

The Story of a Child.

BY MARGARET DELAND.

"MY own opinion is," said Mrs. Dale, "that he heard they were coming to Old Chester again, and he felt that his presence would be an embarrassment to her, and so went away. Very properly. I'm sure; it shows very nice feeling in a person like Mr. Tommy."

"Well, perhaps so," Mrs. Wright agreed; "but I don't know why he should shut up his little house, and go away, dear knows where, just because she is to be in Old Chester for the summer. Suppose he was foolish when she was here before; I don't know but what it shows a little conceit on Mr. —on his part, to think that his presence makes any difference to Jane—I mean to her." Mrs. Wright corrected herself nervously, glancing at the little figure curled up on the steps of the porch.

Mrs. Dale raised a cautioning finger. "Children do understand things in the most astonishing way," she said in a low voice.

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Wright said quickly. "I didn't mean to mention names, I'm sure. But it is so awkward to have the apothecary shop shut up, and have to go to Willie King's for one's medicines, all because Jane Temple—Oh, dear me!" ended Mrs. Wright blankly.

"She didn't hear you," Mrs. Dale assured her: "it's almost her bed-time, and she will go in in a few minutes. But do be careful, dear Susy."

Mrs. Wright, who despite her forty-five years was still in the bubbling inconsequence of youth, said nervously, "Oh, my gracious, yes! I didn't mean to. Only the Temples haven't been in Old Chester for four years, and I'm sure that is time enough for him to have forgotten that he was ever so foolish as to think of—of her," said Mrs. Wright, swallowing the name; "and I'm sure she never encouraged him."

"Of course not," Mrs. Dale agreed.

"They are talking about Mr. Henry Temple's sister," the child on the steps reflected; "and they are talking about Mr. Tommy Dove going away and leaving his house all shut up. They have to talk about those things because they are grown up."

In her heart she pitied them, but not too deeply to disturb the joy of that delicious melancholy that a child feels in the summer twilight. She put her head down on her arm and looked up into the branches of the locust-trees, standing, sentinel-like, on either side of the porch. She followed with her eyes the curious outlines of the gnarled and twisted limbs as they were drawn against the violet of the evening sky. She knew these outlines well; they met and crossed in a way that suggested the arm and clenched hand of an airy giant imprisoned by the growing branches. She had, long ago, fashioned a story to suit the tree picture. She said to herself that when her grandfather died this hand was stretched out to rob her of her grandmother, too, but that the wrinkled branches of the friendly trees had caught it and held the giant fast; when the wind blew, she could hear him whispering and complaining, but the faithful trees kept him a prisoner so that he could do no harm. The thought that he might ever escape made her shudder; it occurred to her that it would be wise to do something to keep the trees friendly; perhaps, water them every evening.

Such plans led her far away from the talk of the grown people. She did not hear Mrs. Wright say that if only "he"

had been in a different walk of life she would have been glad enough to have had "her" marry him. "Her life in her brother's family can't be very happy," said Mrs. Wright; "her sister-in-law is such a wretched invalid, that she, poor dear, has to give herself up to the housekeeping and to those two children. She ought to have a home of her own. Of course she would be lonely, but an unmarried woman must expect to be lonely." Mrs. Wright said this with as much severity as a plump woman can; she tried to have Christian charity for every one, but, being happily married herself, she found it hard to excuse Jane Temple's single life.

"Yes," Mrs. Dale admitted briefly, and then added, "but it is better to be lonely than wish to be alone. If she had married a man so different from herself, she might have come to that."

The child, sensitive to the change in her grandmother's voice, looked up, and her little forehead gathered in anxious wrinkles; she thought she would like to take Mrs. Dale's hand and kiss it, and say, "don't be sorry!" She listened for some comment from Mrs. Wright, but none came. How still they were, these two, sitting in the darkness! The full skirt of her grandmother's silk dress looked as though it were carved out of black marble, and above it glimmered whitely the old solemn face that she loved and feared; Mrs. Wright's comfortable form seemed to melt into mystery; and suddenly, as she looked at the two motionless figures, all the intangible dumb terrors of childhood began to rise in her throat. Oh, if they would only speak; if she could hear some other sound than the high faint stir of the leaves above her and, far away, below the terrace, the prolonged note of the cicada!

"Suppose," she said to herself, her eyes widening with fright,— "suppose that all of a sudden grandmother's head and Mrs. Wright's head were to roll off, and roll down the steps, right here, beside me!" Her breath caught in a sob of terror. The vision of the rolling heads frightened her to the last point of endurance; she could not trust her voice to say good-night, but darted down the steps and ran, her knees trembling under her, along the path to the back of the house. She knew that the servants would be in the kitchen; yawning, very likely, over the good books Mrs. Dale provided for their edification, or rocking and sewing in stolid comfort, but alive—speaking! In her rush along the dewy path the child had a ghastly thought of a dead world, herself the only living thing in it; but this was followed by the instant reflection that, under the circumstances, she might walk into the queen's palace and put on a crown; this thought was so calming that when she reached the women she had no desire to throw herself into Betsy's arms, as she had planned to do, declaring that she would be a good girl forever afterwards. This promise had seemed to Ellen necessary as a bribe to something; but, her passionate fright over, the impulse faded, and she was content to pin Betsy's shawl around her waist and walk up and down the kitchen with a queenly tread, absorbed in visions of future if solitary greatness.

The two ladies upon the porch were rather relieved by her flight, though Mrs. Wright checked her kindly gossip long enough to say, "Why, what is the matter with Ellen?"

"She has gone to tell Betsy to put her to bed, I suppose," Mrs. Dale said. "Dear me, Susy, she is a great care. I wish she were like your Lydia, quiet and well behaved. I often think I'm too old to train a child; and she is very like