

# MRS. HURD'S NIECE.

Six Months of a Girl's Life.

## CHAPTER XI.

IN PASTOR NELSON'S STUDY.

Theo and Lois are sitting in "Violet Dell," as, to please her, the big cousin has facetiously named the little cousin's room.

Theo, perched upon Lois' lap, is busily unloading her baby mind of various thoughts and conjectures. She bids fair to show an imagination as active as Lois' own. But to-day her questions are answered idly, almost at random. The dear nursemaid is preoccupied, so Theo amuses herself with the "theory" Lois has told long after it is finished. Theo has heard it, now, the twentieth time, but that does not matter. She talks away about the little Joseph, and his wonderful adventures, and finally, like Gail Hamilton, she wonders why the great Prime Minister didn't let his fond old papa know he was safe somewhere!

"Now thee here, couthin," says the baby with a final toss of her curly head and a pull at Lois' sleeve, "I tink they wath funny folkth! They wathn't good folkth at all. The boyth didn't like each other, and their papa liked two more'n he did the retht, and give Joseph a nither coat than he did the othert,--and then Joseph didn't care if hith papa worried himself to deff! Why aint he tele-graphwath!"

Lois rouses herself and discourses concerning manners and customs for half an hour; but, instead of things becoming clearer, the bright little town-bred child is greatly dazed to hear of lands and times when there were no telegraph wires running along the streets, no post-offices, even; still it was very delightful to hear of the strange camel, and of the beautiful desert-walks, and of the shepherd fannies and their life--the migratory life which was a kind of perpetual packing up and going elsewhere.

Theo thinks she should like that herself. She is especially interested in the cloth residences that could be folded up and carried from place to place, and she means to try this umbrella sort of house herself when Lois goes out. It is as marvelous as the things in her fairy books, and it leaves an impression upon her baby brain which presently she discloses.

"Of courtho it wath yearth and yearth ago--hapth it wath when mamma wath a little girl, before Columboth unthcovered the world, and evy flug wath ah treuth and Indianth. I tink, perhapth Joseph's folkth wath the fad becauth they wore wath Indianth--wathn't th, couthin?"

The little tongue has been tumbling so long, and "couthin" has been so absorbed with her own thoughts, that she has ceased to hear. But now she is dimly conscious of a pause, and of the rising inflexion of the last sound.

"Yes, dear," she answers at a venture, and, rising, puts Theo down and goes out.

In the corridor she hesitates. "Must I really ask permission to go for a walk as if I were Hannah, or the cook?"

Yes, thus she feels obliged.

For a brief space Lois stands opposite her aunt's door. In her ear Pastor Nelson's sermon preaches itself over. She tries to "endure," tries, in her proud bitterness, to feel as one longing for the "living loving Help."

But her ideal of Christian meekness, and the instincts of self ownership, clash. Each time she raises her hand to rap upon the door, she hesitates--she cannot go in and ask the servile question.

At last there is a sudden sob. The paling lips set, and she raps upon the door.

Saideo, however, is in her mother's sitting-room. As she catches the import

of Lois' words she dispatches the disagreeable business in a trice.

"Of course, you can go! she says with a flushing face. "What an idea, that none of the rest could see to Theo for an hour or two!"

Lois turns back. But her aunt's eye is observant of a very unusual expression upon her face.

"Where are you going? she asks point-blank.

Saideo again interposes. "Now, mamma, you shall not demand things of cousin Lois like that! Under cover of this Lois herself pretenses to leave the room without making her destination known."

Saideo's face remains painfully overcast. It is several moments before she can speak in a tone sufficiently respectful to satisfy her idea of daughterly propriety. Even now it is none too respectful.

"Mamma," she says, "I must say I think it quite shameful that Lois should feel she may not go out without asking leave. Mamma, I am so ashamed of everything, that I scarcely know what to do. It has become a trial for me to look her in the face. I believe she is perfectly wretched; and, what is more, I have a curious feeling that she is going to do something about it. I remember what Elizabeth said--that she would marry some day. I do wonder if Elizabeth will ever live to treat one of my girls so!"

Saideo is so wrought upon by this curious idea, that she rises and paces the floor.

Mrs. Hurd answers grimly. "Four daughters, Saideo, should they resemble you, will, I trust, teach their mother just how much trouble you must have made yours."

Saideo goes out to see where Theo is, feeling most unhappy. She is sorry for Lois, dissatisfied with herself because she has spoken sharply to her mother, and utterly discouraged because she cannot see more plainly where lies her own duty in the matter.

Lois, indeed, is going to do something about it. She believes that, at least, she has a definite plan for her future life. She hurries along strangely determined and brave. Even to herself the plan is a startling one. Lois is poor, but on one side she comes of a family that knows nothing of rendering service. The proud Leo blood, and the Gladstone good sense have had a hard fight.

She has dashed the plan aside more than once, turned her back on it. Yet every time she has looked around there it has stood, right in the doorway of her future, so calm, and so vigorously commending to her consideration her own words, "Were I either servant or relative."

Indeed, these angry words to Saideo first suggested the plan. Long thought, earnest prayer and tears have followed--at last it occurs to her to lay the whole before the wisest person at hand--Mrs. Whitney? No, Lois is not upon the way to her, although Mrs. Whitney figures prominently in the plan. Instead, she is following up that little card again. She takes it from her pocket and looks at its reverse, and turns up the streets in the direction of the ivy garlanded church among the elms.

"No. 32 Halbert St." proves to be a modest white house, all vines and veranda. She follows a path around to a side entrance, rings the bell, and then stands trembling in every nerve and fibre.

Pastor Nelson himself comes to the door. He looks down at Dr. Gathrie's little parishioner with a momentary surprise, for both her face and manner bear

strong traces of trouble. But she draws a long breath of relief as she sees him.

There is, indeed, something strikingly ministerial even in Pastor Nelson's everyday aspect, in his face, voice and bearing. In fact, he has never striven to de-ministerialize himself as so many of our modern clergymen have; you never find yourself in his presence overtaken by a sudden shock of recollection that he is a minister.

No, no! He never forgets,--and therefore neither do you,--that above and beyond the duty of being a good man, and a true man, and a strong man, he has assumed the office and the dignity of an Ambassador of Christ. The chief expression of his face is sympathetic; but there is about him that which strikingly suggests the apostle, the bishop, the prophet; and as he stretches out his hand to her, Lois impulsively says:

"I have come to inquire the Lord's will concerning me."

That a sudden thought of the girl's own pastor flits through Pastor Nelson's mind is not strange. But it is followed by the swift reflection that a timid girl might very naturally turn to a plain, humble man like himself rather than to his reverend and deeply learned brother.

He takes her to his study. Once there, Lois in a few words lays her troubles before him, together with her plan. She speaks so directly to the point that her listener feels she has given long thought to the matter.

"I must work for my living," she says, "that is evident. Would it not be better, then, in the beginning, to take up my lot in a straightforward manner, work for wages, receive wages, and make the most of them, preserve my independence and self-respect, allow no one to consider me a burden, and, above all, stand in no false social position? My position now is so false, so uncomfortable, so hateful to me!" She speaks these last words vehemently.

Pastor Nelson has never been called upon in quite such a delicate matter as this. Two answers rise to his lips--his own personal opinions, and the conventional ideas of others. He remembers, also, that he is about to advise Mrs. John Hurd's niece.

"I judge you to be a somewhat sensitive young person, sister Gladstone--have you considered well what it would be, in a town like this, to become a servant girl--an acknowledged servant-girl?"

"I already know what it is to have my entire time at the disposal of others. It surely would not be more unpleasant to take my orders from one who buys my time and pays me for it."

"But I refer, sister Lois, to a servant-girl's position--not, understand me, to what a sensible man feels that it should be--but to what--you will excuse me--it really is."

Lois colors faintly. There is an indescribably contemptuous lift of the little head. "I can imagine--still I should much prefer that position to my own. I suppose that I should be ignored by the fine society that openly neglects me now, but I could console myself that I had no claims upon it, and therefore ought not to feel hurt."

Pastor Nelson cannot fail to understand how this girl is situated. He does not doubt that she has force of character sufficient to enable her to leave her "false social position," go out alone into the world, and carry out her resolutions, resolutely, and--even to the happier for it. He has good cause to meditate awhile.

Lois goes on. "What else can I do? Sewing, for me, is deadly work. I am not equipped in any one particular to be a successful teacher. But I really like housework--housework in all its variety, and could I secure a place in a Christian household, I believe that I could make myself valued, and, in my own sphere, respected."

"Have you such a place in mind?"

"I have." After a pause, she adds, "Mrs. Whitney's," pronouncing the name with just a shade of inquiry.

"Yes," he says, heartily. He rouses himself and continues. "Sister Lois, you have looked at a dependent person's position very sensibly--at one side of your duty toward yourself very sensibly indeed."

Lois listens attentively. "At one side of her duty toward herself--" what does he mean?

"I think I should catechize you a little, my young sister."

Lois smiles, inclines her head. "Well!"

"Should you grieve any one of your uncle's household by taking the step you propose?"

Lois wishes to settle upon the truth. "Yes," she says at last. "I should mortify my aunt, and, I suppose I should really grieve my cousin Saideo--and probably break Theo's heart," she adds with a faint smile.

"Ah! they must be attached to you, then. Do you know, my child, that you gave me the idea that you were quite friendless there? Now we have peculiar obligations toward persons who love us, more, believe me than toward those we love."

As he speaks, Lois suddenly remembers what Mrs. Whitney said to her concerning Saideo and her influence over her, and she is startled to think how many warnings she has had concerning her duties of late, and how she is like that servant of old who said, "I go, sir," and went not.

Pastor Nelson continues. "Have you been all, as a Christian, that you might be to this cousin? If she has needed you in any way, and you have failed her, you should pause before you take this step. It is never safe to leave a post, at which God has set us down, for any other until after we have discharged every duty of that post."

Lois drops her head with an involuntary movement, as of defeat. As in a flash of lightning, sweet, bright Saideo stands before her--doubting, irresolute, half skeptical Saideo. Has she done any one thing since the day of her arrival which would increase her cousin's admiration for the dear old-fashioned Christianity? Has her daily life been beautiful and winning--has it made religion seem beautiful and altogether to be desired? Alas! she knows, instead, that Saideo has been obliged to hold her, has had need to be very tenderly patient with her, and she sees, now, how she might have consecrated the days as they passed, sees now that, like Paul, she might have been to the "furtherance of the Gospel in all the palace."

"This little Theo has, perhaps, been in your hands to train and to mould?"

"Yes, she has."

"Would her new maid probably be a Christian?"

"Nine chances out of ten--no."

Pastor Nelson allows her a moment in which to think this over. Then he goes on.

"Have you tried to make the best of your situation? tried to be as lovable as possible when you have been thrown with your aunt? ever put yourself forward so much as to show your uncle--I know him to be an excellent man, my child--what a nice home is it of girl you were in reality? In short, have you made one honest earnest effort to win the love of your relatives?"

No. Lois has left all making of advances to others. She has never considered that she had any duties in that direction. It flashes over her for the first time, that it was her privilege to have tried to render herself a favorite in the household. She sees herself going about day after day, silent, smileless, meeting all attempts at conversation with briefest "yes" and "no." "I, myself," she is constrained to add, "should not have taken any great pains for a person so forbidding and cullen."

She sits sad and discouraged. Pastor Nelson seems to have nothing more to say, and, at last, she sobs forth, "I know I have not done right, I know I have not been lovable, but oh, I have been so lone-