

SARAH WATKINS;

OR,

CRUMBS FOR THE BIRDS.

EDITED BY THE  
AUTHOR OF "THE HEIR OF REDCLYFFE."

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THE VICTORIA TALES AND  
STORIES.

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LONDON:  
FREDERICK WARNE AND CO.,  
BEDFORD STREET, COVENT GARDEN.



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# SARAH WATKINS;

OR,

*Crumbs for the Birds.*



## CHAPTER I.

SARAH WATKINS.



SARAH WATKINS lived in a little village just outside Gorseham Wood. Her father had been a soldier in a Highland regiment, but he was dead now, and his widow with her one little daughter earned a very poor living indeed by knitting stockings. They were well known to be respectable

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and honest, and the ladies of the town (which lay two or three miles off) were glad to employ Widow Watkins, who was such a good fancy knitter, and knew so many beautiful patterns. Shells, and diamonds, and feathers—all sorts of pretty shapes—used to grow like magic under her thin, worn fingers; and there was generally quite a rush to her cottage in the autumn, to give her orders for the many pairs of stockings, mits, and comforters, that were wanted for the winter's use.

And even in the summer the cottage was not quite deserted, for Widow Watkins was considered a very good hand at babys' socks; she could puzzle out the most intricate patterns that were brought to her to be unravelled, and the delicate yet strong fabrics that grew under her hands out of a few fleecy skeins of gay-coloured wool, were quite the admiration of every one who saw them.

But this winter, this terribly severe winter of 1866-7, Sir Guy, at the Hall, on whose family with their numerous visitors Widow Watkins mainly depended for orders, took it into his head to go to Rome, where a great many of his fashionable friends had gone before him. "And so, Mrs. Watkins," said the Lady, as she paid for a pair of baby's shoes which she had ordered for her grandson, "we shall not want any of your excellent stockings this winter."

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Widow Watkins courtesied, and wished my Lady a safe journey, and stood watching her out of sight without a change in the expression of her face. Then she went in and shut to the door, jingling together the two or three small coins she held in her hand; and little Sarah looked up, to see that there were two large tears standing one in either eye.

“Oh, mother!” she said, for she was a wise child, and knew and shared a great many of Widow Watkins’ troubles; “Oh, mother! what-ever shall we do to live this winter?”

“We must trust,” said her mother, brushing away the two tears, “like the little birds.”

And this sentence quite haunted Sarah throughout the weary time that followed. She never forgot that her mother had told her to “trust like the little birds.”

True, there was the rector’s family remaining in the place; but they were forced to live far more economically than the family at the Hall, and their orders were not so frequent. Once in every other winter they paid a visit to Widow Watkins about this business of stockings; not that these were the only occasions on which they entered her tiny cottage, for they were used to stop and chat with her whenever they passed that way: what I mean to say is, that it was only once in two years they paid her what they called a professional visit. They had done so in

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the year that was past, and the money had all been spent in food, firing, clothing, and Sarah's schooling, which became more expensive as the girl grew older.

Widow Watkins had, in short, very little to support her child and herself upon at the beginning of this winter, which people said would be a hard one. The signs were easily read in the abundant crop of holly and hawthorn-berries. Widow Watkins, however, tried not to fear. She applied for a blanket when the Lending Society were going over their list of candidates for these necessary things, and as she had never done so before, some notice was taken of it, and the rector's youngest daughter, Miss Emily, who had won the widow's heart by learning knitting of her, questioned her a little as to what had brought about the change.

"It's the Hall family as have done it, Miss," she said, sadly. "We have always lived, Sarah and me, from hand to mouth like, and we depended a good deal—we were obliged to depend—upon my Lady's orders every winter. Now she has gone away, of course we suffer. And all the same, Miss, I don't think it any disgrace to ask for help when I can't help myself." For, you see, Widow Watkins had a great deal of that self-respect which, while it led her to struggle on as long as she could without asking any one for assistance, did not prevent her from accepting

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the help which was freely offered to all who were in like need with herself, when she found her own utmost efforts insufficient of themselves to keep poverty from her doors.

“Ah! the Hall family,” repeated Miss Emily, as if not quite pleased. “We must learn not to depend on them too much, Mrs. Watkins. Suppose we try this winter, for instance, to see if we cannot get on without them. And meanwhile,” she continued, “I will speak to my father, and I am sure he will give you a blanket if he has one left. You are such a regular attendant at church, in spite of the three miles’ walk, that we often think you set an example which would be worth copying by our richer neighbours.”

The blanket and a trifle of money the rector gave her with it were of the greatest use to Mrs. Watkins, and enabled her to watch the dawning of the first December morning with some little comfort to herself. Hitherto the weather had been mild, and she hoped against hope that it might continue so.



## CHAPTER II.

### THE BIRDS IN DISTRESS.

MEANWHILE the holly-berries ripened, to the great joy of the many little birds who had made music all day long in the beautiful summer-time, and now would not see that their joy must speedily end while they hopped and skipped about on the twigs, and feasted on the red berries which Nature had so bountifully scattered for them among the evergreen forest leaves.

But, ah! such a terrible time was coming. It happened that there were no holly-berries nearer to the town than those around the widow's cottage, in Gorseham Wood. Morning after morning did little Sarah look from the window and watch the bright-eyed robin redbreasts pecking at the fine fruity berries, until she fancied they grew fat under her very eyes.

"Mother says we must trust, like the little birds," she said to herself; "I suppose they do trust, for they seem to thrive—perhaps if I trusted I should thrive too. Yet I do wish it would please God not to let the flour and potatoes melt away so fast: one never seems to know where they've got to."

December drew to its close. The days were clear and bright—the days that were soon to

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usher in the wonderful morning which we call Christmas, in memory of the Blessed Babe whose birth—in all the weaknesses and feeblenesses of our nature—has consecrated helpless babyhood for evermore. Sarah wondered why she felt her eyes grow moist and the corners of her mouth go down as she thought of the last Christmas before her father died, which they had all spent together, around a blazing peat fire, in Scotland, and the supper-table was groaning under its weight of currant bun and substantial short-bread. Certainly Sarah felt that she and her mother had never been so badly off as they were now.

“Tom,” said Miss Emily, one day, at the Rectory, “I will tell you where we can get some holly for the church decorations:—at Widow Watkins’ side of Gorseham Wood. Don’t you remember the last time we passed her cottage, how we noticed that the bushes around it were perfectly scarlet with berries? Such a good year it is for them.”

“I’m your man,” said Tom, an under-sized boy of eleven. “But do you think we shall be allowed to take them?”

“Oh, yes. Sir Guy said, before he went away, that we might do anything we liked on his grounds except poach! He mentioned the evergreens, for church decorations, particularly.”

Ah! and the next thing was, that a most

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unusual array of figures found their way into Gorseham Wood, and surrounded the widow's cottage, breaking very pleasantly in upon her retirement, which, at the winter-time, was apt to grow just a little oppressive. For there were two of Sir Guy's cheery, stalwart men cutting down the holly branches, which were then dragged away, and put into a cart, beside which stood Miss Emily, her cheeks rosy and her eyes bright—in her scarlet petticoat, and monkey muff, and her hat with the sea-bird's feather in it; and Mr. Tom, in his round jacket and blue cloth cap—altogether about as inspiring a sight as need be seen on a December morning.

They caught Mrs. Watkins' eye, and ran in to speak to her. "Yes; they had come by Sir Guy's permission. All the holly-berries that could be found were needed to work out the devices so many clever people were inventing, for their large old church at Shearingford. There was to be a text running all round the chancel, with letters a foot long, composed entirely of holly-berries, if they could only get enough."

"Don't spare them, Robert," called out Mr. Tom; "we want every one."

So a great clearance was effected; and the young lady, and the young gentleman, and the men, and the cart, all went away, leaving that little cottage in the wood, to all appearances,

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more desolate than ever for the glimpse of sunshine which had shown itself, only to disappear.

And besides: when Sarah looked out of window, next morning, she saw that a great change had come for the birds. They were picking up the few scattered berries which had been accidentally thrown upon the ground, and searching wistfully among the prickly branches for more. It was clear that this scanty provision could not hold out among so many eager little birds. What was to be done? Sarah asked herself this question for many successive mornings, during which she thought the little creatures increased in numbers; and she watched them growing tamer and tamer, until it was no uncommon thing for them to hop up on the window-sill, and knock against the glass with their beaks; begging, with piteous little chirps, for food.

This she had not to give them. Mrs. Watkins' increasing poverty made her enjoin her daughter to be careful of the very crumbs; and she was obliged to harden her heart, and tell Sarah that so long as the snow kept off, there would be plenty of worms to be had. "It's the snow," she said, "that is the real enemy of these little birds."



CHAPTER III.

BEGGING FOR THE BIRDS.

CHRISTMAS DAY came. The widow could not get to church by reason of the rheumatism in her knee; but she sent Sarah, who, as she gazed up at the walls of the grand old building, and wondered at the exceeding graciousness of the angels' song, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill towards men," and admired the beautiful scarlet letters in which it was written on the chancel wall, felt awed into thinking that surely the little robins would never have grudged their food, if they could but have come to church, to be told into what magnificent ornaments a little glue, and a great deal of taste, had converted them.

As Sarah was leaving the church, the old woman who kept the door beckoned her apart. "Miss Emily said I was to tell you to go up to the Rectory, and get your dinner there," said she. "Where's your mother?"

"At home, lame with rheumatism, ma'am," returned the child. "I ought to be home, too, by now," she continued, with a wistful glance at the wide white gates, which showed the way to the Rectory.

"You had better come up and have some

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dinner," said the old woman; "I shall join you there by-and-bye."

"Mother will be expecting me," said Sarah, hesitatingly.

"You 'd better stop, and perhaps they 'll let you take some dinner home to her, who knows?"

Which really happened when all the servants came flocking out of church, and having satisfied their hunger, found that there was still beef and pudding to spare. When they had packed her up a good basin-full of beef and gravy, plums and spice, with a saucer to divide the sweet from the savoury, little Sarah blushing, and scarcely able to speak for gratitude and shyness mingled, faltered out a strange request—"would they be so good as to give her the crumbs that had been left on the table-cloth?"

"What do you want them for, child?" asked the cook, in some surprise.

"To give to the little birds around our house," replied Sarah, blushing deeper; "they are so hungry, and we have nothing."

The soft-hearted cook immediately gave her a slice of bread; but this, although she was very grateful for it, was not exactly what she wanted; it was quite too good, she thought, for the little birds, being, in fact, just the thing her mother would have liked for her supper. Sarah was too honest to wish to gain anything on false pre-

tences, so she put it back gently, saying, "No, thank you, that would do for a Christian to eat; what I want is something that could be of no use to anybody—crumbs for the birds."

The cook looked at her with a curious expression on her face, and then seeing that the simple child was in earnest, she shook the crumbs from the table-cloth into a little paper bag, which she gave into Sarah's hands. The girl thanked her hurriedly, and then set off home, wondering if she had been naughty to stay so long; but the prospect of beef and pudding, not only for herself but for her mother, had been a powerful temptation. The Christmas dinner in Gorseham Wood was to have consisted merely of brown bread and the coarsest blue cheese that could be got; not too much of this either.

Widow Watkins was looking anxiously from her window as Sarah came running along the little path. She had felt somewhat frightened at the length of the child's absence, and kissed instead of scolding her. The untasted dinner lay spread out upon the table, and a clean plate and knife was set for each.

"Oh, mother!" said Sarah, "don't keep anything for me, I have had all I wanted at the Rectory. And see what I have brought you," she added, uncovering the basin and putting it before the widow, "besides crumbs for the little birds;" saying which, she dipped her hand into

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the bag, and scattered part of its contents on the window-sill.

Mrs. Watkins was very thankful, and a good deal touched by the kind remembrance in which she was held at the Rectory, so she sat down to eat her Christmas dinner with a thankful heart.

“ Ah, child !” she said, when she had repeated her simple grace ; “ there ’s a deal more of kindness and thoughtfulness for the poor in those above them, nor any one would think. We should never grumble at the rich nor envy them their fine houses, for they have all the trouble of giving, and very hard work that must be sometimes, for it is difficult to know who ’tis best to give to, and more than difficult to satisfy everybody ; while we have only to receive whatever it pleases them to send us, and that oughtn’t to be very hard to us,” said Widow Watkins, sighing a little : for once she had never thought she would have to receive charity. Only she was a wise woman, and knew that after she had done all she could to earn money, there was no disgrace in accepting such aid as might be willingly offered her.

The little birds had enough to eat on Christmas Day, which was fortunate ; but the mildness of the weather was quickly passing away, and on New Year’s Eve the trees in the wood were laden with a soft snow covering, which lay upon them heavily enough to bend their bare branches to

the earth. Then the little birds assembled in flocks at the cottage door and window-sill, marking the pure snow-wreaths all the way with the print of their little feet. The frost which came, too, had not endured for many days before a soft dove-coloured pigeon was found by little Sarah frozen to death, and lying on a heavy drift. She fancied all the little birds looked especially melancholy on that day, as she brushed the snow off the window-sill that the robin red-breasts and blackbirds might find, as her mother said, "a rest for the soles of their feet."

"But what is the good of inviting them to come when we have nothing to give them?" said she, for having been taken from school that winter because Mrs. Watkins could afford to keep her there no longer, she had plenty of time for watching and grieving over the feathered suppliants. "Mother, do you think there would be any harm in my going to the Rectory, and begging kind Mrs. Cook to give me some more crumbs for the robins?"

Her mother looked sharply at her. "Is it only for the birds, child, you are thinking of begging?" asked she.

"Only for the birds, mother," replied Sarah, with some earnestness. "I know God will take care of us, because you told me He would."

Mrs. Watkins saw no reason why she should be kept back from helping the birds, who, after

all, are God's creatures, and have as much right in the world as we, and whose little pains and sufferings we should therefore look upon with sympathy, rejoicing whenever we find it in our power to avert them. "But you must remember," she said, "to ask it very humbly and gently—not as a right, but as a very great favour. Mrs. Cook is often busy, and may not have time to attend to you; in which case you must not mind having to come away without anything."



## CHAPTER IV.

### AT THE RECTORY.

**I**T was a long cold walk, and Sarah's frock and shawl were thin, but of late she was not used to warmer clothing, and she got on surprisingly well without it. That is to say, although her arms were blue with cold, it never came into her head that a warm coat would have mended the matter, so she was saved—this brave little Sarah, with her simplicity and her faith—from the sin of repining.

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At the Rectory back door she was met by the pretty housemaid, a kind-hearted girl enough, though to Sarah's eyes she looked very nearly unapproachable.

"Well, child," said she; "how cold you seem. Come in and have a warm by the kitchen fire."

But Sarah had been so much impressed by the sharpness of her mother's tone, when she asked if the child meant to beg for anything else besides crumbs for the birds, that she was half afraid of accepting favours, even though they might be unasked. "Oh, if you please," she said, nervously, "I have come to see if you have any crumbs to give me for the birds? It is a great favour," she continued, clasping her hands; "but indeed you don't know how hungry they are! They never get any breakfast now." The tears stood in Sarah's round eyes; perhaps, if the truth were known, she did not either.

The housemaid stared. "The birds?" she repeated: "well, there have been half a score of beggars at the back door this morning, for we've never had a harder time of it; but they all craved for themselves—and that's what you'd better be doing, than taking trouble about what can't concern you."

Sarah was abashed, and ventured on no reply; while the housemaid, who persisted in thinking that she had, or ought to have, some personal motive in her application, showed her at once,

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without any ceremony, into the presence of Miss Emily, who sat at a table in the warm dining-room, writing out tickets for the Soup Kitchen, and regretting that Widow Watkins lived too far off for the weekly distributions of soup to poor and deserving families to be of any use to her.

Miss Emily looked up as the child entered. "Well?" she said, in a kind tone.

Sarah was less afraid of her than she had been of the smart housemaid.

"I didn't mean to disturb you, Miss," she said, with a respectful courtesy. "I only came to ask Mrs. Cook if she had any crumbs to spare for the birds in Gorseham Wood; I am so afraid," said the child, piteously, "of their dying of hunger."

Miss Emily looked concerned. "I hope not," she answered, gravely. "Come and tell me what's the matter with them?"

Her kind manner drew the child further into the room, until she came within reach of the cheering blaze. She opened her heart to the young lady, and told her the whole story of her pity for the pretty redbreasts, who had thriven so well until the Christmas decorations had taken away all the holly-berries. "And we have nothing for them," continued the little girl, "and mother said I might come and tell Mrs. Cook how that they never get any break-

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fast—and I don't think they can make much of a dinner either."

Miss Emily had laid down her pen, and was listening as attentively as if Sarah had been telling her some case of parish distress. "But are you sure," she said, "that they are in such utter want? Do you think the fathers and mothers exert themselves as they ought for the support of their families?" Now, these were precisely the questions Miss Emily would have asked if the sufferers whose cause Sarah was pleading had been human.

"Oh, yes, Miss," said the child, eagerly: "indeed they are very needful—they come to the window and beg so hard! and there's a big black-bird, who looks at me with such bright eyes, I always fancy he feels it worse than the others, and that he means to tell me how that he never begged before, and wouldn't now, only times are so hard, and he's got, maybe, a sick wife at home." All this Sarah uttered in perfect good faith, for, living so far from all other playmates, she had taken the birds to be her companions, in a sort of silent way, and was never tired of making up long histories about them to herself.

Miss Emily did not laugh at her; she thought what Sarah had said was extremely likely to be the case, and, after reflecting for a moment, she looked up to remark, "You say you want crumbs. Now, we finished breakfast long ago,

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and threw the crumbs out to our birds, for a great many of them assemble on the Rectory lawn, more than you would think; and we must not rob these, even to give to you. Still, as it seems your birds would not be half so badly off but for our stripping the trees in that wholesale manner at Christmas, I think I ought to give you a loaf of bread to take home and do what you like with. A slice or two, cut every day and crumbled, would make it last some time. It must be a small loaf, though, for we get so many human beggars now-a-days that we have very little left for birds."

Miss Emily's manner was not very willing, for she had an elder sister, to whom she would have to account for whatever she did with anything so important as a loaf of bread; and she had heard her sister say that very morning that they must stop giving presently, or they would not have enough for themselves.

Rather to the young lady's relief, Sarah refused the loaf. The child felt as if it would be a sin to cut up a loaf of bread even for the pretty redbreasts, when her mother and she so often went hungry to bed. "No, thank you, Miss," she said, courtesying, "I only want crumbs. Maybe if I come back to-morrow you will ask Mrs. Cook to keep some for me."

"Very well," said Miss Emily, "I will see if they can save some of the kitchen crumbs for

you. Our own we must keep for the birds on the lawn. But as I am afraid you will not get enough in that way, I will tell you what I would do if I were you. I daresay you know that the Soup Kitchen, and the Penny Club, and the Blanket Society, and all the other charities which my father sets going in the town, would never get on at all without a public subscription. One gives half a crown, and another five shillings, and another a pound—according as people can afford it or are willing. Suppose you were to try this plan for your robins? You might come to the town one day in every week, and bring a little bag with you to hold the crumbs: and you might come here, and to the doctor's house, and to the mill, and then to the Hall. I think," said Miss Emily, "that it is always meal-time there, and there are a great many servants; and if you were to mention my name," she continued, in her district-visiting manner, "they could not refuse you. Perhaps you will say you don't like begging; but neither do my sisters and I, only we are sure it is our duty. And if we are to believe the poor people, they bless us when they are warmed and fed for having helped to make them so; and this, I dare say, the robins would do if they had souls, which they haven't, poor little dears! Still, you know, they are cared for and watched over by **ONE** who can count every feather they shed,

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and He must be pleased when He sees any one taking trouble to find food for them."

Having said this quite as much to herself as to Sarah, Miss Emily took up her pen to write on a soup-ticket, "Widow Mason, 7 children, 3½ quarts," and the child courtesied herself out again.



## CHAPTER V.

### AT THE HALL.

SHE took Miss Emily's advice and went up to the stately-looking Hall; but on her knocking at the back door, and being allowed to enter (for all the servants knew Widow Watkins and her child), what was her confusion to find herself in the presence of a fair, sweet-looking young lady, in a scarlet Garibaldi made of some soft, fine-looking stuff, and with a scarlet ribbon running through her pale silken hair. This was the wife of Sir Guy's eldest son: he had brought her to the Hall for a few days on their way to London, and finding herself dull in the large old house, she had taken a fit of usefulness, and was busy at that moment in learning

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to make pastry, dipping her white hands and arms up to the delicate elbows in flour.

“What does the child say she wants?” she asked, a little annoyed at being caught.

“Please, ma’am, it’s Dame Watkins’ little girl begging crumbs for the birds out yonder in Gorseham Wood.”

Mrs. Neville laughed merrily. “What an odd request,” said she; “let her come and tell me all about it.”

So Sarah did as she was bid; but as we sometimes find when we are asking charity for others, her accounts of the destitution to which her feathered neighbours had been reduced were subjected to a severe scrutiny.

“I do not feel at all sure,” said the young lady, carelessly, “that you need distress yourself about the robins, my little girl. It seems to me that they are not really hungry, but that it is a sort of affectation with them to appear so.”

Respect alone prevented Sarah from answering indignantly. Her dear little suffering birds to be accused of affectation! But her face expressed quite enough; and as she was turning to leave the kitchen, Mrs. Neville ordered a slice of bread to be cut, and crumbled it down with her own hands into Sarah’s patched apron. “There, child, that’s for you; only mind, you mustn’t expect the birds to be grateful—little pampered things!”

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“Thank you, ma’am,” said Sarah, who was ready to cry at finding her favourites so misunderstood; “may I come again?”

Mrs. Neville hesitated. “I suppose so,” she said, “if the servants will let you.”

Sarah met Miss Emily as she left the lodge gates.

“Well?”

“Mrs. Neville says it’s affectation in the robins, Miss, to look hungry; but she made some crumbs for me for all that,” said the child, opening her apron.

“Just like her: when we asked for the Soup Kitchen, she said starvation among the poor was all idleness and fancy. But did you tell her that the church decorations had caused this famine among the birds? You didn’t? Ah! you should not have forgotten to make out the best case you could for your friends. But never mind; nobody can try to do good without meeting some discouragements,” said Miss Emily, nodding to the child, as she turned into a side path.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE DOCTOR'S.

SARAH walked boldly up to the doctor's house: she knew he had a soft heart for little children, having made proof of this once in the matter of strawberries, during a languid recovery from the slow fever; and she thought very likely the little birds were allowed to share in his compassion. Nor was she mistaken. She had to pass by the dining-room window on her way to the back door, and by an almost irresistible impulse she looked up as she passed. There were always so many odd things to see in that dining-room, that if it had not been such a very rude thing to do, she would have liked to have stood at the window for half an hour, gazing at the green and red parrot on the stand, at the curious stuffed birds in the glass case by the door, and at the Chinese dog, with its broken nose—it is considered a point of beauty in a Chinese dog to have a broken nose, which is given to it on purpose; for the great charm of this house consisted in its master's having been a naval doctor, and having made use of his opportunities, and collected a great many treasures from the different parts of the world he had visited.

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As Sarah passed the window and looked up, her eyes met those of the doctor, and he beckoned her to stay where she was, while he hurried to admit her himself by the front door. The child was quite overcome by this unexpected honour, and seemed inclined to remain courtesying for the next hour on the steps. He, however, led her into the very room where the curiosities lay; and there, on the hearth-rug, were two or three little birds in the last stage of freezing—their wings quite stiff, a film coming over their bright eyes, and scarcely breathing.

Sarah waited to do as she was told, and soon found that she was expected to kneel down beside the doctor, and help him to force open the beaks while he tried to get a few drops of wine down the poor little throats.

“You are a good child,” said Dr. Sands; “I couldn’t get my housekeeper to come and help me, she said she was busy; I don’t believe it, though, it was only a poor excuse for not meddling with my birds, as if they were not good enough for her to touch—not but what she is a very superior person,” continued the good doctor, quite appalled at having allowed such an opinion to escape him; for he, like other sailors, considered women superior beings, and very seldom allowed himself to find fault, even with his stiff old housekeeper, whom nobody but himself could be found to say a good word for.

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“Only think!” he said, presently, “I found these little birds under the trees in my shrubbery. Doesn’t it seem sinful to think of their dying of cold and starvation so close to my door? But what can I do? I throw out food for them every day of my life, and——Ah! it is no use: won’t they revive, poor little things?” The tone in which he spoke was quite melancholy. “Well,” he said, laying the dying heads back on Sarah’s hand, with a wonderfully tender touch, “I’ve tried this before, and found it of no use: but I thought perhaps anything in the shape of a woman would manage better than a clumsy old fellow like me. And now I must be off to my patients.” Then suddenly remembering that Sarah had been coming to the house when he called her in, and must have had some reason for doing so, he changed his manner, and asked her if anything were the matter with her or her mother.

“No, sir,” said Sarah; “it’s only the birds.”

“The birds again? Do you want me to prescribe for them? If you expect me to do them any good, you mustn’t call me in too late,” and he looked sadly down at the cold little forms that lay now quite dead upon the rug.

Sarah opened her business, and the doctor was delighted, telling her she might come whenever she liked, and she should never be sent away empty. He was very near cutting her a

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huge slice of a cake which lay in the cellaret, rather than disturb his housekeeper again about such trifling things as hungry birds, while her head was full of dinners, and breakfasts, and other such important matters. But Sarah would have no luxuries, and persisted in finding her way to the kitchen, and doing her best to make an impression on the housekeeper—who, after all, loved her master better than any one else in the world; and when she learned that it was his wish that she should be kind to the little girl, turned out all the bread-dishes for her, and promised to remember her in future.

On the whole, Miss Emily's plan seemed a good one; and the tame little birds reaped many a benefit from Sarah's weekly journeys through the snow, without there being any fear of their growing fat and lazy, and indisposed to take trouble to procure food for themselves—a state of things at which Mrs. Neville hinted next time she saw Sarah with her little bag.

On the 12th of January, as Sarah turned in at the Rectory gate, she was told a piece of very good news. The letters had just come in, and amongst them was one from the rector's married daughter, who had lived for many years in Australia, to say that she was coming home with her husband and her five little children, and expected to land in February.

“And oh, Sarah!” said Miss Emily joyously,

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“tell your mother to get her knitting-needles ready directly; for only think how many pairs of stockings, and mits, and how many comforters and shawls, my sister and her children will want to keep them from the cold of this terrible English winter! All these things are to be the grandpapa’s presents; and we are going out presently to buy a tremendous quantity of worsted, and if you can wait, you shall carry it to your mother, and tell her we are coming to speak to her about it by-and-bye.”

So, you see, this was a great present relief to Widow Watkins and her daughter. Meanwhile Dr. Sands had been thinking, as much as his patients would let him, of the little girl who came every week to ask for crumbs, and nothing but crumbs, at his back door.



CHAPTER VII.

THE HOUSE TO WHICH THE BIRDS WOULD  
NOT COME.

“**T**HAT’S an extraordinary child; three miles into Shearingford, and three miles back, through the snow, are no joke,” he said to rich old Lady Meredith, as he sat by the blazing fire in her sitting-room, and tried to convince her that there was nothing the matter with her which time and a little attention to some simple rule or other could not cure. Lady Meredith fancied herself a great invalid, and on this score she shut herself up in her large beautiful house, refusing to see any visitor of any sort, whether rich or poor, excepting Dr. Sands. In consequence her life became very barren of interest; for as she never went out, and never saw anything new or fresh except the spring crocuses and violets which grew half-despised on the lawn under her high, narrow windows, and somehow missed telling her their beautiful stories of hope and joy—perhaps because she was not ready to listen—her heart had gradually withered away.

This was a very sad state of things to come to, especially as it was not for want of objects

that the source of Lady Meredith's affections had run dry. It was true that her only daughter was dead, but for many years before her death the old lady had refused to see her, on account of some early quarrel, in which it is to be feared that one was as much in fault as the other. So Mrs. Horseley's death had made very little difference in her life to all appearance, and certainly had no effect whatever in inducing her to love and help her grandchildren, who were left poor and lonely, but not, after all, either so poor or so lonely as the woman of seventy, with her narrow heart and her wide house.

On this evening her tall but drooping figure was sunk in the recesses of a soft couch, screened by heavy curtains from the slightest suspicion of a draught from the well-fitting door, and she was listening with very little appearance of animation to the village stories which Dr. Sands persisted in telling her whether she liked them or not. "For if she does not take an interest in her fellow-creatures, she ought, and may, perhaps, be got to do so," he said to himself as he paused now, expecting an answer. Lady Meredith feebly echoed his words, as that was the form of reply likely to give her the least trouble,

"An extraordinary child indeed!" Then as the pronunciation of the words on her part seemed to force her, although against her will, to think a little more deeply than she had

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hitherto done upon the subject, she asked, "what do you say she does it for?"

"For the birds, Lady Meredith; for the birds who are starving of cold and hunger in Gorseham Wood."

"But why does she come so far for crumbs! can't she get enough at home?"

"Alas! she has no crumbs. The rector tells me that she and her mother have been as near starving this winter as the robin redbreasts themselves."

Lady Meredith frowned as the rector was mentioned. Dr. Sands knew she would, because she always did; but not for this would he refrain from naming the good rector whenever he had a mind to do so. One of Lady Meredith's grandsons had married the rector's eldest daughter, and this had been quite sufficient to set the old lady against her clergyman. She had long left off going to church for fear of taking cold, and when he came to her she gave orders to her servants that he should not be admitted. This was a very sad state of things, and Dr. Sands thought it quite shocking, but he was always hoping that she might one day be brought to a better mind.

So to-night he would not notice Lady Meredith's frown, but went on with what he was saying. "She's a very good child, and I should like some sort of a situation to be found for her as

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soon as she is fit to leave her mother ; that lonely life in the wood, with only the hungry birds to play with, can't be good for her ; and besides, she eats, or ought to eat, her mother out of house and home. Growing children should never be stinted in their food any more than the birds she thinks so much about, should they, Lady Meredith ? ”

The old lady was obliged to say “ no. ” “ But these birds, ” she began, almost eagerly ; “ if there is so much distress amongst them, why don't they come to my window-sill and get fed ? ”

Dr. Sands knew perfectly well that Lady Meredith's servants had fallen too completely into their mistress's habits to have a single thought of providing for the necessities of the cold and hungry, whether feathered or otherwise ; and that, either repulsed or else altogether unheeded, as they were sure to be, the birds were not likely to flock to the great house as they did to the cottage in Gorseham Wood. He said gravely, “ I suppose they go where they are most certain of a welcome. ”

Poor old Lady Meredith ! her life had been, by her own will, so entirely cut off from family ties, she was so far removed from all the delightful and manifold interests which spring up about a happy home, however humble that may be— from the excitement consequent on Robert's suc-

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cessful passing at college, or Henry's return from sea, or the winning of Joan's first French prize, or the cutting of Anna's fifth tooth, any one of which is sure to be matter of moment to a properly affectionate mother or grandmother—that she had been forced to try and fill up the vacancy in the few affections she had left, by petting and over-feeding a heavy, lumbering poodle, who had lately done something or other to forfeit his place in her esteem, and left her craving—as human beings will crave when Nature is not allowed to have her way—for some creature to supply his place. Not that this want led her to fix her mind on the idea of making some one human being happy; but she wished for another pet, and began to be almost envious of the little girl who so often went hungry, but who, nevertheless, was rich in the blessing of being able by her own exertions to give comfort to so many, and who was not only able, but willing too, and was actually at that moment a benefactress to hundreds!

“The birds would be welcome here, indeed,” she said. “I will have some crumbs strewed about the house, and one of the men shall be set to watch; and they shall catch a few of the prettiest for me, and put them into the large cage I used to have for my parrot when he was alive. With plenty of food and warmth, I am sure they won't mind a little confinement during

this severe weather ; and I shall have singing all the winter through.”

“ Oh, indeed ! You care for singing, do you ? ” thought the doctor as he glanced round the room, which was full of corners and quaint curtained recesses, and childish-looking curiosities, which, because they were foreign, were called, not toys but ornaments, and allowed places of honour on stands and tables. He thought what a delightful place it would be for her little great-grandchildren to play hide-and-seek in when they landed after their perilous voyage.

“ And surely, then,” he said to himself, “ the whole place would be full of music—music of the sweetest and best. But, ah ! I suppose it will never be. How strange it is now,—she will imprison and cram little creatures who can be only happy in the open air, and her own tender children cast out ! ”

Lady Meredith’s confidential maid was given orders to cut up a loaf of bread, and to crumble it on the window-sills and doorsteps ; and the footman was set to watch, with the great cage at his elbow. But, sad to say, servants are not always very attentive to orders when the mistress herself is not present to enforce them ; and the servants at the old house saw too little of their lady, and believed their own interests to be too far separate from hers, ever to put themselves out for her convenience. They told her that

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the birds were shy, which, if they had thought a moment, they would have known was a poor excuse to make at a season when the little creatures were driven in such numbers to ask from man the food which was denied them in the fields and orchards. And if they were shy, who had made them so?

But the poor rich lady was obliged to be content with the explanations her people thought fit to offer her. Whether these were true or not, she had no means of judging; but, at all events, the print of the little feet was never visible on doorstep or window-sill.

"It's really very extraordinary," said Lady Meredith, with some animation of manner the next time the doctor paid her a visit; "very extraordinary. And you say this little girl gets them to eat out of her hand?"

"Yes; they perch on her shoulders and peck crumbs out of her apron. It's the prettiest sight in the world to see the child and the birds together," said the good doctor, who had indeed strayed out to Gorseham Wood one day for the express purpose of watching Sarah Watkins, while she thought herself unseen, distribute food to the feathered suppliants.

Lady Meredith sighed, "They won't come to me!"

"They are frightened, perhaps, at the size of your house," said the doctor, gravely. "Truly,

Lady Meredith, in some respects the blessings of the poor exceed those of the rich."

Lady Meredith arranged the folds of her India shawl in a somewhat discontented manner. At last she said, "Perhaps the child could catch me some robin redbreasts, and bring them here? She should be well paid."

"Paid for treachery?" said the doctor, bluntly; "that won't do. The birds love my little Sarah, and would come to her for the asking. She mustn't abuse their confidence, must she?"

Lady Meredith said, pettishly, "You don't care for me, Dr. Sands; you have no wish that my little fancies should be indulged." Such a melancholy speech it was for the old lady to make on that January afternoon, while she spread out her heavy silk dress before her, and folded her white withered hands together, scarcely with resignation. The snow was falling thick and fast without, and lying on the garments of a beggar woman and her two little children, who, having managed to slip unperceived past the lodge, had reached the house only to have their petition for aid rejected, and were despondently making the best of their way back again.

The doctor gave a dejected shake of his head. That was a sight not good to see, considering what a rich household it was that had sent the beggar woman empty away: bread in the bake-

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house and meat in the larder, but not a crumb to spare for the sick or the poor! Yet he found it in his heart to pity the mistress of it.

“You know I do care for you, Lady Meredith, or I should not be here to-day. Professionally I can be of little service to you; for, as I tell you, there is scarcely anything the matter with you. But I must say good-bye now, for Miss Emily at the Rectory has caught the influenza, and those simple folks, her father and sisters, are all in a fidget and fret lest she should not be well against next month, when her elder sister and the children are expected to land.”

Dr. Sands rose; but Lady Meredith would not hold out her hand in token of farewell. “The birds,” she said; “am I not to have them?”

“Birds?” he repeated, as if he had forgotten their previous conversation; “what has the great-grandmother of ever so many babies to do with birds, except feeding them when they come her way?”

Lady Meredith never replied to Dr. Sands when he spoke to her of her relatives. She remained silent for a few moments, and then said in an ungracious tone, as if she were reluctantly according a favour he had asked, “Well, I suppose you may tell your little girl to come here and get crumbs as she does at other houses: since they won’t eat them on my doorstep, they may on hers.”

*Sarah Watkins ; or,*

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“That I will do, if you like,” said the doctor, approvingly; but as he had his doubts as to whether her orders—if she condescended to give any on such an unimportant subject—would be attended to, he immediately proceeded to seek an interview with the housekeeper, and to impress on her that it was her lady’s pleasure that in case of a child calling herself Sarah Watkins presenting herself at the door to beg for crumbs, her request should be attended to. This he managed to do in such a way as to ensure prompt obedience.

Thus Sarah Watkins added another house of call to her list, and the birds throve better than ever.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE BIRDS AND EVERYBODY MADE HAPPY,  
AND CRUMBS NO LONGER NEEDED.

AT length intelligence was received at the Rectory that Mr. and Mrs. Horseley, with their five children, had arrived safely in London; and all was bustle and excitement, for the whole family were presently expected to come to the country on a visit. Miss Emily was quite well by this time.

On one of the few fine days in our late bitter tempestuous March, old Lady Meredith found herself well enough to look out of window, a thing she very seldom did. Sarah Watkins was coming up the avenue without her accustomed bag, but with a child in her arms. Sarah was dressed in a complete new suit of clothes, and her face was sparkling with pleasurable excitement. The air was full of sweet scents from polyanthuses, crocuses, and violets, and of tender liquid sounds from the throats of wood-pigeons, chaffinches, and yellow-hammers. Everything seemed bright, and young, and fresh, except the tall old woman, who sat in precisely the same attitude as she had done all the winter,

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only that now she had raised her head to look out.

Sarah came nearer—so near that Lady Meredith could distinguish the features of the beautiful babe on her arm, and hear his crow of delight as he stretched out his arms towards the solitary peacock who was parading the terrace. The child was evidently in ecstasies of joy. Lady Meredith opened her eyes; the peacock had never struck her in the light of an object of pleasure before.

“I wonder whose that baby is?” said she to herself; “such a remarkably fine child!”

Sarah was lost round an angle of the house. Lady Meredith felt baffled and disappointed: she would have liked another look at the beautiful child.

The housekeeper was receiving Sarah’s blushing thanks for past favours, and her explanation that now they were no longer needed, as the birds were feasting every day on food of their own finding, and, in the excitement of building their nests, had quite neglected her for some days past, when the lady’s-maid came in to say that Sarah Watkins was wanted in Lady Meredith’s room. Sarah put the baby in the housekeeper’s arms, and prepared to follow the maid, wondering much what so great a lady could possibly want with her.

“No, no!” said the lady’s-maid, “it’s the

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baby my lady wants ; bring him along with you."

As Sarah entered the sitting-room, Lady Meredith looked up in almost feverish expectation. She stretched out her unaccustomed arms to the boy, but he shrank away from her, and hid his face on his little nurse's neck. However, Sarah dared not disobey the lady's gestures, so she came nearer and put the boy upon her lap. Lady Meredith's cheek sank down upon his little shoulder. "You beautiful child, tell me what is your name?"

"He's Mr. Cecil Horseley, my lady,—Mrs. Horseley at the Rectory's youngest child," explained Sarah, eagerly ; "mother's nurse there now, and I'm helping in the nursery." She ventured to add this, supposing that as Lady Meredith had been so kind through her to her birds, she would be likely to feel interested in the wonderful piece of good fortune that had happened to her mother and herself. For on reaching England Mrs. Horseley had been compelled to part with the nurse who had accompanied her on her passage home from Australia, and had arrived at the Rectory in such distress for want of that useful attendant, that her father and sisters promised to exert themselves to the utmost to procure a trustworthy person for the post. They mentioned the difficulty to Mrs. Watkins when she brought the store of knitted

*Sarah Watkins ; or,*

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stockings, &c., that had been ordered of her, home to the Rectory; and to their infinite relief and surprise, she offered herself to enter Mrs. Horseley's service provided her little girl could be allowed to accompany her, as she was, she confessed, quite tired of the precarious means of subsistence which were all that could be hers while she continued to live in the cottage in Gorseham Wood.

Lady Meredith heard no more than the first part of the sentence. Somehow she had had a feeling that this was her great-grandson, and Sarah's words only confirmed her previous supposition. Great-grandchildren at a distance, and great-grandchildren near at hand, were very different things. She could (though it is a marvel how she could) harden her heart against little creatures she had never seen, but not against the weeping babe on her bosom; and, to Sarah's great astonishment, she covered the little face with kisses, while one or two tears—slow and unwilling, as if their source had long been dried up—coursed down her face.

Mrs. Watkins, who had come out with Mrs. Horseley's babies, and was waiting at the lodge while Sarah, who had been permitted at her own earnest request to carry Cecil with her to the house, remained to deliver herself of her errand, was exceedingly impatient, and heartily tired of the conversation of the lodge-keeper's

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wife, before Sarah made her appearance, perplexed in place of bright, with a note in her hand instead of a baby on her arm. The note, whose contents she of course did not know, was written in Lady Meredith's crabbed handwriting, and ran as follows :

“MY DEAR GRANDSON,

“I have requested your little maid to leave your beautiful boy with me, till you come to claim him.

“Your affectionate grandmother,

“JOHANNA MEREDITH.”

Of course Mrs. Horseley was in a great fright at first when her nurse returned without the boy, and little Sarah got something of a scolding when it was found that she had suffered herself to be persuaded to leave him with Lady Meredith. Mrs. Horseley said that he should never have been taken near the house at all! But when she heard of the old lady's tears and kisses, and when her husband read her his grandmother's letter, they both agreed that it might be the beginning of her coming to a better mind, and that at any rate he might as well go up to the house and make her acquaintance. He was gone a long time; but when he came back, it was in softened and subdued tones that he spoke of Lady Meredith.

## *Sarah Watkins.*

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“She is very much broken,” he said: “very, very different from anything I had ever imagined. I cannot grudge her the pleasure of showing us a little kindness, even if she does spend upon us a portion of the money which has done her no good for so long.”

So Mr. and Mrs. Horseley and their children went to pay the old lady a long visit, and Dr. Sands rejoiced to see the luxurious rooms, both large and small, invaded by the children’s feet, while their merry laughter mingled with the clear notes of the birds. The old lady’s age seemed in a fair way now of being busy and full of interest: she forgot her invalid ways, and Dr. Sands might have scratched her off his list of patients, only he began to like her so much in the new aspect of her character that now shone out, that he would not have omitted his weekly visit for the world. It is even not impossible that if all the party are together when next winter comes with its storms and snow, robin redbreasts may flock to the doors to be fed with crumbs of fine white bread from the hands of old Lady Meredith’s darling Cecil.

And Widow Watkins is very happy too, for want seems far removed from her and her child.

“Ah! Sarah,” she says, again and again, while her heart overflows with gratitude, “did not I say right, when I told you we must trust like the little birds?”

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“Yes, mother; and you never said a better or a truer word. And, mother, it seems to me that the crumbs which fed the little birds have led the way to Lady Meredith’s making peace with her grandchildren.”

E. E. G. B.



