

THE VINE AND THE VINE-DRESSER.

It was a noble vine. Right along the high south wall, and up to its very top, its strong and healthy branches bore rich and ripe the clusters of its purple fruit. The master, as he walked thoughtfully along the broad walk, would look up at it as it spread itself from one end of the wall to the other; and as the gentle summer breeze waved aside its broad green leaves and displayed the ripening fruit, a smile would come over his face, and his heart would fill with joy as he thought how his noble vine spoke to him of the richness and beauty of the Divine goodness in all His works and ways. All seasons pleased him as he studied his vine. Its ragged-looking stem and reed-like branches, in winter all bare and barren, told him of a life within—latent, not destroyed,—able to face the bitter blast as well as to develop itself in autumn fruitfulness. In spring and early summer it pleased him well, as each delicate leaf-bud unfolded itself from its velvet bed, and each tendril wound itself round the rugged branches. And it pleased him well, as summer came on, to inhale the fragrance of its richly scented blossoms, and watch the forming of the fruit which autumn should bring to perfection.

So the vine grew, and threw out its branches here and there with wanton luxuriance of strength, fed by the rich soil and warmed by the reflected rays of the southern sun.

But there was another thing also which the master saw,—and his thoughts, as he saw it, had a touch of sadness in them.

Twice in the year the gardener came; and as he followed the course of the branches along the wall, beneath his feet lay luxuriant branch, and broad leaf, and curly tendril, and sometimes half-formed fruit.

"It must be so," said the master. He did not like to see the poor shoots, lately so rich in life and vigour, strewed on the ground; and oftentimes he would turn away sadly as the sharp knife did its work, as if the vine could feel some human pain at seeing its richness and luxuriance thus apparently destroyed. And sometimes, as he saw what seemed to be the work of destruction going so ruthlessly on, it would seem to him as if he heard and interpreted the complaint of his noble vine.

"Oh, why," it seemed to say, "am I to be treated thus? Deep down under ground, in the so winter, I have treasured my life, that I might put it forth with vigour as the genial spring returned; and now, year after year, I see my glories destroyed, my branches laid bare, and even my fruit cut off. Why is it? Why cannot I be left to bring forth fruit as I will? How richly would I spread, not only all along this wall, but even over it; yes, and cover the ground beside. How deep would be the shade of the bowers I should build with my leaves and tendrils, and overhead should hang the rich ripe fruit. But no, I cannot do as I will." Then the summer breeze caused the leaves to tremble and sigh.

The master still listened, but whether it was to the vine, or to a voice that spoke his own thoughts, he hardly knew; but he heard this—

"But I do not think," said the vine, "that I ever thrust forth such noble shoots, such abundant leaves and blossoms, as I have done this year. Perhaps the master will tell the gardener to spare me. These tendrils cling so firmly, these branches grow so richly, and my leaves are so broad; this year surely I shall be left to bring forth fruit as I please, and the master shall rejoice yet more in his noble vine."

The master sighed, and the thought came across his mind, Need so much be cut away? Might not some of these branches be spared? Could we not find room on the wall for a few more? His thoughts found words, and the gardener heard them.

He looked at the master with a smile, and then—quick and sharp was the knife—those luxuriant shoots strewed the ground.

In the autumn the master stood by his vine again, and the gardener stood by him. He had been away for a while, and when he went the branches looked almost bare where the knife had thinned the new growths. Now it was covered with foliage and with large clusters of grapes.

"What splendid fruit!" he exclaimed. "There seems hardly room for it to hang."

The gardener smiled as he thought of how the master wished to spare the too luxuriant branches, and said, "Where would have been the ripened fruit if the pruning had not been done?" The vine, too, seemed to smile as the sun played upon its myriad leaves and abundant fruit, and to say, "I thought I

