



THE  
SMOOTH  
HANDLE.

HERE are many pretty nooks and corners in England, but nothing much more fair and peaceful than a certain little village in one of the southern counties, which for the present we will call Elsenham. Certainly, people who like the noise and bustle of large cities might call it dull; but those who had dwelt there for the best part of their lives were not of this opinion. That Elsenham must be a healthy place was proved by the rosy cheeks of the children, the strength and activity of the larger part of the inhabitants. Those who were weak and ailing, were so from age, or some other such cause, and doctors' visits were so rarely needed that the nearest of that useful profession lived fully ten miles from Elsenham, and never found it inconvenient.

One of the villagers, however, might have been singled out as destitute of that quiet cheerfulness and content that we generally see on the faces of those whose home is in a rural neighbourhood. Harriet Evans was the busiest and most hard-working woman to be found in a day's walk, but there was an anxious restlessness in her looks, her tones, and her ways, that none who saw her often could fail to notice.

The secret of this is soon told. She was one of those unhappy people who make troubles out of nothing; who think of future possible griefs and losses when there are none in the present; who take the worst view of people and of circumstances, and thus destroy their own peace of mind, and that of every one who has any dealings with them.

Her two rooms were as "neat as a new pin," according to the old saying, for she had no one to make a litter there. In her early womanhood she had been left a childless widow, and now at fifty years of age she had laid by a nice little sum to secure her against need when work was impossible. But for the present Mrs. Evans was well able to earn money by her ironing and her beautiful fine-sewing, and the Elsenham people who heard her complaints and dismal forebodings were apt to say that "some folks never knew when they were well off."

"Yes, it's true that I've plenty of work now," Harriet would admit, when some of her neighbours told her she had good reason to be content; "but there's no saying how long it may last. Some of the families might move away, or I might get laid up and not do a hand's turn for weeks. I'm sure there are nights when I lay awake thinking that I may come to want yet, in spite of all the years I've been toiling."

These and many other such thoughts (with the aid, too, of her fretful, anxious expression) were enough to convince any one that poor Mrs. Evans had not laid to heart certain words of Scripture which say, "Casting all your care upon Him, for He careth for you."

All of a sudden her frequent complaints of loneliness were cut short, and for the future her grievance was that she no longer had "a quiet place to herself." A brother who had been away so long at sea as to be supposed dead, suddenly arrived in England, and when he proposed that he and Harriet should "jog along together," she could not well say no.

From his first appearance in Elsenham, Captain Morgan was in high favour. Not only the children, but the mothers and fathers were never tired of hearing his adventures during the sailor's life he had only given up because he was growing old. True, he was rough in manner, but he had a heart of gold; and big people as well as little ones soon find out when such is the case.

"Well, well, Mrs. Evans," said the neighbours now, "you are indeed in luck. As if you weren't well-to-do enough before, here's your own brother come back from foreign parts with a tidy bit of savings, to settle down with you till he dies. You'll not complain of being lonely any more."

"No, it's company, to be sure," was the answer; "still, though I'm glad to see George after all these years I fancied he was lost, it seems to me I could work better and feel more happy before he came. One gets used to being alone, you see, and my brother coming has put me rather about."

It is possible—indeed, some of the people who pretend to know everything were sure of it—that Captain Morgan was also "put about" by finding his sister so different from what she had been in their long-past childhood; but he never said so. Seeing that she was the cause of the worrying, discontented people of this world, the good-hearted sailor pitied her, and made up his mind to bring peace to her face if he could. "Dear, dear, Harriet!" he often exclaimed, "have you forgotten the old saying that there's two handles by which you may lay hold of everything? Take the smooth handle, sister, 'tis always the best plan."

Sometimes Mrs. Evans answered him sharply, "It was all very well for those who never troubled their heads about anything." At other times she turned away without a word, and kept silence for hours, so that at last the captain was forced to seize his glazed hat and seek the company of some of his boy admirers in the village. There were, however, moments in which Harriet really thought her brother was in the right, and wished she could "take things by the smooth handle;" but she absolved herself at the same moment from all blame by deciding it was not her way, and people could not change their natures at her time of life.

Yet, as time passed on, this woman began to understand that the captain's beaming face and bluff good-nature were not due alone to his natural disposition. He could talk freely of storms at sea, but the words would have stuck in his throat had he even tried to tell of a certain night when the old Bible stories of