

Hocking Silas Kitto

Her Benny: A Story of Street Life



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Silas Kitto Hocking
Her Benny: A Story of Street Life

TO

My Bairns

(GOD BLESS THEM!)

THIS LITTLE BOOK IS DEDICATED

WITH MUCH

AFFECTION

PREFACE

My pastoral work, during a three years' residence in Liverpool, called me frequently into some of the poorest neighbourhoods of that town, where I became acquainted with some of the originals of this story. It was not until I had seen the little Arabs of the streets in their homes – if such haunts of wretchedness be worthy of that name – that I felt that interest in, and sympathy for them, that I have experienced ever since. Getting to know them in their homes, I was glad to stop and speak to them in the streets, and give them a word of sympathy and encouragement. They are not all bad, as many people seem to think. Many of them try hard to earn an honest living, though they find it a difficult matter, especially when at home they receive no encouragement, while in the streets temptation is being continually put in their way by those of whom "Perks" so justly complained.

The grouping of the characters that figure in the story is purely fictitious, but not the characters themselves. Benny and little Nell, Perks and Joe Wrag, Granny and Eva Lawrence, are drawn from life. I knew them well. Some of them are alive to-day, others have gone to their rest.

For the interest my little story has awakened in both old and young, in its serial form, I am rejoiced and thankful; and if, in the more permanent and attractive style it now assumes, it shall awaken any sympathy for the poor little waifs of our streets, I shall have my reward.

SILAS K. HOCKING.

October 21st, 1879.

CHAPTER I. Brother and Sister

Perhaps while in our glowing grate
The cheerful blaze is rising higher
There's some one sitting desolate
Without a spark of fire.

Oh, what are we, that God hath blessed
Our winter homes and made them glad,
While other hearts are sore distressed,
While other homes are sad?

It was getting dark, though the Town Hall clock had only just struck four. But a fog had hung all over Liverpool since morning, and everything was as damp and dismal as it well could be; and now, as evening came on, the fog had settled into a downright drizzle, converting the streets into what seemed to Nelly Bates (who was crouched in the shadow of St. George's Church) to be endless puddles.

"I wish Benny would come," said she to herself. "I wonder what has kept him? He said he'd be here when the clock struck four."

And she wrapped her tattered clothes more closely around her, and looked eagerly down Lord Street and up and down Castle Street. But no Benny appeared in sight.

"I'm glad as how they's lightin' the lamps, anyhow. It'll make it feel a bit warmer, I reckon," she went on, "for it's terrible cold. But Benny won't be long now, nohow. I hope he's sold all his fusees."

And she looked wistfully at the unsold matches lying in her lap. Then, after a pause, she went on again,

"It's had desp'rate bad luck to-day. I reckon the gen'lmen thinks it too much trouble to take off their gloves to get at the coppers. I wonder if they know what it is to be cold and hungry like me?"

And the child moved a little farther into the shadow of the church, to escape the keen cold blast that swept up from the river.

Little Nelly Bates was a delicate-looking child, with a pale, thoughtful face, and big, round, dreamy-looking eyes. She had none of that wolfish expression that so often characterizes the street Arabs of our large towns and cities; but, on the contrary, there was an air of refinement about her that was difficult to account for. Poor little waif! Her own mother she could not remember. She had only known a stepmother – a cruel, drunken woman; and, alas! her father was no better. Almost as soon as she could walk she had been sent into the streets with her brother Benny, who was a year older, to get her living as best she could. Never knowing a parent's love, the affections of these two children had gone out to each other. Each to each was more than all the world beside. At the time our story opens Nelly was nine years of age, and Benny, as we said, a year older.

Still the minutes dragged along, and Benny came not. The 'busses were crowded with people outside and in, wrapped in huge warm overcoats, and all down Lord Street she watched the hurrying crowds bending their steps homewards. And she tried to picture their cheerful homes, with great blazing fires, and happy children running to greet them, and wondered how none of them ever paused to notice her, shivering there in the shadow of the church.

At length the great clocks all around began to strike five, and Benny had not come; a sense of unutterable loneliness crept over the child, and she began to cry. Besides, she was hungry and cold, and there was a great fear in her heart that something had befallen her brother. The last stroke of the Town Hall clock, however, had scarcely died away when she heard the patter of bare feet around the corner, and the next moment her brother, panting and breathless, stood before her.

"Oh, Nell!" he burst out, "It's just soft, I is. I's missed a hour in the time. I never did think I was sich a fool. But can't be helped now, nohow."

"I was afraid you'd got hurt, Benny; but I don't care now you're all right," said Nelly, looking proudly at the flushed face of her sturdy young brother.

"Me hurt? Oh, never fear! I knows how to take care of myself. But what luck, Nell?"

"Bad, Benny, very bad. Nobody wanted matches to-day."

For a moment Benny was silent, then he burst out,

"By golly, Nell! what's us to do? You know what the guv'nor said when we came away this morning?"

"Ay," said Nelly. "But 'ave you 'ad bad luck too?"

"Horful, Nell – simply horful!"

And for a moment the children looked at each other in blank dismay. Just then a gentleman was seen crossing the street carrying a portmanteau.

"Here's a gent with a portmantle," whispered Benny to his sister. "I'll try my luck! Foller me, Nell, as quick as you can." And off he darted across the street.

"Carry yer bag, sir?" said he, stepping in front of the gentleman; and there was something very appealing in his tone as he spoke.

The gentleman looked kindly down into the two honest-looking eyes that flashed in the gaslight.

"What will you take the bag to the ferry for?" he inquired.

"For what you please to give," said Benny sturdily. "Times is bad at present, and little chaps like us is glad to 'ave what we catches."

"Oh, that's it, is it? But I'm afraid this bag is too heavy for you."

"Oh, never fear," said Benny, as he got hold of the portmanteau. "I'se 'mazing strong, and I ken carry this like winkin'." And he trotted down the street before the gentleman in a way that showed he was in earnest about the matter.

The gentleman looked after the little fellow with an amused smile, but volunteered no further remark.

Meanwhile little Nelly, who had become stiff and cramped with cold, followed at a little distance, taking care, however, that Benny did not get out of her sight. On reaching the bridge that led down to the landing-stage, Benny turned round, and, seeing his sister behind, shouted back,

"Stay here, Nell, till I come back – I'll be no time sca'ce." And down the bridge he trotted, evidently glad that he was so near laying down his burden.

"Woodside boat, sir?" said he, turning round to the gentleman.

"Yes, my lad."

"Here we is, then, jist in time." And down the gangway he went at a sharp trot, and into the saloon, letting the bag down on one of the seats with a thump. "There you be, sir. Couldn't a-been sarved quicker by a bigger chap."

"All right, my little fellow," and he held out his hand.

Benny's eyes gleamed as he caught sight of something white between the gentleman's finger and thumb.

"Be jabbers! it's a thrip'ny," was his mental soliloquy, as he eagerly clutched the coin; and bowing his thanks as politely as he knew how, he dashed up the gangway with the fleetness of the wind, muttering to himself, "Shouldn't wonder if't was a fo'penny, arter all." Standing under

a lamp, he took the coin out of his mouth and looked at it. "Oh, glory!" he ejaculated; "if't ain't haaf a bob. Murder and turf! this are a catch!" And he turned two somersaults on the stage by way of expressing his delight, unfortunately, however, planting his foot in his second revolution in the stomach of a young gentleman who was hurrying down to catch the boat.

The gentleman soon recovered his sudden loss of wind, though the dirty footprint on his immaculate coat was not so easily removed.

"Beg pardon," said Benny, in a fright, and hurried away just in time to escape a vigorous kick aimed at him by the infuriated young gentleman. "My stars and stockings!" he soliloquized, as he hurried up the bridge to join his sister. "If he 'ad a-catched me, I'd a-got a wolloping, an' no mistake. Hallo, Nell! what's a matter?" he said, as he saw great tears on the cheeks of his little crouching sister.

"I'se so cold, Benny – oh, so very cold!" sobbed the little girl.

"Never mind, Nelly, I'll soon get yer warmed up. Look here, I'se got haaf a bob, and a good warming into the bargain. Now for a roast tater, my gal, and you'll feel as right as ninepence."

And, taking his sister by the hand, they hurried away at a quick trot, lessening their pace only when they were quite out of breath, and Nelly declared she was quite warm.

"Here's the tater man," said Benny; "now for't, my gal. Pennorth o' taters – hot, plaise, an' a good sprinkle o' salt," said Benny, with quite an air of importance.

"All right, my young gent, 'ere you are;" and the man put three moderate-sized potatoes into Benny's outstretched palms.

"Now for old Joe's fire, Nell, where the roads is a-mendin';" and once more they hurried away at the same quick trot.

In the next street they caught sight of the glowing grate of Joe Wrag, the night watchman, and of Joe himself, sitting in the doorway of his little wooden hut.

"You ax him, Nell," whispered Benny; "he winna say no to you."

"May we eat our taters by your fire, Joe?" said the plaintive voice of little Nelly, as she placed her tiny hand on the fence, on which a red light was burning.

"What dost 'a say, little woman?" said Joe, in a rough though not unkindly voice.

"May we eat our taters by your fire, please – Benny an' me?"

"Ay, ay, my little 'arties. Come along, I'll make room for 'e here;" and honest old Joe moved aside to make room for the little waifs who sought shelter from the biting cold.

"By golly, Nell!" said Benny, as he felt the grateful warmth of the fire, and dug his teeth into the potato, "ain't this sumpshus?"

"Ay, Benny," was all the child's answer, as she greedily devoured the two potatoes that Benny had insisted was her share.

Then there was silence between them for awhile, and Joe went out and heaped more fuel on the grate, while Nelly kept her eyes steadily fixed on the fire. What did the child see as she gazed into its glowing depths? For ever and anon a sweet smile played around the corners of her mouth, and spread over her pale thoughtful face, lighting it up with a wonderful beauty, and smoothing out the lines of care that at other times were only too visible.

Meanwhile Benny was busily engaged counting his money. Fourpence he laid aside for the purpose of purchasing stock for the morrow's sale, a penny he had spent in potatoes, and still he had threepence to the good, besides the sixpence the gentleman gave him, which was clear profit. The sixpence was evidently a great prize to him, for he looked at it long and earnestly.

"Wish I could keep it for mysel'," he muttered; "but it's no go – the guv'nor will 'ave to 'ave it. But the coppers I'll keep 'ginst bad times. Here, Nell," he said, nudging his sister, "you keep these 'ere coppers; and then if the guv'nor axes me if I has any more, I can tell him no."

"All right, Benny." And again the great round eyes sought the glowing grate, and the sweet smile played over her face once more.

"What are 'e looking at, Nell?" said Benny, after a pause. "You look as 'appy as a dead duck in a saucepan."

"Oh, Benny, I see such beautiful pictures in the fire. Don't you 'members on fine days how we looks across the river and sees the great hills 'way behind Birkenhead, such miles an' miles away?"

"Ay, I 'members. I'll take 'e across the river some day, Nell, when I'se richer."

"Will 'e, Benny? I shall be so glad. But I sees great hills in the fire, an' trees, an' pools, an' little rivers, an' oh! such lots of purty things."

"Queer!" said Benny. "I don't see nowt o' sort."

Then there was silence again, and Joe – who had been to see that the lamps at each end of the torn-up street were all right – came up.

"How are 'e now, my 'arties? Are 'e warmer'n you was?"

"Ay, Joe, we's nice now," said Nelly; "an' we's much 'bliged to you for lettin' us come."

"Oh, ye're welcome. But ain't it time you was to home?"

"What's o'clock?" said Benny.

"Seven, all to a minit or so."

"Ay, then, we must be off," said the children in chorus; and wishing Joe good night, they darted off into the wet, cold street, and disappeared in the gloom.

"Purty little hangel!" said Joe, as he stood looking up the street long after they had disappeared. "I wonder what will become o' her when she grows up?"

CHAPTER II. Addler's Hall

The whole court
Went boiling, bubbling up from all the doors
And windows, with a hideous wail of laughs
And roar of oaths, and blows, perhaps... I passed
Too quickly for distinguishing ... and pushed
A little side door hanging on a hinge,
And plunged into the dark.

– *Elizabeth Barrett Browning.*

On the western side of Scotland Road – that is to say, between it and the Docks – there is a regular network of streets, inhabited mostly by the lowest class of the Liverpool poor. And those who have occasion to penetrate their dark and filthy recesses are generally thankful when they find themselves safe out again. In the winter those streets and courts are kept comparatively clean by the heavy rains; but in the summer the air fairly reeks with the stench of decayed fish, rotting vegetables, and every other conceivable kind of filth.

The children, that seem to fairly swarm in this neighbourhood, are nearly all of a pale, sallow complexion, and of stunted growth. Shoes and stockings and underclothing are luxuries that they never know, and one good meal a day is almost more than they dare hope for. Cuffs and kicks they reckon upon every day of their lives; and in this they are rarely disappointed, and a lad who by dodging or cunning can escape this daily discipline is looked upon by the others as "'mazin' cute."

To occupy two rooms is a luxury that only comparatively few families indulge in. Why should they pay rent for two rooms when one will answer the purpose? "We know a trick worth two o' that," is their boast. And so year by year they bid defiance to all law and authority.

The police rarely, if ever, venture into this neighbourhood alone, or if one should be foolish enough to do so, he has generally to pay dearly for his indiscretion. House agents and policemen are objects of special aversion.

A friend of ours, some years ago, came into considerable property in this neighbourhood, and employed a young man who was new to the work to collect the rents for him. On entering the first house the agent was confronted by a big, villainous-looking man, who demanded in a surly tone what he wanted.

"I am come for the rent," said the agent.

"Oh, you have, have you?" was the reply.

"Yes."

"Ah! Did anybody see you come in?"

"No."

And instantly seizing a huge poker and waving it in the air, he shouted to the affrighted agent, with a terrible oath, "Then I'll take care nobody ever sees you go out."

This had the desired effect, and the terrified agent escaped for his life. At the next house at which he called he was received very blandly.

"So you have come for the rent, have you?"

"Yes, that is my business."

"Ah, yes, indeed, very proper. Could you change a five pun' note, now?"

"Oh, yes."

"That will do." Then raising his voice to a loud pitch, he shouted, "Mike, come down here; there's a chap that 'as five pun' in his pocket; let's collar him – quick!"

And a second time the affrighted agent fled, and gave up the situation at once, vowing he would never enter any of those streets again while he lived.

It was to this neighbourhood that Benny Bates and his sister wended their way, after leaving old Joe and his warm fire. Whether the lamplighter had neglected his duty, or whether some of the inhabitants, "loving darkness rather than light," had shut off the gas, is not certain; but anyhow Bowker's Row and several of the adjacent courts were in total darkness.

This, however, seemed no matter of surprise to Benny and little Nell, who wended their way without difficulty along the rough, ill-paved street. At length they turned up a narrow court, darker and dirtier even than Bowker's Row, which went by the name of "Addler's Hall." About half-way up this court they paused for a moment and listened; then, cautiously pushing open a door, they entered the only home they had ever known.

Much to their relief, they found the house empty. A lump of coal was smouldering in the grate, which Benny at once broke up, and soon a ruddy glare from the fire lighted up the dismal room.

The furniture consisted of a three-legged round table, a chair minus a leg, and a three-legged stool. On the window-sill there was a glass bottle with a candle stuck in the neck, and under the stairs there was a heap of rags and shavings, on which Benny and his sister slept. A frying-pan was suspended against the wall near the fireplace, and several cracked cups and saucers, together with a quart mug, stood on the table. The only other article of furniture was a small cupboard in a corner of the room close up to the ceiling, placed there, no doubt, to be out of the way of the children.

Drawing the chair and the stool close up to the fire, Benny and his sister waited the return of their parents.

Outside, the wind moaned and wailed, and whistled through the keyhole and the chinks in the door, and rattled the paper and rags with which the holes in the window were stopped. And as the children listened they shivered, and drew closer together, and nearer the fire.

"By golly!" said Benny, "this 'ouse is like a hair-balloon. I wish as how we could keep the wind out."

"You can't do that, Benny; it creeps in everywhere."

"Are 'e cold, Nell?"

"No, not very; but I's very hungry."

Just then an uncertain step was heard in the court outside, and the next moment their stepmother staggered into the room.

"Now, out of the way, you brats," was her greeting, "while I cooks your faather's supper."

And without a word they got out of her way as quickly as possible, for they saw at a glance she was not in the best of humours. They were pleased to see, however, that she had brought with her a loaf of bread, some butter, and several red herrings, and so they were hopeful that for once they would get a good supper.

The supper was not quite ready when their father came in, flushed and excited.

"Where's the brats?" was his first angry exclamation, glancing round the room.

"There," said his wife, pointing under the stairs, where the children were crouched.

"Come out here, you young vermin; quick! do you hear?"

And the frightened children came out and stood before him.

"Have you brought me that sixpence that I told yer? For, if you ain't," said he, scowling at Benny, "I'll loosen yer hide for yer in double-quick time."

"Ay," said the little fellow, producing the sixpence, "'ere it are."

"Is that all you've got?"

Benny shot a quick glance at his sister before replying, which, however, did not escape his father's eye.

"Ay," he said, stoutly; "I ain't got no more."

"You lie, you villain!" roared the father; "fork it out this moment."

"I tell yer I ain't got none," said Benny. Nelly was about to speak here, but a glance from her brother silenced her.

"Will you fork it out?" said the father again.

"No," was the reply.

In a moment Dick Bates had taken the leather strap from his waist, and without mercy rained blow after blow upon the head and shoulders of his child.

At first Benny bore the blows without shrinking and without uttering a cry; but this only the more aggravated the inhuman father, and faster and more furious fell the blows, till the little fellow shrieked with pain and begged for mercy. But there was no mercy in the father's heart, and still the blows fell, till little Nelly, unable longer to bear it, rushed in between her father and brother, saying, "You shall not beat Benny so."

"Oh, you want it too, do you?" roared he. "Then take that, and that, and that."

"Faather," said Benny, "will you strike Nell?"

The question for a moment seemed to stagger him, and he looked down upon the pleading face of his suffering child, and into those great round eyes that were full of pain and tears, and the hand that was raised to strike fell powerless to his side, and with a groan he turned away.

What was there in the face of his little daughter that touched this cruel, besotted man? We cannot tell. Perhaps he caught a glimpse in that sweet face of his early love.

It is said that he loved his first wife dearly, and that while she lived he was tolerably steady, and was never unkind to her. He even went with her to the house of prayer, and listened to her while she read the Bible aloud during winter evenings. These were happy days, but when she died all this was changed; he tried to forget his trouble in drink, and in the companionship of the lowest and most degraded men and women.

Then he married again, a coarse drunken woman, who had ever since led him a wretched life; and every year he had become more drunken and vicious.

If he yet loved anything in the world, it was his "little Nell," as he always called her. She was wonderfully like her mother, the neighbours said, and that was doubtless the reason why Dick Bates continued to love her when all love for everything else had died out of his heart.

He had never treated her before as he had treated her to-night; it was a new experience to the child, and for long after she lay on her heap of shavings with dry eyes and hot cheeks, staring into vacancy.

But when the last spark of fire had died out, and her father and stepmother were asleep in the room above, turning to her brother, who was still awake, she said,

"Put your arm about me, Benny, will yer?"

And Benny put his arm around his little sister, and pressed her face to his bosom. And then the fountain of the child's tears was broken up, and she wept as though her heart would break, and great sobs shook her little frame, and broke the silence of the night.

Benny silently kissed away the tears, and tried to comfort the little breaking heart. After awhile she grew calm, and Benny grew resolute.

"It's not going to stand this no longer," he said.

"What will you do, Benny?"

"Do? Well, I dunno, yet; but I's bound to do some'at, an' I will too."

After awhile he spoke again. "I say, Nell, ain't yer hungry? for I is. I believe I could eat a grave-stun."

"I was hungry afore faather beat me, but I doesna feel it now," was the reply.

"Well, I seen where mother put the bread an' butter, and if I dunna fork the lot I's not Ben Bates."

"But how will yer get to it, Benny?"

"Aisy 'nough, on'y you must 'elp me."

So without much noise they moved the table into the corner of the room underneath the cupboard, and placing the chair on the top of the table, Benny mounted the top, and was able to reach the cupboard without difficulty.

A fair share of the loaf remained, and "heaps of butter," Benny said.

"Now, Nell," said he, "we'll 'ave a feast."

And a feast they did have, according to Benny's thinking, for very little of either loaf or butter remained when they had finished their repast.

"What will mother say when she finds out?" said Nelly, when they had again lain down.

"We must be off afore she wakes, Nell, and never come back no more."

"Dost 'a mean it, Benny?"

"Ay do I. We mun take all our traps wi' us i' t' morning."

"Where shall us go?"

"Never fear, we'll find a shop somewheres, an' anywheres is better nor this."

"Ay, that's so."

"Now, Nell, we mun sleep a bit, 'cause as how we'll 'ave to be stirring airly."

And soon the brother and sister were fast asleep, locked in each other's arms.

CHAPTER III. Roughing it

Ne'er saw I, never felt a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God, the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still.

– *Wordsworth*

Next morning Benny was stirring early, and when the first faint rays of the coming day peeped through the dust-begrimed and patched-up window, they saw the little fellow busily engaged in gathering together what things he and Nelly possessed previous to their final departure from home.

Nelly still slept on, and several times the brother paused and looked fondly down upon the fair face of the sleeping child. She looked very beautiful, Benny thought, as she lay sleeping there, with a pink spot glowing on either cheek, and the long flaxen hair thrown carelessly back from the pale forehead. Once or twice she murmured in her sleep, and the same happy smile spread over her face that he had noticed the evening before when she sat gazing into Joe Wrag's fire.

"I wonder what she's a-dreamin' on?" he murmured to himself. "Perhaps she sees the hills and flowers and trees agin."

Then he set to work again turning over a heap of rubbish that had been pushed as far back as possible under the stairs. At length a joyful exclamation burst from his lips as he came upon a small heap of potatoes.

"Here's a fortin', an' no mistake; Nell and I'll be able to walk off the lot."

And he brought them out into the room, and wrapped them up in an old handkerchief that his stepmother used to tie round her head when she went out. There were scarcely twenty potatoes altogether, but to Benny they seemed almost an inexhaustible supply.

This being done, he sat down beside his sleeping sister and waited until he should hear any movement in the room above. Gradually the cold grey light of the morning stole into the room, revealing all its squalor and dinginess, and Benny felt that he and Nelly would have to make their escape soon, or else they might be prevented. He felt very loth to awake his sister, she slept so sweetly, and he did not know where they might find a shelter when darkness covered the earth again. But there was no help for it. His father might awake any moment, and the neighbours would soon be stirring in the court and in Bowker's Row. So bending over her, he pressed his lips upon her brow: still she moved not.

"Nelly," he whispered, "it's time to be movin'."

Slowly the great round eyes opened, and looked languidly up into his face.

"Come, stir your pegs, Nell, or we'll be too late."

"Oh, ay," she said, as the recollection of the previous evening came back to her. "We 'as to be off to-day, ain't we?"

"Ay, my gal, we's goin' on our own 'ook now, so look alive."

"Does yer think we's doin' right, Benny?"

"'Course we is, Nell; I'll take care o' yer, never fear."

Thus reassured, she followed Benny silently out of the house and into Bowker's Row; then seeing that no one was about, they set off at a quick trot in the direction from whence they had come the previous night.

Nelly had the utmost confidence in Benny's sagacity, and though she had doubted for a moment whether they were doing the wisest thing in the course they were taking, yet she had little doubt that her brother would be equal to every emergency, and that he would find her a home of some sort. And the child had a vague, undefined feeling that they could not be worse off, whatever might happen. To see her Benny punished as she had so frequently done of late was "pain and grief" to her: not only had he suffered the pinchings of cold and hunger during the day, but he had been compelled to bring home a certain amount every night, or else take the consequences of her father's senseless anger.

And as the child thought of these things she could not wonder that Benny had resolved to run away and seek a home somewhere else. But what of herself? She had on the whole been much better treated, and she thought perhaps her father did not well know what he was doing last night, as he was in drink. Ought she, then, to run away? "Ay, but I canna leave Benny," was her mental response; and having settled that question, she seemed perfectly satisfied to share the fortunes of her brother, whatever they might be, and help him as best she could to fight the battle of life.

As for Benny, he had no qualms of conscience about the matter. He had never heard the command,

"Honour thy father and thy mother," and even if he had, it would not have troubled him on the present occasion. He had a feeling that he had been wronged, cruelly wronged, and that he ought not to stand it any longer. Once the question had crossed his mind, "Had he any right to take those potatoes?" But he answered the question to himself by saying, "Ain't I brought home a haaf a bob every night for th' week, an' then bin kep' without supper? By jabbers, I's paid for those taters, and I'll eat 'em." Moreover, his notions of right and wrong were of the vaguest character. He had some dim recollection of his mother, and how she used to tell him it was wrong to steal, and to tell lies, and to cheat. But the more he tried to recall it, the vaguer the recollection became. Yet sometimes when he was tempted to steal, and would look around to see that no one was watching him, a voice within him would whisper, "Don't, Benny, it is wrong to steal," and he would turn away with a sigh, feeling that there was something in that voice that he dared not disobey.

In after years he held firmly to the belief that his own mother was permitted to be the guardian angel of his childhood, and that it was she who whispered to him when he was tempted to do wrong. He has also been heard to say, that though he regarded it as very wrong for children, under ordinary circumstances, to leave their home without their parents' consent, yet in his case he thought his action perfectly justifiable.

But we must leave this question, with the hope that none of the children who read this story may be driven by cruelty and wrong to a similar course of action, and must follow the little waifs as they threaded their way through the dingy streets that cold December morning. Their object was to reach Joe Wrag's fire before his watch ended, and in this they were successful. Joe was standing before his hut, rubbing his hands over the still glowing grate, though Benny noticed that the fire was burning low.

"We's brought some taters from hum, may we cook 'em on yer fire, Joe?" said Benny, putting on as bold a face as he could. Joe looked at the children for a moment without speaking.

"Please do, Joe, like a good man," chimed in Nelly's plaintive voice.

"Come along with yer, then. But how are 'e out so airy?"

"Lots o' bisness on hand," was Benny's prompt reply.

"There's some'at up wi' you youngsters, I reckon. But yer not goin' to eat all these taters at once, are yer?"

"Oh, no!" said Benny, "we on'y want two apiece, and we want you to keep the rest till we comes agin."

"Very likely story," said Joe, gruffly. "Where's yer bin stealin' 'em from?"

"Oh, nowheres, Joe," said Nelly. "We bringed 'em from hum, we did, for sure."

"Well, ain't that a-stealin' on 'em?"

"No!" said Benny stoutly. "I's tooked 'em hum a haaf a bob every night for t' week, and they b'longs to me."

Joe shook his head dubiously, as if not certain of the soundness of Benny's logic, but made no further reply. He, however, gave his aid to the children in cooking their potatoes, which were soon done to a nicety, and even gave them a piece of bread, the remains of his own morning's repast. Thus fortified, the children were soon ready for the duties of the day.

Their first business was to go into Park Lane and get in a stock of matches for the day's sale; this done, they separated and went their different ways, agreeing to meet in the shadow of St. George's Church at twelve o'clock, and at four, to report progress.

Nelly's stand was near the junction of Lord Street, Church Street, Paradise Street, and Whitechapel, going occasionally as far as the "Sailors' Home." Benny, on the other hand, waited about near the landing-stage, selling his matches if he could, but at the same time looking out for an opportunity of carrying some gentleman's bag.

But to-day Benny had another object in view, and that was to discover, if possible, some place where he and his sister might sleep when night came on. He knew of a place where, for the payment of a penny each, they might sleep in a cellar on some dirty straw amongst a lot of rough boys. But somehow Benny shrank from introducing his sister to such company as there assembled night after night. He must find some place where they could be alone, if possible, though he felt that that would be no easy matter.

The day was beautifully fine, with a clear frosty sky, and both Benny and his sister carried on a brisk sale in fusees, and when they met at noon they were in high spirits over the proceeds of the day. Still Benny had found no place as yet where to spend the night.

During the afternoon, however, his attention was directed to some sailors who were caulking a boat not far from the George's Dock. The boat he noticed was turned bottom upward, and that it had one end stove in; evidently it had had rough handling somewhere. And besides this, Benny noticed that there was a large quantity of hemp and tow on which the sailors were kneeling while at their work. Several times during the afternoon he took a look at the sailors, and when at length he saw them lift up the boat and push the tow underneath, his mind was made up.

"Stunnin'!" he ejaculated; "I b'lieve we is in luck's way to-day. Couldna have bin better if it wer' a-made for us."

Punctually at four o'clock the children were at their trysting-place. They were both in high spirits, for their profits were larger than they had been for many a day past. Benny especially was in high glee, for he had the prospect of a comfortable lodging-place for the night, without any fear of his father's fury, and was consequently eager to communicate his discovery to Nelly.

"Golly, Nell," was his greeting, using his favourite expression, "it's a heap too cold to stick in one place. Let's off into Park Lane and git a feed; we can 'ford it to-night."

And off they started, hand in hand. The place to which they directed their steps was not the most select, the character of the customers being of no consequence, so long as the money was forthcoming. This fact was well known to Benny, so he entered, leading his sister by the hand, without any trepidation. It was a long narrow room in which they found themselves, with several small tables placed at regular intervals down the sides. A bright fire was burning in the farther end of the room, near which Benny took his seat, requesting that "two penny loaves might be brought, and a pennorth of cheese."

They remained as long as they felt they dared do so, then again sought the wintry streets. But the keen frosty air made them long for shelter, and once more they sought the glowing grate of honest Joe Wrag. The old man seemed pleased to see them, and made room for them in his hut, though he said little. Oh, how the fire glowed and crackled in the keen frosty air, revealing to little

Nelly Bates scenes of wondrous beauty! And as Joe watched her face glowing in the firelight, he muttered to himself, "Purty little hangel; I hopes she'll grow up good, or – or die – ay, or die!"

It was after eight o'clock when they left Joe's warm hut, for Nelly had pleaded so hard to stay that he could not deny her request. She seemed to be twining herself around the old man's heart in a wonderful manner, and but for his fury of a wife he would have taken her to his own home when it became known to him that the children were homeless.

It did not take them long to reach the boat; and having satisfied themselves that they were not noticed, they crept underneath in a "jiffey," as Benny would have expressed it.

"Brimstone and treacle!" said Benny, as he put his hand on the large heap of tow; "ain't this sumpshus? We'll be as snug as Jonar 'ere."

"Ay, Benny, this is fine."

"Let's shut out all the daylight fust, Nell, an' then the cold won't git in."

Thanks to the abundance of tow this was not difficult, and soon the children were cuddled in each other's arms, feeling warmer than they had felt for many a night past. It was a long time, however, before they could get to sleep. To Nelly especially was it strange. And thoughts too deep for them to express kept crowding into their minds, keeping them wide awake.

At length, however, a feeling of drowsiness began to creep over them, and they were just dropping off to sleep when they were startled by a footstep near them, and a hoarse voice muttering, as if in anguish, "O Death, what dost thou mean?"

For a moment the children clutched each other in terror; then they heard the footsteps dying away in the distance, and their confidence returned again.

"Who could it be?" said Nelly.

"A bobby, I 'specks," said Benny; "but he ain't catched us, so we's safe 'nough now."

For awhile after they lay listening, but no other footsteps disturbed them, and soon balmy sleep stole over them, sealing their eyelids, and giving rest to their weary little heads and hearts.

CHAPTER IV. A Friend in Need

Friendship, peculiar boon of heaven
The noble mind's delight and pride;
To men and angels only given,
To all the lower world denied.

– *Samuel Johnson.*

The experiences of Benny and his sister during the next day were but a repetition of what we recorded in the last chapter; but during the second night they found the shelter of the boat but a poor substitute for a home, and in the morning they were stiff and cramped through lying so long in one position; and when they paid Joe Wrag their third morning visit, the old man noticed that all was not right with them. Nelly especially was gloomy and depressed.

Joe Wrag was generally a silent man, and not given to asking many questions; but when he saw great tears in Nelly's round eyes as she sat gazing into the fire, he felt that he must know what was troubling the child, and help her if he could. He had also a dim suspicion that they had not been to their home of late, and he wondered where they could have spent their nights; and, like Benny, he dreaded the idea of little Nelly congregating with young thieves and vagabonds, and felt he would rather a thousand times the child should die than that she should grow up to be a wicked woman. So after reflecting for some time, and wondering how he should best get at the truth, he burst out suddenly with the question,

"When were you last to hum, eh?"

For a moment there was silence, and Benny looked at his sister as much as to say, "That's a poser; we're in for it now."

"Come, now," said Joe, seeing their hesitation, "let's 'ave nowt but truth; out wi' it, an' it will be best in the end."

"You tell 'im, Nell," said Benny, "'cause he'll b'lieve you."

So Nelly, in her sweet pleading voice, told him all the story of Benny's wrong, and of her father's cruelty, and how even she herself had not escaped his anger.

"And did he beat you, my purty?" said Joe, clenching his fist tightly at the same time.

"Ay, Joe; but I dunna think he know'd what he were a-doin'."

For a few moments the old man's face worked as if in pain. Then he muttered to himself, "Some'at must be done, an' no mistake; but what? Eh, what?" Then he looked at the children again. "Don't yer think you'd better go to hum again to-night?" he said; and he watched eagerly for the effect of his question. Nelly was the first to speak.

"Oh, no," she said; "we should get it worse nor ever. Dad would a'most kill Benny." And the tears welled up into her eyes again.

"I's not goin' to risk it," said Benny stoutly. "I's 'ad hidin's enough to last me a lifetime."

"Ay, ay," said Joe. "I wonder, now – " And he looked reflectively into the fire.

"What are 'e a-wonderin' on?" queried Benny.

But Joe was silent. He had evidently got hold of some idea which he was trying to work out. At length he looked up and said,

"Now, away with yer, an' come here again this ev'ning at six o'clock. D'ye hear?"

"Ay, ay," was the response; and away they bounded, leaving Joe alone to his meditations.

Joe remained some time after they were gone in one position, scratching his head most vigorously, and would doubtless have remained much longer had he not been disturbed by the men who had come to their work, and who set him at liberty from his watch until darkness should again come down upon the earth. Joe walked leisurely to his home as if burdened with some great thought, ate his morning meal in silence, and then went to bed, and lay tossing for full two hours ere he could find a wink of sleep.

Joe Wrag had been for many years a complete enigma to a number of well-meaning people, who had become much interested in this silent and thoughtful man, and were anxious to know more about him than he cared to reveal. Several "town missionaries" had tried to make something out of him, but had utterly failed. He had never been known to enter a house of prayer, and whether in the matter of religious knowledge and belief he was a heathen or a Christian was an open question; and yet, notwithstanding this, he lived a life that in many respects was worthy of the imitation of many who made greater professions.

Indeed, to be strictly accurate, Joe Wrag never made any profession whatever of any kind, and yet he was as honest as the day, and as true as steel. Honest, not because "honesty was the best policy." Nay, policy never entered into his thoughts; but he was honest because he could not be otherwise. His *soul* was honest; and as for lying, he loathed it as he would loathe a viper. Nothing could tempt him to be untruthful. In fact, he recoiled as if by instinct from everything mean and deceitful. What teaching he had received, or what influences had surrounded him during his early life, we have never been able to gather. He kept himself mostly to himself, and was silent about the past. Year by year he moved along the even tenour of his way, ever ready to do a kindly deed when opportunity presented itself, but never thrusting himself where he felt he might not be wanted. He had a perfect horror of appearing to be better than he really was; and it was thought that that was his chief reason why he never made any profession of religion.

About three o'clock Joe got up, and after partaking of a substantial meal, wended his way to the neighbourhood of Copperas Hill. After turning several sharp corners, he found himself in a small court containing about half a dozen houses. Before one of the doors he paused for a moment, then raised his stick, and gave a sharp rat-tat-tat. The door was instantly opened by a woman who had evidently reached her threescore years and ten. Yet she appeared hale and strong for her age, and though poorly, was yet tidily attired.

"Well, ye are a stranger," was her greeting. "I'm verra glad to see 'e, though."

"An' I'm glad to see you, Betty."

"Well, come tha in. What's i' tha wind?"

"Nowt much, Betty; but what thar is consarns you as much as me."

"Well, out wi' it, Joe," said Betty, as soon as Joe had seated himself. "No trouble, I 'ope?"

"No, not that I knows on; but could 'e make room 'ere for a couple o' lodgers – little 'uns, mind you – children, on'y 'bout so high?" holding out his hand.

"Well, what an idear, to be sure! What are ye a-dreamin' on?"

"Your old man," said Joe solemnly, "was my mate for mony a year, an' a good man he wur; an' if from that fur-off country he can see what's doin' 'ere, he'd be mightily pleased for 'e to do, Betty, what I'm a-axin' o' yer."

"But I dunno that I quite understand," said Betty; "explain your meanin' a bit more."

And Joe, in a solemn voice, told the story of little Nell and her brother Benny. "It mebbe, Betty," he said, "they're the Lord's little 'uns. I'm none o' the Lord's mysel'. I've tried to find 'im; but He winna be found o' me. I'm none o' the elect. I've settled that for more'n twenty year now. But if these bairns are the Lord's, we mustna turn 'em away."

"All bairns are the Lord's," said Betty; but Joe only shook his head, and sat gazing into the fire.

Before he left, however, it was settled that a bed should be made for the children in the corner under the stairs, which would be near the fire also. For this they were to pay a penny per night.

"We mustna make paupers o' them, you know, Betty," was Joe's remark.

It was also agreed that she should do what washing and mending the children's clothes needed, for which they were to pay also, if they could afford it. "If not," said Joe, "I'll make it square wi' you, Betty."

Punctually at six o'clock the children put in an appearance at Joe's hut. They had had but poor luck during the day, and Benny did not feel nearly so courageous as he had felt two days before. The prospect of sleeping night after night underneath a boat was not so inviting as he had imagined it would be; besides, there was the fear that their hiding-place might be discovered, and that even this poor shelter might be taken away from them at any time.

He did not confide his fears to Nelly; he felt that it would be cruel to do so; and she – whatever she may have felt – never uttered a single word of complaint. She knew that "her Benny" had enough to bear, and she would not add to his burden.

Benny had been very much puzzled at Joe Wrag's manner in the morning, and had wondered much during the day "what he 'ad been a-turnin' over in his noddle." He was desperately afraid that Joe would try to persuade him and Nelly to return to their home, or even insist upon their doing so; and rather than do that, he felt that he would lose Joe's friendship and warm fireside into the bargain.

Joe was looking very abstractedly into the grate when they came up to the fence, and for a moment they watched his rugged face with the firelight playing upon it. But Benny, who could read his father's face pretty cleverly, declared to himself that "he could make nowt out o' Joe's."

As usual, Joe made room for Benny in his little hut; but to-night he took little Nelly very tenderly on his knee, and stroked her long flaxen hair with his hard rough hand, muttering to himself the while, "Purty little hangel; I reckon she's one o' the Lord's elect."

Benny wondered for a long time when Joe was going to say something that he could understand; but somehow to-night he did not like to disturb him by asking questions. Nelly, on the contrary, was far away again from the cold and dingy streets, and the ceaseless roar of the busy town, and was wandering in imagination through sunny meadows where the turf was soft and the grass was green. She fancied she heard the music of purling streams, and the songs of happy birds in the leafy trees that waved their branches over her. The air was fragrant with the scent of flowers that she had heard of, but never seen, and weariness and cold she felt no more.

The voice of Joe banished the beautiful vision from the glowing grate, and the child wondered if ever it would become a reality – if ever she would dwell amid such scenes in a life that had no ending.

"I've some'at to say to 'e, my dears," was Joe's first exclamation; and the children looked up into his face, and wondered what was coming next. "I've found a hum for 'e, and a reet good 'un, an' ye'r to go to-night."

"Oh, scissors!" shouted Benny; and he ran into the street, and had turned two somersaults ere he knew what he was doing; then stood on his head for at least five seconds by way of cooling off, and what other performances he might have gone through I cannot say, had not Joe called him into the hut.

Little Nelly said nothing; she only nestled closer to her benefactor, and Joe felt great scalding tears dropping upon his hand, and knew that her heart was too full for her to speak. Then he told them all about their new home, and what would be expected of them, and how he hoped they would be good and kind to the old woman, and always be honest and truthful, and then when they died they might go to the good place.

"Does folks go somewheres when they die?" said Benny, with a look of astonishment.

"Ay, Ben, that they do."

"Oh, beeswax and turpentine!" he ejaculated, "that are a go!"

But Nelly's face grew luminous, and her eyes fairly sparkled, as she faintly grasped the idea that perhaps her dreams might come true after all.

They had no difficulty in finding their way to Tempest Court, or in discovering the house of Betty Barker. The old woman gave them a rough though kindly welcome, and Benny was soon at his ease. Their bed in the warm corner under the stairs was, to use Benny's phrase, "simply sumshus;" and next morning when they appeared before Joe, it was with faces glowing with gladness and delight.

CHAPTER V.

"Oh, Death! what does thou mean?"

To sleep! perchance to dream; – ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause.

– *Hamlet*

We must now go back to the morning when Benny and his sister left their home, and pay one more visit to "Addler's Hall." Dick Bates got up in the morning with a splitting headache, and, if the truth must be told, with an aching heart. His sleep had been disturbed by horrid dreams, the recollection of which haunted him still, and made him feel anything but comfortable. He had dreamt that he had been working near the docks, and in going close to the edge of one of them he saw his two children rise to the surface of the water clasped in each other's arms; and while he looked at them, they opened their glassy eyes and cast upon him one lingering, reproachful glance, then sank to the bottom again. Twice during the night had this dream been repeated, and when he awoke in the morning it was with a vague fear of impending evil. Dick Bates, like many other hardened and cruel men, was at heart a great coward, besides being very superstitious. He listened several times for any movement downstairs, but all was still; and this only increased his alarm, for he knew his children were in the habit of stirring early, and he saw by the light that the morning was far advanced.

We may judge, therefore, of his alarm when, on coming downstairs, he found the room empty, and he thought, with a terror in his heart that made the perspiration ooze from his forehead, that perhaps his children had been driven by his cruelty to put an end to their existence.

He tried to banish the thought as weak and childish, but he could not; his nerves were completely unstrung to-day, and he did not seem at all himself. When his wife came down he sent her into the neighbours' houses, and into Bowker's Row, to inquire if any one had seen them. But everywhere the same answer was given: no one had either seen them or heard them. His wife characterized his fears as "bosh," and declared "he wur wuss nor any owd woman. The brats'll turn up agin to-night, never fear," she said; and Dick sincerely hoped in his heart that they would do so. He was too late to get any work that morning, so he spent most of the forenoon in the house, brooding over his fears. And while he sat there on the low stool with his face buried in his hands, memories of other and happier years crowded in upon his brain. His boyhood life in the country seemed to him now, as he looked back at it through a long vista of years, like a happy dream. And he was glad that his old father and mother were dead, and did not know how low he had fallen.

Then he thought of the morning when he had led his first young bride to church, and of the few short years of happiness that had followed. He remembered, too, the promise he had made her on her dying bed – that he would take care of the children, and meet her in heaven. Alas! how he had belied those solemn words! He had not cared for his children, he admitted to himself with shame; but, on the contrary, he had cruelly neglected them, had behaved towards them as the veriest brute. And now perhaps they were dead – driven to death by his cruelty.

Then other thoughts took possession of him. "If they're dead," he said, "they are better off: what is there to live for? Better for 'em to die now than to grow up to be like me an' Sall."

Then he began to wonder what dying meant. "If I wur sartin," he said, "that there wur nowt arter death, I'd die too." And he got up and walked about the room; after awhile he sat down again,

and buried his face in his hands once more. "Mary used to say," he mused, "that bad people went to a bad place an' was tormented for ever; but that if we was good, an' trusted in the Saviour, we should go to 'eaven an' be 'appy for ever. And poor owd father and mother used to say t' same. I remembers it very well! Ah me, I've nearly forgot all sense o' it, though."

And thus he mused hour after hour, heedless that his wife swore and raved that "the brats had eat all the butter, and walked off all the taters."

When, however, he was made to comprehend this fact, he became less concerned about his children, and a little before noon he started off in search of work. But all the afternoon he was gloomy and depressed, and instead of going to a public house, as was his wont when the day's work was done, he set off home, much to the surprise of his mates, who grew warm in a discussion as the evening advanced as to what "'ad a-comed over Dick Bates."

From seven to nine he sat in his own desolate home alone, for his wife was in no humour to keep him company, and every patter of feet in the court made him start and look eagerly towards the door, in the hope that he would see it open, and his children enter; but the door did not open, and his children never came.

"I wouldna a-minded so much," he said, "if I hadna a-wolloped poor little Nell;" and he vowed with a terrible oath that "he would treat 'em better in t' future, if he ever had the chance."

But when the clock in the steeple not far away struck nine, he started up, muttering to himself, "I canna stand this: I wonder what's comed to me? If 't bairns would come home, I reckon I'd be all right." But the bairns did not come, and he started out to get a glass, to help him to drown remorse.

His mates tried to rally him, but they had to confess that it was "no go;" and when at eleven o'clock he left them at the corner of the street, and once more directed his steps towards Addler's Hall, they touched their foreheads significantly to each other, and whispered it as their opinion "that Dick Bates was a-goin' wrong in his noddle, and was above a bit lunny."

When he reached his home, he opened the door with a beating heart. All was silent, save the heavy breathing of his wife in the room above. He went to the dark corner where his children slept, and felt with his hands; but the bed, such as it was, was empty, and with a groan he turned away and hid his face in his hands. And again his past life came back to him more vividly than it had done for years.

"I mun go an' look for 'em," he said. "I shall see 'em floating in one o' the docks, as I did last night in my dream." And with a feeling of despair in his heart he wandered forth again into the now almost deserted streets.

As we have before stated, it was a clear frosty night; not a single cloud obscured the myriad stars that glittered in the deep vault of heaven. And as Dick Bates wandered under the light of the stars along the long line of docks, no one would have believed that this anxious-faced man was the brutal drunkard that only on the previous night punished his unoffending children without mercy.

Was it God that was working in his heart, bringing back to him the memories of other years, and awaking within him better thoughts? Who shall say it was not?

Still on he went, starting continually as he fancied he saw something white on the dark still water. "How nice it would be," he muttered, "to sleep for ever! to be free fra the worry an' trouble." But how could he know that death was endless sleep? Might it not be, as his Mary said it was, the beginning of a life that should never end? He was now near the boat under which his children lay. It was his footstep that startled them just as they were dropping off to sleep. It was his voice that muttered the words, "O Death! what dost thou mean?"

How near father and children had come to each other! but neither knew of the other's presence: then they drifted apart again, to meet no more on earth. There were only a few small vessels in the next dock, and all the lights were out.

"There they be, sure enough," said Dick, as something white, floating on the surface of the water, caught his eye, and he went close up to the edge of the dock, forgetful of the fact that the huge

damp coping stones had, by the action of the frost, become as slippery as glass. He had scarcely planted his foot on one of the huge stones when it slipped from beneath him; a piercing shriek rang out on the startled air, followed by a plunge, a gurgling cry, and the cold water closed over him.

A moment later a pale agonized face gleamed up from the dark water, a hurried prayer floated up on the cold frosty air, "Saviour of my Mary, save me!" then the water closed over him again. Two other times, at longer intervals, Dick Bates' agonized and horror-stricken face appeared for a moment on the surface; then the ruffled waters grew smooth, hiding in their dark bosom the dead body of Richard Bates, whose soul had been so suddenly called to its account.

The next day the dead body was dragged to the surface, and conveyed to the dead-house, where it was claimed by his wife. An inquest and a funeral followed, of which Benny and little Nell never knew. And it was well, perhaps, they did not. The knowledge would have been pain to the little waifs, and they had already as much trouble as their little hearts knew how to bear.

CHAPTER VI.

In which Benny makes a Discovery

All unseen the Master walketh
By the toiling servant's side;
Comfortable words He speaketh,
While His hands uphold and guide.

– *Baynes.*

Christmas Day this year came upon a Wednesday, and, during the two days preceding it, Benny did what he characterized as a "roaring bizness." There were so many people leaving and arriving by all the ferry-boats and at all the stations, that our hero was kept on the trot nearly all the time. His frank open face seemed to most people, who had a bag or a bundle to carry, a sufficient guarantee of his honesty, and they hoisted their bag upon the little fellow's shoulder without any fear that he would attempt to pry into its contents, or make off with it round some sharp corner.

For a time the "match business" was turned over entirely to Nelly's management; and though the modest little girl never pushed her wares – she was too shy for that – yet Benny declared she did "stunnin'."

Many a gentleman, catching just a glimpse of the pale sweet face as he hurried past, would turn to have another look at the child, and, without taking any of her fusees, would put a penny, and sometimes more, into the little thin hand. And Nelly would courtesy her thanks, unable to utter a word.

Benny declared "he liked Christmas-time 'mazin' well, and wondered why folks didn't have Christmas a sight oftener than once a year." How it was that coppers were so much more plentiful at this time of the year than at any other time was to him a mystery. Poor little fellow! the thought never seemed to enter into his small head that it might be that people's hearts were more open at this festive season than at some other times. However, Benny was not one that speculated long on such questions; he only wished that people were always as ready to have their bags carried, and always gave their pence as ungrudgingly. Once or twice he felt a bit sad, and brushed away a hasty tear, when he saw boys no bigger than himself wrapped up in great warm overcoats, and beautiful little girls with fur-trimmed jackets and high-heeled dainty boots, clasped in the arms of their parents as soon as they stepped from the ferry, and then hurried away to a cab or to a carriage in waiting – and then thought of his own cheerless life. "I specks they's mighty 'appy," he said reflectively, and then hurried away to the other end of the stage, where he thought he saw the chance of employment.

On Christmas Eve Benny took his sister through St. John's Market, and highly delighted they were with what they saw. The thousands of geese, turkeys, and pheasants, the loads of vegetables, the heaps of oranges and apples, the pyramids of every other conceivable kind of fruit, the stalls of sweetmeats, the tons of toffee, and the crowds of well-dressed people all bent upon buying something, were sources of infinite pleasure to the children. There was only one drawback to their happiness, and that was they did not know how to lay out the sixpence they had brought with them to spend. If there had been less variety there would have been less difficulty; but, as it was, Benny felt as if he would never be able to decide what to buy. However, they agreed at last to lay out twopence in two slices of bread and ham, for they were both rather hungry; and then they speculated the other fourpence in apples, oranges, and toffee, and, on the whole, felt very well satisfied with the results of their outlay.

It was rather later than usual when they got home, but old Betty knew where they had gone, and, as it was Christmas Eve, she had got a bigger fire in than usual, and had also got them a cup of hot cocoa each, and some bun loaf to eat with it.

"By golly!" said Benny, as he munched the cake, "I do wish folks 'ud 'ave Christmas ev'ry week."

"You are a cur'us boy," said the old woman, looking up with a smile on her wrinkled face.

"Is I, granny? I specks it's in my blood, as the chap said o' his timber leg."

The old woman had told them on the first evening of their arrival, when they seemed at a loss what name to give her, to call her granny; and no name could have been more appropriate, or have come more readily to the children's lips.

"But could folks have Christmas any oftener if they wished to?" asked little Nell.

"In course they could, Nell," burst out Benny. "You dunna seem to know what folks make Christmas for."

"An I thinks as you dunno either, Benny."

"Don't I, though?" he said, putting on an air of importance. "It's made to give folks the chance of doing a lot o' feeding; didn't yer see all the geeses an' other nice things in the market that the folks is going to polish off to-morrow?"

"I dunna think it was made purpose for that. Wur it, now, granny?"

Thus appealed to, the old woman, who had listened with an amused smile on her face, answered,

"No, my child. It's called Christmas 'cause it is the birthday of Christ."

"Who's He?" said Benny, looking up; and Nelly's eyes echoed the inquiry.

"Don't you know – ain't you never heerd?" said the old woman, in a tone of surprise.

"Nay," said Benny; "nothin' sense. Some o' the chaps says 'by Christ' as I says 'by golly'; but I never knowed He was somebody."

"Poor little dears! I didn't know as how you was so ignorant, or I should have told you before." And the old woman looked as if she did not know where or how to begin to tell the children the wonderful story, and for a considerable time remained silent. At length she said, "I'll read it to 'e out o' the Book; mebbe you'll understand it better that way nor any way else."

And, taking down from her shelf her big and much-worn Bible, she opened it at the second of St. Matthew, and began to read in a tremulous voice, —

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judæa in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is He that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship Him."

And slowly the old woman read on until she reached the end of the chapter, while the children listened with wide-open and wondering eyes. To Nelly the words seemed to come like a revelation, responding to the deepest feeling of her nature, and awakening thoughts within her that were too big for utterance. Benny, however, on the contrary, could see nothing particularly interesting in the narrative itself. But the art of reading was to him a mystery past all comprehension. How granny could see that story upon the page of her Bible was altogether beyond his grasp. At length, after scratching his head vigorously for some time, he burst out, —

"By jabbers! I's got it at last! – Jimmy Jones squeeze me if I ain't! It's the specks that does it."

"Does what?" said Nelly.

"Why, the story bizness, to be sure. Let me look at the book through your specks, shall I, granny?"

"Ay, if you like, Benny." And the next minute he was looking at the Bible with granny's spectacles upon his nose, with a look of blank disappointment upon his face.

"Golly! I's sold!" was his exclamation. "But this are a poser, and no mistake."

"What's such a poser?" said granny.

"Why, how yer find the story in the book; for I can see nowt." And Benny looked as disappointed as if he had earned nothing for a week.

By much explaining, however, granny enabled him to comprehend in some vague way how the mystery was accomplished; and then arose within the heart of the child an unutterable longing to understand this mysterious art fully, and be able to read for himself – a longing that grew in intensity as evening after evening he tried, by granny's help, to master the alphabet. In fact, it became a passion with the lad, and many an hour in the weeks and months that followed he spent gazing at the placards on the walls, and in trying to explain to the other Arabs that gathered around him the meaning of the mysterious characters.

Benny was naturally a sharp lad, and hence, though his opportunities were few, his progress was by no means slow. Sometimes he startled Joe Wrag by spelling out a long word that he had carried in his head the whole of the day, and asking its meaning. Long words had an especial fascination for him, and the way he brought them out in all sorts of connections was truly amusing.

Nelly manifested no desire to learn to read. If ever she thought about it, it was only to regard it as something infinitely beyond her capabilities; and she seemed content to remain as she was. But if she could get granny to read to her a chapter out of St. John's Gospel, she seemed to desire no higher pleasure. She would sit with a dreamy far-away look in her half-closed eyes, and the smiles that old Joe Wrag loved to see would come and go upon her face like patches of spring sunshine chasing each other across a plain. She never said very much, but perhaps she thought all the more. To honest Joe Wrag she seemed as if ripening for a fairer country, and for a purer and nobler life. Not that she ailed anything. True, she had a little hacking cough now and then, and when she lay asleep a pink spot would glow on either cheek; but nothing more than that.

"Speretual things," mused Joe Wrag one night, as he sat in the door of his hut looking into the fire, "are speretually discerned, an' I b'lieve that child 'as rale speretual discernment: she looks a mighty sight deeper than we thinks she do, that's my opinion. I should like to get howld o' all that passes through her purty little noddle, the little hangel – bless her! As for the boy, 'e's a little hanimal. I reckon the passons would call him a materialist. I don't b'lieve 'e b'lieves nothing but what 'e sees. No speretual insight in 'im – not a bit. P'raps he's like me, don't belong to the elect. Ah, me! I wonder what the likes o' us was born for?"

And Joe went out, and heaped more fuel on the fire by way of diverting his thoughts from a subject that was always painful to him. But when he came back and sat down again, and the fire before him blazed up with fiercer glow, the thoughts returned, and would not be driven away.

"Bless her!" he said. "She sees in the fire only woods, an' meadows, an' mountains, an' streams; an' I only see the yawning caverns o' hell. An' to think I must burn in a fire a thousan' times bigger an' hotter than that for ever and ever without a single moment's ease; scorching on every side, standin' up or lyin' down, always burnin'! No water, no light, no mercy, no hope. An' when a million million years are past, still burning, an' no nearer the end than at the beginnin'. Oh, how shall I bear it – how shall I bear it?"

And big drops of perspiration oozed from his forehead and rolled down his face, testifying to the anguish of his soul.

"I canna understand it – I canna understand it," he went on. "All this pain and suffering for His glory. What kind o' glory can it be, to bring folks into the world doomed aforehand to eternal misery? to give 'em no chance o' repentance, an' then damn them for ever 'cause they don't repent! O Lord a mercy, excuse me, but I canna see no justice in it anywhere."

And once more Joe got up and began to pace up and down in front of the fire; but the thoughts would not leave him. "'Whom He did foreknow,'" he went on, "'them also He did predestinate.' Mighty queer, that a Father should love a part o' His fam'ly an' hate the rest. Create 'em only to burn 'em for ever an' ever! An' what's the use o' the burnin'? That bangs me complete. If 't was to burn away the dross an' leave the metal, I could understand it. I think sometimes there's jist a bit

o' the right stuff in me; an' if hell would burn up the bad an' leave the good, an' give it a chance of some'at better, there 'ud be more justice in it, seems to me. But what am I a-saying? It shows as how I'm none o' the elect, to be talking to myself in this way. What a wicked old sinner I be!"

And once more Joe sat down with a jerk, as if he meant to say, "I'm not going to be bothered with such thoughts any more to-night." But alas! he found that thoughts would come, whether he would or no.

"Pr'aps," he said, "we don't know nowt about it, none o' us. Mebbe God is more marcyfuller than we think. An' I'm sadly banged about that 'makin' an end o' sin;' I don't see as how He can make an end o' sin without making an end o' the sinner; an' whiles there is millions sich as me in hell, there'll be no end to neither on 'em. I'm sadly out in my reck'nin' somewheres, but 'pears to me if there was no sinners there 'ud be no sin; an' the way to rid the univarse of sinners is to get 'em all saved or kill 'em outright."

Much more to the same effect Joe Wrag turned over in his mind that night, but we must not weary the reader with his speculations. Like many other of God's children, he was crying in the darkness and longing for light. He had found that human creeds, instead of being a ladder leading up into the temple of truth, were rather a house of bondage. Men had spread a veil before the face of God, and he had not courage to pull it aside. Now and then through the rents he caught a ray of light, but it dazzled him so that he was afraid there was something wrong about it, and he turned away his face and looked again into the darkness. And yet the night was surely passing away. It wanted but a hand to take down the shutters from the windows of his soul, and let the light – ay, and the love of God that surrounded him, like a mighty ocean – rush in. But whose hand should take down the shutters? Through what agency should the light come in? Let us wait and see.

CHAPTER VII. Two Visits

Tell me the story slowly,
That I may take it in;
That wonderful redemption,
God's remedy for sin.
Tell me the story simply,
As to a little child;
For I am weak and weary,
And helpless and defiled.

— *Hankey.*

One clear frosty evening early in the new year two little figures might have been seen threading their way along Old Hall Street, in the opposite direction to the Exchange. It had not long gone five, and numbers of clerks and warehousemen were crowding into the street and hurrying in the direction of their several homes. But the little figures dodged their way with great skill through the crowded street, still holding each other by the hand and keeping up most of the time a sharp trot.

After pursuing a straight course for a considerable time, they turned off suddenly to the right into a less frequented street. Then they took a turn to the left, and then again to the right. It was very evident they knew the streets well, for they wound in and out, now right, now left, without the least hesitation.

At length they reached a street where all was darkness, save where here and there the flickering rays of a candle struggled through the dirt-begrimed window. This was Bowker's Row, and Benny and his sister paused for awhile before venturing into the darkness.

For several days their little hearts had been aching with curiosity to visit once more their old home. They had no wish to be seen, and as for living again in Addler's Hall, that was altogether out of the question. Still, they were filled with a curiosity that they could not resist to peep at the old spot once more, and ascertain, if possible, how far their father and stepmother were pleased or otherwise with their disappearance.

They had talked the matter over for several nights as they lay in each other's arms in the warm corner under Betty Barker's stairs. They admitted that there were difficulties, perhaps danger, in paying such a visit; but at length curiosity became too strong for them, and they resolved to risk it.

With Nelly, too, there was something more than curiosity. Notwithstanding his drunken habits and his cruelty to Benny, she loved her father, for there had been times when he had made much of her, and called her "his little Nell." Perhaps she did not love her father very deeply. In comparison to "her Benny," he occupied indeed a very third-rate place in her affections. Still he was her father, and now and then he had been kind to her, and hence he was more to her than a stranger, and her little heart longed for one more sight of his face. They did not wait long at the end of Bowker's Row. Ascertaining that the coast was tolerably clear, they darted up the street, and without any one recognizing them, turned into Addler's Hall. From the window of their late home a feeble light struggled, which satisfied them that the house was not empty.

"Take care," said Benny to his sister, "an' don't make no noise if yer can 'elp it."

"Right you are," whispered his sister, and with silent footfalls they glided up to the door and listened.

From within came the sound of voices, but they were the voices of children – strange voices, too, they were.

And Benny looked at his sister and whispered —

"By golly! this are a go. The owd folks 'ave flit, that's sartin."

"Can yer get a peep through the winder, Benny?" said Nelly, with a white, startled face.

"Dunno, but I'll try;" and try he did, but without success.

"Brimstone!" he whispered, scratching his head; "what's us to do? Oh, I 'ave it," he said at length. "Come 'ere, Nell. I's 'mazin' strong, an' I can lift you 'igh 'nough to get a peep."

And, taking his sister in his arms, he managed, not without considerable difficulty, to enable her to look through the window and get a glimpse of the inmates of the room.

"Do 'e know 'em, Nell?" said Benny, after he had lifted her down very carefully.

"No, I dunno who they is; I've never seen 'em afore."

"Well, then, we'll ax 'em." And without further ado he pushed open the door.

There were four hungry and neglected-looking children in the room, the oldest of them about the same age as Benny. They looked up with questioning eyes at the intruders, but said nothing.

"Does you live 'ere?" said Benny, putting on a bold face.

"Ay," was the response from all together.

"How long?" said Benny.

"Week afore last," answered the oldest lad.

"Where's the folks as lived 'ere afore you comed?"

"Dunno."

"Ain't you ever heerd?"

"Ay, we've heerd."

"Where is they, then?" queried Benny.

"Childer is drowneded."

"Golly! are that so?" and there was an amused twinkle in Benny's eye as he put the question.

"Ay," was the response; "we's heerd so."

"Where's their faather?" was Benny's next question.

"Dunno," said the biggest lad.

"Ain't you heerd?"

"Ay, we 'ave."

"Where is he, then?"

"Well, faather says he's gone to Davy Jones, but I dunno where that are."

"Nor I too," said Benny, scratching his head. Then he looked at the oldest lad again.

"Did the man's missus go wi' him, does yer know?" he inquired.

"Never heerd nothing 'bout 'er," said the lad.

"An' yer knows nothin' more 'bout 'em?"

"No, nothin'."

"Mich 'bliged," said Benny, with an air of importance. And taking Nelly by the hand, he walked out of the house.

He hardly knew whether he was most pleased or disappointed with his visit, so he said nothing to his sister until they had left Bowker's Row behind them, and got once more into the region of gaslight. Then, turning to his sister, he said,

"What does yer think o' it now, Nell?"

"Pr'aps father's mended, and 'as gone to live in a better 'ouse," was the quiet reply.

"Mos' likely," said Benny, and again they trudged on in silence.

At length they paused in front of a chapel that abutted close on to the street. A few people were dropping in quietly one after another, and Benny wondered what they did inside. He had never been inside a church or a chapel; they were most of them so grand, and the people that went were

dressed so well, that he had concluded long since that they were not for such poor little chaps as he. But this chapel was anything but grand-looking, and the people who were going in did not look very smart, and Benny began to wonder if he might not dare take a peep inside.

While he was speculating as to what he had better do, a gentleman who had been standing in the vestibule came out, and said in a kindly voice,

"Well, my little ones, would you like to come inside?"

"May us?" said Benny, eagerly.

"Oh, yes," was the reply; "we shall be very glad to see you, and there is plenty of room; come this way."

And without a word they followed him.

"Here," he said, pushing open a green baize door, "I will put you in my pew; you will be nice and comfortable there, and none of my family will be here to-night."

For a few moments the children hardly knew whether they were awake or dreaming; but at length they mustered up sufficient courage to look around them.

The place they thought was very large, but everything felt so snug and warm that they almost wished they could stay there all night. Still the people dropped in very quietly and orderly, until there were between two and three hundred present. Then a gentleman opened the organ and began to play a voluntary; softly at first, then louder, swelling out in rich full tones, then dying away again, like the sighing of a summer's breeze; anon bursting forth like the rushing of a storm, now rippling like a mountain rill, now wailing as a child in pain; now rushing on as with shouts of gladness and thanksgiving, and again dying away like the wind in far-off trees.

Nelly listened with open mouth and wondering eyes, oblivious to everything but the strains of music that were floating all around her. And Benny sat as if transfixed.

"By golly!" he whispered to Nelly, when the piece was ended, "if I ever heerd sich music as that afore. It's made me cold all over; seems to me as if some one were pouring cold water adown my back."

But Nelly answered nothing; her attention was attracted to a gentleman that stood alone on a platform with a book in his hand. Nelly thought his voice was strangely musical as he read the words, —

"Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.
Hide me, O my Saviour, hide,
Till the storm of life be past;
Safe into the haven guide:
Oh, receive my soul at last."

Then all the people stood up to sing, and the children thought they had never heard anything half so sweet before. Great tears welled up in Nelly's brimming eyes and rolled down her cheeks; though if any one had asked her why she wept, she would not have been able to tell.

Then followed a prayer full of devout thanksgiving and of earnest pleading. Then came another hymn —

"Would Jesus have a sinner die?
Why hangs He then on yonder tree?
What means that strange expiring cry?
Sinners, He prays for you and me:

Forgive them, Father, oh! forgive;
They know not that by Me they live."

And once more the congregation stood up to sing. Nelly was even more affected than during the singing of the previous hymn, and while they sang the last verse —

"Oh, let me kiss His bleeding feet,
And bathe and wash them with my tears,
The story of His love repeat
In every drooping sinner's ears,
That all may hear the quick'ning sound,
Since I, even I, have mercy found," —

she fairly broke down, and, hiding her face in her hands, she sobbed aloud.

She soon recovered herself, however, when the preacher began to speak. Clear and distinct his words rang out: —

"Let the wicked forsake his ways, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon."

And Nelly eagerly drank in his words as he went on to tell how we were all wanderers from our Father's house; and how the Father's heart yearned towards us, and how He had invited all to return home, giving the same invitation to every one of His children, and promising an abundant pardon to all that would come. And then he told, by way of illustration, the beautiful parable of the Prodigal Son, and concluded with an earnest exhortation to all the unsaved to come to the Saviour that very night, and to come just as they were.

Nelly felt that she would very much like to "come to the Saviour," but, alas! she did not know how. And when she saw several persons leave their pews and kneel around the communion, she wondered if they were "prodigals going home to the Father."

But what of Benny? Alas! if Joe Wrag had seen him that evening, he would have been more than ever convinced that he was none of the elect, and that he had not one particle of spiritual discernment. The words of the preacher seemed to have a very soothing influence upon our hero, for scarcely had he uttered twenty words of the sermon ere Benny was fast asleep. Nor did he wake again till near the end of the service, when he was startled by a strange voice speaking.

It was one of the men that Nelly had noticed kneeling at the communion. The man stood up, and with a face radiant with his new-found joy, he said, in broken accents,

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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