

THAT BOY.

Vera Lansford had dropped her work on her knee and was bending over an open letter, when her old friend and servant, Jenifer Evans, popped her head in at the door.

Jenifer was swathed in a huge coarse apron made of sacking, and her steaming arms had just been taken out of the soap-suds, for it was washing day, and she was busy.

"Teet to gootness, Miss Vera," she cried, shrilly, "tisn't kind of you to forget how busy I am, and the oration those poor starving ladies will make—pless their hearts and podies!—if they come home from school and no tinner cooked for them! The milk for the stirabout ought to be on the fire and boiling; and how can I be there to watch it, and a copper full of clothes ready for rinsing?"

"I'll come and attend to the milk, Jenifer, but what am I to do about this letter? You must advise me, for I have no one else," and Vera's sweet gray eyes filled with tears, for the sudden death of her father was a grief that, although not very recent, still made itself keenly felt when any difficulty arose.

"Is it a pill?" queried Jenifer, eyeing the sheet of paper suspiciously. "We haven't any money for anybody, so put it behind the fire, my heart's darling, and don't think of it."

"No, it is not a demand for money. It is addressed to papa—poor papa! and it is from a very old friend of his, Sir Damer Wharton, the great traveller. It is written from Persia, and the news of our loss has never reached Sir Damer, for he asks my father—but let me read what he says."

However, Jenifer chafed at the hindrance.

"If it's in a foreign tongue how am I to understand it? And there's the copper and the milk to be seen to. Put it away till Sunday, Miss Vera, and then, if it isn't wrong to read what was not meant for our eyes, we'll have it over at our leisure."

"But, Jenifer, you must hear it *now*. This letter has been delayed. It appears that Sir Damer has married since he went abroad. His wife is dead, poor thing, and he is left with one son, whom he is obliged to send to England for his health; and he writes to ask papa to make a home for his boy till he himself can come to England and relieve him of the charge."

"Another poy! coot cracious!" ejaculated Jenifer. "Two's too many for our peace and comfort, and three will drive me out of my wits. Yes, and intet they will!"

"Lance and Leo are not worse than other healthy, spirited lads of their age, and you always take their parts if I scold them," she was reminded. "But what is to be done? This poor boy, of whom his father speaks in the most affectionate terms, will be here in a day or two at farthest. We cannot refuse to take him in till we can communicate with his father, can we?"

"The troubles of this world are upon us always, miserable sinners that we are!" groaned Jenifer, tragically. "Another poy! and a spoiled one! If he'd only been a girl, and they are bad enough, with Miss Daisy's pinafore so stained with gravel and making mud-pies that I can do nothing with it. Oh, aye, he'll have to come, more's the pity! and if you don't keep a tight hand over him, Miss Vera, a nice life he'll lead us."

Vera sighed.

"It's not this only. If he is delicate, he will require dainty food, and how shall we afford that?"

"Sure to gootness he'll have to bring his appetite down to the same fare that contents the rest of us," retorted Jenifer, grimly. "Your father's daughter is too honest to run in debt, even though it be for a guest. And there'll be no dinner for our own hungry lads if we don't bestir ourselves. The poy's father must have kinsfolk somewhere; let him go to them."

"Mr. Huxtable, of Lincoln's Inn, my solicitor, will honour any drafts made upon him," read Vera from a postscript to Sir Damer's letter. "Then it is to him I must send an explanation of our present position. He will find another home for Sir Damer's little son, I daresay."

Consoled by this thought, Vera hurried to the kitchen, and smoking bowls of hasty pudding were on the table by the time her schoolboy-brothers arrived. There were two little girls younger than Lance and Leo, and there was no one in this wide world to care for them but their half-sister Vera. Mr. Lansford had always intended to make a provision for his second family, especially after they became motherless, but he deferred it till an attack of heart disease carried him off in a few hours.

After paying the funeral expenses, Vera, who had been hastily summoned home from the school at Cologne where she was finishing her education, found herself mistress of a roomy old house at Chelsea, the only piece of property her father had ever possessed, and the eighty pounds per annum she had inherited from her own mother. All else had been invested in a promising speculation, and it was the discovery that this had failed that killed Mr. Lansford.

Behind the old house at Chelsea there was a large walled garden, in which Jenifer dug and delved, and grew the finest of vegetables, leaving only a square of turf for the use of the children. On this turf Vera sat in the evening with Daisy, who was an ailing little creature, in her arms; and the sturdier Violet holding a tea-party with her dolls; while Lance and Leo conned their tasks for the morrow, or appealed to the patient elder sister to be helped out of some difficulty.

The first interruption was a peal at the door bell, and Leo, glad of any excuse for putting his books aside, scampered away to answer the summons.

He came back quickly, and looking so pale and odd, that Vera questioned him.

The boy laughed and excused himself.

"Oh! I say, it would have startled anyone, even you. Only think!

when I opened the door there stood a great he-fellow with a trunk on his head—black, quite black!"

"The trunk or the man?" queried his sister.

"Why the man, of course; and he says—as well as I can make out his gibberish—that he is Sir Damer Wharton's servant, and that he has brought his young Massa Laurie to us. He'd got him in a cab outside, and which was his room? I showed the black chap up to the spare bedroom. Was that right, Ve?"

"You should have come to me first," said Vera, rising with difficulty, for the child in her lap was heavy. "It was not ready; nothing is ready. who would have dreamed of the boy being here so soon?"

"It wouldn't have been good manners—would it—to keep the man standing under that heavy trunk while I fetched you, would it? But I'm always wrong," added Leo, with boyish pottishness, and he flung himself on the grass and went on with his lesson, while his sister essayed to untwine the arms now clasped tightly about her neck.

Daisy was frightened at the idea of having a black man domesticated with them. She would not hear of Vera leaving her, and Jenifer, fortunate in her drying that day, had gone off with a huge basket of neatly-folded clothes to have them pressed through the nearest mangle.

"Daisy, you are naughty; you must let me go," said Vera, at last, in despair. "How can you be so selfish as to forget that a poor sick boy who has come across the sea to us, because his father thought we should treat him kindly, is waiting all this time for us to give him a welcome?"

"Promise to send the black man away and I'll let you go!" Daisy whimpered; but finding her sister really angry, she loosened her hold and set her free.

By the time Vera reached the hall the cabman was lugging more trunks into it; but where was the boy? His father's black servant was coming nimbly downstairs, and he bowed low to the young lady before he paid and dismissed the man.

In reply to Vera's inquiry for his young charge, he explained that he had just carried him to the room pointed out by Leo.

"Massa Laurie got one of his bad turns on him. Drefful bad," he went on to say. "Nothing for it but lie down in the dark with wet cloth on head."

"Ought I to send for a doctor?" inquired Vera, anxiously.

"No tank ye, missie. Massa Laurie all right to-morrow or nex' day. Physician gentleman at Aden give Peter Johns 'structions how to treat him."

"What is the matter with the poor boy?"

Peter Johns shook his head gravely.

"Massa Laurie do foolish things sometimes. Try to kill big snake—big snake bite him. Hard work to keep him alive. Doctor say won't get posson out of system without change of air. Sir Damer say, Peter Johns take him to England, and he soon get well. Which way to cook-house, missie!—young massa must have hot soup before he go to sleep."

Jenifer was aghast when she came home, and found Peter busy amongst her pots and pans. He had warmed some Liebig, spread a small tray with a white cloth, taken possession of a china basin, so valuable in Jenifer's eyes that no one was allowed to touch it, and was whistling softly while he crumbled into it part of a French roll.

She trotted away to Vera.

"You might ha' knocked me down with the leaf of a leek when I saw that chap! Coot cracious, what's to be done? I can't have a nigger in 't out my kitchen, touching everything with his smutty fingers."

"It will only be till to-morrow," said Vera, soothingly. "We cannot turn Sir Damer's little son out of the house till another home has been found for him. As for this man, you should remember that his being at attendance on the boy will relieve us of all trouble and responsibility."

"But a black man, my dear! I can't stand his colour! 'Tisn't a natural one," Jenifer insisted; "and every time he rolls his great eyes upon me I shall have the creeps. I don't know whether I won't shut myself in one of the garrets till he's gone. Sit down to meals with him, and see good food touched with black hands, I can't!"

However, Jenifer was partially reconciled to Peter's complexion when she saw how useful those reviled hands could be, and found herself treated by him with the most flattering respect. And before he had been in the house twenty-four hours, he had contrived to win the goodwill of all the children but Daisy, who continued to hold aloof, half anxious to join the group that gathered round the black while he rigged Leo's boat, or mended Lance's cricket-bat, and Violet's dolls, yet too much afraid to do so.

"Poor Massa Laurie" was still a prisoner, so thoroughly prostrated by the fatigue of a rough passage up the Channel as to be unable to lift his aching head from his pillow. Peter was an indefatigable nurse, and a clever one. No matter how he might be engaged, the faintest sound of "young massa's" bell would make him rush away to answer it; and even when he admitted that no one could have cooked, or served more daintily, the nourishing messes with which every two hours he strove to tempt the invalid's appetite.

"I shouldn't like to be ill, and obliged to keep my bed," said Leo. "I should growl like thunder. Is he pretty patient?"

Peter smiled.

"When poor boy can't move limb without sharp pains, can't lift a toe to throw boots at poor nigger's head, can he? Wait till Massa Laurie better; then he jump, dance, sing, whistle, teach you shoot with his dog-barrel, ride horse, kill tiger, and make man of you both."

Vera listened with alarm. To have a boy, reared to indulge in such savage sports, brought into contact with her young brothers, would be terrible. Once endowed with such tastes, how would they submit to her control?

Although it seemed inhospitable to be in such haste to get rid of a