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Cecil was a singular youth and anything but manly, as you would have said if you could have seen him now with tears in his eyes and a slight quivering of the lip, kissing the flowers which Laurence had given him.

CHAPTER XVII. AN ILLNESS AND A QUICK RECOVERY.

Joy rises in me like a summer morn.—COLERIDGE.

A few days after, Cecil fell ill, not seriously, but enough to keep him to his room, from which he refused to budge, stating to Mr. Stewart that he should be all right on the morrow, and that all the medicine he needed was a day's quiet.

The settler, who had grown wondrously fond of the willful boy, would have doctored him after the cattle-runner fashion, that is, with a decoction of strong herbs and rum; but thought it better to let the lad have his way for one day and not be badgered.

On the morrow, true to his prophecy, Cecil came down, but looked so pale and woe-begone that the settler refused to let him work, and to prevent him getting to the books locked the armory door.

Left to idleness, the youth went and lay down under the trees and half dozed the day away, taking only some milk porridge, which old Martha brought him in a wooden bowl.

The settler was troubled. He didn't want his little clerk and general manager laid up, and having had some experience in prairie fever dreaded lest he was about to have an attack.

After thinking it over he decided he would send for a doctor, and, with his hands in his pockets, strolled over to where the youth was lying and told him he should dispatch one of the runners to the Bay for one.

But Cecil seemed anything but grateful for the kindness, and, starting to his feet, said he should do nothing of the kind.

"I won't see him if he comes. Doctor, indeed! Why, I'm quite well. Look at the expense, too! Pretty item in the books that would be—Doctor for Master Cecil, for slight attack of mulligrats!" Nonsense—I won't have him!

"Won't you, you saucy young rascal?" retorted Mr. Stewart, with a grin. "But you shall, if I send for him."

Cecil turned pale and, having gained nothing by defiance, tried coaxing.

"Oh, don't send for a horrid doctor, sir! I do hate 'em so; and I'd never take the nasty physic. Oh, don't send for him; there's a good master!"

"Well, well—drat the boy!" muttered Stewart, very much as Squire Darrell had growled when vanquished by his niece. "Well, I'll wait till to-morrow; but if you ain't better I'll have him, physic and all. So mind you!"

That night Laurence came galloping back.

Cecil, hearing the clatter and the usual hubbub, got out of bed and saw him wearily dismount from the black.

In the morning he was much better—so much, indeed, in appearance that, as he entered the little office where he always took his meals, Mr. Stewart, who was seated there talking to Laurence, looked up with surprise.

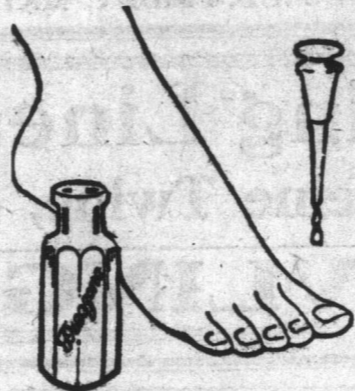
"Hello, youngster!" he said; "the doctor's frightened you has he? Well, we shall know how to cure you for the future my fine fellow. Look here, Laury, taking Cecil by the arm; 'here's the invalid I was speaking about—contradicts me pretty nicely with his rosy cheeks, don't he? It's a regular swindle! Here have I been and got up a nice breakfast to tempt his appetite! I'll be bound he could eat a horse."

Cecil made some saucy answer and sat down to the breakfast—a delicate and tempting one—of sweetbreads, crisp, white bread, and new milk.

Laury looked at him kindly.

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"Haven't you been well, Cecil?" "Yes," retorted Cecil; "quite well, thank you. How have you been?"

"The only complaint he's got, you see, is manners," laughed Mr. Stewart, perching himself on the stool and watching the boy eat his breakfast with a nice air of proprietorship.

Laury smiled.

"I'm glad it's no worse," he said. Then they continued the conversation in a low undertone, of which Cecil—though he kept his ears open with that curiosity of which we have said he had a considerable share—could catch only a word here and there.

But these scraps made sharper his desire to hear more, and he resolved to pump Master Laurence—if he could—at the first opportunity.

At last the conversation was concluded, seemingly by Laurence carelessly assenting to some proposal of the settler's, and the two left the room.

Having finished his breakfast, Cecil sat down to his books and, as might be expected, soon lost his rosy looks.

Presently Mr. Stewart came in.

"Hello!" said he; "you've got at the books, have you—and got chalk-cheeked again? But you can shut the accounts up. Laury's offered to take you with him buck-hunting, he says, and I think it'll do you good."

The youth's face crimsoned with pleasure, but he pouted:

"Oh, indeed!" said he; "it's very kind of Laury, to be sure. But how long is he going to be away?" he asked, sharply.

"Oh, I'm sure I can't tell you!" laughed Mr. Stewart. "Who knows when to reckon upon Laury? Two or three days perhaps."

"I can't go, then," said Cecil, dejectedly.

"Why not?" asked Mr. Stewart.

"Because I won't," said Cecil. "I can't leave the books; they're behind-hand already."

"Oh, bother the books!" said Mr. Stewart. "You needn't bother about 'em if I don't. Leave them."

"I won't," retorted Cecil. "I know my duty and I'll do it. I don't want to have you turning over my wages at the end of the quarter and thinking I haven't earned them."

"Oh, oh!" laughed Mr. Stewart; "you're uncommon particular—most uncommon! Well, lad, you must have your way. How long will you go for?"

"One day," replied Cecil, decisively.

"Well, I'll tell Laury to be back before night," said Stewart; and he went off, leaving his clerk all in a glow of delight and expectation, notwithstanding the cool reception he had given Laury's message.

(To be continued.)

Fashion Plates.

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CHAPTER XVII. A STRANGE BOY.

The knock was repeated and he answered it.

"—Laurence," was the reply.

"What do you want?"

"I want to speak to you. Are you in bed?"

"Yes—that is, no," replied Cecil. "Is anything the matter? Go down-stairs and wait by the horse and I will come to you."

The footsteps descended and, waiting a moment to glance at the glass, with a sharp, questioning look—Cecil was vain for a boy—he unclosed the door and cautiously stripped down the stairs.

Laurence had mounted again and was waiting for him.

Cecil went up to him timidly, notwithstanding the assumption of ease and superiority upon his pretty face, and said:

"Well, what is it? This is a fine time of night to disturb any one!" and he looked up impudently at the stern, grave face above him, upon which the moon was shedding a clear, soft light.

"Lad," said the cattle-runner, looking down upon him sadly, but with a majestic kind of dignity that will befit the grave, handsome face, "lad, I couldn't go away to-night without telling you that you were right and I was wrong to-day. I had forgotten myself, and played the coward, the braggart, and the lunatic. You brought me back to my senses with that look of yours, and I am grateful."

"Well," said Cecil, laying his hand on the horse's neck and looking up with a provoking laugh, "and have you called me up to tell me that stale news, Mr. Grim?"—it was a strange, girlish habit the lad had of calling those he liked by fanciful but appropriate names.

Laurence smiled.

"Of course it was wrong," continued Cecil, with a shake of the head and the same smile. "You'd no right to risk your neck for the sake of breaking that idiot, Tim's. As to being a lunatic, you know best about that."

"Ay," said Laurence, curtly.

"And why are you going off in this harum-scarum way? Is the night too good for you to stay here?"

"If one can not sleep, it is ill to waste time by lying idle, Cecil," replied Laurence.

"Oh, lying idle!" retorted the lad. "You are a singular fellow, to call taking one's natural rest idleness. Pray, do you never know what it is to rest?"

"Very seldom," said Laurence, with his grave smile.

"Oh! And perhaps you are never tired?"

"Often—always," he replied, gathering the reins tighter.

The lad did not remove his hand from the horse's neck; he seemed to enjoy the moonlight and the chat.

"What a beautiful night it is, Laurence!" he said. "I almost envy you. It must be fine to scamper away across the hills and in the forest, with the moon shining down on one," and he sighed.

"You are better in bed, lad," said the runner, looking down with his sad, yet kindly smile; "you would catch cold, being so slight and girlish. Why, what hands are these for holding the reins in a thirty-mile run!" and he caught the little, white hand with his strong, brown one.

"Let my hand alone, you bear!" retorted Cecil, snatching the imprisoned hand away with an indignant flush;

"It is clever, if not so strong as yours, for all your impudence. There, I had forgotten to scold you for calling me down, and now"—pretending to yawn—"I am too tired to do it. It shall keep until you come back; and, pray, when will that be?" he asked, with a feigned indifference, but looking with almost an anxious glance at Laurence's face.

Laurence shook his head and threw off the hair which had blown against his forehead.

"Who can tell?" he said, lightly. "Not I. Who cares? Not I, again; and I'm sure you do not, lad, so let the black and me go."

And he laid his hand, with another smile, upon Cecil's shoulder.

"How do you know?" retorted the youth, mockingly, and still retaining his light grasp of the horse's neck.

"Perhaps I am not as indifferent as you think; perhaps I want some one to give me a helping hand in managing the boys and Mr. Stewart. Nay, I do in all seriousness, for they are dreadfully unruly sometimes, and will not obey me half as well as they do you. Laury, why do you waste your time playing the unsociable bear? I asked you before, but you would not tell me; come, tell me now. I can keep a secret, never fear," he added—the last rather significantly.

Laurence looked away with a darkened face; but as if willing to humour the lad, turned his face again to him and said, with a smile:

"Questions breeds questions, lad. Suppose I ask you what brought you to such a pass as keeping the books of an African cattle station? What would be the answer? Not that I want to know—"

"'Tis lucky," retorted Cecil, who had retreated within the shadow of the horse, as the question was asked, and lowered his eyes, but raised them now as roguishly as before, " 'tis lucky you do not, for I would answer—nothing."

"See, then, lad, how little right you have to question me," retorted Laurence, with a grave air.

And, setting spurs to his horse, he sprang forward; but before quite out of sight he looked round and waved his hand.

The youth, who had gazed after him with a strange, wistful look upon his face—fearing, perhaps, that he had given offense—brightened up at the signal of farewell and walked moodily back to his room.

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