

The Inglenook.

BECKY.

BY ANNIE HAMILTON DONNELL.

There was a buzz of excitement in a corner of the Asylum playgrounds. A dozen eyes, in turn—blue, hazel, black—peeped through the "peep-hole" in the high board fence.

"Now it's my turn, Em'ly Knapp! You've peeked as long as two peeks!"

Tilly's voice was freighted with mild indignation. She stood next in the line of little checked aprons. They all wore checked aprons—Tilly, who was the playground wit, said that was their coat of arms.

"Well, go ahead and peek, then, Tilly Voss; I'm willin'," Emily said, coming back on her heels with a little thud.

There was a brief moment while Tilly adjusted her eye to the knot-hole, then a little shrill cry:

"Oh, my, it's a span! You never said it was a span, Emily! An' there's a man on the top seat, all spangled over with brass buttons! There's a lady gettin' out! Now she's goin' up the front walk! Em'ly Knapp, why didn't you say she was han'some an' looked exactly like a mother?"

One by one the eyes took their places till all had had their turn. The daintily dressed woman had passed out of the range of their vision, but there were the horses still to look at and the brass-spangled coachman.

"Let Becky peek, why don't you?" whispered Emily, glancing toward the quiet little checked figure under the butternut tree. For some reason they always whispered when they spoke of Becky, though it was palpably unnecessary.

"The idea!" retorted Tilly. "As if 't would do any good!"

"Tilly Voss, she isn't deaf an' dumb in her eyes!" laughed Emily.

The excitement buzzed on, increasing as the minutes passed. For there was the prospect of being sent for at any time. The matron would send a messenger—Tilly, Em'ly, Mary, Sue, 'Lizbeth," she would say, "you're wanted in the reception room right away."

The messenger would not say "Becky." Becky was never wanted in the reception room right away. She shrank away under the butternut tree and hid her little wistful face out of sight. But she too was watching for the matron's messenger. The sight she had seen through the peek-hole in the fence was fresh in her mind—Becky's eyes were as bright as her little ears were dull.

"I wish I'd been in time to see the lady—I know there was a lady," ran on Becky's thoughts. "I'd like to have seen if she looked motherly. The one that adopted Prissy Baily did—I saw her goin' out. She had hold of Prissy's hand, and she was lookin' down at her, a-smilin' just as motherly as anything! I'd have smiled too if I'd been Prissy. I wonder"—Becky's plain little face took on a shade more wistfulness. There was evident doubt in it. "I wonder if any mother in this world ever adopted a deaf-an'-dumber? Oh, no, of course not!"

Becky always referred to herself in that way, though nobody knew where she had ever "heard" the expression. Had some mischievous little checked orphan spelled it out to her on her fingers, with unintenti-

onal cruelty?

"They'd never want a deaf-an'-dumber—what you thinkin' of, Rebecca Dalrymple? You might just as well give up wondering things. There isn't a single mother in—this—world—wants a little girl like you!"

Becky had been over all this many and many a time. She always ended with a long, patient sigh.

"Mary, Sue, Tilly, Em'ly, 'Lizbeth," somebody called importantly, "you're wanted in the reception room, right off."

The messenger added a few other names, but the four expected names were all there. They belonged to the prettiest, brightest little orphans who were slowly being dwindled by adoption. Last time it was Prissy Baily. This time—who would it be this time? The unbidden little checked aprons clustered together and whispered excitedly. Under the butternut Becky waited, too. After a while she stole to the fence and tiptoed up to the peek hole. She must have waited there a long time, but her reward came in the end. She caught her breath in a short gasp.

"It's Tilly!" she thought. "Tilly's adopted and it's a real mother. I guess I can tell mothers!"

How could Becky "tell" mothers? She had never had one. Once, not so long ago, there had been a sharp-faced aunt with an increasing brood of quarrelsome little children. When the brood got to the limit of using up all the room in the small home, Becky had been hustled out with small ceremony. How came it that Becky knew mothers by sight?

"It's Tilly!"

"Tilly's adopted!"

"Yes, sir, Tilly!"

The murmur of voices swelled to a loud chorus. It was Emily who brought the news.

"She's gone—Tilly's gone," she announced, briefly. "They wanted a blue-eyed orphan. Tilly said to say good-bye to all of you—the lady couldn't wait another minute. Tilly said you could have her play-house, Cherry Gile, an' she left her gold mine to Mary Sue—and—O, yes, she left me all her turns at the peep-hole, an' Becky—where's Becky?"

Emily hurried over to the butternut tree.

"Becky!" she cried, and then stopped in confusion. She dropped beside Becky and spelled out Tilly's legacy on her fingers very slowly. Becky "listened" breathless and excited.

"Tilly leg't you—her—e-o-lan harp, Emily spelled out laboriously. She spelled "left" "leg't" because she couldn't remember how to make the f, and g, she argued wisely, was the next best thing! But Becky understood—she was used to understanding. Her thin, brown little face lit up with pleasure. It was so good to be included in Tilly's last will and testament, and nobody thought of the aeolian harp as an incongruous legacy for Becky.

"She was nice—the lady was," one of the other contestants for adoption volunteered soberly: "Oh, yes, she was nice! She was a mother fast enough, but I guess it's all right she chose Tilly. I didn't mind."

"Mary Sue Leadbetter, if that isn't sour grapes!" scoffed Emily, with scorn radiating from every freckle. "I guess you'd like to

be adopted by a span of horses and a mother, if you'd only had blue eyes!"

It was Saturday, and the little inmates of the Wimpenny Orphan Asylum were privileged to run wild in the playgrounds until supper time. Then they formed into an orderly line and filed into the dining room.

Becky's chair was empty, but so was Tilly's and one or two others; so no one noticed. Out under the butternut tree a little checked apron got damp and clammy in the dew. The matron found it there after dark, when she was hunting for her missing little orphan.

"Why, of all things!" she exclaimed. "The child's covered with dew. Becky, Becky!"

People kept forgetting that Becky was a "deaf and dumb." She had only been in the Wimpenny Asylum a little while. The matron remembered presently, and felt about in the dusk for Becky's little "talking" hand. She began talking on it slowly, but there was no answering pressure.

"Why, the child's asleep!" And it was not dew on Becky's cheeks, the matron surmised pitily.

"She cried herself to sleep, the poor little thing. She was grieved about something—bless me, could it be because—why, of all things!"

The matron lifted the little damp figure and carried it gently to bed. She had discovered Becky's wistful secret. The child was homesick and motherless, in the lonely silence that shut her in. She wanted "to be adopted," as the well-worn phrase was, in asylum dialect.

"And she never will be in this world," the kind matron thought, sorrowfully. She sat down beside Becky's bed in the row of little white beds. All the children were asleep, and their flushed faces peeped above the monotonous blue and-white quilts—a double row of little faces. One or two were smiling, but on little lone Becky's rested the shadow of her hopeless longing.

"Dear child! If I wasn't going away, it wouldn't be quite so bad—I'm getting to understand Becky," the matron's thoughts kept on musingly. "The new matron, just as likely as not, won't. And if I was going to stay, I might possibly be able to persuade somebody—no, no, I don't suppose I could do that. Nobody would want poor little Becky. She's a plain little thing besides her other afflictions—there isn't a mite of a chance for her. And, of all things, to think she should go without her supper and stay out there in the dark, crying!"

The matron of the little Wimpenny Asylum had performed her duties with unflinching faithfulness for twenty years. She was "next thing to a mother," Tilly had said. Her matronship was as old as the asylum itself. She had seen many a bright, pretty child find a home and an adopted mother, but no Beckys—no, no, there wasn't a bit of a chance for Becky!

In a week the matron was going away. She sighed now as she thought of it. She was so sure to miss going in every night to look at the little faces in a row.

"But I'm getting middle-aged, and I want to rest. I've always meant to retire when I was sixty." The matron called sixty middle-aged—why not? "There isn't any reason why I can't settle down and take my old age easy, when it comes. Dear knows I've worked steady and saved up enough! Oh, yes, I'm not going to back out now. I shall be lonesome at first, but I'll get used to living alone."

The room was full of the soft purr of many little breaths. The matron tiptoed down the