

GOOD FOR EVIL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "EPISODES IN AN OBSCURE LIFE."

(CHAPTER II.—Continued.)

When, after a pause, her valediction had come back to her, she repeated it. A second time the echo acknowledged it, and a third time she uttered it, but before the echo could reply, there came a fierce growl out of a plantation hard by. A voice, which Helen knew too well, demanded with an oath, what she was howling there for.

The poor little maiden fled like the wind. All the peace of the summer night had passed away—had been most roughly dissipated. She was still so agitated when she reached home that her father anxiously asked what had happened.

He laughed when he heard that some man had shouted at her out of the firs by the Ten Acre. "He didn't know 'twas you, then, whoever 'twas," said her father, re-assuringly. "Nobody in these parts would want to harm a little gal like you: no, nor a tramp neither, and there's none about." Helen, however, was bidden never again to stray so far from home so late.

A most otiose order. Thenceforth, even in broad daylight, she did not like to go alone beyond the orchard, farmyard, or home-croft. She took a dog with her when she went for the letters to the village street. Now that Grim Jim had come back to the parish, her half-formed resolve to denounce him utterly melted away. The terror of him again haunted her like a ghost—a ghost which no one but herself was conscious of. She rarely heard his name mentioned. Her father and brothers, the women-servants and the farming-men, seemed still to think, when they thought of him at all, that Grim Jim was either far away, or else that he had committed suicide. That alternative belief made him a double terror to little Helen. She had once, to her shuddering self-reproach, derived a moment's satisfaction from the thought that perhaps he had made away with himself. She was punished for it now. It must be remembered that although she went to boarding-school, she had been born and bred in a parish in which down to these days, long after the date of this little story, superstitious beliefs have lingered on.

In Helen's time there was a horse-shoe nailed on either the lintel or the doorstep of almost



CHIEF JOSEPH AND HIS FAMILY.

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every cottage, cowhouse, stable, and barn in Old Bere. The village forge, which might have been supposed to be sufficiently protected by the array of shoes within had, nevertheless, three, arranged like the golden balls in the Lombardy Arms, nailed over the door. The people of Old Bere were quite ready to duck old women suspected of witchcraft, and crossed straws, and laid other ingenious traps for their detection. Nevertheless, the inconsistent villagers crossed gipsies' palms, and resorted to the Wise Man to get their fortunes told. Young ploughmen sowed hemp-seed in the churchyard; milkmaids performed mystic rites before looking-glasses in order to discover their future lovers. Anxious parents passed their ague-stricken children under donkeys' bellies. Middle-aged farmers might laugh, but they had a sneaking belief in the efficacy of the curative process when their herdsmen applied shrewwash twigs to their suffering cattle. Their wives hastened to throw a pinch over their left shoulders when they had spilt the salt, shuddered when their guttering candles

made winding-sheets, or

"Bounce from the fire a coffin flow,"

fully believed that they would soon see strangers when soot-flakes flapped on the bars of their kitchen grates, and took scrupulous care to give their bees, after respectful tapping on their hives with door-keys, early information of family deaths and weddings; and to put the hives into mourning, or decorate them with bridal favors according to the circumstances. Almost everybody in the parish believed that effets and toads spat poison, and that blue-burning, automatic corpse-candles slowly moved at midnight from the houses in which people were going to die to the spots in the churchyard—always entering by the lych-gate—in which they would be laid; and even the vicar, when appealed to on the subject of ghosts, gave forth an uncertain sound.

No wonder, then, that Helen believed in ghosts; and this was the dilemma between the horns of which she found herself placed. Grim Jim had come back to the parish, either in the body or out of the body.

In the former case, his return

was fraught with all the possibilities of evil to her father and herself which she had formerly dreaded.

In the latter, though a ghost could not be killed, and therefore her father could not be hanged for murdering Grim Jim, there was no saying what dire mischief his grim spectre, released from all amenability to human law, might inflict on both her father and herself.

If her father chanced to say before her that he was going to the Ten Acre, she became almost sick with fear. Either he might chance to find a flesh-and-blood Grim Jim lurking in the plantation, and at last suspect that he was the man who burned his ricks, or the ghost that once inhabited the putrid corpse dangling from a bough, or lying entangled at the bottom of the black plantation pool, might have power even by day to wreak its malice on her father and then come on to her.

After nightfall, Helen believed that a ghost could do nearly what it liked, and therefore, after she had put out her candle and lay in bed with her head buried in the bed-clothes, she was often in an agony of fright. Some fascination of the terrible compelled her ever and anon to peep from the bed-clothes, although she almost fully expected to see the awful thing standing by her bedside.

For company's sake she let the dogs sleep in turn in her bedroom. But dogs are no guardians against the supernatural.

One moonlight night her canine room-mate added to her terror.

He rose, whimpered, and then bayed at the moon most dismally, and Helen for a time firmly believed that he saw the ghost noiselessly drawing near.

Silvery moonlight nights, golden sunny days were common during those holidays; but, in the words of the old chronicle, "The sun was like a black shield, the moon was as if it had been sprinkled with blood," to poor little Helen.

CHAPTER III.—SACRILEGE.

Old Bere church stood in the Squire's park. The mounded churchyard was separated from the more level turf around by a low grey wall, embroidered with silver-grey, grey-green, and orange-colored lichens, and held together by a network of small-leaved ivy.

There were white, grey, green, black grave-stones in the church-