

BOYS AND GIRLS

St. Cecilia of the Court

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CHAPTER IX.—Continued.

She pointed to the bed and whispered, 'Do you know, Jim?'

Jim put his hand upon the tumbled red hair and said softly, 'I know. She's just sleepin' like, and she's done with the work and pain and the cold, and is restin'. And I know you're a brave little woman, and you ain't grudgin' it to her.' Then, feeling the chill of the room, more piercing than the chill outdoors, he instinctively drew his coat closer, and then paused, half-ashamed lest he had pained the child by noticing that there was no fire.

'I'll be sendin' some wood,' he said simply, and turned to go.

But the Saint started up. 'There's wood here, Jim,—I don't want no fire!'

'You don't want no fire!' Jim could scarcely believe his ears. 'It's cold out, child! You'll be took yourself if you sit here long! You must have a fire!'

Cecilia cast an anxious look at Mrs. Flynn, sitting there, and started to talk, but couldn't, and pointed dumbly at the stove. Jim lifted the lid to see if there were something broken, and the child made no movement of protest, only a shudder crept through her, and she bent her head on her arms. But she did not need to hide her face—Jim was so wise! So wonderfully far-seeing! He bent over, as if to peer into the depths of the little stove, and, with his back to the nodding neighbor, he slipped the ugly bottle beneath his coat, and, after poking about a bit, said brightly, 'I've fixed it all right now, Mrs. Flynn. Will yé be lightin' the fire?'

CHAPTER X.

Cecilia, with her nose flattened against the glass of the shop door, was watching for Jim to come home. By crowding into the corner, and pressing her face tightly against the glass, she could see the bit of sky overhead, and catch the cheery gleam of a few stars. She had always loved the stars, they seemed so calm and clear. But now they had an added charm; Jim had explained that stars were only little holes in the floor of heaven which allowed the light to shine through, and that if one watched closely, perhaps one might see passing the forms of those who are in heaven. The Saint had pondered deeply about it during the two days that had elapsed since her mother's funeral. Somehow, since she had seen her mother lying so still and white, in the clean, pretty white gown that the neighbors had put on her, she felt that her mother had been much better than she had realized before. Cecilia scarcely knew her as she lay there, and wondered if there mightn't be some mistake, and this really 'could' be her mother! But somehow there came a flash of recollection, of some time long ago, when her mother hadn't been so flushed and scowling, and when she really had looked as this silent calm figure looked. And the more she pondered it o'er, the clearer in her memory stood forth the newer picture, and the one of her mother as she had known her of late years faded; so Death, with infinite kindness, brought to the child what unkind Life had denied her — the

thought of a loving motherhood. Her eyes grew misty as she thought about it now, and still peering at the star, she murmured her thought aloud: 'You know, God, she only got drunk because she had so much trouble! And she looked awful still and good, and please won't you put her there by the stars!'

She didn't even see Jim until he was fairly at the door, then her face lit up as she stepped back to let him in.

'Were you watchin' for me, Saint Cecilia?' he asked cheerily.

'I wasn't thinkin' of watchin' for you just then,' explained Cecilia honestly. 'I was watchin' the stars.'

'Watchin' the stars, were you?' Jim hung up his coat and hat on their accustomed nail. 'Well, they're the poor man's diamonds—and it's sparklin' they are this night!'

'Do you think all heaven is as bright as the bit we see through the stars, Jim?' she asked as she turned from the door.

'Sure! And brighter still! Why, child, heaven is a place the like of which we never even dreamed! They left those little holes in the floor so as we could just get a bit of a taste of what's waiting for us if we deserve it!'

'Jim,' the Saint's voice was very solemn, and her eyes very earnest as she peeped into his face, 'do you think she's there? Or do you think maybe God wouldn't let her in because she—she used—to—kinder forget sometimes?'

Jim looked down into the thin, earnest face, and gently pushed her red hair back from her eyes. 'Never you fret, Cecilia. Heaven is a big place, and He's mighty good who's Ruler there. He'll be taking care of your mother.'

'But, Jim,—there rang still a tone of doubt through her voice. 'I watched since ever the stars came out—and there's three big ones I can see from here, and I looked and looked, and I couldn't see her, nor nobody.'

'Why, Saint Cecilia, child!' Jim was half sorry that he had told her, with her utter belief in him, the bit of nonsense; but, quickly, he wove another bit to keep her trust in him. 'The only ones who can see through the stars are the ones who are so good that God thinks they are fit to see.'

'Then, I'm not good enough yet, Jim,' she heaved a disappointed sigh, 'cause I could not see.'

'Well, don't you be feeling bad,' cheerily commented Jim, 'cause I never did neither.'

'You "didn't"?' No tones could be fuller of astonishment. 'Then I don't believe any one did—'Cause there "ain't" no one better than you!'

But Jim only smiled as he sat down with Cecilia at the tiny table next to the stove; something seemed to blur his eyes as Cecilia lifted the hissing little tea-pot from the stove and poured his tea. It was years since any one had done that for him, at his own table, and he coughed furiously that he might hide his face in his great red handkerchief; then gulping down the great thing that seemed to choke him, he smiled at Cecilia and said, 'It is good not to be eatin' alone, child.'

'I might not be eatin' at all if I wasn't keeping you company.' The Saint said it

very fast for fear she could not hold her tears back until it was all said.

'You are welcome to this and more, Saint Cecilia—' Jim's voice was almost stern—'and I'm tellin' you again that it's kind to me to be keepin' the place while I am away. God knows I had need of some one—and a child here will bring sunshine. Are you grugin' me that?'

'Oh, Jim!' It was all she could say. It was all she had said when her mother had been laid away, and in the evening, she had sat helpless and hopeless, with a few of the neighbors, in the little room that had been home. They had solved, with the great-heartedness of the poor, the problem of the near future at least. Mrs. Flynn had said that she might sleep in her home, for her Jimmy and Minnie and the baby had a bed to themselves, and, as she argued, where there was room for three there was sure to be room for four. And Jim had decided that during the day he had great need of some one to stay in the shop, and while he couldn't afford to pay any one much for doing it, he would be glad if Cecilia would take her meals with him as part payment. And when Cecilia had sobbed outright, crushed by a great sense of obligation, they had carefully explained that it was Puddin' they were thinking most for—that Jim's would be a fine place for him to stay when he came out of the hospital, and she could then go to work. And thinking of Puddin', she tried to stifle the awful feeling of dependence, and had stepped into Jim's little domain, vowing within herself that she would pay them all back. She had started in by giving the shop such a cleaning as it had never before been treated to; Jim declared that since she cleaned the windows, daylight lasted a full hour longer in the shop.

And, indeed, the debt was not all hers, for Jim's heart warmed as it had not in years; and unforgotten throbs came back to him as he watched her wash the two cups and saucers. When Cecilia put her little shawl around her shoulders to go to Mrs. Flynn's for the night, he opened a parcel he had brought home with him, and took out a woollen hood, old-fashioned and a bit faded, but soft and warm.

'I was thinkin' you'd be going to see Puddin' to-morrow, and seein' this in a window, I thought to myself you'd be feelin' snug if your ears were covered like.'

'Ain't it lovely!' Cecilia pulled the soft gray hood down over her ears, and tied the narrow cotton ribbons under her chin. 'Sure, Puddin' won't be knowin' me at all with this on, for I never did have anything so fine.'

Jim stood in his doorway as she sped across the Court—then rubbed his eyes with his rough fingers as he locked up for the night. 'I'll have to be workin' three weeks to be payin' up for the funeral—and then the ring! But she's worth it—and I'm thinkin' it's lucky I can be earnin' my pay on the Avenue.'

When Cecilia went to the hospital next day it was with a conscious pride in her attire; she wore her mother's shoes, as they were so much better than her own—her new hood was pulled down tightly and the ribbons tied precisely under her chin—her little shawl was pinned with a great black-headed pin, and she held in her hand a black-bordered handkerchief. Both pin and handkerchief had been given her by Mrs. O'Reilly, who explained that she ought to wear some black, and Cecilia felt that, somehow, her mother would stand higher in the respect of the Court, since she wore mourning.

The car seemed to go very slowly to her, and when at last she ran up the stone steps of the hospital, she could hardly wait until the door was opened. Then, she walked in and was half-way down the hall before the nurse who had opened the door could stop her.

When asked as to whom she wanted to see, Cecilia answered sharply, 'My brother, of course! Who'd you think?'

'And who "is" your brother?' inquired the nurse politely, trying to keep her eyes from smiling at the curious little figure.

Cecilia had it upon the tip of her tongue

SPECIAL NOTICE.—We are constantly receiving requests for back numbers of 'St. Cecilia,' which we regret to say have been exhausted. Any subscriptions now received for the Three Months' Coupon offer will therefore not be able to begin with the first chapter of the story, but must date from the current number.