

'Am I? O—' a shadow fell over the eyes as they gave a quick, anxious glance at the kindly questioning ones. 'I—didn't mean to be.'

'What kept you, dear?'

'Oh—I was—just looking at something.'

But from that time on perplexity mingled with Mrs. Vernon's regard for her new charge. Certainly a great change had with surprising suddenness come over the child. Her feet had found their trippiness, so Marian declared, and there were times in which she appeared to be running over with an irrepressible joyousness. But it seemed to bring her no nearer those to whom her gladness was such matter of concern.

'What ails the child?' Mrs. Vernon said to Marian. They had from the window watched her approach. A glow overspread her face and the spring in her feet told of the lightness of her heart. 'But now look,'—Bessie had glanced up at the window—meeting the faces which smiled a welcome to her. Instantly, as if she feared rebuke, her face lost its brightness, and she came into the house with her usual quiet response to their greeting.

'But where are your mittens, Bessie,' said Mrs. Vernon, as she held her hands, 'your hands are so cold.'

'O no—they're not cold,' was the quick reply, given in evident fear of being blamed or further questioned.

'Didn't you wear them to school?'

'Yes, but I—gave them to a little girl who hadn't any.'

'That was kind of you, dear, but when you see little ones to whom you would like to give things, let me know, and I will see that you have others to give. Don't give away the things I give you for your own.'

'She is most perplexing,' sighed Mrs. Vernon, as Bessie, with a face and step from which all the lightness had gone, went to put away her things. 'She's a great deal happier than she was, and I rejoice in it, but—'

'She keeps it away from us,' said Marian, filling the pause.

'Yes, she seems to get farther from us rather than nearer, as ought to be the case. Well, we can only wait for better things.'

'Christmas is coming, my little girlie,' said Mrs. Vernon one day, as she held Bessie on her lap and talked with her.

'That's what they are talking about at school,' said Bessie.

'Do you remember last Christmas?'

'—Yes—' the answer came between two quickly drawn breaths.

'What did you do, dear?' The question was asked not with a view of stirring up painful memories, but in the hope of establishing a link of sympathy with matters of former interest to the child.

'I stayed with Mamma—and—Margie. Margie is my sister.' To Mrs. Vernon's surprise the flash of joy again passed over the sober little face, but the eyes were resolutely kept from her own.

'Well, we must try and have a merry, merry Christmas. We haven't had good ones of late, and because there were no little children here to make it for, and you know the birthday of our Lord, who came as a little child is the time for children to be happy. And now I have you and I have Marian, so we must have a happy time.'

The sober little face did not again light up, but grew still more sober, as if the small

mind within were working with problems painfully grave.

One evening as Mrs. Vernon was returning home from a drive, her eye was caught by the sight on the street of the small figure which, in spite of the puzzling lack of confidence, was becoming so dear to her. The wintry twilight was closing down, and the street lamps being lighted. Mrs. Vernon was about to call Bessie, but delayed for a moment, struck by the appearance of the child.

Surely she had never before seen Bessie as she really was. Nothing now of the slow aimless movement, the depressed, half-averted look. Every motion and every feature seemed alive with eager joy. Before the call was given she had darted down a shabby side street, and as Mrs. Vernon's anxious eyes followed her she disappeared in a narrow alley way separating between two small houses.

Ordering the carriage drawn up before it, Mrs. Vernon penetrated the alley, and, guided by a bright light shining from a window at the back of one of the houses, stopped in surprise at what she saw inside it.

It was a room used as a kitchen and dining-room, a white covered table standing ready for the evening meal, everything looking clean and comfortable. But the eyes outside the window were caught and held, not by the things, but by the persons in the room. Before the cook-stove sat a child, the first glance at whom caused Mrs. Vernon's heart to beat excitedly. For was not every feature an exact copy of Bessie's own? Close to her, with arms tightly clasping her, was Bessie herself. And both faces shone with a light which recalled to the observer the words of the woman at the asylum.

Mrs. Vernon did not linger long, not wishing Bessie to know that she had discovered her secret. The little girl came home soon after, still with the subdued joy in her face, with evidently the fear of being questioned concerning her delay. This was not done, but the next day, at an hour when she knew there was no danger of Bessie making a visit, she went to the house in which she had seen her sister.

The mistress of the house proved to be a gentle-voiced woman with a good face. Mrs. Vernon at once acquainted her with her discovery of the evening before.

'Ah, poor little things,' said the woman. 'They met on the street, and Margie, my little girl, brought her sister here. You would have cried to see 'em, ma'am, as they kissed and cried in each other's arms. It was all I could do to get Miss Bessie to go home. I don't know how she'll feel, I'm sure, when she knows you know, for I told her if you knew she came here you would forbid her—'

'Ah, that is why she has behaved so strangely,' said Mrs. Vernon.

'I don't know as I did just the right thing, ma'am—' said the woman, 'but I was so puzzled what to do—seeing the difference between the way they're fixed—we so poor, and you—as you are. I really didn't know exactly what to do about it—'

'Never mind,' said Mrs. Vernon, kindly. 'If your little girl has a good home, as I think she has, the difference is not so great as you seem to think.'

She took leave with a mind filled with crowding thoughts, and before long made a second visit to the home of Bessie's sister.

'I don't know when I've seen you seem so bright and so well, Aunt Emily,' said

Marian, one day not long before Christmas. 'Or so happy. You must be thinking of pleasant things.'

'I am, my bird. I'm thinking of Christmas, and of what I am going to do then.'

'Oh, what? Is it so very nice?'

'Very nice, indeed.'

'Are you going to tell me what it is,

'I think not, dear. I shall save it as a surprise for you. I am going to give the most precious present you ever saw.'

'To me?'

'No, not to you,' said her aunt, with a smile.

'To Bessie, then. But I'm sure I know of the nice things you are doing for her. Certainly she never had such a Christmas before.'

No, I'm sure she never had,' said Mrs. Vernon earnestly.

Marian was overwhelmed with business of all sorts, principally that of preparing a Christmas tree for Bessie. That small maiden looked on at such of the preparations as she was allowed to know of, smiled when she was called on to smile, but appeared little interested.

'No one can be admitted to the back parlor to-day,' announced Marian, gaily, on the morning of Christmas eve. 'Passing by the door, ten cents each time. Peeps through the key hole, twenty-five cents.'

With a zest she worked on that tree with many small exclamations of surprise all to herself, as the love fruit with which it was to be loaded came under her hands.

'Well—if any one wouldn't imagine that Aunt Emily had two or three small girls to make Christmas for instead of that one fortunate little Bessie, that doesn't seem to have enough sense to know how well off she is. Bless my heart—two big dolls just about alike, and all their belongings. Well, there's no harm in a little girl having two dolls, but I should think they could have got along with a set of China between them. Well, well—the load of things. It does make me feel out of patience to think how some children would fairly stand on their heads over such a Christmas as this—and Bessie—a dear little thing, too, but I could shake her all the same—will stand around and look as if it might be any day in the year so far as she were concerned. I do wish Aunt Emily had invited in several other children, just to give a little life to things. Only one coming, she says. When she told Bessie of it, she looked as usual, as if she didn't care. She didn't even ask who it was.'

A pretty flush of excitement spread over Mrs. Vernon's face with the approach of Christmas eve. Marian's work was pronounced charmingly done, and she was sent to her room to dress for the evening.

Just before the time at which Bessie was to have been introduced to the tree, Marian skipped down and lighted the wax tapers on the tree, then hurried back to her aunt with a face of vexation.

'O Auntie! Bessie's got into the back parlor, without being told. And I did want to see her face when she caught the first sight of that tree. I don't think it's nice of her,' impatiently, 'she's right in among everything—almost behind the tree, and she didn't stir when I told her she ought to have waited till she was taken in.'

Mrs. Vernon turned on her such a radiant smile that Marian could easily see that Bessie was in little danger of receiving the well-merited scolding.

'O, here she is,' went on Marian, as Bes-