

JOHANNA SPYRI

# Veronica

AND OTHER FRIENDS





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## CHAPTER I.

### A VISIT TO THE DOCTOR.

It was early in the month of March. The dark blue vault of heaven lay over mountain and valley, swept free from clouds by the keen northern blast as it blew across the hills, swaying the big trees hither and thither as if they were bulrushes, and now and then tearing off huge branches which fell crashing to the ground. Other and sadder victims were sacrificed to this fierce north wind. Human beings as well as inanimate objects fell before him. He struck down with his mighty arm, not only the old and feeble, but the young and strong; just as he swept away the clouds, hurrying them across the skies, beyond the horizon line, away out of sight. Sometimes in one day, a cruel malady would seize one occupant out of each one of the three or four little villages clustered on the hillside. A sharp pain attacked the lungs, and after a brief illness the resistless disease bore away the sufferer to the silent grave.

At the very moment of which we write, a group of black-clad mourners were standing near one of the pleasantest houses in the isolated village of Tannenegg, waiting for the sound of the church bell, as the signal to lift the covered bier on which was stretched the body of a young woman, the last victim to the north wind's cruel stroke, and to bear her to her final resting place. In the quiet room within, two children were seated on a bench, which ran along the wall. They formed a striking contrast to each other. The girl, a little black-eyed frowning thing, dressed in some mourning stuff, followed with fierce looks the rapid movements of a woman who, standing before an open cup-board, was moving its contents over and about, as if in search of something that did not come to hand. The boy was also watching her, but his dancing blue eyes had in them a merry look of pleased expectation.

"I want to go out, Cousin Judith," said the girl, and her tones were half angry, half anxious, "Where can my mother be?"

"Be still, be still," said the woman, still tumbling the contents of the cup-board about nervously. "I shall find something pretty for

you presently; then you must sit down quietly and play with it, and not go outside, not one step, do you hear? Pshaw! there is nothing but rubbish here!"

"Well, then give us the rose," said the little girl, still scowling.

The woman looked about the room.

"There are no roses here," she said. "How should there be, in March?" she added, half vexed at having looked for them. "There," said the child, pointing towards a book that the woman had but a moment before replaced in the cup-board.

"Ah! now I know what you mean. So your mother always kept the rose, the "Fortune rose?" I often envied her when she used to show it to us in her hymn-book;" and as she spoke, she turned the leaves of the old hymnal, until she found the rose and handed it to the child.

"Take it," she said, "be quiet, and do not get up from your seats till I come back;" and she hurried from the room.

The little girl took the prettily-painted rose, in her hand; it was an old acquaintance, her favorite Sunday plaything.

When her mother wanted to secure a quiet hour for herself on Sundays, she used to give her "Fortune rose" to her little Veronica, and it was sure to occupy the child for a long time in perfect contentment.

"Look, this is the way you must do," said the child, as she pulled with her fingers a small strip of paper that stood out from the side of the picture; suddenly before the astonished eyes of the boy the red full calix of the rose flew open, disclosing a glittering golden verse that lay in the centre of the flower. Then Veronica pushed the paper-strip back, and the rose folded its leaves and was a perfect flower again.

Quite dazzled by this wonderful magic the little boy stared with amazement at the rose, and then seized it to try for himself.

While the children were playing, Veronica's mother was being laid in her grave. After awhile Cousin Judith came back into the room. She was "cousin" to all Tannenegg, though related to no one. She came back to take the rose, and put it into the hook, which she replaced in the cup-board. "Sit still awhile longer, children;" she said, "and presently your mother will come for you. Be good and do not trouble her, for she has enough to bear already."

It was the little boy's mother she meant, and the children knew it. They knew also very well, that they must be good and not trouble



her, for they had seen her for two days going about the house with eyes red with weeping. Presently she entered the room, and took the children one by each hand, and went to the door with them. She seemed to be struggling with sad and heavy thoughts. She usually spoke cheerily to the children, but now she was silent, and every now and then she furtively wiped away a tear.

"Where are we going, mother?" asked the boy.

"We must go to the doctor's, Dietrich," she answered, "your father is very ill." And she led them along the foot path toward the little town, where the white houses shone in the sunlight. Fohrensee was a new place, that had sprung up as if in one night from the soil, and now stood there a great white spot against the dark hillside. Not long before, it had been only a little cluster of houses standing in a protected spot on the side of the hill, not very far below Tannenegg. It was so situated that the biting north wind, which blew so sharply over the exposed houses of Tannenegg, did not reach the nook where little Fohrensee lay bathed in the full light of the sun. But the little place was high enough to be visited by all the cooling breezes, and was healthy, pure and fresh, to a remarkable degree. When, not long before this time, an enterprising inn-keeper discovered its health-giving qualities, and built an inn there, guests filled it so rapidly that he soon put up another. Soon, one after another, little inns sprang up, as from the ground, and then a crowd of trades-people came up from the valley, and settled around, for the number of guests constantly increased, and the strangers found the spot so favorable to health, that it became a favorite winter resort. And thus the obscure little Fohrensee became, in a few years, a large and flourishing town, stretching out in every direction.

Gertrude, however, walking sturdily along with the children, was not going as far as Fohrensee, with its shining white houses. She turned off into a foot path that led to several scattered dwellings up on the hillside, and soon reached an open space, on which stood a handsome house, with large stables near by. Out from the stable, a hostler had just led a spirited horse, which he began to harness into a light wagon. Instantly the little boy freed his hand from his mother's, planted himself before the horse, and could not be induced to move.

"Stay there then, if you want to," said his mother, "we will go on to the house; but you must take care not to go too near the horse."

The doctor was just hurrying out from his office; he must have

had a long distance to go, for he was starting off before the usual time for office hours was over. Gertrude apologized, and begged the doctor to excuse her for not having come earlier to see him; she had been very busy with her invalid, and could not get away before. "Never mind; as you have come, I will wait a few minutes," said the physician, briefly; "Come in; how is your husband?"

Gertrude went into the room, and told the doctor about her sick husband. It was Steffan, a strong, young man, on whom the mountain sickness had seized with unusual violence. The doctor silently shook his head. He took a small mortar that stood on the office table, and shook into it some stuff which he ground with the marble pestle. His eyes fell on the child who stood by Gertrude's side, gazing earnestly at the doctor's occupation. The little creature had something unusual about her, and attracted attention at once. Under her thick black hair and heavy brows, her big eyes looked forth with a solemn gaze, as if everything she saw gave her food for thought.

"He had no one but himself to blame for it, I fancy," said the doctor, as he filled some small square papers with his powders.

"No, no! he was not the least of a brawler; he was a quiet industrious fellow. They had rented some of our rooms, and lived there peaceably and happily for three whole years, and never was an unkind word exchanged between them. But he was a stranger in these parts; he was never called anything but the Bergamasker, and the other fellows could never forgive him for having won the prettiest and most courted girl in the whole village. They never ceased to tease and irritate him, and on this especial evening at the Rehbock they must have been unusually offensive. Apparently they were all somewhat excited, for they could afterwards give no clear account of the affair, but the end was that the Bergamasker came home fatally wounded, and died the next day. Everything has been different among us since the Rehbock was built. Our village used to be quiet and orderly; every one was contented to work all the week and rest on Sunday. Nobody ever heard of such a thing as noisy drinking and rowdyism. But I have another errand with you now, doctor. Lene charged me on her death bed to attend to it. She did not leave any money, but she had an excellent outfit. She bade me sell her bedstead and her bureau, and bring you the proceeds, to settle what she owed you. She was very anxious that I should see to it, for she felt that you had done a great deal for her; and she spoke

of how often you had climbed the hill both by day and night, to visit her. So, please give me the bill, doctor, so that I may settle it at once, as I promised her."

"What relatives has the child?" asked the doctor shortly.

"She has none at all in these parts," replied Gertrude. "She has been with me all through her mother's illness, and now she is mine. Her mother's family are all gone. She might perhaps be sent to her father's parish in Bergamaskische, but I shall not do that; she belongs now to us."

"I would not go there," said the child firmly in a low tone, clinging to Gertrude's dress with both hands.

The doctor opened a big book, tore out a leaf, and drew his pen twice across the closely written page.

"There," he said, handing the cancelled sheet to Gertrude, "that is all the bill I shall give you."

"Oh, doctor, may God reward you," said Gertrude. "Go, child, and thank the doctor, for you owe him a great deal."

The child obeyed after her own fashion. She planted herself before the big man, looked steadily at him with her great black eyes and said somewhat hoarsely,

"Thank you." It sounded more like a command than anything else.

The doctor laughed.

"She is rather alarming," he said, "she is evidently not accustomed to say anything she does not really mean. I like that. But come, I must be off," and handing the medicine to Gertrude he left the room quickly so as to avoid her repeated thanks.

The little boy was standing where his mother had left him, still staring at the restless horse. The doctor looked kindly at the little fellow.

"Would you like to take care of a horse?" he asked, as he got into his wagon.

"No, I should like to drive one of my own," replied the child without hesitation.

"Well, you are quite right there: stick to that, my boy," said the doctor, and drove away.

As Gertrude, holding a child by each hand, climbed the hillside, the boy said gaily,

"Say, mother, I can have one, can't I?"

"Do you mean to be a gentleman like the doctor, and own a