

# LITTLE FRANCIS

by Harriet Prescott Spofford

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MRS. FANSHAW'S marriage had been one of those made in haste and repented at leisure. Great wealth and its inducements had developed the worst side of Mr. Fanshawe's nature, and he had died largely of his excesses before his child was born. After the shock of it Mrs. Fanshawe felt that she had almost been born again into a world of delightful freedom and power, with no more disturbance, no more disgust, no more alarm, and with a fortune to spend as she pleased. What her little son's fortune would be, after its long years of accumulation, passed the dreams of avarice, as Dr. Johnson once wrote of the potentialities of the brewery. At first she felt that she never could love the child that was his; and then the helplessness of the baby, the charm and delight of him so grew and warmed her heart that she was in danger of apotheosizing her departed husband, since his child could not be so altogether lovely and he so altogether wrong. Only in danger, however, for there were times and seasons when memory rose stanch and faithful and showed her Mr. Fanshawe as he was.

But indeed little Francis was altogether lovely; his voice was music, his smile was sunshine; every morning on waking he seemed to have come straight from heaven. And anyway, with her freedom, her wealth, and with little Francis, it was heaven here, she used to say. Not quite heaven, though, for she lived in constant fear of something happening to her darling. If he sneezed, if he shivered, if he had a pin-prick, she was in a panic, and the intensity of her embraces at times made little Francis quite uncomfortable.

And then, to be sure, there was Elizabeth, always a vexation, another crumpled rose-leaf in her bed. For Elizabeth was a child that Mr. Fanshawe had adopted, but without troubling himself to take out legal papers. It had been supposed that he would make her his heir; but, then, like Bonaparte, he did not know he would live till he was married; and he died without making any provision for Elizabeth. Some people who were distant relatives of her mother, acting in her behalf, pressed Elizabeth's claims upon Mrs. Fanshawe in so unbecomingly and threatening a manner that Mrs. Fanshawe refused to listen to them. Give that girl any portion of little Francis's property? Take her into the family? What if she had no other home? The people who were so busy in her behalf could give her one! What if she did need care and affection? She must find them where she had a right to look for them! It was none of Mrs. Fanshawe's affairs, Clement very surely thought Mrs. Fanshawe ought to take the young girl into her family; Mrs. Fanshawe very surely thought that she would do nothing of the kind. And it was no affair of Clement's, either. She knew nothing of this Elizabeth; appearances certainly were against her, and Francis was too perfect a being for any risk to him through the companionship of a totally unknown person. Why let her remain unknown? What business? Why not let her remain unknown? The poor people Francis had to love—was Clement saying?—the better for him. Francis had his mother to love, his old black mammy, Clement himself, Clement being his guardian; and he would have to get along with them. For her part, she would never divide her little angel's affections with any others.

If ever a child looked like an angel it was this little Francis, with the blue of his eyes, the gold of his pretty locks, the exquisite delicacy of his rose-petal skin, the charm of his loveliness, of all his dear ways and manner. It was a little singular, in view of Mrs. Fanshawe's persistent refusal to marry him, that the affection of Elizabeth, Clement—who was an old friend of Mrs. Fanshawe's, and the guardian of the boy—somehow got to Francis a trifle dearer still. For some of his angelhood, there were times when little Francis was quite human. The exhibition of a fine streak of temper would have alarmed his mother, but she had seen him so severely punished himself with several heavy blows of his tiny fists upon his own head, while he exclaimed, "Naughty Francis, naughty Francis!" or else toddle off to the corner of the room and hide his face there against the wall until he felt sufficiently punished, or occasionally show a lively recollection of one of his mammy's rhymes:

"Before your naughty voice is heard  
In angry answer, child, or when  
You want to say an unkind word,

And Francis's way of counting, "one, two, five, seven, twenty," was probably quite as effective as the other ways.

"There's some little boys," he said, when brought in from his walk one day, "who have fathers. Why don't Francis have a father?" It was somewhat difficult to tell him that his father had gone to heaven, because Mrs. Fanshawe had quite a strong notion that he had gone in a very different direction. "You have Uncle Clement," she said, before she thought.

"But there's no auntie to him," Francis urged. "Is Clement his father? Does he go to heaven when he goes away from here?"

"Far from it!" cried Clement.

"I would like to have Clement for my father," continued Francis. And when Clement indignantly assured him that he would gladly become his father any day his mother wished, he was perpetually beseeching his mother to wish.

As for Clement, he had been in love with Fanny Fanshawe ever since the day he first saw her in her black bonnet; when he thought she looked too much like a breathing beauty to be allowed to remain such a suffering saint as she appeared. But Fanny Fanshawe had been too completely wrapped in her little son to give Clement a second thought as a lover. Why in the world should she marry the best man alive, having escaped from such a cruel bondage, as she had? She had thought Mr. Fanshawe had not his peer when she married him, and till she discovered his cruel tyranny, Clement was all well enough just now; but married, who could say? And anyway, while she had little Francis's dear arms about her, and his kiss at her shoulder, his sweet kisses for her own, she wanted no further affection.

Perhaps there was no time in his waking when Francis seemed so sweet and dear as when, arrayed in his little white nightgown, he knelt at his mother's knee for his bed-time prayer, his great blue eyes lifted and rapturous as if he saw the heavenly choir. He understood very well that he came from heaven, and had a Heavenly Father there; he somewhat con-

fused the Lord with his Fanshawe father, and he felt that he loved that father very much; but these esoteric emotions never hindered his closing his dear petition with the words, "And please make Clement my father, too. Amen." And as most of his wishes were granted as soon as expressed, little Francis was a firm believer in prayer; he spoke with assurance of the time when Clement would be his father, since, with him, it was to ask and to have, and he made his little ascriptions of prayer and praise twenty times a day. "Did you ever know a child so devoted?" his mother would ask with tears in her eyes—those eyes that looked, when suffused, like bright sapphires. "Oh, he is so perfect, Clement, that I am afraid he can't be long here. Oh, what should I do? What should I do?"

"What would any of us do?" Clement answered.

"You do love him, don't you, Clement?"

"I should love him better if his mother were my wife," said Clement.

"What makes you so silly?" she cried.

They were standing before one of the long mirrors, as it chanced, and he caught her hand and turned her about, facing it. "That makes me," he said, as they looked at the rosy, golden-haired woman all blushes and smiles and dimples at the moment.

You really ought to be ashamed to trouble me so," she said. "We are very well as we are." And probably if she had looked the way her words sounded, he

would have gone and troubled her no more.

"No, no. I am afraid of change. There is the inevitable change of Francis growing older."

"And needing a father to look out for him."

"His guardian can do that," she cried triumphantly. "It is his duty."

But one day Francis peered outside the garden gate—it was alluring there. Very presently he ran away. His lip trembled, and his great blue eyes melted when his mother caught him by the ankle and trouble; but by and by outdoors again was tempting enough to triumph over virtue, and Francis ran away again.

It was one of these escapades that Clement came across a little barefoot urchin, hatless and coatless, and he took him by his yellow curls as Pallas did Achilles, bending his face back, and then caught him up in his arms. "I didn't run away, Clement," he exclaimed. "I walked, and the little boy didn't shoot, and no coat, and he hadn't no hat, and so I gave him mine, you know."

"I know," said Clement. "And I know, too, that if you had caught your death, without your coat, your mother would have caught her. You'll break her heart yet, young man."

"Will it hurt her? Will she cry?"

"If your mother went away from you and never came back, would that hurt you?"

"Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" sighed Francis, catching his breath.

"Then if you go away from her and never come back, would it hurt you, do you think?"

That night in his prayer little Francis thought the heavenly powers to keep him from running away and breaking his mother's heart; and he was so entirely sweet and trusting that his mother couldn't help catching and kissing him in the midst of it.

"Buddy Scott has a sister," Francis announced one day on coming in from his walk. "Can't I have a sister?"

"There is Elizabeth," said Clement under his breath. "Fanny, why not let me bring Elizabeth here for a call? She is a nice child. She is really a nice child. She would

love Francis very much. And he will need all the love he can have as the years go."

"How perfectly preposterous, Clement!"

"Well, the love of an elder sister isn't a half bad thing to have."

"As if I couldn't supply all that myself!" she said.

"Are you eleven years old as Elizabeth is?"

Can you be full of gratitude to the boy for the blessing of a home and comfort undreamed of, as she would be?

"It's no sort of use your going on this way. I won't listen. I don't want to remember that there is such a person as Elizabeth. And I won't take her into my family, and that settles it!"

"The only fault you have, Fanny, is your feeling about Elizabeth; your hostility to her because her second cousin troubled you so with what they thought her rights—your inhumanity to that homeless child, who has to spend even her vacations either at a boarding school or with these underbred, coarse relatives."

"Oh, I don't pose for all the virtues."

"I can't understand your position."

"Don't try," twisting one of Francis's curls around her finger and humming a

tom, and then the yard, the street, the areas adjoining, with calls and cries and adjurations. It was remembered that Francis had been known to walk in his sleep—he might have done so now. But search and outcry were quite in vain.

There was no more sleep for any one that night; the nurse had all that was coming to her in the nap she took while little Francis was being stolen. "Oh, my darling, my darling boy!" Mrs. Fanshawe cried again and again. "Where are you! I know you are in a fever of fear! Oh, I hope they will be kind to him—they can't help being kind to him, can they, Clement? And he so lovely! But, oh! I don't know—if they were such fiends as to steal him from his mother, they may be fiends enough to abuse him. Oh, Clement, I shall go mad! I shall go mad!"

Before the morning following that terrible night, Clement had secured detectives, and he himself foresook all business and devoted every instant to the search for Francis. "I will not leave a stone unturned," he said.

"And he loved you, Clement. Oh, he loved every one! His little loving heart—

him—"

"But when—oh, when! It is breaking my heart to think what may be happening to him this minute!" hiding her face in the hands she had wrung till they ached.

ward those who stole your boy, what reward am I to have who bring him back to you?"

"Oh, anything, everything, Clement. Only bring him! I am in torment!"

"If I could comfort you, dear—"

"There isn't any comfort," she said, dashing away her tears with both her trembling hands. "Oh, why can't I know if he is well or not?"

"You may be sure those that have been holding him for a big sum of money are not letting any harm come to him."

"Oh, how can you tell?"

"Because I know who they are. Some distant kinsfolk of Elizabeth live in town."

"Oh, Elizabeth! Am I never to hear the last of her?"

"I have been paying Elizabeth's way myself in her boarding school; and, going the other day to settle a bill, she happened to remark that she wouldn't be an expense to me much longer, for she had heard her mother's cousin saying that she was soon to have her rights in a big fortune. Are you listening, Fanny?"

"Oh, what do I care for Elizabeth?" she exclaimed as if her thoughts were far away.

"You will care a great deal about her presently. Well, you know the detectives thought the wretches had taken Francis out of town, but that I was not so sure of it. What she said set me thinking. I asked her before long if she had ever seen little Francis on his walks, and she said she had, with an old colored woman, and she said further that there was a little boy visiting at her mother's cousin's house that looked rather like him. I expressed some proper surprise, and asked her to take the little boy out for a walk and bring him to Mrs. Fanshawe's and then we could see how much he really resembled Francis, furthermore telling her to do it very privately, as I wouldn't like her mother's cousin to know about it till afterward, and giving her money to take a car when they were around the corner, and later a cab. My word is law to Elizabeth; she thinks I am Premier John and the Grand Lama together. Fortunately, she had forgotten a lesson book at her mother's cousin's. That was yesterday. I haven't spoken of it before—except to say that I was very hopeful—for fear of the waiting being too much for you. But somehow—now—I am expecting—something—every moment!"

"Oh, Clement! how good you are. What should I do without you?"

"I don't like to contemplate such a possibility," said Clement.

"When Francis comes home—Oh, Clement, you shall have your way," she exclaimed, the tears that poured over her face, illuminated by the smile, the blush, the glance.

"And if he never comes?"

"Then I shall need you all the more!"

And just then came the sound of commotion in the hall, exclamations, outcries, laughter, and a wild cry from old mammy, and the heavy portieres parted, and a little girl stood there timidly looking from one to another, and Francis ran with a scream of joy to his mother, who screamed, too, and then straightway fainted.

But Mrs. Fanshawe's happiness was too extreme to let her stay long unconscious. All the love beating wildly on heart and nerve called her back to life and joy before Clement had time to get in any fine work of salts and cologne. "Oh! it is really true!" she said. "I am not dreaming!"

"I hope not," said Clement. "For you gave me to understand a short time ago, and in quite a shameless way, that you would marry me. And I can't consent to think that a dream."

"Then it is true. And my darling boy is safe, my own dear child, my treasure. He shall never go out of my sight, or of yours, Clement, as long as he lives." And then Mrs. Fanshawe pushed back the fallen and drenched hair and walked across the room.

"And this is Elizabeth?" she asked, embracing the bewildered little girl. "Elizabeth," she said, "would you like to come and live with me and Mr. Clement, and share everything with Francis whole I live and after I die? You have brought me back my little son, and now I have a little daughter, too. Can't you have their name changed to Clement, too? I don't think well prosecute any one; it might be embarrassing to Elizabeth, and—they took such good care of Francis."

"That," said Clement, "is something to consider. But I don't think I would give them a present."

"Try not to think of that, dear."

"Not to think of it? You might as well tell me not to breathe! Oh, I can't think of anything else! I can't eat, I can't sleep, for the horror of it!"

One morning Clement came in with a quicker step than usual. "Oh," cried Mrs. Fanshawe, "have you something to tell me? I shall die of this suspense!"

"And I would, too," said Clement. "If I had not heard from the kidnappers."

"The kidnappers? Then he is alive! He is alive!"

"Very much so. But he will not be returned except after the deposit of half your fortune."

"Oh, they may have the whole of it! The whole! If they only give me back Francis!"

"I think we will have Francis back without giving them any of it."

"Oh, but you can't mean to let money weigh in a case of life and death like this! Oh, Clement, promise them everything, give them everything! If it takes everything!" Her eyes were blazing, her cheeks burning, her hands shaking, her heart was bounding to suffocation. "I can take care of my own boy," she cried. "If it comes to that, I can take boarders—I—I—You can take care of me, Clement!"

"I have asked you to let me do that before."

"Oh, but Clement, it's no time for nonsense!"

"There's no nonsense about it, Fanny."

"But I tell you we are wasting time! Reply to those creatures—please—at once—that they may have all they ask—only give me back my boy. Don't look at me that way! If—if you loved me, you wouldn't want me kept in this suspense a day, an hour. Oh, if you don't get him for me while you can, I shall hate you!"

"If it isn't a time to talk of love, it isn't a time to talk of hate," said Clement. "You can't hate me if you try." And he loved her none the less in the ecstasy of misery and joy. "But since you are so eager to re-

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In the days that dragged their length along Clement and the detectives sought Francis through the slums and evil regions, and had broadsides posted along the streets offering great rewards. If perchance they thought they had a clue, presently it came to nothing. "Man plinks," said old mammy through her tears, "but God dis'plinks!" Mrs. Fanshawe herself, in a burning fever of eagerness, haunted the alleys where ragged children begged broken food at the back doors of rich houses. What if the kidnappers should make Francis do such work? Or what if he lay drowned at the end of some one of the wharves; what if he were to grow up and be like one of these terrible boys of the street? "Oh, what a little way separates us from them!" she cried. "A few dollars, more or less, and a child has the chance to be an angel, and another to be a fiend! Oh, it is the work of fiends to steal my child. But he never can become like those creatures, can he, Clement? It seems to me, oh, it seems to me, I could bear it better if I knew he were just dead! But alive and suffering without me—without you—oh, why do I live myself? Why don't I die and go where my baby has gone?"

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