

yourself ready by the time Mr. Atherfield's groom comes for you."

"My box is packed, ma'am," answered Ruth, steadying her voice as best she could, for her mistress' voice acted like a tonic upon her; "I have only to make a parcel of the few things that are left out, and I will

do my best to Mrs. Atherfield or any other mistress, for the sake of you and the dear master that is gone."

"I know you will," said Mrs. Merton cheerfully. "And you will remember that your old friends are always within reach of you by post, and always interested in hearing of you."

CHAPTER II.

"NEW FRIENDS."



WHEN Abraham Choules drove up to the vicarage door, true to his word, as the clock was striking five, he found Ruth waiting for him, with a group of children gathered round her. Mrs. Merton came out to speak to him.

"You will tell Mrs. Atherfield that I can give Ruth an excellent character," she said; "and I am sure she will find a faithful servant in her."

The two younger children clung round the girl crying, and it was plain that tears were not far from the eyes of Mrs. Merton, or of her eldest daughter, while the boy, a fine lad of fourteen, vented his feelings in truly masculine style, by whistling, and kicking at the pebbles in the path.

"Come, young woman, we must hurry up," said the old man, as he respectfully touched his hat after Mrs. Merton had spoken. "I ought to have been halfway home by this time. If you wouldn't mind just standing by the mare's head, sir, I'll put up the box."

The boy blushed with pleasure. "She's a beauty," he said, as he stroked the mare's soft nose.

"Ay, ay, sir! She's all that, but a bit cantankerous in her temper; can't trust her overmuch. Now, young woman, up you get!" and amidst a chorus of "Good-bye, Ruth," they drove off.

"Seems pretty much set on you," said the old man, looking down at his companion, and noting that she had dried her eyes, and was sitting with firmly compressed lips gazing ahead of her.

The words, which called up to Ruth all that she had lost, brought the tears welling once more to her eyes, but, remembering her mistress' words, she dried them, and answered as cheerfully as she could, "Yes, they all know me so well, and they know how I love them."

"And is that all Parson Merton's family?"

"Yes—Miss Helen and Master Philip, and the two little ones, Miss Amy and dear little Master Tom. Just look what he squeezed into my hands when he said good-bye," and half-laughing, half-sobbing, she held up a top. "It is his favourite top, dear little boy."

"And what are they going to do? Folks say that the parson hadn't got much laid by."

"How could he?" exclaimed Ruth. "Why, the living is a very poor one, and master was the most charitable of men."