

THE VILLAGE GOSSIPS.

THE day was cold, dreary, drizzling. The sudden thaw of a severe frost had made the roads into mud-pools, and the lanes into ditches. It was evening. Against the doorway of a neat, comfortable cottage, two women were leaning. They were not too well clad; but so busily were their tongues going, that they seemed utterly regardless of the cold, and of the large drops that fell on them from the thatch. Dorothy Dixon, the mistress of the cottage, stood within the door, saying but little, and every now and then casting an anxious look up the road. They had been long there, resting first on one leg and then on the other, when the heavy tread of a man, splashing through the mud, disturbed them.

"Good night, John Dixon," said one woman, as she turned away. The other did not wait even for this short greeting, and they were both quickly in the lane behind the cottage.

John Dixon was a man of very severe temper. His work, the proper conduct of his wife, the training of his children, the respectability of his home, to these things he gave his thoughts, and to nothing else. With his neighbours' affairs he never meddled. If the idle and profligate came in his way, he condemned them in his heart, but seldom censured them in words, and he detested gossip. He had been trained to hate it, and his natural temper fell in with the training; he never indulged in it himself, nor permitted it in his dwelling.

It was with a stern look and somewhat sullen manner that he took his usual seat in the chimney-corner, without fetching wood and water, according to his custom. Dorothy well knew what this portended, and busied herself in getting the tea, and making the porridge for her children's supper. She ventured one or two little remarks, which John answered only with a whiff of his pipe. Getting rather impatient, she said pettishly: "You needn't take on so, John; I couldn't help the women coming here; it wasn't my asking that brought them."

"No, that's like enough," said John; "but you could have helped keeping 'em, I suppose."

"They wasn't here so very long," said Dorothy, in an injured tone.

John answered drily: "Very like they was vastly entertaining, and it made the time go pleasant. I seen 'em here half an hour before I came, when I was on the top of the turnip field, and they looked quite comfortable and settled in then."

"Well, I'm sure I wanted 'em gone long enough," said Dorothy, ready to cry; "I didn't half mind what they was talking about, for I was in a hurry to fetch the children, and get their suppers and your tea ready, before you came home."

"Why didn't you tell 'em so?" said John.

"What! and have my name up for being ill-natured all over the place?"

"What signifies! You are more concerned to please

me, I reckon, than them as 'll pick you to pieces the moment they're out of your sight, whether you please 'em or not."

Dorothy did not answer; she thought John was very cross, and the tears came into her eyes as she left the cottage to fetch her children. They were at the village school, where they had been left this evening long beyond their usual hour, and in consequence she found them out in the road before the door with other children, playing in the mud. She scolded them all the way home; and there was much washing and changing of clothes to go through before they could sit by their father to eat their porridge.

"This comes of gossip, wife," said John, quietly; but Dorothy did not answer: she wanted her tea, and was provoked to think she must fetch both wood and water before she could have it, for it was growing dark. She felt her temper rising, but she knew the cost of showing it; so, shutting the door with as much of a bang as she dared to venture on, she went to the brook.

"How surly he is," she thought; "but I won't give way to him, that I won't. I can't have a word with a neighbour, but he goes on like this; and, as Bet Smith was saying, there's nobody in the place has got such a name for being kept in as I have; and what Sally Brown said about people saying he was more particular than was needful, was very true; and I don't wonder that people are sorry for me, and I'm sure Bet Smith is, and so is Sally Brown; as to saying anything against me, they wouldn't do it for anything, for they're very kind neighbours, and always so civil; but it's because he likes me to be for everlasting at work, work, work, as Sally says, and it's very true." These thoughts lasted her down to the brook.

Just as she was letting down her bucket, she heard voices behind the hedge that divided the garden from the lane. Her own name sounded distinctly in her ears, with a laugh after it; and, drawing near, she found the voices to be those of Sally Brown and Bet Smith, who appeared to have a third companion.

"Well, it's time we was home, Bet," said Sally; "it's good for us as we haven't got John Dixon to look to. I'll be bound Dorothy's had a good beating before now; and serve her right, for being such a sneak as she is."

"Sneak, indeed," said Bet; "what do you think of her leaving us to stand at her door for near an hour, and never to ask us in, all for fear of her husband?"

"Maybe she was afeared," said Sally, "that we should wear out her chairs; she was always as near as a skinflint when she was a little 'un, and she hasn't improved. There isn't one as has got a good word for her for neighbouring."

"I should say it's John's fault," said the strange voice.

"Not a bit of it," said Sally; "they're as like as two peas. Folks lays it on John; but they're well matched, only he's got more spirit."

"Oh, didn't she turn white when she see him