

Family Department.

Little Trouble-the-House.

BY L. T. MEADE.

CHAPTER VIII.—I'M SO GLAD 'TIS A LEAKY BOAT.

(Continued.)

"We won't drown," said Miles encouragingly. "I have read lots 'bout people drowning, and I think 'twas always their own fault. 'Twas just 'cause they did not mind the 'rections they should have minded, but lost their heads and got frightened. What you has to do, Polly, if the boat does fill up, is on no account to scream, nor throw up your arms, but turn round flat on your back, then you'll float. I'd rather like to float; would not you?"

"No, indeed," sobbed Polly, "I wouldn't like it a bit. I'm dreadful, dreadful frightened, Miles, and I'm sure I'll scream and throw up my arms."

"Oh dear!" said Miles, "what a pity you are a girl. Girls have no heads, not the jolliest bit of heads. Why, this is 'bout the jolliest lark we ever had, and there you are crying like a baby. Well, if you're frightened, we will turn back. I'll land you, Polly, and go out and get wrecked all alone."

"Yes," said Polly eagerly, "and I'll watch you from the shore. You can tie your pocket handkerchief to a bit of a stick, and I'll pretend to see it, and get you off. Land me quick, Miles."

"Yes," said Miles; "I must stand up, I s'pose. Now, then, how shall we turn her? Oh!" with a sudden start, his eager face getting pale. "I never thought of it, indeed, Polly—never once—but—I can't turn the boat!"

"Why?" asked Polly. "O Miles! do stand up and begin, see how fast she is filling!"

"No, I won't stand up," replied Miles; "there's no use in it. We can't neither of us turn the boat without oars. I never thought of that."

"Oh dear?" sobbed Polly, "then we shall be drowned."

"No, no," said Miles, "we'll float a bit longer;" but he said these words gravely and with little of his former mirth. He began to see that they were in danger.

The boat was filling fast, and the current was bearing them to the mouth of the lake. Miles had sense enough to know that if once it bore them to the river they were really lost.

They ceased to talk to one another, and began to bale out the water faster than ever, not only with their caps, but with their little cold hands.

In the presence of the real and imminent danger Polly's tears dried on her round cheeks. They knelt opposite to one another, their hearts beating fast.

Miles knew now that the boat must go down—that soon he must know what floating meant. So near and so certain, it no longer looked nice.

Perhaps he too, as well as Polly, might lose his head and go down—down under that cold and ugly water. And there he and Polly would lie, and soon their breath would stop, and they would be—drowned!

Brought so close to him it was a very, very unpleasant word, he dared not think what it quite meant.

"Polly," he said at last, "if I was you I'd take off my shoes."

"Why?" asked Polly.

"'Cause you'd be lighter for floating."

"And must I float?"

"Yes. We'll soon be in the water."

Then they were silent again, neither of them crying, but each getting cold and stiff with fear. "I think I've been hard on Miss Cecil," said Miles after a long pause.

No answer from Polly. Her eyes were fixed on the fast filling boat, her little tired hands had ceased to bale out the water.

Miles threw up his head, and began to gaze at the evening star which had come out in the winter sky.

It reminded him of his mother.

"Be good, Miles," he said to himself. "No, I wasn't good." Suddenly a memory came back to him, words he had forgotten recurred to him; he gave a cry of joy. "I know it now," he said, "Polly, I know why I failed, 'twas my own strength—Polly—next time—"

Still Polly did not answer, for now the boat was really sinking; slowly, slowly, with a bubbling noise it went down, and the water closed greedily over it.

For half an instant Polly found herself struggling in the cold water, then she went down after the boat. Miles had also disappeared.

CHAPTER IX.—A VERY WEAK WOMAN.

As the children sank there was a loud cry of agony from the shore, and the next instant a woman was seen tearing off her cloak and shoes and plunging into the water.

This woman was Miss Cecil, the governess. She was a tall woman, and it was in her power to rescue Miles and Polly.

This was how matters stood.

The boat, while nearing the mouth of the lake, had been also drifting towards the opposite shore.

It went down, unperceived by the children, within a few feet of the shore.

The water where it went down was quite deep enough to drown Miles and Polly, but Miss Cecil hoped that she could stand in it. Ever since Frank had been brought to her stiff and cold, ever since Frank had been drowned, she had dreaded the water, but this was a moment when the prejudices of a lifetime must give way; and she plunged in boldly, without even a fear.

Polly was the first to rise; she seized her by her long hair and bore her to the shore.

But now came the real danger. Miles came up further out, beyond Miss Cecil's depth. How like Frank he looked with his white face gleaming on the water! She must reach him. When a child she had learned to swim—two bold strokes and she was by his side. She stretched out her hand to him and tried to drag him to shore, but his weight proved too much for her, and they sank together to the bottom.

But other and more efficient assistance was close by—and Miles was rescued. His life and that of the brave woman who had risked her life for his was spared.

Yes, Miss Cecil was a brave woman. In one supreme moment the faltering feeble nature had grown noble; she had risked all for the sake of another. She had done this, too, at a time when almost despair had taken possession of her, when she felt that, having lost all influence over the children, she must resign her charge of them.

But now everything was changed—changed inwardly, at least; and her heart glowed as it had never glowed before.

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"Mother," said Miles, when he came to himself; "Mother—I—know"—

Then he paused and looked around him. He was lying on Miss Cecil's bed in her quiet room, and his father and the governess were bending over him. For a brief half instant he had fancied himself in his mother's arms.

"I want mother," he said, turning from Miss Cecil with his old dislike; but then came memory back, and he closed his eyes with a look of pain.

Poor little Miles! he was very ill, and he was going to be worse. The grief and passionate excitement he had undergone for his mother had weakened him, and he was much longer in the water than Polly had been. Polly did not suffer at all; but before that night arrived fever, and bad fever too, had set in with Miles.

"Don't have any stranger with h.m," said Miss Cecil when she heard this; "I will take care of him. I was always considered a good nurse."

And so she proved. All through the bad illness that followed, she hardly left the boy's side—scarcely sleeping, scarcely eating, living only for him. Mr. Harleigh, the servants, the doctors, all said she must break down, but she did not; on the contrary, her face had more life in it than it ever had before.

This was not to be wondered at—for the first time in her existence she had an all-absorbing interest.

But she had much to try her also—some sad revelations to be opened up before her startled eyes—through the mirror of a child's soul she was to see herself, and the glimpse so obtained was not pleasing.

Miles in his delirium now really forgot his mother's death; he was always either wildly calling on her to come to him, to hold his hand, not to leave him; or else imagining her there, speaking to her—pouring out his complaints to her, unburdening the bitter sense of wrong that filled his little breast to the loved one who always helped and comforted him.

"Mother, I can't obey Miss Cecil:" that was his constant cry. "She does not understand what a boy should do, mother—she is hard and unkind; she makes me feel so very wicked. Mother, I can never loved Miss Cecil. Mother, why do you sit there without touching me?" he said, fixing his unconscious eyes full on the governess's face. "'Tisn't a bit like you to sit there so stiff—I want you to stoop down—I want to whisper to you—do you know, mother, that Miss Cecil is a coward—she is, indeed, mother—she was afraid of our dear little Jolly—she fetched the cat, and got him eat up."

Then, after a pause, with a loud laugh.

"Oh! do you know how she amuses herself? ain't it rum? she plays hoop!"

When Miles said this, Miss Cecil got up and removed the old hoop, which she had put together with twine, from its place round Frank's picture; and then going away into a distant corner, she, who so seldom prayed, cried earnestly to God.

"Teach me how to teach this little child," she said, "for I am a very weak woman, Lord."

One day, after praying in this way with great fervor, she resumed her old place by Miles' side.

He had been crying most piteously for his mother, and begging of her to put her hand on his head.

At last in despair Miss Cecil ventured, though with little hope of doing him good, to lay her own soft fingers on his burning brow. To her surprise, the troubled face relapsed into a smile of contentment, and he turned his eyes, eloquent with love, towards her.

"Ah! that's right; now I'll get a bit cool perhaps. Mother, do let me kiss your nice, nice hand."

She lowered it to his lips, and he pressed them on it fervently.

From that time, whenever Miss Cecil wanted to quiet Miles, she laid her hand on his head. The moment that soft hand—she had peculiarly soft and beautiful hands—the moment it touched him, he murmured happy words, and grew calm and contented.

But one day things came to a crisis. The boy was worse than he had been yet, and dark and sad thoughts came fast into his poor little brain.

He went over and over again through the scenes of the last few weeks. Now he was lying on his mother's grave, telling her he could not be good—he never could be good again—now