The Children's Friend.

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SELECTED STORY.

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FROM THE CHATTERBOX.

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NOBODY'S CHILD.

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CHAPTER II.—CONTINUED FROM LAST WEEK.

The old woman paused, and turning to the fire continued, after a moment's silence, "Dear, dear, only to think that that's nine years ago! Why, it seems only like yesterday. Me and my master were just a-leaving the heap, when all of a sudden we heard a cry close by us; we looked round, but couldn't see nothing, and were just a-going on when we heard it again, a bit louder. Now, Furmedge he were a great one for children, and never could a-bear to hear them a-crying, so he says to me, 'Mother! I'm sure there's a little one got lost or something just about here; you hold my things while I take a look round.' It were most too dark to see anything, but I let Furmedge go, and by-and-by, back he comes, a-holding what I first thought was a bundle, but which were nothing more nor less than a baby, and that baby was you, Polly. Well, we brought you home, and I felt rather cross-like when Furmedge wouldn't let me go straight round to the station, but instead, went himself to the milk shop and bought a half penny worth of milk! We thought as how you must be about of a ten months; and my! how you did take to the master, and he to you, even that first night! He warmed the milk his very own self, and was as happy as a king when you looked up at him and smiled and crowed. We went the next day to the P'lice Station, and for several days; but we couldn't hear nothing of any body as had lost a baby; and after a bit they told us as how we had better take the child up to 'The House.' The evening as they told us that you was asleep; and just as we were a-turning into bed, ourselves, he says, 'No, mother, I can't see it.' 'See what?' says I. 'Why, taking the little 'un up to the House! I can't bear the thought of such a pretty innocent little thing growing up without ever a kind word, pretty dear! and being sent out into one of them horrid little places, where there's little to eat and plenty of work and hard words; just the very thing to drive a poor girl to be bad. We take other 'finds' and keep 'em and sell 'em, and if we keep things as bring us money, why shouldn't we keep this here other kind of 'find,' which may bring us in something else? Money is a good thing for us poor folks, but it's not everything. The parson tells us kind words and deeds count for something up yonder; and it were only the Sunday before last as how he was preaching about little children. I always thought we poor folks were not called upon for anything more than just to keep straight ourselves, without looking after other people's belongings; but now, I can't believe as how God meant me to find that there poor little thing for nothing more than just to hand her over to 'the House.' No, missus, we'll keep her, and I'm sure we shan't never be the worse off.'

Mrs. Furmedge stopped, and after wiping a tear from her eye with the corner of her coat, she added, in a somewhat shaking voice, 'and we never was, Polly; and somehow I always feel that them four years the master lived after you come to us, were his happiest years. At first he always called you little 'Nobody,' because, he said, you were 'Nobody's Child,' but after a bit that didn't please him, and he says to me, 'Mother,' says he, 'if the little 'un's nobody's child on earth, that's no reason she shouldn't be God's child, so you and me will just see about it.' So he took down his Prayer Book. What a man he always was for his Prayer Book! That very one on the top of the Bible, only it had two covers then; and he looked it all through, until he found out all about them as should stand for a child, and then he says, 'Mother, this here little maid, (you was about two then) must have two god-mothers and one god-father. Now, I'll be her god-father, and you and Mrs. Bates (you mind her, Polly, she as lived in Butcher's Row, a died a twelve months ago last Christmas) shall be her god-mothers, and we will take her up to Christ Church this very next Sunday and have her done. And what's more, she shall be called, Mary, after our own little 'un, who, if she had lived, maybe, might have married and had just such a babe herself.'

Mrs. Furmedge stopped again and looked into the fire, between the sips she took from her tea-cup. Polly, too, had stopped in her labors, and sat with bright eyes listening to the tale of her own early days.

She was the first to break the silence by exclaiming, 'Grannie, I like that story better than any you ever tell me! and I mind grandfather very well, though I weren't very old when he were took. I am ever so much bigger now, and I am sure if you would let me have the key of days, I could mind it quite safe, and I would clean up the place a bit. It would be something to do, as I do get that tired of being about the streets all day, specially when it is so cold and wet, I'd like to make our room clean like Mrs. Kellicks'.

'Oh, that's what you're after, is it?' snapped the old woman; 'well, if you are growing too fine to live along with me, why, just take yourself off, that's all, and find somebody else to bide with. There's lots of folks with cleaner houses; p'rhaps they would have you; p'rhaps they wouldn't!'

A bad ending to a conversation which had been more friendly than was common in that back kitchen, for mother Furmedge was not, as a rule, talkative, and the before-going outbreak was almost an unheard-of thing. Nevertheless, Polly had the key next day, though it was not given her with a good grace by the old woman.

CHAPTER III.—POLLY'S LIFE.

Every one in this great world of ours leads some kind of life, useful or frivolous, for God and our neighbor, or for ourselves, and even little Polly had her life; though, I am sure, she thought little whether it was useful or dull, or for other people. No! Polly was no great thinker, though, from having roughed it a good deal in her short life, she had become sadly sharp, for one so young, over common, every-day matters. She had not had much teaching, as Belmore Gardens were in a poor, new suburb of London, which had not as yet had much attention paid to it. True, there were the schools attached to Christ Church, but Mrs. Furmedge could not spare the two-pence a-week to pay for Polly, and it was only during the winter months of the last three years that a free night school had been opened hard by. Polly had been a regular attendant from the very first, and she had struggled bravely through the first difficulties of both reading and writing, notwithstanding sleepy eyes and cold fingers that came of her long days out of doors during mother Furmedge's absence at the dust heap.

But Polly's days were not without interest to her, and if you had asked her, she would have given you a whole list of duties, (self-imposed, indeed) which, by their due performance, made the happiness of her life; and she would have told you of pleasures undreamt of by any one but herself.

I must try and tell you of these duties and pleasures.

Cleanliness and order were not, we have seen, marks of Mrs. Furmedge's back kitchen. The 'tidying up,' given before her early start in the morning for her work at the dust heap, was not fitted to teach her much of either of those virtues, neither was the 'regular turn-out,' now and then, a much better school for her. Polly's day might be said to begin when 'Mother Furmedge' closed her door and pocketed the key.

The hour of this proceeding varied according to the time of the year, as did also Polly's provisions for the day vary according to the family finances, from nothing at all to a slice of bread, or a half-penny to buy a bit of 'spotted dick' for dinner.

In her earlier years Polly always went with her guardians to the heap, where her young life was spent grubbing among the dust, till her baby figure looked like nothing more nor less than a small living dust heap. This practice had, however, been given up for some time, 'Grannie' having decided that she learnt no good there.

Poor little woman! perhaps she did not; but were the streets a more instructive place for her? At any rate they furnished her friends, and perhaps the kindest of them, for dogs and cats, when friendly, *look* kind, and say no sharp cutting things. Our Polly had a strange way of attracting her four-footed friends, especially as her command of food, which is the most usual way of gaining their affections, was small indeed. Most days she contrived to stint herself of some part of the fare left her by 'Grannie,' to carry around the corner for the benefit of four or five dogs, who were always on the look-out for her coming, the first thing in the morning. The portion for each was, at best, very small, and frequently nothing at all; but there was a friendship between the child and the creatures which made the rough jumps and licks as acceptable to the one, as the 'hie there, poor fellows!' and caressing pats were to the others.

Perhaps the longing *for* love, and the *giving*, which dwelt in the heart of 'Nobody's Child,' found an answer in the hearts of these homeless dogs. Each animal had its special charm to her; and the half starved, dirty, white terrier, who seemed more prepared for kicks and cuffs than kind words, had as warm a place in Polly's affections as any dainty 'Toy,' or 'King Charles,' in those of a fashionable young lady.

But Polly's friends were not all four-footed. She had others, among whom was Mr. Tapp, an old cobbler, living in a narrow alley turning out of Belmore Gardens. How the acquaintance had begun, or what the link was between the child and the surly old man, it would be hard to say, as Tapp was a man of few words, and his only notice of her presence was a 'humph!' now and then, in answer to some of Polly's small services or flow of chatter. As regularly as the clock chimed half-past seven in the morning, so regular was Master Tapp's window, in the small 'lean-to,' half above and half below ground, which served him for shop, living, and bed room, opened, and a small jug and a farthing were placed on the sill, where the owner's watchful eyes, notwithstanding their shaggy, over-hanging brows, could see that none but the right person touched them.

This right person was our Polly, and before many minutes had passed, she was sure to take jug and money, and carry them to the nearest milk shop, where the small jug was filled with milk, the farthing received, and the jug returned to Polly, who briskly conveyed it back to the old shoemaker.

No word of thanks for this small office was given, neither was it looked for; and for some days this was all that passed between them.

From time to time, however, when Polly's daily errand was done, some such words as the following were addressed to her: 'just look in about twelve.' She knew that these words meant that some job of boot-mending had to be then taken home to some distant customer of Master Tapp's, and that she was to do it. Payment for these small services there was none, nor had the thought of such a thing crossed Polly's mind. She knew that, though the old man held his head up, and reckoned her and the dust heap folks quite beneath him, money was nearly as scarce in Master Tapp's 'leant-to,' as in Mother Furmedge's back kitchen, and though no word had ever been spoken between them on the subject, it was understood on both sides that these things were to be done by Polly 'for love and not reward.'

In mild weather, and when the old man was in good temper, the window used to be left open after the arrival of the milk, or on Polly's return from an errand; and on the sill, with her feet outside, the little woman sat and, with 'Fluff,' the cobbler's old cat, nestled on her lap, she would babble away for half an hour in something of the following strain:

'I never came a-nigh such a set of dogs as I have now for friendliness; I can't see how it is no one else takes to them more. It is a down-right pleasure to see 'Buffey,' (I always call him that because I can't find out any name he will answer to) waiting for me of a morning; he sits just where he can see me coming round the corner, with his head on one side, and both ears cocked up, and a-smiling as good as any body. When I first knowed him down by the market, he always walked ever so far away from me, just as if he thought I was a-going to kick him, and now he jumps up and licks my hands as good as any of 'em. 'Growler' don't make such a fuss, and I am glad he don't; as if he took to jumping up, he'd have me over in a minute. I should be down right sorry though, if he went away, as I'm fond of his broad, white back (leastways it would be white if it wasn't for the smuts and dust), and short grey ears, and bob-tail and blinking old eyes. 'Snap' does fight so, and is always coming with a scratch, or his eye bunged up, or his ear torn, when I'm sure he might have got a lesson from having the other ear clean tore off. I'd like to know sometimes what becomes of the dogs when they give up coming, especially when it has taken me so long to find out what their names are. Why, sometimes it takes me months to find out what they will answer to! I always tries 'Toby' first, and then I goes on to Dick, Charlie, and such like. Why, sometimes I have to think for hours for some new name to try with some of them.'

The talk, of course, varied according to the subject in the small talker's mind, but it was always Polly who spoke and not Master Tapp, who worked on the same as if no one was by. It was closed either by Polly's having talked her subject out, or by the old man's rising and, without further ado, closing the window, and leaving the child to turn her steps elsewhere.

The 'elsewhere' differed. Some days it meant a long wandering in the streets, a game with any stray child she came across, or a long sit in the warm sun on a door step. More frequently it was a visit to a young wife in a small alley near the Gardens.

ADVICE TO BOYS.—You are made to be *kind*, generous and magnanimous, says Horace Mann. If there is a boy *in* school who has a club-foot, don't let him *know* you ever saw it. If there is a boy with ragged clothes, don't *talk* about rags in his hearing. If there is a lame boy, assign him some part in the play which does not require much running. If there is a dull one, help him to get his lesson.