

"A BAND OF THREE."

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CHAPTER XIV.—A NEGLECTED WARNING.

When the little girls went into their own room and locked the door behind them, Robin, too, retired into his attic. It was the back attic, and theirs was the front. It was much smaller than theirs; so small, so cold, so comfortable, that old Harper, try as he would, could never let it to anybody. Consequently Robin was welcome to an old mattress thrown on the floor in one corner, and to what little shelter the anything but rain-proof roof could afford him. It pleased old Harper to show this hospitality to his orphan nephew. It cost him absolutely nothing, but it sounded well in the ears of the neighbors. He often reflected with pleasure that however hard the outside world might consider him, they must at least applaud his conduct to Robin; for did he not from one end of the year to the other afford to Robin good shelter at least? and what more could possibly be expected from a man who appeared so very poor as himself?

When Robin parted from Skeggs he ran home as hard as he could. He had the large sum of half-a-crown in his pocket, but though he was hungry enough, yet he never passed even to buy a bun. He ran back to Adam and Eve court and into the house. Here he looked stealthily and eagerly around him. There was no one in the passage leading into old Harper's room. He crept softly along it until he came to a hiding place known only to himself. Just at the end of the passage was the deep recess formed by a window which had been built up. Robin curled himself up in a corner of this recess. Here he could see all that was going on without himself being seen by any one. His heart beat hard as he crept into his hiding-place. He waited and watched with an aching stillness, but much internal impatience.

He had been curled up in his hiding-place for about ten minutes when a shuffling step was heard coming along the passage, and old Harper went into his own room. Immediately after Skeggs came and knocked at the door. He was admitted, and the door shut and locked on the two. Now was Robin's opportunity. He slipped off his old boots, and stole softly as any cat to the other side of the locked door. He went down on his knees beside the door, and put his ear against the keyhole. He ran great danger in so doing. Any one passing by would notice him, and the very least expression of surprise from those without would reach the alert ear of old Harper from within. Robin shook all over as he reflected on his probable fate, should either of the men discover him. In the forlorn hope that no one might pass by old Harper's room for two or three minutes, he knelt and listened now. He had very sharp hearing, and he did not miss a word. As he guessed, Skeggs and Harper were talking about him. "The boy ain't no use worth'ever," said Skeggs. "I offered to bribe him to do the little job, but he wouldn't see it. He's one of them silly, weakly creatures who thinks 'cause the little child gave him sixpence as he oughtn't to make her fortune. There's no manner of use in wasting words 'b'over him. I had to confide more'n I wished in him, but I don't think as he'll dare peach."

"He'd better," said Harper, with a scowl, which Robin, listening outside the door, felt without seeing.

"But," continued Skeggs, "with the boy's help or without it, I must have the little gal. Why, she's a perfect little duck of a beauty; the whole theatre's made up one like her, I must have her, Harper, and you must get her for me."

"But not for nothink," said Harper; "wot 'all you give me?"

Skeggs scratched his head, and there was a moment's pause while he was considering. "It must be unknown to her sisters," he said. "I can't have them young 'uns a-coming and a-crying over her; she'll fret then and lose her looks, and then—why the whole game's 'up! No, of you can get me the little 'un unknown to the sisters, why, I'll give yer a five-pound note—there!"

"It shall be done," said Harper. And just then footsteps were heard coming along the passage, and Robin had barely time to fly. He ran out for a bun, and then spent the rest of the day in his attic, waiting for

the little girls to return. He had not an idea what he would do if they did come back. As to telling them the whole wicked plot, and so effectually guarding them, that he had not courage for. He was a timid boy; a boy rendered almost cowardly from hard blows, and kicks, and cruel usage. Miserable as his shelter at old Harper's was, he felt that he might die without it; and if he told the sisters what Skeggs had confided to him to-day, he must never show his face to Robin again. Nay, he almost felt that Skeggs might kill him, so very terrible had his eyes looked when he warned him to keep his secret.

No, he certainly could not venture to tell what he knew to Dulcie, Peachy, and little Angel. But though he could not tell, would it not be possible for him to give them one little hint, to drop some word which would put them on their guard against the hidden danger. He thought he might manage this; and with the hope that they might invite him into their room, he waited for them at the top of the attic stairs, his old fiddle in his hand. Dulcie had promised to show him how to play the fiddle properly, and if she saw it in his hand it might incline her to ask him to come in with them. But, alas! no such thought did occur to Dulcie. She saw the fiddle, she saw the waiting boy; but in her sorrowful and perplexed eyes there was no special thought for him. Even Peachy, who was so eager and friendly yesterday, only nodded. Little Angel was the only one thoughtful enough to give him even one word of greeting.

He considered the children unkind to lock their door upon him; and when he went into his own dreary attic he threw himself upon his old mattress in a very desponding frame of mind indeed. After all, why should he trouble himself about these children? They evidently did not want him. They had been a little kind to him yesterday, and Angel had given him sixpence on Saturday—that was all. Now they evidently meant to do nothing more for him. Why, then, should he interfere? He had already for their sakes given up the valuable possession of a whole, bright golden sovereign. He would not take the sovereign, because, valuable as it would be, it would be the price of little Angel; but now it seemed to him that he had been rather foolish to throw away so rich a chance out of his poor life. In any case little Angel would go, and Harper would get the money, and five times as large a sum, for doing that which he refused to do. Suppose he changed his mind and sought out Skeggs the next morning, and promised to bring him Angel, and so earned his sovereign and cheated his uncle. For a moment this temptation seemed very strong to poor Robin, but only for a moment. How very, very sweet Angel had looked when she ran away from her sisters and raised her dear baby face to his, and held out the little dimpled hand which contained the sixpence for him to take! and how, tired and sleepy as she was, she did find time and thought to call him by his name to-night! What a pretty name "Wobbin" sounded from those little lips! No! no! no! he could earn no golden sovereigns by betraying little Angel. He was a very ignorant, and not at all a good boy; but to this depth of lowness he could not sink. But though he would not betray her, could he save her? He knew nothing about the lives of the little children who had to dance on the tight ropes. Skeggs said the life before little Angel would make her fortune; but Robin guessed very shrewdly that the only fortune which would be made would be Skeggs' own; he knew only too well that her present life of hard work and street exposure was a life of luxury compared to the life which lay before her. Would any woman be kind enough now and then to take the first little child into her arms and tenderly hold her as Dulcie did to-night! No, no. Robin felt that Angel too, as well as he, must learn to do without pity and tenderness. He was accustomed to it for himself. But he did not like to think of it for little Angel. Something soft began to stir round his hard little heart; and salt tears came up and filled his eyes, and caused his eyelids to smart. He did long very much to save little Angel. But how could he accomplish it?

His mattress was placed by the wall which divided his room from the Rose's. Lying perfectly still he heard the low voices of Dulcie and Peachy as they made their plans together. Suddenly it occurred to him that if he could get an inkling of their plans he might be better able to help them. How could he manage to hear what they were saying; should he again have recourse to the keyhole? No. He thought of a better and less dangerous plan. The partition was very thin between the two rooms. Could he make a tiny hole in the wall, and so both hear and see? He thought he could. He drew out of his pocket a sharp, long nail which he had picked up in the street; then feeling softly along the wall, he found a spot very thin already; he inserted his nail and worked slowly and cautiously. If the children heard the least noise it would be all up with him; but they did not, and soon Robin saw the light in the other room, and in a little more time had made a hole against which he could put his eye or ear at will. He was in time to hear most of the French play; and he saw the little girls go to the secret board, and take out the canvas bag and reckon its contents. He was amazed at the goodly sum which the bag contained, but he did not feel covetous about it. He felt himself to be the little girls' champion now, and would not allow himself to touch their money. He thought the French idea an excellent one. He had no knowledge whatever of what it all meant; but France, where the children spoke of going, could scarcely be in London, and out of London little Angel would be safe. But why did not Dulcie act on Peachy's suggestion; why did they not all go away to-morrow? What mad danger there was in delay.

He resolved to drop some strong hint in the morning before they went out; to say something, he did not know what, to hurry their departure. Accordingly, when the three went away a little earlier than usual the next morning, Robin waited for them on the stairs again.

"Why, Robin, yer seem ter live yer," said Peachy with a little laugh. She had lost her interest in Robin; he had been, she considered, a mistake. She had been wonderfully anxious to entertain him, hoping thereby to obtain her own desires. But now she considered Robin as the beginning of their troubles, and prepared after her one quick little speech to dash after Dulcie and Angel. Robin, however, stepped forward and took a very firm hold of her dress.

"Don't run away for half a minute, please, Peachy; I ha' somethink as I must say ter yer."

"Well, say it quick then, wot'ever it is," said Peachy, "for I'm in no end of a hurry."

"It's nothink, nothink at 'all about myself," said Robin; "it's just this, Peachy, as you ha' made a real enemy of 'old Harry, yer ha' revenged himself, but I can't possibly say how. Don't stay yer, please, dear Peachy, go away to-day, go away to-day, you and Dulcie, and little Angel."

"We are going away," said Peachy, the confidence almost forced from her by Robin's solemn, agitated words.

"Yes, yes; but let it be to-day. Don't put it off. I know wot I'm saying. It's near as much as my life it's worth to say this much. Do go this werry day, and do it private. Don't come back no more. Oh! please, Peachy, jest go back and take the money away, and don't come back no more."

"Wot money?" asked Peachy, in a tone of consternation; for she could not guess how Robin had possessed himself of so very dangerous a knowledge.

"Little Angel said somethink about money," stammered Robin. "There ain't no fear of my touching of it; it's jest for your sake and little Angel's as I'm telling yer 'all this. For the sake of little Angel, do take the money, and don't never come back no more."

"You're werry, werry puzzling," said Peachy; "I can't for the life on me make 'out wot yer mean. I don't see no danger. Wot danger can there be? Old Harper may be the next, but we won't stay for that. He can't keep us against 'our will. He may be our enemy, but he can't do us no more harm than that. You're werry, werry queer, Robin. But of yer won't speak 'bout, I can't waste no more words on yer."

"I can't speak out, I can't!" said Robin; and he suddenly rushed into his attic; and Peachy heard him sobbing on his bed.

She felt a little alarmed, and for half a moment half hesitated whether to go into his room and force a confession from him, or to go back and remove the canvas bag from its hiding-place. But how foolish either course would be! They had lived

safely in this attic for three years now. They were going away on Friday, perhap Thursday. No; Robin was going to have fever, or something strange. There could not possibly be any truth in his wild words. And in the meantime the sun was shining brightly, and Dulcie's voice was calling her impatiently from below. She contented herself by going back to feel again that their room door was securely locked; then, singing gaily, she dashed down stairs.

CHAPTER XV.—THE LITTLE HOLE IN THE WALL.

In the street, however, Peachy felt uncomfortable, and often and often through the day her thoughts recurred to Robin's strange words and manner. Many times she was on the point of confiding her perplexities to Dulcie, but Dulcie was very busy, and so preoccupied herself that she never noticed how very silent Peach-blossom was. So Peach-blossom at last decided not to trouble her. They really could not go away to-day. They must, for so long and important a journey, make a few preparations. Thursday would come round very soon, and it was quite impossible that there could be any fear of their remaining where they had already spent three years, until Thursday. Peachy consulted herself with these thoughts, and as the day wore on her fears grew less; and she became once more thoroughly interested in making her dancing, her singing, and her performance on the tambourine as perfect as possible. The children seemed to have quite a run of luck, and Angel was always tripping forward to receive the pennies and small silver coins held out for her acceptance.

They all went home in high spirits in the evening, and Peachy had almost forgotten Robin's warning. They found their room just as they had left it; and having, as usual, locked their door, they sat down to count their gains.

"We can go on Thursday, I think," said Dulcie, with a sigh of satisfaction. "We have done werry well indeed to-day. Why, see, there's 'all this money 'b'over, after paying 'our food. We can get our boots well mended with this. I'll take 'em round first thing in the morning to Mr. Benson, the cobbler at the corner of the court."

"Give them to me at once," said Peachy, "and I'll run 'em to 'em. He had far better have 'em in time, else maybe they won't be ready when we want 'em."

This was too sensible a suggestion to be set aside, and Peachy, with the half-worn boots tucked up under her arm, ran off. As she mounted the stairs rather slowly on her return, it occurred to her that, danger or no danger, she should greatly like to know what Robin meant by his very queer and startling remarks this morning. He was always in his attic at this time, and though her charity toward him had ceased, and she was no longer anxious to give him any hospitality, yet she thought if she herself visited him in his attic she might get him to speak out plainly. Accordingly when she reached their landing she turned and tapped softly at Robin's door. There was no answer. Perhaps Robin was asleep. She waited an instant, then turned the handle and went in. It was late, and there was neither light nor fire in Robin's poor attic. It had a musty, desolate smell and feel, which rather smote on Peachy's little heart.

She stepped across to the bed, expecting to find Robin asleep there. But no, the bed had no occupant, it was still in the tumble, untruly state Robin had left it in after last night. "Poor Robin!" sighed Peachy. "I guess as he don't often get his bed made. It takes us women-folks to understand them 'ere things. I'll put it tidy for once." She tossed off the bed-clothes, and turned and shook out the mattress with her vigorous young arms. Then she smoothed out the dirty blanket and turned the pillow, and then, with a glow of satisfaction at her own great kindness, went back to her home, which looked and felt to her doubly cheerful in comparison.

"Where have you been, Peach-blossom?" asked Dulcie.

"I went in to find Robin," said Peachy. "That 'ere boy's bin neglected shameful. I ha' jest been making his bed a bit tidy."

"Angel loves poor Wobbin," said the little child, looking up appealingly at Peachy.

"Wor he in, Peachy?" asked Dulcie.

"No, that he won't. I wish as I had found him."

"Well, when he do come 'in, we'll give him a little bit of supper. There'll be one red herring 'b'over. We'll cook it, and make it werry hot for him."

"An Peachy you 'bout 'Be Dulcie maybe 'l'over sleep i and l when wor f keep mothe god shan't can." "W "and the h' all I gue "Du and P to the room. light: courts and astion and s none suppe "T o'ff h' possiti "Pe dash, room utter d'iph stairs at of al nati- ions." "Oh Robi poin' not s thou there and take noth light in th' fresh hole him, whic "Of who little The he h inde covr chik dom bly. Wh' din Har chie' hoar it t' so; sec ver, bel ach Ha his an 'ry all hit "y Ha of off sof an no the cot ext be for ho