

"Which of you suggested this mad piece of folly?" asked the master sharply, looking up for an instant, though without pausing in his work.

"I, sir," replied Robin, without a moment's hesitation.

"Ah; I thought as much. If White dies—"

He broke off abruptly. A glance at the lad's white, agonised face told him that there was no need to point a moral.

Robin's remorse for that night's work was poignant enough to change the young master's righteous anger into pity.

"You had better go home at once," was all he said; but Robin still lingered. He could not go until the awful suspense was put an end to one way or the other. Half-an-hour passed, and still the two worked on without bringing a sign of life into the awful stillness of Arthur's face; then Mr. Langley happened to look up, and his eye fell on Robin, whom he had imagined safe at home by this time.

"Why don't you do as you are told, sir?"

he said sternly. "Do you want to get your death of cold? Here, Dobbin Major, you don't seem to have distinguished yourself so far"—for the master's keen eye had taken in the significance of that figure on the bank—"come and take Hume's place, and you, Fergus, take that shivering idiot home, and tell his mother to give him a hot bath. I'll send the doctor round to have a look at him, when he's done what he can for poor White."

There was a hopelessness in Mr. Langley's tone as he said the last words, which went to Robin's heart, as he set off for home with Fergus.

"We'd best run," said the elder boy, but Robin shook his head.

"I can't, I'm half frozen," he said, through his chattering teeth; and Fergus grasped his arm, and never let go till he saw him safe in his mother's arms.

Half-an-hour later, when he had had his hot bath and a warm drink, and, safe in bed, was at last beginning to feel warmer, he heard the doctor's step on the stairs.

"Mother! mother!" he cried, in an agony,

"go and ask him—I daren't—if Spider's dead!"

He buried his face in the pillows: the suspense was more than he could bear.

"It's all right, my lad," said the doctor kindly, and Robin burst into tears. "We've brought him round," the doctor continued; "but I can't, of course, say what the effects of the chill may be. He hasn't your cast-iron constitution, you know."

But Robin could take in nothing beyond the fact that his little friend was alive.

"Thank God! Oh, thank God!" he said.

Arthur White did not die, though for some days he was very ill; and as soon as the danger was past, Robin was his bright, merry self again.

Nevertheless, the lesson of that night was not quite lost on him. One of its results was to change the half-contemptuous protection, which he had hitherto extended to little Arthur, into a warm and lasting friendship, which was of service to both boys in more than one episode of their future life.

(To be continued.)



"WILLOWS AND WATER."



WE are well into the month of December, but no snow has come yet to put a pall of pearly white on the year's dying face. Still the touches of colour have gradually been growing rarer, and there has come a look of quiet maturity into the features of the scene.

"Nor spring nor summer beauty have such grace

As I have seen in an autumnal face,"

said old John Donne of his friend Mrs. Magdalen Herbert, and so we think of December's self as we watch these quaker greys and gossamer trappings of the year's close. The prevailing pearl and russet tone, like the sober wedding attire of Jane Eyre, is a very fitting background for the few gems of bright colour that still remain, as was Jane's serene calm face for the ardent heart beneath. From the top windows of the house the eye wanders to the red-tiled roofs

of the upper village, across the sage-sere network of that which as we look down upon it might be called the orchard-roof. How bright saffron those branches of mistletoe are with their pale berries in the dark bare branches of the apple-trees. Brighter still looked three red and yellow apples still hanging on the bare boughs in the last three days of November. What a joy it is, in our walk to come on a great withy-bed with the yellow twigs tinged with red which swell almost imperceptibly to the breeze, and remind us of the freer motion of the summer's corn-field. The vivid green of those strips of cabbage in the cottage-garden paint the brown face of the earth with hues as gay as a gipsy's scarf against her sun-burnt cheek.

The raven-black of the privet-berries peeps from the winter-hedge and studs its dull surface with countless little eager eyes that give more brilliancy for all their blackness than the rarer treasure-trove of the lurking deepest-purple sloe.

Heavy rain descends and soon lies on the surface in this flat willow-land, and then the high road gleams like a silver stream, or a milky way in the surrounding dun. Evening falls and Hesperus shines in a pale gold sky that has that intense pure thrill of rarity that only winter air possesses.

The days pass on and it is little more than a week to Christmas and yet no snow has come. But other hands than those of frost have been at work to shift the scenes for us. Water has risen in all the low places, and our rich meadow-land has become a world of meres taking all the colours the sky paints upon it, gleaming blue and silvery white and sullen leaden grey. Not many years since our little country town became a tiny Venice, with

the poor flooded folk skilfully threading their way in boats to the windows. Things are not as bad as that this year, but enough rain has come to give a subtle touch of romance to our home-landscape, like the light in the eyes of some village Hester on her marriage morning. The withy cutters are sore at being swamped out of their winter work of withy cutting, but for all that the rain will in the main be a blessing to the country-side.

At any time the walk by the disused canal has an especial Dutch charm of its own, but now that the waters have overflowed the banks the young willows stand nearly mid-stream, and in the clear crisp air with no breath of wind they seem to bend lightly over, like Tennyson's "straight staff bent in a pool" to look at the curving sister-willow in the water-world below, making a soft flush of winter colour where their bare red plumes touch the pale blue sky and the clear water. Across the canal the hedge that runs up between those two fields meets the towing-path with a hawthorn that has been allowed to grow at its own sweet will. Look what heavy-laden boughs of dark red fruit it sprays out on every side. How they take up the tender yellowish red of the willow-heads and give it a deeper note. A plain black bridge that spans the stream with no suburban attempt at so-called ornament ends the harmony of hue with its still form reflected in the stream.

This winter the very hedge-rows have been orchard-ranks of dark-red hawthorns almost plum-coloured, and the holly has given a Christmas look already to all the hedges where it gleams and puts forth its sturdy brilliant fruit. The little birds are very happy over the frequent pools. We see them fluttering their little feathers in them and