

Coals of Fire.

Bessie Grant was alone when the landlord came in—a rough, gruff old man, who scowled at her as he asked, sharply:

"Where's your mother, child?"

Bessie looked at him silently for a moment with great, dark, serious eyes.

"Mamma has gone to sell her wedding-ring," she said, quietly. "There was no money to pay the rent, and that was all she had to sell. Are you the landlord? Have you come for the rent?"

"Yes, yes; and I can't wait either," said the gruff man, impatiently. "She should have had the money before this. Tell her I'll be back in an hour, and if the rent isn't ready, out she goes. It's six dollars, and little enough, too."

And he went off, muttering to himself, half wondering why he had not been harsher with the little brown-eyed girl, who did not seem at all afraid of him, as most children were.

When Mrs. Grant came in, Bessie told her what the landlord had said.

"O dear! what shall I do? I could only get three dollars," said the poor lady; and tired, nervous, altogether despondent, she burst into bitter weeping.

"Don't cry, mamma dear," said Bessie, brightly. "I will give him my flowers; he will be glad to have them, I guess;" and she turned toward the window where her treasures were. It was a little window, and there were not many flowers; only one box of delicious heliotrope and sweet mignonette; a little pot of tea-roses; and—pride of her heart—one great, queenly calla, that lifted its proud, pure white face above its humble companions, nodding graciously as its perfume was wafted upward, as if receiving incense that was due its queenly station.

"What are your flowers worth, darling?" asked Mrs. Grant, smiling through her tears as she kissed the little comforter.

"They are worth all the world to me," laughed Bessie; "but I will let the man have them for six dollars; then you can have your money to buy back your ring again."

Just then came a loud rap at the door, and without waiting for permission to enter, Mr. Dorman, the landlord, walked in, gruffer than ever at having to come twice for his money.

"Well, ma'am," he said; "is the rent ready?"

"I am very sorry," Mrs. Grant began. "Sorry?" he interrupted, angrily. "That means that you haven't got six dollars for me, of course? I then just pack up and leave my house, for you shall not stay another hour unless you pay me."

"I'll pay you Mr. Landlord," said Bessie, in her sweet, piping voice. "See! take all my dear flowers. They are worth lots of dollars, and you have a little girl; maybe she will love them as well as I do, and be glad you took them instead of money. And oh! do tell her to be good to them!"

Mr. Dorman looked down at Bessie's pleading face, with a curious softening in his hard grey eyes.

"What do I want with your flowers? Thank fortune, I've no little girls to give them to," he said at last. But somehow his voice sounded as if it was hard work to be gruff now; and Bessie was almost sure that the tear which fell on her hand had not come from her own eyes.

But then as if ashamed of showing signs of feeling, Mr. Dorman said:

"I must have my money or you must go."

"I have only three dollars. Will you not take them and wait until I have earned the rest?" entreated Mrs. Grant.

"No!" he thundered. "I'll not wait!" then turned and left the room, slamming the door violently behind him.

In an instant there was an awful crash; then a groan, and a heavy fall. Mrs. Grant, hastening to open the door, was almost blinded by a cloud of dust and mortar. The wall had fallen, striking Mr. Dorman as it fell, and he lay motionless among the debris. She called aloud for help, and soon men came running up the stairs.

"Where shall we carry him?" they asked, finding that he was only stunned. "In here," replied Mrs. Grant, promptly; and they brought him in and laid him on her bed.

It was days before he recovered consciousness; days during which Mrs. Grant tended him with the gentle, unwearying care a daughter might have shown. One morning while she was sitting sewing at his bedside, Bessie brought a lovely rosebud and laid it on his pillow.

"It will give him sweet dreams, mamma," she whispered softly; "and perhaps when he wakes up and knows how good you've been to him he'll let you stay here;" for mean as the little room was, it was "home" to poor Bessie.

"He'll never know dear," whispered Mrs. Grant sadly, in reply.

"Then he ought to, and I'll tell him," said Bessie, with an emphatic nod of her head, which set all the golden curls dancing.

Mrs. Grant, too preoccupied with troubled thoughts to notice this speech, went out to return her finished sewing, and bring back more; leaving Bessie installed as nurse.

The child was just beginning to weary of her enforced silence, when Mr. Dorman opened his eyes to the full light of reason.

"Where am I?" he asked, feebly, looking at Bessie in a kind of mild surprise.

"In my mamma's room," she answered, jumping up delightedly, and running to him. "Don't you remember?" The wall fell on you the day you were going to send us away. We couldn't go, you see," she added, apologetically; "for you were in our bed; and mamma had to stay and take care of you. I guess you were a good deal of trouble, for she hasn't had any time to sleep—I sleep next door, in Mrs. Flynn's bed, but it's coarse and hard—and she has to sew awful fast to get money to buy your medicine; and she spent the ring money, too; and the doctor said if she hadn't taken such care of you, you would have died.—And I helped; I gave you a flower every day; I'll get you one now."

And she flew to the window, and

cutting a sweet bunch of heliotrope, laid it in his hand.

"Where's your mother, child?" Mr. Dorman asked, in the same words he had first addressed to Bessie; but oh! in what a different tone, so gentle and sad that it almost made her feel like crying.

"Gone to get some more sewing—There she is now!"

And she ran to the door to admit her mother, who came in wearily, with a great bundle of work that would have tired a far stronger woman to carry.

"Coals of fire! Coals of fire!" Mr. Dorman muttered, and turning his face away, seemingly to avoid speech, lay silent till the doctor came in, who pronounced his patient on the road to recovery, and gave consent to his speedy removal to his own home.

Mrs. Grant was out the morning the carriage came for him, and returned to find him, with the doctor's assistance, ready to leave. She did not expect or wish thanks for her unceasing care (he had been so ungraciously silent these last few days she fancied he resented it), but her heart sank like lead when he turned to her, saying:

"You remember I said you should leave this room. Well, you shall, this very day;" then went out without one word of farewell.

How long she sat there, with that grief too deep for tears eating into her heart, she did not know, but the doctor's entrance roused her.

"Mr. Dorman sent me for you. Will you not come, you and little Bessie?" he said.

In a kind of dream she rose and prepared Bessie and herself to go out. They "woke up," as Bessie said, in a beautiful room, in a splendid house, far up town, where Mr. Dorman was waiting them.

"Can you forgive me?" he asked Mrs. Grant, almost humbly. "I was so harsh this morning; and yet I had it in my heart to make you happy. I said you should leave that mean, dreary room, and I meant it; but I did not say that I would beg you to come and share this great empty home; and you little Bessie. Will you come and be my children, and let me care for you? I am such a lonely old man. I was harsh and cold to all, but the coals of fire you showered on my head have melted my hard heart. Will you not come and help me?"

What could Mrs. Grant say? Bessie's face pleaded more strongly than the old man's words. And so—they are living a beautiful dream-life in that splendid home; and Bessie, with flowers to her heart's content, is as happy as the day is long. I do not think they will ever "wake up," if that means going back to the miserable poverty from which Mr. Dorman rescued them. He says that it was all because of the "coals of fire" on his head; and Bessie wonders what he means, when she knows it was only lumps of plaster.

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