

Lizzie Bates



The Climbers

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066426668

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I.

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“It’s of no use, and what’s more, I don’t believe it’s right,” said Mr. Jeffries, “this filling every boy’s head with thoughts of rising in the world. It looks all very well in books; but is quite a different thing in reality. I tell you what, it’s doing a mighty deal of damage in the world. Why, it’s almost impossible for anybody that wants help to get any of the right sort. Once find a boy that has any grit in him, and he’s off as soon as he can scrape up enough money to go to school with. There’s that stable-boy of mine, as good a little fellow as I’d ever care to have; but in the room of playing like other boys, when he has a moment’s leisure, he’s off to the barn with a book in his hand. I’ve told him many a time ’twould be the ruin of him; but he seems to take to it as naturally as a duck does to water;” and the little hotel-keeper looked around complacently.

“I thought that was the very spirit that was commendable in this country, Mr. Jeffries,” said I, turning my gaze from the mountain towering above us to the face of my host. “Hope is the grand incentive to the American boy, the hope of knowing more, and doing better for himself and others, than his father and grandfather did before him. Look around you and see who are the men of the present; ten to one they are poor men’s sons. They felt that they could do something, and they accomplished it.”

“It looks all fair, I allow; but the thing is carried too far; it makes them discontented and unsteady, changing from one thing to another. In my opinion, if you want to make any

thing in the world, you must stick to one thing. It is an old saying, 'A rolling stone gathers no moss.'"

"True; but may not these poor boys have a higher aim and purpose, and carry it out quite as effectually as if it required no changes? Your stable-boy may have mapped out, vaguely perhaps, his future, and to reach it must make use of such stepping-stones as come within his reach. He does his work well, does he not?"

"Oh, there's nothing to say against him, only I don't like to see him always reading; he can't go by a newspaper—and my wife keeps them hung up by the side of the roller—without stopping for a bit, catching as a hungry horse does at a spear of grass or hay that comes within his reach. I give him pretty good wages for a boy, and the women folks patch up his clothes and see that he has plenty to eat. It seems to me that he ought to be contented and happy, with jests and frolic like the rest, in the room of being shut up with his book. And then, to cap all, I went into the barn the other day, and there he was perched up on the haymow, talking away and making gestures just as the parson does. I could not keep from laughing, and he came down and skulked away looking sheepish enough."

"You have interested me in this boy, Mr. Jeffries. Who, and what is he? Where did you find him?"

"Oh, his father lives up among the mountains, a thriftless, good for nothing creature, who spends all his earnings in whiskey. The mother was a delicate ladylike woman; my wife thought a heap of her; and when she died, she made us both promise to look after her children."

Just then a showy carriage was driven round from the stable, and a sprightly lad jumped quickly down, and stood holding the lines respectfully while the owner made ready to start. He was a tall, slight young man, whom I had noticed in the hotel as excessively talkative, flush with his money, drinking and smoking freely, and interlarding his conversation with now and then an oath. He came out with a swagger, followed by a little crowd of idlers. Mr. Jeffries broke off the thread of conversation, giving the hand of his guest a prolonged shake.

“Always glad to see you when you come this way, Robinson; you will always find the bar just the same; I never keep any thing but the best.”

“That’s a fact; the best mint julep I’ve had in a long time.”

While the leave-taking was going on, I was eagerly scanning the face of the stable-boy. My heart ached for him as he stood there, the little torn straw hat just covering the mass of dark hair, that had apparently not seen a comb for days, the great heavy locks clustering over a broad well-formed forehead, above delicately curved eyebrows with long brown lashes. But the eyes were hidden; I could only imagine what they must be from the profile of the face, the straight nose, somewhat deep upper lip, and well-turned chin. Still and straight he stood, and almost as motionless as though carved out of marble: yet not a dead, passive statue; his very stillness had a life in it, just as the framework of machinery is still while the movable parts are running swift as thought can follow.

Down the steps and into the buggy the young gentleman passed, and as the lines were handed him he tossed a silver coin to the stable-boy, but so carelessly that it glanced from his shoulder, rolled across the porch and down a crack in the floor before he could stop it.

“It’s gone, Marston; better luck next time,” said Mr. Jeffries with a patronizing air. The boy bit his lips, while the eyelids quivered, and turning on his heel was out of sight in an instant.

It was not in my heart to talk any more. Life was new to me; I was myself trying to make my way upward in character and life. Just through college, my health failed, and I was told to try mountain air and exercise. My meagre purse would not allow of my gratifying my benevolent feelings, and still every day there were just such cases occurring. “Work yourself out” had been my motto. No doubt Marston Howe would adopt the same. A rough, thorny way he will find; the feet will become weary, the hands torn and bleeding; still, if he wills he will succeed. It is better to wear out than to rust out; better be a climber than a cumberer; and though we seem never fully to attain our desires, let not the heart grow bitter and misanthropic, moody and uncharitable. Success is sure if we try for it. Let me whisper this to Marston Howe, and I have then done him all the good I can. Looking up I saw the doctor’s buggy coming slowly round the curve of the mountain, and a moment after it drew up, while a kindly face looked out. “How is this invalid of mine? Almost ready to go home?”

“Nearly ready, doctor,” and my eye caught sight of the stable-boy with his pail of water for the doctor’s horse.

“That’s right, Marston,” said Mr. Jeffries; “the doctor’s horse don’t like to pass here without something,” but the doctor did not notice the hint.

“You are fond of books,” I said to Marston as he held the pail for the horse to drink; “I have one in my pocket which I think will please you. It is called ‘Self Helps,’ and will show you how others have worked and struggled to become good and useful men. I hope that is what you wish to do.”

“I shall try for it,” he answered in a clear tone, while his grey eye brightened as he grasped the book. “Aim to do right, Marston, and what you do, do well; perhaps we shall meet again.”

Quick as an arrow he bounded round the corner, and the doctor’s pony trotted leisurely down the mountain with us.

It had been a glorious afternoon, and I had taken a longer stroll than usual; resting at the little mountain house, while the doctor visited a patient further up the mountain.

“Do you know any thing of Marston’s family, doctor?” asked I, when we finished what we had to say of the immediate landscape.

“Not much. The mother was a well-educated gentlewoman, above the majority in these parts; she died soon after I came here, and her husband soon married a real vixen. They say he spent every thing in whiskey after that, and these two children, Marston and Jennie, live with Mr. Jeffries, a good-natured man in his way, but mightily puffed up with his success in that hotel. He has a good many boarders in summer, and is making a great deal of money.”

By this time pony had struck into a quicker pace; the road was more familiar, or he scented the corn crib, and his

master let him have the rein.

The next day I left the mountains, but not without a thought of Marston Howe, and an earnest wish that he might succeed.

Poor, and dependent on his own labor, there was something in his case that reminded me strangely of my own; and more than once I felt my heart throb with a quicker beat as I thought of what might be in store for him, had he the courage ever to undertake what I saw from his look he so earnestly craved.

Still, with constant effort, untiring self-denial, and inflexible purpose, the height might be won. The germs of the future harvest must be planted before it can be gathered in. Slow and difficult might be the ascent, and many a time the feet might falter in the way, and the heart well-nigh break, while weakness, prejudice, and passion hinder the progress of the eager soul.

One look to God, however, and obstacles vanish, doubts dissolve. His strength is never denied those that ask him. Marston Howe's mother was a Christian. His cradle was consecrated by her prayers, and the little son she left behind her was still the object of divine love and care. Such thoughts comforted me. He must go up through the narrow defile of labor, the rocky strait of necessity; but he will overcome: the mother's prayers will not be lost.

Years have passed since that summer day: we have both been climbers; both began at the same level, the only difference being that I had the start by some half a score of years; difference enough when starting in the race, but

hardly perceptible when standing, as we both now do, nearer the top than the bottom of the ladder.

Last summer I again met with Marston Howe; and for the sake of the climbers who have suffered and striven, and of others who are still suffering and striving, I am induced to tell his story as nearly as he told me as I can well remember it.



II.

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OF my early life I cannot remember much before we went to the mountains, and still I have always had a vague remembrance of a pleasant home surrounded with tall trees, a fountain bubbling up and catching the sun's rays in a thousand bewildering forms, sweet flowers, and singing birds; while in my own little room there was a curious round glass with rock and moss at the bottom, where the gold fish flashed their beauty through the crystal water. Then there were days indistinct and shadowy, when the glory and beauty had gone, where I hardly knew, and we had another home—my mother, Jennie, and I.

My father I had seldom seen, and now I saw less of him than before. I did not so much wonder, for it was not home to me, that little brown house perched like a bird's nest on the shelf of the mountain. I did not like it, and often used to ask my mother why we were there. She never used to answer me; but putting her arm around me drew me closely to her, kissing me over and over again, while the tears fell on my face, but saying nothing.

It was not so with Jennie, the pretty golden-haired baby that I used to rock in a nice little crib in our first home. Then we had pretty carpeted floors, and I could ride my pony all day in a room made on purpose to play in.

But when I grew older I saw it all, and understood why my mother pressed me to her heart and wept. I then knew what made my father reel and stagger so as he came up the path; and why, when Jennie put up her hands, and crowed

out her evening welcome, he took no notice of her, and one night came very near crushing the little creature as he fell over the threshold. Oh, sad, sad days, when he was so cross, declaring the house was cold and cheerless, or the rooms were so bare of comfort—when he went to the village at the foot of the hills every morning, and if he did not come back at night, mother took Jennie in her arms, and we went after him.

In this way we lived till Jennie was five years old; then mother grew sick, and for days lay on the bed so white and still, Jennie curling up beside her, putting her little chubby cheek close to the thin pallid one, while I dug up raspberry roots and boiled them into broth for mother and the baby to eat.

One day she spoke less frequently; I thought she was asleep, and walked about very carefully so as not to wake her: at length she looked up, beckoned me to her, put her arms about my neck, and kissed me. “Whatever happens,” she said, “you must be a good boy, Marston. You are now almost ten years old; you will take good care of Jennie, and never let her leave you.”

“I will, mother; but what makes you talk so?” and I cried aloud in grief and fear.

“I am very sick, Marston, and I may die. If I do, you will take care of Jennie; promise me.”

“Yes, mother; but you will not die. God must not—”

“Hush, my son; God knows what is best; you will always remember to love and obey Him.”

“How can I, mother, if he takes you? You are all we have in the world. What will Jennie and I do without you? No,

mother, if he is good, he will not do this;" and I buried my face in the pillows. My poor sick mother put her thin arms about my neck, and drew me still nearer, her hot cheek meeting mine.

"God *is* good, my child, and still I must leave you. Mother would not tell you any thing that was not so. You believe me, Marston?"

"I believe you, mother," I cried passionately, "but I cannot let you go; if you go, I must go with you."

"No, Marston, you must stay to take care of Jennie and your father. Jennie is such a little girl, what would become of her without you?"

"Will it make you happier, mother, if I take care of Jennie?" and I kissed her white cheeks again and again.

"Yes, my son, I shall be very happy if you will promise to be a good boy, and take care of your little sister for Christ and for me."

"I will promise; I will be good, mother," and my tears were dried.

Invested with a new dignity as the protector of my little sister, I must be a man; and I took up Jennie and fed her from the one little china bowl that remained to us of our old home.

Weary with the effort of talking, my mother fell asleep, looking so calm and placid; while I rocked the baby, and watched her quiet breathing.

Presently a neighbor came in, and bending over the bed asked how long she had been sick.

"Two weeks," I answered.

"Poor thing; why didn't she send for the doctor?"

“She thought she should be better soon,” I replied, laying Jennie down on the foot of the bed; and going softly to my mother, I gently kissed the pale forehead.

“Marston, promise,” and she opened her eyes.

“I do, I will, mother.”

“Dear me, Mrs. Howe, why did you not send for me? your husband told me this morning that you were sick; and as soon as we had dinner, I came right up.”

“I knew there was no help for me. If it was not for leaving my children—”

“Don’t be troubled, Mrs. Howe. It isn’t much that I have, but such as it is they shall have a part.”

Slowly the sun went down, and as the darkness rolled up the mountain father came home. He was steadier than usual, and for the first time he seemed sorry that mother was sick; took her hand kindly in his, and bent over the pillow and kissed her.

“Only get well, Mary, and I will stay at home always.” It was all he could say, the tears choked him.

“I am very sick, Robert. You will do this for the children,” and her eyes closed.

All night the two watched by her bed, Mrs. Jeffries and father; while Jennie nestled in my arms, occasionally putting up her mouth for a kiss, thinking it was mother.

I lived an age in that night, and how many resolves I formed and plans laid of what I would do, and how I would care for that one little sister.

Alas, I had to learn that he who wins must walk through rough places; that the sweet rest for which we long is only given to those who have been prompt in duty, resolute

against temptation, strong in faith, patient in the hour of trial. Alas for the weary feet that must walk through the world without a mother's guidance.

Before morning Jennie and I were alone, while my poor father was stricken into soberness.

Three months passed. My father was much steadier, stayed more at home, and was no longer cross and overbearing; for hours would he read to us, then taking Jennie on his knee, sing her to sleep.

"If mother could only see him," I said frequently to myself. I had not known he was so handsome, for he kept himself much better, and looked like a new man. Then at night he would put us in bed, and sometimes sit down by himself, or go out looking so good and happy; I did not understand it.

One day I had been down to Mrs. Jeffries with Jennie, and Mr. Jeffries asked me what I would think if my father gave me a new mother. I told him that could not be; we could not have but one mother, and our mother was dead.

"But what if your father marries again?"

I went home in tears. Cheerless as our home was, I could not bear that another should enter it. It was no place for a good woman to come, and I felt it so. It was not long, however, before I found the reality of what I feared. My father, on the strength of his good looks, married a pretty, showily dressed woman, and brought her to our mountain home. Very kindly he introduced us; but she did not so much as kiss either of us. I grew indignant, and could have darted out of the house, but for my remembered promise to my mother.