

quite proud of him. Come, girls, we will go and see how the fire's burning, and father and grandfather will come presently."

And Mrs. Wilkinson rose from the table, not forgetting to give Flo a special charge to bring her reticule, for she had seen her little girl's look.

In the drawing-room the fire was burning brightly, and presently came tea, and with it the gentlemen. Then Cicely and Rose played their duet with much applause, and the mother sang in her sweet plaintive voice. Ned danced his hornpipe, and was sent to bed happy in the possession of a new half-crown.

Then Mr. Wilkinson brought out a volume of his Malone's Shakespeare, and read some scenes out of the "Winter's Tale"—a play he chose, he said, because it was November, and because Queen Hermione was a perfect wife.

Cicely and Rosalind sat and listened with laudable attention, and Flo managed to keep her eyes open while he read about Autolycus and his wares, and her eyes sparkled at the "ribands of all the colours of the rainbow," at the "gloves as sweet as damask roses;" but when at length Mr. Wilkinson closed the book, and his auditors had leisure to look about them, it was discovered that little Flo was quite unconscious, being rolled up fast asleep in a corner of the sofa.

Mr. Wilkinson took her up in his arms and carried her to the nursery, where Nurse took her in charge and put her to bed almost as if she had been still an infant. She was sound asleep, and though she mechanically assisted in the process of undressing, and stammered through her baby prayers, she was fast asleep before her head was on the pillow, and Nurse drew the clothes over her, muttering as she kissed the flushed cheek—

"Poor lamb! what's the use of botherin' her little head with poetry; she'll never take it in, bless her!"

#### CHAPTER II.

It is five years since Mrs. Wilkinson kept her birthday, and little Flo fell asleep during the reading of the "Winter's Tale" years of great and stirring interest to the world at large, years which have strained the resources and energy of England, for she has been engaged almost single-handed in stemming the tide of French aggression, and vindicating the liberties of Europe.

War, the genius and the glory of the Gallic race, which has stripped her of the flower of her manhood, still rages in Spain; the threatened coalition between the despots of France and Russia has happily come to nothing; and Napoleon, holding, through his tributary kings, Italy, Holland, Sweden, and Westphalia, is gathering his forces for that supreme effort which is to sweep away his greatest Continental enemy, and leave him at leisure to chastise those *bêtes d'Anglais* who have been continually a thorn in his side.

England still maintained her courage; but, crippled in her trade, mulcted of her sons by the press-gang, and fettered by the protection which forbade the introduction of foreign grain, and kept the necessities of life at starvation prices—the quarter loaf being for some time as high as 2s. 6d.—it was no wonder if the Wilkinsons, in common with others of the middle class, felt painfully the pressure of the times.

Private troubles also were added to public burdens. The house in which Mr. Wilkinson was a junior partner had been almost ruined by over-speculation. Good Sheriff Harrison had died suddenly, leaving no will, so that his large property went to his son, who not only declined to give any share to his sister—pretending that the £1,000 she had received as her dowry was all her father intended her to have—but refused her even such small personal trifles as she begged for as mementoes of her father.

The children meanwhile had been growing apace. Cicely was a comely young woman of seventeen her mother's right hand, and Rosalind had blossomed out into a beauty, with charming chestnut curls, eyes of deepest blue, a colour like Hebe's own, and a voice and gesture which made everyone her slave, from her father to the baby brother whose cries were changed into laughter at the sound of her voice. Rosalind was one of those delightful rarities, an unquestioned and unquestionable beauty, her inborn sunniness making her charming at home and abroad. She had a voice sweet as that of a woodlark, and though she had no pretension to much musical culture, she sang ballads in a way that delighted old and young, for her voice vibrated with every emotion which the song described.

Cicely was a better scholar, a better housekeeper, and ten times as unselfish as Rose. But even their mother, who strove to be in all respects just to her good elder daughter, could not always help putting Rose first; and Mr. Wilkinson, who had an almost childish admiration for beauty, distinctly accepted it as a compliment to himself, that his daughter was lovely, and considered that it became the family to sacrifice themselves for the glory of this masterpiece of womanhood. Mrs. Wilkinson was at this time in delicate health, partly from the anxieties of an increasing family and narrowing means, partly from grief at the death of her father and the estrangement of her brother; so that when she and Mr. Wilkinson were invited out it frequently happened that she preferred to stay at home. Cicely was asked, as a matter of form, to take her place, but Cicely had many domestic cares and very few superfluities of toilette, so it generally ended in father trotting off with Rose upon his arm, who never thought of not going, and who always looked perfection, though her toilette were of the simplest.

Little Flo meanwhile has grown thin and angular, though not very tall; her large blue eyes and abundant auburn hair redeem her countenance from plainness, but she lacks the steady dignity of Cicely, no less than the beauty of Rosalind. She has had the advantage of a steady education for five years; she has learnt the geography of the habitable globe five times at a time, and is convinced that there are four quarters to it, the fact having been perseveringly demonstrated to her by her brothers Edward and Tom, both with apples and oranges, the latter choice fruit

being familiar to the young Wilkinsons, through their father's connection with the East India trade; and the fact had been further impressed upon her by her having Africa devoted to her, while Tom and Fred disposed of Europe and Asia, and divided America between them. She knew that India was a place from which pretty shawls, muslins, and preserves came, and was convinced that it was a very long way off, for dear Ned was to go there as soon as he was thirteen, in one of the great East Indianmen which came to unload at the Docks; and the captain, whom she had anxiously questioned, had confessed to her that it would take all the time from midsummer to Christmas to make the voyage; but of the relative positions of the great cities of Europe, except perhaps, Paris, London, Dublin and Edinburgh, no young person in the dominions of His Most Sacred Majesty, King George III., was more happily ignorant. Nor was she clearer about figures; the multiplication table, indeed, at one time, she did know perfectly, by dint of hearing her little brothers say it day after day; but one after another they spun ahead of her, and to the last little Flo's forehead wrinkled with perplexity if any cruel person asked her to explain the simplest rule.

An adventurous young master whom Mr. Wilkinson engaged to give his daughters lessons in arithmetic and composition, did, indeed, by dint of energy and a most charming manner of teaching, carry her triumphantly through the first four rules, so that she had a sort of fugitive comprehension of them; but, when in an unlucky hour he started the subject of vulgar fractions, little Flo shrank back in dismay, her big blue eyes were fixed in amazement on Mr. Matthews, and she whispered in horror the word "vulgar." In vain Mr. Matthews explained. With all her faults and all her weaknesses, Flo was her mother's daughter and a lady, and the cruel adjective killed for ever the little germ of knowledge that had been planted in her heart rather than in her mind, and Mr. Matthews at last sorrowfully acknowledged that "Miss Flora did not seem to possess the faculty of number with which both her sisters were so admirably endowed."

In history Flo found very little to her taste. She read assiduously, both by herself and with Cicely in Goldsmith's histories; but if ever any one were mischievous enough to misplace her marker, she would go over the old ground without discovering that she had read it before. It seemed to her that somebody was always fighting with somebody, that somebody was killed, and somebody else was made king, and that in the end it didn't much matter what had happened, for Tower Hill was always Tower Hill, and no one was ever beheaded on the green now, and it was a very nice place to live in, and she hoped she would live there all her life.

The story of good Queen Eleanor sucking the poison from her husband's wound did indeed make an impression on her. She wondered very much how it tasted, and tried on little Charlie's arm one day when he scratched himself with a pin, only she snoked so hard that she made Charlie cry, and left a red mark as if someone had begun to cup him; but as to remembering whose wife Eleanor was, it was out of the question, nor did it matter very much, she consoled herself by thinking, for it happened so long ago; but Flo christened her biggest doll Eleanor, and the lovely one with blue eyes and flaxen hair was Mary, after the unhappy queen at whose fate the little girl shed floods of tears, solacing herself by belabouring a wooden doll of severe countenance, whom she called that horrid old thing, Queen Elizabeth.

French and music were the subjects to which little Flo did "most seriously incline." She grew pale, indeed, and her hair stood on end, over the irregular verbs, which she spent hours in committing to memory, and forgot almost as soon as she had learnt them. She might perhaps have done better if school-books then had been what school-books are now, but grammar was pure, unmitigated grammar then, and the mastering all its idiosyncrasies was looked upon as a *sine qua non* before attempting to write, read, or speak the decidedly irregular language of our neighbours.

Certain fables of La Fontaine Flo did manage to enunciate with a very fair accent, and she pored with dutiful attention over her Charles XII., but when she was launched on the weary pages of *Télémaque*, the poor girl was fairly bewildered, and, thoroughly convinced of her own iniquity in not appreciating so good a book, hid her head once more in the pages of her grammar as the more interesting study of the two.

She also studied music under Cicely's supervision, practicing on her mother's pianoforte, a lovely piece of furniture, the top of which was a cupboard, and the keyboard about three inches wide, the harmonious rattling of whose notes when set in motion either by her mother or by Cicely, Flo secretly adored; and she laboured at it with such indefatigable perseverance that in time she came to be a very creditable performer.

Apart from her studies, Flo was by no means an unuseful person in the house. If possible, she loved her mother more as she grew to be a woman, than when inattention to her lessons had been imputed to want of love to that mother; and to wait upon her, to serve her in any way was Flo's greatest happiness. Her father she also loved and admired, and her love to her parents was reflected back on her little brothers, whom she loved and tended with a proud and tender care, always ready to sympathize in their troubles or further their wishes, never spoiling or misguiding them, for, simple as she was, Flo was the soul of honour, and never told a lie or acted a deceit in all her life. Rosalind once said, not without a touch of irony, that "Flo hadn't imagination enough to tell a story," which may have been true, but it was a blessed want, and kept the simple girl always respectable and respected.

The lessons which Flo had found such cruel enemies when she was herself a student, were a little kinder to her when she laboured at them for the sake of Charlie or little Matthew, for she quite recognized the necessity of the boys knowing all about the three R's, and was very proud of Edward, who was in the sixth form at St. Paul's School, and never failed to let her friends know that Tom might

have been a Grecian, if his career in the Bluecoat School had not been cut short by an accident which introduced him favourably to one of Nelson's captains, and induced the gallant officer to take him as a midship in his own ship, to Tom's enormous delight, and to the satisfaction of the whole family except Mrs. Wilkinson, who could not refrain from secret tears at losing her apple-cheeked boy, and at the thought of the dangers and privations of a sailor's life, the rather that the anxious state of his circumstances had induced Mr. Wilkinson to send his eldest son on board an East Indianman; but his calling was peaceful, and there was a probability that before many years he might be a wealthy merchant.

The pleasure of seeing Tom, with his chubby cheeks and plump little figure, in His Majesty's uniform checked the sorrow of his sisters, and sent a wintry smile into the face of his mother; while the boy himself was sadly distracted between a desire to cry like the child he was, and a sense of the dignity of wearing a dirk and being in His Majesty's service.

It might have appeared that the family circle having been relieved of the two elder boys—unquestionably the best appetites—things might have gone more prosperously; but times were bad and did not seem likely to mend, and in addition to the public troubles which affected all England alike, there seemed to be a fate which blighted all Mr. Wilkinson's efforts to reinstate himself. The house for which he had worked having failed, he would not enter into engagements of a similar character with any other house. At that time he had a considerable sum of money laid by, and though much disappointed at receiving no share of his father-in-law's fortune, his circumstances were such as to cause him to be looked upon as fortunate by his acquaintances, and to dispose him to congratulate himself. If he had kept steadily in the line of commerce which he understood, no doubt he would have done very well in spite of the times, but unfortunately Mr. Wilkinson was a favourite with society; his handsome person and genial temper caused him to be much sought after, and in spite of much natural sagacity, he more than once fell a prey to designing speculators, who promised him a golden harvest for his money.

The indulgent life he led and the absence of regular employment were not slow to tell on his character. His sweet temper degenerated into carelessness, his good nature into indifference to the moral qualities of his acquaintances, and Mrs. Wilkinson, though she would not acknowledge the deterioration, could not help occasionally being distressed at the sort of people that "got hold of Edward"—people of easy manners and ready wit, but in whose talk there was a tone which jarred on the ear of their pure-minded hostess, marred as with the trail of a serpent the brightness and beauty of their intellects.

The presence of such guests reconciled the mother to the frequent absence from home of Rosalind, who now spent much of her time with her godmother, an old friend of Mrs. Wilkinson, who had no child of her own. Cicely, she knew, had a heart and mind too full to be much affected such company; and as to Flo, an occasional wide opening of her blue eyes showed that she wondered at some daring sentiment, and sometimes a burst of amazed laughter drew attention to her; but Flo would have remained innocent and unconscious in society ten times as bad.

The straitened circumstances of the family at length rendered a move imperative, and Mrs. Wilkinson's weakened health and the delicacy of little Matthew formed an excuse for a removal, first to lodgings at Islington, then to a pretty cottage in the midst of a large garden in the rural district of Marylebone. Much as the girls missed the river, and the shipping, and the old buildings, the Tower, St. Paul's, and Westminster, it was a great delight to have a garden all about the house, to see the apple and pear trees in blossom, to sit under the shade of their own mulberry tree, with clumps of roses, tall hollyhocks, Michaelmas daisies, and fragrant clematis, to walk for miles in the direction of Hampstead, under the shade of huge elms, which cast ghostly shadows in the moonlight; to gather daisies in the Harcourt fields, and to find some compensation for the loss of the grand old river in pleasant walks along the Regent's Canal, besides which hedges of wild roses and hawthorn divided rich pasture lands, where the sedate cows lay chewing the cud of soft grass, starred with daisies, buttercups, and the deep red of abundant vetches.

Fields—fields everywhere, and endless charming picnics or Cicely, Flo, James, and Charlie when father had a day of liberty. Sometimes they hired a little pony-carriage from Mr. Martin, the milkman, and father drove mother and little Matthew right up to Hampstead, or to Kilburn, where the pretty brook cut its way through the rich pasture, where the air was always soft, the milk and the eggs rich, and the flowers abundant.

Primrose Hill, too, was within an easy walk. What delicious air on its breezy heights; what walks, ankle deep in primroses; and what views of the great city, where they had lived so long and been so happy!

Nor were they altogether shut out from the great world. Hyde Park, St. James', and Pall Mall were quite within walking distance for the girls and their father, who loved to sun-himself in the smiles of royalty. The majesties of those days were wont to see and to be seen. London had its limits then, and was not overwhelming in its population, a genial king, a sprightly if rather severe queen, and abundant princes and princesses, held the affections of the people by the strong bond of family life.

The king was a word of power in those days—the first Englishman who had sat on the throne for a century; and his fair kindly face, familiar on our coins for upwards of fifty years, was not indeed the impress of a man of great intellectual endowment; but it was the impress of a good man, who strove to do his duty in hard times, and who by his truth and love always had a firm hold on the affections of his people, and perhaps it was not without its symbolism of the people over whom he ruled, who amid perplexities and troubles, often amid blindness and error, have striven to hold fast by the laws of truth and love, and who by faith in God and in the world He has created, have