

THE CARRIER'S NIECE.

BY NELSIE BROOK (MRS. ELLEN ROSS).

(Concluded.)

AFTER tea Flora looked about her and said, "Don't you like pictures, aunt? I see you have none about."
 "I don't care for 'em, they harbours dust," said Mrs. Prescott.

"But they make a room look so lively and pretty, and often make you think of pretty things, too," said Flora. "For my own part I can't bear to see a room without them, and they are very easily dusted, you know. I have some that would look very nice on these white walls—gay-coloured pictures from the *Illustrated London News*, and some on my music, which I could mount prettily. My cousin Alfred taught me the way. Wouldn't you like to have them up, aunt?"

"Praps I shouldn't mind," answered Mrs. Prescott. "We'll see."

After tea she sat down to stocking-mending, on a pair that was very much darned already, and thin, too. Flora, having dived to the bottom of her box to get the materials for the cushion, sat down busily to work.

"Are you stocking-knitting, aunt?" she asked.

"No, only mending. I never learnt to knit properly. My mother got me down one leg of a stocking, but when I got to the foot I was fair baffled, and gave it up. If I could knit I shouldn't be darning these thin wove rubbish, I guess."

"I'll knit you some, aunt," responded Flora instantly. "I'm a fast knitter, and understand stockings like A, B, C. If uncle will bring me some yarn from Bagley on Monday, I'll get you a pair ready next week."

"Bless the child," exclaimed Mrs. Prescott, with a softer light in her eyes than had shone there for many a day, "How many more things are you going to do for me, if you've thought of them already since you came? It's something new to have a body offer to do anything for me. Somehow I feel so alone, like a pelican in the wilderness, as Scriptur' says."

"Well, you won't feel alone while I am here, at any rate; for I shall follow you about like your shadow if you will let me," said Flora, smiling kindly on "Vinegar Jane," so that she was unable to resist the fascinating influence, and allowed a smile to make its way into her face, and dispel every trace of sourness from it. George looked up furtively from his paper, and saw the smile which his wife gave Flora, and how comely it made her look for a moment. "Poor Jenny," he said to himself, "I've bantered her for her nagging ways, gave her the name of a scold, teased her, and got angry with her many a time; but it have all made her only harder and more nagging, like. But here's Flora have broke her down in a minute, and changed her from a snarling cat into a lamb. How's that, I wonder?" He ruminated for a minute or two and then said, "I think it's because Flora has got a real loving heart; and she looks below all her ungracious words and ways, and feels for her—feels sorry as she's got tempers as makes her act so, and she's a-trying to wake up new feelings—better and kinder ones. Now that's what I never tried to do. I've bullied her for them she had, but never tried to wake up better, and yet how many times I've heard it said, as 'Love begets love,' and kindness begets kindness, to be sure. In one way I *hain't* been unkind to Jenny. I ha'n't knocked her about, or swore at her as some fellows would, but then I've never showed her that sort o' kindness as knocks ye down surer than a blow, as Flora have done to-night." George was a man of action, and having got thus far in his ruminations, he looked up at his wife, and said as naturally as if it was his wont to speak so kindly—

"Jenny, my dear, this is Saturday night, and we've got a visitor; just you think of somethink nice as you'd like for supper, and I'll trot out to Morgan's for it, and if it wants cooking, I'll do it without a bit o' mess, and save you the trouble."

Mrs. Powell was about to give him a great stare of astonishment, but as soon as she raised her eyes to his they fell again, and her face flushed as she bent over her stocking. In her embarrassment she said to Flora, "What would you like, Flora?"

"Anything you like, auntie. In my opinion there's nothing nicer than your sweet bread-and-butter and some warm milk."

But that would not satisfy George. He felt inspired to

act magnanimously, so he drew on his coat, and marched off to the village "provision warehouse," and brought back two pounds of German sausage, and some real Stilton cheese, which Morgan said he had got in for the folks at Montreal House meaning the Danverses. That night Mrs. Prescott slept very little, *not* owing to her supper though, for she ate but a morsel, her heart was too full to allow her to eat, and it was just that unwonted fullness of heart that kept her awake. Sometimes she felt half savage that she had allowed herself "to be rode over by *his* niece," and then she asked herself how was it that she was so conquered? It was not awe of the girl, her airs and graces, the dress and grand manners, for simple-hearted Flora had none of these. It was that she had come with a heart full of love, sympathy, and pity, in a generous, self-forgetful spirit, and taken the old woman by storm; she completely overcame her by love, and Mrs. Prescott was so vanquished that she over and over confessed to herself that she felt quite new-like somehow, and that she'd not be able to help keeping a quiet tongue in her head as long as Flora was there.

Yes; and she grew quite to love the girl, to feel satisfied only when she was near her, to be impatient when she went out a jaunt with her uncle, or anywhere else; and at last she grew desperately jealous when she saw with those keen, observing eyes of hers what was coming of Harry Danvers's frequent evening visits "to have a chat with George." Was it for George he came so often? And why did he always sit away from the fire where he could see Flora, and not draw up to the hearth with George, as he used to? What if the evenings were warmer? At any rate, why did he keep his eyes on Flora so? These and similar questions Jane sometimes pettishly asked her husband, who answered them by saying the room was so pretty now with the pictures, so sweet with the flowers which Flora gathered every day for her aunt, and so comfortable with cushions to the chairs, that Harry Danvers liked it almost as well as home. Why did Jenny begrudge his coming a bit oftener? Wasn't he going to America in the autumn? Then they should never see him again.

Meanwhile, Flora frequently spoke of getting a situation, but was always silenced for the nonce by her aunt's, "Tut, tut, child! Be quiet where you are a bit. There's time enough."

As the summer came on, it was patent, to all who chose to observe, what was going on between Harry Danvers and the carrier's niece; for they met, talked, walked, and evidently took mutual pleasure in each others company.

Mrs. Prescott watched them—not with anger, spleen, or rank jealousy, but with great misgiving and sinking of heart. She had become gentle as a child with Flora, and seemed to cling to her with more than a mother's fondness. This had such an effect on her character, it so softened and womanised her, that her neighbours were struck by the change in her manners, and the village urchins ceased calling her nicknames.

Mighty in its power for good was this earthly love; but a higher, a Divine love was stealing into the yearning heart of lonely Jane, working wonders in her. For during those quiet, happy summer months Flora, by her gentle persuasiveness, and by the silent influence of her sweet character, constrained her aunt to sit with herself at the feet of the Good Master, whose loving disciple it was her joy to be. Every evening, after the work was all put away, and they sat together for a little converse, before going to bed, Flora got the large family Bible from the little side table, where it had stood almost undisturbed ever since George and Jane had been married, and read portions to them which fell upon their ears like good news from a far country.

"La, bless me! I didn't think there was half as much in the Bible as there is," remarked Mrs. Prescott, one evening, when Flora had been reading, and, in her own simple way, commenting upon the fifteenth chapter of Luke. "I ain't much of a scholar, though I can read a bit, and I've never cared to trouble to sit down and search out them lovely things as 'ud just suit me. Then I ain't much of a churchgoer: the church is a good three mile, t'other side o' the village, and there ain't no chapel about these parts, and I'm mostly too tired on a Sunday for a six-mile walk: I ain't as young as I used to be. And so, you see, Flora, I knew very little about all these things as is as familiar to you as your own name. It's a disgrace to me to own it, and what a loss, too! Yes, I feel it. Why, if I'd known about the love of God years