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The Golden House, by Mrs. Woods Baker

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[Frontispiece: Nono and the princess]

[Illustration: Vignette]

THE GOLDEN HOUSE

BY MRS. WOODS BAKER

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THE GOLDEN HOUSE.

CHAPTER I.**BLACK EYES AND BLUE.**

A dreary little group was trudging along a Swedish highroad one bright October morning. It was a union between north and south, and like many other unions, not altogether founded on love. The bear, the prominent member of the party, was a Swede, and a Swede in a very bad humour. The iron ring in his torn nose, and the stout stick in the hand of one of his Italian masters, showed very plainly that he needed stern discipline. Now he dragged at the strong rope attached to the iron ring, and held back, moving his clumsy legs as if his machinery were out of order, or at least as if goodwill were lacking to give it a fair start.

The broad hats of the two men were gloomily slouched over their eyes; for they were thoroughly chilled, having passed the night in the open air for want of shelter. The woman, brown, thin, and bare-headed, coughed, and pressed her hand to her breast, where a stiff bundle was hidden under her shawl.

They rounded a little turn in the road, hitherto shut in by high spruces, and came suddenly in sight of a cottage of yellow pine, that glowed cheerfully against its dark background of evergreens.

"We stop at the golden house," said the older of the men, the bearer of the organ, and evidently the leader as well as the musician of the party.

The younger Italian laughed a scornful laugh as he said in his own language, "Only poor people live there."

"We stop at the golden house!" commanded his companion, adding, "It brings good luck to play for the poor."

The cottage had its gable end to the road, while its broadside was turned towards the southern sunshine, the well-kept vegetable-garden and the pretty flower-beds in front of the windows.

The gate was open, and the Italians came in stealthily--an art they had learned to perfection. One little turn of the hand-organ and the bear rose to his hind legs. The open door of the cottage was suddenly filled. Round-faced, rosy, fair-haired, and eager were they all--father and mother and six boys. They had evidently been disturbed at a meal, for in their hands they held great pieces of hard brown bread, in various stages of consumption.

Eyes and mouths opened wide as the performance went on, and Bruin had every reason to be satisfied with his share of the praise bestowed on the entertainment, as well as on his personal appearance. He was a young bear, and his brown coat looked as soft as plush, and it was no wonder that two-year-old Sven whispered to his mother, "Me want to kiss the pretty bear!"

Sven judged Bruin by his clothing, not by his wicked little eyes or his ugly mouth, which was by no means kissable.

The performance over, bread and milk were liberally passed round to the strangers, the bear having more than his fair portion.

"Come in and sit a bit," said the tidy mother to the dark young woman.

The answer was a pointing to the ear and a shaking of the head, which said plainly, "I don't understand Swedish."

The kindly beckoning that followed could not be mistaken, and the Italian woman went into the cottage, glad to sit down in the one room of which the interior consisted. One room it was, but large, and airy too; for it not

only stretched from outer wall to outer wall, but from the floor to the high slanting roof. The rafters that crossed it here and there were hung with homely stores--bags of beans and pease, and slender poles strung with flat cakes of hard bread, far out of the reach of the children.

The Italian opened her shawl and took out a little brown baby, wrapped up as stiff as a stick. It was evidently hungry enough, and not at all satisfied when it was again tucked away under the shawl.

Half by single words and half by signs the two mothers managed to talk together. Swedish Karin soon knew that Francesca was ill, and was going home to Italy as soon as her husband had money enough to pay their passage. There was a wild look in the dark woman's eyes and a fierceness in her gestures that made Karin almost afraid of her. When the stranger had put into her pocket a bottle of milk that had been given her, and a big cake of bread, she got up suddenly to go.

It was evident there was to be another performance--a kind of expression of thanks for the hospitality received. The bear stood up and shook paws with the men, we may say; for the brown hands of the Italians had a strange kind of an animal look about them. The clumsy creature walked hither and thither, and then towered proudly behind his two masters, looking down on their heads as if it gave him satisfaction to prove that he was their superior in size at least.

Francesca now took out her baby, and began to toss it high in the air, catching it as it fell, and dancing meanwhile as if in delight.

Perhaps the bear took offence that the attention of all beholders was turned from himself. He made one stride towards the descending baby, and opened and shut his great mouth with a wicked snap close to the child.

The Italian mother laughed a loud, wild laugh, and turned her back to the bear, who put his two strong paws on her shoulder. A heavy blow from the stout stick of the younger Italian brought him down on all fours in a state of discontented submission.

Karin had swept her children inside the wide door of the cottage, and then Francesca was hurried in too with her baby.

The leader of the party pointed after her, and then to his own head, moving his thin hands first rapidly backwards and forwards, and afterwards round and round, so describing the confusion in the poor woman's brain as well as if he had said, "She is as crazy as a loon."

Karin's eyes grew large with horror. She drew her husband round the corner of the house and said, "Jan, I can't see that crazy woman go off with the baby. Let me keep it!"

"We have mouths enough to feed already," said the husband, and the sturdy giant looked down, not unkindly, into the appealing eyes. His face softened as he saw the little black bow at her throat, her only week-day sign of mourning for her own little baby, so lately laid in the grave.

"He will cost us almost nothing for a long time," she said, "and he can wear my little Gustaf's clothes. Perhaps God has let our little boy up in heaven send this baby to me to take his place."

"You are a good woman, Karin, and you ought to have your way," said the husband; and she knew she had his consent.

Francesca looked back with approval on the cheerful room as she came out, then stooped to pick a bit of mignonnette that grew by the steps.

Karin stretched out her hands, took the little brown baby in her arms, pointed to the black bow at her throat, and quickly made a sign of laying a baby low in a grave. Then she pressed the little stranger close, close to her heart, and moved as if she would go into the cottage with him.

A light gleamed in Francesca's eyes, and a tear actually glittered on her husband's black eyelashes.

"I keep the child," said Karin distinctly, turning to the man.

He bowed his head solemnly, and said, "I leave him." Then he pointed suddenly up to the sky, stretching his arm to its full length; then he thrust out both hands freely towards her again and again, as if throwing gifts in lavish profusion.

[Illustration: "He thrust out both hands, as if throwing gifts in lavish profusion."]

Karin understood his "God will reward you abundantly" as well as if it had been spoken in words. She kissed the little brown baby in reply, and the father knew that crazy Francesca's child had found a mother's love.

The men bowed and waved their hands, and the bear followed them lumberingly out through the gate. Francesca lingered a moment, then caught up a stick from within the enclosure, where Jan had been lately chopping. She wrapped it hastily in her shawl, and went off with a long, wild laugh.

The Swedes watched the party make their way along the road, until they came to a turn that was to hide them from sight. There the Italians swung their broad hats, and Francesca threw the stick high in the air and caught it in her hands, as a parting token.

Karin pressed the little stranger to her mother's heart, and thanked God that he was left to her care.

So the little Italian came to the golden house--the black eyes among the blue.

CHAPTER II.

KARIN'S FLOCK.

There was a family group in the big room at the golden house. The mother sat in the centre, with the brown baby on her knee. The heads of the six fair-haired children were bent down over the new treasure like a cluster of rough-hewn angels in the Bethlehem scene, as carved out by some reverent artist of old. With a puzzled, half-pleased glance the stalwart father looked down upon them all, like a benignant giant.

"Is he really our own little baby now?" said one of the children.

"What shall we call him?" asked another.

"We'll name him, of course, after the bear," said the oldest boy, who liked to take the lead in the family. "I heard the man call him Pionono, and he said the bear knew his name."

"We won't call him after that horrid bear!" exclaimed Karin.

"Uncle Björn is as nice as anybody, and his name is just 'bear,'" urged one of the boys.

"Don't contrary your mother," said Jan decidedly. "Pionono is too long a name. We'll call him Nono, and that's a nice name, to my thinking."

"A nice, pretty little name," said the mother, "and I like it."

And so the matter was settled. The little brown baby was to be called after a pope and bear, in Protestant Sweden. Nono (the ninth) suited him better than any one around him suspected. The tiny Italian was really the ninth baby that had come to the golden house. Karin had now six children. She had laid her firstborn in the grave long ago, and lately her little Gustaf had been placed beside him in the churchyard.

Classification simplified matters in Karin's family, as elsewhere. The children were divided by common consent into three pairs, known as the boys, the twins, and the little boys. For each division the laws and privileges were fixed and unalterable. "The boys," Erik and Oke, were the oldest pair. Erik was at present a smaller edition of his father, with a fair promise of a full development in the same direction. Now, at twelve years of age, he was almost as tall as his mother, and could have mastered her at any time in a fair fight. Oke, a year younger, was pale, and slight, and stooping, with a thin, straight nose, quite out of keeping with the large, strongly-marked features of the rest of the children. As for "the twins," it was difficult to think of them as two boys. They were so much alike that their mother could hardly tell them apart. Indeed, she had a vague idea that she might have changed them without knowing it many times since they were baptized. How could she be sure that the one she called Adam was not Enos, and Enos the true Adam? Of two things she was certain--that she loved them both as well as a mother ever loved a pair of twins, and that they were worthy of anybody's unlimited affection. She was proud of them, too. Were they not known the country round as Jan Persson's splendid twins, and the fattest boys in the parish? As for "the little boys," they were much like the Irishman's "little pig who jumped about so among the others he never could count him." "The little boys" were always to be found in unexpected and exceptionable places, to the great risk of life and limb, and the great astonishment of the beholders. To try to ride on a strange bull-dog or kiss a bear was quite a natural exploit for them, for they feared neither man nor beast.

As for Karin, she was not a worrying woman, and took the care of her many children cheerily. She could but do her best, and leave the rest to God and the holy angels. Those precious protectors had lately seemed very near to her, since baby Gustaf had gone to live among them. That all would go right with Nono she did not doubt. When she laid him down for the night, she clasped his tiny brown hands, and prayed not only for him,

but for his poor mother, wherever she might be, and left her to the care of the merciful Friend who could give to wild lunatics full soundness of mind.

CHAPTER III.

ANEHOLM CHURCH.

Sunday had come. Along the public road, where the Italians and the bear had lately passed, rolled a heavy family carriage, drawn by two spirited horses. The gray-haired coachman had them well in hand, and by no means needed the advice or the assistance of the fat little boy perched at his side, though both were freely proffered. The child was dressed in deep mourning, but his clothes alone gave any sign of sorrow. His face gleamed with delight as he was borne along between green fields, or played bo-peep with the distant cottages, through a solemn line of spruces or a glad cluster of young birches.

On the comfortable back seat of the carriage was an elderly gentleman, tall, thin, and stooped, with eyes that saw nothing of earth or sky, as his thoughts were in the far past, or in the clouds of the sorrowful present. By his side, close pressed to him, with her small black-gloved hand laid on his knee, sat a little nine-year-old girl, her sad-coloured suit in strange contrast with the flood of golden hair that streamed from under her hat, and fell in shining waves down to her slight waist. The fair young face was very serious, and the mild blue eyes were full of loving light, as she now and then peeped cautiously at her father. He did not notice the child, and she made no effort to attract his attention.

"Papa! papa! what's that? what's that?" suddenly cried out the little boy. "What's that that's so like the gingerbread baby Marie made me yesterday? Just such a skirt, and little short arms!"

The father's attention was caught, and he turned his eyes in the direction pointed out by the child's eager finger.

The sweet sound of a bell came from the strange brown wooden structure, an old-time belfry, set not on a roof or a tower, but down on the ground. Slanting out wide at the bottom, to have a firm footing, it did look like a rag-dolly standing on her skirts, or a gingerbread baby, as the young stranger had said.

A stranger truly in the land of his fathers was fat little Frans. Alma, his sister, had often reproached him with the facts that he had never seen his own country and could hardly speak his own language. Born in Italy, he had now come to Sweden for the first time, with the funeral train which bore the lifeless image of his mother to a resting-place in her much-loved northern home.

"Is that the church, papa?" Alma ventured to ask, seeing her father partially roused from his reverie.

The barn-like building was without any attempt at adornment. There was no tower. The black roof rose high, very high and steep from the thick, low white walls, that were pierced by a line of small rounded windows.

"That is Aneholm Church," the father said, half reprovingly. "There your maternal ancestors are buried, and there their escutcheons stand till this day. I need not tell you who is now laid in that churchyard."

He turned his face from the loving eyes of the child, and she was silent.

A few more free movements of the swift horses, and the carriage stopped before a white-arched gateway. A wall of high old lindens shut in the churchyard from the world without, if world the green pastures, quiet groves, and low cottages could be called. It was but a small enclosure, and thick set with old monuments and humbler memorials, open books of iron on slender supports, their inscriptions dimmed by the rust of time, small stones set up by loving peasant hands, and one fresh grave covered with evergreen branches. Alma understood that on that grave she must place the wreath of white flowers that had lain in her lap, and there her father would lay the one beautiful fair lily he held in his hand.

This tribute of love was paid in mournful silence, and then the father and the children passed into the simple old sanctuary.

The church was even more peculiar within than without. It was white everywhere--walls, ceiling, and the plain massive pillars of strong masonry on which rested the low round arches. It looked more like a crypt under some great building than if it were itself the temple. The small windows, crossed by iron gratings, added to the prison-like effect of the whole. It was but a prison for the air of the latest summer days, shut in there to greet the worshippers, instead of the chill that might have been expected.

Warm was the atmosphere, and warm the colouring of the heraldic devices telling in armorial language what noble families had there treasured their dead. The altar, without chancel-rail, stood on a crimson-covered platform. On each side of it, at a respectful distance, were two stately monuments, on which two marble heroes were resting, one in full armour, and the other in elaborate court-dress. Alma could see that there were many names on the largest of these monuments, and her eyes filled with tears as she saw her mother's dear name, freshly cut below the list of her honoured ancestors.

The father did not look at the monument, or round the church at all. With eyes cast down, he entered a long wide pew, with a heraldic device on the light arch above the door. Prudently first placing little Frans at the end of the bare bench, he took his place, with Alma on the other side of him.

The church was almost empty. A few old bald-headed peasants were scattered here and there, and on the organ-loft stairs clattered the thick shoes of the school children, who were to assist in the singing.

The father bowed his head too long for the opening prayer. Alma understood that he had forgotten himself in his own sad thoughts. Her little slender hand sought his, that hung at his side, and her fragile figure crowded protectively towards him.

Meanwhile Frans had produced two bonbons, wrapped in mourning-paper, and with hour-glasses and skeletons gloomily pictured upon them. He was engaged in counting the ribs of the skeletons, to make sure that the number was the same on both, when Alma caught sight of him. The gentle, loving look in her face changed suddenly to one of sour reproof. She motioned disapprovingly to Frans, and vainly tried to get at him behind the rigid figure of her father. Before her very eyes, and in smiling defiance, the boy opened the black paper and devoured the sweets within, with evident relish, bodily and spiritual.

At this moment there was a stir in the vestibule and in the sacristy adjoining, and then a murmur of low, hushed voices, and for a moment the tramping of many little feet.

Alma looked around her, and now noticed on the platform for the altar a small white-covered table, and upon it a little homely bowl and a folded napkin. Beside the table a gray-haired old clergyman had taken his place. In one hand he held officially a corner of his open white handkerchief, while in the other was a thin black book.

There was a slight shuffling first, and then a tall man, with apparently a very stout woman at his side, came up the aisle and stood in front of the clergyman.

"It cannot be a wedding," thought Alma, accustomed to the splendid fonts of the churches of great cities; she could not suppose that simple household bowl was for a baptism. The broken, disabled stone font she did not notice, as it leaned helplessly against the side wall of the building.

The clergyman opened his book and looked about him, doubtfully turned over the leaves, and then began the service "for the baptism of a foundling," as the most appropriate for the present peculiar circumstances that the time-honoured ritual afforded.

At that moment Karin threw open her shawl, and showed the little brown baby asleep in her arms. Alma's attention was fixed, and Frans was all observation, if not attention.

[Illustration: The baptismal service.]

"Beloved Christians," began the pastor; he paused, glanced at the scattered worshippers, and then went on, "our Lord Jesus Christ has said, 'Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.' We do not know whether this child has been baptized or no, since, against the command of the heavenly Father, and even the very laws and feelings of nature, he has been forsaken by his own father and mother."

Here Karin gave involuntarily a little dissenting movement as she thought of the half-crazy mother and the sorrowful father, and made the mental comment that they had done the best they could under the circumstances. The pastor paused (perhaps doubting himself the appropriateness of the statement), and then read distinctly,--

"Therefore we will carry out what Christian love demands of us, and through baptism confide the child to God, our Saviour Jesus Christ, praying most heartily that he will graciously receive it, and grant it the power of his Spirit unto faith, forgiveness of sins, and true godliness, that it, as a faithful member of his church, may be a partaker of all the blessedness that Jesus has won for us and Christianity promises."

The service then proceeded as usual, and the little Nono was baptized in God's holy name.

Jan and Karin were duly exhorted that they should see that the child should grow up in virtue and the fear of the Lord; which promises and resolutions the honest pair solemnly determined, with God's help, to sacredly keep and fulfil.

Nono was borne down the aisle, having acquitted himself as well as could be expected on this important occasion. The eager prisoners in the pew by the door now filed out, six in number, to form little Nono's baptismal procession. Sven, insisting upon kissing the baby then and there, was prudently allowed to do so, to prevent possibly an exhibition of wilfulness that would have been a public scandal. This proceeding well over, Nono and his foster-brothers went back to the golden house, in which he now had a right to a footing, and the blessing of a home in a Christian family.

Alma could never remember anything of the service or the sermon on that day. Her attention had been fully absorbed in the baptism of the wee brown baby whose parents had deserted him, and in whom the "beloved Christians" of the parish had been called on to take so solemn an interest.

Before leaving the church, Alma's father gave one long, sorrowful glance at the new name on the old monument. Beside it the old clergyman had taken them all by the hand, and had said some low-murmured words of which the little girl could not catch the meaning.

"Papa," Alma ventured to say when they were fairly seated in the carriage, "did not the pastor mean you and me, too, when he said 'beloved Christians'? We were there, and only a few other people, and he must have meant us too. We are Christians, of course, are we not?"

He turned his large sorrowful eyes towards her, and was silent. *She* might be a Christian. The Saviour had said that children were of the kingdom of heaven. But she was no longer a very little child, but uncommonly womanly for her age. He suddenly remembered some unchristian peculiarities that were certainly growing upon her. She must be looked after, and placed where she would be under the right kind of influence. Her small hand was now laid caressingly on his knee, and he placed his own over it.

Alma was not astonished at her father not answering her. She was accustomed to see him sunk in moody silence. Happily she could not read the thoughts that her question had suggested. That he was not truly one of the "beloved Christians" the father secretly acknowledged to himself. He had not, he was sure, the firm faith in God and the loving trust in man that belong to the children of the kingdom of heaven.

CHAPTER IV.

NO SECRETS.

The children at the golden house had been regaled with milk and white biscuits in honour of Nono's baptism, and were enjoying the treat in the grove behind the cottage.

Nono lay on Karin's knee, and she was looking fondly at him, while Jan stood silently beside her.

"I am a kind of a mother to him now, a real god-mother," she said. "I don't mean to tell him that he is not quite my own child. I mean to love him just like the others, and he shall never feel like a stranger here."

"Now you are quite wrong, Karin," said Jan, with a very serious look in his face. "He isn't your own child, and you can't make him so by hiding the truth from him. Tell him from the very first how it was. He won't love you the less because he was a stranger and you took him in. It would be a poor way to bring him up so that he will 'grow in virtue and the fear of the Lord,' as we promised this morning, to begin by telling him what wasn't true right straight along. What would he think of you when he found out in the end that you had been deceiving him ever since he could remember? And the other children, too; they know all about it. Could you make them promise to pretend, like you, that Nono was their own brother? No good ever comes of going from the truth. That's my notion!"

Jan stood up very straight as he finished, and sitting as Karin was, he seemed to her in every way high above her.

"You are right, Jan," she answered sorrowfully. "I suppose I must do as you say. I did so want him to be really my own, just like my little Gustaf."

"*Your* little Gustaf, *our* little Gustaf, is in a good place, and I hope Nono will be there too sometime," said Jan.

"Not Nono in heaven yet!" said Karin, pressing the dark baby to her breast. "I cannot spare him, and I don't believe God will take him."

"Now you are foolish, Karin. That was not what I meant," said Jan tenderly. "You bring him up right, and he will come sometime where Gustaf is, and that's what we ought to want most for him." Jan paused a moment, and then went on: "Somehow those words of the baptism took hold of me to-day as they never did before, not even when my own tony children were baptized. I mean to be the right kind of a godfather to him if I can."

Jan kept his resolution. He could sometimes be rough and hasty with his own boys when he was tired or particularly worried; towards Nono he was always kind, and just, and wise. Somehow there had entered into his honest heart the meaning of the words, "I was a stranger, and ye took me in." What was done for Nono was, in a way, done for the Master.

Karin did not reason much about her feelings for the black-eyed boy who was growing up in the cottage. She gave him a mother's love in full abundance. If little Nono had no sunny Italian skies above him, he had the sunshine of a happy home, and real affection in the golden house.

From the very first Nono heard the truth as to how he came to be living in the cold north. Before he could speak, the story of the bear and the Italians had been again and again told in his presence. Of course, every one who saw the black-eyed, brown-skinned child inquired how he came among the frowzy white heads of his foster-brothers. The picture of the whole scene grew by degrees so perfect in Nono's mind, that he really believed he had been a witness of as well as a prominent partaker in the performance. It was only by severe reproof and reproach on the part of the other children that he was made to understand that he had been only a

baby "so long" (the Swedish boys held their hands very near together on such occasions), while they had had the honour of seeing the very whole, and remembered it as perfectly as if it had happened yesterday, as probably some of them did.

So Nono had to take a humble place as a mere listener when the oft-repeated story was told, with every particular carefully preserved among the many eye-witnesses.

"But I love him just as well as if he were my own," was Karin's unfailing close to such conversations, with a caress for the little Italian that sealed the truth of her assertion.

Nono loved his foster-mother with the grateful affection of his warm southern nature. Yet the very name Italy had for him a magical charm, and the sound of a hand-organ, or the sight of a dark-faced man with a broad-brimmed hat, made him thrill with a half joy that his own kith and kin were coming, and a half fear that he was to be taken away from the pleasant cottage and all the love that surrounded him. Bears had a perfect fascination for him, but all the specimens he saw were rough and ragged. No bear, the family were all sure, had ever had such a beautiful brown coat of fur as that Pionono that Sven had been so anxious to kiss.

Nono's favourite text in the Bible was the one that expressed the youthful David's reliance on God when he went out to meet the insolent Goliath: "The Lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me from this Philistine." The Philistine stood for any and all threatening dangers of soul and body, and this passage cheered the little Italian through many a childish trouble, and many an encounter with the big boys from the village, who delighted to assail him in solitary places, and reproach him with being an outlandish stranger, living on charity, and not as much of a Swede as the ugly bear he was named after.

All the warmer seemed to Nono the sheltering affection of Karin, contrasted with these frequent attacks from without. His gratitude expressed itself in an enthusiastic devotion to Karin, and a delight in doing her the slightest service.

"Nono sets a good example to the other boys," said Jan one day. "I don't know, Karin, what he wouldn't be glad to do for you. Our own little rascals get all they can out of 'mother,' and hardly take the trouble to say 'Thank you.' As for thinking to help you, that always falls on Nono."

"Our boys are much towards me as we are to our heavenly Father, I think. We seem to take it for granted he will give us what We need, and that's all there is of it. At least that's the way I am, Jan."

Karin liked to make an excuse for her children when she thought Jan was a little hard upon them.

"I won't forget that, Karin, when I'm put out, as I am sometimes with the boys," answered Jan. "They are not a bad set, anyhow, to be so many. I know I am not half as thankful as I ought to be: not in bed a day since I can remember."

CHAPTER V.**AN ARTIST.**

Time slipped away rapidly at the golden house. There had been many pleasant family scenes, both within and around the cottage, since Nono had been so tenderly welcomed there, eight years before.

It was a bright July morning. The bit of a rye-field on the other side of the road stood in the summer sunshine in tempting perfection. The harvesting had begun, in a slow though it might be a sure manner. A tall, spare old man, his hat laid aside, and his few scattered gray locks fluttering in the gentle breeze, was the only reaper. His shirt sleeves rolled up above the elbows showed his meagre, bony arms. His thin neck and breast were bare, as he suffered from heat from his unwonted labour. The scythe moved slowly, and the old man stopped often to draw a long breath. Near him stood a fair-haired, sturdy little girl, who held up her apron full of corn flowers, as blue as the eyes that looked so approvingly upon them. They were in the midst of a chat in a moment of rest, when a figure, strange and interesting to them both, came along the road with a light, free step.

The new-comer was a tall young girl, with a white parasol in her hand, though her wide-brimmed hat seemed enough to keep her fair face from being browned by the glad sunshine. She stopped suddenly when she came in front of the cottage, and fixed her eyes on the old man and the child with an expression of astonished delight. "Charming! beautiful! I must paint them," she said to herself.

The stranger put down the camp-stool she had on her arm, and screwed into its back her parasol with the long handle. She sat down at once and opened her box, where paper and pallet and all manner of conveniences for amateur painters were admirably arranged. "Please, please stand still," she said; "just as you are. I want to paint you."

"I have to stop often to rest; but I must work while I can. I don't want to be idle if I am old. I can't do a real day's work; but I can get something done if I am industrious," said the gray-haired labourer hesitatingly.

The child seemed to notice something sorrowful in the tone of her companion's voice, and she came quickly to his aid, saying,--

"Uncle Pelle is the best man in the world. Mother says he'll never teach us anything that isn't just right. He does a good bit of work, father says, and he knows."

The little girl was evidently accustomed to be listened to, and did not stand in awe of this stranger or any other.

"I shall pay you both if you hold still awhile and let me take your picture; and that will be just as well for Uncle Pelle as cutting grain, and lighter work, too. You can talk if you want to, but you must not stir while I am making a real likeness of you."

"As the young lady pleases," said the old man, with a look of resignation. "I want to be useful."

"Is that your uncle, child?" asked the young artist. "I thought, of course, it was your grandfather." Then looking towards the old man she added, "Do you live here?" and she nodded towards the golden house.

"I don't live anywhere," said the old man sorrowfully. "The poorhouse in Aneholm parish and the poorhouse in Tomtebacke, some way from here, can't agree which should keep me, and now they are lawing about it. I've had a fever, and I seem to be broke down. I don't belong anywhere just now, but Karin there in the house says I'm a kind of relation of hers, though it puzzles me to see how. She wants me to stay with them till all is

settled; and Jan, who mostly lets her have her way, tells me he hasn't anything against it. So you see I like to do a turn of work if I can, if it's only to show I'm thankful. Karin says she's used to a big family, and it seems lonesome since her oldest son went to America, and I must take his place. I don't live in the cottage. There are enough of 'em there without me. They've fixed me up a place alongside of Star--that's the cow."

"It's a dear little room," said the child, "and we all like to be there; but Uncle Pelle shuts the door sometimes, and won't let us in."

"Old folks must have their quiet spells," said the old man apologetically.

"It isn't just to be quiet, you know, Uncle Pelle. Mother says Uncle Pelle reads good books when he is alone, and makes good prayers, too; and he's a blessing to the family," said the little girl, who seemed to consider herself the friend and patron of her companion.

"She's a bit spoiled. The only girl, you see. There were six boys before, not counting Nono or the two boys that died."

"Nono!" exclaimed the stranger. "That was the name of the little brown baby I saw baptized in Aneholm church, eight years ago, when I was at home before, just for a few days."

"It is a queer name," said Uncle Pelle. "The pastor said it meant the ninth, as the Italians talk; and so when this little girl came, he said Karin and Jan might as well call her Decima, which was like the tenth, in Swedish. And they did. They about make a fool of her in the family; and I ain't much better. That's Nono behind you."

A slight dark boy had been standing quietly watching the young stranger while she skilfully handled her brushes. He now stepped forward, took off the little straw hat of his own braiding, and bowed, without any sheepish confusion.

"Here's Nono!" said Decima, placing herself beside him, as if she had a special right to exhibit him to the stranger.

"And so you are Nono," said Alma. "I have always felt as if you belonged in a way to me. Where did the people who live here find you?"

"They didn't find me at all; they took me, and have brought me up as if I was their own child," said Nono, his eyes sparkling.

The story of the Italians and the bear was told by Nono, as usual, and the scene most vividly described by word and gesture. Decima did not pretend that she knew more than he did on this subject, and indeed he was quite her oracle in all matters. She thought Nono a pink of perfection; and well she might, for he had been her playmate and guardian ever since she could remember. It was confidently affirmed in the family that Nono could, from the first, make her laugh and show her dimples as she would not for any one else. Nono had soon learned that he could be a help to Karin with the baby, and was always more willing than were her rough brothers to be tied to the child's little apron-string.

Nono had hardly finished his story when the young lady took out the smallest watch imaginable and looked hastily at it. She gathered up her painting apparatus in a great hurry, and was off with a hasty good-bye, saying her father would be expecting her home to dinner, but she would see them again soon and finish her picture. She had almost forgotten in her hurry the money she had promised, but she suddenly remembered that part of the transaction, and left in the old man's hand, as he said, "more than enough to pay for a whole day's work, just for standing still, that little bit, to be painted."

Alma was soon out of sight of Pelle and Decima, who followed her with their wondering eyes as she sped along the road towards her pleasant home. The one thing about which her father could be severe with her was being late at meals. But for this severity, he would often have dined without her; for Alma was full of absorbing hobbies, and when anything interested her, food and sleep were to her matters of no consequence. Now her brain was revolving a new scheme. Alma had been for years in a Swiss boarding-school, and there, among many accomplishments, had acquired a thorough knowledge of the English language. She had been charmed with the accounts she had read of the work of the English ladies among the cottagers on their large estates. She had determined to "do just so" when she was fairly settled at home. She would now begin at once with Nono. She felt she had a kind of charge over him. Had not her own dear mother died in Italy, where his mother came from? That baptism, too, she could never forget! He should not grow up like a heathen in Sweden if she could prevent it. She would have him up at "the big house" every day for a Scripture lesson. She wanted to paint him too; how lovely he would be in a picture! She must have the old man with him. How charming it would be to sketch youth and age working in the garden together! She could pay them for their time, and they would look up to her as a kind of guardian angel. Alma flitted along, almost as if she had wings already, as these pleasant thoughts floated through her mind.

The angel seemed suddenly to change to a fury as a shout arose from behind a dark evergreen, and a nondescript-looking individual, ragged and dirty, came out upon her, exclaiming,--

"I suppose I must not come near your highness, looking as I do!"

Streaked with mud on face and clothing, his feet bare, and his trousers rolled up to his knees, her brother stood before her, his eyes gleaming with delight in spite of her evident displeasure.

"I've got a basket of polywogs, and some delicious bugs, and a big caterpillar that would make your mouth water if you were addicted to vermicelli. See here!"

He moved as if he were about to open up his treasures for her inspection.

"Do keep away, Frans!" exclaimed Alma, as she drew her befrilled and beflounced skirt about her, as if to escape dangerous contagion.

At this moment she swept in at the gate that led to the house, and shut it hastily behind her.

"I'm going in the back way, anyhow," said Frans, with a merry laugh. "Your grace and my grace cannot well make our *entrée* together."

"The most troublesome boy in the world!" said Alma to herself, and she expressed her sincere conviction.

At this moment Alma saw the bent form of her father riding slowly before her. Her whole expression changed again, and she quickened her steps into a run, and was soon at his side.

"Are you very tired, papa, after your little ride?" she said tenderly.

"No, darling. But how fresh and rosy you look! The air of old Sweden suits you, I see."

How happy the two were together! how gentle and loving were they both! Alma really looked like the guardian angel she meant to be to Nono and Uncle Pelle.

CHAPTER VI.

THE BOYS.

When Decima had been fairly settled as the tenth little baby that had come to the golden house, Erik, the oldest of the flock, confided to Nono that he meant to start as soon as possible for America. Nono was the recipient of the secrets of all the children. They always found in the little Italian a sympathetic listener, and they could be sure of his profound silence as to their private communications. Nono's evident sense of the many for whom Karin was called on to care had suggested to Erik that although it would be too great a penance for him to be tending a baby, as Nono did, he could go out and earn his own living; which would probably be quite as useful to the family. So to America he had resolved to go, always understanding that he had gained his parents' permission. That permission was not hard to win, for Karin had friends who were emigrating, and who would take care of her boy on the way, and were willing to promise to look after him on his arrival in the "far West," whither they were bound.

Erik went off cheerily, with his ticket paid to the end of his journey, and a little box of strong clothing, his Bible, and his parents' blessing as the capital he took to the new country. Erik had another treasure, not outside of him, but in his inmost heart--a resolve to lead in a foreign land just such a life as he should not be ashamed to have his parents know about, the Word of God being his guide and comfort. Erik was no experienced Christian, but he had started in the right spirit.

Erik had never been renowned for his scholarship, but rather for his industry and skill when real practical work was in question. He wrote at first short letters in Swedish. They soon came less and less frequently, and finally in a kind of mixed language, a mingling of the new and the old, a fair transcript of his present style of conversation. These letters caused much puzzling in the golden house, and occasionally had to be taken to the old pastor for explanation and translation. One came at last, beginning "Dear moder and broder, hillo!" Then followed a page in a curious lingo, wherein it was stated that Erik now had a nice room to himself in the "place" he had obtained. He did not say that the room was in the stable where he was hostler, or that it was just six feet by eight when lawfully measured. He also mentioned that he had food fit for a count; which was true in a way, as he was daily regaled with fruit and vegetables that would have been esteemed in Sweden luxuries sufficient for the table of any nobleman. He dressed like a count too, he said; on which point Erik's testimony was not to be accepted, as he had had little to do with counts in his native land. The big boy did not mean to exaggerate. He was simply and honestly delighted at his success in seeking his fortune. Not that he was laying up money. Far from it. He was sending home to "old Sweden" all he could possibly spare, and was anxious to have Karin feel that it was a light thing for a son who was so comfortable to be remitting a bit of money now and then to a mother who had given him such love and care all the days of his life. Erik did not write much about or to his father, but he thought of him all the more, and inwardly thanked that father for his stern and steady hand with his boys, and for teaching them not only to do honest work, but to know what a real Christian man should be.

Oke, the next boy, had been the bearer to the parsonage of Erik's unreadable letters, and had there been instructed in their proper rendering into everyday Swedish. So a kind of special acquaintance had grown up between the slender, pale boy and the kind old pastor.

The pastor was a bachelor, and lonely in his declining years. He had found it pleasant to see Oke coming with an American letter in his hand, his young face beaming with delight. The pastor had, besides, learned to know more and more of Karin's home and the spirit that was reigning there. Perhaps, when he saw Uncle Pelle sitting in church, Sunday after Sunday, clean and happy among Karin's boys, he had thought he too might have a guest-room that might receive one member from the full golden house. So Oke came to live at the pastor's, who said he did not see as well as he once did, and he must have a boy trained to read aloud to him, and to write a bit, too, for him now and then. It was stipulated that Oke's duties were not to be all of the literary sort. The pastor was convinced that Oke had a good head for study, and really ought to have a chance

to improve himself. The boy was not, however, to be kept constantly bending over books, but was to have as much work in the open air as possible. The pastor himself had a weak constitution, and had suffered all his life from delicate health, and had found it no pleasant experience. Oke should be a robust Christian, for a Christian he was of course to be.

The elder boys being disposed of, the twins had come into power. The oldest among the children had always been allowed to be a kind of perpetual monitor for the rest, with restricted powers of discipline. Oke's rule had been mild but firm. He had taken no notice of small matters; but if anything really wrong had gone on, Jan was sure to hear of it, and a thorough settlement with the offender inevitably followed.

The twins were rather against the outside world in general, strong in their two pair of hands, and two loud voices to shout on their side. Nono really feared this duumvirate, for the twins had more than once given him to understand that he would "catch it" when they got to be the oldest at home. They had no particular offences to complain of or anticipate on Nono's side, but they enjoyed giving out awful threats of what they would do if ever they had the opportunity. Oke had kept them in order without difficulty, for he had a vehement power of reproof, when fairly roused, that could make even the twins hide their faces in shame, as he pictured to them their unworthiness.

Nono had gotten on very well with the "lions and the bears" of the past, but how was he to deal with this two-headed "Philistine" under whose dominion he had now come? He was resolved on one thing--Karin should hear no complaints from him. She should not be worried by the little boy she had taken in among her own to be so wonderfully happy.

CHAPTER VII.**A YOUNG TEACHER.**

Nono and Uncle Pelle had been working a whole morning in the garden at Ekero under Alma's direction. She was going to have a parterre of her own, according to a plan she had been secretly maturing. Now it was the time of mid-day rest, and she was prepared to give Nono his first lesson; a kind of Sunday school on a week day she meant it to be, and of the most approved sort. Alma had chosen for herself a rustic sofa, with a round stone table before her, and behind her the trunk of a huge linden, with its branches towering high over her head. Opposite her was Nono, on a long bench, awaiting the opening of the Bible and the big book that lay beside it. Alma, tall, and fair, and slight, looked seriously at Nono, small, and dark, and plump, sitting expectant, with his large eyes fixed upon her.

Alma paused a moment, and then looked towards one of the grass plots that made green divisions in the well-kept vegetable-garden. There sat Uncle Pelle, his round woollen cap on his head, his red flannel sleeves drawn down to his wrists, while his coat lay over his knees. Uncle Pelle was very careful of his health. He did not want to be a trouble and a burden to Karin. He held a little, thin, worn book, over which he was intently poring. He did not look up until Alma spoke his name. Perhaps she had thought that he might be feeling lonely there by himself, or perhaps she fancied that she had prepared too rich a dish of instruction for little Nono to receive alone. At least she had sprung hastily towards the old man. "What are you reading here by yourself, Uncle Pelle?" she said pleasantly.

Pelle turned to the title-page, showing it to her, and then placed the book in her hand, open to where he had been reading. Her eye fell on the passage his long finger pointed out to her. "Use your zeal first towards yourself, and then wisely towards your neighbour. It is no great virtue to live in peace with the gentle and the peaceable, for that is agreeable to every one. It is a great grace and a vigorous and heroic virtue to live peaceably with the hard, the bad, the lawless, and with them who set themselves in opposition to us." Alma's eyes flashed along the lines, and her conscience pricked her with a sharp prick. She handed the book back to old Pelle, and said quite modestly,--

"I was going to give Nono a little lesson there under the tree. I have some nice Scripture pictures, too, that you would perhaps like to see."

"Thanks," said old Pelle, getting up slowly, and falteringly following the slight figure that flitted on before him.

Pelle took his seat beside Nono. They both clasped their hands and closed their eyes. Alma was taken by surprise. She saw what they expected before this "Bible lesson"--a prayer, of course! No prayer came to her lips. "God help us all! Amen!" she said at last. "Amen!" came solemnly from her companions.

Alma was so disturbed by this little occurrence that her whole plan for her lesson went out of her mind. She turned with relief towards the great book, where her mother had placed in order photographs of some of the most beautiful pictures illustrating the life of our Saviour that the world can boast. Alma had meant to explain and expound, but she continued silent. As old Pelle and Nono looked reverently on as she turned page after page, their faces glowing with reverent interest, now and then they exchanged meaning glances or a murmured word; which plainly showed that they understood the incidents so beautifully given by the great artists of the past. When they came to the Christ on the cross, their hands clasped themselves as if involuntarily, and a great tear found its way down Pelle's worn face. The scene was really before him. He felt himself standing on Calvary, beside the cross of his Master.

There was a long pause. Then Alma turned slowly the next page. There, a modern artist had pictured the bright angels falling adoringly back, as the Saviour, shining in his glory, burst forth from the tomb.

"Risen!" said Nono joyously, with the relief of childhood that the sad part of the holy story had now been told.

Alma passed on to the representation of the ascension. Pelle looked at it, his eyes beaming. He raised his long finger and pointed to where a bright cloud was for the moment half veiling the sun. "So he went, and so he shall come again. Blessed be the name of the Lord!" burst from the old man's lips. He was still looking towards the skies, as he added, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus!" He bowed his aged head and sat silent, with clasped hands. Nono and Alma followed his example. When they looked up an astonished beholder had been added to the group under the linden.

"How are you, Uncle Pelle?" said the voice of Frans, as he took the old man cordially by the hand. Pelle looked at him confusedly for a moment, and then, with apparent difficulty, brought his thoughts back to this world, and responded to the pleasant greeting.

"Nono is to go fishing with me. I've been to the cottage, and got permission from Mother Karin. I knew the little brownie would not stir an inch without her leave.--So now, Nono, we are off for a good fish, and then a good supper for you and me.--Your highness will excuse me for interrupting your little meeting," added Frans, with mock politeness. "I hope it has been profitable to all parties."

Alma compelled herself to keep silence, and to respond pleasantly to the thanks of Pelle and Nono for what they called "the nice lesson." They neither of them understood that they had been the teachers, and the fair, slight girl their humble and abashed pupil.

Alma took her Bible in her hand, and went into the house to send a servant for the great album that lay on the stone table. She sat down in her room in a most disturbed frame of mind, ashamed of her first effort as a teacher, and irritated that Nono should have come under the very influence she would have most dreaded for him, even that of her own brother.

Then came a voice from below gently calling "Alma." The loving part of her nature at once took the upper hand, and the fond daughter went down to her father, ready to do anything he could ask of her for his joy or comfort.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN ALMA'S ROOM.

The day after the Bible lesson Alma threw herself heartily into her plan for her parterre, at which Pelle and Nono were busily working. In the midst of a large velvet patch of closely-cut grass she had a great parallelogram marked out which was to represent the Swedish flag. The blue ground was to be of the old Emperor William's favourite flower, while the cross stretching from end to end was to be of yellow pansies. The Norwegian union mark in the corner was to be outlined in poppies of the proper colours.

There was a slight twinkle in the old man's eyes as he watched Alma, all enthusiasm, flitting hither and thither, and ordering and planning like an experienced general, while it was plain to Pelle that she was as yet but a novice in the mysteries of gardening. He did venture to hint modestly that it was late--the middle of July--to begin such an undertaking. Alma took no notice of his discouraging hints, but went on expatiating as to how charming it would be to have the Swedish flag lying there on the green grass, and how her father would enjoy it, loving his country as he did, and being a real soldier himself. A soldier the colonel certainly was by profession; but he had had other enemies to meet than the foes of his native land. He had struggled long with sorrow and ill-health, his constant portion. Exiled from Sweden for the sake of his delicate wife, and that he himself might be under the care of eminent physicians who understood his complicated difficulties, he had still continued a warm Swede at heart. Now he considered himself stronger; and did it mean life or death for him, the north should be his home, and his children should learn to love the land of their forefathers. His native language he had never allowed them to lose, even when far away from the bright lakes and clustering pines of the country so dear to him. A war against all that could injure his fatherland the colonel had all the time been waging with his skilful pen. By sharp newspaper articles and spirited papers in magazines he had cast himself into whatever conflict might be going on in Sweden, and had so had his own share of influence at home. He had read the Stockholm journals as faithfully as if he had been living in sight of the royal palace.

As to her father's being charmed with her plan for her flower-bed, Alma was confident. She would not listen to Pelle's suggestion that the flowers would hardly blossom richly at the same time, and those blue weeds would in the end quite overrun the garden. She had no misgivings, but walked about with a peculiar air of determination in her slight, very slight figure.

Alma's whole person gave the impression of extreme fragility, sustained by strength of will. It was the same with her delicate face, haloed round by her sunny hair, ready to float in every breeze. The small mouth was thin and decided, and the large, full blue eyes could be soft or stern as the passing mood prompted. They were very gentle as she looked at Nono when the noonday rest came, and told him he might come into the house with her, as perhaps she could help him a little about his writing in her own room.

Nono would have preferred at that moment to consume the hearty lunch Karin had provided for him, but he followed submissively. Pelle looked after the pair as he went to his favourite seat. Somehow the decided figure of the young girl always touched him. There was something about her that made him uneasy for her, body and soul.

Nono looked despairingly at his shoes, fresh from the flower-bed, as he came to the wide doorway through which Alma had beckoned to him to follow her. It was in vain he tried to put his feet into proper condition by gently rubbing them on the mat that he thought fit for a queen to step on. The colour dashed to his brown cheeks as he saw the marks he had left on it. He could but tiptoe after Alma as she entered the, to him, sacred precincts of the "big house" at Ekero.

Alma felt young and guilty as she met a stout, elderly woman on the stairs, as she went up with Nono.

"It's the little Italian boy I saw baptized," she said apologetically.

"I've seen many children baptized, Miss Alma, and paid respect to what was doing, I hope, but I don't have them trudging up and down the grand staircase--no, not even when the colonel is away in foreign parts. Miss Alma must do as she pleases, but I'd like the colonel to know that I see things in order as far as I can. I can't be responsible for boys like that leaving tracks like a bear behind them."

The comparison to the bear was not meant to be personally offensive towards Nono, though he always felt that with Bruin he was specially connected. He had indeed, in his caretaking, not left marks like a human being as he had tiptoed along, leaving round traces on the shining floor and stairs, as if a four-footed creature had passed.

Nono was not much accustomed to harsh words, and the reproaches of the faithful housekeeper increased his awe of the place, where he felt himself a decided intruder, though following the young mistress at her express command.

Nono was even more disturbed in mind when he was seated at a beautiful little writing-table, and requested to write on a fair sheet of paper laid before him. The first verse of a hymn was dictated to him from the prettiest little psalm book imaginable. His writing was really wonderful for a boy of his age. The letters were clear and round, and almost graceful, with here and there a little flourish of his own invention, added in his desire to do his best.

[Illustration: "The first verse of a hymn was dictated to him."]

Alma was quite disappointed when she saw that there was no field here for her instructions. She could hardly write better herself, and by no means as legibly. She was aiming at a flowing hand, and her efforts but showed that her character was yet too unformed to attempt such a dashing style with the pen.

On nearer examination, Nono's spelling was found to be most exceptionable.

"Have you never been taught spelling at school, Nono?" asked Alma, very seriously.

"Oh yes!" he answered cheerfully, and forthwith drew himself up as he stood, and recited the rules for the various ways in which the English sound "oh" may be represented in Swedish, giving the proper examples under the rule. This little Nono could rattle off in grand school-recitation style, though these etymological gymnastics never bore on his practices as a writer.

Of such rules Alma knew nothing. She had learned Swedish spelling on quite another principle. For years she had copied a Swedish poem every day for her father (whether with him or away from him), in pretty little books, which were in due time presented to him with the inscription at the beginning, "From his devoted daughter."

Alma now gave Nono the "psalm book," and bade him copy the hymn carefully. He did not dare to touch the dainty little volume, for his hands were far from immaculate after his morning's work. He managed, though, with his knuckles to steady it against Baxter's "Saints' Rest" and "Thomas à Kempis," which in choice bindings found their place among Alma's devotional books, more in memory of her mother, to whom they had belonged, than for any special use they were to the present owner.

Nono's copy proved fair and correct, for he had the idea that whatever he did must be done well. He signed his name, and put the date below, as he was requested, adding a superfluous supplementary flourish, like an expression of rejoicing that the trial was over.

On one side of the table was a little porcelain statuette that fixed his attention. On an oval slab lay a fine Newfoundland dog, while a boy, evidently just rescued from drowning, was stretched beside him, the dank

hair and clinging clothes of the child telling the story as well as his closed eyes and limp, helpless hands.

"Is he really drowned? is he dead?" asked Nono, forgetting all about the spelling, as did his teacher when she heard his question.

"That is one of my treasures, Nono," she said. "The princess gave it to my mother. She modelled it with her own hands--the group after which this was made, I mean. You have heard about the good princess, Nono?"

Nono shook his head and looked very guilty. He knew the king's name, and believed him to be quite equal to David; but as to the queen and all the "royal family," he was in most republican ignorance.

Now Alma had something she liked to talk about. Perhaps she was willing that even Nono should know that her own dear mother had been intimately acquainted with a princess, and had loved her devotedly, and been as warmly loved in return. Alma even condescended to tell Nono that it was the princess who had first led her dear mother to a true Christian life; which high origin for religious influence Alma seemed to look upon as if it were a sort of superior aristocratic form of vaccination. Alma went on to describe the saintly princess as she had heard her spoken of by both her father and her mother, whose respect and affection she had so justly won.

How the image grew and fixed itself in Nono's mind of a real, living princess who sold her rich jewels to build and sustain a home for the sick poor! He heard how she, in her own illness, surrounded by every luxury, could have no rest until she had planned a home where they too could have comfort and tender care. The dark eyes of the listener grew moist as he heard of the hospital the princess now had for crippled and diseased children, where they were made happy and had real love as well as a real home.

Nono was a happy boy when he went out from Alma's room with a little engraved likeness of the princess in his hand, and a glow of warm feeling for her in his fresh young heart. For certain private reasons of his own, she seemed very near to him, and the thought of her was peculiarly precious.

When old Pelle and Nono were going home that evening, he produced his little likeness of the princess, and told Pelle all about her.

Pelle's eyes sparkled, and he said as he rubbed his hands together, "That princess does belong to the royal family! She is a daughter of the great King!"

"May I put her up in your room, Uncle Pelle?" asked Nono. "I do not quite like to have her in the cottage, where the children can get at her. They might not understand that this is not like any other picture."

"That you may," said Pelle; "and come in to see her, too, as often as you please. A sick princess and a Christian too! She wouldn't mind having her likeness put up in my poor place, if she is like what you say. God bless her!"

Nono had a way of taking what was precious to him to Pelle to keep, and curious were the boyish treasures he had stored away in Pelle's room. It had been a bare little home when the old man went into it, but he had made it a cosy nest in his own fashion. Pelle had been for a time a sailor in his youth, and had learned to make himself comfortable in narrow quarters. A fever caught in a foreign port had laid him by, and left sad traces behind it in his before strong body. Other and better traces had been left in his life, even repentance for past misdoings and resolutions for a faithful Christian course. As a gardener's "helping hand" he had long gotten on comfortably; but illness and old age had come upon him, and there had seemed no prospect for him but the poorhouse, when Karin's hospitable door opened for him.

The lawsuit was not settled, but it was well known in the neighbourhood that Jan Persson had said Uncle Pelle should not go to the poorhouse while he had a home.

Pelle felt quite independent now, and he held his head straight as he walked by Nono and talked about the good princess. Had not the young lady at Ekero said she should need him straight on in the garden? for she saw he knew all about flowers, and could be of real use to her. Alma wanted to be a friend to Nono too, but she did not yet exactly see how. There was something about the boy she did not quite understand.

CHAPTER IX.

KARIN'S FÊTE.

Nono was in disgrace. The twins had twice brought him before Karin, his clothes all smeared with mud, as if he had purposely made his whole person the colour of his brown face, and had given his hands rough gloves of a still darker hue. Of course he had at first been sternly reprimanded, for Karin suffered no such proceedings in her neat household. The second reproof was more severe, and accompanied by the promise of a thorough whipping if the offence were repeated.

The long summer evenings gave a fine play-time for the boys, and then Nono generally amused himself out of the way of the twins, who were very despotic in their style of government. Again they had detected him brushing himself behind the bushes, and dolorously looking at the obstinate stains upon his cotton clothes. With a wild hollo they seized the culprit between them, and hurried him along towards Karin, who was cheerily examining her flower-beds under the southern windows, and chatting meanwhile with Jan, who sat on the doorstep.

Karin was both grieved and angry, and unusually excited. "Nono must be whipped, and that soundly," she said emphatically to Jan. "This is the third time he has come to the house in that condition. I won't have him learn to disobey me that way."

Jan got up slowly, and took from its hiding-place inside the cottage something that looked like a broom-brush made of young twigs. It was the family emblem and instrument of punishment, much dreaded among the children; and with reason, for Jan had a strong hand and a sure one. He had been accustomed to giving his own boys a thrashing now and then, but on Nono he had never laid hands, as Karin's gentler discipline had usually sufficed for her foster-son.

The tears were in the eyes of the culprit, but he stood quite still, and was at first speechless. At last he managed to say, "Don't whip me here, Papa Jan; take me down to the shore, please." Jan generally had his times of punishment quite private with the boys, the grove behind the house being the usual place of execution. He could not, however, refuse Nono's modest request. Off to the shore they went together, the twins meanwhile shrugging and wincing, as if they themselves were undergoing the ordeal, while they said to each other, "He'll catch it! It won't feel good!"--not without some satisfaction, mingled with a sense of the seriousness of the occasion.

Little Decima, who had been a depressed looker-on at the proceedings, buried her head in her mother's apron and cried as if she herself were the victim. The little boys, no longer little, were hardened to punishment, as they were often in disgrace for their wild pranks, but the idea of Nono's being whipped seemed to have made them uncommonly sober. Sven went into the cottage to look among his treasures for something with which to console Nono on his return from the shore. Thor was walking up and down, giving defiant looks at the twins for their want of sympathy with Nono in his humiliation. There was a sorrowful shadow over the whole family group that evening not common at the golden house.

To the surprise of all parties Jan soon appeared, holding Nono by the hand, both apparently in a most cheerful humour. There were no tears in Nono's face, and Jan looked down at him with peculiar tenderness.

"Nono has not meant to be a bad boy," said Jan; "and I have forgiven him, and I think you will have to forgive him too, Karin."

"Dear, dear Mamma Karin, indeed I did not want to be a bad boy," said Nono. "That would be hard, after all your kindness to me. Please, please forgive me!" Nono put his arm round Karin as he spoke. She looked doubtfully at him, but could not refuse the lips he put up to her to be kissed in sign of full forgiveness.

Sven, who had found a broken horse-shoe among his treasures, was rather disappointed that he had lost the opportunity of consoling Nono with his friendly gift.

Decima laid her little hand in Nono's, and was about leading him off the scene, when she was suddenly captured by her mother and hurried into the cottage, with the exclamation, "Here's Decima up till this time! One never knows when to put children to bed these summer evenings. She'll be as cross as pepper in the morning if she don't get her sleep out!"

It was plain that Karin was not quite satisfied with the turn the whole affair had taken.

"Papa is too partial to Nono! It is a shame!" murmured the twins, as they went off in a pout.

The morning of the second day of August was warm and bright. When Karin awoke, Jan was already up and out of the house. The children were dressed in their holiday clothes, by their father's permission, they said, their faces beaming with satisfaction. Karin was hardly in order when Jan appeared and advised her to put on a white apron, which she wonderingly consented to do, and then Jan led her off down to the shore. Behind them the children followed in orderly procession. Old Pelle brought up the rear, like the shepherd with the sheep going on before him.

Of the why and wherefore of all this ado the children had no idea. Nono had assured them that their father approved of the whole thing, and the proud and yet tender way that Jan was walking with Karin showed that the affair had his full endorsement.

On a green bank in a little cove in the shore Karin was ceremoniously seated, and Jan placed himself at her side.

The children threw into her lap their bouquets, each of a hue of its own, to lie there like a jumbled-up rainbow. With Oke's bright flowers from the pastor's garden fell a bank-note from the absent Erik, with an inscription pinned to it in his usual lingo: "Mamma. From her gosse Erik." (Nono had assured Oke it was best to keep the gift till the second of August.) A few drops fell on the note and the bright flowers from Karin's astonished eyes; but there was a sudden sunshine of joy and wonder as Nono proceeded to take down the evergreen branches that were leaned against the bank opposite to her. There, a deep arch had been scooped into the hillside. In its sweet retirement there was a tiny house of yellow pine, perfectly modelled after the family home, the door open, and the flower-beds in their proper place under the windows. In front of the house was a group, which all recognized at a glance. "Perfect! Just as if he had seen it! Think! he could make it, when he was only *so long* at the time!" exclaimed Oke, his fingers indicating a most diminutive baby. There was no contempt, but unlimited admiration, in this mention of the infant Nono.

[Illustration: The model house.]

It was indeed a most successful bit of modelling. The picture that had been so long in Nono's mind had taken form. Bear, and Italians, and Swedes, and the very baby Francesca was raising high in the air for a toss, were wonderfully living and full of expression.

When the tumult of delight was subdued for a moment, Jan intimated, as he had been requested, that Nono had something to say.

What grandiloquence Nono had prepared never transpired. As it was, he forgot his intended speech. His heart was in his throat; but he managed to say that this was Katharina day in the almanac, and so Mamma Karin's name-day, and the dear mother of them all ought, of course, to be honoured. He had found some nice clay by the shore, which would stay in any form he put it, and he had tried to make the group he had thought so much about to show how thankful he was to have a place in such a home. He had not meant to be careless, but when

he got at his work he forgot everything else, and so it had all happened. The last time was the worst, when he had spilt the basin of water, just as he was trying to make himself decent. Papa Jan had forgiven him, and he hoped Mamma Karin would do so too, now she had heard all about it. He really had not meant to be a bad boy.

Karin caught the little Italian in her arms, while Jan looked down on them benignantly, and the children roared an applause that came from the depths of their hearts. They had never thought of celebrating their mother's name-day. It had never even struck them that she had one, as her name as they knew it was not to be found in the almanac. As for themselves, each could remember some simple treat that had been provided for his name-day--a row on the bay, pancakes after dinner, an apple all round, a trip to the village, or some other favour calculated to specially please the recipient and make all happy in the home.

The children, all but Nono, had been sure to have their *fête*; for if the name by which they were called in everyday life had no place in the almanac, they had a luxury used only once a year which fixed their time to be honoured--a second name that stood in the calendar. So Decima had come to be a kind of D.D. in her way. She had been baptized Decima Desideria, that she too might have a name-day and a celebration.

Desideria was a royal name, and a kind of a queen too. Decima had been from the very beginning the one girl among many boys, and ruling them all with her whims and caprices.

Jan had no idea of lingering all day by the shore, and he soon broke up the party by saying it was time for them all to go in and get on their everyday clothes, and be twice as busy as usual to make up for lost time.

Jan spoke bluntly, for he found himself in a softened mood, and that was his odd way of showing it. For his part, he had made up his mind that he had taken too little pains to give Karin pleasure--his good wife, who had all kinds of bothers, no doubt, and never troubled him about them.

A truce was sealed that day between Nono and the twins, though the duumvirs said never a word on the subject. They were not going to trouble a boy who could make such wonderful things, and show how grateful he was to their own mother, who had been just as kind to them, and they had thought little about it, and not even found out she had a name-day at all.

When Nono was going to bed that night, Karin thanked him again for the great pleasure he had given her.

"I did not give it to you; it was all the princess," he said. Karin looked wonderingly at him, and he added, "I told Oke I wanted to make beautiful things like some he showed me in a book about Italy the pastor had lent him. Oke laughed first, and then he said it told in the book that the men who made beautiful things did not always have beautiful lives--good lives it meant, Oke said. I want to have a beautiful life, Mamma Karin, and I thought it might be best not to try to make figures at all, as I am always wanting to, and I felt sorry about it. When Miss Alma showed me what the good princess could make, I thought I might see if I could make beautiful things and have a beautiful life too, like her. So you see it was the princess. I am glad you were pleased."

Karin bade the little boy good-night with unusual tenderness. She understood him, and in her heart the purpose was strengthened to try more herself to lead "a beautiful life," and to begin more earnestly than ever before on her name-day.

CHAPTER X.

THE LITTLE COTTAGE.

Of course, Alma was anxious to see the wonderful group that Nono had made for Karin. The evening after the celebration of Karin's name-day, Alma appeared at the cottage in a light summer costume and her parasol held daintily in her hand, though the sun was veiled in golden clouds. What was her astonishment to see Frans cosily sitting on the doorstep beside Jan in his working dress, and his own not more presentable for eyes polite. Frans enjoyed society where the laws of etiquette and the dominion of fashion were unknown.

"You here, Frans!" exclaimed Alma, with a sudden cloud on her before smiling face.

"You here, Alma!" answered Frans, starting up with affected surprise, then offering to his sister with formal courtesy the seat he had vacated at honest Jan's side.

Jan took himself up too--a slow process for him after a day of hard work. Bareheaded he stepped forward to welcome the young lady, who at once explained the object of her visit. Nono, who had seen her in the distance, now came to meet her, and willingly led the way to the shore. Karin, who was weeding in the vegetable-garden, did not know of the arrival of the guest.

Alma's delight with the group exceeded Nono's expectations. She used words about it such as she had heard her father employ in criticising works of art, and quite soared beyond Nono's comprehension as well as her own. The little house, just like Karin's cottage, charmed her completely. "Did you really make it all yourself, Nono; the house, I mean?" she said.

"Uncle Pelle helped me about it a little," said Nono honestly. "I am glad you like it."

"I like it so much that I want just such a one, to be really my own, but very, very much smaller it should be. I should like to use it as a money-box, a kind of savings-bank. The chimney should be open all the way down, so that I could drop the money in. The door should be locked, and I should have the key. I have a lock from an old work-box that would just do. Pelle could help you to fit it in, I am sure; he is so handy about everything. Will you do it, Nono?"

Of course Nono gladly said he would try; and then Alma added, "But I want to see Pelle too, and Karin, and Pelle's room, and the cottage."

"Pelle does not often let anybody come into his room but me," said Nono hesitatingly; "but Mamma Karin will be pleased, ever so pleased, to see you, I am sure."

"Perhaps I had better come another time," said Alma, remembering that Frans was on the premises, and not being at all sure what he might choose to say while she was trying to make herself agreeable at the golden house. So Alma made her way to the gate, escorted by Nono, and only left a message for the family, who had all assembled in the garden, which Frans was cheerily inspecting.

Nono began at once to plan about the savings-bank for Alma, and was much in deep consultation with Pelle. In the course of their conversations on the subject, Nono heard from the old man how the golden house came to be so very different from the usual red cottages of Sweden. He felt it was like Karin not to have told him the story. She had served as maid in her youth to an eccentric old lady, with whom she had lived until she was married. When her former mistress was near her end, and was gloomily looking forward to death, some words of simple faith and hope she had once heard from Karin came now to her mind like a new revelation, and the glad truths took deep root in her troubled heart. An abounding gratitude to Karin at once took possession of the dying woman, and she added an item to her will providing that Karin, who was struggling along with her

young family about her, should have a bit of land of her own, and a cottage built upon it, like those the testator remembered in the part of Sweden where she had lived in her childhood. It should all be one great room up to the roof, but very comfortable and convenient. It must not, though, be red like any other cottage, but yellow at first, and always yellow; for Karin had been as good as gold to her mistress, and better. So this was the story of "the golden house," as the Italian had named it--a name it had borne ever since.

Bright yellow, and complete in all its appointments, was the little house that Nono at last took to Alma. If not gold itself, something golden, small and round, fell into Nono's hands as Alma received it. "Now, Nono," she said, "that is your gift from your godmother, for I am a kind of a godmother to you. It may be the last present you will have from me. I am going to be very saving now, and lay up all the money I can."

Nono felt as if common Swedish words were hardly fit to express his thankfulness, so he astonished Alma by dropping on one knee and kissing her hand, as he had seen "a courtier saluting a queen" in a "history book" he studied at school.

Old Pelle, meanwhile, was looking on with the sharp twinkle in his eye with which he watched many of Alma's proceedings. She knew he had been consulting-architect as to the little cottage, but she could not help calling on him now to admire it, saying, "Is it not a beauty, and just like Karin's home?"

Pelle leaned on his rake as he stood, and answered, "It is like it, and it is not like it. People's faces can look like them even when they are dead. That is a kind of a dead house to me with the door tight shut. That isn't the way at the cottage. The door is always open, in a way, there. It says, 'Come in; you're welcome.' If the Master up there," and he raised his thin finger towards the skies, "was to say to Karin, 'Where is the guest-room?' she'd likely point to the house, all one great room inside. She'd make a mistake, though. Her guest-room is in *here*, where she let the Master in long ago." Pelle laid his hand on his breast, where he supposed his honest old heart to be beating. He may not have located it right physiologically, but something whispered to Alma that the old man spoke the truth as he added emphatically, "The guest-room is the heart, to my thinking; and when the right Guest gets in there, sharing is easy, and a man or a woman grows free and friendly like."

Pelle began to work very diligently, raking the newly-cut grass as if he had had his say in the matter and had no more time for talking.

Alma went into the house with the savings-bank in her hand. A savings-bank it proved to be as the months went on, with a very strong draught down the little chimney. Alma had been in earnest when she had said she meant to be economical. Her firm will was now set in that direction. Coin after coin was dropped into the chimney, as swallow after swallow sinks into similar quarters when a summer night comes on. The accumulating store lay in secrecy and in stillness, save when Alma now and then made the little house shake as if an earthquake threatened it with destruction, while she listened delightedly to the jingling and rattling within. She wished often that she had asked Nono to make real windows with glass in them, through which she might have feasted on her treasure. She did not like those little black pasteboards based with white, and the pots of flowers painted behind them to simulate Karin's geraniums.

Every Saturday evening Pelle came to be paid for his labours of the week. His gains were duly handed over to Karin, and then Pelle went to his little room, where he walked up and down, holding his head as high as the ceiling would permit, in the comfortable consciousness that he had turned his back on the poorhouse, and yet was not a burden at the cottage.

The colonel had provided the money for Pelle from the first, and now Alma had asked him to do the same for Nono, as she had something particular in view for which she was saving all she could spare. The colonel looked inquiringly, but received no answer to his questioning glance. He was accustomed to Alma's having her plans and her whims and fancies; and as they generally did no harm, he was not in the habit of examining particularly into them. It would even be a pleasure to him to pay Nono's wages personally. He liked the little

brown boy who made him think of the sunny south, and could not pass him in the garden without giving him a pleasant word or a friendly nod. It pleased him to think there would now be a new link between them. A silver link it proved in a small way to Nono, who had no reason to complain of the change. The little Italian did, however, half realize that Miss Alma did not notice him quite in the same way as at first; but he was thankful for the friendliness of the past, for his pleasant home, and for steady work, and life was very bright to him now that the twins were more his protectors than his tyrants.

Frans was not at all pleased with the new system of economy. Alma had always been ready to give or to lend to him from her own private purse when he was "short of money," for the construction of his machines or for any of his various undertakings. She had often scolded him for being thriftless and reckless, but had been as liberal with her loans and gifts as with her reproaches. He was fairly astonished when his birthday came round to receive from her an old book of her own, with the fly-leaf torn out, and an inscription written on the title-page, "Frans. From his devoted sister."

"Much devoted!" he said with a shrug, as he looked at his present, a nicely-bound book, truly, and containing much good advice, but conveyed in such long words and long sentences and such very small print that Alma herself had never been able to read it. "What's got into you, Alma?" he added hastily; "you seem to be drawing off from me, every way, as fast as you can. I wonder if you will stop calling me Frans one of these days, and pretend you are no sister of mine. You know I don't care for this thing! I'm not much of a reader, any way, and books are not much in my line, unless they are about travels or machines or something that grows or crawls. You are all the sister I have, and I wish sometimes you would find it out!"

Frans did not wait for an answer, but ran off to thank the housekeeper for the big cake she had made for him, and the flower-decked table on which it had been placed. He wanted to thank his father, too, for the neat little cupboard that had been placed in his room for his cabinet, with lock and key, glass doors, and plenty of shelves, just as he would have wished it.

The colonel was not well, and had not yet appeared. Perhaps he wanted to see his boy first, alone, on his birthday.

Frans looked quite tender and softened when the interview was over. He was convinced that his father, at least, did love him very dearly, in spite of the trouble he was always giving. "Suppose--suppose," he thought to himself--"suppose I should turn over a new leaf, and really try to be better!"

He passed out into the garden and chanced to look up at Alma's window. She stood there with the yellow cottage in her hand, and was dropping something down the chimney. "There goes my present, I daresay," he thought, and again the bitter mood was uppermost, in spite of his father's kind words and the charming new home for his cabinet.

CHAPTER XI.

THE SLIDE.

Not the angel of death but the angel of beauty seemed to have made his rounds in the night. Not a tree nor a shrub had been passed by. The very dried weeds by the roadside were clothed in fairy garments. It was as if nature had been suddenly purified, exalted, made ready for translation. Alma looked out through her window,--not on the dark old oaks or the bare slender birches of yesterday. In feathery whiteness the oaks stood up before her, their hoary heads a crown of beauty, as in a sainted old age. The graceful birches stood in "half concealing, half revealing" pure drapery, as if shrouded in a bridal veil.

Round Karin's home the solemn evergreens had lost their gloom, and the white-robed branches drooped, as if to cast a double blessing on the passer-by.

Four noisy boys stormed out from the cottage door with a glad shout. They saw nothing of poetry or beauty or mystery in the wonders the hoar-frost had been working. They but remembered they were in the midst of the Christmas holidays, and to-day they were to finish, under the direction of Frans, the packing of the snow slope that led down to the frozen bay. There they were all to have a splendid time coasting on the long new sled that all had been busy in perfecting. "She," as the boys said, was a "grand affair," a "regular buster."

Similar thoughts had been uppermost with Nono, but they had now taken a different form. He was still inside the cottage, coaxing Karin to let Decima have her share in the frolic. He would hold fast to her himself, he said, and see that she came to no harm.

By two o'clock in the afternoon the slide was ready. Many hands had made light work, and Frans had proved an admirable engineer. He now took his place on the long sled as steersman and captain of the whole affair. Decima, rolled in her mother's red shawl, was placed in the midst of the group of merry boys, Nono's willing arms holding her as firmly as it was possible to grasp such an uncertain kind of a bundle.

All went on merrily. Far out on to the ice-covered bay the great sled rushed with wonderful swiftness. Then there was the return trip uphill, Decima riding with only Nono beside her, as her humble servitor, to keep her steady.

The sport went on and time flew by. Grown more and more daring, the strong heels of the boys urged on the descending sled till it moved at the pace of a swift locomotive. Suddenly there came a clumsy old-fashioned sleigh along the shore road, which crossed the slide at a right angle. Frans braked with heel and staff, and the other boys in vain did their best to help him. The sled struck the sleigh, and was emptied in a moment. The boys who were unencumbered fell here and there in the soft snow or on the road. Nono held desperately fast to his precious bundle, but could not save little Decima. While the rest of the party were jumping up and rubbing their bruises, or declaring they were "all right," Nono, half stunned, lay helpless with little Decima still in his arms. She was screaming terribly, and would hardly submit to being lifted up by the boys, even when Nono had rallied and was giving her a helping hand.

The accident was followed by a weary, sorrowful time at the cottage. Decima's broken leg was set by the doctor, and she was laid on the box couch, her usual bed, with a brick dangling from her ankle to keep the injured limb straight while it was healing.

If Decima had been a queen before, she now became a despot of the most arbitrary sort. She was not patient by nature, and as to her habits of obedience, they seemed broken as well as her leg. There was no limit to her exactions. Her brothers she treated like worthless slaves, and they soon learned to keep out of her reach, and when possible out of the cottage. Nono spent his spare time faithfully beside her, contriving all sorts of devices for her amusement. Frans looked in often to see how she was getting on, and never came

empty-handed. There was always some special sweet bit to please her, or a "picture book," or an apple, or a dainty plate of food begged from the housekeeper.

Once, when Frans was going to the village, Alma had thought of commissioning him to buy a doll, a prettily-dressed doll, for Decima; but she checked herself, almost as if the idea had been sinful, and that day a special contribution found its way down the chimney of her treasure-house. Notwithstanding the kindness of Frans to the little patient, he did not find her an angelic sufferer, even as far as he was concerned. She became more and more fastidious as to his presents, always expecting some gift more novel and beautiful than the last. Frans made all kinds of jokes about her "decimal fractiousness," which were noisily appreciated by the young arithmeticians at the cottage. Nono alone could not laugh at anything which concerned Decima's misfortune, for which he considered himself in a manner accountable.

The great undivided room of the interior of the cottage was now a sore trial for Karin. The door seemed to be always ajar, Decima declaring she felt a draught wherever she was placed. At last the boys went out one day and left the door wide open, with poor little Decima alone in the room, with a rush of keen air blowing upon her. Of course she took cold, and Karin was quite in despair. The child began to complain that the boys always were making a noise, and the dishes rattled so they hurt her. It was in vain that Karin tripped about with the utmost care; her lightest steps, Decima said, shook the whole floor. As for Jan and the boys, they were for ever doing something that made the little patient's head ache or that put her in a bad humour. The doctor finally said he did not see how Decima was to get well in that room, with that noisy family about her. It might do for well folks to live so packed together, but to be sick in such a place was another question.

Karin, with her usually cheerful face all clouded, went one day to old Pelle's room for comfort, as she had often done before. He did not say, though he thought it, that his own little den was none of the warmest, or he would take Decima there. He was thankful for the shelter, such as it was. He proposed nothing for the child's comfort, but reminded Karin that little Decima was as precious to the Master as are the tender lambs to the shepherd, and she went out comforted. She found Nono waiting for her at the door, with his dark eyes large and earnest.

"I have thought what I can do, Mother Karin," he said. "I shall go up to Stockholm and ask the good princess to take Decima into her home for sick children, and she will be sure to get better there!"

"You go up to Stockholm! you ask the princess!" exclaimed Karin, astonished at the magnitude and almost presumption of the proposal.

"I feel as if I knew the princess," persevered Nono. "I have thought so much about her, and looked at her face until she don't seem to me like a stranger, and then I know that she is so good. I want to start to-day, Mother Karin. There is only a little time left of the vacation, and I could not be away when school begins, you know. It is so beautiful to-day, and not very cold."

Jan came along at the moment, and Nono explained his plan to him, much as he had done to Karin, but with quite a different result.

"You are the right kind of a boy, Nono," said Jan, with hearty approval. "You shall do just as you say. Maybe the Father in heaven put it into your head. I know how a father feels when his children are in trouble. Our royal family have never held their heads too high to hear when the people were really in need. I am sure the princess would be pleased to do what she could for our little Decima.--Karin, you get Nono ready, right off. He is a good walker. It will only take him two days to do it. Give him some loaves of bread, and he shall have some coppers from me to buy milk by the way, and it will go well with him, I really believe. There is not a cottager in Sweden who would not take him in for a night when they had heard what he was out for. Something must be done, any way, and we had better try this. It takes all the heart out of me to see Decima as she is--our only girl, and such a dear!"

There was something moist in Jan's eyes, but he brushed it away with the back of his hand.

The boys had been sent to the woods to bring home their sled loaded with brandies, to be cut up for fuel, for Jan had been felling a tree the day before. When they came home to dinner they heard with astonishment that Nono was off on his wonderful errand. "The little boys" were at once detailed to wait upon Decima, when she condescended to receive their attentions--an office on which they entered with quizzical shrugs and wry faces and many misgivings.

It had struck Jan at once that one of the older boys would have been much better fitted for such a trip than little Nono; but what would they dare to say to a princess? They would perhaps never be allowed to get into the palace at all. Nono, with his pretty ways and bright black eyes, would be sure to get in anywhere. Karin had made him neat enough to come into anybody's house. And as to his telling his story, he could talk like a book when he got started, and make his hands talk too, if he chose.

Old Pelle's eyes had glistened when he heard of the plan. When he bade Nono good-bye, he had begun the boy's favourite text, "He who delivered me from the lion and the bear--" He stopped, and then added, "The princess is no Philistine, but one of the Lord's anointed, I am sure. She is the great King's daughter! You know what I mean, Nono."

Nono did understand, and went out strengthened. He knew he had Uncle Pelle's approval and his blessing on his errand.

CHAPTER XII.**A PEDESTRIAN TRIP.**

Nono had not started alone on his trip to Stockholm. He had with him a companion as lively as himself. A black companion it was, and with a voice that could vary from the deepest bass to the highest treble, not only at will, but at the word of command. Alas! this companion had a ring in his nose like a heathen islander, though he had been born in a Christian country, and had enjoyed unusual advantages for education. He was accustomed to be washed, and to be dressed on occasion, and he took his food most respectably considering his ancestry. If he were not "learned," as some of his race had been, he was at least a most accomplished and amusing companion. Nono had tried hard to make his pet a biped; but the creature was not ambitious of being promoted to walking upright like man, though he could stand on two legs as stiffly as any statue, at least for a few moments. He knew he was after all but a little black pig, with a ring in his nose (as a punishment for rooting), and submitted humbly to being led, and tried to obey his master's least command as far as his intelligence permitted.

When the little black pig had made his appearance at the colonel's, in the midst of six rose-coloured brothers, everybody had been reminded of Nono among the fair-haired children at the golden house. Frans at once declared that the eccentric pig ought to belong to the little Italian, and the present had been finally made, with all due ceremonies, and an appropriate speech from Frans, which won great applause from the auditors. Blackie then and there received his name, which he had ever since retained, and to which he seemed willing to bring honour.

Nono had made his pet a rustic home of his own, and had resolved from the first that Blackie should be something remarkable. Oke had described to the boy the learned pigs about which he had read, and Nono betook himself in earnest to the education of Blackie, and found his efforts crowned with amazing success.

Karin had looked rather gloomy at first about piggie's being destined to an exceptional career, but she relented when she saw what innocent merriment he had introduced into the family. Jan was never too tired to laugh as heartily as the boys to see Blackie giving his hard paw to be shaken, or singing or scolding according to the words of command. If the order were "Scold, Blackie!" he scolded to perfection in his grunting way. If it were "Sing, Blackie!" he laid his head sentimentally on one side, and gave a succession of shrill squeals that brought forth from the listeners a glad round of applause. Blackie's everyday dress was provided by nature, and was dusky of course, but scrupulously brushed--a process which he evidently considered an agreeable luxury.

Blackie had been taken to the yearly fair in a red flannel blanket pointed at the edges, that an elephant might have been proud to wear if it had suited his proportions. Nono had exhibited his pet thus attired, and his accomplishments were so well rewarded that Karin received in advance full pay for Blackie's winter accommodation, to Nono's infinite satisfaction.

Nono had not thought of taking Blackie as a companion in his pedestrian trip until he was passing the home of his pet, after bidding good-bye to the elders of the family. The traveller had been suddenly struck with the thought that Blackie might chance to serve instead of a long purse for the exigencies of the journey, and it would be best to take him, as private property, to supply the possible needs of the uncertain future.

It may be that it had unconsciously seemed dreary to the little Italian to start out into the great world alone, and that a four-footed friend would be better than none. The plan promised to prove a good one; for Blackie was a companion who, though he said little, required too much attention for his master to have many anxious thoughts. Accomplished as piggie certainly was, he was evidently puzzled as to Nono's intentions, and constantly suggested in his own way that the walk had been long enough, and it was time to turn back to the golden house. After a sharp contention on this subject, the travellers came in sight of a house which Nono

fancied would suit his purpose, for he rightly guessed that Blackie's appetite had been sharpened by the long walk in the fresh air. Most abundant refreshments for boy and beast were given on the one side, and on the other a whole family had a hearty laugh to promote their own digestion. Blackie could not have done better if he had fully realized the importance of the occasion.

Towards twilight the glad jingling of bells rang out on the air--a perfect concert of its kind. A train of sleighs drawn by prancing horses came dashing down a long hill that Nono could see in the distance, as he trudged over a level stretch below. Nono stepped out into the soft snow as the first sleigh was almost upon him, the pace of the horses being prudently slackened at the sight of the uncommon impediment in the road. Nono took off his hat and bowed, while his face gleamed with delight at the pretty display--the festal white nets of the horses, and the fur-covered sleighs where the merry party were so comfortably stowed.

When Nono bowed, at a motion from him the pig did the same, standing in his very best way, if not in most graceful court fashion. The little dark figures on the background of snow brought forth a cheery peal of laughter, as sleigh after sleigh passed by with nods and shouts of approval. Some self-sacrificing lover of children first managed to get his hand into his pocket under the wraps; so came, by example, from one and another a small rain of copper, with now and then a silver bit for company. Nono and Blackie plunging round in the snow to pick up the treasures (Blackie hoping for a dainty morsel, and Nono eager that nothing should be lost) made a funny little roadside scene that sent the gay party on their way even more merry than before.

Nono was not sure that he had gathered up all the results of this unexpected exhibition, but he soon felt obliged to resume his march, as the night was coming on rapidly. Blackie introduced him pleasantly to a little shoemaker, who came up from behind and joined the two pedestrians. Of course he asked Nono all manner of questions, and got true replies, as to where he was going and why. The hardy shoemaker had a leather apron over his heart, but the heart in his broad breast was honest and kind. Nono and Blackie were taken into his poor cottage, and were free to sleep in its one room, where he and his wife and two children, and the leather and the shoes to be mended, and much more of a nondescript nature, were huddled together.

In the morning Nono was assured that one day's more walk would bring him near to Stockholm. That was a trifle, the shoemaker said. He had walked as far as that to church every Sunday, when he was young, and lived up in the north, where the snow was not to be sneezed at, and the night lasted almost all day, as he inconsistently expressed it.

As to visiting the princess, the shoemaker assured Nono that was sheer madness. A boy like him would hardly dare to look any of the royal family in the face, he was certain. He had never heard anything particular about the princess, to be sure, but high folks didn't like to be bothered. He advised Nono to show Blackie in the streets. That might bring him a bit of money; and if worst came to worst there was begging, not a bad business in Stockholm he had heard. Money was to be made that way, no doubt, by such a chap as Nono, who had such a pretty story to tell.

The shoemaker meant no harm, after his way of looking at life; but Nono drew himself up straight, and said he believed he should see the princess, he knew about her, and she was almost an angel. He might have added, if he had spoken his thoughts, that he felt acquainted with her after a fashion, and that, further, he hoped he should never come to begging while he was able and willing to work. Nono could pay for food and lodging for himself and Blackie without drawing on Jan's coppers, and he set off full of courage. The shoemaker and his wife had been kind, and he thanked them in his heart, as he had with his lips, at parting, but he felt more and more grateful for his home in the golden house. Nobody ever swore there, or tipped up a black bottle with something strong in it. And how clean it was always, and how cosy!

The shoemaker's discouraging words had, however, been for Nono much like the chilling mist that surrounded him when he started on his second day's journey. He suddenly thought of "the lion and the bear" and "this Philistine," and he was again convinced that there would be a blessing on his undertaking, and the dear

princess would prove to be no Philistine, but just what he had fancied her.

As Nono drew nearer to Stockholm the cottagers seemed to be of a rougher sort; and it was well that he had money to buy what he needed, for nobody seemed to care to look at him or his piggie. When he tried to tell his story about Karin and little Decima, and that he was going to see the princess, he heard only rude shouts of derision or hard words in reply. He got, however, leave to pass the night in a stable, with Blackie beside him, with the parting good-night warning not to steal off with the lent blanket in the morning. It would not have been easy to slip off unobserved, for the stable was locked and barred, and Nono was as safely imprisoned as if he had been in the common jail. The friendly old cart-horse taught him no harm, and mumbled with contentment as it cheerfully ate its humble fare, peering now and then towards the dark corner where Blackie sang and scolded, as if for the special entertainment of the host in the stable.

By making payment in advance in the morning Nono got a glass of milk to take with his hard bread, and Blackie had the same fare, which put him in a good humour for the day.

Nono was surprised to find that he felt a little shy about entering the city, when he saw the spires shining in the morning sun and the houses rising in close lines about them. The mist had fairly rolled away. All nature was bright, but Nono had too solemn a sense of the greatness and the extraordinary nature of his undertaking to be in anything but a serious mood.

He was in the outskirts of Stockholm, when some big apprentice boys who were on their way to their work hailed him as he was in the midst of a contention with Blackie, who seemed convinced that, with all his accomplishments, he was not fit for city life, and it was best for him to stay in the rural districts. The apprentices offered to help Nono, which they did substantially, if subduing Blackie were the matter in question. Two of them took him in their arms and held him firmly, while Nono was ordered to tell honestly how that stylish little pig came into his possession. Nono said simply that it was given to him, and then hurried to tell the story of his errand. He was afraid of the rough, dirty fellows, who had a wild, reckless look about them; and they so interrupted him by loud laughs unpleasant to hear, that Nono got confused, and really gave no very clear account of himself.

The apprentices, putting on an air of mock respect, declared it was quite impossible to go to see the princess with that little pig as a companion, genteel a pig as he seemed to be. They could take care of him, and Nono could call for him on the way home. They lived, they said, in a house at which they pointed in the distant fields. Then they started off in that direction as fast as their feet could carry them, with Blackie held fast in the strong arms of the tallest of the party.

It was in vain that Nono called upon the retiring enemy. They shook their fists at him and laughed mockingly, and called out that they would "give it to him" if he undertook to follow them now. He could call for piggie when he had seen the princess; and again they pointed out the house towards which they seemed to be hastening.

Nono felt inclined to sit down and cry by the roadside. It suddenly struck him that these were Philistines, quite of the scoffing, Goliath sort; but he was not to be discouraged by them, not he! It would have been rather awkward to appear before the princess, in her beautiful home, with Blackie beside him. There was truth in that at least. Perhaps those wild fellows meant well after all. They might have been just teasing him, as "the little boys" teased Decima sometimes, though they really loved her at the bottom. Yes, Decima! he must not forget that it was for her he had undertaken it all. In such a good cause no "Philistines" should make him afraid. He was so far safely on his way. He must thank God and take courage. And he did.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PRINCESS.

Jan had given Nono the strictest injunctions to ask questions only of policemen when he had once entered the great city. Of course Nono implicitly obeyed, and so was soon able to find the palace. What a grand building he thought it, and how beautiful the bright water about it! He was sure the world could show nothing more charming than the home of the Swedish king.

Nono would have trembled at the idea of entering the royal palace if he had not remembered that the good princess, his princess, was there. He had a friend within the castle. Not that the palace looked at all like a fortified castle. Its plain, square sides were pierced by long rows of rectangular windows, while on the water-front two long white wings shut in a quiet garden. In one of these wings, he had been told, the princess had her home. A sentinel was at the entrance of the vast courtyard through which he had learned he must pass. The guard looked so imposing that Nono almost trembled as he took off his felt hat and asked the way to the part of the palace where the princess lived. The sentinel condescended to point his finger towards the colonnade under which the desired door was to be found.

A lady was just ringing the bell. Nono watched her, and then closely imitated her movements. The door flew open for him, too, as it had done for her. A dignified, gray-haired man, in a livery Nono considered quite royal apparel, looked inquiringly at the little visitor. Nono asked simply to see the princess about a matter of importance. He was shown into a room, where a fair-haired lady gave him a kindly reception, and told him her royal highness would see him in a few moments.

What rich moments of waiting those were for little Nono! He stood as if on enchanted ground. From the wall looked out faces of gentlemen and ladies in gorgeous array. Real people they seemed to be, though silent and quiet, as, encircled by bright frames, they condescended to be looked at by the wondering, admiring black eyes that were fixed upon them. There, too, were bits of nature brought into that rich room--flashing waterfalls, and quiet pastures, and golden skies through which Nono almost fancied he could see the heaven beyond.

Nono stepped on the soft carpet without a thought of its strangeness to his rustic feet. A vision of beauty had been vouchsafed to him, and his eyes glanced from picture to picture, now glistening with delight and now lost in rapt admiration.

The fair lady, who had been watching him with amusement, soon told him that he might now go in to her royal highness, but only for a few moments, as this was her morning for receiving the poor, and as she had many to talk with her she was very tired.

Nono saw nothing of the room into which he was now admitted, nothing but the tall, slender, stooping figure that came forward to meet him. The painters have liked to give the angels golden hair, but this was to Nono a black-haired angel. Smooth, dark, glossy bands framed in the high, full forehead, while the delicate chin made a corresponding point below. The large brown eyes were full of loving light, and the thin mouth smiled a welcome before the lips had spoken it.

"What have you to say to me, my boy?" said the princess. A weary look quickly clouded her face, and she sank suddenly into an easy-chair, saying, "I have had many visitors to-day, so you must say quickly and plainly what you have to tell me."

"Perhaps I had better come another day," said Nono. It grieved him to see his princess look so weak and worn. Recollecting himself, he added, "But I don't see how I could, for I have come just for this a long way--from near Aneholm Church."

"Aneholm Church!" exclaimed the princess, brightening. "I once had a dear friend who lived in that neighbourhood. What do you want to tell me?"

It was hard for Nono to make his story short. He must go back to the bear, and how he came to the cottage, or the princess would not understand why he loved Karin and little Decima so, and why he felt he must help them. The princess must hear, too, about the accident, and how it was almost his fault, because he had insisted on having Decima out with the boys.

The princess soon forgot her weariness. This was no common beggar, with sycophant whine and forced civility. Nono spoke freely, frankly, and trustfully. She was some one good and powerful, who, he was sure, would gladly help him. His dark eyes looked into hers as he stood before her, while his words sprang from his heart, and his hands and his whole figure helped to illustrate his story. When he came to little Decima, the sister whom the brothers loved and took care of, who played with the boys, and was the pet and darling of all, the whole face of the listener was aglow.

"I was just such a little sister!" exclaimed the princess. "I never played with a doll in my life. I was the special pet with one of my brothers, who loved me very dearly. We romped and we painted, and we made clay figures together. I know what a brother can be!" and the tears for a moment filled her eyes. She dashed them away, and told Nono to go on with his story.

Nono wanted to say that he had seen a beautiful thing the princess had made, and that was one reason why he felt so acquainted with her, but he wisely kept to Decima and what he wanted for her.

When the princess heard of Decima's misfortune, and of the big room where all the family lived, the boys always leaving the door open to blow on the little patient, her heart was quite melted, as it had been many times before, as she compared her own comfort with the surroundings of the sick poor. She herself had been long an invalid, and often for months a prisoner in her beautiful rooms. She put out her arm towards Nono, who had drawn near to her in his eagerness, and was now close at her side. Affectionately her white slender hand was laid on the boy's, as she said,--

"Yes, Nono, your little Decima shall have a place in my home for sick children. I will have the permit made out at once, and she can come as soon as 'Mother Karin' can send her."

The princess spoke aside to the fair lady, who began to write the few words that were necessary, but stopped to ask Nono the full name of the patient.

"Decima Desideria Persson," was the prompt reply.

"Desideria!" said the princess, with a pleasant smile. "That was my grandmother's name, so the little girl half belongs to me to take care of."

"We don't call her Desideria," said Nono truthfully. "She had that name because it stands in the almanac, and seemed to sound well with Decima, Mother Karin thought; and besides, she wanted the only little girl to have a name-day to keep as well as the boys."

Again the pleasant smile came into the face of the princess. She wrote in a free and flowing hand her signature to the permit, which was duly placed in an envelope and given to Nono.

"Since Decima Desideria is to be my guest, I must pay for her journey," said the princess.

Nono received the generous gift, and dared to kiss the hand that gave it. He was too full of joy and gratitude to express himself fully by his murmured thanks.

"I understand you, Nono," said the princess. "You can go now. Perhaps we shall meet again, some day; perhaps up there, if we both love the dear Lord and try to be his true children." The thin hand made a sweep upwards towards heaven, whither Nono, child as he was, felt that his princess was going, all too soon for the mourning hearts she would leave behind her.

So ended Nono's visit to the royal palace. The princess sank wearily back in her chair when the fair lady had gone out with Nono. On her mild face there was a shadow that betokened something more than weariness. That little boy she had trusted so implicitly while she looked into his clear eyes, what if he should prove an impostor? She had had her own bitter experience from the falsehoods of the apparently needy. "No! Nono is not an impostor, I am sure," she said to herself. "Little Decima, no doubt, ought to be taken care of immediately." A slight smile came over her thoughtful face as she recalled the unusual name.

The dignified old servant now brought in the letters from the morning mails. The first that the princess opened was in an unfamiliar hand. A cloud of sadness came over her, as a friend long in heaven was recalled to her mind. The colonel had written, not to renew the sorrow of the princess by reminding her of his lovely wife, but to say that he had accidentally heard of Nono's departure, without credentials or recommendations of any kind to insure her confidence. The letter guaranteed the truthfulness and honesty of the boy, and contained warm words in favour of the family at the golden house.

The good princess was glad to be acquitted of rashness in her promise, and was once more encouraged to love and to trust, and to give freely out of her abundance.

Little Nono had started cheerily on his homeward journey, grateful at heart. He was hopeful as to finding Blackie at the house where he had been assured his pet would be awaiting his return from the palace. Nono was met there by rude answers to his eager inquiries, and was told that no one had seen anything of a little black pig, nor did any one on those premises wish to see anything more of a little dark boy full of impudent questions. There was a sweep of meadows about the house, and no other dwelling was near the spot.

Nono could but disconsolately begin again his homeward walk, and try to forget his pet in the thought of the future opening before little Decima. He betook himself to the highroad, and trudged along as cheerily as he could. Drops of blood on the snow suddenly arrested his attention. They formed a regular line leading into the far distance, where a familiar black object was getting over the ground at a marvellous rate. It must be Blackie! Nono gave a long whistle by which he was accustomed to call his four-footed friend. The black object stopped. The whistle was repeated, and in a few moments the little pig was awkwardly capering about his master, almost tying his tail into knots, as it was twisted round and round as an expression of delight.

Blackie had evidently escaped from confinement and uncongenial society. Where he had been, of course he could not tell. His poor nose was sadly torn where the ring had been wrenched away as he broke loose from his imprisonment. Nono was glad that Blackie had lost his badge of servitude; and as to needing a rope to be led by, the poor creature was willing enough to follow Nono wherever he might choose to lead him. A kind countryman returning from the city with an empty waggon gave the odd pair a good lift, and took them along so rapidly that towards evening they reached the shoemaker's cottage. Nono thought best to be set down there, and he was hardly on the ground with Blackie beside him when there was an impromptu concert of singing and scolding that brought the inmates of the house at once to the door.

Of course the travellers were warmly welcomed. There was great eagerness to hear Nono's adventures, and he was at once besieged with all sorts of questions. When he had told his story, the shoemaker got up and bowed respectfully to the absent princess, whom Nono had so vividly described that she seemed actually standing there in the cottage. "There be some good people left in high places!" exclaimed honest Crispin. "It's of no use talking against the royal family while such a princess is above ground." So some dim socialistic ideas that had been troubling the mind of the poor shoemaker died a violent death, and the warm loyalty of his youth took the upper hand.

Nono and Blackie were hospitably housed for the night, and treated almost as if they were ambassadors from court, with a flavour of royalty about them.

It is needless to tell with what joy the travellers were received the next day at the golden house, or what rapid preparations were made for Decima's departure. The princess should see that Jan and Karin were prompt to avail themselves of her kindness.

Jan took an unusual holiday, and actually was for the first time in a railroad car, with Decima cuddled close at his side.

Decima Desideria, who had a keen sense of her own fitness to come to honour, really seemed to think the children's hospital had been established for her special benefit, and that her presence there, and the ado that had been made about her, were quite natural matters, with which gratitude had very little connection. Once made mistress of one of the little white beds, and surrounded by every comfort, her arrogance and her exactions would probably have known no bounds, if she had not wonderingly seen about her from day to day deformed children, suffering children, and almost idiots, as tenderly cared for as herself. It somehow came into her head to be thankful that she at least had but to lie in her bed, without great pain, that she could understand all that was said to her, and could even be learning to knit and crochet, which she was doing with extreme satisfaction.

How Decima longed to see the good princess! When at last that much-talked-of princess came and stood by her bed, and beamed down love and tenderness, the little invalid was softened into real gratitude, which she managed brokenly to express, with tears in her eyes. Then the kind princess talked to her cheerfully and naturally of the great Shepherd of the lambs, as of some one whom she knew and who was really dear to her.

At the golden house religion had been lived and inculcated; at the hospital it seemed the felt, ever-pervading atmosphere. Heavenly comfort was sung in the sweet hymns, breathed in the trustful prayers, spoken of as something always in mind, and acted out in the sweet offices of love towards the unfortunate. Such surroundings were life-giving to the poor little invalid. Her fretfulness gave way, and a sweet quietness succeeded her nervous irritation. After the weary turmoil of the past in the noisy, crowded home, there was now a serene peace for her, as if the angels had taken her under their sheltering wings.

CHAPTER XIV.**WHERE?**

Alma was sitting in her own room, with her treasure-house before her. Its door was still fast locked, as was her purse for all applications for pecuniary help. Closed, too, seemed the door of her heart to the great Friend who still lovingly knocked without. His question, "Where is the guest-room?" had been met by a long, unbroken silence.

Now Alma's mind was on her future plans. She had shaken the little cottage, and had been quite dissatisfied with the result. She rose hastily. A drawer in her writing-desk was impulsively unlocked. She took out a jewel-case where a diamond ring, and a brooch set with the same precious stones, and a watch with a monogram in pearls, were lying side by side. She looked admiringly at them, and carefully examined them all. The ring, the brooch, and the little watch were then deliberately let down the chimney of the golden house, as if they had been black sweeps on a lawful errand. They were given, "offered," she felt, and her design was now far on its way to its accomplishment. There could be no more earthquake-like shakings of that cottage. That amusement must be abandoned.

There was a sharp prick from Alma's conscience in the midst of her evident satisfaction. Her father had said this jewellery would some day belong to her, and had even, at her special request, allowed her to have the now sacrificed treasures in her own keeping. "They were to be mine. They *are* mine," she said to herself. "I have offered them. I shall never wear them now. My mother in heaven would approve of what I have done." Here her conscience gave her a cruel pang. She was inclined to open again the velvet-lined box, and lay the jewellery where it had so long rested, but that was impossible without opening the little locked door of the treasure-house. That she had vowed to herself she would not do before the time appointed--a time she was now most anxious should soon arrive.

At this moment Alma heard the sound of footsteps. She thrust the case into its drawer, locked it and dropped the key into her pocket like one disturbed in a dishonest act rather than in a noble deed. There was a loud knock at the door. Alma opened it, and Frans stood before her.

"What do you want here?" she said impatiently.

"I can't find papa," said Frans. "I wanted to tell him that it went 'bully' for me at the examination this morning. I thought perhaps your highness might like to know it too. The teachers seem to think I shall stand 'tip-top' in my report."

"I don't believe you will deserve it," said Alma sharply. "I never see you studying."

"But I have studied lately, more than I ever studied in my life. I didn't go to bed a single night last week before one o'clock."

"You ought to be ashamed to tell it!" said Alma reprovingly. "You know papa don't allow you to sit up late."

"I shall tell him about it myself, and I know papa will excuse me," said Frans, in high spirits.

The colonel did excuse Frans, and was delighted to hear of his success, though he did not fail to say it was hard to make up by such forced studying for neglect during the term, and a thing that he hoped would never be needed again.

Frans was in a glorious good-humour during the short time he allowed himself for lunch, and made his pony fly as he hurried back to school immediately afterwards.

The school was in a village about twenty minutes' ride from the colonel's home. The afternoon session was over, and yet Frans did not return. The colonel was very anxious about his son. He feared that he had been induced to celebrate his success in some wild frolic, and sent in a messenger to search after him.

The report came back that Frans had done very badly at school during the latter part of the day, and had ridden off at full speed, evidently in a very bad humour at his failure.

Later in the evening the pony came home, riderless, and sorrow settled on the household at Ekero.

"It is only some foolish trick that Frans is playing upon us!" Alma had said at first, but as the hours wore away she too had become really anxious.

The colonel, who went himself at once to the village, came home late, discouraged and distressed. Telegraphing and sending off messengers in every direction had been in vain. The morning brought terrible news. A theft had been committed in a shop near the schoolhouse the evening before, and an older pupil of bad repute had disappeared. It was generally whispered that he and Frans had gone off together.

Alma's feelings can easily be imagined. Shame, anger, righteous indignation, and real distress were strangely mingled together. Her father left home as soon as these horrible rumours were told him. Alma was alone all day, save when she was called on to hear the moans of the housekeeper over her "dear boy who had gone wrong; such a sweet boy as he had always been towards her."

At such a mention of himself Frans would have been much astonished, as this faithful friend of the family had not failed to set his shortcomings fully before him. She now reproached Alma for not making home more pleasant for her brother, for "worrying and worrying at him until he had no peace of his life. Such a knowing boy as he was, too, with the ways and doings of beasts and birds at his tongue's end. As for the Swedish kings, he could tell stories about them all a long midsummer day, if a body had patience to listen. And *he* not do well at an examination!" and the housekeeper snapped her fingers in contempt of the whole pedagogical corps.

To these various forms of lamenting Alma listened in convicted silence. She was glad of any company in the dismal loneliness of the house, and felt she deserved much blame, if not all the burden of responsibility that was cast upon her, for Frans's misdoings.

The colonel had been unwearied in his efforts to find his son; but when he was at last convinced that he had gone off in company with a boy suspected of actual theft, he would not seek for his son to be brought home to public trial and possible conviction. The authorities might find the boys if they could, he would take no further steps in the matter.

The colonel locked himself into his room, and not even Alma's gentle knock was answered. Like the housekeeper, he had a deep sense of Alma's coldness and bitterness towards her brother, and he understood how Frans must have dreaded to meet her after his disgrace at the examination. He understood, too, how much Frans must have feared his displeasure; but that such a mother's son should be so degraded as to consort with a thief and possibly share his guilt! The thought was madness. He pictured the desperate boy, flying perhaps to a far country, to suffer, and sin and go down to the lowest depths of degradation. The prayer burst forth from the depths of the colonel's heart, "God have mercy on my son! God have mercy on me, a sinner!" There was a thoroughgoing penitence in that closed room. The colonel's whole life stood before him, with all its shortcomings and its sins. To the world it had been an outwardly blameless life, but within there had been an uncertain faith, a half-heartedness, an indecision in his inner life, that ill befitted one who so well knew the love and purity of his heavenly Father. He cast himself upon his knees, to rise forgiven, and strengthened to lead a decided, devoted Christian life. With his own humiliation came back his tenderness towards his absent, erring boy.

When the door was opened at last to Alma, she saw the traces of sorrow and deep emotion on her father's face. She threw herself into his arms, exclaiming, "Dear, dear papa!" She could say no more. He gently closed the door by which she had entered. No human being ever knew the words that then passed between them, but they were henceforward to be bound together by a new and a holier tie than ever before.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BIRTHDAY GIFT.

In the midst of the shadow over the household at Ekero, Alma's birthday had come. No festivities could be thought of. No birthday table was decked for her with flowers and gifts. Her father had not even remembered the fact that she was now eighteen years old until the evening came on. The housekeeper, a thorough Swede in all things, could not forget such an anniversary; but she was in no mood towards Alma to prompt to any particular kindness in that direction, or any festal preparations.

The father and daughter were sitting quietly together in the study in the evening. "Alma," he began, "I have just remembered that it must be your birthday. It has been a sad, neglected birthday for you, my child; but it shall not pass altogether without notice. Give me the jewel-case that has been in your charge, and the key too, dear. I have, of course, meant that you should have these things that were so peculiarly associated with your dear mother's younger days. The watch you can wear at once, as your own does not seem to keep good time. Hers was an excellent time-keeper, and it will remind you to be exact and true, and gentle and holy, like your dear mother. I shall take real pleasure in seeing you wear it. Go, daughter, at once! I am glad I thought of something that will please you on your birthday."

Alma obeyed mechanically, and returned quickly with the empty case in her hand, hoping that when the critical moment came she should be able to explain herself satisfactorily. She gave the casket into her father's hands, and waited in a silence so natural under the circumstances that he did not notice it.

There was no sparkle from the dark cushions, but a sudden, astonished sparkle in the colonel's eyes. "Empty, Alma! What does this mean?" he exclaimed.

"I have given them away," she said, blushing very deeply.

"Given them away!" repeated the colonel, slowly and sternly.

"I have given them for a good object, very dear to my heart. I am sure you would approve of it. Please, papa, do not ask me any more about it now. I do not want to tell you yet. It is a secret. I have promised, just to myself, and almost to God, never to tell any one until a certain thing is accomplished--until I can fully succeed."

"What is the matter with you, child? Have you lost your senses? You had no right to give away things intrusted to your care. I have told you that, by your mother's simple will, all she had was left at my disposition. Am I to be disappointed in both my children?" and the colonel bowed his head upon his hands.

"Dear papa, you are not to be disappointed in me! I have done nothing wrong." Here Alma's conscience gave her a sharp prick. Suddenly she broke out, after a moment's pause, "I want to be like the princess. I am sure that would please you, papa! You know she sold her jewels for a home for the sick poor."

The colonel answered seriously: "The princess is a saintly woman, and you would do well to follow her example. She sold her jewels to build a home for the aged sick, but she did not do it, princess and grown woman as she was, until she had asked the consent of her mother and her brother the king. What have you done, my child? What have you been thinking of? You must explain yourself fully. I have a right to demand it!"

Alma again left the room, to return with the little yellow house in her hands. "Here is my savings-box, papa," she said; "Nono made it for me."

A flush of pleasure came over the face of the colonel. "So exactly like Karin's cottage!" he exclaimed. "What a clever little boy! I like him."

"I thought--I thought," said Alma, encouraged by her father's smile--"I thought I would like to have a home for sick little children. I wanted to save my money to do something really good and lasting, instead of fooling it away by giving a little here and there, that did not after all do much good to anybody. I have saved all I could, and have given nothing away for anything else, but it went very slowly, and then I thought of those ornaments that were to be mine, and--I really did not think you would care." Here Alma blushed, and added, "I hoped you would not mind!" and her tears fell fast.

"My poor child!" said the colonel, as he put his arm around her and drew her to his side. "So this is the explanation of the change that had passed over you, and had given me so much pain!--my little Alma, who loved so dearly to give, and who has lately been so hard and cold that the very idea of an appeal from a poor family seemed to close her heart and stiffen her face into determined opposition. You cannot be a princess, dear, and do some great thing. I am afraid there was more pride than holy love in your plan. You should not think of yourself when you want to do good, but of your heavenly Master and his suffering brothers. Remember that! That was your dear mother's way. Self seemed dead in her. If she could but have lived to teach you by her beautiful example! It is not in seeking to do some great thing that we are in the right path. The little things that come to us day by day and hour by hour are safest for most Christians, and surely so for beginners. Where is the key to this locked little house?"

Alma produced the key at once, and placed it in her father's hands. He might open that small door if he pleased. She fancied it would be almost wrong to do it herself.

The door was opened, and there, among small coins and great, lay the jewels. The crystal of the watch had been broken by some falling contribution. The colonel took the watch in his hand, and said,--

"This can easily be repaired. You must wear it constantly; and may it remind you that the best gifts to God are those that are offered humbly, modestly, with no thought of self, and with no desire for the praise of man. If the little watch can so remind you of your duty, it will be a holy messenger to you, and so in a way set apart to the service of God. You have unwisely given, as you thought, the diamonds to the poor. We will not take them back. Your dear mother had not herself worn them for many years. They shall be sold, and you may send the money anonymously to any hospital for children where help is needed. So you will keep your motives. With the money lying in the little cottage you can have the joy of helping the suffering poor; but you had better consult with me as to how to use it. It is not to be thrown away now lavishly on every applicant, to do perhaps more harm than good. Lay the jewels in the case and lock the door of the little cottage." He was going to add, "Remember, Alma, that one kind word from you to your brother is a better offering for you than much money given in charity." The words were not spoken. He but said, "Poor Frans! where is he? God help my boy!"

Alma put her arm round her father's neck and whispered, "Dear papa, if Frans comes home--when he comes home, I do really mean to be more kind to him than ever before; but he--"

"No 'buts,' Alma," said the father. "However far wrong your brother has gone, he is still your brother, your only brother, and it will be your duty to love him, and pray for him, and watch over him with tender affection. He has no mother. You must be to him all that a good sister can be."

"Papa!" said Alma, deeply moved, "you are too gentle towards me. I do not deserve it. I half felt all the while that I might be doing wrong about those things that did not really belong to me. I see it now very plainly. I would not listen to my conscience. I see I had a foolish pride in what I was trying to do. I did not see it clearly then, but now I know I was taking possession of what did not really belong to me--I who have been so angry with Frans, so ashamed even to think of him as my brother! I don't know what I should have been if I had

fallen into temptation, and had had a bad companion to lead me on! Please, please, papa, forgive me! I know you do; but I cannot forgive myself! I am sure the sight of dear mamma's watch ought always to make me humble."

"May God help you and keep you from all evil!" said the father solemnly, as he kissed his daughter and bade her good-night.

CHAPTER XVI.**SPECTACLES.**

The news of the disappearance of Frans had brought gloom to the golden house. There he had been lovingly received, and had appeared at his best. Nono was clear in his mind that Frans had had nothing to do with the theft, however wrong he might have done in running away and causing his friends such painful anxiety.

Jan shut his mouth firmly and went about in determined silence. Karin cried as if it had been her own boy who had gone wrong.

"He hasn't had any mother to look after him," said Nono, and he patted Karin tenderly. "If you could have had him it would have been quite different, I am sure."

"That is a fact," said one of the twins.

"A solid fact!" echoed the other.

Karin smiled for a moment kindly, and then said soberly, "If only Uncle Pelle were here! I should so like to know what he would say."

Old Pelle had gone on his pedestrian trip. Not that he had any sportsman accoutrements, or used any slang as to the particulars of his expedition. In one respect he was prepared for his excursion on the strictest modern principles. He was lightly equipped as to clothing, and in woollen garments from top to toe. Better still, he had a light heart within, and a thankful one. He was out on a pleasant errand.

Pelle was now a settled resident in the parish where the golden cottage stood, with occupation pledged to him while he had strength to work, and a support as long as life lasted. The colonel had settled that matter; and Karin rejoiced to see the shadows cleared from the old man's future, with the bright prospect of his continuing to be "a blessing" to them, as she said, "while he was above the green grass."

Pelle had left a few trifles at the poorhouse, where he had been grudgingly received during his last long attack of serious illness. He had before been unable to make up his mind to go after his small belongings. There had been lingering in the depths of his heart a germ of bitterness about the whole affair, and he had been afraid it might spring into strong life if he returned to see the old place again. Now the rankling, tormenting thoughts had vanished in the sunshine that had come to him, and he was sure it would be pleasant to see the familiar scenes again, and to take well-known people by the hand in a friendly way, and let bygones be bygones.

Pelle had been rowed over to the opposite side of the bay, to avoid an unnecessary bit of walking; and now that he was expected home, Nono was sent across the water to meet him. Nono was already in the boat and taking up the oars, when Alma came strolling along the shore with her hands full of wild flowers, for she had been botanizing. "Let me row with you," she said eagerly to Nono.

"Yes," said Nono; "I am going after Uncle Pelle. But the boat--" and he looked at Alma's light dress, and then at the traces left of the last trip of the fishermen to whom the boat belonged.

"Never mind that," said Alma cheerily. "I can manage my dress, and I do so love to row." She seated herself and took up a pair of oars.

It was a long pull across the bay, and they were only half over when they saw a sail-boat in front of them, making for the wider part of the inlet.

"Not very good sailors, I think," said Nono critically, for Pelle had taught him how to trim a sail. He had hardly spoken the word when a flaw struck the little skiff they were watching, and it capsized instantly. There was a loud shriek from the place of the accident, and a groan from Nono and Alma. They could soon see two heads, and arms clinging to the upturned boat. Alma and Nono rowed desperately towards the spot, but made slow progress, as the bay had suddenly grown rough, and the wind was contrary. They could distinguish the faces now. One was unknown, but Alma's eyes grew large and full of anguish as she recognized her brother. "It is Frans!" she said to Nono.

"Yes," was his only reply, and they pulled with even more determination than before. In a few moments Frans and his companion were taken on board by Alma and Nono.

"Frans!" said Alma, as she laid her hand in his, "I was so afraid--I was so afraid we should not reach you in time. You can swim; why didn't you start out for us?"

"Knut here can't swim, and of course I couldn't leave him. I knew I couldn't keep him up and make my way to you. It was better for us to hold fast as long as we could."

A well-manned boat was now seen coming towards them from the shore. The strong rowers soon brought it to their side. Knut looked meaningly at Frans, but was silent.

"We must have those young fellows," said the person in command, who was evidently an officer of justice.

The dripping boys changed their quarters without a word. Frans turned and looked at Alma as the boat he had entered headed for the shore. "Thank you, sister," he called out; "you rowed like a man!"

He had never called her "sister" before. Alma's eyes filled with tears. She moved as if to row after her brother.

"Uncle Pelle will be expecting us. I think I see him there waiting," said Nono. "We must go for him." Nono was decided. This was the errand on which he was sent, and the duty must be done, even though Miss Alma might be displeased with him. Alma looked impatient, but after a moment she began to move her pair of oars willingly as she said, "You are right, Nono," and relapsed into silence.

When Pelle came on board, Nono did not say anything about what had happened until Pelle himself, who had seen the whole from the shore, asked what it all meant, and who the boys were who had so mismanaged their boat, "green hands" as he could see.

"You can tell him, Nono," said Alma. "He will have to know it all. But I am so glad Frans was not drowned!"

Alma looked straight forward over the water, while Nono, as kindly as he could, told in a few words all the sad story to Pelle, who listened in silence; but towards the close a strange gleam of intelligence came into his eyes. Pelle never talked if he were not in the humour, and now Nono was not surprised that no answer came from the old man's firmly-closed lips.

Alma was the first to step ashore. With a hurried nod to her companions she moved off swiftly towards her home.

"Now pull for town--pull, Nono!" said Pelle, with unusual energy, taking up himself the oars that Alma had laid down.

Pull they did, tired as were Nono's young arms, and feeble as were Pelle's. The distance was short by water, and the two were soon at the magistrate's office, where Pelle expected to find the delinquent boys. They were already there. Their wet clothes had been changed, and they were for the moment in private conversation with

the colonel, who had been summoned immediately on their arrival.

In the pocket of the dripping coat that had been worn by Frans a bundle of the missing bank-notes had been found, carelessly rolled in a bit of yellow wrapping-paper. This all the by-standers about the door had heard, for the proceedings at the country seat of justice seem to be considered to belong to the small public of the neighbourhood.

While Pelle was waiting without, Nono having been sent back at once with the boat, the colonel was holding Frans by the hand, and talking to him from the depths of his stirred paternal heart.

"I have you, Frans, as one alive from the dead, and so I must talk to you," said the colonel solemnly. "Don't answer me; don't speak a word, Frans!--And you, boy," and he turned towards Knut, "keep quiet. No excuses; no explanations from either of you!--I want to say to you, Frans, what I should have longed to say to you if you had sunk in that deep water. I have not watched over you as I should, my boy. I take my share in the blame of what you have done. I have been too wrapped up in my own sorrows, my own ill-health, and my own melancholy reflections, to be to you what I ought to have been. I find I love you most intensely, and your loss would have been a terrible blow to me. Your bright face gone for ever from the home would have made it dreary indeed. You have caused me great sorrow by running away, and have, I fear, been guilty of that for which the law must punish you."

[Illustration: Frans admonished.]

Frans stirred as if about to speak.

"Silence!" said his father sternly. "The missing bank-notes were some of them found in your coat pocket. You had no such money when you left home; you will be called on to account for its being there."

Frans stared speechlessly at his father, and then looked at his companion.

"He's been free with money since we were out," said Knut; "but I supposed such high-fliers had always no end of cash on hand, and never suspected anything more than the boys' frolic we started out for when we found it had gone contrary for us at school."

"Papa!" began Frans eagerly.

At the moment an officer came in to say, "There is an old man outside--old Pelle everybody calls him--who says he *must* see the boys; that it is most important for them." The magistrate and Pelle and several other solemn-looking individuals entered the room.

Pelle looked first at Frans and then at his companion. The strange gleam came again into his eyes as he bowed to all present and asked to be allowed to tell his story. Permission to speak was authoritatively given him, and he began,--

"About four hours ago I was standing by the bay, up at Trolleudden, when I saw that young fellow," pointing at Knut, "come up to a chap who had a sail-boat there to let to the summer villa people. The boy wanted a boat for a trip down the bay. He was willing to pay handsomely, he said, and he did, with a bank-note, though he didn't look as if he were much used to handling that sort of thing. I somehow thought there must be something wrong about it. Then I went up to the little inn to get a glass of milk and a bit of bread. When I came into the sitting-room, there was a boy there, who sat with his arms on the table, and his head on his hands, with his hat tipped down so over his eyes that I couldn't see his face. He was dressed like a workman, with a leather apron on, and a coarse shirt, and an old overcoat outside, though it was so warm I was glad to go in my flannel sleeves. There was something queer about the boy. I could see his hands. They were not very clean, to be sure,

but they didn't look as if they had seen much real work. I soon got through thinking about the boy, who seemed to be asleep. I finished my bread and milk, and took out my book to read while I rested, and quite forgot where I was. Suddenly I heard somebody steal into the room, tiptoe up, and stand behind me. I kept quite still, but on the watch, for I felt all was not right. As I looked into my spectacles I saw who it was that was so near me. Often in church I see the person who is standing behind me. I don't know how it is, but I do, as if my spectacles were a looking-glass. I didn't like the sly, bad face right before my eyes. I could not help seeing it between me and the book, and I knew it was the lad who had hired the boat. In a second an arm was stretched forward towards the boy who was sitting very near me, the other side of the corner of the table, and a little yellow parcel was tucked into the pocket of his great-coat. I had nothing to say in the matter, and did not let on that I noticed it. It might be some young folks' frolic. I am not used to meddle in other people's business, but I generally know what goes on round me. The face went out of my spectacles, and the door shut quietly. I finished my reading and went out. Those boys I have not seen again to know them till I meet the very same here."

"What were you reading?" asked the magistrate sternly.

"This book," said old Pelle, taking out his worn paper-covered "Thomas à Kempis," and handing it to the gentleman, who returned it without a word, but ordered the wet clothes of the boys to be brought in. "I don't know those things, surely," said Pelle, pointing to the larger suit, "but should say that might be the leather apron the younger boy had on. I couldn't be sure either of the coat, but the striped shirt is just like the wrist-band that showed as the boy had his arms on the table, as he was asleep or pretended to be."

"The roll of bank-notes was found in that coat, wrapped up in a bit of yellow paper," said the magistrate. "You may sit down, Pelle."

The magistrate then solemnly called on Frans to speak for himself.

"I know nothing at all about the money," he said. "I heard somebody coming in at the inn, and put down my head at once, and tipped my hat forward to hide my face. I did not look up again until I had heard the person beside me stir and then go out. I believe I had dozed a little, but I can't be sure."

Knut, when questioned, denied having seen old Pelle at all, and declared that it was probable the whole story had been made up after the old man had heard outside that the notes were found in Frans's pocket. As if anybody could see who was behind him by looking into his own spectacles! It had been a bad business going off with Frans, and he was very sorry for it. He had found Frans in such a taking about his bad report, ashamed and afraid to go home, and talking of working his way as a sailor over the ocean. "Of course I went with him, and tried to take care of him," said Knut, "and this is my reward! Frans and that old fellow have been regular 'chums.' I have often seen them together. Of course 'the quality' would have somebody to turn the world upside down to help them. Frans has his own father, but I"--here Knut sobbed audibly--"a poor widow's son, have nobody to stand by me. If my *poor* mother were here, what could she do for me? But she is far back in the country, not knowing what her boy has come to by trying to help a young scamp who had got into a tight place."

There was much sympathy for Knut in the little assembly, and "Poor fellow! poor fellow!" had been murmured by more than one listener as he went on.

"See out of the back of his head!" continued Knut, "or in his spectacles, as he says! Likely! Better try him," he boldly concluded.

"A good suggestion," said the magistrate.

The court-room seemed suddenly changed into a playroom for grown people. Pelle was placed on a chair,

now here and now there, while different people were placed behind him, and he was called on to say who was leaning towards his shoulder.

Pelle looked and looked in vain. The spectacles told no tales. A sneer went round the room again and again, and Knut was heard to chuckle as he said, "Of course he made up the whole story. That any one in his senses could believe it!"

Pelle was discomfited. At last he said falteringly, "I have told the truth. I did see that face in my spectacles, but I don't see anything now. It has happened to me many times in church on Sunday morning. I am sure I could do it where I sit in the church."

"Why not let him try it in the church?" said the colonel. "I am sure the pastor would give his permission."

The experiment in the church was arranged for the next morning.

Frans and his companion were left in custody for the night, and the colonel went home with a sad heart, but not without some hope that his son would be proved to be innocent. For it was true that Frans had been much at the golden house, and was a great favourite there, and it was not impossible that the temptation to free him had been too strong for Pelle to resist.

The morning came, and at eleven o'clock there was an unusual gathering in the parish church. The stillness round the marble sleepers on the monumental tombs was broken, not by the sound of prayer and praise, but by the low hush of murmuring voices and the tramp of eager feet. Pelle came quietly in and took his usual seat. He bowed his head, just from habit, then followed a silent petition, not for a blessing on the services of the sanctuary, but that the innocent might be defended and the guilty brought to justice.

He raised himself up and sat down, intending to wait for further orders. He suddenly said in a sharp voice, "Take off your hat, Adam or Enos!" and then turned unconsciously to look behind him. Yes, there stood one of the twins, which he could not say, his mouth wide with delight, while a murmur went round, "He was right this time!"

"Of course it was all planned before at the cottage," said a dissenting voice.

"I don't plan to have boys stand in the church with their hats on," said Pelle.

"I ordered the boy to take his place there myself," said the magistrate.

Again and again the experiment was tried, and with success, even the pastor and the magistrate curiously taking their turn in the performance; Pelle then, most respectfully stating whom he had had the honour to see, bowing as he did so.

At last all present were fully convinced that Pelle had spoken the truth, and he was conducted in a kind of triumphal procession back to the cottage.

The question was everywhere agitated, "What is to 'come of Pelle's testimony?" The fate of the boys was not to be altogether decided by him.

The authorized messengers who had been sent to the little inn where Pelle had stopped came back with the innkeeper and the owner of the boat that had been hired by the boys. From them it was easily learned that the culprits had been seen at the time mentioned by Pelle, and had been considered suspicious strangers, especially the older lad, who was foolishly free with his money, and had a bold, bad look about him. The younger boy was described as cast down, and evidently not on good terms with his companion.

The case did not come to a public trial. A large part of the money taken had been recovered, the note paid for the boat being identified as one of the missing bills. The merchant who had been robbed declined prosecuting the offender, as his loss was fully made good to him by the colonel. It was, however, exacted in the agreement that Knut should be sent out of the country at once.

The pastor took Knut home with him, and gave him such a kind, serious talk that the poor lad's heart was quite melted, and he, sincere for the time at least, promised to try to lead a better life.

"He will only go to ruin if he is sent to prison," Pelle had said. "May God help the boy in his own way! I will try to help him in mine. Who knows what I might have been if I had kept on as a sailor!" So Pelle, for the time a prominent man, went round in the neighbourhood and collected money enough to send the guilty boy over the Atlantic to begin life again in the far West.

Karin wrote a short letter to her "son in America," full of love to Erik, and with a request that he would do what he could for Knut to help him on in the right way. Oke penned a full description of the whole affair, which he declared was written so plainly that anybody ought to understand it, let alone a Swede like Erik, born in the best country in the world, though he did now seem to be more than half an American.

A neat suit of clothes had been sent to Frans by the careful housekeeper, so that he looked quite like himself when he took his seat beside his father for his homeward drive.

Oke had made haste to tell all the neighbourhood of the success of Pelle in the church, and Alma had had her share of the good news. Whether Frans would be allowed to return home with his father she had not yet heard. She sat anxiously watching at the window, when there was a sound of carriage-wheels in the avenue. There were two persons in the carriage! Yes, one was certainly Frans!

Alma ran down to the veranda. "Dear, dear Frans! I am so glad to see you!" she exclaimed, as she put her arm around him; and so they followed their father into the house.

"Thank you, sister!" he answered, with a quivering lip. He could say no more.

The colonel went into the library and closed the door, and Frans and his sister were left together. They went back to the veranda and sat down side by side, Frans still struggling to gain self-command.

"Dear brother," began Alma, "I am so sorry I have been a cross, disagreeable sister to you. I mean to be better. I shall try, and you must forgive me if I fail, and am cross to you sometimes."

"Don't speak so, sister," said Frans, interrupting her. "You do not know what you have been to me. You have kept me from much that is wrong. When I have been with the boys, and have been tempted to speak and do as some of them did, I have thought of you. 'What would Alma say to such talk and such doings?' would come into my mind and help me to resist temptation. I have thought of you as something higher, holier, purer than myself. And such a good scholar, too! I have always been proud of my sister. You found fault with me, of course. I deserved it, poor, thoughtless fellow that I have been. I cannot be like you, Alma, but I am really going to try to be better. I have done with idle ways and bad companions. I did not know what Knut really was until we came to be constantly together, and then, bad as I was, I thanked God that I had had such a father and such a sister and such a home. It is only God's mercy that has saved me from a prison. I had no way to prove my innocence. What I have suffered you can understand, but I deserved it all. I have been doing badly all the term. I tried to make it up at the last. All went well with me in the morning, but in the afternoon I was so worn out and so tired and dull that I could not command myself to say what I really knew. Of course I made a miserable failure. I was afraid to meet my father and ashamed to see your face when I had come out so badly. I did the worst thing I could do. I added wrong to wrong, not thinking of all the worry and trouble I was making. I was quite desperate when I met Knut, and he proposed that we should go off together. I caught at

the plan.--Listen. When I was hanging, clinging to the boat, in that deep water, so far from the shore, my whole life came before me; and what a worthless life it was! I seemed shut out from heaven. I felt so miserable and hopeless and wretched! Then I saw you coming over the water. You looked so pale and slight, but you worked like a man. Then I understood that you loved me, that you really cared for me, and would forgive me. I did not know then of the dreadful thing of which I was suspected, but you did, and you and dear father were willing to forgive me. That helped me afterwards to understand that I might try to lead a new life, and to believe our heavenly Father too could forgive me, and willingly give me strength to do better."

Alma had several times tried to speak, but Frans had laid his hand pleadingly on hers as he went on. Now she said solemnly, "Thank God, Frans! we are to begin our new life together. I have not been the true Christian you seem to have thought me, in spite of my very wrong way towards you. I feel that I have set you a very bad example. We must help each other now."

"*You* must help me," said Frans soberly; then starting up, he exclaimed, "But I am forgetting Marie, who has always been so kind to me. You can't think how many messages she managed to send me when I was in town in disgrace, and little things to eat, too, that she thought I would like."

Marie was lingering in the hall, listening not to catch the words of the conversation going on without, but enjoying the satisfaction of hearing the voice of her "dear boy," as she called him, once more in his own home. She had made up her mind, however, to reprove him sharply for causing them all so much trouble. When, however, she saw him looking so humble and sorrowful, so little like himself, she had no reproaches for him, but took his offered hand affectionately, and exclaimed, "You dear boy!" as if he had been a little child.

And Frans felt like a child--a naughty child; but a child forgiven, and resolved to do better.

CHAPTER XVII.

QUESTIONINGS.

Another spring had come to the golden house. Such a little family as Karin now had! She quite mourned over it. The twins had gone to America; Erik had written for them. He had now a good place on a farm, where there was work for two such "hands" as he was sure Adam and Enos must be, raised in such a home. The twins had been good teachers of the Swedish language in their way, the best way, by example; and Erik was soon able to write a letter again that could be understood at the golden house without a translator. He wrote that the twins were the admiration of the country round, and his pride too. So Karin was thankful; but she missed the big, boisterous fellows, and said she felt like an old table trying to stand on three legs, with only Thor and Sven and Nono at home.

Pelle and Nono still had many cozy talks together, for which the boy was much wiser and the old man much happier. But the time came when the little Italian had a real sorrow.

Up in Stockholm the solemn bells were ringing, and mourning garments and mourning hats were everywhere. In stately mansions and in dreary attics real tears of sorrow were shed. The good princess was dead. In the palace, in a grand apartment all draped in black, lay her silent, wasted body, on a pompous funeral bier. Throngs of the loftiest and the noblest of the land passed slowly by, in solemn procession, to pay their last respects to the humble princess and the true-hearted woman who had gone to her reward. Rough peasants and the poor of the city came too, with their tribute of real mourning, grateful to see once more the face of the loving friend who had cast sunlight into their shadowed lives.

Far away in the country little Nono's heart was sorrowful. *His* princess was dead! No one had been able to really comfort him. Suddenly he seemed to see her bright and glad in the Holy City. She was at home at last! She was where she belonged--where "the inhabitant shall no more say, I am sick;" where "the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary be at rest." Nono had now his princess in heaven, and he went about his work with something of the light in his face which he had seemed to see in hers.

From the hospital there came the news that little Decima was drooping and sad. She said she must cry because the princess would never take her on her knee again and call her "Decima Desideria." The child declared she was well now, and she wanted to go home. Indeed she was as well as she could ever be, the doctors said, but she would be a cripple for life. She must always walk with a crutch. A change would do the child good, was the universal opinion; so home came the little girl, to her mother's great delight.

"Such a dear little useful creature as she had learned to be," Karin said, and it was true. As to knitting and crochet-work, no one in that parish could match her. The little lame girl really brought sunshine back to the golden house. She had such sweet songs to sing, and such hymns for Sunday, that Jan said it was quite like going to church to hear her, or more like hearing the little angels doing their best up in heaven. To Pelle she particularly attached herself, laughing merrily, as she said they belonged together, as they both walked with a stick.

Decima was soon the soul of merriment. She seemed to have been provided with an extra stock of gladness, to bubble over, in spite of her misfortune, to be a joy to herself and all about her. Her resources for talk were inexhaustible. She had always stories to tell of her stay at the hospital, something that had happened to herself or the other little patients, whose biographies she had quite by heart.

Of the princess Decima never wearied of talking--how she played with the children, even let them cover her with hay, then rose up suddenly out of the silent heap, and smiled at them so friendly, just like an angel, they all thought. What sweet words she wrote to them, too, about the good Shepherd that would willingly lead them to the green pastures!

"Yes, little Decima is lame for life, but it has been her greatest blessing," said Pelle to Karin. Karin opened her eyes wide, and he went on: "We all spoiled Decima. The boys petted and teased her, and even you, Karin, seemed to think the world must be made all smooth for her. The princess has taught her the way to heaven, and has gone before, so the child understands what a real place heaven is. We mustn't spoil her again."

The caution was needed. When Decima was pleased to speak, all listened. Something was said one day in her presence about a monkey. She began to laugh cheerily, and told about a baby monkey that a hand-organ man brought once to the hospital in his pocket. She had seen him from the window. It was a queer man, they all thought, for he said he was looking for a golden house, where he left a baby long ago. Maybe it was Nono he meant. He only stayed a little while, and then went away, and never came back again.

[Illustration: "She had seen the hand-organ man from the window."]

Nono's eyes gleamed as he listened, and his mouth trembled so he could not speak. "It must have been my father!" he exclaimed at last, and his tears fell fast.

So thought all the family, and the news was soon spread abroad that Nono's father was in Sweden, and was looking for him. Decima had to tell the story over and over again to listeners in the house and listeners without. The colonel and the pastor set on foot an inquiry for the man who had appeared months ago at the hospital, but with no apparent result. The interest in the search gradually died away, and it was the general conclusion that the man had returned discouraged to his native land.

As for Nono, he was quite changed. He did not give up the hope of finding his own father. He seemed always listening, looking out for, expecting something. Yet he did his work faithfully, and was more than ever thoughtful of Karin, and dutiful and obedient towards Jan. There was a special tenderness towards the dear friends in the cottage, as if the time of parting might be near. The likeness of the princess seemed meanwhile to have become especially dear to him. He would stand and look at it long and wistfully, as if he would ask his friend some deep question, or read in her inmost soul.

Pelle watched the boy narrowly, and grew uneasy about him. Nono was not inclined to talk about his father, and Pelle would not force his confidence. He was afraid some wild scheme was forming in the mind of the boy, some plan of going off in search of his father. Pelle took occasion at one time to speak of the sorrow Frans had caused in his home by his disappearance; at another, he enlarged on the dangers that beset young lads without the protecting care of those who understood life better than they did, etc., with innumerable variations.

Nono listened in respectful silence, but with a wandering, wistful look in his eyes.

Alma had been intensely interested in Decima's story. Nono's life was quite like a romance, she said, and she wished she could turn to the last page of the story, as she often did in a book she was reading. She, too, was watching and waiting and expecting. The sound of a hand-organ brought her at once to the window, and many a wandering musician was astonished with questions in Swedish and Italian as to whether he was looking for the golden house, where he had left a baby long ago; what had become of Pionono, the bear; if Francesca were dead, etc. Such questions, put so suddenly and skilfully, Alma fancied would be sure to bring out the truth. The puzzled stragglers often went away from Ekero half suspecting that they were losing their own wits or the young lady had quite lost hers, or that Swedish and Italian were now so confused in their brains that they could fully understand neither. When such wanderers happened to meet Nono on the highroad, they were likely to be further mystified by the dark boy's saying suddenly, "Don't I look like an Italian?" or "I am the baby that was left at the golden house," or some other equally surprising question or announcement.

If Nono chanced to have neglected to speak to such a stranger, he was haunted by the thought that perhaps that very man was his father, and he might have lost his only opportunity of succeeding in his search.

"I shall be glad when winter comes, and these black-haired fellows stop tramping the country round," said Karin one day. "I am tired of the sight of them, and thinking when I see them perhaps they are coming to carry off Nono. What should I do without him? Why, he's just like one of my own boys."

Karin was talking to Pelle. She always allowed herself the liberty of saying out first what was in her heart to him. Now he answered her at once. "You seem to think that Nono was made just to be a pleasure to you, like a baby's plaything. A pleasure he has been to you and to us all, and that I don't deny. God knows what he means to do with the boy, and we don't. It's likely he'll have to go out like the others to earn his living. He can't weed and run errands for Miss Alma all his life. You must think that he is getting to be a big boy, if we do call him 'little Nono.' The Lord will take care of him, I am sure of that," and Pelle turned away from Karin and went into his little room.

Karin dashed away the tears that had come into her eyes at the very thought of parting with Nono, but she thought to herself, "Pelle is right. Nono is getting to be a big boy, and more's the pity. How glad I am that I have Decima for company! and so cheerful and helpful the child is. I don't know how I got on without her so long. If I had had my way and kept her at home, she would have been a wild, spoiled little thing, to be sure. The Lord's ways are best, as Pelle says. That's what I am, a poor scholar at learning. A mother, though, must be a mother, and that the Lord knows as well as I do, and that's a comfort."

CHAPTER XVIII.

NONO'S PLANS, AND PLANS FOR NONO.

Winter had come again. Nono, who was usually of a contented spirit, seemed continually displeased with the weather. It was now the last of January. There had for many weeks been a pleasant alternation of sunshine and storm, of cold and a milder temperature. The snow had been continually on the ground, but not deep enough to be in any way an inconvenience; yet Nono was not satisfied. At last the light flakes had fallen slowly for several days, and then the paths about the cottage were cut out sharply, as from the solid rock.

Nono's face wore an expression of musing satisfaction. He seemed now in a mood for play. Thor and Sven were delighted when they heard him ask their mother's permission to build in his spare time a snow-house after a plan he had in his mind, and if it might stand in the open space between the cottage and the gate. Karin was pleased to see Nono looking so happy, and promptly granted his request.

Nono found no difficulty in getting the other boys to act under his direction, as they had great confidence in his architectural abilities. With such willing hands the work went on cheerily, and with wonderful rapidity. Block after block was put in its place, and the surface most skilfully smoothed and hardened.

After all, it only looked like a watch-house when it was done, Jan said, and he was right. There was much playing sentinel among the children, as they stood on guard, being relieved at stated intervals, even Decima being allowed to share in the fun. This kind of frolic came to an end when Nono, with Karin's leave, had smeared the arched interior with a dismal pasty composition from the refuse of the coal-cellar at Ekero.

Nono now ventured to ask Karin to lend him a sheet to hang for a few days before the opening of the watch-house, as the structure was familiarly called in the family. Sven and Thor gave each other significant punches as the request was granted, to signify that no sheet would have been loaned to them; which was no doubt a fact, as they were not much to be relied on for discretion or care-taking.

Now began the erection of something within the snow-house, which Nono alone was allowed to touch. The so-called "little boys" were of the opinion that Nono was making the stump of a crooked old tree; but Oke, who considered himself an authority in the family as to matters literary and artistic, declared his opinion that Nono was making a model of the leaning tower of Pisa, of which he spoke as familiarly as if he had seen it personally in his travels. To the disappointment of Decima and her brothers, they were soon all shut out from the scene of Nono's labours; and he asked them so kindly not even to peep behind the white curtain, that they gave their promise to do as he wished, and promises were held sacred at the golden house.

One morning, early in February, Nono had gone out early to "the watch-house," and had removed the curtain, as the sheet was respectfully called. The family had finished their breakfast, and were just breaking up to set off in different directions, when there was a sound of sleigh-bells stopping at the gate.

The colonel and a gentleman who was staying at Ekero had started out for a morning drive, "Shall we pass near the post-office?" said the gentleman, taking a letter from his pocket. "I forgot to say before we left the house that I had a letter I was anxious to have mailed at once. It is my wife's name-day, and I want her to get a few words from me."

"We shall not pass the post-office," said the colonel, "but I can get a trusty messenger here;" and the coachman drew up at once at the cottage.

The gentleman started, and the colonel sprang to his feet in surprise.

"How wonderful! so like her! I almost thought I had seen a spectre!" said the stranger. "And her name-day, too. My wife was named after the princess."

Yes! There stood the princess in white garments, seemingly coming forward, her figure gracefully bowed, as it was in life, as if by a loving, unconscious desire of the heart to draw near to all who approached her. A fleecy shawl seemed to lie lightly over her shoulders. Snow-white coils of hair crowned her head, and her fair face had a pure sweetness of its own.

"It is wonderfully like her!" said the stranger.

The family from the cottage now came out, Nono leading Karin, who had all the while been in the secret, and the rest eagerly following.

"Is this your work, Nono?" said the colonel.

Nono modestly bowed, and murmured an answer, while his eyes glowed as if they were on fire.

The sound of little Decima sobbing broke in on the conversation. "That is a cold white princess!" she said. "She can't take me on her knee and tell me pretty stories. I don't like the cold white princess!"

Jan took Decima in his arms, while the colonel said pleasantly: "But we like her, Decima; and we loved the princess, both of us; and this gentleman's wife has her name; and he has written a letter to her that we want taken to the post-office at once, that she may get it on her name-day.--Can you go, Nono?"

Nono was glad to spring away with the letter, full of happy thoughts--that every one knew that it was the princess, his dear snow princess, that he had made with his own hands! The gentlemen liked it, too!

While Nono was joyously bounding along the road to the village, the group round the statue could not get through admiring it.

"He's a wonder, that boy!" said Karin, as she went into the cottage. "That he should come to me to bring up, when I can't cut out a gingerbread baby so that it looks like anything!"

"God knows why he sent him to you, Karin," said Pelle, "and God will know what to do with him in the time that is coming. He is a wonderful boy, that is sure!"

While the simple people at the golden house were talking in this way about Nono, the colonel and his guest had driven away. The stranger had promised to come in the afternoon and take a photograph of the snow statue, and of Nono too, the very best he could get, and of the whole family group just as he had seen them.

As the gentlemen drove on together they talked of the princess, beloved by rich and poor, and of the visitor's wife, one of the pure in heart worthy to bear the name of her honoured friend.

Nono, too, was the subject of conversation. His whole story was told, and listened to with intense interest. It was agreed that Nono should, with Karin's permission, come for some hours every day to Ekero to wait upon the stranger, who was a sculptor, and was making a marble bust of the colonel's wife from the various likenesses of her, assisted by her husband's vivid descriptions of her ever-remembered face and her person and character.

"I must know that boy, and take him to Italy with me in the spring if I can," said the sculptor. "There is an artist in him, I am sure, and it will only be a pleasure to train him."

When, later, Pelle heard the plan that was proposed, he said quickly,--

"Those artist fellows are not always the best to be trusted with the care of a boy. It would be better for Nono to work in the fields, with good Jan to look after him, than to make figures in a far country under the greatest gentleman in the world who was not a good man."

Karin looked relieved, and turned to hear what Jan would say on the subject; for, after all, in important matters it was always Jan who decided.

"The colonel said, when he talked to me"--and here Jan paused and looked about him. He did not object to having it understood that the colonel considered him the head of the family, a fact which Jan himself sometimes doubted--"the colonel said," he continued, "that artist was a Christian man, and he had a wife just fit to be called, as she was, after the princess, and he couldn't say any more. And he didn't need to! They haven't any children of their own, so she just goes where he goes, everywhere, and she's the kind of a woman to be the making of Nono, such a boy as he is. Nono will go with him in the spring; I have made up my mind on that matter."

Karin began to cry. "To bring him up, and such a nice boy as he is, and such a wonderful boy, too; and to love him so, and then have to give him to people who hardly know him at all!" and Karin fairly sobbed.

"You are partial to Nono, Karin," said Jan sternly. He never held back a rebuke for Karin when he thought she deserved it. "You never took on so when your own boys went away, three of them, over the sea."

"*Our boys are our boys*," said Karin, "and that makes a difference. They can't belong to anybody else. I should be their own mother, and they'd feel it, and so should I, if they lived in the moon. But Nono, off there, he may find his own father and mother and never come back. They may be tramping kind of people. Most likely they are, and there's no knowing what ways they might teach him. They have a right to him and I haven't. That's what I feel. I love him just like my own. He wouldn't turn the cold shoulder to his own father and mother if they were poor as poverty or just fit for a prison, I know that. It wouldn't be in him. Not that I think he would forget me. It would be a shame to say it, such a good child as he has always been to me!"

Jan put his hand on Karin's shoulder and looked helplessly at her, as he generally did when she had a flood of tears and a flood of talk at the same time.

Pelle came to the rescue, as he had often done before. "Karin wants to be Providence," he said. "She wants to take things into her own hands. That's the way with women, especially mothers. There was my mother, when I was a sailor, almost sure I would go to the bad; but God just lays me up in a hospital, and turns me square round, and sets my face to the better country. I just went home, and made up my mind to stay by my mother, and do for her as long as she lived; and I did, God bless her! It is good sense, Karin, to let the Lord manage his own way. Your way might not turn out the best after all."

"Yes, I know it," said Karin, wiping her eyes. "But things do come so unexpected in this world, one can't ever be ready for them."

"Just take one day at a time, Karin, and don't bother about what's coming," said Pelle. "We can't any of us say what is to become of Nono, not even Jan, who is so clear in his mind. We don't any of us know what to-morrow may bring. He'll have just what the Lord has planned for him. Women are better at bringing up 'critters' than driving them when they are brought up. They are about the same with boys. Mothers should bring up their boys right, and then let the Lord do what he pleases with them afterwards. Isn't it so, Karin?"

"Yes--maybe--I do suppose you are right, Pelle, and I'll try to remember it. But a man don't know how a woman feels."

"It's well they don't," said Jan curtly. "It wouldn't have suited what I've had to do in life to be like them. Karin's heart is bigger than her head; but things have worked well here so far, and it's likely it will be so to the end," and Jan looked kindly after Karin as she went off to feed the chickens, with Decima in her train, evidently thinking her mother was the injured party.

At the bottom of his heart Jan was convinced that he had about the best wife in the world.

CHAPTER XIX.

PIETRO.

The statue of the princess had long since passed away, and the thoughts of the pleasant scenes around it had melted into the cheerful memories of the past. In the cottage there were ever the photographs of the beautiful white figure and of the family group, and under them an almost perfect likeness of Nono.

The real Nono was far away in the land of his forefathers. He was sorely missed in the home where he had been so tenderly cared for. Blackie was, as usual, wearing deep mourning, though he showed no emotional signs of feeling the absence of his master. Blackie, like many a precocious two-legged creature, had not developed into the wonder that was expected. Example and daily association had made him more and more like his fellows; and Nono had not been long away from the golden house before Jan began to talk about the little black pig as the pork of the future.

Karin had supposed that the parting with Nono would be like the parting with her other boys--a separation only lightened by letters coming rarely, merely to tell that the absentees were well and doing famously. With Nono it was quite otherwise. The letters from him came weekly, almost as regularly as Sunday itself. And such letters as they were, written so clearly, and containing such a particular account of his doings, and, what Karin prized more, warm expressions of grateful affection for the dear friends "at home," as he still called the golden house, though it was plain that the once houseless little Italian had now two homes.

Nono wrote that the artist's wife treated him as if he were her own son, and was teaching him carefully everything that would help him to understand all that was about him. Object lessons they seemed to be, with wonderful Rome for the great "kindergarten." He was learning Italian too, and that he thought charming. As for his work in the studio, it was only a pleasure, excepting that he was impatient for the time when he could make beautiful things himself. When he had walked in the streets at first, he had thought all the boys might at least have been his cousins, and some of them made him feel as if he were looking in the glass. Now and then he would meet a man that he felt sure must be his father, but he did not often dare to speak to such strangers. He had hoped and believed he should find his father in Italy, but now he was sure it would be harder to know him there than in Sweden. He had almost given up thinking about it lately, he had so much to do and so much to see, and everybody was so kind to him.

Karin did not feel that Nono was drifting away from her, though he wrote so openly and affectionately of his new friends. His thankful remembrance of all the love and care he had had at the cottage was expressed in every letter, and a deeper gratitude for the kind instruction that had taught him from his childhood to love his heavenly Father, and to try to obey his holy laws.

Alma missed Nono, it was true, for she had really grown fond of the little friendly boy while he had been an inmate at Ekero; but she had a new deep content in the pleasure she was learning to find in the society of her brother. Together they were struggling heavenward, and were daily a help and joy to each other.

Alma was walking on the veranda one morning in early summer, when she saw what she thought two tramps approaching. She had no liking for such wanderers, and turned to go into the house. At that moment she caught sight of the worn face of the older man, and stood still. He looked so gentle, and yet so weary and weak, as he clung to the arm of his younger companion. They were not dressed like Italians, nor like any style of persons in particular, for their costume was evidently made up of cast-off garments that had seen better days. Their faces, though, were dark and thin, and there was a southern fire in the eyes of the younger man as he said at once in tolerable Swedish, "Pietro here is tired. He cannot get any further, miss. I told him he could not hold out for this trip, but come he would, and I had to let him. Perhaps he could sit down somewhere a few moments and get a glass of milk or something like that."

"He looks very tired," said Alma. "Go that way to the kitchen, and I will see that you have something to eat."

The colonel, hearing voices, came out at the moment. He saw at once that the men were Italians, and addressed them in their own language. The eyes of the one who had spoken flashed with pleasure, and a light came into the face of his companion, who now said in Italian, "I have been very ill. It is too cold for me up here. No summer, no summer! The north killed my wife long ago, and I suppose it has killed me. I knew this man when I was here before. I only met him again yesterday. He knows where the house is I want to find. I left my boy there, a baby, and I want to know if he is alive. It was Francesca's baby, and she loved it before she went wrong," and he touched his forehead significantly.

The colonel looked meaningly at Alma, whose eyes were wide with intense interest, for she had understood enough to follow the conversation.

The colonel took the hand of the old man kindly, and said,--

"You must rest here a little, and then we will talk together."

When Pietro was refreshed by rest and food the colonel sat down beside him, and told him all about the happy life Nono had had at the cottage, and how he had made the snow statue of the princess, and was now far away in Italy, learning to be perhaps a great sculptor himself.

The tears rolled slowly down the old man's cheeks as he listened. "It is good to hear, Enricho," he murmured, addressing his companion; "but I am too late, as you see."

"Can't we keep him here, and take care of him? He is our Nono's father, of course, papa," said Alma, much moved.

Alma had truly received into the inner chamber of her heart the heavenly Guest, and she was eager to share all with his humbler brethren.

"Where shall we put him?" said the colonel thoughtfully.

"In the little room in the wing, where the painters slept last summer," answered Alma promptly. "I will see that it is all nice for him. He looks so sick and tired. I am sure Marie will do her best for him, she was so fond of Nono. And, dear papa, we can use my money for him. I have ever so much still left in my little cottage. Let me, please, papa!"

The colonel gazed lovingly at Alma as he said,--

"Now you look so like your dear mother. It is just what she would have said. Certainly we will keep him here."

Enricho was only too glad to leave Pietro in the pleasant quarters that were prepared for him before evening. When the weary old man lay down in his comfortable bed, with everything neat and clean about him, he felt as if he were in some strange, blissful dream. He was not to see his boy; but how lovingly they had spoken of him!

Karin cried like a child when she heard that Nono's poor father had appeared; the very man she had dreaded to think of, who might come at any time to carry off the boy who was as dear to her as her own children. How she wished she could speak the poor father's language, and tell him what Nono had been to her! Later, she did try to make him understand it all, not only by broken Swedish words and signs, but with Frans sometimes as a translator. Mr. Frans had been studying Italian with his father, and was glad himself to talk about Nono.

Pietro, broken down by hardship and illness, and thin and worn, seemed older than he really was. Pelle and Pietro were soon good friends. It was a precious time for Frans when he translated the conversation between these two veterans from life's battles--the one defeated, wounded, near his death; the other humble, yet triumphant, victorious, and soon to be summoned to the court of his King for a more than abundant reward.

"I am not fit to be the father of a boy like Nono," said Pietro one day--"not fit to be his father."

Pietro's old superstitious confidence in the religion of his country had passed into a dull unbelief in all that was sacred. He had a disease which Pelle found he could not reach.

Then the colonel came and sat day by day in Pietro's room, and talked to the poor Italian out of the fulness of his heart as he had never talked to a human being before. There, in that small room, the colonel won a victory greater than the triumphs of war. There he won a soul for the heavenly King! The colonel, by nature so self-controlled, so reticent, was moved to warmth and tender tears as Pietro grasped his hand and thanked him for opening the way for his soul to the real knowledge of God and holiness and peace.

It was the first human being that the colonel had led in the way of life, and Pietro was a precious treasure to him.

Alma insisted upon being responsible for every expense that was incurred for Pietro. She could do nothing more for him but remember him in her prayers. The fair, slight girl, with the kindly look in her dear blue eyes, seemed to him a thing quite apart from his life, something he could not understand--that could not understand him.

The time would come when Alma, now walking tremblingly herself in the way of life, would be strong to help the weak and struggling, and lead the wanderers gently home.

CHAPTER XX.

THE OPENED DOOR.

The sweet bells of Aneholm Church were cheerily ringing. The sunshine shed a quiet gladness over the smooth meadows, and even the moist, dark evergreens of the distant woods glittered in the clear light.

Within the church, garlands of birch leaves hung here and there on the white walls and festooned the carved pulpit. Green wreaths crowned the golden angels that supported, each with one lifted hand, the sculptured altar-piece; while in the other, outstretched, they loosely held wild flowers, as if ready to strew them in the paths of the pilgrims bound heavenward. The still marble figures that had so long sat watchers beside the effigies on the great monuments of the honoured dead wore now on their brows blue circlets of corn-flowers, as if to tell for to-day of glad resurrection rather than of the dark tomb.

Tiny floral processions seemed passing in long lines along the tops of the simple wooden seats for the congregation; for the sconces that had held the lights for many a service on a winter morning or evening were now filled with bouquets, placed there by the children who had the day before been confirmed in the quiet sanctuary. The flowers, like the children, were from the rich man's garden or from the woods and meadows--here choice roses or glowing verbenas, there buttercups and daisies.

To-day the newly confirmed, "the children of the Lord's Supper," were to "come forward" for the first time to the holy communion.

The colonel generally walked to church with Alma and Frans, but this morning the carriage had been ordered for him. A friend was to be with him who was not strong enough to go on foot to the service. The doctor, who was carefully watching over Pietro, had said that it would not be at all dangerous for him to have his desire gratified--to take the holy communion at the sacred altar. His days were plainly numbered; it but remained to make his decline as full as possible of joy and peace.

The poor old fellow was pleased to wear his fresh homely suit and the broad-brimmed hat that reminded him so pleasantly of home. The congregation were already assembled when the two entered--Pietro leaning heavily on the arm of the colonel, who gently led him to the corner of the pew that had been comfortably prepared for him.

The preliminary service over, the children recently confirmed went forward first to the communion, circling the chancel in solemn stillness, while the prayers of the congregation went up for the young disciples. Then came the elders to the holy table. Old Pelle and Pietro knelt side by side, the latter staying himself by one hand on the colonel's shoulder, as if he had been a brother. The Italian knew nothing of the pride and stiffness of the early days of his friend. The colonel was but to him the loving guide who had led him to the heavenly kingdom. Their paths were soon to separate. Pietro was to be summoned upward; the colonel was to linger and labour, and perhaps suffer before he entered into rest.

The future lay uncertain before the dwellers at Ekero and the golden house, but they had nought to fear. They had opened the guest-chamber of their hearts to the heavenly Visitant, and they would henceforward be blessed by his continual presence.

And Nono, who had so early admitted the sacred Friend? He did not see his father on earth, but he had the glad hope of meeting him in the true home above. Nono was to "make beautiful things," and had the beautiful life of all who follow Him who is the spring and source of beauty and purity and love.

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

"If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him."

"Be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of glory shall come in."

THE END.

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