

SWEET WILLIAM.

A STORY FOR GIRLS.

By the Author of "That Horrid Boy Next Door," etc.



CHAPTER I.

"OUR AND-
EIGHTPENCE,
not a penny
more, and
there's Willy's
cod-liver oil to
get out of it,
and the coal to
pay for, and
two loaves we
owe the baker
at the street
corner!"

Betty Merrick laid down her pen, and propped her chin on her elbows.

"Yes; it has made a difference, having to have fires," she said slowly. "Coal is coal here, and wood is wood, when one can't really afford them."

"And we can't," said Meg, still fingering the two florins and few coppers ruefully. "Things have been different since mother died."

"She was so clever," said Betty. "And her pictures always sold," put in Meg mournfully, with a glance at the painting on the easel.

"Yes, and so will yours, Meg," said Betty hopefully. "It really isn't half bad. In fact, there's something little short of wonderful in the way you've caught the right expression in the eyes," coming over from the table and standing before it. "And—now I look at it in this light, I think it is simply splendid. Oh, Meg dear, I didn't know before you were so clever. It must sell. Why, it's just enough to make one cry." Betty choked something down in her throat, which sounded strangely like a sob. "What shall you call it, Meg darling?"

"I had thought 'Sweet William.'"

"Capital!" cried Betty, clapping her hands. "He was mother's sweet William. Meg, you're a genius." And she threw her arms round the elder girl with an excitable little hug.

"No, I'm not, Bet. I'm not a bit clever. If I were we shouldn't live in this hole and be poor as we are. We should have proper food and decent clothes and plenty of friends. And you, Bet, would be at school now, where you ought to be at your age, instead of grubbing away from morning till night for dear life."

"But, Meg, I'm seventeen," began Betty, in a little injured tone.

"I don't care, my dear. You are still a child."

"I'm sure I try to look grown-up," Betty went on, struggling to get a peep at herself in the bit of cracked mirror over the cornice. "I've done up my hair and lengthened my frocks."

"And you are still seventeen. Beside, you've been left school a year. Mother wouldn't have neglected your education, cost her what it would."

"You don't neglect it either, Meg dear. Don't you spend hours helping me to grind away at my Latin grammar and French verbs, when you could be doing other things? And copying MSS. is only strengthening and improving my handwriting."

"Not when you burn the midnight oil to do it."

"But that's only because I want to get it

finished. There is seventeen shillings when I take it home."

"You always say the same. But I tell you your health won't stand it no more than your tender years. Poor living and long days, shut up in a bad-smelling, sunless old garret—"

"And you, Meg?"

"Oh, that's another thing! I'm old and hardy. I can stand anything."

"No you can't," said Betty solidly; "and it's no use trying to think you can! Flesh and blood can only put up with a certain amount of wear and tear. And you're all we've got now, Meg, and if anything were to happen to you—well, I don't know what would become of us."

Betty had caught Meg's hands and raised a pained tearful face.

"There—there, Bet," said Meg, kissing her. "Don't go bothering that little head of yours about me. You need it all for your work. I shall take care of myself for your sake—and Willy's."

Margaret and Betty Merrick were sisters, renting the top floor of a cheap lodging-house, where they had lived with a little sick brother since their mother died. It was not in the nicest of localities, but the Merricks could not pick and choose with their slender means, and they were glad to get anywhere to be able to make them eke out. And Brookfield Street was cheap, though dirty and common and saturated with an everlasting odour of fried fish and chip potatoes. But the Merricks kept to themselves, and while they had lived at number thirteen three years, they knew little or nothing of the other people in the house. The man on the next floor below chose to nod to them when he was sober, but he only received a stony dignified glare from Meg, though Betty responded cheerfully enough. He was a workman with a large family, who very often came home tipsy and kept them awake all night "having it out with the missis."

Margaret Merrick was twenty-three—a tall, pretty, brown-haired girl with soft blue eyes and a "better-class" air about her which the landlady vulgarly described as "stuck-huppish," in spite of the shabby, thread-bare gown and worn straw hat. Betty did not look the six years younger, though she was bright and girlish, with little feathery ways and a merry tongue which even poverty could not check. She was lithe and graceful, with hair inclined to redness, a tender coppery shade and plenty of it, twisted round her head. Her eyes were blue—three shades deeper than Meg's. She had a small mouth, rosy and prettily shaped, and a saucy chin, with a white throat, round which she wore always a thick beaten gold chain with an old-fashioned gold cross curiously wrought at the end of it. It was her mother's when she was a girl, the last gift of a fond eccentric old uncle, and as Betty was her living portrait, the locket fell to her keeping. Willy, the boy, had a look of Betty, only he was thinner and paler, with fair limp hair and brown eyes, which long suffering had made sad.

As Meg pushed open the door leading into an inner room, a narrow bit of a place with a bedstead stuffed up in a corner, and just room enough for a chair and a washstand, the evening sun stole through the little window, for once finding its way through the crowded chimney-pots, and fell in a pure strip over the bed and the boy sleeping there. It lay softly and

sweetly on the small white face on the pillow, brushing the young pain-drawn mouth, and turning, with the same soft touch, the yellow head into golden.

"Still asleep," said the girl, in a queer, strangled voice as she let the door fall noiselessly to again. "But how he sleeps!"

"Yes—he isn't so well again to-day."

Meg sat down in a chair near the window and stared through at the flaring posters on the wall opposite.

"The doctor is right—London is killing him, slowly but surely. He's dying by inches, and we can't help ourselves—our hands are tied. It is fresh country air—far away from here—he's dying for."

"We couldn't raise the money?"

"Only by selling my picture. We might manage it then. I came across a bundle of mother's old letters the other day. They're all tied up together there in the davenport. There was one—here it is—from mother's old nurse, Emma Crossland. It is written from Scarcroft—Elm Tree Cottage, Scarcroft. Shall I read it to you? It begins—"

"DEAR FRIEND, I got Your letter tellin me master Merrick was Dead, it was a grate blow to me as it was all so Sudden, and its awful for you miss Polly, Who has always been used To bein a lady to have been left without a penny in the world, with your Little children. But you wer always one to look on the Brite side of things and brave always, but paintin picturs a'tat So payin nowadays, i hope you will forgive me what I am goin to Say. i know i am only an old woman and You are the bewtiful young Lady miss Polly that you Always was. But i wud be Glad if ever you wer wanting to Cum down to the old place agen if you wud cum and make my poor cottage Your home. there is 2 rooms upstairs that is Never used, And the front parlor cud be your privet sitting-Room and ther is a goodish Bit of garden strip with Plenty of stuff in it That is only spoilin For the want of catin. i hope that you will Forget what i have sed, miss Polly. i know it aint for such as Me to hope that you'll cum under my roof, But i wud Always be Glad to see any of you if a rainy day Shud cum and we never know. i can't forget you Miss Polly and all those happy days we had together Up at the Big house tho you did go away like That and the old man was never quiet Rite after. But they have buried him now and Ther was your uncle old silas Hebblethwaite cum down all the Way from Barclay to the funeral and he was askin about you miss Polly And i spoke you fair Dearie, And he sed He used to be So fond of you and he did miss your bonny face Then wer his words and i know it was a tear that fell down his coat. "i am an old Fool, emma," he said, "but i cant Help it." And i konclude Now with all my harts luv for you Dear miss Polly and the little girls and Boys. your old friend,

Emma.

P.S.—Ther is sum new folk Cum up at the Hall and they is makin terrible altrations and Puttin up things moden they says, it aint The same old place now.

emma Crossland."

"Well?" asked Betty, as Meg tied up the letter again with the others.

"Well, you could write to Emma and tell her all about ourselves. How mother died from a cold she took tramping one wet night to Hatton Garden taking home a picture.