

weathered many a storm which has wrecked states claiming higher intellectual endowment, more abundant in resources, and, to all appearance, born to empire.

In the days when Flo Wilkinson was growing into a young woman the king was a real presence among his people—at church, at the concerts, in the park he was among them, sharing their occupations and their emotions; all that concerned him concerned them; to have seen the king was a real pleasure, to have been spoken to by him was felt to be a reward for the highest virtue.

CHAPTER III.

"Flo, you won't forget mother's egg beaten up at eleven, and be sure Charlie and Matthew are at school in time; they ought to be ready now, and see that Sally takes James's shoes to Farren's to be re-soled. He would have gone out in them this morning, damp as it is, especially across the fields, if I hadn't seen them, and perhaps got his death of cold. I'll try and go round by Tottenham Court Road, and bring in some buttons for Charlie's jacket."

"No, Cicely; I can do that. I want a bit of ribbon to do up mother's cap."

"Very well, Flo, but you must be sure not to leave mother too long."

"Never fear, Cis, you think that no one can take care of mother but yourself. I'm sure if father looks pleased when he comes home it does her more good than half-a-dozen eggs beaten up; horrid things, they make me shiver, and father always notices if she has a new cap."

"That's quite true, Flo; father has a great eye for dress. You won't forget to make Sally iron our white muslins? But I must run, or I shall be late. Good-bye, dear, take care of yourself. Mrs. Bracebridge is sure to ask if our time is slow."

"Why don't you ask her if their time isn't fast?" laughed Flo, having given her sister a hearty embrace.

Busy Cicely sped across the fields to a stately mansion in what is now the Regent's Park, but what was then a pleasant rural region, where she was permitted to teach two young ladies of the ages of ten and twelve such subjects as she herself knew, and walk with them and to be their "guide, philosopher and friend," from ten in the morning until six in the evening, for the annual stipend of £40, paid quarterly, out of which sum Cicely managed to clothe herself and Flo, and to purchase many a delicacy for the dear mother who never complained, but who, alas! grew thinner and paler year by year—at least so Cicely thought, with many a tender sigh that she could do so little to comfort her.

Rosamund, beautiful as ever, was married not too happily to a young man who was disposed to look down upon city connections, being himself the fifth cousin to an earl, whose ancestor had won his title, not by commerce, but by the sacking of cities; but he was a rising barrister, who would probably be well-off in a few years. These few years, however, must be years of struggle, and the wife who had brought no dowry must be patient and economical, virtues difficult to practise for a beauty of two-and-twenty. But Rose was mastering them, being much assisted in the study by a young philosopher at present engaged in the difficult problem of cutting his teeth, who had convinced her that there are phases of society which offer better chances of enjoyment than are open to ladies and gentlemen in spare and uncomfortable apparel in crowded rooms, with the uncertain chances of scant and unnatural food.

Whenever she could, Rose brought her boy to see her mother, and the little fellow showed a proper appreciation of the garden, of grandmamma's skilled nursing, of Aunt Flo's pretty curls, and above all, of little Uncle Matthew, who had just begun to go to school.

But the days which Rose and her baby spent in Lissen Grove were gala days, there were many dull and dreary days when no one rang at the bell except the milkman, that beneficent dispenser of Nature's purest gift, whose visits are accepted as a matter of course from their very regularity. On these days Flo's time would have hung heavy on her hands if she had not made the acquaintance of their next-door neighbour, Madame Labalastrière.

As her name implies, Madame was a Frenchwoman, and she came to occupy the cottage next door about nine months after the Wilkinsons had settled down in Lissen Grove. She furnished her little cottage in the most perfect French taste, and made her quarter of an acre of garden an epitome of all that can grow in English soil. A row of apple trees trained laterally screened the *jardin potager* from the drawing-room windows, and behind this screen grew rows of beans, peas, scarlet runners, and cabbage; the harder plants, such as stocks, mignonette, gilliflowers, and pinks, made the air fragrant all the summer-time; while the inside of the house was gay even in winter-time with a thousand inexpensive but elegant devices, which set off to advantage Madame's elegant *cafétière* and choice china.

Mr. and Mrs. Wilkinson were rather shy at first in responding to Madame Labalastrière's friendly overtures. The Peninsular war was still raging, Tom was an officer in the British fleet, burning for an opportunity to fight any number of Frenchmen, and it is not wonderful if Englishmen at that time had little sympathy with anyone of that nation; but it chanced that little Matthew had a bad attack of whooping-cough, the sound of which penetrated to Madame's house, and she prepared with her own hands a "*tisane*," which gave him great and immediate relief. After this Mrs. Wilkinson could do no less than call upon her; and she found her so charming, so leavened as it were with a sweet melancholy, that she came back quite delighted. Madame, it appeared, was the widow of an officer who had maintained the royal cause in La Vendée, and had finally lost his life there. Madame had but one son, a youth of seventeen, and to avoid the conscription she had fled with him to England, where, by the recommendation of friends, he had been received as foreign clerk in a merchant's office.

At first they had resided in the heart of the city, but Madame fancied that her Auguste's health suffered for want of the fresh air to which he had been accustomed from infancy, and she thought herself very fortunate in being able to secure a pretty cottage within an easy walk of his place of business. All this she communicated frankly, almost volubly, to Mrs. Wilkinson; but that good lady would have been glad if her confidence had gone a little further, for Madame did not explain why she trudged out herself every morning, wet or dry, leaving her *bonne*, Emilie, to keep house and to do the thousand-and-one things indoors and out to which a Frenchwoman of the good old type can turn her hand.

Mrs. Wilkinson communicated to her husband and her daughters her conviction that Madame was a lady, and she felt drawn to her by the sympathy which is naturally excited by one who suffers meekly, and whose affections have been quickened and disciplined by sorrows. It was clear to her motherly heart that Madame lived for her son, the swarthy and rather ungainly youth who worked indefatigably morning and evening in the garden, and who sat so contentedly at the little table opposite his mother in the summer-time, enjoying their *à fresco* supper.

Auguste was a good son; his mother had testified with tears in her sweet brown eyes "she could not desire a better; he had a noble heart, the heart of his father, and of the old regime; but alas! they were poor, it was necessary that he should work to gain his living, and he did work with a will, poor boy. Doubtless it was sometimes dull in this England, where they make no fête on the Sunday, but in fine there was peace and rest, and he would not be torn from the arms of his mother to water with his blood the furrows of the enemies of France."

"That is all very true," meditated Mrs. Wilkinson, when, removed from the glamour of Madame's sympathetic presence, she turned over in her own mind the details of her visit; "but that does not explain where she goes every day herself. I should like to know, not that it is any business of mine, but living next door it is impossible to avoid a sort of intimacy, and Madame is so charming that I should like the girls to know her, besides, the practise would be so good for Cicely's French. But one does not like to be precipitate, and it is strange that she goes out every morning, wet or dry, before the clock strikes the quarter-past eight."

Time threw no light on the matter. Madame continued to be away from home from a quarter-past eight a.m. till five, and sometimes seven o'clock in the evening, but her house was kept with such beautiful regularity, and she was so good a neighbour when she was at home, that the feeling of friendship gradually increased; and the young people especially were glad to have a chat with the graceful widow, who seemed to have abundance of indulgence for all young people.

To Flo she was especially kind, never seeming to suspect that she was the dunce of the family, for as Flo herself said, she could *parler Français* almost as well as Cicely, and Madame could not tell that she didn't know her verbs, and couldn't write an exercise without a hundred blunders.

Certain it is that Madame was very kind to Flo; that she seemed to have an instinctive knowledge of anything that was wrong at Ivy Cottage, as, alas! came to be more and more frequently the case. Many a dainty omelette or delicately-prepared dish of chicken was passed over the low garden wall by Madame's order, to tempt the mother's failing appetite, and as to Charlie and little Matthew, whose rosy cheeks she loved to kiss, Madame ruled them with *batons of sucre de cerise*, or by huge emperors in *saucis d'épice*.

M. Auguste, as Emilie always deferentially called him, remained a spectator rather than an actor in these friendly overtures. He was at that rather awkward age when the boy is passing into the man, and all is still chaotic and confused in mind and person. It may be that he was not so unconscious as he appeared; that little Flo had eyes of "most celestial blue," that the hair which curled in soft ringlets round head was just of that rich shade of auburn which can neither be taken for brown or red, and yet has a touch of both; that her cheeks, though, perhaps a little too thin, were delightfully fresh and rosy, her brow and throat of the palest pink, and that she had the most joyous laugh, which, like her tears, was ever close at hand, and which caused her to display a shining row of strong white teeth—which, by the way, she shamefully misused, little dunce that she was, by cracking hard nuts, biting thread, and a hundred other injurious practices. But if M. Auguste were aware of these personal advantages possessed by his neighbour he conducted himself like a prudent young person who was aware that his present business in life was to learn how to keep accounts, conduct foreign correspondence, and do his best to console his dear mamma.

It is not to be supposed that a household containing so many young persons as that of the Wilkinsons should be so culpably deficient in interest and curiosity as not to endeavour to unravel the mystery of Madame's daily absence from home.

"Oh, Madame!" cried Flo on one occasion, when Madame looked weary and complained of headache, "why can you not rest a day or two? Why cannot M. Auguste go for you?"

"That is impossible, chérie," replied Madame, quietly, "each one must attend his own affairs. I cannot go for my son, my son cannot go for me. Ah, petite," she continued with a smile, "you want to know all about my affairs; is it not so? But I do not want to tell you; *c'est tout*."

"I don't think I want to know very much," said Flo, blushing, "only people talk, and I'm quite sure there is no harm; I'm quite sure there is something that is altogether good if one only knew, but people say it is so strange."

"Alas! my child, and is not life made up of things that are strange, things that rouse our curiosity, but which we can know nothing about? Be satisfied to be ignorant. Knowledge comes soon enough."

Auguste was assailed by James and Charles, but Auguste had a singular want of facility in the English language, considering that he was a corresponding clerk, and he never understood what was said to him unless he wished to understand; and the attempt to pump Emilie was a signal failure. "Did not Madame say that was Madame's affair? Her affair to her Emilie was to make the soup and sweep the house."

So the days passed, summer darkened into winter, and winter was gone and the gardens were once more full of leaves and flowers; it was a pleasure merely to breathe the air. Beside the garden of Madame Labalastrière, the garden of Ivy Cottage look like a wilderness. Mr. Wilkinson had no knowledge of horticulture, and though he occasionally appeared with a spade in his hand or a rake over his shoulder, his efforts were too desultory to produce much effect. The boys and Cicely were out all day, and it was part of Flo's nature that if she undertook the care of flowers or animals she managed to kill them, or reduce them to the last stage of misery, generally in the misdirected intention of magnifying their happiness.

It must be confessed that Madame spent a great deal more money on her plot of ground than the Wilkinsons could afford. It was not only that Auguste was indefatigable, sometimes being at work by five in the morning, sometimes arranging his *parterres* by the rising light of the summer moon, but he and his mother brought home choice plants and seeds, and not unfrequently invoked the aid of the professional gardener to further their designs with manures, cunningly mingled moulds, judicious training, and what not. In fact, it was becoming clear that Madame's circumstances were improving, that as the pressure of necessity tightened about the Wilkinsons, choking all pleasant outgrowths of ornament and decoration, and making it continually more difficult to supply the pressing wants of the seven who now formed the family, Madame Labalastrière and her son were now growing easy. A certain elegance began to show itself in the household, and Madame's toilet, which had always been becoming and elegant, assumed a richness which had hitherto been quite strange to it. But this improvement induced no change in their habits, both were away for the whole day, and almost always at home in the evening.

Mr. Wilkinson, it must be confessed, had not improved since the days when he and his little daughters watched the ships from Tower Hill; he had had no settled occupation for nearly ten years, and was sinking into the shabby genteel stage which is so distressing to the eyes and heart of a loving wife. Mrs. Wilkinson scarcely cast a thought on the defects of her own wardrobe—the shiny look of her black silk, or the flabbiness of her velvet mantle. It was not necessary that she should go into society—her health formed a plausible excuse; but it cut her to the quick to see her husband blocking the whitening seams of his coat, or endeavouring to blow up the worn nap of his beaver hat. Wilkinson never complained—in fact, he was buoyed up by and ever renewed confidence that some brilliant piece of good fortune was on the eve of befalling him, and he was in the last degree anxious that his wife and daughters should maintain their position as belonging to the monied class. Edward and Tom were well started; neither of them, it was true, could do anything for the family for years to come, even if they should be so unselfish as not to form ties of their own; but when Edward should be captain of an East Indianman, wealth would flow in upon him, and it would be in his power to do something for his sisters and brothers. Rose, of course, ought to have made a better match, but Scarfield would do well enough by and by. It was a thousand pities that Cicely had not more go; she was a good girl, very; no one knew that better than her father. But governing was a misérable calling, nothing to be made of it—a pity she had ever taken it. And then Flo—what was to be done with Flo?—a good little girl as ever lived, but without a second idea.

"Madame Labalastrière will have it, Edward," pleaded Mrs. Wilkinson, who did not like to hear her daughters so disposed of, "that poor Flo is not without talent. I am sure I don't know what we would do without her; see how tidy she keeps us all."

"I wish with all my heart that Madame or anyone else could turn Flo's talent to some account."

"So she would, Edward, if we would permit her," said Mrs. Wilkinson eagerly; "but I was afraid to mention the subject to you, lest you should be angry."

"If I cannot provide for the girl," said Mr. Wilkinson, with a touch of inconsistency, "it does not seem fair to stand in the way of her providing for herself, or you either, Kate."

"That is just what I think, Edward," chimed in Mrs. Wilkinson.

"Well, if you will tell me how Flo can develop a talent which may be of use to her and her family I shall say, Kate, that you are what I have always thought you, a very clever woman."

"Come, then, Edward; let us take a stroll, and I will tell you what Madame told me last night about herself and about our little Flora."

Mr. Wilkinson readily assented. To do him justice, though he often went into society without her, he retained much of his tenderness with which he had regarded his wife when he had won from many competitors the beautiful and only daughter of wealthy Sheriff Harrison; and perhaps it would have been better for both of them if she had been able to be his companion more frequently. On the evening in question they strolled a long way beside the then picturesque banks of the Regent's Canal, talking much and eagerly, Mrs. Wilkinson urging something which at first appeared altogether distasteful to her husband, and they sat for a good hour on the grassy bank. The moon was rising high and clear when they reached home, but Mr. Wilkinson had given his consent under certain conditions, that his daughter Flora should be entrusted to Madame Labalastrière, to develop the talent that was in her, and, if possible, do something toward relieving the pressure of family wants.

"At least," said Mrs. Wilkinson, as they entered the