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Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
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Ester Ried Yet Speaking

Pansy

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CHAPTER I.

"IT MAY BE THAT SHE IS WORKING STILL."

It was raining drearily, and but few people were abroad — that is, few, comparatively speaking, though the streets seemed full of hurrying, dripping mortals. In the large dry-goods store business was by no means so brisk as on sunny days, and one of the younger clerks, whose station was near a window looking out upon the thoroughfare, had time to stand gazing at the passers-by. They did not seem to interest him particularly, or else they puzzled him. His young, handsome face wore a thoughtful look, almost a troubled expression about the eyes, which seemed to be gazing beyond the passers-by. Just across the aisle from him, a lady, seated in one of the easy chairs set for the accommodation of shoppers, waited and watched him, — a young and pretty woman, tastefully, even elegantly dressed, yet her costume was quite in keeping with the stormy day. The young man's face seemed to have special interest for her, though he apparently was unaware of her existence. A close observer would have discovered that she was watching him with deeply interested eyes. Whatever served to hold the thoughts of the young man apparently grew in perplexity, for the troubled look continually deepened. At last, forgetting the possible listener, he addressed the dripping clouds, perhaps, — at least, he was looking at them: —

"I don't know how to do it; but something ought to be done. It is worse than folly to expect good from the way that things are now managed. Ester would have known just what, and how; and how interested she would have been! I try to do her work, and to 'redeem the time;' but the simple truth is, I don't know how, and nobody else seems to."

These sentences were not given all at once, but murmured from time to time at his unsympathetic audience outside.

Patter, patter, patter, drip, drip, drip! steady, uncompromising business. It was all the answer the clouds vouchsafed him.

With the listener inside it was different. The interested look changed to an eager one. She left her seat and moved toward the absorbed young man, breaking in on his reverie with the clearest of voices:—

"I beg your pardon,—but are you thinking of your sister? You are Mr. Ried, I believe? I have heard of your sister's life, and of her beautiful death, through a dear friend of my husband, who loved Ester. I have always wanted to know more about her. I wanted to get acquainted with you, so I might ask you things about her. I am waiting now for my husband to come and introduce us. But perhaps it isn't necessary. Do you know who I am?"

"It is Mrs. Roberts, I believe?" the young man said, struggling with his astonishment and embarrassment.

"Yes, and you are Mr. Alfred Ried. Well, now we know each other without any further ceremony. Will you tell me a little about your sister, Mr. Ried? You were thinking of her just now."

"I was missing her just now," said he, trying to smile, "as I very often am. I was a little fellow when she died; but the older I grow the more difficult I find it to see how the world can spare her. She was so full of plans for work, and there are so few like her."

"It may be that she is working still, in the person of her brother."

He shook his head energetically, though his face flushed.

"No, I can only blunder vaguely over work that I know she, with her energetic ways and quick wits, could have done, and done well. It happens that she was especially interested in a class of people of whom I know something. They need help, and I don't know how to help them. It seems to me that she could have done it."

"Will you tell me who the people are?"

"It is a set of boys for whom nobody cares," he said, speaking sadly; "it hardly seems possible that there could ever have been a time when anybody cared for them, though I suppose their mothers did when they were little fellows."

Thus spoke the ignorant young man,—ignorant of the depths to which sin will sink human nature, but rich in the memory of mother-love.

"I think of my sister Ester in connection with them," he said, speaking apologetically, "because she was peculiarly interested in wild young fellows like them; she thought they might be reached,—that there might be ways invented for reaching them, such as had not been yet. She had plans, and they were good ones. I thought so then, little fellow that I was, and I think so now, only nobody is at work carrying them out; and I wonder sometimes if Ester could have been needed in heaven half as much as she is needed on earth. She used to talk to me a great deal about what might be done. I think now that she wanted to put me in the way of taking up some of the work that she would have done; but she mistook her material. I can't do it."

"Are you sure? You are young yet, and besides, you may be doing more than you think. Couldn't I help? What is there that needs doing for these particular young men?"

"Everything!" he said, excitedly. "If you should see them you would get a faint idea of it. They come occasionally down to the Sabbath-school at the South End; in fact, they come quite frequently, though I'm sure I can't see why. It certainly isn't for any good that they get. Their actions, Mrs. Roberts, surpass anything that I ever imagined."

"Who is their teacher?"

"That would be a difficult question to answer. They have a different teacher every Sabbath. No one is willing to undertake the class twice. They have tried all the teachers who attend regularly, and several who have volunteered for once, and never would attempt it a second time. Just now, there is no one who will make a venture."

"Have you tried?"

He shook his head emphatically.

"I know at least so much. Why, Mrs. Roberts, some of them are as old as I, and, indeed, I think one or two are older. No; we have se-

cured the best teachers that we could for them, but each one has been a failure. I suppose they must go."

"Go where?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"What an awful question! Where *will* they go, Mrs. Roberts, if we let them slip now?"

He was tremendously in earnest. One could not help feeling that he had studied the possibilities, and felt the danger.

"Suppose I try to help! Shall I come and take that class next Sabbath?"

This simple, directly-put question brought the young man suddenly from the heights of his excitement into visible embarrassment. He looked down on the small, fair lady, reaching hardly to his shoulder, attired in that unmistakable way which bespeaks the lady of wealth and culture, and could imagine nothing more incongruous than to have her seated before that class of swearing, spitting, fighting boys. Not that her wealth or her culture was an objection, but she looked so utterly unlike what he had imagined their teacher must be,—she was so small, so frail, so fair and sweet, and ignorant of the ways of the great wicked world, and especially of those great wicked boys! What could he say to her?

He was so manifestly embarrassed that the small lady laughed.

"You think I cannot do it," she said, almost gayly.

He hastened to answer her.

"Indeed, you have no idea of the sort of class it is. I have given you no conception of it; I cannot. You would think yourself before a set of uncaged animals."

"Yes, and in case of failure I should only be where the others are, who have tried and failed. If you will introduce me, and your superintendent will let me, I mean to try; and that will relieve you of the dilemma of being entirely without a teacher for them."

Young Ried had nothing to say. He thought the attempt a piece of folly,—a worse than useless experiment; but how was he to say so to the wife of his employer?

That gentleman appeared just then, making haste.

"I was unavoidably detained," he explained; "I feared you would grow weary of waiting. Ah, Ried, my wife has introduced herself, I see. Is he the young man you were speaking of, Mrs. Roberts?"

"The very young man,—Ester Ried's brother. He doesn't know how glad I am to have met him. Some day when we are better acquainted, and you trust me more fully, I am going to tell you how I became so deeply interested in your dear sister. Meantime this little matter should be definitely settled. Mr. Roberts, I have invited myself to take a class to-morrow down at the South End Mission."

"Have you, indeed?"

Mr. Roberts spoke heartily, and seemed by no means dismayed,—only a trifle perplexed as to details.

"How can we manage it, Flossy? My prison class takes me in an opposite direction at the same hour, you know."

"Yes, I thought of that; I propose to ask Mr. Ried to call for me, and show me the way, and vouch for my good intentions after I reach there. Do you suppose he will do it?" She looked smilingly from her husband to young Ried, and both waited for his answer.

"I obey directions," he said, bowing respectfully to Mr. Roberts. "Am I to have the honor of being detailed for that service to-morrow?"

"So Mrs. Roberts says," was the good-humored reply, and then the merchant took his wife away to their waiting carriage that had drawn up before the door, leaving Alfred Ried, if the truth must be told, in a fume.

"Much she knows what she is talking about!" he said, jerking certain boxes out of their places on the shelves, and then banging them back again, seeming to suppose that he was by this process putting his department in order for closing. "Little bit of a dressed-up doll! They will tear her into ribbons, metaphorically, if not literally, before this time to-morrow! She thinks, because she is the wife of Evan Roberts, the great merchant, she can go anywhere and do anything, and that people will respect her. She has never had anything to do with a set of fellows who care less than nothing about money and

position, except to be ten times more insolent and outrageous in their conduct than they would if she had less of it! I shall feel like a born idiot in presenting this pretty little doll to teach that class! Mr. Durant will think I have lost what few wits I had! What can possess the woman to want to try? It is just because she has no conception of what she is about! But Mr. Roberts must know—I wonder what he means by permitting it?"

In very much the same state of mind did our young man pilot his new and unsought-for recruit into the crowded mission rooms of the South End on the following Sabbath afternoon. She looked not one whit less able to compete with the terrors which awaited the teacher of the formidable class.

Her dress was simplicity itself, according to Mrs. Roberts' ideas of simplicity; yet, from the row of ostrich tips that bobbed and nodded at each other, all around the front of her velvet hat, to the buttons of her neat-fitting boots, she seemed to bring a new atmosphere into the room.

Yesterday's rain was over, and the pleasant south windows were aglow with sunshine. As Mrs. Roberts sat down the sunbeams came and played about her face, and she seemed in keeping with them, and with nothing else around her.

The superintendent bestowed curious glances on her during the opening exercises. He had seen the shadow on young Ried's face when he seated her, and had found time to question.

"Whom have we here?"

"Mrs. Evan Roberts. She wants to try the vacant class! *I* did not ask her, Mr. Durant; she invited herself."

Mr. Durant looked over at her, and tried to keep his eyes from smiling.

"She looks very diminutive in every way for such an undertaking. They will frighten her out before she commences, will they not?"

"I presume so; but I didn't know what to do. She wanted to come, and I could not tell her she must not."

"No, of course,—the occasion is too rare to lose. Very few people ask the privilege of trying that class. There is no teacher for them to-

day; and your Mrs. Roberts must learn by experience that some things are more difficult than others. I will let her try it."

Meantime, "the boys" of the dreaded class were studying the new face. She was the only person not already seated before a class, and they naturally judged that she was to be their next victim. They looked at her and then at one another, and winked and coughed and sneezed and nudged elbows and giggled outright, every one of them, — meantime chewing tobacco with all their might, and expectorating freely wherever he judged it would be most offensive.

Alfred Ried watched them, inwardly groaning. Being used to their faces, he could plainly read that they anticipated a richer time than usual, and rejoiced greatly over the youth and beauty of their victim.

But young Ried was not the only one who watched. Mrs. Roberts, without seeming to be aware of their presence, lost not a wriggle or a nudge. She was studying her material; and it must be confessed that they startled her not a little. They represented a different type of humanity from her Chautauqua boys, or her boys in the old church at home, — rather, an advanced stage of both those types.

When Mr. Durant came toward her, the look on his face was not reassuring, it so plainly said that he expected failure, and was sorry for her as well as for himself. However, with as good grace as he could assume, he led her to the seat prepared for the teacher, and gave her a formal introduction.

"Boys, this is Mrs. Roberts, who is willing to try to teach you to-day. I *wish* you would show her that you know how to behave yourselves."

Mrs. Roberts wished that he had left her to introduce herself, or that he had said almost anything rather than what he did; the mischievous gleam in several pairs of eyes said that they meant to show her something that they considered far more interesting than that.

Many were the sympathetic glances that were bestowed on the young and pretty lady as she went to her task. As for Alfred Ried, there was more than sympathy in his face. He was vexed with the young volunteer and vexed with himself.

He told himself savagely that this was what came of his silly habit of thinking aloud. If only he had kept his anxieties about that class to himself, Mrs. Roberts would never have heard of it, and been tempted to put herself in such a ridiculous position; and if this episode did not break him of the habit, he did not know what would.

He was presently, however, given a class of small boys, with enough of original and acquired depravity about them to keep him intensely employed, and the entire school settled to work.

CHAPTER II.

"WHAT DID IT ALL AMOUNT TO, ANYHOW?"

Settled, that is, so far as the class of boys in the corner would permit the use of that term. *They* had not settled in the least. Two of them indulged in a louder burst of laughter than before, just as Mrs. Roberts took her seat. Yet her face was in no wise ruffled.

"Good afternoon," she said, with as much courtesy as she would have used in addressing gentlemen. "I wonder if you know that I am a stranger in this great city? You are almost the first acquaintances that I am making among the young people, and I have a fancy that I would like to have you all for my friends. Suppose we enter into a compact to be excellent and faithful friends to one another? What do you say?"

What were they to say? They were slightly taken back, surprised into listening quietly to the close of the strange sentence, and then giving no answer beyond violent nudges and aside-looks. What did she mean? Was she "chaffing" them? This was unlike the opening of any lesson! It certainly could not be the first question on the lesson-paper; nor did it sound like certain well-meant admonitions to "try to improve the opportunity" and "learn all that they could." With each of these commencements they were entirely familiar; but this was something new.

"Do you agree to the compact?" she asked, while they waited, her face bright with smiles.

"Dunno about that," said one whom she very soon discovered occupied the position of a ringleader; "as a general thing, we like to be kind of careful about our friendships; we might strike something that wasn't quite the thing with people in our position. You can't be too careful in a big city, you know."

It is impossible to give you an idea of the impishness with which this impudent answer was jerked out, to the great amusement of the others, who laughed immoderately.

It suited Mrs. Roberts to treat the reply with perfect seriousness and composure.

"That is very true," she said, courteously; "but at the same time I venture to hope that since you know nothing ill of me as yet, you will receive me into a sort of conditional friendship, with the understanding that I remain your friend until I am guilty of some conduct that ought to justify you in deserting me. I am sure you cannot object to that; and now, if we are to be friends, we should know each other's names. I am Mrs. Evan Roberts, and I live at No. 76 East Fifty-fifth Street. I shall be glad to see you at my house whenever you would like to call on me. Now, will one of you be kind enough to introduce himself and the class? Perhaps you will introduce me to your friends?"

She looked directly at the ringleader.

"Certainly! certainly, mum!" he replied, briskly. "This is Mr. Carrot Pumpkins, at your service, mum — this fellow on my left, I mean; rather a queer name, I dare say you think. It all came of his being fond of sitting astride of a pumpkin when he was a little shaver, and of his hair being exactly the color of carrots as you can see for yourself. And this fellow on my right is Mr. Champion Chawer, so called because he can make the biggest run on tobacco of any of the set, taking him day in and day out. That fellow at your elbow is 'Slippery Jim.' We don't call him 'Mister,' because he doesn't stay long enough in one place to have it tacked on to him. He is such a slippery scamp that an eel is nowhere, compared to him."

During this rapid flow of words the listeners, who evidently admired their leader, became so convulsed with laughter as to lose all vestige of respectability, and Mr. Durant's disturbed face appeared in view.

"Boys, this is perfectly disgraceful!" he said, speaking in sharp and highly-excited tones, — "perfectly disgraceful! I don't know why you wish to come here to disturb us in this way Sabbath after Sabbath! But we have really endured enough. There is a policeman at

the foot of the stairs, and he can easily call others to his help; so now if you wish to remain here you must behave yourselves."

During the deliverance of this sentence some of the boys gave mimic groans, one of them whistled, and others kept up a running comment:—

"A policeman! oh good! that's little Duffer, I know! We've seen him before! Wouldn't mind giving him a chase to-day, just for exercise, you know, mum."

"I say, boys, let's cut and run, the whole caboodle of us. We can jump these seats at one bound, and take the little woman along on our shoulders for a ride! Shall we do it?" This from the leader, who in time came to be known as "Nimble Dick."

"Bah! no!" replied a third; "let's stick it out and see what she's got to say; she's a new party. Besides, we can't give her the slip in that way; we're friends of hers, you know."

"Mrs. Roberts," said the distressed Mr. Durant, in a not very good undertone, "I think you will have to give it up. They are worse than usual this morning. We have endured much from them, and I must say that my patience is exhausted. Will you not take the seat at the other end of the room?"

"Not unless they wish me to."

The people who had known Flossy Shipley well would have detected a curious little quiver in her voice, which meant that she was making a strong effort at self-control; but a stranger would hardly have observed it.

"Do you wish me to go away, young gentlemen?"

The scamps thus appealed to, looked at one another again, as if in doubt what to say. This again was new ground to them. Policemen they were accustomed to. At last Nimble Dick made answer:—

"No, I'm bound if we do; it comes the nearest to looking like a lark of anything that we have had in a long time. I say, Parson, go off about your business and let us alone. We was having a good time getting acquainted till you come and spoiled it. We'll be as sober as nine deacons at a prayer-meetin'. And look out how you insult this young woman; she's a friend of ours, and we're bound to protect

her. No asking of her to change her seat; she's going to sit right here to the end of the chapter."

Mr. Durant looked his willingness to summon the police at once, but Mrs.

Roberts' voice, evenly poised now, took up the story:—

"Thank you; then I will stay. And since it is getting late, suppose we lose no more time. There was something about which I wanted to tell you. But a few evenings ago I attended a gathering where I saw some very singular things. A gentleman in the party was tied with a strong rope, hands and feet, as firmly as two men could tie him,—people who knew how to tie knots, and they did their best; yet while we stood looking at him he shook his hand free and held it out to them. How do you think it was done?"

"Sham knots!" said one.

"No, for my husband was one of the gentlemen who tied him, and he assured me that he tied the rope as firmly as he could. Besides, more wonderful things than that were done. I tied my own handkerchief into at least a dozen very hard knots, and gave it to him, and I saw him put it in a glass of water, then seize it and shake it out, and the knots were gone. I saw him take two clean glasses, and pour water from a pitcher into one, and it seemed to turn instantly to wine; then he poured that glass of wine into the other empty glass, and immediately it turned back to water, or seemed to. Dozens of other strange things he did. I should really like to tell you about them all. I will, at some other time; but just now I think you would like to know *how* he did them."

"*How* he did them!" "As if you could tell!" "*Can* you tell?" "Pitch in, mum; I'd like to hear that part myself!" These were some of the eager answers.

Had the little teacher, under the embarrassments of the occasion, taken leave of her senses? Actually she was bending forward, opened Bible turned face downward on her knee, engaged in describing in somewhat minute detail the explanations of certain slight-of-hand performances which she had recently seen! What