

out over the twilit field, with its flitting groups of children, while his friend waited patiently enough.

Miss Carroll was standing up in the midst, straight and tall, and the children were skimming round her in long lines like flights of swallows, singing as they ran—

Ring around (they sang), Ring around,
How fast the tree grows!

'I was only thinking,' said Oliver in an undertone. 'You said just now that one shouldn't punish for consequences. But isn't that how folks *get* punished?'

'By whom?' asked Mr. Wilmot.

'Well—*God*! A man does a thing all in a minute, never thinking, and has to suffer for it all his life after.'

'If the consequences *are* the punishment how can it be helped?' answered the curate thoughtfully.

'But he didn't know what would come of it,' cried the young fellow, almost as if he were pleading for some one. 'And God knew, and didn't stop him.'

'Do you mean any individual case? It is sometimes easier to judge of special cases than to try to understand the seeming injustice of this world's ways as a whole.'

Again Oliver was silent, watching the children's play. A name and a story came very near his lips, but the habit of his whole life-time kept them sealed.

'*How fast the tree grows!*' sang the children. Their long lines were winding themselves up now into a tight knot. Somehow it seemed to Oliver, watching them, that if he did not speak before the last ring had twined itself in he could never speak at all. Why could he not speak out? He had told Mr. Wilmot many things—had been more confidential than most lads of his kind would have dreamed of being. Was he afraid of the answer he might receive?

He glanced round. The curate was not wondering at his silence; his attention had been called in another direction—somebody was beckoning to him.

'*The tree is down! the tree is down!*' shouted the children, jumping up and down, locked in a close embrace.

Then, with peals of laughter, the whole knot split up and streamed over the field, and Oliver's little cousins came running to him, petitioning for one more swing.

He drew a long breath as he let them lead him away. Was it relief? Was it regret? He could not have told. Anyway the moment had passed and he had not spoken. The thought that had been in his mind had not taken shape in words, and so could seem unreal still.

The feast was over, and the weary, happy children straggled homeward on their different ways. Oliver and his four little cousins had at least a mile-and-a-half to go, and he had made the distance an excuse for hurrying them off amongst the very first.

Silently he walked with them up the darkening road, hearing as in a dream their merry chatter of all the afternoon's doings, making so little response that presently the youngest girl, his pet, began to cry, complaining that 'Nolly' was cross, and made her walk too fast.

He paused at that, with some compunction, and took the little thing in his arms and carried her all the way home, but still could find nothing to say in answer to the children's confidences, for wondering what they might find when they got there.

Home was reached at last, the little brownish-grey farmhouse standing back from the winding, lonely road.

They crossed the little yard, and stepped in at the ever-open kitchen door; and then the children hesitated and drew back shyly, and Oliver made a step or two forward, feeling that what he had expected had come to pass, and had taken him by surprise after all.

The fire was burning brightly, filling the wide, low room with shifting lights and shadows. On one side of the fireplace Oliver's uncle was sitting, his hands on his knees, and his shrewd, weather-beaten face bent forward in an attentive attitude.

Opposite, lounging on the settle, with an air half-weary, half-restless, sat the tall dark man whom Oliver had last seen by the gate of the Rectory meadow. He was