

OUR NELL.

CHAPTER XVII.

Dreary days followed at the farm. To each of the elder members of the family had the catastrophe brought its individual burden. With Mr. Masters' pride was a passion and honour an idol. That the breath of scandal should ever dim the bright reputation of his name, that the imputation of blame should cause to shine less clear the uprightness of his own character, were calamities that had never taken shape in his consciousness as possibilities, and they held within them capacities of torture to a man of his spirit. In the village the tidings spread from neighbour to neighbour like wild-fire. There was, as is usual in such cases, a spice of maliciousness in the comments that were made upon the affair. Some blamed Mr. Masters for not looking after his daughter's behaviour. Others, of a more cynical turn, expressed their opinion that he had been in the right of it, and that it was a fine thing to get your daughter married to a rich gentleman. These even hinted that the father's anger was a mere blind to conceal his rejoicing at the success of his plans. Others, again, confined their remarks to Carry. She, it appeared, had always been considered a sly girl, putting herself too much above her station to come to a good end. Some, indeed, whispered, with a shake of the head, that, in their opinion, this prediction had been already fulfilled.

It need scarcely be said that no such constructions were put upon the matter at the Vicarage. Amazed consternation were there, and bitter disappointment that Walter should have so deceived them. There was about it a mystery also, which Miss Lettice in vain endeavoured to solve. Walter's conduct was inexplicable. If he honestly loved this girl, and wished to make her his wife, where was the reason for this utter and dishonourable secrecy? It did, indeed, occur to Miss Lettice to doubt for a moment, with a keen pang, whether poor Carry's pencil scrawl stood only for the dream of a deluded girl; but she repelled the doubt with force.

"I would stake my life that Walter is incapable of that," she cried, with energy. No, there was a mystery; nothing remained but to wait; tidings must surely come. But the matter weighed heavily upon Miss Lettice's spirit, hopeful and courageous as it was. The Masters family was plunged in deepest gloom, and for the two foolish young and exiled creatures what could be foretold but disappointment and vain repentance?

While the attitude at the Vicarage was thus sympathetic towards Mr. Masters, his towards them was one of angry suspicion, at times expressing itself in bitter invective. The main cause for this lay, doubtless, in the fact that here, if anywhere, he might expect to be blamed, and his pride was eager to forestall this by assuming an offensive instead of defensive position. He was, moreover, a man of strong though not tender affections, and his love for his children was rooted deep down in his nature. In profession, he had cast Carry off forever, and her deceit rendered her vile in his eyes; but in reality anxiety for her future entered largely into his feelings. Derwent had been, it will be remembered, a favourite with him, and this fact served to embitter the contempt and abhorrence with which he now regarded him. No act in his estimation could be too bad for him to perform. And with the injustice of unreasoning anger he vented his indignation on Derwent's friends at the Vicarage.

To poor Mrs. Masters, the affair would have had at first its bright side, had it not been for the attitude her husband had taken in it. Simple, loving, innocently vain, it appeared to her only natural that no one should think himself too good for her darling Carry. True, the de-

ception, the secrecy, had been strange and startling, and many bitter tears did she shed over her child's want of confidence in her; but she was sure it would all be explained. Carry would write in day or two and make everything plain, and then, if Mr. Derwent would but bring her now and again to see her mother, things would be right and happy once more. But when post after post and day after day passed by, and no tidings came, Mrs. Masters, from a state of feverish expectancy, sank into one of fearful depression, from which nothing could rouse her.

In Nell's share of the family trouble there was an added and a sharper sting, which rankled in her breast with keen smart. She had lost her sister, but she was bereft of love as well. She knew now how that love had been inwoven into the warp and woof of her daily life, now that every thought of Derwent was to her heart a stab of pain. She knew now that his harshness, and the hope of seeing him, had given a zest to her days, and a joy in the mere sense of living, now that she knew also that he had brought great darkness into her days to come.

Soon after the news reached the Vicarage, a note was brought to Nell. It was from Miss Lettice, and ran thus—

MY DEAR.—I know how terrible has been the shock of this to you, by the shock it has been to me. The suddenness, the mystery, make it hard to bear and wait with patience. God help them both, and bring them back to us! I have loved Walter as a son, and she is your only sister. They are in God's hands; let us trust in Him for them both.

May I come to you? I have not sought to see you, nor I will not unless you give me permission.

Nell was touched. Tears, which had come to her seldom in those days, and then with painful violence, came now in healing flow. She wrote a few words, and sent them back by the messenger. They were these—

Thank you, Miss Lettice, very much. I will some day call and see you; but, please, I cannot yet.

The same evening the Vicar called at the farm. His visit was disastrously ill-timed. The comments and reports floating about in the village had just come to Mr. Masters's ears, and, sore and angry as he already was, had all but maddened him. That he should be suspected capable of plotting to get his laughter married above her station, had the effect of increasing his unreasoning resentment tenfold. To advance a single step towards forgiveness would be to give colour to the rumour. Towards the Vicarage, especially, he nursed his wrath.

Nell opened the front door to Mr. Oliver. He looked at her gravely, but beyond a formal greeting, took no further notice of her. His errand was to her father. When he stood in the low doorway of the parlour, Mrs. Masters hurried forward to meet him.

"Eh, sir! this is good of you," she exclaimed. "Come in, sir, come in."

The Vicar shook hands with her silently, then turned to Mr. Masters. He was standing on the other side the table, training his eyes towards the visitor.

"Why have we the honour of this visit, sir?" he asked.

The Vicar's sensitive spirit quivered under Mr. Masters' tone.

"My friend," he began, "if you will allow me to call you so—"

"Nay, sir," interposed Mr. Masters, "I hardly see how that can be. When the lamb is robbed from the fold, the shepherd does not feel like calling the thief his friend."

"Oh, John, John! what art thou thinking of, to speak like that to Mr. Oliver?—Nay, sir, don't take any heed of him. He's not himself just now, poor man."

"Hold thy tongue, mother," said Mr. Masters, but he put his hand on his wife's shoulder, not unkindly.

The Vicar had straightened his bent shoulders, and stood at his full height.

"Masters," he said, "this injustice is not worthy of a man like you. God knows I feel acutely enough that he who

has been as one of my own family has acted in a manner unworthy of my name, and deeply do I deplore it. But it were indeed a terrible thing if the shepherd of God's sheep were himself to become a robber of the fold. Have I, or my sister, ever acted towards you and yours during the many years you have known us, in a way which could justify your bitter words?"

"No, no, indeed, sir," murmured Mrs. Masters, with her handkerchief to her eyes.

"May-be I am unjust, sir," answered Mr. Masters. "There's little inside of me just how but feelings, and one of them is that your family has brought on mine that which words, nor deeds either, can't amend. He's one of your belongings, sir, the villain that's stolen my daughter."

"If that be your attitude towards me," said the Vicar, "there remains nothing more for me to say, except to express—and that was my purpose in coming here—my fellow-felling with your grief, and my trust that you know where to look for sustaining grace. You will not refuse to shake hands with me?"

"No, sir; but there's a word I should like to say before you go, which I'd rather you heard from my own mouth than from the gossips. It is this, sir, that, be my days long or short, never shall I darken your church doors again."

The Vicar started slightly, the bodily sign of an inward shock. As he was about to speak, Mr. Masters interrupted him.

"Nay, sir, excuse me; I know all you'd say, and I'm not in the mood for arguments."

"So be it, Masters," and the two men shook hands silently, and parted.

An hour later, Miss Lettice tapped at the door of her brother's study. Receiving no answer, she entered. The Vicar sat at the table, his head buried in his hands. His sister touched him gently on the shoulder.

"James," she said, "what is it?"

He raised his head, and said, with a faint smile—

"The old thing, Lettice, the old thing; any life is now, as it ever was, a failure."

"What has happened, brother?"

"I have been to see Masters, and he has repulsed me. He declares, moreover, that he will never enter the church doors again."

"Oh, you don't say so, James! I am sorry, I am sorry!" and Miss Lettice's eyes filled with tears.

"You see, Lettice, how clear a proof is this, if I had needed any, of the absolute powerlessness of my influence among my parishioners. When trouble comes upon them, they fling me and my teaching aside. 'Yea, I have spent my strength for naught, and my labour is in vain.'"

"James, you are wrong—as you always are—on this subject. Oh, that you would not let this despondency eat away your courage and your common sense. Look at the facts of the case, and see here a man of fierce pride, and unsubdued will, blindly striking at all which seems connected with his grief. I, too, have had a repulse to-day, though couched in gentler terms than yours. See here;" and Miss Lettice showed him the note she had received from Nell.

"Brother," she said, in a solemn voice, "we are both cut off from this. Let us stand on one side, and see what God will do. He means to work alone, and His work is sure, and will never err. Let us take off our shoes from our feet, for this is holy ground."

(To be continued)

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ETERNAL VERITIES.—Nothing more ancient than God, for He never was created; nothing more beautiful than the world, for it is the work of that same God; nothing more active than thought, for it flies over the whole universe; nothing stronger than necessity, for all must submit to it.—*Thales.*

Children's Department.

IN THE CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL.

BY ALFRED TENNYSON.

AND she lay with a flower in one hand, and her thin hands crost on her breast—

Wan, but as pretty as heart can desire, and we thought her at rest.

Quietly sleeping—so quiet, our doctor said, "Poor little dear."

Nurse, I must do it to-morrow; she'll never live thro' it, I fear."

I walk'd with our kindly old doctor as far as the head of the stair, Then I return'd to the ward; the child didn't see I was there.

Never since I was nurse had I been so grieved and so vexed!

Eddie had heard him. Softly she call'd from her cot to the next:

"He says I shall never live thro' it; Oh, Annie, what shall I do?"

Annie consider'd. "If I," said the wise little Annie, "was you,

I should cry to the dear Lord Jesus to help me, for Eddie, you see,

It's all in the picture there: 'Little children should come to me.'"

(Meaning the print that you gave us, I find that it always can please

Our children, the dear Lord Jesus with children about His knees.)

"Yes, and I will," said Eddie, "but then if I call to the Lord,

How should he know that it's me? such a lot of beds in the ward!"

That was a puzzle for Annie. Again she consider'd and said:

"Eddie, you put out your arms, and leave'em outside on the bed—

The Lord has so much to see to! but Eddie, you tell it him plain.

It's the little girl with her arms lying out on the counterpane."

I sat three nights by the child—I could not watch her for four—

My brain had begun to reel—I felt I could do it no more.

That was my sleeping-night, but I thought that it never would pass.

There was a thunder-clap once, and a clatter of hail on the glass,

There was a phantom cry that I heard as I tost about,

The motherless bleat of a lamb in the storm and the darkness without;

My sleep was broken besides with dreams of the dreadful knife

And fears for our delicate Eddie, who scarce would escape with her life;

Then in the grey of the morning it seem'd she stood by me and smiled.

And the doctor came at his hour and we went to see the child.

He had brought his ghastly tools; we believed her asleep again—

Her dear, long, lean, little arms lying out on the counterpane;

Say that His day is done! Ah! why should we care what they say?

The Lord of the children had heard her, and Eddie had passed away.

ROBERT WATSON'S WATCH.

WHEN Robert Watson was about twelve years old, a kind relative made him the present of a watch. It had a beautiful appearance, and kept time to a minute. Indeed, Robert was very proud of his new watch, and was ready to tell the hour to any person. One day, however, he came to his papa and said, "Papa, my watch isn't going right. The hands haven't moved for such a long time." His papa took the watch and looked at it a little, and said, "I'm afraid, Robert, your watch requires cleaning. You had better take it to the watchmaker."

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