

MRS. HURD'S NIECE.

SIX MONTHS OF A GIRL'S LIFE.

CHAPTER XVII.

WITHIN OR WITHOUT.

Presently, some newspapers in his hand, "Mr. Max," as Saidee calls him, comes in. He has been school-fellow, and "Max," with every girl in the room save Lois; but during the last two years, excepting Saidee Hurd, he has to them all become "Mr. Whitney," even to "wild, naughty, gifted" Caddie Greenough.

It is not because of any lack of cordiality and warm remembrance. It is, rather, because the girls themselves are aware that while they have been standing still as regards the deeper interests of human existence, he has become absorbed with life's higher aims,—because that in his presence they feel how trifling, how unworthy, are their dealings with life's most solemn questions, most serious duties.

He never comes home but he disturbs these girls. Sometimes the seriousness of his manner strikes them as a shadow, sometimes as a light.

Even Saidee, who compromises and calls him "Mr. Max," who says to herself that the boyish gaiety and staunchness has but mellowed into a man's geniality, and who feels that the delightful school-life friendship has deepened into most faithful, watchful care—even Saidee, although she may daintily tease and mock, feels, when in his presence, how truly and how wholly he has consecrated himself to his Master's service.

These girls like him none the less, however, for these changes. Even Cad Greenough admires consistency as much—well, as much as she dreads it. Caddie is no Christian—she herself often thinks she never shall be.

"But, all the same, Saidee Hurd," she says, "I'm glad to know there's solidity somewhere—so very awful glad of any human character that I can respect from beginning to end. But, mercy!" she adds with a grimace, "were I you, Saidee, in such imminent danger of becoming 'Mrs. Max,' I should stipulate to be left at home with the mother, and only see my lord and master at intervals—I should like to live with Mrs. Whitney myself."

Saidee blushes softly, then rouses herself and draws a distressful picture of dear, quiet Mrs. Whitney shut up in daily life "with such a daughter-in-law as you would be, Cad, supposing you were me!"

Every girl in the room, excepting Caddie, is a member of Dr. Guthrie's church. But Caddie does not feel at all out of place among them. Not she. "Always glad to work with the church," she has said saucily to Mrs. Whitney when she was invited.

Caddie is, in reality, the leading spirit in all the church fairs, and festivals, and excursions; and her class—one of the infant classes—is by far the best-drilled in the Sabbath-school.

"It's enough," she says, "to answer for just my own personal iniquities, without being brought to book some day for my influence—I mean to take care that my influence don't commit many sins!" And Caddie looks very serious—but nobody can tell for certain whether she is, or not.

Arranging for this evening, Mrs. Whitney has said to Mrs. Guthrie, "and Cad Greenough?"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Guthrie has replied, with a tender smile, "most certainly ask Cad Greenough. Dear, naughty Caddie! She'll manage to not feel out of place, we may be sure, and even to be of use."

So here, among the young church members this strangely dear Caddie is; and, as a certain air of gravity settles upon the circle when Mr. Whitney seats himself with his papers, she touches Saidee's hand.

"Now I don't feel like a black sheep in the flock at all; but, do you know, my dear, that you are looking exactly as if you did!"

Saidee receives this eminently Caddyish whisper in silence. To her, instead of gay, these chances to be solemn words. For the last few months, she has, indeed, stood in the door of the Fold, quite as ready to stray away over those dark mountains of unbelief where Elizabeth is so wearily wandering—quite as ready as to turn and follow the Good Shepherd. She feels, with a strangely sinking heart, that this evening the door is close upon her—shutting her safely with

in, fastening her forever without—one or the other, forevermore.

"Mr. Max" opens his newspapers. His tones are grave.

"Before we consider our own little field of work, perhaps it will inspire us to hear what a few other young people have accomplished. To what I am about to read I was an eye witness, and so I can affirm that it was really the work of a few young ladies."

Saidee Hurd's heart quakes within her as he reads, and no doubt other hearts do, too. Can he be expecting that kind of work of them? Can he mean that they shall take such elder's and deacon's duties upon themselves—to organize private prayer-meetings, each girl with her own little revival to preside over?

"The entire village has been Christianized by this earnest layman's work," Mr. Whitney says, as he lays down his paper. "Why cannot the experiment, so signally blessed in results, be repeated here?"

He looks around, his face flushed with his fervor. He discovers but faint response in the fair young faces.

Doreas societies, missionary outfits, visiting the sick, the support of a dozen poor families through a hard winter—how eagerly he has seen these same wealthy young Christians take up these branches of church labor! But, one and all, they draw back from this!

There is a long silence in the little council. It is Caddie Greenough who breaks it at last. She turns to Mrs. Whitney.

"You've gone beyond me this time—I might as well go home!"

The spell of silence dissolved, Mrs. Guthrie says:

"Come, my girls," and Mr. Max follows them over to the sofa.

Under cover of the buzzing voices, Mrs. Whitney moves her chair nearer Caddie. Caddie knows she is going to be taken to task now; but he likes dear Mrs. Whitney's little earnest religious talks. She settles down with an indescribable air of coyness, leaning a little toward her hostess, with an obedient, listening mien altogether edifying for those to see who have felt the merry sarcasms of her daring, handsome black eyes.

It is never hard to speak to Caddie upon religious subjects; still of her, more than of almost any other, Mrs. Whitney wonders where the end will be.

"My dear girl," she says, "do you think it would be unsuitable to hold a prayer-meeting in your parlor?"

"Unsuitable—I don't know as it would. Still, now that you put it thus, I doubt if the rooms wouldn't see me like a church, or a conference-room, for weeks after. Think of dancing the German in them after that!"

"Then, 'after that,' supposing you shouldn't dance the German?"

"It's hardly fair to follow me up so close, Mrs. Whitney!" laughs Caddie.

Mrs. Whitney pursues her. "Don't you think, Caddie, that you would dare go to a dozen houses and invite the people to prayer-meeting?"

"Dare! Oh! yes, I'd dare—but wouldn't it be funny business for me, Mrs. Whitney? Would you like yourself to see me in such an absurd position?"

Mrs. Whitney's gentle eyes express volumes. Caddie meets them frankly.

"As to the prayer-meetings themselves," she goes on, "it is very proper work for Christians, I think. I should suppose, indeed, that Christians would occupy their time thus far more than they do; and this sort of prayer-meeting I approve of; it is something definite, something to the point. These girls might set themselves about it very properly. They belong to the church, and they could ask people to come to a prayer-meeting with a grace."

"There's that little nun of a Hurd cousin; now I should think it might be just her vocation. And I can fancy how Saidee Hurd might suddenly turn a sharp corner, and put her whole soul into it. I've always thought there was the making of a glorious kind of Christian in Saidee Hurd, and may I be there to see!"

"But as for Cad Greenough—why, Mrs.

Whitney, what would people think to see a person not a church member, instituting a prayer-meeting, and asking her friends to come! What an assemblage we should be, to be sure! Mrs. Whitney! I shall expect you to tell me next that I ought to pray at my meeting!"

"Perhaps so, Caddie, dear. And ought you not? Indeed, ought you to wait for the meeting? Ought you not to go home this night and fall on your knees, and cry, 'Lord be merciful to me a sinner!' Oh, Caddie, Caddie! When are you going to do that?"

Caddie is too frank and fearless not to make some sort of answer, even to this question; but she answers Mrs. Whitney as she would no one else—with the deepest truth within her.

"When I cannot stand it any longer, I suppose." But after this answer she will not say a word further, and Mrs. Whitney will not press her.

Mr. Whitney is talking with Lois. He has been haunted by a desire to learn something more of that Hannah Gregg.

"I saw you were particularly interested in her," he says, "and I like to strengthen myself with good examples. I can't bear to miss a shining Christian. I want to know your Miss Gregg."

Lois, finally, is led to tell him of Hannah's great plan; seeing his interest to be genuine, she talks and talks, and quite forgets herself.

"Isn't she something remarkable!" she ends. "I don't suppose she ever as much as heard, until I told her, of Jennie Collins and her Boffin's Bower, nor of any of that sort of work in the eastern cities. So it is as much to her credit as if nothing of the kind ever had been done—don't you think so?"

"She must be encouraged," Mr. Whitney says with equal warmth. "And she will need far more encouragement and help than she dreams of now. If Mrs. Guthrie is interested, as you think, the plan will widen and assume proportions none of us can begin to imagine at present. Yes, she must be quite a remarkable person; but I dare say that to-day, in scores of places, there are women turning over just such blessed plans. I have noticed, Miss Gladstone, that God usually drops a whole handful of such spirits into an age when he intends a great reform, and that often the work begins in a dozen spots at once."

In the brief silence in which Lois meditates upon this, she thinks of Pastor Nelson and of Dr. Guthrie; and she reflects that really it is not so rare as she has thought to meet in every-day life those who strengthen and renew one like the reading of some glorious book.

But it is of Hannah she is thinking when she asks with a glimmer of a smile:

"Are these prayer-meetings, Mr. Whitney, to be such very aristocratic prayer-meetings—are they to be confined to the Christians and sinners of 'our set'?"

Mr. Whitney smiles, too, as much as his feelings upon the subject will allow.

"Does it look like it to you, Miss Gladstone? If it does, we ought to go over to the rest and talk about it a little."

Lois hesitates.

"It is not for me to propose anything," she says. "I am a stranger here—but I do not think it can be right or well to leave out such earnest Christian workers as Hannah Gregg. Still, please, Mr. Whitney, do not refer to me or say anything which—which I shall be obliged to reply to."

Mr. Whitney smiles at her distress, but all the same takes her over to the group around Mrs. Guthrie—a very quiet unenthusiastic group it seems to them both.

Miss Baker's face, indeed, is lit up with a kind of hopeful look; but Mr. Whitney is not so far out of the way when he suspects that she and the shrinking girl at his side are the only ones whom the bugle call for battle has found with their armor on.

Lois falls back behind the tall chair in which Saidee sits, a little apart from the rest. Saidee herself has beckoned her.

"Lois," she says, in a low, hurried voice, "what do you think of this new thing? To me it seems impracticable. How can we ever do it?"

Lois sees how troubled is the sweet face. All Mrs. Whitney's solicitude recurs to her. In low tones, under cover of the voices of others, she essays to encourage her. Just now she herself has more than usual courage and faith. Those few moments with Maxwell Whitney, his larger faith, his wider views, have refreshed her confidence in hu-

man effort. This "strange work" seems strangely easy to undertake.

"Such a strange thing, is it?" she repeats, as she bends over her cousin. "What is it in reality, dear Saidee? Just to gather your neighbours together; just to point out the goodness of the Father to those who do not acknowledge it; just to tell the 'old, old story,' the blessed story, to those who have never cared for the love of Jesus; just to help each other up the heavenly way—Oh, Saidee," Lois urges, quite forgetful of herself now, "you have such a royal way of holding fast by your friends, I could think you would be the very one of us all to rise up and glory in our Master's service!"

Saidee's face droops out of sight.

"That service first of all demands my own consistent living, Lois."

Consistent living—Lois thinks how often she has failed in that. Still she knows that the tender Master takes at its utmost, and with great reward, her daily and hourly endeavor.

"Jesus—Saidee, Jesus is our righteousness," she whispers in tones all tremulous with her own exceeding joy in this blessed thought.

But Saidee's face only droops lower, and her fingers lie cold in the fervent clasp.

"Oh, Saidee! You surely do not turn away from the name of Jesus!"

And then, suddenly, Lois remembers the little poem she saw on Saidee's table yesterday—she bends closer, and with a breaking-tremulous voice murmurs the lines that Saidee's own tear-drops had stained.

Who could see him, droop and anguish,
Who could see him in death's anguish,
And herself no sorrow know?

And not love him, and not see him,
Loud proclaim him and confess him,
Hanging on the cruel tree!

"Could you deny him, Saidee? Could you crucify him afresh?"

She feels all the tremor of the shrinking figure she is tenderly shielding from sight, and the cold fingers have tightened about hers—she hears Saidee repeating her words:

... see him in death's anguish,
And herself no sorrow know?
... herself no sorrow know?

These are the words that pierced Saidee's heart yesterday. They seem, to-night, to question her anew with a voice of anguish unspeakable.

Suddenly she turns and lifts her eyes to Lois; they are misty with tears.

"No, Lois, I cannot quite do that. I am unworthy—unworthy—but I will confess him,—the tears are falling now in a sweet, warm rain,—'yes, love him, and confess him!'"

So low have been Lois' tones, so gently she has stood by Saidee, self-forgetful, but shielding her, that Mr. Whitney alone knows what is passing. He is standing near in statue-like silence. How deeply he is moved betrays itself in the pallor of his face.

He sees Lois' face in all its exquisite tenderness, hears every low word and sweet tone, catches, at last, the rapturous lift of the bright eyes heavenward—and perhaps upon his ear, too, Miss Stillman's voice jars when she turns toward them and says:

"Come, Miss Gladstone, come, Saidee, let us see if we all understand where we are to begin our work."

"I certainly don't quite understand," Anna Francis says, turning to Mrs. Guthrie. "Is it the young ladies of our church only that are appointed?"

"We appoint only you," Mrs. Guthrie answers. "But you might as well expect to keep the flames within your own enclosure, if your house was on fire and the wind blowing, as to expect to confine the work to our own church, if the Spirit of God blesses you."

"And don't you see, Anna," exclaims Miss Baker, warmly, "that we are all sprinkled in together so—Methodist, Baptist, Congregationalist, Episcopalian—on the same street, we cannot go out to gather our first meetings without bringing the denominations all together? The simple plan comes straight to the point! It is almost millennial in its scope when one looks at it!"

"It is so meant. I never before saw churches brought into such unity as the churches of A—were by means of these neighborly little prayer-meetings. You know that at each of your first meetings you select persons to gather new prayer-meetings in the sections adjoining your own little parishes, and the new ones at theirs will appoint others to extend the work—if it is