

BOYS AND GIRLS

St. Cecilia of the Court

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CHAPTER V.—(Continued).

With a bound, Cecilia was on her feet, her face white and tense, her hair tumbled about her like a crimson halo, her hands clenched fiercely.

'You'll take him to the hospital? Take him, Puddin'! Don't you dare to say it! Don't you dare to touch him! I'll die first! I'll—I'll kill you if you try it!'

The doctor stepped back in utter astonishment at the shrill onslaught, and looked dumbly at the Saint, who stood there like an image of defiance. Puddin' was too frightened to cry, and his mother stood helplessly looking on, as if she had nothing to do with it all. Only Jim had an inkling to the truth, and he put his hand kindly on Cecilia's shoulder, and said calmly, 'Is it forgettin' you are that you bear a saint's name, Cecilia? The doctor is offering his best, and ye are forgettin' that Puddin' needs him. But he shan't go to the hospital till ye say the word—I'll promise ye that.' Then he gave a quick look at the doctor, who understood it rightly that Jim would manage it for him. So he left a simple sleeping draught, and promised to come again on the morrow, and left.

The Saint's outburst having died away, she sat, weak and weary, on the edge of the bed. The little lamp threw a sickly yellow light over them, and made Puddin' look whiter and thinner; Cecilia noticed it, and looked up at Jim with a wistful appeal for help.

Mrs. Sweeney was mutely creasing her apron with her fingers, looking at the Saint helplessly, while Jim sat down next to her and said, 'Cecilia, what is it ye're doing this day? The child a-layin' here suffering, and a fine, big, clean room awaitin' him, with a nice nurse in a big apron, and a fine doctor, and you not carin' at all, but rather let him lay here a-cryin'!'

This from Jim! Cecilia bowed her head upon her arm, and bent in'o a little heap on the foot of the bed. 'I won't let them take him to a hospital! I won't! They say they do be killing people there! And Puddin's me own! And I won't!'

All the wealth of motherliness she had showered forth upon Puddin' was told in the sobs that shook her form.

'Was ye ever in one, Cecilia?' asked Jim gently.

She shook her head.

'I'll be takin' ye in the mornin' then, and your mother will be stayin' at home to be lookin' after Puddin'.'

And quite as if that settled the matter, Jim said 'Good-night,' and went back to his little shop, which seemed full of a restruited quiet.

VI.

THE PAWNING OF JIM'S WEDDING RING.

There was not even a gleam of dawn in the Court when Jim arose next morning; yet it was not deserted. Some of the men were starting forth with their lunch-pails, which told the story of busy ones that had risen even earlier to fill them. Jim lit his lamp that he might see to make his toilet, which seemed an unusually elaborate one for a week-day morning. He bent over his basin of water, and splurged and splattered so in his energetic washing that a hissing noise from the stove told where the flying drops had landed; then he took from a shelf a wire comb, and parted his hair with a nicety that was suggestive of foppishness. From the same shelf, the re-

ceptacle of his household goods, he took a brush that gave sign of long usage, and brushed his shabby clothes thoughtfully.

When at last his toilet was completed, he took the little lamp from its bracket, and set it on the floor behind the curtain; there was just about room there for Jim himself, and he sat down on the cot that he might bend down to draw from beneath it a wooden box that not even the boys had ever seen. He held his head upon his hand, and looked long and earnestly upon the little polished box; perhaps he had not seen it for a long while, for he bent over to examine the little tracery of metal work on hinges. He even traced with his fingers the intricate geometrical design carved upon its cover, and when he had drawn from his bosom the key attached to a string, he waited a moment before he fitted it into the lock. Then he threw his shoulders back with a shrug, and lifted the lid—but when he had done so, he bent over until his lips touched the bit of linen that lay on the top, and his hands trembled so that he could scarcely hold it. He reverently lifted the dainty handkerchief, and from beneath it he took a little golden circlet, which gleamed in the yellow glare of the lamp. As if fearful that he might give way, he slipped the ring within his shirt, hastily locked the box, and shoved it back under the bed.

He looked over at the picture where it hung upon the wall. Something seemed to come between it and his eyes, for he rubbed them restlessly with his coat sleeve, and there was a certain huskiness in his voice, as he said slowly, 'You was a good woman, Margaret! You were that! I'm thinkin' you was took because you was more fit to be an angel!'

He rose and placed the lamp back in its place, and put on his hat to go out. But when he was all ready, he went back to the picture. 'I wouldn't be doin' it for myseif, Margaret! You know I wouldn't! But the little lad is sufferin'—and you'd be doin' the same! It's well for our own little lad that he don't need it! I'll be doin' this for him like.'

Jim picked his way out of the Court, stepping from stone to stone slowly. The street outside was noisier than the Court, for more people were going on to their day's labor. Usually he had a cheery word for his acquaintances, but this morning he pushed ahead, and paid little attention to the passers-by, lowering his eyes as if he were half ashamed of something. When he had gone several blocks, he turned down a side street and paused at a shop before which hung the symbol of its trade, three gilded balls. But in the windows the shades were pulled down,—Jim saw it and passed on as if he had not meant to stop.

He was saying to himself, 'I might be knowing that the place wouldn't be open yet, and it barely six. I'll be walkin' a bit.'

But walking about in the early morning, when the streets are wet and cold, and when one is painfully hungry is not easy; restlessly, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, Jim walked up one street and down another, wondering if the little gold ring had really worn itself through his shirt into his heart, or if it only felt so.

It was half-past seven when he came back to the little shop, and a few lights burning showed that some one was within. Jim's hand trembled as he turned the knob, and a curious something crept up into his throat and almost strangled him, when the salesman came forward to meet him.

He didn't try to find his voice, he only drew forth the ring and laid it upon the glass case; when the man picked it up and took it to the light, Jim clenched his hands until his nails dug into the palms, and then hastily rubbed his coat sleeve across his eyes.

Perhaps it was no unusual thing to the man, for he carelessly asked, 'Wedding ring?'

When Jim's answer came in a husky 'Yes,' he turned around, and although he was used to seeing hearts laid bare, he spoke kindly when he saw that there was a man who was not used to dealing with his ilk.

'I'll do the best I can for you; it seems to be all right. How's two dollars?'

Jim's face fell still more. 'It cost me ten when I bought it—she only wore it a year.'

He ended huskily.

'I know,' the man answered, 'but these goods don't hold their value.'

Silently Jim held out his hand for the money, and the ticket which the man held towards him; he slowly opened his coat and put the ticket within his shirt where the ring upon which the man had slipped a tag and which he was slipping into a case.

When he had opened the door to go out he turned back again to say, 'I'll be comin' for it soon.'

It was a short way back to the Court, but Jim made it long by walking about until he felt that his face wore the usual expression of calm. Then he went into Rickey Madigan's restaurant and sat down at the table.

Rickey came forward as he saw who his guest was. 'I'm glad to see you, Mr. Beilway! 'Tis the first time ye've honored me.'

Jim's explanation was entirely understood. 'The money is scarce, and I can eat myseif cheap. But I had business out this mornin', and I came in here for a cup of coffee and to wish you good-luck.'

Maybe it was because of his wish, but it was a very big cup of coffee and an unusually big roll that was set before Jim. And when he left, he carried with him some well-buttered rolls and a generous can of tea.

Somehow he felt better than he did; surely a headache is easier to bear when one has had breakfast. He even smiled cheerily as he stepped into the drug store, and asked for the kindly clerk whom he had known before. And when he came, he told him simply the little story of the doctor's visit to Puddin', and the Saint's intense horror of hospitals; it was a little thing he had to ask, but it would be such a favor! Would the clerk telephone to the doctor and ask him if it mightn't be possible for Jim to take Cecilia through a hospital that morning?

The clerk listened very attentively while Jim was telling him of the Saint's devoted care to Puddin'; he even blinked away a little unnecessary moisture that would gather in his eyes. Then without a word, he stepped to the back room, and rang up a certain hospital, and asked for a certain doctor whom he knew to be on the staff, and insisting that he must talk to that particular man, the doctor came speedily to the phone, although he should have been resting at that early hour. All the clerk did then was to repeat Jim's little story, with a few words of explanation, and to picture quickly the people who dwelt in Flanery Court, a locality not at all familiar to the doctor by name, but the like of which he knew full well from many of the patients in the free wards of his hospital. And before the clerk had really stopped talking, the doctor had promised that when Jim appeared, he would be shown every consideration.

When Jim got back to the Court with his rolls and tea, the children were coming forth to school. They looked at him anxiously, and wondered why he was abroad so early. Only Mickey voiced the one thought of all as they surveyed Jim's unusually neat toilet, 'Who is it that's dead, J'm?'

'You won't tell, if I tell you, Mickey?' Jim spoke in low tones, solemnly.

Mickey as solemnly answered, 'Cross my neck and body, I won't!'