

GENERAL LITERATURE.

THE FIRE-FLY.*

(From the Church of England Magazine.)

A poor woman named Mary was sitting one evening near her window, her pensive looks wandering over the beautiful orchard which surrounded her cottage. It was during the intense heat of summer. She had worked all day, and when the sun began to sink, had gathered into one heap the fragment hay which had been mown in the morning from her orchard. The last rays of the setting sun cast their purple tints over the horizon; the bright moonbeams streamed through the cabin window, trellised with vine branches, and the circular forms of the panes were distinctly marked on the white floor of the room. Little Ferdinand, six years of age, was leaning on the window-seat beside his mother. His sweet countenance bore the appearance of health and innocence. The moonlight played among his long curling hair, and shone on the white collar of his shirt and scarlet jacket.

Poor Mary had sat down to rest herself; but her heart was sorrowful, and her mental sufferings were more overwhelming than her fatigues of the day.—She sat down to supper; a bowl of milk was on the table, but she could scarcely taste it. Little Ferdinand was also sad, and sat motionless; for he saw his mother plunged in grief. Seeing her weep, he began to cry too, and like her was unable to eat.

The cause of their grief we shall now relate.

Mary had lately become a widow. John, her husband, had died in the spring. He was one of the worthiest young men in the village, and through hard work had succeeded in laying by some of his earnings. He had purchased the cottage and orchard of which we spoke; but this acquisition had obliged him to contract some debts. He had also planted fruit trees, which already produced excellent fruit. Although Mary was an orphan, without fortune, he had married her for the good education she had received. She had also distinguished herself above the other young girls of the village by her gentleness, her piety and diligence at work, and irreproachable morals. The husband and wife lived in the most perfect harmony, when an epidemic ravaged the country; and John, attacked by the same malady, was carried off in a few days. His poor Mary had lavished her most tender cares on him, and scarcely was his eyes closed ere she herself was attacked with the same fever which had brought him to the grave. She was near following him, and recovered but slowly.

Her own, and her husband's illness had thrown her considerably in arrears, and, to add to her misfortunes, she saw herself menaced with the loss of her little cottage. John had for a length of time worked for a rich farmer in the neighbourhood. The latter, touched by his fidelity and zeal, and desirous to reward him, advanced him the sum of eight hundred francs,† to help to purchase a cottage and small garden. John was to pay it back by a hundred francs a year, half in money and half in daily labour.

He had been very exact in paying his benefactor, and when death took him from his wife and son, his debt amounted to no more than a hundred francs.—Mary was well aware of all these circumstances; but, the farmer dying himself a victim to the same epidemic, his daughter and son-in-law inherited his property.—Among his papers was the bill for eight hundred francs, signed in John's hand-writing. This acknowledgment fell into the hands of his successors, who never having heard any mention of the affair, exacted from Mary the reimbursement of the whole sum.—The poor widow, in consternation, affirmed, and called God to witness, that her husband had paid his debt, with the exception of a hundred francs. But she had no proof: she was treated as an impudent liar, and the young farmer summoned her before the court.—Mary was sentenced to pay the entire sum, which was declared due. The poor woman possessed nothing but her cottage and orchard: no other resource remained but to sell them. She threw herself at the farmer's feet, and conjured him to have compassion on her. The little orphan Ferdinand joined with his mother, and weeping, embraced the knees of

this harsh and cruel man. All was in vain.—The forced sale was to take place in the morning. It had just been announced to the unfortunate widow by a peasant from across the hedge while she was working in her orchard; and this it was which caused her such bitter sorrow.

Casting her eyes first towards heaven, and then on her dear Ferdinand, she burst into tears. Her look became fixed, and painful silence expressed still better than her tears the emotions of her soul. "O, my God," said she to herself, "this very day then is the last that I shall ever make hay in this orchard; these plums, which I have plucked for my Ferdinand, are the last fruits which my poor child will gather from these trees, planted for him by his father, and cultivated with so much care. This is, perhaps, the last night which we shall pass under this roof: tomorrow evening our house will be in the possession of another, and the poor orphan and his mother will not have where to lay their head."

At this thought her heart again overflowed, and the tears rolled down her cheeks.

At this moment, Ferdinand, who, until now had sat quietly weeping, and looking at his mother, approached her, and said, "Mamma, don't fret so, or I shan't be able to talk to you; do not cry; you know what my papa said to us when he was so ill in bed, just before his death. God, said he, pressing our hands, is the protector of the widow, and the Father of the orphan: pray to him in all your wants. He will have pity on you. These were my papa's words: are they not true?"

"Yes, my child," said his mother, whose feelings were calmed by these words.

"Well, then?" replied Ferdinand, why do you feel sorrowful? Pray to God, mama: he will come to our aid. When I was with papa in the forest, where he was cutting wood, I had not long to cry when anything happened to me: if I was hungry, if I was pierced with a thorn, I went to him at once; I asked him for bread, or begged him to take out the thorn which pained me; he always left his axe to give me food, or to dress my wound. God is like a papa; he is not hard-hearted and unfeeling like that rich man who repulses us, and turned us out of doors when we went to throw ourselves on our knees before him. Yet God is much richer than this man: look out of the window—see the moon and stars—all are his; the whole world is his, papa always said so. We must not weep so, mamma: come, let us pray to God, he will surely aid us; begin, I will pray with you. You will see if we do not succeed better than with the rich man."

"You are right, dear child," replied his mother, shedding sweeter tears, and pressing her son to her heart: for the child's words brought comfort to her mind.

Mary, too, was consoled; she clasped her hands, and raised her eyes, bathed in tears towards heaven. The moon-beams fell on the figure of the mother and child, and the tears in their eyes sparkled like dew drops. Mary prayed, and Ferdinand repeated each word.

"O, our father," said she, "listen to the prayer of a poor widow, and an unhappy orphan. We are in affliction; we have no refuge in this world. But thou art our Father; we call on thee in our necessity. Deliver us and let not injustice deprive us of this cottage. Nevertheless thy will be done. If it be thy intention to send us this trial, give us also, O Lord, strength to bear it meekly. Do not permit our hearts to be too severely wrung, when, driven from our house, and having reached the summit of the hill, we turn to take a last look at it. Teach us to profit by our sufferings. Grant only that we may find a place of refuge; however wretched, we shall be happy if thy Holy Spirit be with us."

Mary's emotion prevented her continuing. Her eyes were fixed upward with a mingled expression of hope and sorrow. Ferdinand stood by her side, his hands still firmly clasped, when he suddenly pointed at something with his finger: "Mamma, mamma, look! what is that little bright star coming towards the window? How pretty it is! O, mamma, 'tis like the stars of heaven. It is coming into the room. See, see, mamma, it has risen as high as the ceiling. How curious!"

"It is a fire-fly," said his mother; by day-light its appearance is not extraordinary; but at night it shines as you see, with a beautiful lustre." "Mamma," said the little boy, "can I take hold of it without danger? Will not its light burn like fire?"

"It will not harm you," answered his mother smiling at the artless and childish joy of her son; "take it in your hand to examine it more closely. This insect is another wonder of the Creator's power."

Nothing more was wanting to make Ferdinand forget all his sorrows. He ran to catch the fire-fly, which hovered about the room, now taking refuge on the chairs and then on the table. But at the very instant his hand was on the point of seizing the brilliant insect it disappeared between a large press and the wall. The child stooped down to look under the press.

"I see it very well," said he, "just close to the wall; its light shines all around it, and one would take it for the moonlight, it is so bright and clear. But I can't reach it; my arm is too short."

"Wait a moment," said his mother, "it will not be long before it comes out."

Ferdinand waited for a moment. However, he was very anxious that his mother would help him to catch the fire-fly.

"Dear mamma," said he in a gentle voice, as he approached her, "do make it come out, or just draw the press a little from the wall, and I can easily get it."

Mary rose, and did as he desired. The little boy took the fire-fly in the hollow of his hand, and began to examine it with the greatest attention; he was happier than a king.

In the mean time Mary was very differently occupied. At the moment when she drew away the press she heard something fall on the ground, that had been fixed between it and the wall.—She bent down to pick it up, and as she rose up, screamed out, "O thou good God!" she cried in a transport of emotion, "thou art come to our assistance. Here is last year's almanac, which I have so long and vainly sought. I can now prove that my husband paid the sum which has been demanded with so much cruelty and injustice. Who could have supposed it would have been found behind the press, which was bought with the house, and which has not perhaps been displaced since the cottage was built?"

Mary hastened to light a candle, and read, while tears of joy streamed from her eyes, the journal in which her husband had entered every important matter; and there she found detailed in full the different payments which he had made, whether in money or daily labour, of the sum which he still owed at the commencement of the year. At the end of the calendar was found the following receipt: "On St. Martin's day I have regulated my account with John Blum, who now owes me only a hundred francs."

Mary, almost beside herself with joy, clasped her hands, snatched up her child, and pressed him to her bosom. "Ferdinand," said she, "my dear Ferdinand, thank the good Lord, we shall not leave our house; we shall not go away!"

"It is I who am the occasion of that," said the child kissing his kind mother, "am I not, dear mamma? If I had not begged of you to draw out the press, you would not have found the calendar."

Mary was quite overcome. She sat motionless for some time, and, after she had in some degree recovered from the effects of her surprise and joy, she retired to rest with her child.

The next morning, her heart swelling with gratitude, she took her little boy by the hand, and repaired to the house of the magistrate, to whom she related all the particulars of the previous evening, and how the little fire-fly had proved, as it were, an index to point out the spot in which her husband's calendar lay concealed. The worthy magistrate was much interested in her story, and immediately sent for the young farmer, to whom he in turn mentioned the circumstance. The young man instantly recognized the signature of his father-in-law, and expressed the deepest sorrow at having been the cause of so cruelly injuring a poor unprotected widow, and addressing Mary with much feeling, asked her forgiveness, telling her, as a proof of his sincerity, that he would willingly excuse the payment of the remaining hundred francs; and that should she ever stand in need of assistance, he would always prove her friend.

Deep and overpowering were the feelings which possessed poor Mary's heart as, accompanied by her dear little boy, she retraced her steps, and at length came in sight of her beloved cottage now once more her own; and many and

* From the German.

† Eight hundred francs are £32.