

The Children's Friend.

VOLUME I.

OXFORD, N. C., WEDNESDAY, MARCH 3, 1875.

NUMBER 9.

SELECTED STORY.

FROM THE CHATTERBOX.

NOBODY'S CHILD.

CHAPTER III.—CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK.

Twenty-three years is early in life to feel it a burden, but Mrs. Rankin felt it such. At sixteen she had been a bright, happy girl, silly and vain, no doubt, but she had had little teaching, and her pretty face brought her many flattering speeches.

No speeches were so pleasant to silly Jenny White as good-looking Joe Rankin's; and she had only known him some few weeks when, with no thought for the future, their hands were put up, and Joe and Jane became man and wife. But wedding ribbons and smiling faces do not last forever; neither do good looks bring work, or silly, idle words manage the money and home.

Joe was not over steady, to begin with, and Jenny knew nothing of management: and when there was no fire or comfort in the small room which they called home, Joe went back to his old companions at the public house, and Jenny soon felt what it was to have nothing coming in to pay for food, fire or shelter, or to suffer bitterly when Joe had work, and his earnings were spent in the flaring gin palace instead of on things for his home.

Evils grow quickly, and by the time two babies were added to their home, Jenny was a worn, hard-worked woman, taking in washing, doing charring, and grumbling at her life and its miseries. Not that she did not love her husband. Deep in her heart she loved him fondly and truly, and though she gave him hard words, and failed in making his home happy, she thought no one so handsome and kind, and excused and pitied his faults.

Time added a third baby to their family, and scarcely was poor Jenny about again, when, without a word of warning, Joe disappeared, leaving his poor young wife and three small children to fight as they might with their poverty.

It was in one of her useless walks in search of her husband that Jenny Rankin had fallen in with our Polly. The acquaintance began by Polly's offer to help the poor, tired, half-starved young mother, to take her three crying babies home. And it had grown into an almost daily visit, as rarely did twenty-four hours pass over, without Polly's presenting herself in the little back attic, either to play with the children, or to listen, half puzzled, but comforting, to the self-reproaches for the past and wonders for the future of poor, sad Mrs. Rankin.

Polly spent many a long hour in Mrs. Rankin's attic, and might have lived there pretty near, but for the child's inbred delicacy. No matter how hungry the little woman was, the more mention of food was enough to send her off. The usual end to her stay with Mrs. Rankin was, 'well, there, I will just run down and fill your kettle, and then I'll be off; Lottie

Jones will very likely be wanting me or, may-be, if she doesn't, Grammie may have come home a bit earlier.'

And a bright afternoon it was for poor, dirty little Polly, if Lottie Jones did want her. Most of us, knowingly or unknowingly, have our fairy land and fairies, and Polly's fairy land was Mr. Jones's parlor, and her fairy, his only daughter, little eight-years old Lottie.

Mr. Jones, as we saw at the beginning of this story, was the overseer of the dust heap, and he rented of Mrs. Kellick her two best rooms. He and his wife were comfortable, respectable people, who liked to have a neat, cosy home, and above all, to have their only child, Lottie, all that was tidy in dress, behavior and bringing up, according to their station.

Polly's knowledge of Lottie was of a limited kind, and to within the last two years had been confined to admiring glances at a distance.

About two winters before the time of which I am writing, Lottie had a serious illness, during which Polly acted as medicine carrier; and her anxiety for the sick child's well-doing so touched the anxious father and mother, that since that time their acquaintance had increased; though Polly still felt how inferior she was to the 'grand' friend. Still her admiration for her overcame everything, and the pleasure of a quarter of an hour's talk on the stairs, or a hasty call from Lottie, to come up to the landing outside her parent's room to see some new frock or toy, was never dimmed by a shade of envy, or marred by the thought that she was expected to be at Lottie's beck and call.

In the dull struggling life of 'Nobody's Child,' the sweetest music she almost ever heard was Lottie's voice calling over the bannisters, 'Polly, I want you here a bit,' and the brightest picture she knew was Lottie's smiling face, with its rosy cheeks and bright blue eyes, shaded by her sunny curls.

CHAPTER IV.—POLLY'S WORK.

Our last chapter was only meant to throw a little light on Polly's life and friends, and I must now go back to the concluding words of the second chapter, and remind you that Polly had the key next day, though it was not given her with a good grace.

'And there is the key,' growled the old woman after giving Polly her bread for the day, 'and if you lose it, or keep me waiting, see if you ever have it again.'

Polly's heart sank a bit when she cast her eyes round the little room, into which the faint light of a dull November day had hardly as yet penetrated, and she had almost finished her bit of bread before she remembered her dog-friends. Starting up she paid her usual visit to them and Master Tapp, and was soon back again, and busy with the old broom and pail. She was so occupied with her work that she hardly heeded how time was speeding, when she was startled by a voice, saying, 'Polly! close beside her. Turning round she saw Lottie's face peering in at the door, and presently

the whole of her small figure was standing within the room.

What a strange contrast the two children presented! Lottie, with her round face, blue eyes, and shining curls, looked sadly out of place in the damp little kitchen, while Polly's small pale face, all black with dirt, and her ill-clad figure, seemed part and parcel of the place. As if to make the contrast stronger a faint November sunbeam had stolen in at the window and seemed to linger lovingly about Lottie, and to leave Polly to look darker and dirtier than ever, as she knelt by her pail in the shadow by the fireplace.

'Whatever are you doing, Polly?' asked Miss Lottie. 'I have called you ever so many times! Why, you are as black as a tinker!'

'I should just think I was,' replied Polly, rising from her knees, and wiping her hands on her frock. 'Grammie has let me clean up instead of her, and you can't think what a job I have had. You never would believe what a lot of dirt there was. You see Grammie's clothes bring back such a lot of dust from the heap, let alone my coming in and out. But doesn't it look clean?' she continued, stepping back a pace, and surveying her work with head on one side.

'Ye-e-es,' answered Lottie, somewhat doubtfully, to those eyes the damp, ill-cleaned room, after her own tidy, bright home, looked wretchedness itself.

But Polly was not discouraged by the hesitating reply to her question. The work had brought its own reward, as honest work always does, and Polly's eyes brightened as she surveyed the result of her labors.

'I've most done now,' she continued; 'there's only the fire to lay ready, and the plates to have a good wash, and then I must give myself a bit of a clean before I go round to Mrs. Rankin's. I suppose it is past twelve, from your being come home from school?'

'Past twelve indeed,' replied Lottie, 'I should just think it was. Why, we have had dinner and mother has washed up, and it is nearly time for me to go back to school again. Why, it is nearly two o'clock!'

'To think of its having taken me all this time!' exclaimed Polly. 'But I thought it must be lateish, as the work had made me hungry. Well, if you don't want me for nothing particular, I'll just finish up, and have a bit of something and be off.'

'No,' said Lottie, 'it was not anything very particular I wanted you for. I had not anything to do, and thought you might like to know that mother has got me a purple merino for best, and I am to have my tuscan hat trimmed up with velvet to match.'

So saying, Lottie departed, leaving Polly to put what she thought were finishing touches, and to eat her remaining crust of bread. It was a very dry one, but Polly ate it with great relish after her work, and looked round with admiring eyes at the state of the room. Gradually her mind wandered away from what was

before her to Lottie's talk of the purple merino and velvet, and on to her own pet vision of how some day she herself would have a new print frock and cape, that no one else had ever worn, and a straw bonnet with red ribbons, with strings that would always keep it on her head, and that then she would be able to go with the school-children for their treat in the summer. It had often been described to her, and her small mind wandered through the delights of the start in the red-curtained vans; the arrival in the country with beautiful trees and grass like those in Victoria Square, only a great deal better; the picnic meal on the grass with as much meat and bread 'as ever you can eat,' to say nothing of cold pudding afterwards; the afternoon wandering about in the warm sunshine picking May, or playing games, or singing till it was time to meet for tea. 'Oh, it would be very, very nice!' and Polly clasped her little black hands and wondered whether such a pleasure would ever fall to her lot. 'I expect not,' she said, half aloud as she rose, and pushing back her hair, tied on her big black bonnet, and turned to go out, adding, as she took her last look, 'The kettle is filled, and the fire is all laid, I do wonder what Grammie will say.'

She placed the key within the bosom of her dress, and was passing out into the street when she paused, and after a moment's hesitation turned back, and tapping timidly at Mrs. Kellick's door, drew forth the key again, and placing it in the landlady's hands, said, 'Grammie gave me the key this morning, and I was just going to take it out with me when I thought I might drop it or something, or very likely she might be in first, so would you just mind it and give it her, if I'm not back?' Prudent little woman! perhaps the time when you will have no need to think for others is not so very far off. It has not quite come yet, so go on and see whether or no you are wanted in the back attic.

Yes, she was sadly wanted. Mrs. Rankin's work had been slack of late, and since she last saw Polly her troubles had been added to by the loss of eighteenth-pence,—no large sum certainly, but shillings and sixpences were scarce articles with poor Mrs. Rankin, and this money had been her hope for bread and fire for her little ones for several days to come. The poor woman, weak with want and anxiety, was sitting before the empty fireplace, as Polly entered, sobbing bitterly, while the baby slept on the heap of straw which formed the only bed, and the two elder children sat cowering by her feet crying for food.

'Is that you, Polly?' sobbed she. 'I thought I had seen the last of you as I have of most things!'

'Why, whatever is the matter now?' answered Polly cheerfully: 'it is only two days ago I was round here, and then you thought things were looking up a bit.'

'So I might then,' answered Mrs. Rankin, 'but it is very different now. Mrs. Jones is ill and

has a nurse in who will do her washing, so there's an end of my bit there for the present. Mrs. Bunce's eighteenth-pence I managed to drop coming home this morning, so where's the use of my trying to keep going when everything goes like this? The children had the last piece of bread to-day, and I haven't where to turn for more, or for coals neither! Ah! it's very hard, and I am pretty nigh tired of trying.' The poor creature buried her face in her hands and rocked herself to and fro, while Polly wondered what she could do or say to comfort her; and by way of beginning she picked up the two elder children and set them in the window-seat, promising if they would not cry she would have a good game 'when mother was better.' Then turning herself to Mrs. Rankin, she said,—

'There now, don't take on so; things do look black to be sure, but they have done that times and times before, and something has always turned up.'

'They never were so bad before,' cried the poor woman; 'the rent is behind awful, and I'm almost afraid to go in and out, for fear Mrs. Robinson should tell me I must go. Where to, I wonder? I've pawned everything and I've no one to turn to. Mrs. Bunce's washing only comes once a fortnight, Mrs. Jones is ill, and the others who used to give me a bit of work are dead or gone away, or too poor, or something. There's nothing left, it seems to me, but for me and the children to get out of the world as fast as we can. We're not wanted in it, that's clear; and I'm sure it's not so pleasant as to make one wish to stop longer. Why,' she continued, rising from her seat and pacing up and down the room, 'that girl up Windmill Street that drowned herself last week was only a year older than me, and hadn't had half the trouble I have had. Ah! she was a wise one, she was, to give it all up.'

Polly started back at those words, and the wild, hard look in Mrs. Rankin's eyes made her heart beat. After a few moments, she found courage to say, 'Please don't talk like that, it do sound so dreadful. I recollect ever so long ago hearing Grandfather (that's Mr. Furnedge, you know) say as how no one has a right to get out of the world before his time, that God gives us our lives, and that it is murder to take them.'

'Mr. Furnedge wasn't starving himself, and hadn't three starving little children neither,' groaned Mrs. Rankin.

'Can't you get the House to help you a bit more?' asked Polly.

'Much you know about the House,' answered her companion; 'never a bit more than a loaf and a shilling will they give me, because they say I can work, and so I would fill I dropped if I could only get it. Then they say I ought to be drafted into the parish I came from, but I can't bear to leave this room; why, it is the one Joe brought me home to after we were married, and where he left me; and if he was to come back and find me gone, why most likely we should never meet again.'