

**THE LITTLE
WANDERERS. A
SWISS TALE.**

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MISS E. M. STEWART

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LITTLE WANDERERS.

A Swiss Tale.

BY

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THE LITTLE WANDERERS.

CHAPTER I.

A GREAT many years ago, there lived in a pretty village of Switzerland a little boy and girl, whose names were Conrad and Gertrude. They had no relations that they knew of in the world, nor any friends, save their nurse, who had brought them up, and the good people of the village. In spite of this, they were very happy, for they loved each other, and loved their nurse very dearly, and were both so good-tempered and obliging, that they were themselves loved by all the inhabitants of the hamlet, which did not consist of more than perhaps a dozen houses, nestled in the green bosom of a valley in the district of Mount St. Gothard.

The real wants of this life are very few, and the simple but hardy inhabitants of Niederwahl—the name of the village—sat down to their frugal meals, and wore their plain clothing, with a satisfaction which silken robes and luxurious tables very seldom give. As for their occupations, the men, for the most part, pursued the dangerous employment of hunting either the nimble-footed chamois goat, as it leaped from crag to crag, or the fierce bear, whose den was in the caverns of the rocks, and whose subsistence was in the thick woods that skirted the base of the mountains. In the summer

time, too, they fished in the lakes and streams that abounded in the valleys, or pastured a few sheep on the grassy slopes. The women, on their part, were not idle: they spun their own and their husbands' woollen garments, and dressed the soft skin of the chamois for sale; they salted and preserved the bear's meat, and made cheeses from the goat's milk.

In all these feminine occupations, the nurse, Dame Lucilla, bore a part; but amid them she found time for other duties, in the exercise of which she displayed accomplishments unknown in the hamlet of Niederwahl, and uncommon in spots far less sequestered than a village of Switzerland a hundred years ago, for Dame Lucilla could actually read and write.

The nurse was herself a native of Niederwahl, but taking service in the great city of Berne in her youth, she became the wife of the favourite attendant of a German nobleman; and accompanied her husband to Wurtemberg, which was at that period only a duchy and electorate. Many years elapsed, and then Lucilla returned to her native village, a middle-aged, sorrow-stricken woman, and a widow. She was accompanied by two children—Conrad, then about four years old, and Gertrude, a year younger. She said the children were not her own, but gave no account of their parentage, which might perhaps have been judged to be attended with some mournful mystery, so sad and anxious were the looks with which she would oftentimes regard them. The honest and true-hearted dwellers at Niederwahl, however, indulged neither curiosity nor suspicion; those unamiable emotions are born of the luxury and deceit of great towns. The children were innocent and engaging, and Lucilla was their countrywoman, and unhappy. She had lost her

husband, and had no male relation to assist her with the spoils of the chase: the only thought, therefore, of the good villagers, was how they should help and console her; and oftentimes was the choicest portion of the game, or the first cheese from the dairy, forced on the acceptance of Lucilla. When we render services to the world at large, we ought to look for no reward on earth beyond the consciousness of having performed our duty; but deeds of kindness rendered to virtuous people have a seven-fold reward.

Lucilla had not fixed her abode in her native village to be in any way a burden to its honest inhabitants; and not only did she soon acquire skill in those domestic arts of the women of the valley, which she had not practised since her youth, but from some slight knowledge which she possessed of medicine, directed by her excellent judgment, became in a manner the surgeon and physician of the village, as she was also its chief spiritual adviser; for neither church nor chapel was within reach of that secluded spot, which was only occasionally visited by a wandering friar.

Meanwhile, time rolled on its everlasting course; Gertrude had entered her twelfth year, and Conrad was nearly thirteen. Though originally of somewhat delicate frame, their free mountain life had endowed Conrad with a strength and activity equal to that of the active lads of the district, and spread the cheeks of his sister with the brightest hues of health. Steady of brain, and firm of foot, he could pursue the chamois from height to height, leaping the dark chasms, or treading the slippery verge of the precipice, where it scarce seemed to afford a resting-place for the human foot. Once, too, unknown to Dame Lucilla, he had joined a party of hunters in quest of a

large and fierce bear, which was tracked to its haunt and slain; and though Conrad owned, when the huge carcass of the brute was borne in triumph to the village, that he had ventured to join in the chase, he left it to the athletic young mountaineer who had speared the bear to tell how, but for the noble courage of the boy, who had boldly approached the bear, and plunged his long knife into his heart, he must himself have been borne down by the creature's weight ere any of his companions could have approached to aid him.

The attainments of Conrad, however, were not confined to the courage and skill of an alpine hunter. Naturally a woman of fine abilities, and a great favourite with her employers, Lucilla, during the years of her absence from her native hamlet, had acquired not only the arts of reading and writing, but a purity of speaking both French and German, which might not have misbecome the polished society of Paris or Dresden; and this valuable acquirement Lucilla was at pains to impart to her young charge. The simple inhabitants of the valley held Lucilla in too much respect to question any part of her conduct; but one aged woman, who had nursed Lucilla herself, not being exempt, even in her seclusion, from that curiosity which is said to be the especial failing of the daughters of Eve, ventured to ask Lucilla for what reason she was so desirous to impart book-learning to her foster-children.

Lucilla sighed, and evaded the question; but, as the tears rose in her eyes as she spoke, and she presently fell into a fit of deep musing, the old peasant woman forthwith determined that there was some strange mystery attached to Conrad and his sister, in which food for conjecture

she perhaps found more satisfaction than she would have derived from any explanations of Lucilla.

There is a certain grace and refinement in the simplicity of nature—among the inhabitants of great towns are found the essentially vulgar and ill-bred; thus living among the free and noble peasants of the Swiss valley, with their active health, their pure morals, and their minds ripening under the wise and gentle teaching of Dame Lucilla, Conrad and Gertrude, happy in their humble sphere, would have given a new grace to the highest. "God chasteneth those whom he loves." But He also, we are told by the same divine authority, "tempers the wind to the shorn lamb."

The bitter cup of affliction, that wholesome but unsavoury draught, was preparing for the lips of those poor children.

It was the commencement of an unusually fine and early spring, in the year 17—; the purple saxifrage, the Alpine heaths, and the early primrose, bloomed in the grassy nooks of the valley; cascades leaped forth, sparkling from the dark pine woods, now clothed with a fresher green; and the shepherd, who had kept his flocks safely penned during the storms of the long winter, led them forth to feed upon the tender and aromatic herbage. While the fragrant breath of spring, however, called forth the forms of beauty and brightness in the sheltered valley and on the mountain's pine-clad brow, the frame of the good and gentle Dame Lucilla began to droop and decline. Her own simple remedies, and the medicaments of a kind of travelling practitioner, who occasionally visited Niederwahl, alike failed to relieve her pain, or restore her failing appetite, which the good wives of the village in vain endeavoured to tempt with the

little dainties of the poultry-coop or dairy. It was a warm, bright morning, and, after a sleepless night, Lucilla was sitting near the open casement of her cottage, propped up in a kind of easy-chair, fabricated by Conrad, with the assistance of the peasant lads, of pine wood and goat-skins. A balmy freshness was on the air, as it swept past laden with the perfumes of the wild thyme and wood violet, and the poor invalid drew her breath less heavily as she inhaled it. The two children stood by, regarding her with anxious looks, for they had overheard ominous whispers from the matrons of the village, and they knew what death was; they had seen Dame Bertha's pretty pale baby sprinkled with wild flowers, and laid in its little grave. Father Maurice, too, the oldest man in the village, who used to be so merry and kind, and had always some pleasant story for them of his young days—him too they had beheld stretched out so moveless and silent, with that solemn look upon his features; and as they stood beside their dear nurse, they began to weep, seeing how very ill she was, for they feared that they were about to lose her—that she would die.

Poor Lucilla!—her own tears fell as she thought how lonely her dear children would soon be, knowing as she did, from the mystery locked up in her heart, that the life of the poor peasants in that secluded valley was not for them to lead; that but for the wicked intrigues of bad men, they would have been dwelling in a great and rich city, with all the advantages of education which wealth and rank confer. It is very hard sometimes for poor human beings to drain the bitter cup, and in the midst of afflictions to say, "Thy will be done." But Lucilla had a rational and steady piety, and, folding her thin hands upon her bosom, while the