

**LITTLE GERTY; OR, THE
FIRST PRAYER (FROM
THE LAMPLIGHTER)**

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Little Gerty; or, The first prayer (From the lamplighter) by Maria Susanna Cummins

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MARIA SUSANNA CUMMINS

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Fisher

(FROM THE LAMPLIGHTER.)



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LITTLE GERTY ;

OR,

THE FIRST PRAYER.

LIGHT IN DARKNESS.

It was growing dark in the city. Out in the open country it would be light for half-an-hour or more, but within the close streets where my story leads me it was already dusk. Upon the wooden doorstep of a low-roofed, dark, and unwholesome-looking house sat a little girl, who was gazing up the street with much earnestness. The house door, which was open behind her, was close to the side walk, and the step on which she sat was so low that her little unshod feet rested on the cold bricks. It was a chilly evening in November, and a light fall of snow, which had made everything look bright and clean in the

pleasant open squares near which the fine houses of the city were built, had only served to render the narrow streets and dark lanes dirtier and more cheerless than ever; for, mixed with the mud and filth which abound in those neighbourhoods where the poor are crowded together, the beautiful snow had lost all its purity.

A great many people were passing to and fro, bent on their various errands of duty or of pleasure; but no one noticed the little girl, for there was no one in the world who cared for her. She was scantily clad, in garments of the poorest description. Her hair was long and very thick, uncombed and unbecoming, if anything could be said to be unbecoming to a set of features which, to a casual observer, had not a single attraction—being thin and sharp—while her complexion was sallow, and her whole appearance unhealthy.

Had any one felt any interest in her (which nobody did), had she had a mother (which, alas! she had not), those friendly and partial eyes would, perhaps, have found something in her to praise. As it was, however, the poor little thing was told a dozen times a day that she was the worst looking child in the world, and, what was

more, the worst behaved. No one loved her, and she loved no one; no one treated her kindly; no one tried to make her happy, or cared whether she were so. She was but eight years old, and alone in the world.

There was one thing, and only one, which she found pleasure in. She loved to watch for the coming of the old man who lit the street-lamp in front of the house where she lived; to see the bright torch he carried flicker in the wind; and then, when he ran up his ladder, lit the lamp so quickly and easily, and made the whole place seem cheerful, one gleam of joy was shed on a little desolate heart, to which gladness was a stranger; and though he had never seemed to see, and certainly had never spoken to her, she almost felt, as she watched for the old lamp-lighter, as if he were a friend.

"Gerty," exclaimed a harsh voice within, "have you been for the milk?" Gerty ran off as fast as she could, for she feared the lamp-lighter would come and go in her absence, and was rejoiced on her return, to catch sight of him, as she drew near the house, just going up his ladder. She stationed herself at the foot of it, and

was so engaged in watching the bright flame that she did not observe when the man began to descend ; and, as she was directly in his way, he struck against her as he sprang to the ground, and she fell upon the pavement.

"Hollo, my little one," exclaimed he, "how's this?" as he stooped to lift her up. "What'll Mammy say?" Then as he saw she looked apprehensively at her spilt milk, he added, "she will not be hard on such a mite as you. I'll bring you something to-morrow that perhaps you'll like."

At this moment Nan Grant came to the door, saw what had happened, and commenced putting the child into the house, amidst blows, threats, and profane and brutal language. The lamp-lighter tried to appease her, but she shut the door in his face.

Gerty was scolded, beaten, deprived of her hard crust, and shut up in her dark attic for the night. Poor little girl, her mother had died in Nan's house five years before, and ever since she had been tolerated there, not from kindness, but because Nan had reasons of her own for wishing to keep her.