

## OUR YOUNG FOLKS.

## AT THE GATE.

## CHAPTER I.

THE garden looked bare and dreary as Constance paced up and down the walks, stopping now and then to gaze at brown, empty beds, where only a few withered tufts of last summer's leaves and flowers were to be found.

Near the gate, however, a rich border of snowdrops extended as far as the hedge at both sides, appearing like unthawed remnants of the snow which had but lately disappeared.

Soon the child heard the garden gate creak slightly on its hinges.

"Some one coming in; I'll look who it is." Peeping through the branches of the shrubs Constance saw a little ragged boy standing outside, and, on drawing nearer, a small thin hand thrust between the bars.

"He is trying to steal our snowdrops!" she exclaimed, and, with noiseless steps, hurried across a corner of the soft grass, appearing suddenly close to the gate, just in time to see the hand grasp a bunch of fresh buds which happened to grow within reach.

"Oh, don't take our pretty flowers!" cried Constance, as the boy, hearing her voice, gave one frightened glance upward, and, starting to his feet, rushed away. But dangers threatened on all sides; for the gardener, who was just returning from his dinner, happened at that moment to turn into the road leading to the gate; nothing remained, therefore, but to run back to where Constance stood—certainly the least formidable of the dangers—with her hand on the latch.

"Miss! miss!" said the terrified boy, in his despair; "indeed, I'll never do it again if you'll let me in to hide behind a bush till that man passes."

Constance peeped out. "'Tis only old John," she said, "but he'd be very angry with you for touching our flowers. I heard him say yesterday he wished he could catch the person who took them; but I'm not sure it would be right for me to let you in."

There was no time to argue the question, for the old gardener's steps came nearer and nearer; he would be within sight of the gate in another moment.

Constance's good nature conquered. "Perhaps," thought she, "if I help to save him this time he won't come back any more to steal. It would be better than letting him be sent to prison."

While these thoughts passed rapidly through her mind, the boy remained with his eyes fixed entreatingly on her face, until, opening the gate quietly a little way, she allowed him to pass in, at the same time pointing to a thick clump of evergreens, where he had but just taken refuge as the old gardener walked up to the entrance.

"Miss Constance," he said, "Some one has been at the snowdrops since I left this. Have you gathered any?"

"No, John," she replied, blushing and hesitating, for she was unused to concealment of any kind.

"Then, if I catch the thief, I can tell you I'll bring him straight to the police."

Constance, trembling at this threat, glanced uneasily towards the little shrubbery. All

was safe so far, though she fancied the laurel branches shook slightly at the near side. What was her dismay, however, when the gardener commenced his work on a bed close beside the gate, muttering that he was "determined to keep a tight watch."

How was it possible for the poor boy to escape now? Walking round and round the garden in the utmost perplexity, Constance almost regretted the step she had taken. At length, pushing her way through the tangled branches at the farthest side of the clump, she saw the little ragged boy crouching under the boughs of a tall Portugal laurel. Just as he was starting up, frightened at the rustling of the leaves, she held out her finger to impose silence, and whispered cautiously, "You must stay where you are for a while, for old John is watching the gate."

"Yes, miss, I see him through the bushes, and he's working away. I don't think he's a mind to leave that soon."

"No; and I'll have to go in before long, so you must watch your own opportunity. But first tell me, little boy, why you wanted to steal our snowdrops?"

"Well, I thought there was no one looking."

"Oh, but there was."

"Yes; I didn't see you, though, till you came up close to the gate."

"I don't mean that; there was some one else too."

"Was there?" said the boy, looking amazed.

"Yes, one you could not see, but who always watches you; I mean God."

"I've heard that before, but I never much minded. Is it true? God may see us, but he doesn't care for me or little Cissy—poor Cissy, that's always sick and tired!"

"Oh yes He does, Bert! I'm quite sure He loves you both, though you don't know it yet. Who is Cissy?"

"Cissy's my little sister. After mother died, old Marthy took her to live in her room, and she brings her out in the cold and wet, because the child looks so white and thin, people are sorry for her, and give plenty of pennies. Marthy's always angry when she's too sick to walk, and says he's not worth her food; then Cissy stays at home alone and cries."

"Do you live with them too?"

"No, I do for myself; but when Marthy's out I often slip in to see Cissy, and bring her anything I can get. 'Twas for her I wanted the flowers. Yesterday I brought her one or two, the rest I sold in the street for a penny, and bought a cake, but she wasn't hungry, and liked the flowers best."

"Well, Bert, I'll give you a good large bunch of nice fresh ones when you're going away."

"Aye, but when will that be?"

"You can't get out while John watches the gate."

"I'm thinking he'll stay there all day."

"Then you must wait till he leaves off work; it grows dark very early this time of the year. But there's the bell; I must go."

It seemed almost cruel to enjoy a comfortable room, and good dinner, while this poor boy was imprisoned in the shrubbery, cold and hungry; but, managing to lay by a slice of bread and some meat, Constance stole out

again for a few moments, when unobserved, to bring it to Bert.

The boy devoured the bread greedily, but stored up the meat in his pocket to give as a treat to Cissy.

Time passed on, and still old John remained at the gate.

All that afternoon Constance felt restless and uneasy, and could not settle to book or work.

"Why do you sit at the cold window, my dear?" her mother asked; "you are usually fond of the fireside at this hour."

"Oh, mamma, do let me stay longer here," she said, "I like looking out of the window. It's not very dark yet; old John has not left off work. Now, there he goes! and he is locking the gate!"

Without a word of explanation, Constance rushed from the room, and ran down the garden walk.

"John, John!" she cried, "oh, come back!"

"What is the matter, miss?" asked the old man, returning a few steps along the path.

Panting with excitement, Constance gasped out, "Have you really locked up the garden?"

"Yes, sure enough, and good reason too, when the flowers are stolen every morning."

"Please, John," entreated the child, "leave me the key."

"What for, Miss Constance? No one ever wants to pass out this way so late?"

"But I have a reason; please let me keep it for this one night!"

"I can't indeed, miss; I'm in charge of the garden, and must bring the key home with me." And old John walked off quickly, to avoid further solicitations, wondering what the child could mean by such a strange request.

Poor Constance stood in silent dismay, shivering in the cold blast, and trying to consider what was to be done next, when a low voice spoke from the edge of the laurel clump.

"Miss, miss, he's gone, and has locked the gate after him. Is there any other way to get out, or must I sleep here all night?"

"Oh, you can't do that!" said Constance, thinking of her own warm room and comfortable bed. "I must tell mamma, and try if she will let you pass through the house. I'll make some plan; don't be afraid to come if I call."

(To be continued.)

## "IT WILL HURT MY FATHER."

THE boys were at play in a garden where there was a tree full of ripe cherries.

"Oh, Frank," said one of them, "let us pick some of these red cherries; look how fine they are!"

"No, Willie," said the other, "we must not touch them. You know we were told not to pick one of them."

"But, Frank, there is no one here to see us; you need not be afraid. And if your father should find out that we took them, he is so kind that he would not hurt you."

"That is why I will not touch them," said Frank to Willie. "I know my father would not hurt me; yet for me to disobey would hurt my father, and I would not wish to grieve him."

Did not that boy know what it was to obey? We think he must have loved his father.