

LITTLE BOW-LEGS.

It certainly was a dreadful day in the middle of March: the sleet was being driven in clouds along the streets by a keen east wind, and roads and pavements were deep in slush. Nurse Grant paused just within the threshold of a small house in Old Road, Stepney, to unfurl her umbrella and gather up her skirts. "I will call again this evening, Mrs. Evans; but I think the danger is past for the present, and you need not be uneasy."

"Thank you, nuss, I'm sure. Please God, things will go better now."

"Well, I really think she is round the corner; but be sure she takes plenty of nourishment.—Good-morning."

"Oh, nuss, I nearly forgot, so I did! Will you just call at No. 9 and see Little Bow-legs?"

The nurse nodded; she was already out in the street, and the wind would have drowned any verbal reply. Her black veil was blown across her face, her umbrella creaked with the strain upon it, and nurse gave a little shiver as she hurried along, pushed on by the wind as by unseen hands. When she reached No. 9, she gave a sharp double rap at the knocker, and then watched a grating in the pavement to the left. A face appeared below it presently, and nurse nodded; a moment after the door swung open, and nurse dived into the welcome shelter.

"Very dark down-stairs to-day, isn't it, Miss Moses?"

"It is so, nurse; but I'm glad all the rooms are let."

"I'd rather have one up-stair room unlet, I think, and get more light and air. I wonder I don't have you for a patient, living in a cellar like that;" and nurse shook her head severely and began to climb the stairs. On the second landing she opened a door and entered a low room lit by one small dirty window. There was a bed in one corner of the room, and a large table covered with crockery, sewing materials, papers, &c., stood in the middle. The walls were hung with bird-cages of every description, some wretched little wooden things, others nice large breeding-cages, and all occupied by birds, who were fluttering and singing and filling the room with noise. Several strings were stretched across the ceiling, from which damp garments were hung; and diving under these, nurse reached the fireplace, before which a small boy was sitting. He had not heard her enter because of the birds; but directly he saw her, he got up from the floor, and seizing various rags, threw them over the cages from which the loudest songs were thrilling, and then pushed forward a chair and said: "Sit down." He was a boy of about seven, with a well-shaped head and clear pale complexion; on his face was a grave expression, as of one weighed down by weary experiences.

"He is very ill, nurse. Do you think he can live? He is to be my very own, if he does;" and he held up a wretched-looking canary he had been cuddling under his coat.

"It looks very ill, Jim. Has it caught cold?"

"I b'lieve so. He used to sing beautiful, better nor all the others put together, and now I think he'll die."

"I hope not.—But you didn't send for me to see the canary, did you?"

"No, nurse." The boy paused and covered up his bird. "I want to go to the hospital."

"I'm afraid, dear boy, they can't do anything for you there."

"Oh yes, they can; they can do most anything. Do take me."

"But, Jim, it would be a horrid operation, and you would have to stay in bed for weeks."

"I don't care; I don't care for nuffin, so as to be like other boys. Now, I can't run, but I tumbles down, and they shouts after me every-

where: 'There goes Little Bow-legs!'" The boy's voice quivered, and nurse looked distressed.

Just then the door opened, and a woman came in with a black bundle in her arms. "Bless me, nurse, is that you? Sure you are good to that boy. I dunno what he would do without the books you lend him, for he can't play like other boys."

"Is that work, Mrs. Millan?—How are you getting on?"

The woman unpinned the black bundle and threw it on the bed. "Flannel trousers, nurse. A nice job to do in a muck of a room like this. They birds sprinkle dirty water over everything."

"Better than no work; and the birds paid the doctor's bill last year."

"That's true too.—How's Betty Evans?"

"She is much better to-day.—About this boy of yours, Mrs. Millan; he says he wants to go to the hospital to see if they can straighten his legs. What do you wish?"

"Wish! I wish I'd never married his father. He's got his father's legs, and he'll get his father's temper soon, I specs."

"I don't know anything about his father; but I think Jim is the best and most intelligent boy of his age that I know.—Do you wish him to go to the hospital?"

"As he likes," replied Mrs. Millan carelessly. "I don't believe nothing will make those legs straight. 'Taint as though it were an accident; it runs in the family."

"If anything could be done, it would probably be by breaking the bones of both legs, and the boy would be in bed a month.—Could you lie quietly on your back for four weeks, Jim?"

"Yes, or a year so as I should be like other boys."

"If he's set on it, nurse, he'd better go, if you can give him a letter."

"I will give him a letter," said nurse, rising. She glanced round the crowded little room, and longed to put in a plea for more space and light; but experience had taught her it was useless. The Millans were very respectable; but the husband was an enthusiastic politician, and his spare time and cash were devoted to the cause of his particular creed. He also had legs so bowed as to be a hideous deformity, and perhaps this had helped to embitter the man's spirit. Poor Mrs. Millan had a hard time of it often with this cantankerous husband of hers; and her speech had grown very sharp, her nature hard, through constant collision with the man she had married from love and pity. She had to work to keep the home together; and small room though that home consisted of, it was often difficult to pay the rent. So nurse made no complaint of the untidy close room, but wrapped her cloak around her, and nodding good-bye to Jim, went forth into the storm-driven streets again.

That very afternoon she applied to the matron of the District Nursing Society, and secured an out-patient's letter for Little Bow-legs. She scarcely thought the surgeons would attempt to straighten such crooked limbs; but the boy might become more content were he once persuaded that his burden was inevitable.

Mrs. Millan took Jim to the hospital the next Saturday afternoon. They found many friends in the out-patients' waiting-hall, and Mrs. Millan enjoyed a good gossip before Jim's turn came to enter the surgeon's room. At last the porter passed her in; and a nurse in a white cap and apron came forward and took the letter, and after glancing at it, stripped off Jim's shoes and stockings and set him on a chair before the surgeon. A few rapid questions were asked, and several of the students examined the legs.

"My boy, do you want your legs put straight?" asked the surgeon at last.

"Yessir."

"You are quite sure you are willing to bear some pain?"

"Yessir."

"Give him a ticket for the children's ward, Smith.—Next case, nurse."

Jim's heart failed him for a moment when he found himself in the long ward with so many curious eyes fixed on him as he walked along in his ungainly manner. Every one seemed very busy; and a nurse whisked a screen round a crib and slipped Jim into bed in no time, and then dismissed his mother, telling her to come again the next afternoon. Jim pulled the clothes over his head and cried a little; but presently a baby girl in the next crib began crowing at him, and Jim played bo-peep with her through the bars. Gradually he gathered courage to look around. There were such lots of pictures and toys and flowers about in this large bright room, that Jim thought it must be like the fairy palace in the book Nurse Grant had lent him. Presently there came down the ward a tall woman in a dark dress, but wearing a soft white cap with long floating strings, and a dainty apron. She had the most beautiful face Jim had ever seen, and she was always smiling. There were some people who knew Sister Mona well who said that when she wasn't smiling her face was the saddest face on earth. But Jim never saw Sister without a smile; and because of the love and compassion that dwelt in her eyes, he always thought she looked like the photograph of the Christ which hung opposite his bed. The Sister stood beside his crib while she read his entrance ticket; then she had a look at the poor crooked legs. She talked cheerfully to Jim all the time, but seemed to understand, as no one else had done, what a grievous affliction is an ever-present deformity. However the next day when Mrs. Millan came, Sister took he into her own little room and asked her seriously to consider whether she desired her son to undergo an operation before she came to a final decision.

"Bless me Sister, I brought him here for an operation. I certainly ain't agoing to take him out again. He gave me no peace till I brought him; now here he must stop till summat's done."

Sister turned away and went to question Jim; but he only reiterated his mother's statements. His one wish was to be like other boys.

It was Tuesday afternoon when the celebrated surgeon, Mr. Pell Taylor, came to make a thorough examination of Jim. He was followed by a crowd of students, to whom he pointed out the most remarkable features of the case. He bade them notice the absence of all signs of rickets; he commented on the strangeness of such a deformity being inherited; and he told them that the outside world would say osteotomy was a cruel operation, not to be undertaken merely for the cure of a deformity; yet it was at the express wish not only of the parent, but of the small patient himself, that he was about to perform that operation. And in conclusion he bade the dresser of the case make a cast of the legs as they then were, and told Sister to have Jim in the theatre the next day at three o'clock.

After all poor Little Bow-legs was only a child, and was very frightened when the time for the operation drew near. But he knew nothing about it. He remembered waking up and feeling very sick, and his legs pained him, and he cried a great deal. Then he slept again; but when he woke, the pain was still there, and his head ached, and he cried again. Then Sister came and tried to soothe him, but he scarcely heeded her till she said: "Look at your legs, Jim."

He dried his eyes, and Sister threw off the bedclothes—and there were two straight legs tightly bandaged up between thin wooden boards, and slung from an iron cradle. He gazed in amazement.

"That's right, dear; don't cry any more, for