

BOYS AND GIRLS

St. Cecilia of the Court

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CHAPTER III.—Continued.

Jim saw the traces of recent tears in the red circles around his eyes, and the grimy streaks on his fat cheeks. He started to ask the reason, but thought better of it, and went behind the curtain; in a moment he emerged, with a huge slice of bread, buttered generously.

'Eat it,' he commanded.

Like a soldier, Puddin' obeyed orders with admirable promptness; he gulped it down in great mouthfuls, and carefully picked up the few fallen crumbs from his lap, and ate them.

'You live here all alone, don't you, Jim? Puddin', evidently feeling much better, was ready for conversation.

'All alone, and never get lonesome, neither.'

'Wish I lived all alone—with Celie.'

'Well, that's pretty near what you're doing now, with your mother away all day.'

'I wish she was away all the time!' responded Puddin' earnestly.

'Puddin', Jim spoke severely. 'It's a bad thing you're wishin'! A body has no friend in the world like his mother!'

'What for does she hit me then?' Puddin's mind usually moved very slowly, but it needed no thought for his simple, but convincing answer.

Jim leaned back, to think over a suitable answer; before he thought of it, Cecilia came in, her hair slightly dusted with snowflakes.

'It's snowin' out,' she remarked as she brushed them off, with a quick movement of her hand.

'It's all right for it to be snowin' out, so long as it don't snow in!' Jim thought this witticism worthy of an answering smile, but the girl crept close to the cheery stove, and made no answer. No traces of tears on her face! Jim, on the other side of the stove noticed that the upper half of her face, shaded by the tumbled mass of red hair, was pretty and childish, but the lines that drew towards her tightly drawn lips made her look very old and careworn.

Puddin' broke the silence. 'Jim gave me a big piece of bread-and-butter. More butter than you ever give me. It was good.'

Cecilia tossed back her hair out of her eyes, and in her grateful glance, Jim saw what deep brown eyes she had. He saw, too, across her forehead, now that her hair was back, an ugly bruise.

'How'd you do that?' he asked, pointing to the bruise.

Puddin' started to answer, but she hushed him with a sharp word, as she swept the hair back again with a quick gesture. 'I hit it—against the door.' Jim saw a hot wave of red flush her face, although her eyes looked daringly into his. He hadn't lived in the Court so long without learning many things, and so said nothing. Indeed, he got up for his flute, and with his eyes fixed on the ceiling, started to play. I do not know how well Jim played—it really could not matter, so long as he satisfied his audience; Puddin' soothed by the melody simply let his head fall against the wall, and slept quietly, even the dirty streaks on his face fading in the stove's shadow. The drawn lines on the Saint's face relaxed, and once in a while, she gave a little sigh of restful content. Her red hair, glinting in the fire rays, fell over her forehead in a loose mass, which she now and then brushed back with a quick but graceful movement. Jim fancied that she, too, had fallen asleep, but heard her humming

lightly to his tune, humming so tunefully that he tried to woo her into song by playing a snatch here and there, of a half dozen of the popular street airs. But she only hummed carelessly, air after air, until he turned into a solemn old hymn, with which she was not familiar, but she leaned forward, and listened eagerly to the rich chords, and when it ended, in a burst of tender melody, said simply, 'I like that! It reminds me of Jerusalem.'

'Jerusalem!' Jim echoed. 'And how could that remind you of Jerusalem. Sure that's in Asia!'

'I mean the song—the song "Jerusalem"!' Jim shook his head—he had never heard that song, he said. Did she know it?

'I don't know it exactly,' the Saint explained. 'The last Christmas I was in school, there was a lady sung it, and I can't forget some of it since. I wish I could hear it again, you bet I'd remember it all!'

'Now, if you'd sing what you do remember, maybe I'd know it myself,' said Jim, cutely.

'I'll sing it!' Cecilia threw her head back, and let her hands fall idly in her lap. Her eyelids were half closed, but Jim could catch the gleam of her brown eyes in the glare of the stove, and he noticed that when she started to sing, a look of rapt enjoyment came over her face that almost transfigured it. At the first note, Jim threw his head back, and gazed in bewilderment at the child—rich, strong, true, rang out the words, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem! Hark! How the angels sing, Hosanna in the highest, Hosanna to your King!' With a perfect abandonment to the mere sense of an outpouring of self, she sang the words again and again, the rich full tones filling the little shop with echoing melody.

'That's it,' she said, simply, as she finished.

'I don't know that song, at all,' answered Jim. He reached for his pipe, and deliberately filled it from the package of tobacco he drew from his pocket; then he picked from the floor a burnt match, and opened the tiny stove door that he might light it again at the hot coals; he puffed at his pipe in silence for a few minutes, and then he remarked, carelessly, 'You sung that song well—that you did!'

'Sung it well!' she echoed it scornfully. 'You ought to have heard that lady sing it—like a bird!'

'Maybe she did—maybe she did.' Jim looked at his pipe meditatively. 'But you sung it like a Saint!'

'Wish I was a saint! Wish I was any old thing as long as I was dead and away from here! I hate it here—I hate, hate, hate it!' The Saint had jumped to her feet, her body trembling with the feeling which she usually hid, but to which her outburst of music had unlocked the clasp; she shook her hair back unconsciously and the bruise, now colored a sullen purple, stood forth distinctly. Puddin', awakened from his slumbers, sat up sleepily, and asked, 'What's the matter, Celie?'

She crowded back the tears that had begun to gather in her eyes, and said cheerily, 'Oh, nothing! I was only playin' off! Come on, Puddin', it's gettin' late!' and without so much as a 'Good-night,' she hurried out into the Court.

Jim sat still for a while by the little stove, and but for his puffing at his pipe, might have been asleep; then, when the smoke was ended, he knocked out the ashes from the bowl, and rose to lock the door of the shop. He peered for a moment across the Court,

which bore its new carpet of white as proudly as if it would not again be miserably dirty on the morrow, and, letting his glance fall on No. 20, he said, half aloud, as he turned around, 'You poor little thing! You might be playin' off for Puddin', but you can't fool Jim, that way! I seen too much of life not to know play actin' from real actin'!'

IV.

THE ACCIDENT TO PUDDIN'.

Jim missed the Saint all next day; usually she ran in several times, and to-day when she did not come, he found that something cheery was missing. He dropped his work at noon-time, when the noise in the courtyard told him that the youngsters were coming home from school, and watched for Puddin'. Even he failed him. After school in the afternoon, he casually walked over to the pump to see if Puddin' were not amongst the boys there. He seemed the only one missing. Mickey Daly was there, blowing into his red hands alternately to warm them, and fervently hoping that Jim was looking for some one to run an errand—an errand would probably mean a cent—a cent would certainly mean something to eat. Prompted by the cheering possibility, he remarked to Jim, 'Is it me you're lookin' fur? If it is, I'm here!'

'So I see!' Jim answered cordially. 'But I'm looking for Puddin'.'

Mickey's face fell. 'If it's an errand you want done, Puddin' won't be doin' it. He's fell downstairs.'

'And is that why I haven't seen him all the day? I've been wondering where the little fellow was! Did he hurt himself bad?'

Mickey shook his head. 'Aw, he's too fat to hurt himself fallin'! Sure, nobody gets hurt bad fallin' downstairs.'

Jim was half-satisfied, and went back into the little shop, and lit the lamp. He whistled cheerily as he spread a big slice of bread for himself, and made a sandwich of it, with a piece of cheese between. He had given up tea for supper several days before; work was slack, and tea was a high-priced luxury. Jim always whistled cheeriest when he had to drown some feeling or lack or disappointment. He was still whistling when he sat down on his bench to finish putting a great patch on a shoe far too small to be in proportion to the patch, and was hammering busily, when the door opened and let in a gust of wind, and the Saint, whose hair, uncovered, was blowing about her head. Jim moved along on the bench, and made room for her near the stove; she sat down with a weary air quite unlike the valiant Cecilia, and leaned her head on her hand. The old shawl she had wrapped around her shoulders fell back, and her calico waist, buttoned awry, stood open at the throat. Jim noticed how thin it was, and that he could almost count its rapid pulsings in the faint light. She cleared her throat once or twice to speak, and then said huskily, 'Puddin's sick.'

'Sick, is he?' Jim tried to make his voice show little concern. 'Sure that's nothing, he'll be all right in a day or two.'

'He fell down-stairs, last night, when we came home from here, in the dark. He ain't hardly stopped cryin' since.' Her voice sounded as if she had hard work to keep from crying too.

Jim put forth a kindly hand of sympathy. 'Now, I wouldn't mind! Don't all children go tumblin' down-stairs often! Does he say where it hurts him?'

''Twas his head achin' him all the night, and now all the day it's his back. He won't let me lay the weight of my finger on him for the pain. My mother says that rubbing would help it—but he won't let me touch him.'

'You might rub it with liniment,' suggested Jim, slowly, as if he were pondering over the prescription.

'Would that be good?' she asked eagerly. Then she turned her back on him, and