

Children's Department.

FREDA'S CHOICE.

Ash Grove was the home of the Lesters, a family consisting of a father, and mother, Freda a girl of fourteen, and a little orphan niece of Mrs. Lester's whom they had adopted. The house stood in pretty grounds, and was quite near London, though, once within the gates, all was so green and sweet in its summer beauty you could hardly believe the great city was so near.

One summer's day at the beginning of the holidays, Freda and her cousin Olive, who was just her own age, sat in the big schoolroom, the windows of which gave on the back lawn.

Freda was a tall handsome girl, with bright brown eyes, and thick dark hair in long plaits down her back. Olive was small, with a delicate little white face that told the tale of suffering, and long golden hair.

They were a great contrast—Freda full of health and spirits, Olive gentle and quiet, and often, from delicate health, unable to run about as Freda did.

"What shall we do this afternoon, Freda?" asked Olive, putting down her drawing materials.

"I don't know," said Freda, "It is so cool we might have gone for a walk, only there is no one to go with us."

"Oh, Freda—I remember something I wanted to do," said Olive. "I must try and finish that shawl I am making for Miss Osborne, to send her on her birthday."

"Well, then, do—and I will practise," said Freda.

"But, Freda—can you lend me your crochethook?" asked Olive, timidly. She knew that Freda very much disliked lending her possessions, though she by no means made it a rule not to borrow.

A frown came across Freda's forehead. She did not like being asked, and she answered shortly, "I can't lend it, Olive—I wish you would not ask."

"I will take such care of it, Freda," pleaded Olive. "And I can't finish my shawl unless you do, for I have lost mine."

"Olive it is no use asking; I won't lend my things," said Freda, marching off to the piano and beginning to practise, though she knew Olive's head ached. She wanted to get a passage in a fugue of Bach's perfect, and as usual she considered herself and her own inclinations first.

However, she had not struck two notes before she felt a hand on her shoulder. Mr. Lester, a tall man, had entered unperceived, and had heard what had passed about the hook.

Freda started. "Oh, papa! I did not see you." "Freda, I want you a few minutes," said Mr. Lester; and Freda, rising, followed her father out of the room into his study, which was at the other end of the landing.

Mr. Lester was much occupied generally, studying and writing. He wrote scientific papers for many magazines, and his lectures were much thought of by learned men of the day. He had an absent dreamy expression in his eyes, and people often fancied that he was so lost in thought that he did not perceive much of what went on around. His own family, however, knew to the contrary, and that papa noticed everything, and had a deep insight into character, a wonderful way of finding how to help those who could not tell their troubles in words; and a habit of observing everything. He was a most kind husband and father, and with all his learning he had as well a real love of God. Deeply as he studied nature and science, the ways and will of God were his first study, and great had been his joy to find that both Olive and Freda had for some time been trying to live not for themselves, but for God.

"Freda," said Mr. Lester, standing before his daughter, and looking gravely into her bright brown eyes, now raised questioningly to him, "I am surprised at you."

"What about, papa?" "My child, your selfishness," said Mr. Lester. "Selfish, papa! am I selfish?" asked Freda, looking surprised.

"You are, Freda; extremely selfish. I have noticed it in many ways, and I warn you of it, as I know you really want to do right. Do you not?"

"Indeed I do, papa," said Freda, and for a moment the bright eyes were dim. "I really did not know I was selfish."

"My child, consider how constantly you think of yourself, and how you dislike giving up to Olive. I mention her particularly, because with your parents it is a question of obedience, not of yielding, and you are obedient. But you are selfish; you were just now in not lending that hook to your cousin; and I am sure if you look carefully into your life, your conscience will bear me out in what I say."

"Indeed it does, papa," said Freda, after a moment's pause.

"Then profit by the knowledge, Freda, and remember Him who pleased not Himself. But now I

am going to tell you what I came into the schoolroom to say."

"Something nice, I see," said Freda, her spirits reviving. "Oh, papa, tell me first."

"Don't you think Olive would like to hear as well?" asked Mr. Lester.

Freda smiled, but, fresh in her good resolution to amend, she ran and called her cousin, and the two girls listened as Mr. Lester spoke.

"In a fortnight our pastor is going to have a children's flower service. All children are to attend, and bring with them some flowers, which will be given to the hospitals on the following day."

"Oh, papa, and can we give some?" said Freda.

"Yes; you and Olive can go, and the flowers, I think, should come from your own gardens."

"That will be much nicer," said Olive, shyly; "it will be like having something to give God."

"It will. Give your choicest and best to Him for His poor."

"It is nice being able to do that," said Freda; "and I do love flowers so much."

"Yes," said Mr. Lester, dreamily. "Yes, it is sweet to think that children's hands can tend God's flowers, and then give them again to Him. But, children, remember these are not the only flowers you can give God."

"Oh, of course, papa," said Freda, "there are the wild flowers. I do get some when we go into the country, and Miss Osborne sends them to the hospital for us."

"I don't mean wild flowers, Freda," said Mr. Lester, smiling at the wistful face of little Olive, who was rarely well enough to run about and gather the large bunches of primroses and daffodils as Freda did when they went at Easter to the country. "I mean the sweet graces of love, faith, humility, unselfishness—all the fruits of the Spirit, all that make us more like Christ. All these are like sweet flowers, and we must cultivate them, and so make them in our lives as meet offerings to the King."

II. The children often thought of Mr. Lester's words. They were both anxious to do right, and they asked God constantly to help them. Olive was one of those sweet saintly characters who seem to be good naturally, but Freda had many difficulties to contend with, and a hard sharp battle to be fought before the beautiful flowers her father spoke of grew in the garden of her soul. From the day on which my story opens until the Saturday morning before the flower service, the children had been hard at work at their gardens. They had each a square of ground bordered with box close to the vinery, and many sweet flowers grew in these squares. Olive and Freda watered their flowers daily, tied up carnations, hoping that they would have sufficient for a lovely nosegay.

Saturday morning came, and they ran eagerly to look at their beds.

"Oh, Olive!" said Freda, who had run on before, "see what has happened to your bed!"

"Olive could not run as fast as Freda, but she hastened her step, and saw that her mignonette, had all been trampled down, and that her large Gloire de Dijon rose-tree had all the flowers crushed and the branches broken, as if some weight had fallen on the tree.

At first Olive was speechless. She had been so delighted at the idea of having these flowers to give to the poor sick people in the hospital—she, who could do, as she feared, so little for God—and now they were ruined; only some few common scarlet geraniums and sweet Williams were left. Her lip quivered, and the tears came silently down.

"I am so sorry, Olive," said Freda. "But how could it have happened? for, see, my bed is perfectly untouched, just as we left it last night, you remember?"

Olive nodded. She remembered quite well how, after tea, she and Freda had gone to water the mignonette, as it had been a very hot day, and the remembrance of her flowers looking so lovely in the sweet evening twilight made her only cry more.

"Well, Miss Freda, ain't this a piece o' work along of Miss Olive's bed, eh?"

It was Hilton the gardener who spoke as he came out of the vinery.

"Oh, Hilton—is it not dreadful?" said poor Olive. "How can it have happened?"

"Well, Miss Olive, I can tell you. As I came along this morning what should I see but Zulu, Mrs. Chester's black cat—as vicious an animal to all appearance as you can wish to see. Well, there he was running over the bed chasing of a mouse. Up the tree, too, he goes before I could make after him, and I could only send him off in time to stop him doing more mischief."

Well, there was no help for it, and the children returned sadly to the house, and at breakfast told Mr. and Mrs. Lester of the accident.

Mrs. Lester was much occupied reading some important letters, but after breakfast Mr. Lester went out with the children and looked at Olive's bed.

"Is it not sad, papa?—poor Olive won't have any flowers to give."

"I am very sorry, my poor little Olive," said Mr. Lester. "Well, I shall propose something that may mend matters a little."

Olive shook her head. Nothing could bring back her lost flowers.

"Make up two bouquets from the two gardens, and each take one. Olive, you can make it up to Freda another time by giving her some of your flowers for the Infirmary."

Olive's face brightened; Freda's face clouded. "Give Olive some of my flowers, papa?" said she slowly.

"No, only lend them for this time. I will give Olive another rose tree instead of that one, so you will get some roses," said Mr. Lester, watching Freda anxiously.

Freda turned away, and Olive began looking at her poor remaining flowers, hoping that Freda would do as Mr. Lester suggested.

Freda went into the vinery, and, sitting on the step of a flower-stand had a hard battle with herself. It did seem hard, she thought, after all her care of her flowers, that her bouquet should be quite spoilt. She had made it up in imagination so often. Ferns and sweet mignonette, some delicate jasmine, geraniums, and above all her four lovely Glorie de Dijon roses, which were just in perfect beauty.

"Even Christ pleased not Himself." The words came to Freda then, but she would not heed them, and went on thinking how she had made up her mind to give her best flowers to God. "Ah!" whispers Conscience, "but you know that they would be given to God all the same, though another's hand gave them."

"My bouquet will be so shabby," said Freda to herself, in answer. "Only two roses, and only half of all the best flowers."

Again Conscience spoke, and whispered of the sweet flowers of love and unselfishness she could offer by the sacrifice.

Which would she choose?

III. Sunday afternoon came, the church bells were ringing, and the children were carrying bouquets of flowers as offerings for the sick and poor. All had some flowers, but the bouquets varied very much in appearance.

The children of the rich carried beautiful exotics and hot-house flowers, daintily arranged in delicate baskets, or made up into lovely bouquets. There were white and coloured bouquets; and the poor children of the Sunday-school, who came many of them from some home in a back street, had also brought their offerings. Some had saved up their few pence to buy flowers, and carried them lovingly, feeling that pleasure bought by offering to God the fruits of self-denial; others which had no pennies, had some shabby flowers, the best they could get, yet which they had walked a long way to get. Faded and shabby they might be, but God, looking down on the loving thought, saw perchance those shabby flowers shining with a radiance that many hot-house bouquets lacked.

Olive was there, carrying a few geraniums and other flowers. As Freda had not mentioned the subject again, she had concluded, and rightly, that she could not have any of hers.

Mr. Lester determined to test Freda, had not offered Olive any others.

Freda's face was not happy. She had an exquisite bouquet of flowers, all from her own bed, and all of her own rearing, and yet she was not happy, and she began to wish that she had followed her father's advice.

Round the churchyard was a low stone wall, with railings, and Freda laid the flowers down for a moment while she fastened the lace of her shoe, which had come undone. Olive, who had not perceived her cousin was stopping, walked on.

"Olive, wait. I am just tying my shoe," said Freda.

Olive came back just in time to see a rough boy, who had been watching Freda, catch up the flowers and run off with them.

He was out of sight before Freda realised what had happened, but as the bell was just ceasing, she had to go into the church all the same—the only one among all those there who had no flowers to offer.

Poor Freda! She felt it was a punishment to her for her selfishness, for though she knew that it might have happened all the same if she had shared her flowers with Olive, she felt she deserved it now as a punishment.

The service went on—the prayers and Psalms, and sweet children's hymns; and then all the children gave their flowers to the clergyman, who held a large long basket to receive them.

As Freda waited for Olive, she thought of many things.

Her thoughts went out into good deeds, and one certainly could hope that Freda had learnt a lesson never to be forgotten.

Children, have you no lives of love and unselfishness, sweet as God's flowers, to offer to Him?