

"A BAND OF THREE."

BY L. T. MEADE,

Author of "Mother Herring's Chicken,"
"Water Gipsies," Etc.CHAPTER XXIII.—A RECIPE FOR MAKING
BEEF-TEA.

Meanwhile Peachy, with much importance in her step and mien, ascended the stairs with the first beef she had ever purchased in all her life, hid away in a little basket under her arm. She met old Harper descending. He stopped her to say—

"Now, my dear, take right good care o' yer sister, and don't forget as tis me as is going to pay for the doctor."

Peachy's face flushed high with pleasure and gratitude.

"Oh, Mr. Harper!" she exclaimed impulsively, "how ye three little gals did misjudge yer! I think as yer the very kindest old man as I ever seed."

"Well, tell it to Dulcie; tell it to Dulcie, my dear," said old Harper, chuckling, and patting her under the chin. He thought Peachy's words the sweetest he had heard for many a day.

Peachy, thinking many good things of him also, softly entered their room, closed the door, and set about, with some indescribable heart-beatings, the making of her beef-tea. Dulcie was still asleep. She would get it all ready, and have a cup of it for her to drink the very moment she awoke. Peachy had not the least manner of doubt that anything so highly nourishing and supporting as beef-tea would effect Dulcie's cure almost instantly. Yes; she must not lose a minute in getting the beef-tea into order; but how was it to be made? Certainly Peachy had not the least idea. She stood perfectly still, clasping her hands before her, as the full difficulty confronted her. Hitherto she had considered that the only thing in the way of Dulcie having beef-tea, which the parish doctor had ordered so long ago, was the absence of the beef. But now here was beef—delicious, juicy beef—which she had seen the butcher cut with his own hands. Yes; but beef was not beef-tea. For a moment or two Peachy blossomed felt quite overcome. Then she smiled, as a brilliant and most simple solution of her difficulties occurred to her. What a silly little girl she had been! Did not the very words, "beef-tea," show her how the thing was done? How was tea made as a rule? It was put into the old, cracked teapot, and boiling water poured on it, and then it was left to draw on the hob. The longer it was left to draw, the blacker and better it tasted and looked. Of course all other was made on the same plan.

Peachy felt quite cheerful. She went to the fire-place, relit the fire, for it had gone out, and set the kettle on to boil. Then she scalded the teapot as carefully as Dulcie or even mother had done it long ago, and with trembling, eager fingers, placed the beef in the bottom of the teapot. She then filled it up to the brim with boiling water, and set it on the hob to draw. Yes, what a comfort! the beef-tea was made at last, and all ready for Dulcie to drink and get well on when she awoke.

In about a quarter of an hour the sick girl stirred and opened her eyes. In a moment Peachy had sprung to her feet and fetched a cup and saucer, and taking the teapot off the hob, she poured out a cup of the contents. Well, certainly it did not look very tempting; it had an ugly, red look, and there were particles of under-done fat floating about on it.

Peachy, however, had no misgivings. No doubt it tasted extremely delicious. She just raised the brimming cup to her lips to take one tiny sip. Well! no; she did not feel encouraged to try another. What a fuss people made about beef-tea! If that was all, it was a poor stuff, rather nasty than otherwise. She had no doubt, however, that, like medicine, the virtue lay beneath. So, still with full confidence in its healing powers, she approached poor Dulcie's bed with the cup of greasy water.

"Yere's real beef-tea at last, Dulcie. Yere's the stuff as the doctor says as you've got ter take to be made quite well again."

"Beef-tea, is it?" said Dulcie. "I never tasted beef in h'any way. Let me have a sip, Peachy."

Peachy put her hand under her head and raised her up, and Dulcie took a long sip. She did not try another, however. She said, a trifle faintly—

"I don't think as 'tis werry good. I'd a

deal rather have h'our common black tea. Please lay me back again, Peachy; and I think as I'd like ter have a drink o' cold water."

Poor Peachy! the tears filled her eyes.

"Oh, Dulcimer! won't you try and drink it. The doctor said, indeed he said, that if you hadn't real beef-tea as you'd die."

"Well, I'll try it again arter a bit, darlin'; but it do make me so sick. Oh, Peach! is that an orange that I sees? Oh, how I should like a bit of one!"

Peachy almost screamed. "Why, there ere six o' 'em!" she said; "so big, and sech beauties! Perhaps it wor the doctor as left 'em yere. I'll peel one fur yer straight away, Dulcimer."

Peachy seated herself on the side of the bed, and Dulcie watched her with half-closed eyes as she prepared the fragrant fruit.

"Do you know what I ha' bin thinkin' on h'all day!" she said "so often."

"Oh, no, Dulcie. I thought as you were asleep and wor'n't thinkin' o' nothink."

"No; I wor'n't exact asleep, Peach-blossom. It seemed somehow as though I wor half-asleep and half-awake. I wor werry peaceful; I hadn't never a care. Only one thing come over me and over me—I kep' thinkin' o' jist a few words as mother said when she wor a-dying."

"Wot words?" asked Peachy.

"She said as she wor real glad to have the arms o' Jesus round her. Do you know who Jesus h'is, Peachy? Maybe 'tis cause I'm so weak, but I can't no way remember havin' h'e'ver heered o' him 'cept jist that once when mother wor a-dying."

Peachy shook her head. "I never heerd o' him at all," she said, "never, never. Maybe 'tis about him in the old book as mother used to read out o' so often."

"I wish I knew," said Dulcie.

She closed her eyes again with a faint, weak sigh.

Peachy looked at her in some perplexity. Somehow Dulcie's words, manner, and look sent a keen pang of anxiety to her heart. Was Dulcie really very ill? so ill that she might go away, go quite away as mother had gone away three years ago? Peachy did not like her words. She did not like her referring to what their mother had said when she was dying. For aught Peachy knew to the contrary, all dying people said the same things. But what puzzled and grieved poor Peachy most of all was Dulcie saying that she was peaceful; that she had no care; that nothing troubled her. This was so very unlike her anxious-minded sister, that Peachy feared that some very great and terrible change had come over her. Dulcie peaceful! Peaceful now when their little Angel was away! when their own precious little Angel was absolutely lost!

It tore Peachy's heart even to think of Angel, and yet Dulcie—Dulcie who had loved her so devotedly, in whose care their dying mother left her—could say calmly that she had never a care. Peachy wished she would rouse herself to drink that beef-tea. Though nasty, it must be nourishing. She wished she would do anything but lie so motionless, with her dark lashes hiding her sunken eyes.

CHAPTER XXIV.—MRS. GENTLE.

Dulcie lay most of the afternoon in a kind of stupor, and Peachy sat on the side of the bed, her elbows resting on her knees, her hands supporting her chin. Once there was a quick run up the stairs, followed by a rather impatient tap at their door. When Peach-blossom opened it a boy stood without with medicine.

"Can you read?" he enquired of Peachy.

"No—never a line," answered Peachy.

Then he told her she was to give half the contents of the bottle to Dulcie when she awoke, but she was on no account to disturb her to take it, and with a nod he vanished.

Peachy sat down again on the side of the bed, with the bottle of medicine clasped in her hand. That medicine comforted her very much, and partly made up, in the assurance with which it filled her mind, for the failure of the beef-tea. She sat on, too listless and unhappy to care to exert herself in any way, until it began to grow dusk; then there came another tap at the door. It was a very faint and timid tap this time, and it came without any perceptible forerunner of footsteps, so that Peachy, sitting in the dark, felt for a moment half afraid to attend to it; but when the knock came a second time, a little more firmly, fearing that it might continue and disturb Dulcie, she rose softly, crept to the door, and open-

ed it about an inch. A woman was standing without—a tall, pale woman, dressed in rusty black. Dark as it was growing, Peachy had some difficulty in suppressing a little scream at sight of her. She was the woman who, on the day their little Angel was lost, had given her a farthing, and had told her about the happy lambs who feed in green pastures.

"Oh, come in! come in!" gasped Peachy, coloring high, and with she knew not what undefined hope at her heart. "I remember quite well who you ere. We ha' come through a deal o' trouble since we seed you out in the street, ma'am; yere's Dulcie as ill as h'e'ver wor, and h'our little Angel as spoke to you so pretty—why, she's lost. We don't know nothink 'bout our darlin' little Angel—she's gone quite away, same as your little gal went quite away."

"No, not so far as that," answered the woman; "not quite so far, nor so complete away as that. Ain't it strange, now my dear, but I had a dream as you had yer pretty little dear. Don't you never fret, my love, children like your little Angel is allers took good care on by Almighty God. But wot's the matter wid this 'ere gal?"

"That's Dulcimer," said Peach-blossom; "she ha' bin werry bad h'e'ver since our little Angel wor lost, and to-day I'm mortal feared as she's real bad, she do talk so strange, and she won't h'eat nothink—not even my beef-tea, and the doctor did say o' she didn't drink up that 'ere beef-tea as she'd die."

"I don't think as she'll die," said the woman. She knelt down as she spoke, and passed her hand very softly over Dulcie's forehead. She listened for a moment to her breathing, and pushed back her heavy, dark hair. Then she got up, saying as she removed her bonnet and shawl, "The gal is havin' as nice a sleep as h'e'ver wor, and is quite cool, and there's a little moisture on her skin. She won't die, my dear, she'll do real well; we won't disturb her, but you and me 'ull get ready the beef-tea to give her when she wakes."

"'Tis h'all ready," said Peachy, whose little anxious heart was filled by this time with she knew not what measure of comfort and relief. "'Tis h'all ready, please ma'am. I'm feared as it may be a bit cold, but I made the beef-tea long ago, and there's more in the teapot."

"In the teapot, child? Jest you show me wot you made."

Peachy brought over the cup of cold and greasy water. The woman in black tasted it; she did not smile, her face grew a little sadder and more pitiful. "Well," she said, "if it wor'n't a good thing as I come h'in this afternoon. Why, my poor little honey, this ain't beef-tea at all; yer sister 'ud only be made worse by sech bad, sickening stuff as this. You get me one of yer saucepans, Peachy, and make it werry clean, and I'll show you, deary, how to make it right—see ef Dulcie won't drink it up when it is made right."

The next half-hour was one of great happiness to Peachy. She watched the cutting up of the beef, and saw it, with the same water she had poured over it, turned into the saucepan, and a little salt added; and then the saucepan was put upon the fire, and the woman in black explained to Peachy how beef-tea must just boil, and keep just boiling, but never quite boil, which was altogether an inexplicable mystery to so ignorant a little cook. Presently from under the lid of the saucepan issued forth a most fragrant smell, at which Peachy smacked her lips and tried to live over in imagination the delightful moment for Dulcie when she would be drinking up her cold, fragrant, strong beef-tea. Poor Peachy was very hungry herself, which, doubtless, made her appreciation of Dulcie's coming enjoyment all the keener.

"Please, ma'am," she said at last, "yer a werry kind woman, and I'm more obligated to you than h'any words can say, but I'd like real well to know yer name. You know h'all our names, ma'am, even mine, though I can't tell how h'e'ver you guessed it; but I don't know how I'm to call you, ma'am."

Had there been light enough to see by, Peachy would have noticed a faint flush come over the sad woman's face; she did not speak at all for a moment, then she said in a faltering, rather apologetic kind of tone, "I'm allers rare and quick at picking up names, and I never heered little gals called by sech pretty ones as you three!"

"Yes, but wot's your name, ma'am? I know a Mrs. Jones, and I did know dear

Mrs. Price. Be you called Mrs. Jones or Mrs. Price, please, ma'am?"

"No, honey, neither o' they. You may call me—call me, if you like, Mrs. Gentle, Peach-blossom."

"Gentle!" repeated Peachy; "I like that name real well, and I think as you look like that. Please, Mrs. Gentle, ma'am, may I give you a kiss?"

Instantly Mrs. Gentle's thin, yet most motherly arms, were put round the child, and she felt herself, for the first time since her mother's death, gathered into the comforting embrace of a loving woman; but when Mrs. Gentle kissed her she left some tears on her cheek. After that they busied themselves over the beef-tea and toast, until Dulcie awoke. It was quite dark by that time, and though the fire-light shed a warm glow over the centre which immediately surrounded it, it was far too dark for Dulcie to notice the strange woman who knelt by the hearth. She called to her sister, who approached her almost trembling with excitement, and bearing in her hand a steaming and delicious cup of real, strong beef-tea.

"Dulcie, please—'tis better now—please have another sip of the beef-tea."

Dulcie allowed her head to be raised, and the fragrant smell encouraging her, she took a sip; one sip, and yet another, did she take, until the good nourishing food, toast and all, had disappeared, and Peachy, flushed and triumphant, sat down on the side of the bed.

"Peachy," said Dulcie, and already her voice was stronger and more natural in its tone, "I'd real like of you were to sing me 'Home, sweet Home.'"

Peachy started at this request; she felt her heart failing her, and something like a lump rising in her throat.

"Do sing 'Home, sweet Home,'" repeated Dulcie.

Still Peachy hesitated. "Home, sweet Home" was her favorite song—the song she sang best, the song she felt, now that Angel was gone, she could never, never bear to sing or hear again, for little Angel had loved it so, and was beginning to join her own dear little tiny voice so very prettily in the chorus. Peachy began to feel all her fears for Dulcie reviving, when she made so strange a request; for Dulcie knew well what this song had been to Angel, what it had been to them all. Yes, Dulcie must really be dying when she asked for this song. But when a third time she begged, in a slightly fretful key, that Peachy would sing that, cost her what it might, she must make the attempt. Trembling all over, her voice husky with the effort after self-control, she commenced; but her own perfect knowledge of the tune gave her confidence, and sweet and full the exquisite, bird-like voice took up the second part of the first verse—

"A charm from the skies seems to hallow us there,
Which seek thro' the world is ne'er met with elsewhere,
Home! home! sweet, sweet, home!
There's no place like home—"

A cry from the bed suddenly broke on her ear; Dulcie had started forward.

"Oh, Peachy, Peachy!" she gasped through a whole torrent of choking sobs, "there'll never, never be no more sweet home for us. Oh, my little Angel—my little Angel!"

It was the first time since she had lain down on her sick-bed that Dulcie had mentioned Angel; it was the first time her head had come to her eyes. Now the full torrent of tears came with such an agony that it almost seemed as if it must rend the weak, frail life away. Peachy was terrified; but Mrs. Gentle knew what to do. She took the weeping, exhausted girl in her arms, and laid her head on her shoulder, and told her to cry her fill. "Don't be frightened, honey," she said; "cry as long as you like, and as hard as h'e'ver you like. 'T'll do you a real power o' good." She also found time and opportunity to whisper to Peachy that these tears had taken the pressure off the poor child's brain, and in all probability had saved her life.

"My little Angel—my little lost, lost Angel!" sobbed the poor girl. It was not until these cries had soothed themselves down, and from their very force were exhausted, that Mrs. Gentle, still holding Dulcie clasped to her bosom, began her task of comforter.

"I wouldn't fret about the little Angel; she's safe, and no harm can happen to the little dear."

"Oh! she is!"

"I know believe you no little of who ha another safe."

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