

JANET MASON'S TROUBLES.

(From the Sunday Magazine.)

"Then go to the pump and get it out again," answered his mother, sharply. "What were you doing to make him throw the ink-bottle at you? If your brother was in the wrong, do you think that makes you right?" And, loving to be impartial in the justice that she distributed, Mrs. Mason advanced to her youngest son, and cuffed him on both sides of his head.

Jack had received his punishment in silence, but Bill when he was boxed roared, and went roaring from the room; and then Mrs. Mason, with her spirit up and her hand well in, turned round to Janet.

"And what are you doing? You're at the bottom of it all, I've no doubt," she said. "What—you haven't mended any? You've just been idling and quarrelling? Take that, then, for your idling." And if Mrs. Mason boxed Janet's ears less sharply than she had boxed Jack's and Bill's, at any rate the child got a blow that made her cheeks tingle for half an hour afterwards.

You see Mrs. Mason's system of education was a very simple one. She was a woman with much work and many cares upon her shoulders; was it not natural that she should not be fond of wasting time when her children took to quarrelling in trying to find out which amongst them was most in the wrong? Was it not so much easier to punish them alike all round?

"Why, if I was to try to get to the bottom of it every time they took to fighting with one another, I'd be worn to a thread-paper," she would often say; and I am afraid there is little doubt that she would, for three boys who did more in the way of quarrelling with one another than Dick and Jack and Bill you scarcely could have found in a long summer's day. No two of them were ever together for ten minutes but they began to spar, or to tease one another, or to fight.

"I should think you must get tired of it," Janet said one day hesitatingly to Jack, having considered the matter a great deal in her grave little mind, without having reached any satisfactory conclusion concerning the advantages of it.

"Get tired of it?" repeated Jack, opening his eyes, and not in the least knowing what she meant.

"Yes—don't you?"

"I don't know what in the world you're talkin' of," said Jack.

"I mean, you—you're always fighting together."

"Well?" enquired Jack, not seeing how any rational person could object to such a natural occupation.

"But it seems so odd."

"Odd to fight? I think it would seem much odder not to fight. You can't know, of course," said Jack, in a tone of supreme contempt: "you're only a girl; but they'd be rum boys, I think, who didn't do it."

"But you do it so much," Janet ventured to suggest.

"We don't do it a bit more than we need," said Jack. "You should see the boys at school. Then you might talk! But you're such a baby. If anybody looks at you you're ready to cry out. I wouldn't be a girl for something!" cried Jack with unction, and with a beautiful frankness, and he gave Janet such a look of scorn that she felt quite abashed and hung her head.

After that day when Jack threw the ink-bottle at Bill's head, Janet sometimes in her troubles, when the others were rough to her, or were teasing her, would turn to Jack; she would feel a certain faint sense of protection in being near him. She was very affectionate, and she had so little here to care for that there were moments when she almost felt as if she liked him. She said to him one day—

"I wish you had come to see us once, Jack, while papa was alive. I think it would have been so nice. I do think you would have liked it."

She was sitting when she made this speech looking at Jack as he cut out a boat from a bit of wood.

"H'm—I don't know. Perhaps I should," replied Jack, condescendingly.

"It was so pretty. And you would have liked papa."

"Oh, well, I'm not so sure of that. Parsons are queer coves. They're not much in my line," said Jack, cautiously.

"Oh, but he was so kind. Nobody could have helped liking him."

"It's best to be on the safe side," said Jack, with a knowing wink. "I daresay he was all right, but it's a chance if we'd have pulled together. Besides, there would have been such a lot of church-going, you know."

"You needn't have gone to church more than once if you

hadn't liked it," said Janet, meekly. "But of course it's no use talking of it all now. Only nobody knows how nice it was," and then the poor little voice shook, and the tears rose up to the child's eyes.

"Well, I daresay it did seem queer at first when it was all up, and you had to come here. I don't know that I should have liked it myself," said Jack; "that's to say, not for a bit. But I shouldn't think you'd like to go back to the country now."

"What! not like to go back?" cried Janet, with her face flushing and her grey eyes opening wide.

"No; you'd find it ever so stupid."

"Oh, Jack!"

"Why, what would you do if you were there this minute?"

"What should I do?" She paused to think for a moment or two. It was the afternoon of a September day—a warm day with a deep blue sky. "Perhaps I might be in a wood gathering nuts, or I might have gone to see them milk the cows at the Rectory, or perhaps Mrs. Jessop might have lent me her little pony, as she sometimes did, and I should be having a ride—oh, Jack, such a lovely ride across the fields. I know exactly where I would go. I would go past the church and over the meadows, on and on till I came to the great pine wood. And then I would let my pony loose a little (he was so quiet he never used to run away), and perhaps I would go blackberry gathering over the common. Perhaps I should have taken a basket with me, and I would bring it back all full of blackberries."

"Well, I shouldn't wonder that it might be rather jolly," said Jack thoughtfully, with a mind open to conviction. "I'd like the riding, and the blackberry getting, and all that. I'd like to go bird-nesting too; that's fun."

"Y—es, I suppose it is," said Janet, faintly.

"I went bird-nesting out at Hendon one day last year," said Jack; and then he proceeded with much unction to give Janet a minute and lively account of this expedition; and poor little Janet listened, and had not the courage to speak out the thoughts about it that were in her mind. For, of course, to her—loving, as she did, every little feathered creature that sang—this amusement of Jack's seemed a sorrowful and cruel thing.

"I never took any birds out of their nests; I—I never cared to do it," she just said timidly once. "I like so much better to have them in the trees."

"Oh, bother the trees," exclaimed Jack, contemptuously.

"What I'd like to do best would be to snare them. I shouldn't mind being a bird-catcher for a bit. I could make such a lot of money that way. Think of coming in with a whole sackful of birds!"

"But surely nobody puts birds in a sack?" cried Janet in a tone of horror.

"Don't they though! What else could you do with them when you catch such a lot? They stuff them in one after another."

"Oh Jack!"

"It's a fact. You ask anybody. Why, that's the fun of the thing."

"But they must get suffocated?"

"So they do—some of them. You've got to take your chance of that. There's sure to be more alive than dead. What you do is to catch a bag full of them, and then the man at the shop gives you so much for the lot, and you tumble them all out into a cage."

"Oh, poor little things!"

"Well, I must say it's pretty hard lines for them, but that's their look-out. There's an awful scrimmage sometimes when they get into the cage. You can fancy it—can't you? Just think—two or three score of birds put into a cage not that size. And then—when they get their food—! Why, they fight so, and they're jammed so close that sometimes—sometimes after a night of it—there's nine-tenths of them dead. But that's bad management," said Jack, severely. "I say, if it's worth your while to buy birds, it's worth your while to keep them alive."

"But, Jack," said Janet, with the saddest face, "I think you're trying to deceive me. Do you really mean that people are so dreadfully cruel to the poor little birds?"

"Oh—cruel?—that's all stuff. They can't help it—at least, not most of it. I think, for their own sake," said Jack, with an air of wisdom, "that they ought to give them a little more room."

"But it seems so dreadful."

"It ain't a bit more dreadful than other things. It all depends on what you're used to."

"But the birds never can be used to being packed in bags."