

## FAMILY DEPARTMENT.

## EVER NEAR

BY F. B.

*"Be strong and of a good courage... And the Lord, He it is that doth go before thee."*

Erst while flow'ry paths we trod,  
Seeking but our own delight,  
E'en forgetting that our God  
Holds us ever in His sight.  
With fortune's smile of kindly cheer,  
What need to know our best Friend near!

Pleasure's garden full in view,—  
Oh, to revel there at will,  
Ga her flowers of richest hue,  
From sparkling fountains drink our fill!  
Enraptured with these scenes so dear,  
We soon forgot that Friend is near!

But when storm-clouds fill the sky,  
Tempests rock our little world,  
Chilling blasts are sweeping by,  
Roses all to ruined whirl,—  
Oh, then, amid our wildest fear,  
We joy to feel *one* Friend is near.

When the storm has cleared away,  
When we stand and view the wreck,—  
Hopes more bright than dawning day,  
That shall ne'er our brows bedeck,—  
Oh, then, when falls the bitter tear,  
To comfort, that true Friend is near!

Long we for a life complete;  
Striving with unaided might  
For that goal. Our weary feet  
Falter, till, adown the height,  
There comes a voice all silver clear.  
"Take courage, child! thy Friend is near!"

## "AND HE SHALL GATHER THE LAMBS."

A STORY FOR THE YOUNG PEOPLE.—Continued.

Little Sarah had never seen the snow. She knew that it was beautifully white: for some of the children who had run past the cottage playing snowballs two years ago, had told her so. Now and then she would go to the door, and plunge her hand into it, as it lay piled up against the walls, and try to imagine what the trees in the plantation and the road down to the little church looked like with the snow upon them. That was all she knew of the country-side—the plantation, and the road to the church. Her mother had been used to take her to the plantation of a summer's evening to listen to the birds, and to church of a Sunday morning; and that was all she knew. There was no one to take her any longer; her father had cursed her one Sunday when she had asked him timidly whether he would take her to church. She had forgotten the way to the plantation: it was through the out-fields, and down some by-paths: and her only walk now was up and down the lane for a short distance.

So she would take the snow up in her little hands, and ask the wren how the plantation and the road to the church looked with the snow upon them.

"I can't go out now, little wren," she would say—"not even down the lane—'cos I am blind, little wren. I can't see. Dear little wren, will you come again to-morrow? 'Cos if you don't come, there won't be any birds singing anywhere. 'Cos the blackbird is gone somewhere from the plantation, little wren. I don't know where he's gone to. I hope he'll come back again. Good night, little wren, and please come again to-morrow."

She was very lonely and cold in these chill cheerless days, for she was poorly clad; and there was for one whole week no coal in the house. Her father had spent his week's wages

in drink, and was forced to wait until the end of the week ere he could get the money to buy coal. Their food ran short, too. Once or twice then her wistful little face was pinched as if with hunger; but she never once complained.

"Dear little wren, I am very cold," she said once; and those were the only words of complaint she uttered.

She had been alone all day. Her father had not come home to his dinner, as was sometimes his wont. It was nearing Christmas-time, and the work was kept well in hand, to enable the labourers to take a day's holiday. The snow was still on the ground, and the dull grey sky, with something of a shimmer of steel colour lying here and there across it, seemed to threaten a second fall. It had been freezing since early morning. At three o'clock in the afternoon the rooks had gone home to rest. A robin had perched at mid-day on the edge of the water-cask; but he had probably found the ice-bound rim too cold for his feet, for he had flown away almost immediately. He had not twittered even once; so that she had not known he was there. Later on a sparrow came to the same place; and he, too, flew away. Later on still the dull rattle of a cart might have been heard on the turnpike road, across the fourth or fifth field from the cottage; for there the snow had been beaten down by the traffic. These things were the only signs of life that one might have heard or seen near the cottage since the early morning, save for the little wren that still sang on manfully at intervals all through the day.

The black night-shadows came down. The distant hills loomed grimly against the dull clouds. A moaning wind swept across the snow-clad fields, and sang a sad tune through the bare hedgerows. The wren ceased to sing in the elm-tree. Save for the occasional moan of the wind, it was a land of still darkness.

She had prepared her father's supper. Then she had stood at the door for a moment, listening for his footstep. But the stillness had frightened her, and she had gone to the corner and had sat down, with the fear at her heart, upon her little stool. The wind rustled the boughs of the elm-tree just once, and then died away. A piece of hardened snow fell from the roof on the window-sill with a dull thud. An owl hooted once in the fir-wood on the slope of the hill, and then became disheartened. All these faint sounds caused a painful terror to arise within her. She could hear the quick beating of her own heart as she sat there.

She could not repress a cry of terror when someone suddenly knocked at the door. The snow was deep in the lane, and had deadened the sounds of footstep. She could not keep back the cry of terror that rose to her lips. She shrank into the corner, and put her hands out imploringly, as though to ask for mercy, and almost simultaneously the door was opened. It was a pale, thin woman who appeared in the door-way. She was a foolish woman, or she would not have come to this helpless blind child with such a message.

"Little Sarah Carter," she said breathlessly, "if you don't want your father to be killed you had better come down to the 'Crown' at once, and try to get him home. He's goin' to fight with three men, and they are all on 'em drunk, him and the three men, and they'll kill Joe Carter as sure as life if they begins on him!"

The child had put her hand to her heart when she heard the first sentence.

"Oh, take me down to him!" she said, sobbing. "I don't know the way, mum; I am blind, Oh, please take me down to him!"

And a few seconds later these two were running down the dark lane, hand in hand. The cruel snow bit its way through the blind girl's poor little shoes, and numbed her feet; but she knew it not. She kicked violently against the sharp-edged stones that lay scattered about the lane; she did not feel the pain. These men were going to kill her father—her dear

father; and she must go and try to get him away. On through the snow; on, struggling through drifts, and striking her tender feet against these large stones. Twice she fell; and once a briar, protruding from the hedge, caught her cheek and scratched it so deeply that the blood trickled down to her neck. But they were going to kill her father; that was all she knew.

The public-house was at the foot of the lane. In the snow, in the centre of the lane, the four men were struggling. They could hear their brutal oaths as they came nearer. This foolish but kindly woman never knew what happened afterwards; but the next moment the blind child, guided by the sounds of the oaths, was in the midst of the men, with her hands stretched out imploringly, as she had stretched them out in the kitchen a few minutes before, and crying—"Oh, my dear father! Oh, please do not hurt my dear father!"

It was all the work of a moment. The woman ran forward with a scream of horror. There was a dull thud, and the child was lying senseless on the ground. Her own father, aiming in his drunken rage at the face of one of the men before him, had struck her to the earth.

## III

The yellow hammers came, darting down to the ash-copse as of yore. As of yore the black-bird whistled in the plantation; and the plovers piped 'Wes-ah-wee! wee-ah-wee!' about the cornfield; and the children shouted at play as the reapers reaped the corn; and the breeze rustled the tremulous leaves, as it sang a low, sweet song up the country-side.

As of yore the wren chanted gently in the stunted elm-tree. But Sarah could no longer go to the door to speak to him, for she was forced to be from morning till night, and from night till morning, in her little bed in the back room up-stairs. Sometimes, indeed, she would try to speak to him, but her voice was too weak to go further than her bed-room door. And then she would whisper, with a smile on her face, "Dear little wren, will you please to come every day until—until I am better, and—sing loud for me to hear you? I am listening, little wren, although you can't see me," and here she was forced to gasp for breath.

Since that cruel night when she had run through the snow and darkness, she had lain thus: her face a little whiter than usual, and her breath rather shorter at times. There did not seem to be much else the matter with her; only she could not get up. And her father (who, strange to say, had not drunk a single pint of beer since that terrible night) would come up-stairs after his day's work was over, and look upon her wistfully, and sob quietly, as though his heart were going to break; and would sit by her side the whole evening, holding her hand and smoothing her hair.

"Oh, but she would be better soon! Oh, yes, she would be better soon! The summer would come before long, and then she would grow well again," he would say to himself; and then he would lay his head between his hands and sob.

Summer came, and made music in the land; the yellow-hammers darted hither and thither, as of yore; the thrushes warbled in the distant woods; the golden light of the sun fell across yellow corn, and through the green leaves of the copses; the summer came, and still she lay in her little bed.

And could any woman have been more tender with her, than her father was now? He would sit for hours and watch her face, while the big tears crept down his cheeks. He would live upon dry bread for days together, that she might have some little luxury to eat. He knew her every want, almost before she knew herself. He would stand by her, and smooth her hair, and coax her to eat the dainties which he had so carefully cooked.

One evening he came home earlier than