

# Dick and Brownie eBook

## Dick and Brownie

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# Page 1

## THE ESCAPE.

The summer sun blazed down scorchingly on the white road, on the wide stretch of moorland in the distance, and on the little coppice which grew not far from the road.

The only shady spot for miles, it seemed, was that one under the trees in the little coppice, where the caravan stood; but even there the heat was stifling, and the smell of hot blistering varnish mingled with the faint scent of honeysuckle and dog-roses.

Not a sound broke the stillness, for even the birds had been driven to shelter and to silence, and except for the rabbits very few other live things lived about there, to make any sounds. That afternoon there were four other live things in the coppice, but they too were silent, for they were wrapped in deep sleep. The four were a man and a woman, a horse and a dog, and of all the things in that stretch of country they were the most unlovely. The man and the woman were dirty, untidy, red-faced and coarse. Even in their sleep their faces looked cruel and sullen. The old horse standing patiently by, with drooping head and hopeless, patient eyes, looked starved and weak. His poor body was so thin that the bones seemed ready to push through the skin, on which showed the marks of the blows he had received that morning. The fourth creature there was a dog, as thin as the horse, but younger, a lank, yellow, ugly, big-bodied dog, with a clever head, bright, speaking brown eyes, and as keen a nose for scent as any dog ever born possessed.

The brown eyes had been closed for a while in slumber, but presently they opened alertly; a fly had bitten his nose, and the owner of the nose got up to catch the fly. This done, he looked around him. He looked with drooped ears and tail at the sleeping man and woman, with ears a little raised at the old horse, and then with both ears and tail alertly cocked he looked about him eagerly, even anxiously. A second later he was leaping up the steps and into the caravan; but in less than a minute he was out again, leaping over the steps at the other end, and out to the edge of the coppice. What he was in search of was not in the van, or under it, or anywhere near it.

The dog did not whine, or make a sound. He knew better than that. A whine would have brought a heavy boot flying through the air at him, or a stick across his back, or a kick in the ribs, if he were foolish enough to go within reach of a foot. With his long nose to the ground he stepped delicately to the edge of the coppice, then stood still looking about him, his brown eyes full of wistful anxiety.

He looked to the right, he looked to the left, he listened eagerly, then he stepped back to the van again. This time he found something. It was only a clue, but it sent his spirits up again, and with his nose to the ground he came quickly back to the edge of the little wood and beyond it; then, evidently satisfied, he took to his heels and raced away with a joy which almost forced a yelp of triumph from his throat.

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The old horse raised his head and looked after the dog wistfully. "If only I were as young and fleet, and able to get away as quietly!" he thought longingly, and sighed a sigh which made his thin sides heave painfully. Then his head drooped again, even more sadly than before, and he closed his eyes patiently once more. He loved the lank yellow dog. Next to little Huldah he loved him better than anything in the world. It hurt him as much or more to hear the stick raining blows on them as it did to feel it on his own poor battered body, for his poor skin was hardened, but his feelings were not.

On each side of the wide road which ran past the coppice and away from it were sunk ditches and high hedges, separating it from a bit of wild moorland, which stretched away on either side as far as eye could see. Here and there in the hedges were gaps, through which a person or an animal could pass from the road to the moor, and back again. To Dick, who did not understand it, this was very bewildering. Ahead of him a black shadow would flit for a moment, dark against the dazzling white road, then it would disappear. It moved so swiftly and so close to the ground, that if it had not been for the scent he might have thought it was some animal dodging about among the ditches and dry grasses. Dick could not know that when it had slipped through a gap in the hedge it became, instead of a shadow, a solid little dingy brown figure.

Dick was puzzled. He was sure that Huldah was on ahead of him somewhere, and he was very sure that he wanted her, but he was not at all sure where she was, or that she wanted him; and there are times in the lives of caravan dogs when they are not wanted, and are made to know it. Dick had learnt that fact, but he wanted Huldah, and he could not help feeling that she wanted him. It was very seldom that she did not.

So he followed along slowly, keeping at a safe distance, his eyes and his senses all on the alert to find out if that shadow ahead of him was really his little mistress, or what it was—and if she would be angry if he ran after her and joined her.

For a mile, for two miles, they went on like this, then the moor ended, and roads and fields and houses came in sight. The black shadow, which was really a little brown girl, stood for a moment under the shelter of the hedge and looked hurriedly about her. "Which'll be the safest way to go?" she gasped to herself, and wished her heart would not thump so hard, for it made her tremble so that she could hardly stand or move. She shaded her eyes with her little sun-burnt hand and looked about her anxiously.

"They'd be certain sure to take the van along the main road," she said to herself; "and anyway somebody might see me, and tell *'im*. He's sure to ask everybody if they've seen me." A sob caught in her throat, and tears came very near her eyes. She had often and often thought of running away, but had never before had the courage and the opportunity at the same time, and now that she had got both, and had seized them, she was horribly frightened.

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She was not so frightened by the prospect of want and loneliness and uncertainty which lay before her, as she was by the thought of being caught, and taken back again. The risk of capture after this bold step of hers, and what would follow, were so terrible that the mere thought of them made her turn off the high road at a run, and dash into the nearest lane she came to. She had the sense to choose one on the opposite side of the road, lest she should find herself back on the moor again. A moor was so treacherous, there was no shelter, and one never knew when one would be pounced on. There was no shelter either, no food, no house, no safe hiding-place, and of course there was no chance of finding a friend there, who might take pity on her.

The lane she dashed into so blindly was a steep one, it led up, and up, and up, but the hedges were so high she could not see anything beyond them. They shut out all the air too, and the heat was quite stifling, her poor thin little face grew scarlet, the perspiration ran off her brow in heavy drops. She picked up her apron at last, to wipe them away, and then it was she found the bundle of raffia and the two or three baskets she had brought out to sell, when the thought had come to her that she would never go back any more—that here was the chance she had longed for. Now, when she noticed the baskets for the first time, her heart beat faster than ever, for she could well picture the rage there would be, when it was discovered that not only had she run away, but had taken with her two baskets ready for sale!

“They are mine! I made them,” she gasped, nervously, “and I left some behind!” but her alarm put fresh energy into her tired feet, and, in spite of the heat and her weariness, she ran, and ran madly, she did not know or care whither, as long as she got lost. Wherever she saw a way, she took it; the more winding it was the better. Anything rather than keep to a straight, direct road that they could trace.

At one moment she thought of hiding away her baskets and raffia, but she was very, very hungry by this time, and with the baskets lay her only chance of being able to buy food, and oh, she needed food badly. She needed it so much that at last, from sheer exhaustion, she had to stop and lie down on the ground to recover herself.

It was then that Huldah first caught sight of Dick. All the way she had gone, he had followed her at a distance, careful never to get too close, cautiously keeping well out of sight, running when she ran, drawing back and half-concealing himself when she slackened her pace, and there was a likelihood of her looking around. Now at last, though, they had come to moorland again, with only a big boulder here and there for shelter, and when Huldah suddenly fell down, exhausted, Dick, in his fright at seeing her lying on the ground motionless, forgot all about hiding away. Everything but concern for his little mistress went out of his head. Huldah, lying flat on the ground with her head resting on her outstretched arm, her face turned away from the pitiless sun, saw nothing. She did not want to see anything; the desolateness of the great bare stretch of land frightened her. She felt terribly frightened, and terribly lonely. Should she die here, she wondered, alone! At the prospect a sob broke from her.



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To poor Dick, who had crept up so close that he stood beside her, this was too much. At the sound of her distress he was so overcome, he could no longer keep his feelings under restraint. A bark broke from him, eager, coaxing, half frightened; then, repentant and ashamed, he thrust his hot nose into Huldah's hand, and licked it apologetically.

Weary, dead-beat as she was, Huldah sprang up into a sitting position. "Dick!" she cried, "oh, Dick! How did you come here? Oh, I am so glad, so glad!" and flinging her arms round his long yellow neck she burst into happy tears. Dick was delighted. Instead of being scolded, he was petted, and his little mistress was plainly glad to see him. He was as hungry as she was, and very nearly as tired, but nothing mattered to him now.

"Oh, Dick, how did you come? and, oh, won't they beat us if they catch us! and—and oh, I hope they won't beat poor old Charlie worse than ever, because they are angry. Oh, I do wish Charlie was here too. Poor old Charlie! he will be so lonely."

Dick wagged his tail and looked about him. Perhaps he was thinking that Charlie might have been able to find something to eat in that bare spot, but that it was more than they could. Huldah realised this too, and with a sigh she scrambled on to her aching feet again. She must find somebody to help them—a house and food of some kind.

"You shall lead the way this time, Dick. You are clever, and can scent things out. You'll know which way to go to find houses."

It took Dick a little while to understand that he was expected to run ahead now, not to follow, and indeed it is doubtful if he did understand it, but a rabbit popping up ahead of them at that moment drew him on, and Huldah more slowly followed. It was a very zig-zag way that Dick took them, for he was intent on finding rabbits, not houses, but, fortunately, it led them at last to a house, too.

The sun was going down in a crimson glory, and a mistiness was creeping up over the land on all sides, when, to her great relief, Huldah saw the welcome sight of smoke rising out of chimneys, then other signs of life, and presently came to a farm standing in the middle of a large yard. The yard seemed very full of animals, and where there were no animals there were hay-ricks and corn, and empty upturned carts and waggons.

It was a lonely-looking place in that evening light, and the melancholy mooing of the cows, the good-night cluckings of the hens, the bleating of the sheep, seemed to add to the desolateness. As Huldah and Dick drew nearer, another and more terrifying sound arose, and that was the barking of dogs. Dogs sprang up from everywhere, or so it seemed to poor little Huldah, and, forgetting the coming night, her hunger and everything else, she fled from the place, shrieking to Dick to follow her.

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Fortunately, Dick obeyed. Hunger and tiredness had taken most of his spirit out of him, or he could never have resisted such an opportunity for a fight; the enemy numbered six to one, too, not to speak of the farmer, who was armed with a long whip, and two or three workmen, who were well provided with sticks or pitchforks, and hungry, footsore Dick did not at that moment feel equal to facing them all, and doing himself justice. So, with an impudent flick of his tail he followed Huldah, with the air of one who would not deign to fight mere farm-dogs.

It was a very weary, dejected pair, though, that at last stopped running, and summoned courage to stand and look about them once more; and the fright had so shaken Huldah's courage that when presently she caught sight of more smoking chimneys, and a group of little grey stone houses, and other signs of life not far ahead of them, she felt almost more sorry than glad.

When she came closer, and found the village street full of people, she felt decidedly sorry, and wished wildly that she had gone any other way, and so avoided them.

After the terrible heat of the day, men, women and children had all turned out of their close, stifling cottages, and were sitting or lounging about on doorstep or pavement, enjoying the coolness of the evening air; and, having nothing to do and little to talk about, and not much to look at, they naturally took a great interest in the odd-looking pair which came suddenly into their midst. The dusty, shabby little girl and the lanky yellow dog.

Huldah did not appreciate their interest. She felt ill with nervousness, when she saw all the eyes turned towards her, and, she longed to be out on the moor again,—anywhere, lost, hungry, lonely, tired, rather than under this fire of eyes. She had wanted very much to try to sell one of her baskets, that she might be able to buy some bread, but the staring people daunted her. She felt she could not have stopped and spoken to one of them, or have offered her wares, to have saved her life. It was all she could do to drag her trembling limbs past them, and out of their sight.

The end of the street was reached at last, though the cottages grew more and more scattered, then stopped altogether, and the pair found themselves alone once more. Poor Dick was by this time past doing anything but plod wearily along, his tail down, his ears drooping, his tongue hanging out. Huldah herself was in a half-dazed state, she scarcely knew where she was, or what she was doing. She plodded on and on mechanically, every step becoming harder, every yard a greater tax on her. She had almost given up hope, and decided to lie down under a hedge for the night, when her dim eyes were attracted by a light which suddenly shone out on the darkness, down a little lane on her right.

She paused in her walk, and stood gazing at it longingly. To the exhausted, lonely, frightened child it seemed a beautiful sight. It was like a friendly smile, a kindly welcome reaching out to her in her hopelessness.

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"I will go and ask them to help me," she thought, dully. "They won't kill me; perhaps they'll give me a bit of bread for one of my baskets. They won't call the p'lice so late as this."

Dick looked up at her and obediently followed. It was all one to him where he went. He had no hopes and no fears, he was better off than poor Huldah in that respect, but he roused to renewed interest and expectation when his little mistress stopped before a cottage, and walking timidly up the garden, knocked at the front door.

## CHAPTER II.

### A NIGHT SCARE.

Silence! Seconds passed, to Huldah they seemed endless, her heart, which at first had beat furiously, quieted down until it seemed scarcely to beat at all. Save for the good-night calls of the birds, and the sad mooing of a cow in a field not far away, the silence remained unbroken.

"Perhaps I didn't knock loud enough," thought Huldah, "or whoever's inside may be gone to sleep."

If her plight had been less desperate, she would never have had the courage to knock again, but she felt ill and exhausted and frightened, and something seemed to tell her that here she might find help. So, after waiting a little longer, she screwed up her courage again, and rapped once more, this time more loudly; and this time, at any rate, her knock called forth response. There were sounds of hasty shuffling steps across the floor, and then a voice, old and evidently trembling, called through the door, "Who is there?"

Huldah was puzzled how to answer. If she were to say "me," it would be only foolish, while if she called back, "I am Huldah Bate," her hearer would not know who Huldah Bate was. However, she had to say something, so she called back pleadingly, "I am a little girl, Huldah Bate, and please, ma'am, I'm starving, and—and please open the door. I can't hurt you, I am too little."

It was her voice even more than her words which induced Martha Perry to open her door to the suppliant. It was such a childish voice, and so weak, and pleading, and tired. So the bolts were drawn back, and the door was opened. It was only opened a few inches, but wide enough to let out a stream of light, which brought some comfort and hope to the child's heart and the dog's heart. Huldah stepped forward into the light to show herself.

"You are sure you 'aven't got anybody with you?" asked the woman, with nervous suspicion.

“No, ma’am, no one but Dick.”

“Who’s Dick?” hastily pushing the door close, in her alarm.

“Dick’s my dog. He—he followed me. He’s starving, too,” and a sob broke from Huldah’s throat. “We wouldn’t hurt you, ma’am, for anything; we couldn’t, we’re dead-beat. I haven’t had anything to eat since yesterday, and we’ve come miles and miles. I don’t want to come in, ma’am,” she pleaded, more and more eagerly, as the door remained rigidly closed, except for about three inches. “If only you’ll give us a bit of bread. I haven’t got any money, but I’ll give you one of my baskets for it. Oh, please, ma’am, don’t turn us away!” The tears began to rain down her thin white cheeks. She had borne all that she could bear, and she had not the strength to keep them back any longer.

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Dick, who could never bear to see his little mistress crying, pushed himself forward; first he licked Huldah's hand, and then seated himself in front of her, as though to protect her from the ogress who made her cry. Something in the ogress's face, though, told Dick that she was not a real ogress, and he looked up at her with a world of pleading in his big brown eyes, and his long tail waving coaxingly.

"Poor doggie!" exclaimed the ogress. "Poor Dick, are you hungry, too? You do look tired and thin. Yes, you shall come in;" and the narrow stream of light became a wide river, which broke over the pair and surrounding them drew them in, until they found themselves safely landed in the cosiest little kitchen Huldah had ever seen.

It was really a very humble little kitchen, with signs of poverty everywhere, but to Huldah it was a palace. It was spotlessly clean, and as neat as a new pin, and to a child who had spent the greater part of her life in a dirty, untidy caravan, this was a sign of superiority, even of luxury.

To Dick the cleanness and neatness meant nothing, the rag mat before the hearth was the most luxurious thing he had ever seen in the whole of his life, and he stretched his lanky aching body on it with a deep sigh of perfect bliss, and promptly fell asleep.

Huldah and old Mrs. Perry meanwhile stood in the middle of the kitchen surveying each other.

"Sit down, child," said Martha, at last, "you look fit to drop." She spoke brusquely but not unkindly.

"Thank you, ma'am," said Huldah, gratefully, and perched herself, with a long-drawn breath of excitement, on the edge of the hard chair nearest the door.

"Not there. Go and sit in the arm-chair by the fire-place. Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Oh!" gasped Huldah, almost too delighted to be able to find words to answer with. There was more pleasure, though, in her tone than any number of words could have conveyed.

"The kettle is on the boil. I was just going to have a cup myself, before I went to bed."

"Oh, thank you, ma'am!" gasped Huldah, feebly, but again with a world of gratitude in her tone.

"Put down your load for a time, then, and rest your arms." Then, as her eyes fell on the baskets the child had been carrying, "Was it one of those you offered me for a bit of bread?"

"Yes, ma'am," answered Huldah, shyly.

“Well, you meant well, I don’t doubt, but those baskets are worth more than a bit of bread. They ought to sell for eighteenpence or two shillings each, I should say.”

“Yes, ma’am, Aunt Emma always asks half-a-crown, and then comes down to two shillings or eighteenpence,” said Huldah, innocently.

“Who’s Aunt Emma?”

Huldah hesitated a moment, somewhat at a loss how to explain. “She isn’t my real aunt, though I calls her so. She and Uncle Tom ain’t any relation to me really. They’re called Smith, and my name is Huldah Bate; but when mother died—”

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"Haven't you got any mother?"

"No, ma'am, and father is dead too. He died when I was too little to remember, and mother earned her living by making baskets, and when I was big enough she taught me."

"How long ago did your mother die?" asked Mrs. Perry, more gently.

"Two years, ma'am, and when she died Aunt Emma and Uncle Tom said I was to go and live with them. They said mother had said I was to."

"Um! Did your mother think so much of them, then?"

"No, ma'am. They was always too rough for mother, they drinks a lot, and—and swears terrible, and they'm always fighting."

"I wonder at your mother leaving you to such people to be took care of."

"I don't believe mother ever did," said Huldah, "she never told me so, anyway," and she burst into bitter sobs; "but there wasn't anybody else there, and they told the parish orf'cer that I was their little girl, and then they went away as fast as they could, and took me with them."

"Are they kind to you?"

"They beat me—they're always beating me, or Dick, or Charlie,— Charlie is the old horse that draws the van,—and I'd sooner be beaten myself than see them being knocked about. We don't ever get enough to eat, but that isn't so bad as the beatings."

"Poor child! You both look as if you had never had enough to eat in your lives. Did they make baskets too?"

"No, ma'am, they can't. They make clothes-pegs, and they sell brushes and mats, but my baskets brought them in as much as a pound a week sometimes, and oh!" and she gasped at the thought, "Uncle Tom will be angry, when he finds I don't come back!" and her eyes were full of terror as she thought of his passion.

Mrs. Perry disappeared into the little scullery behind the kitchen, and opened the door of the safe where she kept her scanty store of food. There was very little in it but a ham-bone, a few eggs, a loaf of bread, and a tiny bit of butter. The bone she had, earlier in the day, decided would make her some pea-soup for to-morrow's dinner, but she thought of poor Dick and his hollow sides, and came to the conclusion that her soup would taste just as good without the bone; and Dick, when he really grasped the fact that the whole of the big bone was really meant for him, soon showed her that no ham-bone in the world had ever given more complete satisfaction.



“Could you eat an egg?”

Huldah stared blankly at her hostess. She could not at first realise that the question was meant for her. “An egg! Me! Oh, yes, ma’am, but I don’t want anything so—so good as that.” She could have eaten anything, no matter how plain, or poor, or unappetizing. But an egg! One of the greatest luxuries she had ever tasted. “A bit of dry bread will be plenty good enough. Eggs cost a lot, and—and—”

“My hens lay eggs for me in plenty. I don’t ever have to buy one,” said the old woman, proudly. “I’ve got some fine hens.”

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"Do you keep a farm, ma'am?"

Mrs. Perry smiled and sighed. "No, child; a few hens don't make a farm. I had a cow at one time, but all that's left is the house she lived in. Now, draw over to the table and have your supper."

At any other time Huldah would have been shy of eating before a stranger, for in the caravan good manners were only a subject for sneers and laughter, and she remembered enough of her mother's teaching to know how shocking to ordinary eyes Mr. and Mrs. Smith's behaviour would have seemed. To-night, though, she was too ravenously hungry for shyness to have much play. She tried to remember all she could of what her mother had taught her, and got through fairly creditably.

"Now," said Mrs. Perry, when that wonderful, glorious meal was at last ended, "where did you think of going for the night?"

"I don't know," sighed Huldah, wistfully. "I hadn't thought of anywhere perticler. I daresay there's a rick or a hedge we can lay down under. I don't mind where I go, so long as Uncle Tom don't find us."

"Well, I can't give you a bed here. I've only this room and my bedroom, and—and—" Mrs. Perry did not like to explain that she was too nervous, and too doubtful of Huldah's honesty to leave her alone in the kitchen, while she herself went to bed and to sleep. To her mind all gipsies, and all gypsy children, were thieves, and though she was interested in Huldah, and felt very sorry for her, she had, after all, only known her about an hour, and knew nothing of her past history. In her heart she could not as yet believe all her story, or bring herself to trust her.

The child instinctively felt something of this distrust, and it hurt her. Her eyes filled, but she forced back the tears, and spoke out bravely.

"I shall do all right, thank you, ma'am. We'll be going on again, now. I ain't afraid of nothing when I've got Dick with me, and—and thank you, ma'am, for all you've given us; but I wish you'd 'ave one of my baskets, ma'am, please! I can easy make another, and I'd be glad if you would, please, ma'am."

Mrs. Perry felt a prick of conscience, and her heart melted. She could see that the child's feelings were hurt, and that her self-respect made her anxious to pay for all they had received.

"If you wouldn't mind sleeping in the barn in the garden, you and your dog, you're welcome. It's as clean as can be, and there's plenty of nice straw there, to make a comfortable bed for you. You'd be under shelter there, and if so be as your uncle should come this way, he'd never find you there."

Instead of conferring a favour, she found herself almost asking the child to stay, and to Huldah the temptation was too great to be resisted. To be safe from her uncle! She felt she could bear anything, if she could only for a few hours feel quite safe. She was so tired, too, so dead-tired, she did not know, in spite of her brave words, how she could possibly drag her weary body a step further.

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A few moments later the front-door had been securely bolted, and Mrs. Perry, lantern in hand, was conducting her two strange visitors out of the back door and down the garden.

"That's the fowls' house," she explained, flashing her lantern over the door of the little building as they passed it, "and here is the barn."

She opened the door, and threw the lantern light all over the wooden shed. It was spotlessly clean, and sweet with the smell of the straw which was scattered about one end of it. There were some bundles and some loose straw lying on the ground. Huldah sank down on one of the bundles with a little cry of relief, while Dick burrowed delightedly in the loose straw.

"You won't be afraid, you think?"

"No, ma'am, thank you, not with Dick," she answered, bravely.

She did not feel quite so brave, though, when the light had gone, and she heard the house-door bolted, and found herself and Dick shut in alone in the dark in that great empty strange place. She did wish that Mrs. Perry had seen fit to leave them the lantern. Rats loved straw, Huldah knew, so did mice, and she was dreadfully afraid of both. The moonlight shone in through the sides of the barn, and Huldah had a feeling that eyes were at all the chinks, watching her.

To try to forget the rats and mice and not to see the eyes, she nestled down in the straw, with one bundle at her head and another at her back, and hoped she would soon fall asleep and forget everything. But though she was so tired, or, perhaps, because she was overtired, sleep when it did come was not sound or pleasant. Every time Dick rustled the straw, she awoke. Every time a bird called or an owl hooted, she started up wide awake. She woke once from a dream of her uncle, with, as she thought, his voice echoing in her ear. Another time she felt certain he was banging at the barn door, trying to get in, to beat her and Dick, and take them both back.

"Oh, I wish it was morning!" she sighed, and sat up on her straw bed, to see if daylight was beginning to dawn yet.

But all was dark still; even the moon had gone. She was just about to lie wearily down again, when a real, not a dream sound, caught her ear. The sound of nailed boots on stones, and stealthy footsteps.

"It really is someone climbing the wall and coming up the garden," she thought to herself, and her mouth and throat grew dry with terror, and her heart beat suffocatingly. "Dick!" she gasped, in a low voice. "Dick, they're coming, they've found us. Listen!"

Dick raised himself on his haunches, with his ears cocked. Huldah was seized with sudden fear that he would growl, and so betray their hiding-place, for her uncle would recognise Dick's growl in a moment. She laid her hand on his collar firmly. "Quiet!" she commanded, firmly, and knew that he would obey. She tried to peer out through the chinks, but it was hard to move without rustling the straw, and all without was black as pitch.

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Then suddenly, quite close to her on the other side of the planking, sounded a whisper, and Huldah never knew afterwards whether she was most frightened or relieved—frightened by the nearness of somebody, or relieved that the somebody was not her “uncle.”

“Bill, where’s the sack?” the voice asked, impatiently.

“I dunno!” answered another voice, sourly. “You had it. I’ve cut my knee on that there wall; I can feel the blood running down my leg.”

“You always manages to do something,” was all the sympathy Bill got. “We’ve got to ‘ave the sack, so you’d better find it. How’re we to carry the birds without it? In our hats?”

“It’s the fowls!” thought Huldah, thrilling with excitement. “They’re going to steal the fowls. Oh, they shan’t! The lady’ll think it’s me. Oh, what can I do? How can I tell her? I *must* stop them, somehow!”

Bill had gone back in search of the sack, and the other thief stood waiting for him. Huldah had time to think, but no plan came to her. She did not know her way, nor where to turn for help; and if she screamed, they would only find her out, and knock her about. They would steal the fowls all the same. A slight movement beside her recalled her thoughts, and sent her spirits up with a bound. “Dick! why, of course Dick would help her!”

Quick as thought she crept to the door, and with one hand on Dick’s collar she gently raised the latch with the other. Bill had evidently found the sack, for the thieves were together again; she heard them whispering. One even seemed to be already fumbling with the latch of the fowls’ house door.

“Quick, Dick, catch them!” she whispered, excitedly. “Go for them, Dick! bring them down!” With one fierce yelp Dick was out of her grasp and out of her sight.

It had all happened so swiftly that the thieves were bewildered, dazed, and frightened almost beyond power of speech or movement. They had heard nothing, and certainly had expected nothing, yet suddenly, from somewhere quite near by, came a voice, and out of the darkness came a large dog bounding upon them, growling savagely. For a second they were too frightened to move; then, with an oath, they dashed across the garden, making for the wall they had come over. Fast though they went, Dick was after them and on them, and Bob, as well as Bill, knew what it was to feel blood trickling down his leg. Bob yelled, Bill groaned, Dick growled and snarled and barked furiously with excitement. The frightened hens, startled by the hubbub, added their share to the uproar.

In the cottage a curtain was drawn back quickly from a window, and a white frightened face stared out. Huldah caught sight of it, and coming out of the shelter of the barn, raced eagerly along the path to the house.

“It’s all right,” she cried, panting. “It’s all right, ma’am, some fellows come stealing your fowls, but Dick’s after them.”

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Dick was after them, but he could not capture them; he was but a young dog, and the enemy was two to one. A heavy kick sent him rolling over, just as the thieves reached the wall, and before he could pick himself up again they were over it, and making good their escape.

At the sound of Dick's cry Huldah went flying back to the spot whence the sound came. "Oh, Dick, Dick, what have they done!" she cried, terrified.

Dick, though, was not one to make a fuss about anything. Kicks he was well accustomed to. Men, according to his experience, were given to kicking. Limping heavily, but mightily pleased with his fray, he came running up to her. Huldah knelt down in the path beside him, and hugged him to her. "Oh, Dick!" she cried, anxiously, passing her little hand over him to feel for any hurt. "Poor Dick, you are always getting knocked about by somebody!"

But Dick was far less concerned than she was. All that really troubled him was that his enemies had escaped him, and had got off so lightly.

"Huldah! Huldah!" called a frightened voice from the doorway. "Whatever is happening? Oh, do come in, child, and bring Dick. I am terrified to be left alone! Come in, both of you, and shut the door;" and at the sound of her voice Dick gave up his frantic search for his enemies, and limped quickly back. When the lady who gave him the ham-bone called, she must never be kept waiting!

## CHAPTER III.

### WHAT THE MORNING BROUGHT.

It was a very shaken, tremulous trio which stood and faced each other in the tiny kitchen, after they had locked and bolted the door. Dick trembled with excitement and eagerness only, but Mrs. Perry was really frightened.

"But what of my poor hens!" she gasped, as Huldah poured out the adventures of the night. "Will the thieves come back again? What can I do? There's twelve of them; I can't bring them all indoors, and yet—oh, poor dears, and they so tame, and knowing me so well. I'd sooner see them all dead than in the hands of such men; and they'll be so frightened."

"They're all safe enough, ma'am," said Huldah, consolingly. "The thieves didn't as much as open the door before Dick was on them, and they won't be coming back here again in a hurry; they'll never feel sure but what Dick's under the wall waiting for them."

Mrs. Perry bent down, and patted Dick's head gratefully. It was the first time she had actually touched him. "Good dog," she said, warmly. "Oh, you good doggie, to protect a



strange old woman and her belongings!" and Dick was overcome with pride and gratitude for her condescension.

"Oh, I am glad it has all ended so well," she exclaimed, with a deep sigh of thankfulness. "What with the shouting and the barking and confusion, I couldn't make out anything, or hear what you said, and I thought for certain they'd got away with the poor things;" and she patted Dick's head again, to his great delight and Huldah's. "I must sit down, I am that shaken," and she crept over to a chair and dropped into it wearily, "and I am sure you must be too, child. I wish the fire hadn't gone out; it seems chilly now, for all 'twas such a hot day,—at least, I am chilly."

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"Let me light up the fire for you?" asked Huldah, eagerly. "You do look cold, ma'am. Shall I make you a cup of tea, or get you some milk or something?"

The scene they had just passed through seemed to have broken down some barrier, and drawn them as close together as though they had known each other a long time.

Martha Perry hesitated a moment, though not now because she distrusted Huldah. She was thinking, ought she to afford it?" Yes, child," she answered, at last. "I don't believe I could sleep if I went to bed as I am, I feel all unstrung and chilled." Then her mind went back to the thought which troubled her most—"I wonder if the fowls will be really all right," she mused, anxiously.

"Oh yes, ma'am." Huldah had no doubts on that point. "Those fellows would be afraid to come back. Dick did give them a scare, springing out of the dark on them like that, and they're too hurt about the legs to want to walk any further than they can help, yet awhile!"

"Oh yes, of course," in accents of great relief, "I'd forgotten. They wouldn't want to come and face Dick again, and they wouldn't know but what he was mine, and always living here."

A bright idea came to Huldah. "Would you like me to let Dick out into the garden again. He'd see that nobody came into it. Nobody wouldn't dare touch anything with him there, I know!"

The suggestion evidently pleased Mrs. Perry, and relieved her greatly. "Now that would be a comfort," she said, gratefully. "I'd feel ever so safe then. On a warm night like this he can't hurt, can he?"

Huldah laughed. "Dick doesn't know what 'tis to sleep in," she said. "The most he ever had was a sack thrown down under the van, unless when Charlie was put in a stable, and they'd let Dick go in too, but Uncle Tom liked best to have him about, to guard the van."

All the time she was talking she was laying in the fire quickly and deftly. Mrs. Perry watched her interestedly. She felt the comfort of having someone cheerful to speak to; and when she remembered that but for this little stray waif she would have been alone now, and her hen-house robbed, her heart was very full of gratitude.

"Miss Rosamund will blame me when she hears about it," she said, presently. "She was always telling me I ought to have a strong lock on the hen-house door. She said it was tempting folk to be dishonest,—not to have anything but just the latch, and me known to keep good fowls always. 'Twas Miss Rose that gave them to me," she explained. "I mean, she gave me a sitting of her prize eggs, and every one hatched out."

“Oh my!” exclaimed Huldah, who had filled the kettle, and was now waiting for it to boil. She was immensely interested in all she saw and heard, and there seemed so much to see and hear in this new life into which she had suddenly found her way. “Is Miss Rose a—a lady?” She only put the question in the hope of leading Mrs. Perry on to talk more.

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"A lady! I should think she was, indeed! One of the best that ever lived! 'Twould be a good thing for this world if there were more like her."

Huldah listened intently. She wondered if she should ever see this wonderful Miss Rose, and find out what it was that made Mrs. Perry speak so warmly about her. She thought it must be fine to be thought much of by anybody so superior as Mrs. Perry.

"I think you are the kindest lady in the world," she said, impulsively, looking up at her hostess with shy, grateful eyes. "Would Miss Rose have taken me and Dick in, if we had come to her house like we did to yours?"

"That she would!" declared Mrs. Perry, emphatically, "and 'twas the thought of what she would do that made me do it."

"I'd love to see Miss Rose," said Huldah, eagerly. "I wonder if I ever shall!" but the kettle boiled at that moment, and Mrs. Perry's mind was taken up with the making of the tea.

While they sat on each side of the hearth, drinking their tea and eating their crusts of bread, she wished Miss Rose could know about this little waif, who seemed really not a bad little waif, but honest and very thoughtful and kind. She wanted her advice as to what to do about her. Already her feelings towards the child had changed so much that she did not like to think of sending her away in the morning, to wander on alone again, with no home, no money or food, and no protection but Dick.

Dick might be killed, or stolen, and then the poor little soul would be alone in the world. Huldah looked up eagerly at her hostess more than once, but, though she was longing to ask some more questions, she did not like to interrupt her while she gazed with such grave, thoughtful eyes into the fire.

At last Mrs. Perry roused herself from her thoughts, with a tired sigh, and brought her eyes back to Huldah again. "Have a bit more bread," she urged, kindly, seeing that the little brown hand was empty. "You must be hungry."

Huldah was always hungry, but she was not accustomed to any notice being taken of the fact. "No, thank you, ma'am," she said, politely. She had already guessed that her kind protector was very poor, and she knew well what a difference every slice made to a loaf, so she said, "No, thank you, ma'am," though she could really have eaten the whole of the nice brown crusty top. But she was more interested in Miss Rose than in her own appetite.

"Does Miss Rose live near here?" she asked.

Mrs. Perry smiled. "Why, how funny!" she exclaimed. "I was thinking of Miss Rose too. Yes; she lives at the vicarage, and that's a little way further on in the main road. If you

hadn't turned down this lane, you'd have come to it about half-a-mile further on. I wonder you didn't see the church tower as you came along."

"It was too dark," said Huldah. "Oh, I was glad when I saw your light shine out," she added, impetuously. "I didn't know what to do or where to go, and we were so tired! I very nearly lay down under the hedge, 'cause I felt as if I couldn't drag another step."

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"It'd have been better for you if you hadn't seen it, but had gone on till you came to the vicarage."

"I don't think so," said Huldah, emphatically. "P'raps the servants would have driven us off,—anyway, they couldn't have been kinder than you was—"

"It wouldn't have been better for me if you'd gone on," added Mrs. Perry, gratefully. "I shouldn't have had any hens now, if it hadn't been for you, and I'd have been scared to death. I think I will go up to bed now," she added presently, in a weary voice. "I had thought I wouldn't go back again, but I am that tired."

"You do look tired," rejoined Huldah, sympathetically. Her own little body was aching all over, and she was so weary she could gladly have lain down anywhere and slept, but it never occurred to her to mention the fact. "Dick'll mind the garden, so don't you worry about that."

"Can you sleep on the sofa, do you think?"

"Oh yes, ma'am!" cried Huldah, rapturously, gazing at the hard black horse-hair covered thing as though it were the most luxurious couch in the world.

"I'll give you my big shawl, to wrap yourself up in, and you can use that cushion there for a pillow."

"Thank you, ma'am; but I think," she added, anxiously, "I'll run out first, and see that Dick's all right. You can bolt the door after me while I'm out."

Martha Perry did not do that, though. She stood there with the open door in her hand, and watched almost affectionately the little brown figure run down the garden path, and disappear in the gloom.

"Put Dick in the barn to sleep," she called after Huldah. "He'll be nice and comfortable there;" but Dick, wise dog, was already there, snugly curled up in the straw, and as happy as a dog could be. The hens, too, had settled down to sleep again in their house, and all was safe, so Huldah ran back again contentedly; and Martha Perry welcomed her as gladly as though they were old friends, and when she shut the door and bolted themselves in, it was with a sigh of relief that she had this little companion.

A few minutes later the old woman was stretched out comfortably in her bed, and the child was rolled up snugly on the hard sofa, and silence once more fell on cottage and garden, broken only by an occasional sleepy cluck, cluck of the hens, as they moved on their perches, or a whimper from Dick, as in his dreams he lived over again his rout of the enemy.



Huldah did not dream of thieves, or hens, or anything else. She just slept, and slept, a heavy, dreamless sleep, unconscious of everything. The hard sofa galled her poor, thin, aching body, the round hard pillow gave her a crick in the neck, but neither of them could make themselves felt through the sleep which held her fast in merciful unconsciousness.

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It was broad daylight, and the sun had been shining for a long time when at last she woke with a start, and sprang up, wondering where she was, and what had happened. Then by degrees recollection came back to her, and she began to wonder what she could do. The old clock in the corner pointed to seven, but there was no sound of movement in the house. Huldah was afraid to get up and move about, lest Mrs. Perry should suspect her of being at some wickedness; and she was not sorry to lie still, for her limbs ached, and she felt very, very tired, so she stretched herself out on her hard couch, and gave herself up to studying the little kitchen, and all that was in it.

It was very wonderful, she thought, and very lovely. There were some dark green wooden chairs, and an arm-chair, and a little round table, scrubbed to spotless whiteness. Above her head, on a window-ledge stood some geraniums in full bloom, and on a row of shelves let into the wall stood a large Bible, with a crochet mat over it, and some other books, some vases and ornaments, and a box covered with shells. The only other things to see were the grandfather's clock in the corner, some well-polished bright things on the mantel-piece, a pair of brass candlesticks, a couple of tea-caddies, and a pair of snuffers on a tray.

There were some pictures on the wall, and an almanac. One picture showed two beautiful horses ploughing a field, a white horse and a brown one, the other was of the same two horses going slowly home, at the end of the day's work. The sight of the white horse brought Charlie to Huldah's mind, and filled her eyes with tears.

"Oh, if only Charlie was here too!" she thought, "and if only he looked like that horse there!"

There was indeed all the difference in the world between the well-fed, well-groomed horse in the picture, with his erect head, his bright eyes and glossy coat, and poor old Charlie, with his bones showing distinctly through his rough, neglected coat, his drooping head and sad eyes!

Huldah looked and looked again at the pictures; she thought they were perfectly beautiful; but by-and-by she began to fidget a little. She was tired of lying quiet, and the silence and stillness worried her. She slid off the sofa, and sat on the edge of it, wondering if she might move, if she might go and see Dick, or clean up the grate and light the fire.

Presently there was a whine at the back door. Dick had come in search of her. She stood up and quietly made a step or two towards the scullery and the back door, wondering if she would be taking a great liberty to let him in. She did long to. And then, while she stood hesitating she heard a voice calling weakly down the stairs, "Little girl—Huldah, are you there?"



Huldah, greatly relieved, sprang to the foot of the stairs. She was glad to have the silence broken at last. "Yes ma'am. It was only Dick whining to come in."



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"Let him in, then come up to me, will you?"

Ordering Dick to stay below, Huldah mounted the stairs, full of awe. She had not been allowed up them before. She thought the little winding white staircase was wonderful, and oh, how clean it all was!

At the top was a landing about a yard square, and an open door. Through the doorway she saw an old-fashioned bed with pretty flowered frills and curtains, and lying on the bed was Mrs. Perry.

"Come in, child," she said, feebly. "I've been calling to you for ever so long, but I couldn't make you hear. I expect you were very tired, and slept heavy."

"I've been awake for a good bit," said Huldah, "but I didn't like to move about till you come. I wish I'd heard you. Did you want me?"

"Yes, I'm feeling very bad. I think I must have got a chill last night, or else the fright upset me."

"Oh, I *am* sorry," cried Huldah, with genuine feeling. Mrs. Perry really did look very white and ill, and Huldah felt quite alarmed. "Can I get you something? What can I do? Shall I light the fire?" she asked, eagerly.

"Yes, if you will, I'd be very much obliged. I'd like a cup of tea, as hot as I can drink it, and," pointing to some flannel lying on the bed, "if you could make that very hot, and bring it up to me, I'd be glad. Perhaps heat'll ease the pain a bit."

"I'll be as quick as I can," said Huldah, eagerly, turning to hurry downstairs. "Is there anything else?"

"Oh my, yes! there's the fowls; they'll be wanting their breakfast. It's all put ready for them in a pan in the scullery, if you'll give it to them. Don't let them out into the garden."

"I'll see to that," said Huldah, cheerfully.

"Then when they're out eating their food, go into the house, and see if there's any eggs in the nests."

"Yes, ma'am, and please may I borrow the loan of the bucket, to have a wash? I'm feeling all dusty and dirty."

Mrs. Perry smiled, in spite of her pain. "Yes, of course. You'll find a basin and soap, and a rough towel in the scullery, too. I'm glad you reminded me."

Huldah slipped down the stairs as blithe as a bird. This was keeping house in real earnest, and she loved it. She set to work to light the fire and tidy the stove first, then she went and fed the hens, and came back triumphantly, carrying three large eggs. When she had shown these to Mrs. Perry, and discussed their size and beauty—and surely there never had been such eggs found before—she went down and had her wash, and oh, how she did enjoy it! She wished she had a clean frock or apron to put on, too. But when she remembered all she had got, she felt ashamed of herself, for even thinking of wanting anything more.

In the scullery was a sweeping-brush, and the sight of it tempted her to sweep up the kitchen. She opened the door wide, to let in the sunshine and fresh air and the sweet scent of flowers, and then she went sweeping away, not only the doorstep, but the tiled path down the garden to the gate. For the moment she had forgotten her fear of being discovered. All here seemed so different, so safe and peaceful, and far away from her old unhappy life.

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The sun was shining radiantly, drying up the dew on the flowers, and making the red-tiled path glow warmly; it seemed to fill the garden, the cottage, and all Huldah's world with cheerfulness. By the time she had finished sweeping, the kettle was singing, so Huldah got the teapot and warmed it. She even warmed the cup and saucer too, in her anxiety that Mrs. Perry should have her tea as hot as possible. Then she cut a slice of bread as neatly as she could and toasted it.

Dick was lying out in the sun, gnawing at the remains of his ham-bone, as happy as a dog could be. Huldah glanced out at him every now and then while she was toasting the bread, and tried to realise that they were the same two who only yesterday morning were thrashed so unmercifully—she, for giving Dick some bread and butter, and Dick for eating it, after which had followed that dreadful scene when her uncle Tom had kicked poor old helpless Charlie so cruelly, partly because the poor old horse moved slowly, but chiefly because he knew that it would hurt Huldah more than any beating or starving of herself could.

It hurt her so greatly that she felt she could not bear it any longer, and then and there made up her mind to run away. Half of Charlie's kicks and blows were given him, she knew, because they hurt and angered her. Perhaps, she thought, if she were gone life would become easier for him. So she went,—and that was only yesterday, and the only pang of feeling or remorse that she felt for what she had done was the loss of Charlie.

## CHAPTER IV.

### MISS ROSE.

"Do you think you could find your way to the vicarage?"

Huldah had given Mrs. Perry her breakfast, and taken her own, and now had gone up again to remove the cup and plate, and ask what more she could do. She was longing to make herself useful, that she might show how grateful she was for all that had been done for her.

"Yes, I'm sure I could," she answered, readily.

"Miss Rose said she'd come to me any time I wanted her, and I feel I want her now, but I don't know how to let her know, unless you will go for me."

"I'll go," said Huldah, eagerly. "I'd like to." Then, with sudden recollection of her uncle and aunt, her heart sank. "I—I don't suppose I'd meet uncle that way, but—but there'd be the chance of that, any way I went," she added, trying to be brave and sensible.



Mrs. Perry looked anxious too. "I don't s'pose he could have got so far by this time, even if he came this way. You see, he'd have to keep to the road with the van, and you cut across country."

"Oh, it's sure to be all right," said Huldah, more bravely, determined not to be afraid. "I won't take Dick, though, if you'll keep him, ma'am. If I did see them coming, I could hide behind a hedge or somewhere, but Dick, he's racing everywhere, and I'd never be able to hide him too."

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"Would they recognise him—so far from where they lost him?"

"Oh yes, ma'am, and he'd know them and Charlie, and he'd be sure to run up to speak to Charlie."

"Very well; you leave Dick here with me. I'll be glad to have him for company while you're gone; you'd better start before the day gets any hotter. Tell Miss Rose, that if she can spare the time, and it isn't very inconvenient I'd be very much obliged if she could come to see me to-day. You'll remember, won't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, I'll tell her you'm bad in bed."

"I wish," began Mrs. Perry, then hesitated, her eyes glancing over the shabby little maiden standing by her bedside. "I wish you weren't quite so—I wish you were a little tidier."

Huldah flushed under her glance. "My face and hands is clean," she said, shyly, "and I'll put the sweeping-brush over my hair—"

Mrs. Perry smiled, in spite of herself. "No, don't do that, child; take and use that one over there by the looking-glass; but 'twas your frock I was thinking about, and your apron is too ragged and dirty to see a lady in. I don't suppose you could wear one of mine—it'd be too long, wouldn't it?"

"I'm 'fraid it would, ma'am, but I'll try, if you like."

"There's one there on the chair by the door; hold it up against you, and let me see how it looks."

Huldah took the apron shyly, and held it round her waist. It hung far below her frock, and reached the top of her foot, but it hid her shabby old frock, and certainly gave her a cleaner look.

"P'raps if I tied it round under my arms it would look better," she suggested. She was very anxious to be a credit to her new friend, and she was even more anxious not to shock Miss Rose, at first sight, by her disreputable appearance.

"Yes, that will do," agreed Mrs. Perry, approvingly, and Huldah, quite unconscious of the funny figure she cut, started off in high spirits.

"Go to the top of the lane till you reach the high road, then turn to your right, and keep straight on till you come to the church and the vicarage. Go to the back door and knock gently, and ask to see Miss Rose. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am. Can I do anything more for you before I go?"



“No, thank you. Keep in the shade as much as you can; it is going to be dreadfully hot again, I b’lieve.”

In the lane, in spite of the shade, the heat was already stifling, the high hedges seemed to shut it in, and to keep out the air. Huldah, hurrying along over the rough ground, felt her face growing scarlet, and her breath coming quick. She was almost glad to get out on the high road, for though the glare of the sun was blinding, and there was no shade, it was less stifling there; but it was not the discomfort that she minded so much, her great desire was to look her best when she had to face Miss Rose. So she walked on the grass by the road-side, to keep her from getting dusty, and every now and then her hands went up to her cheeks, to feel if they were very, very hot; and indeed, between nervousness, and the heat, her cheeks were very, very scarlet by the time she reached the vicarage, and had found the back door.

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Obedient to her orders, she knocked gently, so gently that for a time no one heard her, and she was about to knock for the third time, when a lady came round from the front of the house and caught sight of her.

She was a young lady, tall and thin and pretty, with such shining golden hair that it made Huldah wink to look at it gleaming in the sunshine.

"Can't you make anyone hear? I expect cook is busy; you must knock more loudly." She smiled kindly as she spoke, and her eyes were so gentle and pretty that Huldah scarcely heard what she was saying, for looking at them. "It must be Miss Rose herself," she thought to herself.

"Please, ma'am, I—I wanted to see Miss Rose," she stammered out at last. "Please, ma'am, are you—"

"I am Miss Rose Carew, yes. How did you know my name? You don't live anywhere hereabouts, do you?"

"No, miss." Huldah was almost glad her cheeks were so hot already, for she felt herself blushing at this question. "No, ma'am, I—I don't live anywhere. I'm come from Mrs. Perry, in Woodend Lane. She's ill in bed, and if it wouldn't be putting you out very much, please would you come and see her, miss? She'd be very much obliged, I was to say."

Miss Carew's quick sympathy was aroused at once.

"Mrs. Perry ill. Oh, I am so sorry! What has caused it, I wonder? I hope she hasn't been out in the hot sun. I warned her not to."

"No, miss; 'twas last night that upset her, I think. Some fellows came and tried to steal her fowls, and she was reg'larly frightened she was, and I reckon she caught cold standing at the door in her nightdress."

"Some men came stealing her fowls! Oh, how wicked!" Miss Rose's cheeks flushed with indignation, and her soft eyes sparkled with anger. "Did they take them all?"

"No, miss, they didn't get any. Dick frightened the thieves off, just as they were going to open the door, and he bit their legs too. I'll be bound they're lame enough to-day!" and Huldah chuckled aloud at the thought, forgetting her shyness, and everything else but the thieves.

Miss Carew gazed at her, frankly puzzled. Who was Dick? and who was this funny little maid with the brown skin, brown hair, golden brown eyes, the shabby brown frock, and battered old hat?





“Are you a young relative of Mrs. Perry?” she asked, gently.

Huldah blushed again, and the laughter died out of her eyes. “No, miss; I aint nobody’s relative, I haven’t got nobody but Dick.”

“Is Dick your brother?”

“No, miss, he’s only a dog; but he’s ever such a good dog,” eagerly. “He’s so clever, there’s nothing he can’t do. He’s at home with Mrs. Perry now, to keep her company while I’m gone, ’cause she’s nervous after last night.”

“I see,” said Miss Carew, thoughtfully. “I am very glad she has Dick to take care of her. Tell her I will come to see her this morning, will you? and wait a moment, I must give you something for Dick, as a reward for his care last night.”

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Miss Rose opened the door near which they had been standing, and disclosed a large wide, slate-paved passage, with large, cool-looking slate slabs on each side. After the glare and heat outside, the slates looked cool and restful to the eye. At the other end of the passage a door stood open, and through it Huldah could see a big bright kitchen, with a snowy table standing in the middle of the blue slate floor, and a window beyond, festooned with green creepers and roses.

"Dinah, I want something nice for a brave dog," said Miss Rose. "Have you got a bone with something on it?"

Dinah produced a leg of mutton bone and some cold pudding. Huldah's eyes gleamed, as she thought of Dick's delight. Two bones in two days! He had never before known such a wonderful time. Miss Rose added two large dog biscuits. "Those will come in for his supper," she said.

Huldah took the parcel with a joy she did not attempt to conceal. In her pleasure she lost her shyness. "Oh, miss!" she exclaimed, "I wish you could be there to see Dick when he knows the bone is for him!"

"I wish I could, but don't keep him waiting, poor doggie!"

It was not until she put out her hand to take the parcel for Dick that Huldah remembered the basket which she had brought with her to sell, and which she had been holding all this time. Now, though, when she did remember it, she could not bring herself to offer it for sale. Indeed, she longed to give it to pretty, kind Miss Rose.

Miss Rose, though, settled the matter for her. "What a sweetly pretty basket!" she exclaimed. She had noticed it in Huldah's hands, and been attracted by its prettiness. "It is too dainty to put that clumsy parcel into. Isn't it a new one?"

"Yes, miss; I—I made it," stammered Huldah, shyly.

"Did you really? What a clever little girl! Do you make them to sell?" She had begun to understand the situation.

"Yes, miss; but I—I—"

"Will you make one for me? I should very much like to have one; I am always needing baskets. What do they cost?"

"This size is—eighteenpence," said Huldah, hesitatingly. It suddenly seemed to her that it was a great deal of money to ask for it. "You can have this one if you like, miss. It is new; I—I brought it out to—to sell, if I could. I do want to get some money to give to Mrs. Perry—she's been so good to Dick and me, and—and I hadn't got anything to give her." Then, mistaking the cause of Miss Carew's thoughtful silence, she added,

nervously, "But perhaps you'd rather have a new one made on purpose for you, miss. This one is quite clean, but—"

"Yes, yes, I'd like to have this one; I'd rather have this one, child. I was only thinking." Then, as she put the money for it into Huldah's hand, she asked gently, "Will you tell me your story, dear, presently, when I come to see Mrs. Perry? I should so like to know it. Then I shall be better able to understand, and perhaps I could help, or do something. I must not keep you now, or Mrs. Perry may begin to worry about you."

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"Yes, miss; I think I ought to go back now, and—and thank you, miss, very much." Huldah was so excited she scarcely knew how to get her words out. A great sense of relief and happiness filled her heart. If Miss Rose would help her, she felt sure she would be safe and happy; and Dick too.

She almost danced back over the sunny road, in spite of the scorching sun. Her heart was lighter, she had eighteenpence in her hand to give to Mrs. Perry, and she had a feast for Dick. Life seemed beautiful, and happy, and hopeful. Could it have been only yesterday morning that she was in that dreadful caravan, bruised, hungry, miserable, and desperate to escape? It seemed impossible!

Suddenly, around the bend of the road ahead of her, appeared the head and shoulders of a white horse,—and instantly all her world changed. Her heart almost stood still with fright; then, with a low cry of despair, she scrambled over the hedge and into a field on the other side of it. "If I'd had Dick, I couldn't have done it!" she panted, as she scuttled along under the hedge, bending low, almost like an animal. At the corner of the field she paused. "If I can get over this hedge, I shall be in the lane," she thought; but the sound of wheels made her crouch low again; the horse was just passing. Fascinated, yet terrified, Huldah peeped through the hedge, and saw— a quiet old farm-horse drawing a hay-cart, and the driver sound asleep on the shafts! Oh, how her heart thrilled with relief at the sight! If she had known what prayer was, she would have offered up a thanksgiving then. As it was, she scrambled out over the hedge and into the lane in a somewhat sobered mood. The thought of what might have been, made her heart beat fast and her limbs tremble, and her new life seemed more than ever beautiful.

Miss Carew meanwhile had stood watching Huldah flitting like a little dark shadow along the road. "What an odd little brown thing she is!" she thought to herself, half-amused, half-sad. "I ain't nobody's relative, I haven't got nobody but Dick! She seemed so cheerful about it, too, it makes one feel that she did not mind the want. I wonder—but I must go and hear more about the strange pair who seem to have dropped out of the clouds to act as good fairies to poor Martha Perry."

When, about an hour later, Miss Carew reached the little cottage in Woodend Lane, she found Huldah washing the floor of the little kitchen, Dick lying in the garden gnawing his bone, and Martha Perry lying in bed with eighteenpence on the table beside her, and a bunch of flowers in a jug. Huldah had taken off Mrs. Perry's apron, for that was far too clean and precious to be worn for such work, whereas her old dress could not possibly be made shabbier.

When she saw Miss Carew standing on the doorstep, she looked up with a bright smile of welcome. "Please to walk in, miss," she said, shyly. She had hoped to have had the kitchen washed and made quite neat before the visitor arrived, but nothing could lessen her pleasure at seeing Miss Rose.

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Without her white apron she looked browner than ever, and Miss Rose felt as she looked at her a great desire to dress her in pretty, clean, dainty things, a blue, or pink, or green cotton frock, with big white apron and white collar. She said nothing, though, but, stepping delicately over the clean floor, made her way up the stairs alone to visit the invalid.

Huldah had washed the kitchen and the tiled path to the gate, and shaken the mats, and dusted the chairs and mantelpiece, and was sitting down to rest her hot and weary little body, before Miss Rose came down again. When she heard the footsteps on the stairs she started up at once.

"Huldah, you are a veritable little brownie," said Miss Rose, "not only in appearance, but in everything."

Huldah smiled, but looked puzzled; then she put her hands up to her cheeks. "My hands is brown," she laughed, "but my face feels like fire."

"You should not work so hard while the heat is so great. In spite of your red cheeks, you are a real brownie. Do you know what a brownie is?"

"No, miss," said Huldah, with a shake of her head. "I haven't ever been anything but a gipsy—a basket-seller, I mean."

"Well, basket-sellers can be brownies too, especially when they come in to help and protect poor, helpless old people, and sell their baskets to give the money to those who need it. Have you ever heard of fairies, Huldah?"

Huldah shook her head again, with a puzzled look in her eyes. "No, miss."

"Well, fairies and piskies and brownies were supposed to be very little people who lived underground, or in flowers and shells, or in rocks and mines, by day, and only came out at night. Some of them only danced and played and enjoyed themselves, but others, the piskies and brownies, loved to come at night and help the sad and ill and poor, and those who were good and kind. They would come when folks were asleep, and tidy their kitchen for them, or chop their wood, and spin their flax. Sometimes, for the very poor, they would bake a batch of bread or cakes, and have all ready for them; and when the poor people came down in the morning, cold and weak and hungry, wondering how they would manage to get any food to eat, they would find the kitchen clean, wood and coal to make a fire, and food in the larder. Sometimes, too, there would be a piece of money at the bottom of a cup. Can't you imagine how people would bless and love those dear little industrious brownies?"

"Oh yes!" gasped Huldah, "and how I'd love to be able to do things like that!"

"I think you are one, dear, only you don't vanish by day, and you don't work secretly."

Huldah flushed with joy. Never in her sad, hard life had she felt so happy.

“I hope, though, that you are not like the little people in one respect,—they were so very easily offended. Such a little thing would rouse their anger, and when they were angry they did not mind hurting those who had offended them, or even injuring them very greatly.”

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“Oh!” cried Huldah, looking disappointed.

“Now, little brownie, before I go I want you to trust me, and to be quite frank and open, and not be afraid, for I want to be your friend. I want you to tell me all about yourself and your past life, and where you came from, and why you and Dick are quite alone in the world. Will you? I want to help you, and do what is best for both of you, but until I know all I can do nothing.”

“You won’t send us back to Uncle Tom, will you miss?” she cried, her face paling, her eyes wide with fear. “I’ll tell you everything,— I—I want to, but if you send us back to Uncle Tom, he’ll pretty nigh beat us to death, me and Dick, I know he will!” And at the mere thought of it she broke down and sobbed so violently that it was long before Miss Rose could soothe her, or calm the trembling of the half-starved, bruised little body.

She herself was shocked by the terror with which the mere thought of returning to her uncle and aunt filled the child; and her heart ached as she realised what she must have endured to bring her to such a state, for it was plain to see that Huldah was naturally a spirited, brave little creature.

In her own mind, Miss Carew determined then and there that such persons were not fit guardians for any child, and never with her consent should Huldah be sent back to be again at their mercy. Her life would be one of greater suffering even than before. She shuddered at the thought of the blows and abuse and hunger which would be her lot. The hunger for love and kindness, too, which, now she had had a glimpse of both, would be even greater than her hunger for food, and even less likely to be gratified. No—oh no!—Huldah should never face such a fate, as long as she could help her. She would seek the protection of the law first, she decided; but, in the meantime, until the law was necessary, she herself would do her best to make her life happy and useful and good. So much was due to the child.

Everyone whose life was happy, and full of love and peace and comfort, owed some share of her blessings to those who had none,—and surely here was one to whom a large share was owing.

## CHAPTER V.

### SURPRISES.

The confession had been made, the story told, and, to her unspeakable joy and relief, Huldah had not been sent to Uncle Tom or to the workhouse. The latter fate she had dreaded even more than the former, for if she had been sent to the workhouse she certainly would have had to part with Dick; whereas, if she had gone back to the

caravan, she would have had both him and Charlie, and she would rather endure hunger and beatings than lose Dick.



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She had, though, escaped both fates, and life for the time seemed to Huldah almost too beautiful to be anything but a dream, for it had been arranged that both she and Dick were to stay on for the present with Martha Perry in the cottage. Since the night of the attempted robbery Mrs. Perry had been very ailing and nervous. She could not bear Dick to leave the house, when once twilight began to fall, and she would not have stayed there at all at night without him. She had grown to rely on the lanky yellow creature as though he had been a man. No harm, she felt, could come to her or her hens, as long as Dick was about the house or garden.

She needed company and help too, so Huldah was to stay on, to keep the cottage tidy, and run the errands, and be at hand, in case Mrs. Perry was ill again.

A tiny room, which was scarcely more than a cupboard or a 'lean-to' jutting out over the scullery, was transformed into a bedroom for Huldah. A little iron bed was sent down from the vicarage, and sheets and blankets, a chair, and even a little square looking-glass to hang on the wall. Huldah was in a perfect turmoil of glad excitement. She thought her room perfectly beautiful, and from the little window she could look right over the back garden, and away to a great stretch of country beyond.

"I don't know what to do for a chest of drawers for you," said Mrs. Perry, thoughtfully; "you ought to have something to put your clothes in." But Huldah pooh-poohed the idea.

"Oh, I shan't want anything," she said, cheerfully; "you see I haven't got any clothes."

"Ah, but wait," said Mrs. Perry, knowingly, then stopped abruptly, and said no more. Huldah did not understand. "If I can sell some baskets, I'll be able to get an apron or two," she said, gravely. "I'd like fine to have some, but I could keep them on my chair."

Mrs. Perry smiled. "A box would be better. If I could get you a nice big box, that would do for the time, wouldn't it?"

"Oh yes, that would do grand," agreed Huldah, readily, "but don't you worry about it, ma'am. I've got to make my baskets first and sell them, and then I'll have the aprons to make; there won't be any need to worry till I've got them," she added, in her old-fashioned thoughtful way. "Wouldn't it be lovely, ma'am," she added, a moment later, "to have a new frock, a whole real new one?" It took a moment for such a possibility to even enter her head. "A blue one," she added, revelling in it, now it had come, "and a blue hat, too! Oh my!" She looked at Mrs. Perry with clasped hands and eyes full of rapture. "I've never had a new frock or hat, not in all my life. I suppose some people do?"

"Yes, some do," agreed Mrs. Perry, gravely. Then a bright smile passed over her face, and her eyes lighted up almost as eagerly as Huldah's had, a moment before. Miss

Carew's pony-cart had come jingling down the lane, and had drawn up before the garden gate.

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Huldah sprang forward gladly to open the door, but Mrs. Perry was at it first. "I will go," she said, hastily, "I understand Miss Rose wants me."

Huldah, puzzled and disappointed, did not move another step. Through the open door she saw the dear fat pony, and longed to pat him; she saw Miss Rose smiling and talking, and longed to be there to receive one of her smiles. She saw her too lifting boxes and bundles out of the pony-cart, and piling them in Mrs. Perry's arms.

"Why can't I go out and help?" she asked herself. Everyone was out there, even Dick, and she felt forlorn and left out. Then she saw Miss Carew fasten the pony to the railings by his strap, and, picking up the last of the boxes, follow Mrs. Perry up the garden.

"Good morning, brownie," she said, brightly, and her voice and smile drove the "left out" feeling from Huldah's heart in a moment.

"I am trying to pretend to be a good fairy to-day, but I am too big and clumsy for the part."

Huldah gazed wonderingly, not understanding.

"I wanted you to have some new clothes, brownie, so I waved my wand,—and here they are."

"New—clothes!" gasped Huldah, "for me!" She looked round, and caught sight of Mrs. Perry's face, wreathed in glad smiles. "But I never have any, miss, I was telling Mrs. Perry so as you drove up. Old ones is plenty good enough for me. I should be afraid to wear new ones, for fear of spoiling them."

"Then you must learn to, little brownie. Oh, you have lots to learn yet. There's only one thing I am sorry for, you won't be a brownie any longer, nor yet a fairy dressed in green"; and with the same she whisked the cover off the big box she had been carrying, and there lay neatly folded three little plain print frocks, one lavender, one pink, and one blue.

Huldah cried aloud in sheer amazement. She had never seen anything so pretty in her life. Underneath the frocks were some plain holland aprons. Huldah began to fear it was all a beautiful dream, from which she would awaken presently.

"Open that other box, please, Mrs. Perry," said Miss Rose, briskly; and in that one was a neat sun-hat, with a black ribbon bow on it, and beneath the hat were two little pink cotton petticoats, some calico garments, some stockings and handkerchiefs.

Huldah by that time was in such a state of excitement, she could no longer exclaim, she could hardly breathe, and when the last of the parcels was opened, and disclosed a pair



of good boots and a pair of slippers, the tears which had gradually been welling up in her eyes fell over, and with a sob she threw her arms round Mrs. Perry and buried her face on her breast.

“Oh, it’s too much, it’s too much, I can’t take it all! I can’t do anything for anybody, and I can’t pay for nothing. I haven’t got any money, and you mustn’t give me such a lot—”

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"Huldah, dear," said Miss Rose, softly, laying a gentle hand on the little girl's shaking shoulders, "You have what is better than money. You have a kind, willing heart, and a wise little head, and these are of more value than money, for no money can buy them, but you have given them both to us all this time, asking no return. And you know, dear, brownies are always repaid in this way. You can soon pay for these things, by taking care of Mrs. Perry, doing all you can to help her, and making her happy and comfortable. Then, with your basket-making you will be able to earn enough to clothe yourself in the future, and perhaps help others as well. So don't cry, child, but turn round and smile, and let us see how nice you look in one of your new frocks."

Huldah swung round eagerly, her cheeks flushed, her eyes sparkling with happiness. "Oh yes, yes, so I can. I'll be able to help by-and-by! Oh, Miss Rose, you are so kind to me, I don't hardly know what to say, it seems as if it can't be real, its all too beautiful."

"It isn't too beautiful, brownie. Life can be as beautiful as any dream, even more so. It all depends upon ourselves, and what we make it for each other."

"Oh, I will try to make it beautiful for those who are so good to me," thought Huldah, with almost passionate determination, as she arrayed herself in some of her new clothes; and her heart beat fast and her spirits rose, as she dreamed beautiful dreams of her coming life.

All this had happened the day before, and now Huldah stood in the garden in her blue print frock and holland apron, her hair well brushed and shining, her face full of sober gladness. On the line hung the old brown frock, which had been washed and spread out to dry.

"Life can be as beautiful as any dream, even more beautiful. It all depends upon ourselves, and what we make of it for each other." As she stood looking away from the garden to the quiet sunny stretch of country beyond, the words echoed and re-echoed through her brain, "What we make of it for each other."

"Why, of course," she thought to herself, "the world is just the same, the sun and the breeze, the earth and the sky, just the same as they were when I was living with Uncle Tom and Aunt Emma. 'Tis Miss Rose and Mrs. Perry who have made it all seem so beautiful. Just fancy two people making such a difference. I wish, oh, I wish I could make something seem beautiful to somebody, just as they have for me."

The busy hens had ceased their scratching, to gaze wonderingly at the little blue figure standing so still in the path near them. Dick sat in front of her, and stared up at her with perplexed, uneasy eyes. It was unlike his little mistress to be dressed as she was, and to be so quiet. A little whimper of distress broke from him, he could bear the silence no longer. The sound roused Huldah from her reverie. "Why, Dick, what's the matter?" she cried, throwing her arm round him, and kissing the top of his head. "Why, there's

nothing to fret about now, it's all lovely. You and me have got a home, and we've got work to do, and oh, Dick, we've got to do a lot, to make up for all that's been done for us; and we'll do it, won't we, old man! We'll never mind what we do, as long as it's to help somebody."

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Dick wriggled and wagged his tail in joyful assent, and barked loudly, to show how much he appreciated the arrangement.

Mrs. Perry came to the door, looking down the garden, to see if they were there. "Huldah," she called, "Huldah! I want you to go into the village to get some tea; we have run out, and we want some sugar, too."

Huldah turned and ran quickly into the house. She was quite ready to go, but in her heart of hearts she always shrank a little from going into the village; the people stared at her so, and asked all manner of questions, which she found it difficult to answer.

A little girl and a dog cannot arrive in a village as though they had dropped out of the sky, without, of course, people wanting to know who they are, and where they come from, and why they came, and with whom they lived before, and with whom they are staying now, and how long they are going to stay.

Mrs. Perry had adopted Huldah as her niece, but a number of people in the village did not really believe she was so, and, having very little to do or think about, they were anxious to find out, and Huldah, when she did go amongst them, found it very trying.

Dick did not find it trying, though, he loved a walk, no matter in what direction it lay, and questions and curiosity did not trouble him at all. He looked wistfully from Huldah to Mrs. Perry, begging with his eyes that he might be allowed to go too.

"Yes, take him," said Mrs. Perry; "it is only three o'clock, and you'll be back by four. I don't mind being alone in broad daylight like this." So Huldah, not a little pleased with her appearance in her pretty blue frock and new hat, started off, basket in hand, and Dick, very proud and pleased, trotted off beside her.

It was not until she drew near the village that she began to wonder what the people would think of the change in her appearance, and a great shyness seized her, and reluctance to go on and meet their looks of surprise, and their open remarks. The feeling grew and grew with every step she took, until she had begun to wonder if she could ever bring herself to face them, when suddenly her mind was lifted off her fears by the extraordinary behaviour of Dick.

Growling savagely, his hair rising stiffly along his back, he was walking more and more slowly, and drawing in closer and closer to Huldah, as his habit was when he felt he must protect her.

"Why, Dick," she cried, puzzled and half-alarmed, "what is it old man? whatever is the matter?" Then, her eyes following the direction of his, she saw, standing by a gate deep-set in the hedge, two young men. To her they seemed harmless enough, just two ordinary-looking strangers, and if it had not been for Dick's behaviour, she would have

passed them by without a thought. But evidently they were not harmless in Dick's eyes, for his growls and snarls grew louder and more forbidding the nearer he approached.



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The men looked surprised and frightened, and, like most frightened people, they lost their tempers. "Hold in your dog, can't you?" cried one. "You've no right to keep a brute like that."

At the sound of the man's voice Huldah felt a shock of surprise, and Dick's anger increased alarmingly. Where had she heard that voice before? She was sure it sounded familiar.

Without replying, she laid her hand on Dick's collar, and held him close to her.

The other man grew more threatening. "I'll go to the p'lice, and tell 'em you've got a savage dog that ought to be shot, 'cause he isn't safe!" he shouted out, furious with anger and fear.

"He isn't savage, he's good-tempered," Huldah burst forth, at last. "He won't hurt anybody unless they was up to no good, and—and deserved it." She was very near the verge of tears, but she felt she must not break down then.

"Call him good-tempered, do you? We wasn't doing anything but just standing here, and he come along ready to fly at our throats!"

Huldah could not deny the man's statement, nor could she explain. The men certainly seemed to be doing no harm, and Dick's behaviour was very extraordinary. All she could do was to clutch his collar with all her strength, and hurry away as fast as she could go. All thoughts of the village people's looks and remarks were gone from her mind now. She was shaking with nervousness and excitement and fears for Dick, and could think of nothing else.

How she did her errands she never knew, for the scare had driven almost everything else out of her head, her one idea being to hurry home as quickly as possible, and get herself and Dick into safety. The men were strangers to her, and she hoped they would never find out where she and Dick lived.

All the way back until she got past the gateway she still clutched Dick by the collar, much to his surprise and annoyance, for there was much to interest him on a walk like that, and he had quite forgotten his anger and the strangers who had aroused it.

When they had got safely past the dreaded gateway, Huldah's fears calmed down a little.

The men had departed, and all the road ahead of them looked empty.

"You may run now, Dickie," she said, with a sigh of relief, "and don't go getting into any more rows, for I can't bear it."

Dick, with a joyous flick of his tail and a bark of delight, bounded forward delightedly, and Huldah, free at last to attend to other things, looked over her parcels anxiously, to see if she had forgotten anything, for she had really only had half her wits about her when she was in the shop.

“Tea, sugar, box of matches—” A sharp yell made her look up quickly, her heart seeming to stand still with terror. It was Dick’s voice, and Dick was in the middle of the road rolling about and crying out sharply, in evident pain.

“Dick! Dick! Come here, what has happened? Oh, Dick!” she called frantically, as she flew to his side; but before she could reach him a big stone came whizzing from the hedge, and another sharp cry of pain showed that poor Dick had been struck again.

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“Oh, Dick, Dick dear! what have they done to you?” she cried, dropping on her knees in the dust beside him. The dog tried to struggle to his feet, but could not; every movement caused him to yelp with pain. He looked up at her imploringly, and licked her hand, as she put her arm under him to raise him, and the pain and helplessness in his loving eyes made her tears overflow. What was she to do? He was too big and heavy for her to carry all the way home. She looked about her helplessly, but there was no one in sight, or likely to be at that time of the day; only those two cowards hiding behind the hedge; for it had not taken Huldah long to guess who Dick’s assailants were.

From time to time Dick gave a little whimper, and Huldah lifted his head upon her lap; but she was almost afraid to touch him, lest she should cause him more pain. How long, she wondered miserably, would it be before help came? Would those cowards throw more stones? It was horrible to stay there alone with that cowardly heartless pair hidden behind the hedge, and the feeling that at any moment more stones might be hurled at Dick. To protect him she placed herself between him and the hedge.

At last, at long last, when she had begun to wonder anxiously if night would fall and still find her there; and to think how frightened Mrs. Perry must be getting already, the sound of wheels struck on her ears, and it seemed to her the most welcome sound she had ever heard in her life.

The cowards heard it too, apparently, for “Come on, Bill,” called a low voice, in the direction of the hedge. Huldah gave a great start of surprise. Where had she heard that voice and those very words before? Why, of course, it was all plain now. That first night at the cottage, the barn, the fowl-robbers!—it all came back to her with a rush. No wonder Dick had been angry when he saw them again,— and she, in her stupidity, had blamed him for showing temper. Dear clever, wise, brave Dick! He, too, recognised the voice now, and growled again with all his former spirit. Huldah’s indignation rose beyond control. “Oh, you cowards!” she called out in a shrill angry voice, “I know you now. You came robbing a hen-roost, and the dog drove you off. You ran away from him, but he bit your legs. No wonder he growled when he saw you again. He knew what you were. I wish now I hadn’t held him in. I wish I’d let him go at you, then p’raps it would have been you lying in the road howling, not him. Oh, you thieves and cowards!”

Her voice rang out clear and loud, but how much the men heard no one will ever know. Probably they did not stay to hear much, for the last thing they wanted was to meet people, or to run any risk of being seen.

The wheels drew nearer, then the vicarage pony-carriage came round the bend. For one moment Miss Carew stared bewildered at the group in the middle of the road, the little blue-clad girl, the yellow dog, and the basket of groceries all on the ground in the dust together; then she saw that something was wrong, and sprang out quickly to their assistance.



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"Why, brownie! What has happened?" she cried, alarmed. "Dick, oh, poor old doggie, whatever have you been doing?"

Well she might ask, for poor Dick was covered with dust. He had a lump on his head, and a cut on his shoulder, and he could not help whining, as he made another effort to rise to greet her.

Then, amidst sobs and tears Huldah told her story, and Dick meanwhile looked up at her, a little protecting whimper escaping him from time to time. Now that the strain was over, and relief had come, Huldah broke down completely for a time. She was trembling in every limb, and was white to the lips. Miss Rose saw that the best thing for them both was to get them home as quickly as possible.

Half lifting Huldah, she helped her into the carriage. Then she put Dick in across her lap, and her basket at her feet, and finally got in herself.

"Now then," she said, cheeringly, "we shall soon be home, and Dick shall have his bruises bathed and his poor leg bound up. Don't cry any more, brownie, or you will frighten Mrs. Perry, and we mustn't do that on any account, must we? Dick is going to be very brave—he always is—and you are going to be as plucky as Dick. See there, he is better already," as the invalid gave a bark of excitement, at the sight of some sparrows in the road.

Huldah smiled, then laughed. If Dick was all right, nothing else seemed to matter. Dick turned his head and smiled up at her, to assure her he was better; and so, on the whole, it was quite a cheerful little party which drew up a few moments later before Mrs. Perry's gate.

## CHAPTER VI.

### HULDAH GOES SHOPPING.

Though she made light of it to Mrs. Perry, the fright she had received kept Huldah in a very nervous state for many a day to come. She lived always in a constant dread of some harm coming to poor Dick, and she was never really easy if he was out of her sight. By day, her eyes were here, there, and everywhere, fearful that somewhere those two dreaded figures might be lurking about, waiting to attack or steal her Dick; and at night she lay awake hour after hour, thinking she heard sounds in the house or the garden. Half-a-dozen times she would get out of her bed, shaking with nervousness, yet unable to lie still, and peer out, to see if they really were getting over the garden wall or not, and always she longed for the night to be over. She felt safer when she was up and about, with Dick under her eye.

Miss Carew grew quite troubled about her—about them both, in fact, for Huldah's nervousness, though she tried to keep it to herself, could scarcely be concealed from Mrs. Perry.

Something must be done to distract the child's mind, she felt,—but what? And then, as though to solve the difficulty for her, came an order for half a dozen of Huldah's pretty baskets.

No other cure she could have found would have been half so good. Huldah's spirits went up to a pitch of delight such as she had never known before. She was full of gratitude and of eagerness to begin, and if Miss Rose had not been able to drive her in to Belmouth that very day to buy the raffia, there was, as Miss Rose said, no knowing what might have happened.

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Huldah liked the work, and she had done so little lately that the thought of going back to it was a pleasure in itself, but best of all was the thought of what she would do with the money when she got it. That thought kept her in one thrill of joy.

She was to have eighteenpence each for the baskets. Nine whole shillings! It seemed to Huldah a perfect fortune, and she would spend the whole of it on Mrs. Perry. She would get her in a store of coal, in readiness for the winter; then they would be able to have good fires, and not have to be counting the cost all the time.

That was the first decision. After a time, though, that seemed rather an uninteresting purchase. All her money would be gone at once, and almost before she had realised that she had got it. She next decided to get a large piece of bacon, two sacks of coal, and a sack of corn for the fowls; but this plan was changed again for others. Every day Huldah thought out some new and delightful purchases, and what she would have bought finally nobody knows, for Miss Rose and Mrs. Perry put an end to all her schemes, by insisting that the money was to be spent on herself. She was to buy a new winter coat for herself, they decided, and Huldah had to give in. She was bitterly disappointed at first; it had never entered her head to spend her money on anyone but Mrs. Perry, it was for her only that she had wanted it.

Autumn was well advanced now, the mornings and nights were cold, and the days not really hot, and Huldah soon began to realise that she did need a warm garment of some sort, for she had only her thin print frocks, and a little shoulder shawl that Mrs. Perry had given her.

So, as soon as she had got her nine shillings in her pocket, Miss Rose came with the pony-cart and drove her in to Belmouth to hunt through the shops in search of a coat or a cloak which would not cost more than nine shillings, and at the same time be neat and warm, and—at least, so Huldah hoped,—pretty.

Such a day as that was to Huldah! Such a day as had never come into her life before. First of all there was the drive, four whole miles with Miss Rose in her dear little pony-carriage, and actually wearing one of Miss Rose's old golf cloaks wrapped snugly round her. The sun shone and the birds sang, and the air was exhilarating with the first touch of frost; the trees glowed warmly in their autumn dress, and the hedges too.

Huldah was speechless with excitement, when, after leaving Rob, the pony, at a livery-stable, she followed Miss Carew into the big draper's shop where the purchase was to be made. She was half frightened too, the place was so large, and there were so many people there, who seemed to have nothing to do but stare about them. It was quite an ordeal to walk behind the shop-walker between the long lines of counters with so many people looking over them at her. She kept very close indeed to Miss Rose, and tried to believe that it was at Miss Rose they were staring, and not at herself.

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Then at last they came to the jacket department, and before she knew what she was doing a very tall young woman was standing beside her with a bright scarlet coat in her hands, and actually holding it out for Huldah to try on.

“Oh, that will not do,” interposed Miss Rose, sharply. She was sorry that Huldah should have seen it, it was so attractive, though unsuitable, and would probably make all the others seem dull and ugly. But Huldah knew too that it was quite unsuitable for her purpose. What she wanted was a serviceable garment for Sundays and week-days, wet weather and fine; she would have loved though to have it, and for years after, one of her ambitions was to have a bright red coat in the winter.

Miss Rose strolled away with the girl, after that, to say a word to her in private, and to try to help her pick out something suitable; and very soon they came back again with black coats, blue coats, dark green and grey coats, and one after the other Huldah tried them on, and one after the other they were thrown aside as useless. The shoulders came to her elbows nearly, and the cuffs beyond her finger-tips, while the collars refused to come anywhere near her neck! It was most disappointing.

“She is very narrow, and thin for her height,” remarked the girl, apologetically, as one after the other the coats hung off Huldah’s shoulders like loose sacks. “I wonder if you wouldn’t find a cloak more satisfactory for her. Fit does not matter so much with a cloak. Now this one is a very good one; it cost fifteen shillings at first, but it is reduced very much, because it is a little out of fashion, and slightly shop-worn,” and she held up a warm brown cloak with big bone buttons, and, oh! joy of joys in Huldah’s eyes, a hood lined with blue! “Hoods aren’t being worn now,” she went on; but Huldah heard no more.

“Not worn! Out of fashion!” All her life Huldah had longed for a cloak with a hood! In a rapture she felt the cloak being placed on her shoulders, and saw the girl button the big horn buttons, and in a tumult of shy delight she looked over herself, and then up at Miss Carew.

“That fits her very well,” said the girl, in a tone of relief.

Miss Rose read Huldah’s eager face, and almost nervously enquired the price. It would be such a blow if it should be beyond them.

“It is reduced to eight shillings, madam,” said the girl, who was almost as anxious to sell as they were to buy. “It is good cloth, a real bargain.”

“Then we must have it, mustn’t we, brownie?” cried Miss Rose, promptly. “It may not be as warm as a coat, but it certainly fits her and suits her. Why, we have turned you into a brownie again, Huldah! Are you pleased with your purchase?”

“Oh yes, miss! I think it is lovely, I like it better than any!” gasped Huldah, excitedly. She could scarcely believe yet that she was not in a dream, or that it could really be she, Huldah Bate, to whom all this was happening.



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The young attendant stooped to unbutton the cloak, to take it away and wrap it in a parcel, but Miss Carew stopped her. "I think she may as well wear it home," she said. "It is cold, and it will be the easiest way of carrying it."

"Yes, madam. I will give you the bill."

When the stranger's back was turned, Huldah found her tongue. "Oh, Miss Rose, isn't it lovely! It's so warm, I can feel it already, and—and oh, I can't believe it is mine!"

"I am glad you like it, dear. Now get out your purse, and pay the bill."

That was indeed a proud moment! From the depth of her pocket, and from beneath the wonderful cloak, Huldah produced a small, rather shabby purse, an old one of Miss Carew's, and from its pockets she produced all her worldly wealth. Her fingers trembled so, she could scarcely separate the coins, but at last it was all managed; and, still in a maze of delight, she found herself walking out of the shop behind Miss Carew, clutching her thin little purse, in which reposed one solitary shilling, and proudly wearing her own purchase.

To have walked out in it between that double fire of staring eyes, would have been an ordeal she could scarcely have endured, if it had not been that her thoughts were more occupied with her shilling than with herself, for with it she was going to buy something to take home to Mrs. Perry, and what that something was to be was a matter for grave consideration.

However, with Miss Rose's help, the money was at last laid out on some tea and some biscuits, and, greatest treat of all, a smoked haddock, to make a feast for the tea which was to crown the end of that glorious afternoon.

The tea and the fish and some of the biscuits were for Mrs. Perry, and some of the biscuits were for Dick, as his share of the rejoicing, but for Miss Rose Huldah had nothing, and that was the one cloud on that happy, wonderful day. It was rather a big cloud, too, for she did long to do something for her, to show how grateful she was, and the thought of it kept her very quiet and grave for a part of the drive home.

"Are you tired, brownie?" asked Miss Rose, presently, noticing her silence.

Huldah looked up with grateful, happy eyes. "Oh no, miss. I am too happy to be tired! and it's lovely to feel the warmth of my cloak coming in to my shoulders. I think it is so beautiful. Do you like it, miss?"

"Very much indeed, and I like to have our brownie in brown again; it seems just right!"

Huldah laughed happily. "I wish"—she began, then stopped, as a sudden idea flashed on her mind. Why, of course, she could be a real brownie, and by getting up very early

she could, without anyone's knowing anything about it, make one of her prettiest and nicest baskets for Miss Rose! Her spirits went up, and up with pleasure at the thought all her gravity left her, and when at last they drew up before the cottage in Woodend Lane, her face was one big radiant smile. Mrs. Perry was at the door as soon as they had reached the gate.



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"Oh my!" she exclaimed, throwing up her hands with pleasure and surprise at the sight of Huldah walking up the path actually wearing her new purchase. "Oh my, how nice we do look! Now, I do call that just perfect!"

The child's face was glowing with health and happiness, her eyes were beaming with affection, and eager for sympathy. Could she possibly be the little ill-used, runaway waif who had come to her door starving, only so short a time ago? Mrs. Perry asked herself the question as she looked at her, and in her heart thanked God for sending her this blessing, this chance to help another; and for staying her tongue when she had felt tempted to bid her begone.

Across her mind too flashed the thought of what might have happened to Huldah, if she had turned her away that night. Would it have been to the workhouse, or the jail she would have drifted,—this bonnie, healthy, smiling child? But her mind was drawn back to healthier thoughts by Huldah's little brown work-worn hands.

"Don't you like it, ma'am?" she was asking, troubled by the gravity on Mrs. Perry's face.

"Like it!" she cried, coming back to the present with glad relief. "I should think I did, and you in it, too, dear!" and for the first time in her life she stooped and kissed the little maiden, and Huldah returned the kiss with all the warmth of her affectionate heart welling up to her lips.

It was the first time anyone had kissed her since her mother died, and the first time that she had kissed anyone but Dick and Charlie.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A MEETING AND AN ALARM.

Autumn had come now; late autumn with winter not so very far off, and the days were growing very short and dark; so short and dark that there was no chance of working early in the morning before she went downstairs, nor after she went to bed at night, except by candlelight, and she could not, of course, burn candles. So Mrs. Perry had to be taken into the secret, and Huldah worked in comfort by the fire in the afternoons, after she had done her housework.

And how she did love those cosy afternoons, and how the memory of them lived with her all her life after! The wind and rain storming outside, the snug little kitchen, where they sat so cosy and warm, Dick lying contentedly on his rug, Mrs. Perry sitting in her armchair by the fire, reading aloud from one of her few but precious books. They were old, those stories, but to Huldah they were more beautiful than any she ever came across later on.



Then came the glad day when the basket was completed. Huldah had taken more pains with it than with any she had ever made, and her care was rewarded, for a prettier, daintier basket no one could wish to possess. As soon as it was finished there arose the great question of how, and when, and where the gift should be made.

"I want it to seem as if it comes from a brownie," Huldah insisted, eagerly. "I couldn't make it at night, as the brownies would have done, but couldn't I leave it, as they left their gifts, just where it is sure to be found? It would be much nicer, wouldn't it? Miss Rose would laugh, and be so pleased. I am sure she would like to have it that way."

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At last, after a great deal of thought, and a great many plans had been made and set aside as not quite suitable, it was decided that Huldah should get up early in the morning and walk to the vicarage, then creeping softly into the stable, she would tie the parcel on to Rob's back, or to his manger, where he could not reach it. Miss Carew always went out early, to feed her hens, and to take Rob some bread and sugar, so she would be sure to see it.

Another plan was for Huldah to creep into Miss Rose's sitting-room when the maid's back was turned, and leave the parcel on the table; but they did not like this plan very well, for one thing, Huldah did not like creeping stealthily in and out of the house, and for another, Miss Rose might not find the basket for hours. She was always so busy about the garden and Rob and the hen-houses that she might not go to her room till quite late in the day.

No; Rob, they decided, must be the medium, and Huldah thrilled with excitement.

When she went to bed that night, she was so full of fears that she would not wake in good time in the morning that she tried to keep awake all night. But, after a while the time seemed so long, the night so endless, and the morning so far off, she longed to be able to go to sleep, to bring it nearer more quickly, and while she was wondering if the kitchen clock had really struck ten, or was it really six, and time to get up, she fell asleep, and the next thing she was conscious of was Mrs. Perry calling her, and the old clock in the kitchen striking six as hard as it could strike.

"You dress and get ready, and I will light the fire," she said; and when Huldah presently went downstairs, the kitchen was bright with lamp and firelight, the kettle was singing gaily, and Mrs. Perry was already warming the tea-pot.

By the time they had had their tea and Huldah was ready to start, it was already growing light out of doors. The night had been cold, and there was a thin layer of ice on the puddles in the road, and a nipping little wind made Huldah glad to wrap her old shawl snugly about her,—the shawl which Mrs. Perry had lent her, to save the new cloak. Dick bounded along delightedly; it was not often now that he had a walk at that hour of the morning, and he rejoiced in every inch of it; though he was rather hurt when, on reaching the vicarage gate, Huldah took a piece of string from her pocket and fastened it to his collar. It was only his perfect trust in his mistress that enabled him to bear such an indignity, and he followed her full of wonder as to what was to happen next.

Keeping on the grass by the side of the drive, they made their way noiselessly round to the courtyard and stables. No one was about out of doors, Huldah rejoiced to see, but guessed that Dinah was already up and in the kitchen, for smoke was coming out of a chimney.

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With Dick keeping obediently close to her side, she timidly opened the stable door and crept swiftly in. Rob knew her well enough by this time, and only looked mildly surprised at her appearance. He had a horse-cloth over him, fastened round him by a girth, and while he scrunched up the sugar Huldah had brought him she secured her basket on his back by the girth, as fast as her nervous fingers could manage it. "Miss Rose can't help seeing it there," she thought, delightedly, "and Rob can't harm it before she comes." She stood for a second gazing in sheer joy at her handiwork, the dainty basket and the big white label tied to it, with "From a grateful Brownie," written in large letters on it. Then, fearful of being discovered, she hurried quickly out, fastened the door behind her, and with Dick still close at her heels raced away as quietly as ever she could, and never paused until she had reached the top of Woodend Lane once more.

Stephen Lea, the groom, had been ill, and was late that morning, and Miss Rose reached the stable first. Almost at once her eye was caught by something unusual on the pony's back, but in the dim light of the stable she could not make out what it was.

"Why, Rob," she exclaimed, laughing, "what have you been doing? Where have you been to pick up a load?" Then she searched his side, and made out what the load really was. "Oh, that dear child!" she cried, as she read the inscription written in a big round hand on a sheet of paper, and her eyes grew misty, "From a grateful Brownie." "Now when could she have brought that, and tied it there, I wonder. Rob, you bad boy, why don't you tell me all about it? You know you have been gobbling down sugar this morning, greedy little creature that you are; but I should never have known it from you, if I hadn't seen the crumbs. You are the best secret-keeper I know, but I do wish you could tell me about this, Rob dear."

She looked at the pretty basket with eyes full of tenderness and admiration. "Dear, kind little brownie!" she whispered softly.

Later that day, Rob, still looking as though he did not know what a secret or a brownie was, trotted down Woodend Lane, and drew up as a matter of course before the cottage gate. Indeed, his feelings would have been quite hurt if he had been told that he must not stop there, but must go further down the lane.

Huldah heard his steps, and saw him arrive, watched Miss Rose get down from the carriage and fasten Rob to the railings,—then, in a sudden access of shyness, flew out of the back door and down to the very bottom of the garden.

There Miss Rose found her, a few minutes later. "Huldah," she said, smiling, her pretty blue eyes full of pleasure, and gratitude, and affection, "I found on Rob's back this morning, left there by the brownies, a basket so pretty and so dainty that everyone who has seen it wants one like it. It was a brownie's basket, and as you are the only one of them that I know who can do work like it, I have come to bring you the order."

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"Oh!" gasped Huldah, forgetting her shyness in her delight.

"I am going to call them 'Brownie baskets,' to distinguish them from any others; but the reason shall be our secret, shall it not? Thank you very, very much little brownie, for your sweet gift," and she stooped down and kissed Huldah on the forehead.

The child's eyes filled with tears, glad, grateful tears. "Oh, Miss Rose," she exclaimed, "I am so happy, I don't know what to do; it is all too lovely. I am always afraid I shall wake up and find it a dream."

"It is no dream, brownie; so long as you go on trying to make others happy you will find your own happiness is quite real. Happiness lies in helping others and bringing sunshine into their lives. You will have some disappointments. It will seem as though some people do not want to be made happy, others would not admit it if they were. Such people need a lot of patience shown them, but you must go on trying. There is always something to be done for someone. You must come indoors, though, or you will be taking cold, and we cannot afford to have that happen."

Huldah followed Miss Rose along the path, hardly conscious that her feet touched the earth. Her heart was throbbing with joy, her eyes were dancing. Dick followed his mistress, his tail wagging contentedly, he knew by instinct why she was happy, and his senses told him that she had been very happy ever since they started for that beautiful walk that morning.

"I am going to begin the work to-morrow morning," Huldah said, eagerly, to Mrs. Perry that evening, as they sat over their supper before the fire. "I expect Miss Rose would like to have the baskets soon, and they will take a little while to make."

Alas, though, when morning came, Huldah's eagerness received a sharp check. She had only the least little bit of raffia left, and to get more she would have to go into Belmouth.

"What a pity!" she cried, disappointedly; "it will take hours to walk there and back, and I meant to have done such a lot to-day!" She could have wept with vexation. Belmouth was four miles off, and one of the hilliest four miles imaginable. But it was not this that daunted her, it was the length of time that she would be kept from her work. However, there was no good done by worrying over it, or by delaying, so, as soon as she had done her housework, and dinner was over and the dishes put away, she put on her new brown cloak, and with Dick for company she started.

They stepped out briskly, for the days were short now, and Mrs. Perry grew anxious if they were long away, and nervous if she were left alone when the light began to fade. They stepped along so briskly that by half-past two they were in the town, and making their way to the shop where Miss Rose had bought the raffia before. The purchase took

a little time, for the shopman had not enough out, and had to send to the stock-room to get some. But, now that



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she was there, Huldah did not mind that. She loved watching the people coming in and making their purchases; it was all so lively and new and interesting. The shopkeeper, who had seen her come there with Miss Carew, and had heard about her basket-making, was nice and friendly too. He seemed to take quite an interest in her work, and promised to get her some orders if he could, so that altogether Huldah came out of that shop feeling extremely happy, and not in the least sorry that she had had to come.

"I feel almost too happy," she was saying to herself, as she stepped out into the street, where the setting sun was flooding the place with radiance, a dazzling, rosy radiance that shone right in Huldah's eyes, and blinded her to all about her.

"It is all so lovely," she added, "it seems as if it can't be true, as if I can't be really me"—a sudden sharp, excited barking on the part of Dick made her turn quickly. She turned her back to the sun, and the dazzle went out of her eyes, and with it the sunshine from her life,—or so it seemed to her,—for there, drawn up by the opposite pavement was her uncle's van, and old Charlie! and, as Huldah knew, the owners themselves would not be far off!

Dick had recognised Charlie—that was the meaning of his excitement, and therein lay the greatest danger, for he was barking and leaping about the old horse in such delight that everyone's attention was attracted, and it was only a question as to how soon he would attract Uncle Tom's attention too. Huldah's own heart yearned to go over and speak to the dear old horse, but her fears were stronger. She felt half paralysed with terror, and for a moment her wits so forsook her that she did not know what to do. Then inspiration came to her, and she turned and hurried away as fast as her feet could carry her. She did not run, she was trembling too much for that, she dared not whistle for Dick, for that would have called attention to them both. She could only walk away, and trust to his following her; but even as she went she heard a dreaded voice shout out excitedly, "Why there's our Dick! Dick, Dick, come here"—but at the sound of it Dick felt the old fear in his heart leap to life, and with his old instinct to fly from his master, he dashed along the street as swiftly as his long legs could carry him, and was very quickly out of sight. So swiftly did he race that he shot past Huldah without recognising her, and her heart beat faster with thankfulness, for the further away he got the better, and it was better for both of them that they should not be seen together.

How she got over those four long miles home Huldah never knew. Her head swam, her legs trembled, indeed, her whole body shook with nervous dread, so that, in spite of her anxiety to get home quickly, she had to stand still many times, to quiet the beating of her heart, and get breath to go on again.

Half a mile out of the town she found Dick, running wildly backwards and forwards looking for her, and troubled and ashamed at having lost her. She wished, though, that

he had gone all the way home, for if they were followed and seen together she would be recognised instantly, and she would have no power of escape such as Dick had had.

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She took her hat off, and drew her hood over her head, but with Dick beside her nothing would save her, she knew. So slowly had she come that darkness was already beginning to fall. Seeing this, she tried to hurry on more quickly, and once within sight of their own lane relief gave her strength to run. In the lane the twilight was deeper, and already Mrs. Perry, growing nervous, had lighted the lamp in the kitchen. The warm glow streamed out on poor frightened Huldah, and welcomed her. At the sound of her footsteps the house door flew open, and Mrs. Perry came out on the step to meet her; but instead of her usual smile and greeting, Huldah fell exhausted into her arms and burst into a passion of bitter sobs.

### CHAPTER VIII.

#### TRACKED DOWN.

"I tell you that there's my dog! He was stolen from me, and I'm going to 'ave the law of whoever's got 'im."

Tom Smith went blustering back into the public-house, almost speechless with anger. To have been so near Dick and then to have missed him, was almost more than he could bear. If he had known he had missed Huldah too, he would have been even more angry.

"You can't have the law of people for taking in a stray," remarked one man, quietly. They none of them liked Tom Smith, and most of them wished he would go on his way and leave them to their quiet gossip.

"Perhaps he ran away," suggested another, drily.

Tom Smith glowered at him sullenly. "What should he run away for?" he asked, sharply.

"Well, that's more'n I can say," answered the man, calmly. "It seems to be his way, by the look of him just now. Dogs do it sometimes, when they think they'd like a change."

"I know he didn't run away; he was stolen, and I'd give five shillings to know who'd got him, and where he lives."

He did not mean what he said, and he never intended to part with five shillings, but he did want to find Dick, and he meant to do it, too. For once he was taken at his word.

"Hand over your five bob. I can tell you where the dog lives." The voice came from over by the window, and all eyes were turned in that direction. A young man, a stranger to all there, was standing leaning eagerly towards Tom Smith, his hand held out. He had been sitting silent until this moment, but listening attentively to all that was being said.



Tom Smith turned towards him, looking very foolish; and, as usual, when he felt small he began to bluster. "Likely tale I'm going to hand over five shillings now! How do I know you knows anything about the dog; what one I means, or where he lives, or anything at all about him? Besides, I don't give the five bob unless I actually gets hold of the dog."

"I tell you I do know him; he's a yaller dog, a long-legged thing with a short tail, and he goes about with a girl, and he's called Dick. I shouldn't have said I know'd him if I didn't."

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"A girl!" Tom Smith's cruel eyes lightened with eagerness. "Have you seen a girl with him? a kid about twelve-year old? When? Now? Are you sure? Why, 'twas she that stole him!"

"What should a child of that age want to steal a dog for?" asked one of the other men.

"Better ask her, if you want to know!" retorted the other, rudely. "I'll give 'ee another shilling if you can help me lay my hands on the both of them."

"Right you are," agreed Bob, promptly, and without a single qualm of conscience. "We'd better start; 'tis about four miles from here they live, and it'll be dark soon."

"Ugh!" Tom Smith looked vexed; he was a lazy man, and he did not relish the prospect of a four miles' tramp. "I've got to wait for my old woman to come back," he muttered.

Emma Smith was going round the town with a big basket of tins and brushes and things, trying to sell some, while he hung about the public-house, enjoying himself doing nothing. Her round was a long one, and few people seemed tempted to buy of such a slovenly, disagreeable-looking woman, one who grew rude too, if people did not want any of her goods.

So it was that Huldah had got safely home without being overtaken, and once within that cosy kitchen felt herself safe from all danger. She little dreamed that at that moment the three persons she feared most in the world were starting out from Belmouth in search of her. Poor Huldah!

It was six o'clock and quite dark by the time the trio, and Charlie and the van, reached Wood End; and many a time before they got there Bob Thorp would have thrown up the job, if he had not wanted the money so badly. For the whole of the four miles Tom Smith grumbled, bullied his wife, beat Charlie, and snapped and snarled at everyone and everything.

"I don't wonder at anybody's running away from you," remarked Bob at last, losing all patience. "If I was your wife I'd do the same."

Whereupon Tom snarled again with rage, "She'd better let me catch her trying it on, that's all," he said, threateningly, and glared at his wife, as though she had threatened to do so.

A little way beyond the village they drew up, and without troubling to ask anyone's leave Tom drove the van into a field,—where they had no possible right to be, and poor tired Charlie and his tired mistress were left to themselves for, at any rate, a few minutes' peace.

The two men walked on again in silence until they reached the top of Woodend Lane, There Bob Thorp drew up, and showed a decided disinclination to go any further.

“‘Tis down there they live, the first cottage you come to; you can’t mistake it. There’s only an old woman, I b’lieve, besides the girl and the dog. I’d better keep away, ‘cause they knows me, leastways the girl does, and—and the dog. If you’ll hand over that six bob now, I’ll be getting home. I’ve got a good step to go yet.”

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Tom Smith agreed almost pleasantly. "Right you are," he said, diving his hand into an inside pocket, "and, thank 'ee, I'll manage the rest, and I'd better manage it alone. I don't want to draw my friends into any trouble over it,—leastways not those that have done me a good turn."

He fumbled for some time over the counting out of the money, but when at last he had put it into Bob's hand, the latter turned abruptly away, and with only a brief 'good-night' plunged hurriedly down the dark lane.

"Good-night," said Bob, "and thank 'ee. Three florins isn't it?" But Tom Smith was out of sight, and Bob was glad to hurry away too, as fast as his legs could take him. He did not feel altogether pleased, though he did try to cheer himself by chinking his money in his pocket, and planning how he would spend it. All the way he went he seemed to see again Huldah's pained, sorrowful face, as she knelt in the road beside her dog, and tried to shelter him with her own body. How she must love the ugly yellow creature, and how he loved her! and how they would feel it, if they were parted. What a life they'd lead, if they had to go back to the van and that ill-tempered, grumbling pair!

"I couldn't wish anybody any worse harm than to have to live with that fellow," he muttered to himself. "'Tis a poor look-out for 'em, poor toads!"

The thought of Huldah, and the desire not to be mixed up in the affair, sent him home and to bed, to be out of the way. So he went to sleep, and tried to forget what he had done, and his three florins remained untouched in his pocket until morning.

In the meantime Tom Smith had made his way stealthily down the lane until he reached the little cottage. At the gate he stopped, and peering about him, listened for a time, while he tried to plan what his first move should be. Should he be civil and friendly, or should he just go in and frighten them all? As he stood there debating he looked like some mean beast of prey, waiting to spring on his victim. A cheerful light shone out of one of the little windows, and in the stillness of the night the sound of voices reached him. One he recognised at once as Huldah's. A savoury smell of cooking was wafted out to him, and roused him to greater anger.

"That little hussy is a-selling of her baskets, I'll be bound, and she and the old woman live on the fat of the land with the money that they bring. My baskets, I calls 'em. It's sheer thieving! A fine old yarn she'll have told, too, and a nice character she'll have give'd me, ugh, the little—"

A ripple of laughter sounded through the silence. To him it seemed as though Huldah were mocking him. Hesitating no longer, he strode up the path and knocked heavily on the door. Instantly the voices and the laughter ceased. There was a spring at the door and a growl. Dick had scented the enemy! Then after a moment's pause a voice asked timidly, "Who is there?"

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Tom Smith heard the alarm in the voice, and rejoiced. It gave him the greatest pleasure always to know that he inspired fear in anyone.

“Open the door. It’s me, Tom Smith, and I’ve come after that dog of mine that you’ve stole!”

No answer came, nor was the door opened.

“Open the door, I say, or I’ll fetch the police for you! pack of thieves that you are!”

The threat of the police would have made Huldah smile, if she had not been in such a state of terror for herself, and even more so for Dick. She knew that her “uncle” would not go within a mile of a policeman if he could help it. Indeed, she longed and prayed for a policeman to come along then, that she might appeal to him for protection.

Unfortunately for them, though, not even a bolt stood between them and their enemy, and before Huldah could step forward to shoot it, or turn the key, the latch was raised, and Tom Smith was in the kitchen. With one well-aimed kick he sent Dick into the furthest corner, and with equally sure aim he seized Huldah by the wrist. “Now, you come along of me, and no nonsense, do you hear? A fine dance you’ve led me and your poor aunt! You deserves a good hiding, both of ’ee, and I ain’t sure but what you’ll get it yet.”

“Let her alone,” gasped Mrs. Perry, “let her go—she isn’t yours. You’ve no—right—to her.” Her face was grey white, her heart seemed to have stopped beating, and she could hardly speak.

Tom Smith took no notice of her whatever, he was not going to waste time in arguing—bullying was more in his line. “Now then, come along. If you makes any noise, I’ll turn the p’lice on the old lady there, for harbouring thieves and receiving stolen property. Stop it now!” as Huldah wrenched herself away. “P’raps that’ll teach you,” and he caught her a heavy blow on the ear.

Mrs. Perry screamed. “Don’t hurt her—oh, don’t do them any harm!” she pleaded. “Promise not—to beat them.” It seemed to her impossible to resist him, they were helpless there, those two alone. Huldah and Dick must go.

Huldah’s heart sank with overwhelming sorrow. Was she really to be given up? was she to leave her new home, her new happiness, her work, Mrs. Perry, Miss Rose,—all to go back to the old torture? Oh no, it could not be. She could never bear it! Mrs. Perry spoke as if she would have to; but what would she herself do there alone? She would be almost frightened to death.

Poor Huldah grew frantic. “I am not going. I can’t go, and Miss Rose said you can’t make me. I am not yours. Oh, Miss Rose, Miss Rose do come and save us!”



With a little whimper of pain Dick crawled out of his corner and came towards her. He seemed to realise that his little mistress was in danger, and he meant to stand by her.

“Shut up your noise!” shouted her “uncle,” and dealt her another sharp blow on the side of the head.

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Mrs. Perry screamed, and fell fainting into the chair, and with the same Tom Smith picked up Huldah in his arms and made for the door.

The sound of footsteps and bitter cries died away in the lane, and a deep oppressive silence followed. The kettle sang and boiled and bubbled over, the supper burnt in the pan, the fire died down, and still that senseless form lay huddled up in her chair, her white face turned upwards to the ceiling, as though beseeching help.

Minutes passed before any sign of life came back to her, and with a shuddering sigh she opened her eyes again. At first she was dazed, and her mind a blank, then the open door, the empty room, the stillness, brought all back to her in a sudden overwhelming rush of sorrow.

For a few moments she sat, weak, white, and trembling, trying to think; then rising stumblingly to her feet she picked up her shawl, and wrapping it over her head and shoulders, she groped her way out of the house, down the garden, and out into the darkness of the night.

Stumbling, tottering, having to pause every few minutes, to rest her shaking limbs and gasp for breath, she made her way up the lane. She must find Miss Rose. Miss Rose must know, Miss Rose would help them! Oh it *must* come right! She could not lose her child and Dick. She could not live without them now!

Tears welled up, and poured down her ashy face, as she thought of those two, and what they might be enduring now.

"Dear Father, protect them!" she prayed. "Dear Jesus, take care of them!" and all the way she went her pleadings beat at Heaven's gate for the two poor waifs she so loved. "Dear Jesus, protect them, and bring them back to me. I love them so, and they are all I have."

Her heart laboured so heavily she could scarcely breathe, her head throbbed distractingly, her limbs shook so much under her that she could scarcely drag herself along. Every now and then she fancied she heard a scream or Huldah's sobs; then again she thought she heard Dick's bark, and each time she stopped and listened, and gazed into the darkness, but presently the loneliness and darkness so oppressed her that she could not bring herself to stop again. All she could do was to stumble onward until the vicarage was reached, and arrived there she sank down on the doorstep exhausted. The fright and the walk, so long for her, had nearly killed her.

Dinah came quickly to the door, in response to the frightened frantic knock, and as she opened it Martha Perry fell in at her feet, faint and helpless.



“My—Huldah”—she panted, “he’s found her; he’s taken her—away—and Dick too! Help me—to—” then, as they raised her and carried her into the kitchen, she lost consciousness entirely.

When she opened her eyes again Miss Rose was standing beside her. “Huldah! where’s my Huldah?” she cried, her poor eyes filling with tears. “What—can we do?”

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Miss Rose's face was very white, but her eyes were brave and smiling. "It's all right, Martha, dear. She will be back with you to-morrow, I hope. We have sent to the police; they are to take the matter up, and see it through, and we have telegraphed to Belmouth, and Woodleigh, and Crinnock, to tell the police there to look out for the man, and stop him."

Mrs. Perry moaned with disappointment, she could not help it, when she thought of poor Huldah, every moment going further and further from them all. Longing, hoping, expecting every moment that someone would overtake them and save her, straining her ears to hear help coming,—and then, at last, in utter hopeless despair realising that she was left to herself, helpless, broken-hearted! She would not know that it was only for one night, and that help was coming in the morning.

Martha tried to smile back at Miss Rose, and to seem pleased, but her misery was too great. Then an idea came to her, which brought her swiftly to her feet, with new hope in her heart. Perhaps, oh, perhaps, Huldah and Dick might manage again to escape! If they did, they would go to her, surely! Of course she should be at home to receive them! She told Miss Rose, and though Miss Rose scarcely believed it possible, she thought it kinder to humour her,—besides which there was just the chance,—a chance which could not be missed.

So the two went back to the cottage, where the lamplight still shone out cheerfully through the open door. For a moment hope leaped in their hearts, then a glance round the little kitchen assured them that it was deserted still, and hope died down again.

"Never mind; morning will soon be here," said Miss Rose, hopefully, "and 'joy cometh with the morning.' Now I am going to make up a good fire, and I will read to you, and you must try, Martha, dear, to listen, and not to think of anything else."

She made Martha comfortable in the old armchair, with her feet upon a stool, and a shawl about her knees, then she took down the well-worn Bible, and began to read. Her sweet voice rose and fell evenly, soothingly; for more than an hour she read on, unwearied, never faltering, selecting all the most helpful and comforting passages she could find; and by-and-by Martha Perry's face grew less drawn and anxious, her sad eyes grew tired, then the lids closed in a blessed, peaceful slumber, and Miss Rose's voice ceased, and silence fell on the little cottage.

The night sped on, the cold grew greater, the darkness deeper. Miss Rose sat quietly at the table, the open Bible before her, keeping watch over the sleeping woman and the fire, her ear always alert for a sound outside. Her hearing grew so strained that over and over again she thought she heard footsteps coming, Huldah's quick, brisk step and Dick's pat-pat patter; again and again she tip-toed to the door, and opening it wide peered out into the darkness. But no real sound broke the silence, save the hoot of an owl, and by-and-by the chirping of the waking birds.

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Then at last day dawned, and streaks of light appeared in the sky, turning presently to a glorious fiery radiance, as the sun rose, flooding the sky and all the world with brightness and with hope.

Martha Perry stirred stiffly in her chair, and opened her eyes. "Oh, Miss Rose, I've been asleep, and left you keeping watch all by yourself! Oh, I am ashamed!"

"Not by myself, Martha. I had this," laying her hand on the open Bible, "and I felt God nearer me than ever in my life before, I think. He is going to help us, I know. I feel that He has given me His word this night!"

"She has not come?" sighed Martha, glancing round the kitchen, as though expecting to see Huldah hiding somewhere. "Oh, what a night of misery she must have endured!"

"She has not come yet, but she is coming, and brownie is very brave, Martha, and patient and hopeful. She has the blessed gift of making the best of what can't be helped, and she has a wonderful faith. Look, Martha, look at the sky, does it not already sing to us 'joy cometh with the morning'?"

Martha Perry walked to the door and looked out, and even her timid, doubting heart could not but feel calmed and comforted.

"'God's in His heaven: All's right with the world,'" quoted Miss Rose, softly, as they stood there together. And already help was on its way to Huldah.

## CHAPTER IX.

### TO THE RESCUE.

When Bob Thorp awoke that same morning about six o'clock, his first thought was that he had six shillings in his pocket. Six shillings got without working for them, so that he had every right to look on them as an extra, and spend them on himself.

Having made up his mind on this point, he lay for a happy half-hour, thinking how he should lay it out to get most pleasure out of it. "Why, I know!" he almost exclaimed aloud, as a particularly pleasant idea struck him. "I'll go to the big football match at Crinnock. It's going to be a clipper, they say. Ain't I glad I thought of it! I shall have just enough to do it comfortably."

The idea so excited him that he jumped out of bed then and there, and, banging at his poor mother's door, he bade her get up sharp, and light the fire, and get the breakfast, because he had to be off early. Then he dressed himself in the best he'd got, and presented himself in the kitchen.

In answer to his mother's surprised looks and questionings, he explained that he had to go away on business, in search of a job, and must look his best; and his mother, rejoicing in the prospect of a day of freedom from him, cooked him the last egg she had, and gave him as big a breakfast as he could eat; and he ate it heartily, without a qualm of conscience for his deception towards her.

At the railway station he met quite a crowd, all going in the same direction as himself; neither the darkness nor the cold could affect their energy or spirits, and Bob's spirits rose too, as he followed the stream of travellers into the little gas-lit booking office for his ticket.

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“Third return, Crinnock,” he said, loudly, tossing a shining new florin on to the counter.

At the sound of it the booking clerk half hesitated in stamping the ticket he held in his hand, glanced sharply at the florin, and hurriedly picking it up, scanned it closely.

“Bad ‘un,” he said, shortly, handing it back to Bob. “Ninepence, please.” Then, seeing the look of blank dismay on Bob’s face, he added, “Been had?”

Bob’s cheeks were white, and his hand shaking, as he dived in his pocket for the other two florins,—the only money he possessed in the world. He saw himself tricked, cheated out of a day’s pleasure, made to look small in everyone’s eyes.

He turned out the two other florins upon the counter, and at the first ring of them on the wood he knew the truth, and his passion blazed out fiercely against the man who had fooled him under cover of the darkness.

“I’ll have the law of him!” he stammered, almost speechless with anger. “I know where he is, or pretty near, and I’ll set the p’lice on him, I will. Why—why—I might have been had up myself for trying to pass bad money! Oh I’ll make him sorry he ever tried his games on me, I will!”

Back through the waiting crowd Bob elbowed his way, in search of a policeman. His disappointment about the football match was swallowed up in his longing for revenge.

“Look here, bobby,” he said, going up to the constable who was standing on the platform to see the crowd off peacefully. “Look at this!” thrusting the coins under his very nose. “Bad money, that’s what ‘tis,—passed off on me last night! But I know who done it, and where he is,—leastways where he was last night, and he can’t have got so very far. He’s Tom Smith, the hawker, and he’d got his van in a field nigh ‘pon the top of Woodend Lane last night—put it there without a with-your-leave or a by-your-leave! Trespassing, that’s what he was, and that’s another thing you can have him up for. He was there to kidnap a child and a dog what he said was his; but I’ll bet they wasn’t—and that’s another thing against him. Of course he’d move on as soon as he’d got the kid, but he can’t have got so very far with that old horse of his—he looked as if he’d drop dead if he was made to go another mile.”

The policeman stayed to see the train depart with the crowd safely packed inside it, then turned away with Bob. He was as anxious as Bob himself to follow up the case. Policemen did not get much chance in little country places, and promotion came slowly. “What was he giving you six shillings for?” he asked, as Bob and he trudged up the hill from the station.

Bob looked foolish. “Oh—for—for showing him the way,” he stammered.

The policeman looked at him sharply. “What way?” he asked.

“To—to Woodend Lane,” he answered, shortly, wondering distractedly how he could avoid giving true explanations; but the policeman, to his relief, did not press the matter further, and whatever his thoughts were, he kept them to himself.



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Presently he asked, casually, "Where was the child he wanted to get hold of? In Woodend Lane?"

"Yes—I mean I dunno. I don't know nothing about it."

"I only asked, 'cause we've had word to keep a look-out for a man, probably with a caravan, who has stolen a child and a dog from Wood—"

"Why, look, what's that over there?" interrupted Bob, in sudden excitement.

"That over there" was a shabby brown caravan, hung about with tins and brushes, standing beneath a high hedge in a corner of a distant field. From the road beneath it, it would not be visible to any passer-by, but looking across country as they were the glitter of the tins flashing in the rays of the morning sun caught the eye, and discovered the van in its hiding-place.

"Here goes!" cried the policeman, excitedly. "A chap don't get a chance like this every day. Come along, young fellow, and don't make a noise."

Avoiding every possible risk of being observed approaching, Bob Thorp, led by the constable, made his way to the field where the caravan stood. Tethered to the hedge close by was Charlie, and securely roped to the van lay poor Dick.

"That's the dog," whispered Bob Thorp, excitedly.

Dick growled slightly at the faint sounds which now reached him, and more violently when he recognised his old enemy.

"Lie down, can't you?" bellowed a hoarse voice, roughly; and walking cautiously round to the front of the van they found the very man they were in search of lying on the ground rolled in a rug, with a couple of sacks over him. At the sight of Bob Thorp and the policeman he sprang to his feet at once.

"Anything you want, gentlemen? Anything I can sell you?" he asked, impudently. "A nice scrubbing-brush or—"

"'Tis you needs the scrubbing-brush, by the looks on you," said Bob, cheekily.

"And I want you," said the constable, sharply.

"Want me? What for?" he demanded, indignantly; but his face had suddenly turned an unhealthy gray colour, and in his eyes they could plainly read his alarm.

"Passing bad money," answered the policeman, quietly.

“Who says so? Who brought that charge against me?”

“Im,” the policeman jerked his head and his thumb towards Bob.

“And who’s he, that his word should be took agin mine? Who’s to say he hasn’t been passing it himself, and—and of course he’s got to put it off on someone, when he’s found out.”

“Well, you can fight that out before the magistrates. You’ve got to come along of me now. If you can explain it, that is all right, and you will soon be back again.”

“All right,” said Tom, agreeing, because he saw the uselessness of holding out. His brain was busy, though, trying to think out a plan. “I must just step inside, and break it to my wife—”

“Oh yes, and empty your pockets of all the rest of the bad money you’ve got!” burst out Bob, unable to control himself. “Likely tale that, eh!”

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The policeman stepped over and laid his hand on Tom Smith's shoulder. "There's one or two other little matters too," he said. "You're wanted for some little affair about a girl and a dog. Is that the dog?"

"She's my own niece—"

"Is she? All right; you've only got to prove it, and that you're her lawful guardian, and a fit and proper person—"

A sharp scream suddenly rent the air, and made them all start. Emma Smith, waking from her heavy sleep, had heard the sound of voices, and looking cautiously out of the window, had caught sight of the policeman grasping her husband by the arm. Day and night for years she had been fearing this, and now it had actually happened! The shock was too much for her. Scream after scream pierced their ears, as she staggered out of the van and flung herself upon her husband.

The screams, which roused Dick to a fury of barking, and startled even poor old worn-out Charlie, wakened Huldah from the deep sleep into which she had fallen, exhausted by sorrow.

Springing from her bed, she saw the policeman, and that he had his hand on her uncle, holding him securely, in spite of Aunt Emma's attack. But why was Bob Thorp there, too? Huldah recognised him with a shock of surprise and fear.

For a moment she gazed frightened yet fascinated at the group, then across her mind flashed the thought, Here was her chance of escape! Quick as thought she caught up a knife from the table, and slipping down the steps cut the rope which held Dick, then, sheltered from view by the van itself, she clambered through the hedge with the dog at her heels, and away and away as fast as her feet could cover the ground. Her aunt's screams deadened any other noise, and her aunt's furious attack took all the attention of the three men, so that escape was easy.

It never entered Huldah's head that the policeman had come on her account, and that she was safer now than ever in her life before. She did not know there had been time to communicate with the police, and the one thought that had filled her mind all these weary hours was escape, and getting back to Mrs. Perry.

At first she raced wildly, but before very long her strength gave out, her excitement died down. Her pace grew slower and slower, more and more halting, and then finally she stopped. Thoughts of her Aunt Emma would force themselves on her mind. If her uncle was taken to jail, her aunt would be left alone with the horse and van. What would she do, day and night alone? How could she manage? Could she, Huldah, go and leave her like that!—but could she live that dreadful life again! Every day going further and further from Miss Rose and Mrs. Perry, and the dear little cottage, never perhaps to see



them again! Huldah sat down on a bank underneath the hedge, to try and think the matter out. Dick came back from his happy wanderings and sat beside her, staring at her with wistful eyes, for he saw that she was in trouble, but why she should be was more than he could understand,—for were they not away together, and on their way home?

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He gave a little whine, and Huldah looked up at him. "Oh, Dick, what can I do? Mrs. Perry will be so frightened there alone, and she'll be troubling about us so, and—and there's Miss Rose too"—more tears trickled down Huldah's cheeks,—“yet I can't go and leave Aunt Emma all alone now, with the van and Charlie to look after, and Uncle Tom in jail. Oh, what can I do? what can I do!"

Dick was puzzled too, but at that moment a fresh burst of screams burst on her ears, terrible, noisy screams, and bitter cries and shoutings. Tom Smith was being led away by the constable, and his wife had flung herself on the ground in hysterics, real or feigned.

Huldah crept back to the hedge and peered through. Her heart was heavy as lead. Her body ached with the blows she had received the night before, and her head throbbed painfully too, but these were as nothing compared with the pain of her poor little aching disappointed heart. On the other side of the hedge she saw her aunt lying on the ground, sobbing, screaming, and beating the ground with her fists.

Huldah crept back through the hedge, and up to her side. "Aunt Emma, don't take on like that," she said, gently, trying to comfort her. "He'll be back soon. They won't do anything to him, for certain." She little dreamed how black the case was against him.

But the sight of the girl seemed to change her aunt's overwhelming grief to sudden and violent anger against herself. Springing to her feet, she snatched the heavy whip from the van, and brought it down with all the force of which she was capable across Huldah's shoulders.

"It's all your fault!" she screamed, "it's all your fault! It was only to get hold of you that he offered the fellow the money, and if you hadn't run away he'd never have had to do it. 'Tis all your fault he's took, and I'll make you smart for it, my lady!" and seizing the poor shrinking, frightened child, she beat her until her arm dropped to her side exhausted.

"Stop that!" cried a stern voice, loudly. Huldah and her aunt fell back, shocked and startled by the sight of another policeman close to them. In the noise and excitement they had not heard anyone approaching. "Give me that whip."

Huldah gave one terrified glance at the man in blue, and fell fainting at his feet.

Emma Smith handed over the whip meekly enough. She was thoroughly scared now, for she never doubted that Huldah was dead, and that the policeman would declare that she had killed the child. In her terror for herself, her anxiety about her husband was forgotten. She began to wail and sob and beg forgiveness. She threw herself on the ground, calling loudly to Huldah to open her eyes and get up. She tried coaxings and all sorts of promises, but the policeman only thrust her aside.

“Go and get some cold water,” he said, sternly.

She crept away meekly, and presently brought back a little drop in a broth basin.

“That’s all there is,” she said, apologetically. It was very little, but with it the big man bathed the child’s face and hands, and dabbed her lips and her brow.

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"Go and get a blanket," he ordered. "She oughtn't to be lying on the cold wet ground so long. She doesn't seem to be coming round." He felt Huldah's pulse, and laid his hand over her heart. "It *is* beating," he muttered, in a tone of relief. Then he lifted her on to the blanket, and wrapped her in it, then bathed her brow again, until presently a faint quiver of the body and a fluttering sigh showed that consciousness was returning.

At last Huldah opened her eyes and looked vaguely about her, wondering where she was. At sight of her aunt and the policeman the old look of terror came back to her face, and she struggled to sit up.

"Don't you hurry yourself, now," said the policeman, kindly. "And don't you be afraid of me. I've come to look after you, and take you back to your friends."

"You can't," muttered Emma Smith, sullenly. "She's mine. The child's right enough; they all want a hiding sometimes."

"Sometimes, perhaps, but not constant; and never as you lays it on. I should be taking you up for murder if you did it often in your way!"

Emma Smith only looked more sullen. "Well, she's mine, and no one else's, and I'm going to keep her."

"Look here, my woman, what's the good of going on like that? You've got to prove, first of all, that she is yours, and then that you're a fit and proper person to have her. In the meantime I've got my orders to fetch her away, and if you want her you can apply to the magistrates, and prove to them all that you've been saying. Now, then, where's her bonnet and shawl?"

"She hasn't got any," sulkily.

"Then you've got to provide her with some. Hurry up; but first of all, has she had anything to eat or drink to-day?"

"No, nor won't have. I haven't got anything for myself."

"That seems unlucky; but if you'll come along of me you shall have a good cup of tea and a bit of breakfast. Now then, missie, are you ready?"

Huldah had sat speechless all this time. She felt giddy and ill, and quite worn out. She was so dazed too, she could not think what to do, or what she ought to do. Things seemed to have got beyond her, and to be taken out of her hands.

She struggled to her feet, and let the policeman wrap her, head and all, in the old shawl. She wondered vaguely if she would feel better able to walk when once she had

started; but even the standing on her feet seemed too much for her, and it was with a real sense of relief that she felt the man lift her in his arms and stride away with her.

No word of farewell was said, but in a moment or two she heard her aunt's rough voice calling after them, "You've no right to that dog, and if you takes him I'll have the law of you!"

The policeman stopped, and turned round. "Oh, by the way, I've forgot one thing now. I want to see your dog-licence."

But Emma Smith only walked away into the van muttering angrily, and banging the door after her, left them to go their way in peace.



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Huldah scarcely knew how that walk passed. She was conscious now and then of a feeling of shame, for letting herself be carried. She felt she ought to walk, but before she could say so the old faintness stole over her again, and she knew that to walk was beyond her power. Now and then she heard the policeman talking in a friendly voice to Dick, who walked close beside them, and Dick's excited bark. She was wondering how much further they had to go, when they drew up, and Huldah found herself being laid on a wooden bench in a room where two or three policemen were standing round a fire.

To her surprise, she was no longer afraid of them, they were too kind and gentle for that. One of those standing by the fire, an elderly man, came over to where she lay.

"Well, young woman," he said, cheerfully, "and when did you have anything to eat last? Day before yesterday, by the look of you."

Huldah tried to remember. "It wasn't quite so long ago as that," she said, feebly. "I had some dinner—yesterday, I think. When was yesterday?"

The man laughed. "Don't you worry," he said, kindly; "you've been living two days in one, and have got muddled. You will feel better when you've had a basin of hot bread and milk. Bring her over to the fire, Harry, she's starved with the cold."

"Harry," her first friend, carried her over, and put her in a big armchair by the fire, and presently one of the others brought her a basin of hot bread and milk, and a plateful of food for Dick, and before Huldah had taken a half of it she was feeling altogether a different person.

"I didn't feel hungry, but I s'pose I was," she said, simply, looking up with grateful, friendly eyes at the old policeman. "I feel ever so much better now."

"Ay, ay; we don't always know what we want, nor what is good for us,—but here's somebody as'll be good for you, unless I'm very much mistaken!" and Huldah, following the direction of his eyes as they travelled to the door, gave one long low cry of rapturous delight, for there walking in to the police station were Mrs. Perry and Miss Rose!

## CHAPTER X.

### ONE SUMMER'S AFTERNOON.

Huldah was home again, and Dick too, and more free and happy than they had ever been in their lives before, for, from Huldah, at any rate, there was lifted the great dread of being traced by her uncle and taken back, a dread which had in the old days lain always like a shadow on her life. Now, the worst had happened, and was over, for the law had declared that neither Tom Smith nor Emma, his wife had the slightest claim to her, not being related at all. Nor were they fit and proper persons to have the charge of

any child. And to her great delight she was handed over to the guardianship of the vicar and Miss Rose Carew, and to the care of Mrs. Perry, to be trained and brought up to be an honest, truthful, industrious woman.

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Never to the end of her life would Huldah forget that home-coming, that drive back to Woodend Lane, or those days that followed.

“Was it really only yesterday that I was here, and Dick and I walked into Belmouth?” she asked, incredulously, as she lay back in the carriage. “It seems weeks and weeks ago! Oh, how lovely everything is! It seems as if I didn’t notice it enough till now;” and she drew in long breaths of the fresh cold air, and the mingled scents of wet earth and pine trees. “I seem to smell vi’lets, but they can’t be out yet, can they, miss?”

Miss Carew laughed. “Lots of things have happened since yesterday, brownie; but even the brownies could not make the violets spring up and open in one night.”

“But God could,” thought Huldah to herself.

After all that happened in the last twenty-four hours, she felt that nothing was beyond His power, but she was too shy to say so aloud. A deep sense of love and gratitude for all the goodness shown to her made her feel, a moment later, ashamed of her shyness. God had been so good to her, how could she be so bad as to feel ashamed to speak of Him? She had prayed and prayed, and prayed to Him all that long night through, and He had heard her, and sent her help.

She had been frightened, and she had been made to suffer, but it was only that all might be made better for her presently. Young though she was, she could see that if she had not had this trial to go through, she would always have had the old danger, the old fear hanging over her. She would never have felt quite safe and happy.

Miss Rose had taught her about God, and His Son, the gentle, loving Christ. She had taught her to pray to Him, and to read her Bible, and to sing hymns, but only now did He become real to Huldah, her very only loving Father, and her heart swelled with love and gratitude to Him who had stood by her and taken care of her. She knew now, too, that He would take care of her all her life through.

“Oh, it’s grand!” she thought to herself, “to have a big strong Father and a Brother to watch over one!” And she felt as though no one could harm her any more.

Rob was walking in leisurely fashion up the hill now, and no sound broke the silence but the twittering of the birds in the hedge, Rob’s short, sharp steps on the hard road, and the scrunching of the gravel under the wheels, when suddenly Miss Rose’s voice sounded singing softly but sweetly,

“Lead Kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,  
Lead Thou me on;  
The night is dark, and I am far from home,  
Lead Thou me on.

Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see  
The distant scene,—one step enough for me.”

Then Martha Perry’s feeble voice joined in, and last of all Huldah’s shy, weak treble. They were all so grateful, so full of thankfulness and faith, they could not help it. And ever after, when Huldah passed along that road, the same lines sprang spontaneously to heart and lips, “One step enough for me.”

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Winter ended soon, and spring came early that year. In the cottage garden the wallflowers and daffodils had sprung up and burst into bloom before anyone had quite realised that their time had come. In the field opposite the hedges were so lined with primroses that the scent greeted you across the road.

In those warm days, when school was over, and on half-holidays, Huldah took her work across to the field, and sat in the sunshine surrounded by the gold-starred hedges, where the ferns and violets and ladies' smocks fought for room, and mingled in one sweet tangle of beauty. She was very, very happy in those days, and busy from morning till night. She had her house-work, her school-work, and also her basket-making, and she worked very hard indeed at the last, for by means of it she was able to buy many little comforts for "Aunt Martha," as she had learnt to call Mrs. Perry, and was able to clothe herself, and put something by in the bank. At least, she hoped to be able to go on doing that, if the orders came in as they had done.

"When I leave school I shall have ever so much more time, too," she thought, joyfully,—for Huldah did not love school, and longed for the time when she would be freed from it.

In the middle of the field rose a high hillock, over which the young lambs loved to run and play in the spring-time, and on the top of the hillock lay the trunk of a large tree, which had lain there ever since a storm had blown it down years ago.

Huldah, at any rate, was glad of the idleness which had never put the tree to any good use, for it formed her favourite seat now. The view from it was lovely, she could look right down over the slope of the hill to the woods and stream at the foot, and then away up over the moorland beyond, and she could see the road, too, and keep watch over the cottage, and if Aunt Martha wanted her, she had only to step to the door and wave her hand.

Sometimes during that summer she got Mrs. Perry up to the fallen tree too, and more than once they had their tea there. But Mrs. Perry was not very fond of sitting out of doors, and more often Huldah was alone, save for Dick, alone with her thoughts and hopes and dreams.

That summer was a long and hot one, with frequent heavy thunderstorms. Mrs. Perry could not endure the storms, they made her feel ill, and frightened her, until all her nerves were set quivering. Huldah herself felt no fear, but she did dread the storms for her aunt's sake, and there seemed no end to them that summer.

"I do believe there's another coming up," she sighed, as, suddenly noticing that the light was going, she lifted her eyes from her work and looked about her. "I'd better go in now, in case it does come on; but it is vexing. I did so want to finish this."

It was the last day of August, and the close of the holidays, and Huldah had made up her mind to get the last of an order finished, and ready to send away before she went back to school. She glanced down hesitatingly at her unfinished work, and then at the gathering blackness of the sky around her, a blackness which had a red-brown angry glow underneath,—a glow which left no time for hesitation.

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There was no doubt about it, she must go, and go quickly, or Aunt Martha would be worrying. She glanced across at the cottage, and there sure enough was Mrs. Perry standing waving her hand to call her in.

Huldah sprang to her feet at once. "Run on, Dick, and tell her I'm coming. Run home, that's a good dog!"

Dick started, hesitated, but at a sign from his mistress ran on again. Huldah collected her work and rolled it all up in her work-apron,—one with big pockets, which Miss Rose had made for her,—but before she was ready a sharp bark from Dick made her wheel round quickly. A strange, shabbily dressed woman was standing talking to Mrs. Perry. She had come so silently, so unexpectedly that Huldah had quite a shock, it seemed almost as though she had sprung up out of the ground.

"Only someone begging, I suppose," she said to herself, but there was a vague feeling of trouble at her heart that she could not account for. The new-comer looked harmless enough, a poor, shabbily dressed beggar-woman, thin, stooping, feeble-looking.

When Mrs. Perry raised her head and looked up over the field again, Huldah saw that her face was white and frightened, and in sudden alarm she took to her heels, and ran as fast as she could to the gate.

At the click of the latch the new-comer turned and looked across the road, and as she looked Huldah felt her head reel, and her heart almost stop beating, for the tramp was Aunt Emma! Aunt Emma, come to cross her path once more. Aunt Emma, shabbier and dirtier than ever, and with a pinched, starved look, which showed that things had not been going well with her.

When she caught sight of Huldah, her face lightened a little, and she hurried across the road to meet her.

"I've come to know if you can help me," she began, in the same old fretful, whining voice. "I know you don't want to see me again, nobody does, but I'm starving. I've been starving mostly ever since Tom was took away—"

"Took away," gasped Huldah faintly. "Where?"

"He's got three years. Didn't you know? And I'm left to keep myself, and I can't do it. I'll never live till he comes out, I know. I've sold the van and everything. I couldn't go round with it by meself, but the man that had it off me cheated me something crool. When Tom knows he'll—he'll—oh he'll be mad with me—"

"And Charlie?" asked Huldah, anxiously.



“Charlie! Oh, he’s dead. He dropped down in the road one day. ’Twas lucky I’d sold him, wasn’t it? He died only two days after.”

Tears sprang to Huldah’s eyes. “Oh, Charlie, poor dear old Charlie!” she cried, “and—and I never said good-bye to him, or anything!”

“He’s best off,” said Emma Smith, coldly. “I wouldn’t have been sorry if I’d dropped down dead, too.”

Huldah gasped.

“I can’t get anything to do. I’ve tried to sell laces and buttons, and cotton, but nobody don’t seem to want any,—leastways not of me,” and neither of her listeners wondered, when they looked at her, so dirty, so untidy, so forbidding in appearance.



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"I couldn't earn enough to get food or a bed, leave alone buy a new stock."

Huldah wondered why she had come. Was it only to beg? In another moment she knew.

"I came to see if you couldn't 'elp me a bit. You've got good friends and a comfortable home, and plenty to eat and drink. You surely wouldn't let me go starving—me that brought you up, and did everything for you."

"Everything!" Huldah's thoughts flew back over her life, from the time her mother died until she made her escape, a year ago, and wondered what was meant by "everything."

"I know as you can make a good bit by your baskets, and it don't seem fair that strangers should have it all, do it?"

"Strangers don't have it all," said Huldah, warmly. "Even my best friends don't. I have what I earn, to buy what I like with. I buy my own clothes, and I give Mrs. Perry a little for keeping me—"

"Oh! a pretty fine thing that! Why, she ought to be paying you wages for being a little galley-slave to her, and doing all her work!"

"I don't!" cried Huldah, indignantly. "I don't work nearly as hard as I did for you, when I never had a penny of my own, not even from what my baskets made."

In a moment, though, she was sorry she had lost her temper. Mrs. Perry, standing at her door watching them, looked so frightened when their words rose high, and Emma Smith herself looked so weary and miserable one could not help pitying her.

"I—I've got half-a-crown in my purse. I'll give you that," said Huldah, gently. "It's all I have now, but it will get you a bed and some food."

Mrs. Perry came towards them. "Huldah," she said, kindly, "if your— if Mrs. Smith will come in and rest, I'll make her a cup of tea. She looks fit to drop."

The poor tramp turned to her gratefully. "I feels like it too. I haven't tasted anything since yesterday," she added, feebly; and, now that the eagerness and excitement had died out of her face, she looked almost like a dying woman.

They led the way into the cottage, and gave her the most comfortable chair. She dropped into it with almost a groan of relief, and then, as though the kindness overcame her, she began to weep weakly. "I couldn't help coming to Huldah," she sobbed. "I couldn't keep away. I haven't a friend or relation in the world but her, nor nowhere to go,—but the workhouse, and I can't go there. I'd rather die under a hedge. I've always been so used to the open, and my freedom, and I couldn't bear it. But I haven't got a

penny, nor no means of getting one. Whatever I'm going to do I don't know. Tom's put away for three years, and I shan't ever live to see him come out, I know,—but nobody cares! It don't matter to nobody whether I'm alive or dead."

The storm had broken by this time, and the crashing of the thunder seemed to add horror to the hopeless misery of her sobs and complainings. Huldah could scarcely bear it.

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"Aunt Emma, don't say such things," she cried. "I care, I do really. You shan't starve,—not while I can work. I'll work harder, and help you. I'll ask Miss Rose about it."

But the half-starved, miserable woman could not check her sobs, once they had begun. The hunger and want and loneliness had worn her health and spirit until a little kindness was more than she could bear. She broke down entirely under it.

Huldah sat with a very grave face all the time they were taking their tea. Things had suddenly become so perplexing, she did not know what to do or think.

"Oh dear," she sighed, "it all seemed so lovely only an hour ago. I thought it was going to last like it for ever and ever." She was so lost in perplexity about Aunt Emma's future, that Mrs. Perry was left to entertain their guest,—to listen, at least, to the tale of her wanderings and sufferings, and the hardships she had endured all her life.

"I've never 'ad nobody to care for me, nor no kindness from anybody, so I haven't got to thank anybody for anything—that's one thing!" the poor foolish woman kept repeating, as though, instead of being ashamed of it, it was something to be proud of.

"As we sow, we reap," thought Aunt Martha; the truth of the words had come home to her many times, since she had taken in the two friendless waifs. Dick and Huldah would have loved this woman too, if she had allowed them to. She grew a little impatient of the long complainings. "We don't get love back, if we don't give any," she said at last.

"Who'd I got? Who'd want me to love them?" she demanded, peevishly.

"Why, the child, for one, and Dick, and that poor old horse, not to speak of your husband."

Emma Smith was silent. It had never before entered her head that to be loved one must love, that the way to win it is to think of others first, and self last. She ceased her complaining, as she realised for the first time that others besides herself had something to complain of. She had always been one of those who are so full of pity for themselves that they never have time to feel pity for others.

By the time the meal was finished Huldah's mind was made up. She must talk to Miss Rose about things. The matter seemed so puzzling, so complicated, she could not sort out the right and the wrong of it at all. It was all beyond her. Aunt Martha fell in with the plan at once.

"Mrs. Smith can stay here with me till you come back," she said, hospitably; and the visitor agreed eagerly.



The storm was over by that time, but the air was oppressive, and the heat great. Huldah walked along very soberly, for there was a sense of depression weighing on her, a foreboding that an end was coming to her happy, peaceful life. There was always trouble when any part of her old life cropped up again.

She was ashamed, too, to be troubling Miss Rose again about her affairs; she felt she had done little but bring trouble to them all ever since she had walked into their lives that summer's night a year ago. She who longed to bring them nothing but pleasure!

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Just then she came to the top of the little hill up which Rob had crawled that winter morning, and once again the words Miss Rose had sung came back to her, as though they still lingered on the air there,

“Keep Thou my feet; I do not ask to see  
The distant scene,—one step enough for me.”

Huldah sang them aloud as she descended the slope, and the load of care slipped off her heart, leaving her with a brave determination to face courageously whatever might have to be faced.

## CHAPTER XI.

### HULDAH’S NEW HOME.

And there was very much to be faced, she found as the days came and went, for within a week of that afternoon when Emma Smith crossed her path again, much had been discussed and arranged, and another change was to come into Huldah’s life.

The doctor, the vicar’s own doctor, had seen and examined Emma Smith, and had given her but another year to live. He had not told her that, but he had warned her very gravely that she was in a very bad state of health, and that he would not answer for the consequences, if she did not obey him; and something in his voice or manner had stopped her peevish complainings, and set her thinking seriously.

The doctor strongly urged that she should go to the workhouse infirmary. “She will be well nursed and looked after there,” he said, “and she will be provided with all she requires,” but she herself showed such violent opposition that at last, in fear for her health, they ceased to press it. Had they done so, she would surely have run away. At the same time she had no other home, no means, and what powers she had had of earning any were fast failing her.

“I thought you’d be able to help me, now you’re getting on so well,” she said to Huldah. “We fed and clothed and did everything for you, and now’s your chance of returning some of it.” Then her mood changed, and she wept and moaned, and clung to the girl passionately. “Don’t you leave me!” she pleaded, hysterically; “don’t you go and turn your back on me, too. You was mine before you was hers,” nodding her head towards Mrs. Perry.

Her clinging to Huldah was more than a passing fancy, as they found, when they tried to get her to go into a home where she could have had rest and change and food and nursing. She sobbed and pleaded, then flatly refused to go, unless Huldah went too.

“She’s the only one in the world I know,” she cried. “Don’t send me away with strangers, they’ll all look down on me, and—and I—no, I couldn’t bear it. I won’t go, I won’t, I won’t! I’ll go off on the tramp again, where none of you will ever find me, and I won’t ever bother any of you any more.”

At last Huldah went with tears in her eyes to Miss Carew. “I’ll have to go with her, miss,” she said, piteously. “She can’t go away on the tramp all by herself. I can keep us both pretty well. I must go with her, Miss Rose, wherever she goes; she hasn’t got anybody else.”

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This of course they could not allow. They could never send such a child as Huldah out into the world, with only a dying woman as companion and protector, to live where and how she could, in nobody knew what dreadful haunts. So it was decided between them that Emma Smith was to settle down amongst them, and Huldah must leave Mrs. Perry and go to live with her. No lodgings could be found for her, for in that village the houses were not big enough to hold in comfort even the families that lived in them, and there was certainly no room for a lodger. And houses were as scarce as lodgings.

At last a brilliant idea came to Miss Carew, and with her father's permission she hurried off with the good news.

"You shall have the two rooms over our coach-house," she cried, delightedly, for it was a real relief to her to feel that Huldah would be so near her, and under her own eye. "They are a good size, and dry and airy; and we must all pull together to get what furniture we can."

Huldah's face grew brighter and brighter with every word Miss Rose uttered, for she had begun to fear that they would have to go elsewhere.

To be near Miss Rose, too, would help to make up for the pain of leaving Aunt Martha and Dick and the cottage, a parting which had been weighing on her more heavily than she would have liked anyone to know. Dick, it was decided, was to remain with Mrs. Perry, for without him she declared she could not live on in the cottage when Huldah was gone.

As soon as the rooms had been cleaned and papered, the furnishing began, and that was really rather fun. No one was rich, and no one could give much, but what they gave they gave with a will. Miss Rose turned out some sheets and pillow-cases, a table and a chair, the vicar ordered in half a ton of coal, the doctor's wife gave them a bed, some pieces of carpet, curtains, a kettle and an old basket chair. Mrs. Perry gave a teapot, cups and saucers, and a rag-rug of her own making. The doctor sent in some pots and pans, and meat and other food to put in them, and the folks in the village, who had come to know Huldah's story, turned out something, and sent, a jug, a brush, a sack of firewood, a bar of soap, and all manner of odds and ends, every one of which came in usefully. Huldah's own little bed and looking-glass and odds and ends came from her bedroom in the cottage, and all together helped to make the two bare rooms look home-like and comfortable.

The furniture was scanty and shabby, but to anyone accustomed to rough it as Emma Smith had done, the place was beautiful, and full of comfort and rest.

When it was ready, and she was first taken into it, she dropped into the basket chair by the fire, and burst into grateful tears. It was the first time she had shown any gratitude or pleasure in what was being done for her.



“It’s like ’ome,” she sobbed, weakly, “and I’ve never had one since I got married, till now, —and now—how I’m ever going to thank everybody, I don’t know. I never seem able to do any good to anybody, I don’t. ’Tis all take, with me, and no give, and I’m ashamed of it.”



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Huldah felt some of the load slip off her spirits as she looked about her. Here really was a home for Aunt Emma,—and now it rested with herself to make it as neat and comfortable and happy as a home could be. She would keep it as clean as a new pin, and as pretty as lay in her power. She tried to conquer her sadness by hard work, to put away her sorrow at leaving Aunt Martha and Dick and their happy life together.

“Brownies always go where there’s most to be done, Miss Rose says, not where they’ll be most comfortable,” she said to herself, bravely, but her poor little face was very wistful. A few days later, though, when, after a long day’s work, she sat down and looked about her, she remarked cheerfully, “I don’t think anybody can go on feeling very miserable when they’ve lots to do and somebody to take care of.” A glow of pride warmed her heart, as she sat there drying her water-soaked hands, and glanced from the gleaming stove and fire-irons to the speckless window, and well-scrubbed table.

On the table stood a jar full of autumn flowers, and on the window-sill a box full of brown earth and little roots, double daisies, primulas, wallflowers. This last was Huldah’s special joy and pride.

“We’ll have a proper little garden there, when the spring comes,” she remarked proudly to Aunt Emma.

Aunt Emma shook her head in melancholy fashion. “I shan’t be here to see it.”

“Oh yes you will. You’ll be helping me with the spring cleaning,” said Huldah, trying to keep cheerful,—one of the hardest of her daily tasks, for Aunt Emma’s melancholy seldom left her. She never saw the bright side of anything, poor soul, nor the best, nor did she try to; and the depressingness of it told on the child’s spirits more than anyone knew.

She worked very hard indeed at this time. The vicar had given them the rooms rent-free; but Huldah’s basket-making had to supply almost everything else—food, clothing, lights, and many an extra—needed for Aunt Emma. Their rooms were few, and there was not much in them, but all that had to be done fell to Huldah to do. Emma Smith never put her hand to anything, not even to wash a dish, cook a meal, or make her own bed. She needed a great deal of waiting on, too, and was very fretful. She did not like to be left alone, even while Huldah went out to do the errands; and on the days when the poor child had to go to Belmouth to deliver her work, or get more raffia, Aunt Emma had always a very bad turn, and an attack of melancholy.

It was quite pathetic to see the way she clung to the little waif she had treated so cruelly when she had her in her power. She wanted no one but Huldah now, and she wanted her always. She loved her brightness and cheerfulness. When Huldah laughed and sang she was quite content, but the moment she was sad or quiet, Aunt Emma would grow peevish and uneasy.

“You’m fretting because you’ve got to stay here with me, I know. You’m longing to be back with that Mrs. Perry. I know it’s ‘ard to ‘ave to live with a poor miserable creature like me, and I wonder you can bear it as well as you do.”

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Then she would burst into tears. It never occurred to her that she might try to make it less miserable for Huldah, by trying to be cheerful herself sometimes.

"I'm not fretting. I love taking care of you," pleaded poor Huldah. "I was only trying to think how to make a new-shaped basket that people might take a fancy to. Shall I read to you, Aunt Emma?"

Emma Smith loved being read to, and hour after hour Huldah spent over a book when she knew she ought to be at her basket-making. To try to make up the time, she got up at four or five in the morning, but in the winter that meant burning oil, and they could not afford that. Then one day it occurred to her to sing instead of reading, and after that she found things easier, for she could sing while she worked.

It was a strange medley of songs that echoed through the rooms in the thin child-like voice. "Home, sweet Home," "Father, dear Father, come Home," "God save the King," "The Old Folks at Home," were some of their favourites, and if the words and air were not always correct, they never failed to bring pleasure to both performer and audience.

Of hymns Huldah had a greater store in her brain, and by degrees these ousted the songs as favourites.

"Sing that one about the green hill without any wall round it," Aunt Emma said one day. "It does mind me so of 'ome when we were children. Our cottage was just at the foot of a hill like that, and mother used to turn us out there to play together by the hour. It was what they call a mountain. We used to dare each other to go to the top."

"Did you ever do it?" asked Huldah, plaiting away industriously.

"Never; we was so afraid. It was so high up, and the top looked so far away, and—oh, it used to frighten me! I'd dream at night that I was lost up there, and I'd call and call, and nobody ever heard me or came to save me."

"He'd have saved, if you'd asked Him," said Huldah, gravely.

"I wonder why He didn't save Himself," said Aunt Emma. "I spose He could have, couldn't He?"

"Oh yes, He could, and He could have struck all His enemies down dead if He'd liked, only He was always one for thinking about others, never about Himself."

"And that's the sort that always gets put upon," said Aunt Emma, quickly.

"He died that we might go to Heaven,  
He died to make us good,  
He died that we might be forgiven—"

Aunt Emma's voice failed, and she suddenly burst into tears. "I couldn't never be good enough," she sobbed, piteously. "I haven't been good since I was a child, and now I'm going to die—I know it, I feel it, I see it in the doctor's face, and—and everybody's. I've got to die, and just when I'm happy for the first time. He says He loves everybody, but nobody ever loved me, I never gave 'em reason to, and—and I'm afraid to die, Huldah! I've been so bad, and it'll be so lonely! I wouldn't mind so much if there was somebody over—over the other side that loved me."

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There had been a footstep on the stair, but neither of them had heard it, and when Miss Rose entered the room neither of them saw her, for their eyes were blinded with tears.

“Oh, Aunt Emma!” cried Huldah, springing to her bedside, “I love you! I do, I do, and—and oh, I wish someone would tell you all about it, so that you’d understand, and feel happy!”

A soft, light step crossed the room, and a gentle hand was laid on Huldah’s bowed head. “Dear, shall I try? Shall we try together?”

Huldah sprang to her feet with a glad cry. “Oh, Miss Rose, I was longing for you to come. You can tell Aunt Emma.”

Miss Rose sat down beside the bed, and laid her hand gently on Emma’s hand. “I wish I was more clever,” she said, wistfully. “I wish I could make you feel how dearly Jesus has always loved you, how He has wept for you and longed for you, how He has forgiven you all the neglect and insults you have heaped on Him, and has held out His arms, beseeching you to come to Him! At this very moment He is standing at the door, patiently waiting for you to let Him in. Will you keep Him outside, dear Emma?”

Miss Rose’s voice died away, and silence reigned in the darkening room; the fire fell together and sent up a cheerful flame, Emma Smith lay thinking,—“Was it really true that He wanted her?” That she had turned her back on Him, and mocked and insulted Him, she knew, knew better than anyone else could,—and could He really love her in spite of all?

Miss Rose’s voice broke the silence, singing softly,

“Knocking, knocking, who is there?  
Waiting, waiting, oh, how fair!  
’Tis a Pilgrim, strange and kingly,  
Never such was seen before;  
Ah, my soul, for such a wonder  
Wilt thou not undo the door?  
Knocking, knocking—what, still there?  
Waiting, waiting, grand and fair,  
Yes, the pierced hand still knocketh,  
And beneath the crowned hair  
Beam the patient eyes, so tender,  
Of the Saviour, waiting there.”

Low sobs broke from the poor soul on the bed, sobs of grief and joy and repentance. “If He really cares—if He is really like that!” she sobbed. “Oh, I want Him! I do want Him to love and take care of me, too!”

Miss Rose's arms were round her, her lips were on her brow. "My dear, He is all that, and more. He will take care of you always, in this world and the next. He will love you so that you cannot feel lonely any more. Put your hand in His, put all your troubles off on His shoulders, trust Him, and follow where He leads you, and nothing can harm you. Don't be afraid. He will lead you to a home, and love and happiness such as no one could know in this world, where we are all so weak and full of faults."

"Home! Will it seem like home?" she asked, timidly.

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"I'll soon be at home, over there,  
For the end of my journey I see,  
Many dear to my heart over there  
Are watching and waiting for me,  
Over there, over there,  
I'll soon be at home over there."

sang Huldah, softly. The flame died down, and left the room very dim, but still the three sat on, silent, thoughtful. Miss Rose sat between them, holding a hand of each.

"I expect 'twas Him as led me back to Huldah," said the weak voice, presently.

"Yes, dear. He was bringing you together, that all might be made happy between you."

"I am very glad He did. 'Twas more'n I deserved—after the way I'd treated one of His."

Huldah threw herself across the bed, her arms thrown round the dying woman. "Aunt Emma—Aunt Emma, don't! That's all forgotten. I deserved what I got. It's all over now; don't let's remember it any more!"

"Will you tell—Him you've forgiven me?"

"Yes, oh yes; but He knows, there's no need to tell Him. He knows we love each other now,—oh, Aunt Emma, if you can only get well, how happy we shall be!"

Miss Rose got up and stirred the fire to a blaze again. Her heart was glad, yet sad. Glad that this poor soul was coming to her Father, but at the same time sad, for she knew how little hope there was of Huldah's wish coming to pass. It was sweet, though, to the dying woman to hear the wish from the child she had ill-treated and neglected so long, and she clasped her to her in a paroxysm of love.

For a moment they lay thus, then Miss Rose put a handful of wood on the fire, and made the blaze grow bright and brisk.

"I am not going to talk any more now," she said, cheerily, "or let you talk, Emma, or I shall have a scolding from the doctor, but I am going to ask you and Huldah to give me a cup of tea, here in the firelight. Then, after that, I am going to tell you a little piece of news."

## CHAPTER XII.

### HAPPY HOURS.

The bed was wheeled up to the fireplace, the tea table and two chairs were grouped about the hearth, and there they had their last meal together in happy peacefulness.

A sense of quiet rested on them all, a shade of awe, of feelings so deep that ordinary chatter would have seemed out of place. Emma Smith's thoughts were still lingering about that figure standing outside the door, "Knocking, knocking." She must have seen a picture once of that figure with the patient, tender eyes, knocking at a fast-closed door, but she had never troubled to ask who it was. Now it all seemed close, He was so real. It was ordinary, everyday life that seemed unreal now, that began to seem to her so far away.

Huldah was drawing bright pictures in her mind of days when the spring would come, and Aunt Emma would be stronger and able to walk about; they would be able to go and see Aunt Martha sometimes. Her thoughts dwelt lovingly on Aunt Martha and Dick. She saw them seldom now, the storms and the rough roads kept Aunt Martha at home, and Huldah could not leave her Aunt Emma.



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So busy was she with her thoughts that she forgot all about Miss Rose's promised piece of news, until, when the tea was over, Miss Rose spoke of it again.

"You must light the lamp now, brownie. I want to talk to your aunt. There is someone wanting to see her,—someone that she wants to see, I think."

Emma Smith turned quickly, an eager light flashing over her face. "Is it—Tom?" she asked, excitedly.

"Yes—your husband. He has behaved so well he got his discharge as soon as it was possible, and he has come in search of you."

Suddenly the light and eagerness died out of her face. "Charlie—and the van!" she cried, growing white to the lips. "I've got to tell him,—he'll never forgive me." Her lips quivered piteously.

"He knows," said Miss Rose, soothingly. "I told him. I thought it better to explain quickly what had happened, and not let him be expecting to find them too."

She did not tell of the scene there had been when first he had heard of the loss, nor the difficulty they had had in persuading him to see his wife, and be kind to her. "I don't want her; 'twas the horse and van I wanted," he said, cruelly.

He was not really as cruel, though, as he appeared. He seemed quite touched when he heard of his wife's starving state when she came in search of Huldah, and of her condition now, and expressed a desire to see her. "I won't say nothing to upset her," he promised, when they seemed to hesitate.

Huldah's face had turned even whiter than Emma's, when she heard who was near, and what he wanted, her fear of him had been so increased since he carried her away by force that night. But when she saw how eager her aunt was to see him, she did try to overcome her fears.

Within a few moments of Miss Rose's telling of her "news," he was there, in their midst. To pale, trembling Huldah, whose every nerve had been set quivering by the mere sound of his step on the stair, he threw only a cool nod, as, awkwardly enough, he made his way to his wife's bedside, and sat down beside her.

"I hear you'm bad," he said, coolly, but it was plain that her altered appearance shocked him. Every now and again, when she was not looking, he gave long wondering glances at her, and his eyes were almost troubled. "So I hear you and the kid have been living together again."

"Huldah? Oh, Tom, she's been such a comfort to me—"

“That’s all right. I s’pose she isn’t such a bad kid, on the whole.”

“She’s more’n good to me.” Then quickly, feverishly she began to pour out the story of her life since he “was took away.” She told him of Charlie and the van, and how she was tricked. Of her coming to Huldah, and their home together, and her own illness, until gradually her voice grew weary and fainter and fainter. The flush died out of her cheeks, the light out of her eyes. She was exhausted, but after she could not even whisper, a smile still hovered about her lips, and her hand held that of her husband. He sat on, apparently content to do so. When her voice ceased, he did not seem to notice. He appeared to be lost in thought to which no one had the clue.

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Huldah sat as still as a mouse, never speaking, and hoping to escape being spoken to. Occasionally she placed a piece of coal or wood on the fire, but that was all. She could not see her aunt's face, but she thought at last she must be asleep, she was so still and quiet.

The silence, broken as it was only by the crackle of the fire, had begun to grow oppressive, when suddenly it was broken by a sound of singing, low, quivering, almost indistinct:—

“For the end—of my—journey—I see—  
Many dear to my heart—over there  
Are watching—and waiting for me.  
Over—there, over—there—  
I'll soon be—at—home—”

Tom Smith tried to draw away his hand, but his wife's hand clung to it, her voice died away. “Kiss me—Tom, won't you?” she gasped.

He stooped and kissed her. She lifted her hand to touch his cheek, but it fell back helpless. “Hark,” she gasped—“the knocking! I—am coming—” then with one long deep sigh, her voice was still for ever.

A few moments later, Tom Smith stumbled down the stairs, and out into the darkness and away, never to be seen by Huldah again. She knew and realised nothing then, but that her Aunt Emma was dead, that all her dreams had ended, all her plans for the future were fruitless, that their living together was ended, her home broken up once more.

“She's had such a hard life!” she sobbed. “And I thought I was going to make her so happy when she got about a bit again.”

“But she never would have got about again, dear. She could never have got beyond these rooms, and I feel sure she would always have worried about her husband. She could never have gone about with him again, and she would have fretted at being left behind. She is happy now, brownie, and out of pain. No one who really loved her could wish her back again. Don't grieve so, Huldah dear. You made the last months of her life happier than any she had known.”

“But I ran away and left her, and he beat her and Charlie for it, and—and—”

“Brownie, dear, if you want to do what would have pleased your aunt, you will forget all that. She loved him and forgave him everything, and she longed for others too to forget that he was ever anything but a kind husband.”



Huldah was silent. She understood the feeling. It was what she wanted everyone to feel with regard to Aunt Emma,—to remember only what was good of her.

And she had her wish. The little group gathered in the churchyard a few days later remembered only her suffering and her sorrows, and the love which had lived through all, and many a pretty bunch of winter flowers and leaves and berries were laid on her grave by kindly, pitying hands. In the furthest corner of the little churchyard they laid her, in a corner where the sun rested, and where a hawthorn grew, in which a robin sang hopefully while they laid her to rest.

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Huldah, standing by the grave-side while the beautiful words of the Burial Service were being read, thought of those other partings, so sad, so cruel,—oh, this was better than those, and not so complete. She could still feel that Aunt Emma was near her, and safe, and in the best of all keeping, at peace for ever and ever.

They thought it best that Huldah should not go back to the empty rooms again, and she was glad; so after the service was over she walked back to her old home once again, as though she had never left it, and the last few months had been but a dream. And it was all so like a dream that at the top of the lane she paused and looked about her, half bewildered. Could she be, she asked herself, the same Huldah who not so many months before had stood there a cowed, frightened, hunted thing, starving, exhausted, but minding nothing as long as—as what?

As long as she escaped from the two she had so lately parted with, with such an aching heart. She looked down over her black frock. She felt the sadness in her heart, the sense of loss. Could such changes really have come about, that now she was full of grief that she could never again see or hear the aunt she had so feared?

“Come home, dear; come home. I want you too, oh so badly!”

Aunt Martha's voice broke in on her thoughts, and brought her quickly back to the present. Aunt Martha's face was white and tired with cold and weariness. Huldah was filled with repentance.

“Oh, you're tired,” she cried, remorsefully, “and chilled, and I'm keeping you standing here. Oh, Aunt Martha, I hope you haven't taken cold. We'll hurry now, and I'll make you a good fire, and some tea, and—and I am going to take care of you now, auntie, all the rest of my days, till I'm an old, old woman, and I'll never go and leave you any more, for it's plain to see, looking up at her half mischievously, you can't take care of yourself without me.”

So, for the third time Huldah came back to Woodend Lane, and to Dick, who went nearly crazy with joy, and to the chickens, and garden and her basket-making; and this time she stayed, if not till she was an old woman, at any rate until someone big and strong and very fond of her, came and built a new cottage, to join Mrs. Perry's old one, and a new fowl's house on to the old one which Dick had guarded so well, that he earned for his little mistress and himself a home and friends for ever. And even then one could scarcely call it “leaving,” for presently the wall which divided them was knocked down, and the two cottages were made one.

Huldah's basket-making business increased and increased, until at last she had to teach another little girl, that she might come and help her, and then another and another; and perhaps the proudest moment of her life was when she was able to buy

the cottage she loved so much, and present it to her dearly-loved 'Aunt Martha' as a Christmas gift.

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By that time Huldah, the little waif, who had earned for herself the name of “the Brownie,” had made for herself so many friends, that when her wedding took place, so many wished to attend it, they had to borrow the field opposite for the wedding-feast. And where she had once sat and worked and dreamed of the future, there she sat now flushed, smiling and happy, cutting the wedding cake which old Dinah, with great pride, had made in the vicarage kitchen.

There she sat, with Dick close beside her, his old heart somewhat sad with fear of another parting, Aunt Martha opposite, divided between smiles and tears, and beside her her husband, who was not going to divide them, but bind them more securely together; and last, but not least, on Huldah’s other hand sat Miss Rose,—no longer “Miss,” but always “Miss Rose” to everyone in Woodend,—who, if Huldah had been the “brownie,” had proved herself the fairy godmother, the best of guides and friends to those two who had strayed into her life that hot summer’s morning years ago—those two poor loving, hungry, friendless waifs,—Dick and the Brownie.

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