



The Family Circle.

A MAY-DAY STORY.

BY LUCY C. LILLIE.

As long ago as my memory will carry me back, I recall a May-day party, given at a country house on the Hudson where a large company were assembled. There was quite an excitement over the event, days in advance. A May Queen was chosen from among a band of school-girls in the neighborhood, the votes being cast with an air of mystery in itself fascinating. A box was affixed to a Maypole in the school garden, and in the hallway of the house was a basket filled with blank cards. Each girl could take one of these at will, write the name of her candidate upon it, and put it into the garden box. On the eve of the first of May the "counting-up" took place, and I remember the satisfaction seemed quite general, when a very sweet, brilliant girl, of about fourteen, was declared the Queen, and at an early hour next day the revels began. Just what was done I cannot wholly recall; but the Maypole, well-garlanded, and the Morris dance I distinctly remember; the dozen all the more clearly because half a dozen children who danced in it were dressed in character. There were Maid Marian, Friar Tuck, Robin Hood, etc., all innocent and merry little revellers and very joyous subjects of the Queen. May-day parties, our elders tell us, were much in vogue in America when they were young; chiefly as school festivals; but they seem to have died out of popularity in these times; and it is a pity, for no sort of festival sport, whether conducted within doors or out, is prettier or more innocent, suggestive, as it is, of the happy time of the year when the "buds are springing and the leafage green."

In England, a century ago, May-day revels were very general; and away back in the time of Chaucer the festival began at day-break, lords and ladies going out in gay companies to "gather the May," as the lovely hawthorn flower is called. At the present day, in England, May-day companies still go about in various places; but, except among the chimney sweeps, the day, as a festival, is now celebrated chiefly by children. There are some towns or villages where a regular Maypole is erected and the lads and lasses deck it with garlands and dance about it, the "Morris" being the May-day dance most admired. This dance was brought from the Moors in Spain, and from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century was performed in characters at May-day festivities.

In London, as I have said, the chief "Mayers" are the chimney-sweeps, and they have a special festivity of their own. Dressed in peculiar costumes, and carrying garlands, and a sort of rudely constructed bower, they go about from house to house, when planting their pole; they sing and dance, a character called the "Jack in the Green," inside the bower, making his appearance now and then to ask for pennies from the passers-by or the people in the houses.

A curious story was related to me in connection with this branch of May-day festivity, which may interest my young readers. Told as it was to me one sweet spring evening, in a large, old-fashioned house in London, where the events took place, it quite excited me, especially as only the day before I had been down to some wretched houses in old Drury Lane, where lived once, not so very long ago, the chief actor in the narrative. Perhaps he will not seem much of a hero; and yet I think if any one had seen, as I did, the place where he was born, and allowed to grow up to be a lad of ten years of age—I cannot say brought up, you see—this one action of his life might seem heroic.

Rob, as I will call him, lived in one of the old courts back of Drury Lane. It was, and is, a tenement of the poorest description; once a grand house, where ministers of state lived, where Charles II. spent many very luxurious hours, but now fallen to decay, and with the wretched alley lead-

ing out into the main street simply swarming with inhabitants. Rob's profession was that of crossing-sweeper, so that he welcomed rainy and muddy and even foggy weather; and when a dull day dawned, Joey, the little cripple, knew that his friend would be in fine spirits returning home at night, and no doubt, bring him a feast in the way of hot sausage, or perhaps tripe in a covered dish, from the public house on the corner; so that, unlike most children, fair weather made them feel very down-hearted, and it was funny to hear Joey say, in dolorous tones, to his comrade, "Oh! I say, Rob! Here's a go! Another fine day!" or to observe Rob's discontented expression when a streak of sunlight made its way of a winter morning into the corner of the miserable room.

Rob's crossing was a very interesting one to him, for one special reason. On the corner was a fine house; a solid brick mansion, with many windows and a wide doorway, with three steps, railed either side with old-fashioned iron work. To watch the comings and goings of the family who lived in this house, to catch glimpses of the animation or life within, was Rob's delight; and he learned to know just what to expect at certain hours; and many a time would he lean upon his broom, gazing into the lower windows, where different figures, familiar to him, could be seen—the tall, grave young master of the house; the delicate, girlish-looking lady who was, as Rob knew, his wife, and the blooming young girl, her sister. There was a child, too, a boy near to Rob's own age, and whether he sat over his books in the little room to the left of the doorway down-stairs, or walked out with his uncle, or rode on his small, black pony, Rob always watched him with admiring delight, and would tell Joey, on his return, all about it. Often and often Rob earned or received a sixpence for holding the carriage door or making the crossing particularly clean; but, although they often spoke of the child among themselves, they had no idea how large a part of his daily life they were. Once—would Rob ever forget this?—he had seen the two ladies drive away in all their splendor to court! It was a brilliant day in April; although little Rob did not know it, a special festivity for a visit of distinction had occasioned this court summons; and the two ladies had come out of the brick house in gorgeous array, which not all their wraps could conceal, and the flash of jewels, and the beauty of the white feathers and the diamonds in their hair, fairly dazzled Rob, who was at his own crossing, waiting hopefully for an April shower. They came and went like a glimpse of a fairy tale to the boy, who went home to tell Joey all about it, quite unconscious that others were listening. Two chimney-sweeps—of the lowest class of that hard-worked, and I must say usually honest, trades-people—had a bed in the same room; and one of these listened to Rob's story with both of his wicked ears wide open. Rob was telling Joey how, looking in, he had seen the ladies taking the jewels out of a little iron-bound safe in a room in the ground floor. "Such white stones, Joey, you never did see!" Rob said, excitedly. "Her had a whole string of them."

Well, unsuspecting Rob did not quite understand, why, the next day, the oldest and grimmest of the chimney-sweeps began talking about "his house" to him, saying he knew who lived there; he cleaned one of their chimneys last week; and, little by little, he drew from the boy all about the jewels in the little safe, what they looked like, and just what he had seen through the window. Now, the chimney-sweep knew more than Rob did; knew that the young master of the house was to be absent on court business on May-day; knew, also, that the ladies of the house would very likely be away; and they planned getting into the house, and having Rob's assistance.

They began by asking him how he would like to go about with them on May-day; and Rob was delighted; for he had envied the sweeps last year when they were starting forth, and wished he belonged to their trade. But what was his horror on the eve of May-day, when the sweeps boldly announced their purpose, or enough of it to insure his assistance, and threatened him in a terrible way if he refused his aid! The sweeps knew very well that Rob's word against them was of no special conse-

quence, so they did not hesitate to unfold their plans; and they let him know that they were going to put down their pole in front of Colonel G——'s house long enough to find out who was at home, and learn something of the family plans that day.

Rob, at first inclined to be defiant; at last grew silent, and apparently acquiesced in their plans; but his head was busy working out a means of warning the family. Well enough he knew that the chimney-sweeps would keep an eye on him, and he had only until the next day to do anything. He cast about in his mind who could or would possibly help him, without at once betraying him to the sweeps. He had no one in the court to whom he dared apply; every one there was more or less of the same sort, if not in sympathy with the actions of villainy planned and carried out, at least afraid to oppose them; and I am afraid that but for his interest in "his house," even poor little Rob might not have had sufficient morality, or known enough, to oppose the schemes of these men. All of his life, you see, had been spent among just such people. One portion of the tenement had just been what they called "reclaimed"; that is, a rich and benevolent lady had bought it for the purpose of trying to make the condition of the people better; and once or twice a week she, or some of her assistants, came down there to look things over and make plans.

Now, Rob, coming in one rather bright February afternoon, very much disheartened after a "fine" day, and no work, had encountered, on the rickety staircase, a tall, bright-faced girl, with a pair of honest and very friendly brown eyes, whose face he remarked seeing that very day in one of the windows in his house. She was carrying a little case, with an ink bottle open in her hand, and she had evidently been making entries in a little red-bound book. Rob was quick to discover that she was one of Miss H——'s ladies, who had begun to repair the old tenement, and after that he learned to watch for her coming into the court, and to know her days.

This 30th of April Rob well knew was one of them. How could he contrive to get a word with her the boy wondered; to say something which would in itself be a message? He sat still on the old steps of the entrance to the house that afternoon, waiting and wondering and trying to see his way out of the difficulty, and at last the young lady and her middle-aged attendant appeared, coming into the dingy court like a ray of sunshine, and with a pleasant smile for Rob, sitting, in his ragged garments, on the broken-down step.

The little pen and the ink bottle and the book had suddenly given him an inspiration, and, much to her surprise, the boy suddenly sprang up and addressed the young lady in a whisper.

"If yer please, Miss," he said, and blushing violently all over his rough little face, "would yer write down a few words for me?"

"Do you know," said this same young lady to her companion, that evening, at a very grand dinner party, "I had such a curious experience to-day. I have been working a little for Miss H—— in those old tenements in Drury Lane, and I have often noticed a poor boy, who is, I believe, a crossing-sweeper; but he lives in the part of the building we have not undertaken so far; quite the poorest part. Well, to-day he was sitting on the old steps of the house just as I was going in, and suddenly he waylaid me, and, with a most honest blush, asked me if I would write something for him."

"A letter?"

"Not at all. After considerable thinking, he dictated just these words: 'Put your bright stones away safe, and look out for thievs.' I assure you I was quite startled; but I could not induce the boy to say any more. He took the paper with the mysterious words, thanked me, and disappeared as quickly as possible."

It so chanced that a young lawyer was present, who listened very attentively to the young lady, and who later took down from her the street and number and some description of poor Rob. The young man had, as he afterward said, a strong feeling that something more would come of it; and so, without knowing it, Rob had set a friend to work to help him in protecting "his house" and "the family."

Rob's own plan was a very simple one. He arose and joined the chimney-sweeps in apparently very good spirits, and did really enjoy being dressed up in a gaudy hat and coat, with artificial flowers stuck here and there; and then, in the first freshness of the sweet May morning, they started out. They set up their pole and danced at several houses, receiving cakes and money or glasses of beer from nearly every one; and at last, with a quickly beating heart, Rob saw that "his house" was to come next. The oldest of the sweeps had instructed him to dance up and down before the lower windows of the house, and then to knock at the front door boldly and ask—as sweeps on May-day are allowed to do—for the mistress of the house to whom he was to offer one of the gaudy sort of garlands they had made, if she appeared. If she did not, he was to feign illness, and be, no doubt, admitted into the house, upon which the sweeps were to rush in to their little comrade's aid, which would enable them to make a survey of the room on the ground floor and find out, of course, if the family were at home. If away, one sweep was to conceal himself by good management in the room, the chimney of which he had so recently cleaned, and "lay in wait" for them to return with the "shining stones" Rob had seen.

Now, I must tell you that all this time the young lawyer had followed Rob and his party, and the manoeuvres in front of Colonel G——'s house at once attracted his attention. Colonel G—— was a friend of his, and he did not hesitate in slipping around to the servants' entrance, and, summoning the butler, desired him to let him answer Rob's knock, in his place. Accordingly when Rob, pale with anxiety, and holding his garland, appeared, this gentleman received him, and at once drew him into the house. Rob knew well he would have to go through the pretense of seeming suddenly ill, but in his garland he had stuffed the paper with the young lady's written words upon it, and, as he offered the flowers to the gentleman, he whispered:

"Take care of the piece of paper," after which he began his little farce. The sweeps rushed in, and all would have gone on as they had planned it, but for Rob's message. While the sweeps were bowailing Rob's apparent illness, the young lawyer had contrived to summon two policemen from outside, and before a quarter of an hour had elapsed, the entire party were under arrest. Rob was obliged to tell all he knew in the police court, although he quaked with terror at so doing, not in the least knowing that "the family" would protect him from the vengeance of all the rough people where he and Joey lived. But he understood it an hour later, when the young master of the house came up to thank him; when Joey was sent for, and the two boys were conducted, in a half-dazed condition, to "Rob's house," to be surrounded by "the family," all eager to see and thank the little crossing-sweeper, to remember that they had noticed him often, had watched his industrious little broom.

Now, if this were not a true story, now much that would be romantic I might introduce! But I think that, after all, the real ending was very pleasant and wholesome. Little Joey was placed in an excellent "Home" in Kensington, where he was almost entirely cured, and taught a good trade, and Rob was made entirely happy by being taken into the service of "the family," at their country place in Kent, where I saw him one day, a year or two later, watering the plants in the garden, evidently as much interested in a fine day and plenty of sunshine as he used to be in rainy weather and a fog. When the story was told me, and the "white stones," as Rob called them, were duly inspected, and I heard their story—how they had come down through an honorable line of ancestry, and flashed at court for three centuries—it was May-day again, and a very honest looking little group of sweeps were dancing out upon the pavement, expecting, with good reason, their usual gratuity of pence and half-pence; "for," as my friend said, turning from the open window, with the spray of hawthorn given her by the "Jack in the Green," "one dishonest sweep doesn't ruin all the trade, any more than one swallow makes the summer." And May-day is too full of happy, blooming episodes to have one little cloud affect it.—*N. Y. Independent.*