

It was a long way—over two miles—and entirely new ground to Pen, whose travels had been necessarily limited. It was nearly six when he reached the place; and, having sought out the greengrocer, and delivered his message he sat down on a box in the doorway for a rest, and looked round the big bare building.

Down one long avenue fitches of bacon and feathered fowls hung in melancholy rows in the fading March twilight; down another, wet shining fish lay in shoals, on slabs of dingy slate; others were given up to stores of oranges and potatoes; close by where he sat was a vast pile of vegetable refuse, ready for the scavenger's cart. Glancing over the heterogeneous mass, Pen caught sight of a mysterious lump of something, covered with little dark brown knobs. He picked it up curiously, not quite sure whether it was not some strange animal; but it lay perfectly still on his palm, and he turned back to the greengrocer, and asked him if he knew what it was. The man took it out of his hand.

"Why, it's only a fern-root."

"What's that?"

"Something that grows—it's green; they're rather nice, some of them," he added.

"May I keep it?" asked Pen, suddenly; he had never seen a green thing growing.

"If you want it. Stop a minute, though."

From the back of his stall the man produced a small red pot. He put the root into it, and pressed down some loose earth round it.

"There, youngster; give it plenty of water, and you'll have a fine plant some of these days."

Pen received it gratefully; he took his new possession carefully under his arm, and then the great bell rang for closing, and he left the market, and began his pilgrimage back.

At one of the street corners he came upon a blind man encamped under a doorway; he was reading by his fingers, slowly and jerkily, from a big dingy volume, and Pen stopped in front of him to watch the process.

"And Jesus sat over against the treasury, and beheld how the people cast gifts into the treasury; and many that were rich cast in much. And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing; and He called unto Him His disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast in more than they all have cast in of their abundance, but she of her want did cast in all that she had, even all her living."

There it ended: he closed the book. Pen waited a minute or two, but it was evidently concluded for the night; so he went on his journey. He did not understand it all—many of the words were altogether beyond his level—but he had gathered a general impression that the poor widow had given all her money away, and thereby pleased some great person, who had spoken out for her right well. He somehow associated it with the hospital-boxes he had often seen at street-corners, and he wondered at which of them this person sat; then, remembering the faded old volume, he came to the conclusion that it must have happened some time ago, and most probably they were all dead now.

At the entrance to his own court, he encountered an acquaintance—a sickly unhappy-looking girl, carrying a huge bundle of slop-work. He stopped to show her his new property, but she hurried on impatiently.

"I've no time to bother with it now," she said. "They want all this back by to-morrow night."

Pen turned into the dingy cellar that constituted his head-quarters. He put the little pot tenderly into a corner of the grated window, and, recollecting the greengrocer's injunction, went out to the court pump with a broken jug, the entire contents of which he straightway administered to the unfortunate root.

Days and weeks came and went: the fern remained to all outward appearance in exactly the same condition. At first he limped across to it hopefully, then patiently, but at last he lost all heart, and told the sewing-girl about it almost with tears of disappointment.

"I've given it pints of water, Margaret, and covered it up always but it doesn't make a bit of difference."

"Why, you stupid boy," she said, "you're giving it too much. There's lots of time yet; those things never come up till the sun gets warm. I've seen heaps of them. Put it outside the window."

Pen put it outside thenceforth, and gave it the benefit of every ray of sunlight that found its way between those dank walls. Not many days after he fancied he saw a change in the shape of the little brown knobs. There was a day or two of breathless anxiety, then hope blossomed into certainty—the brown sheaths slowly uncurled themselves into tiny curling green fronds.

It was like a revelation from another world to Pen. For hours together he would bend over it, his face almost touching the little tender leaves. He hid it away in a dark corner in terror when his father was in; but the darkest fear he had was of a woman who sometimes came in to "straighten things up" in the miserable room. Mercifully these visits were few and far between, but Pen suffered such anxiety for the safety of his fern the first time she was in possession that ever after he took it with him to the church steps, where he generally sat with his stock of fuses and matches.

One night he carried it up to Margaret's attic to show her; she put down her sewing this time, and took the little pot on her knee, and Pen presently saw with astonishment that tears were glittering in her eyes.

"They used to grow round the house where we lived," she explained. "It was hundreds of miles from here, and I've never seen one since I left it."

"What made you leave it?" inquired Pen, sympathetically.

"Father and mother died, and I thought as I'd get on better here. One has to live, though one might as well be dead as live in this hole," she wound up bitterly. "There, take the thing away."

Pen took it down, but often afterwards, he would carry it up to her for a little while. She was a fretful irritable girl, but her face always softened and brightened at the sight of it, and truly the little fern grew and flourished as rarely a professionally tended one ever does; the tiny fronds lengthened into feathery sprays as gracefully as though they had never left their home in exile; and every leaf held a separate beauty of its own for the two who watched it.

Margaret talked to him sometimes of a far country that was filled with growing trees and flowers, of fields white with daisies, and hedges thick with giant ferns; she told him how they grew and waved by thousands on the hill-sides. Pen thought of Ludgate-hill, his only experience of mountain scenery, and received that item with a heavy discount. The hedge might pass—he had never seen one—but there should be no hill-side for his fern, if he could help it.

One sultry August morning it chanced that he found himself stranded in a distant street. He had set out with two or three other boys to see some procession, but his limbs failed him half way, and they went on without him. He was standing still looking for a friendly doorstep, when the sound of a irking monotonous voice broke upon his ear; a few yards off against the wall stood a wooden stool, and on it reading from the same old book, the blind man he had once listened to before. Pen stole softly up and settled down beside him.

"And—there—came—a—certain—poor—widow—and—she—threw—in—two—mites." The story went on to the end, the same story; when it was finished Pen touched the reader's sleeve.

"Doesn't that treasury mean the box for the hospitals?"

The man turned his face towards him sharply—"No, of course not; it was a church."

"But they don't keep boxes at the church," objected Pen, who had never penetrated beyond the steps, and knew nothing of their internal arrangements.

"Is that person who spoke up for the poor widow alive now? Isn't he very old?"

"Why, it was Jesus," and the man explained, in a rather shocked tone, "He's up in heaven, you know."

Pen didn't know, but he went on in his quest of knowledge. "Then there isn't any treasury now?"

The man hesitated; these were leading questions. "I don't know exactly; I suppose it means giving to poor people, and I wish to goodness they'd do a little more at it."

But the widow was poor herself, the book said, persisted Pen, "and that was why that other person spoke about her."

"Well, well; I can't stop talking here; it might have been for somebody poorer than herself, or sick, perhaps."

"Does the book say it *wasn't* the hospital-box?" asked Pen, coming back at the word to his original point.

"No, it doesn't," owned the scholar, reluctantly. "But I don't think it was. You ought to go to school, and learn about it. It means that you ought to help the poor."

"What's the use, if the person isn't beside the box, now?"

"It wasn't a box I tell you; and He knows about it all the same."

Pen rose up with a sigh.

"It's rather curious to understand, isn't it?"

"Not when you've been brought up to it," returned the modern Gamaliel, loftily.

Pen had not been brought up to it; but the story had taken a deep hold upon his mind. He would have walked a long way to look at the originals in the little drama, if he could only have discovered their whereabouts; but there seemed some uncertainty about it. He puzzled over it often as he sat on the steps with his fuses through the long sunny days.

There was one inhabitant less in the crowded court that August. Pen, going up as usual one evening to Margaret's attic, found it deserted. The woman beneath told him that she had been taken away to the hospital that morning.

"When is she coming back?" asked Pen, blankly.

"There'll be no coming back for her," said the woman decidedly. "You can go and see her at the hospital, if you like, twice a week; it's in Grey's-road."

Pen limped down again, rather disconsolately. Margaret had not been always a congenial companion, but he had not met many, and the fern had been a strong tie between them. He missed her more than he thought; and the first day that the rules allowed, Pen presented himself at the hospital gates.

"Margaret Ellis," echoed the nurse, a tall kindly-faced woman, in a snowy cap and apron. "Are you her brother?"

"No, nothink; but she lived beside us."

"I am afraid you cannot see her to-day, my boy; she is very ill."

"Is she going to die?"

"I am afraid she is."

Pen gave a little sob.

"And she'll never see my fern again," said the nurse, not quite comprehending; "she has suffered a great deal here, and she would be safe with Jesus, we hope."

A sudden light broke over Pen's troubled face; he had found the missing link.

"Oh, I know him!" he cried out, joyfully; "it's the person who sat by the treasury."

The nurse looked at him doubtfully.

"I don't know; but you had better go now; you can come again on Saturday."

Pen pondered over it as he went home. He had been right after all; it was the hospital-box. How strange that, among so many hospitals, he should have found

the very place where He was! and yet that man with the old book had said that He was dead. All the parts of the story did not fit in—much of it he did not understand; but then he had not been brought up to it, and then seemed to know about it.

"I didn't understand about my fern till I saw it grow," he wound up, unconsciously linking together the two great mysteries of the life that is and the life that is to come.

And if he had had anything to give he would have given it then, but he had not. Nothing in the world, except—except Pen's very heart stood still as it came upon him his fern. The poor widow gave her money to some one who was poorer than herself, or sick; Margaret was both. If it had been anything else she would have had it, but that—it was not possible to give her that.

Pen pattered back to his cellar, in sore trouble; he took his fern out of its corner, and put his arms around it, and his face went down among the leaves, his one little piece of the great green world that he had never seen, possibly might never see. He thought of the light it had shed in that dismal room, and the gladness every new leaf unfolded about him; of how the sick girl's face had lit up at the sight of its greenness—had she seen that person? he wondered, and had the rich persons given her many things besides? And then the widow came back again, who had "given all that she had," and the little seeker, blindly groping after his Lord's will, fell asleep at last, his head upon the table beside his much-loved fern.

It seemed to Pen afterwards that he lived through a good deal in those few days. Saturday morning found him in the hospital with the fern in his arms. It was to be cast into the treasury. The nurse took it from him, and touched the fronds admiringly.

"It is a beautiful one," she said. "It will be a real comfort to her. She talks about the country incessantly."

Pen went away without a word. He had sat on the steps in the summer moonlight that night long after the chance of a customer had gone by; and when at length he went back to his cellar, he crept up to his pallet in the corner without one glance at the place where the little pot had stood.

He wondered round the big hospital many a time that week, only to look at the rows of windows, and wondered which held his treasure, and how it looked, and if Margaret would care for it as he had. An hour before the gates were opened on the next Saturday. Pen was there, propped against the opposite wall on his crutch; after that he had to wait a long time in the little room before the nurse came. She stood on the threshold and patted his head kindly.

"Margaret's troubles are over, my boy," she said. "She died three days ago."

"Was she glad to get the fern?" asked Pen.

"Yes; she kept it close beside her till she died; and the last time she spoke, it was to ask to have it put in her coffin."

"And was it?" he queried, eagerly.

"Yes, certainly, and it was buried with her," answered the nurse, softly closing the door upon him.

"Perhaps she told Him how it was the only thing I had to give," he said to himself, as he slowly limped down the steps and back into the crowded street.

Aye, and perhaps she did. And perhaps, also—given more ignorantly, but as loyally and lovingly as were the widow's mites of old—not among the least of the gifts of His treasury the Master may have counted that little fern.

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DEATH.

COOLEN.—On the 11th December, 1890, at Fox Point, County Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, much and deservedly regretted, JAMES COOLEN, J.P., an earnest Churchman and a consistent Christian.—Aged 49 years.