

Our Winnie
and
**The Little Match-
Girl**

BY
EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN

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**OUR WINNIE,
OR
“WHEN THE SWALLOWS GO.”**

CHAPTER I.

WATCHING THE SWALLOWS.

INIFRED sat by the nursery window, upon the wide cushioned seat, leaning her little pale face against the glass and gazing with big blue eyes towards the rosy sky, where the sun was setting in a blaze of golden glory.

It was a pretty view the great oriel window commanded—garden and shrubbery just below, and beyond the close laurel hedge, low-lying pasture lands dotted with pine trees, and a large piece of water, which lay shining like molten gold in the glow of sunset radiance.

The swallows were enjoying the beauty of the evening as much as living things could do. They were darting this way and that in the bright, soft sunshine; now flying high, now low, and ever seeming drawn by irresistible attraction towards the shining surface of the water, which lay smiling and placid, without even a ripple to break its glassy smoothness.

Winifred was very much interested in the swallows. In the springtime she had watched them with the utmost absorption as they built their nests and hatched their chattering broods amid the many eaves and jutting lead-pipes of the old-fashioned manor-house in which she lived.

When the summer came, and the young birds had left the nests, she still fancied she knew "her swallows" from all the rest, and was always interested in their movements; fond of foretelling

the weather according as to whether they flew high or low, and making stories about them and their cleverness which would rather have astonished an ornithologist.

And now that autumn was drawing on, the child watched them with an increasing sense of fascination, for she knew that it would not be very long before she lost her friends and playmates (for in her eyes they were friends and playmates), who would fly far, far away from England with the first approach of winter.

“I wonder why they want to go?” the child sometimes said. “I shall so miss them. I wish they would stay here always.”

Winifred was nine years old, but she was so small and thin that she hardly seemed so much; and yet her little face, with its large, thoughtful eyes, and grave, serious lips, looked almost older than a nine-year-old child’s should do.

She had been very, very ill last winter, so ill that nobody had thought she could get better; and even now, although the summer had brought a little strength to her limbs, and a little colour to her face, she was still very delicate, and her father and mother often looked anxiously into the deep eyes of their only little daughter, and wondered how long they would keep her with them, and if she would ever grow up strong and hearty like Charley and Ronald, her two big brothers.

Winifred did not know this; she only knew that she could not run about and play like other children, that she soon grew tired, and that it was much more pleasure to her to sit on the nursery window-seat and read a favourite story-book, or watch the

swallows, than it was to romp and race about the garden and fields as the boys so loved to do. The little girl was not discontented; she was very happy in her own way, and was fond of being quiet, and indulging in her own dreams and fancies. She saw no reason why she was to be pitied.

A door opened softly, and without turning her head to look, Winifred knew that her mother had come in.

Nobody but mamma had such a soft, gentle step; nobody else seemed to bring into the room that kind of brightness and sweetness which Winifred always felt accompanied her mother's presence. Sometimes the child would think to herself that it was like music and moonlight just to feel that mamma was near.

Mrs. Digby was a tall, graceful, sweet-faced mother—an ideal woman for a child's love and worship, so gentle, so firm, so loving and sympathising.

Winifred's little face smiled all over, a slow smile of satisfaction, although she never turned her head until her mother had seated herself in the great rocking-chair that stood beside the window. Then she left her seat and crept into her mother's arms, laying her head against that comfortable shoulder, and looking alternately out of the window and into her mother's face.

"What was my darling doing all alone? What was my little girl thinking of?"

"I was watching the swallows, mamma dear."

“You are fond of the swallows, Winnie.”

“Yes; so many of them are my swallows—and soon they will go away.”

“Yes, darling.”

“Mamma,” asked the child, with a serious, wistful look in her eyes, “how is it that the things we love best and care most for always seem to go away soonest?”

It seemed to Winifred that the warm, loving arms closed more tenderly and closely round her as the mother answered gently:

“Does it seem so to you, darling?”

“Yes, mamma. It was my favourite rose-tree that died last winter, and my favourite oak-tree that was blown down in the storm. Ronald lost his best puppy, and papa’s favourite horse went lame. I like all the birds very much, but the swallows much, much the best, and it is the swallows who go, and the robins and chaffinches that stay behind. I wonder why it is.”

“But the swallows come back again, darling,” said the mother, kissing her child’s broad brow. “I remember how sorry my little girl was when they had all gone last year; but here they are again, and it was such pleasure to watch them build that you told me it made up for the long time of waiting. It will be the same again this year, Winnie.”

“Will it, mamma? It seems as if it would be winter for such a long, long while. I cannot fancy that the spring will ever come again.”

Mrs. Digby made no reply, and by-and-by Winifred went on.

“And last year I was so disappointed, for I never said good-bye; I never saw them go. I had watched them gather, and gather, and gather, and I did so want to see them start, and I never did. Do you think they will gather here again this year, mamma?”

“I think it is very likely. They very often do.”

“If they do, I will be *sure* not to miss them; I do so want to see them go, and say good-bye.”

“What is it you are not going to miss, my little girl?” asked a kind, cheery voice from the other side of the room.

Winifred and her mother looked round, and saw that Dr. Howard had entered unobserved. He was never very many days without paying the child a visit, and she had grown fond of the old man, and was not afraid to talk to him freely.

He came and sat in her vacated seat—the wide window-ledge—and looked into her face, and took the thin little hand in his, and patted it in a friendly fashion.

“Well, Winnie, what is it you are so anxious not to miss? Do you want my leave to go to a children’s party, or to do something else bold and daring?”

“Oh no!” answered Winnie, smiling; “we were only talking about the swallows. We think they will gather here before they fly, as they did last year, and I do so want to see them go. Last year I missed them somehow.”

Dr. Howard smiled and shook his head.

"I never saw the swallows go yet, little maid, though I am an old man now; and what is more, I never knew anybody who had, either."

Winifred's eyes opened wide.

"Does nobody ever see them go? Somebody must. They do not turn into fairies and vanish away, do they?"

The old doctor smiled and answered in a fanciful way for a little while, until seeing the child was growing puzzled, he said at last:

"No, no, my little girl, it is nothing so strange after all; you need not open your big eyes, and look as if I were telling you mystic fables. The swallows always start in the night, that is all; and in the morning we wake up and find them gone, but we do not see them go."

"In the night?" echoes Winifred, with a cloud passing over her face. "Then sha'n't I be able to see them go this year, either?"

"I'm afraid not, little one."

"Oh I am *so* sorry!" said the child with a deep sigh; "so very, very sorry. I did so want to see them go."

"Dr. Howard," said her mother's voice in the pause that followed these words, "do you think this little bird had better follow the swallows and the sunshine, and leave the cold and the rain behind? Sometimes I fancy we ought to run after the swallows and catch them up where they have caught the summer. What do you think?"

“I think,” answered the kind old man with a look in his eye which the child did not understand, “that this little bird is best in its own warm nest, under its mother’s wing. It does not suit all little birds to fly away.”

And then the doctor rose, and Mrs. Digby too; and Winifred was left alone to rock herself in the vacated chair and think about the swallows.

She was lying in her little bed that night, cosy and warm, when she became vaguely conscious that her father and mother had come in, and were talking together softly, and as it seemed, sadly. Unless it was a dream (and Winifred did not feel quite sure which it was), papa had his arm round mamma, and seemed to be comforting her. She almost looked as if she had been crying, and her voice shook when she said:

“There is nothing that we can do. It is God who gives, and God who takes away, but it is very, very hard to lose her. You must help me, Ronald, sometimes I fear my faith will give way.”

“God will give His strength with the trial if He sends it. Perhaps in His mercy He will spare it us.”

“Yes, we may still hope and pray; but I must struggle for resignation to His Holy Will. I fear—I fear—”

“I know what you fear, my sweet wife. Did Dr. Howard hold out no hope?”

“He would not—or could not—say anything definite; but he thought—he thought our darling would not be long after the swallows.”

There was a deep sob, and the sound of tender caresses, then came Mr. Digby's voice.

"Our precious little daughter. It is hard to spare her; but think, dearest, to what a happy place she is going."

"I know—I know. I try not to be selfish. It is her gain, her happiness. Oh yes, I know what a happy, happy thing it is for children to be taken in all their innocence. But oh, I shall miss her so sorely."

"I know, I know. But we believe that trials are sent us in love and not in anger; and we must think of our Winifred's gain and not of our loss."

Some soft kisses and warm tears were dropped upon the child's sleepy face. She had moved, and the voices ceased, but both parents were bending over her little bed. She opened her eyes drowsily, smiled and kissed them, and then she sank off to sleep again holding her mother's hand in hers.

CHAPTER II. WINIFRED'S TROUBLE.

WINIFRED awoke early the following morning, to find the sunshine playing over the window-blind and the swallows twittering in the eaves.

She fancied that something unusual had happened in the night; but she could not, all in a moment, recollect what it was.

Gradually some of the sense of what had passed between her parents in her night-nursery came back to her as she lay in bed puzzling things over, and she began to talk softly to herself as she had a way of doing.

“I think they said I was going away somewhere, to some nice place where I should be very happy. I can't quite remember, and I thought Dr. Howard meant I was to stay at home; but I don't always understand what people mean. I'm almost sure papa and mamma said I was to go—I suppose it's to some nice place where little children get strong and well again. I should like to be able to run about again and play with the boys. I should like to do what other children can.”

But a little more thinking brought other considerations.

“Mamma was sorry—I think she cried. I'm afraid she isn't coming with me, because she talked about losing me. I suppose nurse will take me—that will be next best; and mamma could not be spared. Papa wants her and the boys, and there are the servants and the house. Oh no, they could not possibly spare

her. I must try to be brave, and not to cry and make her more sorry. I won't seem to mind leaving her, if I can help it, though it will be very, very hard; and I will try to get better as fast as ever I can, so as to come back soon strong and well as Charley did when he had measles, and nurse took him to the seaside.

"I wonder where I am going—a good way off, I think, because I don't think mamma would have cried if it had been only a little way or for a little while. Perhaps I am going where the swallows go—perhaps I shall see them again. I should like to do that. I think I am going when they go—I will try to get well to come back when they come. That would be very nice, for I think they would miss me when they began to build their nests; and I don't think I *could* do without mamma longer than that—Oh no, I must come back when the swallows come."

Winifred was smiling now; but by-and-by her face grew grave.

"I wonder if people will miss me when I am gone. I wonder if they will be sorry. Mamma will, I know, but is there any one else? I should like to think some of them would miss me and want me to come back; but—but—I'm not sure that they would!" and here the child's face grew rather red.

Children all have their faults, and Winifred was no exception to this rule. Perhaps there were excuses to be made for this little girl, because her bad health had made it needful for her to be very quiet and rather idle, and because, with all her faults, she was always gentle and docile; but at the same time Winifred was selfish, and she was more idle than she need have been; and when she began to think whether people would miss her,

she could not help remembering many little things which she did not quite like to think about.

Charley and Ronald were very fond of their little sister, and would have liked to spend a good deal of their spare time in the nursery, which they had once shared all together; but since Winnie's illness the nursery had been given up entirely to her service, and she had not failed to assert her right as mistress of her domain.

It was often quite true that the noise the boys made at play tried her head and made it ache; but there were other days when she could have borne the noise quite well, only she did not care to let the boys in because she felt more inclined to be quiet. Then she never tried to do any little services for them, or for any one else, thinking nobody could expect it of her when she had so little strength.

Winifred was a gentle, loveable child, in spite of her tendency to selfishness, and everybody seemed fond of her. Indeed, it was not every one who knew what her chief faults were. Charley and Ronald never thought for a moment that she was selfish, and would have been indignant if any one had called her so; but at the same time they knew it was no good ever asking Winifred to do anything for them.

Perhaps Mrs. Digby and nurse knew best where the gentle child's weakness lay; but it had not been very easy in her present state of health and spirits to make her see her own faults in the proper light.

But as Winifred lay in bed thinking, it dawned upon her slowly that her going away would make very little difference to anybody in the world—that only mamma would miss her, and that only because mamma was mamma, not for anything her child had ever done for her.

A resolution came into Winifred's mind.

"I will be different," she said. "I will do something before I go to show them I am fond of them, and then perhaps they will miss me more. I should like to do something for a good many people. There are the boys, and the servants—and—and—Oh, I must think about it. I have a good deal of money: I will see what I can do."

Winnie turned over this idea very many times in her head, as she lay waiting for nurse to dress her. She rose late, and breakfast was not over till nearly half-past ten.

"There doesn't seem any time left to think this morning," said Winnie, after she had taken a little walk in the garden with her mamma. "I feel tired now, I will watch the swallows a little, and think after dinner."

Presently nurse came in.

"Miss Winifred, dear," she said, "Mary wants to clean out the young gentlemen's play-room to-day; but it's their half-holiday, and she doesn't like to begin unless they can come here when they come home. You look pretty well to-day, I think. You won't mind letting them into the nursery?"

“Oh, not to-day, nurse, I couldn’t do with them to-day,” answered Winnie, looking distressed. “Indeed I would if I could, but I have so much to think about to-day. I can’t think when they are here—and it’s about them too. It can’t make any difference to Mary what day she cleans the room. Please tell her I’m very sorry, but I really can’t to-day. I don’t think she can mind.”

Winifred’s pale little face looked pleading and earnest. Nurse said no more to urge her.

“Very well, dear, we will arrange something somehow. Mary does not want to put you out. Have you anything you want to do to-day?”

“I have a great deal to think about.”

“Do you think with your fingers?”

Winifred smiled.

“No, of course not, nurse. What do you mean?”

“Well, I was wondering if you could not do something with your fingers, whilst you were doing all this thinking.”

Winifred was not fond of employing her idle fingers, and her face was not very responsive as she asked rather slowly:

“What do you mean, nurse? I have not anything special to do.”

“No, Miss Winnie; but I think there is something somebody would be very much delighted if you did do,” and nurse nodded her head mysteriously.

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