said Norton.

"They are your people," said David.

"They are not! I have nothing to do with them, and it is no use – Davie Bartholomew, you *know* it's no use – to try to help them. Pink is so tender-hearted, she wants to help the whole world; and it's all very well for her to want it; but she can't; and I can't; and you can't."

"But we can help Sarah Staples," Matilda ventured.

"And then you may go on to help somebody else, and then somebody else; and there's no end to it; only there's this end, that you'll always be poor yourself and never be able to do anything you want to do."

Norton was unusually heated, and both his hearers were for a moment silenced.

"You know that's the truth of it, Davie," he went on; "and it's no use to encourage Pink to fancy she can comfort everybody that's in trouble, and warm everybody that is cold, and feed everybody that is hungry, because she just can't do it. You can tell her there is *no end* to that sort of thing if she once tries it on. Suppose we all went to work at it. Just see where we would be. Where would be Pink's gold watch, and her picture? and where would be her gold bracelet? and where would my greenhouse be? And where would this house be, for that matter? and the furniture in it? and how should we all dress? Your mother wouldn't wear velvet dresses, that you like so much; and mine wouldn't wear that flimsy muslin stuff that she likes so much; and grandmamma's lace shawl would never have been mended, for it never would have been here to get burnt. It's all a lot of nonsense, that's what it is."

"There is law about it, though," David began again gravely.

"Law?" Norton echoed.

"The law of my people."

"O what is it, David?" cried Matilda; while Norton was grumly silent. He did not want to debate David's Jewish law with him. David gave the words very readily.

"'When there is with thee any needy one of one of thy brethren, in one of thy cities, in thy land which Jehovah thy God is giving to thee, thou dost not harden thy heart, nor shut thy hand from thy needy brother; for thou dost certainly open thy hand to him, and dost certainly lend him sufficient for his lack which he lacketh.'"

"That says what the people would do – not what they *ought* to do," said Norton.

"I beg your pardon; it is a strong way of saying, in the Hebrew, what they *must* do. Listen. 'Thou dost certainly give to him, and thy heart is not sad in thy giving to him, for because of this thing doth Jehovah thy God bless thee in all thy works, and in every putting forth of thine hand; because the needy one doth not cease out of the land, therefore I am commanding thee, saying, Thou dost certainly open thy hand to thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy one, in thy land.'"

Matilda was thinking of other words, which she dared not bring forward; being in a part of her Bible which David did not like. Neither was it necessary. Norton had got quite enough, she could see. He was in a state of fume, privately.

"I am going to give one side of the green house to you," he said, turning to Matilda. "Now you have got to think and find out what you will put in it. I shall have the shelves and all ready by the end of the week; and next week, Pink, – next week! – we must put the plants in; because the winter is going on, you know."

The conclave broke up, to go upstairs and look at the new greenhouse. Norton explained his arrangements; the oil-cloth he was going to put on the floor, the rising banks of green shelves, the watering and syringing and warming of the little place; till Matilda almost smelt the geranium leaves before they were there.

"Now, Pink, what will you have on your side?"

"I can't give more than a dollar to it, Norton," said Matilda very regretfully.

"A dollar! A *dollar*, Pink? A dollar will get you two or three little geraniums. What's to become of the rest of your shelves?"

"I shall have to give them back to you, I'm afraid."

"You've got money, plenty."

"But I can't spend it for plants."

"Because you are going to throw it into the mud, Pink? O no, you'll not do that. I'll give you a catalogue of plants, and you shall look it over; and you will find a dollar won't do much, I can tell you. And then you will see what you want."

He was as good as his word; and Matilda sipped her glass of water and eat her sponge cake at tea time between the pages of a fascinating pamphlet, which with the delights it offered almost took away her breath, and quite took away the taste of the sponge cake. Norton looked over her shoulder now and then, well pleased to see his charm working.

"*Yellow* carnations?" cried Matilda.

"I don't like them best, though," said Norton. "There, *that*– La purité – that's fine; and the striped ones, Pink; those double heads, just as full as they can be, and just as sweet as they can be, and brilliant carmine and white – those are what I like."

Matilda drew a long breath and turned a leaf.

"Violets!" she exclaimed.

"Do you like them?"

"Violets? Why, Norton, I don't like any thing better! I don't think I do. Dear little sweet things! *they* do not cost much?"

"No," said Norton, "they do not cost much; and they don't make much show, neither."

"But they don't take much room."

"No; and you want things that *do* take room, to fill your shelves. The greenhouse ought to be all one mass of green and bloom all round."

Matilda heaved another sigh and turned another leaf.

"I don't know anything about tuberoses," she said. "Primroses? what are they like? 'A thousand flowers often from one plant!' what are they like, Norton?"

"Like?" said Norton. "I don't know what they are like."

"I'll tell you," said Judy, who as usual was pleasing herself with a cup of strong coffee; "they are like buttercups come to town and grown polished."

"They are not in the least like buttercups!" said Norton.

"That's what I said," replied Judy coolly; "they have left off their country ways, and don't wear yellow dresses."

Matilda thought it was best to take no notice, so with another crumb of sponge cake she turned over to the next flower in the catalogue.

"What are Bouvardias? I don't know anything about them."

"Of course," said Judy. "Not to be expected."

"Do you want to take care of your own flowers yourself, Pink?" inquired Norton; "or do you mean to have me do it?"

"Why, I will do it, I suppose."

"Then you had better leave the Bouvardias to me. They are a little particular about some things."

"Are they handsome?"

"Wait till you see. Splendid! You'll see, when I get them a going. We'll have just a blaze of them."

"A blaze?" said Matilda. "What colour?"

"Flame colour, and scarlet, and white, and splendid crimson."

"Heliotrope. O I like heliotrope," Matilda went on.

"You can have those," said Norton. "They're sweet and easy. And we must have them, of course, on one side or the other. Begonias – those you might have, too."

"Hyacinths I have got," said Matilda.

"Yes, but you will want more, now that you have room for them."

"Azaleas – O azaleas are lovely," said Matilda. "They are showy too; and you want a show, Norton."

"So do you, Pink."

"Well, I like azaleas," said Matilda. "Do they cost much?"

"Not so very. I guess you can have some."

"O what a geranium!" Matilda exclaimed. "'Lady James Vick' – 'seventy-five cents each' – but what a lovely colour, Norton! O I like geraniums next best to roses, I believe."

"You must go to another catalogue for your roses," said Norton.

"That is beautiful! I never saw such a colour. These roses are better yet."

"You can't have roses enough in bloom at once. We want other things to help make up the blaze of colour there ought to be. But that's easy."

Matilda turned the catalogue over and over with a disturbed mind. It seemed to her that to have such a little greenhouse as Norton proposed, full of beauties, would be one of the most enjoyable things that could be. Every new page of the catalogue, every new detail of Norton's plan, tugged at her heart-strings. She wanted to get those plants and flowers. A few delicate tea roses, some crimson blush roses, some pots of delicious purple heliotropes with spicy breath; two or three – or four – great double carnations; bunches of violets, sweetest of all; she wanted these! Then some azaleas, larger of course, to fill up the shelves and make a beautiful show of colour, as Norton desired. Her imagination went over and over the catalogue, always picking these out for her choice; and then imagination took them to the little room upstairs, which was going to be such a lovely little greenhouse, and saw them there and almost smelt their fragrance. It would be so pleasant to take care of them; she fancied herself watering them and dressing them, picking off the dead leaves and tying up the long wreaths of vines, and putting flowers into Mrs. Laval's stem glass for her dressing table. But what use? she had not the money to buy the plants, if she went on with her plans for Sarah's behoof; no counting nor calculating could come to any other conclusion. She thought of it by day and she thought of it by night; and the more she thought, the more her desires grew. Then too, the wish to please Norton was a very serious element in her cogitations. To disappoint him by utterly failing to do all he wished and counted upon from her, was very hard to do and very disagreeable to face. But Sarah? Matilda could not change her line of action, nor divert more than one dollar from the fund saved for her benefit. One dollar, Matilda thought, might be given for flowers; but what would one dollar be worth, with all one side of the little greenhouse to be filled.

It is not easy to tell, how much trouble all this question gave Matilda. She thought it was quite strange and notable, that just when she was trying to accomplish so right a thing as the helping of that poor family in the cellar, this temptation of flowers should come up to make it hard. In one of her windows stood three little pots, in which three hyacinths were already bursting through the brown earth and showing little stout green points of leaf buds which promised nicely for other buds by and by. They had been a delight to Matilda's heart only a week ago; now, it seemed as if that vision of heliotropes and roses and geraniums had somehow swallowed them up.

When she went next to Sunday school, however, and saw Sarah's meek, patient face, Matilda was very much astonished at herself, and not a little ashamed. She sat next Sarah in the class, and could see without seeming to see, how thin her dress was and how limp it was, as if she had not enough petticoats under it to keep her warm. There was a patch too in one place. And Sarah's shawl was a very poor wrap alongside of the well covered shoulders under Matilda's thick coat. "No gloves!" said Matilda to herself, as her eye glanced from her own very handsome and warm ones; "how can she bear it? I wonder how it makes her feel, to see mine? Another time I'll wear an older pair." But

the contrast went home to Matilda's heart. Why should she have so many good things, and Sarah so few? and the words David had quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures came back to her.

With an odd feeling as if there were wrong done for which she was somehow chargeable, after the lesson was done and school dismissed she asked Sarah "how she was?" The girl's meek eye brightened a little as she answered that she was well.

"But you are hoarse," said Matilda. "You have got cold."

"O I often do, in the winter time," said Sarah. "I don't think anything of it."

And that slight shawl and thin dress! Matilda's heart gave some painful blows to her conscience.

"I didn't see you at your place the other day," she went on.

"That was Thursday," said Sarah. "No; I was too bad Thursday. I didn't go out."

So she staid at home to nurse her cold, in that cellar room with the mud floor. What sort of comfort could be had there? or what good of nursing? Matilda did not wonder that the street corner was quite as pleasant and nearly as profitable. And the thought of Sarah's gentle pale face as she said those words so went home to her heart, that she was crying half the way home; tears of sorrow and sympathy running down her face, as fast as she wiped them away.

That same evening, at tea-time, Norton asked if she had made up her list of plants for the greenhouse? Matilda said no.

"We shall want them, now, Pink. By Wednesday I shall have the staging ready; and the sooner we get it filled the better."

"O but, dear Norton," said Matilda, "I am very sorry to disappoint you; but I cannot take the money."

"Can't take what money?"

"The money to buy those plants. I would like them; but I cannot."

"But you were making your list," said Norton.

"No, I wasn't. I was only thinking what I would *like* to have."

"And you are not going to come into the greenhouse at all?"

That was more than Matilda had counted upon; the tears started to her eyes; but she only said, —

"I cannot get the plants, Norton;" and she said it steadily.

"You are going into that ridiculous charitable concern?"

Matilda was beyond answering just then; she kept silence.

"Let *me* into your greenhouse, Norton," said Judy.

"Yes; fine work you would make there," Norton replied.

"Indeed I would. I'll fill my shelves with just the finest things we can get; camellias, if you like; and the newest geraniums, and everything."

"You wouldn't take care of them if you had them."

"Well, you would," said Judy; "and it comes to the same thing."

"Pink," said Norton, "I must have my shelves full; and I can't do it all. If you won't come into the greenhouse, I shall let Judy come."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.