

MAG'S CHILDREN.

The branches of the chestnut trees are swaying in a March wind, patches of snow linger still in odd corners and cling to the sheltered side of the cathedral roof. If you look in through the latticed belfry you can see the great bells, hanging silent as the wind rushes by. Down below, where two ways meet, long streams of people mingle and separate again. One street leads to the bay, where the winter sunshine strikes coldly; down the other a fiery sunset is reddening the city smoke. The cathedral stands within an iron fence, along which are ranged large chestnut trees. It is in the heart of the city. All around are dull warehouses. Along the streets are passing continually jingling street cars, heavy drays and crowds of busy people. Under the chestnut trees stands a boy watching the passers-by. Often his attention is attracted by the newsboys who throng round this corner. With them is a girl, her voice rising shrill above the others in the various paper cries. The cathedral bells strike the hours one by one. The trade in papers slackens. The last newsboy goes off calling "Good night, Mag!" to the girl, who turns up the street by the cathedral. She is passing the solitary figure in the shadow of the trees, when the boy takes a doubtful step forward. She stops.

"Aren't you going home?"

The boy shakes his head.

"Why not?"

"I haven't any home here."

"Don't you live here?"

"I came on the train this afternoon with a man who was to take me to my uncle, but he had gone away. The man said he would find him and left me here."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know," said the boy forlornly.

"What's your name?"

"Robert Carr."

They stood looking at each other. The electric light, shining through the chestnut boughs, threw flying lights and shadows on their faces.

"Well, suppose you come home with me. You can stay with us to-night. Come on."

They had gone but a few steps when the chimes rang the three-quarters.

"A quarter to ten!" said Mag. "My! won't Jule and Sammy be lonely. Let's run."

They ran a little way up the street, turned along a dark alley and stopped before a dingy house, then went in and climbed to the attic.

Mag opened the door and Bob stood back, while a boy and girl came rushing out to welcome her. In one corner of the room stood a crib bed and on the floor beside it was a mattress. A small fire burned in the grate, and near the fire was a table, on which a candle shone dimly.

"Sammy, you'll eat your supper in bed if you don't be good. Baby, stop pulling sister's hair. Don't stare at visitors. This is Mr. Robert Carr. Shake hands."

Sammy thrust his hands into his pockets, so far that one came out at a hole half way down.

"What a swell! Look at his boots, Jule."

Jule looked shyly at Bob from behind her sister. Then, encouraged by a smile, held out her hand.

"Now, you and Sammy make some toast while I set the table." Mag unrolled a bundle which she had carried wrapped in a newspaper. It was a loaf of bread. When supper was ready they began to eat merrily. Then the short candle flickered out and they went to bed in the dark.

Robert Carr was an orphan. On the death of his parents, he had been sent to an uncle living in Canada. The man in whose care he was had left him, as we have seen at the cathedral corner, promising to return.

The next morning Bob told his story to the children, saying as he finished, "What will I do now?"

"He was a bad 'un. He didn't mean to come back," said Mag, shaking her head. "Do you think you could sell papers?"

"Yes, I think I could."

"He would spoil his fine clothes," said Sammy. "Did you ever see a newsboy with no holes in his boots?"

Mag looked at him gravely.

"I guess I'll go and see Peter Flannigan. He'll be sure to think of something."

Mag went out and came back presently with a suit of Peter's clothes.

"Peter says to wear these and he'll take you to a good place for selling papers."

It was still early when they reached the cathedral corner, where they met Peter. Bob recognised him as one of the newsboys he had seen the day before.

"Good morning, Mr. Carr. You look like an old friend a great deal better than new. I never knowed before how well I looked myself."

Peter went up to the city every morning to catch the business men on their way down town.

"It's a good paying place, besides letting you see a little high life. I know an illegit corner with never the shoe of a newsboy near it. I'll leave you there and call for you again on my way down town."

At first Bob was backward, but soon he learned to call his papers and jump on the passing street cars. His shyness had worn off by the time that Peter came back. The day passed quickly after that. The trade in papers was brisk. One lady bought a paper from Bob, saying to her companion, "Such a gentlemanly little fellow. I just got

it to have him look at me with those sweet eyes." Bob blushed, then laughed gaily with the others.

So day followed day, full of work. Sometimes the children would do well. Sometimes nothing would be left from supper, and they would have to sell papers before breakfast the next morning.

The March winds blew away and April came in smiling. The streets grew dusty, and one day Sammy told them with glee that he had washed himself at a watering cart. The days were long and hot. Sometimes thunder clouds would gather and a heavy shower cool the air. Then it was as sultry and dusty as ever.

The children all felt the heat, but Bob suffered the most. His face got pale and thin, and his eyes looked sadly out from beneath his ragged hat. The novelty of selling papers had worn off. He watched the passers-by eagerly thinking that surely some day he would find his uncle.

On two sides of the cathedral ran busy streets, but at the back was a street where life moved slowly. Old houses, once grand mansions, now deserted, grew dingier year by year. Now and then an errand boy with his cart would use it as a short cut. After he had driven by, his shrill whistle and the rattle of the wheels echoed slowly away as if loth to leave the place to its silent dullness. Part of the cathedral grounds had once been used as a graveyard. It was years now since anyone had been buried there. The long grass had grown over the gravestones, some of which were lying prostrate, while others leaned sideways in gloomy dejection. Bob had chanced along here one day and had taken a fancy to the place. He liked to hold the bars of the iron fence in his hot hands and look through at the green grass and the gravestones. One near the fence had leaned over towards it and Bob could make out some of the words.

"Reginald"—the green moss had crept over the rest. A little further down—"12 years." At the foot of the stone was—"Suffer little children to come unto me and forbid them not for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

He remembered reading it with his mother, her hand guiding his finger. The words repeated themselves over—"Suffer little children to come unto me, to come unto me," bringing back with vivid distinctness his mother's face and scenes that had almost faded from his memory.

One hot afternoon in August, when no one wanted papers, Bob came to this secluded corner. It seemed cooler there,—whether it was the green grass or the quiet of the place, the sun's rays did not burn so fiercely. Bob slid down beside the iron fence, holding the bars and resting his head on one of his hands.

That afternoon Mag met her Sunday School teacher, Miss Psasmer, who gave her three tickets for one of the parks near the city. Mag's cheeks flushed with pleasure. She watched Miss Lucy out of sight, then ran home to tell the others. She made up her mind on the way that Bob must take the children. A sail on the lake would do him good. She came to the quiet street by the cathedral and glanced along. Surely that was Bob?

"Is that you, Bob?"

He turned his face towards her and smiled.

"What are you looking at?"

Bob pointed at the stone.

"It is a little boy's grave, Mag, and the children's verse is on his gravestone."

"Is it?" said Mag, slowly. "Read it, Bob."

Bob repeated it reverently.

"Isn't it nice here, Mag? So quiet."

"Yes," said Mag absently, then suddenly remembering.

"Oh, Bob! Miss Lucy has given us three tickets for you and Sammy and Jule to go for a sail on the lake."

"But, Mag, you should go."

"No! I shouldn't. I have been often and often and I always get sick. Now you go and tell the others. I'll stay here and get cool."

Mag was left alone to gaze through the bars at the graves. It was so quiet and the grass was so green. An elm tree cast a soft shade over the grass. Mag, with her face pressed against the bars, repeated—"Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not, for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." Her eyes filled with tears. It would be a good place to sleep on the grass in the shade of the elm tree. The cathedral chimes began to play. 1, 2, 3, 4. The quick bells seemed to be chasing each other. 1, 2, 3, 4; 1, 2, 3, 4; and again, 1, 2, 3, 4. Then the great bell struck slow and deep. Mag counted the strokes as they fell. "Five!" She counted "Five!" And springing up, she ran away to sell papers.

The next morning great preparations were going on in a house in the suburbs. Miss Lucy lived here, and a private picnic was coming off that day. On a verandah at the back of the house was Miss Lucy on her knees before a hamper packing away provisions. A maid was handing her the different parcels, and endeavouring, at the same time, to keep an eye on Master Jack and Miss Mabel, Miss Lucy's nephew and niece. A few minutes before they had coaxed Aunt Lucy to give them some cake. Now they were chasing the cat, who took refuge in the top of an apple tree. A moment's quiet, then from a distant part of the garden came in a shrill treble:

"Aunt Lucy, Aunt Lucy, is Mr. Carr coming this afternoon?"

"Yes, Mabel."

"Aren't you glad, Aunt Lucy?"

"Mabel, when you wish to speak to me you should come near me and speak gently, and not shout like that."

In a wonderfully short space of time the question was repeated breathlessly by her side.

"Are you glad, Aunt Lucy?"

"I am pleased, Mabel, that Mr. Carr will see our beautiful lake."

"Hasn't he ever seen the lake, Aunt Lucy?"

"Yes, but he has never been on it yet. Now run away. I must get this packing done."

Mr. Carr met them later on board the steamer. Mabel looked at him wisely from her aunt's side. Their seats were far up in the bow. The boat starts, the blue waves dance and the paddle wheels dash them into foam. A cool breeze is blowing from the lake and brings the colour into Bob's pale cheeks. The children are sitting in the stern. Peter and Mag waved good-bye from the wharf, and now every turn of the paddle wheels brought a new delight—a white cloud floating far above them and casting a shadow on the steamer's deck, a gull swooping down to the water, or a tug ploughing its way through the waves. They reached the park. Then there was a rush over the gangway and up the long wharf to the green meadows. How delightful it was racing down the hollows or playing hide-and-go-seek among the trees!

In the city Peter and Mag have separated long ago after coming from the wharf, and have met again a dozen times in the streets. Peter fancies that Mag is quiet and wonders what she is thinking about.

The afternoon seems long to Mag, who is tired. When she buys the evening papers she smiles to herself, thinking that the children will be at tea. She is crossing the street when suddenly she hears a shout and then a dreadful crash. She wonders what it is. Sees a face, recognises one of her customers, and holds out a paper with a smile, then falls in a little huddled heap at his feet. Some one takes her into a drug store to wait for the ambulance. When they reach the hospital she is carried in gently. Over the door she notices the words, "I was sick and ye visited me." In some dim way Mag connects them with another verse, and the house doctor, bending over her, hears her murmur, "Suffer little children to come unto me."

Mag opening her eyes finds herself in a bed in a quiet ward. Opposite her are great windows looking out to the sky. The afternoon sun sends long rays of light into the room. A cool breeze comes in at the open windows and blows softly on her face. The stillness is broken only by the footfall of the nurse as she passes from bed to bed. Mag watches her until the nurse, looking up, comes quickly to her.

"Do you know where you are, my dear?"

"In the hospital."

"You are not frightened, are you?"

"Oh, no; not when you are here. What time is it?"

"Almost six. What is it, dear?" she added, noticing the tears in Mag's eyes.

"My children! What will become of my children?"

"Tell me about them." And kneeling beside the bed,

the nurse half lifted Mag in her arms.

At five o'clock the children went to Miss Lucy, who was talking to a gentleman. Bob thought that he looked like his father.

"This a brother and sister of one of my Sunday School scholars, Mr. Carr, and this little boy's—"

But before she could say Bob's name, he sprang forward.

"Uncle, uncle, don't you know me?"

Mr. Carr looked at Bob's eager face, then caught him in his arms. "My dear boy, where have you been?"

Bob poured out his story, while Miss Lucy listened in silent astonishment. When Bob had finished, Mr. Carr turned to Miss Lucy.

"This is my nephew, whom I lost last winter. He will be your nephew, too," he added in a whisper. Miss Lucy blushed and bent down to kiss Bob. What a feast they had! What a friendship Jack and Mabel struck up with the children! Then came the sail home when the sun was going down. Peter was waiting at the wharf. He took hold of the children as soon as they crossed the gangway.

Mr. Carr said:

"I will help you with the children, Peter."

Bob had told him who it was.

"No. Mag's hurt. I am going to take care of the children for Mag. Don't cry, Jule, I'll take care of you."

"Did you say Mag was hurt?" cried Miss Lucy.

nodded. After he told them what had happened, it was decided that Mr. Carr would take the children to see Mag, while Miss Lucy went home with Jack and Mabel.

"It will be better, Lucy; then you can come to see Mag afterwards."

Mag was lying quiet, when, looking up, she saw Mr. Carr and the children standing at the door. The nurse met them.

"I am glad that you have come, sir, with the children. I have seen you with Miss Psasmer," she added.

"Yes. I am Bob's uncle."

"Are you indeed, sir? Mag will be so pleased."

Mag held out her arms with a smile as they came up the ward. The children stood beside her bed in the red glow of the sunset and heard her voice, as in a dream, telling them that she was going away.

"I was sorry at first, but God will take care of you; and children be good, be good always, and keep together. Take care of Sammy and Jule, Peter, and be kind to Jule, Sammy."

She kissed them good-bye, then the nurse led them away. Mr. Carr took Mag's hand in both his. "I want to thank you, Mag, for being so kind to Bob. Miss Lucy is going to be my wife and we promise to take care of the children for your sake, Mag."

"Thank you, sir," she said simply. "Give my love to Miss Lucy. Good-bye."