

BOYS AND GIRLS

A Paper Chase.

(By C. E. Mallandane, 'The Dawn of Day').

It was a beautiful evening early in June. From the masses of white pinks in Joyce Merton's garden came whiffs of pungent fragrance, and the honeysuckle in the hedge by the gate smelt sweet.

'As if the world were one
Of utter peace and love and gentleness.'

But the looks and tones of the two who stood under the walnut tree were not in harmony with the calm loveliness of their surroundings. Joyce Merton had a flush on her cheeks, an angry sparkle in her hazel eyes, while her companion showed as much perturbation as a man of his massive build, and fair, impassive face is ever capable of revealing.

'If you want to know my opinion of him,' he was saying, 'it's just this—he's an adventurer.'

'You've no need to tell me your opinion,' was the indignant answer; 'I know it quite well. I know how you go hinting it here and there, just where it will do most harm. You've made father suspicious, though he owns he has no fault to find with him. It's a shame! How would you like to be treated so if you went to get a job in a strange place?'

'I should never be fool enough to attempt anything of the sort without taking my credentials with me.'

'Oh, of course not. You are always right in every respect, to your own thinking. But I tell you what, Stephen: you'd do well to copy Walter Penny in one thing. He's never missed his church on a Sunday since he came.'

Stephen bit his lip.

'We all know what that means,' he muttered, 'humbug!'

'That's a nice, generous speech to make,' said Joyce, in a voice of scorn; 'because you won't go yourself you must needs belittle those who do. We are all humbuds, and you are the only honest one! What you want, Stephen Oldroyd, is a good humbling, and I hope you may get it.'

At this Stephen deliberately turned his back on the walnut tree, the girlish figure beneath it, the black board above the gate on which the words 'William Merton, Builder and Contractor,' stood out in gold letters, and marched away at a quick pace, along the lane between the flowery hedges.

If any stranger, passing through the village of Bushbury, three miles from the large country town of Merton, had thought fit to stop and enquire who was the steadiest, most hard-working man the little place contained, the answer he would have received from well-nigh every mouth would have been 'Stephen Oldroyd.' If he had pushed his enquiries further, and demanded particulars relating to this same Stephen, he would have been told, with a touch of pitying wonder at his ignorance of local celebrities, that young Oldroyd—the son of poor, respectable parents, who died when he was a lad—had raised himself to the position he now occupied—entirely by his cleverness and good qualities. He had outdone the busy bee in the diligence with which he improved the shining hour; and having a strong turn for business, obtained employment as clerk at an iron foundry in Merton. His trustworthiness soon won him the confidence of his employers; and as he was one of those rare happy people who possess not only quickness of intellect, but also a capacity for hard plodding, he bade fair to be a successful man, and Bush-

bury was already proud of him. Amongst those who admired him most heartily, and had a strong personal regard for him as well, were Mr. and Mrs. Croft, of Elmtree Farm, distant relations of his mother's, with whom he had lodged since he had been left an orphan.

'It's from his mother's side he gets his brains,' said Mr. Croft with a complacent chuckle; 'his father was well enough, but he'd a poor head-piece, and none of his family was ever aught but middling sharp. Now, Stephen—he's good all round, that's what he is.'

'There's one thing about him I'd have different,' said his wife; 'I wish he was more of a church-goer.'

'That'll come, when he's married and head of a family, if he marries the right woman. Joyce Merton now — she goes very regular, and she's a girl of spirit. Her husband'll find she's not the sort of wife to do all his churchgoing for him, as some wives do, leaving the men to loaf about at home.'

'Do you think she'll ever take Stephen for



HE THRUST THE ENVELOPE BETWEEN THE FOLDS.

her husband?' said Mrs. Croft. 'I have doubts about it myself.'

'Take him? why any girl would take him who'd a scrap of sense, and Joyce has plenty. Beauty as she is she'll never get a better chance. He's bound to get on, and he's a fine-looking chap too, and steady as old Time. What more can she want?'

His wife made no answer, but she did not look convinced. For there was another at Elmtree Farm who, it's mistress thought, was on friendlier terms with Joyce Merton than any man had ever been—even Stephen Oldroyd, who had known her from childhood. For the last four years Joyce had been universally regarded as the prettiest girl in Bushbury, and there were few young men in the neighborhood who had not, at any rate, fancied themselves in love with her. But Joyce was a difficult, almost unapproachable subject from a lover's point of view. She could be a capital comrade—bright and genial as a fair spring morning, so long as the limits of comradeship were strictly observed; but at any hint of warmer feeling, the skies were clouded, a cold wind blew, and all her frank friendliness van-

ished. She and Stephen had been playmates in old days, and as his prosperity increased, and he evidently rose higher and higher in Mr. Merton's esteem, the belief gained ground that he was destined to be the favored suitor.

'It's just like his luck,' the other young men grumbled.

Stephen himself began to have hopes of success and all seemed to be going smoothly and prosperously for him, when an obstacle arose in the shape of a stranger, one Walter Penny, a good-looking, high-spirited young fellow of his own age, who had settled in Bushbury, and established himself in everybody's good graces with astonishing rapidity. He was a skilled carpenter with a talent for wood carving, and old Merton, who knew a good workman when he saw one, consented at once to take him on trial, though Penny frankly owned he could give no character, as he had been working on his own account, and failed through lack of capital. That was some months ago; and Walter Penny, in spite of a very bad memory and a careless, happy-go-lucky way which often tried old Merton's patience, had given such satisfaction by his good workmanship, that he had been entrusted with the carving of the oak staircase in the new wing, lately built on to Bushbury Hall.

From the first Stephen had been inclined to look upon the clever, engaging stranger as an interloper, likely to outshine him in the public esteem. When he discovered the strong, close friendship which had sprung up between Walter and Joyce, these faintly hostile feelings changed to jealous dislike, and after that hot dispute under the walnut tree—the first that he and his old playfellow had ever had since the childish quarrels of long ago—dislike became positive hatred.

Her last speech had struck home, for it was quite true that he did pride himself on his honesty in staying away from Divine Service. Not that he was an unbeliever: it was simply that he had not felt the need of religion, and was confident that he did just as well without it. His evenly-balanced nature had protected him from the temptations which beset more impulsive men, and it had never been difficult to him to keep straight. What was the use of kneeling down and confessing himself to be a miserable sinner when he was morally certain he was nothing of the sort? Why should he, strong and self-reliant as he had always been, ask for help which he did not want? No, whatever other men—whatever Walter Penny might do—there should be no humbug about him; he would never pretend piety to curry favor with anyone.

About two hours after he left Joyce, as he entered the little sitting room at the farm where he and his fellow lodger had their meals, the frank, good humored voice which he was beginning to loathe greeted him with a cheery—

'Hullo, Oldroyd, here you are at last! I've nearly done my supper. What have you been doing with yourself?'

'I've been for a ride,' answered Stephen curtly, seating himself at the table.

'Ah! that reminds me I must have a look at my machine; I've got to ride to Merton to-morrow. I'm worth robbing to-night, Oldroyd. Look here,' and he drew from an envelope lying on the table a bank note for £20.

'Where did you get it from?' asked Stephen, curiously.

'It's old Merton's—it's not mine, worse