

THE LITTLE FOLK.

The King's Picture Book.

By S. M. CRAWLEY BOVEY.

An old man walked at sunset in the King's highway. His hair and beard were white, and his steps were noiseless as the tide on a summer night. On his shoulder sat a dove and a raven, before him flitted an owl, and he walked slowly, for the weight of years he carried was heavy; besides, he had other things. One hand held an hour glass, the other a reaping hook, and round the man's neck by a chain hung a golden casket.

Presently he halted, for a few paces in front was a little, ragged, barefoot girl, whose sad blue eyes looked out of a face that was thin and white, as no child's ought to be.

"What are you doing?" asked he of the hour glass.

"Nothing," answered she, half ashamed; and she put a finger to her lips.

"This is my highway," said the old man gravely, "and those who walk in it are my subjects; they are bound to serve me."

"Are you the king, then?" inquired the other with a wondering look. "If so, who is your crown, and what is in that casket?"

"I am King Time," was the gentle reply. "In this," and he glanced at the hour glass, "I measure my subjects' lives, and when the harvest of their good deeds is ripe, I reap it with this hook. My casket is full of nice things, gifts and treats, with rose-coloured hope at the bottom to beautify the rest. But," and a smile faded from the speaker's lips, "how is it that you are here idle, for none are too young to serve me?"

"I have no home, no parents," said the little one pleadingly. "Folk call me Dorothy, and I beg for bread."

"God's gift," murmured his Majesty to himself, yet thrown carelessly aside as if of no account. "Come with me," he added, kindly, "and I will find for you all you need. You must learn neither to misuse me, nor to become a slave."

Before long the pair reached a place where lived some rich people who had all they wanted except children, and they welcomed Dorothy gladly as a loan from the hand of King Time. Before turning to go, he strewed the floor with myrtle leaves and bright hopes from his casket, saying:

"She was a stranger and you took her in. On you will surely rest a choice blessing."

Dorothy prospered in her new home, and did her best to serve the old man who had befriended her, though she had not understood all he said, and wondered sometimes if she should ever see him again.

One night he visited the child when she lay snugly tucked into her white bed, and she welcomed him gladly because she knew him again by the birds and the hour glass. Instead of the reaping hook his Majesty carried a picture book, which he opened as he sat down, saying:

"Live and learn, dear, for the hour has come in which you must see some evil things that you may the better avoid them. Look here."

On the first page the gazer saw two girls, many years older than herself, one of whom had a gay piece of fancy work across her knees, and in the lap of the other was a novel. Yet neither girl was occupied, for the worker idly fingered a skein of tangled silks, and the reader lounged in an easy chair, chatting, with hands clasped behind her head.

"How slowly time goes in this dull place," said she with a yawn. "Life is hardly worth the living if there's not a dance in prospect, or a party of some sort."

The raven here croaked angrily, and the King whispered in Dorothy's ear:

"These are some of my would-be murderers, poor silly things! Their chief thought is how to kill time, as they express it. Now, look here."

The next picture was a gas-lit room, in which a bald-headed man sat poring over a big book at a desk, while his finger pointed to columns of figures. Soon a servant appeared at the door.

"Please sir," said he, "a poor woman has come to see you. May she enter?"

The bald-headed man glanced at the clock above him.

"Half-an-hour after business hours, Thomas. The office is closed, and she must come again to-morrow."

"She seems in great distress, sir, and has walked a long way," persisted Thomas. But his master only frowned as he shrugged his shoulders.

"Can't help that," said he, "I'm busy. She must call again," and the door was shut.

"That's a slave," explained the King. "He has grown into a sort of machine, and won't stir out of his way or stop for anybody."

Again the raven croaked, flapping its wings, and the page was turned over. On the next there were several small pictures, at sight of which the dove began to coo softly. One was the ward in a children's hospital, and between the rows of cots walked sweet-faced women in white caps, who gave smiles or tender words as they moved along, tending, comforting, amusing. Another scene was a prison cell, in which a chaplain talked earnestly to a criminal, who sat sullenly by with folded arms, while good and evil struggled together within him. Then came a village school full of happy child faces, with a mistress hard at work in their midst. Lastly, might be seen a couple of girls plodding through the snow to take a basket of good things to the inmates of a tumbledown, thatched cottage in the distance.

"I was sick, and in prison, and ye visited me," murmured the King, as he shut the book and rose to his feet.

"All these are doing something for others," said Dorothy, after a few minutes of thought. "Is that the best way of serving you?"

A sudden light came into the older's upturned face, and the dove fluttered down on the little one's shoulder, nestling there with a caressing air.

"Child," answered Time, "there is so much to be done for others, and so many ways of doing it, that there is no excuse for an instant's idleness. See, the sand grains in my hour glass are of gold, and when they have run through they can never be recalled, because I always replace them by fresh ones. Store them up, then, as they pass, and remember that each kindly unselfish action, every loving word, quarrel smoothed, or enemy reconciled, is an atom of gold laid up in my store-house to benefit you in the end. But woe to those who make themselves slaves instead of faithful servants, and doubly woe to such as misuse me."

"Hoot," said the owl, "these are true words of wisdom."

Dorothy's eyes were downcast, and when she next raised them the sun was shining, for another day had begun. But she never forgot that Royal visit, and, as she grew up, all loved her more and more, because she knew the secret of the best service for King Time.

A Friend in Need.

Brennus, more commonly known as Bren, is a friend of mine, who wears all the year round a glossy black coat, a magnificent tan waistcoat, and a white shoker. One look at his thoughtful brown eyes must assure you that Bren is gifted with plenty of sense, and a few hours in his company must convince anybody that he has the manners of a gentleman.

So thought Jack, who became in consequence a staunch ally, though he, unlike Bren, could not claim the smallest connection with the Collie family, nor indeed with aristocracy of any kind. Yes, truth to tell, Jack was a mere nobody, without a feature suggestive of a long pedigree! His tail was stumpy, his nose a snub, and his yellow eyes with red rims to them seemed to carry on the idea of his tight-fitting, reddish coat. He was accustomed to alights, and having no envy or malice in his nature, Jack was content that Bren should have the double portion of attention to which his appearance and manner entitled him. After all, both animals owned four legs, living hearts, and a language of their own, so they lived together under the same roof on excellent terms.

This being a true story, the reader must be told that Bren had a weak point—in fact, a bad one—in the shape of cowardice, and he would do anything to escape acquaintance with his neighbours' teeth. Few were ill-tempered enough to quarrel with such a well-conducted collie, but Bren had one enemy, a distant cousin in poor circumstances, who no doubt felt disgusted that his relation should be so much better off than himself. Bluff was a farmer's dog, a powerful beast, whose teeth and temper were well known as things to be avoided in all the countryside.

One day Bren trotted into a field, at the far end of which his cousin happened to be with the farmer. Bren espied his enemy, halted, sat down, and reasoned somewhat as follows for a short space: "There's that quarrelsome creature again. What a nuisance. If he sees me, there'll be a fight, and then he's sure to get the best of it; he always does. Yet I want to go on. Happy thought—I'll fetch Jack and we'll tackle him together. Two are better than one any day, and dear Jack is as brave as a lion."

No sooner said than done. With bushy tail lowered, Bren hurried home, told the state of affairs to Jack, and in a few minutes the friends were trotting quickly across the field. But Bluff soon caught sight of them, and rushed to battle, caring little for the fact that there were two to be dealt with, because the red dog was less than half his size, while Bren was a born coward. Bluff, however, did not reckon on Jack's pluck and endurance; so, after a pitched battle, the sheepdog was fairly driven from the field, leaving the friends to go their way, covered with wounds and glory.

The farmer who watched the whole affair with some amusement told this story to Bren's master and from him I heard it only the other day.