



# THE LADIES' COMPANION

At Home and Abroad.

EDITED BY MRS. LOUDON, ASSISTED BY THE MOST EMINENT WRITERS AND ARTISTS.

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## THE FIRESIDE FAIRY.

### HOB'S FIRST VISIT.



LITTLE Pansy Martin, very tired, sat dozing before the dying fire. She had been up a long—long while before it was light, and the clock was now striking eleven. The little thing seemed unconsciously to shiver at the sound, and then hug herself more compactly on her seat—a low stool in front of the grate.

And then, as the flame flickered, the child's pale face nodded—nodded in sleep, and the candle-end burnt low, and shadows swallowed up all about her—all but the red speck of fire that still brought out the child's thin face; a face wherein the finger-prints of care were sharp and deep.

And Pansy continued to sleep, gradually sinking to profoundest rest, when, almost falling from her seat, she was startled into wakefulness. She had thought herself in bed; whereas it might be an hour—or two—or three, before all the folks were in, and the doors locked. And so, with a patient look about her, Little Pansy trimmed the candle, threw about a handful of coals upon the fire, and again sat down to watch, or sleep, but anyway to wait.

The fire kindled up, and out flew a live coal upon the hearth. "I wonder," thought Pansy, as languidly she looked about her—"I wonder if it's a coffin or a purse?" And then the child, with childish fancy quickened by the fireside superstition, looked more earnestly. "Here it is," she said, taking the piece of coal, no bigger than a hazel-shell, in her hand, and turning it over and over—still undecided, still perplexed. Now, it seemed to her very like a purse—and she would certainly have money; and now she could make nothing better of it than a coffin, and there would be a death. Perhaps it was herself that would die—and Pansy looked no whit sadder at the thought.

Still Pansy held in her open hand the piece of coal that tinkled, tinkled with the dying fire. She could not but look at it; could not but listen to it—for now, louder and louder the sound came from it—sweeter, and sweeter, like any music—little Pansy's heart beating thick as she listened. She felt afraid, yet could not throw the coal from her. Afraid, yet pleased—more and more astonished, charmed, delighted.

There never was such music! So low and yet so very sweet; low and soft, as though nobody but herself should hear it; yet so clear and so distinct that she was sure she could count every sound. She had heard nothing

like it before; of that she was assured; and yet, only to hear it seemed to be enough to understand it. Now, she wished to dance—and now, as she looked upon the coal, which she dared not cast away, she felt strangely afraid.

Suddenly, the coal became diamond-bright, growing larger and larger, and still brighter and brighter in her hand; Pansy, in a tremor of strange happiness, intently gazing—she could not, try as she might, do otherwise—at the growing diamond, that, now large as a dove's egg, lay and glittered in her little hand, and threw a pure white light about it. In another minute, the diamond shell broke apart, and a strange little creature, shaped like a man, but not much higher than a knitting-needle, stood, then made a bow, in Pansy's hand.

He was the drollest little fellow; and while Pansy takes courage to take a good look at him, we will try and describe the new-comer. Though so very short and small, he was very old. His face was brown and wrinkled as an over-kept pippin; yet the wrinkles had smiles in all of them. His eyebrows and a little patch of beard, rounded like a bodkin's end, were iron-grey; his eyes black and melting as a fallow-deer's. He had a noble little nose, with decision holding the bridge. His mouth was small and delicate, as though moulded by the soft, gentle, melancholy things that continually flowed from it. His forehead was square and open as an ivory tablet. His hair was thin, and, when he lifted his hat, a bald place, as though marked with Time's forefinger, showed itself on the crown of his head. He was dressed, from top to toe, in the blackest black; a sort of close, thick, velvet-pile that, as he brushed it to and fro with his hand, would give out sparks, even as the mourning coat of Grimalkin the Black will give out electric sparkles in the dark. In his hand he bore what seemed at first a club of steel; and so, indeed, it was: only that the club, unlike the clubs of Ogrelan, had in its shape a symbol of peace and good-fellowship; for the club, duly examined, revealed itself a poker: a thing not weightier than a corking-pin, yet in every way a well-wrought, cleanly-fashioned poker.

Pansy, holding her breath, still gazed at her visitor, as he stood in her hand. Then looked about her. What could she do with the little creature,—where put him? At once, the stranger saw the child's distress. "Sit you down, child," said he; "I warrant me, I'll find a seat for myself. Sit you down, Pansy," repeated the little man. The child sank, wonderingly, upon her stool, and her visitor hopped like a cricket from her hand, and in a second was seated at the opposite fire-side, on the edge of the fender. "It's a cold night," said the little man, and he thrust before him, and poked about him with his little steel poker; and though he only thrust and poked at air, the coals in the grate seemed to acknow-



ledge the power of the fairy metal, for they stirred themselves, and crackled, and roared, and put more heart and heat into themselves than was ever known before, in so small a coal assembly. And the little man continued to poke and stir the air, and the red shadows darted through the kitchen, and danced over the ceiling, and the coals blew little trumpets of flame at the bars, as in fealty and honour of their liege lord, throned upon the fender.

"Now we shall do," said the little man, and he let his poker gracefully fall within his arm, like the emperor of the Two Indies when he would lay by his sceptre. "Now, Pansy, we shall do."

"If you please, sir," said the timid girl. "But, kind sir, if I may be so bold—and don't be offended—how did you know my name was Pansy? I thought nobody knew me but mistress, and the lodgers, and they not much—and—"

"And St. Martin," said the visiter.

"To be sure, sir—yes," said Pansy.

"I know you, and all about you: and because you're a quiet, good, patient little girl—come, I won't have any crying, not a tear," said the little man, and he flourished his poker with a gay face, and again the fire roared jovially in the grate. "Because you're a good girl, I'm come to see you, and I shall come again and again to talk to you—and, I hope, do good to you. Much good."

"Thankee, sir," said Pansy, and she rose and bobbed a curtsy; then—in obedience to the steel wand—sank again upon her stool. "Do you indeed know me, sir? If you please"—and the poor little thing looked desolate as she spoke, and her voice moaned piteously—"if you please, sir"—and then the child, obeying the strong little heart within her, arose and fell upon her knees, then folding her hands together, said—"oh, if you please, sir, what am I, sir?"

"'Tis the question of all others I like you to ask," answered the stranger. "But you shall hear all in good time. At present you must hear a little about me: but take your seat again, and don't interrupt me. When I tell you that for more than a thousand years I have been a visiter at all sorts of firesides, you must be certain that I know a great deal. A thousand years! Why, Pansy, I remember when that piece of coal was a bit of a green tree, and had leaves upon it, and—but I am going too far into the night, for you as yet to follow me. All in good time. To talk about yourself, Pansy. I remember you a baby—a little, little baby."

"Do you indeed, sir?" cried Pansy, her tears, in spite of her, falling.

"I was seated in the matron's room—seated at the fire-side as I may be now—when they brought you in. 'Twas a cold, raw summer, and in the matron's room coals still crackled. You were, I should think, some six weeks old; a little doll of a mortal, and—as the matron said—with a look of the mother's grief upon you. Well, you had been trusted to the world in a rush-basket; with just enough about you to keep you warm; no further stock; no paper, no writing; nothing—I remember how the matron stared when she took 'em out—nothing in the basket but a bunch of half-dead heart's-ease. Whereupon, the matron said, if no better name came up, you should be called Pansy, and—and so it seems, you are;" and the little man paused, and looked thoughtfully, tenderly, at the little orphan, alone in the world,—alone to make her daily bread. "Well, Pansy, that's thirteen years ago."

"Yes, sir; they say I'm thirteen, sir," said Pansy.

"And out at service? Drudge at a lodging-house? Thumped and bumped, and bowled about—and made to keep watch, and listen for the midnight knocker. But then, Pansy, so it is with the poor children of the Saints."

"The Saints, sir," said Pansy, "who are they?"

"Why, there's your father—I mean your parish father Saint Martin, he's one of 'em. Then there's Saint Clement and Saint James, and Saint Botolph, and Saint Mary, and Saint Margaret, and Saint Catherine, and Saint Dunstan—and a hundred more—what families they have! What a crowd of boys and girls—poor little souls!

—put out here, put out there—lent on hire—made the best and the worst of. It can't be helped, I suppose. Nevertheless, much as I've seen of the world, I do feel more and more for what I call the children of the Saints. Now, suppose your father"—

Pansy looked startled.

"I say your parish father, father Saint Martin, was some day to come here, and inquire how they treated his child. Do you think father Saint Martin would be satisfied? Well, then, Pansy, as you don't seem quite to understand me—are you satisfied? Are you happy here?"

"They do sometimes stay out very late, sir," said Pansy; "but I'm used to being tired: besides, when it isn't very cold, and they leave me a little coals, I can sleep. I don't know what they'd say if they saw such a fire; and I'm sure I didn't make it."

"No, Pansy; I'll bear you witness there; but you shall have as good a fire every night you sit up, and the coals in the cellar never waste for it. What can I bring you when I come to-morrow? What most do you wish?"

"Then, sir, if I may say—I should like a big, big book; and—and"—

"And what next, Pansy?"

"And to be able to read it—that is, to read it as ladies and gentlemen read, without stopping."

"And why, little one, do you want to read?"

"Because—because"—said Pansy—"it seems to me that a book would tell me what I am, and—oh! I should so like to know."

"It's the best secret to come at, my child," said the little man, his eyes softening; "and, well as I may, I'll help you in the difficulty."

Here the street-door knocker muttered, as though stealthily.

"That's the gentleman in the second floor back," said Pansy, taking the candlestick, and looking affectionately, anxiously, at her visiter.

"I know it," said the little man. "Good night, God's blessing, like his air, surround you!"

"Oh, you'll come again," cried Pansy, with a gush of tears.

"To-morrow," cried Hob—for Hob was his name—the Fireside Fairy.

#### TO A FRIEND ON HER BIRTHDAY.

THE thoughts, the names, that to the Heart lie nearest,  
Dwell ever *there*, and find no voice in song;  
It broods above the wealth it holds the dearest  
In joy, whose fulness words could only wrong.

Yet its deep blessings, fervent and unspoken,  
Are not enough to consecrate *the day*  
That gave Thee unto me! Some gentle token  
Must mark it ere it pass upon its way;

And be a sign whereon thine eye may linger  
In after days, and find it pointing yet  
Upon Life's dial, with a silent finger—  
To memories too tender for regret!

For there, as Thought its backward course retraces,  
The shadow more than *ten degrees* removed,  
Falls now on sunny, now on shady places  
Yet meets no hour when *Thou* wert not beloved!

We will not chide with Time, dear friend, nor waken  
A sigh for hopes that with him harshly fared;  
All, all the years upon their wings have taken,  
But dearer, sweeter, makes what they have spared.

Unto the chain that long hath firmly bound us,  
They add some link yet brighter than the last;  
They leave us ever richer than they found us,  
To reckon o'er the *treasure of the Past!*

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DORA GREENWELL