

YOUNG NICKER.

A STORYETTE.

By MOLLIE KENNEDY.

The earth was rejoicing in that curious half-light that precedes the dawn, and the long, white road went straggling up like a ribbon towards the hills. The birds began their faint twitterings, and the scent of the may trees was wafted up to me as I leant from my bedroom window.

Sleep refused to come, and I waited for the dawn to break from behind the bank of dull grey clouds that lined the horizon, when suddenly I heard footsteps on the gravel below.

"Burglars!" I said to myself, forgetting that such gentlemen do not, as a rule, pursue their nefarious calling just at daybreak. At any rate, the steps were not those of Robert, the village policeman. They were too light.

But I could see nothing, although I leant out so far as to endanger my balance, and after waiting well nigh five minutes, seeing and hearing nothing, I decided I had been mistaken.

I had scarcely told myself this when I distinctly heard the noise once more. This time I was not mistaken. They were footsteps, and I again peered out.

It was lighter now; so light that I could distinctly see each flower and bush in the garden below, and so amazed was I that I could scarcely repress a scream.

For there, amongst my rows of sweet-peas, a little figure was industriously digging. It was a child.

Hastily donning a dressing-gown and some felt slippers, I hurried downstairs, and as silently as I could alighted the bolt of the hall door and went into the garden.

I was just in time. Complacently regarding her handiwork, a very small, very dirty, very sharp-faced child stood between the rows of peasticks, a garden spade in her hand.

She started as a twig cracked, and I stood beside her.

"What are you doing here, little girl?" I asked, severely.

She looked up, unabashed. "I haven't nicked nothing, I haven't," she said. "Strike me dead if I have!"

"What are you doing here?" I repeated. "Who are you, and where do you come from?"

She rubbed her shoes uneasily against the spade, and I saw her little brown feet were peeping through the leather. That decided me. Besides, too, though early summer, the morning was chilly and her face was pinched and forlorn looking.

"Come indoors with me," I said. And with one swift, upward glance she followed as I led the way to the kitchen. Here, after a brief survey of the larder shelves, I produced the remains of a pasty and a glass of milk.

"Here," I said, "you look as if you are hungry."

She nodded. "Ain't had nothink to eat since he were took," she remarked vaguely, taking a huge bite for the pasty, and, smacking her lips as she proceeded. "That's good!" she said, with innocent emphasis, as the last crumb disappeared. "Beats old Mother Pike's porks pies into a cocked hat, that does!"

I did not stay to seek the connection between a pasty and a hat rakishly placed, nor did I inquire who Mother Pike was, but, looking in the child's face, I asked:

"What's your name?"

"Young Nicker," she returned, in matter-of-fact tones.

"Is that your real name?" I demanded.

"Dunno," she answered. "They all calls me that. Bill Butt, him as ha' jest got six months, he allus says 'Young Nicker' he do!"

"Where is your father?" was my next question.

"Doin' time," was the laconic response. Then, after a quick glance round, the child continued: "Ere, missus, hadn't I best be goin'? If your old man comes knocking round things'll be lively fur me, I reckon."

I bridled.

"There is no old man," I said, in as haughty a manner as I could assume. A flannel dressing-gown and hair on deshabille does not add to one's sense of dignity.

This was evident, even to Young Nicker.

"You looks like African-Bodie afore her dresses up," she announced, calmly, "only her 'air ain't as yaller as yours."

"Look here," I said, sternly. "If you don't tell me what you were doing in my garden just now I shall call a policeman and hand you to him."

She grinned. "He've gorn to bed," she affirmed. "I seed him go an hour ago."

Probably she was right. Our village Robert is no fond of too many peregrinations.

"Nevertheless," I said, "if you don't tell me, I shall find a way to punish you."

"Sure you won't tell then?" she asked, quickly.

And I agreed not to reveal the secret whatever it might be.

"I was buryin' the swag," she declared, simply.

"The what?" I asked, scarcely believing my ears.

Young Nicker looked sharply at me. "The swag," she repeated. "I allus has to hide it fur 'im, an' I've bin a-watchin' this 'ere place fur ever so long. Think I, when the job do come off, that'll be a fine place between them there flowers. Nobody 'd ever think to look fur it there."

"I sincerely hope not," I affirmed, grimly. "What ever should I do if stolen property was found in my garden?"

She grinned from ear to ear. "Blessed if you ain't green!" she ejaculated. "Well, I'll be blowed! What d'ye take me fur?"

I apologised mentally and stared at the quaint little figure before me. What did she mean?

"I 'pects I'll ha' to show you," she said, slowly, after a minute or two's pause. "Only you'll ha' to giv' your solemn promise you won't tell."

"Very well," I returned.

And we again entered the garden. A pert blackbird, delving for worms stared

at us in astonishment, and Young Nicker picked up a stone.

"See me hit that there bird!" she said. But I raised her arm.

"How dare you, you wicked girl!" I cried. "That would be murder."

She stared up at me curiously. "Laws, missus," she cried, "you be a funny 'un!"

We had reached the sweet-peas now, and her face grew very earnest.

"I has to be a bit careful," she said. "If I didn't the others 'ud collar it."

Little by little she raked away the loose earth until a small wooden box stood revealed.

"There 'tis," she said, briefly. And visions crossed my mind of silver spoons, even jewels. Then she opened the lid.

"What did I see?"

There was only a dirty clay pipe, a humble briar, and a half-finished packet of tobacco, unmistakably labelled "Shag."

"That's farver's," said Young Nicker, touching it lovingly. "He'll be awful glad of it when he comes out!"

(The End.)

After the great fire in San Francisco, hundreds of tons of lead and zinc and other metals were found fused into a solid mass, four or five feet thick, covering the entire foundation of the ruins of an old shot-tower. This represents a large money-value; but owing to its enormous size and weight it is quite impossible to make use of the metal by any ordinary means. It has been decided, therefore, to cut the metal up into blocks weighing about one ton each, and this work is now being accomplished by means of an electric arc. All the men who are engaged in cutting or melting the channels through the mass of metal have their faces covered with canvas to protect them from the blinding glare of light. It is believed that the work will occupy the whole of the winter, for it is estimated that over two hundred tons of lead, zinc, and tin still remain to be recovered.

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