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THE LITTLE "FAIRY."

A STORY OF A CHRISTMAS TIME.

It was a cold, wet, gusty afternoon, near Christmas. The pantomimes were in rehearsal at most of the west-end theatres, and at the east end the "People's Palace of Amusement" was not to be behind its more aristocratic neighbors.

Near the door of this theatre a crowd of children were gathered—ragged, dirty, half-starved looking little girls—who were talking eagerly and loudly, and occasionally looking back towards a fruiterer's shop a few doors off, where a girl sat crouched up under the projecting shop-board, trying to screen herself from the bitter wind and pelting rain.

"Come on, Annie," called one of the children.

"I tell you she ain't coming. I heard Cohen say he wouldn't have her no more; she wasn't no good for nothing."

"I tell you she'll be the queen; she was the queen last year, and a beauty she made too, with all her long, pretty-colored hair let down, and her face that clean it seemed a pity to put the stuff on her."

"What's the good of washing your face to be a fairy? It looks just as well when you're done up," said another whose face certainly bore tokens of an abstinence from soap and water that would have done credit to a saint of the Middle Ages. Most of them were in a similar condition, but one or two candidates for admission to fairy-land during the Christmas season had attempted to make themselves a little cleaner by way of recommendation.

Presently the door opened and the whole crowd tumbled in; but one lingered to say to the man who acted as porter, "Ain't Annie coming?"

"You go on and mind your own business," said the man gruffly; and he went in and closed the door behind him.

Perhaps there had been a last lingering hope in the mind of the girl crouching there by the shop-window; for as the door closed her chin went down from her knees, where it had been resting, and burying her face in her hands, she burst into tears.

"Is that you, Annie?" said a gentle, womanly voice as a customer, carrying a bag full of oranges, went out of the shop.

"Yes, ma'am, it's me," said Annie sadly.

"But what are you doing here at this time of day? I thought you said they began with the fairies again, yesterday?"

"Yes, ma'am, so they did; but—but—Oh dear, I don't know what I shall do!"

"Come in here and tell me what is the matter. Has your mother been beating you again?"

The child shook her head. "Not yet, but she will, I know; and I'll have to go in the streets for good, too; and I ain't eat much, either. Mother told me not to eat much when I'd got the chance, but to drink all the gin I could get hold of. It ain't much wittles or gin either as comes my way, and yet, somehow, my legs will grow." And she looked down angrily at her offending limbs, which certainly were much too long for the frock she wore.

"But you haven't told me now, Annie, what is the matter—why you have not gone to the theatre this afternoon," said the kindly voice.

"Well, it's all along of my legs, ma'am; they would grow, you see; and now I'm too

big to do the fairy business, and not big enough for any of the other parts." And the tears ran down the girl's face so pitifully that it seemed cruel to smile at her complaints against her legs.

"You are hungry too, ain't you, Annie?" said her kind friend.

"Well now, you seem to find out everything about me. I wish you'd see mother and tell her I couldn't help growing."

"Sit down here while I fetch you some bread and butter." And a basket was turned up in a sheltered nook of the shop, where Annie would be much warmer than crouching under the shop-board.

When the bread and butter had been eaten, Annie said, "Am I to go now?"

"Where are you going, child? Your mother will be at the theatre, I suppose?"

"I'm just the wrong size for everything, and just at the busy time, too, and when you're always cold and hungry if you ain't at the theatre."

"But, Annie, you would not always like to be a very little girl. God wants you to grow up a useful woman."

"But I'm just no use at all now," said the child fretfully. "There ain't no room nowhere for me; mother says there's too many people in the world, and there is, too, or else they wouldn't have a chance of picking and choosing about the size of fairies, but would be glad to keep me on till I was fit to take something else."

"Never mind about the fairies now. You can't read, can you, Annie?"

The child shook her head. "Never had no time to learn; but mother says I must some

"I am sure I wish there was no theatre," said her friend; "but now let us talk about the school and forget the theatre. God wants you to go to school, Annie, that you may learn to be a useful woman, I am sure."

"But what can I do when there's so many people in the world? Nobody wants me: mother don't, I know."

"Well, if you go to school you may find out a way of being useful. My sister will take you and speak to the teacher for you, and while you are there I'll send for your mother and talk to her about it."

This last condition proved irresistible to Annie, and she agreed to go home and wash herself, and come again at six o'clock to go to school.

Six o'clock struck, and with it came Annie, all her bright hair bundled up under an old bonnet of her mother's. She looked a quaint, demure little creature, trudging through the wet streets in her mother's bonnet and shawl, beside the kind friend who had so often longed and prayed to be able to do something to save her from the perils of such a life as lay before her.

When they reached the school, so warm and bright and inviting after the wet, cold streets, Annie looked up gratefully into her friend's face. "It's nice here," she said.

The teacher came forward to welcome her new scholar, and a few words were spoken by the lady who had brought her; for they were not unknown to each other, and she had often spoken of this child and her wish to befriend her. On her way back, she met Annie's mother, who was not unknown to the sisters. "Are you in a hurry, Mrs. Morris?" she asked.

"Well, no; I was just looking round for my Annie; she ain't at the theatre to-night, you know, ma'am."

"So I hear, and I think my sister wants to speak to you about her, if you will come into the shop."

"Ah, Annie has been telling you of the misfortune, I suppose?" said the woman. She had been drinking as usual, and her red blood-shot eyes were full of tears.

"Well, I don't see that it is such a misfortune for the child to grow. You would not have her a child all her life?"

"Well, no, ma'am; but—but your sister knows what I mean."

They had entered the shop by this time, and she looked up appealingly as she spoke.

"You are talking about Annie, I suppose. She is in a great deal of trouble, poor child; but, as I told her, you could not be angry with her, for she could not help growing."

"Well, I don't know so much about that. You see ma'am, she would eat. The bread and butter that Annie eat for her breakfast would frighten you."

"I don't think it would. Growing children always have a good appetite."

"That's just what I said. She was growing, and instead of eating the bread and butter, and every bite of anything she could get hold of, she should have took a drop of gin now and then. It would have stopped the craving at her stomach, and stopped the growing; but not a drop of gin would she touch; and now see what's come of it. She's no good for nothing; she's just too big and too little."

"But, Mrs. Morris, I think you ought to be very glad that Annie would not take the gin. How often have you told me that if it hadn't been for the drink you would have been a much better woman? and I quite believe it."

"That's all very well, ma'am, as far as it goes," hiccupped the woman; "but you see, it was for her good that I wanted her to take it, and she ought to have done as I told her, and I'll make her take it yet."

"Come, come, Mrs. Morris, don't be angry and unreasonable with the poor child; you



"IS THAT YOU, ANNIE?"

"Yes, ma'am; she always stops after the sweeping and cleaning is done; she likes to be there best, she says."

"Well, don't you think you had better go to the school I've told you about before? You couldn't go there, you said, because you were at the theatre."

But Annie shook her head slowly. "I've been thinking all day about what you've told me here two or three times, and what you say they teaches about at the school—that God loves little children, even little girls like me, and takes care of 'em."

"Yes, Annie, He does."

"Well now if He did, what did He let my legs grow like this for? I ain't like some girls; and if He knows everything, as you say, why, he knows I was born on the stage, as you may say, and can't do nothing else; and yet my legs have got to be that awkward that

day, for the big ones have to learn their parts out of books."

"Then, now will be your time to learn, though I hope you will find something better to do than go on the stage, and—"

"And come to be a sweeper at last, like mother is," said the child. "I often wonder, ma'am, what it must be like to have a nice home, like, and no theatre at all. You don't go to the theatre, do you?"

"No, Annie."

"I don't think you'd like it either, though there's plenty of gaslight when the people are all in; and then, when the music's going, and everybody's dressed up till you wouldn't know 'em, it's all very grand. But when it's all over, and the gas smells, and the sawdust and the smoke and the gin, and you're tired and got the headache, then you wish there was no theatre, for everybody's cross and—"