

OUT IN THE DARK.

(From Books for Children, No. 2.)

Three little girls were standing one summer evening at the gate of the court before the school.

The least of them was leaning against the gate-post, with her pinafore held to her eyes; and she was saying something that nobody could well understand, because she was sobbing and crying.

One of the bigger boys was standing there too. He was rattling the gate with a stick that he had in his hand, and saying,

"Well, Kitty, I can't help it, you know; I must go to the farm."

The other two little girls came close to Kitty. Charlotte pulled the pinafore from her eyes, and Susan took hold of her hand, and said,

"Why are you crying, Kitty?"

Kitty answered with sobs,

"Because I always go home with Tom, for he lives close by us; and now he says he is going to-night to his uncle's, and I must go alone; and I can't. I am afraid; I never go home alone."

And then she began to cry bitterly.

"Oh, don't be a baby," said Tom. "You know the way well enough. It is a month and more since you have been living there. Only go down the lane, and across the wheat-field, and through the copse—no, the common first—and there's only the lane up to your father'srick-yard. Come, set off and run; you'll be there in no time."

"But I can't run, it is so dark. I shall not get home before dark. Oh, dear, what shall I do?"

And then she began to cry again. But Tom had taken up his hat and his dinner-bag, and was out of sight in a moment.

Susan and Charlotte wondered what Kitty should do to get home. She was not used to be left to herself. Her father was a farmer, and she had been rather brought up; and she was timid, and shy, and very soon frightened.

Susan said,

"The schoolroom is locked up, and mistress is gone; but I dare say she will keep you to-night, if you are afraid to go home."

Kitty could not bear to think of sleeping all night in a strange room; so this only made her cry the more.

Then Susan said,

"Charlotte, shall we go home with her?"

Charlotte said,

"Mother will want us, and wonder where we are; it is too far to go round to ask leave. Kitty, shall we take you home, and find room for you in our bed?"

But poor Kitty still cried, and said,

"I want my mother—I want to go home to mother!"

Kitty was a very little girl, not five years old; and as you have heard, she was a stranger to the village, and to every thing about it. So the two little girls, who were rather older, were very sorry for her, and Susan said,

"Do you think father would be angry? Do you think mother would be frightened, if we were not home till late? Look, the sun is nearly set! How red those black clouds around it look! I mean the edges of them."

"Why, you know, we ran down the village to grandmother's, a little while ago, with a message; and when we said we did not like the dark, father laughed; and asked if we were afraid anything would eat us up. So I don't think they would be angry."

"Then, Kitty, shall we take you home?"

Kitty wiped her cheeks, and smiled, and said,

"Yes, I'm not afraid to go with you. Let us go now!"

And she took hold of Susan's hand, and pulled her along.

So they set off very merrily—Kitty between Susan and Charlotte, jumping as she went; quite as gay as if she had not been crying the moment before, as though her heart would break.

She chattered to them all the way down the village; and when they got into the sandy lane, she had forgotten her hurry about getting home so much, that she wanted them to stop and gather the tall foxgloves that grew high up on the steep bank.

But Charlotte said,

"You forget we have no time to play, Kitty. We are come all this way on purpose to please you. You must come along."

And she twitched the fern out of Kitty's hand rather sharply, as she was trying to break it off.

Susan said,

"It's very hot, for all the sun is gone down. There is not a breath of air. I should not wonder if it was to pour with rain presently—those clouds are so black and dark."

"Every body will be glad of rain, because the ground is so dry. Father wants it very much. Mistress said she thought there would be a thunder-storm to-night."

They walked on pretty quick through the fields, over the common, with their bonnets in their hands for coolness. They fanned their faces with their bonnets, for there was not a breath of air even on the open common; and it was very close and hot in the copse.

When they got to the end of the rick-lane, Susan started, and listened, for there was a sound very far off.

Kitty said it was father's wagon; but Susan said it was thunder.

"We must make haste home now, Kitty; you see the yard gate. We need not go any farther with you. Now Kitty was afraid, not for herself, but for her friends; she said,

"You will be in the dark; you will be lost in the storm; you will lose your way, and get down to the river. Come home with me; mother will give you some supper. You shall have my bed. Oh, do come!"

They said they must go home; they could not stay any longer. They looked at the farm-house, though, and the light shining through the windows so nice and comfortable. They wished they could be at home, too. Beyond the yard they saw two or three cottages, in one of which Tom lived. They wished Tom had been going home, and that he could have taken care of Kitty. But they were not sorry they had come with the poor girl either. They kissed her, and wished her good-bye, and then they heard another long, distant sound of thunder; so they turned round quick, and ran down the lane, and through the copse, and on to the common.

The sky was all covered with clouds, like a curtain drawn over it; and every now and then, as they looked up at the clouds, a great big drop of rain fell on their faces. Presently they heard the thunder louder; and soon after, Charlotte started, for there was a flash of lightning, and the thunder again; and the rain came on faster and faster. They quickened their steps.

Susan said,

"People will be glad of the rain."

And Charlotte answered,

"But I wish it had not come just now. See how fast it comes down. We shall be wet through. What puddles there are on the ground already! Oh, how little that was! The lightning—do you see it? And the thunder! it is rolling over our heads."

"I wish there was any house near. Let us run back to the farm."

"Oh, but mother will be frightened. We must go on. We shall change our wet clothes when we get home, just as father does when he has been out in the rain. How comfortable we shall be then!"

But Charlotte's heart was beginning to fail her; for the lightning was bright, and every now and then the thunder seemed to roll over their heads; and talking of home made it worse. She began to say, with a faltering voice, "Oh, if we were but there!"

"Don't cry, Charlotte; don't be frightened. It won't be so very dark when the storm is over. Don't cry."

Charlotte could not stop crying, however. Susan recollected there was a cow-shed somewhere in the fields near. In the summer, her mother had been making hay in those fields; and Susan and Charlotte had been very happy at play in that shed, and had sat there with the haymakers when they had their dinner. She said,

"Let us look for the cow-shed. I can see it only two fields off."

"I never can get over the hedge; and then that ditch—I dare say it is full of water now."

"Never mind; I'll help you up. Take hold of my hand."

So they ran across the fields, holding down their heads because of the lightning, and the rain which streamed from their bonnets and blinded their eyes. They got through the first field, and into the next by a gate; and in the next to that they saw the cow-shed; but between them there was a hedge, with a high bank and a deep ditch.

As they came up to it, there was a flash of lightning, and the thunder very loud, and the rain came down as if it was poured out of a watering-pot.

The two little girls crouched down on the ground. Charlotte cried, and Susan was very near it. But she jumped up and said,

"Make haste, Charlotte; I'll help you." So she scrambled up the steep slippery bank, where there was a gap in the hedge, and pulled Charlotte after her. Then she tried to get carefully down on the other side; and when she was at the bottom, she helped Charlotte down. Charlotte ran after crying, and not able to speak, for she had left her shoe in the sticky clay bank.

But Susan said,

"We must not stop now; and they ran on to the shed, and crept into one corner of it, out of breath, and hardly able to stand.

The cow-shed had mud walls all round it; only the doorway and the place for the window were open. So they saw the rain and lightning, but were sheltered from the rain.

At first they were heartily glad to have got there; but they had nothing to do but to think of their fears, and they got more uncomfortable. They fancied the thunder louder as they listened to it; and the violent rain seemed to make the dry ground smoke.

Charlotte thought every thing was on fire; and as they crouched down in the corner of the shed, she hid her face on Susan's knees, who sat with her pinafore over her face; and she cried. Presently Susan said, "Charlotte!" and she raised her head in a moment.

"Don't you know what we ought to do when we are in danger? I had forgotten it till now."

"We should say our prayers, I know. We should pray to God. But I can't think of any thing to say."

"Let us say the Lord's Prayer; that must be best, you know. Let us say it, and think of what it means, and then God will keep us safe from the storm."

Charlotte said, sorrowfully,

"I know God will keep good people safe; but I have not always been good. I have not minded mother. I have not been good at church."

"Nor I! I know we have not. But, you know, we are to say our prayers for all that."

So they knelt down, and said the Lord's Prayer together; and as they said it, all the things they had been taught about it came into their heads: how they had been taught, it was the best prayer of all, and that they should say it as often as we could, because there is something in it to suit every body, and all things that can happen to us: so it was a comfort to them to say, "Our Father," because they recollected God could do more for His children than their father on earth could do. They would have been glad, indeed, to see him coming to look for them; but they knew their father in heaven was near them. And when they said, "Forgive us our trespasses," they prayed in their hearts that their careless and disobedience to their mother, and all their faults might be forgiven. And they recollected that God would forgive them, if they were heartily sorry, and tried to do no more. They prayed that He would deliver them from this evil that had now come upon them; and they thought that, when they were tempted to do wrong, they should always recollect this time. So they both felt more quiet, and less frightened; and they sat close together, shivering a little with the wet, for they were wet through; but thinking of these things, and as they thought of them, they felt less frightened.

After a time, the rain did not come down so heavily on the roof of the shed, though the drops still splashed from the eaves; and the thunder was going off beyond them, though it was still loud. And when they looked out, quite in the west, where the fierce clouds had gathered round the setting sun, there was a clear light streak in the sky. That streak light, though it was now quite night, because the rest of the sky was dark.

Though the rain was very little now, they could not see farther than the hedge. Susan said,

"There is no moon now; but if the sky clears, the stars will shine. The rain is nothing to signify. Let us set off towards home. The thunder might come on again."

"Oh, yes, let us go before it comes again," said Charlotte, leaping up. "And that is the way out of the field; through that little gap into the lane. Don't you remember the hay-wagon went that way? Make haste."

"But we will go to the high bank, and find your shoe."

"Oh, don't mind my shoe. I'll go home without it."

"But your new shoe; mother can't easily buy another pair. Sit down here, and I'll go and look for it."

Charlotte was ashamed to let her sister go by herself, and rather afraid, too, to be left alone. So they both set off together, splashing through the wet field; for every thing was as wet now as it had been dry before.

They did find the shoe, more by feeling than by looking for it; and then they got into the lane, and felt their way along it; for the hedges were high, and the lane very narrow; it was only used to go to those fields. The darkness was their only difficulty now; for the thunder was very far off indeed, and they saw no lightning. The rain had stopped. Susan said,

"Charlotte, we ought to be very thankful to God for having kept us safe through the storm, should not we? Let us try to say some of the psalms we have learnt, and that will make the time pass away pleasantly."

So they said them as they walked along the middle of the lane; and then they talked cheerfully, and said how nice it would be to get dry and warm at home, and hoped mother had not been frightened.

But presently Charlotte stopped short, and started; she squeezed Susan's arm, and said,

"What's that?"

"Where?" said Susan; and her teeth chattered, she did not know why.

The sky had got more clear; there was a little light from the stars, but not enough to see anything clearly. A little before them, on one side of the road, they saw something quite white. Now and then it moved a little.

"Hush," said Charlotte; "stop a moment!"

They stopped and looked. Neither liked to go. Presently there seemed to come from the white thing a low hollow sound.

"Oh, I can't go by—it's something terrible—worse than the thunder!" said Charlotte. "I had rather stay all night in the shed."

"What can it be?" said Susan, nearly as much frightened.

"They stood helpless in the lane. At last Susan said, 'God will keep us from any bad thing that might hurt us in the dark. If we believe, He will take care of us; we ought to try to go by it boldly. Come, Charlotte; come on, without thinking; and we will say our lessons—the hymn; and try if we can say part of the collect for next Sunday. Then we shall not think of it.'"

They walked on; and when they saw the white thing, they stopped saying their lessons, and their knees shook; but they went on. It was lighter now; and as they came nearer, they both cried out at once, "It's the white cow!" Kitty's father's cow. She told us, you know, they had one quite white. It has strayed into the lane."

And they both looked at it as if it was a friend. Then they went on, and soon got into the sandy lane; but they could not see the foxgloves and fern now. The sandy lane was very dark, because the banks were so high. They felt the bank with their right hands as they went along; and they began to laugh when the briars caught hold of them. Presently they came to a more open part, when Charlotte stopped, and pulled her sister back.

"What's that, Susan?"

"The moon, I think; no, a star."

"It's moving about."

"It is one of those stars that seem to shoot from the sky. I saw them last year after a thunder-storm, as I lay in bed."

"Oh, no; it is coming towards us. It is something very dreadful, that goes about at night. How large it gets! If it was to lead us out of the way, into the river!"

Susan shook a little, but said,

"I can't, if we stand quite still it is gone by. I hear somebody hallooing. Oh, Charlotte, it's a lantern! Somebody with a lantern! I thought every body must be in bed!"

"They are coming to look for us, perhaps. Oh, I'm sure that's father calling. Come on!"

And they both ran towards the light—the faster when they heard their father's voice, and their brother Sam's too. They were quite out of breath when they got up to them, and could not speak; when Sam cried out,

"Well, here you are, safe and sound, at last!"

And their father said,

"Why, girls, you have made a fine business of it! Your mother is almost scared out of her wits."

As soon as they had recovered their breath, they were both near crying, partly for joy, and partly for fear of being scolded. But they told their father how it had all been; and he took their hands to lead them along, and said there was no harm done. "But we must get you home to dry you."

And then he took Susan up to carry her; for she was so tired, she could not stand; and Sam, who was a great boy, carried Charlotte. So they were soon at home.

Cannot you fancy how glad they were to see the bright light of the fire shining through the windows, and, most of all, when their mother opened the door? They ran to her, and kissed her; and she seemed to glad to speak while their history was told to her.

She did not blame them for taking care of little Kitty. She took off their wet cloaks, and wrapped their winter-cloaks round them; and they were comfortable and happy, sitting in the chimney-corner, with some warm tea to drink; and they laughed merrily when their brother told them they looked like two little old women.

They were surprised to find any body up; for it seemed to them they must have been out all night, so much happened to them. They were glad to go to bed; for their walk and the warm fire made them sleepy. But they did not forget to kneel down, and say their prayers; and they felt very thankful that they had been kept from harm, and brought back safe to their kind friends.

The next morning, when they awoke, the sun was shining bright, and the drops glittering on all the trees, looking nice and fresh. And when they looked out, they saw everything in the garden, that had been parched up, quite alive, and the flowers, that had been drooping, holding up their heads again.

Then they thought that the thunder-storm had done good, and that they should enjoy the fine clear weather the more for their troubles the night before. They had not done their breakfast before Kitty's mother came to the door with her little girl. She said she could not be easy without hearing how the girls got home. She had nobody at home that evening to send after them; and little Kitty had woke in the night and cried, because Susan and Charlotte were out in the dark.

Kitty ran to them and kissed them; and they began telling their history, and how they got safe home, till it was time for all three to go to school.

Soon after they took a nice walk to Kitty's home. It was on a holiday; and they drank tea there, and played in the garden, and saw the ducks and chickens, and the calf, and gathered nuts in the copse. And their mother came in good time to fetch them home; so that the walk this time was a pleasant one, and only seemed too short.

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WM. VYNNE BACON,
Secretary,
Toronto, 25th January, 1848.

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