

## THE OLD FARM-HOUSE.

"Misfortune never comes singly" is an old saying, the truth of which we found, my good papa and I, during the eventful year that followed the death of my lamented and dear mamma. We had scarcely recovered from the grief occasioned by her loss, when some commercial transactions in which papa was engaged proved failures, by which he lost a large sum of money. Then our private residence took fire, and the excitement and exposure I suffered, having barely escaped with life from the burning building, told heavily on a system already enfeebled from sorrow and anxiety. The consequence was that I became ill and continued so for some weeks; but youth, and a naturally good constitution, together with the assiduity of a skilled physician, and the unwearied care of a doting father, triumphed in the end, and I was saved.

When I was convalescent, the good doctor declared I needed change, much of my ailment having been due to mental disquiet. "The very thing!" cried papa, "I find the state of my affairs will compel me to visit England this summer, and I will take Ada with me."

But Dr. A—— gravely shook his head:

"Say, my dear sir," he replied, "your daughter certainly requires change, but change combined with quiet, and entirely free from excitement; and that, I think you will agree, we could scarcely look for in what you propose. No, what I should recommend would be a sojourn of a few months at some pleasant, country place, where she would have the advantage of quiet, and pure air."

Papa looked puzzled, for we had no relatives or even acquaintances living in the country; and he knew that I should be unhappy among total strangers who might be persons with whom I could have no sympathies in common.

But coming home from business, that same evening, the look of anxiety had vanished from his good-natured countenance.

"You know Burt, Ada? Burt, of Burt and Fawcett?" he exclaimed questioning.

Yes, I knew the gentleman by name, having heard papa casually mention him in connection with business. He was a merchant, I knew, and a bachelor, and lived in a boarding house down town. This was all I knew of him and much I marvelled whether the enquiry tended.

"Well," pursued papa, "I met Burt to-day, and speaking of my approaching departure, I happened to mention how the doctor had put his veto on my little scheme of taking you with me, and his recommendation of country board; and fortunately enough Burt knows the very place that will suit."

"But is Mr. Burt sure?" I began.

"Why it's his own brother," interrupted papa, "he is a well-to-do farmer, living out at St. C——, a retired romantic place, Burt tells me. There won't be any children to annoy you with their noise, for the family consists of Mr. and Mrs. Burt and an only daughter, a young lady of about your own age, who will, I judge, be a agreeable companion for you. There is an only son too, I believe," continued papa, "but much to his father's regret, and his uncle's delight, he has forsaken the plough for the pen, and has commenced his commercial training in his uncle's office."

I could offer no reasonable objection to papa's plan, which promised to suit admirably; so he lost no time in communicating with Farmer Burt, to whom his brother had likewise dispatched a letter to the same effect. We received a prompt answer from the worthy farmer, expressing his pleasure, and that of his family at the prospect of having me for a guest.

So I began to pack up immediately; for papa desired to see me settled in my new home before his own departure. I had some pretty jewels, much prized both for their intrinsic worth, and the halo of sentiment that hung about them; for all had been living gifts to my deceased mother and myself. They were all contained in a little casket of rare wood, strongly banded with steel; and as I placed it in my trunk, papa laughingly told me to be very careful of them, for he was not so rich as he had been, and would be ill able to replace them in the event of their being stolen.

Of course I replied in the same spirit; for we both desired to appear cheerful before each other in view of our impending separation, the first we had experienced since our bereavement.

Off at last; through the dusty city streets; on board the shrieking cars, and flying along through the pleasant open country, to the little station of L——, the nearest point from which to reach our destination. Past farms, where the labourers stopped their work, and shaded their eyes with their sunburnt hands, to watch the flying train. Past little barelegged urchins, leisurely driving meek cattle along and staring curiously up at us as we rushed by. Past little villages, with the neat white cottages clustering round the little central church, like sheep about a shepherd. Past gardens gay with poppies, and tall hollyhocks, and roses, and scarlet runner beans, all mingled in sweet confusion; and past lonely pastures, out of sight of any dwelling, but dotted with a few sheep and cows.

L—— station at last, and we got out, nervously and apprehensively, on my part at least. There is a long rambling building something like a cattle shed, this is the station. There is a two-story house with many windows, and a sign, "The Railway Hotel." There is a less pretentious one in which the station master lives, and two or three little stores, that is all, and this is L——.

A quiet-looking young fellow clad in homespun steps up to papa and enquires deferentially, "if he is the gentleman to go to John Burt's," the prefix "Mr." is seldom heard in this primitive region; the minister almost invariably enjoys an unquestioned monopoly of the title.

This is the hired man sent to meet us, and drive us to the farm which we reach in about an hour.

I know not how it was, but I felt confident of being happy, directly the Burt homestead greeted my vision. I was delighted with the old farm-house and its surroundings. The house stood at some little distance from the road, and was approached by a straight avenue, bordered with poplar, and evergreen fir trees, planted alternately. A neat fence ran along on either side this avenue, with its trees, intended to keep off predatory cattle. As the man descended and opened a white gate, allowing us to pass in, a young foal galloped up to the fence, and greeted our mare, evidently its dam, with a gentle whinney, which she returned.

The house was painted white, with red doors, and window frames; but the somewhat glaring effect of this was toned down by the luxuriant hop vine, which ran up over the gables and hung in festoons from the roof. A large clear space in front of the house was occupied on our approach, by a graceful young girl, engaged in feeding poultry. A broad brimmed home-made sunhat shaded her face; but as we approached, the scared poultry scattering on either side, she lifted the heavy brow with her little shapely, but sunburned hand, and revealed to us a pair of bright eyes, filled with an expression half shy, and half pleased.

Her first impulse seemed to be to hide herself, probably remembering the corn still held in her large useful-looking apron; but taking sober second thought, she did what was certainly the most pleasing, because the most natural thing she could have done, came forward, and gave us welcome with a heightened colour certainly, but in a few well-chosen and courteous words.

Arrived in doors, we were duly presented to our hostess, Mrs. Burt, a comely buxom dame of fifty, resplendent in a cap with mauve ribbons, and one of her best dresses, a black alpaca, evidently donned in honour of our arrival. I knew it was one of her best dresses, because of the apologetic air with which she wore it, and from the fact that directly night began to close in, she suddenly appeared in one more suited to her tastes and occupations, a homely calico. About the same time, farmer Burt put in an appearance, he having been absent superintending some fence repairs on a distant part of the farm, they told us.

He was soon in high confabulations with papa, principally about brother Wal, whose affairs he imagined papa must be thoroughly conversant with, even to the average amount of customs he enjoyed in a day. He did not seem to be aware that none are such strangers to each other, as those who are crowded together in a great city.

The next morning papa left, after committing me to the tender care of Mr. and Mrs. Burt, and the sisterly companionship of their daughter Fanny.

Fanny and I soon became like sisters in very truth. Together we roamed over the broad fields, and confided to each other our girlish dreams and fancies. I told Fanny about my city home and city friends. And she told me of her troubles in poultry raising, which interested her because the profits were exclusively hers; about the two years she had spent at a city boarding-school; about brother Walter and his many noble qualities; and finally about a certain blue-eyed young farmer who admired her greatly, and to whom I soon felt convinced pretty Fanny had lost her heart.

And not only on personal or local topics did we converse; Fanny was fond of reading and in her quiet life had found much time to indulge her taste in this respect; she was a wise and intelligent girl, a thinker as well as a reader, and I soon found that in her I had a most instructive companion.

On Sunday we went to church. It being at some distance, the old folks drove thither, but Fanny declared there was a charming short cut across some fields, and through a narrow strip of woodland, which we would take; and as I was always delighted to have the opportunity of a quiet chat with her, I consented, and we set off.

The little stone church was not quite in the village, but stood some distance from it, on a grassy eminence, starred with dandelions, and with a background of dark firs.

The small congregation was gathered outside when we arrived, and many were the furtive glances bestowed on the young "town's lady," by the younger members.

"You'll set the fashions!" laughed Fanny as we took our homeward route along a grass covered woodland, the thick branches interlacing above our heads, and sheltering us from the hot rays of the sun, which, however, stole in at intervals, and formed fantastic patterns of light and shadow beneath our feet.

And she spoke truly; for next Sunday I perceived some one had been endeavouring to copy the fashion of my new silk mantilla, poor Madame Mode's *chef-d'œuvre*; but it was so execrably done, that I imagined how Madame would have held up her hands in professional horror, could she have seen it.

This circumstance formed a fresh subject for mirth between Fanny and myself; in fact, I was always observing some new item of interest, in studying the habits of this primitive people.

And so the peaceful days went by, and I was soon rejoicing in more than my former strength, and in what I had not known for months before, an exuberant flow of spirits. I had received a cheerful letter from papa, announcing his safe arrival at Liverpool, and his continued good health. This I answered with a glowing account of the good people with whom I was domiciliated.

I began to take a great interest in all the details of farming and in the farm servants. One man in particular I noticed as appearing to be very strongly attached to the family. Seeing that I noticed this, Fanny gave me his brief history: "He is a townsman of yours, dear Ada," she said, "and was employed as a porter. He was a great drunkard and was several times sent to prison for being found intoxicated. At last a graver crime brought a greater punishment. His appetite for drink drove him to steal a quantity of liquor from his employer, a wine merchant, and so when he regained his liberty, no one would employ one whose dishonesty had become so well known. My brother Wal had known him (his name's McCabe) during a short time he had been employed in uncle Walter's store, and meeting him one day, ragged, and starving, and hearing his pitiful story, he took compassion on him, and sent him out here to work on the farm, where there is no liquor to tempt him; and we are none of us sorry for it, for the poor fellow has proved his gratitude in many ways."

Of course I thought it was a noble thing for her brother Walter to do, and a good thing for poor McCabe; but still I did not relish the fact of his actually having been in prison for stealing, and while scarcely knowing the reason why, I took a careful survey of my little jewel box, that night, before retiring, and securely locked it up.

Fanny had been telling me her brother Walter was expected home in few weeks, for the summer holidays, but we were none of us prepared to see him enter, one evening when we were all at tea, hot, dusty, and tired, having walked from the station. He seemed in a perturbed state of mind too, although he tried to appear natural and cheerful. He was a fine-looking young fellow, and made a favourable impression upon me, even under the disadvantageous circumstances of his first appearance. He had his mother's clear, ruddy complexion, his father's manly height and breadth of shoulder, and his sister Fanny's shy, brown, earnest eyes.

I saw a rapid glance pass between Fanny and her mother, when he came in. It expressed mute enquiry on the part of the daughter, and pained conviction on that of the mother. Evidently they feared something was wrong.

The trouble was soon revealed to the fond and sympathizing mother, however, who told Fanny, who told me.

Walter had been in company with some young men, who had either a greater command of funds, or a greater contempt of the bugbear called debt than he had. Their example had led him into expenditures scarcely warranted by his means; the fact had come to his uncle's ears, who being a self-made man, regarded everything like this with holy aversion; the uncle had expressed his disapproval in terms more forcible than satisfactory; a quarrel had ensued, the uncle refusing to receive him back, till his father had settled these liabilities, and so poor Walter had come home to break the news as best he could.

He had a powerful auxiliary in his mother, however, who ruled her household in love, and exerted an influence over her husband, greater perhaps than the good farmer would have cared to acknowledge; so Walter's mind seemed more at ease with his mother in his confidence, as I suppose he trusted implicitly in her will and ability to carry him through the ordeal.

"Walter's room was fitted up for you," observed Fanny to me, "so Walter takes the wool room now."

Next day her brother joined Fanny, and myself, in our customary ramble, and my previously formed impression of this young gentleman was assuredly not changed for the worse, as I became better acquainted with him. He was polite and attentive without obtrusiveness, and I mentally decided that his sister's praise had not been dictated by mere partiality.

We were on a berrying expedition that day, and our ramble was extended beyond its usual limits. We had to cross some fences, and Walter's strong arm was ever in readiness to lift me over these obstructions, which Fanny laughingly sealed without assistance, being rather proud of her superior training in this respect.

Arrived at home, we made a delicious repast on the raspberries we had gathered, with the addition of some cool, rich cream from Mrs. Burt's dairy; and after tea went out into the garden, an immense irregular inclosure, half orchard, and half garden; for there were vegetable plots between apple and plum trees, and marigolds forming a border for cabbage beds. To my mind there was something homely and comfortable in this old-fashioned, unpretentious spot, and it was a favourite haunt of Fanny's and mine. McCabe had put us up a swing between two hoary apple trees, and here we had been wont to amuse ourselves by the hour, like two school girls.

This evening, Walter and Fanny showed me what I had before been unaware of, the existence of a shady little grotto completely concealed by giant gooseberry bushes, where they had played "house" together as children. A large stone being rolled away, disclosed a cavity beneath the garden wall, which Fanny recalled to Walter, had served them for a cupboard, in their early attempt at housekeeping. This incident furnished us a subject for a little innocent gossip, but repassing the swing we were led to speak of the man McCabe.

Walter, as his early patron, made some inquiries as to his general behaviour.

"It is irreproachable," replied Fanny, "but I am almost sorry I told Miss Gower his history, as I am convinced she trembles for the safety of her jewels, in the vicinity of a man like McCabe."

She spoke jestingly, but Walter turned his earnest brown eyes gravely towards me:

"Be sure yourself on that point, Miss Gower," he said, "I fully believe the man's act to have been prompted by his excessive love of liquor, and not from dishonest predilections. Even if this were not the case, as he does not sleep in the house he has little opportunity of justifying your fears. However, I suppose the existence of your valuables is not known to the servant, and I advise that this may remain so, for I should never forgive myself if anything unpleasant were to occur from my act in sending this unfortunate fellow out here."

The latter part of his speech filled me with a vague uneasiness, although no more was said on the subject, and I could not dismiss the man McCabe from my mind, even after I had assured myself of the safety of those treasured gifts, disrobed myself and gone to bed. My temperament is such that if an idea ever so extravagant once enters my mind, I dwell upon it in spite of my better judgment, until in my fertile imagination it becomes like a fulfilled reality. On this occasion I even recalled my papa's jest about the trinkets, and persuaded my foolish little heart that he had a foreboding that his words would come true. I had had too keen a sense of the folly of such speculations to breathe a word of them to the household, and Fanny's thoughtless remark had been prompted more by a merry, teasing spirit which sometimes possessed her, than by anything I had led her to infer, so that none suspected the effect the few words they had uttered had upon me. I fell asleep at last, thinking thus, and my pillow was visited by many wild intangible visions; I rested badly, and next morning arose late and unrefreshed by slumber.

I heard Mr. Burt telling his wife to keep the cats in-doors next night, as he feared rats were getting into the house, having heard some slight noise which awakened him. I may remark, *entre parenthèse*, that the cats were shut into the barn at night, to keep off those troublesome little pests, the mice.

Hay-making was just commencing, and the Burt family were going to be busy. Walter mounted a handsome bay horse early in the morning and rode away to visit a relative living some fifteen miles distant. He was the bearer of some sort of commission from his father. The man McCabe was dispatched to the station to bring home some implements that were to arrive by train. The two "girls" went out to assist in the fields, and Fanny, good little housewife, began to assist her mother in the increased labour thus devolving upon her in-doors. Left all alone, I established myself in the shady parlour, with the last novel sent me by a friend in town. We all met at tea, Walter having returned and taken his place in a fine flow of spirits. He spoke vaguely of returning to town, and I judged that his father had opened his heart and purse strings to the relief of his son.

We all spent a pleasant, peaceful evening. Good Mrs. Burt folded her hands placidly on her lap, and nodded at intervals with eyes and ears closed to surrounding influences. The farmer smoked his evening pipe in the open doorway, keeping a vigilant eye on the proceedings of his men as they did up the various "chores." Fanny, tired with her unaccustomed labours, reclined on a couch beneath the half-open window, buried in a reverie in which I have no doubt a vision of blue