

The Inglenook.

For DOMINION PRESBYTERIAN.

The Little House Over the Way.

BY FIDELIS.

The December afternoon was swiftly darkening down under a heavy grey sky, and the bitter north wind whistled circling round the little white house that stood back from the street, solitary in its neglected garden. In summer it looked rather picturesque with its little old-fashioned windows or a glimpse of white curtains, showing through straggling old plumtrees that never bore any fruit. An old church tower near made an effective contrast, and Miss Mabel Deane who lived in the handsome brick house nearly opposite, and was artistically inclined, had made a pretty sketch of it from her window, one summer day, which she intended to send to a Christmas sale, for the benefit of the church.

But in the gloomy December afternoon, with the snow covering up the old garden, and outlining the small window-panes, the little house had a decidedly dreary look even from without. Mabel Deane and her little fair-haired sister as they passed homeward from Sunday school, wrapped in their warm furs, noticed how dull and dark it was, and wondered who lived there; for they had not lived very long in that vicinity themselves. Little Gladys declared that she sometimes saw a woman going out or in and that she looked very poor, and Mabel noticed the hand-printed notice over the door, "For Sale,—Enquire Within," and laughingly said they must go some day and enquire the price. And then they turned into their own bright cosy home, where the warm firelight sent its cheerful glow to defy the closing dusk—and happy voices greeted the two girls and loving hands helped to undo their wraps; and little Gladys was speedily engrossed in petting her beloved grey kitten, basking on the hearthrug.

The solitary inmate of the little white house had watched the two lightfooted girls pass, and her eye had followed them towards the ruddy light that already showed through the windows of that comfortable looking home towards which her thoughts often wistfully turned, as she tried to imagine the warmth and cheer within.

She had much need of a little imaginary cheer, for the fast darkening room looked dreary and desolate enough. The little house was all the property she owned in the world, and as each year found her waying poorer and poorer, it was long since she had been able to do anything to repair the ravages of time. The paper which had once covered the low walls now hung here and there, in strips, leaving most of the dingy grey plaster uncovered. An open fireplace was the only means of warming the cold draughty room, into which the bitter wind found many an entry through crevice and open seam, so that as the solitary occupant sat with her little rocking chair drawn close to the handful of fire in the wide chimney, she shivered in the draught that chilled her shoulders. One old tea kettle was propped on the burning sticks, to make her solitary cup of tea. The oil in her smoky lamp was almost gone, so there was nothing for it but to go to bed as soon as the little fire had burned out, for the weather had gone down

to zero and she must not use her small store of fuel any faster than she could help. It would be exhausted soon enough and she did not know where she should find the money to buy more. Yet she could hardly find much warmth in the small bed in the corner, with its one thin tattered blanket and two or three cotton spreads. It was scarcely to be wondered at if some bitter thoughts found their way into her rambling disconnected thoughts, as she still recalled the picture of those winsome girls tripping towards their happy home.

"And I once was a girl like them," she half-muttered to herself, as memories came thronging to her mind of a happy country home, and merry sleigh rides, long years ago!

The flickering firelight threw a fitful light on the weatherstained walls, here and there bringing into view the photographs and prints that were fastened up, with a certain attempt at adornment. The same attempt was noticeable in the heterogeneous collection of old glass or china ornaments displayed on an old stand. Each bit represented some pleasant memory of the past,—some birthday or Christmas. Ah me! It was long since she had a Christmas present now. To-morrow would be Christmas Eve and she would be thankful if she knew where she should procure one comfortable meal. For work, such as she could do, had become very scarce. The few vegetables her garden had produced were done long ago. Her half-dozen fowls had been sold one by one, each with a heartache, to procure the wherewithal for a bare livelihood. Now she was at the end of her resources. "To beg she was ashamed"; and partly through a constitutional proud reserve, she had no intimate friends left and could not bring herself to sue for compassion. She had been wont in happier days to attend church, and there she had often heard of a Heavenly Father who helps his children when they call upon Him. But the habit of church going had been long broken for now her best attire seemed to be no longer presentable, even for attending the church close by where in any case she had always felt herself a stranger. And with church going had ceased such little religious feeling as she had once had. And now she had even forgotten how to pray! yet in her loneliness and extremity, something like an unuttered petition for help and daily bread and warmth flowed through her dark and despondent soul.

How long she sat over the fire after her poor meal of bread and tea, she could not have told. She dreamily heard the footsteps of the church going people creaking on the dry hard snow, in the frosty stillness of the night. Then after the bells had ceased their chiming she roused herself, for the fire had burned low; and with a heavy sigh rose to seek her comfortable bed. Just then a scratching at the door arrested her attention, and as she listened, wondering whether it was one of her enemies the rats, she heard a faint plaintive mewling. She had always had a soft heart for animals, especially when in distress, and she quickly opened her door, to discover the applicant for admission; when in bounded a pretty grey kitten, with a pink ribbon adorning its neck.

"Somebody's pet!" she said to herself;

"and a pretty little creature it is; well 'twill be a bit of company, and the poor thing is glad to get in anywhere such a night." The kitten purred all around her showing in its joyous gambols its gladness at finding even such a shelter and so it came to pass that poor Mrs. Norris, in the little white house, fell asleep with the kitten curled close to her neck and keeping her a little warmer—Gladys Deane's pet kitten, for whose mysterious loss she had been lamenting, till she, too, had fallen asleep with tears on her cheek, even though it was almost Christmas Eve.

Next day Mrs. Norris had finished a late and very spare breakfast, intended to serve for dinner as well, from which she had, however, spared a morsel for the hungry kitten, when a knock at her door startled her. As she undid the clumsy fastening, she encountered the bright eyes of the two girls she had watched the previous evening. The fair-haired child burst out with—"Oh, please, did you see my kitty?" She hesitated whether to ask them to come in, but just then the kitten hearing its little mistress voice ran out, and then, with true kittenish caprice ran in again, as if to challenge Gladys to follow.

"Oh kitty, kitty!" the delighted child exclaimed, "please may I come in and catch it?"

Half against her will Mrs. Norris stood aside, while Gladys impetuously ran in, to find her pet quite ready to play a game of hide and seek with her there.

The older girl with gentle voice and manner, apologized for the intrusion, explaining that her little sister would take no rest till she had sought for the kitten in every house where it would likely to be found, and Mrs. Norris not liking to keep the young lady standing at the door, invited her in.

Mabel Deane caught her breath in dismay as she looked round the desolate room, and, through all her wraps, she shivered as she felt its damp chill. And this was the interior of the picturesque little white house, with its deceptive white muslin curtains, now reinforced by several folds of newspapers. Her eye took in rapidly the absence of all ordinary comforts and conveniences, the hollow, empty fireplace, the miserable bed, and, forgetting her little sister and the kitten, she exclaimed with the tears starting to her eyes, "Oh, how can you live in this cold place?" "Well Miss, it's all the place I've got!" the poor woman replied. I suppose it does seem kind of poor to the likes of you? Nor I wasn't always used to the likes of it!" she added, her pride and fortitude breaking down a little under the novel experience of kindly sympathy.

A little talk followed, while Gladys caught and duly hugged and scolded her kitten, and Mabel drew, gradually from the poor woman and her surroundings, some conclusions as to her needs. Then taking out of her purse a crisp new dollar bill, she almost forced it into Mrs. Norris' hand, declaring that in finding her kitten, Gladys had got the most welcome Christmas treat she could have, and that Mrs. Norris must at once procure some fuel, and have a good Christmas fire that very evening.

"And you must come over to see our Christmas tree this evening!" said Mabel as she turned to go, ignoring the scruples of Mrs. Norris at being paid for nothing at all. "Gladys shall come for you when it is ready, and perhaps there will be something for you too."

It was not long before Mrs. Norris had secured a small supply of firewood and