

A POT OF MYRTLE.*

BY THE REV. MARK GUY PEARSE.

CHAPTER I.

DOWN IN THE COUNTRY.



HE had lived down in the the country. In the country — that phrase which is so pathetic on the lips of the London poor. To those who have been lifelong dwellers in the slums, the country is a place vague and far-off like heaven, where all is rest and beauty. Some happy glimpse of it has left to memory the vision of an infinite stretch of sky and infinite leisure. "There's room to breev," as one of them put it one day. With some the holy quiet is associated with strange bits of knowledge that they bring out occasionally, with the air of one who knows everything if he were minded to tell it all.

"Down in the country some of the sparrers has red breasts," says one. "Garn!" is the sceptical shout of the company.

The barley ripening is a mystery until one girl sees it and exclaims, "I reckon they'll soon be arter pickin' these 'ere shrimps."

To one the cuckoo's call prompts the inquiry, "Wherever is that clock a-strikin'?"

Such accounts of the country we have heard from the girls. The boys were most impressed by the discovery that "butterflies is stupid things," and by the fact that "there mostly ain't no pleecemen."

But she of whom I tell was not London born, and to her "down in the country" meant something very different—the memory of all that was holiest, a vision of all that was sweetest, a treasure of the heart.

* In the story of the work of West London Mission for 1901 the following sketch by one of the leading workers of the mission is printed. Mr. Pearse says: "The story of my own work in St. James' Hall presents few features that distinguish it from an ordinary morning service. One cannot but feel how poor a thing it is compared with the hidden service of those who work in the grime and the slime of the slum, with so much of discouragement and distress. I have, therefore, given a story of work in Chalton Street, which I had from Sister Agatha, as my contribution to the report."

It was in one of the Midland counties, in a little country village amid the silent hills and smiling meadows, that she had lived with a widowed mother. The cottage was set in a garden, the pride and joy of both. The happy toil of tending it was their recreation and delight. Behind the wooden palings the flowers were everywhere—up to the door, and clustering about it with a wealth of roses that reached the overhanging thatch. The memory of the mother was inseparable from the garden. To the daughter's thought they were one in quiet beauty and a kind of fragrant loveliness. Then, the window of the little kitchen and parlour were filled with flowers. The big, old brown leather Bible, from which the mother read a chapter night and morning, stood in the deep ledge beside a pot of myrtle and a spreading fern. It may well be that the holy book had more to do with the quiet calm and sunshine of that fact than even the garden had; but to the little daughter it seemed as if the flowers wrought a spell and charm that warded off all that was ill, and breathed a sweetness and purity and peace in the place. At any rate, brought unconsciously the message that the Master sent by them, "Your heavenly Father careth for you"—a message that was not a word merely, but the strength and music of the mother's life.

And so the mother lived, and so she died. Then the daughter married a labourer. From the beginning it was a rough struggle against poverty, and it took all their time to keep the wolf from the door. Life had no room for the flowers then. There were days and weeks when work failed, but the rent had to be paid and the babes provided for. Drifting hither and thither, each drift left them at a lower level. At last they drifted into London, where so much human wreckage is stranded. Life came to be a thing from which all beauty had died and all hope had been lost. One room in a slum, where all was grimy and hideous, where faces were made brutal by drink and wretchedness, where voices were hoarse with cursing, and where the public-house was the only refuge and drink was the only excitement—a "liver" they called it. With all the conditions of life so dreary