

## THE CARRIER'S NIECE.

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## I.

GEORGE PRESCOTT, carrier of the hamlet of Hawley, was swathing his neck in a yard or two of woollen comforter one bleak morning in March, preparatory to setting off with his cart to the market town of Bagley, some six or eight miles away, when he was interrupted by the entrance of the post-boy, bringing a letter from that very town to which he was going. George paused in his toilet operations, leaving the ends of his red comforter hanging down his back, eagerly opened the letter, which was a rarity to him, and became absorbed in a moment. It was but a short one, yet it took him a considerable time to read, for he was not adept at reading writing, and the addresses on the packages committed to his care often tried him sorely.

The note ran thus :—

"My dear uncle Prescott, I am going to ask you and aunt a great favour, greater than I have any right to expect you to grant, considering how little you have seen of me in all my life. Yet from the little I have seen of you, I know you are kind, and so I feel hopeful in sending to ask you if you will allow me to come and stay with you for a few weeks, just until I can meet with a situation in a school or a private family. Uncle Tracy is going to marry again almost immediately, and he has given me to understand that I am no longer welcome here. Pray call the first time you come over, and I can tell you more.—I remain, your affectionate niece,

"FLORA DENLEY."

While Mr. Prescott is spelling out this epistle, let us look around at him and his. He is a short, stout man, of compact build, and his general appearance is—jolly; no other word can so adequately describe him. He has a florid, weather-marked face, in a setting of sandy hair and whiskers, streaked with grey. His jollity is not that of the tippler, neither is his complexion; but it is that of a genial old soul full of kindness and honesty; and these traits of character, fostered for nearly three score years, make George look considerably younger than he really is.

Jane Prescott, his wife, is a tall, thin woman, wrinkled and angular. She looks as if all the care of the world rested on her, and was fretting the flesh off her bones, and every trace of comeliness from her countenance. The young fry of the village call her "Vinegar Jane," and "Old Naggles," and she really looks to merit either *soubriquet*. The only redeeming quality in her is excessive cleanliness. Her iron grey-hair is as smooth as satin, her attire as clean and nice as washing and careful ironing can make it. The three rows of lace to her cap are as stiff and quaint-looking as an Elizabethan frill, and surrounding her thin long face, give her quite a unique appearance.

The large, low-ceiled kitchen is spotlessly clean—the floor as white as milk, the brasses are shining like gold over the mantel-shelf, the grate has such a high polish on it that it would almost serve the purpose of a mirror. But there is not the slightest ornamentation about the place. The white walls are as bare as those of a prison; not a picture, or a flower, or even a cushion to a chair is to be seen in the room. Neither beauty nor comfort is studied there, only grim utility.

While George was engaged with his letter a young man entered, with a small parcel. He looked the picture of health and strength, as he took his hat off to wipe his heated brow.

"I was so afraid you'd be gone, friend George," he said. "I've run the whole way to catch you."

"Morning. Wait a minute, sir, please," said George, looking up absently for a moment, and then turning to his letter again.

"You needn't ha' been afraid he'd been gone," said Mrs. Prescott, in a high, treble voice. "He's daft, I should think, to let time fly like this, and booze over that letter. D'ye hear, George?" she demanded, in a shriller tone, going and plucking his sleeve. "Here's Mr. Danvers come with another parcel, and you ought to ha' been off ages ago."

"One don't get a letter every day," said George, coming to himself, but not heeding the presence of Harry Danvers. "This is from Flora Denley, and she wants us to take her in for a

few weeks, as Tracy is going to marry again, and wants to turn her out, and she've got nowhere to go to."

"A stuck-up boarding-school miss in my house!" cried Mrs. Prescott. "Not if I knows it, George Prescott. Ain't I got enough to clean after, with you, and folks as comes in with dirty feet on business? No offence to you, Mr. Danvers, as gen'ly scrapes your shoes. No; Flora's father and mother turned up their noses high enough at us when they was alive, the proud nobodies, and they must expect as such sin 'll be visited on their child. It 'll teach her a lesson to have our door shut against her."

"But she ain't going to learn that lesson," said George, waxing warm and bold, and looking up in his wife's face with a defiant expression. She was at least four inches taller than himself. "Her mother was my own sister, and so was Tracy's wife; and though they was both a sight more set-up in the world than me, owing to them getting gentlemanly sort of fellows for husbands, and owing to my being such a noddle-headed vagabone when I were young, and throwing away opportunities which might ha' set me alongside o' the best of 'em, I ain't going to turn my back on Flora because her mother wasn't as friendly to us as she might ha' been. No; that ain't Christian, Jenny; and it's no use of us going to church so religious-like on Sundays if we don't act up to what the parson tells us. I ain't seen Flora more than twice within the last three years; but she spoke like a hangel to me then, and even if she ain't a good disposition we can hear with her for as long as she wants to stay. She's a good-looking lass, and if she don't get a situation somebody or other 'll soon snap her up for a wife, I'll be bound."

Noticing that all this did not disperse the frown from his wife's brow, and the angry light from her eyes, George took up his riding-whip and brought the handle down with a heavy thud on the floor, saying, "I'm the master o' this house, and I'll do what I please, as is right and proper. I shall bring Flora home with me to-night if she'll come, or else I shall fetch her on Saturday. There."

Then turning from his wife, who was pale with rage, to young Danvers, George adjusted his comforter, saying, "You'll excuse me, sir, a-keeping you waiting, and speaking out as I did afore you. And now, please read me the 'dres on your parcel, and I shall deliver it as usual—safe, and no mistake."

"I am sorry I happened to intrude just when you were discussing a private matter," said Mr. Danvers.

"Don't mention it, sir; there's nothing much private about that. We ain't folks as deal much in secrets, and I don't mind you knowing about us. You always behave like a gentlemen to us and others, Mr. Harry, and I shouldn't be afraid to tell a downright secret to sich. I've known you from a baby, and your father before you, when he first came to that country-house o' yours. How is it you're not down to the city to-day, to business?"

"I just go when I like, now," answered Harry. "I'm not going to be partner with my father; it's decided now."

"Not!" exclaimed the carrier. "Why, how's that?"

"I am going to America to my uncle, who is also a merchant, to enter into partnership with him; and Ned will take my place with my father."

"Ha! And that suits you, I'll warrant, Mr. Harry, going to furrin parts. And so both you and your brother Edward are made for life, as they say. But I mustn't stay gossiping any longer, else wife 'li say I'm as bad as a woman. But do ye come an hour some evening, Mr. Harry, and let's have a chat. If you're really going away for ever, I can't see too much of you afore you go; so do come as often as you can, and do us the honour of your company."

Having thus delivered himself to his great satisfaction, George got the top button of his long drab coat fastened over his comforter, drew on a pair of dirty leather gloves, took up his whip, and followed Harry Danvers out.

"A plaguey east wind again!" he muttered, wriggling his chin and nose down under the comforter. "Fit to nip a fellow's nose off."

"I don't envy you your jaunt to Bagley," laughed young Danvers, as he thrust his hands in his pockets, preparing to make a run homeward.

"But perhaps you might envy me my jaunt back again in my snug little cart, if I lag my pretty young niece to-day, and bring her with me," said the carrier, with a mischievous wink of his eye.