

Dedicated

TO

FOUR BROTHERS AND FOUR SISTERS.

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EDITOR'S PREFACE.

It is always a memorable era in a mother's life when she first introduces a daughter into society. Many things contribute to make it so; among which is the fact of the personal blessing to herself, in having been permitted to see the day—to have been spared, that is, to watch over her child in infancy, and now to see her entering life upon her own account.

But a more uncommon privilege is the one granted to me on the present occasion, of introducing a daughter into the literary world; and the feelings of pride and pleasure it calls forth, are certainly not less powerful than those created by the commoner occurrence. It is my comfort also to add that these are not overclouded by any painful anxiety or misgiving. There may be differences of opinion as to the precise amount of literary merit in these tales; but viewed as the first productions of a young author, they are surely full of promise; while their whole tone and aim is so unmistakably high, that even those who criticize the style will be apt to respect the writer.

I ought here to express a hope that it will not be thought presumptuous on my part, to undertake the office of introduction. I [8] beg it to be understood that I address myself especially to those readers who have (I speak it with deep gratitude and pleasure) listened kindly and favourably to me for several years past, and who will, I trust, be no less well disposed towards my daughter's writings.

To them also it may be interesting to know, that in the "J.H.G." of "Melchior's Dream," etc., they will find the original of my own portrait of "Aunt Judy."

But I have still something more to say: another little bit of gratification to express. What one sister has written, another has illustrated by her pencil; a cause of double thankfulness in my heart to Him from whom all good gifts come.

Margaret Gatty.

Note.—The foregoing Preface was written for the first edition of "Melchior's Dream, and other Tales." This was published in 1862 under Mrs.

Ewing's maiden initials, "J.H.G." It contained the first five stories in the present volume, and these were illustrated by the writer's eldest sister, "M.S.G."

MELCHIOR'S DREAM.

AN ALLEGORY.

"Thou that hast given so much to me,
Give one thing more — a grateful heart."
George Herbert.

"Well, father, I don't believe the Browns are a bit better off than we are; and yet when I spent the day with young Brown, we cooked all sorts of messes in the afternoon; and he wasted twice as much rum and brandy and lemons in his trash, as I should want to make good punch of. He was quite surprised, too, when I told him that our mince-pies were kept shut up in the larder, and only brought out at meal-times, and then just one apiece; he said they had mince-pies always going, and he got one whenever he liked. Old Brown never blows up about that sort of thing; he likes Adolphus to enjoy himself in the holidays, particularly at Christmas."

The speaker was a boy — if I may be allowed to use the word in speaking of an individual whose [10]jackets had for some time past been resigned to a younger member of his family, and who daily, in the privacy of his own apartment, examined his soft cheeks by the aid of his sisters' "back-hair glass." He was a handsome boy too; tall, and like David — "ruddy, and of a fair countenance;" and his face, though clouded then, bore the expression of general amiability. He was the eldest son in a large young family, and was being educated at one of the best public schools. He did not, it must be confessed, think either small beer or small beans of himself; and as to the beer and beans that his family thought of him, I think it was pale ale and kidney-beans at least.

Young Hopeful had, however, his weak points like the rest of us; and perhaps one of the weakest was the difficulty he found in amusing himself without *bothering* other people. He had quite a monomania for proposing the most troublesome "larks" at the most inconvenient moments; and if his plans were thwarted, an Æolian harp is cheerful compared to the tone in which, arguing and lamenting, he

"Fought his battles o'er again,"

to the distraction of every occupied member of the household.

When the lords of the creation of all ages can [11]find nothing else to do, they generally take to eating and drinking; and so it came to pass that our hero had set his mind upon brewing a jorum of punch, and sipping it with an accompaniment of mince-pies; and Paterfamilias had not been quietly settled to his writing for half-an-hour, when he was disturbed by an application for the necessary ingredients. These he had refused, quietly explaining that he could not afford to waste his French brandy, etc., in school-boy cookery, and ending with, "You see the reason, my dear boy?"

To which the dear boy replied as above, and concluded with the disrespectful (not to say ungrateful) hint, "Old Brown never blows up about that sort of thing; he likes Adolphus to enjoy himself in the holidays."

Whereupon Paterfamilias made answer, in the mildly deprecating tone in which the elder sometimes do answer the younger in these topsy-turvy days:—

"That's quite a different case. Don't you see, my boy, that Adolphus Brown is an only son, and you have nine brothers and sisters? If you have punch and mince-meat to play with, there is no reason why Tom should not have it, and James, and Edward, and William, and Benjamin, and Jack. And then there are your sisters. Twice the amount of [12]the Browns' mince-meat would not serve you. I like you to enjoy yourself in the holidays as much as young Brown or anybody; but you must remember that I send you boys to good schools, and give you all the substantial comforts and advantages in my power; and the Christmas bills are very heavy, and I have a great many calls on my purse; and you must be reasonable. Don't you see?"

"Well, father—" began the boy; but his father interrupted him. He knew the unvarying beginning of a long grumble, and dreading the argument, cut it short.

"I have decided. You must amuse yourself some other way. And just remember that young Brown's is quite another case. He is an only son."

Whereupon Paterfamilias went off to his study and his sermon; and his son, like the Princess in Andersen's story of the Swineherd, was left outside to sing,

"O dearest Augustine,
All's clean gone away!"

Not that he did say that—that was the princess' song—what he said was,

"I wish I were an only son!"

This was rather a vain wish, for round the dining-room fire (where he soon joined them) were gathered his nine brothers and sisters, who, to say the truth, [13]were not looking much more lively and cheerful than he. And yet (of all days in the year on which to be doleful and dissatisfied!) this was Christmas Eve.

Now I know that the idea of dulness or discomfort at Christmas is a very improper one, particularly in a story. We all know how every little boy in a story-book spends the Christmas holidays.

First, there is the large hamper of good things sent by grandpapa, which is as inexhaustible as Fortunatus's purse, and contains everything, from a Norfolk turkey to grapes from the grandpaternal vinery.

There is the friend who gives a guinea to each member of the family, and sees who will spend it best.

There are the godpapas and godmamas, who might almost be fairy sponsors from the number of expensive gifts that they bring upon the scene. The uncles and aunts are also liberal.

One night is devoted to a magic-lantern (which has a perfect focus), another to the pantomime, a third to a celebrated conjuror, a fourth to a Christmas tree and juvenile ball.

The happy youth makes himself sufficiently ill with plum-pudding, to testify to the reader how good it was, and how much there was of it; but recovers in time to fall a victim to the negus and

trifle at [14]supper for the same reason. He is neither fatigued with late hours nor surfeited with sweets; or if he is, we do not hear of it.

But as this is a strictly candid history, I will at once confess the truth, on behalf of my hero and his brothers and sisters. They had spent the morning in decorating the old church, in pricking holly about the house, and in making a mistletoe bush. Then in the afternoon they had tasted the Christmas soup and seen it given out; they had put a finishing touch to the snow man by crowning him with holly, and had dragged the yule-logs home from the carpenter's. And now, the early tea being over, Paterfamilias had gone to finish his sermon for to-morrow; his friend was shut up in his room; and Materfamilias was in hers, with one of those painful headaches which even Christmas will not always keep away. So the ten children were left to amuse themselves, and they found it rather a difficult matter.

"Here's a nice Christmas!" said our hero. He had turned his youngest brother out of the arm-chair, and was now lying in it with his legs over the side. "Here's a nice Christmas! A fellow might just as well be at school. I wonder what Adolphus Brown would think of being cooped up with a lot of children like this! It's his party to-night, and he's to have champagne and ices. I wish I were an only son."

[15]

"Thank you," said a chorus of voices from the floor. They were all sprawling about on the hearth-rug, pushing and struggling like so many kittens in a sack, and every now and then with a grumbled remonstrance:—

"Don't, Jack! you're treading on me."

"You needn't take all the fire, Tom."

"Keep your legs to yourself, Benjamin."

"It wasn't I," etc., with occasionally the feeble cry of a small sister—

"Oh! you boys are so rough."

"And what are you girls, I wonder?" inquired the proprietor of the arm-chair with cutting irony. "Whiney piney, whiney piney. I wish there were no such things as brothers and sisters!"

"*You wish WHAT?*" said a voice from the shadow by the door, as deep and impressive as that of the ghost in Hamlet.

The ten sprang up; but when the figure came into the fire-light, they saw that it was no ghost, but Paterfamilias's old college friend, who spent most of his time abroad, and who, having no home or relatives of his own, had come to spend Christmas at his friend's vicarage. "*You wish what?*" he repeated.

"Well, brothers and sisters are a bore," was the reply. "One or two would be all very well; but just look, here are ten of us; and it just spoils everything. [16] If a fellow wants to go anywhere, it's somebody else's *turn*. If old Brown sends a basket of grapes, it's share and share alike; all the ten must taste, and then there's about a grape and a half for each. If anybody calls or comes to luncheon, there are a whole lot of brats swarming about, looking as if we kept a school. Whatever one does, the rest must do; whatever there is, the rest must share; whereas, if a fellow was an only son, he would have the whole—and by all the rules of arithmetic, one is better than a tenth."

"And by the same rules ten is better than one," said the friend.

"Sold again," sang out Master Jack from the floor, and went head over heels against the fender.

His brother boxed his ears with great promptitude, and went on, "Well, I don't care; confess, sir, isn't it rather a nuisance?"

Paterfamilias's friend looked very grave, and said, quietly, "I don't think I am able to judge. I never had brother or sister but one, and he was drowned at sea. Whatever I have had, I have had the whole of, and would have given it away willingly for some one to give it to. If any one sent me grapes, I ate them alone. If I made anything, there was no one to show it to. If I wanted to act, I must act all the characters, and be my own audience. I remember that I got a lot of sticks at last, and cut heads and [17]faces to all of them, and carved names on their sides, and called them my brothers and sisters. If you want to know what I thought a nice number for a fellow to have, I can only say that I remember carving twenty-five. I used

to stick them in the ground and talk to them. I have been only, and lonely, and alone, all my life, and have never felt the nuisance you speak of."

This was a funny account; but the speaker looked so far from funny that one of the sisters, who was very tender-hearted, crept up to him, and said, gently —

"Richard is only joking; he doesn't really want to get rid of us. The other day the curate said he wished he had a sister, and Richard offered to sell us all for ninepence; but he is only in fun. Only it is rather slow just now, and the boys get rather cross; at least, we all of us do."

"It's a dreadful state of things," said the friend, smiling through his black beard and moustachios. "What is to be done?"

"I know what would be very nice," insinuated the young lady.

"What?"

"If you wouldn't mind telling us a very short story till supper-time. The boys like stories."

"That's a good idea," said Benjamin. "As if the girls didn't!"

[18]

But the friend proclaimed order, and seated himself with the girl in question on his knee. "Well, what sort of a story is it to be?"

"Any sort," said Richard; "only not too true, if you please. I don't like stories like tracts. There was an usher at a school I was at, and he used to read tracts about good boys and bad boys to the fellows on Sunday afternoon. He always took out the real names, and put in the names of the fellows instead. Those who had done well in the week he put in as good ones, and those who hadn't as the bad. He didn't like me, and I was always put in as a bad boy, and I came to so many untimely ends I got sick of it. I was hanged twice, and transported once for sheep-stealing; I committed suicide one week, and broke into the bank the next; I ruined three families, became a hopeless drunkard, and broke the hearts of my twelve distinct parents. I used to beg him to let me be reformed next week; but he said he never would till I did my Cæsar better. So, if you please, we'll have a story that can't be true."

"Very well," said the friend, laughing; "but if it isn't true, may I put you in? All the best writers, you know, draw their characters from their friends now-a-days. May I put you in?"

"Oh, certainly!" said Richard, placing himself [19]in front of the fire, putting his feet on the hob, and stroking his curls with an air which seemed to imply that whatever he was put into would be highly favoured.

The rest struggled, and pushed, and squeezed themselves into more modest but equally comfortable quarters; and after a few moments of thought, Paterfamilias's friend commenced the story of

MELCHIOR'S DREAM.

"Melchior is my hero. He was—well, he considered himself a young man, so we will consider him so too. He was not perfect; but in these days the taste in heroes is for a good deal of imperfection, not to say wickedness. He was not an only son. On the contrary, he had a great many brothers and sisters, and found them quite as objectionable as my friend Richard does."

"I smell a moral," murmured the said Richard.

"Your scent must be keen," said the story-teller, "for it is a long way off. Well, he had never felt them so objectionable as on one particular night, when, the house being full of company, it was decided that the boys should sleep in 'barracks,' as they called it; that is, all in one large room."

"Thank goodness, we have not come to that!" [20] said the incorrigible Richard; but he was reduced to order by threats of being turned out, and contented himself with burning the soles of his boots against the bars of the grate in silence: and the friend continued:—

"But this was not the worst. Not only was he, Melchior, to sleep in the same room with his brothers, but his bed being the longest and largest, his youngest brother was to sleep at the other end of it—foot to foot. True, by this means he got another pillow, for, of course, that little Hop-o'-my-Thumb could do without one, and so he took his; but, in spite of this, he determined that, sooner than submit to such an indignity, he would sit up all night. Accordingly, when all the rest were fast asleep, Melchior, with his boots off and his waistcoat easily unbuttoned, sat over the fire in the long lumber-room which served that night as 'barracks.' He had refused to eat any supper downstairs to mark his displeasure, and now repaid himself by a stolen meal according to his own taste. He had got a pork-pie, a little bread and cheese, some large onions to roast, a couple of raw apples, an orange, and papers of soda and tartaric acid to compound effervescing draughts. When these dainties were finished, he proceeded to warm some beer in a pan, with ginger, spice, and sug-

ar, and then lay back in his [21]chair and sipped it slowly, gazing before him, and thinking over his misfortunes.

"The night wore on, the fire got lower and lower, and still Melchior sat, with his eyes fixed on a dirty old print that had hung above the mantelpiece for years, sipping his 'brew,' which was fast getting cold. The print represented an old man in a light costume, with a scythe in one hand and an hour-glass in the other; and underneath the picture in flourishing capitals was the word TIME.

"'You're a nice old beggar,' said Melchior, dreamily. 'You look like an old hay-maker who has come to work in his shirt-sleeves, and forgotten the rest of his clothes. Time! time you went to the tailor's, I think.'

"This was very irreverent; but Melchior was not in a respectful mood; and as for the old man, he was as calm as any philosopher.

"The night wore on, and the fire got lower and lower, and at last went out altogether.

"'How stupid of me not to have mended it!' said Melchior; but he had not mended it, and so there was nothing for it but to go to bed; and to bed he went accordingly.

"'But I won't go to sleep,' he said; 'no, no; I shall keep awake, and to-morrow they shall know that I have had a bad night.'

[22]

"So he lay in bed with his eyes wide open, and staring still at the old print, which he could see from his bed by the light of the candle, which he had left alight on the mantelpiece to keep him awake. The flame waved up and down, for the room was draughty; and as the lights and shadows passed over the old man's face, Melchior almost fancied that it nodded to him, so he nodded back again; and as that tired him he shut his eyes for a few seconds. When he opened them again, there was no longer any doubt—the old man's head was moving; and not only his head, but his legs, and his whole body. Finally, he put his feet out of the frame, and prepared to step right over the mantelpiece, candle, and all.

"'Take care,' Melchior tried to say, 'you'll set fire to your shirt.' But he could not utter a sound; and the old man arrived safely on the