

A vintage-style illustration of a young child sitting on a swing. The child is wearing a striped shirt and blue shorts. The swing set is framed by two vertical posts and a decorative archway. The entire scene is surrounded by a lush arrangement of red and pink roses with green leaves. The background is a light, textured green.

PLAYGROUND
TONI

ANNA · CHAPIN · RAY ·

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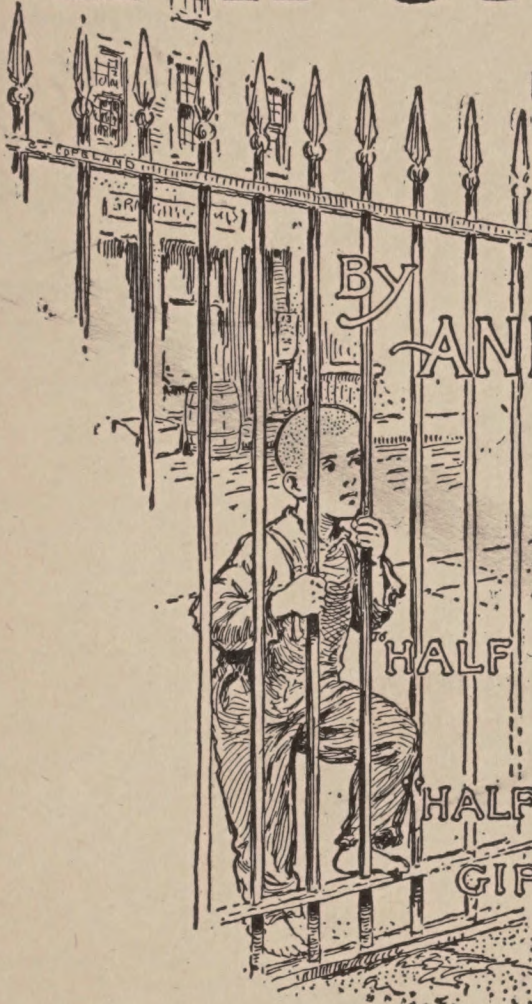
PLAYGROUND

TONI

By ANNA CHAPIN

RAY-

AUTHOR OF
"HALF A DOZEN
BOYS"
"HALF A DOZEN
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To

NATHANIEL THAYER CHAPIN

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PLAYGROUND TONI.

I.

TONI SCOFFS.

TONI stood on a chair by the back window, with his small elbows resting on the sill, his small chin in his hands. The immediate prospect was not an especially alluring one: a frowsy geranium or two and a nicked white pitcher on the ledge outside; beyond them, a background of dull gray sky. As a rule, Toni preferred the side window, for it opened on the fire escape where he and the boy below had constructed a string telegraph line. The nearness of the fire escape added to the desirability of the tenement. By day, it served for a playground for Toni and a storeroom for Toni's mother; by night, hot, suffocating nights, when the very walls of the little rooms seemed gasping for breath in the foul, sodden air, it became a species of roof garden. A frayed cane-seated chair, a ragged blanket, the clean, clear

stars above, and, more than all else, the contrast with the room inside, made the long evenings on the fire escape seem quite luxurious by comparison, and the voice of Toni's mother lost all its minor intonations, as she answered shrilly to the shrill questions of her neighbor on the fire escape beneath.

To-day, however, the fire escape had no attraction for Toni, and he turned a deaf ear to the call of the boy below. The back window was set high in the wall and from the floor Toni could see only geraniums and sky. The sharp rap, rap of a hammer and the sound of voices from below had whetted his curiosity to such a point that, heedless of maternal chidings, he had tipped the cat out of a chair and dragged the chair to the window. As he clambered up, his line of vision changed. Below the gray sky, the tops of tall elm trees came into view, then a red-tiled roof, a red brick wall and at last the yard of School Number Seven.

It was not characteristic of Toni to betray surprise. As a general thing, he looked on the world with a passive indifference which amounted almost to patronage. Life in the tenements takes the edge off from most things, and Toni's usual attitude was one of boredom, except in the rare moments when he

forgot himself and became the jolly little urchin for which Dame Nature had intended him. In such moments, Toni was irresistible; he laughed and twinkled and exuded merriment from every pore of his skin. There were other moments, also rare, happily, when Toni flashed fire, and in such moments it was not well to provoke him. For the rest, he was utterly lawless, utterly lovable, and not even approximately clean.

He was well acquainted with the playground of School Number Seven. It was now some months since his parents had moved into the square brick block in a Rose Street back yard, and Toni had been enrolled among the pupils of Room Three. He knew the playground as a barren waste of brown earth trodden hard by many small feet, and shaded by the trunk of one little leafless tree, zealously planted on Arbor Day, but discouraged into yielding up the ghost within four weeks. Now, as he looked, his eyes grew round with astonishment.

Four bicycles leaned against the high iron fence; four stranger women were hurrying this way and that, issuing orders to a dozen men who plied hammer and saw and built tall scaffoldings whose purpose he was at a loss to discover. The yard was in

two sections, and in the middle of each section he saw something that looked like a small and very gay circus tent, only without any prohibitive canvas at the sides. Some scarlet swings and green seesaw planks, probably of the nature of side shows, caught his eye; but they were mere details. It was the gay scarlet tents that counted, the tents without any sides—unless they were to be added later. But if the two rings were in different tents, how see them both at once? The lady with the yellow hair seemed to be directing the others. Most likely she was the one who jumped through the blazing hoops. Toni had never been to a circus; but he knew the lessons of the bill-boards by heart. He took one long, steady look. Then he stepped softly down from the chair and stole away out of the room.

The yellow-haired lady looked up, a little while afterward, to discover a chubby nose pressed between the iron bars of the tall gate. The nose belonged to Toni, who had resolved upon getting a nearer view of the circus than the one to be gained from a chair in the back window. Moreover, one of the legs of the chair was broken, and it had wiggled insecurely under its excited occupant. His present position was at once more steady and more commanding.

Unknown to himself, Toni made quite as interesting a picture as did the tents in the school yard. His feet were bare and chubby, and his brown great toes perked themselves upward with a droll air of wishing to see what was going on in the world. His head was also bare, literally and absolutely bare, for Toni's father was a barber, and he made it his rule to test the sharpness of his razors upon the head of his little son. It was better for the razors than for the son, however, and Toni's head was perennially as bare as a billiard ball, since the soft yellow thatch could not begin to keep pace with the exigencies of the paternal business. Beneath his shorn pate, his lashes were full and curving above his dark blue eyes, his nose was snubby and round, but his upper lip shaped itself into a rosy bow. His costume was marked with the simplicity of the district in which he lived. It consisted solely of blue denim overalls and a dingy white cotton jumper with one cuff and no collar at all. On his Sabbath, he wore top boots and a hat; otherwise he scorned such superfluities during the summer.

The yellow-haired lady looked at him and smiled.

"Our first victim," she observed to one of her companions.

"Where?"

"At the gate. Isn't he a picture?"

The other surveyed him doubtfully.

"Ye—es. I'm not sure that I want to get too near him, though. Look at those hands! Do you suppose they have ever been washed?"

"Yes, last Friday night," the yellow-haired lady answered, as one who knew the habits of the dwellers in Rose Street. "You can't be finicky down here, Isabel."

Isabel Dering raised her eyebrows.

"Perhaps not," she returned. "Still, I do prefer them to be clean."

"Make them so, then." There was no suggestion of abruptness in the speaker's tone, no hint of a rebuke. "I must tell those men to put the swings nearer together; we can't spare so much room for them. When the sand comes, be sure it is put into both the bins." She walked swiftly across the yard to where the carpenters were at work. When her orders were given, she looked back in time to see Isabel Dering draw nearer the gate.

Toni watched her approach with some doubt. She was probably intending to drive him away; he had met that fate, usually from men, however, upon pre-

vious occasions when the circus had come to town. Still, he was shrewd enough to know that, so long as he was in the public highway, he was within his lawful rights, and he determined to maintain his stand. He was unable to account for the absence of a frown from her face; but that would come later. Meanwhile—

“Well, small boy, what do you think about it?”

The accent was unlike anything Toni had ever heard before; but the voice was kindly. He rolled his eyes up to her face and was silent for a moment. Then his curiosity refused to be held in check longer.

“W'en's the cirkiss?”

“The circus! I don't know. Wasn't it some time in the spring?”

The rosy lips and the surrounding smudgy halo took on a scornful curve.

“Don't yer know?”

“I'm afraid I don't,” Miss Dering confessed meekly.

“W'y, yer b'long to it; don't yer?”

“I? Me? Oh!” And she began to laugh. “Do you mean this?”

“Sure. De tents an' de teeters an' all dat. W'en does it come?”

“Next Monday.”

"Ain't yer gittin' it ready too soon?"

"No. Do you think we are?"

Toni surveyed the scarlet and green tent dubiously.

"Wot if it rains?" he asked.

She mistook his meaning.

"Then we shall wait till Tuesday."

"Yer won't have it if it rains?"

"I think not, not if it rains hard, that is."

For a space, Toni ignored her presence, while he watched the setting up of a swing. Then he turned back to Miss Dering again.

"An' will she jump t'rough de hoops?" he asked.

"What? Who?"

"Her." He pointed his smutty thumb at the yellow-haired lady inside.

For one short instant, Miss Dering's face grew scarlet and her lips twitched. Then she rallied.

"No," she said gravely; "this isn't that kind of a circus."

"Oh, ain't it? Wot sort is it, den?" His tone betrayed his disappointment.

"It is a place for you to come to play, this summer."

"Wot for?"

"So you can have a good time."

"Wot if I don't wan' ter come?"

The question, asked with a nonchalance far beyond his years, was a poser. Miss Dering changed her tactics.

"What is your name?" she inquired.

"Toni Valovick."

"How old are you, Toni?"

"Seven."

Seven! And from his manner she had thought him ten at the very least. She shuddered at this first lesson in the way childhood is killed out in the tenements. At home, her seven-year-old brother was scarcely out of the nursery.

"Will you come here, next Monday morning, and bring your little brother?"

"I hain't got no brudder."

"Your sister, then?"

"Ain't none." Toni's eyes were fixed upon his brown toes.

"Then come alone."

"Wot's the use?"

"To play with us."

From beneath his long lashes, he flashed one glance at her. The glance was swift, but shrewd.

Then he shrugged his small shoulders and hitched up his lonely cuff.

“Wot’s de matter wid playin’ in Rose Street?” he asked.

“Oh, but you don’t have swings and things there,” she urged.

“Wot’s de tents for, if dere ain’t no cirkiss?” he demanded suddenly.

“To keep off the sun in hot days. We’re going to have some hammocks under them, and some seats.”

“Wot’s hammocks?”

She smiled mysteriously. She saw that Toni was curious and that, through his curiosity, there lay the best chance of getting hold of him.

“Wait and see,” she said craftily. “They will be ready for you when you come, Monday morning.”

He turned to face her and disclosed the fact that one side of his snubby nose was quite white from long-continued pressure against the iron bars.

“I ain’t comin’,” he said tersely and with an invidious accent upon the personal pronoun.

“Oh, please do,” she urged.

“Shall you be dere?”

“Yes.”

“An’ her?” He pointed across the yard.

"Yes."

He wavered. Then he said,—

"No; I'd radder stay wid de udder kids."

"But they will all be here."

Silence.

"And you'll come, too?"

Silence.

"And swing in one of the hammocks, Toni?"

Silence.

"And play jacks with me?"

Silence.

"And help the other large boys swing the little bits of girls?"

Toni's lip suddenly curled again.

"I don' take care of no kiddies," he said curtly; "an' I don' git into no mission kindergarten, if I knows myself. W'en I plays, I plays in de street with de udder fellers." With the dignity of a buskin-shod hero of melodrama, he turned upon his little bare heel.

A moment later, Isabel Dering stood looking through the gate into a deserted street.

II.

TONI TRESPASSES.

“ADAM!” Toni’s voice was charged with excitement, as he bent over the rail of the fire escape.

No answer greeted him, and he called again,—

“Adam! Adam Dombowski!”

“H—h?” The monosyllable was interrogative and expressive, but quite unspellable.

“Come up here.”

“Can’t.”

“W’y not?”

“Me mudder told me to min’ de baby.”

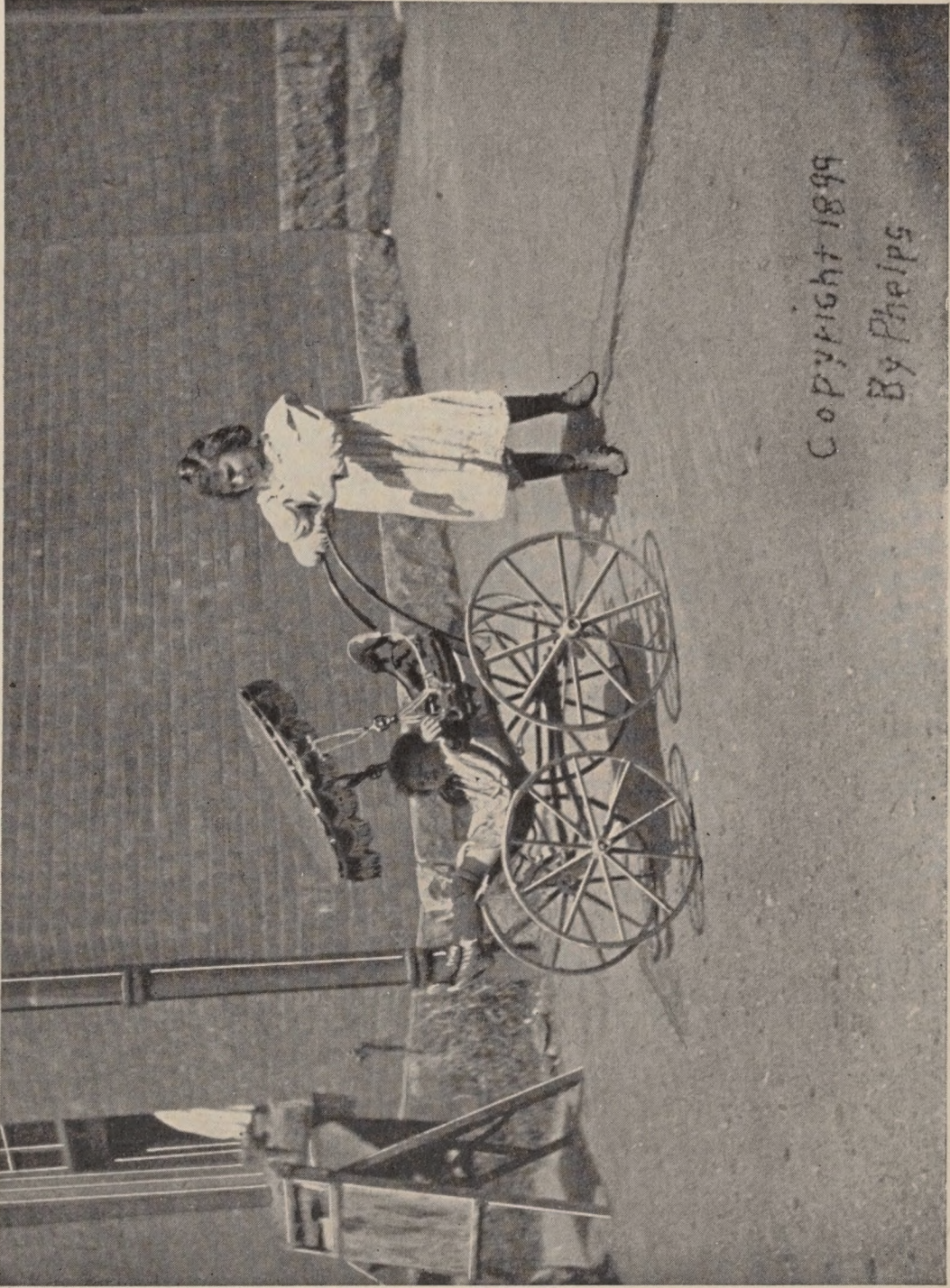
Toni peered scornfully over the rail. Himself an only child, he was at a loss to comprehend the loyalty his friends showed to the family baby, their pride in infant achievements.

“Dump him in de chair an’ come along.”

“Can’t. Wot’s de row?”

“It’s down in de yard,” Toni explained excitedly; “allde fellers from Rose Street an’ lots of girls.”

“Inside?”



A FOND MAMMA.

“Nah.” Again the reply was somewhat unspellable, though plainly of negative intent. “Just hangin’ round outside an’ lookin’ in.”

“Ain’t nobody inside?” Adam asked. His position was too low down to permit him to view the scene of action, so he was forced to depend upon Toni’s bulletins, and he appealed to him as to a watchman upon a hilltop.

“De laidies.”

“Wot laidies?”

“De ones I told yer about, de udder day.” Toni’s accent was slightly toploftical, as befitted his position. Besides, had he not held converse with one of the aforementioned “laidies”?

“Wot’s dey doin’?”

“Just standin’ round an’ talkin’. De gate is shut. Gee! Now dey’re bringin’ out t’ings to beat de cars.”

Toni’s excitement communicated itself to Adam, and inadvertently he tunked the baby’s head against the wall. The baby was a soggy little creature, however, and only blinked.

“Wot sort o’ t’ings?”

“Balls an’ books an’ a little blackboard an’—carts—an’—a shiny wheelbarrer.”

There came a thump and a protesting wail from the baby. Then Adam, minus his small charge, came clambering up the fire escape. He reached the top and took his stand by Toni, just in season to see the iron gate swing back and the women inside range themselves in a hospitable row to greet the inward rush which would follow. No rush did follow, however. Instead of that, the children coyly withdrew to the curbstone and feigned an interest in a passing dray. Miss Dering, who was wont to be nervous in supreme moments, giggled and hurriedly turned her back. The others stood waiting irresolutely, all but the yellow-haired lady. She stepped outside the gate and held out her hand to curly-headed Naomi Budesheim.

"Come," she said, with a smile that showed two deep dimples and took away all of Naomi's small doubts; "come in and see if we can't find a dolly for your baby to play with."

With infallible instinct, she had struck the right chord. The surest way to win a place in Naomi's heart was to notice her tiny sister Ruth. Dollies were few and shabby in Ruth's corner of the world, and the pink-gowned, bewigged blonde that lay on a bench just inside the gate was exactly the right size

to fill the little arms. Naomi hesitated only for a minute; the next minute, she was nestling close to the yellow-haired lady and, with Ruth clinging fast to her other hand, she suffered herself to be led through the open gateway.

It had been a wise choice that had fallen upon Naomi Budesheim. Without in the least suspecting the fact, Naomi was a leader in her small world. For one thing, in her pale, pinched little fashion, she was a wonderfully pretty child and totally devoid of all selfishness; for another, her mother had new lace curtains and a plush album in her parlor, and her father made it a point that his children should never be seen barefooted in the street. Naomi shared her social supremacy with Hosie Wikrowski, who had moved into a house with a doorplate left over from some remote day when that part of the city was the court end of town, and who wore spectacles and a mortar-board cap. To be sure, in its descent from university circles to a Rose Street slop shop, the mortar-board cap had lost most of its freshness and all but ten threads of its tassel; but nevertheless Hosie felt himself a man of the fashionable world, as he watched the ends of those ten threads swaying before his eyes.

Naomi was eight, and there were five little Budeheims younger than herself; but her whole heart was given up to Ruth, a fragile, fretful baby of two, whose calls upon her young nurse were constant and insistent. When it pleased Ruth to walk alone, she walked; otherwise she lifted up her voice and wailed until Naomi picked her up in her tired little arms and carried her for blocks at a stretch. Pennies were not plenty, and Naomi's mouth watered at sight of the sticky goodies in Rose Street stalls; but all the coveted morsels found their way into Ruth's mouth. It was doubtless much better for Naomi's morals and Naomi's digestion that it should be so; but the experience involved some self-denial.

It was a busy life that Naomi led. Her mother had more thrift than her neighbors; but there was much to be done, and little Naomi must help where she could. Up in the morning early to get breakfast and tidy up the room, out on the streets all day long when the weather would allow, to give Ruth all the fresh air she could get in that close-packed neighborhood, then home at night to tuck the babies into bed and crawl in beside them, too glad to be off from her tired little feet to care whether she lay on husks or on eiderdown. All that spring, Ruth had been ailing.

Now her pretty curly hair lay damp and clinging about her forehead, and her face had the pinched look of a hungry young robin. The doctor had prescribed fresh air, so, day after day, Naomi had carried her and led her by turns here and there through the neighboring streets. The sights they saw, the words they heard, were unfit for the eyes and ears of children; yet, strange to say, Naomi saw and heard, and yet lost nothing of her childish innocence. It is a law of nature that soil rolls off from some surfaces and leaves them unsullied.

And now, after days of aimless strolling about the hot streets, of letting Ruth amuse herself with scraps of orange peel rescued from the pile swept up in the gutter, Naomi was clinging to a firm, soft hand and looking down at Ruth, who sat in a little scarlet chair and hugged the pink dolly to her blue calico bosom. She was too happy in watching Ruth to see the expression in the blue eyes above her, or to heed the merry clamor that began to go up from the yard around.

Naomi might be too busy, too absorbed in Ruth to know or care whether she was popular. Still, where Naomi led, certain others were bound to follow, and the yard was slowly filling, while an ever-

increasing throng held themselves warily outside the gates and waited to see into what manner of trap their comrades had strayed and what befell them there.

And Toni, meanwhile, stood on the fire escape, alone, for Adam had gone back to the baby. He watched the flying swings, the waving seesaws, watched Phillie Luyckx trying to draw on the little blackboard. Phillie always thought he could draw; but he couldn't, at least, not one-tenth so well as Toni himself. He saw Bennie Bronstein and Sollie Levandowski playing with a great red ball, and immediately life became empty to him because he possessed no such ball as that. He watched the whole happy, busy scene; he envied as he watched; and, the more envious he became, the more caustic were the bulletins that drifted down to Adam, now dandling the baby upon his ragged knees.

Suddenly the bulletins ceased. All at once, Toni had been sure he saw Miss Dering look up toward him and wave her hand invitingly. On the impulse of the moment, he made a hideous face back to her. It was only a passing impulse, and Isabel Dering was too far away to catch the grimace. Nevertheless, Toni's heart became heavy within his small

breast, and his wit ceased to sound witty in his own ears. He turned away and went down the long, dark stairways, crossed the yard and turned into Rose Street in search of some entertainment. Rose Street, in so far as its juvenile population was concerned, was well nigh deserted.

Nearly a week later, Toni was again on the fire escape. Since that first Monday morning when, doubtful whether after all it might not be a real circus, he had taken his stand at dawn to watch what the day might bring forth, not a morning had passed without his appearing there. As yet, he had not been inside the playground; only once had he been lured into peering inside the gate. No one knows what might have happened next, had not the policeman come around the corner just then. As it was, Toni scurried away like a frightened mouse that, ready to nibble at a baited trap, discovers a cat drawing near its tail. It was the part of safety to watch from the vantage ground of his own fire escape, or from the insecure footing of a chair in the back window. However, at noon and in the late afternoons when the yard was closed, he usually descended to the street to discuss the problem with his fellows.

“Wot’s it all for?” he asked, one day.

“Dunno.”

“Wot does dey want of yer?” he persisted.

“Nothin’.”

“Oh, dey’s after somethin’,” he asserted. “You’s a greenie, if yer don’ know dat. Sometimes it’s shoes, an’ sometimes it’s picture-cards, an’ now it’s dis yard. Wot does dey call it?”

“Playground.”

“Play-rats! Wot is it dey does to yer?”

“Nothin’.”

“Don’ dey talk to yer, nor have any rules, nor wash yer?”

His companion neatly threaded his toe through a slice of onion in the gutter. Then he said slowly,—

“No; not really. Dey won’t let us grab t’ings from de little kiddies, an’ dey says we’s got to play fair an’ take our turn in de swings after de girls. Dat’s all. One day, Teacher was goin’ to tell us a story; but she wouldn’t do it till she’d sent Sol inside to wash his hands off. ’Twas a whoppin’ story, too, all about a man that planted snakes’ teeth, an’ raised a big crop of sojers.”

“Gee!” Toni said appreciatively. Then he departed to ponder upon the matter, for it passed his

comprehension entirely. A place to play in, toys to play with, grown-up people who professed themselves anxious to play, too, people who could tell snake stories and no moral attached! It was far better than the picture-cards. Their moral was palpable, and usually printed on the back in full-faced type. Toni scratched his right ankle with his left toes reflectively.

On this particular afternoon, Toni's heart was heavy. Even Adam had deserted him and gone over to the enemy. Toni could see him now, just lifting the baby into a basket-like carriage with a blue parasol hanging from a hook above it. That wonderful yard seemed to hold everything, even baby carriages. Naomi had put little Ruth into another one and was rolling her about the yard, in a futile effort to make Ruth go to sleep. All night long, Ruth had been ill and feverish until, in the gray dawn of early summer, Naomi had crept out of the crowded bed, taken the fretful child in her arms and, sitting on the fire escape in the cooler air outside, had crooned over and over again her little song about "Birdies in the Greenwood." To be sure, Naomi had never seen any live birds but English sparrows, and she had no notion of what a greenwood might be;

but she liked the swing of the little song just as well for all that, and at last it had lured Ruth into a half-hour of restless slumber, before it was time to dress her and take her to the yard.

Naomi was a fond mamma, and, like all other fond mammas, she showed some skill in getting for her baby the best of whatever offered. Babies were plenty in the yard, that morning, yet Naomi had contrived to possess herself of a carriage with a shiny black top, and of a great red ball, just such a ball as Toni had coveted for so long. Ruth was too listless to hold the gay ball, however, and Naomi tucked it in beside the child who, too large for the carriage, lay stretched out with her thin little legs dangling limply over the dashboard.

Up and down, up and down she went, a little human pendulum, only pausing now and then to peep under the black canopy to see whether the waxy lids drooped. Then more and more slowly she moved till she brought the carriage to a halt in the shadow close to the back fence. The woman-like care not to waken the sleeping child was not wholly amusing. Then Naomi crept away for a dozen paces, looked over her shoulder to assure herself that Ruth was really and truly asleep, and with a bound was in the

middle of the group under the awning, a child in the midst of children.

And Toni, from above, saw it all, saw the red ball lying unheeded beside the child asleep in a deserted corner of the yard. Temptation entered into Toni's soul. The ball was so big and bright and bouncy.

Ten minutes later, there was a scratching and scraping from the other side of the fence, there was a thud, a shrill wail from Ruth and a shriller outcry from Naomi. On its side lay the carriage, with Ruth under it, and two small, smutty hands were just letting go the top of the back fence. To complete the chain of evidence, one of the hands also grasped a scarlet rubber ball.

III.

TONI COMES.

THERE were many teachers; there was only one Teacher. The teachers came twice a day. They were there when the yard opened; they closed the gates after the last child had gone. They were always kind and patient and helpful, always efficient; but in the eyes of the children they were obviously hirelings, and even their kindness suggested their being girt for the toil. Teacher came less often. Few days there were when she did not appear, but her appearings were at irregular hours. She had a trick of coming into the yard so quietly that none of the children saw her until she stood in their midst, smiling at the shrill shouts of welcome, at the swift rush of little feet flying toward her. Even then, she rarely said much to them or petted them; she only looked straight into their eyes, rested her slim, strong hand on their shabby shoulders and listened to what they had to say to her. It was wonderful how soon she came to know the secrets,

not always the happy secrets, of their little lives. Her word was law, a final authority from which there was no appeal; yet the children never really feared her. By instinct they knew that she was just. Teacher was the lady with the yellow hair, and she it was who finally lured Toni into the yard.

“Isabel, where is your cherub?” she asked abruptly, one morning, when she and Miss Dering chanced to be in the playground at the same time.

Miss Dering was crossing the yard, with Grimm’s Tales tucked under one arm, and a garland of children clinging to either hand.

“Which one?” she asked blithely.

Teacher laughed outright. The yard had been opened for two weeks now, and there was certainly an improvement in the cleanliness of the children. There was still room for improvement, however, and as Teacher saw the black finger-prints on Miss Dering’s fresh shirt waist, she recalled Miss Dering’s early denunciations of the untubbed state of the children. That was two weeks ago, and now, for an hour, Isabel Dering had been sitting under the awning with Orpah Budesheim in her lap and six or seven more children leaning on her shoulders. It was the same Isabel Dering, but—

"Your cherub at the gate, that first morning we were down here."

"Oh, the cirkiss one?"

"Yes. Has he ever been here?"

Miss Dering cast an expressive glance about the playground.

"Has he? With all these swarming myriads, how can I tell? Still, I think I should know him again, if I saw him."

"I should, I am sure," Teacher said with decision. "He charmed me completely, and I wish we could get hold of him."

"That is sheer vanity on your part," Miss Dering observed. "You liked him because he thought you were the chief star of the cirkiss. So you are, even if you don't jump through white paper hoops. Have you asked Miss Loomis about him?"

"I don't even know his name."

"It was Toni Something, Valovick, or Valorick, or Valorous. It made an impression upon me, for, as a rule, we are all minor prophets here, Hosie Wikrowski, and Amos Budesheim, and Dannie Mastenbrend."

"Yes, we can begin at Adam and run through the list to Malachi," Teacher answered. "But I would

like to find out something about your Toni. His snubby little nose between those bars appealed to me wonderfully."

"Perhaps some of the children can help you find him," Miss Dering suggested.

Moved by a certain shy delicacy, the children realized that the talk did not concern them, and they had reluctantly gone away, leaving Miss Dering alone with Teacher. It was a constant source of wonder to both women, this innate fineness which kept the children from crowding upon them or becoming too insistent. It was contrary to all their notions to find that children from such homes were more easily ruled, quicker to heed a word or even a glance of dismissal or rebuke than their own small brothers and cousins. With a childish gladness they received whatever good was offered them; when there was no more to be had, they took themselves off with an elderly contentment with what they had already received. It was not altogether obedience, neither was it wholly apathy. It was made up of them both, and it came from long generations of being a despised and persecuted race. Later on, it would be hidden under other and less lovely traits.

"Naomi, come here a minute."

With a bound, Naomi was at her side, her fingers clasped around Teacher's hand. Ruth came trudging at her heels.

"Do you know any Tonis, Naomi?"

"Yes, lots of 'em, ma'am."

"That aren't here in the yard?"

"Yes, ma'am. There is Toni Valovick that stole Ruth's ball, and—"

Over Naomi's curly head, Teacher and Miss Dering exchanged glances.

"So that was Toni Valovick, was it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What sort of a boy is he?"

"Oh, he's a bad one!" Naomi clasped her hands dramatically as she spoke.

"Do you know him?"

"No, ma'am; not to speak to him. He hasn't lived in Rose Street long, only since spring; but everybody knows about him."

"Why?"

"Because he is so bad. He steals out of the push-carts, an' he knocked Ruth down, one day, an' took away her candy an' ate it, right while I was a-lookin'."

"Why doesn't he come to the playground, Naomi?"

"Him?" Naomi's tone was incredulous. "You don't want him, Teacher."

"Why not?" Teacher's lips were smiling; but her eyes looked steadily, kindly, rebukingly down at the little Pharisee.

"Because—why, Toni's so bad," Naomi reiterated. "My papa wouldn't let me play with him a bit. He's a very bad boy."

"All the more reason we want him here," Teacher said. "That's what the playground is for, Naomi."

"Yes, ma'am," Naomi said obediently, although she had not the faintest notion of what Teacher was driving at.

Teacher waited long enough to give her time to grapple with the problem. Then she added,—

"Naomi, what if we should try to get Toni here, and show him what good fun he could have without being bad? Don't you think he'd rather play ball with you and Hosie than steal out of the push-carts?"

"I don't know, ma'am. You see, he is so awful bad."

"Poor baby!" Isabel Dering murmured. "And he is just seven years old."

But Teacher went on,—

"If he should come, Naomi, would you ask your papa to let you play with him?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Who knows him, who that's here, I mean?"

"Adam does. He lives under him."

"Which is Adam?"

Naomi pointed out Adam, who was propping up the soggy baby in a chair and hemming him in with other chairs, and Teacher betook herself to his side.

"Good morning, Adam," she said cheerily. "Is this your little sister?"

"It's me brudder, ma'am." And Adam showed his pleasure in being singled out for notice by straightening down the baby's skirts.

"Isn't he good? And you take all the care of him? But I wouldn't give him that candy, if I were you, Adam."

"W'y not? He likes it."

"I know; but it isn't good for him. Babies don't want sweet things." Teacher spoke as hopefully as if she had not been waging war upon Rose Street candy, for the past two weeks. Among these ragged, underfed children, stray pennies were more plentiful than she had supposed, and she was fast learning that one cause of baby illness lay in the fact that the

babies sucked doubtful and highly colored taffys before they left off sucking their own dingy thumbs.

Of course Adam saw her disapproval; of course he took the candy away from the wailing infant; of course he promised to buy no more, and of course he promptly broke his promise. Meanwhile, as soon as she could make herself heard above the protestations of the baby, Teacher returned to the charge.

"Adam, do you know Toni Valovick?"

"Yes, ma'am. He's my chum, an' de best scrapper in Rose Street."

"What is the reason he doesn't come to the yard?"

Adam's social sense was still in a rudimentary state, and he saw no reason for beating about the bush.

"Don' wan' ter," he said tersely.

"I'm sorry. I thought you boys liked it."

"We does, all but Toni."

"Has he ever been here?"

Adam shook his head.

"Have you asked him to come?"

"Yep. Says he don' wan' no yard to play in, w'en he's got Rose Street."

"What kind of a boy is Toni?" Teacher asked suddenly.

"He's all right."

"Not a bad boy?"

"Nah. He's no softie; but he's good, for all dat."

Teacher liked Adam's frank loyalty to his absent friend.

"How do you mean good?" she asked.

"W'en I busted my leg, in de spring, an' couldn't go out wid de pypers, he took mine an' his'n too, an' give me half de rocks. An' once he kicked Phillie Luyckx for sassin' Becky Keinstein, w'en she didn' know enough to sass back. Toni ain't got no use for Phillie, anyhow."

Teacher nodded understandingly. Becky, fourteen in years and four in intellect, was in constant attendance at the playground, which winked at its nine-year limit when she appeared. She was not attractive, and Toni's championship of her cause might be owing to some latent germ of pure chivalry which might in time atone for the episode of Ruth's ball. It might also be owing, however, to an inherent fondness for strife.

"You will bring Toni with you, to-morrow, Adam?" Teacher said interrogatively, as she rose.

"Yes, ma'am," Adam replied obediently; "if he'll be brung."

The baby had lopped forward again, with its head and feet in unnatural proximity. It was gurgling and choking to an alarming extent; but, for the moment, Adam paid no heed. He was watching Teacher's firm, free step as she crossed the yard, looking at her smooth yellow hair and at the trim hang of her short skirt; and, as he watched, he thought of his mother's frownsiness, and he wondered. Then he picked up the baby, shook out its crumpled clothing, and with his clumsy boyish fingers tried to straighten down the tangled hair and rub away some of the smears from its face.

There was a great bunch of nasturtiums to be distributed, that noon, and the children lined up inside the gate and stood waiting patiently for a blossom or two. As a rule, the gates were left hospitably open until an hour before time for the yard to close; then they were locked and, at the appointed hour, the children were marshalled out in decorous order, the boys in the rear, the girls ahead of them, and the babies first of all. To-day, the teachers were going up and down the lines, their hands laden with the bright blossoms, while the children received the blossoms with faces as bright as the golden flowers. Some were greedy, some shy, some indifferent; yet

each was the better for the flower or two to carry away to his flowerless home.

Teacher and Miss Dering never tired of watching the pretty picture. Sometimes they took a hand in the distribution; more often they stood back and looked on, smiling to see a red blossom "swapped" for a yellow one, a pink sweet pea for a blue bachelor's-button. Suddenly, as they stood together, Miss Dering broke the silence that had fallen between them.

"Poor Toni!" she said impulsively.

Teacher shook her head.

"Not poor Toni at all! I do hope we can get him to come soon."

"But if he is so bad," Miss Dering interposed dubiously.

"He isn't."

"Naomi said—"

"Naomi doesn't forgive any insult to Ruth's dignity," Teacher said, smiling. "Toni isn't altogether hardened. I asked Adam about him, and he told me—"

"Hsh! Here he is!" Miss Dering clutched Teacher's arm excitedly.

"Ah—h—h—h! Dat's de time yer couldn' git

out'n dere. Now wot does yer t'ink of yer playground? You's rats in a trap; dat's wot yer is."

Teacher turned around, to discover Toni dancing gleefully about the sidewalk and exchanging compliments with Adam who, by reason of the baby, was at the head of the line of boys. Toni was a shade less clean than when she had seen him before, and his jumper had parted with its solitary cuff. Otherwise he was unchanged.

"Shut up!" Adam said explosively.

"Rats! Rats! Doesn't yer wish yer could git out? Dere's a feller been nabbed, down in Rose Street; de cops has got him now, an' yer can' see de fun."

"Don' believe it," said Adam sturdily.

But Toni frisked about like a gnome, alternately jeering at the captivity of his friends and explaining to them the exciting events just transpiring in Rose Street. In spite of herself, Teacher laughed. Then she drew near the gate; but Miss Dering was before her.

"Toni," Miss Dering called; "Toni, don't you want some flowers?"

He halted and looked at her, half merrily, half distrustfully. Between the bars, she held out a half-

dozen blossoms toward him. He seized them, smelled of them gingerly, held them high in the air; then, with a merry, mocking laugh, he tossed them back again over the fence and went scampering away up the street and around the corner.

It was earlier than usual, the next morning, when Teacher came into the playground. She made her usual leisurely round to see that all was running smoothly; she went inside the great sunshiny kindergarten room to talk over a few details with the teachers; then she came out again and, instead of going over to the awning or the sand bin, she settled herself in a shady corner just inside the open iron gate, with her back turned directly toward it.

"Now, who wants to hear a story?" she asked gayly, and in a moment Naomi and Ruth and Adam and the baby and a dozen more of the minor prophets were squatting on the ground beside her.

Teacher told a story well. She never lost a certain dainty purity of speech, yet the minor prophets never seemed to realize that she was not talking to them in their own vernacular. Moreover, as she told over the dear old classic tales, the dragons appeared to be all teeth and claws, the heroes to be all shining mail and noble courage, and Adam, as

he listened to the stirring climax, clutched the baby so tightly that it roared a lusty accompaniment to the death of the Minotaur.

“And so the Minotaur died, and Theseus went home to his father,” Teacher was saying, when Naomi suddenly twitched at her skirt.

“Teacher, here’s Toni!”

But Teacher never heeded. She neither turned her head nor raised her voice at all, as she went on to the end of her story, yet so near was she to the fence, so clear and distinct was her accent, that each syllable was heard by the small ears just outside the gate.

“But Theseus was selfish. He only thought about himself, and he forgot all about his promise to change the color of his sails. And so his father was sure he had been killed and eaten up by this terrible beast, half-bull and half-man. The old father loved his son so dearly that he died of sorrow, because he thought he should never see him or talk to him again. That is all of that story; but we have time for just one more. What shall it be?”

“Tell about de feller dat planted de snake’s teeth,” Adam suggested.

And so, for the tenth time, Teacher told the chil-

dren the story of Cadmus. She threw herself into all the details with an enthusiasm which apparently made her heedless of the small figure stealthily drawing near and nearer the group.

"How many of you have ever seen a snake?" she asked, when she had satisfactorily extricated Cadmus from all his difficulties.

"Me an' Bennie went to de Fort, las' summer, an' we seen a little one dere," Hosie said triumphantly.

"Did you? What was he like?"

"Black an' yellor, an' he walked like dis." Hosie wriggled in what he fondly imagined was a graphic representation of a snake's mode of locomotion.

Teacher sat waiting for more disclosures. The children always loved to contribute their mites to the story-telling. While she waited, she watched a group far across the yard beside one of the swings.

"My turn next!" she heard Linkie Jefferson shout, as Carrie Luyckx let the old cat meet a slow and reluctant death.

Linkie was as smooth and brown and round as a chocolate cream, and he always amused Teacher; but now the smile on her lips was not all for him. Out of the corners of her eyes, she had discovered

the little figure on the outskirts of the group, had seen him moving uneasily, as if he too had had experiences with a snake and were burning to impart them.

“My big brudder he killed a snake once, out’n de park,” Phillie was boasting proudly.

“Dat’s nothin’.” The explosion had come at last, and so suddenly that even Teacher started a little. “W’en me fader come over to America, dere was a big snake got loose in de ship wid ’em, an’ dey had ter shoot it daid before dey could ketch it agin.”

“Ah—h—h, rats, Toni!” Adam protested.

But Teacher had risen to her feet.

“That is enough story for this morning,” she said blithely. “Now I think I’d like to play ball, and I am going to ask—” her glance strayed over the group and instantly a score of hands were waving in mid-air, “to ask Adam,—and Hosie,—and Naomi,—and Toni to play with me.” And followed by her four chosen playmates, she walked away across the yard.

IV.

TONI FIGHTS.

“I wen’ ter visit a frien’, one day ;
She only lived across the way ;
She said she couldn’ go out ter play
Becuz it wuz her washin’ day.

 This is the way she washed away,
 This is—”

NAOMI’S thin elbows were flying, as she scrubbed at an imaginary board, and beside her Ruth flapped her arms in time to the pounding rhythm of the refrain. Beyond Ruth was Hosie Wikrowski; beyond him, Adam; beyond Adam, Toni.

Once safely inside the yard and safely out again, Toni had been a daily visitor. Such a sudden change of attitude might easily have weakened his dignity; but Toni’s prompt measures had forestalled that. The first boy who had twitted him upon his capitulation had been silenced by a resounding whack over the head with the picture book whose possession he had been disputing with Toni. The whack, given in the presence of a round dozen of

the minor prophets, had proved efficacious. The victim had deemed it wise to pick up the ruins of the book and to hold his peace, while Toni had stalked away in company with Adam.

"Yer fetched him a good one," Adam observed with manifest satisfaction. "He won' give yer no more talk, Toni."

"Let him, if he wants ter," Toni said pugnaciously. "I'll smash him wid a chair, if he does."

"Nah; once'll do. Yer licked him, an' dat's enough. Wot's de use o' scrappin' here?"

"W'y not?"

"Teacher don' like it."

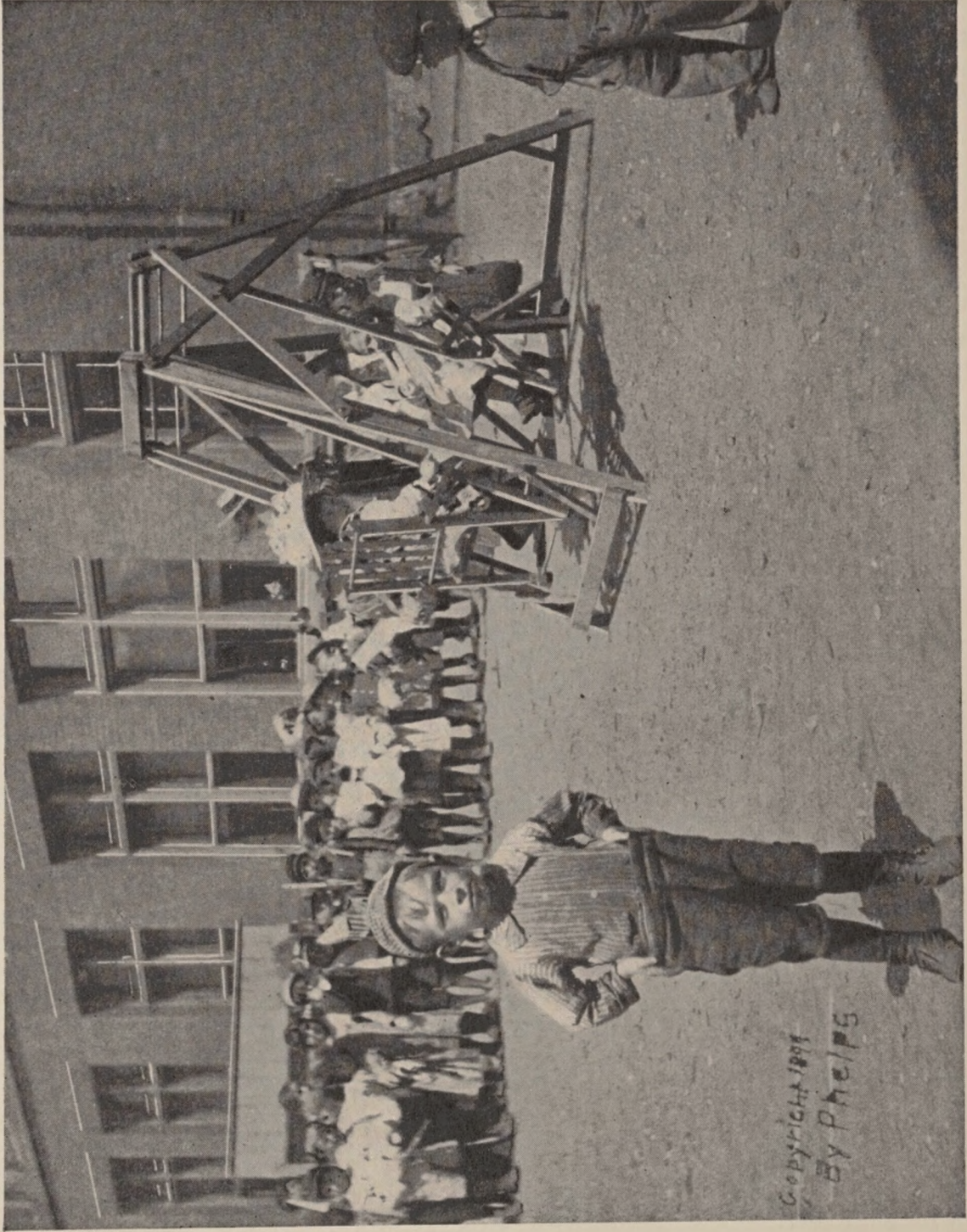
"Teacher!" Toni mocked in a plaintive falsetto. "W'ich teacher? Dey's all teachers here. 'Tain't no better'n de school."

Adam's lips quivered with the longing to ask him why he came; but he wisely forebore.

"Dey's all on 'em teachers; but she's de only one dat's in it," he returned, with a sweep of his hand toward the awning. "Miss Loomis an' the rest's good enough; but Teacher ain't like 'em. She don' have ter come, an' she's so kind er—shiny." He had hesitated for the last word; but, when it came, he used it with a sort of triumph, for it seemed to

him to express just what he wished. Once, in one of his rare expeditions to the better part of the city, he had strayed into an old brown church with arches and bright colored windows. Now, whenever he looked at Teacher, he thought of those windows and of the way the sunshine slanted through them.

Now that he was inside the playground, Toni was allowed to go on his own tempestuous little way. It was something to have him willing to come at all; for the present, it was better to leave him unmolested. For a day or two, he apparently devoted himself to proving all things. Swings, seesaws, picture books, balls and the blackboard, he tried them all in turn. He was discovered with the largest doll in his arms, and he even went so far in his explorations as to take possession of a baby carriage, baby and all, and go racing about the yard in a mad career which endangered the life of his shrieking passenger. Miss Loomis interposed, however, just as Toni tilted the baby on the ground and prepared to clamber into the carriage in its place. She interposed once more, when Toni assumed sole ownership of the sand bin and held the dispossessed babies at bay with one hand while he constructed tunnels with the other. He had proved all things;



" I DON' WAN' TER SWING "

now apparently he was about to hold fast that which was good. Monopolies could not be allowed, however, and the line must be drawn somewhere. Still, for the most part Teacher's advice was followed, and Toni was left to his unregenerate ways.

It was some time before Toni ventured into the kindergarten room where the ring was, and the singing games. It was a great airy, sunshiny place, bright with flowers and gay with the sound of a piano; but Toni appeared to regard it as a species of trap, and he withstood all of Adam's efforts to drag him inside. At length, however, he yielded, and Miss Loomis, the head kindergartner, smiled to herself as she saw the enthusiasm with which he shouted the songs. For the hour, Toni was at his best. He liked the marching, he liked the games in the ring, and when upon his shoulders fell the honor of being chosen

"The loving father,
Brave and full of cheer,"

he fairly strutted, as he crossed to his place in the family circle at Miss Loomis's side. To be sure, it was impossible for him to take anything, even his happiness, altogether seriously, that day. His merriment mounted with his excitement; it manifested

itself in all manner of little giggles and snickers, and it reached an ecstatic climax when he ended the "loving father" song with an improvised trill at least an octave and a half above the other voices.

"You mustn't do that again, Toni," Miss Loomis remonstrated. "I want you to sing with the others."

"No, ma'am," he returned obediently; "but I feels so funny I can' help yellin' a little."

Toni continued to feel funny, all that day and the next, until the other children were reduced to a titting state of demoralization. On the third afternoon, Miss Loomis asserted herself. It was all very well for Teacher to have a protégé; but teachers had their rights as well as Teacher, and the protégé was upsetting all the discipline of the games. Accordingly, when Toni presented himself at the door of the kindergarten room, the door was closed to him. For a time, he besieged it in vain; then he sallied forth into the yard, to wreak his vengeance upon any one who might chance to come in his way.

That some one proved to be Adam. The kindergarten room could only hold a small fraction of the three or four hundred children in the yard. For

a week, Adam had contrived to wriggle past the young teacher at the door and to take his place in the ring; but, on this particular day, he had been told to remain outside to make room for the others. Adam's temper was usually of the best; but now he set the soggy baby into the swing, with a thump which roused it from its wonted apathy.

"Shut up, or I'll lick yer," he growled, as he rocked it gently to and fro. "Git out'n de way, Toni!"

"Sha'n'."

"Le' go. Yer in de way."

"I'm goin' tēr swing de kiddie," Toni announced, not for love of ministering to the baby, but because he was shrewd enough to discover that Adam was cross, and that Adam would be annoyed by his attentions.

"Nah, yer ain't. Yer'll pitch him out. Stop it, I say."

"'Tain't your swing."

"Nor your'n."

"Go over an' swing dat udder one, if yer wants ter."

Toni cast a scornful glance over his shoulder at the trio of girls in the swing near by.

"Dey can swing derselves, or dey can sit still," he announced. "I stays here."

Adam yielded, and for a few moments the mutterings of the coming storm were silenced.

"W'y ain't yer inside?" he asked, after a pause.

"Didn' wan' ter. W'y ain't you?"

"Sick of it," Adam replied tersely.

Toni eyed him malignly.

"Bet yer life dey wouldn' let yer in."

"Would, too."

"W'y didn't yer go?"

Adam made a false move. If he had only adhered to his statement that he was tired of it, all might yet have been well. Unfortunately he shifted his ground.

"I had ter mind de baby."

"I'll mind de kiddie. Go on in."

"Nah."

"Go on."

"Don' wan' ter," Adam reiterated.

"Dey won' let yer; dat's w'y." Toni fell to capering on one foot. "Ah—h—h, Adam got fired out!" he shouted to Hosie Wikrowski, half the yard-length away.

"Was not. Yer got fired out, yerself. I hearn Teacher tellin' yer ter keep out."

"No such a t'ing. I kin go in w'en I wants ter. I'd ruther stay here an' swing."

"Yer'll have ter go somewheres else to do it."

"'Tain't your swing, an' you've had it, all de afternoon."

Forgetful of the baby, Adam swung himself round to face a tormenting foe.

"I don' wan' ter swing, myself; but I ain't goin' ter hike dis kid out fur a feller like you," he proclaimed, as he hitched up his small trousers and then planted his hands on his hips.

The attitude was defiant, the tone more so. Moreover, both boys were smarting from the knowledge that the chief joy of the afternoon had been denied to them. Approached differently, the knowledge might have made them forget the smart in the loved companionship of misery; as it was, they eyed each other askance for a long minute, poised for the fray like two small bantam roosters. Then they clinched, and in an instant they were rolling on the ground together.

"Toni! Adam!"

It was wonderful what strength lay in those slen-

der white hands. All of a sudden, the two boys felt themselves plucked apart and held up to justice. Above them, Teacher's blue eyes were blazing, and she felt a momentary longing to bump the two small heads together until the culprits cried out for mercy. Only the evening before, she had assured a sceptical young man that fighting was unknown in the playground of School Number Seven.

"What are you doing?" she demanded sternly.

Toni wrapped the shreds of his jumper sleeve about his elbow with every manifestation of anxious care. Then he looked up.

"I sh'd think yer could see widout bein' told," he responded nonchalantly.

"He pitched inter me," Adam exploded.

"Did not. He begun de scrap. I was only fool-in'. I could lick him easy, an' not harf try."

"Could not."

"Could!"

Too late, Teacher regretted her unwisdom in letting go the combatants. Before she could stop them, they had flown at each other once more, and Toni's jumper had parted with the rest of its sleeve.

"Now," Teacher said quietly, when she had them on their feet again; "I want to have a little talk

with each one of you. I shall see Adam first, because he has to take care of his baby. Then I shall send him home. A boy that fights can't stay here. Toni, while I talk to Adam, I am going to put you into this room by yourself, and leave you to think about what you have done. It will bear a good deal of thinking about, too."

Driving the two boys before her like sheep, she entered the corridor of the building, passed the door of the kindergarten room and led the way to a large, light storeroom. She turned the key on Toni. Then she took Adam away to the stairs at the far end of the corridor and made him sit down beside her.

"Now, Adam, I want you to tell me all about it," she said kindly, yet with a decision he dared not gainsay.

"Toni laid for—"

"Wait," she interposed abruptly. "I asked you to tell me about it, not him."

Adam looked uncomprehending.

"Wot d'yer mean?"

"I don't want to know about Toni; he can tell me that part of it. What made you fight?"

"He did."

"But I thought you and Toni were friends."

"Nah."

"He sold papers for you."

Adam's eyes dropped to his bare brown toes, and he pulled at the loose threads around the hole in the knee of his baggy trousers. Teacher pursued her advantage relentlessly.

"I don't think it was all Toni, any more than I think it was all Adam. One boy never fights alone. Something was the matter with you. What was it?"

He wriggled uneasily. Under similar conditions, his mother was wont to cuff him. Her hand was hard and her arm was strong; yet her cuffing had never hurt him half so much as did the look of grave displeasure in the blue eyes above him.

"Felt ugly," he blurted out, after a prolonged silence.

"Why?" Was it chance that led Teacher to rest her fingers on the brown head, at that moment?

"Dey wouldn' le' me inside de room."

"Had you been naughty there?"

"Nah. Dey said 'twasn' my turn."

"That was it? We all have to take our turns, Adam. It isn't fair for you to be in the ring, every day. Was that all?"

He nodded.

“And you felt ugly, just for that? And fought?”

“Yes; but Toni, he—”

She interrupted him again.

“No; we won't talk about Toni. We are talking about Adam Dombowski now. Adam, what if, every time I felt ugly, I fought with somebody?”

He looked up sharply.

“Do yer feel ugly?”

“Yes, often.”

“Honest? Let's shake.”

With perfect gravity, she offered him her hand. Then she returned to the charge.

“What should you think, Adam, if you saw me rolling on the ground and fighting?”

“Me mudder done it once,” he said reminiscently; “an' de cops come an' took her away in de p'lice wagon.”

Teacher faltered. In talking with these children, one could never be sure of one's ground. It was useless to appeal to Adam's sense of decorum, when he was accustomed to see his mother sinning even as he had just sinned. How far were these children accountable for their naughtinesses? Resolutely she pushed the question aside. She would forget the

cause of the trouble and only hunt for the cure. If Adam's parents fought like the beasts of the street, then just so much the more reason that, in the little time she had with him, she should try to kill out the beastly in his nature and strengthen the germ of true humanity which is common to all little children, whether their homes are in tenement or in palace.

No matter what she said in the talk which followed. Like Adam, we all have had such experiences; but the words would be tame and colorless, if we tried to set them down. But the sun, striking down through the stairway window, fell full upon Teacher's yellow hair, as she bent over the boy at her side, fell full upon Adam's tousled head buried in his arms on the step above him. Gently, very gently, Teacher lifted the head and turned the face toward her.

"Adam," she said slowly; "it isn't easy to do; but I want you to remember that, when you feel ugly, you mustn't strike somebody. Just shut your teeth and laugh, and try to forget all about it, and then the ugly will go away. Better still, don't be so ready to feel ugly. We want you to be happy and full of fun." She half drew back before the

bitter mockery of her own words. Happy, full of fun, in such a home as that of which he had just been telling her! Then she went on bravely, "That is what the playground is for, to help you to be happy. Happy people are always good, and we want you to be very good, so we are trying to make it as easy for you as we can. Now, take the baby and go home, dear. You've been naughty, and you must take your punishment like a man; but remember that I am coming down in the morning, and that I shall look for you. And, Adam, don't you think it would be a good idea to ask your mother to put a clean dress on the baby?"

Reluctantly he rose and went away down the corridor. At the door, he turned to look back. Teacher was standing where he had left her, in the full glare of the July sunshine, and once more his thoughts went back to the dim old Gothic church, and to the central figure of the window above the altar.

And Toni?

Teacher wearily drew her hand across her forehead. Then she stepped down from the stairs and entered the darker corridor. She was astonished to find wide open the door of the room where she had left Toni. Farther along the corridor, Isabel Der-

ing stood with her back against a closet door. From the other side of the door there came roar after roar, full-toned and lusty, and punctuated by sounding blows from two small fists and two small feet.

“My cherub is in here,” Miss Dering announced grimly. “I began to think you were going to keep on remonstrating with Adam until he arrived at years of discretion. Really, I needed reinforcements. I discovered too late that this door doesn’t lock, and the cherub within is flapping his wings rather vehemently. Please lend me your back, to eke out the failing strength of my own.”

In spite of herself, Teacher laughed.

“Do be serious, Isabel. What did you put him in here for?”

“What did you put him in the storeroom for?”

“He and Adam had been fighting.”

“Oh. Well, I was passing the door and I heard him explaining to whomsoever it might concern that, if we didn’t let him out, he would ‘bust de winder on us’ and go that way. I didn’t want to run the risk of a bill for broken glass, so I transferred him to this dungeon. If I had supposed it would take you so long to administer justice to

Adam, though, I think I shouldn't have taken just this stand in the matter."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Forever, I should think. It is temper now, not sorrow, I suspect, and his voice is getting a little husky, so the crisis may be passing."

"Toni!" Teacher raised her voice above the murmur in which they had been speaking.

"Le' me out!"

"Not until you are quiet."

The knob rattled furiously; there came a fresh roar, a fresh storm of kicks against the panels. Then,—

"Le' me out'n dis, I say!"

"Not till you stop kicking and crying."

The kicks redoubled. Teacher waited until the childish strength was exhausted. Then she said,—

"Toni, you are only wasting your time and mine. You can't come out until you are quiet. When you stop kicking, I will open the door."

The kicks ceased; but the roars continued.

"Kicking and screaming both, Toni."

There were a few last sounds from within. Then there was silence. Teacher took out her watch and held it while the second hand marked five complete

circles. With an expressive glance at Miss Dering, she threw open the door.

"Toni."

No answer.

"Toni, you can come out now."

Not a word.

"Toni, come here."

Teacher's voice was authoritative; but there was no answering sound from the closet. At best, the closet was a dark one and, in the late afternoon light, it was impossible to see far inside its doorway. Teacher and Miss Dering exchanged another glance; then slowly and gingerly Teacher stepped across the threshold. The closet was deep and, bending at a sharp angle, it wound away under the stairs. Teacher moved slowly to the angle, stumbled a little over a box or two, came into collision with a pile of chairs, cast one lingering glance backward at the square of light from the doorway, and rounded the corner into the pitchy darkness beyond. Once she thought she heard a little chuckle, and she halted to listen. All was silent, however, and she moved on again. The next instant, she started violently. From the darkness behind her there came a shout.

“Booh!” And Toni rose and scurried away out of the closet, but, alas for his cunning calculations! straight into the arms of Isabel Dering, who was still on guard at the door.

V.

TONI INTERVIEWS TEACHER.

SEWING afternoon was always a time of excitement in School Number Seven.

Twice in the week, the kindergarten games were given up, and the room was filled with groups of little chairs, each group gathered about a central chair of larger dimensions. Outside the door, the minor prophets were clamorous with a clamor that ceased only when the door opened and they swarmed inside. Within the room, the volunteer teachers were sorting out their classes, and there was leisure for Teacher and Miss Dering to stand at the doorway and watch the mob that shot past them.

"I wonder if it is of any manner of use," Miss Dering said thoughtfully.

"What? Yes, Naomi, you can take Ruth with you, if she will sit very still."

"This sewing."

"Of course it is good for them," Teacher answered decidedly. "We aren't likely to turn out many ex-

perienced tailors; but it is something to give them a notion of which end up to hold a needle, and that one piece of cloth sewed to another piece of cloth can be made to fill up a hole. I tried to insist on thimbles, but I had to give that up. Thimbles belong to a later and more advanced stage of evolution."

"The Dombowski baby swallowed a thimble, last sewing day," Miss Dering observed.

"Isabel!"

"Yes, I was sorry, for it was one of our few little thimbles, and those small sizes are so hard to get."

Teacher looked horrified. Then she laughed.

"What about the baby?"

"You can see for yourself." Miss Dering pointed to Adam, who was just passing them with the baby in his arms. "Isn't it surprising to find the boys so eager to sew? But, really, I felt a good deal worse about the thimble than I did about the baby, for Adam told me that it frequently swallowed buttons. He didn't seem to be in the least alarmed. Still, I thought I wouldn't say anything about it till I saw whether it proved fatal."

"I shouldn't have known an easy moment. Do you suppose it will happen again?"

“You might punch holes in the thimbles and tie them to the teachers’ belts,” Miss Dering suggested flippantly. “Then, in case of accident, you would have a clue to the situation.”

Teacher shook her head.

“Isabel, I can’t classify you at all. You belong to no known species of slummer. Your speech is unorthodox in the extreme; but your deeds are adorable. Any one who can evolve Becky Keinstein to the use of a comb and garters has proved her right to exist. Farewell. I must go to my babies.”

As a rule, Miss Dering took no regular class in sewing. There had been volunteers enough for the work, and she preferred to be free to play with the children in the yard or, in case of need, to substitute for some absent teacher. Now she strolled out to the yard to see what was happening there. A kindergartner was reading aloud under each awning, a third was perched on the edge of the sand bin, directing the construction of Morro Castle, and a fourth was preventing monopolies at the swings. Every one seemed busy, every one happy, even to Becky Keinstein, who was content to sit by the hour in one of the tiniest chairs and clasp a dolly to her elderly heart. Sometimes the dolly’s head

was uppermost, sometimes its heels; but mere questions of anatomy mattered not to Becky.

Miss Dering paused at her side.

"Pretty dolly, Becky," she said gayly.

Becky nodded quite as gayly.

"Yes, Becky's dolly. Teacher, see Becky's hair!"

And she turned herself about proudly to disclose the rough and stubby pigtail that stuck out rampantly from one corner of her head.

With a word of praise, Miss Dering left her and crossed to the patch of shade where Toni was giving a private lesson in drawing to Carrie Luyckx. It had been a matter of some surprise to the powers that ruled over the yard of School Number Seven, when Toni had appeared, on the morning after the fray. Adam had come promptly; they had expected him. But Toni had followed close upon his heels, although he had left the playground, the previous afternoon, protesting loudly that the place should see him no more.

During the still watches of that night, Teacher took plenty of time to think over the details of her long talk with Toni. It had been an explicit talk on both sides; yet, the more she thought of it, Teacher could not be at all sure that she had come

off conqueror. For one moment, she had felt certain of victory; the next moment, she had been betrayed into an irrepressible smile, and after that concession she had been unable to regain her lost advantage. The next morning, however, she felt some satisfaction in Toni's return to the yard. It showed that her influence over him, her hold upon him, was strong enough to draw him back, even at the risk of being made to behave himself.

Toni was slightly subdued, that morning, and his white jumper was no more. In its place, he wore one which obviously had been constructed from the ruins of a university banner, and his back bore the mystic initial so ardently coveted in athletic circles. Long exposure to the elements had faded the original color to an imperfect harmony with his overalls; but still its source was unmistakable. One other change in Toni was becoming apparent. There was a financial panic in Rose Street, that summer, and the paternal business was at a standstill. Between eating and being shaved, popular prejudice lay with the former alternative. As an indirect consequence, Toni's hair was becoming visible.

He looked up, as Miss Dering approached the little blackboard.

"I wan' ter sew," he said abruptly.

"You, Toni? What for?"

"Cos de udder fellers does."

"Then why didn't you go in, when Miss Loomis called?"

"She never said nothin' ter me."

"No; she said it to everybody. You could have gone."

"Sure?"

"Of course. Why not?"

"She fired me out, de udder day."

"Because you were naughty. You aren't naughty now, Toni. Will you come?"

He eyed her distrustfully; then he stuck his fist into her outstretched hand.

At the door they met Teacher.

"I was just looking for you, Isabel. There is a reporter here, and I must talk to him. Can you take my class?"

"Of course. Toni is coming to it, and we are going to make an expert seamstress of him."

"That's good. Are the hands clean, Toni?"

Toni spread out two grimy little paws for inspection, and was promptly ordered to the washroom. Then, still at Miss Dering's side, he threaded his

way among the groups until he found himself in a low chair between Adam and Orpah Budesheim. Orpah was the healthiest of the Budesheims and the least lovable. She was a self-conscious child of four years, who had been spoiled by reason of her long brown curls and her thread of a soprano voice. She had a cunning trick of putting her head on one side and rolling up her great blue eyes, until even Teacher had yielded to her fascinations. Orpah was too young to sew; but she was a sort of honorary member of Teacher's class, where she alternately sang and babbled, to her own great satisfaction.

At Toni's approach, she drew up her little skirts disdainfully.

"I don't wan' to sit next him," she protested.

"Sit down, Toni," Miss Dering said calmly; but Adam rebelled.

"He's as good as you," he said sharply.

Orpah looked at him askance. Then she made a sudden dash at his pink and yellow patchwork and jerked the squares apart.

"Orpah!" Miss Dering's tone was ominous, while she laid a restraining hand upon Adam's shoulder.

"What, ma'am?"

"You mustn't do that again."

"Do what?" Orpah's eyes were at their widest, and her expression one of bland unconsciousness of evil.

"Tear Adam's work."

"I didn't."

Adam started up aggressively; but Miss Dering held him back.

"I saw you, Orpah," she said quietly.

With a swift glance, Orpah assured herself that, far across the room in the advanced class, Naomi was too much absorbed in making a little petticoat for Ruth to heed the scene. Naomi was the only person in the world whom Orpah really feared or loved.

"You lie," she said, with a certain dainty accent peculiarly her own. Then she added, with a side-long look from under her heavy lashes, "An' I'll kill you, if you tell me I lie."

"Poor baby!" Miss Dering thought to herself; but her voice was stern, as she answered, "Orpah, you can't stay here any longer, after using such words. Go right out into the yard."

And Orpah went.

Teacher stopped her, as she was dancing and singing along the hallway.

"Why, Orpah, what are you doing here?"

"That other teacher fired me out," she said airily. "I don' know why. Most peoples likes to see me round."

"You see Rose Street occasionally produces one care-free child," Teacher remarked to the reporter, as Orpah vanished through the open doorway.

Miss Dering, meanwhile, was finding her hands more than full. Seven children were allowed in one class. Without Toni, there were seven; with Toni, there were apparently seventy times seven. To preside over the threading of seven sticky needles, the tying of seven dingy knots, the "sharpening" of the seven aforesaid needles, and the untying of the many times seven unintentional knots, and to keep up a brisk fire of cheery talk the while: all this required a person of steady poise. Add to this Toni. He never remembered having seen a needle before that hour. He examined it with a minute attention, and then promptly lost it up the sleeve of his jumper. Found again and threaded by Miss Dering, he tied a succession of knots at the eye of the needle, to prevent future mishaps; and, by the time this was accomplished, he had lost his work. With infinite patience, Miss Dering hunted up the scrap

of calico, untied the knots and took a few stitches by way of pattern for him to follow. Then Sadie Mastenbrend claimed her attention, and, for the moment, she forgot Toni. It was only for a moment, however. The next minute, she heard a gleeful chuckle.

“Oh, ain’t dis funny?”

Turning abruptly, she discovered that Toni had tied himself into a knot as complicated as the one in his thread. With his feet curled up under him in his chair, he was holding his needle between his two great toes and pressing his work down over it with both hands. The chair was small; Toni’s centre of gravity was questionable. He balanced, for a moment; then he tilted over backward and landed in a heap at the very feet of Teacher, while out from the breast of his little jumper there fell a paper match-box whose ragged corners showed the sodden bits of cigar packed within.

For one short instant, Teacher hesitated. By right of office, no real discipline should have fallen upon her shoulders. Miss Loomis and her assistants were there to keep the children in order and to deal with just such emergencies as this. At first, she was minded to shake herself free from any responsibility in the matter. Why not? It was not

her place to dispense justice, nor to speak the final "Thou shalt not." Then she dismissed the temptation. She picked up Toni and the box, and went away out of the room.

"Now, Toni," she said, when they were alone together; "what are these for? Do you smoke them?"

As she spoke, she dropped down on her knees beside the child and took his hands into her own. Even then she looked down upon him, small morsel of depravity that he was. They formed a curious contrast together: Teacher, every yellow hair, every fold of her clothing dainty and orderly and spotless; Toni soiled and sodden and besmudged of body as of soul. Yet there was no shrinking on Teacher's part, no hint that she realized the vastness of the chasm between them.

"No." Toni hesitated before he replied to her question. "I don' re'ly smoke 'em. Dat is, dere ain't no fire comes out."

"What do you do with them, then?"

"Oh, I jus' rolls 'em roun' in my mouth an' chews 'em," he replied, staring critically up at her sailor hat. "I wasn' goin' ter chew dese," he added unexpectedly, after another interval.

"What were you going to do with them, then?"

Toni eyed her gravely for a moment.

"I was bringin' 'em ter de teachers," he answered.

Teacher felt a sudden wild impulse to laugh; but she struggled against it bravely. A smile now would cost her too much, so it was with a gravity equal to Toni's own that she asked,—

"Toni, do you ever really smoke?"

He nodded.

"Yep, an' drink, too."

"Drink what?"

"Whiskey."

"Toni! Where do you get it?"

"At de s'loons. Dey gives it ter me for runnin' erran's."

"And you like it?"

"Yep, it's good."

If she had only left the case to Miss Loomis, after all! She had no notion how to proceed. Toni stood looking up at her with a debonair composure which made her feel indescribably young. A temperance lecture would be useless; the very alphabet of such questions was unknown to the child. For the moment, the generations upon generations of different environment seemed to be pushing them

apart and making her powerless to speak to him in any language which he could understand. And he was so little, and so naughty, and so fascinating, and so hardened. Deep down within him there was a tiny spot still unharmed. Now and then she had caught sight of it. Had he not championed the cause of Becky Keinstein? In a few years, that spot, too, would become like flint. How could she reach it and, breaking down the walls around it, give it a chance to grow?

"Oh, Toni," she cried despairingly; "how can you do such bad things? You aren't a bad boy."

In her weakness, Teacher had gained unexpected strength. For a short instant, Toni's eyes veiled themselves. Then he looked up perkily.

"Ain't I? Dey mostly says I is."

"Never mind if they do. You can show them that they are making a mistake."

Opposition of any kind was dear to Toni's heart, and he asked eagerly,—

"Show 'em dat dey lies?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"By being a good boy."

Toni shrugged his shoulders.

"Do' wan' ter."

"Toni, what is a good boy?" she asked abruptly.

"Goin' ter mission an' wearin' shoes an' dyin' w'en I'm a kid and not punchin' Adam in de stum-mick," he responded promptly.

She laughed, this time with no fear of consequences, for Toni was utterly in earnest.

"About Adam, yes. The others don't count for much. What do you think I call a good boy?"

"Wot?" Toni looked interested.

"One that doesn't get ugly, doesn't fight nor smoke horrid ends of cigars, one that is clean and honest and brave."

"How brave?" he demanded. "Like de feller wid de snakes?"

"Like Cadmus? Yes."

His face fell.

"I couldn' be like him, Teacher. He was a jim dandy. Besides, I hain't got no snakes."

"Yes, you have, Toni, and they are crawly ones; at least, they make me crawl."

"Don't yer like snakes?" he inquired impersonally.

"No; not your kind."

"Wot is my kind?"

"Bad ways, Toni, and bad words."

"Dey ain't snakes."

"Yes, they are, dear, and you must fight them, or they will crawl all over you. I want to tell you a new story about Cadmus, Toni, one that nobody else will ever hear. It is just for you. When Cadmus fought the dragon—the snake, I mean—there was just one little spot in his whole body where, if the snake bit him, the bite would kill him. Again and again it flew at him; it bit him again and again; but it never hit that one little spot, much as it tried. At last, just as it had its head raised to strike that very place, Cadmus took it in his two hands and broke its back. You don't see what that story has to do with it, Toni; perhaps you never will. No matter; I do, and I am going to play that you are Cadmus and have just killed the snake. Do you remember what became of Cadmus, Toni?"

"Licked everybody, an' den busted de bank," Toni responded.

"Would you like to be just like him?"

"Bet you!"

"Well, we will try to see what can be done to get you there. It won't be fun, Toni, but good hard

work, with plenty of things in it you don't like. Now, what are we going to do first?"

"Do' know."

Teacher smiled. Even in the midst of her allegory she had realized that she was talking far over Toni's head, yet she had gone on to the end, partly to gain time, partly to reason out to herself her own position.

"I'll tell you. Don't punch Ruth and the other babies; don't be naughty here in the yard, and don't ever, ever touch another piece of a cigar."

Toni eyed her scornfully. To his mind her allegory had been literal history.

"Dat ain't wot Cadmus done."

"Not in the story. We don't know what happened first. But listen, Toni. There are better things than to be like Cadmus. Teacher tells you so, and she wants you to believe her. Good boys aren't made in a minute, nor in a summer; but will you promise Teacher that you'll try, all the rest of the summer and afterward, to be as true as you can, as kind to the little babies, and as generous to Adam and Naomi and Phillie? You've got it all in you, Toni; it only wants letting out. If you wish, you can help Teacher ever so much in keeping the yard

orderly and in making the others have a good time. Will you help me, Toni?"

He looked up at her, quizzically at first, then more gravely. Then his eyes drooped.

"Yep," he said despondently; "I s'pose so; but I don' see de fun in it all."

VI.

TONI GOES TO THE SEA.

THE meanest mongrel in Rose Street might have felt himself insulted by hearing the weather termed dogdays, that summer. Even the up-town houses set in their broad lawns grew sticky and malodorous; down in Rose Street, the atmosphere was reeking. Inside the houses, the stuffy rooms were opened as far as might be to the outside air; but the outside air came in but sluggishly, damp, and disease-laden. Street-cleaning was at a low state of evolution, local public opinion at a lower. It was easy to clear out the push-carts and the stalls by the simple method of dumping the spoiled material into the street. In vain the police interfered; the piles of rubbish appeared and reappeared, and around them swarmed the children, searching to rescue some eatable bits from the general ruin. The cleaning carts came through occasionally, so did the watering carts; but they were powerless to cope

with the general noisomeness. Besides, there were long intervals between their comings.

For the dwellers in Rose Street, there were degrees of misery in the weather. July had been scorching; but the heat was dry, therefore it was bearable. August swept down upon them in a hot, moist wave, which exhausted their already spent strength and reacted upon their nerves. The days they passed in a sort of apathy, rousing themselves now and then to quarrel fiercely together; at nightfall, they emerged into a species of life, and for a few hours the street bore a semblance of its wonted activity. The elders congregated about the corner stalls where, all day long, the owners had dozed uninterruptedly, lying across their wares to prevent too much stealing. The children sat in rows along the curbstone, their bare feet in the gutter where the evening visit of the watering carts left little streams of sirupy thickness. Those who had been in the playground all day long were too drowsy, too tired with healthy play, to heed what was passing around them. The others, those who had shared the general daytime apathy, were all alert, listening to the flow of squalid talk around them, watching eagerly for the too frequent times when the patrol wagon

swept down among them and carried away a father or mother or, perhaps, one of their child companions.

And, meanwhile, the babies were dying fast. The infant death rate in Rose Street was always at its highest in mid-summer. It was small wonder. For the mothers, it was almost unbearable to stay inside the little rooms where the very paper on the walls perspired and slowly loosed itself; where, from week's end to week's end, the beds were never made up, the table never cleared of remnants of the stale pastry and fruit which formed the greater part of their living. Generations ago, ambition had died out from these women; it belonged to the days of peasant homes in the country; there was no place for it in these stuffy dens. All that was required of them by the social law of their district was to shake out the curtains and "tidies" of their parlors; then betake themselves to the street doorway, to sit on the steps and call to one another, while the babies made straight for the roadway in search of what they might devour. Then came dysentery; then the undertaker.

Like the Budesheims, there were exceptions to this rule; but, like all exceptions, they only served

to emphasize the fact of the existence of the rule. And yet upon the Budesheims also, August was laying a heavy hand.

"I'm so tired," Naomi confessed, one day. "It was so hot in the house that Ruth couldn't sleep, an' my papa an' me got up early an' took her out on the fire escape."

"How early, Naomi?" Miss Dering asked.

"Two o'clock; but she went to sleep just beautiful." Naomi clasped her hands rapturously, as she spoke.

"But why didn't you go back to bed, and let your papa hold her?"

"He was tired an' wanted to go to sleep. Besides, she likes me best. When he's mindin' her, she always takes my hand an' holds on awful tight."

"She is your baby, isn't she, Naomi?"

Naomi laughed and nodded, as she put her hand under the sharp little chin and turned the blue-veined face toward the light. Ruth gave a weak, querulous cry, however, and Naomi gently, too gently for so young a child, let the curly head drop back against her shoulder once more.

"Yes, she's my baby," she answered contentedly. "She's awful sick; but she ain't too sick to cry for

her Naomi. She won't let me leave her, a single minute."

"But when do you rest?" Miss Dering asked, with a swift recollection of her own coddled self at Naomi's age.

"Nights, after they're in bed," Naomi responded. "All day long, it's Naomi this and Naomi that; but, after supper when Ruth and Orpah are in bed, then's my happy hour. Ruth cries a good deal now, but it's only because she's so sick. She's gettin' better, though. My papa said the doctor told him Ruth would have died, this summer, if I couldn't have brought her here, every day."

"And you had her here, all day yesterday, and held her in your arms from two o'clock till morning?" Miss Dering questioned kindly. "And now you are carrying her again. You mustn't hold her any longer, Naomi; your arms will break off. Toni, run in and bring out a carriage. There is one left in the hall, and I want it for Naomi."

Toni looked up from his jackstones.

"I do' wan' ter," he returned coolly.

"But Naomi is waiting."

"Let her git it herself, den. I ain't takin' care er no kids."

“Toni!”

Toni looked up hurriedly. Then, quite as hurriedly, he went scurrying off toward the door. He had seen in Miss Dering's merry eyes an expression he had never known till then; but, more potent sight than that, directly behind Miss Dering stood Teacher, and it was Teacher's voice that had spoken the last word. He obeyed; but he grumbled while he obeyed. He was still grumbling, while Miss Dering put Ruth into the carriage and drew it up beside a bench in a shady corner of the yard.

“We can't have any tired little girls, this afternoon,” she said then. “You will be close beside Ruth, and you can hear her if she stirs; but I think she will drop to sleep in a few minutes.”

But before Ruth's lids had drooped, Naomi was wandering through a cool and flowery dreamland, a veritable greenwood where the sparrows decked themselves with strange and wondrous colors. No surer proof of the child's utter exhaustion could have been found than that she was able to drop off, that morning, for the whole playground was agog with excitement. Vague rumors of a coming treat were flying about, and even the most stolid of the children were elated and correspondingly irritable.

No one knew just what was in store for them; but the mere hint of some unwonted frolic made the usual amusements flat and stale by comparison. Teacher and Miss Dering had been at the playground, all the morning, now holding low-voiced colloquies with Miss Loomis, now receiving brown paper parcels at the gate and swiftly stowing them away in a closet with a lock on the door, and now descending upon a group who wrangled loudly over the possession of a dismantled doll or a turn at the swing. Toward noon, Miss Dering's presence of mind forsook her.

"When do I git in?" Phillie Luyckx was demanding of Orpah Budesheim, while he shook the swing fiercely to and fro.

"When I git out," she answered pertly. "Me an' Yetta's swingin' now, an' we want you to swing us."

"Not if I know it," he returned. "It's my own swing now. You've been in here, all day."

From the shadow of a yellow and flowery hat, Yetta eyed him through the hole in the brim. The hole was skewered together with a pin and a large needle; but the edges sagged a little and offered a convenient loophole for Yetta's languid, liquid eyes.

"Phillie, I'll hit yer," she said serenely.

“Yer dassent.”

It was at this point that Miss Dering intervened. She had already extricated Phillie from seven disagreements, and her patience was exhausted.

“Phillie,” she said sternly; “go straight into the kindergarten room and tell Miss Loomis I sent you. We can’t have any bad little boys going with us, this afternoon.”

Going! Like wildfire, the tidings spread among the minor prophets that Miss Dering had said that they were going somewhere. Then it was true, even as rumor had predicted it, that a treat of some kind was in store for them; that, unless they were good, very good, they would be left behind. And such is the nature of childhood that straightway they became tenfold worse than before, until in self-defence Miss Loomis closed the yard, that noon, fully half an hour earlier than the law allowed.

After the first battle with her own vanity, it mattered not to a certain pretty girl that she went away to the mountains, that summer, dressed in her last year’s tailor suit. She found that life was quite endurable to her, her friends quite as devoted as in past years. It mattered greatly, however, to four hundred excited youngsters when, early that

afternoon, a procession of six empty street cars came down the track and stopped at the gate of School Number Seven.

"Yes, it is a picnic," Teacher answered, while she helped Miss Loomis and Miss Dering to stow away the brown paper parcels under the seats. "Yes, Adam, the babies can go, too. Now, Miss Loomis, if we are ready, you can unlock the gate."

Inside the gate, formed in line by the assistants, the children were prancing and shouting excitedly. Even as rumor had predicted, it had come to pass. Not only were they going somewhere, but they were going in the trolley-cars, to many of them a new and untried means of locomotion. The secret had been kept well; had it not been for Miss Dering's incautious word, no one would have suspected the meaning of the innocent-looking brown parcels. As it was, the mere hint of a treat had sufficed to bring the minor prophets out in full force, and most of them were in festal array to do honor to the event. Adam had on a clean blue jumper, and his hair had been deluged with water and smoothed with the coarser teeth of the comb. Yetta had shed the ragged brim of her hat; Orpah Buddesheim staggered under the weight of one of her father's hand-

kerchiefs pinned by the exact middle to her left shoulder, while Carrie Luyckx eclipsed them all in glory by a string of huge blue china beads and a petticoat made of the better portions of an old lace curtain. For obvious reasons connected with human vanity, Carrie had accidentally tucked the hem of her dress skirt through her pocket-hole. Else, why have a lace petticoat at all?

The gate swung back, there was a rush, a shout, a scrabble; then a chorus of voices, a fugue-like chorus, with numerous differing themes.

"I'm goin' ter ride in Teacher's car! Oh, can we sing all we wants ter? Gee, I'll bet you'll be scairt w'en dey begins to go fast! W'ich is Teacher's car? Oh, look at de flags! Flags! Dere's peanuts in de bags under de front seat! Git out, you're scrougin' me! Naomi, Naomi, come in here!"

But Naomi shook her head.

"I'm goin' to ride in Teacher's car," she announced.

"She's comin' in here; ain't yer, Teacher?"

Teacher looked up and laughed at the clamor.

"We'll see," she said blithely. "Perhaps I shall ride in them all."

As she spoke, she felt a pull at her skirt. Turn-

ing, she saw Toni by her side. He had made no change in his dress for the occasion; but it was apparent, nevertheless, that he had sought to improve his appearance. The usual dusky circle about his mouth had vanished. Across his cheek bones a high-water mark showed plainly the extent of his ablutions, and a patch of dried soapsuds, lying in the lee of his nose like driftweed in the cranny of the rock, marked the method he had taken to beautify himself. Whatever the achievement, Teacher recognized the intention with pleasure.

"Well, Toni?" she asked.

"Well, nothin'," he responded with equal brevity.

"Did you want me?"

"Yep. I'm jes' hangin' on ter yer, so's't I kin set next yer, w'en we goes."

She smiled at the unconscious compliment.

"So you shall, because you have tried to be a nice, clean Toni, to-day. Let me see, it will be a few minutes before I can get in. Don't you think it would be a good idea for you to run into the wash-room and clean your feet and legs a little?"

He shook his head.

"Yer'd go widout me."

"No; I'll wait."

“An’ yer won’ let none of de udders git beside yer?”

“No.”

“Honest?”

“Honest.”

He looked up at her searchingly; then he turned and sped away through the gate. He was gone only for a short time, however; but, so far as he knew how, he had done her bidding. To be sure, the tide-mark was only at his ankle bones; but a low tide was better than no tide at all, and Teacher was content, as she saw the child wriggle into the crack between herself and Naomi in the forward car.

It was a wonderful ride, as wonderful to Teacher, perhaps, as it was to the ecstatic children. Song followed song, died away into a buzz of talk, then broke out into song once more, shrill and happy and discordant. To be sure, with six carloads of children carolling at the top of their lungs as many different songs in as many different keys, it was small wonder that the very horses in the streets shied as the cars whizzed past them. Hosie, on the foremost seat of the foremost car, was waving a flag; but Toni felt no envy of him. In a sudden access of gentleness, new to him, yet feeling very comfort-

able, after all, he was cuddled down beside Teacher with his pudgy hand tucked under hers as it lay in her lap. He had never been on a car before. The swift, free motion had terrified him at first, and he had nestled against Teacher in a sudden longing for protection. Afterward, he had found himself so comfortable that he saw no use in stirring.

"Teacher," Adam asked abruptly, screwing himself around until the baby's head was in danger of being severed from the body; "does yer live in a big house?"

"Not very."

"As big as dat?" He pointed to a farmhouse beside the road.

"Yes."

"Who else lives wid yer?"

Teacher looked surprised at his sudden interest in her domestic surroundings.

"My father and mother and my brother."

"Yes; but who else?" Adam persisted.

"Cheese it, Adam! Turn roun' an' look after yer kiddie," Toni protested, for he had no mind to allow Teacher's attention to be diverted from her own seatful.

"Nobody else," Teacher answered.

"Not any udder families?"

"No."

"Not even one, up-stairs?"

"No."

"Not anybody else in de whole tenement! Whoo! Yer mus' be peaches to git on wid. Dere! Sit up an' look at de cows an' t'ings, an' stop yer yellin'!" The last command was addressed, not to Teacher, but to the baby, and Adam was forced to turn his attention to his young charge again.

Toni, meanwhile, was staring up at Teacher with wide eyes.

"Does yer live all alone in de house?"

"With my family, yes."

"Can't yer git any boarders?" he asked sympathetically.

But the wave of song rose around them once more, and it kept on, shrill and strong, while the procession of cars swept out from the city streets, rushed through the pretty open fields, all cool and green under the arching trees, over a racing, chattering brook, past a farmhouse or two, past more fields where the cows turned their heads to stare placidly after the chorus of *moos* that greeted them, then jerked around a sharp curve, and then—

"Oh, de sea! De sea! Dat's de ocean!" shrieked a semi-chorus made up from those who had been upon previous excursions.

Sure enough, there was the gleaming, sail-dotted ocean; and, right in the foreground, there was a broad strip of sand which put to shame the crowded bin in the yard of School Number Seven. At home in Rose Street, the mothers and babies were gasping for breath in the heavy heat; up in the mountains, a girl in a last year's tailor suit was on the box seat, ready to start off for the choicest coaching party of the season; down by the seashore, four hundred children were prancing along the beach, half beside themselves with the breeze and the splash of the waves and the myriad wonders of the strange new scene.

After the brown paper parcels had been opened and the bananas and biscuits had vanished, Toni and Phillie strayed back again to the edge of the water. Naomi had found a shell or two, and Hosie was the proud owner of a horseshoe crab. Toni felt that the day would be imperfect for him without similar treasures, and Phillie had invited himself to join in the search. Far up the beach they came upon Becky Keinstein.

"Wot yer got, Becky?" Phillie called from afar, for Becky's skirt was sagging from her hands in a dripping pouch.

"See what Becky's found," she said.

"Let's look." Phillie ran up and pulled open the folds of her skirt. "Ah—h—h, Toni, here's all de shells we wants."

"Go 'way!" Becky gathered up the folds of her skirt, as Phillie made a dive after her treasures.

"Go 'way, yerself! Gimme some of 'em, Becky. I hain't got none."

"No; Becky wants 'em." She backed away as she spoke.

"Yer can' have 'em all, den."

"Let her alone!" Toni commanded sharply.

"Sha'n't. She's got enough for her 'n' us, too. Ketch hold er one side, Toni, an' I'll git de udder."

"Shut up!" Toni smote Phillie upon the ear. "Run, Becky!" he commanded. "Scoot! Phil, yer let her go. I'll hit yer, if yer touch her wid one of yer blame fingers."

But Phillie was in no mood to listen to his words. Unduly elated that, after all his sins of the morning, he had yet been allowed to join the expedition, he had been devoting himself to the study of just

how naughty he could be, without bringing punishment upon his head. So far, he had been unable to elude the vigilant eye of Miss Loomis. Now he felt that his time was come.

“Le’ me be, Toni! Git away! Becky, if yer don’ gimme yer shells, I’ll swipe ’em, an’ t’row yer in de watter, too. Den de fishes’ll eat yer, an’—”

“Shut up! Yer scarin’ her! ’Tain’t no sech t’ing, Becky. Yer jes’ run for Teacher licketty split, an’ I’ll do him.”

“Will yer?”

“Run, Becky!”

In confusion, Becky stared from one boy to the other. Then some vague recollection of a far-off day in Rose Street drifted across the dim mirror of her mind. She trusted herself to Toni’s advice and she started to run. Phillie was too quick for her, however. With a well-aimed thrust of his foot he tripped Becky, and she fell sidewise into the edge of the waves, while her hoard of shells scattered in all directions. Phillie pounced upon them and crammed them into his pockets, too happy in the success of his ruse to heed the approach of his foe, But Toni was upon him. There was a shout and a splash. Then Phillie went sprawling forward into

the water, and Toni turned to offer a helping hand to Becky as she clumsily floundered to her feet.

From far up the beach, Teacher and Miss Dering had seen the fray, and, in an incredibly short time, they bore down upon the dripping group. Instinctively Teacher pounced upon Toni as the aggressor, for it was not in vain that she had dealt with him during the past four weeks.

“Toni, what were you doing?”

Toni started and stared up into their accusing faces. If his small heart thrilled with righteous rage at finding himself unjustly condemned, he contrived to conceal the fact to a remarkable degree.

“Doin’ nothin’,” he replied calmly, as he stooped and began to squeeze the water from the legs of his overalls.

“Did, too!” Phillie said explosively. “He t’run me inter de watter.”

Toni flounced about to face his enemy.

“Wot for did I do it?” he demanded.

“Oh,—’cause—”

“’Cause nothin’. Tell, if yer wan’ ter, yer sneak!”

“Toni!”

"Well, he is dat. Let him tell, if he wan's ter. If he don', I will."

Obviously Toni was no hero of child fiction, at least, not of the type who suffers for another's sins, rather than betray a comrade.

"Telltale!"

Quite as obviously Phillie was no model child.

"Ah—h—h, go it, Becky!" he added, as Becky, seeing the attention concentrated in other directions, turned and scurried up the beach.

Toni watched her with an air of impartial interest. When she had vanished behind a tuft of bushes, he looked straight up into Teacher's eyes.

"Well, yer see," he explained; "'twas dis way. Phillie he was tryin' ter swipe Becky's shells. She's a fool, an' it's mean to scrap wid her, so I jus' up an' fired Phillie inter de watter, soused him all over." He giggled at the memory. "'Twas awful funny ter see him w'en he struck. Yer can lick me, if yer wan' ter. I've had my fun wid him, an' he won' swipe Becky's t'ings in a hurry ag'in, I bet." Then, of a sudden, the merriment faded from his face. "'Tain't no sort er use, Teacher," he said gloomily. "Yer told me I wusn' ter scrap no more, an' now I've laid for Phillie an' knocked de stuffin's out'n him."

VII.

TONI CHAMPIONS NAOMI.

INCONGRUOUSLY enough, the minor prophets were engaged in a potato race.

“What is the use of our stimulating their artistic sense with dolls and picture books?” Isabel Dering had said, that morning. “They can’t have them when they go away from here, at least, not under the existing state of things, so why should we train them to feel that life without toys isn’t worth living?”

“What are you going to do about it?” Teacher asked imperturbably.

“It depends upon what we are trying to do. If we are here to teach them the gospel of sweetness and light, have all the Paris dolls you can get. If we’re trying to show them how to have a good, wholesome time as they go along, it strikes me that it would be well to give them a notion of some plays they could have in Rose Street with the mate-



"SO KIN I."

rials at hand. All in all, I think I would combine the two methods."

They were standing beside the kindergarten ring, where Orpah Budesheim sat in the middle, rocking to sleep a doll nearly as large as herself. In a circle around her knelt the children, singing their little song:

"Rockaby, baby, the moon is a cradle,
A white, silver cradle swung up in the sky."

Many of the little faces were grave and intent. It was impossible for them not to enter into the spirit of the lullaby, when the dolly was so large and beautiful, and when the waxen lids drooped so naturally over the staring blue eyes. The only doll of her kind in the yard, she was kept for just such occasions as this, and it was not strange that the vivid imaginations of the children should endow her with all manner of human attributes. Accordingly, their voices sank lower and lower, and thrilled with a note of true mother love which was indescribably winning to lookers-on.

Orpah alone was inclined to be frivolous. She had made a succession of pretty pictures, as her curly head bent over the doll in her arms, and her sidelong glances had been quick to discover the ad-

miration written on Miss Dering's face. Unfortunately, Orpah had misinterpreted the signs. The smile of appreciation she had mistaken for one of amusement, and at once she had begun to play to the gallery, waggling the doll's legs in time to the song, and then slapping it violently when the refrain sank away into silence.

"Orpah is getting spoiled by too much attention," Teacher remarked, as they turned away.

"Yes," Miss Dering assented dryly; "and she is taking it for granted that she and that particular doll are necessary for the success of the lullaby."

And from the talk which followed, it came to pass that the minor prophets were having a potato race.

"How many of you brought potatoes?" Teacher asked, that afternoon. "That is good. Now I am going to choose a captain to see fair play. I think——" After her usual fashion, she hesitated and let her eyes rove over the group. "I think I shall ask—Toni Valovick to be the captain. No, Toni; wait. You can't race. You are to measure the ground and say when to begin."

"But I brung a tater, too."

"Yes, I see; and be careful of it, Toni, or it

won't be good to cook, when we are through with it. Now, if you are ready."

Toni marshalled his forces swiftly and, it must be confessed, with a high hand. Quick to catch the point of the race and its inherent difficulty, he laid out the course with some skill, and chose his contestants with a good deal of shrewd judgment of their powers. Hosie and Phillie he mated, Sollie and Bennie, and Adam and Naomi Budesheim.

"I don' wan' ter play wid no girl," Adam grumbled.

"Bet she can lick yer," Hosie prophesied.

His prediction was fulfilled. When Toni called time, Naomi had broken the record and had retired, victorious, to the handlebar of Ruth's carriage once more.

"She's a good un," Hosie said triumphantly. "Didn' I say she'd lick yer?"

"I wa'n' half tryin'," Adam protested. "Wan' ter try ag'in, Naomi?"

"Nah; yer had yer turn, an' 'twa'n' no good to yer. Let somebody else try," Hosie returned.

"Do you want to try it again, Naomi?" Teacher asked, laughing. "The boys don't want to give in that they are beaten by a girl."

Naomi had just lifted Ruth to the ground. She looked down at her small sister and hesitated. Teacher interpreted the hesitation.

"Won't Ruth stay with Orpah?" she asked.

But Orpah was in the corner, playing dolls with Carrie Luyckx, and she was not minded to come to Naomi's assistance.

"No matter, Naomi," Miss Dering said; "I'll take Ruth. Come here, Ruth, and see these pretty pictures."

As deliberately as if the whole assembly were not waiting for her, Naomi led Ruth across the yard to the awning and saw her settled in Miss Dering's lap.

"Who will race with Naomi, this time?" Teacher was asking, meanwhile.

"I kin beat her, if I try," Adam protested again.

"So kin I." Toni's face was wishful. "I hain't done it yit, an' I brung a tater." Plainly he did not appreciate the honor to which Teacher had promoted him, and regarded it only as so much drudgery in her service.

She nodded.

"Very well, Toni. You can take your turn now. Are you ready?"

Then the minor prophets ranged themselves in two lines and, in the open space between, the race began. Party spirit ran high, for both the champions were well known in Rose Street circles, both had their followings.

“Go it, Toni! Naomi’s gittin’ there! Toni! Toni! Naomi! Naomi wins! No; Toni’s the feller! Ah—h—h!” The shouts ended in a long-drawn cry.

Had Naomi tripped and fallen? Why didn’t she jump up? Was she sulky because Toni was a fraction of a minute ahead? She lay quite still beside her overturned dish of potatoes, with Ruth, who had broken away from Miss Dering, tugging frantically at her skirts. Then the clamor broke out afresh,—

“She done it a-purpose! She knowed Toni’d win in a minute, an’ she went tricky. Sneak! Oh, sneak! She knowed Toni’d git it, an’ she shammed an’ spoiled de whole t’ing. Naomi’s a sneak! Pull her up, Toni. She’s stole de race on yer.”

Toni faced the last speaker angrily.

“Shut up! She didn’.”

“She swiped yer race. ’Twas your’n, an’ she knowed it, an’ tipped her dish over, purpose.”

"She did not. She fell."

"She's shammin', I tell yer."

"Lie!" In the heat of the moment, Toni forgot his new-made resolutions of peace. His eyes blazed, and he danced over the ground like a kernel of corn in a popper.

"I wouldn' have a girl beat me, w'en she had ter cheat ter do it," Hosie observed philosophically. "Yer'd 'a' had de game, if she'd er played fair."

In a second, the mortarboard cap went whizzing over the fence, and the spectacles followed it. Reasons of weight alone prevented Hosie from following the spectacles, for Toni was in a frame of mind which halted only at the impossible. It was not that Hosie's remark was any worse than the others which had gone before; it was only that Toni's temper had reached the boiling point at the instant of Hosie's speaking, and that Hosie's fat, placid personality had been the first object in his way.

Teacher laid a restraining hand upon his shoulder.

"That is all the racing for now," she said. "Run away, all of you. Some day, perhaps, we'll try it again." Then she turned to Toni. "Come into the kindergarten room by and by," she said, too low for

her voice to reach the ears of the others. "I may want you to help me to put away some things there."

Inside the kindergarten room, she found Miss Dering quieting Ruth, while Naomi sat beside them, looking even more white and wan than was usual with her.

"What do you suppose it was?" Teacher asked anxiously, as Naomi slowly led Ruth out into the yard again.

"Oh, she just fainted," Miss Dering said lightly. "The sun was too hot for her, perhaps."

But Teacher shook her head.

"She is a delicate little thing, Isabel. I wish that were all."

Miss Dering looked up sharply.

"What do you think it was?" she asked.

"I don't think; I am only afraid. She had been running so fast; then, all at once, she turned white, blue-white, and dropped. I have seen that color once or twice before, when she has been carrying Ruth, and it has worried me."

"You mean her heart?"

But Teacher was spared the necessity for a reply, for a small figure appeared in the doorway.

"Goin' ter lick me, Teacher?" he inquired, with an air of wishing to get through a bad matter as speedily as possible.

"What for, Toni?" Teacher asked, while Miss Dering withdrew to a window near by.

"Scrappin' ag'in," he replied, with his customary terseness.

"Why, no." Teacher had intended to lead up to the matter by degrees. She felt as if Toni were rather forcing her hand.

"Yer kin, if yer wan' ter," he returned dispassionately. "That blame Hosie Wikrowski——" He hesitated, as he met her rebuking glance.

In her turn, Teacher also hesitated. She had meant to give a little talk upon chivalry, and to wind up with a generous commendation of Toni's championship of Naomi. She had expected, for the present, at least, to ignore the rest of the matter. All of a sudden, it refused to be ignored. As usually happened, Toni had grasped the bull by the horns and dragged him out into the very middle of the arena. How could she contrive to get the beast out of sight again so deftly that Toni would not notice the operation? She temporized.

"Never mind that now, Toni. We'll talk about

that by and by, after you have been over the fence to get Hosie's cap."

"Adam done dat," he returned composedly; "So yer may as well fire ahead wid wot yer got ter say."

At the window, Miss Dering gave a sudden explosive cough. Teacher looked at her despairingly. If she would only go away and take her sense of humor with her!

"Toni," she said gravely; "you aren't all good yet. It will be some time before you are, I'm afraid. But you aren't all bad, either."

Toni looked at her with owlsh solemnity.

"Dat's good," he observed, with an air of encouragement.

"I was glad when you took Naomi's part," Teacher went on, sternly regardless of the shaking figure by the window. "Naomi is a dear little girl, and she was very ill. She wouldn't cheat, for the sake of winning a dozen races. When the others all turned on her, it was good that you stood by her, even when it was your race."

Toni shrugged his shoulders.

"I don' scrap wid no girls," he said. "W'ere 'd be de fun? Dey can' scrap back for a cent."

Launcelot might have phrased it otherwise; still, the spirit was the same.

"Yes, and Naomi is a brave little girl," Teacher assented heartily.

"So's Becky. She don' know nothin', an' she knocked de stuffin's out'n Phillie, de day after de picnic," Toni interposed. "Naomi couldn' do dat."

"No; but there are other sorts of bravery. Think of the way Naomi takes care of Ruth and carries her in her arms, such little arms, Toni, and such a heavy Ruth! How would you like to do that?"

"I don' wan' no kids roun'."

"But Naomi has to have them."

"Maybe she likes 'em. She's use' ter 'em; I ain't."

"Toni," Teacher was fired with a sudden idea; "you haven't any baby at your house. Why don't you help Naomi to look out for Ruth?"

Toni lowered his head and peered up at her from beneath his long lashes.

"Naomi's a peach, Teacher; but I can' stan' no kiddies."

"But couldn't you do it to help, dear?"

"Naomi don' need no help. She's use' ter it."

"That doesn't make it any easier."

Toni looked up at her dubiously.

“Do yer wan’ me ter do it, Teacher?”

“Yes; but that isn’t the real reason you should do it.”

“W’y not? I do’ know but I’d do it, if yer said I’d got ter. I don’ wan’ ter, though. I hain’t got no use for kiddies, an’ I’d ruther not have nothin’ ter do wid ’em. Can’t yer ask me somethin’ easy?”

“I’m not asking it, Toni; and, if you did it just because I asked you, it wouldn’t count for much. It is good to help Naomi with her baby; it was good to take her part. It is ever so much more to do it because it was good, than just because Teacher asks you.”

With his brown toes, he traced the line of a crack in the floor.

“Would Cadmus er done it?” he asked.

“Cadmus? Oh, yes; I remember. I think he would, Toni. He wasn’t selfish about most things.”

“Wot’s selfish?”

“To think only about the things you like, and not be willing to do anything else,—not to help Naomi.”

Toni sighed.

“I reckon de kiddies is my snakes,” he observed.

"I hain't busted 'em yit. Won't somethin' else do, Teacher?"

His accent was desponding, and Teacher relinquished her short-lived golden dream of seeing Toni harnessed to Ruth's carriage.

"There are other things, Toni," she answered; "ever so many of them. I only spoke of this because it was something you could do, and because Naomi needs your help."

"Naomi's all right," he returned. "She ain't so good in a scrap as Becky; but she's got more sense. I ain't sayin' nothin' against Naomi, Teacher; it's only de kids. I ain't use' ter handlin' 'em, an' dey yells at everythin', an' I'm 'fraid dey'll bust, if I touch 'em. But Naomi,—she ain't no frien' er mine. I hain't no sort er use for her, nor for any girl dat can' use her fisties. But w'en I see her down on her taters an' dey was all yellin' at her, I t'ought I'd have a little yellin', myself, an' I guess dey knows by dis time dat, w'en I yells, I mean wot I's yellin' at, too."

There was a prolonged pause. Toni had apparently closed the discussion, and Teacher was at a loss how to reopen it.

"Dat all?" Toni inquired, after an interval.

"Yes, I think so," she answered weakly. Then she looked down into the very depths of his eyes.

"And thank you, Toni," she said quite low.

And Toni understood.

"Isabel," she said to Miss Dering, when they were alone once more.

"Well?"

"The spirit of chivalry isn't dead. I have hopes of our Toni."

"Obviously."

"What do you mean?"

"Did it occur to you that you formally thanked him for buffeting the portly Hosie?"

"You are dense, Isabel. Toni understood me."

"Apparently you understood him. His words and deeds failed to agree, so it was no mean achievement to get to the root of the matter. He cornered you beautifully, though."

Teacher laughed.

"He generally does. I can always count on his saying the most unexpected thing, so it is of no use for me to plan my lectures in advance. But, mark my words, Isabel, Toni will astonish us all, some day."

"By adopting Ruth? I fairly gasped at that idea."

“He may do even that. He loves the unexpected, as I say, and he is such a contradictory little mortal that the mere fact of having refused may lead him to take her under his protection. There is no accounting for Toni. Come, I must go home. We are to have some people to dinner, to-night, and I must put on my state array.”

She led the way into the yard where the prophets were drawn up in line and exchanging mysterious whispers. As she approached, she was conscious of a sensation, and Hosie Wikrowski in his restored mortarboard stepped out in front of the line.

“Now, fellers!” he shouted; and then he led off the shrill chorus,—

“Ginger crackers! Soda crackers! Rah! Rah! Rah! Teacher!”

Laughing and blushing, she bowed in acknowledgment of the salute. For the moment, she felt that she knew some of the emotions of the newly elected president of the university.

The refrain renewed itself,—

“Ginger crackers! Soda crackers! Rah! Rah! Rah! Miss Dering!”

Then there came a number not down upon the programme. From the rear rank of the throng, Toni

bounced out into the open space, bumped against Hosie and jostled him away into the crowd. Then ecstatically he spun himself upon his toes, waved his arms in the air and let off an ear-piercing yell,—

“Ah—h—h—h! Come on, fellers! Now! Ginger crackers! Soda crackers! Rah! Rah! Rah! Naomi an’ her kid!” And, around the corner, the Rose Street mongrels bayed a response to the final shriek with which he sought to emphasize his belief in Naomi’s honor.

VIII.

TONI SEES DEATH.

“GIT away, Toni!”

From afar, Phillie Luyckx warned him off; then he sat down in the wheelbarrow, determined to defend his nine points of the law. For a half-hour, Toni had been insisting upon a tenth point. The rights of his turn next outweighed present possession. Phillie had had the wheelbarrow ever since the playground opened. There was only one wheelbarrow in the playground; Phillie was never unselfish, and long ago he had annexed that wheelbarrow as his own.

“Git away, yerself. It’s my turn; Teacher said I could take it after you.”

Phillie grinned malignly.

“She didn’t say w’en, though. Wot d’ yer want it for? Ter give Becky a ride?”

“Nah!” By this time Toni was near enough to speak without shrieking, yet he neglected to lower his voice by so much as a semitone. “None of yer

business wot I'm goin' ter do wid it. Git out, I say!"

"Le' me be."

"Will I, den?"

With a swift attack on the wheel, the barrow turned upside down, and Phillie ignominiously bit the dust, to the manifest rapture of Linkie Jefferson who nearly tumbled from his seat on the seesaw. Phillie had lorded it too long over the minor prophets. Not one of them but rejoiced in his downfall.

Three o'clock in a hot, suffocating afternoon. For the first time, that year, there was no breeze in the playground of School Number Seven. The sun beat down pitilessly from the cloudless sky, beat upon the baked earth of the yard, upon and even through the striped canvas of the awnings. A horror of intense heat brooded over Rose Street. The watering cart had just passed through the place, and the roadway was filled with puddles, already glazing over the top with a shining, iridescent scum. In the deeper gutters, the children built little dams of refuse, to form pools where they might cool their dusty feet. It was a day when, at mountain or sea, other children were glad to curl themselves up with a book in the corner of a shady verandah.

Here there were neither verandahs nor shade, only the hot, damp, untidy rooms and the glaring, reeking oven of the street.

Languidly enough the minor prophets had gathered in the playground, that afternoon, as soon as the gate was opened. Those who knew the place, were there in full force. Those who had never been there before, came there now. Anything was better, that day, than the familiar sights and odors of Rose Street, better than being within reach of parents whose nerves, never of the steadiest, were worn threadbare by the heat. The playground had never been so full before; neither had the children been so languid or so quarrelsome.

Naomi was one of the last to appear. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her step dragged heavily. For the once, Ruth seemed stronger than her little caretaker, yet Naomi carried the heavy child in her arms, though she swayed under the weight of her burden. At sight of Teacher, however, her face brightened, and her tread grew more elastic again.

"Oh, Naomi, you shouldn't carry Ruth," Teacher remonstrated. "She is too heavy for you, and she is perfectly able to walk."

"It's so hot, an' she don't feel well, to-day. She cried, all noontime, an' she wouldn't eat any dinner." Naomi set down the child and loosed the curls clinging to the little neck, before she added, "So my papa gave me some pennies, an' I bought a lot of apples for us both, an' we had a picnic in the back yard."

"What kind of apples, Naomi?"

"These." From her pocket she took a small, knotty apple, hard, unripe and as wholesome as the red rubber ball which Toni had taken.

"Oh, Naomi, and you have been eating these, and giving them to Ruth! I wish you wouldn't."

"Yes'm," Naomi said obediently, as she stuffed the apple into her pocket once more. "What's happenin' in the street, Teacher? There's men at the door, bringin' in things."

Teacher gave a hasty glance at the drawn shades of the kindergarten room.

"What sort of things, Naomi?" she inquired.

"Great big horn things, sort o' trumpets, only bigger."

"Perhaps it is something for the school," Teacher suggested guilefully.

"Maybe. They was talkin' about it, down in

Rose Street. A man said 'twas somethin' you was goin' to do to us. He told me I'd better not come; but I wasn't afraid." Naomi laughed gleefully, as she stood playing with Teacher's fingers.

Ten minutes later, there came a low call from the window of the kindergarten room, and Teacher stepped out into the middle of the yard.

"How many of the boys and girls want a treat, this hot afternoon?" she called gayly. "Those that do, may form in line, and, when I open the door, they may come inside the kindergarten room and sit down on the floor, close together, mind, for there are a great many of us here, to-day."

Large and airy as was the kindergarten room, on that day it seemed neither. The serried ranks of the minor prophets filled the floor from end to end, and the nameless aroma of Rose Street elevated itself above them and defied the wide-open windows to drive it forth. Even in one short hour, it clogged the lungs and mounted to the head, where it seemed to gather into a dull lump of pain, just above the nape of the neck. If one short hour could accomplish so much misery, Teacher wondered vaguely what it must be to pass all one's days in such an atmosphere. Under its subtle influence, she be-

lieved that she might become capable of almost any crime.

At the end of the room, a man stood waiting beside a box topped with the horn of which Naomi had spoken. When the children were settled and an expectant hush had fallen upon the room, he said a few words to Teacher, and then turned to the box.

"Ah—h—h, we're goin' ter have our faces took!" Adam exclaimed, while, with brotherly foresight, he raised the baby aloft into plain view.

"Yer'll bust it, if yer gits inter it," Phillie observed sardonically.

"Dat ain't no camera," Toni objected a little too audibly. "I seen one down in Rose Street, one day. A feller come along wid de copper an' took some picters. His stood up on t'ree legs an' had a peek-hole under a rag."

But Teacher held up her hand warningly, and Toni was silent. The next minute, as if from far away, there came the sound of a band playing one of the popular street airs of the hour. In a moment, a score of little heels were beating time to the refrain, which repeated itself and then ended in a burst of gnome-like laughter and a swift flow of conversation.

Few of the children had heard a phonograph before. Many of them looked terrified, and some even began to cry; but Toni was ready for the emergency.

"Gee!" he burst out excitedly, at the first pause. "Dat's a talkin' machine; ain't it? Run us in anodder, mister. Dat's de way ter do it! Ain't it a corker!"

"Toni!"

But the song that followed was more potent than Teacher's voice; and Toni quieted down as far as it lay in him to be quiet. At his birth, he had discovered the secret of perpetual motion; under such circumstances as this, he became fairly electric with vitality. And still the phonograph kept on and ever on.

For some time, the crying had been silenced, the fear had given place to rapture, and the children sat quiet in the midst of the stupefying air. Side by side, Teacher and Miss Dering stood by the open window, looking over the sea of upturned faces. The summer's experiment was drawing to a close. What had they accomplished? Pitifully little, beside the great total of possible achievement. Much, very much, if one compared the actual condition of

the children with what their condition might have been after a summer in the streets. They were cleaner, happier, less apathetic, less anxious-looking. And even the doctor had said that little Ruth——

Teacher sprang forward, and there was a sudden sensation in one corner of the room. Then Teacher turned back to the man at the phonograph.

“Go on, please. It is all right,” she said quickly. And, lifting Naomi in her arms, she carried her out of the room and laid her down in the clearer air of the broad hallway.

Teacher never forgot the half-hour that followed, although, in after years, she never could analyze the experience. The time was at once endless and swift-rushing; the events seemed inevitable, as they followed one another in quick succession, yet she found herself exhausted from the physical and mental strain of struggling against each one in its course. When once more she roused herself to take note of her surroundings, she, with Miss Dering and Miss Loomis, was kneeling down, bending over Naomi who was just coming out from a succession of violent convulsions. They had moved her into the same light, airy room where Toni had suffered im-

prisonment. She had cried out in her pain, and they had taken her away out of hearing of the other children; but, beside her, they could still hear the noise of the phonograph, distant and gnome-like, yet piercing. They had no thought that Naomi was dangerously ill, yet the songs jarred upon them while they watched the slow relaxation of the rigid little form. The room where they were grouped, faced the street; but they were too absorbed in caring for Naomi to heed the faces peering in at the window or to note that their disappearing was followed by the quick patter of running feet.

"She is better now," Teacher said at last, as the brown eyes opened dully. "Shall we carry her into the other room and see if we can make her more comfortable there?"

Gently they lifted her and carried her to an improvised couch in another room. Little by little the child struggled backward from the mysterious borderland between the Now and the Then. She stirred a little, turned on her side, and looked up at Teacher with a smile of recognition.

"Where is Ruth?" she asked faintly. "Did she cry for me?"

"Ruth is with Orpah and quite happy," Teacher

answered, while she stroked the tangle of curls away from the thin forehead. "We'll let her come in here by and by."

"No; now," Naomi insisted. "She'll cry with Orpah; she always does. She wants her Naomi."

In obedience to a nod from Teacher, Miss Dering went to the kindergarten room in search of Ruth. As the door was opened, there came, shrill and piercing, a wail from the phonograph,—

"In the swe—e—e—et by and by—y—y—y,
We shall meet——"

Hand in hand, Orpah and Ruth appeared upon the threshold. Orpah paused for a minute; then, as she saw Naomi lying white and still, she uttered a shriek and sprang forward, dragging Ruth at her side.

"Oh, Naomi's deaded! Naomi's deaded! Who's killed her?" And she threw herself down, with her face buried in Naomi's skirts.

It was all over in an instant, before they could foresee it or prevent. Still weak in body and dull in mind, Naomi had roused herself only in part from her stupor, only long enough to ask for the baby who was never long out of her thoughts. Then she had dropped back into a heavy lethargy into which

rang Orpah's cry. At the voice of her little sister, the mother instinct prevailed yet once again. Gathering all her strength, she struggled to sit up. She partly lifted herself; the next minute she turned white with the blue-whiteness of which Teacher had confessed her dread, and suddenly dropped back, unconscious.

"Come here!" Sharp and incisive, Isabel Dering's voice broke in upon the silence that followed, when Teacher and Miss Loomis were swiftly applying the restoratives within their reach. "The street is crowded, and they are shouting for the children."

"What!" Teacher started up from her knees.

"Yes. Come to the window."

Teacher left Miss Loomis to work over Naomi, and hurried to the window. Then she grew white to the very lips. Outside, the broad street was filled with a solid mass of people, ragged women, unkempt women, men with tall hats on the backs of their heads, men with long beards and no hats at all, a furious, excited mob, jabbering and shaking their fists and crying out that the building was on fire and the children were locked in, that the teachers were poisoning the children, and again that there was fire, fire, and that their children were powerless

to escape. And across the hall, the phonograph had just finished a comic song, and there came floating out to Teacher's ears a thin thread of childish laughter. And in the next room, little Naomi was so near the borderland that her ears were deaf to the sounds about her.

"What shall we do?" Miss Dering asked.

Teacher had regained her wonted quiet.

"We must send the children out at once," she said. "We mustn't waste a minute, for the crowd is getting violent. Go to Naomi, and send Miss Loomis to me. No; send the janitor to the gate, first of all. Tell him not to unlock it till the head of the line gets there."

A moment later, Teacher came back into the kindergarten room with Miss Loomis at her side. Agog with merriment, the children looked up to greet her coming. She spoke a word or two to the man. Then she turned to the prophets.

"Now, children," she said, and her voice was as even and quiet as they had ever known it to be; "this is all for to-day. I want you to form your line now, ready to march out and go home."

Regretfully they rose. It was Toni who voiced the general protest.

“’Tain’t time, Teacher. Can’ we have anodder one, just one little one?”

She shook her head. It seemed to her incredible that the children could be deaf to the turbulent throng outside.

“Wot’s we goin’ for now?” he persisted. “Can’ we play out’n de yard?”

Teacher turned to the assistant.

“Miss Sally, will you play the march, please?”

All summer long, the children had been sent out of the kindergarten room to the beat of that same march. To-day, the familiar strains took on a new meaning to some of their hearers, although it was just in the wonted fashion that the line moved away, with Miss Loomis walking backward at its head. Her cheeks were a shade pinker than usual, her blue eyes were blazing and her head proudly erect as she moved off, a fiery, intrepid little figure, down the hallway, through the door into the yard, around the corner of the building, and, still with her back toward the menacing mob, out to the very gate, which swung open, just as she stepped aside to let the children pass through.

As the line of children came nearer the gate, there was a strange contrast: their careless astonishment

at seeing their elders gathered outside, and the terror-stricken faces of the parents who swarmed at the gate, gripping with long, gaunt arms at the children within. There was no appearance of mother love, no tenderness; it was like the snatching of a beast of prey, the clawing of a ravenous animal. Then the gate swung together again, as the last child was swallowed up in the crowd. Outside, the mob was growing larger. Inside, there were two men and six women, and the upper panels of the stout oak door were made of glass.

“What’s that?” Isabel Dering started up suddenly, as a small figure shot past her.

The next moment, she went flying to the door. Just ahead of her, Phillie Luyckx had turned the key, and she was met on the threshold by a browsy, bareheaded woman. Beyond the woman, she saw other women; beyond them, men, all infuriated with superstitious fear, all rushing forward. For one instant, they stood face to face. Then heredity triumphed. Isabel Dering never understood how it happened that the door swung together with a clang of its spring lock, and she stood alone in the broad vestibule. She only sat down on the stairs for a minute. Then she went back to Teacher.

"The whole of Rose Street is here, I should think," Teacher said. "We must have the police and a doctor."

"Is Naomi——"

"I can't tell. She isn't conscious; but I think she isn't any worse. Still, we ought to have a doctor."

"Shall I telephone?"

"There isn't a telephone here."

"There is one in the office."

"It is only a local circuit."

For a moment, Miss Dering faltered.

"Oh, what shall we do?" she cried despairingly.

"There is a telephone in the corner drug store," Teacher answered quietly. "I am going over there."

Miss Dering sprang up excitedly.

"You can't! They'll kill you!"

"No; they won't dare do anything worse than talk. I'm not afraid."

"Send the man."

"He is working over Naomi, and I can't spare him. He is of more use there."

"But you mustn't go."

Teacher smiled a little. Then she raised her head.

“I must go, Isabel. I should be the one, if anybody. They won't touch me.”

Outside, the news of Naomi's sudden and mysterious illness had spread among the crowd. They were shouting for her to be brought out to them, calling their old threats against the place, yet Teacher walked boldly up to the gate and stood waiting, while the janitor turned the key in the great iron padlock. As she paused there, trim and dainty and dauntless in her young womanhood, she raised her eyes and looked about over the wild, feverish crowd outside. Then the gate swung open, and she stepped out into their midst. There was no demonstration, no outcry. The crowd parted before her, as she crossed the street; there were whispered threats, a low, menacing murmur. Then, straight from the heart of the crowd, there came Toni's voice, hilarious and exultant,—

“Ah—h—h, dere she is! Dere's my Teacher! See her? She's a peach! Hullo, Teacher!”

And the cry, caught up and echoed by scores of loving, loyal little voices scattered among the crowd, drowned the menacing-murmurs and brought to Teacher's ears the perfect surety that the end had crowned the work.

IX.

TONI BECOMES REGENERATE.

HALF an hour later, the street was deserted. Inside the locked doors of School Number Seven, Teacher and Miss Dering and the teachers sat on the stairs, talking over the events of the afternoon. Miss Dering looked at her watch.

“Just one hour and eighteen minutes since I called to you to let in the children,” she said. “Think of all that has happened since then!”

“‘From battle and murder and from sudden death,’” Teacher quoted softly. “But I was surprised to see how quickly they forgot us, and rushed off after the ambulance.”

Isabel Dering laughed a little nervously.

“I shall never forget my emotions when the doctor’s carriage, and the ambulance, and the patrol wagon, and the fire engine, all came bearing down upon us at the same moment. Stupid things to send in an alarm of fire! What a crazy race they

are! It's not much use to try to do anything for them."

But Teacher took a more merciful view of the case.

"Think of the generations of persecution, Isabel! They are suspicious and superstitious, and most of them couldn't understand a word of what the police said to them. I don't wonder that they were half frantic."

"Do you think Naomi——"

"I am not letting myself think." Teacher shuddered, as she recalled the tone in which the doctor had said that the child must be moved at once. He was an old man and a skilful; he had tried his best to recall little Naomi from the misty borderland. When at last he had risen to his feet and called for men to carry her to the ambulance, Teacher had understood him. For the sake of them all, it would not do to allow the child to be there, when the moment came for her to pass the border. "We did all we could," she added, after a moment. "Perhaps it was foreordained. I can't fancy Naomi growing up in that atmosphere."

"She may rally."

"She may; but—Isabel, do you realize that her

last thought was for Ruth? And yet, they call it a selfish race."

The face of a policeman appeared in the glass of the doorway.

"The doctor sent me back to report," he said, as soon as the door was opened. "The child was living, when we got her to the hospital. The doctor says she may hold on through the night."

"Did you have any trouble with the crowd?" Teacher asked.

The man shook his head.

"They didn't dare; there were too many of us. They followed us clear to the hospital door, though, and tried to get in."

He was interrupted by a messenger from the drug store over the way.

"They've just telephoned over from the hospital that the child has died, and they asked us to tell you to go away at once. The mob is all outside the hospital now; as soon as they know the child is dead, they are likely to come back here, and the police are afraid that there may be trouble, if they find you here."

Teacher rose. Her voice had regained all its quiet, even inflection, as she said,—

“Come, then, all of you. We mustn't stop for anything. To-day is Thursday. We won't open the yard, to-morrow, Miss Loomis. I will be here, early Monday morning. Isabel, can I count on you, too?”

The reaction came, that night, however. Teacher was powerless to sleep. She could only toss to and fro, going over and over again the scenes of the afternoon, convincing herself that it was all inevitable. The doctor's verdict had been brief and to the point: constitutional weakness, imprudent eating and heart failure. Nothing had been left undone; but—what would the playground be without little Naomi? All summer long, Teacher had depended upon her, watched for her greeting, counted upon her loyalty, felt sure of her influence for good upon the other children. Then, as she restlessly sat up and turned over her pillow, Teacher suddenly be-thought herself of Toni's shrill, exultant greeting which had risen from the midst of that hostile mob. Naomi's was not the only loyalty that she had won. Toni, too, had proclaimed himself her friend.

In a sort of apathy, the next morning, she was still lingering over her breakfast. She was alone, for

the rest of the family had long since left the table. The maid appeared in the doorway.

"There's a boy out here as wants to see you," she announced. "Says his name is Toni, and he's got something for you."

Teacher's face brightened.

"Bring him in," she said.

"Him?" The tone was incredulous.

"Yes. Be quick, please."

"He ain't fit, ma'am."

"Bring him here at once." There was no doubt of Teacher's wish in the matter.

A moment later, Toni appeared upon the threshold. As the maid had said, he certainly was not fit to make his *début* into a conventional up-town dining-room, and yet he had made certain efforts to beautify himself. His head bore signs of having been immersed in a pail of water, and the drops, trickling down from above, had irrigated his face, irrigated, but not cleansed it. He wore a new brown jumper some sizes too large for himself, and his overalls were rolled up into neat bundles about his knees. Apparently he had started with shoes upon his feet. Now they were transferred to his neck where they dangled by their knotted strings. Under his arm

he carried a large round bundle, wrapped in newspapers aged and limp.

"Hullo!" he said laconically, while, from under his long lashes, he shot curious glances about the room.

"Oh, Toni, how do you do? Did you come all this long way up here to see me?"

"Yep. I brung yer somethin'. Here, ketch hold."

Teacher's heart sank within her, as she took the bundle into her hands. It sank still lower, when she drew aside the limp papers and saw the half of a burly watermelon within. The watermelon was quite ripe, and it had obviously parted with its other and better half at some remote point of its career. Must she eat it? Would she too go, even as Naomi had gone? Then she looked up to meet Toni's radiant eyes, and her own eyes softened.

"Thank you, dear," she said then. "I have had ever so many things brought to me; but I don't believe any of them ever pleased me more than this. Now sit down beside me and have a taste of my breakfast."

"Dey says yer p'isoned Naomi," Toni remarked, without further preface.

Teacher's fork paused in mid-air.

"Who says so?"

"All de people in Rose Street, all but me an' Mr. Budesheim."

"Really?"

"Yep; but dey don' know nothin' about it," Toni asserted, with his mouth rather unbecomingly full.

"Dey says yer dassent open de playground ag'in."

"But we are going to."

"Sure? 'Tain't open ter-day, an' so I come up ter see about it. Yer re'ly an' trully goin' ter come back?"

"Yes, of course."

"When?"

"Next Monday."

"I'll be dere. Wasn' dat talkin' machine great? I wish Naomi hadn' whopped over an' busted up de whole show."

"Poor little Naomi! What shall we do without her, Toni; and what will become of Ruth?"

"I der know. Say, Teacher, are yer comin' down, Monday, sure?"

"Yes."

"An' I kin tell Adam an' de udder fellers dat you'll be dere?"

"Yes."

"All right. Dat's wot I come for. We'll be dere. G'by."

"But, Toni, don't hurry."

"Got ter. Wot's de use er hangin' roun'?"

"Well, take another muffin."

She held out the plate. Toni looked at it with glistening eyes, for the muffins were brown and puffy and sweet. Then he snatched all that his two hands could hold, crammed one into his mouth and bestowed the others in his shoes. Then he paused and stood irresolute, with his right hand plunged into the depths of a baggy pocket. Teacher saw that something was on his mind.

"What is it, Toni?" she asked.

There was a short silence. Then he said swiftly,—

"I swiped dis on yer onct. I wish I hadn'. I do' want it no more; yer kin give it ter de kiddie." And he took from his pocket a soiled rubber ball and laid it on the empty plate. Then he drew a deep sigh of relief. "Dat's all," he said contentedly. "G'by. See yer, Monday." And he vanished.

However, Monday morning came, and no Toni. Teacher and Miss Dering were on hand early, ready

for whatever emergency might arise. It must be confessed that their hearts beat a little faster than usual, as they rode down the street and dismounted at the gate of School Number Seven. They found the street deserted, save for the half-dozen minor prophets waiting outside the gate.

"They will all come back," Miss Dering said bravely.

But Teacher only answered,—

"Wait."

They did wait. When the time came to open the gate, there was no eager, excited throng of little faces. Nineteen loyal prophets marched in and took possession of all things. For the once, there were quite toys enough to go around; but Teacher, as she watched, would too gladly have exchanged the unwonted peace for the old wrangles of "my turn next." Little by little the yard filled. Children came, peered in, stepped cautiously through the gate and went scurrying away to their wonted places; and yet there was many a familiar face missing besides that of Naomi.

By ten o'clock, more than a hundred children had gathered, and the playground of School Number Seven had taken on much of its usual appearance.

Swings were flying, seesaws going, the sand bin was thick with babies and, far across the yard, a line of warriors bold was holding a military drill under the stern command of Captain Adam Dombowski. Teacher stood watching the familiar little faces, once so strange to her, but now such well-trying friends. Hosie was there, and Sollie, and Bennie, and Amos, who seemed in no way cast down by the loss of his little sister. But Toni was missing; Teacher found it impossible to realize that his failure to appear could make such a wide difference to the measure of her content. He had said he would surely be there. Had he turned faithless? No. She could not believe in his disloyalty. Rather accept the theory that the unwonted indulgence in muffins had proved disastrous.

“Hullo, Toni!” Forgetting his official dignity, Adam flourished his sword above his head. It was a real sword, part of the one toy uniform which was distributed in sections throughout the entire brigade.

Teacher’s heart gave a quick thump, and she turned more eagerly than she was aware. Around the corner of the school building came Toni, hot, and flushed, and dishevelled. Clinging to his fore-

finger and looking, if possible, even more dishevelled, and flushed, and hot than her protector, Ruth Bundesheim trudged stolidly along. Her clothing bore evidences of a fray, evidences, too, that she had been picked up and carried by two smutty hands; her eyes and cheeks showed that her rebellion had been marked by many tears. Now she was subdued, and Toni was correspondingly jubilant.

There was no mark upon him to show the traces of his moral struggle, no air of saintship nor of renunciation; yet even Toni had fought his good fight against the demon of selfishness, and had come off victorious. He paused at Teacher's side and looked straight up into her blue eyes.

"I busted de snake," he said tersely. "I'm awful late; but it took me a good while. Yer see, dere wasn' nobody else, an' so I brung de kiddie."

THE END.

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