

MORNING, NOON AND NIGHT.

The mountain that the morn doth kiss,
Glad greets its shining neighbor:
Lord! heed the homage of my bliss,—
The incense of my labor!

Sharp smiles the sun like burning rain,
And field and flower languish:
Hear, Lord! the prayer of my pain,—
The pleading of my anguish!

Now the long shadows eastward creep,
The golden sun is setting:
Take, Lord! the worship of my sleep,—
The praise of my forgetting!

SWIFT AS A FLASH.

BY MRS. C. READE.

CHAPTER VI.

"COMES OUT OF DARKNESS, MORN."

It is the morning of mornings, the picnic morning. Every one is on the alert. Chestnut-villa and Berrylands are alike the scene of dire commotion. Things will get lost, will insidiously get into people's pockets, into wrong hamper, out of window, up the chimney, into the fire. Corkscrews are a source of never-ending trouble; string has banished itself far beyond the reach of man; newspaper might be cloth of gold for the fuss that is made about it; soda-water bottles persist in rolling off every mortal thing that can be rolled off; and as for pepper, well, the enormities committed by pepper, by pepper alone, can they be described? Wherefore, steady pen!

At last, however, even the most turbulent spirits in the fray are quelled, and peace is proclaimed; proclaimed by Rae, standing on the top of the biggest hamper, in the most ecstatic periods producible by the British tongue.

Rae has made up his mind to be jolly for the next eight hours, let him be the most miserable of mankind for the remainder of his existence. It is a dubious thundery-skied sort of day in more ways than one; but Rae has made up his mind to be jolly, and jolly he is.

As for Grace, she is activity itself. Here, here, and everywhere; now helping Louie; now flying over to Chestnut-villa messenger-burdened to the tip of her tongue; now reducing Miss Isobel's minor miseries to a state of quiescence; now encouraging Mrs. Thorndyke to something like energy and determination, that lady being utterly incapable to battle against the combined antagonism of her dress, her servants, and her wool-gathering wits; but never by any chance saying a word to one person which she can possibly help saying, or giving him a look which she can possibly help giving, or indeed in any way encouraging him to make a greater donkey of himself than he already has done, in her humble opinion.

The general rendezvous is the station; so to the station they set off at last in excellent time; for, as Grace says rather unamiably, "Of course every one who can be late will be late, just on purpose to drive every one else frantic."

"We are, if anything, rather too early," remarks Isobel placidly, looking at her mite of a watch.

"But then you arn't everybody," smiles Grace with sublime composure; and Miss Thorndyke reverts to her old conviction that "raw school-girls" are decidedly out of place in decent society.

Arrived at the station, they find, however, that the Vicarage trio are already patrolling the platform; a circumstance which affords our Isobel much joy. She has made the acquaintance of the gentleman of the party, and considers him "quite bearable," and not unlikely to prove useful during the day as a scourge unto the recreant Rae, whose shortcomings have of late excited her lively indignation. There is a great deal of handshaking and weather talk, of course, directly the two parties meet. Some one says it is "really nicer than if it was sunshiny;" whereupon every one tries to look as if they thought so too, except Grace, who remarks dryly that, "nice or not, it must be made the best of now."

"Exactly," says Captain Tewell. "I quite agree with you. Haven't you observed how astiduously I am bent on making the best of it?" not without a certain bitterness.

Here the Boscauens make their appearance; they are a couple of good-looking people, with pleasant manners, and a fair allowance of "go." Rae comes to the conclusion that it is a happy thing they have been asked, after a few minutes' talk with madam, who appears not at all insensible to the fact that he is *très convenable, très convenable* indeed.

A little more of indefinite loitering about, and the porter rings the bell deafeningly. The train is within sight at last. Thank goodness! Grace is so weary of this dull do-nothingness which has fallen upon her, so weary of knowing that a pair of eyes are looking at her which she dares not meet, so weary of this holiday of hers, ere it has well begun. Poor Grace!

Growl, screech, pant, goes the engine. "First-class forward; third-class behind. This way, m; plenty of room here. Virginia Water; all right, sir. Thank you!" Bang, soufflé, bang, down go the windows. Two carriages full of friends and parcels and shawls and umbrellas. But who is with whom, I wonder, and where is Grace?

Grace is comfortably ensconced in a corner with Mrs. Boscauw opposite to her, and Mr.

Boscawen by her side; whilst Isobel and the vicarial scion are seated vis-à-vis by the opposite window.

Rae Tewell is playing escort to Louie, Mrs. Thorndyke, and the other young ladies. Grace wishes he would keep out of her way in this convenient fashion all day long.

There is plenty of chatter and laughter as they rush on between the broom-gilded banks. It does really seem so very enjoyable a proceeding to be about to swallow an extra amount of extra indigestible food under circumstances of extraordinary discomfort, garnished with rhododendrons and water-beetles.

Isobel and her Oxonian captive improve the shining hours with laudable earnestness. He is a good boy, and knows when he is well off. She is the prettiest girl to be seen to-day, he thinks, after a cautious survey of Grace, and she has evidently taken a fancy to him: what more can a young man of twenty-one desire? Whether Miss Thorndyke is quite so well at ease must remain an open question; I have my doubts.

When they reach the station the question arises how best to get all the portables conveyed to the hotel, in the grounds of which they are to have luncheon; at length they are packed off in a cab with Mrs. Thorndyke, and every one else prepares to trudge after them, Rae cunningly contriving to get himself attached to Grace and Mrs. Boscauw, which latter lady kindly allows him to carry all her light luggage by way of reward for his discernment.

"Isn't it perfectly charming?" exclaims she, throwing a very heavy plaid shawl over his disengaged arm; "I revel in ruralising when one can do it comfortably, you know."

Grace looks at Rae, and the corners of her mouth twitch dangerously. His bewildered and rueful countenance strikes her as so supremely ridiculous.

It is the first time she has smiled at him of her own free will to-day. He plucks up his spirits, and feels equal to an additional camp-stool or even a second waterproof.

Nobody, of course, has ever been to Virginia Water before; they have been to Rome, Constantinople, the North Pole, but they have never been to Virginia Water! Happy they.

"It is indeed very lovely!" exclaims Grace, when at last the manifold beauties of this most favored spot lie before her seeing eyes. "I never dreamt it would be half so exquisite," looking far away into the purplish distance.

"I don't believe I ever dreamt about it at all," says Isobel prosaically. "What's that queer little place sticking up there among the woods, Captain Tewell?"

Rae tries to see what she is pointing at, but fails.

"Do let us make a tour of discovery. One feels as if one really ought to discover something to-day," pathetically.

He smilingly agrees with her *ex parte*.

Grace walks away. She spies some jockey-grass trembling midst the green.

"Won't you explore?" asks Isobel, glancing up at him seductively from beneath her heavily-fringed parasol.

"Too lazy."

"How dreadful of you! I hope every one isn't going to be so tiresome," somewhat pettishly; the color deepening on either cheek.

"Here I am at your service, Miss Thorndyke. What can I do for you?" exclaims the Vicar's son, dawdling up, his hands in his pockets, his straw hat at the back of his head.

"Take me to see the ruins."

"Most charmed. We shall just have time to do them before the grand event of the day comes off."

But Isobel's eyes follow Rae,—he is slowly strolling up to where Grace is seated plaiting ox-eyed daisies into a wreath,—follow him regretfully; then she walks away with her cavalier, laughing her pretty silvery laugh as she goes, as freely as though she were the very happiest woman under the sun.

"Awfully hot," says Captain Tewell, lowering himself gradually on to the grass beside Grace.

"Yes!" pinching off a long green stalk.

"Don't see the use of walking oneself off one's legs, do you?"

"No."

"Much jollier sitting down and taking things quietly."

"Yes;" pulling up a neighboring daisy by the roots.

"I think I've got a knife somewhere; let me cut that off for you. You'll make your hands in a mess;" fumbling in his waistcoat pocket.

"Don't trouble, thanks, it's done;" with a vigorous wrench.

"But it's not. Don't be so obstinate; give it to me."

She flings it away. "It's a stupid thing," she says, "I can do without it;" and her white fingers set to work again deftly.

Captain Tewell reprockets his knife; as he does so, a queer hard look comes into his eyes, and the lines about his mouth deepen.

Silence for a while. Grace finishes her plait, and lays it across her knees.

"What are you going to do with it now?" asks he, watching her as she resettles this flower and corrects that errant leaf.

"Throw it away most likely."

"But isn't that rather hard on the poor daisies?"

"They have served their turn," smiles this cynic of nineteen.

"Good heavens, what a state of things to have come to!" almost scornfully.

"What, for the poor daisies or me?" and a mocking little laugh.

He is silent. She tries to get up; the grass is slippery, and she is fain to sit down again.

"Why don't you help me?" asks she, with comical savagery.

"Because I don't want you to go away;" lazily turning round on his elbow, and smiling at her rarely. "You are in a naughty temper this morning, and a little wholesome opposition will do you good."

"Thank you. I don't want to be done good to," sulkily.

"Naughty children never do."

Grace begins to doubt whether she has ever really been in a passion before. A second effort to resume her liberty—a fruitless effort like the first; her heels slide away from her, and down she sits again.

"Fate is too strong for you," laughs he.

She folds her arms grimly.

"Poor little thing!"

"Don't speak to me, please;" knitting her brows with ferocity.

Rae laughs.

"What is there to laugh at? How dare you laugh at me, Captain Tewell!"

"Don't be a vixen; it doesn't suit you."

"Sitting here doesn't suit me," emphatically.

Then, with dignity, seeing Mr. Boscawen performing strange and ingenious antics in the distance, evidently indicative of something to eat and no one to eat it, "Luncheon is ready, I believe."

"O, in that case you may be permitted to get up;" getting up himself, and offering her his hand.

She gives him her finger-tips, but necessity compels a closer clasp; so close, indeed, that there seems to be some difficulty about getting it undone again.

"Don't be in a hurry; nobody will miss us."

No answer.

"What an awfully unlucky fellow I am!" taking off his hat, and brushing back his crisp hair.

Still no answer.

"You're desperately angry, arn't you," miserably.

She turns away her face; she is in no mind to submit to cross-questioning just now. Moody silence till they reach the gate leading into the hotel garden; then forced smiles, gay rally, bright looks. They are the gayest of the gay, these two unamiable young people. Ah, me! that sweetness should be but bitter sweet at best!

Seven o'clock; a strange hushed seven o'clock, a darkened meaningful seven o'clock, with a wild lurid sky, wherein float here and there great banks of blue-black clouds, fringed round with steamy white or palest gold, great warring clouds drawn up in fierce array.

It is quite time to be thinking about making a start for the station. Every one has had enough rusticity for once; every one is rather inclined to growl and wax monosyllabic; every one is returning to the hotel by various paths and at various paces.

Louie, Mrs. Thorndyke, and the Vicarage young ladies have been rambling about together now as they skirt the piece of ornamental water.

"Didn't you feel a drop of rain?" says Mrs. Thorndyke suddenly, to no one in particular, gazing about her vacuously.

Splash comes a great drop on Louie's upturned face, into one of her eyes, in fact.

"O dear!" wiping the injured organ with her handkerchief. "Do let us run, there's quite a storm coming on; we shall be drowned;" starting off at a brisk trot.

The girls take to their heels in a second; they are wearing their second-best costumes, and costumes are not matters of every-day occurrence at the Wynbridge Vicarage.

Mrs. Thorndyke cannot imitate their example, however; she is, be it known, proud of her feet,—the late Colonel was proud of her feet,—and to-day she is shod with cruel accuracy. Her boots have interfered with her happiness in divers ways already; now they threaten to risk her life and spoil her dress. Mrs. Thorndyke is not sorry to remember that they are not paid for.

Louie, who is the most good-natured soul in existence, perceiving that to leave this foolish old woman to hobble along in the pelting rain alone—it is pelted now—would be unkind, to say the least of it, bears her company with sublime patience.

"Good gracious, did you see that?" and a sudden flash of bluish light. Crack, crack, growl; the storm has fairly burst on their devoted heads. "Dear, O dear, we shall never get back to the hotel alive!"

"O yes, we shall; won't you have my arm?"

"No, thank you. Is my dress up behind? How very alarming, and Isobel perhaps still among the woods!"

"And Grace too, silly girl. I told her she had better come with us, but she would go off with that horrid sketch-book of hers;" turning round to see if there are any signs of the vagrants.

"O, depend upon it, she has found an escort," viciously. Mrs. Thorndyke is a somewhat acid person under the most advantageous circumstances; now terror, pain, and discomfort render her little short of dangerous.

"My poor Isobel is far more likely to be straying about by herself, poor dear," continues she touchingly. "To-day has not been a very great treat to her, I fear;" and Mrs. Thorndyke halts, and scrapes vigorously at the heel of one foot with the toe of the other, like a fly.

"Please make as much haste as you can." A sullen roar right over their heads strengthens the petition.

On they plod through the pouring rain, smitten asunder, as it were, every other minute by the electric flame.

"I do wish I knew what has become of Grace!" exclaims Louie at length, pushing aside an obstructing bough. "Captain Tewell wanted to go with her, but she wouldn't let him."

"A little drawing back is said to be most attractive, you know, under certain circumstances," suavely.

"How do you mean? Grace is the most unsophisticated creature on the face of the earth; besides, I am sure Rae requires no whipping up," with a vexed little laugh. "It is so wet and dark and dismal."

"No—I beg your pardon, I didn't quite catch what you said," with great politeness.

"O, it doesn't matter; what is to be will be, and there's an end of it."

"You are a fatalist."

"I am half drowned;" swinging back the little gate leading to the hotel. "There is Miss Thorndyke!"

"And Captain Tewell!" exultantly, catching sight of a gray weed back in the verandah.

"No, not Captain Tewell; that boy from the Vicarage!" rather spitefully.

Mrs. Thorndyke tiptoes across the lawn.

"Where is Mrs. Boscauw?" calls Louie to the party already assembled, amongst whom appears that lady's lawful proprietor.

"Gone to see the temple, with Captain Tewell."

"Coming in at the gate," answer two voices simultaneously.

"Good heavens! Then Grace is out in this awful storm alone. Louie turns herself about just as Rae appears with Mrs. Boscauw, dripping and dreary.

"Have you seen Grace? O, do please go and look for her!" exclaims Louie imploringly, tears in her voice.

"Certainly. Where do you think she is?"

"I don't know; she went off to sketch by herself." The gate bangs behind him as she speaks.

"Quite a sensation," smiles Isobel sweetly.

"Quite," smiles back her adorer.

"I only hope nothing terrible may have happened," says Louie solemnly; her sweet eyes dark with fear lest evil should have chanced the friend she loves so well.

When Rae gets clear of the trees outside the gate, he pauses a second, and calls "Halloo!" Rather a mad proceeding, it must be confessed, but he feels rather maudlin, between ourselves. No answer. He calls again; no answer. Nothing but beating rain, and a ragged flash of steel-blue light. Round the lake he runs, up past the ruins, over the uneven ground among the trees. What is that glittering among the drenched moss? He picks it up; it is a penknife; he has seen her use it. Thank God! she can't be very far off, but why on earth hasn't she tried to get back to the hotel?

"Grace!" he calls; "Grace!"

"Yes!" A long shrill "Yes!" somewhere to the right.

Stumble, stumble. "Confound these great sprawling roots!" Slip, dash. Ah, there she is, leaning against a tree; her face as white as her limp white dress, here and there spotted with mud. Is it? No it is red—it is blood!

"Whatever has happened? Are you hurt?" coming fast towards her.

"Only a little;" trying so smile. "I thought I should have to stay here all night!" shakily.

"What have you done to yourself?"

"Fallen down and sprained my ankle, and scratched my face; that's all. Please don't touch me, or I shall tumble down again."

"But you must try and get back. Could I carry you?"

"Not quite;" crimsoning to the tips of her ears. Boom, boom, away up amongst the clouds.

"I fell down about there;" pointing to where she had slipped on the mossy roots aforesaid; "and I lost my little penknife."

"I have found it for you;" taking her sunshade out of her hand, opening it, and holding it over her. They look very comical thus; a sort of grown-up Paul and Virginia.

"Don't do that. It's dangerous, and I am so frightened of the lightning, so very dreadfully frightened;" and she looks up at him ever so pitifully with her great scared yellow eyes.

"Poor child!" coming closer to her. He has forgotten all about the storm, he has forgotten all about Louie's cruel anxiety, he has forgotten everything, save that he has the woman he loves almost in his arms. "Grace darling!" A sudden awful seething rush, a glare of blinding light, a moment of black darkness, of inconceivable horror, and then a noise as of the very heavens falling on the earth.

He has wrenched her by main force away from that stricken tree, now scored and scorched by deadliest flame; he has gathered her up into his breast, saved from the destroyer as by a miracle; her arms are clasped about his neck.

"Are we dead, Rae?" pressing close to him, as though Death were indeed pursuing her.

"Thank God, no!" The smell of fire is about upon them both. "But we must get away from here somehow."

She raises her head, and listens to him; his arms are round her still. There is a sound as of singing in her heart.

"You do love me a little?" says he eagerly, looking with greedy eyes upon her white scratched small face.

"Yes, a little." She would be wilful were she dying, and she is not dying; she is only more gloriously happy than she ever thought it could fall to the lot of woman to be.

One kiss, a solemn kiss, the kiss of betrothal, and then prosaic reality again; a limping, painful, draggled, terrifying reality enough in all conscience.

How Grace gets back, first to the hotel, then