

THE LITTLE OUTCAST.

"May'nt I stay, ma'am? I'll do anything you give me—cut wood, go after water, and do all your errands."

The troubled eyes of the speaker filled with tears. It was a lad stood at the outer door, pleading with a kindly-looking woman who still seemed to doubt his good intentions.

The cottage sat by itself on a bleak moor, or what in Scotland would have been called such. The time was near the end of November; a fierce wind rattled the boughs of the only naked tree near the house, and fled with a shivering sound into the doorway, as if seeking for warmth at the blazing fire within.

Now and then a snowflake touched with its soft chill the cheek of the listener, or whitened the angry redness of the poor boy's benumbed hands.

The woman was evidently loth to grant the boy's request and the peculiar look stamped upon his features would have suggested to any mind an idea of depravity far beyond his years.

But her mother's heart could not resist the sorrow in those large, but not handsome, gray eyes.

"Come in, at any rate, till my husband comes home; there, sit down by the fire; you look perishing with cold." And she drew a rude chair up to the warmest corner; then, suspiciously glancing at the child from the corner of her eyes, she continued setting the table for supper.

Presently came the tramp of heavy shoes, the door swung open with a quick jerk, and the husband presented himself, weary with labor.

A look of intelligence passed between his wife and himself; he too scanned the boy's face with an expression not evincing satisfaction, but nevertheless made him come to the table, and then enjoyed the zest with which he despatched his supper.

Day after day passed, and yet the boy begged to be kept "only till to-morrow," so the good couple, after due consideration, concluded that so long as he was docile and worked so heartily, they would retain him.

One day, in the middle of winter, a peddler, long accustomed to trade at the cottage, made his appearance, and disposed of his goods readily, as he had been waited for.

"You have a boy out there splitting wood, I see," he said, pointing to the yard.

"Yes; do you know him?"

"I have seen him," replied the peddler, evasively.

"And where? who is he? what is he?"

"A jail-bird!" and the peddler swung his pack over his shoulder: "that boy young as he looks, I saw in court myself, and heard his sentence—ten months; he's a hard one—you'd do well to look careful after him."

Oh! there was something so horrible in the word "jail," the poor woman trembled as she laid away her purchases, nor could she be easy until she had called the boy in and assured him that she knew the dark part of his history.

Ashamed and distressed, the child hung down his head; his cheeks seemed bursting with his hot blood; his lip quivered, and anguish was painted vividly upon his forehead, as if the words were branded in his flesh.

"Well," he muttered, his whole frame relaxing as if a burden of guilt or joy had suddenly rolled off, "I may as well go to ruin at once—there's no use in trying to be better—everybody hates and despises me—nobody cares about me. I may as well go to ruin at once!"

"Tell me," said the woman, who stood off far enough for flight if that should be necessary, "how came you to go so young to that dreadful place? Where was your mother?"

"Oh!" exclaimed the boy, with a burst of grief that was terrible to behold, "Oh! I hain't got no mother, oh! I hain't had no mother ever since I was a baby. If I'd only had a mother," he continued, his anguish growing vehement, and the tears gushing out of his strange-looking gray eyes, "I wouldn't 'a been bound out, and kicked, and cuffed, and laid onto with whips; I wouldn't 'a been saucy, and got knocked down, and then run away, and stole because I was hungry. Oh! I hain't got no mother—I haven't had no mother since I was a baby."

The strength was all gone from the poor boy, and he sank on his knees sobbing great choking sobs, and rubbing the hot tears away with his knuckles. And did that woman stand there unmoved? Did she coldly tell him to pack up and be off—the jail-bird?

No, no; she had been a mother; and though all her children slept under the cold sod in the churchyard, was a mother still.