

NOTHING LIKE TRYING.

BY JOHN ESTEN COOKE.

Life after all is a kindly affair:
Why is it stupid and not worth the living?
Striving and getting wont drive away care—
Try giving.

Scowling and growling will make a man old:
Money and fame at the best are beguiling;
Don't be suspicious and selfish and cold—
Try smiling.

Happiness stands like a maid at your gate:
Why should you think you will find her by roving?
Never was greater mistake than to hate—
Try loving.

THE OAK OF THE VILLAGE.

"Dunn't nobody tell me! When the Trevors come to these parts, sentries ago, the Squire—if they called 'em squires in them times—brought w' him a fair young bride. So, when their son an' heir was born, there was fo'in' doins, and the mother, in 'memoration, planted the acorn from which has come that oak. The rooks that cawed in the elms then have died—the elms themselves 'as died—but there's the oak, hale and hearty. The lightning struck it, the wind's blowed it; yet there it stands as firm as ever, and, while it do, the Trevors will be squires at the Hall!"

The speaker was the old sexton. He had just closed the vault of the Trevors, and, with spade and mattock on shoulder, stood among the graves in the shadow of the ancient, square-towered church in which Squire Trevor had that day been laid to rest.

"That, my friend, is, I suppose, the superstition!" smiled the new vicar, scanning the old church with the look of an antiquary.

"Superstition! Well, if truth be superstition, p'raps it is, sir."

"At any rate, the present Squire, they say, is different enough to his uncle—a spendthrift, or worse."

"Mebbe. The Trevors have all been a bit wild at first; but they settle down, you see, sir—they settle down when they marry. Squire Marmaduke will marry and settle down like the rest."

"It is to be hoped so," said the vicar kindly.

"At any rate, he'll marry; that you may be sure, for he's the last Trevor, he is, and the family's bound to live as long as the village oak. Now, sir, I've locked all up, p'raps I may go!"

"Certainly, my friend. Good evening!"

The sexton, his opinion of the new vicar by no means raised by this conversation, plodded his way to the ale-house.

The vicar, his head bowed, his hands behind his back, went slowly through the peaceful churchyard, a quiet smile on his lips. Now and then he would stop to try and decipher the erinkum-crankum letters, as the sexton termed them, of some old tombstone, then go on.

"It's an ancient place," he smiled, "and an ancient family, and will be more so if the worthy sexton's belief is founded on fact."

Reaching the high-gate—no better proof of its antiquity could there be than the church's possession of it—he crossed the space of road, and entered the Vicarage garden.

The blinds that had been lowered out of respect to the defunct Squire were still down; but approaching the long window, which was open, the vicar put back the blind, and stepped into a charmingly cool room, pleasant with the odour of fresh rose-leaves.

The occupants of the apartment were a pretty girl, with brown, soft eyes, small, delicate features, and chestnut hair, and a young man, owning a pleasant, manly countenance, and a well-shaped, easy figure.

As the vicar's shadow had fallen on the blind, the young man had moved so far away from his fair companion's work-table that, aided by the heightened colour of the lady's cheek, that action was more suspicious than his close proximity to the piece of furniture.

"Hullo, Ned! found us out already!" said the vicar, with a smile.

"The fact is, sir," replied the young man, returning the warm hand-pressure, "your description of the old church, the place, and especially that village oak, was too tempting for me to resist. I made leisure, packed up my knapsack, and came down."

"Ah! I understand," remarked the vicar, dryly, and he did understand perfectly well. "The attraction, no doubt, is great to an artist; and his glance wandered to his pretty daughter. "By the way, Jennie," he proceeded, "I have a contribution to your album of 'Family Superstitions.' That village oak has one twined about its ancient branches."

"Has it really, papa?" she smiled, leaning upon his shoulder. "What is it?"

Ned Graham also showing much interest, the vicar told what the old sexton had said.

"Why," laughed the artist, "there is a capital subject for either a picture or a poem."

"Then, I suppose, papa," said Jennie, gaily, "if one night the old oak on the green were to be blown down, there would be an end of—"

"Mr. Trevor, sir!" said the servant, opening the door.

A merry glance passed between the young people.

"Exactly!" smiled the vicar, as he rose and went into the library, where the new Squire awaited him.

The Squire was a handsome man of about thirty, but with the expression of one whose

time had never been well employed. The eyes were bold and dark, the mouth dogged more than determined.

As the only heir to the late Squire, who had died a childless widower, Marmaduke Trevor had led a wild, reckless London life, aware that his future was assured.

The death of his uncle had suddenly aroused him from an existence as idle as dissipated, and he had hastened down to the Hall.

He was by no means loth to take possession, and had already formed plans for a merry future; but the drear solitude of the place at present was unbearable to one accustomed to a succession of amusements.

So, using his own words to Mr. Cathcart, "He had taken the liberty of throwing himself upon the vicar's hospitality."

"Indeed you are welcome, Squire!" the clergyman rejoined. "No doubt you do find it dull, especially to-day. This quiet, slumbrous village is a striking contrast for one used to the great city. We will go into the drawing-room. There are younger people there, who will make it, no doubt, more cheerful for you."

The Squire readily assented, and, for the first time, beheld Jennie Cathcart, in whose society he had not been long before he felt towards her as he had never before felt to any woman.

Those of the fair sex with whom he had associated had not been of that description to win respect, and the freshness and purity of the vicar's daughter came to him as a draught of pure air to one accustomed to breathe noxious gases.

Seated talking with the vicar, his look followed her everywhere, but lowered darkly as he detected the evidently high place that Ned Graham held in her regard.

Marmaduke Trevor was too versed in the art of love-making not to comprehend the apparent chance by which hand so often touched hand as Jennie and the artist played a game of chess, and the frequency with which they exchanged glances across the mimic battle progressing on the board.

The two young men left the vicarage together—Ned to the village inn, kept by the old sexton, the Squire to the Hall.

During the evening the superstition of the oak had formed one of the subjects of conversation; and Marmaduke Trevor, as they reached the green, stopped, with a laugh, beneath its branches.

Many of the latter were leafless, seared by lightning and tempest; but proudly it reared itself aloft like some old stalwart knight, whose dented armour proved rather its strength than its weakness.

"Not until I fall shall fall the house of Trevor," quoted the Squire, smiling. "Those, they say, were the words of my fair ancestress, written on parchment and buried with the acorn, from which sprang this grand old tree. Well, then, surely am I safe, for this iron trunk will weather many a gale!" And he placed his hand on the rich brown lichened bark.

"Your children's children, Mr. Trevor, will, I do not doubt, repeat the same words!" laughed the artist. "There is no decay here; though, for that, we might, perhaps, look rather at the root than the trunk. But now I must say good-night, or my superstitious host may wonder where I am."

Shaking hands, they parted.

"I don't like him at all," thought Ned, entering the inn.

"That fellow will be an obstacle to my success with Miss Cathcart," reflected the Squire. "Yet perhaps not. Women are ambitious, and, to become Mistress of Trevor Hall, would be a great temptation. Yet, supposing some engagement exists between these two, and the girl holds to it! Then I should but admire her the more, and be the more determined to make her mine!"

The days passed on, and the Squire's visits to the Vicarage were frequent.

"Wild Trevor," people remarked, had evidently turned over a new leaf on succeeding to the squirearchy. The reputation of Marmaduke had preceded him, and fear had been entertained that the old Hall would be made the scene of gaieties to which the term "orgies" might be applied.

But apparently the sexton was right. He, as other Trevors, would marry, settle down, and become a worthy supporter of the ancient name.

Certainly it looked like it to see the young Squire dropping in for a chat with the vicar respecting some improvement in the church or village, lingering about Jennie's work-table, persisting in helping her in gardening, or accepting a cup of her five o'clock tea, according to the hour of his visits, which were at all times of the day.

"It shows," remarked the rector, one afternoon, looking up from his book, "how wrong it is to judge any one who has life before them."

"I would rather he came here less often," remarked Ned Graham.

But the vicar had returned to his book, and Jennie only heard the words.

"For shame!" she whispered, smilingly, glancing at the artist. "You would not surely prevent the poor Squire's reformation! His coming here may do him much good, while it cannot harm us. You cannot be jealous!"

"If I were, I should deserve to have cause to be," he replied, in the same tone, gazing fondly on her. "But you guess, surely, Jennie, if your father, engrossed in antiquities, does not, the true reason why the Squire comes here so frequently!"

She looked at him, her brows prettily arched. She could not fail to read his meaning in his expression.

"Nonsense!" she smiled, shaking her head.

"Don't make me vain!"

"If I were able, I should also fear—"

"What?"

"That you would be ambitious, too!" he answered. "Vanity and ambition do not unfrequently run in couples, Jennie."

"Then I'll leave vanity to your sex," she laughed, "for ambition is mostly theirs."

"Really! But mark my words respecting the Squire!"

Not many hours elapsed before the artist's warning was verified. The next morning Marmaduke Trevor, appearing early at the Vicarage, requested to be allowed a few words in private with the vicar.

When closeted together in the study, he confessed the passion with which Jennie had inspired him, and proposed for her hand.

Mr. Cathcart sat a while silent. He had listened in surprise—with regret.

Not the slightest suspicion had he had of the Squire's feelings.

Never would he have conceived it likely that a man holding the position and wealth of Marmaduke Trevor would have sought for a wife the daughter of a vicar possessing but a mediocre living.

His silence, the perplexity marked on his visage, inspired the Squire with confidence. Evidently the poor parson was overwhelmed by an offer so unlooked for.

"Surely, Mr. Cathcart," he remarked, "you must from the first have seen the impression your pretty daughter made upon me!"

"Had I, Squire," broke in the vicar, quietly, and rousing himself, "I should have felt a guilty man in your presence at this moment. I declare to you I had not the least idea. It never crossed my mind that you would ever have desired so to honour my family. Had it, believe me, I would at once have informed you of that which, with much pain, I must now tell you."

A dark shadow fell on the Squire's face.

"And that?" he asked in a low tone.

"My daughter is engaged already; has been so for some months, to—"

"Spare me his name!" interrupted the Squire, raising his hand. "You mean the artist I have met here. I knew from the first he was my rival."

"Scarcely rival," responded the vicar. "He had been accepted before Jennie had the honor of knowing you."

"And, had I been the first, Mr. Cathcart, might I have had hope! Should I have been indifferent to your daughter? Am I so now?"

"Indifferent, Squire! Most assuredly not. Had you met her first who can tell what might have been the result?" proceeded the vicar, anxious to soften his refusal, noting the agitation beneath the Squire's forced outward calmness, and pitying him. "But now—"

"Supposing I, if you will allow me, refuse to accept the 'now' as you would put it!" broke in Marmaduke Trevor, leaning a little forward.

"Mr. Cathcart, I mean no offence to your daughter; but to change is a woman's privilege. Think what I offer her! All the marriageable ladies in the county would jump at the position. They make that too apparent for there to be conceit in my saying so. The settlements should be made according to your and her desire."

The vicar had frowned at the opening of this speech; but he had quickly banished his dark look, though his tone was grave, almost severe, as he responded, "Do you mean, Squire, that you think my daughter capable of proving faithless to the man she loves now because of a wealthier, grander offer?"

"I said it was woman's privilege to change, Mr. Cathcart—that, as they should be, women at times are ambitious."

"That is true, unfortunately; but, I trust, not Jennie. Yet, in justice to her, let it be she who decides. She is in the morning-room, Squire. Ask her. If she consent, I can answer for Mr. Graham relinquishing his claim, and for my accepting you as a son-in-law."

"I thank you. I will, at least, try."

The vicar watched him from the room; then, with some anxiety, sat waiting his return.

Could Jennie—would she be dazzled by his offer?

Not a quarter of an hour had passed when a quick step on the gravel path caused the vicar to look through the window toward it. It was the Squire leaving the Vicarage.

"I knew it!" ejaculated the clergyman, with almost a cry of joy. "I knew I was not wrong about Jennie. Come in," for there was a tap at the door, and his daughter entered.

"Oh, papa!" she said, with sad reproof, "Why did you send the Squire to me?"

"For your sake and his, my darling," answered the vicar, taking her in his arms. "And your reply, Jennie?"

"What could it be, papa! How could I be untrue to Ned! What wealth and position could compensate me for his love?"

"None, pet, that could bring you such happiness. But the Squire!"

"Ah, I am very sorry for him. He seemed so pained. He said that in his love for me he had hoped to redeem the past. He asked me if I had never seen Edward, whether I could ever have cared for him?"

"And your reply?"

"That it might have been—very likely I should. I could not tell what to say. I was so sorry for him!"

And Jennie leaned her head sadly on her father's shoulder.

Neither Jennie nor the vicar would have so commiserated the Squire had they seen his dark, lowering looks, and if they could have read his thoughts, as he proceeded through the Trevor woods to the Hall.

That he should be refused by the daughter of a vicar whose living was in his hands, and for a pitiful artist, with about three hundred a year! After all, it was the artist alone that was to blame. Had he not existed, Jennie Cathcart might have loved him, Marmaduke Trevor!

But he had existed. Still, supposing he were not to exist! So thought the Squire, as he went homeward, the evil of his nature, held in abeyance during the hope to win a return of his love, now regaining full sway.

Thus stood matters when October arrived. The autumn had come in rough and stormy, with intervals of heavy, even sultry weather, that made the old saw, "A warm Christmas, a fat churchyard," ever on the sexton's tongue.

The evening of the ninth was of the latter description—dark, heavy, oppressive; and the Squire wiped the perspiration from his brow, as he stood among the slumbering woods, waiting—for whom? Evidently this poaching, hang-dog-looking fellow that came slouching towards him, for on his appearance he made a step or two forward.

"I'm here, Squire," said the man, doggedly, touching his hat, but keeping a few feet distant.

"I trusted yer. Still," with a swift glance among the trees, "ef 'r've got any of yer darned keepers in hidin', let 'em look out, au yer, too, Squire; I'll die game!"

"Have no fear," said the other. "Come nearer, Stacpool. I am alone."

After a moment's hesitation, the man complied.

"Listen to me," proceeded the Squire, in low but firm accents. "You are ever a suspected, always a hunted man; no one will give you work. Every magistrate is acquainted with you. You are a man not to be trusted, not to be believed!"

"Did you ask me to come here to tell me that?" snarled the man. "What's the use? Don't I know it a'ready! You sed you'd be a friend. How can a feller with my reputation git on here! I ask you that!"

"You are right. You're like the mongrel cur in a big town. He must either steal or starve. In Australia you would be another man."

"Australia!" ejaculated the other with a quick eagerness. "If I could only git there! If, instead of bullying and badgering, they'd only send me there!"

"I'll send you there," said the Squire, lowering his voice. "More, I'll pay your passage out, and give you the means to start!"

"You will!" said the poacher, incredulously. "Yes, in earnest," (showing gold), "this shall be yours to-night. Only I require a service for it."

"What! Whatever it is, to git away from here, I'm yer man!"

"Do you know the artist, Edward Graham?"

"Him as is going to marry the vicar's daughter?"

"Yes," with a fierce spasm of the features. "He returns here to-morrow night. The roads are lonely. I hate him! If he never reaches the Vicarage alive, your passage to Australia is assured. Do you understand?"

"Who wouldn't!" retorted the poacher. "Well!"

"Didn't I say I was yer man!"

Wild and black was the evening of the next day. A gale of wind such as never had been experienced for years swept across the land. No rain fell, but vivid was the lightning that shot down now and again from the clouds.

For reasons of his own, indeed, that no suspicion might rest on him, the Squire had passed the day at a town in a contrary direction to Sarcombe; but, tortured by anxiety, and eager to learn Stacpool's success, having an appointment with him, at ten, despite the weather, he had mounted his horse, directing his head towards the Hall.

Soon he was far from the town, in the darkness of the land, the fierce wind tearing around him, making his horse stagger, and his own seat unsteady. More than once the animal had reared at the lightning, and turned before the wild assault of the blast, but by whip and spur the Squire had forced the shivering, frightened animal on. With difficulty, for in three-quarters of an hour they had not traversed as much of a mile.

All who know anything of horses are aware of the brief space there is between fear and panic. Just where the road was densest and wildest a vivid flash rent the clouds, setting, as it seemed, the whole earth on fire, followed by a fearful crash of thunder, so unparalleled that it made the strongest hearts tremble.

The Squire's horse reared, uttering a scream, then, with dilated eyeballs, dashed on, the bit betwixt his teeth.

That fearful crash aroused the whole village. Jennie Cathcart, alarmed and scared, reflected how pleased she was that Ned had sent a message deferring his return until the morning.

The old sexton had sprung fairly from his bed.

"Bless us, missis!" he ejaculated; "sure the world's come to an end! Save us! what a gust of wind!"

A gust, indeed! It howled and tore across the village, crashing down chimney-pots, rending off loosely-fastened shutters and signs, unroofing