

CHAPTER THE TENTH

First Appearance of Jicks

THERE walked in, at the open door of the room--softly, suddenly, and composedly--a chubby female child, who could not possibly have been more than three years old. She had no hat or cap on her head. A dirty pinafore covered her from her chin to her feet. This amazing apparition advanced into the middle of the room, holding hugged under one arm a ragged and disreputable-looking doll; stared hard, first at Oscar, then at me; advanced to my knees; laid the disreputable doll on my lap; and, pointing to a vacant chair at my side, claimed the rights of hospitality in these words:

"Jicks will sit down."

How was it possible, under these circumstances, to attack the infamous system of modern society? It was only possible to kiss "Jicks."

"Do you know who this is?" I inquired, as I lifted our visitor on to the chair.

Oscar burst out laughing. Like me, he now saw this mysterious young lady for the first time. Like me, he wondered what the extraordinary nick-name under which she had presented herself could possibly mean.

We looked at the child. The child--with its legs stretched out straight before it, terminating in a pair of little dusty boots with holes in them--lifted its large round eyes, overshadowed by a penthouse of unbrushed flaxen hair; looked gravely at us in return; and made a second call on our hospitality, as follows:

"Jicks will have something to drink."

While Oscar ran into the kitchen for some milk, I succeeded in discovering the identity of "Jicks."

Something--I cannot well explain what--in the manner in which the child had drifted into the room with her doll, reminded me of the lymphatic lady of the rectory, drifting backwards and forwards with the baby in one hand and the novel in the other. I took the liberty of examining "Jicks's" pinafore, and discovered the mark in one corner:--"Selina Finch." Exactly as I had supposed, here was a member of Mrs. Finch's numerous family. Rather a

young member, as it struck me, to be wandering hatless round the environs of Dimchurch, all by herself.

Oscar returned with the milk in a mug. The child--insisting on taking the mug into her own hands--steadily emptied it to the last drop--recovered her breath with a gasp--looked at me with a white mustache of milk on her upper lip--and announced the conclusion of her visit, in these terms:

"Jicks will get down again."

I deposited our young friend on the floor. She took her doll, and stood for a moment deep in thought. What was she going to do next? We were not kept long in suspense. She suddenly put her little hot fat hand into mine, and tried to pull me after her out of the room.

"What do you want?" I asked.

Jicks answered in one untranslatable compound word:

"Man-Gee-gee."

I suffered myself to be pulled out of the room--to see "Man-Gee-gee," to play "Man-Gee-gee," or to eat "Man-Gee-gee," it was impossible to tell which. I was pulled along the passage--I was pulled out to the front door. There--having approached the house inaudibly to us, over the grass--stood the horse, cart, and man, waiting to take the case of gold and silver plates back to London. I looked at Oscar, who had followed me. We now understood, not only the masterly compound word of Jicks (signifying man and horse, and passing over cart as unimportant), but the polite attention of Jicks in entering the house to inform us, after a rest and a drink, of a circumstance which had escaped our notice. The driver of the cart had, on his own acknowledgment, been investigated and questioned by this extraordinary child; strolling up to the door of Browndown to see what he was doing there. Jicks was a public character at Dimchurch. The driver knew all about her. She had been nicknamed "Gipsy" from her wandering habits, and had shortened the name in her own dialect, into "Jicks." There was no keeping her in at the rectory, try how you might: they had long since abandoned the effort in despair. Sooner or later, she turned up again--or somebody brought her back--or one of the sheep-dogs found her asleep under a bush, and gave the alarm. "What goes on in that child's head," said the driver, regarding Jicks with a sort of superstitious admiration, "the Lord only knows. She has a will of her own, and a way of her own. She is a child; and she aint a child. At three years of age, she's a riddle none of us can guess. And that's the

long and the short of what I know about her."

While this explanation was in progress, the carpenter who had nailed up the case, and the carpenter's son, accompanying him, joined us in front of the house. They followed Oscar in, and came out again, bearing the heavy burden of precious metal--more than one man could conveniently lift--between them.

The case deposited in the cart, carpenter senior and carpenter junior got in after it, wanting "a lift" to Brighton.

Carpenter senior, a big burly man, made a joke. "It's a lonely country between this and Brighton, sir," he said to Oscar. "Three of us will be none too many to see your precious packing-case safe into the railway station." Oscar took it seriously. "Are there any robbers in this neighborhood?" he asked. "Lord love you, sir!" said the driver, "robbers would starve in these parts; we have got nothing worth thieving here." Jicks--still watching the proceedings with an interest which allowed no detail to escape unnoticed--assumed the responsibility of starting the men on their journey. The odd child waved her chubby hand imperiously to her friend the driver, and cried in her loudest voice, "Away!" The driver touched his hat with comic respect. "All right, miss--time's money, aint it?" He cracked his whip, and the cart rolled off noiselessly over the thick close turf of the South Downs.

It was time for me to go back to the rectory, and to restore the wandering Jicks, for the time being, to the protection of home. I returned to Oscar, to say good-bye.

"I wish I was going back with you," he said.

"You will be as free as I am to come and to go at the rectory," I answered, "when they know what has passed this morning between you and me. In your own interests, I am determined to tell them who you are. You have nothing to fear, and everything to gain, by my speaking out. Clear your mind of fancies and suspicions that are unworthy of you. By to-morrow we shall be good neighbors; by the end of the week we shall be good friends. For the present, as we say in France, au revoir!"

I turned to take Jicks by the hand. While I had been speaking to Oscar the child had slipped away from me. Not a sign of her was to be seen.

Before we could stir a step to search for our lost Gipsy, her voice reached our ears, raised shrill and angry in the regions behind us, at the side of the

house.

"Go away!" we heard the child cry out impatiently. "Ugly men, go away!"

We turned the corner, and discovered two shabby strangers, resting themselves against the side wall of the house. Their cadaverous faces, their brutish expressions, and their frowzy clothes, proclaimed them, to my eye, as belonging to the vilest blackguard type that the civilized earth has yet produced--the blackguard of London growth. There they lounged, with their hands in their pockets and their backs against the wall, as if they were airing themselves on the outer side of a public-house--and there stood Jicks, with her legs planted wide apart on the turf, asserting the rights of property (even at that early age!) and ordering the rascals off.

"What are you doing there?" asked Oscar sharply.

One of the men appeared to be on the point of making an insolent answer. The other--the younger and the viler-looking villain of the two--checked him, and spoke first.

"We've had a longish walk, sir," said the fellow, with an impudent assumption of humility; "and we've took the liberty of resting our backs against your wall, and feasting our eyes on the beauty of your young lady here."

He pointed to the child. Jicks shook her fist at him, and ordered him off more fiercely than ever.

"There's an inn in the village," said Oscar. "Rest there, if you please--my house is not an inn."

The elder man made a second effort to speak, beginning with an oath. The younger checked him again.

"Shut up, Jim!" said the superior blackguard of the two. "The gentleman recommends the tap at the inn. Come and drink the gentleman's health." He turned to the child, and took off his hat to her with a low bow. "Wish you good morning, Miss! You're just the style, you are, that I admire. Please don't engage yourself to be married till I come back."

His savage companion was so tickled by this delicate pleasantry that he burst suddenly into a roar of laughter. Arm in arm, the two ruffians walked off together in the direction of the village. Our funny little Jicks became a

tragic and terrible Jicks, all on a sudden. The child resented the insolence of the two men as if she really understood it. I never saw so young a creature in such a furious passion before. She picked up a stone, and threw it at them before I could stop her. She screamed, and stamped her tiny feet alternately on the ground, till she was purple in the face. She threw herself down, and rolled in fury on the grass. Nothing pacified her but a rash promise of Oscar's (which he was destined to hear of for many a long day afterwards) to send for the police, and to have the two men soundly beaten for daring to laugh at Jicks. She got up from the ground, and dried her eyes with her knuckles, and fixed a warning look on Oscar. "Mind!" said this curious child, with her bosom still heaving under the dirty pinafore, "the men are to be beaten. And Jicks is to see it."

I said nothing to Oscar, at the time, but I felt some secret uneasiness on the way home--an uneasiness inspired by the appearance of the two men in the neighborhood of Browndown.

It was impossible to say how long they might have been lurking about the outside of the house, before the child discovered them. They might have heard, through the open window, what Oscar had said to me on the subject of his plates of precious metal; and they might have seen the heavy packing-case placed in the cart. I felt no apprehension about the safe arrival of the case at Brighton; the three men in the cart were men enough to take good care of it. My fears were for the future. Oscar was living, entirely by himself, in a lonely house, more than half a mile distant from the village. His fancy for chasing in the precious metals might have its dangers, as well as its attractions, if it became known beyond the pastoral limits of Dimchurch. Advancing from one suspicion to another, I asked myself if the two men had roamed by mere accident into our remote part of the world--or whether they had deliberately found their way to Browndown with a purpose in view. Having this doubt in my mind, and happening to encounter the old nurse, Zillah, in the garden as I entered the rectory gates with my little charge, I put the question to her plainly, "Do you see many strangers at Dimchurch?"

"Strangers?" repeated the old woman. "Excepting yourself, ma'am, we see no strangers here, from one year's end to another."

I determined to say a warning word to Oscar before his precious metals were sent back to Browndown.