

SWEET WILLIAM.

By the Author of "That Horrid Boy Next Door," etc.

CHAPTER II.



MEG, I'd like to be errand boy to the green grocer. Let me?"

"Willy," said Meg, drawing him to the sofa, with the tears starting in her soft eyes, "you're not to think of anything Mrs. Moreton has just said. She is a dreadful, wicked woman, who does not love us because we are poor. And she knows we are all alone in the world."

"Yes, dear, that 'ow it is. She be a bad 'un just—she's a reg'lar old vixen!" said the girl, who had lagged behind, wiping her eyes on her apron. "It's the worst place as I've been in. It's somethink shocking the way she carries on, an' stints the estates, an' I wouldn't stop in the 'ouse another minit', but for you, my dears. I know as 'ow she can't do just as she'd like wi' you when Sarah Ellen's ther'. Ther's two of us to play at that game, and I've got a temper, too, as bad as 'ers, ev'ry bit of it. I wouldn't like to say as 'ow I wouldn't'—Sarah made a pass with her fingers across her throat—"when I gets des'p'rate. Yes, miss, slick."

"It's very good of you to trouble about us, Sarah. But we shouldn't like you to get turned away on our account."

"Oh, no, miss, she'll not turn me away. Gen'ral's like me ain't picked up in a minit', as can scrub an' wash an' cook, and all for half-a-crown a week. No, miss, she knows when she's got a good 'un. An' the market's very bad just now. Ther' ain't no decent girls to be 'ad for love or money. Besides, when she ain't rowin', she says as 'ow I'm worth my weight in gold. But I must be goin' else she'll be up 'er agen after me. But don't go mindin' anythink she says, Miss Meg. She's a hard sort as ain't got no feelin's, an' it's just Sarah Ellen as'll look after you, dears, an' keep the old dragon off 'im."

"Thank you, Sarah," murmured Meg gratefully. Betty's impulsiveness completely carried her out of herself, and she finished up with giving the lodging-house drudge a tremendous hug.

"She's a gem," said Betty, as the girl clattered away down stairs. "And now, Meg dear, you'd better get off with your picture while there is any light left. I'll look after Willy."

Meg was soon ready to start out.

"Good luck," said Betty, "and we'll have tea ready by you get back."

They watched her go along the street and turn the corner.

"Dear old Meg. I do hope she'll get a lot for it," said Betty, moving away from the window and busying herself with cups and saucers. Sarah had brought up the kettle and put it on the fire, which was now burning up beautifully. Willy was warming his hands and watching the little playful flames with his great thoughtful eyes.

"Bet," he said suddenly, "aren't I ill enough to die?"

Betty nearly dropped the teapot she was lifting from the cupboard. Then she broke into a little laugh.

"Oh, Willy, what nonsense you are talking. You die? Why we couldn't spare you, even if you were ill enough." He came over to the sofa and the girl sat down beside him. "And so, Willy," she said, "Meg has gone to sell her picture. And then we are going to send you right away from here—from black houses and dirty streets and wicked people, to where you will soon get well and strong. It is lovely in the country. I went once with mother, when I was a very little girl. But I remember it all so well. The sky was bluer there, and the sun didn't make your head ache or scorch you like it does here. And whichever way you turned you saw nothing but fields and trees and flowers. I recollect we had tea at a little cottage in a sweet-smelling flower-garden. I can see the wicket gate, where we went in, and the sun shining on the funny, flagged path and the hens clucking over the porch. There were rows and rows of cabbages and green lettuces and goosberry trees. And musk grew wild all about the door, and roses hung off the walls. I had new milk and sweet oatmeal cakes and eggs, fresh eggs for tea, and home-made strawberry jam. I never forget that tea. I haven't had one like it since. And when we came away the woman there gave me a big bunch of roses to bring home. But they seemed to droop as soon as we got into London, and they died after a few days, though I tried to keep them alive. I believe I cried when they died. I was so fond of them."

"Shall I go there?"

"Well, not to that place or that cottage. But where you are going, you will be well looked after and loved, Willy. She was mother's nurse, and she will take you to her heart because of her."

"When shall I go?"

"As soon as Meg sells her picture."

"To-night?"

"Well, no—not quite so soon. Perhaps to-morrow—or next day."

A fit of coughing took hold of the little fellow. When it was over he lay back in Betty's arms completely exhausted.

"Shall I have any pain there?"

"No, darling. You will leave all that behind you. Scarcoft air will soon blow the roses into your cheeks, and all those aches and pains out of your poor little body. Emma will nurse you well."

"What will you and Meg do?"

Betty shrugged her shoulders.

"Oh, we shall just go along in the old way. Perhaps someday we might make a little extra money and come over for a day and see you."

"And I could meet you," he said with a feeble smile.

"Yes, Willy, think of that. And we shall hardly know you. You will have grown into such a healthy boy."

And then he sank into a kind of torpid state, and lay like that, with a quiet sickly smile hovering round his mouth, until Meg came home. But his dull ears caught the sound of her footsteps coming up the creaking stairs. He rose to his feet and staggered to meet her.

"Meg—the picture—I can go, can't I?"

The door opened and the girl came in. Betty saw at a glance things had not been successful. Meg sank into a chair and groaned.

"Hush, Willy darling. Don't bother Meg. She is tired."

The girl tried to speak.

"Never mind just now, dear," whispered Betty, and the girl's head fell back again on her hands. "And Willy is going to lie down a bit," she said gently, as she led him back to the sofa. "There's a brave boy. Meg is so tired—she works too hard. When she is rested we will have tea. But you—you won't ask any questions to-night, will you, Willy?"

"Poor Meg—no," he said, as he tucked his hand beneath his head and lay down. "And she mustn't mind about me, you know. I'm a lot better, aren't I, Bet?"

Betty checked a tear and stroked the little head lovingly.

"Yes, dear," she said, with a big effort, avoiding Meg's appealing eyes, and the boy was satisfied.

That night after Willy was in bed the girls sat in the window talking. The lamp opposite threw a sickly glare over the dark room. Below in the street, the lights blared out from the shop windows on to the crowds of coarse men and women moving up and down. The thoroughfare was busy to-night. Cabs rolled to and fro to the theatres, costers with their barrows of cheap fruit bawled and shouted with the butcher at the Australian meat shop, now and then a landau drove by with its elegant occupants lounging languidly back against the cushions and looking with disgust on the poorer quarters; while a few ragged children danced with wonderful agility to the strains of a hurdy-gurdy.

Meg watched them with her hands folded idly in her lap and her sweet sorrowful eyes wet with recent tears.

"Yes, that was what he said. It was of no use to him; the subject was uninteresting and the general treatment of it was not good. He said people didn't care to buy pictures of sickly boys' faces. I couldn't keep back my tears, and I think he noticed them. His tone seemed softer when he spoke to me again. He let me leave it a day or two, and he would do the best he could for me. I might look in again."

"Poor old girl," said Betty, with her head nestled up against Meg's shoulder. "Well, never mind, dear. I'm going for my seventeen shillings to-night, and we shall be able to scrimp along another day or two." She jumped up briskly and began to fasten on her saucy little cap. "Oh, don't despair yet, Meg. Who knows what fickle fortune may do for us yet? Do you know I believe it all means patience."

"Yes," responded Meg; "but patience won't pay the rent or buy something to eat. No, fortune is not good to us."

"Nonsense, Meg," laughed Betty with a kiss, as she ran out, and Meg heard her singing as she tripped away down the stairs—

"A merry heart goes all the day,
Your sad tires in a mile-a."

(To be concluded.)