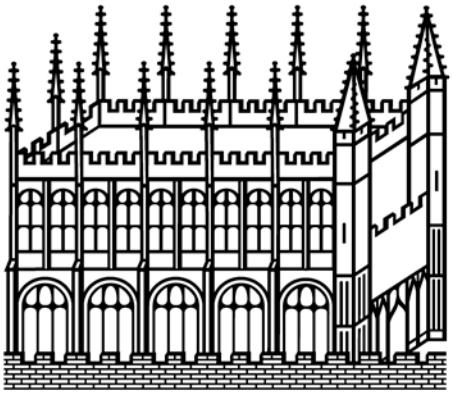

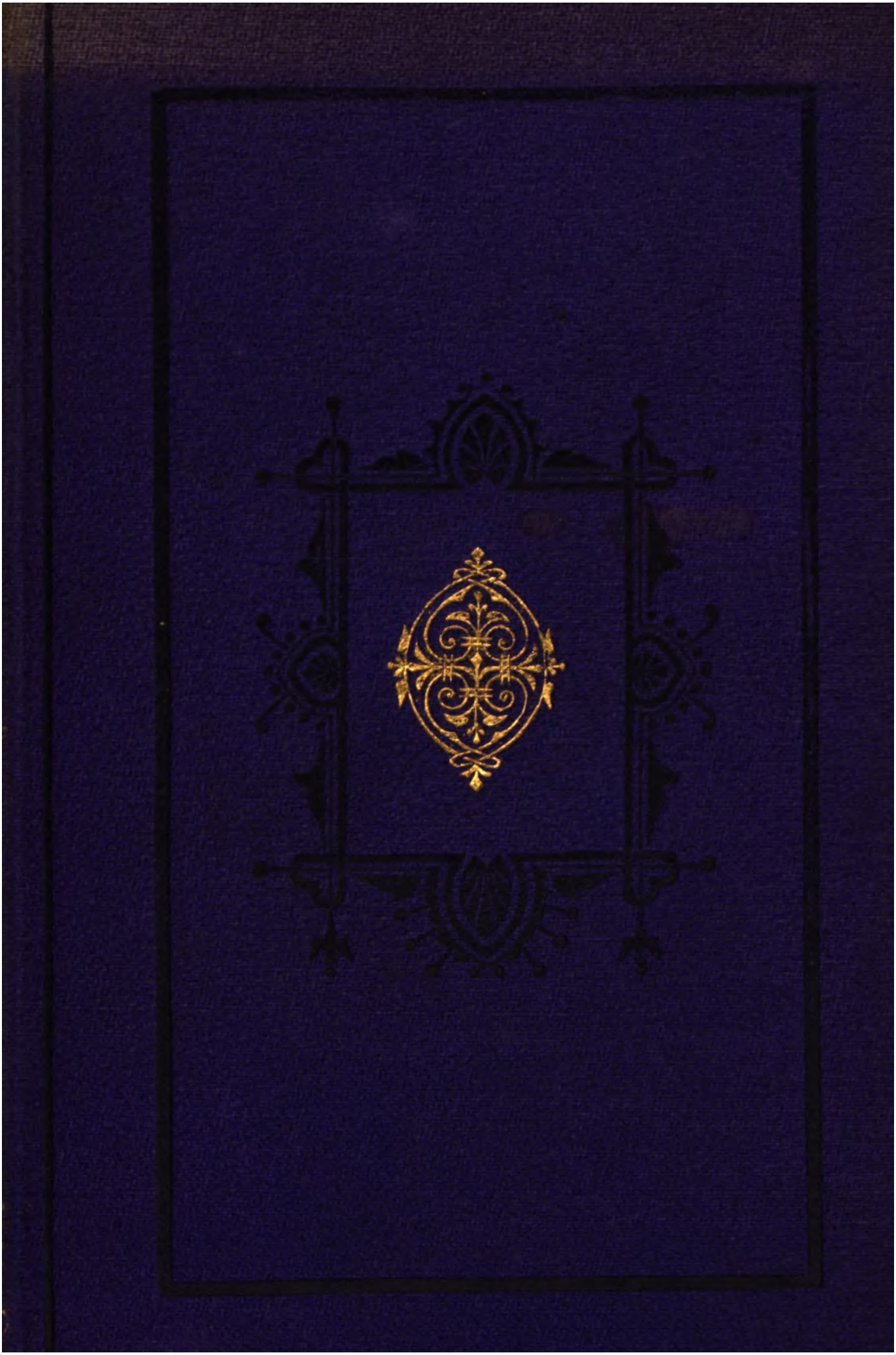

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HELEN FREEMAN;

OR,

ALWAYS BE TRUTHFUL.

A Story of Field-gang Life.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "THE HEARTHSTONE BOY."

PUBLISHED UNDER THE DIRECTION OF
THE COMMITTEE OF GENERAL LITERATURE AND EDUCATION
APPOINTED BY THE SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING
CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE.

LONDON:
SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE;
SOLD AT THE DEPOSITORIES:
77, GREAT QUEEN STREET, LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS;
4, ROYAL EXCHANGE; 48, PICCADILLY;
AND BY ALL BOOKSELLERS.

CLARENDON PRESS, OXFORD.

FOR THE SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE.

HELEN FREEMAN'S WORD.

CHAPTER I.

THE ACCIDENT.

It was a pouring wet day in the early spring. It had been raining every day for a week, and everything about the village of Hayslope had a drenched despondent look, from the dripping thatch of the cottages to the few draggle-tailed hens that picked up their food on the common, or about the village street. Even the children, as they came out of school, looked as though all their spirits had been washed out of them; and they stepped along the rutty road, or picked their way between the pools of water on the path in a quiet subdued fashion, as though going home was not a very joyful

affair, or one very much to be desired at all. Several of them loitered inside the doorway of the school as if very unwilling to depart, until the teacher came out and said they must go, as she wished to fasten the door.

They were all little things, ranging from four to ten years of age—there were very few over nine. One of these, the eldest girl in the school, was just ten, and she, with her younger sister, a fair-haired delicate child of eight, was the last to leave the shelter of the school porch, and step out into the sloppy street.

"Oh, dear! I wish it wasn't half-holiday," said little Alice with a shiver, as she stepped into one of the pools of water, that wetted both her feet and splashed her thin cotton frock, "it's ever so much better at school than it is at home. I wonder when farmer Giles will let father have the things to mend the thatch. Mother says if it had been done last summer it wouldn't have been so bad, and the water couldn't have come in to make the floor wet, and put the fire out as it does now."

"Father said he should try and do something to it this afternoon," said her elder sister with a sigh, as she thought of the dis-

comfort of their home as well as of everything outside. "Don't cry, Alice," she added, "mother has got so much to worry her that we must try and help her."

Encouraged by her elder sister's example, Alice dried her tears, and walked bravely into the little desolate cottage, although it looked very comfortless after the warm schoolroom. There were a few smoking embers in the fire-place, but the hearth, and for nearly a yard round it, was a pool of water, into which there was a continual drip—drip—from the roof above, which made it very uncertain which would gain the victory, the fire or the water.

Mrs. Freeman looked up from her task of trying to coax the fire to burn as the two girls entered. "How late you are to-day, Helen," she said, rather crossly, "your father will be in to dinner directly, and I can't get this bacon to boil. Go and take the baby off the bed," she added, "he has been screaming all the morning."

The little inner room which served as a bedroom was far more comfortable than the outer room to-day, and Helen tried to soothe the baby and get rid of her own tears before

venturing to go back. But baby was cold, and would not be hushed, and Mrs. Freeman was obliged to come and take him herself, while Helen spread the cloth on the little round table, and set her father's knife and fork, and got out the bread and treacle for her mother and the children. The luxury of boiled bacon and cabbage was only known once a week to them, and was not expected on any other day than Sunday; but Helen could not help wishing that her father was not coming home to dinner, for the bacon smelled very savoury when the lid of the saucepan was lifted to see if it boiled, and the bread and treacle did not look at all tempting to-day.

In a few minutes the door opened, and a bluff, hearty looking man entered, and just afterwards a boy, about eight, who had been to meet his father in spite of the rain.

"Father's got the straw, and he's going to mend the thatch this afternoon, ain't you, father?" said the boy.

"Aye, aye, my boy; I'll do a something to keep out this wet. What a spitting that fire makes," he added, as he took his seat at the table.

Helen held the baby while her mother took up the bacon, and cut the bread and treacle, while Alice and Tom stood and watched their father helping himself to huge slices of cabbage, and a moderate sized piece of the bacon.

"You shall have a taste presently, my girl," he whispered to Alice, noticing her look.

"There's none to spare for them, John, and I won't have it," said his wife, overhearing the whispered words, and speaking very sharply.

"Oh, we can spare just a little bit, mother," said Freeman, coaxingly.

"No, not a bit; that's all there is to last you the rest of the week, and how are you to work if you don't eat? Bread and treacle is quite good enough for us, and we like it;" saying which Mrs. Freeman took the rest of the bacon away, and put it into the cupboard.

"Men are only like children where victuals are concerned; they would eat all to-day and go without to-morrow," she said, a little testily, as she came back to the table and took up a thick slice of bread and treacle. She kept a pretty strict watch upon her husband, to see that he ate all that was on

his plate himself; but in spite of her watchfulness Alice received two or three little pieces as she stood close to her father's chair. Tom scorned to take it when offered to him, and Alice refused at last, when she saw that her brother did so.

Mrs. Freeman saw nothing of this little by-play, for it was carried on by signs and looks while she was busy with the loaf and treacle-jar; but when enough had been cut and dinner was nearly over, the cause of her unusual crossness came out.

"Mary Perkins has been in this morning," she said, "and they are going to send little Polly to work."

"Oh! are they?" said her husband, shortly.

"Yes, and she isn't so old as Nelly there."

Nelly shivered, and would have got under the table, or anywhere to have been forgotten just then, but her father's next words gave her immense relief.

"Other people have a right to do as they like with their children, of course, and so have I, and I don't mean to let them join any children's gang while I can work for them myself," he said, firmly.

Mrs. Freeman fidgetted on her seat for some minutes, but at length she said, "Well, John, I don't know what we are to do; Nelly is the biggest girl in the school now, and the neighbours are all asking me when she is going to do something for herself. Fourpence a day is not to be laughed at when there are so many mouths to fill," she added.

"Of course it isn't," said John, "and if it was only just the work to be thought of I'd not say a word against her going. But I tell you, wife, if you had seen what I have with the boys and girls of the field gang you wouldn't want Nelly to go among them. You were a servant, you know".

"But I've seen the boys and girls coming through the village," interrupted his wife; "they're rude and noisy, but Nelly need not be like them."

"How can she help it when she must be always with them?" said Freeman, rising from his seat and looking up at the damaged thatch.

"Can you mend it in the wet, father?" asked Tom.

"I must do something to it to keep the wet out," replied his father, and he went out to

borrow a ladder of a neighbour to set about his work at once.

Tom wanted to carry the straw up the ladder to his father—he would have done anything to be allowed to mount it. "I could help father, I'm sure I could," he said, beginning to cry. "And I shouldn't slip any more than he will."

"Oh yes you would—you're only a boy; but father's a man, and he'd hold tight," said Alice.

"No, he wouldn't; father's a good hand at thatching, and he wouldn't hold anything," said Tom.

Little notice was taken of the children's dispute inside the cottage; but the rain ceasing for a little while they went to stand at the open door, where it was renewed. Freeman at his work heard every word that was said, and he turned round with some straws in his hand and crept towards the door, to lean over and tickle the two children. Whether it was that he tried to be too quick about this, or the thatch, being wet, made it unusually slippery, cannot be known, but the next minute he had fallen from the roof of the cottage, and lay groaning on the ground

below. Tom and Alice both screamed, and Mrs. Freeman ran out in a fright and attempted to raise her husband.

But he only groaned the more loudly, crying, "Don't touch me; run for the doctor, I've broken my leg, I'm sure I have."

The children's terror increased when they saw their mother burst into tears, and Tom's screams and Alice's sobs soon brought several neighbours to their assistance. With their help Mrs. Freeman managed to get her husband indoors, and then one of them ran for the parish doctor, who lived in the next village.

The neighbours shook their heads gravely as they looked towards the bed where the sufferer lay groaning. When the doctor arrived and examined the patient, he said his leg was broken in two places, and he would not be able to go to work again for three months.

Mrs. Freeman lifted her hands in terror when she heard it. "Three months!" she repeated, "why, we shall all be starved in a month, doctor!" and she burst into a flood of tears.

"Now, my good woman, I cannot have your

dishonest, and almost everything that was bad. Wickedness is not confined to either town or country. Men's hearts are evil everywhere, as some of these poor children's friends knew to their cost, but which Mrs. Freeman did not seem to believe.

"Tom is such a good boy," she said, "and a kinder, better-tempered girl than Helen there can't be," she added, when talking to the farmer about their going to work in his fields.

"I can't promise that they'll keep so, you know, my good woman," said the farmer, taking a pinch of snuff, to give Mrs. Freeman time to think about what he had said.

"Oh yes, they will," replied Mrs. Freeman, "I'm not at all afraid, and they shall be here by five o'clock next Monday morning."

So the bargain was concluded, and Mrs. Freeman went home with a lighter heart, busily counting what the children's earnings of fourpence a day would amount to in a week. It took her a long time to reckon, and she had almost walked the three miles of wet muddy road, and come within sight of her own house, before she could be quite sure that four shillings was the correct sum. It

seemed a large one to her, and with the half-crown a week her husband's master had agreed to allow them would almost make up the sum he earned. But Mrs. Freeman was careful not to let her husband know anything of the business she had been upon. When the children were fairly at work, and he saw that they did not grow like the rest, he would be glad she had done it; but now she knew it would only make him fret worse than he did; for it was the thought of his wife and children wanting food that made the pain in his leg so hard to bear.

That evening, when the medicine sent by the doctor had made poor Freeman sleep for a little while, his wife told the two children that they would be obliged to go to work now, to get bread for their father while he was ill.

Tom looked pleased at the prospect, and began clapping his hands and capering about the room, until his mother told him to be quiet, or he would disturb his father. Helen, however, could not help looking rather frightened as she thought of the big rough boys, and coarse rude girls, who had more than once caught and beat her out of mere mis-

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chief. But she would not give way to this. She forced back the tears that were welling up to her eyes, as she said bravely and meekly, "Yes, mother, I'll go if I can do anything for father."

CHAPTER II.

THE FIRST DAY AT FIELD WORK.

MONDAY morning dawned grey, cold, and misty, but, long before the dawn, Tom and Helen Freeman were trudging along the lanes towards Oak Farm. They avoided the groups of boys and girls on their way to work, and Helen held Tom's hand, as though she would keep him to herself, but no one appeared to notice them until they drew near to the Farm, when one of the boys exclaimed, "Halloo! who are you?"

"I'm Tom Freeman, please," answered Tom, in a frightened voice, clinging closer to Helen.

There was a loud burst of laughter from the others standing near, and Helen threw her arms about her brother just as the boy attempted to pull him away.

"Come, leave him," he said, "what business have you here?"

"Oh, don't," said Helen, piteously, "we're

going to work at Oak Farm, for father's broken his leg, and can't move."

"You're a girl, aren't you?" said the boy who seemed to be the leader of the group, for in the half-darkness of the early morning nothing but the outline of the figure could be seen.

"Yes, I'm Tom's sister," said Helen, meekly.

"Well then, Tom's sister, you'll have to do as I tell you, if you come to Oak Farm, for I'm master here," said the boy, roughly.

But Helen still held fast to Tom. "Do you hear what I say, you girl?" said the young tyrant, again attempting to drag Tom away.

"Oh, please let Tom stay with me, and I'll do everything you tell me," cried Helen, in a voice of anguish.

Whether the boy would have acceded to her request or not, is uncertain, but at that moment the faint sound of a church clock striking five was heard, and the whole troop set off with a rush, for they ought to be in the fields by five.

Tom and Helen stood shivering with fright and cold for a few minutes after they had gone, and then slowly walked up the lane and round to the old farm house.

"Halloo! late the first time?" said the Bailiff, in a harsh voice, as he saw the two children. Neither dared to answer, but looked down upon the ground, half hoping, yet dreading that he would send them back again. But the Spring was a busy time with the farmers, and the work of sowing peas had already been planned for these two, and so with a threat to stop part of their wages if they were late again, he sent them to the field where their work lay.

There was a man standing near the gate, and he soon shewed them what they were to do. He gave Helen a short wooden dibber to thrust into the soft wet ground, and make a hole of some inches in depth. These had to be made in regular lines up and down the field. Behind her walked a boy—the very boy who had frightened her in the lane—carrying a basket of peas, and he was told to look after the girl and see that she did her work properly, and drop a pea into each hole. Behind him, walked little Tom, whose work was to cover up the peas in the hole by scraping the mould over them, and filling it up. Helen looked up with horror into the face of her tormentor as the man turned

away and left the field. She felt inclined to run after him and ask for some other work—harder work—anything so that she might not have this boy near her; but the man had leaped over the gate and was gone before she could make up her mind to do this, and so she turned and walked slowly towards the ridge where she was to begin.

"So you've moved at last, have you?" said the boy, "I wondered how long you were going to stand staring after that man." "Now, look here," he said, turning to Tom, "If you don't cover up the peas quick, I'll kick your sister, and if you don't dig the holes as fast as I drop the peas, I'll kick this young Tom." With which threat, he gave Helen a violent push that nearly threw her down, but which certainly had the effect of making her begin her work. The wet soft earth clung to her boots, so that her foot stuck at each step, and her fingers were so cold that she could hardly hold the dibber, but still she managed to do her work quick enough to please the young tyrant for a few minutes; but as her fright wore off her strength gave way, and her footsteps flagged, until at last the boy

had dropped his pea into the last hole made before the next was ready.

"Now then, are you ready for a kick, Tom?" he shouted, which had the effect of making Helen move a little quicker for a minute or two. But her strength would not hold out long this time, and she was soon lagging again, for hands and feet were numbed with the cold, and she began to feel sick and giddy too.

"Now then," cried the boy, giving her a push. It was not a very violent one, but Helen fell flat on her face; and, with a loud cry, Tom rushed forward to help her up. "Oh! Helen, Helen!" he said, bursting into tears. "There, you just leave Helen alone," said the boy, pushing him aside. But Tom would not be kept away.

"She's my sister, and you shan't knock her down," he said, clenching his fist.

"Oh, shan't I, we'll see about that," and he gave her a kick as she was attempting to rise, which made her fall down again.

The next minute Tom struck him a blow in the face with all his might. "Now, do that again," he said.

"Yes, I will do it again, and serve you

the same," he said, giving Helen another kick, and catching Tom by the hair of his head. Tom kicked and plunged, and managed to overturn the basket of peas, but he was conquered at last. The boy beat him cruelly, in spite of Helen's tears and entreaties and promise to work faster if he would let her brother go.

"You'll believe I'm master here, now, perhaps," he said, releasing him at last, and picking up the empty basket.

Helen took up her dibber to return to her work, but it was instantly knocked from her hand again. "What do you mean by that, you insolent little baggage! Pick up all the peas directly, and put them in this basket again. If you don't pick the peas up quick, I'll give you another whacking," he said, turning towards Tom.

Helen contrived to whisper a word of comfort to her brother, as they stood close together picking up the peas, but Tom's passion had been so thoroughly roused that he was too angry to listen to anything she said to him just now. He turned an angry, scowling, defiant face towards the boy as the last of the peas were picked up. He saw the look,

and nodded, "You'd better look out, or you'll catch it again." "Oh, don't, don't beat him again!" cried Helen. "There, you go on with your work, or else I'll give it to you," returned her tormentor.

Helen turned to her work, and they went on till breakfast time without anything more occurring. They had brought some dry bread for breakfast, and bread and treacle for dinner, and the farmer had agreed to give them some warm skimmed milk, if they brought a jug. But their tyrant, Jack, forbad their leaving the field, when he went to meet his companions at the barn; but he took Helen's tin mug with him, and she hoped he would bring them a little warm milk when he came back. Jack, however, had no intention of doing any such thing. He wanted the mug for himself, for he had left his own at home, and he walked up to the barn carrying this as a trophy of his victory over the two children, and amused the rest with his account of how he had served them.

It seemed a good joke to most of them, and they determined to have some fun at the new comers' expense, when they were going home.

"They'll soon know our ways, and be like

us," said one, "so we may as well have the lark while we can get it."

"Yes, they're such a couple of stupids," said another, "I used to be fond of my sister Mary, once, but I know better than that now."

"Aye, look out for yourself, my boy, that's it," said Jack, approvingly.

"They'll learn to look out for themselves, and leave other people alone, before long," returned his companion. "You'll teach this young Tom that it'll be as much as he can do to take care of his own skin."

"To be sure," replied Jack, with his mouth full of bread. If there were any among the crowd who pitied the two who were under the power of their tyrant leader, they dared not shew it, and so, to save themselves sundry kicks and thumps that too often fell to their share, they joined in the laugh and applauded Jack for what he had done.

When the meal was ended, they separated to different parts of the farm, and Jack, giving the tin mug he had taken from his victims a kick to the further end of the barn, went back to his work.

Helen looked disappointed when she saw

him come back without the milk, but she dared not ask him about it, or where her mug had been left. Tom was disappointed too, but he was defiantly angry as well, and when Jack's back was turned towards him, he shook his fist at him, in a threatening manner. Helen saw this, and it put her into a fright, but she could not speak to her brother, for Jack seemed determined to drop the peas faster than she could drill the holes, and so she was obliged to give all her attention to her work to keep ahead of him.

Up and down the field, stooping to the low ridges and poking in her dibber every two or three inches, so the weary day passed, and weary enough Helen found it. Her back ached with the unnatural posture, her feet were wet through, and her clothes as well, from the damp earth, and her fingers were chilled and blistered with the cold and using her dibber, and she longed to be at home hours before it was time to go there.

The unhappy day came to a close at last. The last hole was pricked, and the last pea covered, and not even the tyrannical Jack could keep them in the field any longer. Helen felt stiff and cramped, and could not

walk upright for some minutes, but she contrived to get before her tormentor, and then taking Tom's hand, she whispered, "Let's make haste home before the others come."

The "others" were, however, in as great a hurry to get home as she was, apparently, for they overtook them in the middle of the lane, and greeted them with a shower of mud and stones. Tom threw off his sister's hand as one of these struck him, and taking up a handful from the road, returned the assault.

"Oh, don't, Tommy, don't, they'll only beat you the more," cried Helen. "Let's run away from them," and she seized the child's hand and compelled him to run a few yards. This was just what the others wanted, and with a loud whoop and shouts of laughter they ran too.

For Helen to escape was impossible, and she was soon in the midst of the crowd of boys and girls, who jeered and laughed at her fright, and asked if she was going to tell of them.

"Go away, and let us get home," said Tom, spitting at one of the girls, "I hate you, I do, you are nasty, wicked, cruel—cruel;" and overcome with his own passion, he was obliged to stop for want of breath.

"That's it, go it, little one," said a boy, clapping his hands, while the rest laughed, "can't you think of a few more pretty names? I suppose the parson taught you to call people names at his fine school."

"No, they did not," said Helen, anxious to save the honour of the school. "Tom, don't call them names," she said.

"Oh, let him, if he likes; it pleases him, and don't hurt us," said one of the girls. "Don't you, Tom," said Helen, coaxingly. "Come along, and let's make haste home."

"Yes, let's make haste home," repeated the rest, and they hustled round the two children so as to prevent them from walking together. In this way they trudged for nearly two miles, when most of the party had to take a different road, and the rest growing tired of the sport, left them to go along as they liked.

Poor little Tom burst into a passion of tears as soon as they were out of hearing. "I won't go to work there again, that I won't," he said. "That big ugly Jack shan't beat me just as he likes. I'll tell father, and—"

"Oh, hush, Tom, we mustn't tell father while he's bad," interrupted Helen. "You

know mother said if we didn't go to work and get some money, father would die for want of bread and doctor's stuff."

"Well, I know, and I'll go to work, but I won't go in the field with that Jack again," said Tom.

"But there's no other work you can do," said Helen with a sigh, vainly wishing they could both escape from this dreadful field labour. She looked after the ragged motley crowd led by Jack, and wondered whether she and her brother would become like them, as they said they would. It seemed impossible that she or Tom could ever utter the dreadful words she had heard, and which they had tried to make her repeat; and yet as she looked at little Tom's angry scowling face, she shuddered as though she could see that the work had already begun in him—the evil passions were already gaining the mastery of her little brother, young as he was.

"Tommy, dear, you mustn't get so angry," she said, gently.

"What, not when they beat me and call me names?" he said.

"No, dear, you must try—"

"Yes, I know, I'll try, I'll try to kill that Jack, some day, for he's no business to beat me," interrupted her brother, with clenched fist.

Helen was almost frightened—"Oh, Tommy, Tommy, you don't know what you're talking about," she said, "you must'nt kill anybody, you know teacher and Mr. Lennox—"

"But Mr. Lennox doesn't have a big man beating him," interrupted Tom; "I won't go to work again there, Nell," he added.

"Oh, but think of poor father, how bad he is now, and how he's been to work for us!" said Helen. "Look here, Tom, we must go to work, and I want you to promise not to tell father about Jack. The work isn't so bad, you know," she added, "and we can say we did the work very well, and the man that shewed us how to do it was kind, and then he'll think it's all right, and he'll get well all the sooner. But if we tell him Jack beat us, he'll be worse, and—"

"But teacher said one day we were always to tell the truth," interrupted Tom, who felt that such a promise would be very hard to keep."

"Well, I did'nt say you were to tell a story,

did I?" said Helen, quickly. She forgot that the half-truth she had resolved upon telling was only another kind of falsehood, as it was intended to deceive her father. The motive she had for doing it was kind and generous; but that did not make it less a falsehood, or less wrong, and Helen learned this afterwards. If she had only told her father all that had happened that day, when he questioned her about it, much sorrow and suffering might have been escaped, both by herself and her father, as well as others; but before they reached home, she had persuaded Tom to promise not to tell about Jack until their father got better, and so, to his anxious questionings, after tea, they both said they had got on very well with the work, and did not mind it at all.

"Our Nellie's a brave girl, wife," said Freeman, with a touch of pride, after the children had gone to bed.

"To be sure she is," said her mother; "and she's proud to be at work, and helping a bit, now, I can tell you."

"Yes, I can see she is, bless her, for she never made a single complaint about anything."

"Well, now I hope you and Mr. Lennox will be satisfied that field work isn't so bad after all," said Mrs. Freeman, triumphantly.

"Well, well, Mr. Lennox will be glad enough to know things aren't so bad as—"

"So bad, of course not. Of course the poor things must laugh and have a bit of fun when they've done work, but what's the harm of that? No, no, Helen and Tom are all right, and they may as well be bringing in some money at once, as waiting for Mr. Lennox to get them places in the town."

Freeman was not quite so easy upon the subject as his wife, but now he had questioned Helen, and heard nothing against the young labourers, many of his former objections were set aside, and he resolved to let the children continue the work, at least until he was better.

CHAPTER III.

DOROTHY MARCH.

"A CHILD—send a child to me! a girl, too, above everything else! What am I to do with it? and farmer March scratched his head in dire perplexity, as he threw the letter on the table and paced up and down the room.

Presently the door opened, and an elderly woman, the farmer's housekeeper, put her head in at the door. "The man's come from—"

"Oh, bother the man!" interrupted the farmer, "here, Molly, they're going to send me a girl to mind. She's my brother Sam's little girl, and I promised poor Sam I'd look after her if anything happened to him."

"Is Mr. Sam dead?" asked the woman.

"Yes, poor fellow, he's gone. I thought he'd have lasted a year or two, yet, when I

saw him a month ago,"—and the farmer drew his sleeve hastily across his eyes to dispel the mist that had gathered in them.

"Then I suppose we shall be obliged to have the child, though what we're to do with her here at Oak Farm, with only me and Peggy. She must have a governess," she added, with a sudden thought.

Farmer March looked as though it had been proposed to turn his house into a garrison. "A governess!" he uttered, "I'll have no women folks about me, the girl must do as she can."

"How old is she?" asked Molly.

"Nine or ten, I suppose. Her aunt has taken care of her since her mother's death, and talks of Dorothy being a careful, clever, sensible little girl, who will not give much trouble."

"So much the better. When does she come here?"

"Next week. I am going to my brother's funeral, and will bring her back with me. Did those children from Hayslope come to work this morning?"

Molly nodded. "They were late though," she said.

"That won't do, they must be kept to time. The woman talked about their being good. Good or bad is nothing to me, so long as they do my work, and don't waste my time. Tell Rogers he must be sharp about the time with all of them."

And he turned to look at the fire, and think of all his choice things being turned over, and the whole house upset by this little Dorothy; while Molly went to tell the news that Oak Farm was to be pulled to pieces, and herself and Peggy worn out with this little girl, who was clearly of no use in the world but to make trouble.

"Dorothy, too," said Molly, tartly, "I shall call her Dolly; and you do the same, mind, Peggy."

Peggy nodded. "Very well," she said, meekly. Peggy, though some years older, both in service and years, would not have thought of contradicting anything Molly said. As she sat clicking her knitting-needles—for her old enemy the rheumatics had seized both feet again—she fell to wondering what sort of a child this Dorothy March would prove to be, and began to wish for the coming of this little girl who was expected to give so

much trouble to everybody at the old farm-house.

She dared not let Molly know anything of this eager curiosity, but she was glad when the day came wher. her master was expected to bring home the child; and she contrived to edge herself up to the window, when she heard the rattling wheels of the light cart that had been sent to meet them at the rail-way station some five miles off.

She caught sight of a little figure dressed in black, with a prim bonnet surrounding a sad weary-looking little face, and that one glance gave Dorothy a place in Peggy's heart at once. "Poor little motherless lassie," she said, as she hobbled back to her chair, "I hope Molly will bring her into the kitchen as soon as she's got her things off."

But Molly had resolved not to let the child have too much liberty in running about the house, and so she did not leave the parlour until she went to bed, and Peggy had to be content with the passing glimpse she thus had of her.

The next morning, however, Dorothy followed Molly from the parlour, and did not pause until she reached the kitchen door,

where she stood still for a minute or two looking at Peggy with her knitting. Molly had not noticed the child, but passed on to the dairy.

"Please I am Dorothy March," she said, as Peggy turned and looked at her.

"Yes, my dear, Mr. March brought you to Oak Farm last night. Will you come and shake hands with me? I knew your father when he was a little boy, only as big as you."

"You knew my papa?" said Dorothy, coming forward at once.

"Dolly, go back to the parlour," commanded Molly, stepping back from the dairy.

"Dolly!" repeated the child, "I am not Dolly, I am Dorothy March. Aunt Phœbe never called me Dolly." And she drew herself up to her full height as she spoke, but still stood holding Peggy's hand.

"Go back to the parlour directly," said Molly.

"I don't want to stay in the parlour," said the little girl; "there's nothing to do there, and Aunt Phœbe said I was to be useful if I came to live at Oak Farm."

Even Molly could not help laughing at

the quiet serious way in which this was said; and Peggy so far forgot her orders as to ask, "What do you think you can do, Miss Dorothy?"

"Well, almost anything but hem pocket-handkerchiefs," replied the little girl. "I could do them, only the needle will take big stitches."

"Well, we don't want little girls to do anything here, not even hem pocket-handkerchiefs," said Molly.

"What's that little girl doing there?" said Dorothy, stepping across to the window where she saw the young field-labourers coming into the yard for their breakfast.

"Oh, they work in the field," said Molly, pouring the hot milk into a pail ready for the man to carry to the barn.

"Then I could work in the field," said Dorothy; "aunt said I must be useful to uncle March;" and she went to look for her bonnet at once, that she might begin her work.

But Peggy stopped her when she came back with it in her hand. "You mustn't go out in the yard now, my dear," said the old woman.

"Yes, I must. *She* says I can't be useful here, so I must go out there," said the child, frowning at Molly.

Peggy, however, still held her hand. "My dear, the boys and girls out there are bad, wicked children," she said, impressively.

Dorothy opened her eyes. "Are they?" she said, slowly; "what makes them bad and wicked?"

"I don't know,—because they are," explained Peggy, thinking that as this had satisfied her, it would be sure to satisfy Dorothy.

But the child was not content with this mere statement of the fact. "What makes them bad?" she said; "does uncle know it?"

"Oh, yes; everybody knows it," replied Peggy.

"But if they work in the field they must be useful girls and boys, and so how can they be bad?" said Dorothy, who from her aunt had learned that all wickedness consisted of idleness and uselessness.

Peggy could not explain this, but she managed to detain the child by her side until the yard was clear, and the young labourers

had returned to their work, when Dorothy insisted upon going out to look at the geese and fowls.

"Now don't you get plaguing yourself with that child, Peggy, or we shall always have her bothering round, and *I* won't put up with it," said Molly, when she returned to the room. "She's gone back to her uncle in the parlour, I suppose," she added.

"No, she's gone outside," said Peggy, all of a quake.

"Why, you must be silly, to let her go outside," said Molly, angrily; and she called "Dolly! Dolly! come in directly."

But Dorothy did not make her appearance; and when Molly had finished her work of peeling some onions for the pie, she went to the door to look for her. But she was nowhere to be seen. Molly called "Dolly!" and a gentle meek-eyed cow made her appearance from one of the sheds, but nothing was seen of Dorothy March.

"Well, I can't be running after that child; and Mr. March may mind her himself, or set you to run after her," said Molly, when she returned to the kitchen.

Peggy felt alarmed. "Give me the potatoes

to peel, while you go as far as the Croft," she said.

"Not if I know it," returned Molly; "she'll come back when she's hungry, for there's no such luck as losing her. If she was of any use now I'd look after her; but, as master says, what girls are made for but to plague people it passes me to know."

Molly quite ignored the fact that she had once been a girl herself. She would have a world of men and women without children at all—a view of matters quite the same as her master's, who now sat in the little brown parlour puzzling his brain to know what to do with the child. It had been a positive relief to him when she went out of the room with the breakfast things and Molly, and yet he could not feel quite easy about her while she was out of his sight.

So while Molly was in the midst of making her pie she heard him coming along the passage. "He's coming worrying after that child now, instead of going out to look after the men," she said, testily.

Her supposition was correct. Mr. March called "Dorothy!" as soon as he got to the door.

"She's gone outside," said Molly, shortly.

"All right; I don't want her, only we musn't let her hurt herself," said the farmer, looking relieved that she was not there; and he took his hat from a peg and went out by another door to look after his labourers.

Meanwhile Dorothy had made her way to the fields, where some of the boys and girls were at work. Her appearance at the gate caused everyone to leave off their employment and stare at her, but Dorothy seemed quite unconscious of this. She opened the gate and went in, and, picking her way carefully over the soft clods, went up to a girl about her own size:—"Please, little girl, aren't you very good?" she said, earnestly.

The girl grinned, but looked as though she did not understand, and returned no answer. Not at all discouraged, Dorothy went to the next and repeated her question.

The girl coloured, and looked down. "I try to be," she said, 'but it's very hard sometimes."

"Is it?" said Dorothy; "but you are a useful little girl, and aunt said it was idle people that were mostly wicked."

"Yes, I try to be useful, and help mother

and father, but its hard not to get wicked too," replied the girl, with a sigh.

"And you help my uncle—you're useful to him as well as your mother and father if you work in his fields. Will you let me help you? I want to be useful too," said Dorothy, holding out her hand for the girl's dibber.

But the little field labourer glanced at her own torn soiled frock, and then at the neat black dress and prim bonnet,—"I—I don't think Mr.—"

"My name is Dorothy March. I have come to live with my uncle at Oak Farm, and so of course I may work in his fields," put in Dorothy, quickly, noticing the hesitation. "Will you tell me your name?" she added.

"My name is Helen Freeman," said the girl; "Mr. March pays me to work in the fields, but I don't think he would like you to do it."

"Why not?" said Dorothy, with widely opened eyes, "I used to help aunt weed the garden, and sow the seeds at home."

Helen could not explain what the difference was between sowing seeds in a garden and sowing peas in a field, but she felt there was a wide difference, and still held fast to her

dibber, although Dorothy sadly wanted her to give it up. At length she said, "I must go on with my work, or else Jack will beat me when he comes back." And she drew a weary sigh as she contrasted her condition with that of the little girl beside her.

"Who is Jack?" asked Dorothy.

"The boy that carries that basket, and drops the peas into the holes I make," replied Helen.

Jack had gone to the other end of the field, where Tom Freeman was working with two others. The young tyrant had managed to get the brother and sister separated during working hours, for he had found it impossible to teach or lead Tom into much mischief while Helen was near, and he had determined that these two—unlike the rest of the band when they joined it—should in spite of all become like them ere long.

As Helen saw him coming towards them she turned from Dorothy and went on with her work; but the young lady, nothing daunted by what she still thought Helen's rudeness, picked up a stick lying near, and choosing a spot a little ahead of where Helen was drilling her holes, commenced poking it into the soft earth in a similar manner.

"Halloa! who are you? exclaimed Jack, giving Dorothy a push as he passed her.

The little girl's eyes flashed angrily. "How dare you touch me, you rude boy?" she said.

Jack stood still and stared in blank amazement at the little girl, and at her *daring* in answering him in such a fashion. Every one of the field hands stood in awe of him, and he was the terror of all the children in the village where he lived; and his word had been law to everyone until he met Helen Freeman, and she positively refused to do as he wished if it was anything wrong; and now it seemed she had got somebody else to come and defy him. This he would not have. He had got rid of Tom that he might have her entirely under his own control—to break her obstinacy as he said, and he would not have her upheld by another in it. So he snatched Dorothy's stick from her, and pointing with it to the gate, said, "Now then, come, be off out whoever you are; you've no business here, and I won't have you."

"But I will stay here, you rude, bad boy," replied Dorothy, attempting to take her stick from his hand.

Jack was not troubled with too much re-

verence for anybody, or anything, and the evident superiority of Dorothy made no impression upon him; and so it was with very little compunction that he replied to this with a thump, such as he often gave Helen.

But Dorothy was not Helen, and no wise disposed to take his thumps as meekly. She clenched her fist and stamped her foot as she said, "You are a bad, wicked boy; Peggy said you were, and you are too."

Jack glared at Helen, thinking she had said this, and he gave her a kick as he said again to Dorothy, "Come, get out of this field!"

But, instead of going out, the little girl flew at him in a fury of passion. She had seen the kick, and knew that Helen had done nothing to deserve it, and this had aroused all the fierce anger of her nature. Before the boy could prevent it, she had scratched his face with her finger-nails, holding on to the collar of his jacket so as to raise herself high enough to reach, and using her foot at the same time against his shins, with all her might and main.

He shook her off as soon as he could, but the attack had been so sudden and unexpected

that Dorothy had left the impress of her nails in several places on his face, and one cheek was bleeding. She stood panting for a moment, after getting up from the ground, and he was just about to strike her, when the farmer's voice was heard calling—"Halloa! Halloa! what business have you here, Dorothy?"

Jack turned his scratched face towards Mr. March as he came up. "She did it," he said, sulkily.

"Yes, and it serves you right," said Dorothy, bursting into tears, and running to her uncle's arms for protection. "Take me home," she sobbed, "they are bad, wicked boys." And Mr. March carried her home at once.

CHAPTER IV.

HELEN'S TROUBLES.

Mr. March carried Dorothy home without saying a single word, or asking any explanation of the strange quarrel. She wished he would. She laid her head upon his shoulder sobbing, and feeling very naughty and very miserable, and wanting to tell him so, just as she used to her father or aunt at home, but Mr. March knew nothing about this, and feeling vexed and angry that Dorothy should go out to the field hands and quarrel with them, he resolved to tell Molly to punish her for it, for he thought that she, as a woman, would know how to manage the child better than he did. So standing her down at the kitchen door, he went out to the dairy in search of the housekeeper, to tell her where he had found Dorothy, and that she must keep a sharp look out upon the child and punish her occasionally.

Occasional punishment would have to be inflicted whether the little girl deserved it or not, according to Mr. March. He said something about sparing the rod and spoiling the child, and that he had often had the cane when he was young; to the use of which he owed it that he was now such a good farmer; all of which Molly was quite willing to believe, and reduce to practise upon Dorothy.

Going into the kitchen, as Mr. March passed into the yard, she pretended the utmost surprise at seeing Dorothy.

"Where have you been to get your frock in such a mess!" she exclaimed.

Dorothy looked down at her black frock, all mud-stained and dirty, but instead of answering Molly she turned towards Peggy, who sat near, and said, "Won't it come off?"

Before Peggy could answer, Molly took the child's arm and gave her several sharp slaps. "Now, perhaps you will be able to tell me where you have been," she said. The look of penitence that was on the child's face when she entered the kitchen changed to one of defiance instantly, and she said, "No, I wont! Uncle March knows where I've been, but I wont tell you."

Molly gave the little red arm a few more slaps. "Now, will you tell me how you made this frock dirty," she said, holding out the skirt as far as she could.

"No! no, I wont!" sobbed Dorothy through her tears.

Molly went to the door and called one of the men, "Go and cut me a little ash stick that will serve as a cane," she said. In a few minutes the supple stick was brought, and Molly turned again towards the child. The sight of it would be sufficient to frighten her she thought, and so hoped poor old Peggy, who sat silently by because she dared not speak, and yet so pitied the child that the tears were rolling down her withered cheeks.

But Dorothy stopped her tears instantly when she saw the stick, and looked more defiant than ever.

"Now then, will you tell me how you made your frock dirty," said Molly, holding the stick over her threateningly.

"No," answered Dorothy; but the words were uttered calmly and firmly this time.

Molly gave her arm two or three touches with it, enough to make it tingle. "Now, tell me about this frock," she repeated.

But Dorothy, though her arms were smarting, and she felt choking with anger, would not yield, and scorned to shed a tear. "I won't tell you, and I won't cry," she said, stamping her little foot defiantly.

Molly was at a loss how to act for a minute or two, but at length she said, "If you don't tell me this minute where you have been, I'll take you up stairs, whip you, and put you to bed."

"Then I'd tell uncle March. He won't let you beat me," said Dorothy, confidently.

"Your uncle told me to beat you," said Molly.

As Dorothy heard these words she fell down on the floor as though she had been struck. "Oh! papa, papa," she cried, bursting into a passionate flood of tears, "come and take me to heaven with you, uncle does not love me, and nobody cares for me now!"

Molly told her to get up, and gave her another touch of the ash stick, but Dorothy did not seem to feel bodily pain now.

"Oh! papa, do come to me," she wailed, "uncle doesn't love me as you said he would. There's nobody to love me, and I don't want

to stay here. Oh! papa, let my other uncle come and fetch me."

"I wish he would," said Molly, fervently. She was at her wit's end to know what to do next. "I'll give her a good whipping and put her to bed," she exclaimed at last, and the next minute Dorothy was in Molly's arms, and she and the ash stick were carried upstairs.

She was conquered at last. Molly left her sobbing in bed, and came down to the kitchen again, congratulating herself on the victory she had gained.

"She won't go down to the fields again in a hurry, I know," she said to Peggy, who sat looking helplessly unhappy, as she had done since the beginning of the scene with Dorothy.

"Poor little thing! I hope you haven't been too hard with her," sighed Peggy.

"Well, if ever I heard any thing like that. Hard with her? Why you must be quite silly to think I could be too hard with her, after what I've had to put up with from her to-day," and Molly went off to the dairy again very angry.

When dinner was ready, Peggy suggested

that she should carry up the little girl's, but Molly was of opinion that naughty children should be made to suffer hunger as well as loneliness after being whipped; and so she would not send her anything.

Meanwhile Mr. March had gone to the field to enquire into the particulars of the quarrel, and how it had arisen. According to Jack's account—and no one dared to contradict his statement—Helen Freeman had called the child in and told her that he was everything that was bad, and asked her to fight him. That he had not touched either of them, till Dorothy scratched his face and kicked him, when he pushed her away and told Helen to go on with her work.

Mr. March did not take the trouble to enquire of anyone else into the truth of this. The scratches were evident enough, and that was sufficient for him. Going up to Helen, he looked at her threateningly. "How dare you call people into my field," he said.

"Please sir, the young lady said—"

"Don't answer me. Do you think I'd believe anything you said about my niece," interrupted the farmer angrily. "I tell you this, if ever you call her or anybody else

into my fields again, I'll pack you off about your business. A pretty worker you are to dawdle about and waste my time that I pay you for. Mind, I stop a penny of your pay to-day, and I hope your mother will beat you for it when you get home;" saying which, Farmer March turned on his heel and walked out of the field, leaving Helen to feel the effects of Jack's sullen ill humour for the rest of the day.

Bitterly as she was made to suffer from this, she felt the loss of her penny still more, for she knew that, small as it was, the loss would be felt at home. Her father still lay ill, and little Alice was poorly now, and Helen had been thinking whether it would not be possible to get her wages raised, if she gave up the hour allowed for dinner to work. If another penny could be earned, this would buy some little thing that her father or Alice could eat, for they had both got tired of bread and treacle, and little beyond this could be afforded now. But instead of taking home an extra penny, Helen had to tell of the loss of one, and how she was to do this she did not know. Her mother would be cross and scold her,

and her father would question her, and perhaps find out how things really were, and not let her go again, and then what would become of them all. In the perplexity caused by these unhappy thoughts, she quite forgot Tom, as she started for home that afternoon, and it was not until she had walked some distance down the lane that she turned to look for him. She did not have to look far. A little way behind came the whole troop of boys and girls, and Tom with them. She waited, but he did not attempt to join her, and as he passed, she heard him utter an oath that made her shudder.

"Tom, Tom," she called.

"Tom isn't coming," said one of the girls.

"Tom, come here with me," said Helen, drawing near and speaking very gently.

"I shan't," said Tom, "Look after yourself."

Helen lingered near him, however, until one of the other girls came and pushed her away. "Do you think he's always going to mind you like a baby," she said, scornfully.

"Here, you'd better take yourself off, your'e too much of a saint for any of us," said a boy, giving her another push.

"Yes, that she is," put in the girl; "she's going to church to-morrow, instead of coming out for a lark like the rest of us. Don't you go with her, Tom," she added.

"I shan't," said Tom. "I earn money now, and I shall do as I like, and I shan't go to church for Mr. Lennox, nor anybody else; I know."

"Bravo," cried Jack, while the rest clapped and shouted approvingly.

"That's right, Tom; you're a little one but you've got a spirit, and you're taking home more money than your saint of a sister, for she's had part of her wages stopped for her bad behaviour to-day."

Tom did not believe his sister had behaved badly, but he was afraid to contradict the last speaker, and so he remained silent for a minute or two.

A few handsfull of mud and stones were flung at Helen as she walked on the opposite side of the road, but Tom did not attempt to go to her, or to prevent this being repeated; and Helen felt this more keenly, and it hurt her more cruelly, than the little stinging pebbles striking against her bare arms. In this way they journeyed

homewards; Helen almost forgetting her unhappiness about the penny, in her misery at the thought of Tom becoming like his companions.

When she reached home, and gave her money to her mother, the penny was, of course, missed at once. "How's this," exclaimed Mrs. Freeman, turning sharply round as Helen was going to the pump for some water. "You havn't given me all your money."

"Yes, mother, I have; I couldn't help it—but—but—"

"You went and lost it, larking along the road," interrupted Mrs. Freeman.

"No, mother, I—"

"She had her wages stopped," said Tom.

"What for? Dawdling, I suppose," said her mother with rising anger. "Helen! I'm ashamed of you; here's your father laid up, and Alice isn't well, and yet you'll play over your work and waste the time when you know that we're often wanting bread at home. Tom is younger than you, but he's never had his wages stopped, and he doesn't look half so miserable at having to go to work as you do. There, it's no good crying," she

added, as Helen burst into tears; "crying won't pick up spilt milk, nor yet lost pennies;" saying which, Mrs. Freeman went into the back room to tell her husband of Helen's idleness, as she chose to call it.

The invalid, however, was less disposed to blame the poor girl than her mother. "It's hard work, wife, and the girl isn't used to it yet," he said.

"But there's poor little Tom, he can manage to do the work, or they'd stop his money as well," said Mrs. Freeman quickly.

"Perhaps they've given Tom a lighter job," said her husband; "we won't be hard on the poor girl this time, she'll do better by and bye."

Mrs. Freeman went into the outer room to count over the money once more, and reckon the cost of the bread for the following week, to see if it were possible to get her husband and ailing child a little piece of fresh meat for the following day. While she was doing it, Helen came in with a pail of water. "Your father will never get on, unless he can have some strengthening food," she said; "and yet you must go and lose that penny through your idleness."

"Could you buy him some meat, mother, if you had that penny," asked Helen, humbly.

"Yes," snapped, Mrs. Freeman, without thinking of what she said.

The tears came into Helen's eyes, but she began washing herself as fast as she could. When this was finished, and she had combed her hair, she put on her bonnet and ran out of the house. Through the village, and up to the school house, she ran as fast as she could in the gathering twilight, and before her courage could fail her, she had knocked at the door. A little girl, about as old as herself, opened it.

"Please, can I see governess," panted Helen, out of breath with her run.

"I don't know," said the girl; "Mr. Lennox is talking to her in the parlour, but if you tell me what you want, I'll ask her."

"Will you ask her to give me a penny," said Helen, quickly; and when she had said the words she felt inclined to open the door and run out of the house, for very shame.

The girl stared. "What is your name," she said, for she was a relative of the schoolmistress, and had only come to stay with her for a short time.

"Helen Freeman, but—but don't ask her if you think she'll be angry," she said, all her courage forsaking her at once.

But the girl went at once to the parlour with the strange request.

"Helen Freeman has come to ask for a penny!" exclaimed the clergyman in some surprise. "What does she want it for?"

"I don't know," said the girl.

"Send her in then, and I will ask her."

The next minute Helen, looking like a shame faced culprit, stood in the doorway.

"Well, my child, what do you want this penny for," asked the clergyman, kindly.

Helen hung her head, "Please sir, I had a penny of my wages stopped to-day, and mother says if it hadn't been for that, she might have bought some meat for father and Alice;" and the tears rose to the poor girl's eyes as she spoke.

"How came you to have your wages stopped," asked Mr. Lennox; "were you at play?"

"No, sir," answered Helen, colouring. She was more than ever resolved that her father should not know of the misery of her situation while he was ill, and to avoid this, she

would have to be cautious in answering Mr. Lennox.

"What were you doing then?" asked the minister.

Helen did not answer. The question was repeated, but Helen's head only sank the lower.

Mr. Lennox shook his head, "I am afraid Helen, you were doing something wrong, if you cannot tell me how it happened," he said, sorrowfully.

Helen gave a startled look as she noted the tone of pain in which the words were spoken. "Oh! sir, it wasn't my fault at all," she said, "though I did have my wages stopped for it, and I wouldn't mind losing the penny myself, if it wasn't that father wants the meat so bad, now he's ill. Oh! sir, do believe me," she added, earnestly.

Mr. Lennox did believe her, and yet there was something about her manner that puzzled him. He felt sure she was hiding something from him, and he wondered what it could be. He resolved, however, not to give her the penny. He would try her about this. "I cannot give you a penny unless you tell me how you came to forfeit the other," he said slowly.

All the hope that had been slowly gather-

ing in Helen's face died out as she heard these words, and she curtseyed and turned sadly away, when Mr. Lennox called her back. "I cannot give you the penny, Helen," he said, "but, if you come with me to the Rectory, my housekeeper shall give some meat for your father."

For a minute or two Helen could not speak for joy, but, at length, she managed to say, "Oh! thank you, thank you, sir," and then she burst into tears.

Half an hour afterwards she returned home with a good-sized piece of meat, and her secret still undiscovered, which caused her more pleasure than it would have done, could she have seen and known all about one of the inhabitants of Oak Farm, and how her refusal to tell what had occurred that day would affect her young life.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE HEDGE.

DOROTHY MARCH came down the morning after her disgrace looking very quiet and subdued. She did not attempt to go near her uncle, but took her seat at the breakfast-table without looking at or speaking to anyone. When the meal was over, she went up to her own little bedroom, and shut herself in.

"I don't think you'll have much trouble with the child again, Molly," remarked Mr. March, as the housekeeper was carrying out the breakfast things.

Molly sniffed significantly. "I don't know so much about that," she said, tartly; "that girl's got a spirit of her own, and it'll have to be broken before we shall do much with her."

"She looks as though she meant to be good this morning," said the farmer.

"I don't believe in looks," said Molly;

"she's no business to go off upstairs again. I'm not going to have the place turned upside down with her playing up there." And so, as soon as the breakfast-things were carried into the kitchen, Molly went to the foot of the stairs, and called, "Dolly, Dolly, come down directly!"

But Dorothy would not answer for several minutes. At length she came to the top of the stairs, and said, "Does my uncle want me?"

"Want you! to be sure not!" snapped Molly; "who do you think wants a naughty, tiresome child like you?"

"Then I'll stop up here," said Dorothy; and she went back to the little bedroom again.

"There, Mr. March! what do you think of her being good now?" exclaimed Molly, as the farmer came into the passage.

He shrugged his shoulders, and snatched his hat from the peg that he might get out of the house before this second battle began, for Molly declared she would make the child obey her, and went at once to fetch the little ash stick to beat the naughtiness out of her, as she termed it.

There was a similar scene upstairs to what there had been in the kitchen the previous day, but Dorothy was conquered at last,—that is, she was carried sobbing and crying down into the little brown parlour, and seated on one of the highest chairs.

"There, now, sit there, you naughty girl!" said Molly, giving her clothes a pull to straighten them. "Who do you think could ever love such a child as you?" she added, as she went out of the room and closed the door.

Dorothy did not attempt to get down from the chair, but turning herself round laid her hands upon the back of it, and bowed her head upon them. "Oh, papa, papa!" she wailed, "you told me God would love me if I was good; but I ain't good, and so nobody can love me but you. Oh, papa, do come to me, for I want somebody to love me, and nobody loves me here. You said I must be useful to uncle, and I did try yesterday, and I've tried to-day; but oh, papa, papa, I can't stay here!" and Dorothy's tears broke out afresh.

"That naughty girl had pulled all her clean bedclothes on to the floor," exclaimed Molly, when she went back to the kitchen.

"But perhaps she didn't mean to make them dirty," said Peggy; "perhaps she was trying to make her own bed!"

"What business have you to be listening to what that child said?" snapped Molly.

"Listen? how could I, when I haven't been out of the kitchen?" said Peggy in surprise.

"Well, it's strange you should know what that child said as an excuse for her mischief," replied Molly.

"Well, I know the poor little thing is anxious to be useful," said Peggy, pityingly.

"Of course you'll find an excuse for her. Useful, indeed! I'd like to know what use she could be to anybody!" and Molly walked into the dairy feeling almost as angry with Peggy as the child.

Mr. March thought he might safely trust Molly and her plans for making Dorothy a good girl, and so he took very little notice of her himself beyond occasionally telling her to mind what Molly said, and then she would not be beaten so often. Dorothy, however, was getting used to being beaten, and did not mind it so much. It was not half such a punishment as being shut out of the kitchen away from old Peggy. She would do any-

thing for Peggy. She had given up all hope of ever being useful to anybody, but a whispered word from the old woman would subdue her rising temper and make her obedient even to Molly, who complained sometimes that even beating was of no use to Dorothy.

It was a pity she had ever tried this plan at all, for Dorothy was fast changing under its influence. She cared for nothing nor anybody but Peggy, and when Molly threatened to keep her out of the kitchen away from the old woman, Dorothy said she would run away and go back to her aunt.

Molly laughed at this threat, but the girl really meant what she said. She had been some months under her uncle's roof now, and most miserable months they had been to her. The farmer had been told she could read, and he had given her leave to read his books—books that had satisfied him and his father before him, but which utterly failed to satisfy Dorothy's craving after knowledge.

Once she ventured to ask her uncle to send her to school, but Mr. March said there would be time to think of that when she got older; she must learn to mind what Molly said first. Dorothy had long ago made up her mind not

to do this unless she was compelled, and her uncle's words did not alter it. Sometimes she wished she could run out and talk to the field labourers, especially to Helen Freeman, the girl who was trying to be good, as she had tried to be useful. She wondered how she had fared—whether she had been obliged to give up the struggle and do as the rest did, or whether she was still bravely trying to do what was right in spite of the evil that was around her; for Dorothy had heard a good deal about the children working in the fields, since she had been at her uncle's, and she thought of Helen Freeman very often.

In this way the spring and summer passed, and the busy harvest-time drew near. Dorothy thought she should be sure to have a chance of speaking to Helen now, for Peggy said they all went out into the fields to help; and so the little girl resolved to watch for an opportunity of talking to Helen. Whether Molly knew of this, or whether she feared Dorothy would learn to be more tiresome than ever if allowed to go near the little labourers, she could not tell, but certain it is that she kept so close a watch upon her, that to speak to any of them was quite impossible.

Dorothy saw Helen once or twice, but when first she heard her name called she thought she must have been mistaken in the girl altogether. Such a pale, sad, weary face it looked now, as though the daily struggle was wearing all the life out of it, and as though hope itself had well nigh gone. After seeing her once or twice, Dorothy determined to speak to her in spite of Molly's watchfulness. So that evening, as the little labourers were departing, Dorothy contrived to slip outside the field, and, hiding under the hedge, she waited for Helen.

"Come here, I want to speak to you!" called Dorothy, as Helen was passing. Two or three girls stepped forward, but Dorothy said impatiently, "No, no, I only want Helen Freeman."

Helen stepped into the dry ditch where Dorothy was hiding. "What is it?" she said in a whisper, fearing Jack would come by and drag her out.

"You know me, I'm Dorothy March," said the little girl. "Hush, creep down closer; I can hear Molly coming, and she'll beat me if she finds me here."

"Beat you!" uttered Helen.

Dorothy held up her finger warningly, and

crept closer under the sheltering bank, scarcely daring to breathe until Molly had passed.

"There, now she's gone we can talk," said Dorothy, when all sound of her footsteps had died away.

"But won't she beat you when you go home?" asked Helen.

"I shan't tell her where I've been," replied Dorothy; "I shall say I lost myself."

"Oh, but that would be telling a story," rejoined Helen quickly; "and you know God has said—"

"But I don't care for that, I'm too naughty for God to love me now," interrupted Dorothy.

Helen clasped the little girl's hand. "Oh, don't say that!" she exclaimed; "don't you know God is your Father, and He does love you, though you don't love Him."

Dorothy shook her head. "Molly says nobody could love me now I am so naughty," she said.

"But perhaps Molly makes a mistake," said Helen, drawing closer to the little girl.

"Perhaps she does. I wonder whether my papa would leave off loving me, if he was to come back, now I am so naughty," she said, musingly.

"Where is your papa?" asked Helen.

"Up in heaven. I didn't used to be so naughty and tell stories before he went away, because he loved me; but uncle doesn't, and so there's nobody to care much if I am naughty, and they wouldn't let me be useful, though you know I did try to work in the field and help uncle."

"Yes, I know," said Helen, "but Mr. March was angry about that."

"Was he angry with you?" asked Dorothy.

Helen nodded. "They stopped part of my wages, and everybody says I'm lazy now."

"But tell me, Are you good now?" asked Dorothy, suddenly recollecting what it was she wanted to see the girl for.

"I try to be. But oh, I must give up soon," she said, bursting into tears; "Mother is always scolding, and father is often cross because I don't earn so much as Tom, and Jack—the boy that hit you—won't let me, though he makes me work harder than Tom does."

"But why don't you tell your father?" said Dorothy.

Helen coloured. "I don't like now," she said.

"Why not?" asked her companion.

"Because when we first came to work here father was bad with a broken leg, and I knew if I told him about Jack and the rest he wouldn't let me come; and so, as I wanted to help a bit, I told Tom not to say anything about the boys and girls; and now he's getting like them he won't, though I said I would tell mother the other day about something Jack said to me."

"What was it?" asked Dorothy.

"Oh, I couldn't tell you; but I'd have told mother, only Tom said if I told tales he'd say I was lazy and didn't want to go to work. Oh dear! I wish I'd told them all about it at first, but I thought when father got well he'd take us away again; but mother says it's no good leaving it now we've begun, and Mr. Lennox says it's no good trying to get me a place in the town, for nobody will ever take field girls;" and Helen heaved a deep sigh.

"Then it doesn't seem any use trying to be good?" said Dorothy.

"It doesn't sometimes; only when I go to church on Sunday, and hear Mr. Lennox preach about God loving us, and knowing all about us, it helps me to keep on trying; for

I think God would be sorry if He knew I was like the rest, after going to school and learning about His love, which Jack and some of the others haven't."

"But your brother did, and he's getting like the rest, you say."

"Yes, but Tom isn't so old as I," said Helen.

"But it doesn't seem any use being good if people think you're naughty," said Dorothy.

"But God knows all about it," said Helen.

"Yes, but I should like people to know it too," said Dorothy; "you see I ain't good a bit, and I ain't going to try to be, only to Peggy."

"Who's Peggy?" asked Helen. "Is it the old woman that sits in the kitchen at work—at knitting?"

Dorothy nodded. "I like her, and she likes me; I wouldn't do anything Peggy didn't like, because she's so kind."

"Then if Peggy loves you, don't you think God could love you too?" said Helen.

Dorothy stared. "Peggy is kind to everybody, but God don't like naughty little girls," she said.

Helen looked puzzled. "I wish you could talk to Mr. Lennox," she said.

"I don't!" replied Dorothy, quickly.

"Why not?" asked Helen in surprise.

"Because he's the minister, isn't he?"

Helen nodded. "He's so kind," she said.

"I don't care: he's dreadfully good, and Molly says all good people must hate me, because I'm so naughty. Peggy is naughty sometimes, Molly says, and so perhaps that's the reason she likes me; and I thought perhaps you'd like me a little bit, as you haven't got quite good yet."

Helen put her arms round the little orphan's neck and kissed her: "Yes, I'll love you, if you'll let me," she said. "Do you ever go out on Sunday?" she asked: "Does Mr. March take you to church?"

Dorothy shook her head: "Uncle reckons up his books and scolds Molly on Sunday," she said.

"And what do you do?" asked Helen.

"Oh, sometimes I run after the chickens, or play in the barn, or else run to the fields and have a peep at the things growing."

"Peep at the things growing?" repeated Helen.

"Yes; don't you tell!" said Dorothy, in a frightened whisper; "but I just scratch up

the ground a little bit and look at the seeds, and then I wonder who makes them—who shows them the way. And then I look at the birds, and wonder who takes care of them all the week, when the boys drive them away and won't let them have anything to eat."

"If you'll come out next Sunday afternoon, then I'll read to you about the birds," said Helen, "and who takes care of them, for it tells about it in my Bible."

"Does it? My papa had a Bible, and I used to go to church with auntie sometimes, but I never heard about birds there," said Dorothy.

"Well, I'll show you the place where it tells about them next Sunday," said Helen; "where shall we come to read it?"

"Oh, just here will do best, because it's nice and cool," said Dorothy: "I'll be sure to come; I'll run away if Molly says I'm to stay indoors."

"Hadn't you better go indoors now?" suggested Helen: "perhaps Molly will come out to look for you, and she'll be angry if she finds you out here."

"Yes, I'll go now," said Dorothy, with a sigh; "I wish I had a little girl like you to

come and talk to me: I think I'd try to be good then, but it's of no use now."

"Oh yes, it is," said Helen, as she took the little soft hand into her hard, coarse one,—it was sad to see a *little* hand so hard, and coarse, and labour-stained.

"No, I've tried to be good, but Molly beats it all out with her stick, and I ain't going to try again," said Dorothy.

Helen could not stay to talk longer now. She would have to run very fast to catch up with Tom and the rest, and she was anxious to do this, for if her brother got home first he would be sure to tell her mother some story or another as the reason for her being later; for Tom had seemed to take a pleasure in getting her into trouble lately. Helen had tried all she knew to separate him from the other boys, and threatened more than once to tell his father when he joined some of the others in robbing an orchard, and this, coupled with her refusal to touch any of the fruit that had been stolen, may have induced Tom to take this mode of "serving her out," as he said.

But with all her running, the rest had almost reached Hayslope before Helen caught them.

"Well, I hope you've had a good feast off Farmer March's apple-trees," said one, as she came up.

"I've not touched the trees or the apples either," said Helen.

"That's a fine tale, but it won't do here, though you are a saint, and like to tell tales," said another.

"No," put in Tom; "I saw you hiding down in the ditch, and I mean to tell mother and father of you."

Helen's eyes filled with tears: "Oh, Tom! you know I wouldn't touch one of the farmer's apples," she said.

"Not if you thought you'd get caught. Oh, Nelly Freeman, you are a sneak," said one of the girls; "you said you'd tell of poor little Tom, and yet you go stealing apples for yourself:" and the cry of "Thief, thief!" was taken up by the whole band, and they shouted it all the way through the village.

CHAPTER VI.

TOM'S STOLEN HOLIDAY.

HELEN crept indoors shivering with fright and apprehension at the dreadful word thief. She knew she was not guilty of the charge brought against her, but she was afraid her father and mother would take Tom's word in preference to hers, if he told them what the others had said, and that she lingered behind the rest hiding under the hedge. But whether Tom felt sure his sister would not do such a thing, or whether, taking previous circumstances into consideration, he thought it best not to tell his parents of Helen's misdeeds, to her surprise there was not a word said about it, and by the following morning she had almost forgotten the circumstance herself.

She had not forgotten her promise to Dorothy March, but the accusation brought against her, made it difficult for her to keep that promise. If she asked her mother

to let her go for a walk in the afternoon, instead of going to Sunday School, Tom would at once suspect her of going to Oak Farm Orchard, especially if he watched and saw the road she took. Another thing she feared, that her mother would not give her permission to stay away from school, for Tom had asked to be allowed to do this several times lately, and had been refused, and so at last she resolved to slip out of doors and run away as soon as dinner was over. Talking and reading to Dorothy March, who had no one to love her, was quite different from going birds'-nesting on Sunday, which was what Tom wanted a holiday for.

Helen quite forgot that going without her parents' permission was wrong, whatever she might wish to go for. Perhaps the bad example of her companions made her think so lightly of this matter now, for she would not have dreamed of doing such a thing before; and Helen's love of her Sunday class was so well known, that Mrs. Freeman took no notice when she saw her go out with her bonnet and tippet on, and her little Bible in her hand, some time before Tom was ready.

"Helen's gone to school," she said, when Tom asked for her, as he was about to start. Tom went out and looked up and down the road, but he could see nothing of his sister. "I hope she's gone in school without me, and then I can just have a game for once like other boys do that have to work hard all the week," he said to himself as he walked through the village towards the school. He would be obliged to go that way, for his father had followed him to the door, and was watching him; but he resolved to take the road to the woods as soon as he was out of his father's sight. There was to be some rare fun there with Jack and some half dozen other boys, and they had asked Tom to join them in their cruel sport of birds'-nesting, but Tom had been compelled to decline because his father would not let him stay away from school. Jack tried to laugh him out of asking to be allowed to do this, and then to persuade him to play truant; but the first Tom dared not do yet, and the second he could not, because Helen would be with him.

Now, however, he thought it would be a fine opportunity to get away, as Helen was

nowhere to be seen. He would get back by the time school was over, and then nobody need know anything about it, so as soon as the corner was turned, he ran off to the woods as fast as he could go, fearing each moment he should meet some one who knew him. But no one happened to be going to Hayslope that afternoon, and Tom reached the woods, and received the congratulations and praises of his companions, who told him he had done a very clever thing, and advised his doing it every Sunday until his father and mother should let him have the day to spend as he liked, as all the other field hands did.

"It's a shame to keep you tied up and sent to school like a baby, when you're earning big boys' wages," said one.

"I am a big boy now, father says so," said Tom, proudly.

"Of course you are, and your father ought to treat you like one," said Jack.

"Yes, and let you have some of your money to spend, and come out in the woods for a lark when you're working hard all the week," said another.

"Yes, I will come," said Tom, feeling him-

self very much ill-used that he had to submit to his father's will in this matter.

"That's right, we'll come and meet you next Sunday, and if your sister dares to tell, we'll beat her on Monday for it." Saying this, they went off in search of the tree where one of them had seen several birds' nests, and which three or four of them prepared to climb. Tom preferred remaining on the ground, and taking the nests as they were handed down. There were not many eggs to be got; it was late in the season, and most of them had been hatched, and the young birds fledged and able to fly, but one or two unfortunate sparrows fell into their cruel hands.

Tom tried to persuade himself that he enjoyed the fun very much, but he could not help feeling uncomfortable when he thought of the school and Helen, and how grieved the Rector, Mr. Lennox, would be when he heard how he had spent the Sunday afternoon. If he had only known that Helen, like himself, was far away from the school at this time, he would have entered much more heartily into the fun that was going on around him. As it was, he laughed and shouted as loudly as any of them, but of real enjoyment there

was none fell to Tom's share that afternoon.

Meanwhile, Helen had reached Dorothy's hiding-place of the previous day, and she had not been seated there long before the little girl came running up to her.

"Oh, I'm so glad you are come," she panted. "Molly is so cross, and I have come out without being washed."

"Can't you wash yourself?" asked Helen. "Oh yes, I can, but Molly says I shall make a mess with the water, and so she will do it herself just to tease me. I don't care now. I'm naughty, and it's of no use trying to be good, and I don't want to be useful now, like I did before."

Helen looked as though she could not understand this speech, but as her walk of three miles back would not leave her much time to be with Dorothy, she opened her little Bible at once at the 10th. chapter of St. Matthew, and read, "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows."

"God cares for the sparrows, then," said Dorothy, "though Uncle and Molly says

they're nasty vermin, only made to plague people. I wonder whether He could care for me," she added. "He does care for you," said Helen, "don't you know the Bible says, 'Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows?'"

My teacher told me about this text last Sunday; she said if God looked after a little sparrow that nobody thought of any value, He would never forget little girls, however naughty they might be,—that it was just because they were naughty that he had sent His Son to die for them, and ministers to teach them about Himself."

"He hasn't sent anybody to me," said Dorothy, shaking her head and sighing.

"Yes, He has, dear," said Helen, "don't you know when you go to church?"

"But I don't go to church," interrupted Dorothy.

"Oh no: I remember," said Helen, but still she added, "God loves you, I'm sure, and He will send somebody to tell you about it some day,—somebody better than I am,—Mr. Lennox, perhaps."

"But can't you tell me about it? Does God love you?" asked Dorothy.

"Yes, I know He does," said Helen gently and with a heightened colour.

"How do you know it?" said Dorothy. "God is up in heaven, He didn't come down to speak to you, did He?"

"He came down once and lived a long time in the world," replied Helen. "The Lord Jesus Christ is God, you know, and He lived down here as a poor man, and at last died a dreadful, cruel death, on purpose that our sins might be forgiven, and that we might learn to know and love God."

"Who told you about this? My papa used to talk about it before he went away, but he didn't tell *you*," said Dorothy quickly.

"No, Mr. Lennox told me in church, and my teacher at school, and then I read it in my Bible too," said Helen.

"But how do you know that God loves *you*, when there were lots of people in church besides?" asked Dorothy.

The question puzzled Helen, and troubled her too; she did not know how to answer it to her own and Dorothy's satisfaction. At last she said, "God loves everybody, and so he must love me; don't you know the Bible says, 'God so loved the world, that He

gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'"

"But the world is so big," objected Dorothy, "that God might forget some of the little girls."

"Oh, but God never forgets," said Helen; "don't you remember the text I read just now about the sparrows? God don't forget them, even."

"Dorothy looked only partially convinced, but Helen could not stay to talk any longer, for she had a long walk home, and if she did not start soon Tom would have returned from school before she got there. "Oh, don't go yet," said Dorothy, "I like you to talk to me about God. Stay a little longer. Molly gave me a big apple this morning, and I've saved it for you, see," and Dorothy began pulling at a good-sized apple that completely filled her pocket.

"Oh no, I won't have it all," said Helen, "knock it on this stone and break it in halves."

"No, that would spoil it. I shall like to see you eat it best," said Dorothy, "and I daresay she'll give me another to-morrow, if she isn't very cross."

"But I mustn't stop to eat it now," said Helen, "mother will be cross if she knows I haven't been to school, so I must make haste home."

"Well, then, eat the apple as you go along," said Dorothy, clambering out of the ditch after her companion. They walked a little way together, and then Dorothy, kissing Helen, said, "You'll come again next Sunday, won't you?"

"I don't know," answered Helen, "mother might not—"

"Oh, but you must come," said Dorothy, impetuously, "I can't go to church and school like you can; so you must tell me about these things. Do come, now."

Helen hesitated. Somehow she thought she was wrong in having come this time without her mother's permission, and that it would be better to tell her all about it as soon as she got home, even if Tom failed to find out that she had not been to school. So she said, speaking very slowly, "I'll ask mother to let me come next Sunday."

"But will she let you come?" asked the little girl impatiently.

Truthfully Helen could not say that she

had much hope of this, so she merely answered, "I don't know."

Dorothy looked offended. "You said you'd love me yesterday," she pouted, "and now you don't like to come and talk to me."

"Oh yes, I do, but mother—"

"Well, then, you could come again without asking your mother," interrupted Dorothy, "I haven't got anybody to love me like you have," and the little girl burst into tears.

"Don't cry," said Helen, kissing and caressing her, "I will come and see you again next Sunday."

Dorothy dried her tears on receiving this assurance. "I'll come out then and bring you another apple. Kiss me again," she said, as Helen was leaving her.

Helen kissed her again, and then ran down the lane while Dorothy stood at the corner, and watched her until she turned into the road leading to Hayslope. Then she turned and walked slowly homewards, whispering softly to herself as she went, "I wonder whether God really does love me, Molly says I'm too—"

Her quiet talk was abruptly brought to a close by a violent shake. "You wicked

little thing," said Molly, angrily, "what do you think will become of you, walking about out of doors on Sunday afternoon, such a dirty figure as you are. Look at your frock, is that fit to be seen?" and Molly took her arm and gave her another vigorous shake.

Dorothy pouted. "You wouldn't wash me," she said, in a sullen tone; "you ought to let me go to church," she added.

"Go to church," repeated Molly, wondering what she should hear next; "whoever put that into your head? Church indeed!—church is for good little girls, not naughty ones like you."

Dorothy looked put out. She was led, or rather, dragged indoors, washed and dressed in her best frock, and sent to sit quietly in the brown parlour, where Mr. March was busy over his accounts. He frowned as the child crept in, and Dorothy, seeing it, would have gone back to the kitchen if she had dared, but Molly had threatened to beat her, if she ventured there again. So the poor child had to sit silently by the window, and watch the sunlight as it faded from the fields and orchard, and the shadows of evening crept on; the only break in her watch-

ing being tea-time, when she contrived to make a little jingling with her spoon in the cup, to break the stillness of the dull room.

To Dorothy's intense relief bed-time came at last, and there she could imagine Helen was with her again, and could talk to her half aloud in a similar manner to that in which she had really spoken that afternoon.

Meanwhile Helen had reached home, but had not told her mother how she had spent the Sunday afternoon; for just as she came in sight of the cottage door, she saw Tom running down the village street, and went to meet him, to ask if her absence had been noticed by her teacher. But before she could say a word about this, Tom said, "Oh Helen, don't tell father I haven't been to school," for he made sure she had missed him.

"Haven't *you* been?" uttered Helen in surprise.

Tom looked at her. "Where have you been?" he asked.

"To talk to Dorothy March," she replied, colouring deeply.

"All right, I won't tell of you if you don't tell of me," said Tom.

"But if father should ask what teacher talked about this afternoon, I must tell him we haven't been," said Helen.

"You aren't obliged to tell of me if you tell of yourself," said Tom.

"But father will ask you too. Oh, Tom, don't tell a story!" she said imploringly.

"It's no worse to tell a story than to steal apples," said Tom tauntingly; "you've got some in your pocket now I can see," he added.

Helen drew out the apple Dorothy had given her. She had eaten a small piece of it, but not much, for somehow she could not feel quite easy about staying away from school without leave; and the having promised to do the same again the following Sunday, increased this feeling, and she did not care about the apple. So she gave it to Tom, saying, "Dorothy March gave it to me, but I don't want any more of it."

"You've had such a lot, I suppose," said Tom, in a grumbling tone; "you might as well have saved me another."

"She only gave me one," said Helen.

"Only gave you one," repeated Tom. "Do you think I don't know how you got it? Jack

saw you hiding under the orchard hedge, as we came home last night."

"Oh, Tom, you know I would not touch Mr. March's apples," said Helen, the tears filling her eyes as she spoke.

"Oh, now you needn't look so frightened, I ain't going to tell," said Tom, "and I mean to have some of the apples myself by-and-by."

"Oh, Tom! Tom, don't!" said Helen imploringly.

But Tom burst into a loud laugh; "I'm going indoors," he said, and hiding the apple, he lifted the latch of the door and entered.

The baby had been taken very ill during the afternoon, and Freeman had gone for the doctor, so that no notice was taken of the truants as they entered, and they thus escaped all questioning upon the afternoon lessons. As soon as tea was over, Helen was sent with Tom and Alice to church, that the house might be perfectly quiet; and as soon as they got back they were sent to bed; and thus the opportunity that Helen half hoped, half dreaded, of being found out, did not occur, and Tom was quite triumphant about his stolen holiday.

CHAPTER VII.

WHO WERE THE THIEVES?

ALTHOUGH nothing had been said to Tom or Helen on Sunday, Freeman had noticed something of her restless unhappy looks, and during the week he mentioned it to his wife.

"Nonsense, what should make her unhappy? you're always fancying something must be the matter with her," said his wife, crossly.

"It isn't with her only, but there's a difference in Tom, lately; I'm sure the boy never used——"

"Of course there's a difference in him, he's getting older, and being out at work with bigger boys, it's sure to make a difference in him," interrupted Mrs. Freeman.

"Ah! but you don't know what I mean; the boy is altering for the worse, I can see; he never used to be sullen and ill-tempered."

"Oh! he's tired, that's it," said his wife.

"But I've caught him once or twice using bad language, and threatening to do something if Helen told of him," replied her husband; and he sighed as he thought that the evil example of the little field labourers was already showing itself in Tom.

But, unfortunately, Freeman did not think of doing anything else but sigh. It was too late to do anything in the matter now, he thought. The field gangs were bad,—hopelessly bad, some people said, but there was no other work the children of a poor man could do about there, and though he had hoped that *his* children would have escaped the fate of most of the others, by getting employment as indoor servants in the town a few miles off, there seemed no chance of this now. So the end of all his anxious complainings was, that things remained unaltered, and Tom and Helen went to and fro, without a word of questioning as to how things were going on between them and their companions. Another week passed and another Saturday night came. Several times during this week, the cry of "thief" had been raised against Helen, when she had attempted to join the

main group on their way home that she might walk near Tom, but on this Saturday night they hunted her away each time she attempted to get near him. Jack and one or two of the other elder lads were in close talk, evidently trying to persuade Tom to do something. Helen was afraid it was mischief, but she had no chance of discovering what it was, for the rest of the band had been set to hunt her about and keep her at a distance from these, and most carefully did they perform their task.

She had only been able to catch a passing glimpse and a hurried whisper from Dorothy all the week, and then only the words, "Be sure you come on Sunday," were hastily spoken. Helen had made up her mind to go again, without asking her mother about it, but she hoped Tom was not thinking of playing truant.

"Tom, you're going to school this afternoon, aren't you?" she said anxiously as they were walking to church in the morning.

"I don't know. You're going to see that girl again, aren't you?" said Tom.

"Yes, I must go this afternoon, I promised," said Helen, colouring deeply and

feeling more strongly than ever that she was doing wrong, since her example was encouraging her brother to do the same—perhaps worse—for who could tell what mischief he might be led into.

She was unhappy all church time, and resolved that it should be the last time she played truant, even to teach poor little Dorothy March. She would go just this once, and tell Dorothy how sad she felt at having done wrong, and ask her to let her tell Mr. Lennox all about her, who would be sure to devise some plan—either come and see Mr. March and ask him to let her come to Hayslope to church, or else he could call at the farmhouse sometimes and talk to Dorothy herself.

She had little difficulty in opening this subject, for the moment Dorothy saw her she exclaimed, "What's the matter? Has your mother been cross with you?"

"No," answered Helen with a deep drawn sigh, "Mother isn't cross, but—but I can't come here again on Sunday."

"Why not?" asked Dorothy.

"Because it's wrong to stay away from school without leave, and wrong to pretend

to mother I've been when I haven't," replied Helen.

"But I want you to teach me," urged Dorothy. "I want you to tell me about God loving us. Are you quite sure He loves you?" she added.

Helen's eyes filled with tears. "Yes, I'm sure He loves me," she said, "though I am a naughty girl, for He won't let me be happy while I'm naughty, and teacher said, that that was one sign that God loved us."

"But I feel miserable when I'm naughty," said Dorothy, "and I don't believe God loves me."

"Then you don't love God if you don't believe He loves you, for the Bible says, 'We love Him because He first loved us." We don't love Him first, but He loves us first, and then when we begin to know and believe this we begin to love Him.

"Do you love God?" asked Dorothy.

Helen nodded, "I can't help loving Him when I think about the Lord Jesus coming to live here, and being so kind to everybody; and then dying for us that our sins might be forgiven, that we might go to live in heaven with Him for ever. That's what makes me

feel so sorry when I've done wrong, because I know God sees it, and it makes Him sorry too. I must tell mother how naughty I've been to come here instead of going to school; I've asked God to forgive me, but —"

"Oh! but then she won't let you come again," interrupted Dorothy.

"No, but I've thought of a plan. I'll ask Mr. Lennox to come and see Mr. March and ask him to let you come to church."

"I don't want to come to church," said Dorothy, shaking herself and pouting.

"Then Mr. Lennox might come and talk to you sometimes —"

"I don't want Mr. Lennox," interrupted Dorothy impatiently, "I don't like —" But the speech was interrupted by a shower of apples from the other side of the hedge.

Both girls sprang up as they came rattling on to their heads. Dorothy clapped her hands.

"Oh, jolly!" she exclaimed, "we can have a feast now, and you shall take some home for your brother," and she began picking them up at once and thrusting them into Helen's pocket and hands.

Helen was peeping anxiously through the

hedge. "I wonder who threw them over!" she said.

"Oh never mind, let's eat them," said Dorothy.

"I should like to find out who threw them over first. Was it your uncle, do you think?" asked Helen.

Dorothy laughed, "Uncle never gives me apples," she said, "and he never comes down to the orchard on Sunday."

"Then we mustn't eat these," said Helen. "You'd better take them home."

Dorothy stared. Not eat them!" she uttered. "Why not?"

"Because — because somebody may have stolen them," said Helen, with a heightened colour, as she recalled sundry whispers she had heard during the previous week among her companions, by which she knew they had planned to rob some orchard.

"Well, let's go and see who threw them over," suggested Dorothy. "Don't let's leave them here though," she added, as Helen was about to throw her's down.

By the time they reached the gap in the hedge—for the gate was always kept locked on Sunday—Helen had turned very pale, and

she crept through after Dorothy with her hands and pocket still full of fruit. No one could be seen among the trees, but it was plain somebody had been there not long before, for several boughs were broken, and leaves and fruit lay scattered on the grass.

"I wonder whether they have touched the plums," said Dorothy, "let's go and see," and she led the way to the further side of the orchard.

"Yes, that they have," said Helen scarcely above her breath, as they came within sight of the trees. Some of them were almost entirely stripped of fruit, and the ground was scattered with the broken branches and leaves.

"Oh! uncle will be cross about this," said Dorothy, "whoever can have done it?"

"Let's put the apples down here," said Helen.

"Oh no, I'll take them to uncle," said Dorothy; "come along, we'll go back again now."

As they were creeping through the hedge again, they heard a loud gruff voice, which both girls knew to be that of Mr. March. Helen's heart almost stood still with affright,

while even Dorothy turned pale as she heard her uncle say, "Halloo! halloo! what have you been doing in my orchard?"

The two girls stood speechless before him for a minute or two. At last Dorothy managed to say in a frightened voice, "Please, uncle, we didn't take these," glancing at the apples she held in her hand.

"And you havn't been into the orchard either, I suppose," said Mr. March, pointing to the gap in the hedge.

"Yes sir, please —"

"Hold *your* tongue," thundered the farmer, looking at Helen as though he would eat her, "What business have you to be loitering about here to day?"

"Please sir, I came —"

"I can see that, and know you came to steal my apples. How many more came with you?" impatiently demanded Mr. March.

Helen burst into tears, but Dorothy said in a trembling voice, "No one else went with us, uncle, but, but —" and she hesitated as she thought of the damage that had been done to the trees.

"But what—why don't you speak out?" said Mr. March.

"Somebody else has been in the orchard, uncle," said Dorothy slowly.

"I thought as much, and she brought them here," he said, pointing towards Helen.

She could only shake her head in denial, but the farmer took no notice of this. He carried a small riding whip in his hand, which he cracked over the girls' heads, and told them to walk on in front of him.

"I'll see what mischief has been done before I let either of you go," he said, "and if my trees have been broken, I'll have you both locked up."

"Oh, uncle!"

"Oh, Mr. March!" burst forth the two girls, standing still before him in the middle of the path.

"Go on," said the farmer.

But the girls did not attempt to move.

"Oh, uncle! we didn't do it," sobbed Dorothy.

"Go on, and let me see what mischief has been done," said the farmer, taking the key of the gate from his pocket as he spoke, and holding the whip up threateningly.

They would have clung to each other for support, but he would not let them do this.

"Come and walk beside me, Dorothy," he said. "You've been beaten once for talking to the field-hands, how dare you speak to that girl?" And he again cracked the whip over Helen's head, as he drove her before him.

But Dorothy would not desert her friend entirely in her distress. She was obliged to leave her side and drop behind, but she kept as close to her as possible, and now she answered through her tears, "She came to teach me, uncle."

"Yes, I know that—to steal my apples," said the farmer.

"No, uncle, we didn't steal them," said the little girl, "somebody threw them over the hedge."

"She taught you something else then, besides stealing," said the farmer, "she told you to tell that tale, I suppose."

"It isn't a tale at all," said Dorothy defiantly, "You know I don't tell stories."

"Not till she taught you," said the farmer, pushing Helen roughly aside, as he stepped forward to unlock the gate.

Dorothy was almost as angry as her uncle now. "She didn't teach me to steal or to tell stories either," she said, passionately.

"You tell me the apples were thrown over the hedge to you, and I saw you creeping through the gap with them in your hands. Dorothy, I'm ashamed of you," he added.

"But uncle —"

"I won't hear another word. You'll tell me next that nobody has been into my orchard. Look at the trees how they're broken. Who's done that?" he said, seizing Helen by the wrist, and turning her face towards him.

She did not quail before his angry gaze, as she answered, "I didn't, sir."

"Then who did?" demanded the farmer.

Helen hung her head, and did not answer.

"Who came here with you?" said Mr. March.

"Nobody, sir," answered Helen.

He pushed her aside, and strode rapidly onwards by himself.

As soon as her uncle was out of hearing, Dorothy crept up to Helen. "Run away," she said, "you can get out before uncle comes back."

But Helen shook her head. "Mr. March will be sure to think I am a thief then," she said.

In about a quarter of an hour they saw him coming back, looking, if possible, more angry than when he went away. He carried something else in his hand, beside the riding whip, and, as he drew nearer, Helen saw that it was a boy's boot. She forgot to look at the farmer's face—her eyes were steadfastly fixed on the boot—and when Mr. March came close to her, she uttered a loud scream and turned very pale.

"Halloo! you know this boot, do you, my girl?" said the farmer, holding it up above her reach for fear she should snatch at it. "A pretty lot of mischief you have done to my trees amongst you, but you shall pay for it this time. I've a great mind to have you both locked up," he said, turning to Dorothy and pointing towards the gate. "Go on, I'll bring this girl with me, I mean to take care she doesn't get away till the constable comes for her."

At the word "constable," Helen would have stopped and fallen on her knees before the farmer, but he was dragging her by the arm so fast that she could only gasp out, "Oh, please, sir! don't send me to prison, I didn't take the apples, and I didn't break your trees."

"I'll find out all about that, my girl, never fear," replied the farmer, and without taking any further notice of poor Helen's tears or cries, he drove Dorothy before him, and dragged Helen up to the farmhouse.

"What's the matter now!" exclaimed Molly, stepping to the backdoor as the farmer came up with his prisoners.

"Matter enough to drive a man mad," grumbled Mr. March. "Send Peter for the constable to take this girl to the lock-up, and fasten Dorothy in her own room."

"Oh, ma'am! please ma'am, I didn't steal the apples," said Helen, with clasped hands appealing to Molly.

But she might as well have appealed to the door-post. "You didn't steal the apples," repeated Molly, "why you'd steal anything, you're all a bad lot together, you field-hands."

"But I didn't steal them ma'am. Oh, please! don't send me to prison," implored Helen.

"Mr. March will do as *he* likes about that," said Molly coldly.

By this time Peggy had hobbled to the door to see what all the stir was about, and

Mr. March had gone to look for the key of a small granary to be used as a temporary prison for Helen, until the constable should arrive.

"Deary me! well if I ain't sorry to see you here in such a business," exclaimed Peggy when she saw Helen. "I've thought her such a decent looking little body," she said, turning to Molly.

"Ah looks are deceitful," said Molly, shortly.

"Well, I'm sure there's no need for master to go worrying himself to find the key of that granary, she could be put in the back kitchen, she'd be safe enough there," said Peggy.

"Ah, so she would," said Molly, and seizing Helen by the shoulder, she marched her off to the stone kitchen—itself almost as gloomy as a prison—and then, when the clumsy wooden latch of the door had been secured, Dorothy was taken up to her own room and put to bed.

Molly covered the bed-clothes over her head, but the moment the door was closed, Dorothy was out again and standing by the window, watching for Peter to return with the constable. She wondered whether her uncle really meant to send the poor girl to prison or

not. In her private opinion, Dorothy did not believe that he did. She thought the constable had been sent for merely to frighten them both, and that she should see him depart again, and Helen released before long.

But alas for her hopes. It was not long before Peter returned, and with him the constable. There was some little talking down stairs, for a few minutes, and then the policeman came out holding Helen by the hand, and Dorothy heard her uncle say, "he would be down early in the morning to make the charge against her before the magistrate."

With a great sob of agony, Dorothy crept back to bed, not to sleep, but to think what she should do to help her friend.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FATHER'S TROUBLE.

"TOM and Helen are very late," remarked Freeman, as his wife placed the baby on his knee, while she set the tea-things that Sunday afternoon; and he took the baby in his arms and went to the door to look for them.

"Oh, they've gone to take Alice for a walk, perhaps," remarked his wife, as she bustled about the room. "The child wanted to go to school with them, but I thought she'd better wait till she was quite well."

"Well, here comes Alice then, but I don't see the others," said Freeman, from his post near the door.

"I can't find Helen," pouted the child, as she came indoors.

"Can't find her?" repeated the father, "have the girls come out of school yet?

"Oh, yes, I see a lot of girls, and they said Helen hadn't been to school," said Alice.

Freeman laughed at this. "She'll be in directly," he said, taking his place at the tea-table, with Alice on one knee and baby on the other. But he could not feel quite easy although he said this, and before tea was half over he began to fidget again.

"I'll give them both a good beating, and send them to bed as soon as they come in," said Mrs. Freeman, angrily; and she had scarcely finished speaking when the latch of the door was gently lifted, and Tom crept into the room.

Hot and dirty, with torn clothes, and only one boot, he did not look like a Sunday scholar, as he came creeping guiltily into the cottage.

"Wherever have you been, Tom?" exclaimed his mother, jumping out of her seat as he came in.

Tom mumbled something that no one could understand, as he hung his head, and tried to hide a long slit in the front of his jacket.

"Where's Helen?" asked his father, as soon as he could recover from his astonishment.

Tom looked up quickly, and gazed round the room. "Isn't she come home?" he said.

"Come home, no. How long have you been out of school?" demanded his mother.

Tom's face turned a deeper crimson, if that were possible. "Not long," he said.

His father looked at him very sadly, but very steadily. "Tom, you're not telling the truth," he said, "you've not been to school at all this afternoon."

Tom looked down, but did not answer.

"Where have you been, to tear your clothes like this?" said his mother, giving him an angry shake.

Tom flounced himself out of her hands. "I shan't go to school unless I like," he said, with a muttered oath.

Mother and father stood aghast. Could it be possible that it was their child—their good-tempered, dutiful little Tom, that had given utterance to such words?

At length Freeman said, turning to his wife, "Then he hasn't been to school, and Helen has gone to look for him, you may depend."

"No, she hasn't," said Tom, in a sullen tone, "she hasn't been to school either."

"Helen played truant?" uttered her father.

"Yes, she ain't no better than the rest, only she's a sneak," said Tom.

At first they were inclined to think Tom had spoken untruly about Helen staying away from school, but a few minutes afterwards a girl came in to enquire for Helen, and she gave the information that she had not been at school that afternoon, or the previous Sunday either.

Mrs. Freeman was busily sighing over the rents in Tom's jacket when she came, but it fell from her hands, and she burst into tears as she pictured Helen coming in with her clothes in a similar plight. "Whatever will become of them?" she exclaimed. "Tom, where's your boot?" she said, turning to the boy.

"Lost it," said Tom, coolly.

"Do you hear that?" said Mrs. Freeman, turning to her husband.

He, however, was not thinking of the children's clothes, but the injury their characters must have sustained lately, to make it possible for either of them to act as they had done.

"When Tom has washed himself I'll take him into the other room, and talk to him," he said, quietly.

"But that won't find his new boot;—we must find that," replied his wife, angrily.

"Where is your boot?" asked Freeman.

"I don't know, it came off itself," said Tom.

"It wouldn't come off if you had laced it up," said his mother; "let's look at the other one."

"The lace came out," muttered Tom.

"Why, there's no lace in that one," said his mother. "What have you done with the laces?" she angrily demanded, giving him a shake.

"I didn't take 'em out, one of the other boys did," whimpered Tom.

"Here, come along with me, and tell me where you've been, and whom you went with," said Freeman, leading him into the other room.

This, however, was not so easy to discover as Freeman had imagined. Tom told one or two stories which his father knew were untrue, but at last he found, by cross-questioning, that he had been in the neighbourhood of Oak Farm, with some other boys of the gang; but not a word had been said of robbing the orchard. Helen, too, was going to the same place, he said, and Freeman of

course supposed it was with the girls of the band.

To describe the poor man's feelings, as he went back to the outer room, would be impossible. "This is worse than all," he said, with a groan of anguish, as he sat down at the table, and hid his face in his hands.

Mrs. Freeman was still bemoaning the wreck of Tom's jacket. "The naughty, wicked children," she said; "and Helen is worse than Tom, for staying out so late as this."

Her husband started from his seat—"Hasn't Helen come home yet?" he said.

"Why, you know she hasn't," testily answered his wife.

The fact was, poor Freeman was so lost in grief at the change in his children, that he had quite forgotten that Helen had not come in with Tom. He took his hat from the peg now, however, and went out to look for her.

"Where are you going?" asked his wife, as he was opening the door.

"To look for Helen."

"But where are you going to look for her?"

It was a question Freeman could not answer for a minute or two, but, thinking over the matter, he said at length, "I'll walk up

to Oak Farm, and if I don't meet her on the road I'll may be go and speak to the farmer about them both;" and he shut the door and stepped out into the road, looking carefully all round lest Helen should pass him. He did not know Farmer March, but had heard that he was a hard, cold, strange man, and he hoped he should not need to speak to him. But nothing was seen of Helen on the road, and so he was obliged to summon up courage and walk up to the farm house, and ask for him.

"Yes, the master's at home," snapped Molly, who happened to be outside the door when Freeman came up. "Go back to bed directly, Dolly!" she called, as a little face appeared at the window above.

Dorothy's window was open, and sitting up in bed to listen to the faint sounds of life that came in with the cool evening air, she heard her uncle asked for, and the man say that his name was Freeman, and she slipped out of bed to peep at Helen's father, and was caught by Molly. In a minute or two she heard her uncle come out.

"So your name's Freeman, is it?" he said, gruffly.

"Yes, sir, and I've made so bold as to come and ask if you've seen my Helen to-day? I hear she's been about here somewhere, and it's time she came home."

"Yes, she has been about here," said the farmer, "and well I know it; but she won't be home to-night."

"Won't be home to-night!" repeated Freeman; "I hope she hasn't been doing any mischief—trespassing in your fields or anything."

"I don't suppose you'd think it was mischief—you've taught them all such tricks, I daresay," said the farmer, angrily; "but I call taking apples from my orchard stealing, and I've had her locked up for it, and she'll be taken before the justices to-morrow morning, and I mean to have her sent to prison."

The unhappy father staggered back against the wall of the house. "There must be some mistake, sir; my girl would never do this," he said, faintly.

"But I saw her coming out of the orchard, creeping through the hedge, with my apples in her hands and pockets."

"Oh, sir!" was all poor Freeman could utter; and, in spite of Molly and the farmer being close by, the tears rolled down his

cheeks as he leaned for support against the wall.

"There were more in it besides your girl, and she knows who they are too; for I picked up a boot under one of the trees, and she looked more frightened when she saw that than when I told her I should lock her up."

"A boot!" said Freeman.

"Ah, a boy's boot, and not a very big one either," said the farmer. "May be you'd know it, if you were to see it. Fetch it out, Molly," he added.

Dorothy ventured to peep between the curtains while Molly was gone. She wished she could tell the poor man that his little girl was innocent of the crime that seemed so clearly proved against her; but she dared not while Molly and her uncle were near. They did not believe her account, and before she could have told the whole story to this poor man, Molly would have been upstairs and put her into bed again.

When the boot was brought Freeman uttered a loud groan. "Oh! my boy! my boy!" he said, in a tone of anguish.

"I thought as much," said Farmer March. "Then your boy and girl are both concerned

in robbing my orchard, and breaking down my trees."

And the farmer, at the recollection of his damaged trees, went into a fury of passion, declaring he would send the constable and have Tom taken off to prison that very night.

"Oh, sir! be merciful, pray be merciful!" pleaded poor Freeman, "they're both young, and sending them to prison will do them harm, I'm afraid. They were good and obedient children before they joined the field-gang; it's that has done all the mischief."

Even the hard-hearted farmer seemed touched by the poor man's distress, and at length promised to let Tom remain at home for this night, but said the constable would be at Hayslope to fetch him early in the morning, and that he had better advise him to tell who had been his companions in the robbery. "As to the girl," he said, "I'll have her punished as much as ever I can, for she's been leading my niece into the same mischief. They were creeping through the hedge together when I caught them, so don't try to get her off, for you won't do it, my good man,"—and Farmer March turned and went indoors, while Freeman, with his load

of trouble and sorrow, walked slowly down the lane.

Dorothy, from her hiding-place behind the window-curtain, heard every word, and her face was scarcely less white as she said softly to herself, "Uncle will make Helen stop in prison, because he thinks she made me steal the apples, and he won't believe what I say about it;"—and the little girl sat down on the edge of the bed and burst into tears.

Presently, Molly's footsteps were heard coming up the stairs, and Dorothy crept into bed.

"Oh, you are in bed this time!" said Molly, as she came into the room. Dorothy choked back her tears. "I want to speak to you, please, Molly," she said, very humbly.

"Well, what is it?" snapped Molly, stepping up to the side of the bed. "You're hungry, I suppose, and want me to bring you some supper?"

"I am hungry," admitted Dorothy, "but it wasn't about that I wanted to speak to you. Will you tell uncle we didn't steal the apples? Helen told the truth about it, out in the lane, and so did I. Oh! Molly, do believe me, she didn't pick one apple."

Molly tossed her head, "Well! if ever I

did see such a child as you are, taking up with a low field hand, calling her 'Helen' too, and she a little thief!"

"She isn't a thief!" said Dorothy, sitting up in bed, "she isn't a thief, and uncle ought not to send her to prison."

"You'd better tell your uncle that," said Molly, with a short laugh.

"So I will. I'll tell him to-morrow morning," said Dorothy, "and he shall go and get Helen away from the policeman."

"But your uncle won't hear you to-morrow morning—he won't speak to you again for a week," said Molly.

Dorothy clasped her hands in agony. "Oh, dear! what shall I do?" she said. "Won't you talk to uncle for me?" she said, imploringly.

"I would, if I believed it, but I don't," said Molly, coolly. "You've been a very naughty girl ever since you've been here, and it's all that Helen Freeman's fault, I suppose; for you went out talking to her, and scratched a boy's face the first morning you were here. Your uncle don't forget things like that, if you do, Dolly;" and Molly went down stairs to fetch a slice of bread and a mug of milk for the little girl.

When she came back Dorothy had buried her face in the pillow, and was sobbing. "I don't want anything to eat now," she said, when Molly laid her hand upon her shoulder.

"Oh, very well, perhaps you'll find your appetite before the morning though," said Molly; and she set the bread and milk on the table and went down stairs, while Dorothy lay moaning out her sorrows to the pillows. But moaning and crying, without trying to do something, was not at all in Dorothy's way. She was an active little girl, and before long she left off crying to think of some plan by which she might help Helen. But how could she do this, if her uncle would not believe what she said? It was some time before she could think of any plan, but at last she resolved to get up very early the next morning, and before anyone thought she was awake, she would slip out of doors and walk to Hayslope.

It would not be very difficult to do this, for Molly was always busy in the dairy, and her uncle went out to the fields early in the morning, and so to open the door and slip out as soon as he was gone would be easy enough,

and nobody would miss her until nearly breakfast-time; and with the glad hopeful feeling this gave her, Dorothy soon fell asleep, and dreamed that she and Helen were both down a terrible dark pit; that she was very much frightened, and clung to Helen, and then Helen asked somebody to come and help them out, which very much puzzled her, as she could see no one near. But still Helen kept on asking her unseen friend to help them, and presently a kind gentle voice said, "Don't be afraid, I love you both, and I will help you very soon;" and then Dorothy woke, with the song of the lark sounding very clear in the fresh morning sunshine, and for fear she should fall asleep again, she got up and dressed herself, and then ate her bread and drank the milk Molly had brought up the night before, for she was hungry enough now.

Then she went to the window to watch for her uncle going out, and think over her dream, and wonder whether it would come true—whether anyone would believe her story, and help Helen out of the dark prison. She did not need any help herself, and besides, nobody loved her, but somebody might love

Helen—her father did, of course, and perhaps he would help her to get out, and then part of her dream would come true.

In the midst of these thoughts and hopes, she heard Molly go down stairs and unfasten all the doors and shutters of the house, and soon afterwards her uncle followed, and went at once to look after his men in the fields; and tying on her bonnet, she crept down stairs and went out too.

CHAPTER IX.

DOROTHY'S MORNING WALK.

DOROTHY had been a little way down the road leading to Hayslope before, but she had never been so far as the village, and had no idea where Helen Freeman lived. This was a difficulty she had not thought of until some way on her journey; but although she was already very tired, and a boy told her the village was still a mile off, she did not think of turning back.

No; it was her only chance of helping Helen, and Dorothy quite forgot that she was tired and hungry in her anxiety for her friend, until her long walk made her feel so sick and faint and her legs ache so much, that she was obliged to sit down on the doorsteps of a large house to rest herself.

She had got to the village at last, she knew, for she had passed several rows of cottages, but she had not ventured to ask anyone for

Helen Freeman yet, for she felt so faint, and sick, and giddy, she thought she would rest first before beginning to make her enquiry; and so leaning her head against the door post, she closed her eyes, and did not remember anything more until she found herself in a pretty room, where a gentle motherly face was bending over her, bathing her forehead with vinegar and water.

"Oh dear! where am I?" she said, trying to raise herself from the sofa.

"Lie still, little girl," said a gentleman standing close by: "You have not been very well, but you are better now. Do you think you could eat some bread and milk?"

Dorothy, however, took no notice of this question; her dream and the circumstances of the last few minutes were oddly mixed together in her mind, and she said, "Have you helped Helen out, sir?"

The gentleman looked at her, and then at the elderly woman standing over her. "She is wandering," he said, touching her forehead.

"Don't tell uncle I've been wandering, please, or else he won't let you get Helen out," said Dorothy.

The gentleman looked still more puzzled. "Who is Helen?" he asked.

"Don't you know, sir; she asked you last night to help us out of the pit, and you said you loved us both,—only that was a mistake, because nobody loves me now my papa is dead."

The last words were said so sadly and with such a mournful shake of the little head, that the tears almost fell from the gentleman's eyes, and he stooped and kissed the smooth white forehead.

The kiss seemed to startle Dorothy and bring her back to the reality of the things around her, for she said, "Oh, I forgot; it was a dream I had about Helen, but it all seemed coming true. I must get up now," she added, again trying to raise herself from the pillows; "I must find somebody to help Helen."

"Who is Helen?" again asked the gentleman; "is she your sister?"

Dorothy opened her eyes very widely: "Oh no! I haven't got a sister; but Helen's 'most as good,—she loves me, I know, and she came to tell me yesterday that God loved me too. Do you think He does?" she asked.

"Yes, dear child, I am sure He does," said

the gentleman, seating himself on the couch beside her; "but you must try and eat some bread and milk now," he added, as the housekeeper came into the room with a basin in her hand.

Dorothy ate the bread and milk as though she were very hungry, as in truth she was, for with the exception of her supper, which she had eaten that morning before she came out, she had had nothing to eat since her dinner the day before.

When she had finished the gentleman said, "Now will you tell me your name and where you live, that I may take you home again, for I am afraid you lost your way this morning?"

"Isn't this Hayslope?" asked Dorothy.

"Yes, this is Hayslope; but you don't live in Hayslope," said the gentleman, looking at the little dusty feet and wondering how far they had travelled that morning.

"Then I ain't lost!" said Dorothy, getting down off the sofa; "I must go and find Helen now, please," and she looked round in search of her bonnet.

"But you have not told me your name, or where you live," said the gentleman, smiling at her persevering earnestness.

"No; you said you would take me home to uncle, and I can't go till I've found Helen's father," said Dorothy, firmly.

"But will you not tell me who Helen is?" asked the gentleman once more.

"Don't you know I said Helen Freeman was—was—"

"Helen Freeman!" repeated the gentleman.

"Do you know her?" asked Dorothy, eagerly.

"Yes, my dear; why do you want to find her father?" asked the gentleman.

Dorothy stood before him with her hands clasped in her earnestness, and a glow of excitement on her cheeks. "Oh, please sir, you've been so kind to me, won't you help Helen out?" she said.

"Help Helen out, my child! where is she?" asked the gentleman.

"In prison, sir; the policeman took her last night;" and the tears rose to Dorothy's eyes as she spoke.

"Helen Freeman in prison!" uttered the gentleman in astonishment; "surely you make a mistake, my child!"

"Oh no, sir! I saw the policeman take her," said Dorothy, fairly sobbing now; "for uncle

wouldn't believe that we found the apples. And then she told her attentive listener the whole story, and why Helen had come to sit with her under the hedge instead of going to the Sunday School.

"Ah! it was wrong of Helen to do that without asking her mother," interrupted the gentleman. "You—"

"But it was my fault; I said she *must* come," said Dorothy quickly, anxious to save her friend from blame.

"And you live at Oak Farm with Mr. March," said the gentleman.

"Yes; I'm Dorothy March. My papa—"

"Your papa is dead, Dorothy, and I never heard of it!" said the gentleman, taking the child in his arms and kissing her again and again.

The two looked at each other in mute astonishment for a minute or two, but at length Dorothy said, "Did you know my papa, sir?"

"Yes, my darling, and your dear mamma too. Did you never hear your papa talk about Cousin Lennox?"

Dorothy shook her head. "Are you Mr. Lennox that teach the little girls in church?" she said.

"Yes, dear. Did your uncle tell you about me?" he asked.

"Uncle! Oh no; uncle has no time to think about little girls, or going to church, or anything but peas, and corn, and hay, and nasty apples."

"Nasty apples!" repeated Mr. Lennox, laughing.

"Yes, I shall always call them nasty apples now," said Dorothy, "for it was all through them Helen was sent to prison."

"Poor Helen! I had almost forgotten her in the pleasure of finding my little cousin Dorothy," said Mr. Lennox.

"Am I your little cousin?" said Dorothy, in a tone of surprise.

"Yes, dear; your mamma was my cousin, and I loved her very much, and so I shall be sure to love her little daughter for her sake," said the gentleman.

"But I told Helen I didn't want to see you," said Dorothy, humbly. "She said she would ask you to come and see uncle and me, and I said I didn't want to see you."

"That was because you didn't know me, was it not, dear?"

"Yes," answered Dorothy; "but you'll go

and help Helen, won't you?" she said anxiously.

"Yes, dear; but you will have to come with me, I think. Will you tell the gentlemen the story of Helen coming to teach you, just as you told me?" said Mr. Lennox.

Dorothy nodded. "Will uncle be there?" she said, with a little shiver of apprehension.

"Yes, dear, I think he will, but it is the only way we can help Helen, I think."

"Shall we go now? Is it very far?" asked Dorothy.

"Not quite so far as Oak Farm, but too far for you to walk, I think. I will have the pony put in the chaise, and then we shall not be long driving to the justice room;" and Mr. Lennox went out at once to order the chaise to be got ready, while Mrs. Thorne washed Dorothy's face and brushed her hair.

The little girl was all impatience to start, and hardly liked the delay of calling at Freeman's cottage as they passed; but Mr. Lennox thought it would be wiser to do this, besides the comfort he knew it would afford her parents. They were not at home, however. A neighbour who had come in to mind Alice and the baby said both Freeman and his

wife had gone to the justice-room with Tom and the policeman.

It'll just kill poor Freeman, sir, if the children are sent to prison," said the woman: "it well-nigh broke his heart to let them go to the field gang, and this'll quite do it."

"Well, I hope they will neither have to go," said the clergyman; "I can prove that Helen is innocent of the theft."

"God bless you, sir, for that news," said the woman fervently, and turning to little Alice, who sat crying for her sister, she said, "Don't cry now, Mr. Lennox will bring Helen home to you again."

Mr. Lennox did not feel so sure about this himself, more especially when he reached the justice-room and heard that Farmer March was determined to press the charge against Helen, because she had led his little niece into all sorts of mischief, as he termed it.

When Mr. Lennox went in, the story of Dorothy scratching the boy's face, and being set to do it by Helen, was being loudly discussed by the little crowd of people gathered round.

"The people tell stories," said Dorothy to Mr. Lennox, when they had passed through

and were looking round for Freeman and his wife; "I scratched the boy, but Helen didn't tell me to do it."

At this moment there was a little extra bustle near the door, and three boys were brought in by the policeman.

"There, that's the boy I scratched; he's a bad, wicked boy," said Dorothy, pointing to the eldest of the three.

"Been robbing Farmer March's orchard, sir, and breaking down his apple trees," said one of the policemen who knew the Rector.

"Oh, indeed! You have a little girl here too upon the same charge," said Mr. Lennox.

"Yes sir, we have, and she'll get the worst punishment I'm thinking."

"Why?" asked the clergyman.

"Well, the farmer saw her come creeping out of the orchard with the apples in her hands," replied the man.

"And I had some too, but we didn't steal them," spoke out Dorothy, with flashing eyes.

"Halloa! halloa! who have we here?" said a gentleman, shaking hands with Mr. Lennox and looking at Dorothy.

"My cousin, Miss Dorothy March," said Mr. Lennox, smiling. "Are you on the Bench this morning?" he asked.

"Yes," said the gentleman, making a wry face; "you've heard about the robbery, I suppose? These wretched children of the field gangs are always doing something."

"Ah, I wish I could do away with them altogether," said the clergyman earnestly. "Two of the most promising children in my school joined one a few months since, and now they are both charged with robbing their master."

"Well, it's the masters' fault in a great measure, for they never seem to think the poor little creatures have souls; they are treated no better than the horses or cattle—have no more consideration shown them," said the gentleman, hotly.

"But one of your prisoners—one of this field-gang has not forgotten what she learned at school," said the clergyman, "she has been trying faithfully to do what is right in spite of the difficulty, and the bad example of her companions."

"And yet she is a prisoner, you say," said the gentleman in a tone of surprise.

"Yes, she is accused of robbing the orchard."

"I hear that the girl is the worst—sure to be found guilty," said the gentleman; "but I must not stay talking here—will you come in with me?"

"No, thank you; I want to say a word to the girl's father, and hear what it is against the boy. I am coming as a witness, presently, he added.

"Oh, sir! you'll speak a word for my poor Helen," said Freeman, who at this moment came up to Mr. Lennox; "you know, sir, she always was a good girl till this happened, and—."

There, Freeman, make yourself easy about Helen; I believe she's as innocent as you are of robbing the farmer's orchard."

The poor man looked as though he could scarce credit the evidence of his senses; but in a minute or two he said, sadly, "Ah, sir! but Farmer March saw her coming out with—."

At this moment, the Magistrates having taken their seats, poor Helen was half led, half carried into the adjoining room. They just caught a glimpse of her pale, frightened

face as she passed; and Dorothy would have run after her, if Mr. Lennox had not kept firmly hold of her hand. "Not yet, Dorothy," he said, "I will take you presently."

The poor mother and father, however, pressed eagerly into the room, and a few minutes afterwards, Mr. Lennox and Dorothy were called in. Mr. Lennox spoke first, and said what a diligent, obedient, truthful girl Helen had always been, and then, as he finished, he lifted Dorothy up on a chair, and told the gentleman that she could tell them how Helen came to be in the orchard.

Dorothy looked round for a minute or two, a little frightened at seeing her uncle there; but a glance at Helen and Mr. Lennox seemed to give her courage.

"You know you must speak the truth—all the truth, and nothing but the truth," said one of the gentlemen, speaking to Dorothy.

"I never tell stories, do I, uncle?" said Dorothy, looking across at Mr. March. The farmer was vexed enough to see Dorothy where she was, and was not a little puzzled at it; but thus appealed to, he could not but answer: No, child, I never knew you to tell me one."

A few other questions were asked Dorothy, and then she was told she might tell the gentlemen, just what she told Mr. Lennox, of the way in which she and Helen had spent the Sunday afternoon.

Helen had lifted her head a little, and ventured to look round at her father, while Dorothy was speaking; but the poor man in his gladness, at hearing his child was innocent, almost forgot to notice her in the eagerness with which he listened to Dorothy.

The little girl kept nothing back, telling even how she had told Helen to run away when they were left alone in the orchard, and how Helen had tried to persuade her to put the apples down, and not eat them when they were thrown over the hedge.

It was evident that everyone on the bench was convinced of the truth of Dorothy's story, but to everybody's surprise, one of the gentleman turned to Helen, and said, "You know Miss Dorothy March, does she always tell the truth?"

Everybody expected to hear her say, "yes," but slowly and reluctantly, with a trembling voice, she said, "No, sir."

"How do you know that?" asked the gentleman, greatly astonished.

"Because she told me the other day she was going to tell Molly a story," slowly answered Helen, looking up at Dorothy as if mutely asking her forgiveness."

"Yes, I know I did, but I didn't tell it, Helen," said Dorothy, quickly; "I thought if you were trying to be good, I'd try too.

It's Molly makes me tell stories," she said, turning towards the gentlemen.

Several of them were laughing; "How does Molly do that?" asked one.

She beats me till I say I'm sorry, when I ain't," said Dorothy, demurely.

No one could refrain from laughing at this speech, which made Dorothy rather angry.

At length, however, one of the gentlemen rose.

"Helen Freeman has, I think, fully proved that her word may be taken," he said; "now tell me, are you innocent or guilty of stealing Mr. March's apples?"

"Innocent," said Helen with a trembling voice.

"Then I pronounce you innocent," said the magistrate; and the next moment she was sobbing in her father's arms, while Dorothy pressed forward to kiss her, in token of her forgiveness.

CHAPTER X.

LIGHT OUT OF DARKNESS.

AFTER Helen's release, the charges against the other prisoners were heard. It was clear enough against Tom Freeman, for the boot found in the orchard by Mr. March, was proved to be the one lost by him on Sunday afternoon; but no one doubted that he had been led into the commission of the theft by some of the elder boys of the gang, and Jack, with two others, had been arrested. By the help of the policemen it was proved that they were guilty, not only of this robbery, but of several others in the neighbourhood; and little Tom Freeman had been compelled to join them in these.

The three elder boys were sentenced to three months' imprisonment, but the gentlemen were puzzled to know what to do with Tom. It was plain that they had succeeded

in making him almost as bad as themselves. Unlike his sister, he had not tried to do right when he found it was so much easier to do wrong; but still they thought he might be saved from growing up a bad man. Helen had proved that the lessons taught in the Sunday School were not in vain, and so they hoped it might be the same in the case of Tom, if he could only be removed from all his bad companions at once. After some thought, and a talk with Mr. Lennox upon the subject, it was decided that Tom should be sent to a reformatory, where he would remain several years, and be taught a trade that would be useful to him when he came out. It was a sad trouble to Freeman and his wife to have to part with their child for so long, but they were both wise enough to know that it was the best and kindest thing that could be done for him. His mother blamed herself bitterly now, that she had compelled her children to join the field gang against her husband's wishes. "If I'd only believed what the doctor said when he came to see your leg!" exclaimed Mrs. Freeman, wringing her hands, "he told me God cared for us."

"Don't cry, wife," said Freeman, trying to comfort her, though he could scarce restrain his own tears; "it's all for the best, though I do wish Helen had told me how things were going on among the boys and girls, and our poor little Tom might have been saved from all this."

"Oh! father, forgive me," sobbed Helen. "I didn't like to tell you when your leg was bad, and I made Tom promise that he wouldn't tell, either."

"There, there, don't cry, Helen, I'm sure you've suffered enough, my girl," said her father, kissing tenderly the pale face, and looking sorrowfully at the grimed hardened hands.

"Yes, father, but I was thinking last night, after I'd prayed to God to take me out of the dreadful dark prison, that if I'd just done as Mr. Lennox has so often told us to do—spoken the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—I shouldn't have got into such trouble, nor Tom either. I didn't think about it then, father, but you know the times you used to ask me about the other boys and girls, I used to tell you part—enough to deceive you, and make you believe

they weren't bad, and I thought last night that was nearly as much of a story as though I'd *said* they weren't. Oh! father, I am so sorry, I feel it's all my fault about poor Tom, for if it hadn't been for this, and my staying away from Sunday School without asking mother, he wouldn't have gone to rob Farmer March's orchard."

Freeman kissed and tried to comfort the poor girl, although he could not deny that she had acted wrongly, and that it was mainly owing to this, that all the trouble and sorrow had fallen upon them.

They had reached home, and were looking sadly at Tom's vacant place, when all this was said. Just as they had finished talking, and while Helen's tearful face was still buried in her mother's lap, Mr. Lennox tapped at the door.

Freeman opened it instantly, and begged the clergyman to walk in. Helen held up her head and tried to choke back her tears, as she rose from her stool and dropped a curtsey.

"What! crying, Helen," said the minister, cheerily, while Mrs. Freeman dusted a chair with her apron, before placing it for him.

"Yes, sir; she's been telling us that if

she'd only minded what you taught her about telling the truth outright, this trouble might have been spared us all."

"Ah! yes, and my little niece, Dorothy March, too, might have escaped a good deal of unhappiness, if she'd been perfectly open about everything," said Mr. Lennox.

Helen thought he was angry with her, and her eyes filled with tears. "No, no, don't cry, Helen, *I* am not going to scold you; what you have suffered the last few months has been enough to teach you the evil of not being *quite* truthful, and you have proved to-day that you have learned the lesson. I was only going to shew you how often it may be that others may suffer for our faults. Poor little Dorothy March has from yours."

"Dorothy March! sir," uttered Helen; "Oh! I hope her uncle was not angry because she came to tell the truth about me this morning."

"Well, he was a little vexed at first, but that was nothing, and when I talked to him afterwards, and he heard exactly how things were, he was very glad the child had saved him from being unjust, he said.

Farmer March prides himself on being rigidly just," added the clergyman.

"What was it then, sir?" asked Helen; "did Miss Dorothy get into trouble that first time she came into the field and wanted to help me?"

"Yes; that seems to have been the beginning of her troubles and her self-will," said the clergyman; "and it might all have been spared if you had only told me all the truth about your wages being stopped when you came to ask the governess to give you a penny."

Freeman looked at Helen: "You asked for a penny!" he said.

"Yes, father. Don't be angry," said Helen, colouring deeply, "it was when your leg was bad, and mother said if she'd only got the penny that had been stopped that day out of my wages, she could buy some meat for you and Alice, and so I went to ask governess to give me a penny."

"And did she give it you?" asked her mother, sharply.

"No; don't you remember, mother, Mr. Lennox gave me some meat instead?" replied Helen.

"Yes, but you didn't tell me you'd been asking for anything," said her mother.

"I would not give her the penny," said Mr. Lennox, "because she seemed to be hiding something, and I did not feel quite satisfied about it. I have heard all about that affair to-day. Why did you not tell me then that you got into trouble through little Dorothy March? You never mentioned her name, I am sure."

"No, sir, I didn't like to tell you," stammered Helen.

"But why not? I should have been glad to hear of the child being at Oak Farm. I did not know until this morning that she had lost her father and had come to live there, or I should certainly have gone to see her. Poor child! she has had a hard time of it, I am afraid, at that lonely farmhouse, with only a housekeeper to manage her, or rather mis-manage her."

"And is that all my fault too?" said Helen, sadly.

"You certainly could have prevented a great deal of the poor child's unhappiness if you had been more open," said Mr. Lennox. "How was it you did not tell me all about

the affair? You were not to blame at all, it seems."

"I was afraid, sir, if I told one thing it would lead to another; and somehow it had begun to be easier not to tell, though it was hard at first."

"I see! the habit of keeping back part, if not all the truth, had been formed. A bad habit, Helen," said the clergyman seriously.

"Yes, sir, I know it is now, but I did not know it then," said Helen, tearfully.

But the clergyman thought there had been tears enough shed for one day. Helen was fully sensible of her fault, and had deeply suffered through it, and now he had come to tell them that out of all this trouble and sorrow and suffering, good was likely to arise, both for Helen and Dorothy.

"Mr. March is a just man although he is severe," said the clergyman; "and he is now so convinced of Helen's truthfulness and honesty, that he wishes to help her—"

"I can't let her go back to work in the fields, sir," interrupted Freeman.

"Of course not; but you know there would be a difficulty in getting her any other em-

ployment, except through friends, now," said Mr. Lennox.

"If you please, sir, I've thought of sending her to school again," said Mrs. Freeman. "It was through me she left, but I'm sure I'd work my fingers to the bone rather than that she should go back to the field-gangs."

"No need to do that," said Mr. Lennox; "I think it would be better for Helen to go to school—Helen and Miss Dorothy too, if we can arrange some plan for fetching her every morning, and taking her home in the afternoon."

"Oh, please, sir, couldn't I go and fetch her?" said Helen, quickly.

"Six miles twice a day would be rather too much, I think," said Mr. Lennox, "I must think of some other plan to discuss with Mr. March."

"Could the young lady come to live with you, sir?" Mrs. Freeman ventured to inquire.

"I suggested that," said the clergyman, "but Mr. March does not like parting with the little girl, although she gives him so much trouble. He has promised she shall come and spend every Sunday at the Rectory, but Oak

Farm must be her home, he says, and he *will* do something to help Helen."

What that something should be was a puzzle, not only to Mr. Lennox, but to Mr. March himself. While this subject was being discussed by Freeman and his wife, over their cup of tea, Farmer March sat in the cool brown parlour, and thought over every possible and impossible plan for carrying his wish into effect.

"Girls are such puzzles," he said at length, speaking half aloud, and in a vexed tone.

"Are they, uncle?" said Dorothy, who thought her uncle had spoken to her.

Farmer March looked across to where Dorothy sat curled up in an arm chair,—"Yes, you are a puzzle, and this Helen Freeman is a puzzle," he said.

"Only Helen is a good puzzle, and I am a naughty one," said Dorothy.

"Good or bad, I cannot understand either of you," said Mr. March.

"But, uncle, people like to find out what puzzles mean, don't they?" asked Dorothy.

"Yes, I suppose they do, if they can," said the farmer, smiling.

"Well, then, don't you think it would be

a good thing to have Helen to live here with me, then you'd be able to find us both out?" said Dorothy, archly.

The farmer answered by bursting into a loud laugh. "You little rogue," he said, "come here, and let me kiss you for putting such an idea into my head."

Dorothy bounded across the room, and sprang into her uncle's arms. "I do love you now," she said, twining her arms about his neck, and kissing his bronzed cheek;— "You'll let me love you as well as Peggy, won't you, uncle?" she said, looking straight into his eyes, and wondering why they were filled with tears.

The effect of that kiss was magical. Farmer March felt that he had found the key to his puzzling little niece, which all Molly's use of the rod had failed to bring forth, and a new joy, like that which is felt when a great treasure is found, sprang up in his heart. He sat smoothing Dorothy's hair with his large brown hand, and listening to her story of what Helen had taught her during their stolen meetings under the hedge for nearly an hour. Then he said slowly, "Do you think, Dorothy, the old house would be

happier for you if this Helen came to live with you?"

"Oh! yes, yes, uncle—that it would," said Dorothy, clapping her hands. "Molly would have to throw her stick in the fire, too," she added, "for I should try to be good, like Helen."

"You wouldn't forget to love your old uncle, would you?" said Mr. March, with a strange tremor in his voice; for all at once the little girl's love had become very precious to him.

"Oh, no, uncle, I should love you ten times more," said Dorothy. "You'll let me kiss you, too, and say my prayers—kneeling down by you like I did beside papa, after mamma died—won't you?" she added.

The farmer could not but say "yes" to this, although he knew it would touch a chord in his heart that had not vibrated for years; not since he had knelt at his mother's knee and repeated the self-same words Dorothy would use:—"Our Father, which art in heaven," about Whom he never thought, now that his mother was dead, although he needed that heavenly Father's love and care as much now as when he was a child.

After Dorothy had gone to bed that night

Molly was informed that another little girl was coming to live at the farm-house.

"Another girl coming to live here!" she uttered; "are you going mad, Farmer March?"

"No, I am just coming to my senses, I hope," replied the farmer, with a smile.

"But to think of having another girl," said Molly, "when that one drives me crazy almost. Just think of her running off as she did this morning."

"Well, but two will be less trouble than one, I fancy, Molly," said the farmer.

Molly tossed her head. "I don't know that I shall stop, if there's to be another child like Dorothy," she said.

"But she is not like Dorothy," said the farmer, "she will take all the care of her off your hands."

"People tell you so, I suppose," snapped Molly.

"No, I can trust the girl fully," said the farmer. And then he told Molly of the strange proceeding of the magistrate asking the girl to pronounce whether she was guilty or innocent, and judging her accordingly. "Everybody felt the girl's word could be taken, for when it seemed that her fate hung

upon Dorothy's being quite truthful, she alone said that she was not always so. I love truth wherever it is found, and Helen Freeman has taught me a lesson to-day I hope I shall never forget."

"Oh, I've heard the field hands say Helen Freeman's word could always be taken," said Molly.

"Then why didn't you tell me so yesterday, before she was sent to prison?" said Mr. March.

"Because you would have laughed at me for believing it. You have said—"

"Yes, yes, I know; I've thought of these poor children only as though they were dogs, or horses," interrupted the farmer, "but I will take care to alter this; they shall be looked after a little better now, poor things! This girl shall tell me all about them, and I will do what I can to help them; for I know I can depend upon Helen Freeman's word."

The arrangements for Helen to come and live at the farmhouse were soon made, and Mr. Lennox persuaded Mr. March to let them both attend a good day-school, which had been opened in a neighbouring village for farmers' daughters. Here Helen rapidly improved,

and was soon able to help Dorothy, not only in washing and dressing herself, but in preparing her lessons also.

But those to whom Helen was perhaps indirectly the greatest help were her former companions, the field hands—the poor neglected little gang-children. Helen Freeman's word could be depended upon in what she said about these, and the very fact that she had once been of their number proved that they were children still. Not wholly lost, not wholly depraved—bad as they might be—was a fact well known to everyone who heard the story of Helen Freeman's Word.

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