

THE SIFTING OF PETER.

A FOLK SONG.

"Behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat."—[St. Luke xxii. 31.]

In St. Luke's gospel we are told
How Peter in the days of old
Was sifted;
And now, though ages intervene,
Sin is the same, while time and scene
Are shifted.

Satan desires us, great and small,
As wheat, to sift us, and we all
Are tempted;
Not one, however rich or great,
Is by his station or estate
Exempted.

No house so safely guarded is
But he, by some device of his,
Can enter;
No heart hath armour so complete
But he can pierce with arrows fleet
Its centre.

For all at last the cock will crow
Who hear the warning voice, but go
Unheeding;
Till thrice and more they have denied
The Man of Sorrows, crucified
And bleeding.

One look of that pale suffering face
Will make us feel the deep disgrace
Of weakness;
We shall be sifted till the strength
Of self-conceit be changed at length
To meekness.

Wounds of the soul, though healed, will ache,
The reddening scars remain, and make
Confession;
Lost innocence returns no more;
We are not what we were before
Transgression.

But noble souls, through dust and heat,
Rise from disaster and defeat
The stronger;
And conscious still of the divine
Within them, lie on earth supine
No longer.

—(H. W. Longfellow, in Harper's for March.)

BIRDS IN THE SNOW.

There was a very hard winter in the world. It was a hard winter everywhere, and the snow fell over land and sea so heavily, so blindingly, so continually, that ships were wrecked, trains were blocked, posts were stopped and traffic well nigh came to an end in many of the districts even of Southern England, and how much more in the always cold bleak North! Even down in Devon snow was deep and ice was thick—even in mild, moist Devon, where mostly in winter-time the roses blow, and the south winds too, and all is green at Yule.

Some little people who lived at an old vicarage on the Dart River did not know what to make of it. None of them, except Ray, the eldest, who was 7 years old, had ever seen snow lie on the ground at all; he had, and knew all about it, because he had spent a Christmas tide on the moors of the East Riding with his god mother; but his brothers and sisters Rob and Tam, and Dickie, and the little twins, Susie and Nellie, never had seen the earth white in this way before, and they were very much delighted and very much alarmed, which is a state of mind that has its pleasures at all ages, and its pains, too.

These six little mortals lived in a vicarage, and their father was the vicar, and mother, alas! for them they had none, for she had gone away into the sky (so they were told) when little Susie and Nellie came down from there to earth. "Perhaps, it is the down off mamma's wings," said little Rob, who could remember her very well and cried for her still, when he saw the fine snowflakes come falling down through the air. "If she had wings I am sure she would come to us," said Ray, wistfully looking up. "I don't believe she has wings; I don't." "But papa says she is an angel, and angels always have," said Rob, who was very positive. "She would come to us if she could fly," said Ray; "at least if God would let her," he added on reflection. "Don't you think if she said to Him, I want to kiss Rob and Ray and Tammie, because they miss it so, He wouldn't say no?" Rob thought a minute, then said to his brother "Papa always says 'No,' so perhaps God does too."

"Perhaps?" sighed Ray with a tired voice. "No" was always said to them, and how much sorrow that means in the life of a child!

The vicarage was an old long wooden house overrun with creepers, the very house to be a paradise for children and dogs, with all kinds of deep old casements and chimney-pieces, and corner cupboards and panelled passages; the very place for twilight romps and firelit stories, for fun and play and mirth and mischief, but fun and play, and mirth and mischief, were all a quartette frowned on at the vicarage, and though they crept in at times because they never can be wholly absent where six children are, yet they came in timidly and were in hiding for the most part, and never laughed out lustily or scampered about without fear. For a cold dark shadow was upon the house and the hearts of its children; and this shadow was that of their father. He was the vicar of the out-of-the-world parish of Goldenrod, that lay on the bank of the Dart in a secluded part of the county, as Herrick's did before him; but he was in every way unlike that

bright-hearted and genial country priest. Unhappily for his children he was of a taciturn and gloomy nature, very mean too, and very harsh, and the sound of his heavy foot along the passages made Rob and Ray flee trembling, and the younger morsels cry. What little tenderness he had ever had was buried with his wife under the big green yews on the south side of the church, and the children were afraid of him; sadly and terribly afraid.

Their father was a very good man; that is to say, he was very truthful, very honest, very laborious, never shrank from any duty, however distasteful, and never indulged in any pleasure, however tempting. But he was a stern man and rigid, he was also very mean, "close-fisted," Keziah called it. His parish was immense in extent, and very poor in what it rendered to him. There was scarcely a well-to-do person in it, and the vicar, though he had a snug sum in the county bank, and was by no means straitened, lived like a very poor man too, from inclination rather than from necessity; his thoughts were apt to be sordid, and his laws were apt to be harsh.

They were very happy very often indeed, because there were the old mossy orchards and the broad green meadows, and the hedges, and the woods, and the cattle, and the chickens, and the huge kitchen where they could curl on the wooden settles and eat their porridge and hear wonderful tales from Keziah, who was cook, and nurse, and dairywoman, and housewife all in one. Keziah loved them; she had seen them all born, and when their mother had lain dying, had promised never to leave them, and she kept her word, though she was a buxom woman, much beloved, and might have married the rich miller that had the water-mill eight miles away down the river. But there were many things Keziah wished to do for them that she could not do, because she never disobeyed her master, and she had to give them water when she would have given them milk, and cold porridge when she would have given them hot bread, and was often ashamed at the darned and threadbare clothes in which she had to array their little bodies—"the children that ought to be the first in the parish!" she would say to herself. "It is good to be a saint, no doubt, but it is bad to be a skinflint, too." For a skinflint she called her master, in the secrets of her soul.

When the snow fell she called him so more bitterly than ever.

The snow made all the little people very cold, and she could not set big oaken logs and good cannell coal roaring with flame up all the chimneys as she would have liked to do, and Goldenrod grew very damp and chilly.

"Run out, my chicks, and get warm that way," she said to them when the white covering that was so strange to them stretched over field and wold, and made the leafless trees and the swollen river look quite black against it.

Ray and Rob were taught their lessons by their father in his study, a little dark close place that was as terrible to them as if it had been a torture-chamber, for their acquaintance with letters was small and with the cane large, and their canings were always given them there. But this morning they were free, for their father had been called away to a dying parishioner on the other side of the big brown moor that shelved away from the edge of their orchards. So Rob and Ray ran out into the air and dragged their little brothers with them, and the babies even in their wooden cart, and romped about, and raced, and slid, and pelted, and danced, and made themselves merry, as though no cane were lying on the study table, and no blurred copy-books waiting, grim and grimy. They played at sledging, of which they had some prints in Christmas papers, and made believe the babies were princesses; they then played at being Napoleon at Moscow, whose story Ray had just come to in their "Markham's History," and were so delighted with their marches and battles, and their own deaths and burials in the snow, that they never heard the one step which at all times sent a tremor of fear through them. The cold voice of the vicar cleft the cold air like a knife:

"Are your lessons done?"

Rob, who was burying Tammie in the snow, and Ray, who was carrying Dickie as a frost-bitten soldier of the Old Guard on his shoulders, both heard, and their innocent sport ceased as a dog's play ceases at the sharp crack of a whip.

Ray, grown whiter than the snow, alone spoke:

"We have done no lessons, papa."

"What have you done, then?"

"We have been at play."

"Very well. Go into the study."

Rob began to cry, and Ray's lip quivered. They knew what the order meant.

"It was my fault, master, all mine," cried Keziah, running out, but the vicar put her aside.

"You spoil the children; that is well known," he said coldly, "but the boys are too old not to know their own duty."

Keziah spoke in vain; the boys were bidden to go to the study.

"Whip only me, papa," said Ray, timidly, "only me, please, because if I had staid in, Rob would have staid in too."

The vicar in his inmost soul recognized the generosity of the plea, and felt proud of his little son, but he did not seem to have heard it, and he gave both equal punishment upon the palms of their small, sunburnt, cold hands. Then they were shut in to do their lessons, with two hunches of dry bread instead of dinner.

The vicar was a man who held discipline in high esteem, and enforced it.

They did their lessons; Ray quickly, Rob tardily, both watering the pages of primer and copy-book with scalding tears. Then they huddled together in the deep bay of the one narrow window to hear each other repeat what they had had to learn by rote. The casement looked on the lawn at the side of the house; on the grass was a big old hawthorn tree, and under the tree were huddled together, like themselves, scores of birds.

"Do look at the birds," says Ray. "How pluffed out they look and how dull, and all their feathers stick upright."

"They're cold," said Rob, thoughtfully, and added with fellow-feeling, as he heard the sound of dishes and knives and forks in the adjoining chamber:

"Praps they're hungry, too."

"Hungry?" repeated Ray, who had never thought how birds lived. Then the colour flushed back into his little pale face, he jumped up and upset all the lesson books.

"Of course they are hungry—how silly I am!—the ground is frozen—they eat worms and seeds, and now they can't get any. Oh! the poor, poor, poor little things!"

He jumped off the window-seat, got his dry bread, and jumped on again, threw open one of the leaded window-panes, and crumbled up his bread and flung it out to the birds. Instantly they darted down, a motley little throng: Brown sparrows, gray linnets, speckled thrushes, chaffinches with their variegated wings, three big blackbirds, one tiny blue tom tit, and many robins. They were no longer dull; they hopped and pecked and fluttered and chirped to each other and ate in concert, and were very much better behaved than a finished crowd of human beings ever would have been.

The great hawthorn tree spread above them glittering with icicles on every branch, the white, hard, smooth snow was beneath them; the bright-natured feathered things soon grew themselves again, and their merry chirping made the frosty air alive with *Lieder ohne Worte*, as gayly as if the hawthorn tree were in flower and they at work in it making their nests. Rob and Ray were in ecstasies; they hung against the casement pouring out showers of crumbs, laughing and half-crying in delight at their clever and wonderful discovery that the birds in the snow had been hungry. They never remembered that they would be very hungry themselves, for in their excitement and sympathy they had crumbled away both bits of bread. They watched the little multitude eat every crumb, shake out their feathers, and fly away. One robin flew up to the lower boughs of the hawthorn, and sang as if he were deputed by the rest to speak their common praise and thanksgiving.

"Oh, how lovely!" cried Ray with clasped hands and caught breath. "Oh, how beautiful! Oh, how clever of you, Rob, to remember they were hungry."

"And me who isn't clever!" cried Rob, with a little chuckle of content.

"What are you doing at the window, boys?" said their father's voice.

All their joy ceased, and the robin flew away. Rob was the one this time to answer.

"We give our bread to the dicky-birds. It was me thought of it."

"All your bread?"

"Yes, papa; both bits."

The vicar frowned.

"Then you may go hungry until your tea-time, and remember that I will have no folly of this kind again. Keep your crusts for worthier objects. Birds are mere thieves. They steal fruit and grain, and it is God's merciful provision that frost should come to aid, amid other of His means, in the destruction of their numbers. It is very impious to interfere with God's designs."

Ray's face grew very weary and perplexed, Rob's very grave and resolute.

"God kills birds?" Rob asked at last.

His father replied, "The frost God sends kills them—yes."

"I don't like God, then," Rob said after a while.

"Hush!" said Ray. "God is good. Papa it is that makes some mistake."

Their father grew gray with horror, and stony white with rage. Were these blasphemers his own children!

They were once more punished alike. They were this time flogged instead of being caned, and their little stiff hands were set to write in large crooked characters, "Frost is a provision of nature, instituted by the mercy of God to destroy the numbers of birds that devastate the autumn crops of farmers and destroy the buds of gardeners' summer fruits."

"It is not true," said Ray between his teeth, as his hands travelled painfully over the long sentence. "I am quite sure it is not true."

"No, it isn't true," said his echo, Rob, whose chubby, fat fingers could scarcely manage, at the best of times, to make a round O, and now that they were numbed with cold could not do it anyhow. "I don't care for the farmers," added Rob. "The farmers trap the bunnies; that they do."

Ray did not say anything; his heart was too heavy for talk; he had read in one of the story-books at his godmother's of a northern country where a sheaf of wheat is tied up above the doorway for the frozen birds in winter time; he wished they were in that country. He and Rob cried themselves to sleep that night. For their little bones were all aching, and both their hearts too.

In the morning, when they got up, they ran to the window. It was scarcely light; a big

white moon was just vanishing over the brown edge of the moor; snow had fallen all night, the duck-pond was frozen over, the cold was great; on the sill of their casement there lay a little dead bird.

It was a young goldfinch.

Ray choked all over as he saw it; Rob's cheeks grew red with rage.

"Oh, the poor, poor, poor little dear!" they sobbed together, and life seemed so dreadful to them both that they clung crying to one another. This hard, cold, white world in which God let the dicky-birds die—it frightened them as they had been frightened when they heard the sods beaten down above the grave where their mother's body was.

Ray looked up suddenly with a great light in his eyes.

"I will give the birds my breakfast, and papa may kill me."

"Me, too," said Rob, who would not be behind in any act or word, though his heart gave a terrible throb, for he was very hungry this chilly morning.

"It will hurt to go without anything," he whispered. "Won't it hurt, Ray?"

"Of course it will hurt," said Ray, with scorn in his steadfast shining eyes. "It hurt all the martyrs, but they did it."

Rob shut his little, firm, rosy mouth, and resolved to demur no more.

Ray was always telling him about the martyrs, but Rob did not care much for them; he cared more for the bunnies in the traps.

"Let us go," said Ray, and together, hand in hand, they trotted down the old dark, steep oak stairs.

The children always had their first meal in the kitchen for the convenience of Keziah and the quietude of their father. They all sat round the deal table before the fire, the little ones in their high chairs, Rob and Ray on wooden stools.

For breakfast they had porridge sometimes; this morning they had milk and water in their mugs, and bread; and Keziah, for a treat, added honey, "because it is so high Yule," as she said, for it was the 23rd of December.

Ray looked at the honey and bread.

"Is this my own, this?"

"Yes, dear," said Keziah, wondering.

"I may eat it or not eat it as I like?"

"For sure, my dear. What big eyes you make, my Raidie, for naught!"

Ray looked at his bread with a swelling heart. He had all the hunger of a seven-year-old country boy, but he saw in his fancy all the birds of the world lying dying. He rose up and took his bread in his hands, and with a glance at his brother went to the kitchen door. Rob, with a tear rolling down each cheek, bravely grasped his bread and followed. Their nurse did not notice them, her back was turned as she fed the little twin girls.

"Papa may kill us, but God won't be angry," said Ray calmly, and never one of the martyrs he loved had felt more solemn and more sure. Then he began to crumble his bread and throw it out on the snow.

Rob took one big bite that he could not help, then valorously flung his away in large morsels.

From a lattice above them the voice of their father thundered:

"I will have no such waste in my household. Disobedient and wicked children! is my word not law?"

"He may kill me; I do not mind," said Ray, with a pale, firm face.

Rob frowned and looked surly.

"It isn't waste. It 'ud have been in our tummies, and now it's in the dicky-bird."

Meanwhile the feathered multitude of the old hawthorn tree and all the hedges round were flocking joyously down to share the alms.

Their father's step came down the stairs in haste and called Keziah.

"Job Stevens has cut his hand off chopping furze; he is at the point of death; they have come for me this moment; take these children in and lock them in the study; they will have their chastisement when I return."

"Yes, your reverence," said Keziah in amazement. "But, sir—Job Stevens' is sixteen miles if one, and in the snow!"

"I must walk, of course," said her master hastily; "no horse could get along. That is nothing. Lock those boys in, and do not let them out till I come back."

Then the vicar threw his coat about him and went out toward the moor in the teeth of the savage north wind. Rob and Ray stood motionless.

"My darlings, you heard the orders that the master gave," she said, with the water in her honest eyes.

Rob threw his fat arms about her.

"Yes, but he's gone, Nursie; you won't lock us in!"

Keziah hesitated, and kissed his curls. Ray's face changed from white to rosy red, and then grew white again.

"We must be locked in, Rob," he said sully.

"We mustn't get nurse blamed."

"Oh, the noble little lad you are, my Raidie!" cried Keziah, and sobbed over him. So locked in they were. At 1 o'clock she brought them their dinners, and looked wistful and longing. "His reverence said not till he comes back," she muttered, stroking Ray's hair.

"Never mind, Nursie," murmured Ray, "we do very nice here. We've done our lessons, and we can play."

"What's there to play with?" groaned Rob, who was lying on what he called his "tummy" underneath the table.