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The Cross on the Old Church Tower

By

Louisa May Alcott

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Up the dark stairs that led to his poor home strode a gloomy-faced young man with despair in his heart and these words on his lips:--

"I will struggle and suffer no longer; my last hope has failed, and life, become a burden, I will rid myself of at once."

As he muttered his stern purpose, he flung wide the door and was about to enter, but paused upon the threshold; for a glance told him that he had unconsciously passed his own apartment and come up higher, till he found himself in a room poorer but more cheerful than his own.

Sunshine streamed in through the one small window, where a caged bird was blithely singing, and a few flowers blossomed in the light. But blither than the bird's song, sweeter than the flowers, was the little voice and wan face of a child, who lay upon a bed placed where the warmest sunbeams fell.

The face turned smiling on the pillow, and the voice said pleasantly,--

"Come in, sir, Bess will soon be back if you will wait."

"I want nothing of Bess. Who is she and who are you?" asked the intruder pausing as he was about to go.

"She is my sister, sir, and I'm 'poor Jamie' as they call me. But indeed, I am not to be pitied, for I am a happy child, though it may not seem so."

"Why do you lie there? are you sick?"

"No, I am not sick, though I shall never leave my bed again. See, this is why;" and, folding back the covering, the child showed his little withered limbs.

"How long have you lain here, my poor boy?" asked the stranger, touched and interested in spite of himself.

"Three years, sir."

"And yet you are happy! What in Heaven's name have you to render you contented, child?"

"Come sit beside me, and I'll tell you, sir; that is, if you please I should love to talk with you, for it's lonely here when Bess is gone."

Something in the child's winning voice, and the influence of the cheerful room, calmed the young man's troubled spirit and seemed to lighten his despair. He sat down at the bedside looking gloomily upon the child, who lay smiling placidly as with skilful hands he carved small figures from the bits of wood scattered round him on the coverlid.

"What have you to make you happy, Jamie? Tell me your secret, for I need the knowledge very much," said his new friend earnestly.

"First of all I have dear Bess," and the child's voice lingered lovingly upon the name; "she is so good, so very good to me, no one can tell how much we love each other. All day, she sits beside my bed singing to ease my pain, or reading while I work; she gives me flowers and birds, and all the sunshine that comes in to us, and sits there in the shadow that I may be warm and glad. She waits on me all day; but when I wake at night, I always see her sewing busily, and know it is for me,--my good kind Bess!

"Then I have my work, sir, to amuse me; and it helps a little too, for kind children always buy my toys, when Bess tells them of the little boy who carved them lying here at home while they play out among the grass and flowers where he can never be."

"What else, Jamie?" and the listener's face grew softer as the cheerful voice went on.

"I have my bird, sir, and my roses, I have books, and best of all, I have the cross on the old church tower. I can see it from my pillow and it shines there all day long, so bright and beautiful, while the white doves coo upon the roof below. I love it dearly."

The young man looked out through the narrow window and saw, rising high above the house-tops, like a finger pointing heavenward, the old gray tower and the gleaming cross. The city's din was far below, and through the summer air the faint coo of the doves and the flutter of their wings came down, like peaceful country sounds.

"Why do you love it, Jamie?" he asked, looking at the thoughtful face that lit up eagerly as the boy replied,--

"Because it does me so much good, sir. Bess told me long ago about the blessed Jesus who bore so much for us, and I longed to be as like him as a little child could grow. So when my pain was very sharp, I looked up there, and, thinking of the things he suffered, tried so hard to bear it that I often could; but sometimes when it was too bad, instead of fretting Bess, I'd cry softly, looking up there all the time and asking him to help me be a patient child. I think he did; and now it seems so like a friend to me, I love it better every day. I watch the sun climb up along the roofs in the morning, creeping higher and higher till it shines upon the cross and turns it into gold. Then through the day I watch the sunshine fade away till all the red goes from the sky, and for a little while I cannot see it through the dark. But the moon comes, and I love it better then; for lying awake through the long nights, I see the cross so high and bright with stars all shining round it, and I feel still and happy in my heart as when Bess sings to me in the twilight."

"But when there is no moon, or clouds hide it from you, what then, Jamie?" asked the young man, wondering if there were no cloud to darken the cheerful child's content.

"I wait till it is clear again, and feel that it is there, although I cannot see it, sir. I hope it never will be taken down, for the light upon the cross seems like that I see in dear Bessie's eyes when she holds me in her arms and calls me her 'patient Jamie.' She never knows I try to bear my troubles for her sake, as she bears hunger and cold for mine. So you see, sir, how many things I have to make me a happy child."

"I would gladly lie down on your pillow to be half as light of heart as you are, little Jamie, for I have lost my faith in everything and with it all my happiness;" and the heavy shadow which had lifted for a while fell back darker than before upon the anxious face beside the bed.

"If I were well and strong like you, sir, I think I should be so thankful nothing could trouble me;" and with a sigh the boy glanced at the vigorous frame and energetic countenance of his new friend, wondering at the despondent look he wore.

"If you were poor, so poor you had no means wherewith to get a crust of bread, nor a shelter for the night; if you were worn-out with suffering and labor, soured by disappointment and haunted by ambitious hopes never to be realized, what would you do, Jamie?" suddenly asked the young man, prompted by the desire that every human heart has felt for sympathy and counsel, even from the little creature before him ignorant and inexperienced as he was.

But the child, wiser in his innocence than many an older counsellor, pointed upward, saying with a look of perfect trust,--

"I should look up to the cross upon the tower and think of what Bess told me about God, who feeds the birds and clothes the flowers, and I should wait patiently, feeling sure he would remember me."

The young man leaned his head upon his folded arms and nothing stirred in the room, but the wind that stole in through the roses to fan the placid face upon the pillow.

"Are you weary waiting for me, Jamie dear? I could not come before;" and as her eager voice broke the silence, Sister Bess came hastening in.

The stranger, looking up, saw a young girl regarding him from Jamie's close embrace, with a face whose only beauty was the light her brother spoke of, that beamed warm and bright from her mild countenance and made the poor room fairer for its presence.

"This is Bess, my Bess, sir," cried the boy, "and she will thank you for your kindness in sitting here so long with me."

"I am the person who lodges just below you; I mistook this room for my own; pardon me, and let me come again, for Jamie has already done me good," replied the stranger as he rose to go.

"Bess, dear, will you bring me a cup of water?" Jamie said; and as she hastened away, he beckoned his friend nearer, saying with a timid wistful look,--

"Forgive me, if it's wrong, but I wish you would let me give you this; it's very little, but it may help some; and I think you'll take it to please 'poor Jamie.' Won't you, sir?" and as he spoke, the child offered a bright coin, the proceeds of his work.

Tears sprung into the proud man's eyes; he held the little wasted hand fast in his own a moment, saying seriously,--

"I will take it, Jamie, as a loan wherewith to begin anew the life I was about to fling away as readily as I do this;" and with a quick motion he sent a vial whirling down into the street. "I'll try the world once more in a humbler spirit, and have faith in you, at least, my little Providence."

With an altered purpose in his heart, and a brave smile on his lips, the young man went away, leaving the child with another happy memory, to watch the cross upon the old church tower.

It was mid-winter; and in the gloomy house reigned suffering and want. Sister Bess worked steadily to earn the dear daily bread so many pray for and so many need. Jamie lay upon his bed, carving with feeble hands the toys which would have found far readier purchasers, could they have told the touching story of the frail boy lying meekly in the shadow of the solemn change which daily drew more near.

Cheerful and patient always, poverty and pain seemed to have no power to darken his bright spirit; for God's blessed charity had gifted him with that inward strength and peace it so often brings to those who seem to human eyes most heavily afflicted.

Secret tears fell sometimes on his pillow, and whispered prayers went up; but Bess never knew it, and like a ray of sunshine, the boy's tranquil presence lit up that poor home; and amid the darkest hours of their adversity, the little rushlight of his childish faith never wavered nor went out.

Below them lived the young man, no stranger now, but a true friend, whose generous pity would not let them suffer any want he could supply. Hunger and cold were hard teachers, but he learned their lessons bravely, and though his frame grew gaunt and his eye hollow, yet, at heart, he felt a

better, happier man for the stern discipline that taught him the beauty of self-denial and the blessedness of loving his neighbor better than himself.

The child's influence remained unchanged, and when anxiety or disappointment burdened him, the young man sat at Jamie's bedside listening to the boy's unconscious teaching, and receiving fresh hope and courage from the childish words and the wan face, always cheerful and serene.

With this example constantly before him, he struggled on, feeling that if the world were cold and dark, he had within himself one true affection to warm and brighten his hard life.

"Give me joy, Jamie! Give me joy, Bess! the book sells well, and we shall yet be rich and famous," cried the young author as he burst into the quiet room one wintry night with snow-flakes glittering in his hair, and his face aglow with the keen air which had no chill in it to him now.

Bess looked up to smile a welcome, and Jamie tried to cry "Hurrah;" but the feeble voice faltered and failed, and he could only wave his hand and cling fast to his friend, whispering, brokenly,--

"I'm glad, oh, very glad; for now you need not rob yourself for us. I know you have, Walter; I have seen it in your poor thin face and these old clothes. It never would have been so, but for Bess and me."

"Hush, Jamie, and lie here upon my arm and rest; for you are very tired with your work,--I know by this hot hand and shortened breath. Are you easy now? Then listen; for I've brave news to tell you, and never say again I do too much for you,--the cause of my success."

"I, Walter," cried the boy; "what do you mean?"

Looking down upon the wondering face uplifted to his own, the young man answered with deep feeling,--

"Six months ago I came into this room a desperate and despairing man, weary of life, because I knew not how to use it, and eager to quit the struggle because I had not learned to conquer fortune by energy and patience. You kept me, Jamie, till the reckless mood was passed, and by the beauty of your life showed me what mine should be. Your courage shamed my cowardice; your faith rebuked my fears; your lot made my own seem bright again. I, a man with youth, health, and the world before me, was about to fling away the life which you, a helpless little child, made useful, good, and happy, by the power of your own brave will. I felt how weak, how wicked I had been, and was not ashamed to learn of you the lesson you so unconsciously were teaching. God bless you, Jamie, for the work you did that day."

"Did I do so much?" asked the boy with innocent wonder; "I never knew it, and always thought you had grown happier and kinder because I had learned to love you more. I'm very glad if I did anything for you, who do so much for us. But tell me of the book; you never would before."

With a kindling eye Walter replied,--

"I would not tell you till all was sure; now, listen. I wrote a story, Jamie,--a story of our lives, weaving in few fancies of my own and leaving you unchanged,--the little counsellor and good angel of the ambitious man's hard life. I painted no fictitious sorrows. What I had seen and keenly felt I could truly tell,--your cheerful patience, Bess's faithful love, my struggles, hopes, and fears. This book, unlike the others, was not rejected; for the simple truth, told by an earnest pen, touched and interested. It was accepted, and has been kindly welcomed, thanks to you, Jamie; for many buy it to learn more of you, to weep and smile over artless words of yours, and forget their pity in their reverence and love for the child who taught the man to be, not what he is, but what, with God's help, he will yet become."

"They are very kind, and so are you, Walter, and I shall be proud to have you rich and great, though I may not be here to see it."

"You will, Jamie, you must; for it will be nothing without you;" and as he spoke, the young man held the thin hand closer in his own and looked more tenderly into the face upon his arm.

The boy's eyes shone with a feverish light, a scarlet flush burned on his hollow cheek, and the breath came slowly from his parted lips, but over his whole countenance there lay a beautiful serenity which filled his friend with hope and fear.

"Walter bid Bess put away that tiresome work; she has sat at it all day long, never stirring but to wait on me;" and as he spoke, a troubled look flitted across the boy's calm face.

"I shall soon be done, Jamie, and I must not think of rest till then, for there is neither food nor fuel for the morrow. Sleep, yourself, dear, and dream of pleasant things; I am not very tired."

And Bess bent closer to her work, trying to sing a little song, that they might not guess how near the tears were to her aching eyes.

From beneath his pillow Jamie drew a bit of bread, whispering to his friend as he displayed it,--

"Give it to Bess; I saved it for her till you came, for she will not take it from me, and she has eaten nothing all this day."

"And you, Jamie?" asked Walter, struck by the sharpened features of the boy, and the hungry look which for a moment glistened in his eye.

"I don't need much, you know, for I don't work like Bess; but yet she gives me all. Oh, how can I bear to see her working so for me, and I lying idle here!"

As he spoke, Jamie clasped his hands before his face, and through his slender fingers streamed such tears as children seldom shed.

It was so rare a thing for him to weep that it filled Walter with dismay and a keener sense of his own powerlessness. He could bear any privation for himself alone, but he could not see them suffer. He had nothing to offer them; for though there was seeming wealth in store for him, he was now miserably poor. He stood a moment, looking from brother to sister, both so dear to him, and both so plainly showing how hard a struggle life had been to them.

With a bitter exclamation, the young man turned away and went out into the night, muttering to himself,--

"They shall not suffer; I will beg or steal first."

And with some vague purpose stirring within him, he went swiftly on until he reached a great thoroughfare, nearly deserted now, but echoing occasionally to a quick step as some one hurried home to his warm fireside.

"A little money, sir, for a sick child and a starving woman;" and with outstretched hand Walter arrested an old man. But he only wrapped his furs still closer and passed on, saying sternly,--

"I have nothing for vagrants. Go to work, young man."

A woman poorly clad in widow's weeds passed at that moment, and, as the beggar fell back from the rich man's path, she dropped a bit of silver in his hand, saying with true womanly compassion,--

"Heaven help you! it is all I have to give."

"I'll beg no more," muttered Walter, as he turned away burning with shame and indignation; "I'll take from the rich what the poor so freely give. God pardon me; I see no other way, and they must not starve."

With a vague sense of guilt already upon him, he stole into a more unfrequented street and slunk into the shadow of a doorway to wait for coming steps and nerve himself for his first evil deed.

Glancing up to chide the moonlight for betraying him, he started; for there, above the snow-clad roofs, rose the cross upon the tower. Hastily he averted his eyes, as if they had rested on the mild, reproachful countenance of a friend.

Far up in the wintry sky the bright symbol shone, and from it seemed to fall a radiance, warmer than the moonlight, clearer than the starlight, showing to that tempted heart the darkness of the yet uncommitted wrong.

That familiar sight recalled the past; he thought of Jamie, and seemed to hear again the childish words, uttered long ago, "God will remember us."

Steps came and went along the lonely street, but the dark figure in the shadow never stirred, only stood there with bent head, accepting the silent rebuke that shone down upon it, and murmuring, softly,--

"God remember little Jamie, and forgive me that my love for him led me astray."

As Walter raised his hand to dash away the drops that rose at the memory of the boy, his eye fell on the ring he always wore for his dead mother's sake.

He had hoped to see it one day on Bess's hand, but now a generous thought banished all others and with the energy of an honest purpose he hastened to sell the ring, purchase a little food and fuel, and borrowing a warm covering of a kindly neighbor, he went back to dispense these comforts with a satisfaction he had little thought to feel.

The one lamp burned low; a few dying embers lay upon the earth, and no sound broke the silence but the steady rustle of Bess's needle, and the echo of Jamie's hollow cough.

"Wrap it around Bess; she has given me her cloak, and needs it more than I,--these coverings do very well;" and as he spoke, Jamie put away the blanket Walter offered, and suppressing a shiver, hid his purple hands beneath the old, thin cloak.

"Here is bread, Jamie; eat for Heaven's sake, no need to save it now;" and Walter pressed it on the boy, but he only took a little, saying he had not much need of food and loved to see them eat far better.

So in the cheery blaze of the rekindled fire, Bess and Walter broke their long fast, and never saw how eagerly Jamie gathered up the scattered crumbs, nor heard him murmur softly, as he watched them with loving eyes,--

"There will be no cold nor hunger up in heaven, but enough for all,--enough for all."

"Walter, you'll be kind to Bess when I am not here?" he whispered earnestly, as his friend came to draw his bed within the ruddy circle of the firelight gleaming on the floor.

"I will, Jamie, kinder than a brother," was the quick reply. "But why ask me that with such a wistful face?"

The boy did not answer, but turned on his pillow and kissed his sister's shadow as it flitted by.

Gray dawn was in the sky before they spoke again. Bess slept the deep, dreamless sleep of utter weariness, her head pillowed on her arms. Walter sat beside the bed, lost in sweet and bitter musings, silent and motionless, fancying the boy slept. But a low voice broke the silence, whispering feebly.

"Walter, will you take me in your strong arms and lay me on my little couch beside the window? I should love to see the cross again, and it is nearly day."

So light, so very light, the burden seemed, Walter turned his face aside lest the boy should see the sorrowful emotion painted there, and with a close embrace he laid him tenderly down to watch the first ray climbing up the old gray tower.

"The frost lies so thickly on the window-panes that you cannot see it, even when the light comes, Jamie," said his friend, vainly trying to gratify the boy's wish.

"The sun will melt it soon, and I can wait,--I can wait, Walter; it's but a little while;" and Jamie, with a patient smile, turned his face to the dim window and lay silent.

Higher and higher crept the sunshine till it shone through the frostwork on the boy's bright head; his bird awoke and carolled blithely, but he never stirred.

"Asleep at last, poor, tired little Jamie; I'll not wake him till the day is warmer;" and Walter, folding the coverings closer over the quiet figure, sat beside it, waiting till it should wake.

"Jamie dear, look up, and see how beautifully your last rose has blossomed in the night when least we looked for it;" and Bess came smiling in with the one white rose, so fragrant but so frail.

Jamie did not turn to greet her, for all frost had melted from the boy's life now; another flower had blossomed in the early dawn, and though the patient face upon the pillow was bathed in sunshine, little Jamie was not there to see it gleaming on the cross. God had remembered him.

Spring showers had made the small mound green, and scattered flowers in the churchyard. Sister Bess sat in the silent room alone, working still, but pausing often to wipe away the tears that fell upon a letter on her knee.

Steps came springing up the narrow stairs and Walter entered with a beaming face, to show the first rich earnings of his pen, and ask her to rest from her long labor in the shelter of his love.

"Dear Bess, what troubles you? Let me share your sorrow and try to lighten it," he cried with anxious tenderness, sitting beside her on the little couch where Jamie fell asleep.

In the frank face smiling on her, the girl's innocent eyes read nothing but the friendly interest of a brother, and remembering his care and kindness, she forgot her womanly timidity in her great longing for sympathy, and freely told him all.

Told him of the lover she left years ago to cling to Jamie, and how this lover went across the sea hoping to increase his little fortune that the helpless brother might be sheltered for love of her. How misfortune followed him, and when she looked to welcome back a prosperous man, there came a letter saying that all was lost and he must begin the world anew and win a home to offer her before he claimed the heart so faithful to him all these years.

"He writes so tenderly and bears his disappointment bravely for my sake; but it is very hard to see our happiness deferred again when such a little sum would give us to each other."

As she ceased, Bess looked for comfort into the countenance of her companion, never seeing through her tears how pale it was with sudden grief, how stern with repressed emotion. She only saw the friend whom Jamie loved and that tie drew her toward him as to an elder brother to whom she turned for help, unconscious then how great his own need was.

"I never knew of this before, Bess; you kept your secret well" he said, trying to seem unchanged.

The color deepened in her cheek; but she answered simply, "I never spoke of it, for words could do no good, and Jamie grieved silently about it, for he thought it a great sacrifice, though I looked on it as a sacred duty, and he often wearied himself to show in many loving ways how freshly he remembered it. My grateful little Jamie."

And her eyes wandered to the green tree-tops tossing in the wind, whose shadows flickered pleasantly above the child.

"Let me think a little, Bess, before I counsel you. Keep a good heart and rest assured that I will help you if I can," said Walter, trying to speak hopefully.

"But you come to tell me something; at least, I fancied I saw some good tidings in your face just now. Forgive my selfish grief, and see how gladly I will sympathize with any joy of yours."

"It is nothing, Bess, another time will do as well," he answered, eager to be gone lest he should betray what must be kept most closely now.

"It never will be told, Bess,--never in this world," he sighed bitterly as he went back to his own room which never in his darkest hours had seemed so dreary; for now the bright hope of his life was gone.

"I have it in my power to make them happy," he mused as he sat alone, "but I cannot do it, for in this separation lies my only hope. He may die or may grow weary, and then to whom will Bess turn for comfort but to me? I will work on, earn riches and a name, and if that hour should come, then in her desolation I will offer all to Bess and surely she will listen and accept. Yet it were a generous thing to make her happiness at once, forgetful of my own. How shall I bear to see her waiting patiently, while youth and hope are fading slowly, and know that I might end her weary trial and join two faithful hearts? Oh, Jamie, I wish to Heaven I were asleep with you, freed from the temptations that beset me. It is so easy to perceive the right, so hard to do it."

The sound of that familiar name, uttered despairingly, aloud, fell with a sweet and solemn music upon Walter's ear. A flood of tender memories swept away the present, and brought back the past. He thought of that short life, so full of pain and yet of patience, of the sunny nature which no cloud could overshadow, and the simple trust which was its strength and guide.

He thought of that last night and saw now with clearer eyes the sacrifices and the trials silently borne for love of Bess.

The beautiful example of the child rebuked the passion of the man, and through the magic of affection strengthened generous impulses and banished selfish hopes.

"I promised to be kind to Bess, and with God's help I will keep my vow. Teach me to bear my pain, to look for help where you found it, little Jamie;" and as he spoke, the young man gazed up at the shining cross, striving to see in it not merely an object of the dead boy's love, but a symbol of consolation, hope, and faith.

"It is a noble thing to see an honest man cleave his own heart in twain to fling away the baser part of it."

These words came to Walter's mind and fixed the resolution wavering there, and as his glance wandered from the gray tower to the churchyard full of summer stillness, he said within himself,--

"This is the hardest struggle of my life, but I will conquer and come out from the conflict master of myself at least, and like Jamie, try to wait until the sunshine comes again, even if it only shine upon me, dead like him."

It was no light task to leave the airy castles built by love and hope, and go back cheerfully to the solitude of a life whose only happiness for a time was in the memory of the past. But through the weeks that bore one lover home, the other struggled to subdue his passion, and be as generous in his sorrow as he would have been in his joy.

It was no easy conquest; but he won the hardest of all victories, that of self, and found in the place of banished pride and bitterness a patient strength, and the one desire to be indeed more generous than a brother to gentle Bess. He had truly, "cleft his heart in twain and flung away the baser part."

A few days before the absent lover came, Walter went to Bess, and, with a countenance whose pale serenity touched her deeply, he laid his gift before her, saying,--

"I owe this all to Jamie; and the best use I can make of it is to secure your happiness, as I promised him I'd try to do. Take it and God bless you, Sister Bess."

"And you, Walter, what will your future be if I take this and go away to enjoy it as you would have me?" Bess asked, with an earnestness that awoke his wonder.

"I shall work, Bess, and in that find content and consolation for the loss of you and Jamie. Do not think of me; this money will do me far more good in your hands than my own. Believe me it is best to be so, therefore do not hesitate."

Bess took it, for she had learned the cause of Walter's restless wanderings and strange avoidance of herself of late, and she judged wisely that the generous nature should be gratified, and the hard-won victory rewarded by the full accomplishment of its unselfish end. Few words expressed her joyful thanks, but from that time Walter felt that he held as dear a place as Jamie in her grateful heart, and was content.

Summer flowers were blooming when Bess went from the old home a happy wife, leaving her faithful friend alone in the little room where Jamie lived and died.

Years passed, and Walter's pen had won for him an honored name. Poverty and care were no longer his companions; many homes were open to him, many hearts would gladly welcome him, but he still lingered in the gloomy house, a serious, solitary man, for his heart lay beneath the daisies of a child's grave.

But his life was rich in noble aims and charitable deeds, and with his strong nature softened by the sharp discipline of sorrow, and sweetened by the presence of a generous love, he was content to dwell alone with the memory of little Jamie, in the shadow of "the cross upon the tower."