

The Richest Man in the Parish.

THE richest man in our parish was the squire. He dwelt in a great house on the hill that overlooked, with its broad white face, the whole of the village below, with its clustering cottages, and neat farmers' houses, and seemed to say proudly as it looked down, "I have my eyes on you all, and intend to keep you in order." And in truth, a great many eyes it had, with its rows of high windows brightly reflecting the summer sun, from early morning, till evening, when not unfrequently the last flush in the west left them glowing as with red fire. When strangers looked up at the great house, and inquired about it, the people of our parish used to tell them, with some awe, what treasures of grand furniture, and pictures, and choice specimens of art, the squire had collected in its many handsome rooms; what was the worth of one picture alone, that he had refused thousands of pounds for, and the number of others that were beautiful enough, and valuable enough, to have adorned the palace of the Queen.

They were very proud to be able to say that so rich a man belonged to them, and lived among them, and to point out his crimson lined and curtained pew at church, and the great tombstone that stood behind the pathway in the churchyard, recording the virtues of his ancestors, and testifying, as well as it could, to his own riches.

I suppose the squire knew the homage that was paid to him, and liked it, and was proud in his turn, not of his neighbours, but of himself, and of the wealth he possessed. Whenever he rode abroad he met with bows and smiles from rich and poor—everybody made way for him, everybody courted him. A man with so much money, and so much land, and such fine furniture, and pictures, and statues, and gardens, was not to be pushed in a corner and thought little of, and he knew it as he went along the lanes and roads on his thorough-breds, and nodded to this man, and "good morning-ed" that, with some degree of condescension. He knew that he was courted, and admired, and deferred to, because of his riches, and was quite satisfied that it should be so. He did not wish to be thought ill-natured, so he gave, every year, a treat to his workpeople, and sent money, and coals, and blankets to the poor at Christmas, but he thought little more about them. They were poor, and he was rich; those two words "poor," and "rich," comprised a great difference, and he was quite well pleased there should be such a difference.

One summer morning, he was taking a ride through the woods that skirted one side of his estate. It was very hot, and in the lanes the sun and the flies teased both himself and his horse, so when they turned in beneath the shadow of the oaks and beeches,

it was a great relief to both. The squire gave Dandy the rein, and went along softly. He was soon thinking of other things than oaks and beeches. Perhaps the glitter of the sunshine here and there, as it lay upon a cluster of trembling leaves, or turned to richer red the tall heads of the willow herb beside his path, suggested the crimson draperies and gilded ornaments of his home, for he was thinking of a sight he had seen there only the day before; when at the birthday of his eldest son had been a grand gathering of friends, and a feast such as a rich man makes to the rich, with dainties, and spices, and wines, served in gold, and silver, and rarest china in the utmost profusion, and with the greatest display. He remembered the hilarity of the guests, the healths drank, the speeches made, the compliments so freely given and taken; and with some pride he remembered, too, it had been said, that within the memory of man, no one had given so grand a feast in the parish as he had done that day.

Dandy's feet fell softly, and made little noise on the soft carpet of grass and last year's leaves that covered and hid the stout roots of the oaks. It was no wonder then that presently the squire heard a gentle sound not far away. He became aware that some other human being than himself was in the wood, and checking his horse he listened a moment, as words, half prayer, half praise, met his ears. "Who could be praying here?" He asked himself, and as the voice was near, he pushed aside a bough or two, and stretched his head, till he could see into a little shady hollow not far from the roadside, and discover the strange wood-guest.

Ah! it was only an old man, a pauper, or next door to one, whom he had frequently seen before, breaking stones by the highway.

But what was the deaf old man about? "Praying?" With his eyes shut, and his head uplifted, and his hat just taken off, held in his toil-swollen fingers, while before him was spread out his dinner, a piece of dry bread, part of a small loaf, and a can of water by his side, into which a frolicsome ray of sunshine had tumbled gleefully, dancing upon the pure liquid, as if in joy to get there. Bread and water, nothing else; but the old man was thanking God for it, and was content. *More than content.* An expression of happy praise was on his uplifted face. Such an expression the squire had not seen on any face at his own loaded table for many years. And he was thanking God for bread and water, and was happy! The old man was a sincere Christian, one of God's "hidden ones."

The richest man in the parish did not understand, how, when the soul loves God, the least mercies from his hands are felt to be priceless blessings; how bread and water, with a thankful heart, are sweeter to the taste than any food without it; and he felt humili-