

"There's ourselves," said Ray. Keziah locked them in, her heart more bitter against her master than ever it had been in all the years that would have been, but for the children, very joyless and very thankful.

"Them's just cherubs, and he's a brute. He as drinks the blessed wine every sacrament day, and should know better!" she muttered in her wrath. Had she been learned in hagiology, she would have wished that her master could swallow a spider in the holy wine like German St. Narbert, and be blessed with a beautiful spirit ever afterward.

The day wore slowly on; a snowy, blowing, boisterous day, dark and dreary. When the twilight fell the vicar had not come back. "There's reason in roasting eggs," thought Keziah. "I must let 'em out now. I'll tell him as if they've been in all day, and he knows as me aint a one to fib."

So she let them out. Rob rushed with a bound and shout down the passage; Ray came with a slow step wondering if letting them out would get his nurse into trouble.

"Master's rare late," said the man who did odd jobs. "Mappen he'll sleep at squire's?" "Ay, I shouldn't wonder that he do," answered Keziah. The squire's was the biggest house at Tamsleigh, the village where the furze-cutter, Job Stevens, lay on his deathbed.

"Sure, he's staying at squire's, and a more natural thing than what he often do," she thought, as she did the bolts and bars, and shut the shutters, and told the old man that he had better sleep upon the premises as master was a way.

No one felt anxious. The vicar had gone to Tamsleigh, and, seeing how bitter and wild the day was, had stayed to sleep at his old friend's; what more likely?

The children had a merry time while the snow fell and the winds blew. Keziah was a merry soul by nature, and had all kinds of funny stories, and, saying it was next but one to Christmas Eve, roasted apples for them, and stuck the apples full of cloves and set them bobbing in a bowl of currant wine in the old game that Ben Jonson sings of in his carol.

It was quite late, quite 8 o'clock, when the children went to bed.

"And please God take care of the birds in the snow. Amen," said Ray at the close of his bedside prayers.

"Amen," said Rob, winking and sleepy.

No one was anxious at all that night; but when the morning came, and the moon passed, and their father had not returned a great alarm spread itself from the servants to the children.

The weather had become terrible. The snow fell perpetually, the air was very dark, the winds were very rough; such a day had not been seen in Devon for over twenty years; and away where the sea was, ships and barques were tossing in the snowstorm in sore peril.

"Where can the master be?" said Keziah, in great perplexity. It would be impossible to stay at the squire's at Tamsleigh, for the morrow was Christmas Day, and where would the church be without its church service?

The parish was a very scattered one; a few farms, a few cottages, with miles between each, spread over the moorland, and about the vicarage and church itself there were only a few poor houses; the only house of any importance was the squire's, over at Tamsleigh. The few people, however, who did dwell near, came—dropping in as the short day wore itself on, and each had some darker suggestion, some ghostlier remembrance than the last, to offer in consolation.

Ray stood listening with big startled eyes. He was happy because his nurse had given him a sieveful of grain for the birds, yet he felt a dull sense of something dreadful being near. Rob sang, and raved, and shouted, and played at his pleasure; the terrible snow-storm had no terrors for him.

"It is passing strange," said Keziah anxiously, and knew not what to do, for it was not weather to send a man or beast over the moor, and the vicar might only scold if she did send, supposing he was safe and well at Tamsleigh great hall; he always hated "a fuss."

She did not know what to do.

But at twilight, or rather just as the black day was merging into the yet blacker night, and the mounds of snow were rising higher and higher against windows and door, there came a poor old peddler who had struggled through the storm with his pack on his back, and was half frozen, and begged shelter.

He was a man well known in the district. They let him in and set him in the chimney-corner, and gave him mulled wine and the promise of a bed; but scarce had he come to his full senses out of his cold and fright than he asked for the vicar, and when he heard that as yet the master of the house was not at home, he got up in his agitation though his limbs were all stiff as statues with rheumatism.

"But I passed his reverence yester eve, coming for home above Tamsleigh," he shouted. "The Lord save us! the Lord save us! Sure as I be a living soul he's lost on the moor."

The few neighbours who were gathered in the kitchen screamed aloud, and the children listening grew pale.

"Art sure 'twas master?" cried Keziah.

"Lord bless us, I be sure!" reiterated the peddler. "He gev me a good-even, and said as how he'd be here long afore me; but I struck aside to take some hooks and eyes and thread to Dame Carew as she'd ordered of me, and so we parted company, and I slep' at

Carew's hut and come on i' the morn. Lord, save us! he's a dead man!"

In the bustle and outcry that succeeded no one noticed the children for a few moments till Rob shrieked out:

"Rabbi's dead, too!"

It was then seen that Ray had fainted.

In a little while he was brought round, and opened his eyes bewilderedly.

"Father wouldn't help the birds!" he murmured, and shuddered and wept.

Keziah, with more grief on her shoulders than she felt it right for one lone woman to have to bear, carried Ray up to his little bed, and bidding him not to fret so, because there was always hope, ran down stairs, stormed at the peddler for having been such a fool as to speak so before the children, and then took counsel with her neighbours as to what was best to do.

The men volunteered to go out in search, but there were only four or five of them, and two of them were very old. Still, out they went with their horn lanterns and their pick-axes, and the thick falling snow soon hid them from sight.

They thought of going up to the churchyard and ringing the two bells that were there; but they reflected that it would be of no use because the wind was so high that the bells could have no chance of being heard. So the men went out to search as best they could in the wild night, and their frightened women sat for the most part in the kitchen of the vicarage taking a strange and terrible pleasure in hearing the peddler cry a hundred times, "Lord save us! he's a dead man!" till Keziah told him to go to bed for an old fool which at last reluctantly he did.

The women sat over the fire and sipped spiced wine and told each other horrible tales of things their fathers and forefathers had done or known, with many a "He says, says he," occurring in their narrative.

Keziah sat up by the bedside of Rob and Ray; Rob slept, but Ray lay wide awake, and ever and again he shivered and moaned: "Papa wouldn't help the birds—he wouldn't—and I know God was angry."

The long night wore away, the winds never ceasing to howl, the snow never ceasing to fall. At daybreak the men returned, having found nothing. They said they had searched all the moor for eight miles, but in real truth, though they did not know it, they had scarcely been a mile from home, having only gone round and round in a circle, not seeing where they were in the darkness. The morning broke gray and dreary; the snow fell still, but the wind dropped. Keziah chose the youngest and strongest of the men and bade him strive to get across to Tamsleigh. It was hard to do and an errand of danger for the paths were all obliterated and communication of every kind stopped, but the man was a bold young fellow and promised to do his best. "Though as for that," he muttered, "his reverence is a dead man if he's out all this freezin' night." The other men went up the church-tower and set the bells tolling; the wind had fallen, and it was possible that in the more distant houses they might be heard and some help or some news come.

It was now 11 o'clock in the morning, the hour at which the service of Christmas Day should have begun. The church was a little dark, dismal place; here and there it had been brightened with a bit of holly or a bough of bearberry-tree; the vicar did not approve such follies, and there was little done to relieve the bare stone walls, the square box of a pulpit, the tiny chancel, dismal and damp as any dungeon. As the weather cleared a little the women dropped in, in their red cloaks, and made a glow in the darkness, but they did not stay, for the church was very cold, and it seemed more cold and horrible having no prayer there on Christ's morn, and the pastor, maybe, frozen dead in some snowdrift.

At the vicarage Keziah tried in vain to read the morning service to the children by the kitchen fire; her voice faltered and their attention wandered. They were all grave and frightened, even the twin babies, and Ray sat in the window-seat with his face pressed against the glass, quite silent. The look of the boy frightened his nurse almost more than the loss of her master.

"He do take things to heart so," she said to herself with a sigh.

It was of no use to try and read, she closed the big black prayer book, and let the startled parishioners come in; some of them had plodded many miles over the snow not to miss the blessing of the Christmas prayer, and they found the church empty and the vicar absent. All were sure that he was dead; surer yet, when a man, at great risk to himself, came over from Tamsleigh great house to say the squire trusted that his reverence had reached home in safety.

"Didn't I tell ye the truth, ye unbelieven Jews?" said the peddler who enjoyed his own importance as a sharer in this terrible history. There could be no doubt now. The vicar had left Tamsleigh, refusing all the squire's offers, and had set forth to walk home.

Every one there knew that he must have lost his way, and in all likelihood had perished.

"It do come like a judgment," whispered Keziah to a friend, out of the children's hearing. "Ay, it do. He scolded and punished them dear little souls just for feeding the frozen-out birds! And now—now he knows himself what it is—death in the snow."

Rob began to cry because the women were crying, and he was frightened. Ray never shed a tear nor said a word. He only thought

to himself with an unutterable horror. "God was angry!"

Christmas morning began to pass away. The beef lay unroasted; the pudding that had been in its pot all night boiled madly unnoticed; the bells of the church tolled without ceasing. Folks began to come in from the outlying parts of the parish as the skies cleared and the frost made the snow passable. They all brought terrible tales of the past day and night; of sheep frozen to death, of carts blocked, of travellers lost, of horses killed, of boys drowned by the splitting ice, and of hamlets shut off from each other. It was even rumoured that the great train from London, 20 miles away, was standing still all the night with its freight of passengers unable to move, and that some of them had been frozen to death.

Keziah listened with a beating heart to all these histories; it was now 3 o'clock; she had put away the Christmas dinner, and fed the children on milk porridge, and kept them quiet round her. There was no love in them to agitate their little souls for their missing father; but the sense of some great calamity around weighed on them and kept them still and frightened. Ray was mute, and scarcely moved.

By four it was once more quite dark. The villagers hung about, cowed and afraid like the children. Christmas Day was passing and there had been no service in the church. It seemed to them a thing so terrible that the sin of it would lie on them forever.

All the hushed, whitened moor was without a sound; the safely-folded sheep bleated now and then, and the cattle lowed in the byre; that was all; otherwise a silence like that of death enwrapped the village and the church, and the people dared not speak above their voices. All at once Keziah rose and took the two little girls, one on each of her own strong arms, with their woollen hoods pulled over their flaxen heads.

"Christ's day must not go by without a prayer said in His church," she said to the folks in the kitchen. "Let us go and pray there for master. 'Twill save the day from heathendom."

She went out into the deepening gloom, into the air that was bitter still, but quite windless. Followed by the children, she went over the snow under the dark boughs of the trees to the church door and entered it, the women going behind her with lanterns under their cloaks. They set down their lanterns in the middle of the aisle, and the light made a little pale glow on the tombstones that formed the pavement. Keziah knelt down and prayed aloud, and the voices of the people echoed hers; when her prayers had ceased and all was silent, the little faint voice of Ray stole through the stillness:

"God, please do not be angry any more because papa made a mistake; he did not mean to be cruel. Please save the sheep and the birds and save him. Please do not be angry any more."

Then his own little voice died away in a sob, and all the women kneeling there in the cold and the dark wept too. Solemnly, as they had entered, they left the church; some one had said, "Let us sing a psalm," but no one could sing; their hearts were too full, for all their men were out on the moors, and who could tell what might chance there? Then Keziah on her threshold turned and said to her neighbours:

"Now thank ye all kindly, but go to your homes. Gossiping is bad at such a time as this. For me I will keep by the hearth with the children. The Lord succor their father!"

The women were moved at the seriousness of a woman always mirthful and neighbourly, and each went quietly to her own cottage. She herself went home, as she had said that she should, and the little boys gathered about her knees, and the little girls slept in her arms. Night once more began to fall over the world of snow. In the inner kitchen the old peddler and an old labourer, too aged to go out and search, were talking low over their ale of storms that they had known forty long years before.

Keziah had shut no shutters; she had lit candles and put them against each casement so that by chance the light might assist her master if he were able to find his homeward way.

"Lord help them all, poor souls," she thought, rocking the babies in her arms, and thinking of the ships at sea, of the travellers on the moor, of the sheep lost on the tors, and the trains blocked in the snow.

Rob, with his hands clasped about his little naked legs, sat and gazed into the fire, his eyes wide open, his mouth parted. "Pray do not make me go to bed," he said once; "pray do not."

So when she put the others to sleep she let him sit up with her by the fire. "Why won't you go to bed, my dear," she asked him; as the cuckoo clock told nine of the night.

Ray shuddered. "In my bed last night, when I did sleep, I saw papa dead in the snow and God's birds covering him with snow. I should see it again now."

"Ah, my poor child!" He leaned his head against her, and they sat in the chimney corner together.

The cuckoo called ten o'clock.

There was a sound of voices outside the house, the shuffling of men's feet in the crisp snow; the dog barked outside, the flash of torches flared red on the lattices. Ray and his nurse sprang up and rushed to the door and forced it open. The men were bearing a litter, and the foremost of them cried out: "Little master, it's

your father. We've done a good Christmas night's work. Nay, nay, he's not dead; never fear!"

Ray rushed out into the snow.

For many moments all was confusion; then the men laid the shutter gently down before the fire, and taking off the wraps strewn over him, showed Ray the motionless form of his father, whose eyes unclosed and whose gray lips feebly murmured:

"My little boy, do not be afraid."

Ray burst into tears, and kissed his father as he had never dared to kiss him in his life.

Setting out to walk home from Tamsleigh he had crossed half the moor in safety, in the teeth of the blinding snow, then as darkness fell had missed his way and wandered so far and become so exhausted by the wind and the bitter air that he had lost all power of even guessing where he was, and so had grown feebler and blinder at each step, and had staggered for shelter into a hollow place made by some rocks and trees; there he had sat down, wrapping himself in his cloak and trusting the dawn would break. But the fury of the storm had uprooted some of the trees and loosened some of the boulders; with a roar as of thunder the huge stones and the oak that grew with them had fallen across the entrance of his shelter, and barred him in, a prisoner. There, half-frozen, famished, miserable, he had passed the night of Christmas Eve and the wild day of Yule itself, while his people were searching for him east and west, north and south, and his little son was praying to God "not to be angry." He had resisted the longing to sleep that came over him, knowing such sleep fatal; but he had given himself up for lost, hemmed in by the impassable barrier of the fallen oaks and the rocks, and knowing well that none could see him or hear his voice, shout as he would over the desolate moor.

Death was very near him, and in its awful presence he regretted many things and repented many. He thought of his poor little children with shame and sorrow, and he remembered how he had struck the child for his charity to the birds—for the alms of bread that now he would have thanked heaven for himself! When the sound of the searchers coming over the snow was borne to his ear, and the cries of his own dog—the dog he had often chained and often beaten!—brought them to his hiding-place, and with ropes let down to him from above they dragged him up into the starlit, whitened world, the stern vicar was no stronger than his little son; he swooned away.

He had been imprisoned in the snow for thirty hours.

As he lay in the warmth of his own hearth, with the firelight dancing on the light curls of Ray, he opened his feeble arms to the child.

"My boy, I have been cruel to you. Forgive me. Since my life has been spared, I will try to make it a blessing for you and your brothers."

"And the birds!" whispered Ray.

His father smiled.

"You shall hang a sheaf of corn out every winter, as they do in the Sweden of your story-books. I know now what it is—to die in the snow."

Ray laid his head upon his father's breast, and was happy.

When the morning, which was cloudless, came he had his sheaf of wheat, and hung it above the door, and all the birds flocked to it, fluttering and chirping in little multitudes, the bold bright robins foremost.

"God did hear me when I asked Him not to be angry any more," said Ray, and Rob said, "Me, too; I asked him."

And hand in hand they looked up at the broad blue sky.

MUSICAL AND DRAMATIC.

"THE Pirates of Penzance" is to be produced at the London Opera Comique on Easter Monday.

MISS CLARA LOUISE KELLOGG is still in Paris, where she has been forced to remain on account of the sickness of her mother.

It is said that Mr. Arthur Sullivan intends to change his residence from London to New York, and that, with Mr. Gilbert, he is already engaged upon another attraction for next season.

IN London there are no less than 125 amateur and professional and choral orchestral societies, giving public performances. In the United Kingdom there are upward of 700 such societies.

OF the choral works given in Great Britain last year, those by Handel head the list with 1.0 performances, 62 of which were of the "Messiah." Mendelssohn is next, with 74 performances, 28 being of the "Elijah."

MR. DUDLEY BUCK, whose authorship of the Cincinnati prize composition has been placed beyond a doubt, is engaged upon the music of the three act comic opera, the libretto being the work of Mr. W. A. Croft, the writer of "Bourbon Ballads."

At the June Handel festival, in the London Crystal Palace, a chorus of 4,000 voices and an orchestra of 250 musicians are promised. Sir Michael Costa will be the conductor, and among the chief solo artists are Mmes. Adeline Patti, Nilsson, Albani and Trebelli, all of whom have been engaged.

Two Organs.

Regulate first the stomach, second the liver: especially the first, so as to perform their functions perfectly, and you will remove at least nineteen twentieths of all the ills that mankind is heir to, in this or any other climate. Hop Bitters is the only thing that will give perfectly natural action to these two organs.