

## *Willie's Earnings*

A STORY OF A WOMAN'S DEVOTION

"Wine, grapes, oranges!"

The delicate-looking girl repeated the words slowly and sadly, as she quietly ascended the stairs that led to the sick brother's room. On the landing she halted a moment to brush off the two great tears that trembled upon her eyelids, and then choking down a sob, she softly opened the door and advanced to the bedside.

The sufferer had fallen into a slight slumber, and the tears that she would have driven back had he been awake to see them, now raining down her cheeks, as she noted how ghastly white was his face, how sunken his eyes, and how thin and pinched were his lips.

"He will, he must die!" she breathed to herself, turning away, she went with a noiseless footstep into the next room; "for how, *how* can I get the money to buy anything for him that he really needs? Wine, grapes, oranges! Oh, how easy it is for physicians to tell what their patients need—but how terribly, how fearfully hard it is sometimes for their nurses to get it! What can I do, what shall I do?"

"Is Alfred worse?"

"No, darling; at least I think not. The doctor was here a while ago, and said he was doing as well as we could expect. All he needs now is nourishing food."

"Oh, Willie, if there was only some way that we could get wine, and grapes and oranges!"

And the tears started again.

"Did the doctor say he ought to have them?" And the boy's eyes opened very wide.

"Yes, Willie; and they cost so much. And then I must pay the rent, and—"

But her voice failed her, and in the convulsive sob that shook her whole frame, there was a bitter, bitter story of wants that her slender fingers could never hope to supply.

"Don't Lillie—don't cry so. Only say you'll let me stop away from school this afternoon, and I'll earn money enough to buy him some oranges, at least. I know I can. Won't you let me, Lillie?"

And he clasped her hands and looked pleadingly in her face.

"What could such a little fellow as you do?" And a tender pity settled in her eyes as she glanced at his slight figure and slender fingers.

"I could run an errand, carry a bundle or carpet-bag—oh, I could do something; I know I could! Do sis, say yes—just once!"

And he coaxed until he won a reluctant consent. Then, eating his slice of bread and butter, and making very sure that his face and hands were clean, and his hair neatly brushed, he kissed his sister, said good-by in a cheerful tone, and went out.

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“Have a fly, sir?—fly, sir?—fly, sir?—carry you to any part.”

Ralph Belmont found his exit from the station prevented by three burly hack-drivers, each the owner of a stentorian voice and a heavy whip, which was brandished to the imminent peril of many a poor traveler’s head and shoulders.

“No,” said he, impatiently motioning the same time to make way, and adding, under breath to himself, “And if I did I could ask no one. No!” lifting his voice as the third and most persistent fellow of the three laid a hand on his arm as if to lead him toward his chaise; “I choose to walk.”

And he brushed hastily through the portal, and set his foot firmly on the pavement.

As he did so, a magazine dropped from the pocket of his overcoat. It was picked up and respectfully offered to him by a bright-eyed little fellow, who at the same moment asked timidly:

“Don’t you want your bag carried, sir?”

“And if I do,” the traveler replied good-humoredly, “do you think I’d trust such a little monkey as you?”

The boy’s cheeks reddened, and there was a suspicious moisture in the blue eyes. But mastering his confusion, he said, quietly:

“And why not, sir? Do you fear I’d run away with it?”

“I think I could catch you if you made the attempt, my little one; and what do you suppose I’d do with you when caught?”

“O, I’d promise never to do so again, and you’d let me go!” replied the boy, fearlessly this time, for, with the quick intuition of childhood, he read the heart of Ralph Belmont.

“But you don’t look as if you were used to carrying bags.”

“Nor am I—but—oh, sir, I do want to earn some money very much indeed this afternoon!” And his voice was choked.

“Well, take it up, then, and come on.” And the traveler strode away toward an hotel which, fortunately for the young porter, was only a short distance.

The bag was large and heavily packed, and Ralph Belmont watched the boy with much amusement, as he noted how hard the little fellow tried to act as if it were light as a feather—how he shifted it from one hand to the other in seeming carelessness, and then, with a merry whistle, would hold it before him, clasping the handles with all his fingers. The perspiration stood in great beads upon his face, and his cheeks grew crimson; but still he bent his shoulders to the task,

and bravely kept up with the owner.

“Quite a lift, wasn’t it, little one?” asked the traveler, kindly, as at last they stood together in the hall of the hotel. “And how much do you charge me?” taking out a plethoric portinonnaie.

“I—I don’t know what it is worth; but I wish you thought I had earned the price of a few oranges.”

“And, if I did, and should pay you a shilling, what would you do with the fruit?”

“Carry it home to Al—to my sick brother, sir.”

“And was it to buy oranges for a sick brother that you have worked so hard, my little man?” And Ralph Belmont’s hand was placed softly, tenderly on the strained shoulders.

That gentle touch dissolved the boy’s high-wrought ambition, and he burst into tears.

“Come up stairs with me;” and taking the small, delicate hand, the palm of which was neatly blistered, the traveler led him up into the spacious and richly-furnished parlor, which, having telegraphed for two days before, was awaiting his orders.

“Tell me all about it,” as sinking into an easy chair, he drew the boy between his knees. “Has your brother been ill long?”

“Yes, sir,” wiping away the last tear. “Very long. We have many times thought he would die; but the doctor thinks now he will get well again if he can only eat something nourishing. This morning he said we must get grapes, and oranges, and wine for him, and sister cried because we couldn’t; and I coaxed her to let me go out and try to earn something, and at last she said I might. She never would before—she has always kept me at school. She can’t bear I should run about the streets. But I am not going to live on her earnings any more. I’m going to work. It’s a shame for her to have to support us all.”

“And how many are there of you?”

“Three—brother, and sister, and me. But, oh, sir, it costs a great deal to live now-a-days; everything is so dear! Shall you want any errands done while you stay here?”

“Perhaps so—perhaps so! Can you tell a sweet from a sour orange?”

“I don’t hardly know, it’s so long since I’ve bought one; and yet—”

And the tears started again.

“Yet what, my little man? Speak out.”

“And yet, once we used to have them for dessert every day.”

“Then you haven’t always been poor?”

“Oh, no, no, sir! Before papa failed we were very rich. Sister says it’s all right, our losing everything as we did; but—but it seems to me it’s all wrong. Oh! it’s awful hard, sir, to be poor, and have to eat bread or potatoes.”

“Awwful hard! Yes, I should think so! See here, my—what’s your name?”

“William, sir.”

“Well, Willie, if you’re in no hurry and will stay and dine with me, I will treat you to something better than bread and potatoes.”

“Thank you, sir; but—but I must take the oranges to my brother first, and then, if sister is willing, I will come back. I think she will be, too, for she cries almost every day because she can’t give me something better to eat.”

And he reached for his cap.

“I will go with you and select the fruit;” and the two descended the stairs, and passed out on to the thronged pavement. A few paces brought them to a shop, and Willie’s eyes rested longingly on the boxes of grapes, the baskets of pears and peaches, and the pyramidal piles of golden, crimson, and russet-brown apples.

Taking a brown paper bag, Ralph Belmont placed in it a dozen of the finest oranges, and on top of them laid carefully a heavy cluster of grapes; then, turning to a flower-girl, who stood near, he bought a fragrant and beautiful nosegay, and handed the whole to Willie, who had watched his proceedings with dilated eyes.

“This for me—for me to take home—and I didn’t earn but a shilling?”

“Yes, my little man. And run home with it quickly, for I have just thought of another errand for you to do after we have had our dinner.” And he turned away abruptly.

Had Willie’s feet been winged, he could hardly have reached home sooner than he did. For once he forgot his usual caution, and bounded up stairs, and into his sister’s room, after the fashion of boys in general.

“See, see!” he exclaimed; “see what I’ve earned for Alfred and you! The fruit is for him, and the flowers for you. And, Lillie, mayn’t I go and dine with the gentleman who paid me?”

“Dine with the gentleman. Are you crazy, Willie!” And his sister dropped her work in amazement. “What do you mean? Take time to breathe, and tell me how you came by this fruit. You haven’t been telling any one of our troubles?”

And her cheeks flamed, for she was not yet hardened to her poverty, and the pride of other days still stung her sorely at times.

“Told! Do you mean I’ve begged?” And the boy’s eyes disclaimed the idea more eloquently than

his tones. “No!” And he managed, between his gasps for a long breath, to tell the truth. “And you’ll let me go, Lillie, won’t you? Think how long it is since I’ve had a real dinner; and then it’ll be such a saving, because I shall not want any supper or breakfast. Do say I may go!”

She hesitated awhile, and then consented, thinking it was but some eccentric rich man’s whim, and hardly wondering that her little brother’s fair, bright countenance should so soon have won him a generous friend.

His face and hands were again washed, and his hair brushed, his clothes dusted (he had but one suit), and a fresh collar pinned on. Then, with a kiss, he danced away, and was soon again in the travelers’ sitting-room.

Dinner was served in a few moments, and as Ralph Belmont watched the zest with which the boy discussed the luxurious viands, he said to himself:

“I shall never forget this good deed, whether it be he or not, for the youngster was half-starved on his dry fare.”

And again he heaped the plate of his little visitor.

“Are you sure you’ve had enough, now?” he asked kindly, as they rose from their seats.

“Oh, yes, sir—yes, sir! I shan’t want to eat again before the day after to-morrow; and just think what a saving that’ll be to sister! Oh! I should like to run errands all the time if everybody were like you! What shall I do now?”

“Nothing just now. I am going out by-and-by to hunt up some old friends; and, as I am almost a stranger here, I should like to have you to show me about the streets a little. Sit down by me while I tell you a little of my story.”

And he motioned the boy to the sofa, and then sank into an arm chair. But he did not speak at once. He seemed buried in deep thought—thought that carried him far back into the past.

Finally he began, abruptly:

“I was engaged to be married once to a very beautiful girl, whom I loved with my whole soul. Our bridal day, was appointed, and everything in readiness, when suddenly there came news of her father’s failure. He fell from affluence to poverty in the twinkling of an eye. I would have had the wedding proceed, as agreed upon, but[”]—and he ground his teeth for an instant—“I was forbidden by my father to take a portionless bride under penalty of his curse, and—and my darling would not marry me with a father’s malediction hanging over my head. So we parted—I to travel with my parents in other lands, and she to begin the hard, hard life of toil. Two years after we left England my mother died, blessing me with her last breath for my filial care. A year ago my father passed away, and—and he, too, blessed me, and in that dying hour revoked his curse, and bade me seek my first, last, only love, and marry her.”

He stopped here as abruptly as he had commenced, and leaving his seat, strode to the window, and seemed to be looking upon the crowded street and listening to its sounds; but could the boy

have seen into the traveler's eyes he would have noted that introverted look which passes by the present scene, and is lost in the far-off past, while his ears heard not the medley of the home, but the rich strains of his darling's voice as it sang to him in the days gone by.

Turning, at length, he said softly:

"I came back to my native land, Willie, to find her—came back as fast as ever the wind and waves would bear me. But she is gone from the place where she used to live—she and the two whom death has spared her—for her father and mother soon passed away—gone, and I cannot find her!"

"But I can—I can, sir!" cried the boy; and he sprang from his seat, and seized his cap.

"It's our Lillie! I know it is Lillie, for she—, Oh! isn't your name Ralph Belmont?"

And he grasped the knees of the traveler, and looked at him searchingly.

"Ay, Willie; and this"—and he drew the boy to his heart—"is the little brother whom I used to dance on my knee and carry on my shoulder! I thought I could not be deceived in this bright blue eyes, and those soft brown curls—they are Lillie's over again."

And he smoothed the little rings that clustered about the boy's forehead and gazed wistfully into his eyes.

"And have you really come back to—to marry sister?"

"If she loves me yet."

"Oh, she does!—she does! She had to sell the locket you gave her to buy the medicine for poor Alfred; but she kept your picture, and wears it all the time."

"Do you know where she sold it?" The man's voice was husky.

"Yes sir; but don't be angry; for, indeed, she cried very, very hard about it; but you see we are so poor!"

"Let us go and see if we can buy it back again. Come."

And he took the boy's hand and hurried down the stairs into the street, his heart throbbing convulsively, and every nerve in a quiver. He had not before realized the straits to which his darling had been driven.

How fast he walked! so fast that Willie had to run beside him, and yet every moment seemed an hour, every street a mile.

The locket was still in the jeweler's hands, and Ralph Belmont re-purchased it in the twinkling of an eye, and again took the boy's hand and went on, pausing only once more long enough to buy a bottle of wine, ere they stood breathless before the humble house which held the apple of his

eye.

A few whispered words of caution to his little guide, and the two went noiselessly up the stairs. Pushing open one door, and not finding his sister there, Willie passed quietly into the further room.

The table was drawn up close beside the bed, and upon it were the earnings of the little errand-boy, or, more properly, the gifts of the rich traveler. The flowers had been carefully placed in a glass of water, and one of the oranges, peeled and divided, lay upon a plate; the others were neatly arranged in a circle, the grapes seeming to grow out of its centre. Lillie sat upon the side of the pallet, carefully supporting the emaciated form of her brother, and feeding him as a mother might her sick child.

“Do they taste good?” she asked tenderly, as she broke off another of the luscious grapes.

“Good! Oh, Lillie, I’ve dreamed of them ever since the fever left me—dreamed of just such clusters. But they were always just without my reach, and so were the oranges too. But there, I will lie down now. Leave the table just so. I want the fragrance to float over me all night,” and as she softly placed his head upon the pillow, his eyes closed, and soon the soft and measured breath of slumber stole from his lips.

Drawing a single rosebud from the glass, she fastened it among the rich curls that were tossed back with such careless grace, and then hurried to the next room.

Willie caught her by the hand as she entered, and, drawing her to the window, said quietly:

“I’ve got the wine, too, Lillie.”

“You have?—the wine!” and her eyes brightened. Only for a moment, though. A spasm of pain shot through her heart, and with it they grew humid, and she said, hurriedly: “I hope you haven’t deceived me, Willie; I hope you haven’t taken advantage of the gentleman’s kindness and begged this?” and her fingers convulsively clutched the precious bottle; precious to her, for, imprisoned in those ruby drops, was the last chance of a human life—precious, indeed, for strong pulses seemed beating underneath that dusky glass.

“No, I didn’t, Lillie; he bought it without my saying a word. If you don’t believe me, just ask him yourself!” exclaimed the boy, in his eager desire to acquit himself of the reproach, forgetting everything he had been instructed to remember.

“Ask him, Willie! You haven’t brought a stranger here?”

“He would come, Lillie. Oh, I can’t hold it in any longer—I must tell—it’s Ralph, Lillie—our own Ralph! Oh, she’s dead—I’ve killed her, telling it so quick! Come and catch her!”

Ere the words had passed the lips of the frightened boy, the bronzed traveler, who had stood in statuesque silence on the threshold, was beside the fainting girl, clasping her to his heart, and calling her by the sweetest of sweet names.

Those kisses, hot from his very soul, and passionate with the repressed ardor of years of waiting, how quickly they brought back the color to her cheeks; so quickly that she was quite recovered before Willie had managed, in his awkward haste, to fetch a glass of water.

“No more toil for these little hands,” murmured Ralph Belmont, as he folded them in his own; “no more midnight stitching,” as he pressed his lips to the drooping eyelids; “no more pale cheeks,” and he held his own to hers till they flushed with borrowed warmth; “no more sighs from these, but smiles, and songs, and caressing words;” and he kissed her lips, coral-red now with the new life that bounded in her veins.

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“Wasn’t it lucky, Ralph?” exclaimed Willie, a month later, as in that same parlor where he had first dined with Ralph Belmont, he sat again at the luxurious board, daintily selecting the largest almonds, and the fairest raisins, and the sweetest grapes. “I say, wasn’t it lucky that I met you just as I did that day. If I hadn’t?” And he looked over to a sofa, where, ensconced in soft velvet cushions, lay the convalescent brother.

“It *was* lucky, Willie; nevertheless,” and the bronzed traveler rose from the chair and passed to where Lillie stood, waiting so tenderly upon Alfred. He encircled her with his protecting arm, watching her blushes—“nevertheless, I should have found you soon, for I had resolved to be a married man ere another month closed in. I thought I had waited already quite too long.”

And he bent and kissed his fair young wife, his wife who, for love of him, had suffered, and toiled, and waited so many weary, dreary years, but whose sorrows were all merged now in joy and trust unspeakable.

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