

BOYS AND GIRLS

'Boney.'

(Lelah E. Benton, in 'Presbyterian Banner.')

The November sun shone brilliantly in the avenue the day before Thanksgiving, but in the alley just off the avenue, around the corner from Victor Gray's beautiful home, it did not shine at all. Everything seemed gloomy down there and had a forsaken look. The little children poked blue noses out of the dingy houses and stood shivering at the end of the alley where they liked to gather to watch the well-dressed people hurrying along the avenue to their warm homes.

At nearly every one of the big houses, to-day, grocery waggons were unloading Thanksgiving goodies for the morrow's dinner, but not even a turkey wing to sweep the ashes from the hearth seemed to be coming the alley children's way. And Thanksgiving this year was to have been such a Thanksgiving as had never been seen in that particular alley. Victor Gray was to have given the alley people the present he had promised two years ago when he went away to college. But it was a blue lookout for presents now, for Victor had been brought home ill and at this moment lay in his mother's house without interest in anybody or anything, wasting away with the fever that had come upon him, and on account of which the doctor had sent him home from studies before he had had the chance to win the gold medal his proud friends had hoped would be his. When the alley people first heard that the doctors shook their heads in doubt over the question of his recovery the women all burst into tears, the fathers turned away with a whisper, 'Poor lad,' and the children looked white and frightened. 'No kindergarten of our very own now,' they sobbed; 'No factory,' added the men; 'Oh, his poor mother,' cried the mothers.

How did kindergartens and factories depend on a boy? Well, it's quite a story, and begins back when he was 'little Victor' to everybody. He was always a very thoughtful child, therefore many called him 'a queer child,' especially those of his rich friends whose hearts had never been touched by the poverty around the corner. When Victor was a very small boy he used to almost daily go to the corner of the alley and call the children to share the fun of playing with some new toy he had. When he grew older he visited the children in their homes, and was a missionary to those sad homes, dispensing his loving smile and sympathy with generosity to all, and he had been heard to say again and again, 'Some day I will do some real lasting good in this ugly alley.' He saw plainly enough that many of these poor people lived in rags and dirt only because they had lost the heart to live in any other way, for the houses in the alley were all such old, ugly, tumble-down places that cleanliness would hardly make the rooms any better to live in. The windows were broken, the roofs leaked, the cellars were full of water and this made the alley very unhealthy. Then the fathers could not get work, so the mothers went out washing and had to leave the children to run on the streets and grow up with no tender, watchful care. To tear down the old houses, put up new, cosy cottages, to give

the fathers work, and get a kindergarten started for the children—that was what was needed to make the alley a happy, home-like place—but it would take money, and Victor had no money of his own.

When he was sent away to school he did not forget Slimmon's alley, and each holiday when he was at home he took many walks through it and looked in on some of the poor families with the kind, loving smile they knew so well. It was during one of these holidays that Aunt Betsy came to visit Victor's mother. She had not seen Victor since he was a child and had forgotten how he used to be talking so much of the poor alley children, until one day, when he had been out for some time, she asked him where he had been, and was surprised to learn that he still called the people in the alley his neighbors and thought it his duty to go and see them often.

Later in the day she said to him, 'Now, Victor, to-morrow is your birthday, and I want to give you as handsome a present as ever you had in your life. You shall choose it yourself. No matter what it costs, your dearest wish shall be gratified. Of course I know you will use good judgment and not name the half of my fortune—I trust you that much, so think hard and tell me to-morrow what you want most.'

Victor looked at her with his thanks in his eyes and was seen to be very busy with pencil and paper, doing a great deal of figuring all that day. After breakfast the next morning he asked his aunt to go for a short walk with him and promised to tell her what his birthday present was to be before they came back. She put on her bonnet and leaning on her tall young nephew's arm, for Aunt Betsy was quite an old lady, she found herself being led into Slimmon's alley!

When she came back she went to her sister, Victor's mother, with tears in her eyes. 'What do you think?' she said; 'that dear boy of yours says I am to please give him whatever money I was going to spend on his birthday present and he will use it in getting at least one or two comforts for those alley people. It depends, he says, on how much I give him, as to what he will do with it. Isn't he a noble boy?'

Aunt Betsy gave her nephew a hundred dollars and there was never a happier boy in the world as he carefully laid out the money in as wise a way as a boy could with the advice of his mother and aunt.

The old shoemaker had his wornout tools replaced, and a neat sign put up for him in front of his door, the crippled woman was given a pair of beautiful crutches, the widow who knitted what stockings for sale her rheumatic fingers would let her was supplied with a little knitting machine so she could easily earn her living now, the children of the alley all received something, and in some of the barest homes not a few comforts in the way of bedding and fuel and food and clothing gave a little relief. But when the money was all gone Victor was not satisfied—in his heart he thought, 'O if I had a thousand dollars, to make this street over into a place of happy, pretty homes, with a kindergarten school right in the middle of it all!' But to his Aunt Betsy he only said, 'Thank

you! Thank you!' in warm gratitude for his birthday joy.

That was not the end of Aunt Betsy's goodness. When she died it was found that she had left Victor a very large sum of money, but he was not to get it till his twenty-first birthday. This came along near Thanksgiving time, and it was this he had in mind two years ago when he told the alley families 'to keep up their courage for a couple of years yet,' when he left home for school, meaning to make it a joyful Thanksgiving indeed for everybody. His mother was good and charitable, and she could not fulfil Victor's plans if he died, for she had only a little money of her own, and Aunt Betsy's money was to pass to a cousin if Victor did not live till his twenty-first birthday.

'If he could be made to rouse up and fight against this exhaustion,' one doctor had told his mother, 'there might be hope for his recovery, but you see he just lies there, too weak to care for anything, and will slowly sink away in that state. Is there nothing he is particularly interested in that you could talk to him about so he might feel as if he had something to live for—as if he must live! Get that determination in his head and I believe it would save his life.'

So the mother talked to her boy as she sat by his bedside, talked softly, of the men who had become famous in business or in learning, of how she needed him to be her support, for the father was dead. But Victor lay still and white. 'I am so tired,' he would whisper, weakly, 'so tired,' and his mother was forced to let him sleep again.

Down in the kitchen Mrs. Murphy was finishing the day's washing, and her little girl, Mimpsy—how the child got such a name nobody knew—had come up from the alley to peep in the back door, as she did two or three times a day if she could find any excuse at all. It was a very poor excuse this time, indeed, nothing but a ragged-eared, dingy-looking boney specimen of the cat tribe. 'Boney's come back, ma!' shouted Mimpsy, holding the wretched kitten up.

'Land sakes, child! Did you come way up here to tell me that? Here, ask Annie to give it a drop of milk and then you must take it right home again.'

Annie, the kitchen maid, brought out some scraps for the cat and all three stood around and laughed to see how it smacked its lips over them.

'I am ashamed of you,' said Mimpsy, as she sat down on the doorstep with the kitten a few moments after, for she did not mean to go home till she was made to do so. 'What makes you smack your lips so when you eat—nobody never teached you nothing, I don't believe.'

The kitten did not answer, it did not intend to tell where it had been before wandering into Slimmon's Alley, but it was not necessary to say much about its earlier career—anyone could see it had been an alley cat from its babyhood, been born in a coal bin, likely, and never had enough to eat at any one time yet. No wonder the children in the alley who claimed it by turns had named it Boney when they first saw it—its bones stuck through its skin almost, and it had a hungry face.