

"A GIRL OF GRIT."

CHAPTER I.



ow much have we left for next week, Helen?"

"Only fifteen shillings, dear, but don't worry. Go to sleep. I can manage very well on that, now that you are getting better."

The figure on the bed moved uneasily.

"But am I getting better, Helen? That is the question. I feel weaker every day instead of stronger, and James won't keep my place in the office open for me much longer. I can't sleep at night, dear, for thinking about

what will happen to us both if he gives some other chap my place, and you can't expect him to wait for me indefinitely."

The girl, who was sitting in the well-worn rocking-chair by the window, got up from her seat, and went to her brother's bed-side. They were strikingly like each other in cast of features, but the girl was dark and superbly healthy, whereas the youth was fair, and in his present state of health, looked weak and effeminate.

"Oh, Harold, don't say that! The doctor said you were getting on quite nicely, and with a little fresh air you would be quite strong in a few weeks."

Harold took his sister's hands in his, which were dry and feverish.

"You're a brick, old girl, for trying to cheer a fellow up, but where is the fresh air to come from? I'm too weak to walk, and if we open the window the draught makes me cough."

"That's because this window faces due north. I'm going to have you moved into the front room to-morrow, and we can open the window almost all the morning."

"You're going to have me moved into the front room to-morrow?" A look of joy came into his poor tired eyes. "But, Helen, the front room is two shillings a week more; how can you manage that?"

A flush crept over the girl's face, but she answered bravely—

"Never mind. I'm boss of the situation at present, and you've only got to obey—invalids mustn't ask questions."

As she turned away from the bed to hide her confusion, her purse fell on her brother's shoulder. He lifted it as if with a great effort of strength and handed it back to her; but in so doing he felt how empty the well-worn little green pouch was. His sister held out her hand impatiently to take it from him, but he pushed her fingers aside and looked up into her flushed face.

"Chum, dearest, there isn't fifteen shillings here. Why did you say there was?"

"I didn't say there was fifteen shillings in that purse, you dear old silly! Do you suppose I carry our entire fortune in a purse that leaks? Look, there's a hole in it!"

The boy's face lost its look of anxiety, and he gave a sigh of relief.

"What a fool I was to think you'd deceive me, dear; but I always carry all the money I possess in my pockets, and I never thought you had a private hoard. Our purse always did leak, didn't it, Chum?"

The girl stooped and kissed his heavily-veined forehead with tears in her own eyes.

"You didn't think there was a miser in our spendthrift family, did you, dear? But, go to sleep, Harold, do, while I go out and do some shopping, or the doctor will be saying that you have a high temperature again to-night."

As she closed the door of her brother's room behind her, she found herself face to face with their landlady who was on the point of entering the room to demand a week's rent—not a very unjust demand on her part, for they owed her three weeks' rent, and she, poor woman, had to support a worthless husband and two children.

Before she could say a word, Helen had emptied the contents of her little purse into her hands, and put her firm capable fingers over her mouth.

"Don't speak loud, dear Mrs. Larkin, or my brother will hear, and he is just going off to sleep."

The woman looked at the two-shilling-piece and the few coppers that the girl had thrust into her hand, and said:

"Is that all you have to give me? And you know that letting rooms is my only source of livelihood for myself and for my children! I'd be ashamed to rob innocent children of their daily bread, I would!"

While she was speaking a pair of strong young arms were clasped round her portly waist, and she found herself standing, breathless and panting, at the other end of the narrow passage.

"Do come away from the door, Mrs. Larkin, and scold me as much as ever you like; but, for pity's sake, don't let my brother hear! I have given you every penny I have in the world—what can I do more?—and I promise you that to-morrow evening I will pay you the remainder of this week's rent."

Mrs. Larkin's outburst of anger had been more assumed than genuine. She had braced herself up to be stern.

"Haven't you got any relations you can apply to, miss?" There was a degree of tenderness in the woman's voice, and her attitude was less defiant.

"Not one in the world that would give me a farthing. You are the best friend I have, indeed you are, Mrs. Larkin."

The beautiful, well-bred girl laid her head down on the dusty, work-stained shoulder of the woman who was dunning her for money, and something like a sob escaped her proud, resolute lips. The woman heard it, and her mother's heart smote her.

"There, dear, there; don't take on so! I suppose you would be a bit too proud to help me with some ironing I have to do? I would take something off the rent for it if you'd help me to get it done this evening."

The girl's sob was quickly followed by a happy laugh.

"There, I knew you were the best friend I had! Too proud? Indeed, of course, I'm not! I'm too proud to owe you money and not do what I can to repay it. Give me the things up here and I'll do them the best way I can."

"Not up here, my dear. It would only be costing you coal and making your brother's room too warm. If you'll come down to the kitchen when I have tidied it up a bit there will be nobody to interfere with you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Larkin, and, please, you must not take anything off our rent! Only

let me help you when you are busy to iron or mend the children's clothes by way of return for your kindness. I'll pay you everything when I get the money. I know you haven't bought any meat for Sunday's dinner all on account of not getting our rent, and I feel so ashamed."

"And who told you that, I'd like to know! What we have for dinner is my business and nobody else's until Mr. Larkin chooses to pay for it!"

The assumed anger didn't frighten the girl; she only laughed softly.

"You needn't be angry because I know. Little Victoria Maud told me, but she didn't mean to hurt me; and my heart is too sore to feel much more, Mrs. Larkin. It's beginning to get hardened."

"Indeed it ain't, my dear; it's a deal too tender, and I'll teach Victoria Maud to talk to her betters like that. In an hour's time I'll be tidied up a bit downstairs, and you'd best be going out now while your brother's asleep."

Just at that moment the postman's knock shook the front door.

"It's sure to be for you, dearie, do you mind picking it up? I'm that bad at stooping."

Helen ran down the stair and eagerly picked up the letter. A look half of fear and half of anger spread over her face as she read on the envelope the name of the business house in which her brother was employed as one of the junior book-keepers. She hastily tore it open and read the contents of the letter, which were type-written and autographed with her cousin's signature.

"What a mean cur the man is; and he is our nearest and, in fact, only relation in the world. So Harold was right, he cannot wait for him any longer. Now, indeed, we are absolutely penniless."

She put the letter into her pocket, and went out into the street. Suddenly, as if inspired with a way of getting out of the difficulty, she hastened her footsteps and walked on. In less than half an hour's time she was standing in the manager's private room of the large business house belonging to her cousin. Her heart was beating, and her eyes were bright with excitement. It was not a pleasant errand she had come upon. In a few moments the door opened, and her cousin came in. When he saw who it was, he started, and said—

"Good afternoon, Helen. To whom or what am I indebted for such a pleasant surprise?"

"Good afternoon, Mr. Churchill. I am here to answer your letter to my brother in person. You may think perhaps that such a letter scarcely demanded an answer, but I do. I have come to ask you to give me the post of book-keeper, which my brother has lost through his ill-health."

Her cousin had a weasel type of face, and a falsetto voice. He laughed scornfully, as he answered—

"My dear Helen, I do not employ any women in my firm—the idea is absurd."

Helen tried to speak calmly, but her voice shook as she answered him—

"Pray do not address me as 'dear Helen.' I am here on business, not in the light of a relation."

"Come, come, not so high and mighty. If you are here in that light, the sooner you go the better, for the idea is absurd."

"Why is it absurd? I have learnt book-keeping, and am much quicker at it than my brother, for I have all the business capacity in my family, while he has the artistic temperament of our mother."