

THE OLD NURSE.

STORY FOR THE YOUNG FOLKS.

CHAPTER I.

"How happy they look!" said Mrs. Arden with a half-suppressed sigh, as she turned away from the bow window of her sister's old house at Avonhurst, from whence she had been watching her son and his two cousins set out upon a sketching expedition, in all the beauty of a fine summer's evening. "Alice is always first in everything," she continued; "yet she has kept Ann and Henry waiting a long time to-day, for I saw her turn back three several times after things she had forgotten!"

"Perhaps some one called her?" asked Mrs. Forester in an enquiring tone, as she sat at her embroidery frame in the recess of the window.

"No, no! it was not that; but first she found her paper was not stretched tightly enough, as she had not fixed it on the drawing board yesterday; so she ran in to dry it at the fire, (which made it cockle very much,) and then she missed her India rubber; while, last of all, luckily for poor Dash, she remembered having shut him up in the back stable this morning, that he might not follow her to the school; so she returned for him. But Ann was patient, as usual, and Henry never cares how long he waits for Alice, so nobody found fault with her."

"It might have been better for her if they had," said Alice's mother with a deep sigh; "for in the midst of Alice's talents, spirits, and cleverness, I can trace with deep regret that one fault which mars them all. You think I am too grave,—I see it in your countenance, Emma; but every day more firmly convinces me how difficult it is to cure, unless by some such bitter lesson as I should grieve to think of my Alice receiving."

"Indeed, sister, I do think you unreasonable if you are not satisfied with your two girls. If Henry sees with my eyes, (as indeed I have reason to think he does,) he will not go further than Avonhurst for the wife he needs to share his vicarage with him."

"Where did Ann say they were going to sketch?" said Mrs. Forester.

"In the old church, at my request," replied her sister. "Both Henry and I wished for a drawing of the chancel, and fine old monument of Sir Mowbray de Bellinger; so he is to choose between his two cousins' performances when they are done, and I have promised to have the one he selects for the first ornament of his yet unfurnished drawing-room."

"Did they think they could finish their sketches in a week? for I grieve to think that is all that yet remains of the month you promised to spend with us," inquired Mrs. Forester.

"Why, Ann spoke doubtfully, and said she was sadly slow in finishing up her drawings; but Alice laughed, and promised her a helping hand if she was not ready."

"Slow and sure often wins the race, you know, Emma," said Mrs. Forester, "and, whatever you may think from Ann's quiet manner, I can assure you she generally gets through more than her sister."

"I love Ann dearly, and you know I do; but I must confess that her very tranquil, undisturbed way of going on does provoke me at times; it seems as if she did not care about anything."

"Yet, sister, I do believe it is all upon principle that Ann's temper is so unruffled, and her look so calm, and only because it is the daily and hourly endeavour of her life to bring her own spirit into subjection. You remember good Bishop Wilson's advice in his 'Sacra Privata?'—'Lay nothing too much to heart, desire nothing overmuch, rejoice not excessively, neither grieve too much for disasters; be not violently bent on any design; nor let any worldly cares hinder you from taking care of your soul.'"

"There is one thing I certainly do admire very much in Ann," remarked

Mrs. Arden, "and that is her extreme humility. While taking her utmost pains with everything that she does, she never seems to think it possible her performances should rival Alice's, to whom she looks up with the warmest sisterly affection."

"It has been so from their earliest years," said their mother. "Alice's beauty and quickness always made her the favourite with strangers, and Ann has ever meekly taken the second place, and yet been always ready to help her sister out of the thousand scrapes Alice's careless forgetfulness, and constant habit of delaying till to-morrow what should be done to-day, have led her into. But come, Emma, it is a shame to stay in the house any longer this lovely evening: let us walk towards the church and meet the young ones."

Mrs. Arden was soon ready, and the two sisters passed through the garden, pausing as they went, to listen to the humming of the bees, and inhale the sweetness of the flowers. It was indeed a beautiful place; beds of bright flowers were thickly scattered over the soft green turf, and creepers twined in many a fantastic wreath around the mossy trunk of what had once been a magnificent alder, and which, though there now remained of it but a dead, half-rotten stem, yet derived beauty and fragrance from the plants which in return it supported. There was the gay "canary plant," with its golden yellow blossoms, mingling with the pure snowy hue of a white rose, and both were set off by the dark rich lustrous green of the ivy beneath them. Beds of geraniums, fuchsias, and golden eschscholtzias, bloomed around, and white verbena and mignonne mingled their fragrance in the dewy softness of the evening air. A clear stream bounded the garden on one side, a wood on the other, through which was the "short way" to church; and Mrs. Forester and her sister passed slowly into it, through the green door in the old ivied wall; looking admiringly at the prospect before them, of the near village church with its small grey tower, standing out sharply against the blue distance, while the beaming lights of a red setting sun played upon the trunks of the trees, beneath the flickering shadow of whose leaves they stood.

Comment me to a "short way to church" in the country! Though I do believe it often proves as far again, I love the smooth beaten path that takes you over stile and stepping-stone, away from the dusty glaring road, through fertile green meadows and by purling brooks, where the earliest primroses are sure to blow, and the latest honeysuckle lingers.

Written pictures are notoriously dull things, and I have known good, and not very stupid people, who invariably skip all descriptions of scenery they chance to meet with in a book; yet it is difficult for one who has long known and loved such country walks to refrain from an occasional rhapsody about them.

Mrs. Forester certainly did not, and she found a willing listener in her sister, in whose eyes Avonhurst had all those inexpressible charms the home of a happy childhood must ever possess. There had the two sisters been brought up together, there were their parents' graves, there was the old church in which they had been baptized, there the altar where each had plighted her faith, and there the grassy churchyard, beneath the shadow of whose yew trees both sisters hoped one day to rest; when their mortal career was closed, and their bodies laid in the dust, while their spirits should have returned to God who gave them. Mrs. Forester, to whom Avonhurst had descended from her parents, had been a widow many years, and her affections, ever strong and deep, now centred in her sister and their children. Mrs. Arden never failed to spend a month at least in every year with her widowed sister: her husband was the rector of a large and populous parish in Wiltshire, and much illness, besides the duties devolved upon him by an approaching confirmation, had this year prevented his visiting Avonhurst.

He had, however, urged his wife not to omit her yearly visit under the escort of Henry Arden, their only child, who had not long taken orders, and had just been presented to an excellent living, within a short distance of his paternal home. His almost yearly visits to Avonhurst, and his aunt's to Wiltshire, had produced a lasting friendship between the cousins, and now that Henry was able to marry, and had a comfortable home to offer the woman of his choice in his pretty vicarage at Midsen, his thoughts turned frequently to Avonhurst, with a feeling that he could not anywhere find one more likely to make him happy than either of the daughters of his good and amiable aunt; could he be fortunate enough to obtain such a treasure.

Both had been almost equally the friends of his boyhood, and, as his mother had hinted, it was his full intention to ask the hand of one of them; but of which he could not at present have told himself;—why then should we attempt to do so for him?

Good, clever, and industrious Henry was indeed a son of whom any mother might be proud. Perhaps the most remarkable feature in his character was discernment,—nothing escaped him. He was wise enough not to despise small things, and "trifles light as air" to the careless or uninterested observer, bore to him deep meaning, and often revealed many a secret spring of thought and action. Such was Henry Arden; and such the scrutiny which, with the unsleeping anxiety of one whose future happiness might be deeply concerned in the result, he exercised upon his cousins.

It was a year since he had seen them; and judging by the great change that time had wrought in his own heart and feelings, he thought they might not have remained the same. Nor indeed had they; *we cannot stand still*—the evil inclination, if uncorrected, takes a deeper root, and the fault, but slightly visible at first, grows by degrees into a confirmed habit; while, on the other hand, they who day by day strive on, earnestly keeping watch over their own hearts and conduct, may hope slowly but regularly to increase in *His* favour whose "yoke is easy," and whose "burden is light."

Mrs. Arden and her sister passed on through the wood, over the stile, and along the grassy meadow which opened into the churchyard. Four aged yews grew there,—it may be, coeval with the venerable edifice itself; and in the midst of them stood a simple stone cross, raised a few steps from the ground, after the fashion of the olden time.

"Hark!" said Mrs. Forester pausing, "there is music;" and as she spoke, the rich full notes of the organ came pealing through the open church door, mingled with the tones of a sweet female voice singing that beautiful hymn beginning,

"The Lord my pasture shall prepare,
And feed me with a shepherd's care."

"It must be Henry that is playing the organ," remarked Mrs. Arden, and both sisters refrained from entering the church till the last notes of the melody had died away on the evening breeze. They seated themselves on the steps of the old churchyard cross, from whence they could see into the chancel, through the half-open door. Alice was sitting on a hassock, with her back towards them, so that they could only see the outline of her rounded cheek, and small classical head and ear. Her glossy black hair was smoothly braided in front, and wound into one large plait round the back of her head. Her bonnet lay at her feet, and a large nosegay of wild flowers was beside her; but her pencil rested idly on the drawing board which lay upon her lap while she blended her rich voice with the organ tones.

In the foreground of her sketch (the outline of which was nearly completed) stood the old marble monument of Sir Mowbray de Bellinger. Much elaborate carving was employed to delineate the hauberk (or complete dress of mail,

composed entirely of small steel rings,) which bespoke him a Knight Templar of the 13th century. A hood of mail was over his head, leaving his face exposed to view, in which the calm and peaceful expression of death was clearly marked; while his folded hands seemed meant to indicate that he died in prayer. "MEY IHU and GRAMEY" was carved in old English letters round the top of the of the oblong tomb on which it rested; and the date, "MOURUT XXIII DE JANUAR L'AN DE GRACE MCCCXII;" but the name was illegible. Beyond the monument Alice had slightly sketched the Norman arch which divided the chancel from the body of the church, with its rich mouldings and massy pillars, and a pretty vista into the recesses of the northern aisle.

"Where is Ann?" said Mrs. Forester, coming softly behind her. "There," replied Alice, pointing with her finger to a spot near the middle of the church, where Ann (half hidden by one of the pillars) was standing sketching the chancel. Neither her attitude nor appearance was picturesque, when compared with those of her more beautiful sister, and it required some acquaintance with her to become fully aware that the quiet grace of every movement corresponded with the calm and even tenor of her well-regulated mind. She had fair hair and blue eyes, rather a wide mouth, and a sunny, cheerful countenance. Her sketch seemed much further from its conclusion than Alice's, and more minute in its details; indeed, as the east window (which was a richly painted one, containing many figures) was a prominent part in her design, it would necessarily be more laborious than her sister's.

"How beautiful this old font is!" remarked Henry, who had just descended from his elevated position in the organ loft. "Indeed it is," replied Mrs. Forester, "and I like its stone cover, richly carved as it is, and surmounted by a cross. Surely the holy symbol traced by the ministers on the brow of every infant Christian, is no unfit emblem for the adornment of the font in which they are baptized!"

"Look here, aunt Emma," said Ann, "this monument is my chief favourite; the face is very tranquil in its expression, and that the whole form seems so evidently weak and oppressed, that I'm sure the sculptor intended to represent the good gentleman in his last illness."

"Now, Ann is always romancing about that old statue," cried Alice, who had put up her drawing, and joined the rest of the party. "It is quite dark though, sister mine, and full time both my mother and aunt Emma were safe at home."

"It has been a charming evening," said Henry, as he closed the door after the party: "I never saw lights more beautiful than those which gleamed through the painted window upon the pure white marble of Sir Mowbray's monument, when you began your sketch, Alice."

"Yes, Henry," she replied; "they reminded me of the last verse of a little hymn I was reading not long ago to my class in the Sunday-school,—
'And methought that emblems there
Of a Christian's hope were given
In the marble white of a peaceful death,
In the sun-beam bright of Heaven.'"

(To be continued.)

DIVINE grace educates the intellect as well as the feelings; the reasoning faculties of the mind as well as the best affections of the heart; consecrating both alike in the service of the Saviour.

A REASON that never suffices to govern a man, will never suffice to save him. That which does not distinguish him from a sinful world, will never distinguish him from a perishing world.