

MRS. HURD'S NIECE.

SIX MONTHS OF A GIRL'S LIFE.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IN THE OPERA HOUSE.

From honest prayer to deeds of good-will, from faith to works, is only the natural step.

After this month of prayer it should not be thought strange that the whole city finds itself in pleasant agitation concerning the good work which Hannah and Mary Ann have begun upon a tiny scale. It has transpired that already this laudable undertaking is in danger of falling through for the reason that at the back of the project there is a fund of only four hundred dollars, whereas there is a need of several thousand.

Or, in other words, the class of working women that patronize the Dinner Rooms cannot afford to pay for their warm, nutritious meals what these meals cost. It is as plain as daylight, therefore, to everybody, that in time the poor little firm will become bankrupt, and the rooms close.

As the prayer-meetings continue, and high and low are brought more and more closely together, this fact becomes widely known and deplored; and from a quiet, undenominational assembly which has, at last, been convened in Mrs. Guthrie's parlors, a hundred ladies go forth and work to save Hannah's idea.

A week before Christmas it is announced from the pulpits, and through the dailies, that there will be no Christmas trees at the churches, as heretofore, but that, instead, there will be one grand tree in the Opera House, representing the interest of the entire city in behalf of the "Working Women's Dinner Rooms."

Hannah and Mary Ann are privately requested to gather at the Tree all their boarders; and a little later the plan which has been perfected by several clear and steady heads is respectfully submitted to the two.

Hannah hesitates to become responsible for the use of funds belonging to others, and secretly she shrinks from the thought that her own dear plan is to be merged into a great impersonal charity. But Mrs. Whitney reassures her.

"They shall always be regarded as your rooms. They shall always remain under your control. We only ask permission to hold up your hands, and to give you the benefit of an Advisory Committee."

One day they are taken to see their new rooms—the grand "Working Women's Dinner Rooms," which a dozen prominent citizens have rented, and, through Mrs. Whitney, offer rent free. They prove to be the light, bright, handsome ground suite under the Opera Hall.

Hannah and Mary Ann at once see that the commodious kitchen, with its mighty "range" and countless conveniences, makes possible the great general trade in hot soup and hot coffee which it is proposed shall be inaugurated.

Though both are "persons of narrow culture" as Mrs. Hurd has said to the begging committee, they both can see that the long bright dining-room, with its blooming plants and greenery windows, its pictures, and its supply of daily papers, and its cozy little tables, where good bread, and hot coffee, and hot soup will be served at any reasonable hour, might supplant beer saloons to a great extent.

They can see that the "hot meal tickets," which they are to keep for sale, will enable the citizens to easily and safely distribute charity to the needy; and, after some reflection, they gratefully accept their work in this new shape.

This Christmas eve strikes everybody as a fit culmination of the work among the churches. The illuminated tree seems a beautiful flowering outgrowth of the weeks of prayer. There is light and flowers, and music, and holiday faces and holiday attire. The hall is like a forest in its green bravado of wreath and motto, and arch, and engarlanded column.

The whole city is gathered as rarely before. Every clergyman in town is present, the mayor and all the lesser dignitaries. The bands are out, and such is the universal jubilee that little Theo Hurd, who in her white silken dress knotted up with real pascies is sitting on her father's shoulder that she may the better see the beautiful Burn-

ing Tree, bigger than all the other Christmas trees she has ever seen, screams out shrilly: "It it a For of July and a Criss-mull all together, it it it, papa!"

From the same high perch she discovers her own Lois and Saidee, in their white evening dresses and Christmas flowers, on the stage, she sees Elizabeth, too, at the organ; and she tries to struggle down.

But just then her haughty cries are lost in the great burst of music, as the prelude of the instrument dies away and the whole assembly break out into the grand gladness of "Coronation." Can you imagine that music? Every fine voice in the city is there; and there are strains when it seems as if all heaven were singing above them. Lois, softly caroling away like some happy little thrush, her light notes entirely lost even to her own ears in the great choral harmony, listens and hears Caddie Greenough's voice soaring above them all like the lark up the sky, and with it, wing and wing, Elizabeth's grand tones. She gazes into the two lighted faces and thanks God; and then her eye seeks out Hannah. She is in one of the stage boxes. Her veil is down, and she is not standing with the rest. Good, happy Hannah—this is too much for her!

Pastor Nelson offers prayer. Dr. Guthrie gives an account of what a few ladies of wide sympathies have accomplished in some of the Eastern cities; and then he proceeds to honor the two girls, who, all unknown in their own community, have undertaken a kindred good work.

"All by themselves," he says, "the two lit the little light in a dark place. It is not much that the remaining thousands of us see that the blessed lamp does not go out for lack of oil!"

Then the noisy bands strike up, with clang and blare, and scream; and after that a dozen white-robed and rose-sashed messengers step out from the group of girls upon the stage, and a dozen other busy hands unlade the lighted tree of its fruit.

In answer to their names one after another of Hannah's girls rise in their seats. For the tree does not glitter, after the manner of its kind, with costly jewels, and dainty holiday volumes, and rare, priceless fabrics. All the gifts are for Hannah's Rooms and Hannah's girls.

White table napery without end, forks and spoons by the dozen, unromantic blanket shawls, warm cloaks, fleecy clouds, stout overshoes, rolls of flannel, prosaic bundles of cotton cloth, neat collars and tasteful hats.

Mrs. Whitney stands by Saidee Hurd, surveying the vast assemblage.

"I really do think," she says, "that we haven't left one of those poor girls with an excuse for not attending church."

"And it was so little to do after all," responds Saidee, "only just the expense of the usual holiday gift-making turned into a different channel!"

But this preliminary distribution is but as the mint and anise and cummin compared with the weightier matters which are to follow; although there are only slips of paper, red, white and blue, left fluttering upon the despoiled tree.

When it has grown quiet once more, one after another of the white slips Dr. Guthrie detaches and reads aloud.

The first is a certificate of \$100, deposited at the First National Bank, payable to the order of Hannah Gregg; then follows one of \$200, then one of \$50, one of \$500, from a fellow-Christian (that is John Hurd), one of \$5, another of \$800, and then there comes one of \$1000,—this is from "a personal friend of Hannah Gregg," and here Saidee looks over to her cousin Lois lovingly and whispers to Mrs. Whitney.

There is an endless succession of these bank-certificates, until everybody wishes the doctor would just bunch them together and toss them over to the astonished mistress of the rooms, and say no more about them. But still everybody breaks into a tremendous cheering when the aggregate is announced: twenty thousand dollars as a permanent fund whose interest is to be used in maintenance of the "Working Women's Dinner Rooms."

Hannah leans forward, the little paper-

looking, through the haze of happy tears, like so many great parchments. The people all see her now, in this happy moment, and they cheer her as if she were some hero—poor, modest Hannah!

And now follow the red papers which have so gaily ornamented the tree! The first is an order upon Hempel & Green for a barrel of sugar, another upon Stillman & Jackson, another upon Francis Brothers, and so on, barrel after barrel, until everybody is laughing, and Linda, with big eyes sits nudging Hannah.

"My goodness, and my goodness! Thirteen barrels of sugar to go to at once!"

There are orders also for bags of coffee, and for chests of tea, and kegs of fish, and provisions indiscriminate, until Hannah's own steady head begins to whirl a little under such a long, pelting rain of blessings.

After this the coal men are bound to have their say, and then the millers, until there is coal for the winter, and a score of barrels of flour.

But even this is not all. For, after the volleys of cheers have subsided, there are still to be seen half a dozen blue papers clinging to the tree like last year's leaves. And what shall these prove to be but receipts in full for as many sewing machines, for which as many sewing women are still in debt!

As Hannah brushes away the shining mist from before her eyes, and looks around upon her people, and singles out the faces which have been the bitterest, she sees the last traces of envy and hardness are smoothed away. Even sharp-tongued Kalista Pinckney is smiling as innocently as a child.

Hannah sees her reach across a half dozen people to shake hands with her employer in the Christmas equality and good will—how can she help it, indeed, when his wife's name is on the roll of soft, rich merino that she holds? It was not one week ago that Hannah heard her say:

"Mr. Maginnis is a hard, cruel man—hard, hard as the nether millstone! You needn't talk to me—I don't care whether our work is stoutly done or not—I will rob and cheat him just all I can!"

Mary Ann is not forgotten; and Hannah, too, has her own personal present—a dainty muff and boa, which, together with Linda's pretty cloak, and hat, and a dozen dainty white waiter aprons, she can easily trace back to the donors, even should she not follow Mary Ann's example and look inside the muff; but she does, and finds three cards tied with rose ribbon and bearing the three beloved names. "Saidee," "Lois," "Elizabeth."

It is an evening of rare and universal happiness. Even the cold Mrs. John Hurd half envies Mrs. Whitney and some of the rest of her particular friends because they are able to find so much with which to occupy and entertain themselves in this plebeian matter of cheap meals for poor people. She cannot make it to her taste. So she snubs her husband for his boyish enthusiasm.

"You talk of their distress as if it were something unusual. I am perfectly certain that it is only the common order of things. In every large town there must be similar suffering—what are you going to do about that? This is only a childish battle with the windmills."

Dr. Guthrie comes up, and Mr. Hurd repeats his wife's question and remark.

The good doctor is thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the evening. For weeks, now, he has been living among men and women instead of books.

"Ah," says he, "you forget what he of Avon says,—

"How far the little candle throws his beams!
So shines a good deed in a naughty world."

"The little candle those benevolent Boston ladies lit has thrown its beams so far and wide that already these coffee-rooms, these 'Boslin's Bowers,' are a familiar idea to the popular mind. Any and every town may accomplish all we are undertaking, my dear Mrs. Hurd. We know that no good impulse once embodied in deed, ever dies; its ripples widen, and widen, out beyond sight, and touch unknown shores. Let us be of good cheer, and great faith, brother, sister,—and light the little candles!"

Pastor Nelson has found "little sister Lois." He notices the soft bloom upon her face, the light in her gray eyes, her smiling manner—he cannot but contrast her with the lonely, struggling, trembling stranger, who in her sore need had visited his study twice in a day, not so very long ago.

"She did, then, keep right on in the path of duty, did she?"

She understands. She, too, is thinking of those visits to the little parsonage.

"Yes, she kept right on, I am very much pleased to say. And in that path, where she struggled so hard, and clambered so high to get out of it, she has met all her happinesses, every one, one after another. Only think—they were each awaiting her along that very road!"

He does not fathom all her meaning, but he is satisfied.

"And how is it about freezing to death in Dr. Guthrie's church?" he asks with a mischievous smile.

Lois glances around upon the many faces she is learning to love.

"O Pastor Nelson, I am so, so thankful to you!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

MARRIAGE BELLS.

Mr. Whitney and Lois are going down for a farewell visit at the Dinner Rooms. Mr. Whitney has been there at noon for the pleasant spectacle of the place when Hannah's special boarders are at dinner; but the two have a fancy to see it together for the last time in all its evening light and cheer.

It is a lovely night for January. The walks are dry, there is neither snow nor moon, the darkness overhead is soft, warm and starry, like summer. The stores are open, summer fashion, and the pavements are thronged. A band is playing, and through the open windows of the hall they hear the voices of concert singers.

Just as they reach the door of the Dinner Rooms, a man, followed by his wife, comes with such broad, unsteady tread down the pavement that Mr. Whitney instinctively snatches Lois aside. The man's arms hang loosely, his hat is awry, he pitches from side to side, but still his wife holds to his sleeve with one hand while she tugs with the other at a heavy basket.

Just as they pass a package rolls out. Lois points to it. "See, Max!"

The woman who is not much older than Lois, colors deeply, as she stops that Mr. Whitney may settle the contents of the basket more snugly.

"I know yez, Miss," she says low, to Lois. Hez is one of the young laddies that come so much into the Dinner Rooms bleas em! Mo husband's been there ivy avengin' for his coffee, instead of the beer poor fellows that work so hard, they must have somethin'! Wo had our house full of comforts, the last month, we did. An' he said when he went to his work the mornin', that wad I come down to-night he'd take me in to the little white tables and treat me, an' we'd hear the singin' an' have a look till the pictures—an' now, see the man!"

"The man" has slouched his hat lower, but Lois, after a moment's scrutiny, remembers him very well—the blue-eyed young Irishman who always inquired for "The Scientific American," or "The Builder's Journal." Her hand still on Max's arm, she steps toward him. He is leaning against a lamp post, waiting for his wife. He is not so far gone that he does not turn away his face in shame.

"You are not going by the Rooms, are you, Mr. Dennis? It is the last evening I shall be here for many a year, and I should like to see all the familiar faces to-night."

Dennis shifts uneasily, and mutters concerning pressing work at home. But he glances furtively at the girl who is speaking to him,—so fair, so delicate, so refined, in her white wraps, with her white plums tossing about her, yet who is not too good to stop in the street to speak to him and his wife; and though the gentleman holds her hand within his arm protectingly, Tom Dennis is not too drunk to see that she is well come to stay and talk with him as long as ever she pleases. Another glance and he recognizes Mr. Whitney.

"Is it yez that's goin' to take her from the place?"

Mr. Whitney smiles. "I am that happy man, Mr. Dennis."

"And when I am thousands of miles away," adds Lois, "longing for the sight of familiar faces, and calling up my pictures of what I've left behind me, I shall not like to miss your face from the pleasant Dinner Rooms. You are not going to give them up, are you? You will lose so much, you and Mrs. Dennis, if you do. They are planning so many enjoyable things for you in the course of the year—working men's excursions, Saturday picnics, a course of lectures, free instruction in music, concerts, and drawing class—oh, I can't begin to tell you!"