

## THE MESSENGER.

sure about the boy who was with him; it is about him that Mr. Stevens wants to know, and he will do his best to find out. But fancy a little fellow like Tim preferring to be locked up sooner than get his mate into trouble. I should say that his widowed mother was proud of him. I should be proud of you, Harry, if you were noble enough to do the same.

Harry's cheeks were very flushed, and he drank his tea as fast as he could. Presently, as he pushed the remains of a slice of bread and butter on one side, he asked:

'Will they keep Tim on bread and water, mother?'

'I don't know, dear; I can't say.'

'And lock him up in a dark cell?'

But again Mrs. Birt was unable to give a satisfactory reply, and, feeling very miserable, and with hands pushed deep down in his trousers pockets, Harry strode into the garden.

He was very wretched, and though the sun shone brightly, and the air was soft and sweet, and the birds were singing, there was no joy nor happiness in his heart as he strode moodily on and threw himself down under the branches of a wide-spreading tree.

Then a voice within him, which, whether he liked it or not, would make itself heard, began to speak.

'Tim locked up,' it said, 'this beautiful evening, when he ought to be enjoying himself. And Tim was such a timid, nervous, little fellow. And if he were locked up in a dungeon, and his slender wrists loaded with chains—Harry pictured them in size bigger than Tim himself—he would die, and he would be his murderer.'

Harry hid his face in his hands, his fingers ruffled his hair, his cap fell to the ground, and as he sat he reviewed a certain memorable afternoon in his history, for the explanation of which we must go back in our narrative.

It was the day that Tim last saw the widow Waspey. The sun shone brightly, and Green Hill Lane looked its best. The widow's pretty cottage, covered with honeysuckle and roses, vied in beauty with her trim front garden, while the window, in front of the spotless lace curtains, was full of most rare and beautiful geraniums.

About four o'clock two boys came down the lane. Widow Waspey was out, otherwise not even the boys of West Dutton would have come to a standstill in open daylight before her gate. Hitherto all mischief-loving persons had carried out their evil designs in the dark, for the widow had suffered no little persecution. But the boys knew that they had nothing to fear, and marched straight to the gate, lifted the latch and walked in.

'All right,' said the elder, 'there they are,' and he pointed straight at the widow's parlor window, where those beautiful geraniums bloomed in all their glory.

'Ain't they stunners! Did you ever see anything like them?'

They stood in breathless admiration, then, sad to relate, proceeded to business. The casement, which unfortunately had been left unfastened, was quickly opened, and with exclamations of delight the flowers were ruthlessly gathered.

'Are you going to take them all?' asked the younger boy, who was only a spectator. 'Won't you leave her one?'

'No, not one,' was the answer. 'I wish I could see her when she comes home.'

'You would be afraid to stay for that. I shouldn't like widow Waspey to catch us here.'

The thought of her so doing turned the little boy's rather pale face a shade paler, and his great brown eyes distended with

fear, as he looked uneasily from the pink and crimson blooms in his companion's hand to the gate beyond.

'Well, it is not likely that she will catch us,' answered the latter. 'If she's gone to market she'll not be back till seven. I believe she's gone to sell her eggs.'

'Perhaps to sell her flowers,' said the other boy.

'Then why didn't she take them with her?'

'Perhaps she couldn't carry them,' and with a touch of regret in his voice he added, 'Suppose she was going to sell them, and now she can't.'

'But what makes you think that she was going to sell them?' asked the other with impatience.

'I don't know. People do sell their flowers, and I should be sorry for widow Waspey if she were going to sell hers.'

'What a queer little chap you are,' was the reply. 'All the better if she were. It is time we paid her out.'

But somehow, notwithstanding this assertion, the speaker began to feel unhappy. But the deed was done.

As Harry reviewed these doings he bitterly regretted that afternoon's work. He it was who had gathered the widow's flowers. He was the leader in the mischief, and, greatly against little Tim's will, he had made him accompany him on this errand.

'Poor Tim,' mused Harry; 'I wish he hadn't come with me.'

But to wish was of little use; the remedy was to act. But how could he act? How could he confess the part that he had taken? What would be thought, what would happen, if he said that he had been at the widow's cottage that afternoon? If he owned to taking her flowers, folk would say that he had set her house on fire. Harry was in a terrible fright. He was much more to be pitied than brave little Tim, silently suffering for the good of another; and when at length he rose from his seat, and made his way home, he was undecided what he should do.

That evening there broke over West Dutton a most terrible thunderstorm; the lightning flashed with scarcely any intermission, and loud and long rolled the thunder.

In an ordinary way Harry was not a bit afraid, but now he seemed in a terrible fright. His face was bathed in dew, his teeth chattered, his blue eyes were glazed with fear.

Mrs. Birt, who had never seen her boy so frightened before, tried to soothe him, but her efforts were in vain, and as one crash louder and more appalling than the rest seemed to rend the very heavens, Harry's fears gained the mastery. He could bear it no longer; it was terrible to have this trouble weighing on his mind; he must confess all and tell his mother.

In low, broken, contrite tones he gasped out his story. He told what he had done, how he picked the widow Waspey's flowers, and threw them away in the field at the back of her house, and Tim knew that he had done this, and he wouldn't say for fear of getting him locked up; and he would go to Mr. Stevens on the morrow and tell him, so that Tim might be let out.

In an agony of remorse Harry gazed into his mother's face.

Mrs. Birt was too grieved to scold. Harry had sadly disappointed her, and she was sorry beyond words that he should have done an act of wilful mischief, above all that he should allow Tim to suffer for his fault.

'If you had only confessed before,' she said, 'Tim might have been at home now with his poor mother.'

But kind hearts were with Tim that night,

and more than one of the prison officials showed him kindness, and Tim, who had wronged nobody, lay quiet and trustful, praying that God would guard his mother, and hoping that his dear Harry would never be suspected of burning widow Waspey's cottage.

The next morning, at an interview at Mr. Stevens's private residence, Harry told his story and confessed his fault, and when the magistrate had severely reprimanded him for his mean and cowardly conduct, he added, with his sternest manner, that though he had no proof to convict him for so doing, he should not feel satisfied, but that, by some act of carelessness or otherwise, he was responsible for the fire, and till that mystery was solved he should look upon him with disfavor.

Then, with an assurance that Tim should be released, mother and son were dismissed, and with a heart even heavier than her boy's, Mrs. Birt walked slowly home.

She, more than Harry, knew how greatly this incident might affect his future. Mr. Stevens was one of the leading men in West Dutton; he took an interest in the welfare of its boys, and many on their entrance into life remembered him with gratitude. He respected those who helped themselves, those who made the best of circumstances, and he had always regarded the Birt family with special favor. But now, though he was too just to visit Harry's sins on his parents, Mrs. Birt knew that he would never hold out a helping hand to young Harry as long as this stigma rested on his character—till it could be ascertained how the fire in Green Hill Lane originated Harry's name would not be cleared. And as the days sped on, and no widow Waspey made her appearance, conjecture amounted to certainty that she had perished in the fire. From this date the Birt family were regarded with suspicion; every one seemed to shun them; none were friendly but little Tim and his mother, who by thought, word and deed set an example of kindness and consideration to everybody.

No one but the Birts themselves knew how greatly they wished for widow Waspey's appearance, and this was the state of affairs on a certain day when Mrs. Birt visited some old friends of hers—a mother and daughter who lived on the other side of the hills, a long way off.

They were a lone couple, in a lone cottage by themselves, and Mrs. Birt's cheery visits were regarded with pleasure. She sat between them, with a hand on each, telling her news. She spoke of the fire, of widow Waspey's disappearance, and as they were such very old friends, almost like her own kindred, she told about Harry and little Tim, and how all the neighbors, indeed mostly every one in West Dutton, looked on Harry with disfavor.

'And it all comes of that one naughty act,' added Mrs. Birt. 'I declare when one once gives way to sin there is no knowing where it may stop—it is like a ball rolling down hill, and I often ask myself whether it is possible that Harry had a hand in this fire.'

Then her friends told their news. It was not much, nothing of importance, but every little item had an interest, and they related how one night, the very night of the thunderstorm, they had been awakened by a noise—a dull, low, moaning sound outside the threshold of their door, and on looking from the window they saw a woman, a poor, lone, solitary figure, sitting on the step; she was huddled all of a heap, her knees drawn up to her chin, while she sat and rocked and moaned.

They were a lone pair, and not very brave, but a woman could not do them much harm.